

## PRINT MATTERS MORE Project Extension

Following the success with Print Matters More (July 2016-February 2017), we were keen to see whether the positive impact of the experience was enduring. From April-August 2017, we worked again with 14 of the original 15 families (one family had moved away), which meant that we followed the families for one calendar year and a full school year.

We wanted to find out if the families were still visiting bookshops, understand if children were still reading independently and see if parents were still reading to their children. In short, had we succeeded in making new book buyers and readers?

The extension was designed differently from Print Matters More. Based on our knowledge of the children in the study, we made a bespoke selection of six books for each child and posted one a fortnight over a period of three months (April-June 2017). We hoped that the books would be welcome surprises and nudges to read, though the gifts came with no obligation other than a request to complete a questionnaire online each month (three in total). The questionnaire aimed to track the families' attitudes and engagement with reading. To finish we ran focus groups in July and August 2017.

### **Attitudes to bookshops**

From discussions in the focus groups, it was clear that the Foyles experience the previous year had been very important to these families. The memory of the shop and the pleasure of visiting every week was still with them. Eight of the 14 families were going into bookshops more than they used to. For children, visiting Foyles opened their eyes to the range of books available.

*I didn't know there were such  
books like that  
boy, age 9, Birmingham*

### **Attitudes to reading for pleasure**

We found that all 14 children were still reading and had a positive attitude to reading. They were confident and had strong ideas of what books they liked. Independent reading had continued – half of the 14 children read every day and the rest at least 2-3 times a week – and they were very proud to read alone. In several families, the child's interest in books and reading had percolated to parents and siblings; these families had re-discovered reading. The emotional benefits to both parents and the children when they read together were still present: the project extension confirmed the pure pleasure, connection, love and happiness for both mum and child, and the comfort, reassurance, and confidence for the child, particularly.

*Reading with my mum makes me feel closer to her and a bit happy because most of the time I'm at a club or scheme...reading with my mum makes me feel relaxed*

boy, age 10, London

*I think Mum is really happy when she reads to me because she just always has a smile on her face...it makes me feel really happy because she's enjoying it and I'm enjoying it*

girl, age 9, Bristol

The academic benefits of reading for pleasure were very apparent. At the end of a full school year, 13 of the children had done better with school reading attainment. 13 had done better at school in all areas.

*He got a very good school report, he excelled in all areas especially literacy and spelling!*

Mum, son, age 8, London

*My son struggled at school with reading and he was in quite sort of a babyish level still before the reading project in the summer holidays and then after he just shot up and up and up and it shocked me because I wasn't expecting it at all*

Mum, son, age 9, Birmingham

### **The impact of free choice**

By adopting a different methodology in the project extension, we have been able to explore the impact of free choice on reading. Both studies gave the children six books but with Print Matters More, the children *chose* six books in Foyles over six weeks, whilst during the project extension, they were sent six *pre-selected* books over 12 weeks. Free choice in store was a key element in establishing these children as keen, confident readers. With the pre-selection approach, children thought receiving surprise parcels was very exciting – they rarely get post. 11 of the 14 children were 'very' or 'extremely' pleased to receive the books. We found that the book was generally not one they would have chosen (on average only 5 of the 14 children were 'very' or 'extremely' likely to have chosen each book they received), and so it was encouraging to have introduced them to a book they might have missed.

*From the front cover it didn't look that good but when I started reading it, it was one of my favourite books*

boy, age 8, London

On average, nine children read each book they received, so a good amount of reading was going on over 12 weeks. On average, half of the children 'very much' enjoyed the books they received. However, the majority felt there were too many books and that they came too frequently, although they received the same number as in the summer of 2016 and over twice the length of time! There

was almost a sense of being overwhelmed, despite the initial excitement at getting a parcel. The key insight here is that the children felt less engaged because they didn't choose the books themselves. This is endorsed by the fact that 13 mums agreed with the statement, *'My child prefers to choose their own books'*.

***It was weird that I didn't get to choose my own books and have a bit of an opinion on it***  
girl, age 9, Bristol

***There's just so many books to read...it was quite hard, you felt like you had no time***  
girl, age 10, Birmingham

The importance of their own choice was played out in the school setting, too. Despite the children being enthusiastic readers at home, the majority of the children were not enthusiastic about reading at school, saying there was a poor selection of books. There was also talk of noise and of less help with reading than at home.

