

Building bonds through sharing books

Introduction

Relationships are the basis of children's development, and there is compelling evidence that early shared reading helps nurture these vital connections. This makes shared reading essential to giving every child the best start in life – a goal that sits at the core of BookTrust's mission. Reading and sharing stories provides *relational scaffolding* for the consistent, responsive interactions that lie at the heart of positive home learning environments. This understanding underpins our evidence-informed programmes and drives our impact.

shape rich home learning through deepening connections. Our evidence draws on diverse methodologies, including randomised controlled trials, representative surveys, qualitative and observational studies, systematic reviews, meta-analyses, theoretical and conceptual papers, and BookTrust's own award-winning ethnographic research.

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93% 

of our early years partners see our resources as an effective part of their support to parent-child bonding

83% 

see our resources as an effective part of their support to children's home learning environments¹

About this briefing

With this briefing, we hope to reinforce what many working across policy and practice already recognise: that quality interactions and strong relationships are central to positive home learning environments and children's development more broadly. But not all children will have the same opportunity to experience these. Shared reading offers a powerful way to nurture connections, supporting children's cognitive, emotional, and social outcomes.

By combining wider research with our own insights, we demonstrate that reading is not just a literacy or learning activity, but a relational one. Beyond improving children's outcomes, the relational nature of reading creates a positive feedback loop for caregivers, reinforcing behaviours that

BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity. Each year we reach over 1.4 million children and families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We work with every local authority, delivering evidence-informed programmes that make a measurable difference to children's reading behaviours. Our work is rooted in the belief that every child, especially those from low income or vulnerable family backgrounds, deserves the chance to enjoy reading and all the lifelong benefits it brings.

Reading supports children to:



overcome inequalities before they deepen



bond with their caregivers and experience better mental wellbeing



meet early development milestones and do better at school



develop empathy, creativity and imagination

Relationships are the basis of children's development

Children's learning and development is deeply rooted in social and relational practice.² Early caregiving relationships, particularly those that foster bonding and attachment, are central to healthy development.³ Strong early bonds mould children's capacity to build meaningful connections with other adults and peers.⁴ Early attachments lay the groundwork for children's ability to relate to other people, regulate emotions and learn to do new things,⁵ building their confidence, independence and resilience. Shared reading provides an ideal context for the kinds of interactions that build these foundational relationships.



Definitions: Bonding and attachment are distinct but interrelated processes. Here we refer to bonding as the moments of emotional closeness between caregiver and child.⁶ Attachment describes how a child develops expectations and behaviours based on their caregiver's responsiveness – using them as a *secure base* from which to explore the world, and a *safe haven* to return to when distressed.⁷ Consistent and sensitive caregiving supports strong attachment, which strengthens a child's emotional, cognitive and social development.⁸



Attachment is not fixed,⁹ it is best understood as a dynamic pattern of expectations about relationships that can evolve across the lifespan. The quality of attachment can vary depending on a child's social and contextual experiences.¹⁰ While attachment theory has traditionally emphasised the bond with a primary caregiver, more recent work highlights that children can also develop a secure network of supportive relationships, including extended family, carers and teachers, who together can provide safe havens and secure bases.¹¹ Because attachment is most open to change in the early years, supportive relationships during this time can be especially protective for children who face difficult circumstances.¹²

Our research with **kinship care families** indicates that shared reading can provide a powerful relational space, helping carers and children communicate, connect and co-regulate, while building a sense of safety and belonging. Find out more in our report: [The relational value of reading: insights from kinship care families.](#)

“ Since Dylan first came to us, our relationship has changed 100%. Before, he kept me at arm's length... Now, with our lovely night-time ritual, including reading stories, he now allows me to give him a little kiss on the head every night. **”**

Foster parent, talking about Letterbox Club (Child's name has been changed)

Bonding and strong attachment are nurtured through simple everyday interactions – where children learn to trust and feel safe through sensitive, responsive care.¹³ Shared reading provides a structured yet gentle way to scaffold these connections, helping them develop naturally over time. It promotes warmth, responsiveness and consistency – key behavioural foundations of both strong attachments and positive developmental outcomes more broadly.¹⁴



Reading supports rich caregiver-child interactions

Growing evidence from randomised trials of shared reading programmes shows benefits for both children and adults, achieved through the strengthening of caregiver-child interactions. This evidence has helped shape global parenting initiatives, including those from the World Health Organization.

