

THE READING MAGIC PROJECT

A new research study commissioned by Egmont Publishing UK

In collaboration with WHSmith and Family, Kids & Youth

The Reading Magic Project is a study of 12 families with children aged 3-4 years old.

The aim was to understand why reading to 3-4 year olds is in long term decline and what can be done to encourage more reading and more book buying in families with children of this age. Building on the findings from Print Matters More, our hypothesis for this new study was:

Parents of pre-schoolers are unaware of the importance of reading, of the pleasure of it, and how to do it well. If they are told, shown and experience it, they will read to their children more often and buy more books

The project ran from October to December 2017. All families had two parents living together. All dads were working, six mums worked full time, five mums work part time, one mum stayed at home. All mums described themselves as very short of time. All felt reading to be a task – something to fit in as best they can.

In order to test the hypothesis, the project was designed in two stages.

Stage 1 involved interviewing the parents and setting the scene. We took an overt approach, telling them explicitly the value of reading for pleasure. We gave them a flier to pin up at home, which set out the importance of reading for pleasure, with some Did You Know points, really making it clear what was ‘up for grabs’ and what was at stake. We pointed out the critical importance of reading to children, and the vital role parents can play in facilitating this, asking parents to make a conscious choice to read to their child. We gave them a copy of the parents’ guide *Help Your Child Love Reading*. We sent the families 10 Egmont books over six weeks and with each mailing we included a note with hints and tips on sharing books with their child (see Appendix). At the end of this stage, mums were interviewed in a focus group at their local WHSmith.

The 10 books sent in stage 1:



Stage 2 involved families attending a story time session every Sunday morning at WHSmith. We gave a £6 coffee voucher to the mums each week. At the end, the parents were interviewed in their homes.

We know that consumers have many options for browsing and buying, so physical stores need to offer something special to attract shoppers. We offered a regular event, so that it had the potential to become part of the families' routines. We designed it to be an activity a retailer could manage in the normal course of trading, not just part of a research project. To that end, we employed a storyteller every Sunday morning for six weeks, reading two Egmont books a week. We also provided activity sheets to take away (see Appendix). We wanted to see if this would inspire both reading and buying.

(During the project we investigated perceptions, attitudes and motivations to browse and buy in regard to WHSmith. This information and insight is commercially sensitive and therefore for WHSmith only.)

Initial interviews

We found that all mums were extremely busy and felt stressed. They often viewed reading to their child as a chore. However, most had an inchoate sense of the importance of reading but just *how* important was not understood.

I think it's just the standard thing isn't it that parents do (why do you think that is though?) I don't know if it actually helps wind them down or...I don't actually know in all honesty
Mum, son aged 4

Vocabulary wise, and stuff like that I just thought that it would help her out
Mum, daughter aged 4

We found that parents were attempting to read regularly, all the families read at least once a week. Usually, it was the mum doing the reading, most often at bedtime. As half of the mums were working full time, few read to their children during the day, even at weekends.

Mums told us that shopping with young children is a real challenge. In the case of buying books, there was concern that their children might be too rowdy or damage the books. Ease, comfort, and sense of welcome dictated where these parents chose to go. The families were buying children's books from a variety of places but charity shops were *by far* the most popular, because they sell them cheaply and parents were not worried about children ruining the condition of the book or the display. High Street retailers were mentioned; buying books online was usually chosen for convenience and because of a lack of time to shop.

Visiting libraries was popular when their children were very young but it was no longer happening for most families: these parents were wary of their children making too much noise, of ruining or losing the books.

End of stage 1 interviews

Receiving the books in the post was a huge success. The parcels delighted the children and the parents were enthusiastic, too, partly because they were free, but also because the parents enjoyed the surprise and it took the stress out of having to go to the shops and trying to choose.

At night I'd say 'oh isn't it exciting we've got a new book to read tonight!' and it kind of gets her upstairs and she's excited to read it
Mum, daughter aged 3

We never read during the day before, I actually used to fill that time up, you know I used to race round... but she really enjoyed it and she gets something from it
Mum, daughter aged 3

The book selections changed parents' concept of what engaged their child and what their child could comprehend (they often under-estimated this). It also widened their child's repertoire: parents were surprised at their child's enjoyment of books that they might have not bought, based on their interests or gender; the gender-neutral nature of the books was a revelation to many parents.

