

Storytime First Thousand Days' Evaluation

Alex Woodley, Annalise Myers and Erica Roberts
Point & Associates

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Executive summary

The evaluation focuses on the feedback from families, whānau and providers involved with the Storytime Foundation (Storytime), First 1000 Days programme, delivered nationally.

Method

The evaluation is undertaken in three parts:

1. A literature review (appended) in which the evidence of the impact of reading to infants is summarised
2. An overview of feedback from families
3. In-depth interviews with 28 providers and online feedback from a further 12 providers to determine:
   - whether the move to online enrolment is helpful to providers,
   - if the families and whānau targeted by Storytime are receiving the programme
   - what is working well,
   - any challenges, and
   - to look at the impact the Storytime programme is having on families and whānau.

Literature scan

There is strong evidence to support reading to infants from the earliest age. A scan of the literature shows that reading to children has been found to enhance early language comprehension and expressive language skills, listening, and speaking skills, and to foster enjoyment of books and reading in later life, as well as grow an understanding of narrative and story (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992; Weinberger, 1996, as cited in McCoy and Cole, 2011: 6). Kalb and van Ours (2012) found the relationship between early childhood reading and improved educational attainment to be “a direct causal effect from reading to children at a young age and their future schooling outcomes regardless of parental income, education level or cultural background”.

The OECD considers reading for pleasure to be the most important indicator of the future success of a child. It is an even more powerful factor in life achievement than socio-economic background (OECD, 2002). Russell et al. (2022) in their analysis of Growing Up in New Zealand data, a large, nationally representative cohort, found the only potentially modifiable predictor of ‘flourishing’ developmental health status that they could identify was daily parent-infant reading. They supported an approach which took opportunities to promote ‘nurturing care’ strategies to families. In their view, this would ideally include gifting books directly to infants, a widely used strategy to promote early reading and which

has been shown to boost multiple developmental outcomes among infants from disadvantaged communities (O'Farrelly et al. 2018).

Evaluation

Number of families enrolled in the Bay of Plenty

A total number of 5623 new families were enrolled in the First 1000 Days programme over the past 12 months.

Family feedback

A survey of families and whānau (n=562) enrolled in the First Thousand Days programme over the past three years has found following the receipt of the books:

- Over half (around 60%) report reading to their children once or more a day.
- Most (70%) say they read more often to their children as a direct result of participation in the Storytime programme, with a further quarter (26%) saying they read as often as they used to. Following the receipt of the Storytime books, only 3% say they seldom or never read to their children and they have not read more frequently having received the books.
- Access to books is low with most families and whānau (66%) having 20 or fewer children's books, with one-third (33%) having fewer than ten. (It is noted that the programme delivers up to 8 books per family).

The process is working well

- The programme aims to support low income families and whānau living in areas characterised by deprivation. The providers are enrolling low income families and whānau living in deprivation and without access to books. They are talking to the families and whānau about the importance of reading to their children and encouraging them to build reading into bedtime routines.
- The move to an on-line enrolment process is working well.

The programme is having an impact

- It is enhancing provider and whānau relationships, particularly with families reluctant to engage with providers
- It is providing infants and whānau with access to books
- The families and whānau are enjoying the books
- The books are beautiful quality and are valued by whānau
- They are helping to support the culture and identity of whānau
- The books are encouraging serve and return responses, the back-and-forth exchanges of verbal and nonverbal communications, where the parent or caregiver responds to the infant's cues and the infant responds to the caregiver's signals. This exchange helps the infant learn how to regulate their emotions, develop language

and social skills, and form secure attachments with their whānau.

- The providers say that the books are promoting attachment. They are encouraging whānau to snuggle up with their babies and toddlers and read to them so that they baby hears their voice. The interaction promotes feelings of security and closeness.
- The providers say the books are helping to reduce stress in the parent and infant at stressful times
- The providers see the books as helping to support the development of oral language
- The books align with the child development stages and support cognitive development which the providers see as helping support their mahi.

There are challenges:

- Whānau sometimes shift house and change providers, making them difficult to find to give the books to
- Providers believe linking whānau to community infrastructure such as libraries so they can access more books could strengthen the programme. There are barriers to library use, such as fining, which need to be addressed if this is to occur.
- Providers say having to decide which families and whānau will get the books when there is so much need is challenging, and the providers would like to see the programme expanded so that more families can be enrolled.

Overall

The feedback from both families and providers is positive, with both indicating it is having an impact on child and parent wellbeing outcomes. The providers are supportive of the programme, saying it enhances their mahi and is helping to strengthen their relationships with whānau. They would like to see the programme expanded.

Evaluation of the First 1000 Days programme

Purpose of the evaluation

The purpose of the evaluation is to get feedback from families and providers on the Storytime Foundation (Storytime) First 1000 Days programme to understand what is working well, any challenges and if the programme is having an impact on family and whānau wellbeing.

Background

In 1997 Storytime's started Books for Babes, delivering free books to children aged from birth to 12 months. In 2017 Storytime received funding to trial the First 1000 Days which added two programmes: an antenatal (pre-birth) programme and a Toddler (15 months to 3 years) programme, thereby extending the age range of the programme.

With positive evaluations, Storytime continued to offer the extended programmes in the areas they had been trialled. As providers from other parts of New Zealand learned of the extended programme, they too sought to join it.

Due to the trial nature of the programmes, the initial programmes were not integrated nor streamlined. For example, each had different paper-based enrolment forms, and the progression from one programme to another was not automatic. In 2022 the programmes were amalgamated into two programmes; an antenatal programme and a First 1000 Days programme, with children now staying on the programme from zero to three years. At the same time, an online enrolment process was introduced. Providers are progressively being moved onto the new streamlined programme and digital enrolment process.

Overview of literature

Reading is an important protective factor and predictor of educational achievement and life outcomes. A multitude of studies show a strong association between reading, reading for pleasure, parental reading, and positive health, wellbeing and social outcomes in children, including children and tamariki living in communities facing disadvantage and inequality. Reading stories to children, in particular, is one of the most important indicators for the future success of a child.

Parents' reading to children has been found to enhance early language comprehension and expressive language skills, listening, and speaking skills, and to foster enjoyment of books and reading in later life, as well as grow understanding of narrative and story (Crain-Thoreson and Dale, 1992; Weinberger, 1996, as cited in McCoy and Cole, 2011: 6). Kalb and van Ours (2012) found the relationship between early childhood reading and improved educational attainment to be "a direct causal effect from reading to children at a young age and their future schooling outcomes regardless of parental income, education level or cultural background".

