

**Research with practitioners in Wales:  
Support for foster carers with reading with  
their children**

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## 1. Foreword

Every year, BookTrust reaches 2.5 million families across the country with books, resources and support, to inspire a love of reading. We believe that every child has the right to experience the joy of reading. Research shows that children who enjoy reading have better reading outcomes. Reading also helps to develop imagination, creativity, empathy and wellbeing. However, we also know that not all children experience the benefits that a reading habit brings.

We already support thousands of children in care across the UK through our programmes, but we know there is more we can do. Foster carers are important role models for the children in their care and we know that reading together is a wonderful way to build relationships and ignite imagination, as well as improving vocabulary. We hope that this research will enable us, and others who work with foster families, to better support carers and their children to experience the joy of reading and its associated benefits.

**Diana Gerald** *Chief Executive, BookTrust*

## 2. Background

BookTrust recently commissioned the National Children's Bureau (NCB) to conduct a UK-wide survey with foster carers, and interviews with a small number of carers and children, about reading in foster families. The research aimed to improve our understanding of how foster carers can be better supported to engage with reading for pleasure with their children, and inform the development of our programmes. The research also explored carers' engagement with reading with their child, any barriers they face with this, any support they currently receive to help them with reading with their child, and any additional support that they would like to receive.

## 3. Research with practitioners

Following on from this, we have consulted with practitioners in a range of roles supporting foster carers across Wales, to gain their views and feedback on their experiences of supporting families, particularly with reading with the child(ren) in their care. This helps us to develop our understanding of the specific context in Wales. The research was supported by funding from the Welsh Government Education Directorate (Literacy and Numeracy Branch) as part of BookTrust Cymru's Letterbox Club programme.

The research aimed to enhance our understanding of:

- The types of training and support available to foster carers, particularly in relation to reading with their child.
- The context of training and support available for foster carers related to reading with their child, including any barriers and supportive factors. This relates to: availability; providers; accessibility; take-up; format; funding, etc.
- The perceived need for training and support: for foster carers to help them with reading with their child; and for practitioners to enable support for carers to be delivered.
- The barriers and challenges faced by carers in supporting their child with reading.

- How BookTrust could provide support for practitioners and families to help engage children with reading.

Evidence collected in this follow-up research adds to the data collected from foster carers and children, and helps to broaden our understanding of the needs of foster carers and any gaps in provision. This research will also give a local context and perspective on the implications of the carer survey results, and the applicability of the recommendations.

The findings from this research will be used alongside the results of the NCB research to help BookTrust to develop their support for foster carers and families. The NCB report is available on the BookTrust website [here](#).

## 4. Methods

13 telephone interviews were conducted with a range of practitioners working with foster carers across Wales. Interviews were conducted by independent researchers with expertise in primary education and community research, with support from BookTrust.

Practitioners from the following organisations were interviewed:

| Sector  | Organisation  |
|---|---|
| <b>Fostering charities</b>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Fostering Network</li> </ul>   |
| <b>Independent / private fostering agencies</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Action for Children</li> <li>• Barnardo's Adoption and Fostering Services (Cymru)</li> <li>• National Fostering Agency</li> <li>• Compass Fostering</li> </ul> |
| <b>Looked After Children's Education Service (LACES) teams in local authorities / consortia</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Anglesey</li> <li>• Vale of Glamorgan</li> <li>• Powys</li> <li>• South East Wales Consortia</li> </ul>  |
| <b>Social services / fostering teams in local authorities</b>                                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Torfaen</li> <li>• Rhondda Cynon Taff</li> <li>• Ceredigion</li> <li>• Swansea</li> </ul>  |

## 5. Findings

### 5.1 Challenges/barriers facing families in supporting children with reading for pleasure

Practitioners reported that the main challenges and barriers facing families in supporting their children with reading for pleasure were:

- The impact of children's previous experiences on their emotional and behavioural development
- Children's confidence and ability around reading and education
- Time pressures and other priorities related to children's needs

- Carer confidence, knowledge and ability to support children with reading
- Technology distractions

These findings are discussed further below:

### **5.1.1 The impact of children's previous experiences on their emotional and behavioural development**

One of the main challenges facing families was reported to be that children's previous experiences often led to behavioural and emotional issues, making it more difficult for them to engage with reading, and education more widely.