Having more physical books lying around meant the children picked them up and initiated reading, and new surprise books meant new conversations. Parents were really happy to see their child's response to the books and to being read to more often. Mums said they enjoyed reading to their children and felt that they were being a good mum. More reading was happening in these families. The advice about reading that we had given them was appreciated. The notes in the book parcels helped to keep parents motivated and focused, and parents judged them to be useful.

[Reading] makes me feel like I'm being a good Mum, you're 100% focusing on them, there's no other distractions and you can see their little mind ticking over
Mum, son aged 3

The notes in the parcels were definitely useful because sometimes they do lose concentration and you need some help with ideas on what to do so it was definitely helpful
Mum, daughter aged 4

I loved how the books arrived every week with a little note and a quote from a famous author. I just thought that was so lovely. I remember some of them and I think about them quite often
Mum, daughter aged 4

Parents were still tired, still busy, but they were more positive about reading. It was a virtuous circle: seeing their child's face light up with a book, seeing their child's progress in comprehension and enjoyment was motivation to read more.

For me it's that tug of war between 'I need to come and sit down with you and I need to leave what I'm doing'... it's a real stop and invest

Mum, daughter aged 3

One thing that I've found really good was every time I'd go out shopping or I'd be in the car or I'd go out for dinner and he was there I'd always give him my phone, now I give him a book...he'll get in the car and he'll pick a book and I alternate the books every week

Mum, son aged 3

Stage 2: Story Time

Sunday morning story time happened in the meeting room at WHSmith Watford, which was furnished with bean bags and posters. It made a great impression on the children and parents taking part. For many it became a family event, with both the parents and siblings accompanying the young child.

It's something to do on a Sunday but also really positive

Mum, son aged 3

[Attending Story time] makes you feel really good. I felt so good afterwards...like a good Mum taking her to story time rather than taking her to soft play or whacking her in front of the telly

Mum, daughter aged 4

The storyteller opened parents' eyes to the fact that reading aloud need not be dull. Most parents made an active decision to learn from the storyteller. They learnt a variety of techniques to help better engage their child when reading with them at home. The activity sheets related to the books were, also, welcomed.

The way she changed her voice I was like 'oh I must do that more when I'm telling a story'...focus on trying to have the same voices for the same characters throughout rather than just having two voices

Mum, daughter aged 3

Anne-Lise was just so upbeat, so enthusiastic, I loved how she acted out things with the kids and bought little supplies with her – I thought that made it more than just a story time really

Mum, daughter aged 4

Since seeing Anne-Lise read and the way that she uses different voices, I'm finding that I'm doing that a lot now – not necessarily consciously but I think just having listened to Anne-Lise it does make me read differently now

Mum, daughter aged 3

I put it on my snapchat after Story time [my daughter] with her worksheet and everyone was like 'where is it?', 'what time is it on?'

Mum, daughter aged 4

In research, Sunday is traditionally a no-go because weekends are family time and it's notoriously difficult to get people to commit to any research at a weekend. However, with all but one of the mums working, the only truly free day was Sunday, and the parents in our study were looking for things to do. Coffee was a key part for the mums, carrying with it the notion of time off and relaxation, and parents appreciated the social aspect of our story time. Meeting other families regularly meant a bond formed and some mums had an idea to set up their own story time after the project had finished, although what they really wanted was for WHSmith to carry on offering story time every Sunday. Some mums said it should be free and some said they would be prepared to pay for it; up to £6 was the consensus. The regularity of story time was important

It was interesting that these families did not consider going to the library. While several mums had gone to baby rhyme time when on maternity leave, now that their children are older they felt, that their children would be too noisy and potentially disruptive (also, rhyme time sessions were held midweek, which is not convenient for working mums). Our parents believe that libraries are quiet places; in contrast, story time at WHSmith was rambunctious, so the parents felt relaxed.

