

Bookstart Impact Report 2025/26

Learning from Bookstart Baby, Toddler, Pre-schooler and Storytime

BookTrust
Getting children reading

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Thank you

We would like to extend a huge thank you to all those who work with BookTrust on Bookstart:

- The many Bookstart Coordinators whose dedication is central to the success of the programme.
- Our thousands of valued early years delivery partners – from local authorities, health visitors, public health teams and family hubs to early years educators and workers, nursery teams, libraries and community settings – who support our shared mission to ensure that every child benefits from reading.
- The publishers, authors, illustrators and peer organisations who support storytelling and inspire children and families on their reading journeys.

We are grateful for the generous support we receive from those who share our mission to get children and families reading for pleasure:

- Arts Council England
- Arts Council for Northern Ireland
- The Department of Education Northern Ireland
- Welsh Government

We would also like to thank the many individuals and organisations who supported Bookstart in 2025/26, including:

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- Domlal Foundation Limited
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- The Julia Rausing Trust
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- Mercury
- The Mohn Westlake Foundation
- The Richard Budenberg Charitable Trust
- The Rothley Trust
- The Sir Ralph Pendlebury 1880 Charity
- Strand Parishes Trust
- Waterstones
- Westminster Abbey
- The Wyn and Ken Lo Memorial Foundation

And all those who wish to remain anonymous.

Together we will keep on working to bring the benefits of reading to families, because reading supports children to:

- Overcome disadvantage
- Develop better wellbeing, social skills and strong relationships
- Meet speech and language milestones and do better at school
- Develop imagination, empathy and creativity

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Executive summary

This report summarises Bookstart's activity and impact in 2025/26. Bookstart is BookTrust's evidence informed, early years reading support programme for children aged 0–5.

The report draws on feedback from 644 Bookstart partners and 2,155 Bookstart families.

About Bookstart

For more than 30 years, Bookstart has helped families enjoy the benefits of reading together from the earliest moments in childhood, as a critical part of giving children the best start in life.

Shared reading supports children's development. It creates opportunities for connection and communication, helps to build responsive caregiving. It helps to create a positive home learning environment, supporting language development, early literacy skills and wellbeing.

Bookstart is based on extensive national and international evidence of the benefits of reading and what works to get families reading, a deep understanding of families' lived experiences and insights from decades of working with partners at scale.

Bookstart supports children and families at key stages of early childhood through a series of evidence-informed programmes, all designed to make reading and sharing stories easy, accessible and enjoyable. Bookstart programmes comprise access to free books and resources, evidence-informed guidance and strengths-based messaging for families with support for and from trusted local early years partners.

Bookstart combines national reach with flexible local delivery to respond to local needs and priorities with an established network of almost 30,000 early years partners in family hubs and other multi agency settings, health services, libraries and community organisations. BookTrust works with partners to identify the most effective routes to reach families, delivering support through universal services as well as pathways focused on reaching families on low incomes, children with additional needs or children from vulnerable family backgrounds.

Bookstart in 2025/26 – our reach

- **Over 1.1 million children and families,** across every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland engaged with Bookstart programmes.
- **Bookstart Baby** reached **568,000 babies (93% of all babies born in 2025/26)**.
- **Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler** reached **445,600 children aged 1–4**, including **37% of all 1–4-year-olds living in low-income households**.
- **Over 60,000 children aged 0–5** engaged with **Bookstart Storytime** in England and Northern Ireland. (Of these, 37% were new to the library, 57% were from low-income households).
- In Wales, **Early Years and Pori Drwy Stori** bilingual programmes reached **71,800 children**.

We know there is more demand than we can currently meet.

Over 1.1 million
children and families engaged with Bookstart programmes

Bookstart Baby reached
568,000 babies



Bookstart in 2025/26 – our impact

1. Building on families' strengths

By encouraging enjoyment and connection through shared reading, Bookstart Baby, Toddler, Pre-Schooler and Storytime help families make reading a regular part of everyday family life:

- **83% of parents and carers** say Bookstart creates more opportunities to spend quality time with their child.
- **85% of parents and carers** say that reading and sharing books in Bookstart packs has helped them to feel closer to their child.
- **97% of parents and carers** enjoyed using Bookstart books and activities.

Selecting books that engage and support a diverse range of families is central to Bookstart's impact. Informed by a wide body of evidence and input from early years experts and families we select books with the features that support enjoyment, make positive and rewarding interactions easier, and encourage repeated sharing.

2. Making shared reading easier

Bookstart supports families to establish reading routines through building confidence, knowledge and making reading feel easier and more achievable:

- **76% of parents and carers** learned something new about ways to read or share books and stories with their child.
- **51% of parents and carers** say the books were some of the first books they owned for their child.
- **80% of parents and carers** receiving Bookstart Baby and **77% of parents and carers** receiving Toddler/Pre-schooler say they now read or share books and stories more with their child.

