



'Special time together': An evaluation of Bookstart in South Lanarkshire

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Bookstart is a national programme aiming to encourage parents to share and enjoy books with their babies and young children from as young an age as possible. Bookstart in South Lanarkshire provides a rounded package of services in addition to universal gifting of book bags to babies, twos and threes, funded by Scottish Government. This package includes more intensive support for play for families who need this most; valued opportunities for parents to introduce rhymes and tunes to their young children; and support and training for partner practitioners who deliver Bookstart services.

This small-scale evaluation took place between September 2007 and March 2008. Innovative elements in its design include strong emphasis on bringing forward the voices of parents and their very young children and a partnership approach, whereby the evaluators supported Bookstart staff and partners to gather the majority of the data during the course of their daily work. In particular, the evaluation was intended to explore and make visible those aspects of the Bookstart initiative in South Lanarkshire, beyond the basic gifting of book bags, that contribute to the authority's wider work and objectives related to early intervention, parenting and supporting child development.

Key points

- Young children's responses revealed an overwhelming sense of their enjoyment and happiness in reading together with others. The majority could identify a favourite book and give reasons behind their choice. Many children gave details of books or stories that they particularly liked, talked about time spent together with their parents or carers, cuddles and closeness and the good feelings that arise from reading together.
- Many of the very young children who participated in this evaluation showed a level of exposure to and familiarity with Bookstart, especially those children attending Rhymetime.
- Bedtime was the most popular time for reading together and parents highlighted the role it plays in establishing routines and in settling and calming their child.
- Parents took great pleasure in observing their children's enjoyment in reading, reporting that their own enjoyment comes from seeing their child's positive response. This is an important finding because positive, shared activity between parent and child may be precisely what is missing in families where parenting is experienced as a daily struggle. Many parents observed early reading behaviours in their children, indicating their engagement with books and stories, for example turning pages, pointing, pretending to read and asking questions.
- Parents were highly positive about the Bookstart bags and services that they had received and some parents suggested practical changes that could further improve their experience.
- Bookstart in South Lanarkshire appears to reinforce, encourage and support reading at home by parents, and perhaps to enhance their repertoire in doing so.
- Bookstart in South Lanarkshire comprises of an impressive package of services, including effective distribution of book bags (although this is still developing for three year-olds) and enhanced support for families who need it. The role of co-ordinator is critical in sustaining support, building delivery partnerships and reaching out to the most vulnerable families. Whilst the initiative has attracted the significant commitment and enthusiasm of partners, further work may be needed to ensure that families across the authority area enjoy equity of access to Bookstart services and to maximise the potential of Bookstart in providing support to more vulnerable families with young children.

