

Bookstart Corner Programme Evaluation 2013/2014

Executive Summary

prepared for

Booktrust

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Introduction

- Booktrust is an independent reading and writing charity, which delivers learning and literacy programmes through a unique public/private partnership that involves health, children's services and libraries, predominantly to children of school age and below.
- The flagship programme in Booktrust's portfolio of children's book gifting initiatives is Bookstart. Every baby and pre-school child receives free book packs, guidance and support via health visitors, library services and early years settings in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- In November 2011, Booktrust launched a new, targeted programme called Bookstart Corner for babies and young children, aimed specifically at disadvantaged families. Bookstart Corner is a learning and literacy programme delivered through children's centres across England and designed for babies and children of 12-30 months, later revised to 12-24 months. The programme is designed to encourage parents to share stories and rhymes with their children, especially those who, through lack of confidence or other reasons, find it difficult to read with their child/children.
- It was originally intended that the initiative would be delivered through a series of four home visits to families with children in the targeted age ranges. However, in practice, a range of delivery methods have been used by centres.
- During the home visit parents receive different resources, including picture books, DVDs, finger puppets and rhyme sheets, as well as support from a children's centre practitioner.

Background

- ActionPoint Marketing Solutions was commissioned to undertake a two-part evaluation of the Bookstart programme in October 2013, just over 18 months since delivery began in children's centres in England in March 2012.
- The main part of the project was a quantitative survey with those parents who have completed Bookstart Corner at least one month prior to the interview. This was complemented by a smaller scale qualitative evaluation, to understand practitioner views of the programme and its benefits to parents.
- This executive summary covers both research studies. It summarises the overall findings and provides recommendations for the Bookstart Corner programme based on the findings of both the parents and practitioners' surveys.

Research Objectives

The objectives of the parents' survey were to determine:

- How the programme was delivered to parents
- Parents' views of the programme overall
- Changes in reading habits as a result of the programme
- Parent usage of the Bookstart Corner material and their views on the quality of service, resources and books within the programme
- Whether the programme has increased their knowledge of books and reading with their child
- The types of reading and reading activities parents are doing with their child
- The post-programme engagement of parents who had participated in Bookstart Corner

The objectives of the practitioner evaluation were:

To understand:

- How home visits are working as a delivery method for the programme
- What happens to families after the programme
- Ways the programme could be improved

To review whether Bookstart Corner has an influence on:

- Opportunities to address wider issues with families
- Allowing children's centres to access families that aren't accessing children's centre services
- Encouraging families to take up the free nursery entitlement for eligible two year olds

Methodology

Parents' Survey

The research methodology for the parents survey involved interviews with parents who had taken part in Bookstart Corner. Interviews were either face-to-face at children's centres or by telephone, the parents' telephone numbers being supplied (after their agreement) by their children's centre.

- Over an 11 week fieldwork period, mid-November 2013 to early February 2014, ActionPoint completed 272 interviews with parents, with an average of six interviews achieved per children's centre. Of these, 147 were completed by telephone and 125 were face to face.
- There was a wide geographic spread, with interviews covering most parts of England except the south west and north east.

Practitioners' Research

- The practitioners' research study involved 20 in-depth interviews with practitioners working with Bookstart Corner from children's centres in different parts of England.
- All of the practitioners were at centres which were actively engaged with Bookstart Corner to give maximum insight into how the programme was operating. This may give a slightly more positive bias than is the reality.
- The interviews took place between November 2013 and February 2014. Two of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, lasting 45-50 minutes, and the remainder took place by telephone, lasting 30-40 minutes.

Key findings

High levels of enthusiasm for the programme

- Parents were very positive towards the Bookstart Corner programme and felt that the programme has had a positive impact on their child's reading and rhyming skills:
 - 98% agreed or strongly agreed that they and their child enjoyed taking part in Bookstart Corner
 - 99% agreed or strongly agreed that the programme was worthwhile
 - 98% agreed or strongly agreed that their child will benefit from it
 - 98% of parents agreed or strongly agreed that the centre 'had done a good job' in delivering the programme
- The Bookstart Corner books and resources were also highly praised by parents; 99% thought the books were of a high quality and 97% thought the resources (puppets, DVD, and guidance material) were also of a high quality.
- Most practitioners were very enthusiastic about the Bookstart Corner programme and were keen to deliver it to parents via a method within their time and resource capability:

I think it's a brilliant programme. I go into children's homes and some of these children are in real poverty and parents don't read to them, so we're showing parents how to look at and share a book with their child.

Blackpool

Strong impact on reading and story-telling

- The programme was praised by both practitioners and parents for increasing parents' confidence around reading and sharing books with their child. Additional benefits include: increased bonding, increased focus on the importance of books and parents spending more time sharing books, stories and rhymes with their child.
- Over 65% of parents report they are doing more reading, telling stories and rhymes with their child, and of these 30-45% are doing these activities much more.
- The impact on reading activities is greatest with those for whom English is a second language. 56% of the English as second-language parents feel they are reading much more to their children compared with 36% of native English speaker parents.
- Those who lack confidence in reading also show similarly high increases compared with those who say they are confident in reading. 54% of parents who are not confident with reading report reading more with their child, compared with 38% of parents who are confident with reading.
- Parents continue to use the Bookstart Corner materials after the programme, 89% report using them once a week or more, and 30% report using them every day or nearly every day. Young parents (in their 20s) are more likely to use the resources than older parents (over 30).

