

# The benefits of reading

This interactive resource summarises the evidence on how reading benefits children. Click through for headline findings and more detailed information.





**BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity, reaching over 1.4 million children and families each year in every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.**

Our work is deeply woven into the wider support system for children and families, enabling partners to integrate reading support into their services. Together we respond to local needs and reach families wherever they are, especially in communities where our support can make the greatest difference. Every child, especially those from low income or vulnerable family backgrounds, deserves the chance to enjoy reading and all the benefits it brings. This is why we work with over 30,000 partners across health, early education, schools, libraries, local authorities and more, to support children and families to read regularly and by choice.



**The Open University's Reading for Pleasure Research and Practice Coalition brings together some of the leading international academics and experts in Reading for Pleasure (RfP).**

We conduct research, provide resources and offer a diverse range of research-informed professional development opportunities for educators. These include OU/UKLA Teacher Reading Groups, the Teachers Reading Challenge with the Reading Agency and the Reading Schools Programme: Building a Culture of Reading (Primary and KS3), RfP Student Ambassadors and the RfP Quality Mark with UKLA. These initiatives help build vibrant reading communities that foster a love of reading among teachers, children and young people.

# Reading supports children to...



Overcome  
inequalities  
before they  
deepen



Bond with their  
caregivers and  
experience  
better mental  
wellbeing



Meet early  
development  
milestones  
and do better  
at school



Develop  
empathy,  
creativity and  
imagination





Reading supports children to...

## Overcome inequalities before they deepen



They can experience better educational and social mobility



Those growing up in poverty are less likely to remain in poverty as adults



Throughout school, they are more likely to overcome the barriers caused by disadvantage

“ Several large longitudinal studies show that young people who develop the habit of reading in early childhood are likely to achieve high qualifications and upward social mobility later on. Together with the well-documented developmental benefits of reading, these findings point to reading as a powerful lever for reducing inequalities. ”

**Professor Teresa Cremin,  
Co-Director of the Literacy and  
Social Justice Centre at The Open  
University**



# Reading supports children to...

## Overcome inequalities before they deepen



### They can experience better educational and social mobility

Shared reading is associated with higher reading attainment regardless of family background, suggesting an early boost to educational mobility that can help mitigate socioeconomic inequalities.<sup>1</sup>

By age 16, reading for pleasure is a much stronger predictor of progress in vocabulary, mathematics, and spelling than parental education.<sup>2</sup>



### Those growing up in poverty are less likely to remain in poverty as adults

For children growing up in poverty, being read to daily at age five is significantly associated with a greater chance of avoiding poverty in adulthood.<sup>3</sup>



### Throughout school, they are more likely to overcome the barriers caused by disadvantage

Shared reading has a unique and transformative impact on attainment. It is consistently associated with stronger academic performance,<sup>4</sup> and this link is stronger than that for homework supervision or parental attendance at school events.<sup>5</sup>

Disadvantaged children who achieve highly at the end of primary school are twice as likely to have been read to at home in their early years, compared to their peers. These pupils often continue to read for pleasure and use libraries, suggesting they will continue to reap the benefits of reading as they grow.<sup>6</sup>

Disadvantaged children aged 11-14 who read independently and take part in other enriching home activities are more likely to achieve three or more A-levels, compared to those not engaged in these activities.<sup>7</sup>



Reading supports children to...

## Bond with their caregivers and experience better mental wellbeing



Feelings of security and bonds with parents/carers are enhanced



They are more likely to have healthy routines and habits



They are more likely to experience better mental wellbeing, self-esteem and socio-emotional skills

“ In recent years the evidence linking reading and children’s wellbeing has strengthened markedly. This expanding body of research now makes it clearer than ever that regular reading helps lay key foundations for emotional health and lifelong wellbeing. ”

**Dr Helen Hendry, Senior Lecturer (Primary Education) at The Open University**



# Reading supports children to...

## **Bond with their caregivers and experience better mental wellbeing**



### **Feelings of security and bonds with parents/carers are enhanced**

Reading together creates opportunities for joint attention and emotional closeness between a child and their parent or carer.<sup>8</sup>

