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It's never too soon to start

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[T]he first step, as you know, is always what matters most, particularly when we are dealing with those who are young and tender. That is the time when they are taking shape and when any impression we choose to make leaves a permanent mark. (Plato, 428–348 BC)

Introduction

We all know, almost by instinct, that reading is a good thing, and we know that it is good to read to young children, but it took the Bookstart project, piloted in 1992, to support this belief with research evidence. This chapter is, in a way, a celebration of reading and a celebration of the joy that parents, carers and children experience when they share stories, pictures and rhymes as a regular and important part of their lives. This is not about teaching children to read – others are dealing with that – but about the practicalities and the benefits of reading to children from the very start of their lives.

Reading is still a good thing and, even as technological advances offer different ways of delivering text and pictures, reading continues to be central in life, and certainly in the process of education. Feeling good about books will make children keen to get to school and to learn to read, and the more they read the better readers they will become. Fast, fluent readers who have developed reading stamina will deal well with the whole curriculum and its reading demands and will grow into adults who have reading as a resource for the whole of their lives. They will be able to use books for pleasure, information, experience, solace, escape and so much more, and their lives will be enriched by their ability to access, by whatever means, the mass of fiction and non-fiction now available.

Pleasurable early reading experiences give babies and young children

positive feelings about books. When a baby touches a small bath-book in the water and listens to someone who is known and loved talk about the duck and the story and is lifted from the bath, wrapped in a warm, fluffy towel, and cuddled on a knee and invited to look and listen as a beautiful picture book is read and talked about, they begin to know that books are good things. The baby doesn't know what a book is, or what a duck is, but they know that this bath-time experience is warm, secure and really rather nice. They know the voice of the reader and enjoy the rhythm and sounds of the words long before any of the words make sense.

A little later the baby may meet a book such as Helen Oxenbury's *Tickle, Tickle* (Oxenbury, 1987), the first-ever winner of the Baby Book Award (sponsored in the early years by Sainsbury's plc and now by Booktrust). This book has been hugely popular in Bookstart packs because it demonstrates many of the ingredients that add up to a really good book for a baby. The very short text is a joy to read aloud – very necessary, as anyone with children knows that favourite books must be read again, and again, and again. At a few months old babies don't understand all the words, but they respond to the voice of someone who loves them, and the sounds of words like 'Splish, splash' and 'Tickle, tickle' resonate in their heads; they're great words to say and to demonstrate, and the repetition and rhythm helps babies to develop an ear for language which, as time goes on, will take them into reading. The invitation to adult and child to join in with splashing and tickling makes this a book for interaction and fun, and so offers a memorable shared experience. The illustrations are a delight, as boldly drawn babies fill the pages: babies rule in this book giving it plenty of child appeal. And for those parents who worry excessively about learning, children who've enjoyed this board book will find that they understand such things as alliteration and onomatopoeia when they meet them at school.

So the sharing of words and pictures is, beyond everything, a bonding experience. Many parents and carers have always understood this and have made bedtime reading a normal part of their child's day; but others, perhaps those who had no such introduction to stories when they were young, need to be encouraged and empowered to become involved in their children's earliest education and to read with them. Some, of course, worry about their own reading skills and their ability to read aloud well. Very young children are not critical; they love to hear the voice of someone who loves them talking, singing and reading.

These early, pleasurable experiences with words and pictures, stories and rhymes help children to understand that although reading is complicated

they will soon be able to do it. They will know that they must use their heads to read the words and make sense of the way they are ordered and what they mean, but they must also use their hearts to enter into the magic of the story. William Wordsworth's words in 'The Prelude' are worth remembering:

Twice five years
Or less I might have seen, when first my mind
With conscious pleasure opened to the charm
Of words in tuneful order, found them sweet
For their own sakes, a passion and a power. ...

All our children may not be quite as quick as Wordsworth, may not understand about the power and passion of words before they reach the age of ten, but those who are read to every day from their very earliest days are most likely to do so.

