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**Story Explorers
Evaluation
2024-25**



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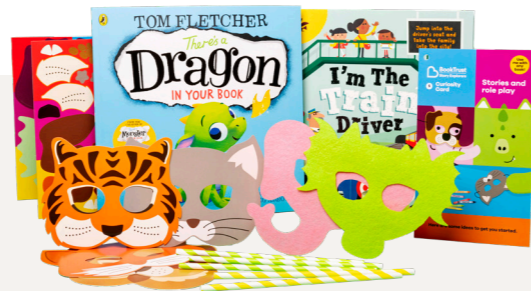
“ Every child deserves books that make them gasp with laughter, thrill with adventure and widen their horizons so they can gaze at the world from new perspectives. Books take us out of ourselves; books can be our buffer during tough times.”
**Patrice Lawrence MBE,
Children’s Author**

About BookTrust
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.



Introduction

In the early years, relationships are crucial to children's development. Story Explorers helps caregivers harness the power of shared reading, through stories and playful activities, to help children in adoption, foster and kinship care feel calmer, closer and more confident in their relationships. The programme is a key part of BookTrust's commitment to creating reading experiences that support comfort, stability and belonging for the children who need it most.



About Story Explorers


Story Explorers is an evidence-informed programme for early years children in adoptive, foster and kinship families. Co-designed with almost 100 parents, carers and children with lived experience, the programme supports families to build strong bonds and feelings of attachment by developing a sense of comfort, stability and belonging through joyful story sharing at home.


Families taking part receive six monthly kits, delivered directly to their home, each containing books and resources that equip carers with meaningful and practical tools to support a nurturing home environment.


For practitioners, Story Explorers provides a resource that can be embedded within their practice, providing a consistent home-based activity that strengthens family stability and supports positive outcomes for children.


About this report

This report shares findings from our scaling pilot, which included:

 **22 in-depth interviews** with foster carers, kinship carers, adoptive parents and birth parentsⁱ who received Story Explorers

 **In-depth conversations** with professionals working with families in six of our pilot organisations

 **32 responses** to our parent/carer survey

 **23 postcards/photos** from children (we see children as active participants and use child-friendly ways to listen to their voices)

 **Process learning with 28 organisations**, including local authority teams, independent fostering agencies, voluntary adoption agencies and charities

The themes outlined in this briefing are based on the experiences and views of those we spoke to and may not be representative of all families receiving Story Explorers. Names of children and parents/carers have been changed to protect anonymity.

ⁱ In one local authority, Story Explorers was extended to families receiving early help support through family hubs.



Families provide children with stability, connection and belonging in many different forms, and children's sense of security can be nurtured through a wide network of caring relationships.¹ Story Explorers celebrates and strengthens these bonds across all types of families.

Thank you

We would like to thank all the organisations involved in our learning, particularly Kinship, The Fostering Network and Adoption Focus for supporting our co-design, and Tameside Virtual School and the National Fostering Group for supporting our in-depth learning with families. We also thank all the children who took part and their caregivers who play such an important role.

Key findings

Parents/carers and practitioners tell us that Story Explorers helps strengthen both reading habits and relationships. These outcomes matter in their own right, but are also important because simple, consistent relational experiences like shared reading help to build children's sense of permanence, safety and ultimately belonging.

“ We have always read to her and used the hard books with music buttons and flaps. There was always a slight element of enjoyment, but it has only been in recent weeks we have seen her show her own interest in books. The first book she received from you was Julia Donaldson's book *Postman Bear*, and there were tears of joy in our house a few weeks ago when she took the book herself and started turning the pages by herself and spending some time looking at each page. Thank you for these books – they are very much appreciated and have had a big impact on a foster child's life.”

Foster carer

1. Strengthening reading habits

- **25 out of 32 parent/carers** say that their child has spoken or interacted more during shared reading since using the kits
- **27 out of 32 parents/carers** say their child now seeks out or looks forward to opportunities to share books and stories as part of their day
- **24 out of 32 parents/carers** say they believe more strongly in the benefits of reading for their child after receiving Story Explorers

Why this is important:

Research shows that when shared reading is interactive and mutually enjoyable, children are more motivated to seek it out, caregivers find it more rewarding² and families read together more often. Each positive experience builds, creating a cycle that is driven by both carer and child to embed shared reading into everyday life. Early shared reading has clear developmental benefits that help reduce inequalities³, but arguably its greatest strength lies in nurturing rich caregiver-child interactions⁴, which is the foundation of strong relational care.

