



Photo: BookTrust

Telling Tales

Reading for pleasure brings families closer, helps children thrive and can boost academic performance. Liz Lowe finds ways to encourage a love of stories

Inside the world of stories, anything is possible: a big friendly giant collects dreams for sleeping children; a tiger arrives unannounced for tea; witchcraft and wizardry are taught at school. Novelist Philip Pullman once said, "After nourishment, shelter and companionship, stories are the thing we need most in the world."

A love of reading can bring many benefits. Research from the British Cohort Study showed that children who enjoy reading at age 10 tend to perform better in tests at age 16,

not just in vocabulary and spelling, but in maths too. In fact, reading for pleasure was revealed to be the single most important marker of future achievement, according to a 2002 OECD report.

"Those children who read for pleasure are more likely to be happier, healthier and do better in life than those who don't," says Diana Gerald, CEO at BookTrust.

Not only that, but a daytime reading corner or snugly bedtime story gives children and parents time to connect. "Encouraging

reading for enjoyment from a young age can help children on their reading journeys and inspire a lifelong love of reading," Diana says, adding: "It's never too early or too late to start sharing stories, books and rhymes with your child."

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Little things like seeing parents read for pleasure, and having books around the house, encourages young readers. However, it's important not to think your job is done once your child is reading independently. In fact, being read to has a powerful influence on even the most confident reader, a 2017 study by Egmont Publishing revealed. It found that independent reading flourishes alongside being read to, and that children who are regularly read to make faster progress in their own reading and at school.



Writer profile

Freelance writer Liz Lowe lives south of Bath with her husband and two young children. Liz used to get songs stuck in her head, but now it's snippets of Julia Donaldson rhymes. Her children love acting out *Sugarlump and the Unicorn*, using Liz as the rocking horse



Story-crafting sessions with The Wild of the Words combine language and nature to inspire creativity from all the senses

Bringing books to life

There are many ways to help children engage with literature and bring the action and characters to life. Local children's author Maudie Smith visits schools and preschools, bringing with her "the fun of stories and the fun of reading to children". Younger children generally love bedtime stories, but for tired parents it's tempting to speed through them. "Give it time, don't rush and say night night," says Maudie. "Allow children to ask questions and see what they think about what's going on in the story."

Books inspire creative play, a key aspect of children's development. In her workshops, Maudie encourages children to view the world through the eyes of different characters. Props and dressing-up can help here, but Maudie emphasises there is no need for expensive costumes. "It's amazing what a child can do with a wooden spoon and a tea-towel."

DragonBird Theatre runs storytelling sessions for young audiences in Bath and Bristol. A story performance is followed by interactive play, enabling children to step inside fictitious worlds. "At every session, there is so much

learning going on, on so many different levels," co-founder Tilly Langdon, explains. One mum told her: "When I first came to a session my little boy was shy, unable to join in play groups and very attached to my legs. We've been on many adventures with you since and I now have a confident, happy little boy."

"Children enjoy talking about a story they've read"

Tilly's tip for bringing stories to life is "not to think that the story stops when the book finishes". She comments that children enjoy talking about a story they've read, and then further exploring it through creative play, using household items as props. Some publishers, such as Egmont, also offer brilliant downloadable activity sheets for children's books.

Never too old

Maintaining an interest in stories and reading can be more difficult as children grow older. Creator of Bristol-based The Wild of the Words story-crafting workshops,

The right tales

There's plenty of help out there for parents looking for the right stories for their child.

Talk to your local bookseller for informed, personalised recommendations. Bookshop websites, such as Mr. B's Emporium of Reading Delights www.mrbsemporium.com often have reading lists for inspiration. The team at My Small World in Southgate, Bath, are great if you're looking for book recommendations for younger children.

Common Sense Media

www.common sense media.org has categorised recommendations on books (and other media) for ages two to 18, plus information about each book and its learning value, as well as honest reviews.

Reading lists on **A Mighty Girl** www.amightygirl.com/book-club-reading-list have not one damsel in distress in sight. This is the place for inspiring stories of powerful, brave and smart children (age six and up).

