

# Reading in the Early Years: supporting generational cycles of readers

Research with families from low-income backgrounds in the UK

## Introduction

Research shows that reading in the early years brings a wide range of immediate and lifelong benefits that can transform children's life chances. Sharing stories with babies and toddlers creates special moments of closeness, shared attention and enjoyment. In turn this supports bonding, positive attachment and wellbeing in families. Children who have regular exposure to books and stories experience important developmental benefits such as improved language skills, social-emotional growth, and creativity. [Read more about the benefits of reading.](#)

Our recent research highlights the extent of the influence that parental reading enjoyment has on nurturing generational reading habits. Parents and carers who themselves like reading, for their own enjoyment, open up more opportunities for their children on their reading journeys. These parents/carers foster mutual exchanges of positive emotions when

sharing books and stories, which motivate their children to read, and in the longer term, create a generational cycle of enthusiastic readers.

At BookTrust we recognise that child and parental enjoyment of reading are key factors that can contribute to children's development as readers. And we know that childhood enjoyment of reading is in overall decline<sup>1</sup>. Building enjoyment of shared reading moments for children and those who can share books and stories with them is therefore at the heart of what we do. Our programmes are designed to create positive, interactive and enriching reading experiences for both children and adults. Working closely with our experienced partners, we provide extra tailored support to families who face more barriers to enjoying shared reading. Our vision is for all families to share books and stories across generations, nurturing generational cycles of reading.



**65%**

parents/carers themselves like reading.

**35%**

of parents/carers do not



**76%**

of children (aged 0–7) with parents/carers who themselves like reading enjoy reading, compared with

**54%**

of children whose parents/carers do not like reading



**68%**

of children (aged 4–6) with parents/carers who themselves like reading are read to daily, compared with

**52%**

of children whose parents/carers do not



**90%**

of children (aged 4–7) with parents/carers who themselves like reading are regularly encouraged to read, compared with

**70%**

of children whose parents/carers do not



**55%**

of children (aged 0–7) with parents/carers who themselves like reading are registered with a public library, compared with

**43%**

of children whose parents/carers do not

## Research methodology

Figures in this document draw on BookTrust's 2022 Family Survey. This online study of 2,148 parents and carers of children aged 0–7 living in low-income households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland was conducted between April and June 2022. This briefing also includes insights from BookTrust's recent qualitative research with families and practitioners, our first Family Survey conducted in 2021, and wider academic research literature.

To note: we use the term 'low-income families' to indicate those living in relative poverty as defined by the Department for Work and Pensions.

## What does this research tell us?

Our research highlights the extent to which parents'/carers' own enjoyment of reading influences their children's enthusiasm for reading and the reading habits their children develop.



Figure 1. Generational cycles of reading

Parents/carers who like reading themselves, for their own enjoyment, are more likely to establish early shared reading as an integral part of family life. 59% of parents/carers in this group view reading as a significant part of their family life (compared with 38% of those who do not like reading).

A wide body of evidence shows that the emotional quality of shared reading experiences, more than parental reading skills, sparks children's interest in reading<sup>2</sup>. In shared reading moments, pleasure and positive interactions flow reciprocally between the adult and the child. Our findings show that parents/carers who themselves like reading, express greater interest in sharing books and

stories with their children than those who do not (50% vs. 29%) and find the experience more rewarding (61% vs. 39%).

These positive feelings enable these parents/carers to deliver emotional warmth, excitement and responsiveness during the times spent reading with their children, which nurture children's motivation and engagement. 81% of parents/carers who like reading themselves influence their children's enjoyment of reading, compared with 64% of those who do not.

Children whose parents/carers enjoy reading themselves are more likely to experience different shared reading activities, including rhymes, storytelling, and book reading. They are also more likely to have access to books, such as through library membership, and to be regularly encouraged by their parents/carers to read<sup>3</sup>.

Our findings indicate that children with parents/carers who like reading themselves are more likely to develop a long-lasting love for reading. At the start of school<sup>4</sup>, 85% of children of enthusiastic readers like reading, compared with 55% of those with parents/carers who themselves do not enjoy reading. And children aged 3–7 who enjoy reading are twice as likely to read independently every day than those who do not (55% vs. 25%). We also know that those read to as children are more inclined to become parents/carers who share books and stories with their own children<sup>5</sup>, perpetuating this cycle across generations.

### About this briefing

In sharing our findings on the role of parental enjoyment in shaping children's reading habits, we want to highlight the importance of supporting families to enjoy sharing books and stories together, creating a generational cycle of reading.

Our other 2023 research briefings from our Early Childhood Reading Habits series can be read here: [Reading in the Early Years](#) and [The role of multiple 'reading influencers' in supporting children's reading journeys](#)

## How BookTrust is supporting generational reading cycles

**Supporting Positive Cycles:** We know that when parents/carers transmit enjoyment of shared reading moments this also makes children more likely to enjoy shared reading experiences. Parents/carers can be motivated to share books and stories when they see their children's enjoyment<sup>6</sup>. However we understand that some parents/carers who lack confidence in reading and/or experience of being read to as a child themselves, may need extra support to get reading with their children.