Case study

Bath and North East Somerset (BANES) Alternative Care Team

Through the work of the Alternative Care Team, 14 kinship care families with children aged 2-4 took part in Story Explorers, using subscriptions fully funded as part of a programme of work for the DfE National Kinship Care Strategy. Within BANES, each kinship care family is allocated a worker who has regular touch points with the family. This is a great opportunity to find out how the families are using the kits and gain valuable insights while promoting and encouraging families to use the resources.

“ Story Explorers is a really lovely opportunity to offer our carers. It provides tangible support that is fun and engaging, while actively promoting attachment and connection. It's refreshing to be able to offer something beyond advice and guidance, as carers don't often receive practical resources they can use at home. While we run activities and support groups, this directly supports the carer-child relationship in everyday family life, making it a truly valuable and ready-to-use resource.”

Cat Reeves, Deputy Team Manager, Family Placement Team



2. Strengthening relationships

- **29 out of 32 parents/carers** say their children enjoy using the kits
- **31 out of 32 parents/carers** say they enjoy using the kits with their children
- **20 out of 33 parents/carers** say Story Explorers has created more opportunities to spend quality time with their children

“ He wanted to come and sit with [me]... he didn't at the beginning. You would just obviously read, but the interaction becomes more... he turns the pages, and it's become very much part of his bedtime routine that he's going to read a story before bed.”

Foster carer



Why this is important:

Research shows that early caregiving relationships, particularly those that foster bonding and attachment, are central to healthy development.⁵ Shared reading provides an ideal context for warmth, responsiveness and consistency – the behavioural foundations of strong, supportive relationships. Because sustaining these kinds of interactions can require persistence and tenacity from caregivers, playful shared reading support provides a gentle framework that ultimately helps caregivers to consistently offer closeness. For children in adoptive, foster and kinship care, everyday acts of care, such as reading together, can be reparative and help create a sense of belonging.⁶ This is because shared reading supports caregivers to offer relational predictability or show support during dysregulation, helping strengthen children's internal sense of safety.⁷

Case study

National Fostering Group

National Fostering Group provides Story Explorers to families across 11 of its agencies. Their Head of Impact ensures practitioners are as much a part of the programme as the families. The monthly home delivery model means it's easy to set up. In some agencies practitioners have created WhatsApp groups for carers to share photos, ideas and encouragement (around a third of foster carers being highly engaged in the group in one agency), while others use monthly supervision sessions to check in and see how the programme is going.

“Giving them that time, that one-to-one time, it's really helping with the bonding and giving them something that they can both focus on together – this fun.”

Family Support Worker

While brief moments of mutual enjoyment over a shared story may seem like a small thing, research from young children's perspectives shows that these everyday events and routines are how they develop a sense of belonging, learning over time “how this family does family”.⁸



In-depth findings

Findings from our pilot learning align with growing evidence from international randomised controlled trials of shared reading programmes – showing benefits for both children and adults can be achieved through the nurturing of caregiver-child interactions.⁹ We found that Story Explorers can create a simple yet powerful shared space between children and their caregivers, a bridge that enhances communication, co-regulation and relational closeness. Offering children a way to express emotions and experiences, while helping caregivers remain present, attuned and confident in responding to their needs.

Designed to make a difference

Story Explorers was developed through extensive co-design with professionals, parents/carers, and children in adoption, foster and kinship care. Using their insights alongside our own expertise in early years and reading, we designed Story Explorers using an evidence-informed, human-centred approach. This approach centres children and reflects the strengths and challenges of adoptive, foster and kinship families. Our pilot learning highlights the value of this design.

Carers gain deeper insight into children's thoughts, feelings and inner worlds.



Children feel safe, seen and supported through warm, consistent interactions.

“The books helped a lot, for both of us. It helps her because, it's helping her to improve her communication skills and understanding, and it's help us, like our connection because it's a time we can share together and have fun... It's like a bridge. We used to struggle to communicate with Rocio, so this has been very, very important.”