The OECD considers reading for pleasure to be the most important indicator of the future success of a child. It is an even more powerful factor in life achievement than socio-economic background (OECD, 2002). Russell et al. (2022) in their analysis of Growing Up in New Zealand data, a large, nationally representative cohort, found that one-in-four children were classified as having suboptimal developmental health, with clusters of developmental health difficulties evident before entry to school. They argued that ameliorating inequities in early developmental health would be crucial to reducing health and educational inequities over the life course. In their study the only potentially modifiable predictor of 'flourishing' developmental health status that they could identify was daily parent-infant reading. They supported an approach, consistent with the Storytime programme, which took opportunities to promote 'nurturing care' strategies to families. In their view, this would ideally include gifting books directly to infants, a widely used strategy to promote early reading and which has been shown to boost multiple developmental outcomes among infants from disadvantaged communities (O'Farrelly et al. 2018).

Inequitable access to books

Yet literacy and engagement in reading are increasingly unequally distributed (Medina and McGregor, 2019). Not all children, young people and communities in New Zealand have the same opportunities to develop a love of reading. Access to books at home has been declining, mostly for Māori and Pacific families, with 18% and 24% respectively reporting ten or fewer books at home (Ministry of Education, 2017). There are also inequities in access to libraries, expertise, support and reading role-models. This is important as there is a strong association between the number of books in homes and reading scores, with those in Year 5 with ten or fewer books having a significantly lower reading score than those with more than one hundred books (Chamberlain, 2020).

Sharing the benefits of reading and storytelling with parents

Studies continue to show that many parents are not aware of the importance of reading and play in their child's learning (Department for Children, Schools and Families, London, 2009). Research in the context of NZ Corrections has found a marked change in reading patterns

when parents are made aware of the benefits of reading. These include parents reading significantly more frequently to children, including babies. Moreover, whānau in community settings are more likely to use the library to take out books and attend story sessions, rather than predominantly visit the library to access free Wi-Fi as they had prior to participation (Woodley, 2017).

Conclusion

Providing access to books for children under 5 years is important as it helps to develop early literacy skills, cognitive skills, language skills, exposes them to new ideas and knowledge, and promotes positive parent-child interaction. All of these factors can help to lay a strong foundation for future academic success and lifelong wellbeing.

Method

The evaluation is undertaken in three parts:

- A literature review (appended) in which the evidence of the impact of reading to infants is summarised
- The results of a survey of 562 families and whānau to find out if they have enjoyed the books and whether the programme has had an impact on their reading habits
- In-depth interviews with 28 providers and online feedback from a further 17 providers to determine if the families and whānau Storytime aims to support are getting the books, to understand what is working well and any challenges, and to look at the impact of the Storytime programme is having on families and whānau in the Bay of Plenty Region, including Rotorua.

Findings

Books delivered

A total of 5623 new families enrolled in First 1000 Days over the past 12 months in:

- Northland 387
- Greater Auckland 938
- Waikato 178
- Bay of Plenty 1010
- Lakes 701
- Tairawhiti-Gisborne 233
- Hawkes Bay 261
- Taranaki 253
- Manawatu/Whanganu 57

- Wellington/Wairarapa 299
- Nelson/Marlborough 129
- Canterbury/ West Coast 852
- Otago/Southland 325

Impact on families and whānau

Feedback from families and whānau show that the programme is making a difference. Most families and whānau are reading more often to their children and it is improving their access to books.

A survey of families and whānau (n=562) enrolled in the First Thousand Days programme over the past three years has found following the receipt of the books that over half (around 60%) report reading to their children once or more a day. Most (70%) say they read more often to their children as a direct result of the Storytime programme with a further quarter (26%) saying they read as often as they used to. Following the receipt of the Storytime books, only 3% say they seldom or never read to their children, nor do they read more frequently having received the books.

Access to books is low with most families and whānau (66%) having 20 or fewer children's books, with one-third (33%) having fewer than ten. (It is noted that the programme delivers up to 8 books per family).

Storytime process

Antenatal

The process of the antenatal programme is as follows:

- The provider enrols the parents antenatally onto the Storytime Antenatal programme.
- The provider has a discussion with the prospective parents about the benefits of reading, and how it can help new parents attach with their child.
- The Enrolment form is sent to Storytime.
- A board book and Hairy Maclary gift pack sent.
- The provider returns enrolment form once books been given.

NB: there are some providers who hold stock of these books and send completed enrolment forms when they have given them out, e.g., Rotorua hospital SCBU.

Storytime programme (Books for Babies/Toddler) zero to 3 years

The process for Books for Babes differs slightly.

Storytime provides providers with a stock of the soft cloth book, *Pepeha*, along with a

provider brochure explaining the process, and key message sheets for family and whānau.

The provider, when visiting family and whānau decides if the family meets criteria for being enrolled in the Storytime programme; namely that they would definitely benefit and/or would likely be classified as living in deprivation (Dep 8 to 10). If the family meets the criteria:

- The family and whānau are invited to join the programme
- The cloth book is given to the parents, and they are told about the importance of reading and talking to babies and how to use the book
- The family are enrolled, either by completing a paper enrolment form or online digital enrolment
- Once the enrolment is processed Storytime will send the next book/pack in the series to the provider
- The provider gives the second book to the family, reinforces the key messages, and lets Storytime know the family have received it (either digitally or by returning a form.)
- The process is repeated until all books/packs are delivered or the family leaves the provider's service.

The providers

Most of the providers describe their mahi as going into the homes and giving extra care for the whānau, supporting them, and facilitating whatever they need for their parenting journey. There are, however, some providing in-service care, such as NICU nurses.

> "Within our korero we weave support around sleeping, attachment, safe sleeping and immunisations, breast feedings, 'all the stuff that comes with being a mum.' Our Kaiawhina have a similar role, but from a Māori world view. They connect their people back to their iwi to the hapu, the hapori, really facilitating what is on top for them."

> "I am there to make sure the family is thriving and am there to help in any way that I can which is a privilege."

About the families and whānau

Most of the providers interviewed say they are working with "high need, vulnerable families." Many of these families and whānau are physically or socially isolated, marginalised, hardly reached, or have complex needs.

> "The families I work with live in very rural isolated areas, minimal cell phone reception, minimal shops, low income, overcrowding in homes, low health literacy, benefit incomes so for these families to receive this valuable resource it is a blessing."

> "We work with families with complex needs. This includes those living in material hardship, They are often short of the basics, including food. They might be living in emergency or transitional housing such as motels. Our families are stretched by life's pressures."
>
> "We get referrals from the DHB, Oranga Tamariki and a lot from the Plunket nurses. So, these are families that are identified to have various challenges. It could be low risk like a relationship break up and we work with high needs, drug and alcohol, family violence, all of those things that raise the risk for children in a home."
>
> "The families who we have contact with, are mostly gang members and do not socialise outside of the gang and therefore can be hard to reach, but once rapport has been built, we find they are respectful. Porirua is known as a low socioeconomic area and a mixture of ethnicities, but high in Maori and Pasifika."
>
> We provide a supportive, open, non-judgemental service and try to ensure our families are well supported and educated.

Many of the providers visit families and whānau regularly. The focus is to ensure "they access the support they need" and that the "child's needs are being met."