A caregiver's steady, close presence calms a baby's brain,<sup>9</sup> is linked to elevated oxytocin levels (the 'bonding hormone')<sup>10</sup> and deepens a child's sense of safety.<sup>11</sup>

Shared reading lifts parents' mood,<sup>12</sup> increases warmth and reduces stress,<sup>13</sup> enabling the sensitive and nurturing interactions young children need to thrive.<sup>14</sup>

Children who already feel secure show more enthusiasm during reading, which encourages adults to read with them even more – further strengthening the bond.<sup>15</sup>

Bonding - the continuous nurturing of the emotional connection between caregiver and child - is foundational to a child's emotional security, identity and overall wellbeing.<sup>16</sup>

[Reference material](#) >





Reading supports children to...

# Bond with their caregivers and experience better mental wellbeing



## They are more likely to have healthy routines and habits

Shared reading plays a role in promoting a relaxing and reassuring bedtime routine. Language-based bedtime routines such as reading are associated with better parental emotional availability and attention,<sup>17</sup> helping create a safe, stable and predictable environment for children's healthy development.<sup>18</sup>

In later childhood, reading for pleasure fits into wider healthy habits. Children aged 11-14 who read independently are more likely to adopt healthy behaviours.<sup>19</sup>



## They experience better mental wellbeing and self-esteem and socio-emotional skills

From infancy, emotionally rich, interactive reading – through joint attention and attunement – supports socio-emotional development and the emergence of self-regulation.<sup>20</sup>

In school-aged children, shared reading is associated with greater self-control,<sup>21</sup> more prosocial behaviour<sup>22</sup> and reduced hyperactivity,<sup>23</sup> and with a substantially lower risk of socio-emotional difficulties, regardless of family background.<sup>24</sup>

Children who read regularly tend to develop better interpersonal skills, supporting their ability to form meaningful relationships.<sup>25</sup>

They also report higher self-esteem and more effective emotional regulation, with fewer emotional and behavioural challenges, such as anxiety and aggression, than peers who read less frequently.<sup>26</sup>

Regular readers consistently score higher on general measures of wellbeing and happiness.<sup>27</sup>

[Reference material >](#)



Reading supports children to...

# Meet early development milestones and do better at school



Brain development, attention and cognitive ability are all enhanced



They have better school readiness and make more progress across the curriculum



They have better speech and language development and literacy skills

“ A substantial body of high-quality research consistently confirms that early reading is a key driver for children’s speech, language and literacy. Importantly, studies also show it goes further - nurturing the critical-thinking and reasoning skills that underpin success throughout school and beyond. ”

**Dr Lucy Rodriguez Leon, Senior Lecturer in Education (Early Childhood) at The Open University**



# Reading supports children to...

## Meet early development milestones and do better at school



### Brain development, attention and cognitive ability are all enhanced

Children's brains undergo rapid growth from birth to age five and are highly sensitive to environmental input. Shared reading, alongside playing, talking, and singing with a parent or carer, serves an important neurological function, supplying the kind of multisensory stimulation that supports cognitive, physical, social, and emotional growth.<sup>28</sup>

Shared reading is linked to stronger brain activation in language, attention, memory and executive function – an effect found across a range of studies, including those that focus specifically on children from low-income backgrounds.<sup>29</sup>

Children who start reading for pleasure early, and read more often, tend to score higher on cognitive tests in early adolescence, indicating that this advantage persists beyond the early years.<sup>30</sup>

Adolescence offers a second window of heightened brain plasticity;<sup>31</sup> sustaining independent reading during the teen years can reinforce and extend early cognitive gains.



