

THE EGMONT READING CLUB

A new research study commissioned by Egmont Books UK

In collaboration with mumsnet

The Egmont Reading Club is a large qualitative study involving 42 families and a total of 64 children aged between 3 and 12 years old. It was conducted over 6 weeks during the early part of the Covid-19 Lockdown (17th April -28th May 2020), when families were almost entirely confined to home, schools were closed and parents were home-schooling. The aim was to understand the impact of really focusing on reading for just a few weeks.

The project involved families choosing 2 Egmont books a week per child, mums committing to read aloud their child daily, or to co-read if the child wanted to read aloud, and to keeping a diary of the experience.

We know that children who are read to are much more likely to read independently. In fact 61% of 5-7s read independently for pleasure daily or nearly every day when read to daily or nearly every day by their parents, whereas 11% of 5-7s read independently for pleasure daily or nearly every day when read to less than weekly by their parents¹. What would this short project do to children's motivation and enthusiasm to read independently, their attainment and their well-being? How quickly could we effect change?

We had mix of families signing up – some children reluctant to read and disengaged from the idea of reading, some already engaged with reading and books. Parents were interested in the project due to lockdown: how to get through it, and, with school out, how to help with their child's education.

The project had a truly enormous impact on both the children and the parents. It was overwhelmingly positive for both the initially disengaged children and the engaged children alike. Many clear themes have emerged. In this paper we are sharing four of them: 1)Parents were surprised at the extent of the benefits, 2)Reading became normalised very quickly, 3)Well-being improved and 4)Attainment increased.

1. Parents were surprised at the extent of the benefits

In all 42 families, parents simply did not expect the impact of the project to be so great, even in the more 'bookish' families. They had not appreciated that reading aloud to a child, regularly, would make such a dramatic difference to relationships, to wellbeing and to learning. Some parents of older children had stopped reading to them a while ago and so re-discovered the joys and benefits of sharing reading.

Day 2. Today my daughter (age 12) asked me to read in the morning! Was quite surprised to be honest but went with it. I actually was amazed at this so very encouraging that she wants to do this. It is a lovely bonding experience I have to say. She seems to be responding so well. She is enjoying time with me, the book, chatting about it and I get a sense of happiness from her for this time.

L (age 8) has enjoyed me reading to him again. The time with just the two of us has been positive. He has read part of the book out loud but still lacks confidence. He seems happy and it's making me feel sad that I don't normally do this, that I thought that reading was a school chore.

I've always loved reading to H (age 5) and equally he enjoys being read to. That hadn't changed during this project. What has changed is the realisation of how important it is for mental health. That moment of escapism and close contact. Reading is one of the great joys in life. Thank you for reminding me.

One big change is in the volume that's being read unsupervised. Taking reading time during the day as well as at bedtime seems to have had a really positive effect on her reading habits and she's averaging a full fiction book a day (things like Gangsta Granny and Katy, rather than shorter books). It's a massive leap in her reading, even though her reading ability was already very good. (Girl, age 7)

H (age 8) was doing a literacy task for school today, and I was really impressed by her use of language and ability to structure a story. I really do think this project has had benefits that we didn't anticipate. She asked me to read to her twice today, gave us some lovely calm moments together.

Kids still poorly so again found it comforting being read to. S (age 10) had a little bit more energy today & completed a comic strip that he had made up by himself so I read that out loud to. Which was lovely. Reading together really is a lovely thing to do. I feel sad that I stopped doing it as the kids got bigger. It's become an important part of our day.

2. Reading became normalised very quickly

Reading became something the families did together, built into their routine with no questions. Just 6 days into the project, one mum said: *I'm really happily surprised that we are all sticking with this without me having to yell at them. Is it possible to get in a routine this quickly?*

Both parents and children enjoyed the routine and focus. Parents said they felt very positive about their child's development and the closeness they felt to their child. They were extremely grateful to be taking part.

I think L (age 7) is really enjoying this new reading routine. To be honest, we don't really have many regular routine things - especially now that school is closed and everything is so bizarre - so creating a warm and happy feeling, a time to share books and cuddles, feels like good thing for both of us.

The pleasure of the experience meant reading happened on increasing occasions throughout the day for many of the families; children asked to be read to more and more often. Daytime reading had a powerful way of establishing reading as a favoured leisure activity, one that could compete with TV and screens, often much to the parents' surprise!

My daughter (age 10) is responding very enthusiastically to the project and begs for extra reading time. I told her we'd read a chapter a day but we ending up reading three today as she loves it so much - my voice was cracking by the end! I have noticed she will go and read instead of automatically asking to go on a screen because of the daily reading activity.

M chose being read to over watching TV. (Girl, age 6)

I like how this has just become what we do, there isn't any question. N (age 8) just brings me a book and we read together. Some days we read more than others. I have noticed that more and more he is choosing to read a book over playing computer games or watching TV.