> "We visit families every week, so it is an intensive home visiting programme. After we get to know the family for a while, we take it down to fortnightly just depending on the needs. We go in each week and focus on child development… Often we will go in and won't even talk about child development because there is so much other stuff going on."
>
> "We can help make sure they are getting food by referring them to foodbanks, that they are accessing WINZ support."

The providers say they are wanting to normalise reading with the families they are working with, so that the babies can hear the parents' voices in utero, and recognise the voices of their parents after birth. They want the babies to be exposed to language and all the associated benefits.

> "We want to support families to attach to their babies, to understand their importance in their child's development, the importance of talking to and interacting with their baby; spending time and enjoying the time they spend together.
>
> "It doesn't matter whether the baby is in utero or after it is born but it is another component of that attachment that continues. The key thing we have is wanting to normalise it to read to the child every day."

> "I tell them if they read to their pēpē, that reading helps to develop language skills and comprehension."

How well the process is working

The providers say they are talking to the families and whānau about the importance of reading to their childen and they are encouraging them to build reading into bedtime routines.

> "As the books match the developmental stages of the child, we can use the books to talk about what their baby is seeing and learning and what they need to thrive."

> "My staff are not just dropping books off. There is always a conversation with whānau around why we are doing it and holding the book and sitting with them."

> "I encourage them to make time to read with their tamariki or add reading to their tamariki bedtime routine."

While there are guidelines in place to ensure the books are age appropriate when distributed, the provider determines when each book or pack will be given to the family. The providers say they try and give them out one at a time unless they are running behind on the deliveries.

> "Ideally the books from Storytime arrive at certain ages and stages. I then call the family and make a home visit, give the book out and we go through the benefits of reading/singing etc, to our babies/children."

Some providers noted that while the process from Storytime tends to be smooth, they sometimes need to make alternative arrangements to accommodate the lives of the families they are working with. Nonetheless, they say they have a conversation in a follow-up visit or by phone.

> "There have been times when I have made the appointment then when I have arrived, they have gone out – so I have left the book with a family member then gone back on a different day to follow up about positive parenting/benefits of books etc."

> "If we have to drop the book off because sometimes, we can't get hold of these people and these books are getting later, you follow it up with a phone call. I have had to drop it off then have that conversation with them. It is never just a drop off."

> "We spend as much time as we can with the whānau discussing the book and other things that may be relevant. If we are unable to physically meet with the whānau – we have a phone conversation with them discussing the above things and ask for permission to leave the book at the doorstep. We NEVER drop a book off without having a discussion with the whānau."

Who providers are enrolling on the programme

Not every family the providers work with receives the programme. The books, collateral and information appear to be going to families in deprivation and facing serious material hardship. There is an acknowledgement by the providers that the Storytime books are not an "infinite resource." With limited allocations, providers say those who have the means to buy books, or use a library are not prioritised. They point out they factor in a broad range of considerations into their decisions of who they will enrol, prioritising families living in poverty, struggling financially, with low literacy levels and/or high social needs and who have "absolutely no books in their homes." They are also prioritising families who need support to "talk to, engage with or bond with their babies."

> "I only enrol whānau who are high needs or struggling and don't have much at all; children that don't have any books, or much positive parenting. The whānau might also be isolated."

> "The books are given to families who are low income and not likely to be spending money on books, or if it is a high needs family for any reason and I know I need to keep going back. The families are mainly low income or high needs."

Role modelling and coaching

Several providers say many of the whānau they work with have not been read to themselves as infants or children. The providers role model reading to the child; interacting in a fun way, showing them they do not need to read all the words. They model pointing to and talking about the pictures and how to make reading to their children a fun and enjoyable experience for both the parent and child.

The move to an online enrolment process is working well

The move from a paper to an online enrolment process has been well received.

Those who are still using paper forms would like it to be paperless. They have found the paper-based system arduous to administer and some said it was a barrier to whānau receiving books. They were not aware that Storytime was moving to an online enrolment process. Those who have moved to online enrolments say they find it easier than having to handle paper forms multiple times.

> "You can do it online which is a lot easier as we can go through with whānau and do it on our laptops so there is no paper trail."

> "Absolutely, it is easier than writing out a paper form, taking it to admin then wondering if it has gone through. The App tells you straight away that it has gone through."

Several providers pointed out they are promoting self-determination with the families they work with, and would like to see a system where whānau could log in themselves and let Storytime know directly they had received their books, or where they could change their address/phone numbers and have the programme continue even if they had moved address or provider.

> "This could be done by sending a link to the families who are registered with Storytime, and they can reply to all these questions in their own time. You could also add an update address and contact button."

Impact

Opens doors

The providers say that the Storytime books are helping to enhance their relationships with families and whānau as it helps to "opens doors. " Culturally, it is respectful to turn up to a home with a koha, gift or contribution; something to show that you are thinking of the whānau you are visiting.

> "For Plunket this is a beautiful resource that I can give to whānau - I have always said to get your foot in the door you need to take something to give to whānau. At Plunket we are limited to what resources we have so we are very thankful to be able to give such beautiful books."

> "A big part of the Storytimes books for us is to use this as an opportunity to meet with the whānau, check on the home situation, ascertain what other needs they may have and build relationships."

> "The books are amazing because we get to talk about where the baby's brain is at, but it also gives me something to bring in as people love free stuff. If I am bringing something they are more likely to open their door that day."

They note that while some whānau are reluctant to engage, and avoid agencies, they will always open the door if the provider is bringing a book.

> "Have they helped with your work, relationships with family and whānau etc.? DEFINITELY! There are some whānau who are not seen by any other agency and avoid appointments with their Plunket nurse, but they will always let me in the house when I am delivering the book."

Access to books

The programme provides infants and their whānau with access to books. The providers note books are expensive and many of the whānau they give books to do not have books in their homes.

> “Personally, I love the books and the entire programme. They are beautiful, age appropriate and free. What stands out to me the most is the fact that these books are often shared with children who have never seen a book.”

> “As you can imagine some of our homes don’t have books.”

> “We should never lose sight of the fact that in some of those homes these will be the only books that come in. They are quite treasured and valued.”

> “Sometimes what I have noted, the books we give out are the only books we see in the home.”

> “Some of our whānau don't have books and that is still a reality. Some parents will say, no there are no books in our house.”

> “Most families are given books because most whānau are struggling financially or have absolutely no books in their homes.”

Families’ response

The families and whānu both value and enjoy the books. The providers note that many of the families are navigating significant social, health, wellbeing and employment issues, and the books are a bright spot.

> “Everyone is always grateful, the older children’s faces light up when they know I am delivering books. It is very rewarding seeing the babies really look at the black and white book.”

> “Families out there have really appreciated the books they have received, and the books are such good quality. They are really interesting, and the babies love the texture books. Those are awesome. I think the cloth books are good. If mum hasn’t had someone read books to her she won’t know so we are introducing that to them.”

The families, particularly those with very little, are excited to have something special for their babies. It is also symbolic, showing that the provider is not just thinking about the parent and caregiver, but is thinking about the wellbeing of their whole family.