We all have a reading history and most of us never forget the earliest chapters of it. Talk to disaffected teenagers, and some will say that they never read and all books are boring. But show them some classic picture books, and most of them will remember with pleasure lifting the flaps and finding Spot over and over again (Hill, 1980); poking their fingers through the holes in *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* (Carle, 1969); being pleasantly scared by the monsters in *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963); and staying awake at night wishing the Tiger would come to tea (Kerr, 1968). Reminding them of the days when reading was fun brings to mind the wonder of some of these books; soon they're talking about the skeletons in *Funnybones* (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1992); the safety of the hen in *Rosie's Walk* (Hutchins, 1968) and searching for the hidden characters in *Each Peach Pear Plum* (Ahlberg and Ahlberg, 1978). Sadly, some children miss out on this very early experience and don't meet these books until they reach school. They start school without that knowledge of stories and books and how they work that gives other children a strong, positive beginning. It was to offer equal opportunity and access to books to all children that the Bookstart project was introduced.

The Bookstart story

This is, inevitably, a very personal account of the beginnings of this book-gifting scheme, which has grown beyond my wildest imaginings. It could be a proper, 'Once upon a time. ...' story because the germ of the idea is the much-told story of one boy called Kevin. Working at Booktrust brought

many invitations to schools, libraries, bookshops and publishers, and certainly the one to visit a school as the new reception children arrived is the most memorable. The year was 1991, nursery education was not available to all and for some children this was their first school experience. The new arrivals were nervous and excited, but their parents were almost traumatized; they didn't want to leave their little ones. The excellent class teacher gave each child a picture book to look at as she gently got the parents to leave. The children looked at their books, most of them turned the pages, pointed things out to themselves and named things out loud; some recognized their book. But Kevin did not. He bent his book, sat on it, sniffed it, tried to throw it like a frisbee and then looked round to see what others were doing and tried to copy. It was very clear that Kevin had never held a book before, didn't know what to do with it and so, in a way, failed at the very first thing he was asked to do at school. He didn't have a wealth of story experience, felt left out and different, and was having a less positive start to school than others. It seemed to me shocking that such a thing could happen – a child of four or five knowing nothing of books – and it pushed me to look further. It became very clear that Kevin was not the only one and that large numbers of parents and carers were not reading to their children – they were parents who cared for their children and wanted the best for them, but thought it was best to leave books and reading to teachers.

Reading does need to be taught, and that *is* the job of a qualified teacher, but parents can inculcate a love of books long before school. It became clear that if we wanted all homes to have books, we needed to supply them, and, since one or two books were not going to change the world, families needed to be encouraged to enrol their babies at the public library as early as possible and so have access to the wide range of wonderful board and picture books now available.

Librarians were immediately keen to be involved in a possible scheme to bring books to children, but libraries were not the places to give out the baby packs because the families who most needed the books seldom went into them. It soon became clear that the only people who saw all, or almost all babies, were health visitors. At that time babies all had a health check at around nine months and health visitors were following up on families if they failed to keep their appointment. Health visitors seemed the very best people to give out those first Bookstart packs, and tying reading in with health stressed the importance of intellectual development alongside physical development. Families accepted the importance of the health check, and receiving books at the same time helped them to focus on the importance of reading.

As always, the hardest part of setting up the pilot project was the raising of necessary funds, and a huge debt is owed to the Unwin Charitable Trust for its contribution and ongoing support. Publishers were behind Bookstart from the start and donated books for the pilot. Birmingham Library Services and South Birmingham Health Authority agreed to join with Booktrust in bringing Bookstart to 300 families with babies of eight to nine months in three areas of the city, areas reflecting the wide diversity of the population. Margaret Meek of the University of London Institute of Education offered valuable advice and wrote a letter to all parents involved. She wisely stressed the need for the project to be properly evaluated, and so Dr Barrie Wade of Birmingham University's School of Education was approached. He agreed to produce an interim report of the project and to follow the Bookstart babies into school; such research would, we hoped, really tell us whether early intervention with books does make it more likely that children start school motivated to read, and whether sharing books with babies changes parents' and carers' attitudes and their library visiting and book-buying habits. Margaret Meek's introductory letter included the paragraph:

Why should we read to very young children? There are lots of reasons but the most important is that the sooner children enjoy reading, the more they will want to read and to become good at it. We know now for certain that the children who handle books confidently before they go to school, and have enjoyed being read to, are those who learn to read in school with most success. Also, parents and other adults who read to children report that babies love to be read to, even before they can talk.