Interviewees reported that children's needs are often misunderstood, and they are assessed according to their chronological age rather than their developmental or emotional stage. For example, one respondent reported that children who have experienced high levels of anxiety and fear due to neglect or abuse are likely to have *'an emotional development delay in understanding relationships, friendships, love and the range of emotions that human beings have [...] children haven't experienced the same emotions as secure and attached people have.'* This perspective was echoed by several practitioners.

Linked to this, several respondents reported that children who have experienced abuse or neglect often appear to be in *'fight or flight mode'* meaning that they find it difficult to concentrate, learn, and form attachments to their carers, which in turn affects their willingness to listen to or engage with their carer. Behavioural issues, e.g. concentration difficulties, attachment issues, ADHD, etc., resulting from previous trauma, abuse or neglect, were reported to have an impact on a child's ability to sit down with an adult and read a book. It was thought to be important for carers to be able to *'look beyond the behaviour and understand where it's coming from and work with that child.'* Practitioners reported that carers need to understand child development and attachment and be equipped to approach reading in different and creative ways to engage children.

As one interviewee put it: *'it can be very difficult for foster carers to literally sit them down for more than 10 mins to look at a particular subject or for support 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'.*

### **5.1.2 Children's confidence and ability around reading and education**

Many practitioners highlighted that children in care are likely to have experienced some interruptions in their education (due to placement moves, school moves, trauma and possible exclusions), limiting their early experiences of reading. This means that they are more likely to fall behind with their reading.

Additionally, children may have had negative early experiences of reading at home. This means that they are not used to reading as part of a daily routine, may lack confidence with reading, have less positive attitudes towards reading, and be less engaged with reading.

### **5.1.3 Time pressures and other priorities related to children's needs**

Linked to the sections above, practitioners often reported that reading, particularly reading for pleasure, is not always a priority due to other issues, such as managing children's school attendance, contact with birth families, behavioural or emotional issues, literacy issues, additional needs, safeguarding, etc.

Getting children settled in a new placement was reported to be a potentially difficult time, during which carers needed to build relationships and trust with the child, and give them a sense of stability. Practitioners emphasised the importance of carers taking things at the child's pace so children do not feel bombarded, which could lead to placement breakdown. One practitioner observed that carers needed to *'have the capacity, the patience, the mental and emotional understanding to take it slow.'*

Finally, some practitioners also reported that carers could struggle with having time to read with their child if they had other children living with them or if their child was involved in a lot of after-school clubs or activities.

#### **5.1.4 Carer confidence, knowledge and ability to support children with reading**

Other potential barriers in supporting children with reading were related to carer confidence, knowledge and ability. Some practitioners reported that carers struggle with literacy themselves, which affects their confidence in supporting their child with reading.

Interviewees also mentioned that carers often lack confidence in supporting their child with reading due to a lack of understanding around the education system and how reading is taught in school. A few practitioners reported that this was sometimes a particular issue for kinship carers, e.g. grandparents who have not had recent experience of the education system, or young aunts and uncles who may have left school at a young age and have low confidence in their reading abilities. Similarly, carers may not be used to looking after children at certain ages and stages so may need additional support in these situations.

While the above point appears to relate to learning to read / supporting reading attainment, it was reported to have implications for shared reading for pleasure, as a lack of confidence meant that carers were concerned about 'getting it wrong'. Practitioners reported that it was important to reassure carers about this; to help them see reading as a fun activity and not to worry about making mistakes. Practitioners also reported that it was important that schools and carers communicate with each other to aid understanding of expectations and approaches to supporting reading. One practitioner reported that this could sometimes be a challenge as *'if a carer has had a poor experience in school themselves, that can be difficult'*.

One practitioner also reported that some carers don't have access to books suitable for the ages and abilities of the children in their care. Again, this was reported to be particularly the case with kinship care placements.

Finally, one practitioner mentioned that their fostering agency advised against carers reading 'bedtime stories' as this could have associations with previous sexual abuse suffered by the child. In particular, carers were advised not to read with children in their bedroom or on their bed.

#### **5.1.5 Technology distractions**

A few practitioners mentioned that technology was also a barrier to reading in foster families, with children preferring watching TV or playing games on an iPad to reading.