Adoptive parent

1. Novelty and curiosity

Story Explorers sparks curiosity, excitement and shared exploration. The variety of books and resources creates moments of discovery that have drawn children and adults together, helping children feel included through new shared experiences and making reading feel enjoyable and rewarding.

- **Fresh, engaging experiences:** Each kit introduces new themes, stories and materials that have sparked curiosity and sustained interest.
- **Playful and fun:** The different items and books in each kit have fostered joy and imagination, helping caregivers and children explore together.



Case study

Shared inspiration

Alessia has been a foster carer for 11 years and is currently caring for five children, with the youngest three receiving Story Explorers. Her agency set up a WhatsApp group for carers receiving Story Explorers. One carer shared a photo of a star-covered beanbag, chosen to match the stars in the 'create your reading den' kit. Alessia loved the idea, so she created a reading corner with the stars from the kits, a star beanbag and a few other soft chairs. “They know when we sit on those chairs, it's reading time. No other toys, just the books.” The children loved it from the start, and the space became a sanctuary, where they could spend time together and fully immerse themselves in the stories without distraction. Alessia told us, “Before, we tried to do reading and it was a bit chaotic, but because they're physically getting the books through the post and they're their books, they want to read them – they want to sit down... So, it's a lot calmer and we are reading a lot more books.” The children's reaction to Story Explorers inspired Alessia even further. She now creates her own 'Story Explorer kits' at home to send back to her house so the children can continue enjoying the excitement of discovering new books of their own.

2. Practicality and ease of use

Story Explorers strengthens what families already do well. It is easy to pick up and use, helping families create more shared moments in their day. The simplicity of the materials supports caregivers to embed reading into routines without added pressure.

Case study

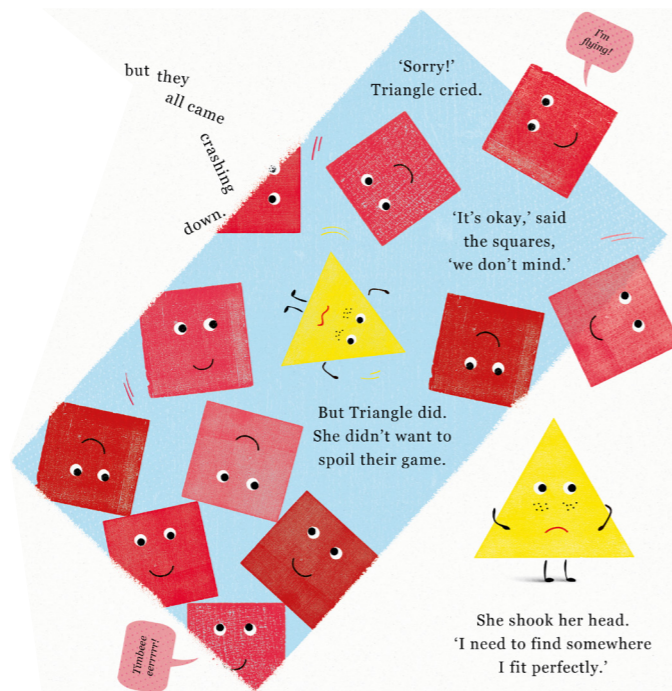
The Perfect Fit – how books open up conversations

The books have been carefully selected and have prompted meaningful conversations around emotions, feelings and identity. One book, *The Perfect Fit*, has helped families discuss and explore emotions in multiple ways. In one instance, this offered an opportunity to validate the child's own experience and provide reassurance. In another, it offered an opportunity to learn to recognise the emotions of others.

"When he felt sad that the triangle wasn't fitting in with any of the other shapes I had a conversation... It's OK to feel different. Because Mike will sometimes say he's strange and I have to remind him that he's not strange... It's OK because everyone's going to be friends and she can fit somewhere else." **Birth mother**

"Identifying emotions, that's something she's recently done... I know for a fact she picked up from the faces in the book, *The Perfect Fit*, how those people were feeling." **Kinship carer**

- **Developmentally aligned content:** Parents/carers told us that the materials feel doable and enjoyable for both themselves and the children in their care, making it easier to get involved and reducing barriers to engagement.
- **Conversation starters:** The prompts and activities in the kits have made it easy for families to include into their daily routines, creating meaningful interactions from ordinary moments.