### **Reading to children**

Mums continued to value reading to their child and recognised its importance:

- 14 agreed *'Reading gives me quality time with my child'*
- 10 agreed *'My child loves me reading to him/her'*
- 13 agreed *'If I read to my child I notice it increases my child's enthusiasm for books and reading'*
- 11 agreed ***'If I read to my child, I notice it increases their own desire to read independently'***

During the project extension, we found mums did read more to their children than before they became involved with the original Print Matters More study. However, despite valuing reading to their children, they were generally doing it less often than they did during the intensive summer intervention, when they read daily. We found that 12 mums read at least weekly, two mums read daily.

***I still love that feeling of sitting on the sofa, snuggling together with a book that we're sharing, he's turning the pages and still having that...sometimes I feel guilty that I don't do that with him as much***  
Mum, son, age 9, London

### **Why are the parents not reading to their children more frequently?**

It is clear that lives are very busy and so reading to children does not take priority. Also, their confidence having increased, some children no longer enjoyed shared reading with their parents or

reading aloud. The children in our families wanted independence and relish reading alone. Some have a strong sense of not wanting to feel or appear babyish and needing to 'grow up'.

*I feel like I don't need them anymore. I should be learning by myself by now so I don't need their help...if I told somebody I'd get picked on*  
boy, age 9, Birmingham

Another issue is the confidence and capability of some mums. As the children have become more confident and competent readers, some of the mums in the study stepped back because they were conscious that they read too slowly for their child. Some children rejected reading with their mums because they felt impatient. One nine-year-old girl said, 'I'd prefer to read alone because I go faster than my Mum'.

However, children want connection with their parents, and even if they were reading independently and reading *together* less frequently, there was still an element of interaction. Some of the children reported sharing funny jokes or interesting parts of stories they were reading with their family.

*I shared this book called Laugh on the Loo with my Mum and she loves it!*  
boy age 9, Birmingham

Overall, it seems that parents are unsure how to connect over reading for pleasure as children get older. They appear to lack the knowledge to choose books to read to their children in addition to their child's own independent reading choice and lack awareness that reading to their child can and should continue alongside their child's independent reading.

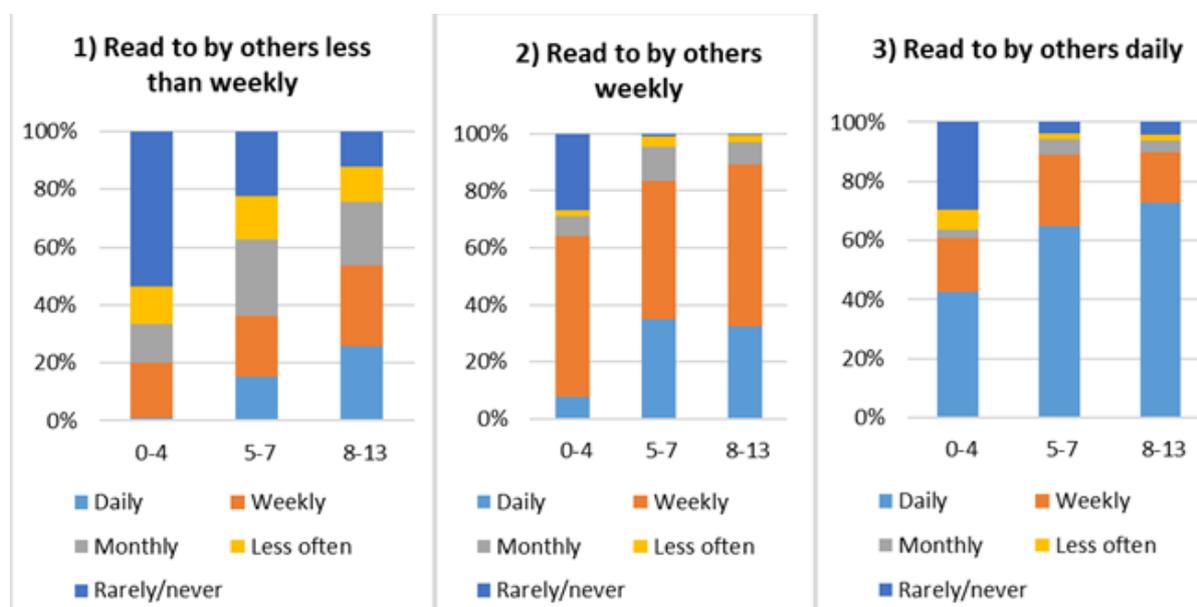
### **The three key roles of parents in their children's reading for pleasure**