> “They get quite excited that they are getting something that is particularly for their baby. Sometimes these same families are eligible for pepe pods. The pepe pods are

> great but that is for the family but when I give the books out it is for the baby. I often talk to the parents and say this is how we communicate with our babies."

One provider noted that the question about the family response was hard to answer, as many were facing significant and overwhelming issues, so while the books were beautiful and well received, their focus and attention was elsewhere.

Types of books

The providers are happy to distribute the books as they are of beautiful quality, not some "scruffy, tatty old book that no one would want to give out, and isn't enticing to read."

> "We are very grateful for the books. They are quality books. They are beautiful."

They were asked about the types of books that whānau enjoyed reading to their children. While board books with few words were read by whānau, it was pointed out that they tended not to be enjoyed by the parents as much as books with a story. It can be hard for parents to create a story based on words, particularly when they are tired or stressed.

> "You have to have quite an astute mum and not all of them are that can turn one word on a page into a meaningful story. It is quite an art."

> "The families like the hard cover ones that still have a story. I am a primary school teacher so am not a fan of books that just have a label and a picture. I like to read to my children. It is good to have books they like with a cat or dog on them that they can point to but actually I think it is important for them to hear a story and be read to. I like them to be able to hold the book because they get it from their room and if it is a big book, it is hard for them to get off the shelf and to carry. They want to hold it while I read it to them."

The providers also think stories with rhythm and rhyme are important.

> "I am not a child's author, but I do know rhyme is important. The story needs to be simple. We are talking about beginning listeners. We are talking about mums who may or may not have limited capacity to be creative. However, she does have the ability to read simple words off a page and understand the value of that little story. The side effect of that is that it could be later in the day and mum has the book put away but mumma can remind the baby of the story, something about the bat and the ball, the cat jumped out the window or whatever else. It just makes mumma attached to the children through this little way of the story around that."

The providers note that while some parents like ABC or counting books as they think it will help their children with pre-reading and pre-numeracy skills, they tend to be abandoned

quite quickly.

> "They are because as soon as mum hears they are story books or Hairy McClary books the mum is ooh, it is not just A, B, C colours and apples."

They have also observed that while the lift the flap books are enjoyed as they are interactive, they tend to get ripped fairly quickly.

> "I wasn't a fan of lift the flap ones for that age group because they just got ripped. There was one that had a spin on it and that pretty got destroyed straight away."

Cultural identity

The providers say the books, such as *Pepeha*, which show pictures of a river, mountain and family, support whānau to have important conversations with their babies about their cutlure and identity from birth.

> "Initially I give the black and white book in person, and I teach the whānau how to use this embracing their pepeha."

> "The books help them to have those important conversations."

The families and whānau particularly enjoy the books in te Reo. The dual language books help parents on their te reo journey as they are able to learn alongside their children.

> "They love the books when they come in te Reo. It is just such a lovely thing."

> "A lot of our Māori mummas are on a journey. They don't know their te Reo so if they can teach it and learn it with their child it is such a friendly way of doing it."

In general, providers believe that books from New Zealand authors about New Zealand are important as they provide a mirror into our culture, and whānau can relate to them.

> "I do like New Zealand books and New Zealand authors if possible. We have had a few books recently, not through Storytime but gifted to us and they talk about excavators and stuff. We don't really use that language; it is very American. Even we looked at a book recently that was very Australian. It is important for the kids to learn but at a young age it is important for them to read things they can relate to."

Serve and return

The providers also point out the importance of serve and return responses, the back-and-forth exchanges of verbal and nonverbal communications, where the parent or caregiver responds to the infant's cues and the infant responds to the caregiver's signals. This

exchange helps the infant learn how to regulate their emotions, develop language and social skills, and form secure attachments with their whānau. They point out that infant reading offers this in a way that other activities, such as children playing on iPads or watching TV, do not.

> "I think it is the sign of the times as people have iPads and technology but I think Storytime brings it back to that valuable stuff, turning the page, doing that connection. It is taking the time to stop and put that baby on your knee and actually read to them. It is actually having that interaction with them where I feel like because I am old school too, so many kids are just given an iPad or phone and told to occupy themselves."

Attachment

The providers say that the books are promoting attachment. They are encouraging whānau to snuggle up with their babies and toddlers and read to them so that they baby hears their voice. It promotes feelings of security and closeness. This is particularly important for whānau who are unsure how to talk to their baby or what to say. They can share time together, and look at and talk about the pictures together.

> "We say the baby likes to hear your voice and it doesn't matter what words are being said in the book, you can make up anything for the baby. It is that close connection with you and hearing your voice."

> "We promote talking to your baby and reading from birth. We encourage whānau to use books to really engage with their babies and use it as a way to bond with them."

> "When Storytime was introduced that was a concept that fell in line with what we are promoting, building relationships between parents and children. It falls in line with what we are doing."

Interestingly, a NICU nurse noticed a baby's vital signs improved when the baby's father was there, talking to and reading to his baby.

> "I had a dad that was a bit of a rat bag and making noise. What I said was when you are here talking to your baby, your baby has far less apnea in breathing than it does when you are not here so what does that tell you? Does your baby know or not know you?"

For whānau it is a way of connecting with children when circumstances may make it difficult to establish relationships.

> "One time we had a grandfather that was part of the conversation when we were

doing the books. Afterwards he would come in from the bush each day. He would come in at 4pm every day, pick up the books from the library. He was quite deaf so would sit beside the baby and read a couple of books quite loudly. He would then say see you tomorrow. It was good because the other fathers and parents could hear him reading the books to his moko. He didn't get the baby up or disturb it at any time unless the baby was up but that was his thing to come in and read the baby a couple of books every afternoon."

Stress

The early years can be a stressful time for parents and caregivers. In addition to stressors that many of the families face, such as poverty or low income, babies and toddlers can add an additional layer of stress, particularly when they are upset, unsettled or behaving in challenging ways. Both parents and providers note that reading aloud to infants can reduce stress for both the parent and their child. It helps to calm both the parents and their children down. The providers in particular felt that reading stories with lyrical rhythms, repetitive language and rhymes are soothing and calming to infants, particularly when read by their caregivers.

"It is calming for the kids and part of our bedtime routine as well."

"It is the act of reading to the kids which is a bonding thing and it is getting the language in there."

Oral language

The providers see the books as helping to support the development of oral language. They believe oral language is "one of the first things we want to be embracing even when mum is hapu".

"The first one, the black and white book that has their pepeha on it is amazing because that is their way of linking them back to their mountain and river along with whānau. so, it is the conversations we are having."

"Getting the books ensures that I spent time talking to the families about how important it is to read to their child and other ways they can prompt their childs language development."

While some families and whānau say they feel "silly talking to their child" the providers say it is part of their mahi to let them know how important it is to talk to their children.