In 1992, Booktrust and its partners produced the first Bookstart packs – simple yellow folders containing a board book, a nursery rhyme card (soon to change its name as parents wrote and said 'thank you for the place mat'), Margaret Meek's letter, a poster illustrating the joys of reading and, most importantly, an invitation to join the library. Parents and carers were also asked to complete a questionnaire to help with the research. They were asked to complete a further questionnaire six months later, designed to investigate changes in attitudes to book sharing, book buying and libraries. Joining in with the giving out of packs was a memorable experience because families found it hard to accept that they were not being asked to pay, but simply to read.

From the start, we looked at the diversity of the population and tried to have this in mind by providing materials in the home languages most used

in the pilot areas. It is interesting to note that one of the poems on the first rhyme card was this poem from Ghana, beautifully illustrated, of course:

Listen to the tree bear
Crying in the night
Crying for his Mammy
In the pale moonlight
What will his Mammy do
When she hears him cry?
She'll tuck him in a cocoa-pod
And sing a lullaby.

Those first Bookstart babies were too young to really understand this rhyme but they were, almost accidentally, learning about the sounds of words, about the rhymes and rhythms of language.

Bookstart was different from other projects in that it was offered to *all* families in the chosen areas rather than being targeted at families considered to be deprived. It was clear that in all sections of the population there were adults who were not reading to their children, who thought that libraries were for when their children were older, and so we were convinced that the Bookstart gift should be for everyone. The aim was to grow the project to benefit all children in the UK.

Support for Bookstart was immediate, and the follow-up, over-subscribed conference generated huge interest and led to the setting up of 30 projects around the country, initiated by enthusiastic librarians and health visitors and supported by local authority funding. The summary of findings in the initial report, *Booktrust report number 2*, published in 1993, read:

Bookstart has been warmly welcomed by professionals and by parents. It has promoted more awareness of books, more reading and more sharing of books with very young children in the wide range of families who received the pack. Significantly more babies had enrolled as library members as a result of the pack. Bookstart had promoted book purchase and book club membership.

(Wade and Moore, 1993)

The enthusiasm spread, more areas became involved, libraries began to run sessions for adults and babies (more on this later) and to compete to get the youngest library member! We knew we had the foundation of something important, and so the struggle for money to improve and extend the project

began. It was perhaps the follow-up research, looking at Bookstart babies when they started school, as well as at other local projects, that brought publicity and began to convince a wider range of people that Bookstart was good news, a project that really benefited children.

A Gift for Life, Bookstart: the first five years, by Barrie Wade and Maggie Moore of Birmingham University, was published by Booktrust in 1998 and found that many positive benefits resulted from sharing books with babies. There is not space here to review the research, which, along with later research, can be viewed on the Bookstart website, but just to say that point one of the report's summary read:

Bookstart is a relatively low-cost scheme, but findings show it has the potential to increase book sharing, book purchase and library usage. Bookstart contributes to laying the foundations for literacy and analysis indicates its potential for raising standards in both literacy and numeracy. (Wade and Moore, 1998)

The literacy findings did not surprise; the numeracy ones did – Bookstart children had shared a wide range of picture books, including, it became clear, books about counting and shape, and so they started school ready and willing to learn how to read and how to work with numbers.

Bookstart continued to be developed by a dedicated team at Booktrust; local schemes continued to grow – there were 60 by 1999 – but the break-through came in 1999 with funding from Sainsbury's plc. Sainsbury's asked its staff and colleagues how they wanted the company to celebrate the millennium. Sainsbury's wanted to support a project for children that was about learning and that would leave a legacy for the 21st century. Bookstart, established and ripe for expansion, was chosen and for the first time universal provision was possible – by the year 2000, 92% of babies were benefiting from Bookstart. *Sainsbury's Bookstart Report* (Booktrust, 2000) reported that 91% of parents said they were reading to their babies after receipt of the Bookstart pack.