Greater benefits for families facing greater barriers: Bookstart recognises that some families face greater barriers to shared reading. Evaluation of Bookstart programmes consistently shows even stronger impact where families' resources may be more limited.

3. Embedding shared reading within existing family support

By embedding reading support in existing services and community settings Bookstart creates connected opportunities for families to experience reading support. Bookstart builds on the expertise and practice of those already working with families through evidence-informed guidance, tools and support for partners:

- **81% of partners** believe Bookstart helps support their organisation's overall objectives.
- **Over 90% of partners** say Bookstart programmes are important to their organisation – in Wales, 100% of partners say this.

Bookstart supports multi-agency working, helping early years services across sectors align and integrate shared reading with broader family support. Our programmes are designed to be used by these multi-agency settings in ways that best meet their communities' needs. Bookstart is now embedded in over 620 multi-agency settings including (Best Start) family hubs, children's centres, Sure Start centres and Flying Start.

4. Building sustainable reading ecosystems

Through Bookstart, BookTrust provides a national infrastructure for shared reading in the early years, supporting Government policy ambitions across England, Wales and Northern Ireland – including those set out for England in the *Best Start in Life*.

Bookstart Baby is established within health visiting pathways, enabling reading support to be integrated into routine contact with all families with new babies.

Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler is embedded within local early years systems, with over 7,400 pathways to reach families on low incomes. In 2025/26 these routes involved 5,950 early education settings, 620 multi-agency settings, 280 health services and 190 charities and community organisations.

Bookstart Storytime is used in over 90% of public libraries in England and Northern Ireland – 2,400 libraries in total in 2025/26. Partners in libraries work with local organisations including early education settings, family hubs, children's centres, early help services and housing associations to connect families with young children to library services.

Alongside delivering Bookstart, BookTrust convenes and mobilises local, regional, national, and international partners to strengthen the conditions that enable children to benefit from reading in the early years.



In the UK we work to ensure that free, government-funded Bookstart programmes are used as effectively as possible. In partnership with Frank Cottrell-Boyce, BookTrust's Reading Rights Ambassador, our national Reading Rights campaign advocates for shared reading to be made a fundamental part of childhood. As the early years partner for the National Year of Reading, BookTrust is helping to raise the profile of reading from birth. BookTrust co-chairs EURead, the key voice on children's reading in Europe, and convenes and manages the Global Network for Early Years Bookgifting.

We extend a huge thank you to the Bookstart Coordinators and thousands of early years delivery partners whose support and expertise is central to BookTrust's success, and to the funders, publishers and creators who support storytelling and inspire families on their reading journeys.

We look forward to our ongoing work together, building on evidence of what works and feedback from families and partners to continue to bring the lifelong, transformative benefits of reading to children in all communities across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.



About Bookstart

For more than 30 years, Bookstart has helped families enjoy the benefits of reading together from the earliest stages of a child's life. What began as a pilot project has expanded to reach families in every local community across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, becoming the world's first national early years reading programme. Delivered with a wide range of partners, Bookstart combines national reach with flexible local delivery.

Bookstart supports children and families at key stages of early childhood through a connected set of evidence-informed programmes designed to make reading and sharing stories easy, accessible and enjoyable. Together, these programmes combine free access to books and resources with evidence-informed guidance, strengths-based messaging for families, and practical support for local partners to promote shared reading in ways that reflect local needs and priorities.

Figure 1: Bookstart programmes for children aged 0–5[1]



Bookstart programmes are designed to support children and families who may face greater barriers to shared reading opportunities. Local partners identify the most effective routes to reach these families, delivering support through universal services as well as pathways focused on reaching families on low incomes, children from vulnerable family backgrounds or with additional needs.

Find out more on our website.

In depth: Choosing books that create impact

Selecting books that engage and support a diverse range of families is central to the impact of Bookstart. Finding the right books matters – because the right books support enjoyment, make positive and rewarding interactions easier, and encourage repeated sharing over time.

Our selection process is informed by child development, behavioural science and research evidence. It draws on input from expert panels of early years partners and children's book specialists, alongside engagement with families. Through this process, we select books that are likely to spark interest, support interaction and sustain engagement.

What we look for in a Bookstart book:

- Visual, sensory and auditory appeal that invites attention and exploration.
- A durable, high-quality format that children can handle and families will want to keep.
- Developmentally appropriate content that can support different ways of participating.
- Opportunities for child-led play, creativity and reciprocal interaction.
- Language and structures that invite anticipation and joining in, such as rhyme, repetition, predictable patterns or an engaging narrative, where appropriate.
- Intuitive and accessible sharing for families with different levels of confidence, literacy and experience.
- Representation that reflects the diversity of families' lives and experiences.