"Part of our assessments of what we do is talk about speech and language, especially

> from one year old upwards when they are starting to talk. We definitely use that a lot to talk about the bond that is created and speech and language. Sometimes I will have a mum say they are too young; they don't know what books are about, so I talk about it being that whole interaction and learning to name and colours."

This is particularly important for babies in hospital. One provider notes that they are in an artificial situation. They are not picking up their baby, taking them out and about in their home or the outside world, talking about what they are doing and where they are going. When the parents come in to visit or look after their babies, the conversation with their baby runs out. Their babies, however, are soothed by their voices as they are familiar to them. Reading to them helps to facilitate communication.

> "It is hard to have a conversation with your baby and after a few minutes your conversation runs out unless you are a good singer or something. Reading a book, they can hear your voice which they need to hear over the monitors and bells and whistles carrying on. They can connect with you because that is the voice they know. You are also communicating with them, and I also talk about that when they go home. It doesn't matter if you are talking about the cows in the paddock or reading them Herald, it doesn't matter if you can't read and are just looking at the pictures making up a story. What matters is the communication!"

The providers say while not all whānau read to their children, they can see the impact of those who are being read to.

> "I see the little ones around the two-year age mark with those that have been read to and those that haven't with their speech. It is huge. Whenever I sign them up and deliver the books, I always just give that gentle reminder that reading is such a lovely time to spend with your baby, even if you just do it once a day and with the story books you can make up your own stories and look at the pictures. It will make a difference down the track with your babies' speech. Some people will be thinking what planet are you on because that is not a big priority."

Cognitive development

The books align with the child development stages and support cognitive development, including prereading skills, which the providers see as helping support their mahi.

> "For Plunket staff it is a good way to link the child's development with books eg their social and mental development etc."

> "The books as per development work really well. They are black and white and soft.

> They are cool because they can't see colours yet, can they? Then there is an upgrade where the book folds out and the baby can lie on the floor. The baby can lie during tummy time and look at the book. Then there is the interactive one where you touch and feel. People are always saying how cool the books are."
>
> "All the books have their wonderful benefits such as the washable black and white one, the touchy feeling ones which are great for fine motor skills, te reo Māori, colours etc."

They say that timing is important. There are windows of opportunity, which maximise the value of the books.

> "With the first book (fabric) we talk about the benefit for baby to look at the pictures even though they cannot see clearly or colour. The baby will be adjusting their eyes to the different shapes and developing their eyesight. The books for older children learn about texture, colours and objects which is seen when the child points and makes the sound of a dog. I have seen a child open the book turn pages (show good hand eye coordination) and pretend to read (developing skill) then put the book on the shelf which I see as valuing the book."
>
> "It is important that we get them on time because we know there are key windows of opportunity in their development so if we can get the next book which is bright colours then we can talk about how your baby is now starting to see the colours. We then go to the feeling book and the textures so if we get a delay, that can delay some of that."
>
> "If we have missed the third book which is around the textures and things then the child has moved to nine months we are in a different stage. We can still use them but it is nice if we can keep it going with that development."

In addition to attachment and oral language, the providers show whānau how to encourage pre-reading skills.

> "We talk about the fixing and following and tracking with your finger while reading the words so the baby is tracking your finger. There is so much opportunity when we have this resource."

Challenges

Timing

The providers note that sometimes the books are sent out late, but they are hoping the new system will streamline the process.

> "Sometimes the books are a little late getting to the child but hopefully with the new system this will not be such a issue in the future. It would be good to have the books just prior to the child's core visit, this would mean we can give the books out then and not have to make an extra trip to drop them off."

Whānau shift house and change providers

One of the challenges is the frequency with which families and whānau move. It can be difficult to track them down. They also change providers. The providers note that at least the whānau have some books available to them, and they often keep the books for another child or family.

> "We work with a mobile population. They might be in transitional housing or move around. We make a real effort to keep in touch with them, but it is not always easy or possible."

> "We often send the books back because they have moved, and we can't find them or we will send the form back and maybe keep the book for another child. We may use that book elsewhere."

One provider has suggested that Storytime partner with local providers.

> "I have asked if they need someone to be a deliverer in the Eastern Bay of Plenty where we have books right on hand and they can be picked up and taken wherever they need to be then we are willing to do that."

It was suggested that having local providers would help to ensure that the books got there in time to align with the developmental phases of the child.

> "There is nothing worse than getting a book finally arrive and the child is too old for that book. We get the first-born book but once we ordered them maybe if they came with book two and three, then if we had them there, we know we would only give the book out at the three-month mark but the book is there ready to go."

Link to community infrastructure could be strengthened

It was suggested that the Storytime collateral and programme encourage links to libraries and community infrastructure to encourage reading and to support the sustainability of the efforts. It was noted that many families and whānau do not use libraries and this could be encouraged. It was also noted that in some areas there is fining in place. This is a significant detterent for families using the library, and many could not afford it. Moreover, there are still fines in place for lost books.

More books so the initiative can be expanded

The providers would like to see the programme extended to more families and whānau.

> "It is hard to choose the families as we have so many that could benefit from this progamme."

> "The providers have difficulty I could probably double my numbers and the number of books I order."

Overall

The providers say the relationship with Storytime is positive.

> "Storytime have been so helpful. We appreciate the way they work. They have been brilliant."

> "We have a lovely relationship with the Storytime Foundation - then I tell them about your wonderful resources/discuss ages/stages/benefits etc. etc."

The providers are thankful to the funders and Storytime for the books.

> "It is fantastic. The opportunities to teach families and encourage better relationships between parent and children are endless with these books. Our community would be lost without them. I am very grateful for these books being distributed in our community. Thanks Storytime Foundation and keep us the awesome mahi!"

> "I would just say it is a fantastic service and it allows that resource to be able to share the health messages that we are trying to get through. Often as the nurses and health workers get busy, things can drop off, but these are the key things that are so important. Language, bonding, and attachment is so important so I would say look if you can partner with your guys, I would highly recommend it."

> "I really would like to thank Storytime for the work that they do and the fact that they are working hard to get books out there I think it is an amazing initiative. It is not easy to keep community initiatives going, especially with Covid as a lot of folded. I know there is a lot of work that goes on behind the scenes to keep something like this running. So, all those people I would like to thank them for their hard work, grit and determination to keep it going."

> 'You provide wonderful/beneficial resources for some of our high needs and most vulnerable clients – very grateful."

Conclusion

The Storytime Foundation programme, First Thousand Days programme is based on a wealth of evidence that shows that regularly reading aloud to babies and young children results in significant development in children's language skills and literacy. Being read to also extends a range of children's cognitive abilities, including memory, attention, and problem-solving skills.

The programme aligns with the recommendations from Russell et. al. (2022) and the nationally representative Growing Up in New Zealand study. The study contends that infant reading was the only modifiable factor they could find to improve wellbeing outcomes. They recommended approaches which take opportunities to promote 'nurturing care' strategies to families, ideally include gifting books directly to infants, as it has been shown to boost multiple developmental outcomes among infants from disadvantaged communities (O'Farrelly et al. 2018).