B (age 8) is calmer when we read together and not bothered about going on the TV or Playstation which is nice as trying to get him away from that. He has also taken to reading a bit more before bed by himself.

3. Wellbeing improved

Parents reported children were fractious and bored due to lockdown. They were anxious, they missed their friends and their routine. Mums were also struggling with the situation and their own stresses and anxieties. The introduction of the reading project to their lives and the commitment from mums to read daily meant the child experienced regular 1-2-1 attention. The effect was transformative on children's wellbeing, and on the parents' wellbeing, too. The pleasure in sharing a story, the physical closeness and cuddles and the focused attention on the child was highly valued by both child and mum.

This book sharing feels like a grown up thing that we can share that is something her sisters can't do. It is just for us. I'm really happy that this has helped her control some of her responses to me. Much calmer! (Girl age 9)

My son (age 5) is struggling with moods and reading calms him down. It is helping immensely and providing calm and quiet time.

He definitely becomes more cuddly and affectionate when we're reading together. He cuddles close or sits on my lap. It makes me feel more relaxed and happy. (Boy, age 3)

K (age 8) was in a bad mood to start with - she was cross about the maths that I had just made her do. As 8 year olds do, she was declaring that it was 'the worst day ever'. She was still happy to sit down and listen to some more of 101 Dalmatians, though, and it didn't take long for her to become immersed in the story again, laughing at jokes and wondering what would happen next. She soon forgot about being cross.

Reading increased T's happiness today and I got lots of cuddles - project is making me feel more positive and enjoy time together more. (Boy, age 5)

Children associated being read to with the deepest comfort and reassurance, with so much pleasure that they were inspired to replicate it and read independently, too. Even those children who ordinarily were capable and engaged wanted to be read to in addition to their independent reading.

Mums talked about feeling good about their parenting, that they were nurturing and doing something valuable. Reading together creates intimacy and makes children feel safe and secure; many parents shared how after storytime their child talked about what was worrying them. Mums reported their relationships with their children were much enhanced by the experience.

I'm enjoying our reading time together. It makes me feel like a 'proper mum' & since 99% of the time I'm winging it, it's brilliant.

Today we carried on with Charlie Bone and the Time Twister. D (age 9) keen to get to reading. No issues and his wellbeing is good. I'm happy with way project is going and feel it has brought us closer together.

Longer story tonight to finish the chapter, and a chance to chat about what makes stories more or less sad. For a girl who does a lot of thinking and not so much talking about her thoughts and feelings, it's good to have a space to explore some of them. (Girl, age 8)

J (age 3) brought me a book to read to him this afternoon to "cheer mummy up" as he thought I was sad!

D (age 10) completes a journal most days listing his 3 favourite things from the day. Before I'd even read to him he put 'story with mum' as top of the list so it's fair to say he's enjoying this shared time together

I can't believe this will be my last diary entry. I say diary entry but it won't be the last time we will read together. This has become so important to our routine in lock down. It's helped open up talking & bonding with us even though my child is no longer a baby. Thank you Egmont & Mumsnet. (Boy, age 10)

4. Child's attainment increased

Many children were unhappy at missing their friends at school and many did not willingly engage with remote schooling. Mums responded in a range of ways, from letting it go to really trying to get it done and become teacher. Most all mums found it stressful in one way or another. We found that adding the reading club into the home learning mix acted like rocket fuel to the children's attainment; they soared.

- General progress improved. It's known that children who read for pleasure do better at school, in all subjects, not just English. We saw this played out. Here's one example:

Fabulous day. V (age 12) read then I read. Had a good chat and lots of cuddles...so nice. Good news today is that she was singled out by her RE teacher for good work. My goodness, my husband and I are so pleased as she is not normally right at the top! But we have had amazing reports from English, RE and Science! Am finding with all these new books she is whizzing through them...when we aren't reading together she is reading alone like a complete book worm! Really thanks for that. The progress I feel she is making is great...I don't know whether this is also linked but I feel she is becoming more confident... this is major when she lacks so much confidence!

- Vocabulary improved. Because reading together is a shared activity, the characters and stories became a source for conversation. This particularly helped with learning new vocabulary. Children asked what words meant, and then used those words in later conversations.

E (age 3) has been using longer words recently. Today he saw a 'huge-mungous' cow. He also used the word 'substantial'. I really is lovely reading to him. He has become very attentive.

This morning we started the day reading. N (age 8) then went off to read in his den for a little while before starting his school work. I'm reading through his English work I noticed that a word we had discussed the meaning of when reading last week. He'd used in his writing work. I was incredibly proud that he was trying to use words that we have been discussing.

- Comprehension increased. Because reading aloud takes the pressure off the child, they are free to listen and absorb the story. As a result, comprehension improved for most children.

