

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and
Education Committee

Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg |
Priorities for the Children, Young People and Education Committee

CYPE 48

Ymateb gan : BookTrust a BookTrust Cymru

Response from : BookTrust and BookTrust Cymru

Question 1 – Within the remit set out above: what do you consider to be the priorities or issues that the Children, Young People and Education Committee should consider during the Fifth Assembly?

BookTrust recognises that the Fifth Assembly faces many significant issues affecting children and young people in Wales. We also welcome the acknowledgement of the importance of early intervention and support in the early years that has already been expressed and actions taken by the previous Assembly.

We are particularly concerned about opportunities for all children, and especially those aged 0-5, to develop strong literacy and language skills and, crucially, to develop as readers. Research shows that the development of early language, literacy and reading skills play a fundamental role in a number of areas of future success, including educational attainment and employability prospects as well as health and wellbeing and creativity.

As a reading charity, with expertise in literacy and the early years, BookTrust will focus our response on particular issues within that area of concern.

The importance of early reading, literacy and language development

The evidence demonstrating that literacy and reading skills have a significant impact on life chances and the wider impacts of poor literacy are well-documented. The Committee is likely to be aware of statistics such as:

- Adults with functional literacy earn 16% more than those without.ⁱ
- A recent report estimated that the UK economy could be more than £30 billion bigger by 2025 if every child left primary school with the reading skills they need. ⁱⁱ

For children to develop into effective readers they need to achieve a good level of early literacy and language. Crucially, early reading experiences, including shared reading, have a central role to play in early language and literacy development and later reading skills depend upon having a good level of early language and literacy. The three areas are inter-connected. Research tells us:

- Reading to children before the age of two stimulates language development and lays the foundations of a reading habit.ⁱⁱⁱ
- An early start with books lays the foundations for future reading by building enjoyable 'social routines'^{iv} around books and increasing exposure to language.
- Books, rhymes and stories create opportunities for families to spend quality time together and support bonding.
- A child who is read to every day at age 3 has a vocabulary at age 5 that is 1.92 months more advanced than a child who has exactly the same observable characteristics (including income group), but who is not read to every day at age 3.^v
- Research shows that reading 3-5 days per week has the same effect on a child's reading skills at age 4-5 as being six months older. Reading to children 6-7 days per week has the same effect as being almost 12 months older.^{vi}
- Regular reading for pleasure is more strongly linked to children's progress in vocabulary, spelling and maths between ages 10 - 16 than parents' education or socio-economic status.^{vii}
- Those who read for pleasure as children have enhanced vocabulary levels 30 years later.^{viii}

The benefits of reading, especially reading for pleasure, need to be recognised beyond educational outcomes, too. A recent review found that recreational reading by children and young people has been linked to improved imagination, focus, relaxation, mood regulation and social and cultural capital. Research also links reading for pleasure with impacts into adulthood as wide ranging as increased understanding of self, empathy and relaxation.^{ix}

Professional services and the home literacy environment

There is a clear need for professional services in different sectors to support early language, literacy and reading. The home literacy environment also plays an important role in supporting outcomes. It has been suggested that a good home learning environment can have more of an impact on children's language development than social class or parental education levels.^x Without positive early reading experiences and practices, a positive home literacy environment and

strong early language and communication skills, children will often struggle to learn to read when they start school.

The impact of poverty

Whilst it cannot be assumed that every child growing up in poverty will have poor language and literacy skills, research frequently demonstrates a connection. The specific links and causality are complex and different circumstances need to be understood in order to build a clear picture of factors at play in different contexts, including lifestyle, cultural and environmental influences.

2015 analysis of data from the Millennium Cohort Study suggests a particularly strong link between language ability (measured through vocabulary ability) at five and performance in reading tests at seven and language comprehension tests at age 11.

- 78% of children in Wales who experienced intermittent poverty and scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five also scored below the average level of reading ability at age seven.
- 82% of those who experienced persistent poverty and scored below the average level of vocabulary ability at age five also scored below the average level of reading ability at age seven.^{xi}

Whilst targeted support needs to be given to children and families identified as living in poverty, this should be against a foundation of support, intervention, encouragement and opportunities for all. All children can experience different needs, vulnerabilities and barriers to reading and literacy at different points in their lives.

Question 2 – From the list of priorities or issues you have identified, what do you consider to be the key areas that should be considered during the next 12 months (please identify up to three areas or issues)? Please outline why these should be considered as key priorities.

BookTrust believes that the Committee has an important role to play in making sure that there is adequate and appropriate provision to support all children in Wales to develop early reading, language and literacy skills and to have opportunities to continue to develop, in particular as readers, as they progress through formal education.

We need to make sure we understand what affects outcomes (both positively and negatively) and that we take account of local need and nuance. We must also remember that every child's 'literacy journey' is different.

We propose two linked questions which the Committee might wish to consider within this area of concern as part of a wider enquiry.

- 1. Do families in Wales have adequate support to enable children to develop early language, literacy and reading skills, including engaging in early shared reading? (This should include access to services and settings, resources and support to develop a positive home literacy environment.)**

The period of the Fourth Assembly was a period of perhaps unprecedented change in local and public service provision. Against a backdrop of service reductions, we all need to be assured that children and families have opportunities to develop early language and literacy and to engage in early reading. This includes access to specialist and more general services. We also need to be confident that we understand the impacts (positive and negative, intended and unintended) when services change from universal to targeted (e.g. changes in the Language and Play grant) and different impacts in different areas e.g. urban vs rural.