The feedback from both families, whānau and providers is consistently positive. Most parents and caregivers (70%) say they read more often to their children as a direct result of this programme. It is providing access to books for families with few books in the home. The providers say the families and whānau are valuing and enjoying the books. They also believe that the books are helping to support the culture and identity of the whānau, promoting serve and return (the back-and-forth exchanges of verbal and nonverbal communications, where the parent or caregiver responds to the infant's cues and the infant responds to the caregiver's signals.). This exchange helps the infant learn how to regulate their emotions, develop language and social skills, and form secure attachments with their whānau.

The providers see the books as helping to support the development of oral language, aligning with the child development stages of the infants.

Although there are challenges, such as whānau being difficult to find when they shift house, the providers are supportive of the prgogramme, saying it enhances their mahi.

They would like to see the programme expanded.

Literature review

Reading to babies and young children

Introduction

The Storytime Foundation has for 25 years run a programme called Books for Babes. By providing books and information to families enrolled in the programme, in collaboration with a number of partner agencies, the Storytime Foundation aims to strengthen vulnerable families by enhancing the bond between parent and child during the early years. In the last five years, the programme has been expanded to include families with babies up to 3 years old; it is now called the First 1000 Days programme.

In 2016, Point Research produced a literature review to sum up the research on the positive impacts of reading aloud to babies and young children. It was clear that there were two broad areas where we can see benefits of this activity: children's language development and educational achievements, and the bond between parent and child.

In 2023, we are undertaking another literature review to build on those findings, and to highlight what we may infer from research about the kinds of books to read aloud to children, so that the bond between parent/caregiver and child is enhanced and children's overall outcomes are enhanced.

Findings are divided into five broad categories:

- Cognitive and educational benefits
- Social and emotional benefits
- Enhancing the bond between parent/caregiver and child
- The benefits for children from socio-economically disadvantaged families
- The kinds of books that work.

Cognitive and educational benefits

A wealth of research shows that regularly reading aloud to babies and young children

results in significant development in children's language skills and literacy.[1] [2] [3] [4] [5] We know that reading aloud to children significantly determines their future level of reading achievement.[6] Children who were read to frequently at 24 months showed language ability at the age of 2.5 and 4.5 years, and showed that they knew about print conventions at 4.5 years.[7] The activity promotes children's ability to both understand and use language, and children who are read to at an earlier age and over a longer period of years show even more ability in these areas.[8] The benefits are obvious from a very early age: one study shows that reading aloud to high risk babies who are receiving care in NICU enhances language enrichment. [9]

Discussing the story with children is also very beneficial: when adults ask questions of children about the story they are listening to, children can learn to make inferences about the story, a skill that is vital for later reading comprehension.[10] Adults reading to children use more language and they have higher rates of engaging in conversation with those children than they do throughout the rest of the day; these can have a profound impact on the children's future language capability.[11]

Being read to also extends a range of children's cognitive abilities, including memory, attention, and problem-solving skills; a study in Brazil demonstrated such benefits from reading aloud beginning in pregnancy and early childhood.[12] Supporting children to

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[1] Council on Early Childhood, High, P. C., Klass, P., Donoghue, E., Glassy, D., DelConte, B., ... & Williams, P. G. (2014)

[2] Bus, A. G. (2001).

[3] Bus, A. G., Van Ijzendoorn, M. H., & Pellegrini, A. D. (1995).

[4] Sulzby E, Teale W. in Barr R, Kamil M, Mosenthal P, Pearson PD, (1991).

[5] Isbell, R., Sobol, J., Lindauer, L., & Lowrance, A. (2004).

[6] Weinberger, J. (1996).

[7] Crain-Thoreson, C., & Dale, P. S. (1992).

[8] Dunst, C. J., Simkus, A., & Hamby, D. W. (2012).

[9] Erdei, C., Klass, P., & Inder, T. E. (2021).

[10] Kleeck, A. V. (2008).

[11] Gilkerson, J., Richards, J. A., & Topping, K. J. (2017).

[12] Piccolo, L. R., Batista Araujo Oliveira, J., Hirata, G., Duarte Neto, W., & Mendelsohn, A. L. (2022).

understand interrelationships is also a benefit that comes from reading to them: "Through read alouds, children can learn the names and meanings of the objects, actions, people, and ideas all around them. At the same time, children can learn how these people, ideas and things relate to one another, which is the critical background information for literacy development in the future."[13] Being read to also inspires a love of reading in children[14]; children who are read to from a young age are more interested in reading than children who have not had this experience.[15]

All of these outcomes help to prepare young children to be ready for starting school. [16] [17] The benefits are long-lasting, too: Australian data shows reading to children at age 4 to 5 has positive and significant effects on reading skills and cognitive skills of these children at least up to age 10 or 11.[18]

Social and emotional benefits

As well as supporting children's intellectual development, reading to them also helps them to develop vital social and emotional skills[19]. Parents can build their children's self-esteem by reading to them[20] [21]. Children can learn not only about the story in the book, but also about their own story, which is important in building their self-esteem.[22] In this way, the story can function as a mirror for a child, helping them to understand their own experiences - a concept first articulated by Rudine Sims Bishop in 1990.[23]

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[13] Kinsner, K., & Parlakian, R. (2021): p.90.

[14] Pankey, J. C. (2000).

[15] Arnold, D. H., Lonigan, C. J., Whitehurst, G. J., & Epstein, J. N. (1994).

[16] Kuo, A., Franke, T.M., Regalado, M. and Halfon N (2004)

[17] Duursma, E., Augustyn, M., & Zuckerman, B. (2008).

[18] Kalb, G., & Van Ours, J. C. (2014).

[19] Sulzby E, Teale W. in Barr R, Kamil M, Mosenthal P, Pearson PD, (1991).

[20] Pankey, J. C. (2000).

[21] Duursma et al., (2008): p. 555.

[22] Duursma et al., (2008): p. 555.

[23] Bishop, R. S. (1990).

Reading to children can also help them to develop knowledge about the world,[24] and about other people.[25] As well as learning about themselves, children can be supported to understand different perspectives, and to empathise with those who have different experiences from their own.[26] [27] [28]This is what Bishop (1990) calls 'windows'[29] - books can help you look through a window into another world.

Emotional literacy is another benefit that children get from being read to. Reading picture books to children has been shown to give children the chance to reflect on and discuss emotions and behaviours that time in that they may not have the time to dissect in rapidly changing real-life social situations.[30] Parents tend to talk more about emotions and mental states when they are reading to children, compared with conversations at other times.[31] When parents do this, children's social understanding increases.[32]

Sharing books with children can also help them to understand and navigate relationships with their peers and to learn coping strategies.[33] Children who are read to show reductions in disruptive behaviours[34]; this activity can help children have better control of their own

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[24] Duursma et al., (2008): p. 555.

[25] Abad, and Pruden (2013); Golos and Mosens (2013), as cited in: Horst, J. S., & Houston-Price, C. (2015).