The Perfect Fit by Naomi and James Jones, published by Oxford University Press

3. Repeated engagement

Most families value shared reading, the challenge is finding the time and energy to make it a regular habit. The kits help reduce the effort required and regular delivery creates a predictable rhythm of engagement.

- **Reading beyond bedtime:** The availability and continuity of the kits has supported reading more frequently, both at bedtime but also at different times of the day.
- **Carer engagement:** In addition to the information in the kits, monthly emails are sent to carers, with around 50% of carers opening emails monthly and 10% seeking out further resources on the Story Explorers online hub.



Case study

Practical support to encourage quality time

Emma, a working mother of three, has found that as life has become busier, reading with her children has become less frequent, only a few times a week. Story Explorers has helped reintroduce more structured reading time into their days. With the kits available, Emma is now choosing to use them in free moments. "It was really, really nice and made me feel really good, because the time we have together in the evening is quite minimal. It would have been easier to just give them 15–20 more minutes on the tablet... But because I had the kits, that encouraged me to say no, I want to go and spend that bit more time with them and make use of it." For her, the kits have made a difference, helping make the most of her limited time with her youngest. And for her children, opening and exploring the kits has led to greater interest and ownership of the reading experience.



4. Ownership and agency

Kits are addressed to the child and are theirs to keep, which encourages their active participation. For some children, feeling remembered and having something that is their own also supports a wider sense of security and belonging.

- **Signalling ownership:**

Parents/carers report children have responded very positively to having something addressed to them, that feels like it is truly theirs.

- **Promoting agency:**

This sense of ownership increases independence, confidence and self-directed engagement.



Case study

Amara's journey to belonging

Erica, a foster carer, is currently looking after Amara and Alexander. Both children have enjoyed the kits, but Amara in particular has really enjoyed receiving the books and activities. She has collected all the items into one box, labelled it with her name, and taken it into her room "so no one can touch it". She now spends more time on her own, reading and playing with the kits. This shift is an important indicator of felt safety, no longer needing to constantly check that Erica and her husband were still there. Amara is an early riser, and the Story Explorers books provide a calming activity she can do on her own at that time. Shared time reading and playing with the kits with Erica has encouraged Amara to talk about her feelings, particularly in relation to her birth family. She has voiced the hope, "When we go back to mummy maybe she can do this with us", indicating shared reading has become part of her understanding of family and belonging.

What children have to say

How do you feel about your Story Explorer kits?
Please circle one emoji

☹️ ☹️ 😐 😊 😍

Tell us in one word how reading makes you feel
(ask an adult to help you write this down)

It makes me feel happy and excited.

Your feedback may be shared in our marketing. For example, on our website, social media or emails.

How do you feel about your Story Explorer kits?
Please circle one emoji

☹️ ☹️ 😐 😊 😍

Tell us in one word how reading makes you feel
(ask an adult to help you write this down)

I want to read it again and again.

Your feedback may be shared in our marketing. For example, on our website, social media or emails.

How do you feel about your Story Explorer kits?
Please circle one emoji

☹️ ☹️ 😐 😊 😍

Tell us in one word how reading makes you feel
(ask an adult to help you write this down)

Happy + Rainbow

Your feedback may be shared in our marketing. For example, on our website, social media or emails.

How do you feel about your Story Explorer kits?
Please circle one emoji

☹️ ☹️ 😐 😊 😍

Tell us in one word how reading makes you feel
(ask an adult to help you write this down)

happy

Your feedback may be shared in our marketing. For example, on our website, social media or emails.

