



MRS Awards 2023
Activation of Insight
Winner

BookTrust

Understanding a disadvantaged target audience through a multifaceted research approach to create sustained behaviour change

Summary

The need for all children to experience the benefits of reading has never been greater. At a time when the disadvantage gap is growing due to the cost-of-living crisis, and a cohort of children's development has been severely impacted by COVID restrictions, the benefits that reading brings related to well-being, empathy, realising new life-possibilities, and bettering educational outcomes can be life-changing. The success of BookTrust's new strategy to get children reading, focused on providing more support to families who need it most, therefore has huge implications for this generation of children.

In the last two years, we have transformed how we work as an organisation to ensure our work creates lasting behaviour-change impact for families. We ensure that qualitative and quantitative insights inform everything we do, from the design and delivery of our programmes to strategic business planning. Indicative of this approach has been our work to redevelop what we provide to families in the early years (EY). We have begun step-changing our EY support to better meet the needs of low-income and vulnerable families identified through our research, shifting from being a charity that primarily gifts books to one that offers multi-touchpoint experiences around reading to achieve behaviour change.

Synopsis

The Challenge

Reading brings a wide range of benefits for children and families: improving their development, health, wellbeing, progress at school, creativity, and supporting bonding in families – irrespective of family wealth or background. Children from low-income backgrounds stand to benefit even more from the immediate and longer-term benefits of early shared reading: a child growing up in poverty who is read to at age five has a significantly higher chance of economic success in their 30s than their peers who were not read to.

BookTrust is the UK's largest children's reading charity, working in every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland to get every child reading regularly, and by choice. Although most parents believe reading is important for their child, almost a quarter of children aged 0-7 in low-income households are missing out on the benefits, and half don't see reading or books as a big part of family life. This is why, as part of our new strategy launched in 2021, we have committed to refocusing our efforts on families who need the most support.

A key priority since the launch of our strategy has been reviewing and redesigning our offer for early years families. Through mixed-method approaches, we have developed a better understanding of the families we are looking to serve, their priorities, needs and barriers to reading. This new understanding has enabled us to design new and effective ways of reaching and supporting these families.

What we are continuing to learn has not only supported the redesign of our early years offers, but has caused us to change the way we operate as an organisation: from one whose primary function was the procurement and delivery of books to families, to one that designs full-service propositions with digital and physical experiences around books that inspire real behaviour change in reading habits, at scale.

Understanding our target families through human-centred design

As a first step, we evaluated the impact of our existing early years book-gifting programmes for our target audience. Through large-scale family surveys, observations and in-depth interviews with delivery partners and target families, we found that in most cases, book-gifting alone was not inspiring less-engaged families to use a book more than once - much less sparking an ongoing reading habit. We also learnt that many of the routes we traditionally used to deliver our offers were not reaching a high proportion of our target audience.

We refreshed our organisational Theory of Change to ensure it captured both our own internal research and evaluation findings, and the latest external evidence on reading, behaviour change and habit formation – both in general terms and for reading specifically. We have ensured our Theory of Change is embedded throughout the organisation, guiding how we communicate with families and partners, our impact measurement and evaluation processes, and the design of our new offers.

We recognised that to create new and effective pathways to reach and influence our priority audience, we needed to build out our picture of these families' lives, and what happens on a daily basis that may ultimately impact their engagement with reading. Alongside our existing evaluations of our early years programmes, we developed a comprehensive research programme to gain clearer and deeper insights into family experiences, including:

- **Undertaking desk research to understand better the early years ecosystem and trends.** This helped us to develop some early hypotheses to test for how we might support reading behaviour change.
- **Conducting two waves of our Family Survey (in 2021 and 2022) to learn more about family life and reading.** In the latest wave, we surveyed 2,148 parents and carers from low-income households in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. As far as we are aware, this is the only early years survey of its kind in the UK.
- **Carrying out 6 months' co-creation work with families and early years partners across England, Wales and Northern Ireland.** We recruited over 40 families in our target audience to complete a series of homework tasks, one-to-one interviews and co-creation workshops, and spoke with 15 early years professionals across the nations who work closely with our target families. The end result was BookTrust developing new resources for families and partners which we piloted with over 400,000 families and 2,000 partner across the above nations.
- **Partnering with an innovation agency on a programme of research to identify new mechanisms for behaviour change impact.** Part of this involved conducting online in-context ethnographic research with 24 target audience families to observe and uncover reading pain points and opportunities within their daily routines and rituals. We also commissioned semiotics / trend and social listening studies to determine how reading fits within our target families' broader cultural contexts. A cross-functional team at BookTrust then used this insight to spark ideas for possible new reading interventions, which we further developed through co-creation workshops with families and early years practitioners across the UK.

