



# Cultivating belonging through shared reading

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21 April 2026



**In the chat, please share your name, role and organisation.**

**Please share one word that comes to mind when you think about belonging in your work.**

# Housekeeping

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- We will be recording this webinar and will share it with you all afterwards
- We will also share these slides with you, so watch out for an email from us in your inbox in a couple of days
- Your microphone is muted, but please submit any questions in the Q&A or chat box and our panel will answer as many as they can

# Agenda

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- **Welcome and introduction**
- **Keynote** - Dr Lisa Cherry including Q&A session
- **BookTrust research on belonging and shared reading** - Dr Fiona Abades-Barclay
- **Discussion** with Amy Salter, Sutton Virtual School

# Who we are

We're 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 and with every local authority, delivering evidence-informed programmes that make a measurable difference to children's reading behaviours.

## Our vision

is a world where reading is part of the everyday life of all children and families

## Our purpose

is to get children from low-income or vulnerable family backgrounds reading regularly and by choice, so that they experience the lifelong, transformative benefits of reading

# Cultivating a sense of belonging through shared reading

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Dr Lisa Cherry



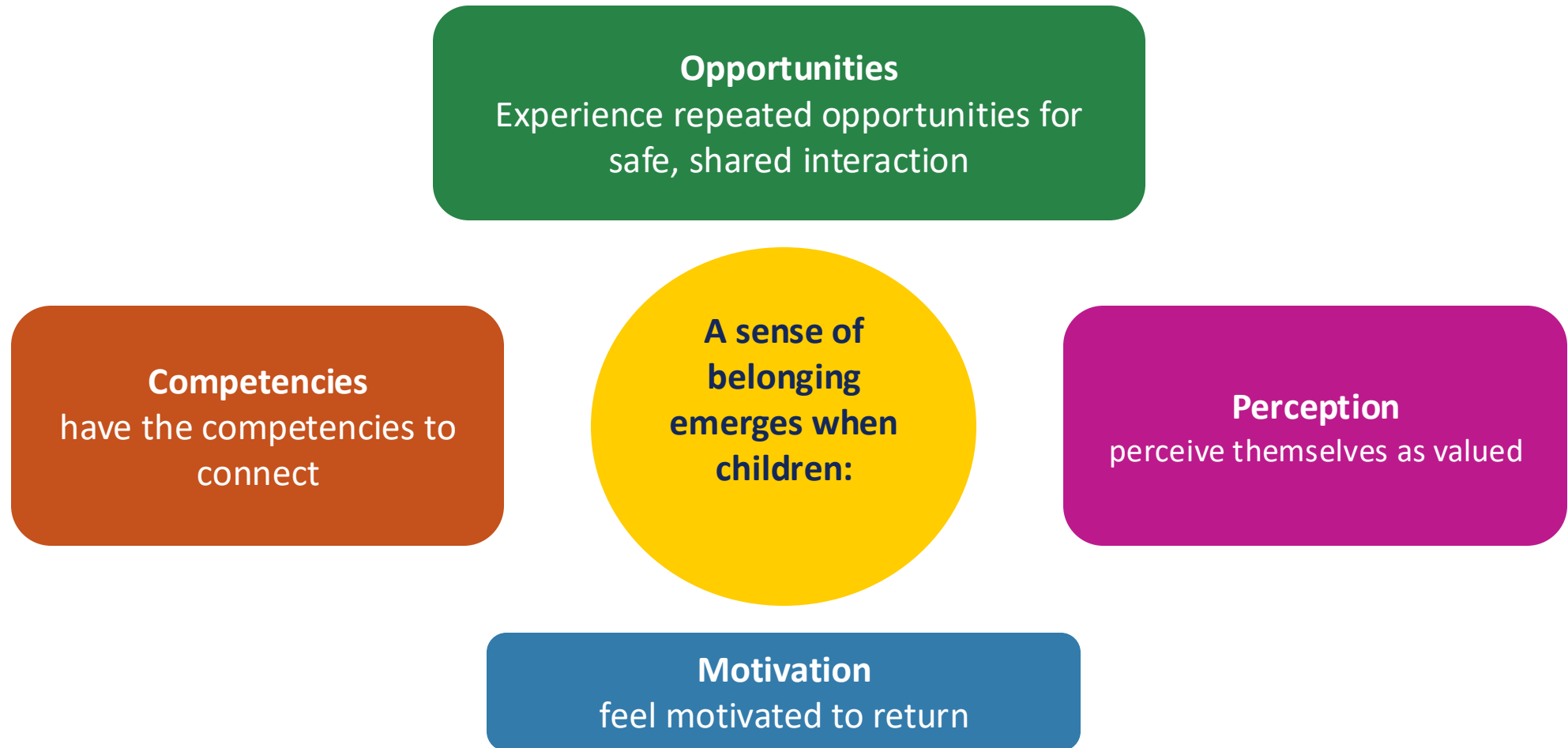
# Belonging and shared reading

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Dr Fiona Abades-Barclay



# How a sense of belonging develops:



# Opportunities make belonging possible (Opportunities)

## Belonging needs repeated chances to grow

Belonging isn't built in one moment; it develops through consistent, predictable connection

## Why shared reading works:

- Predictable and repeated
- Low-pressure and emotionally safe
- Built into everyday routines
- Created natural closeness and shared focus

## What this looks like in practice

- Children can engage at their own pace
- No high verbal or cognitive demand required
- Connection happens in ordinary moments



### Key message:

Opportunities don't need to be over complicated, they need to be **reliable**.