To understand the role shared reading can play in developing relationships between children and caregivers, including its outcomes and underlying mechanisms, we need to draw on insights from psychology, early education studies, developmental science and neuroscience.

Enhancing caregiver-child engagement:¹⁵

Shared reading encourages joint attention and attunement, helping caregivers connect with their child.



How it works: It is the emotional quality of shared reading (e.g., cuddling, smiling, singing, and laughing) that supports strong attachment, not the adult's reading skill.¹⁶ When caregivers use strategies such as pausing for the child's response, asking questions, or following the child's gaze, they not only help children to develop their communication and understanding of language, but also become more deeply attuned to the child's inner world.¹⁷



Increasing caregiver warmth,¹⁸ sensitivity¹⁹ and positive caregiving behaviours:²⁰

Shared reading has been successfully used in a number of international trials, either alone or as part of broader sensitivity-focused frameworks, to strengthen adult-child relationships.²¹



How it works: Shared reading provides a structured context for noticing and responding to children's cues, reinforcing supportive interactions. Decades of child development research demonstrates that caregiver sensitivity is one of the most robust predictors of positive child outcomes, such as secure attachment,²² stronger cognitive and language development,²³ improved emotional regulation, and better achievement and enjoyment at school. Shared reading is a natural setting for this sensitivity. As carers tune into their child's signals and respond with warmth, they strengthen their bond while also creating opportunities for learning and development.



Reducing caregiver stress:²⁴ Shared reading provides a predictable and enjoyable activity that helps caregivers feel capable and confident in supporting and connecting with their child. The calming atmosphere that shared reading promotes also supports improved emotional health for carers and children.



How it works: A caregiver's steady presence during reading helps regulate young children's physiological and emotional rhythms, aligning them with the caregiver's and promoting co-regulation.²⁵

“We're breathing in a particular way, but we're also creating these long-term daily rhythms by reading at the same time and every day. When we create these types of structures for children, our children latch onto them and it helps their own rhythms, which are naturally messier, to become more stable, more predictable, more adult like. **”**

Professor Sam Wass, Institute for the Science of Early Years at the University of East London



Quality interactions encourage reading habits

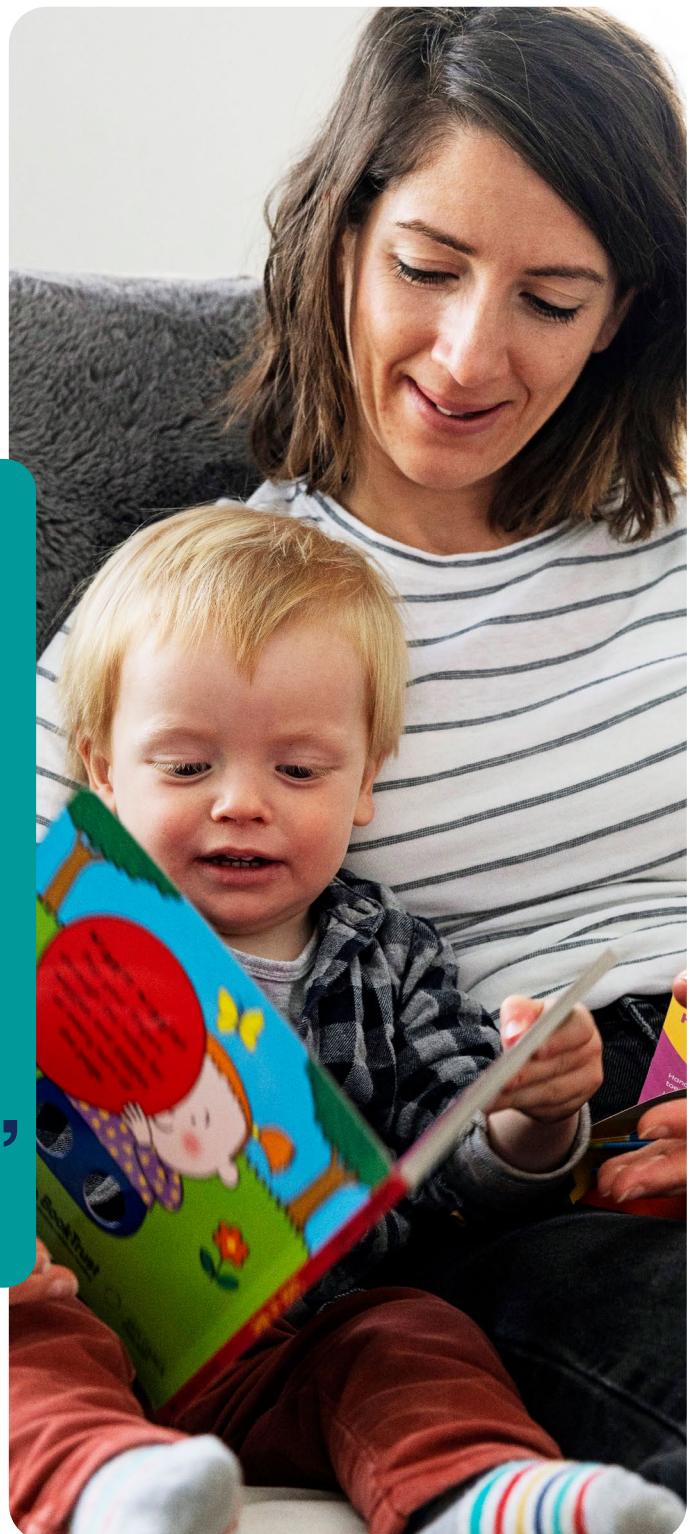
Bonding and attachment are not just outcomes of shared reading, they are part of a reward cycle for parents and carers, as they enjoy seeing their children's growth and experiencing rich, responsive interactions. Our research shows that both short-term and long-term rewards motivate parents and carers to read more with their children. In the moment, shared quality time brings immediate benefits to closeness, while over time, these experiences create treasured rituals.²⁶