Three key insights that are guiding the ongoing development of our work are:

Key insight	How we've activated this insight
30% of children aged 1-4 are not in nursery or registered with a library, meaning they would not be reached by traditional BookTrust delivery routes (Family Survey 2022). Our semiotic study showed that working with organisations beyond BookTrust's existing networks (e.g. other charities, religious organisations) offers an opportunity to reach families from a wider variety of cultures and backgrounds.	These insights have led our Partnerships team to identify new organisations to help us reach target families.
Our Family Survey found that mothers who received advice or information on the importance of reading when they were pregnant were significantly more likely to start reading earlier, and to continue reading more often with their children throughout the early years.	These insights have led us to scope out a new antenatal pilot, through which we are testing the impact of informing expectant parents about the benefits of reading in the second/third trimesters of pregnancy.
Parental enjoyment of, and confidence in, reading strongly impacts children's exposure to reading. Our ethnographic study showed that when choosing activities to do with their children, parents often prioritise immediate benefits over longer-term ones. For example, the 'in the moment' benefits of cuddles and closeness are more of an incentive to read together and reduce confidence barriers than developmental or literacy benefits.	This insight has prompted us to do more work to understand the benefits of reading for parents, to shape how we communicate these to parents for behaviour change.

Embedding the learning across the organisation

With what we've learnt suggesting that a significant change in direction is needed to achieve impact against our new strategy, it's vitally important that everyone across the BookTrust, and our delivery partners, feel that they can champion it in their work.

Insights can be even more powerful when you hear them first hand from those you are looking to support, which is why we regularly invite members of the Board of Trustees and Senior Leadership to see "live" research taking place, as well as delivering regular 'insight updates' at Board and Senior Leadership Team meetings. We have also produced tools and models as outputs from our research, to make it easier for teams who were not involved in the research to use the insights to guide their work. From our ethnographic research, for example, we produced a list of the jobs that any BookTrust innovation must do for our audience, which has been used to inform a recent comms campaign around getting dads reading.

BookTrust works through an extensive network of over 6000 partners across all English local authorities, Wales and Northern Ireland, who are widely consulted in the evaluation of our programmes, and the design of new programmes. Sharing our insights through webinars and regular stakeholder meetings drives engagement with our offers, helping our partners understand how their work contributes to the wider, shared ambition of getting children reading, and supports them in how they communicate about reading with families.

Progress against our strategy

Since we submitted our nomination, we have completed our Year One evaluation of our redesigned Early Years Offer, and are pleased to see that the early findings support our design and development approach:

Impact we designed for	Lessons from our evaluation
Sparking initial excitement and exploration of the books and resources	99% of families were excited to open the packs to find out what was inside and 98% said they enjoyed using the pack together.
Making reading and stories a regular part of everyday life for all families	74% of families said the programme had prompted them to read and share stories more and 66% were encouraged to visit their local library.
Supporting low-income families in particular to discover the lifelong benefits of reading and establish a regular reading habit	The impacts were greatest for low-income families: 77% learnt something new about the benefits of reading (v. 67% overall), 82% learnt something new about different ways to share stories with their children (v. 78% overall), and 84% were prompted to read more (v. 77% of families overall).

And we're hearing first hand from families and partners the difference our work is making, as demonstrated in the linked video.

Why should we win this award?

Our mission to inspire a new generation of children to enjoy books and reading is as ambitious as it is important. Our ability to gather insights from our target families, embed them across our organisation and in the early years sector more widely (for example, through [research briefings](#)), and to adopt human-centred approaches to designing our offers, is critical to our success.

Through scaled evaluation of our offers, anecdotal evidence from partners and direct feedback from families, we are seeing evidence of the difference our work is making to families in all corners of England, Wales and Northern Ireland. And the impact of BookTrust's work goes well beyond reading: if we are successful, we'll help a whole generation of children experience the wide-ranging benefits of reading and they, in turn, are more likely to adopt the behaviours that mean their children experience the same.