

Exploring a national book-gifting scheme: parents' and children's reactions

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Several early learning programmes have targeted children's reading, particularly their relationships with books. One, Bookstart, provided free books to babies attending their 8-month health check at local clinics. Study of this programme suggested that it led to an improvement in language performance upon school entry. Booktime continues from Bookstart and involves the donation of a book pack to 5 year old children in their first school term. This paper reports an evaluation of the impact of Booktime on the time the children spent reading with their families, the children's enjoyment of reading, and the views of their parents/carers about helping their children with reading.

Evidence relating to these questions was collected via a sequence of interviews with twenty five parents/carers whose children had received Booktime book packs, and with their children themselves. Interviews were carried out in the parents' homes, in as non-threatening a manner as possible. The parent interviews were semi-structured, guided by a small number of preset questions, but with considerable variation as each parent was free to elaborate on areas they saw as important. During each interview, we were also able, briefly, to talk to the participating child, always in the presence of at least one of their parents/carers. The conversation began by asking if a child remembered the book he/she had been given at school and continued by the interviewer making a statement along the lines of, "I really liked the bit when ..". Most of the children then told us about bits that they liked without further prompting. The over-riding principle was that the conversation with the child had to be fun and not construed as any kind of a test of their reading.

The key findings of this evaluation were:

- There was an almost unanimous positive reaction to the Booktime pack (bag and book) among parents/carers and children.
- The book itself was valued highly by the vast majority of parents/carers and children, although a small minority of parents/carers had some concerns about the appropriateness of the book.
- A variety of uses had been made of the book, including reading it to children, talking about the pictures and/or the story, children reading or retelling the story to an adult, children acting out parts of the story.
- Parents/carers had not used the book for more deliberate teaching purposes, for example, teaching letters and sounds.
- There was strong support for the continuation of the Booktime scheme into

future years.

The paper argues that, with several caveats, the children experiencing Booktime had been positively involved with books in a way that is likely to have a longer term impact upon their approaches to reading. They, and their parents, had developed an increased enthusiasm for books and reading which had led to an increase in parent-child interactions focused on books, and such interactions, according to the literature, appear to be related to increased reading achievement in children.