[26] Norton & Norton, 2010, cited by Gilmore & Howard, 2016).

[27] Stine-Morrow, E. A., Hussey, E. K., & Ng, S. (2015).

[28] Mooren, 2000 as cited in Gosen, M., de Glopper, K., & Berenst, J. (2009).

[29] Bishop, R. S. (1990).

[30] Dyer et a.l, 2000, and, Sabbagh & Callanan, 1998, cited by Murray, L., De Pascalis, L., Tomlinson, M., Vally, Z., Dadomo, H., MacLachlan, B., ... & Cooper, P. J. (2016).

[31] Adrian et al, 2005, cited by Murray, L., De Pascalis, L., Tomlinson, M., Vally, Z., Dadomo, H., MacLachlan, B., ... & Cooper, P. J. (2016).

[32] De Rosnay & Hughes, 2006, Dunn et al., 1991, Ensor & Hughes, 2008,

and Ruffman et al., 2002, cited by Murray, L., De Pascalis, L., Tomlinson, M., Vally, Z., Dadomo, H., MacLachlan, B., ... & Cooper, P. J. (2016).

[33] Duursma et al., (2008): p. 555; p. 556.

[34] Weisleder, A., Cates, C. B., Harding, J. F., Johnson, S. B., Canfield, C. F., Seery, A. M., ... & Mendelsohn, A. L. (2019).

behaviour, which is important for future learning when they start school.[35]

On the other hand, young children who have not been read to show a higher risk of social and emotional problems as often.[36]

Enhancing the bond between parent/caregiver and child

In terms of the Storytime First 1000 Days programme, one of the most important benefits that comes from reading to babies and young children is the strengthening of the bond between the adult reading and the child. This can happen from birth, as shown with high risk neonatal babies.[37] Sharing a book with a child makes their emotional attachment to the parent stronger, and enhances the interaction between the parent and the child.[38] The child and reader are involved in a focused interaction, which enhances their bond.[39] Children who have displayed behavioural difficulties have shown improvements in this area, as a result of the improved relationship with their parent/caregiver.[40]

In shared reading, the bond between parent/caregiver and child can be enhanced by both having a conversation about the book being read.[41] This is in line with a key concept promoted by the Harvard University Center on the Developing Child: Serve and Return. These kinds of responsive interactions not only shape the architecture of the child's developing brain, but also are crucial to the development of social and communication skills.[42] This kind of responsive interaction during shared reading increases the engagement of the child and the strength of the bond with the adult reading: "Engaging read alouds go beyond reading a book from cover to cover. They involve pausing to ask questions and offer explanations, reactions and comments… (they should be thought of as) an important source

[35] Mendelsohn, A. L., Cates, C. B., Weisleder, A., Berkule Johnson, S., Seery, A. M., Canfield, C. F., ... & Dreyer, B. P. (2018).

[36] Martin, K. J., Beck, A. F., Xu, Y., Szumlas, G. A., Hutton, J. S., Crosh, C. C., & Copeland, K. A. (2022).

[37] Erdei, C., Klass, P., & Inder, T. E. (2021).

[38] Bus, A. G. (2001).

[39] Duursma, E. et al. (2008).

[40] Weisleder, A., Cates, C. B., Harding, J. F., Johnson, S. B., Canfield, C. F., Seery, A. M., ... & Mendelsohn, A. L. (2019).

[41] Ganotice Jr, F. A., Downing, K., Mak, T., Chan, B., & Lee, W. Y. (2017).

[42] Harvard University (n.d.).

of serve-and-return interactions with young children."[43]

An American program that is similar to Storytime's First 1000 Days is the Reach out and Read program; the value of this intervention is beautifully summed up on their website: "At Reach Out and Read, we know that reading aloud together, telling stories, and sharing books help forge a meaningful connection between caregiver and child—they create moments that matter."[44]

The benefits for children from socio-economically disadvantaged families

We know that many children who come from lower socio-economic backgrounds struggle in their early school years, chiefly because reading is difficult for them.[45] In a longitudinal study in Australia, children who were exposed to a number of risks - low family income, single parent family, low maternal education, and maternal psychological distress - tended to not be read to. The more risks the child experienced, the less likely they were to be read to. The authors suggested that the absence of shared reading "may serve as a red flag for multiple disadvantages", and that parents in high-risk situations may find it too hard to spend time reading to their children, because of the high levels of stress and competing urgent priorities in their lives.[46]

Benefits of reading to children have been shown to have pronounced positive impacts among children from low-income families, children whose parents have little formal education, children whose parents belong to minority groups and children whose parents do not speak the dominant cultural language - in this case, English - because those children are less likely to be read to frequently.[47] A Chinese study of migrant and local families enrolled in a shared reading programme suggested improvements in non-reading-related well-being outcomes for the families, which were especially apparent for families with low resources.[48] As well as this, reading to children can help to "reduce poverty-related

[43] Kinsner, K., & Parlakian, R. (2021).

[44] Reach out and Read (n.d.).

[45] Snow CE, Burns MS, Griffin P, eds. (1998).

[46] Taylor, C. L., Zubrick, S. R., & Christensen, D. (2016): p. 1.

[47] Duursma, E. et al (2008).

[48] Ni, S., Lu, S., Lu, K., & Tan, H. (2021).

disparities in school readiness".[49] We also know that higher skills in literacy are predictors of better mental and physical health, better jobs and higher income levels in adulthood.[50]

All of these studies strengthen the case for programmes that encourage and support shared reading in vulnerable families. A number of programs that are similar to First 1000 Days have been highly effective in other countries. An analysis of the international programme Bookstart, for example, found that gifting books and offering reading-aloud advice to parents when babies are around 9 months old has been shown to be a low-cost way of improving educational standards.[51] An investigation into the effects of a literacy support programme based on the American paediatric literacy programme Reach out and Read found that among impoverished preschoolers, the programme encouraged parental literacy support and children's language development improved.[52] Another study looked at the Preparing for Life programme, and found that gifting books directly to infants promotes early reading and improves many developmental outcomes in babies and young children who come from disadvantaged communities.[53]

While there is not much research about inequalities in children's health outcomes in New Zealand, a recent study has found that "children experiencing socioeconomic disadvantage, of Māori or Pacific ethnicity, and with unmet healthcare needs had increased odds of being classified to suboptimal developmental health profiles" - one in four of these children were in this position.[54] This study drew on data from the NZ national longitudinal study Growing up in New Zealand. Since we know that infant shared reading programmes make a significant difference to a range of health and life outcomes for vulnerable children, the case is strong for strengthening support and funding for Storytime's First 1000 Days programme in this country.

[49] Weisleder, A. et al. (2019): P. 193.

[50] Fawcett, 2004, and Lyon, 2002, cited by Niklas, F., Cohrssen, C., & Tayler, C. (2016).

[51] Wade, B., & Moore, M. (2000).