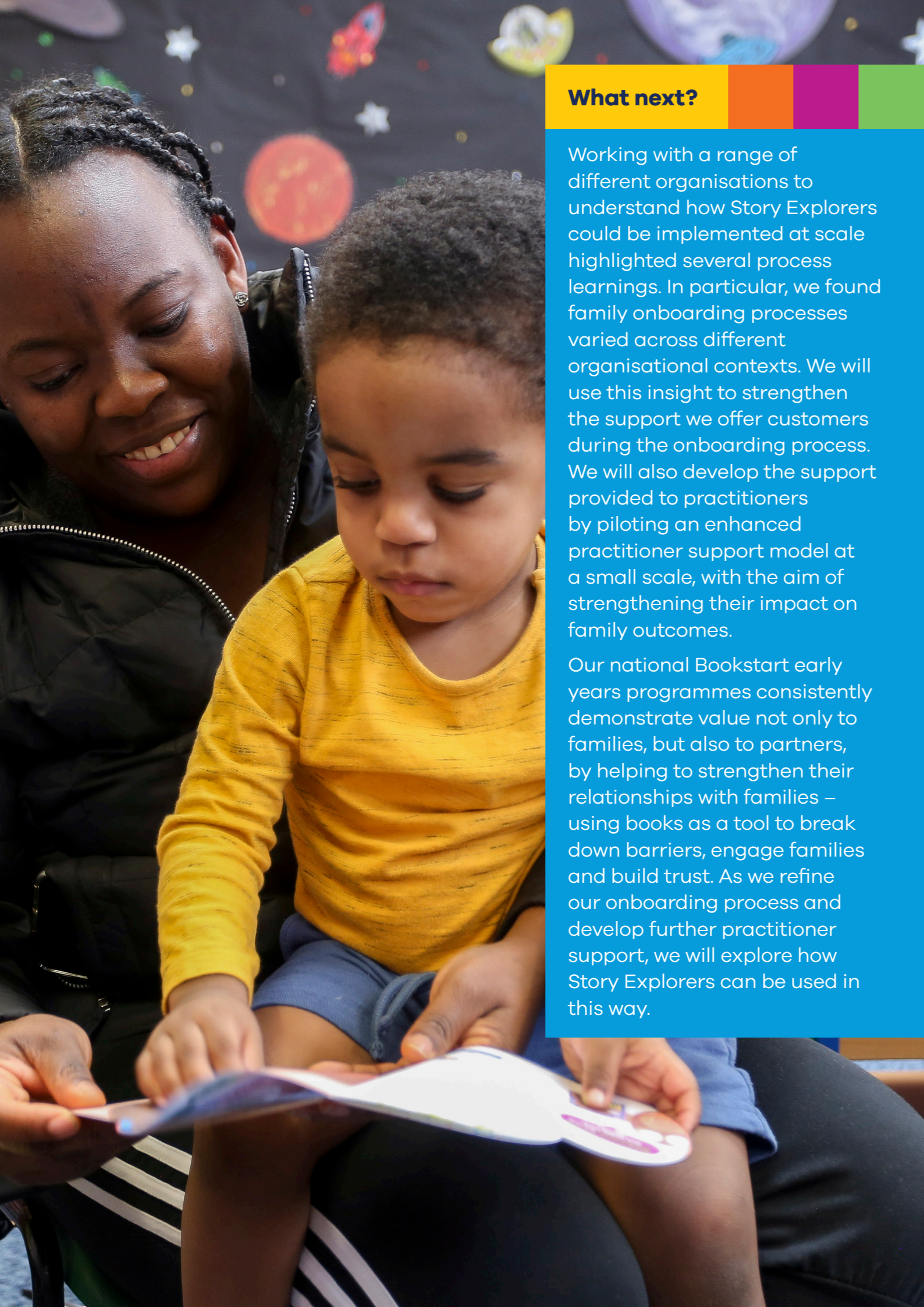
How do you feel about your Story Explorer kits?
Please circle one emoji

🏳️‍🌈 ☹️ ☹️ 😐 😊 😍

Tell us in one word how reading makes you feel
(ask an adult to help you write this down)

INCREDIBLE!

Your feedback may be shared in our marketing. For example, on our website, social media or emails.



What next?

Working with a range of different organisations to understand how Story Explorers could be implemented at scale highlighted several process learnings. In particular, we found family onboarding processes varied across different organisational contexts. We will use this insight to strengthen the support we offer customers during the onboarding process. We will also develop the support provided to practitioners by piloting an enhanced practitioner support model at a small scale, with the aim of strengthening their impact on family outcomes.

Our national Bookstart early years programmes consistently demonstrate value not only to families, but also to partners, by helping to strengthen their relationships with families – using books as a tool to break down barriers, engage families and build trust. As we refine our onboarding process and develop further practitioner support, we will explore how Story Explorers can be used in this way.