## 5.2 Available training

There generally appears to be limited training available for foster carers on reading for pleasure with the children in their care. Although some training was reported to include sections on reading, this tended to be a small part of the training overall and/or focused on literacy rather than reading for pleasure. For example, practitioners from LACES teams discussed training on education but this was primarily focused on understanding the education system and key stages. Similarly, another practitioner mentioned that the training they provided on narrative life story, emotional development, and bond building has some focus on reading and imaginative play. However, some practitioners described providing informal advice to carers related to reading for pleasure, e.g. reading with their child regularly and visiting the library.

Practitioners described various packages of statutory training (e.g. 'Skills to Foster') that individuals need to complete to become a registered foster carer. This training usually focused on attachment, safeguarding/safe caring, understanding the system, recording (child's life story), health and safety, etc.

Some organisations also deliver the 'Confidence in Care' programme, which is a 12-week course run in partnership by the Fostering Network, TACT, Action for Children and Barnardo's. This focuses on bonding, attachment, narrative life story, emotional development, etc. Some practitioners mentioned that the course features reading or imaginative play.

Practitioners generally stated that they had an additional programme of training available for carers on a wide variety of topics. Some practitioners said that carers were required to undertake a certain number of hours of training each year. Carers were usually able to book onto training online. Some practitioners reported that social workers discussed training needs and opportunities with foster carers in their regular supervisions.

## 5.3 Engagement with training

Practitioners described engagement with training as being quite variable, with some foster carers being very keen and engaged and some harder to engage. Practitioners tended to report that the harder-to-reach families were often most likely to need training.

***'There are some foster carers who are absolutely fabulous at attending training events and will go to everything that comes up or is suggested. Whereas for some other foster carers it can be more of a challenge to get them to take up training, so we've tried to promote it to those who are not so interested or perhaps there's some barriers there to their own learning.'***

Approaching families through a range of different methods (e.g. brochures, emails, newsletters, texts, social events, through social workers) to ensure the message gets through and is reinforced was thought to help with engagement.

Foster carers were reported to be more likely to attend training if they could see the direct benefit for the child that they are caring for at that time. They are less likely to attend training that is pitched as for their personal development (even though it would benefit the child), or which is not relevant to their current placement.

*'I always find that if foster carers can see the benefit for what it might bring to the child [they will engage with training]. They are very committed to the development of that child.'*

*'They don't see attending support for them or training for them as beneficial to the kids in the long run.'*

Practitioners described trying to make training accessible for carers through various methods, e.g. holding it in different locations, online, asking carers when would be suitable, holding it during school hours, providing day-care for young children. Training was also delivered through a variety of methods, e.g. formal group training courses, informal consultations, peer-to-peer support, scaffolded training based on need, etc.

#### **5.4 Need for training / support for reading for pleasure**

This section summarises practitioners' views on how carers could best be supported to read for pleasure with their children, and the types of training and/or support that they feel would be most beneficial.

Feedback from practitioners highlighted the need for a greater focus on reading for pleasure in the training and support available to foster carers.

Within this, practitioners highlighted the following areas of need for carer support and training:

- Strategies for carers
- Access to suitable books
- Signposting and awareness raising

These themes are discussed further below:

##### **5.4.1 Greater focus of training and support on reading for pleasure**

When considering the need for further training and support to help foster carers with reading with their child, many practitioners cited a need for a focus on reading for pleasure within care agencies and in available training. Practitioners recognised the importance and benefits of reading for pleasure for this group of children. As discussed above, much of the training available to carers is focused on areas such as attachment and safe caring. Practitioners felt that reading, and particularly reading for pleasure, had been overlooked and felt that there was a need within care agencies to focus on this more.

*'I think to bring it back to everyone's consciousness. It's there but it needs to be at the forefront.'*

Practitioners were aware of the benefits and importance of reading for pleasure, particularly in terms of improving children's attainment and their emotional development. Several



practitioners noted that sharing books and stories helped children to explore their feelings and understand their experiences, such as fear and anxiety, building trust and relationships, different families, etc. One practitioner referenced a book that he had found to be therapeutic for children in understanding their feelings:

*'There is a book called "Morris the Mole" The Mole gets muddled about his feelings [...] they can talk about the characters and this can help them unravel their thoughts and feelings. Language in books also helps them understand their situation. Like "borrowers" are the Foster Carers and they are helping to find "keepers" for the children.'*

One practitioner highlighted the importance of shared reading in terms of bonding and attachment, and ensuring that children feel secure and safe:

*'I know [reading for enjoyment] can really help in terms of forming relationships and attaching and perhaps repairing some things 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 help improve, restore or repair relationships if things have been quite challenging. It's important for that child to know that they're ok going to bed where they have that 10 minutes with their foster carer, even when it's been an absolutely horrid day.'*

#### **5.4.2 Strategies for carers**

As previously mentioned, carer confidence and knowledge about reading with their child can be a barrier. Practitioners reported that carers would benefit from training around strategies to use when reading to make reading fun and engaging, e.g. incorporating reading into daily routines (through writing shopping lists, reading street signs, etc.), playing games or doing activities related to the books. Additionally, practitioners noted that it was important to highlight that it doesn't matter if mistakes are made.

*'They've just done a whole day at school and the last thing they want to do is sit down and plod through a book until they get it right.'*

#### **5.4.3 Access to suitable books**

Many practitioners highlighted the importance of having access to suitable books which engage them in reading. Specifically, this included:

- Books on topics that children will enjoy
- Books pitched at children's interest and emotional development level, as well as their reading age (e.g. high interest – low reading level books)
- Books children can relate to, which help them to explore and understand their feelings.

#### **5.4.4 Signposting and awareness raising**

Many practitioners reported that it was important to ensure that carers were aware of what support was available to help them with reading with their child. Some practitioners reported that communication between schools and carers could be challenging. Further support from



schools to ensure that carers are well-informed about how reading is taught, and how carers can support reading, would be helpful in boosting carers confidence with this.

***'Possibly additional school training for foster carers to help them to engage children in reading and help them to find it exciting and interesting and to be age appropriate.'***

A couple of practitioners also reported that it would be useful to signpost carers to the library, highlighting relevant sessions.

Some practitioners noted the importance of multi-agency working/training. One practitioner commented that carers are sometimes not considered to be 'professionals' leading to them being excluded from meetings (with social workers and schools) about the child they are looking after. This could then exacerbate the barriers faced by carers in supporting their child.

### **5.5 Suggested type/format of training**

Many practitioners suggested that any training, support or guidance developed for carers to help them with reading for pleasure with their child, may be most effective if combined with training or support they already receive. Many practitioners thought a reading for pleasure focus would fit in well with training or support that they currently offer.

For example, some agencies / local authorities ran regular support groups with their foster carers, and some brought in guest speakers to talk about topics of interest to carers. Many of these respondents reported that guest speakers and interactive workshop-style training sessions (i.e. modelling reading sessions) would be very useful and engaging for foster carers.

***'I think more informal training with more practical hands on where you feel you are getting some information and advice on different books in different age ranges or suggestions to try things. People sharing experiences rather than a lecture or someone standing up and talking.'***

***'I think there is scope either for us to do something via our carer support groups, having people come in to talk about it.'***

One respondent described a training session which had been delivered by adults who had been in care. This was particularly inspiring and engaging for foster carers as ***'it helped them understand that when children behave in certain ways or they're kicking off or pushing away they are actually meaning the opposite.'*** As this message came from someone who had experienced it, the session was thought to have made a much bigger impact and encouraged foster carers to ***'re-examine relationships and how things work in placement and look back on placements that perhaps didn't work and what they missed out on and how they should have managed a certain situation.'***

Opportunities for carers to share experiences was felt to be an important element of training generally, and some practitioners mentioned that having ***'foster carer ambassadors'***, i.e. experienced foster carers who can support others, worked well. However, a few practitioners

highlighted that for harder-to-reach carers who were reluctant to engage with training, one-to-one support or home visits had been more successful.

Some practitioners thought that including guidance (such as a hard copy leaflet including tips for getting children reading or online resources) would be useful for carers. Practitioners mentioned that this type of information could be included in regular email bulletins sent out to foster carers, or in foster carers' initial training packs.

*'[Initial training] might be a good point in which to include a leaflet in their training pack about BookTrust and what it does and what support they can get from you and contact points and what you can offer. They have a lot of information every day that they go on the training, they're given stuff to look at, it could be delivered if you provide some material to disseminate.'*

A couple of practitioners suggested that 'train the trainer' sessions (e.g. with supervising social workers) would be most useful to ensure that support is disseminated as widely as possible and can be delivered to foster carers on an ongoing basis.