I asked B (age 11) if she is still enjoying reading with me. Her response was "Totally!" I asked how me reading aloud compares to her reading independently, and she said "Sometimes when I'm reading, it's like I have to go back and read it again and again because I don't get it, but when you read it, it's like it's straight there".

- Imaginations were stimulated. Mums talked of children acting out the stories they were listening to, drawing characters and making up their own stories.

Today H (age 6) drew a picture of the Faraway Tree as her art class during our school session. Reading together and this set of stories is clearly firing her imagination.

- General knowledge improved through exposure to new ideas and concepts.

Today in the park J (age 8) started talking about the story - no prompting from me! She was comparing the open grassland to the prairie, saying that she would have liked to live in Laura's time, and would like to see the wide open land that Laura describes. We had a fairly long discussion making comparisons! I absolutely love having these conversations because it shows me she is really enjoying the story, she is thinking about it and the books that we read are expanding her general knowledge. She knew nothing about American settlers and wagon trails before, but is becoming something of an expert!

- Concentration/ listening skills improved. Through regular reading and listening, children became more able to concentrate on longer texts and enjoy them.

We started a new book on Wednesday night - The Last Kids on Earth. E (age 9) was keen to get stuck into it and I've found she is willing to spend longer reading when we do it together than when she previously did it by herself.

- Reading capabilities improved through recognition of words, talking about words that rhyme outside of storytime, following the text and recognising words while they were being read to. Co-reading enabled children to become more fluent.

It's nice to see A (age 10) growing confidence in her reading: we've been reading a chapter out loud to each other. Her confidence is flowing reading out loud. It's wonderful hearing and seeing her get really into something which isn't her iPad! This has brought us together, we love the project.

- Preferences were discovered. Children, having been read to very often over the course of the project, and having chosen and received 12 new books, found they had a good idea of what they liked and what they wanted to read next.

We sat together and discussed what book we would like to read next, I really enjoyed this discussion as P (age 8) was able to articulate exactly what he liked or didn't like in books.

F (age 5) is really enjoying the focus on reading together. We are spending time talking about what we are planning to read and what we have just read, too. She is making choices according to what she likes. This is a change, as previously she either grabbed a book at random or repeatedly chose the same books over and over.

*Reading is a portal to another world. My favourite genre is Sci-fi because it's a weird way of the world existing and I can see what other worlds might be like.
(Boy, age 9)*

- Enthusiasm for reading grew with all 64 children. Simply, reading aloud to a child is so pleasurable that they want it to continue and so they are motivated to read independently.

*I can't emphasise enough how pleased I am with the difference in W's attitude & ability with reading. In 6 weeks it has improved so much.
(Boy, age 10)*

He seems to still be enjoying reading together and we feel closer together. He's loving reading The Last Kids On Earth as it's exciting. His attitude to reading has improved, he never really read books before unless he had to. (Boy, age 12)

My daughter (age 7) is much more keen to try reading books from school now, and has even said "I'm interested in books".

The first thing L (age 7) said to me this morning was 'Book!' Normally he'd get up and play, or watch TV with his brother, so it was a nice surprise to find him keen to read more of the story. It feels like something he really wants to do and I am enjoying having some one to one time with him. He snuggled up for a cuddle while I read to him, but was paying attention to the story (The Last Kids on Earth)

J (age 7) asks to read and be read to, and now has her nose in a book as often as anything else. She's really got a taste for graphic novels, which is something she hadn't discovered before the reading club.

W (age 5) is enjoying it so much he wanted to take books out with us today. He loves the T Rex book that we got sent so much that I have already read it numerous times! He is questioning the meaning of words more and asked me questions today about other dinosaurs, inspired by this book.

Conclusion

Reading for pleasure – whether independent reading or reading aloud to a child – can plug the education gap incredibly effectively, with great joy and no pain! Perhaps we could call it learning by stealth. Reading aloud to a child is so easy to do and brings so much happiness to children and to families. But parents are not doing it in great numbers, not doing it often, and not doing it throughout childhood (just 33% of 0-13s are read to daily or nearly every day at homeⁱⁱ). If parents are shown what can happen if they do focus on reading at home, they are converted. It simply requires interventions where families experience the impact for themselves.

Final thoughts are best said by this mum:

I am amazed at how the regular reading has affected us all. I feel rather silly because I have an English literature degree and a house full of books - I didn't consider that just having books in the house wasn't enough, I had to actually read them to the children! They are still reading to themselves a lot, especially at bedtime after I've read to them. They have books beside their beds and when I go up to tuck them in later, their beds are full of books. My 4 year old used to say she can't read, but doesn't say that anymore. She could only really recognise the first letter of her name but has started to ask questions about letters now. I'm not doing any home learning with C now because I'm working, but I'm not worried about her education as she's reading so widely. We can't go out, but she said she's not bored. I know that's because of reading.

ⁱ Nielsen Book: Understanding the Children's Book Consumer 2019

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