> "I'd recommend **Look at Me**[2] to anyone because it is a really fun book. It's definitely made reading more fun. I saw the enjoyment on her face and thought, well, maybe we should put a little bit more effort into making the books more fun."
>
> **Parent receiving Bookstart Toddler**

Bookstart reach

Bookstart reaches families in every local authority in England and Wales, and every community in Northern Ireland, through our unique local delivery model.

In 2025/26, Bookstart reached more than 1.1 million children and families through an extensive network of almost 30,000 partners working across early years settings, libraries, family hubs, health services and community organisations.



Bookstart in Wales reached **71,800 children aged 0–5 through** our Early Years and Pori Drwy Stori bilingual programmes



Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler reached **445,600 children aged 1–4,** including **37% of all 1–4-year-olds living in low-income households**

Bookstart Storytime reached more than **60,000 children aged 0–5** in libraries



Bookstart Baby reached **568,000 babies,** equivalent to **93% of all babies born in 2025/26**



Bookstart Touch, Shine and Star reached **23,800 children with additional needs**





Bookstart Dual Language reached **42,400 children aged 0–5,** supporting families in **36 languages** and reaching **47% of families with young children who speak English as an additional language**

Our learning approach



At BookTrust we are committed to learning from families, partners and wider research to continuously strengthen the design, delivery and impact of our work. This report draws on:

- Our latest BookTrust Partner Survey. **644 of our early years partners in England, Wales and Northern Ireland took the survey between February and April 2026**. Our early years partners include libraries, early years education settings, early years health professionals, children's centres, family hubs, primary schools in Wales, and many more.
- Online and paper surveys from **577 families who received our Toddler or Pre-schooler packs**. Findings in this report are based on responses received between October 2025 and August 2026.
- Online surveys from **1,578 families who received our baby packs**. Findings in this report are based on responses received between November 2025 and August 2026.

Together, these sources provide a valuable picture of the experiences and outcomes reported by participating families and partners. The findings are interpreted alongside BookTrust's National Family Survey, which provides wider context on shared reading across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The findings should be read as evidence of experience, association and contribution rather than as causal effects or population estimates. For more information about our survey respondents, please see Appendix.

BookTrust's research, evaluation and learning activities are supported by expert input from our Learning Oversight Group.

Bookstart impact

Bookstart takes a systems approach to behaviour change, working through the wider network of people, places and services that influence family reading habits. By providing trusted resources, supporting practitioners, strengthening local partnerships and embedding reading support within existing systems, Bookstart helps create the conditions that enable families to read together regularly (Figure 2).

This section explores the impact of this approach across families, delivery partners, local pathways and the wider infrastructure that supports shared reading across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Shared reading is an important aspect of the home learning environment, supporting children's development and strengthening family bonds *(Galea et al, 2025, Canfield et al 2020)*. Reading together creates opportunities for connection, communication and responsive caregiving, helping to build positive home learning environments and supporting children's wellbeing, language development and early literacy skills *(BookTrust, 2025b)*.

BookTrust's research makes clear that although parents and carers want their children to spend more time reading, daily shared reading is in decline. Many families face growing pressures on their time, routines and everyday lives, making it harder to establish and maintain reading habits. Some families face greater barriers than others, widening inequalities in access to the benefits of shared reading.

Find out more in our report Trends, drivers and inequalities in UK childhood reading.



Bookstart exists to help families make reading part of everyday life and experience its many benefits. Our approach combines evidence of what works, a deep understanding of families' lived experiences and insights gained through decades of working with partners at scale. Together, this knowledge has shaped the foundations of the Bookstart approach to creating lasting change in early shared reading behaviours:

Building on families' strengths and existing enjoyment of books and stories by supporting positive experiences, aspirations and emotional connections.

Making shared reading easier through support that helps address inequalities in access to books, knowledge, confidence and opportunities to establish reading routines.

Embedding shared reading within existing family support systems, helping create more coordinated and consistent support across multiple touchpoints in families' lives.



"My favourite comment this year was from a family whose child was not interested in books at all, but after a Storytime session within the nursery, loves his 'ladybird' story book, wouldn't put it down, and has to read it every day. Feedback from families like this shows us daily the impact the packs are having."