When caregivers read in a warm, engaging and interactive way, tuning in to their child's interests and needs, children enjoy books more. This creates a positive feedback loop, where children's enjoyment boosts caregivers' confidence, self-efficacy,²⁷ and sense of reward,²⁸ motivating them to keep reading.

“ When I bring up the *Look at Me* book he immediately starts laughing because I put my two fingers in and we walk, walk, walk, and I go ‘look at me’ and look through the peeps and he can see my eyes and he gets to do that as well. So I think for him it’s a lot more fun... There’s this thing he does that’s really kind of cute, because he knows the books are his, he brings them to you sometimes when he wants you to read to him, and he’s trying to open the book pages. ”

Parent on a lower-income, talking about Bookstart Toddler

Reading support in the early years is most effective when it embraces a positive and celebratory approach. Embedding this within core family services creates additional benefits. Evidence shows that integrating reading support into health visits strengthens families' relationships with healthcare providers.²⁹ Something our partners – including health visitors, who are experts in early attachment and key partners in delivering Bookstart Baby - recognise and value.



Case study: Using Bookstart in Hull's 0-19 Integrated Public Health Nursing Service (Humber Teaching NHS Foundation Trust)

As a health visiting team, supporting bonding and attachment is central to our work. In Hull, where levels of deprivation are high, we take a proactive approach to early intervention. Our broader strategy focuses on giving every child the best start in life, aiming to reduce inequalities and improve long-term outcomes through early engagement. Bookstart is a key thread woven through this wider support framework. It helps us address child and family health inequalities and wider determinants of health.

"As the only universal 0-19 public health nursing service, we work with a diverse population, including families facing economic hardship, social isolation, and language barriers. Many live in areas of high deprivation, and our 0-19 service promotes the importance of the home learning environment and ensures that all families, regardless of background, have access to books." **Rebecca Price, Service Manager**

Our role, as part of the team around the family, is to help parents and carers respond to their child's needs. Shared reading and books are key tools we use to help achieve this.

"It's not just a book. We use books as a prop to help look at how to develop safe nurturing relationships. It's a tool to

practically demonstrate how to engage the child and deepen relationships. We use mirroring and demonstrate the serve-and-return of how to use a book with a young child. We show how the child instantly engages and responds. We support parents and carers to be responsive and attentive to the child, encouraging them to be physically present and close, using stories to create these connections." **Kathryn Stark, Clinical Team Leader**

Books play a vital role in breaking down barriers. We visit families in their homes, which helps us to build strong connections with them. This ensures babies, children and families receive holistic, coordinated support and are effectively linked with wider services. Some families have low trust in children's services, so our team prioritises relationship-building through consistent, non-judgemental engagement. Bookstart's universal nature removes stigma, creating a shared experience across communities, and ensuring families feel included rather than singled out.

