

# Reading together, changing children's lives: Summary

**This summary is the distillation of BookTrust's knowledge and understanding about how reading, and shared reading in particular, can transform outcomes for children. It is based on decades of experience of working with millions of families and thousands of local partners, including health visitors, nurseries, schools, libraries and foodbanks. It shows what we think needs to be done to support families to become regular reading families in the early stages of a child's life (ages 0–7) and how some of the most cost-effective interventions can be scaled up based on existing networks and infrastructure. We are sharing these as our contribution to the national debate about how to lay down the best foundations for a child's start in life. A more detailed and fully referenced version can be found on the [BookTrust website](#).**

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have a bedtime story.

*BookTrust Family Survey 2022*



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## Why reading matters

We live in challenging times for children. Many more families are now living in poverty due to the cost of living crisis. Children who missed out on critical development opportunities during the pandemic have fallen behind in terms of language development, literacy and communication skills. Their social and emotional wellbeing has been affected. There is significant risk their attainment at school and their long-term life chances will suffer.

An analysis of studies involving over 1,000 children has shown that **shared reading enhances children's language skills**

Law et al. (2018) Parent-child reading to improve language development and school readiness: A systematic review and meta-analysis.

But we know that there is a way of helping to address these issues. Children who read regularly, and who choose to read, do much better on a wide range of outcomes than those who do not.

We have reviewed hundreds of qualitative and quantitative studies to establish that children who read are more likely than peers who don't read to:

- overcome disadvantage caused by inequalities
- be happier, healthier and experience better mental wellbeing and self-esteem
- do better at school and make more progress across the curriculum
- develop empathy and creativity

BookTrust has developed an [interactive summary](#) on the benefits of reading for people who wish to explore the evidence base in detail.

## What is special about shared reading?

While reading in general has an impact on outcomes, three important ingredients that are specific to shared reading stand out from our research. When adults share picture books with babies and children, there are both immediate and long-term benefits:

- **Physical closeness and shared attention:** Sharing unhurried reading time is a perfect space for bonding and attachment. Sharing a point of interest with an adult teaches concentration, decoding and sensemaking.

- **Enjoyment:** When a child sees an adult getting involved and enjoying a story, they enjoy it too.
- **Interaction:** Interactive reading helps relationships form, and supports children's language and cognitive development, yielding benefits from as early as two weeks. An adult reading in this way involves the child as much as possible, letting a child grab and touch a book while paying attention to the child's responses and reactions.

# Our proposals

## Proposal 1: Embedding reading in the life of every low-income family

**Why this matters:** In childhood, shared reading has immediate benefits. It supports bonding between children and their parents, stimulates brain development and improves sleep. It also helps children reach early development goals and leads to longer term outcomes.

**The challenge:** Families know that reading is important but some struggle to make it part of family life with young children. 95% of families know it's important to read with their child but only 42% of children have a bedtime story.

**BookTrust's solution:** BookTrust has developed Bookstart Baby, Toddler (1–2 years) and Pre-schooler (3–4 years) to provide books and resources in ways that we know will motivate and support families on low incomes to read regularly. We reach half a million families with new babies each year and over 400,000 low-income families with toddlers. 98% of families find our resources exciting and enjoyable and 84% of low-income families say the resources prompted them to read more with their child – but our funding only allows us to reach fewer than 40% of eligible low-income families. (Bookstart Toddler and Bookstart Pre-schooler Evaluation 2022–23)

**Our tested programmes should be available to all low-income children and families, both in areas of high poverty and in pockets of deprivation.**

## Proposal 2: Using shared reading to bring enjoyment and stability to vulnerable children

**Why this matters:** Early shared reading matters for all children. When babies and children experience disruption or difficulties at home, shared reading can be especially transformative. Reading together supports attachment and can help make children feel secure and loved. Looked-after-children and children-in-need have poorer educational outcomes on average than other children, including being less likely to meet age-related expectations in reading at ages seven and eleven.

**The challenge:** Children from vulnerable family backgrounds or those moving from one home to another face particular challenges in establishing regular shared reading. They may have limited access to engaging and appropriate books, complex and busy lives, and circumstances that make regular routines and rituals difficult.

**BookTrust's solution:** BookTrust supports thousands of children in long-term foster care each year with specially chosen books and resources which are delivered through our Letterbox Club programme.

**Our intensive shared-reading programmes should be available to thousands more children from vulnerable family backgrounds, providing evidence-based and sustained support so they can read regularly with their families.**

## Proposal 3: Helping antenatal and early years practitioners promote shared family reading

**Why this matters:** Families interact with a wide range of practitioners in the early stages of their child's life including midwives, health visitors, nursery staff, childminders and early years staff in schools. These interactions all represent an opportunity. When early years practitioners encourage parents to share stories and show them how to do it, parents are more motivated and confident.

**The challenge:** Some practitioners have been supporting the delivery of Bookstart with huge expertise for decades, but more partners could play a role in promoting reading to parents, and not all understand the wide-ranging ways in which it contributes to early development goals.

**BookTrust's solution:** BookTrust's early years programmes include support for thousands of health visitors, librarians and early years practitioners. 83% of librarians liked or loved working with us on our Storytime prize and programme, which took place in more than 2,000 public libraries. (BookTrust Storytime Evaluation 2022–23)

**We want our support, guidance, tools and training in shared reading to be available to all early years practitioners, helping children reach their early development goals, particularly in areas where there are high numbers of children from low-income families.**



## Proposal 4: Supporting primary school teachers to foster a love of reading

**Why this matters:** Shared reading continues to act as a catalyst for children's development once they start school. Exposure to a story-rich environment boosts children's speaking and listening skills, knowledge of the world, and social development, as well as significantly impacting on their capacity to learn to read.

**The challenge:** Shared reading makes a strong contribution to children's academic achievement against early development goals and beyond – but it drops sharply when children start school. 53% of parents and carers of primary-age children say reading is not a big part of family life. Many say that practising phonics takes precedence over reading for enjoyment. Children's enjoyment of reading declines through childhood and is in overall decline.

**BookTrust's solution:** BookTrust has a strong evidence-base for how to build positive reading behaviours in children. We want to see shared reading as a central part of every school curriculum and every family's life.

**Our research, guidance and book recommendations should be part of every teacher's toolkit so children discover a range of high-quality, relevant, inspiring and representative books.**

## What next?

We would love to hear your thoughts on our proposals. Your response should be mailed to [chief.executive@booktrust.org.uk](mailto:chief.executive@booktrust.org.uk).