

Trends, drivers and inequalities in UK childhood reading

BookTrust's National Family Survey Executive Summary

Section 1: Introduction

Reading and sharing stories with children brings wide-ranging benefits that can have a lifelong positive impact. It helps children meet early developmental milestones and do better at school. It develops children's empathy and creativity. It supports bonding, connection and wellbeing, helping children find belonging. It helps overcome inequalities before they deepen.

For families with young children, reading has never been more important, more valued or more at risk. Family life is undeniably complex and this context is shaping reading habits in the early years. Changing societal dynamics and rapid technological change place a range of pressures on families with young children. These pressures are not spread equally, and neither are opportunities for shared reading. As a result, inequalities

in children's experiences begin from their earliest moments. Early shared reading habits, like other aspects of the home learning environment, vary across families. Small but repeated variations in everyday routines and interactions build up over time, gradually shaping children's developmental trajectories in lasting ways.

About this research

This report draws on a wide range of evidence to interpret significant findings from three national surveys of parents and carers with young children. The core dataset is a representative quota sample of 3,508 parents and carers of children aged 0–8 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, surveyed online between 16 October and 5 November 2025. Trend reporting draws on two earlier surveys in 2021 and 2022 which used comparable methods.



Section 2: Reading enjoyment, habits and trends

Our research shows that reading¹ is highly valued, emotionally rewarding and widely practised among families with children aged 0–8. Young children’s enjoyment of reading has increased. Yet despite this broad engagement, daily shared reading has fallen markedly and frequent shared reading (four days a week or more) has also declined in recent years. It appears that although motivation remains high, maintaining a reading habit has become harder over time.



of parents and carers report high levels of enjoyment from reading with their child.



of children are reported to like or love reading – **rising from 65% in 2021.**



of children are read with daily – **falling from 60% in 2021.**



of children are read with frequently (four days a week or more) – **falling from 80% in 2021.**



Section 3: Inequalities in early reading

Our findings suggest reading habits vary across groups in ways that reflect broader inequalities in time, routine stability, resources and caregiving support. These conditions shape not only families’ opportunity to read together, but also how easy and sustainable shared reading feels in everyday life. The greatest inequalities appear where multiple pressures cluster together. These pressures are more likely to affect some groups than others, including families on low incomes.

Analysis of responses from parents and carers of children aged 0–8 suggests that bedtime reading follows a clear income gradient. 50% of children in the lowest income households read or are read to as part of their bedtime routine, compared with 56% in low-income households and 69% in non-low-income households. This interpretation is reinforced by a clear association between bedtime routine stability and daily shared reading. Among families who follow a bedtime routine about half the time or more, 52% report that their child is read with daily by an adult, compared with 31% of those who rarely follow a routine or have none.

¹ In our survey, ‘reading’ is defined in age-appropriate ways that reflect how young children typically engage with books, including reading, sharing, looking at or playing with books.

Section 4: Conditions that shape early reading habits

Families want their children to spend more time reading, but many feel they require help to make this happen.



of parents and carers want their children to spend more time with books and stories.



of parents and carers report at least one challenge to sharing books with their child.



of parents and carers would like to receive more information and support to help their child spend more time with books and stories.

Barriers lie in the everyday conditions that shape families' capability and opportunity to read together. Alongside families' own motivations, these conditions either build resilience or undermine reading habits in the early years. These elements are closely interrelated: capability and opportunity shape how motivating shared reading feels in everyday life.

We identify the following factors as important:

Capability – reading cultures, parental knowledge and confidence, and perceptions of effort.

Opportunity – time, capacity, routine stability, supportive networks and access to books.

Motivation – enjoyment, emotional reward, self-efficacy and experiencing the benefits.



Section 5: Effective solutions

Our findings indicate early reading habits are eroding not because families have stopped valuing reading, but because the effort required to sustain it increases under pressure. This makes it more important than ever to strengthen the foundations that support families to read together.

Establishing shared reading in the first year of life may help protect longer-term reading habits. 58% of children who were read with in their first year are read with daily, compared with 31% of those who started later.

Increasing equity in book access through strong public library systems with properly resourced outreach; access in early years settings, family hubs, schools and community groups; and importantly, in the home, is central to building supportive reading foundations for all children.

Providing support is especially important when supportive conditions are fragile. Families benefit from reassurance, practical guidance and modelling, to make shared reading feel simpler and less demanding.

Strengthening social and professional reinforcement around reading and ensuring that families facing the greatest structural pressures receive proportionately greater support is essential. Reading support should be integrated across the services around families, including health visiting, early years settings, libraries, schools, community organisations, family hubs, early help and children’s social care services, to ensure consistent and joined-up provision and reinforcement.

Evidence clearly demonstrates the impact of embedding reading support into the networks around families with young children. For over 30 years Bookstart has been providing this foundational infrastructure across England, Wales and Northern Ireland – in partnership with almost 5,700 early years education settings, around two-thirds of health visitors, over 2,500 libraries, more than 1,000 multi-agency family-support organisations (including over 300 family hubs), and over 170 charities and community groups. Across the 0–5 age range, Bookstart Baby, Toddler, Pre-schooler and Storytime provide families with high-quality books, practical information and engaging activities, alongside resources and guidance that help professionals to deliver

effective reading behaviour-change support. Reaching 90% of families with new babies and 33% of 1–4-year-olds in families on low incomes, these programmes support families at key moments, helping to establish and reinforce the conditions that protect shared reading.

Section 6: Concluding reflections

At a time of rising economic pressures, many families are experiencing increased strain, making the conditions in which young children are growing and developing more challenging. As a result, inequalities in children’s early outcomes continue to grow. Early shared reading, with its proven developmental benefits, is a powerful way to reduce these inequalities. But complex pressures on family life, combined with unequal access to time, resources and supportive environments, appear to be making reading harder. Parents and carers find it rewarding and they tell us their children enjoy it. The appetite is there – what is missing are the right conditions. System change is needed to reverse the decline and ensure inequalities in early reading habits are reduced. Tackling these inequalities will require greater and sustained cross-sector investment in early reading, supported by partnerships that recognise its role in children’s life chances.



About BookTrust

BookTrust is the UK’s largest children’s reading charity. We work with over 34,000 delivery partners, operating in every local authority. Each year we reach over 1.4 million children and families across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Together with our partners we deliver 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. **Visit booktrust.org.uk to find out more or contact queries@booktrust.org.uk.**

Our thanks go to Arts Council England and Enterprise Mobility for generously supporting this research, to our **Learning Oversight Group** for their guidance, and to all the families who shared their time and experiences with us.