“ Books and reading enhance what we are doing universally to support families. We have a high number of attachment challenges across the city, this impacts how children are learning and developing. We intervene and support early to mitigate this adversity. Books help as an ice-breaker... something as simple as a book will get a family to engage with us and we can then support them. **”**

Louise Chadwick, SEND Specialist Practitioner



Embedding reading into the lives of early years families

Parents and carers know shared reading is important, but making it feel rewarding is key to building lasting habits. At BookTrust, we focus on creating enjoyable reading experiences that can be woven into families' daily routines. These moments of connection drive both behaviours and outcomes for families in the early years. They are also fundamental to how our partners engage families in reading.

That's why we take an integrated approach - equipping partners and communities with the books, tools, learning and infrastructure they need to help families create these moments.

We've worked through local networks for over 30 years

Each year, we work with over 19,000 settings across education, libraries, health, children's social care and early help sectors



Our activities

Nationally:
We provide a consistent, foundational infrastructure for early years reading

Locally:
We help identify, connect, and adapt local pathways

Partners:
We build on partners' experience and practice, providing flexible, evidence-informed programmes

Families:
Our books, reading tools, and support make reading and sharing stories fun and easy to weave into daily routines



...shaping conditions that build support for and engagement with reading.

...so services across sectors align and integrate shared reading with broader family support.

...strengthening reading support in the organisations and networks around families.

...sparking enjoyment and emotional connection.

Our outcomes ...



We support 1.4 million children each year



Our impact



Reading becomes part of everyday life



Families enjoy the many benefits of reading - both in the moment and as their children grow

The power of a universal approach:
Health visiting is essential because it aims to reach every family and provides tailored support based on each family's needs. At BookTrust we embrace this principle in our own approach: ensuring all families have access to our support while designing and delivering in a way that works best for those who need it most. This approach means support is proactive and equitable - families receive help without needing to take the first step.

We have a network of over 34,000 partners delivering our programmes

Making a difference for children who need support the most

By the time children start school, inequalities in their development have typically already emerged – and often widen over time. These disparities are not only apparent in children's development but also in early experiences of bonding and attachment.

The most significant factor in bonding and attachment is the quality and consistency of children's relationships with caregivers, which is not dependent on background.³⁰ Many children from socio-economically disadvantaged households get strong support for their early development, but the overall picture is concerning. Challenges created by poverty or socio-economic stressors can affect the caregiving environment. These challenges are linked in the research to reduced sensitive caregiving, less supportive home environments and increased family stress or conflict.³¹ All of which can negatively impact a child's early development.

Reading is for all children – that is the foundation of BookTrust's mission. We focus on children and families in greater need of our support, because they stand to benefit most. That's why we design our programmes around their needs, creating the right pathways to meet them where they are. And it works: 62% of families on low incomes who received Bookstart Toddler and/or Pre-schooler have tried to set up a reading routine at home and 88% agree it's created more opportunities for quality time.³²

88% of our early years partners are concerned about bonding and family relationships.³³ These relationships are fundamental to positive home learning, making it more important than ever to strengthen them through early shared reading.

Reading Rights: books build a brighter future

BookTrust is partnering with Frank Cottrell-Boyce, Waterstones Children's Laureate 2024-26, on the Reading Rights mission – to ensure every child can benefit from shared reading. Our Reading Rights report sets out a shared vision for early childhood reading, shaped by experts across the political, education, literacy, early years, arts, children's social care and health sectors. To make this vision a reality, we must work together to:

- Embed early shared reading into policy and frameworks
- Integrate shared reading into workforce training
- Prioritise access to high-quality, representative books
- Adopt co-ordinated place-based approaches
- Share evidence and support research where gaps in understanding remain.





This report addresses a key gap in the literature by bringing together insights from different disciplines. It explains the role shared reading plays in supporting the relational aspects of the home learning environment and the mechanisms through which it works. While this has received relatively little attention, we believe that by framing shared reading as *relational scaffolding* we can unlock its full potential in supporting our children's development and future outcomes.

To discuss how you can support BookTrust's work, contact us at queries@booktrust.org.uk

To find out more about our research visit our website [BookTrust Research and Impact](#)

We'd like to thank members of our [Learning Oversight Group](#), contributors to our [Reading Rights campaign](#) and, of course, all our Bookstart Coordinators and delivery partners who are innovating, sharing learning and delivering reading support to families.

“ I think she enjoys the time. Just us. No distractions... It gives your brain and everything a little chance to calm down from a busy day, you know? ...I think she's very appreciative of the time that we have together, just us. **”**

Parent on a lower income, receiving Bookstart



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