[52] Mendelsohn, A. L., Mogilner, L. N., Dreyer, B. P., Forman, J. A., Weinstein, S. C., Broderick, M., ... & Napier, C. (2001).

[53] O'Farrelly, C., Doyle, O., Victory, G., & Palamaro-Munsell, E. (2018).

[54] Russell, J., Grant, C. C., Morton, S., Denny, S., & Paine, S. J. (2022): p. 1.

The kinds of books that work

When researching choices of titles for the First Thousand Days programme, our team found that there is a common wisdom amongst publishers and booksellers, who tend to recommend for the 0-3 age group wordless picture books, 'tummy-time' books which are usually also pictures only, and board books with very limited written language - usually pictures are accompanied by only a few words that tend to label the picture.

However, there are several factors that we know will increase the frequency of reading to children, engagement of the children in shared reading, and development of multiple aspects of children's literacy. These factors all present a compelling argument that shared reading with babies and young children should include more complex, richer books than are currently being recommended by the book industry.

Books that promote parental enthusiasm

We know that if a parent displays enjoyment of the book they are reading, the child will be much more likely to be engaged in the book and enjoy it.[55] [56] [57] Reading aloud to young children, **particularly in an engaging manner** (my emphasis), promotes emergent literacy and language development and supports the relationship between child and parent."[58] Reading with "expression and excitement" will help the child to enjoy what is being read.[59] The National Library highlights strong characters and humour as two of the key elements of picture books that delight and engage children[60] - and, no doubt, adults.

There is some evidence to suggest that shared reading of wordless books with preschoolers invites creativity in the reader and in the child - who may both be prompted to jointly invent a story to accompany the pictures.[61] However, there are two important caveats to this:

- It is important to note that the parents involved in the study were mostly white, tertiary-educated parents from New York

[55] Dunst, C. J. et al. (2012).

[56] Bus & Van Ijzendoorn (1995).

[57] Sonnenschein, S., & Munsterman, K. (2002).

[58] Duursma, E. et al (2008): p. 556.

[59] Cline & Edwards, (2013): p.1217

[60] The National Library (n.d.).

[61] Zevenbergen, A. A., Angell, A. L., Battaglia, N. A., & Kaicher, C. M. (2021).

- Most parents said that they 'hardly ever' shared wordless picture books with their infants, whereas the most common response was that they shared picture books with words with their children on a daily basis.

The parents on the First 1000 Days program may not have the time, energy or creative resources to invent stories with their children, as they may be facing high levels of stress and competing urgent priorities in their lives. Although many of them come from cultural backgrounds where storytelling is important, they may not have come from families where they experienced storytelling when they were children. This may mean that it is easier for them to read a story that is already written for them - which, of course they can embellish, but if they are tired and stressed there is no pressure to create their own story.

Rich and poetic language

We know that even though the conversations that parents/caregivers have with their children are very important in helping children to develop language, the language in books is richer and more diverse than in everyday conversations.[62] Children need to hear this richer language in shared reading: "Much of written language is not found in day-to-day spoken language. When children begin reading independently, they will encounter many new words that they have not experienced in spoken language. Thus, spoken language alone does not prepare the child for the written language of books".[63] It is not only that vocabulary in books tends to be more complex than in spontaneous speech; the grammar and content found in words in picture books is also richer.[64]

Poetic language is important, too. Rhyme and rhythm are important in engaging the infant listener.[65] Even when a child has not developed the cognitive ability to fully understand the words written in a book, "the act of sitting in a parent's lap and listening to the rhythm and intonation of language may not only strengthen the socioemotional bond between parent and child but also address important linguistic precursors such as rhythm and prosody."[66] Rhyme not only helps the child to learn the story, but when new words are introduced so that they rhyme with other words, it is easier for children to become familiar with and remember them.[67]

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[62] Montag, J. L., Jones, M. N., & Smith, L. B. (2015).

[63] Massaro, D. W. (2015): p. 520.

[64] Massaro, D. W. (2017).

[65] Dunst, C. J. et al (2012).

[66] Kuo, A. et al. (2004): p. 1949

[67] Read, K. (2014).

As well as rhyme, other poetic devices help parents to teach speech, language and reading skills: alliteration, onomatopoeia, and metre all play a role in this.[68]

What is interesting is that while some educators and some parents focus on the mechanics of reading - phonics, the learning of the alphabet, and so on - shared reading of picture books with words can help children to develop a range of reading strategies, including phonics, while also encouraging joy in reading.[69]

Windows and mirrors; serve and return

We know that books that provide young children with a 'window' into others' lives help them to develop empathy and understanding of difference; books that 'mirror' young children's own experiences reinforce their identity, explain their world to them and enhance their self-esteem.

We also know that books that encourage interactivity between parent/caregiver and child really work in engaging the child, in enhancing the bond between the adult and child, and in helping vital brain development.

For a fuller discussion of both of these elements, see above under 'Social and emotional benefits' and under 'Enhancing the bond between parent/caregiver and child'.

While some board books and wordless picture books can provide both of these elements, they are more likely to be present in picture books with richer language and a story that is already in the text.

Illustrations and narrative

Engaging pictures are also important, because they help children to enjoy the book[70], they encourage serve and return interactions between parent/caregiver and child, and they help children to remember the story.[71]

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[68] McKenzie, P. (2021).

[69] Campbell, S. (2021).

[70] The National Library (n.d.).

[71] Greenhoot, A. F., Beyer, A. M., & Curtis, J. (2014).

However, a narrative or story is also important in engaging children[72] and in helping children to learn. One study showed that even though both picture books with and without stories encourage the parent reading to use language that will teach their child.[73] However, when reading the books without stories, parents tended to use language that labelled the pictures, whereas when story-based books were read, more references were made to individual characters. Another point to note about this particular study is that most participant parents had completed an undergraduate degree or higher. We cannot assume that the parents who are typically on the First 1000 Days programme are likely to use 'teaching' language if it is not already embedded in the text.

During shared reading, positive results have come from guiding parents/caregivers from low SES families to refer to the plot of the book and also to relate this story to the child's life.[74]

Conclusion

The importance of parents/caregivers reading to children cannot be underestimated. This activity not only helps children's educational and emotional development, but also it enhances the bond they feel with the parent/caregiver reading to them. It is also clear that for vulnerable families, such as those on the First 1000 Days programme, the benefits are profound, long-lasting, and significant.

What kinds of books should we be reading to infants? We can identify several elements that are effective in shared reading: parental enjoyment of the text transmits enjoyment to the child; rich and poetic language, engaging illustrations and narrative; windows and mirrors; and books that encourage serve-and-return interactions between parent/caregiver and child.

While board books, tummy-time books and wordless picture books certainly have their place in supporting babies' development, it seems necessary to encourage reading of richer, more complex texts to babies and young children.

[72] The National Library (n.d.).

[73] Nyhout, A., & O'Neill, D. K. (2014).

[74] Aram, D., Fine, Y., & Ziv, M. (2013).

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