When the two-year sponsorship came to an end Bookstart was strong and established. For the first four years of the new century, Government funding from first the Department for Education and Employment and then the Department for Culture, Media and Sport enabled packs to be produced and local authorities to buy into Bookstart. The scheme was kept in the public eye and, in July 2004, the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, Gordon Brown, announced funding to entitle all families to three packs of books before school: the Baby Book Bag at around nine months, Bookstart+ at 18 to 24 months and the Treasure Chest at three to four years. At last the project had

achieved its major aim, but, it must be said, only with the strong support and involvement of its many partners – especially library and health professionals and children’s publishers.

The carefully chosen books are of course central in the packs, but booklists, booklets offering advice to parents and carers, and a place mat with nursery rhymes illustrated by the best of our children’s illustrators that are now included give added value and added support to families. Today’s book bags and boxes have been developed with creativity and have benefited from the expertise of our many partners – they bear little resemblance to the yellow folders given to those 300 families in Birmingham in 1992. Bookstart has come of age, become a part of children’s early years entitlement, involved with Children’s Centres, Sure Start projects and more. The *Bookstart Partnership Report* of 2003 quotes Professor Kathy Sylva’s statement to the House of Commons Select Committee on Education and Employment:

Our study has shown that the home environment can really make a difference ... more important than the mother’s educational qualifications is what the mother does with her child. Education matters, qualifications matter, but if the mother reads to the child, plays rhyming games, sings songs, talks about letters and sounds, and takes the child to the library, these behaviours at home are more important and can compensate for a low education level. (Booktrust, 2003)

My only complaint with Professor Sylva is that she failed to mention fathers, for of course their involvement is equally important. My celebration is that the core beliefs of Bookstart have become accepted facts. It is somewhat ironic that, as I write this in February 2011, the country’s financial situation is dire and Bookstart funding, and indeed libraries, are under threat.

The exciting developments of the last ten years have been skimmed over, but central has been the introduction of Booktime and Booked Up, giving children books as they start primary and, later, secondary school. Anyone observing the work teachers do with the chosen books will witness a real sense of excitement that any good gift can bring, as children are once again reminded of the wonders that books offer. Reading for pleasure needs to be encouraged amidst the hard work and prescription that school so often brings. Details and research findings could fill this book, but all can be found on the Booktrust website: www.booktrust.org.uk/show/feature/Bookstart-research.

The issue of diversity is one that challenges any organization seeking to intervene in children’s reading development, and clearly Bookstart packs and resources need to reflect the rich and varied society in which we live.

Publishers are encouraged to include positive images of disability, to feature different kinds of families and children from a wide range of backgrounds in their books, but there is a great deal more to be done here. As readers, we remember the books that touch us, the books in which characters think a bit like us or find themselves in situations that we have experienced. Of course we enjoy the wildly fantastical and the journeys and adventures that we will never experience, but the book that makes us feel that the writer knows what's going on in our heads is always one to remember. Picture books have never been richer, but still there are some children who will never see themselves or anyone like them in any of the books they are offered. It is only necessary to observe children, say the young black child seeing the cover of Mary Hoffman and Caroline Binch's *Amazing Grace* (1991) for the first time with wonder and delight on her face, to know that this is important. This book was one of the first in the UK to show a strong and vibrant black child on a cover, and the need for this has been clearly reflected in its ongoing success.

Bookstart, a partnership project

Bookstart is, at heart, a partnership project relying on the support, advice and co-operation of a range of professional groups and organizations. Booktrust produces Bookstart packs and co-ordinates the project nationally. Packs are then supplied to centres around the country and local delivery is managed by library, health and education agencies in each local authority. Every effort is made to reach all families, so organization must be flexible and locally sensitive if Bookstart is to help in the tackling of social exclusion. Ways must be found to identify children with special needs, and organizations such as Home-Start, Scope, the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS), the Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB) and Mencap have been valuable and generous in the sharing of their expertise. Booktouch, a special resource pack for children up to four years old who are blind or partially sighted, and Bookshine, a pack for deaf children, have benefited enormously from the co-operation, experience and advice of experts. Bookstart's list of partners continues to grow and widen as the Bookstart team seeks to reach traveller and refugee families and respond to the language needs of families and the literacy needs of parents and carers – delivering Bookstart to *all* our children is an ongoing challenge.