Final interviews

Families were very positive about the project and attitudes had changed. Parents admitted at the final interviews that reading had been thought of as a chore before, and now it was something they took pleasure in planning in order to spend quality time with their children.

Behaviour had changed, too. All families were now reading to their child at least once a day. Some of the dads started reading to their children because they had either been to story time and seen its impact on their child or observed their child's new interest at books at home. Books were considered an alternative to digital devices as mum opted for stories over screen time.

We're reading at least two a night and I'm enjoying telling them the stories now

Mum, son aged 3

I think I definitely do read more to her... rather than knowing it's important and not really doing anything about it, actually knowing it and going 'oh yeah this is fun when they do engage and they do enjoy it'

Mum, daughter aged 3

I think I'm more keen to, actually. I think the process has relaxed me a bit... I have thought 'oh it is really useful and I could just sit down and read a story'

Mum, daughter aged 3

Parents' skills at reading aloud had grown. They copied the storyteller, and had made reading to their child more engaging; using different voices, talking about the story, asking questions. These things might seem obvious to those who work in publishing but they really not widely known or understood.

Taking part prompted a far greater interest in reading amongst the young children and enabled the first steps in reading for themselves. Children were attempting to read independently by making up stories, using pictures in a book to guide them, or trying to remember the story.

Before [the project] I think he just liked the comfort of me being there. Now he goes and chooses his book and he says 'I want this one' and he wouldn't have done that before

Mum, son aged 3

He likes to ask questions and things like that or he'll say what's going to happen next or ask me questions because he's looking at the pages

Mum, son aged 3

Mums talked again of how much their young children loved receiving books in the post. It was a better experience than for older children, as investigated in Egmont's Print Matters More study, who greatly value their own free choice in a bookshop. Why is this? Perhaps for younger children the satisfaction is in opening a parcel themselves and, excitingly, being able to make a story happen by asking mum or dad to read the new book. And to be able to build a home library.

Impact at retail

Story time did stimulate purchase. Over six weeks, our families bought more than two books each (28 in total). If that level is maintained they will fall into the 'heavy buyer' category (annual children's book purchase categories: light buyer = 1-5 books; medium = 6-15 books; heavy buyer = 16+ books. Source: *Nielsen Books and Consumers*).

We have not yet come out of one of your story time sessions without buying a book

Mum, son aged 3

I bought quite a few new ones from WHSmith when we were there...because I was there and we were doing the story time and I'd get into it and I was like 'I'm going to buy some new ones!'

Mum, daughter aged 4

Insights

To return to our hypothesis: *Parents of pre-schoolers are unaware of the importance of reading, of the pleasure of it, and how to do it well. If they are told, shown and experience it, they will read to their children more often and buy more books.*

- Parents of pre-schoolers are uninformed and unaware of the importance, and perhaps more significantly, of the pleasure of reading to their child. They welcome advice and act on it.
- They are unaware of how to read well. When shown and imitated there is a positive impact on the children's and parents' enjoyment and enthusiasm.
- They are unaware of the choice and range of books available and have pre-conceived ideas of what is suitable for their child. There is an opportunity to communicate the vast choice.
- Reading every day and attending story time regularly has the effect of establishing reading as habitual, part of the family routine.



- Enabling families to share reading for pleasure results in more reading for pleasure.
- For libraries, the opportunity is to offer well-publicised weekend story time, because in so many families both parents are working. Parents need to be told that storytelling will be lively and lively children are welcomed, so that they are not anxious about their children making a noise.
- For retailers, parents would like to feel welcome in stores and not worry about how staff might react to their child's behaviour. There is an opportunity for retailers to offer story time, to create a cosy place where books can be touched, with no obligation to buy, and importantly to make it a regular feature.
- Story time stimulates purchase. The importance of making the store an exciting destination is clear.
- Receiving books through the post works well for young children. There may be potential for pre-paid gifting. This would take the stress out of parents trying to choose.

