

The role of reading for children experiencing vulnerability: building strong foundations for life

Research with foster, kinship and adoptive families in the UK

Introduction

Reading has the potential to support strong foundations for the happiness and future success of children from vulnerable family backgrounds. Research shows that reading and sharing stories supports bonding, stability, identity, wellbeing, social and emotional growth and attainment. [Find out more about the benefits of reading.](#)

At BookTrust, we're dedicated to supporting children experiencing vulnerability. Our goal is to help children and families embed reading habits into their daily life, ensuring that children from low-income and vulnerable family backgrounds experience the immediate and lifelong benefits of reading.



Research methodology

This briefing outlines why reading is important for children experiencing vulnerability and the learning that underpins how BookTrust is encouraging reading habits, so these children can build strong foundations for life. It draws on insights from BookTrust's 2023–24 Story Explorers co-design learning with 97 parents, carers and children, conducted in partnership with Adoption Focus, Kinship, St Christophers Fellowship and The Fostering Network. We also include learning from Letterbox Club and wider academic research literature.

We'd like to thank all the partners, families and children who shared their insights and the Mohn Westlake Foundation and Arts Council England who made our learning possible. We'd also like to acknowledge Professor Rose Griffiths, founder of Letterbox Club, for her contribution to the research in this area.

Why reading is important for children experiencing vulnerability

Children's brains experience most growth in their early years, so much so that an enriching environment during this period can have an impact on a child up to four decades later¹. Development of the parts of the brain responsible for language, emotion and cognition are supported by early attachment experiences when a child receives positive care giving. But these formative experiences may be disrupted when children experience vulnerability².

Wider evidence shows the links between reading and healthy development of the areas of the brain which support language, executive function, and social-emotional processing. Reading in early childhood is associated with beneficial outcomes for cognition, mental health, and brain structure later in life^{3,4}.

Throughout our co-design learning with them, parents and carers told us what they need to support their children to thrive and where reading fits. They want to:

- ★ provide a sense of belonging
- ★ help children feel settled and secure
- ★ help children cope with difficult emotions
- ★ establish healthy routines and family rituals



“ It has made a difference to me by calming me down a bit when I’m annoyed.”

Child talking about Letterbox Club

A regular and predictable reading routine provides a sense of safety and security, which is particularly important for children from vulnerable family backgrounds. This routine also ensures quality time between the child and their parent or carer, fostering a sense of belonging, stability and a child’s sense of their place in the world^{11,12}.

Books can also strengthen belonging and identity through stories that reflect children’s lives and the lives of those around them. Representative books allow children to explore aspects of their own lives that they may not have seen accurately or positively represented before, supporting self-identity¹³.

Our research shows that almost all parents and carers know reading is important, but only around half of those with young children read to them daily. This is due to a range of factors like competing pressures on time, not finding reading easy or simply not knowing what to read^{14,15}. Foster, kinship and adoptive families will experience these same challenges, alongside additional pressures¹⁶.

This is not just about having the time and energy, but also the additional knowledge and experience that may be required to engage a child in reading if past experiences have impacted on their emotional and behavioural development or their confidence and attitude towards reading. Previous research shows, like many other parents and carers, only 51% of foster carers read to the children in their care daily⁸.

“ ...if they’ve had a really difficult or challenging day, just sitting down for 10 minutes reading a book together before going to bed could perhaps improve, restore or repair relationships.”

Fostering Practitioner

A reading routine can also help children regulate and connect with their emotions and nurtures the skills they need to connect with others. Reading provides the opportunity for calm through escapism, imagination and emotional regulation. In many ways reading can act as a protective factor against the adversity some children experience⁹. Children who read or are read to regularly tend to have better wellbeing, lower levels of emotional problems, and improved resilience and self-esteem¹⁰.



As with previous research, those involved in our co-design learning made it clear how important it is to help families find ways to read that fit into their daily lives. And how vital it is to reframe reading to emphasise fun and playfulness, both to make it more appealing, and to reinforce children's sense of agency and ownership¹⁸.

Built on this input from families, our new Story Explorers programme offers online support and monthly kits to guide families through different story experiences, so they can choose how to engage with reading. This provides each family with the tools and support they need to find what works for them.

“ It can be very difficult for foster carers to literally sit them down for more than 10 mins... so they have to be quite creative in perhaps trying to promote reading rather than the more formalised sitting down and reading a book together. It's trying to do reading in different kind of ways.”

Fostering practitioner

How BookTrust is supporting strong foundations for life through reading

Our co-design learning with foster, kinship and adoptive families found that in order to prioritise reading together, parents and carers need to believe in the benefits of reading for the children in their care. Not just as an academic activity, but in helping children feel secure and thrive emotionally.

“ Language and literacy is helpful because it's about expression, my one gets frustrated... It's the frustration of a toddler.”

Kinship carer

Parents and carers also want practical tips and advice to help with common challenges in engaging children in reading, and support in getting the most out of shared story times to benefit the child¹⁷.

As a child's reading journey continues, and the focus shifts from shared to independent reading, different types of support become important. BookTrust's Letterbox Club has been bringing the magic of reading to children from vulnerable family backgrounds for over 20 years.

In response to our regular survey, children receiving parcels for independent reading say...



they either love or like Letterbox Club

96%



they are reading more on their own after receiving Letterbox Club

68%¹⁹



There have been a number of evaluations of Letterbox Club measuring different outcomes and the programme has been shown to have a positive impact on children's reading habits. There are several features designed into Letterbox Club which are key to engaging children in reading. Regular parcels, with books, maths games and stationery build anticipation and provide novelty and reinforcement. Receiving a parcel in the post with their name on it helps children feel held and remembered. All of which contribute to children feeling engaged and excited about the parcels, supporting reading motivation.

Ownership also plays a role. Because the parcels are for them, children are able to make their own decisions about how to use the materials. This feeling of agency is another motivator for reading and helps build children's identities as independent readers^{18,20}.

“ It actually still moves me to think of how delighted the kids were every time they saw one land on the doormat – the packaging was quite distinctive so they always knew!... I can speak first hand to the joy it brings to kids who have often been completely without joy (and to their frazzled parents), and I am very confident that it played a really big part in instilling the passion for books which both my kids now have.”

Adoptive parent talking about Letterbox Club

Built into all BookTrust programmes is the knowledge that great books are fundamental to engaging any child, of any age, in reading. We use our expertise to provide books that are suitable for children's development stage and relatable to their interests. We carefully consider book selection so that the books we provide help children experience the benefits of reading, whether this is about supporting their learning and development, helping them see themselves represented in a positive way, or underpinning their ability to understand and communicate about emotions and social situations.

“ I do love books that are just fun to read. But I also love a book with a story that has a meaning behind it. They make a child think and they make for good conversation with that child... I think knowing that other people, whether they're real people or characters in a book, have had the same lived experiences is important for children in care.”

Foster carer



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.



Story Explorers is a new programme designed with and for foster, kinship and adoptive families to bring enjoyment and stability through reading.
[Find out more about Story Explorers](#)



Letterbox Club is a longstanding programme designed to support children who are experiencing vulnerability or disadvantage to engage in reading and numeracy.
[Find out more about Letterbox Club](#)



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Endnotes

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