The importance of repeated access to messages and support in order to develop positive behaviour must also be recognised: behaviour change is a dynamic process and not a one-off event. We need to be confident that families have the information, support and tools that they need, in the format they need it, and that differences in families' needs are recognised and acted upon.

The home literacy environment plays a significant role in the development of early and later language and literacy skills. Many parents need support to help them to understand the benefits of reading with and talking to their children and to help them overcome the barriers to developing regular positive related routines (e.g. lack of confidence, pressures of time, demands of other family members, other stresses and worries).

Research also indicates that social interaction can support the development of positive behaviour and can create positive social norms.^{xii} This can be facilitated through community-based and social activity e.g. Library Rhymetimes and Storytimes. Such activities provide opportunities for young families to build confidence and knowledge about positive literacy behaviours and also offer important social opportunities.

2. Does every child in Wales have access to adequate provision, support and services to help them develop early reading skills and continue on their journey as readers?

BookTrust believes that there should be a national 'network of support' to get and keep children and families reading.

Developing readers, and those supporting them, need access to high quality books and reading material and to have opportunities to develop knowledge, behaviour and attitudes that will enable them to engage with reading. Children's literature in the UK is booming and Welsh publishers are producing high quality and relevant reading material for children and young people. However, library closures mean we risk losing free and easy access to books and a positive and supportive reading environment.

BookTrust supported the proposal in the 2014 'Draft 10-Year Plan for the Early Years, Childcare and Play Workforce in Wales' to ensure that staff have a good understanding of how language, literacy and numeracy develop. We would recommend that this includes training about how to engage families in shared reading and increase reading motivation and enjoyment. Provision to support this could also usefully be reviewed as part of any discussion of what constitutes 'high quality' childcare.

Work in the early years also needs to be supported by schools if its benefits are to be experienced fully. This includes making sure our teachers are confident and enthusiastic when it comes to engaging children and families with books and reading and that they have knowledge of the materials which will encourage this (including digital). It also includes access to reading materials through well-stocked school libraries and links with local authority libraries, and opportunities for children to read independently for enjoyment rather than for a specific learning outcome.

Children will continue on their journey to becoming a reader throughout their childhood. They will need to build on their early literacy and language to develop skills, knowledge and behaviours that make them effective readers as they move into adulthood. These include both cognitive (e.g. language development, comprehension, decoding) and affective processes (e.g. motivation, identifying as a reader, frequency and breadth of reading, enjoyment, confidence) that together support children to become literate.

Note

BookTrust is the UK's largest reading charity and operates in Wales as BookTrust Cymru. BookTrust works primarily with children aged 0-14, and with their families and the professionals who support them. For more information visit www.booktrust.org.uk and www.booktrust.org.uk/cymru/cymraeg or www.booktrust.org.uk/cymru.

We would be willing to provide further information relating to the areas discussed above.

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- ⁱ Read On. Get On (2014) How Reading Can Help Children Escape Poverty. London, Save the Children, 14.
- ⁱⁱ Read On. Get On (2014), 17.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Mol, S.E., Bus, A.G. (2011) To read or not to read: A meta-analysis of print exposure from infancy to early adulthood. *Psychological Bulletin*, 137(2),267-296.
- ^{iv} Krishnan, S., Johnson, M.H. (2014) A review of behavioural and brain development in the early years: the 'toolkit' for later book-related skills. London, BookTrust. <http://www.booktrust.org.uk/usr/library/documents/main/brain-development-review-executive-summary.pdf>. Accessed 20th May, 2016.
- ^v Vocabulary levels are often used as a measure of literacy and language skills.
- ^{vi} Kalb, G. & van Ours, J. C. (2013) Reading to Young Children: A Head-Start in Life? Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research
- ^{vii} Sullivan, A., Brown, M (2015) Reading for pleasure and progress in vocabulary and mathematics. *British Educational Research Journal*, 41(6),971-991
- ^{viii} Sullivan, A., Brown, M. (2014) Vocabulary from adolescence to middle-age. Centre for Longitudinal Studies Working Paper 2013/10. London, Institute of Education.
- ^{ix} BOP Consulting (2015) The impact of reading for pleasure and empowerment. London, The Reading Agency. <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/The%20Impact%20of%20Reading%20for%20Pleasure%20and%20Empowerment.pdf>. Accessed 20th May, 2016.
- ^x Melhuish, E. (2010). Impact of the Home Learning Environment on Child Cognitive Development: Secondary Analysis of Data from 'Growing Up in Scotland'. Edinburgh: the Scottish Government.
- ^{xi} Save the Children, on behalf of the Read On. Get On campaign (2015) Ready to Read. London, 14. NB The Millennium Cohort Study worked with children born in 2000 and who were consequently 5 years old in 2005; data therefore reflects recent trends.
- ^{xii} Literature Review taken from Gooch, C. (2016) The role of the Bookstart Baby gifting process in supporting shared reading. University of Canterbury, for BookTrust