Librarian and Bookstart partner

The Bookstart impact model

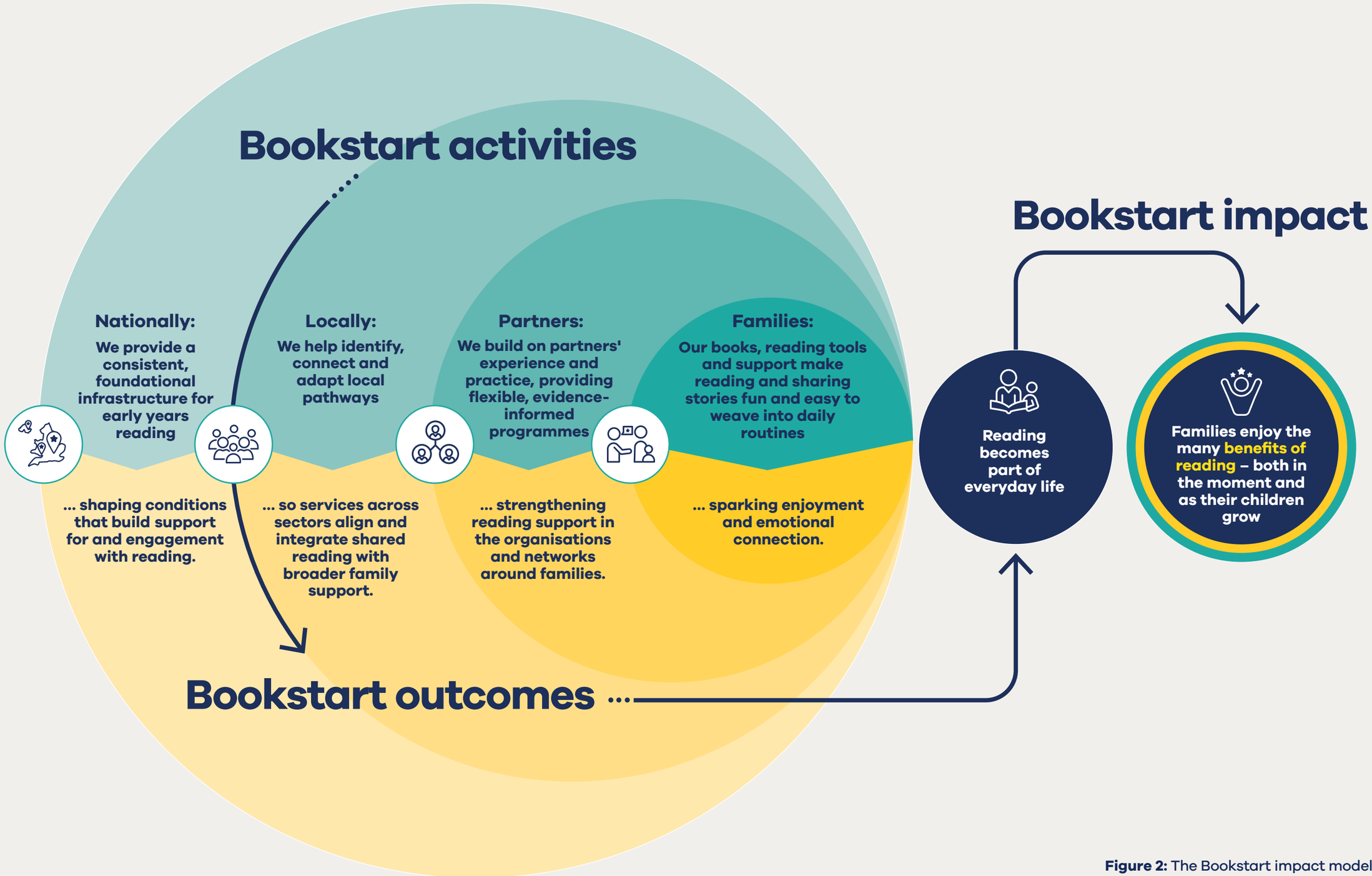


Figure 2: The Bookstart impact model

Building on families' strengths

By encouraging enjoyment and connection through shared reading, Bookstart helps families make reading a regular part of everyday family life.

Our research shows that both the short and long-term benefits of reading motivate parents and carers to read more with their children. The immediate benefits are particularly important – moments of enjoyment, closeness and connection make the experience rewarding for both parent/carer and child. Experiencing these positive interactions encourages parents and carers to read with their child more often, helping to establish and sustain reading habits *(BookTrust and Untapped Innovation, 2023)*.

Bookstart helps families create this quality time together, fostering feelings of closeness and creating enjoyable reading experiences.

- **83% of parents and carers** say the packs create more opportunities to spend quality time with their child. (84% for Bookstart Baby, 82% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)
- **85% of parents and carers** say that reading and sharing the books from the packs helped them feel closer to their child. (87% for Bookstart Baby, 78% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)
- **97% of parents and carers** enjoyed using the books and activities in the pack with their child. (96% for Bookstart Baby, 98% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)

The gift appeal of the Bookstart packs' design, supported by positive, strengths based messaging aims to position books as valued and exciting. Qualitative insights from parents and carers suggest this appeal and excitement encourages children to explore the books inside *(BookTrust and Untapped Innovation, 2023)*.

Fun and engaging Bookstart Storytime experiences aim to help families associate libraries and shared reading with enjoyment, and our qualitative insights suggest these positive experiences encourage families to revisit the library and continue reading together at home *(BookTrust, 2022)*.



Making shared reading easier

Bookstart creates opportunities for families to establish reading routines and build confidence and knowledge around shared reading, making reading feel easier and more achievable within everyday family life.