At BookTrust we spark family enjoyment through creating fun reading experiences for both children and adults, and through building parental confidence. Working closely with our local delivery partners, we provide non-judgmental guidance and role modelling, helping to reduce anxiety that might make sharing books stressful for some parents/carers. All BookTrust offers, such as [our new Bookstart Toddler packs](#), include attractive, easy to use, and interactive books and activities related to books. These prompt families to engage in reading in ways that lead to parental and child enjoyment and build reading habits.



“ When my child was a baby I hadn't really thought about what sorts of books to get as I thought he was too young to enjoy books, but when I received the Bookstart Baby pack I saw him responding to them even though he was so small ... I was suffering from postnatal depression and using this book was a good bonding activity with my baby and helped us connect a lot more.

**Mother, Bookstart Baby Evaluation, 2021**



**Expanding Positive Cycles:** [Our research](#) highlights opportunities to expand generational reading cycles. Many children are read to by several people in their lives, including grandparents, siblings, and teachers. The more people in a child's life who share books and stories with them and transmit a love of reading, the stronger the generational cycles of building future readers become.

BookTrust resources are designed to be used and enjoyed by multiple 'reading influencers' in a child's life. [Our digital resources](#) for families show grandparents and siblings enjoying shared reading moments, to raise awareness of how other 'reading influencers' can support children on their reading journeys.

**Addressing Negative Cycles:** Our research reveals specific barriers to creating strong generational reading cycles. It shows, for example, that parents/carers tend to be more positive about sharing books and stories with their daughters than with their sons, and that boys are less likely to be read to regularly than girls. Many parents/carers report that their sons quickly lose interest in reading or are "too active to sit down and listen to a story".

In BookTrust offers and messaging we reassure families that there is no right or wrong way to read, and that children can actively engage with a story whether through play, with actions, on the move, or outdoors. [Our BookTrust Storytime library offer](#), for example, is designed to challenge parents'/carers' concerns that children should sit and be quiet when enjoying books in libraries.

“My child was so much in love with the pack that she was excited to try everything in the pack. I was also excited about it and it prompted me to read with my child. It is fun, educational and beautiful.”

**Father, Bookstart Toddler and Pre-schooler Evaluation, 2022/23**



BookTrust and our extensive network of partners are working hard to get and keep families reading together from the earliest moments in a child’s life – so that this generation of children can enjoy the wide and important benefits that reading brings.

We are committed to getting this right for children and families. Designing ever stronger support, via ever stronger partnerships for ever more children who most need this support is our mission. Where we are successful in this we know children stand to benefit from better cognitive and social development, wellbeing, school readiness and attainment. And we know that in the longer term reading can play an important role in helping to break the cycle of poverty for children.

This research draws attention to the role of enjoyment of not just children but also of people who share books and stories with them as a key factor in creating the next generation of readers and storytellers. In sharing it we hope to further increase support for parents and others to enjoy early shared reading moments with their children today.”

**Ruthann Hughes, Director of Research and Impact, BookTrust**

## About BookTrust

As the UK’s largest children’s reading charity, we want every child to read regularly and by choice. We reach millions of children and families every year, inspiring them with books and resources to get them started on their reading journey. We provide a wide range of carefully curated and designed books, resources and support to help families start sharing stories and to continue reading throughout childhood. We offer more targeted support to families from low-income and vulnerable backgrounds because we know these children stand to benefit the most from the benefits of reading.

Our support, designed to deliver reading behaviour change, is based on robust evidence including research with parents, grandparents, other caregivers and practitioners. We understand and design for the very diverse structures, circumstances and preferences of early years families in the UK.

Thanks to an extraordinary network of partners, including local authorities, early years settings, schools, libraries, and more across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we are able to reach families where they are, in their local communities.



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## Endnotes

- 1 Nielsen (2023). Understanding the UK Children’s Book Consumer 2022.
- 2 Sonnenschein, S. & Munsterman, K. (2002). The influence of home-based reading interactions on 5-year-olds’ reading motivations and early literacy development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 17(3), 318–337; Landry, S. H. et al. (2012). The effects of a responsive parenting intervention on parent-child interactions during shared book reading. *Dev Psychol*, 40(4): 969-986.
- 3 Previous research on this topic also showed a link between parental enjoyment and the number of children’s books in their home (see, for example, Egan, S. M. et al. (2022). From stories at bedtime to a love of reading: Parental practices and beliefs about reading with infants. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 0(0)), and that between parental reading habits and children’s reading habits through role modelling (see, for example, Sullivan, A. (2007). Cultural capital, cultural knowledge, and ability. *Sociological Research Online*, 12(6)).
- 4 Reception in England and Wales, Year 1 in Northern Ireland.
- 5 Reed, A. (2013). BookTrust Reading Habits Survey 2013: A national survey of reading habits and attitudes to books amongst adults in England.
- 6 Preece, J. & Levy, R. (2020). Understanding the barriers and motivations to shared reading with young children: The role of enjoyment and feedback. *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 20(4), 631-654.