

Supporting your child's education

Research¹ shows that when fathers get involved regularly in focused, interactive activities with their children, it can give them an educational advantage. And the earlier you start, the better.

Parents' involvement: an overview

As a parent, your involvement in your child's education is hugely important: research suggests you can have a bigger effect on their educational outcomes than the quality of their school².

But there are lots of barriers that as a parent can stop you getting as involved as you would like. These include:

- Lack of time: your own life is probably busy, and so is your child's, especially if they attend additional activities outside of school hours³
- Lack of confidence about your skills, knowledge and importance
- Feeling intimidated
- Not being invited or encouraged

There's also an anxiety around 'keeping up' as education becomes more about testing and measuring, and parents understandably want their children to do well⁴.

The struggle can feel especially great if either or both of you work long or inflexible hours, if you're on a low income and so can't afford to spend

¹ Norman, H. and Davies, J. (2023) 'What a difference a dad makes: paternal involvement and it's effects on children's education (PIECE) study'. Leeds: University of Leeds. [link](#)

² See for example, the then Department for Children, School and Families (now Department of Education) report [The Impact of Parental Involvement on Children's Education](#) (2008).

³ Farshore Insight (2013) 'Welcome to Reading Street' report [link](#)

⁴ Farshore Insight (2013) 'Welcome to Reading Street' report [link](#)

money on travel and activities, and if you don't live full-time with your child⁵.

A BookTrust survey found that despite 95% of families recognising the importance of reading with their child, only 42% of children have a bedtime story⁶.

What about fathers' involvement specifically?

Research has shown that there's a gendered element to parental involvement. The barriers identified above can apply to mothers as well as fathers, but it's often mums who pick up most of the burden of supporting children's education – both within the family and in the wider community⁷.

For example: parent-school involvement (things like helping out in the classroom, fundraising, or being a school governor) demonstrates the value and importance of education to the child. This can have a positive influence on learning, behaviour, and attendance – and it's an important first step that can lead to, or enhance, parental engagement at home. Yet fathers are only half as likely as mothers to take part in such activities⁸.

Even in families where mums and dads share the earning and caregiving equally, education is a notable area where gendered differences still play out. A study of these kinds of families found fathers acting as 'educational labourers' (carrying out the mundane aspects of school support) and the mothers as 'educational executives' (assuming responsibility for key education-related decisions)⁹.

Schools and childcare providers have a role to play here, as they tend to position the mother as the primary carer and first point of contact¹⁰. We've heard lots of examples of mothers and fathers who have specifically asked for Dad to be the main contact, only for the school to still call Mum when something goes wrong.

⁵ DadPad blog 'Why should dads read with their children every day?' (2023) [link](#)

⁶ BookTrust 'Reading Together, Changing Children's Lives' report summary [link](#)

⁷ PIECE blog 'Supporting fathers to get more involved at school' (2023) [link](#)

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Brooks, R. & Hodkinson, P. (2022) The distribution of 'educational labour' in families with equal or primary carer fathers *British Journal of Sociology of Education* [DOI](#)

¹⁰ PIECE blog 'Supporting fathers to get more involved at school' (2023) [link](#)

Information about home learning activities and school events, often sent home in children's book bags, tends to be seen first by mothers (who are busy – and even if they work shorter hours outside the home, have a lot to juggle – so may not pass it on to the dad, especially if they live apart). Sometimes school events are also promoted with too little notice for working parents to get time off.

The importance of fathers' involvement for their children's education

Fathers' involvement has been found¹¹ to have a unique and important effect on the educational outcomes of children that is over and above the effect of the mothers' involvement:

Greater father involvement in structured, educational activities (like reading and playing) provides an educational advantage to children in the first year of primary school

Fathers' involvement operates differently from mothers' involvement because it helps to increase children's educational attainment, whereas mothers' involvement enhances children's cognitive behaviour

Fathers' involvement has lasting effects on children

- Fathers' pre-school involvement (at age 3) helps to increase a child's educational attainment at age 5; and a father's involvement at age 5 helps to increase a child's educational attainment in their Key Stage Assessments at age 7

The earlier a father gets involved in the child's life, the more likely he is to be involved later when the child is older

¹¹ Norman, H. and Davies, J. (2023) 'What a difference a dad makes: paternal involvement and its effects on children's education (PIECE) study'. Leeds: University of Leeds. [link](#)

Why might fathers have an important effect?