Our research suggests that shared reading is easier to sustain when books are visible and readily accessible within the home. Effort is reduced when parents and carers feel clear about what enjoyable shared reading can look like; reducing uncertainty helps make it feel more achievable and less demanding. Where possible, establishing reading as part of a regular routine can make it easier for reading to become a habitual part of family life, rather than an activity that must be consciously planned each time *(BookTrust, 2026)*.

Bookstart programmes build families' knowledge on ways to read and why it's important at key developmental stages, increasing confidence around shared reading and helping embed it into early routines. Bookstart, particularly Baby, can often provide families their first suitable books at home.

- **51% of parents and carers** say the books in the pack were some of the first books they owned for their child. (57% for Bookstart Baby, 34% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)
- **79% of parents and carers** believe more strongly in the benefits of reading with their child since receiving the pack. (82% for Bookstart Baby, 70% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)
- **76% of parents and carers** learned something new about ways to read or share books and stories with their child. (75% for Bookstart Baby, 78% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)
- **70%** feel more confident reading or sharing books and stories with their child because of the pack. (69% for Bookstart Baby, 70% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)
- **69% of parents and carers** have tried to set up a reading routine with their child since receiving the pack. (72% for Bookstart Baby, 61% for Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler)

80% of parents and carers receiving Bookstart Baby and 77% of parents and carers receiving Toddler/Pre-schooler say they now read or share books and stories more with their child. Many are prompted to visit the library: 75% of parents and carers receiving Bookstart Baby and 60% of parents and carers who engage with Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler.

Bookstart Baby helps families begin sharing books from birth, while Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler supports families as children become more active participants in shared reading *(BookTrust, 2025a)*. Together, the programmes support families at different points in their shared reading journey, with outcomes reflecting the changing needs and experiences of children and families over time.



Bookstart Storytime can enhance reading support beyond the home by helping families access books and ongoing support within their community. Storytime is intended to help encourage families into libraries through enjoyable group storytelling experiences, particularly those who may not otherwise attend or those who may face greater barriers to reading. Overall, we estimate that among families who attended Storytime sessions:

- **57%** were from a **low-income** household
- **37%** were **new to the setting**
- **66%** **returned to the library** after the session
- **49%** signed up for **library membership**

> "BookTrust's support is really, really important – it's an important piece of who we are and what we offer as a service. We're grateful for all the resources from BookTrust, which are key to helping make more families feel the library is a place where they belong."
>
> **Librarian and Storytime partner**

Greater benefits for families facing greater barriers

Bookstart's design and its delivery model recognise that while all families can benefit from opportunities to read together, some face greater barriers to the conditions that enable shared reading to thrive.

Our findings indicate that Bookstart is particularly valuable for families who may be facing greater barriers to accessing books and establishing shared reading habits. Families on low incomes are more likely to report that Bookstart books are among the first books they own for their child, that they engage with these books more frequently and that they find them more engaging than other books they have.

Figure 3: Differences in reported outcomes by income group, for Baby and Toddler/Pre-schooler



"I was really happy to get the pack as we don't have a lot of books and they cost a lot … being a single mum with four children to support, it is hard to get [books]. I have difficulty with reading myself so it really helps getting the pack, as this helps with books that are good for my baby, as I cannot read around to find good books for us to read."

Parent receiving Bookstart Toddler/Pre-schooler



The impact of Bookstart is also consistently stronger where families' resources may be more limited. Families on low incomes are most likely to report increased belief in the benefits of reading together, greater knowledge and confidence around shared reading, and reading more frequently with their child as a result of Bookstart Baby and Toddler/Pre-schooler.

"It made reading to my baby feel less daunting and pointless. I didn't realise the benefits for bonding and giving me something to say to my baby by reading, as I was feeling a bit silly at first talking all the time."

Parent receiving Bookstart Baby

Figure 4: Differences in reported outcomes by income group, for Baby and Toddler/Pre-schooler



Embedding shared reading within existing family support

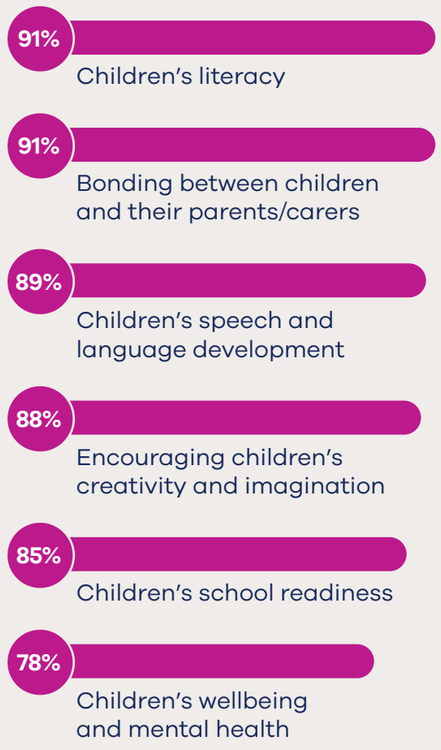
By embedding reading support within existing family support services and community settings, Bookstart helps create more consistent and connected opportunities for families to encounter books, reading support and encouragement throughout the early years.