# Insight 1: Opportunities

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“The book is part of our bedtime routine... he knows what to expect and what’s expected of him... bedtime routine has always been set in stone and it works because children are happier when they know where they’re at.”

- Foster carer



# Competences make connection possible (Competences)

## Belonging depends on the capacity to engage

Children also need the **skills and confidence** to take part in connection

### How shared reading supports this:

- Builds language and communication
- Develops emotional understanding
- Strengthens attention, turn-taking and co-regulation
- Grows confidence in shared interaction
- Helps children understand social situations and relate them to their own experiences



#### Key message:

Shared reading doesn't just invite connection, it helps children **be able** to engage in it.

# Insight 2: Competences

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"She just really loves books, even if she's not listening to the story. She's pointing at pictures and you know, colours and we try and count things... she's learnt a happy face and a sad face. She can identify those emotions from reading the book, which is really good, she knows if you draw a happy and a sad face, and she can tell you... she'll say happy, she knows the difference."

- Kinship carer



# Motivation sustains belonging (Motivation)

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## Children return to what feels safe and rewarding

Belonging grows when children **want to re-engage**, not just when they are expected to

## How shared reading supports motivation:

- Warm, manageable, enjoyable interaction
- Adults adapts to the child's pace and experience
- Positive emotions become linked with connection

## From the child's perspective

- Reading is associated with comfort and recognition
- Motivation to return is driven by emotional reward, not pressure



### Key message:

Belonging strengthens when connection feels good enough to come back to.

# Insight 3: Motivation

"I don't want to see him... to make him sit there for 10 minutes. It's too much. It's too much. So... short short blasts. That's the right word, isn't it?"

- Foster carer

**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 won't to read it again

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

and again  
won't  
age 5

**BookTrust**  
Story Explorers



# Perceptions turn experience into belonging (Perception)

## Belonging forms when repeated experiences become internal beliefs

Belonging is not just what happens to a child – it is how they come to interpret it over time

Repeated relational experiences shape beliefs such as: "I am safe here" "I am valued"

### In shared reading:

- Adult attention and attunement communicate value and safety
- Predictable routines build security and trust
- Returning to books together reinforces reliable connection
- Over time: *"we read books" becomes "I belong here."*

### Why this matters

- Belonging develops through internal perceptions, not just external structure
- Stability is limited if a child still expects withdrawal or loss



#### Key message:

Shared reading helps reshape children's internal expectations about relationships, from uncertainty to trust.

# Insight 4: Perception

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“It's the predictability of the security. But you're also bonding... there's a calmness and a trust being formed... he never had the nurture as a baby or a toddler... so for me it's about teaching him to be in company with somebody and to form that friendship and share something together.”

- Foster carer



# Children's voices: belonging as felt experience

When children talk about belonging, they describe:

- **How it feels:** happiness, safety, enjoyment
- **Who it's with:** friendship, togetherness, inclusion
- **Who they are:** feeling at home, feeling part of a group


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,  
Isabelle, age 3.

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)

It makes me feel Happy  
and Excited.

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



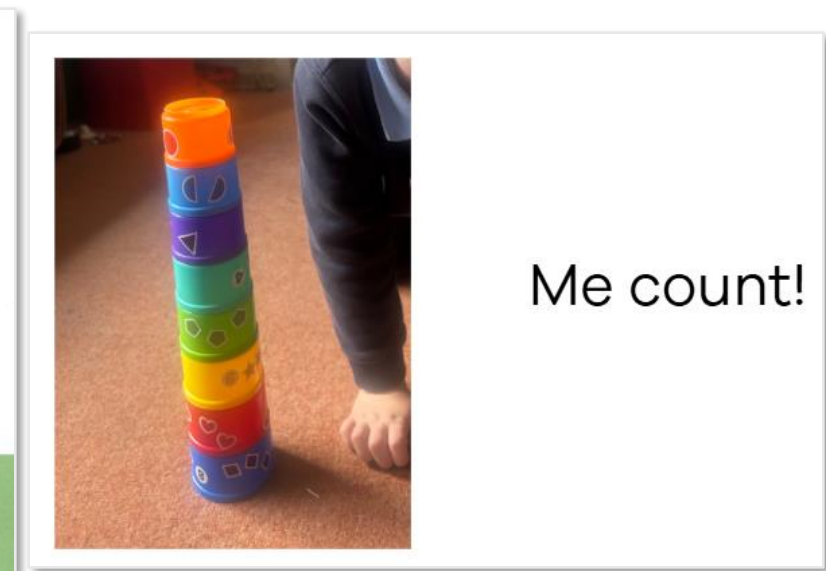
How do you feel about your Story Explorer kits?  
Please circle one emoji

T H A N K U ☹️ 😞 😐 😄 😍

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.



# Stories that connect us



# Amy Salter

## Sutton Virtual School

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## What next?

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Sign up to hear more about our programmes and upcoming webinars via the QR code.