A small group of very special librarians in Birmingham were Bookstart's first partners, and librarians have continued to be central partners as the project has grown. They are involved in inserting local library information

into packs, inviting and encouraging library membership, delivering packs to families and offering activity sessions that support the reading message. In 1992 parents regularly told us that they were afraid to take their babies to the library in case the baby damaged books or made too much noise. I can't imagine hearing such comments today, for libraries have responded to these concerns and today's children's libraries welcome babies and toddlers and support the adults with them as they choose books. More and more parents enrol their babies at the library, and libraries offer them an excellent service. My own local library has displays to support Bookstart, offers a wide range of board books and picture books, reassures adults who may be concerned about books getting chewed or torn and, in fact, offers a friendly space in which children and adults are happy to spend time together.

Activities offered for parents and children vary from area to area but almost always include Bounce and Rhyme Sessions, Storytimes, Bookstart Rhymetimes, etc. that entertain children and, more importantly, model reading for adults who are nervous and uncertain about how to read to their children. Watching a good librarian share books with children really is a great way for parents to begin to see how to go about sharing books and talking about them with their children. These sessions are aimed at the babies and children and so are non-threatening to even the least-confident adults. The work of librarians continues to strengthen the Bookstart message: the six books each child receives before school are a wonderful gift, but it is the regular diet of books from the library that helps children to develop into real readers and book lovers. Now, in 2011, library budgets and libraries themselves are under threat; we lose these services at our peril, for their disappearance would change the educational chances of many of our children.

Librarians are not just passive partners; they bring expertise and ideas to Bookstart. Just one activity can be mentioned here: Bookstart Book Crawl, an idea from Croydon Libraries, a library-joining incentive that has generated millions of library visits. The scheme is very simple: young children collect special stickers when they borrow books and are awarded a certificate after six library visits. This proved very popular, so the idea has been picked up by the Bookstart team and disseminated throughout the country – it is now run in libraries in over 90% of local authorities. It was reported in the Booktrust publication *Reading for Pleasure: reading for life* (Booktrust, 2010) that 195,206 Bookstart Book Crawl Certificates were awarded in 2009, representing 420,824 library visits. Children completing 10 Crawls receive a Gold Certificate, which equates to 60 library visits. The certificates are beautiful, illustrated by such popular children's book illustrators as Tony

Ross, Jane Ray, Jan Ormerod and Nick Sharratt, and many families seek to collect the whole set. This inexpensive, attractive idea is just one example of the additional value that libraries have brought to Bookstart.

Health professionals too have been involved in Bookstart from the beginning and Bookstart baby packs and Bookstart+ are still usually gifted via the family's health visitor. This partnership is invaluable and the gifting during an essential health-care check-up gives the books a greater importance in the eyes of some parents. Health professionals value being part of Bookstart and see it as contributing to parental bonding, early listening and communication skills, development of attention span, pre-literacy skills and social skills. And it is still a fact that parents with babies are more likely to be reached in this way than in any other.

Bookstart could not exist without the support of children's book publishers. Over four million books are purchased every year at a nominal cost, but with a value of over £21 million. Publishers submit books for selection, books that are positive and inclusive, reflecting our society and celebrating gender, race and ethnicity. The chosen books, from classic authors to the very newest talent in writing and illustrating, spark the child's imagination and curiosity, use language well, show words and pictures working together, and can be enjoyed repeatedly by children and adults. Kate Wilson, then Director Children's at Pan Macmillan, gave a publisher's view of Bookstart for the *Bookstart Partnership Report June* in 1993:

Bookstart is, without question, the most exciting cross-agency project I've ever been involved in. As a publisher, we are so impressed by the commitment demonstrated by the national team and by the librarians and health visitors who give their skills and time so unstintingly. It is a wonderful thing for the book industry to have parents and carers of the youngest potential readers exposed to the experience of books and book sharing, and is worthy of the strongest possible support from us all. (Booktrust, 1993)

This support is offered in so many ways, not just in the continuing publication of exceptional books, but in supporting other aspects of the project – particularly the production of a give-away book for Bookstart Day, providing books for piloting new projects to reach special groups of children and making it possible to offer dual-language books to children whose home language is not English. Publishers provide Bookstart with the tools for the job, board and picture books rich in language and illustration that will leave children wanting to read more.