Bookstart is designed to build on the expertise and practice of those already working with families, providing physical and digital resources for families alongside evidence-informed guidance, practitioner tools, partnership support and opportunities to share learning across our network. Together, these resources help partners adapt and embed Bookstart in ways that reflect their priorities and the needs of local families.

Early shared reading supports a wide range of child and family outcomes. Different early years services with different priorities can align around reading as a common goal, using Bookstart programmes as a shared vehicle for supporting children's development, strengthening family relationships and reducing inequalities.

- **81% of partners** believe Bookstart helps support their organisation's overall objectives
- **Over 90% of partners** say Bookstart programmes are important to their organisation (100% of partners in Wales)

Figure 5: Percentage of partners rating BookTrust resources as effective in supporting outcomes



In depth: Embedding shared reading within family support

In Belfast's Glenbrook Sure Start, the team of health visitors, family support workers and early years practitioners use Bookstart Toddler as part of their wider support for families with young children. Rather than being a standalone intervention, Bookstart is woven into story times and group activities and one to one interactions with families. Staff use Bookstart resources to demonstrate the value of shared reading, support children's development and wellbeing, and help families build reading into everyday routines.

Martina Hannon, Health Visitor, explains that many parents initially believe their child is too young for books, so staff model story sharing during sessions to demonstrate how children really can enjoy books from an early age:

> "When parents are introduced to the idea of using books to make up their own story, or ask their child questions as they go, it changes the whole delivery of the activity – it helps it seem much more interactive and enjoyable."

Caroline Donnelly, Early Learning Co-ordinator, explains how they also use Bookstart resources to reinforce messages about child development and wellbeing and then provide families with books and resources to take home:

> "After using the packs in our work with families, we also see parents who maybe have little experience of reading going off in a corner with a book and their child, and just really getting into the story. The engagement is really good with the BookTrust books – they've got strong colours, sensory input and they're suited to telling the story from the pictures not the words, which creates that magic for both the parent and the child."

Bookstart supports multi-agency working, helping services across sectors align and integrate shared reading with broader family support. Through our partnerships, services are connected to create delivery pathways that ensure Bookstart reaches families who stand to benefit most. With a shared commitment to addressing the inequalities that can start in early childhood, Bookstart coordinators and early years partners work with the central BookTrust team to reach families facing the greatest challenges, including families on low incomes.

Over the last three years, Bookstart has reached increasing numbers of early years families through multi-agency settings including (Best Start) family hubs, Sure Start centres and Flying Start. Our programmes are designed to be used flexibly by these multi-agency settings in ways that best meet the needs of their communities, enabling local partners to work towards their own priorities. These may include health development milestones (including speech and language), Ages and Stages, Making Every Contact Count and Good Level of Development.



In **Barking and Dagenham**, family hub staff use Bookstart practitioner resources within targeted group sessions for children and families who need support with speech, language and communication. By modelling shared reading and helping parents to engage with books and stories from an early age, these groups aim to support parents to understand the impact that early engagement with books and reading can have on bonding, attachment, speech and language, driving longer term outcomes for children.

In **Knowsley**, BookTrust is working with trusted early years partners, health professionals and local families to explore how to shape and deliver community storytelling in ways that boost families' confidence. Mike Merriman who has worked as a GP in Kirkby for the past 25 years explains:

"I work in an area that unfortunately has low educational attainment and low reading ages. Those things have a big impact on health and life inequalities. We have an opportunity to bring reading into the healthcare space. For example, I do a weekly baby clinic in Kirkby, and 95% of our mums here go through that clinic – so we have a captive audience...

With the help of BookTrust, we worked with health visitors, midwives, doctors in primary care, the council, the library service and children's services to come together and form a project group."

Together, these partners have identified ways to integrate support for families who aren't confident to read themselves such as creating a series of community storytelling experiences for local families based around Bookstart resources in the Knowsley Family Hubs.

"My son loves reading stories at home, but that all started here. Now, he'll look at three or four books at bedtime. It's bringing him along loads."

Parent, Knowsley





Building sustainable reading ecosystems, nationally

Through Bookstart, BookTrust supports a national infrastructure for shared reading in the early years. Across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, this work contributes to policy ambitions to improve outcomes for young children. This includes Government priorities set out for England in the Best Start for Life vision, which highlights the importance of coordinated support for families and the role of family hubs and wider local systems in promoting positive early childhood development *(HM Government, 2021)*.