### They have better school readiness and make more progress across the curriculum

Children who are read to regularly develop stronger vocabulary, language, and early literacy skills – all foundational for success when starting school.<sup>32</sup>

Reading, especially fiction, supports higher-order comprehension and metacognitive skills such as self-evaluation and regulation, all of which underpin critical thinking.<sup>33</sup>

Reading also nurtures problem-solving, reasoning and cognitive flexibility, supporting long-term intellectual development.<sup>34</sup>

A child who is read to at age 1-2 scores higher in reading, spelling, grammar, and numeracy skills at age 8 to 11.<sup>35</sup>

At ages 10 to 16, reading for pleasure has a substantial positive effect on vocabulary, spelling, and maths performance by age 16.<sup>36</sup>

# Reading supports children to...

## Meet early development milestones and do better at school



### They have better speech and language development and literacy skills

Shared reading facilitates especially rich back-and-forth verbal interactions between adult and child. Among the many key childhood activities such as playing with toys, mealtimes or personal care, shared reading has particular value in sparking these conversational moments.<sup>37</sup>

Shared reading offers children exposure to rich and novel vocabulary in meaningful contexts<sup>38</sup> and because attention is focused on the story, it is thought that new words may be easier to learn than during free play.<sup>39</sup>

Regular shared reading is linked to a wide range of language and literacy outcomes, including larger vocabulary, better oral language skills, print awareness, word

identification and comprehension.<sup>40</sup> It is the only home learning activity distinctly associated with literacy scores when children reach Reception, outperforming parental help with reading and writing, playing music or learning the alphabet.<sup>41</sup>

The impact of shared reading on literacy is long lasting. Children who are read to frequently at age 5 are over half a school year ahead in reading performance at age 15, compared to those who are read to infrequently or not read to at all.<sup>42</sup>

At school age, engaged readers (those who are motivated and use effective strategies) can achieve comprehension gains equivalent to several months or years of extra schooling.<sup>43</sup>

Reference material >





Reading supports children to...

# Develop empathy, creativity and imagination



They build empathy by reading fiction



They develop creative problem solving skills



They develop their creativity and imagination

“ Research on how reading cultivates empathy in children is still emerging. Although the studies so far have been small, the growing interest in this field is set to reveal how today’s educators can translate these insights into real-world practice - and, in doing so, help shape a more empathetic society for tomorrow. ”

**Dr Ly Chu, Principal Research Specialist at BookTrust**



Evidence from selected studies on this topic

[Read more >](#)



# Reading supports children to...

## Develop empathy, creativity and imagination



### They build empathy by reading fiction

Empathy is the capacity to understand, value and respond to other people's feelings and perspectives. Shared reading has been linked to gains in theory of mind and empathic understanding.<sup>44</sup>

Becoming emotionally involved in a story helps children see their own lives as part of a wider human experience,<sup>45</sup> a process that supports empathy development.<sup>46</sup>

Children who read books that offer opportunities to empathise with the characters may have increased levels of empathy, especially towards stigmatised groups.<sup>47</sup>



### They develop creative problem solving skills

Engaging with imaginative or magical narratives encourages children to think beyond their immediate context, loosening fixed patterns of thought.<sup>48</sup>

By predicting or revising "what might happen next" young readers exercise mental flexibility, openness and problem-solving.<sup>49</sup>



### They develop their creativity and imagination

Stories can prompt dramatisation, giving children chances to visualise, verbalise or act out scenes, and thereby practice creative expression.<sup>50</sup>

Daily shared reading at age 3 is associated with higher scores in creative development by age 5.<sup>51</sup>

[Reference material >](#)



## Notes and references

We've drawn on hundreds of peer-reviewed studies, a selection of which are included in the reference list. The strength and type of evidence varies across the outcomes covered in this review.

- The body of evidence draws on a wide range of methodologies, including RCTs, longitudinal studies, representative surveys, meta-analyses, systematic reviews, qualitative research, and neurobiological studies.
- Consistent support is found for key outcomes including language and literacy development, social-emotional development, brain development and cognition, and school readiness.
- Other outcomes - such as empathy, self-esteem, identity, creativity - are supported by more interpretive or qualitative studies and remain comparatively underexplored as standalone areas.

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