Conclusion: the wider picture

All around the world people and agencies who care about reading have heard of, and picked up on, the Bookstart idea. The first country to bring Bookstart to its children was Japan: Izumi Satou of Bookstart Japan believes that: 'All people seek the happiness of their children and that is what Bookstart gives to every child.' Izumi's book telling the story of ten years of Bookstart Japan was published in 2010, sadly only available in Japanese. Asian countries such as Korea and Taiwan introduced Bookstart to remind parents of the pleasure of book sharing as concern was growing about the fast-paced, competitive nature of their schools. Parents were taken up by the need for children to achieve, paying for extra classes and supervising learning, but making no time for enjoyment. Today Bookstart projects are happening from Australia to Thailand to Columbia to the Falkland Islands and many places in between. There are affiliated schemes in many European countries – the German Government committed to seven years of funding in 2010. Projects work in ways appropriate to each country – books can be given out through Buddhist temples or by volunteers, according to what works best. International meetings offering opportunities to share ideas and disseminate good practice have been held at IBBY (the International Board on Books for Young People) conferences and at the Bologna Book Fair, and the message is spreading. The idea, as has already been said, is a very simple one, but delivering it to all children is a challenge in any country and requires the support of a wide-ranging group of people. As Bookstart spreads around the world, Britain is once again fighting for the necessary funding to keep the book gifting going at the present level and to respond to changing needs. A project with wide reach, demonstrating the strength of partnership working, and supported by solid research, cannot be allowed to disappear.

The last word goes to a character in Terry Jones's 1997 book *The Knight and the Squire*. The book is set in the 14th century, a time when few children could read. Tom and his non-reading friend find themselves hiding in a library in France:

Not a library such as the village priest had back home; the priest's library consisted of one perhaps two books at most. This library was different.

If Tom could have counted them all, he would have been able to count eleven thousand volumes sitting on shelf after shelf – and all round the room, and from the floor to the ceiling. There was even a gallery running around above their heads, with ladders up to it and more books stretching on above that. And each book was secured by a chain.

Tom tries to explain to his friend what reading is like:

It's like ... not being blind ... It's like ... standing on the edge of a cliff and knowing you can fly.

And why he's so glad he can read:

walking in here ... I suddenly saw that the whole world – more – is in books.
It's like being able to see beyond the horizon!

Bookstart's wish is for all children to see the impossible, to see beyond the horizon, for this, as Izumi Satou from Japan says, could be one of the keys to happiness.

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Today at 07:01. Happy Monday! It's never too soon to start weekend brunch planning ☺ Choose Paris Seaport for your Sunday brunch date! (@parisseaport) See more. Gables Seaport. Happy Monday! It's never too soon to start weekend brunch planning ☺ Choose Paris Seaport for your Sunday brunch date! (@parisseaport). The intervention also decreased the age at which infants started tummy time (P = .03 for trend) and increased the daily practice of tummy time by 7% from 76% to 83% (P = .05). The home-based early intervention delivered by trained community nurses significantly improved some infant feeding practices and resulted in earlier daily practice of tummy time. anzctr.org.au Identifier: ACTRN012607000168459. It's never too early. Learn why and how to get going. If you take "looking for a job" in this case to mean applying for current job openings by sending a resume and cover letter and trying to land an interview, then there is such a thing as too soon. It doesn't make sense for you to look for a job in this particular way until closer to graduation. After all, if you apply for a current job opening in, say, October but you won't be graduating until the following May, then you're really wasting both your and the employer's time and effort. But it's never too soon if you expand the idea to include more future-oriented -- and usual