Love Reading 4 Kids

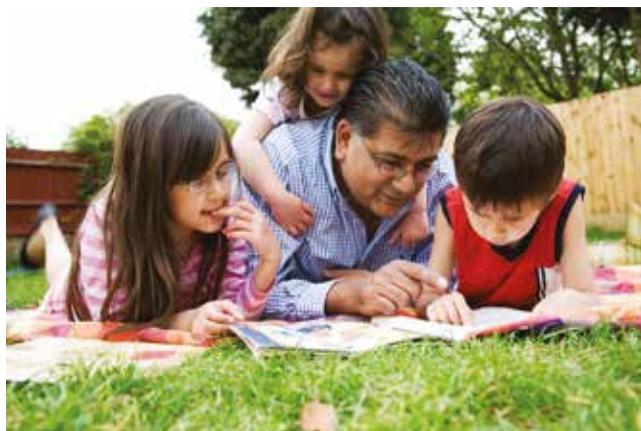
www.lovereading4kids.co.uk has information on over 300,000 children's books. There is something for everyone here, from babies to young adults.

Pridie Tiernan finds older children also respond well to interactive sessions and props. Her workshops are often outdoors, making use of natural materials. The stimulating sensory environment helps to rekindle curiosity and creativity, she believes.

"Read aloud as a family whenever possible; you're never too old to



A Tale of Two Planets: Dragonbird's imaginative play about an alien friendship (photo: Camilla Adams Photography)



Enjoying books as a family helps youngsters with their independent reading (photo: BookTrust)

Discovering stories

Most local libraries run regular storytime sessions, and some have book clubs for children and young people. Check your local library's website for details.

Dragonbird Theatre
www.dragonbirdtheatre.co.uk

The Wild of the Words
www.thewildofthewords.co.uk

Create Tales for Tots, The Edge
www.edgearts.org

The egg
www.theatreroyal.org.uk

Bath Children's Literature Festival
www.bathfestivals.org.uk/childrens-literature

Try a children's podcast from Stories Podcast
www.storiespodcast.com

Listen to an astronaut reading a story from space
www.storytimefromspace.com

Find an audio book for the whole family at Audible
www.audible.co.uk

listen to a story," says Pridie, who is also an English teacher. "And if you're not confident at reading aloud, there are some fabulous audio books to entertain you all on long drives!"

Reluctant readers might be interested in the novels of televised fiction they've enjoyed, suggests Pridie. And, as with many things, giving children freedom when it comes to choosing their books, has a positive effect on reading habits.

"If we're faced with a child who's wavering from reading we love to talk with them directly," explains Nic Bottomley, owner of Bath's Mr. B's Emporium of Reading Delights. "Finding out what makes them tick helps us get them back on track in a way that excites them. It could be a novel, a graphic novel to mix it up a bit, or it could be identifying a book they're going to have fun reading aloud with a parent."

On the stage

Kate Cross, Director of Bath's the egg theatre, explains how children's theatre encourages an interest in literature. "The beauty of children's plays is that they're just an hour long – shorter than the time it takes to read a book. In that time children can have a conversation in their head as a result of what they've just seen. They'll be better equipped to read more into the next story they read or watch on stage."

Bath's Children's Literature Festival has become an annual

highlight, attracting authors such as Julia Donaldson and David Walliams. Literary agent Gill McLay, who founded the festival with her husband John, says their aim was to create an event for children that put children's authors centre-stage. They felt that too often children read the books they've been given, but rarely explored beyond that. "We wanted it to have energy and passion," Gill explains. "Actually, the reading is kind of a bonus, it's all about discovering a love of stories."

One comment Gill makes about the festival seems to sum up the enduring appeal of stories. "It's all about sharing moments and time," she says. "Because reading is some of the most precious time you can spend with a child." And let's be honest, even us grown-ups can't resist a good story. ■

Further information

BookTrust
www.booktrust.org.uk

Maudie Smith
www.maudiesmith.co.uk

Theatre Royal, Theatre School
www.theatreroyal.org.uk/take-part/theatre-schools/theatre-school-under-18s