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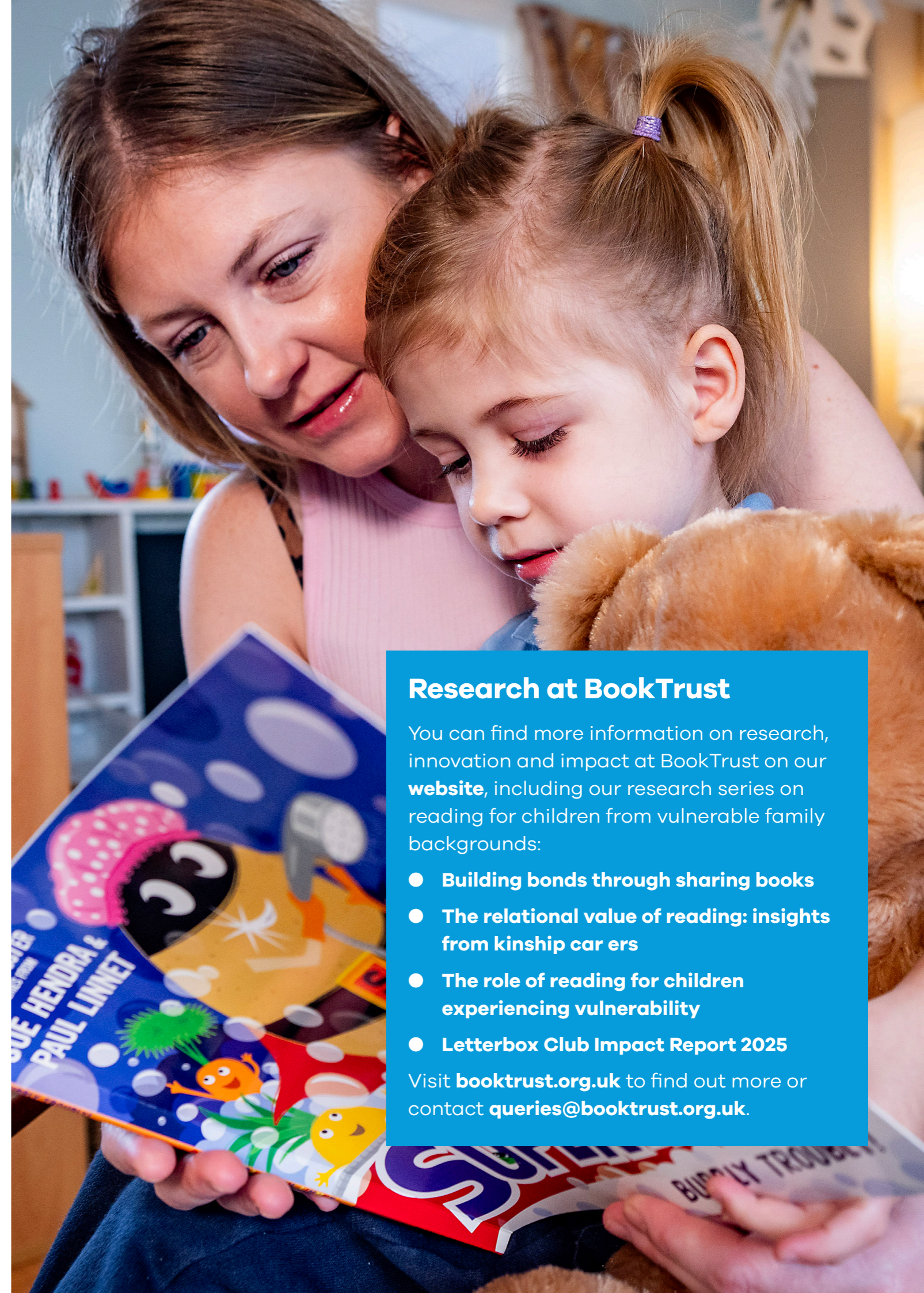
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Research at BookTrust

You can find more information on research, innovation and impact at BookTrust on our **website**, including our research series on reading for children from vulnerable family backgrounds:

- **Building bonds through sharing books**
- **The relational value of reading: insights from kinship carers**
- **The role of reading for children experiencing vulnerability**
- **Letterbox Club Impact Report 2025**

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