The Paternal Involvement and its Effects on Children's Education (PIECE) study suggested that fathers might have an important effect because¹²:

- Having two involved parents rather than one gives a child more varied stimuli, fostering better cognitive outcomes because of the exposure to different behaviours, vocabulary, and parenting styles
- Fathers' input to their child's learning and development may bring particular and unique benefits, as highlighted by previous research that shows fathers tend to engage with their children in different ways to mothers. Dads tend to use longer words and ask more open questions when sharing stories with their child, for example – and this has been linked to children's better vocabulary and verbal reasoning scores¹³

Considering the importance of fathers for their children's education, recent research¹⁴ into fathers' reading habits and behaviours found plenty of room for improvement:

Only one in three children is read a story every day or nearly every day by their dad

Dads aren't as aware as mums that reading aloud to their children encourages them to read more

Fewer dads were read to when they were children themselves and less than half grew up with positive ideas about reading

Dads are twice as likely as mums to lack confidence choosing books their children would like to read - and lack confidence in their reading ability

BUT...when they do read with their children, most dads find it a rewarding and enjoyable experience

¹² Ibid

¹³ Child and Family Blog (2017) [link](#)

¹⁴ Dads make stories magic (2022) 'New Findings' [link](#)

Reading with your child

Shared reading is probably the most important thing you can do to support your child's education. When adults share picture books with babies and children, there are immediate and long-term benefits¹⁵:

- **Physical closeness and shared attention:** sharing unhurried reading time is a perfect space for bonding and attachment
- **Enjoyment:** when a child sees an adult getting involved and enjoying a story, they enjoy it too
- **Interaction:** shared reading helps relationships form and supports children's language and cognitive development

Research shows that the best way to encourage a child to read books for fun is to read and share stories with them¹⁶ - it enthuses, inspires, and motivates independent reading¹⁷.

Yet where families are regularly reading and sharing stories together, this reaches its peak when children are between two and four years old. The frequency of children being read to daily after the age of four drastically reduces and continues to decline throughout childhood¹⁸.

Many parents stop once their children can read independently, but sharing books into middle childhood and beyond can be a great way of keeping in touch and learning from each other. The discussions around the book, as well as the book's actual content, can be powerful, and keep your child interested in reading on their own.

See below a chart showing the results of a survey of parents' attitudes to reading with children of different ages. As you'll see, less than half (47%) of parents thought reading to 5 to 7-year-olds was 'essential', and less than a fifth (18%) thought this about 8 to 10-year-olds.