Bookstart Baby is embedded within health visiting pathways, enabling reading support to be integrated into routine contacts to reach all families with new babies. Available in every local authority, most areas deliver the programme through health visitors, while some local authorities in England use registrars or a combination of both.

Bookstart Toddler/ Pre-schooler is embedded within local early years and family support systems, with partners adapting delivery to local structures and needs through more than 7,400 pathways to reach families on low incomes. In 2025/26 this included:

7,400+ pathways

- **5,950** early education settings
- **580** children's centres
- **340** family hubs
- **280** health services
- **190** charities/community organisations
- **180** libraries

Bookstart Storytime is used in over 90% of public libraries in England and Northern Ireland – 2,400 libraries in total in 2025/26. Partners in libraries work with organisations including early education settings, family hubs, children's centres, early help services and housing associations to connect families with young children to library services.

The national context for shared reading

Bookstart is delivered in a challenging context for families and the early years services that support them.

Rising economic pressures mean many families are experiencing increasing strain, affecting the conditions in which young children grow and develop. Changing societal dynamics and rapid technological change are reshaping family life. Our research suggests that these pressures are not experienced equally, and neither are the opportunities to engage in shared reading. Inequalities in children's experiences emerge from their earliest moments.

Like other aspects of the home learning environment, early shared reading habits vary across families. Our research indicates that these habits are not declining because families valuing reading less, but because growing pressures on time, routines and support make shared reading harder to establish and sustain. Strengthening the conditions that enable families to read together is therefore more important than ever.



95%
of partners express concern about the decline in children's reading for enjoyment

Early years services are also operating under significant pressure. Our partners report that they are responding to increasing financial pressures on families, complex family needs and rising demand while, themselves, facing ongoing constraints on capacity, funding and workforce.

Partners express deep concern about other challenges affecting young children and families in their communities. These include delays in children's speech, language and communication (mentioned by 70% of partners in our most recent partner survey); children's wellbeing and mental health (45%); and time spent on screens (43%).

Embedding reading practice in the early years in this wider context is complex and challenging for early years and school partners. In our partner survey, all partner types express concern about the levels of reading engagement among children and families.

Within a challenging and evolving context, Bookstart plays an important role in strengthening opportunities for early shared reading at a national scale. Alongside the delivery of Bookstart, BookTrust acts as the national advocate for early years reading. We champion shared reading as an important component of the best start in life and work with partners to strengthen the conditions that enable all children to benefit from reading in the early years.

We know that supporting every child to benefit from shared reading requires sustained investment in family support services, a confident and connected early years workforce, improved access to books, and strong leadership at both national and local levels. Through convening leaders across the early years sector, sharing evidence from our research and programme evaluation, and contributing to national policy discussions, guidance and consultations, we help ensure that free, government-funded Bookstart programmes are used as effectively as possible.

Our national Reading Rights campaign – delivered in partnership with Frank Cottrell-Boyce, BookTrust's Reading Rights Ambassador and former Waterstones Children's Laureate – advocates for shared reading to be recognised not as a privilege or a "nice to have", but as a fundamental part of childhood. The campaign calls for coordinated action across early years, health, education, children's social care and culture to reduce inequalities in reading. It highlights five priorities for change: workforce training, policy and guidance, access to books, sharing research and evidence, and stronger multi-agency leadership. As the early years partner for the National Year of Reading, BookTrust is also helping to raise the profile of reading from birth and continues to mobilise our national partner network around a shared ambition to inspire more children and families to read.



Bookstart worldwide

BookTrust co-chairs EURead, the key voice on children's reading in Europe, and also convenes and manages the Global Network for Early Years Bookgifting. This network brings together over 30 early years gifting programmes across five continents, many of which are inspired by Bookstart. BookTrust also co-runs the international researcher network to share research and evaluation evidence and best practice, and to inform future research priorities.

What's next for Bookstart

At BookTrust, we are committed to continuously improving our support for children and families. We use feedback from families and partners, alongside emerging evidence, to inform the ongoing development of our programmes and ensure they remain relevant, responsive and effective. This section outlines some of our priorities for the year ahead.

Strengthening modelling:

Families who receive more information and guidance alongside physical resources consistently report stronger engagement and more positive outcomes from Bookstart programmes. While families commonly receive practical information, such as what is included in the pack or the benefits of reading, more interactive support, such as modelling shared reading, is less common. Increasing opportunities for families to experience modelling therefore represents an important opportunity to strengthen Bookstart's impact.

> "Modelling is when a practitioner shows parents and carers how they might share a book with their child, while the parent or carer watches or joins in. Our learning shows that when this is done in a supportive and inclusive way, it can help families see that their child enjoys shared reading and discover approaches that work for them, building confidence and motivation."
>
> **Dr. Ly Chu, Principal Research Specialist, BookTrust**

What next:

We will strengthen our support for the early years workforce around modelling, through training, support and additional resources, so more families receive modelling, encouragement and practical guidance as part of their Bookstart experiences.