APPENDIX

Examples of notes sent with the book mailings:

Reading Magic Project

Dear xxx

Thank you for joining The Reading Magic Project! As part of the project we'll be sending you 2 books each week for 4 weeks, and then 1 book each week the remaining 2 weeks, that is 10 books in total.

Enclosed are the first 2 books. We'd like you to read these with your child at bed time. Our research shows that it really relaxes children at bed time, so it would be great if you could try to read every night. But you can read more often and whenever you want of course!

Other parents have found that it really helps to spend time looking at the pictures when you are reading together. Ask your child what they can see, or try pretending you can't see something in the picture and ask them to show you – children love knowing more than you do!

We really hope you both enjoy sharing these books.

Best wishes xxx

"Children are made readers on the laps of their parents." — Emilie Buchwald

Reading Magic Project

Dear xxx

I hope you are enjoying spending time reading with xxx. Enclosed are this week's books – we hope xxx enjoys them!

Other families have told us that they enjoy getting books out and reading on the bus, in the park, in a coffee shop. Anywhere! You might start by reading several times in the day – while they are eating can be a good time for some families. Remember, books are very portable so why not put one in the bag when you go out? If they have their own backpack they could carry one too!



Best wishes xxx

"There is more treasure in books than in all the pirate's loot on Treasure Island." — Walt Disney

Reading Magic Project

Dear xxx

I hope you are enjoying spending time reading with xxx. Enclosed are xxx books for xxx's collection.

We've learnt that leaving plenty of books out around the home can lead to children picking them up and becoming familiar with them. This week, why not try leaving some books out and see what happens!

Best wishes xxx

"Fill your house with stacks of books, in all the crannies and all the nooks." — Dr. Seuss

Reading Magic Project

Dear xxx

I hope you are having lots of lovely moments reading with xxx. Enclosed is this week's book for xxx to give you some more reading choices.

If xxx is getting familiar with some of the books, try pausing before the end of a sentence to encourage xxx to complete the sentence. Children often love to show they know what is coming next!

We hope you're having fun!

Best wishes xxx

"Reading should not be presented to children as a chore or duty. It should be offered to them as a precious gift." — Kate DiCamillo

Reading Magic Project

Dear xxx

I hope you and xxx are enjoying the project so far! Enclosed is this week's book. This is the last book we will send to xxx but we are really looking forward to seeing you at the story time sessions over the next 6 weeks!

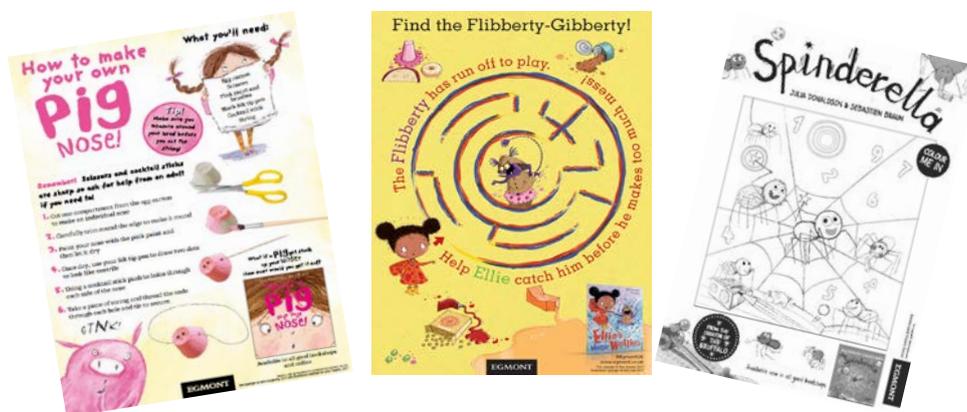
Often the best way to know if a child understood the story is to ask them to retell it to you. This week perhaps you could ask xxx if xxx can tell you the best parts of xxx favourite story.

We look forward to seeing you at story time on Sunday!

Best wishes xxx

"The more that you read, the more things you will know. The more you learn, the more places you'll go." — Dr. Seuss

Some examples of the activity sheets that go with the books that we gave away too. Typically, there are 4-6 sides of activities – colouring in, word jumbles, mazes, makes, dot to dots.



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