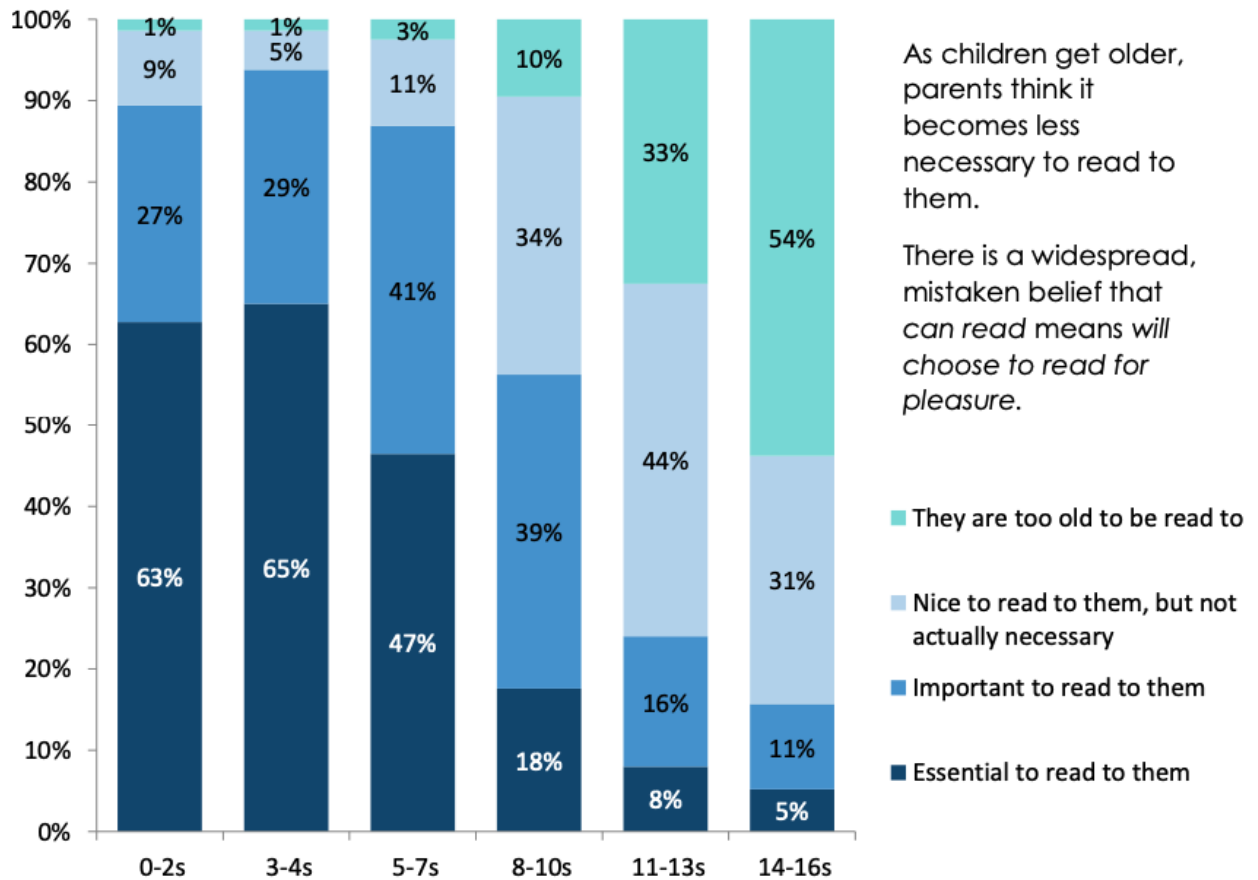
¹⁵ BookTrust 'Reading Together, Changing Children's Lives' report summary [link](#)

¹⁶ Dads make stories magic [website](#)

¹⁷ Farshore Insight (2020) 'Children's Reading for Pleasure' report [Link](#)

¹⁸ BookTrust (2023) 'Almost a quarter of children from low-income families missing out on the benefits of reading in their first year' [link](#)

What is your view on parents reading aloud to the following age groups?



Source: Survey of parents' attitudes to parents reading with children of different ages. Farshore Insight (2020) 'Children's Reading for Pleasure' report [Link](#)

Reading for pleasure

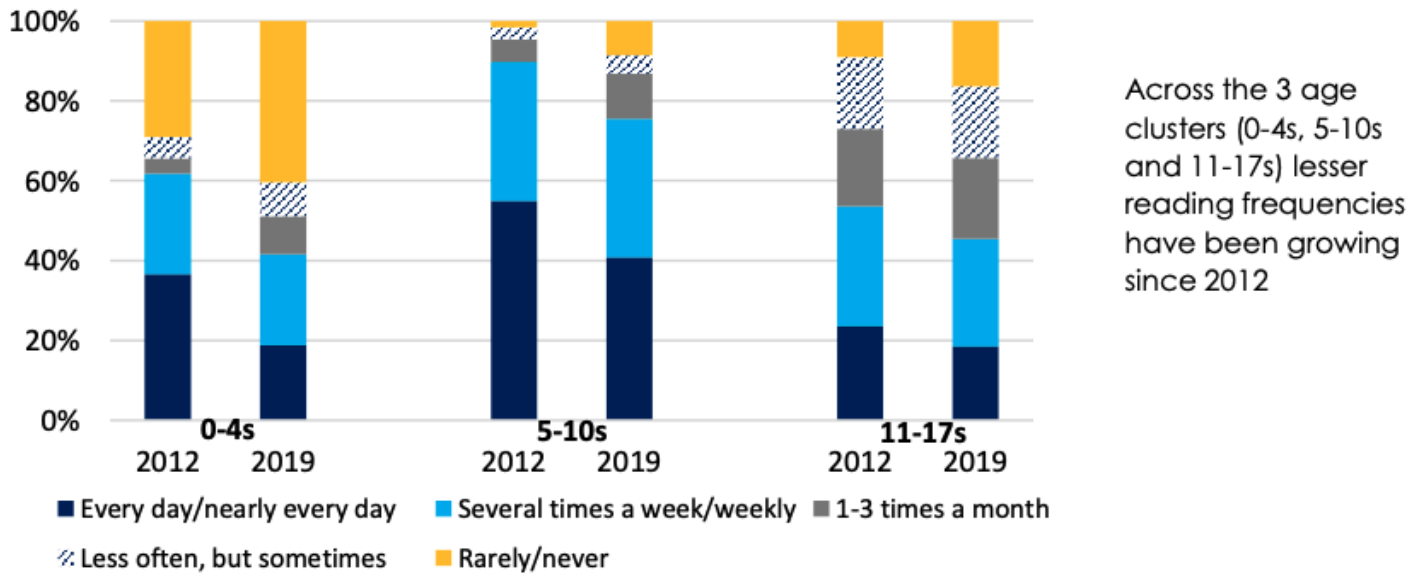
Children who like to read¹⁹:

- Are more likely to overcome disadvantage caused by inequalities
- Are more likely to be happier, healthier, and experience better mental wellbeing and self-esteem
- Are more likely to do better at school and make more progress across the curriculum
- Are more likely to develop empathy and creativity

¹⁹ BookTrust (2023) 'The benefits of reading' online interactive resource [link](#)

By feeding knowledge, imagination, and by engaging empathy, reading feeds children’s growing humanity²⁰. For more detail on the profound, wide-ranging benefits reading can have, see this [interactive resource](#) from BookTrust.

Children who read for pleasure daily/nearly every day, trend since 2012



Source: Farshore Insight (2020) 'Children's Reading for Pleasure' report [Link](#)

What about things other than reading?

Reading isn't the only activity that matters to your child's learning and educational outcomes. It's also great to spend time on activities that will help them learn in other areas, including:

Creativity – here's a [Twinkl blog](#) with ideas for ten ways to encourage your child's creativity, and an [article](#) from My First Five Years about why creativity matters in the under-fives

Science – check out [TheDadLab](#) youtube channel for brilliant science experiments and craft activities to do with your child

Physical activity – here's the [NHS guideline](#) on physical activity for under-fives, and [sports activities and ideas](#) from the NHS Better Health, Healthier Families initiative

²⁰ Farshore Insight (2020) 'Children's Reading for Pleasure' report [Link](#)

Maths – try these [activities](#) from National Numeracy

Music – five [musical ideas](#) to try at home, from the BBC

Search online or follow the links below, to find many more resources.

Top tips from the PIECE study:

Spend as much time as you can on interactive, focused activities with your child, like reading a book or playing together. You don't need expensive toys or books – what's important is listening and responding. These beneficial, back-and-forth interactions help build children's brains, and are sometimes called 'serve and return' interactions

Get into a habit of doing things together regularly: even just 10 minutes a day can help. If the week is too busy, can you do more at weekends?

Team up with your child's mum to share the less exciting jobs like cleaning and laundry. The more you can find time for BOTH of you to have high quality interactions with your child, the better it is for everyone

Play your part in building a good relationship with your child's teachers. Make sure the school/nursery/childminder has your contact details on file and be clear that you'd also like to receive communications directly

Advice taken from the PIECE study 'Guide for Families' infosheet, available [here](#)

Resources

As well as the other resources linked to on this factsheet, check out:

- The National Literacy Trust's parent-facing site [Words for Life](#), which provides milestones, tips, fun resources, and advice to help parents support their children's literacy development
- Especially if you have a younger child, the BBC's [Tiny Happy People](#) website is a mine of useful ideas and activities. For older children, check out [BBC Bitesize](#)
- If you're concerned about your child's speech and language development, reach out to your health visitor, children's centre or other local services (here's a [summary](#) of what services should be available) – and/or you can find useful information from [ICAN](#)
- [Parentkind](#) is the trusted voice for parents in education and the membership association for school PTAs