Evolving the Bookstart Storytime model:

Now in its fourth year, Bookstart Storytime is supporting libraries to deliver highly valued group storytelling experiences. We are now exploring how the model can better reach families who are less likely to engage with libraries or organised story-sharing activities. We've been learning with partners about what works to create effective outreach and tested delivery in a wider range of community settings.

> "Storytime continues to be a well-loved part of library provision that supports partners' work with young children and families. As we look ahead, the evidence suggests there is scope to refresh the offer so that it delivers even greater value for libraries and better supports our ambition to reach families facing the greatest barriers to reading."
>
> **Francesca Fauvet, Early Years Design Lead, BookTrust**

What next:

We will refresh the Bookstart Storytime model and continue to learn about how we can support improved reading opportunities in libraries and communities.





Responding to the changing early years context:
Our Bookstart additional needs and dual language programmes are highly valued by families and practitioners, but as the number and diversity of families who may require specialist support continues to grow, we need to respond to this context.

> “Having BookTrust’s lovely high-quality books is so important. It’s about reaching those most in need, who might not otherwise access libraries and books. It’s about working alongside families to try and break down barriers they might have to sharing stories... One lady was feeling very isolated. Through BookTrust, we were able to get her a book in Tigrinya, and passing on a book in her native language helped reduce her feelings of isolation.”
>
> **Bookstart Partner**

What next:
We will explore how our Bookstart additional needs programmes (Touch, Shine and Star) and our Dual Language programme can evolve to best meet the needs of families and partners.

Strengthening support for partners:
Bookstart’s success depends on the expertise of early years partners who adapt and tailor support to the needs of local families and networks. We are committed to helping all partners, where needed, to feel confident and equipped to deliver reading support in ways that work for their communities, so even more families can benefit from Bookstart.

> “As family hubs become an increasingly embedded part of the early years landscape, they provide an important opportunity to reach families through trusted relationships and joined-up support. By strengthening how we embed reading and story sharing within these everyday services, we can ensure more families receive tailored support that meets their needs.”
>
> **Katy McNamara, Senior Partnerships Manager, BookTrust**

What next:
We will improve our support for Bookstart partners, working with family hubs to produce guidance, training and shared learning, to help local services embed reading support in ways that reflect the needs of their organisations and communities.



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Appendix

Notes on methodology

The results from surveys cited in this report are unweighted and may not be representative of all families engaging with Bookstart programmes. Observed associations may reflect family characteristics, delivery pathways, timing, recall or prior engagement with reading programmes and support. The two family samples (Baby and Toddler/Pre-schooler) are different cross-sectional samples and so differences between them cannot be interpreted as progression or comparative programme effectiveness.

Characteristics of the samples used

Table 1: Characteristics of Bookstart partner survey sample (N = 644)

	%	N
Country		
England	80%	515
Wales	11%	71
Northern Ireland	9%	58
Organisation type		
Early Years Education	41%	261
Library	22%	141
Family support setting	11%	70
Health related	12%	79
Third sector organisation	5%	34
Other	3%	19
Bookstart Coordinator		
Yes	27%	149
No	68%	374
Bookstart Programmes used in last year		
Baby	34%	206
Additional needs	21%	124
Dual language	30%	180
Storytime	27%	165
Toddler	47%	286
Pre-schooler	60%	364
Toddler and Pre-schooler	72%	433

* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing data

Table 2: Characteristics of Toddler/Pre-schooler sample (N=577) and Baby sample (N=1578)

	Toddler and Pre-schooler		Baby	
	%	n	%	n
Country				
England	93%	538	95%	1496
Wales	2%	12	1%	22
Northern Ireland	5%	27	4%	60
Household income[3]				
Low	48%	275	40%	634
Not low	52%	302	60%	944
Concerns about special education/additional learning or development needs				
Yes	14%	56		
No	85%	351		
Concerns about speech and language				
Yes	18%	74		
No	81%	331		
First language				
English	77%	359		
Welsh	<1%	2		
Other[a]	22%	104		

[a] A total of 44 languages were specified, with the most common being Spanish (11 respondents), Urdu (9 respondents), Arabic (7 respondents), Tigrinya (6 respondents), Portuguese (6 respondents), Somali (6 respondents), Cantonese (4 respondents), and French (4 respondents).

* Percentages may not add up to 100% due to missing data

Endnotes

1 Note that funding for Pori Drwy Stori Reception has now been withdrawn by the Welsh Government

2 Finger Wiggle: Look At Me! by Sally Symes and Nick Sharratt, published by Walker Books

3 In our survey, household income refers to the total annual income before tax from all sources and all household members, as reported by the respondent. Income is grouped by household composition, with low income defined as £28,000 or below for single-adult households and £42,000 or below for households with two or more adults. Thresholds are informed by Households Below Average Income (HBAI) statistics.