One practitioner suggested that incorporating training / support on reading for pleasure into carers' initial training may be the most successful option as carers are *'motivated to know that because they're wanting to become foster carers so they're wanting to be there. So it's quite a good point at which to get that information to them. They'll be wanting to see ways in which they can be a good foster carer.'*

## 5.6 Barriers and considerations

A few practitioners noted the need for any training or support for carers to be tailored with an understanding and consideration of the possible barriers faced by carers in supporting their child to read, such as attachment issues, emotional vulnerability and trauma.

*'The children that we deal with have got attachment issues and so might find it difficult to engage and it's how we manage to engage the children to make it fun for them.'*

Two practitioners emphasised the importance of having different options and ways to access training and support to meet the needs of a range of carers who may prefer to engage in learning in different ways:

*'It's about having a variety of different ways of learning, being taught about literacy or helping children to read, from the formalised stuff through to a newsletter going out with an article about the importance of literacy that perhaps we send out to our foster carers, through to our coffee mornings or supervision sessions that we do as well.'*

This would be particularly important in local authorities which cover a large area and are predominantly rural, where it would be more difficult and time-consuming to travel to face-to-face training.

Finally, one practitioner advised that any written guidance would need to be accessible for carers who may have lower levels of literacy.

## 6. Recommendations

- Training and advice for agencies and local authorities should seek to **reinforce knowledge of the benefits of reading for pleasure**, to increase the focus on this in training and support provided to foster carers by these practitioners. In particular, this could focus on the full range of benefits associated with reading for pleasure, including emotional development, communication skills, attention and empathy, as well as the more widely-known benefits for education.
- Support for carers should highlight how reading for pleasure can **help with some of the common challenges** that carers face. For example, helping children to understand and explore their feelings, bonding with their child, establishing a stable routine, increasing children's confidence and emotional development, etc.
- Support and training for carers relating to reading for pleasure should **emphasise the positive outcomes for the child**, rather than for carers' personal development, as this approach was reported to be more successful in engaging carers with training and support.
- Support and advice for carers on **accessing and choosing suitable books** would be beneficial. Information and recommendations about books that appeal to children's interests, which are also suitable for their level of emotional development and reading level, would be particularly beneficial. Advice should also seek to **signpost** carers to other available support, e.g. public libraries, schools.
- Support for carers to encourage reading for pleasure should include a **range of creative methods** to engage children with reading, with a focus on making reading enjoyable. This support should aim to **give carers the tools and confidence** to try different methods of engaging their child with reading.
- Carer support should be developed with the acknowledgement of potential competing demands on time and priorities for carers and children, and should provide **practical advice** on how to **incorporate reading** into their everyday lives.
- A **range of carer support** should be made available to ensure that information and messages reach as many carers as possible, and make sure that it is available to **carers who prefer to engage and access support in different ways**.
- Possible successful avenues for further supporting carers to engage with reading for pleasure **include connecting with currently available support groups or training programmes** for carers.

- Support and training for carers may be most successful if delivered by **people with direct experience of fostering**, including other foster carers, or adults or children who have been in care themselves.
- Suggested options for carer support include: **leaflets** with reading tips (which could be included in initial training packs for carers or via BookTrust programmes), **online resources** for carers (which could be linked to through regular newsletters from agencies and local authorities), **workshop**-style training, guest **speakers** at support groups, **train the trainer** sessions (for supervising social workers to disseminate more widely), etc.
- Training and support should be **flexible** so that it can be tailored for use with families with a **range of different needs** and potential challenges.

## 7. Acknowledgements

BookTrust would like to thank the practitioners who took the time to take part in the interviews, without whom the research would not have been possible.

We would also like to thank Jan Mills and Carrie Westwater, who carried out the majority of the interviews with practitioners and provided valuable contributions to the analysis process.

- **Jan Mills** is an independent Education consultant specialising in Early Years / Foundation Phase. She has worked as a deputy headteacher, a School Improvement Professional, and Foundation Phase Advisor for Swansea Local Authority, and has been involved in a variety of research programmes linked to Early Child Development.
- **Carrie Westwater** has a background in Cultural Theory and Community Arts and Participation. She is currently working on two research projects with Cardiff University. Her passion is how 'story' sharing (in its various forms) improves community and individual confidence in self. As an artist she has worked with children of all ages, including looked after children and young unaccompanied Asylum Seekers.

## 8. Contact us

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the report author **Cathy Harris** at [research@booktrust.org.uk](mailto:research@booktrust.org.uk)

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