Through our studies, we have observed that there are three key roles that parents play with their child's reading:

1. *Parent as reader*: reading to the child and sharing stories, when all the child has to do is listen. This role is very well understood by parents with children at young ages. It is often considered a finite role.
2. *Parent as teacher*: children read aloud and parents listen. This is usually for school, to practise reading. Parents understand their role: they are helping their child on their way by listening to the child practise. This is seen as a finite role.
3. *Parent as guide*: parents and children share reading, taking a portion of the text each. Parents understand their role and again it's typically considered a finite role: when competent reading is achieved by the child, the parent's job is thought to be done. This is the role that the parents in Print Matters More and in the project extension have taken, for the most part.

What is less well understood by parents is their ongoing role as ‘Parent as Reader’. We know that reading to children is the key indicator of children reading to themselves. We have seen this in Print Matters More and the project extension, and we see it in quantitative studies too, including the Nielsen Deep Dive 2017, which shows the truly astounding impact of reading to children. See below.

Chart (1) shows how often children read themselves when they are read to by others less than weekly. 54% of 0-4s rarely/never read/engage with a book. This is not a surprise as children can’t properly access books and stories unless through others at this age. Taking the example of 8-13 year olds, in chart (1) we can see one quarter of 8-13s read daily to themselves and 28% read weekly to themselves, when they are read to less than weekly by others. Chart (2) shows the impact of reading to children more often, in this case on a weekly basis. Now, 32% of 8-13s read to themselves daily and 57% read to themselves weekly. Finally, chart (3) shows the enormous impact of reading to children on a daily basis, so that now 73% of 8-13 year olds read to themselves daily when they are read to daily.



Source: Nielsen Deep Dive 2017

‘Parent as Reader’ needs to continue as children get older. It should not cease when independent reading is established. When the child is simply a listener there is no pressure and no agenda for improving reading skills. Sharing the pleasure of the story and quality time together has a profound effect on children and on their own independent reading. It’s a concept least understood in families with older children.

*I want to read kind of older books with my mum and with my dad*  
boy, age 9, Bristol

## **Key Insights**

When a child chooses their own book it means they are invested in it and have the intent to read. Choice is closely tied up with agency. Even if a child engages with reading they want control over choice. Having control is a key motivator for children and an important part of child development.

There may be implications for gifting, since so many books are bought as gifts and, if not requested by the child, they are in a sense imposed, just as school reading books are. And we must assume many miss the mark – although many will expose a child to a book they might not otherwise have chosen. This a conundrum for the industry because we rely on gifting. It is also an opportunity to convey to parents that if a child is taken in to a shop and allowed to choose whatever book they like, magic happens. Advice from booksellers to the child direct is welcome and we can also see the importance of book tokens and vouchers to enable free choice.

It is clear that parents are largely uninformed and unaware of the part they need to play in their child's reading. What is obvious is the overriding goal for both parents and children is for the child to be an independent reader. There is great pride when this is achieved. However, parents do not understand how to raise a reader. They don't understand that reading for pleasure is not simply a skill to acquire but an interest to nurture, so that over time it becomes a love and a passion. Healthy eating is analogous: it is a long-term commitment to a child involving day-to-day encouragement with the hope that they grow up to be a healthy eater.

Print Matters More and the project extension have shown that reading to children is a decisive way to ignite their interest in reading for pleasure, that a child's independent reading thrives alongside being read to, and that free choice of reading material is a critical element in engaging children and encouraging their reading for pleasure. Although there continues to be pressure on reading for pleasure, literacy levels and book buying, there is a big opportunity for publishers, booksellers, teachers and policy makers to educate parents about the value of continuing to read to their children, and give parents the tools and confidence to do so, and to educate teachers and parents about the critical element of free choice to turn reluctant readers into passionate advocates.

*'Print Matters More is such a vitally important initiative'*

Michael Morpurgo