Increase in confidence, knowledge and positive attitudes about reading

- 85% feel more confident around reading with their child
- 84% feel more knowledgeable about reading with their child
- 86% report spending more quality time with their child
- 97% think that reading confidently is important in life
- 99% think spending time reading with their child will benefit them when they start school
- One quarter (23%) of parents were not confident in reading and, of these, 10% had sought help with this following the Bookstart Corner programme. Those with English as a second language were also more likely to seek help with reading, and 11% had done so.

*It empowers parents to have the knowledge they need to assist their children and gives them ideas on how to share books with their children. **Kent***

*The fact that the parents have more confidence in reading means they are more likely to do it, and the fact that they read to the child means the child is prepared and ready to start school. Bookstart Corner, gives them the confidence to try. **West Midlands***

High levels of local service engagement

- 66% of parents report engagement in at least one local service as a result of the programme, and 46% report accessing 4 or more services (these include visiting the Bookstart Corner reading area at the children's centre, attending a rhyme time/story time session, attending a group or course at the children's centre, attending other play sessions, joining or visiting the library, seeking help with own literacy, joining the Bookstart Bear club or taking up the two year nursery entitlement).

The most highly accessed services:

- 30% had taken up the 2 year nursery entitlement (discussed in following section)
- 31% had joined the library for their child for the first time and 29% had visited for the first time
- 26% had visited the Bookstart Corner reading area in a children's centre
- 21% had participated in a rhyme time session
- However for the engagement in children's centre activities, it was those already familiar with the children's centre environment, i.e. those who had completed in centre sessions rather than in home, who were more likely to be engaged in these activities.

High take up of the two year nursery entitlement

- 30% of those eligible for the two year nursery entitlement had taken up the offer since completing the programme.
- Where awareness of the free nursery entitlement is low (often in the less disadvantaged areas), Bookstart Corner appears to influence take-up by providing a useful route to raising awareness of the entitlement amongst eligible families. However where awareness of the offer is already high, completing the programme has limited impact on the take up of the programme.

- There is strong indication that those children who have completed the Bookstart Corner programme are better prepared for the nursery environment. Some nurseries encourage parents to complete the course because children who have completed the programme are more likely to be at the age appropriate level when starting their nursery education.

I feel it has definitely helped. Most families that are entitled to free funding have sought a place. We also generally promote the free nursery place for entitled two-year-olds. Manchester

Follow up with families after the programme is limited

- There appears to be little formal evaluation of parent outcomes taking place at children's centre level – only three of the 20 centres spoken to conducted follow-up evaluation after the programme, and for two of these this was within an existing programme.
- There is rarely any local follow-up after a programme other than signposting to different activities. However, many parents do initially stay in contact after the course because they were already accessing the children's centre.

Challenges with access and engagement of disadvantaged groups

- Although the programme was not noted for giving the children's centre access to 'new' parents, it was praised for strengthening relationships with 'existing' parents. Some centres also found it acted as a 'door opener' to engage with vulnerable families.
- Some centres have had difficulty in engaging parents in the programme – both in gaining initial interest to participate in a course and also to instil commitment once a course is started. Centres, particularly in less disadvantaged areas, can find it very hard to engage parents, especially if they do not have strong links for referrals from partner agencies.
- Links with partner agencies are important to gain referrals for the programme if the children's centre is not to rely solely on 'existing parents'. In cases where links are weak, the centre normally relies on existing families who already access the centre.

Delivery methods are mixed

- There is a mix of delivery methods being used for the Bookstart Corner programme. However, home delivery is the single largest delivery method for the programme and 43% of parents' interviewed had experienced their Bookstart Corner programme this way.
- However 57% of programmes involved one or more in-centre sessions, either dedicated to Bookstart Corner, or as part of an existing session. Many children's centres use not only different methods for different groups but also different methods with one family e.g. three or two sessions in-centre and one or two in-home.

- Parents were positive about the programme regardless of the delivery method. The prescribed delivery method of four sessions in-home over four weeks is costly on staff resources and time. However, home visits can provide a good relationship building environment in which wider issues can be highlighted/emerge.

*Families do build up trust with you especially in their home environment. Some parents will start to talk about other issues once you've built up a bit of a relationship.***Hertfordshire**

- However some centres find that in-centre sessions also provide access to wider issues in a less threatening environment than a home visit.

Bookstart Corner does give opportunities to discover other issues, even though in-home visits, everything might seem fine, but in group sessions you pick up other issues, how parents are managing the child's behaviour, or how parents interact with their child, or might be isolated, so other things might become apparent **Hertfordshire**

- The delivery of 50 Bookstart Corner packs to each centre is too many for some centres particularly those where there are only pockets of disadvantage within an area. Pressure to gift these may have in part, contributed to the variety of delivery methods that have developed. To 'make use of them' some packs have been given out with very little, if any, training/guidance from a practitioner. Booktrust was already aware that this was an issue and there is now an option to receive 25 packs.
- Most programme participation comprises of three or four sessions typically spread over three to six weeks.

Recommendations

- Overall our findings have shown that parents are very positive about the benefits of the Bookstart Corner programme. Parents who have participated in the programme report improved literacy, interest in, and understanding of books by their child. The programme is providing positive benefits to both child and parent and it is important that targeted parents continue to have the opportunity to access the programme through children's centres.
- When the programme is delivered in a course format, either in home or in children's centres, it has a good structure and format with quality resources. However, there are issues surrounding the delivery of the programme in some children's centres. Although children's centres provide an excellent vehicle for delivery of the programme, we believe that the full potential of the Bookstart Corner programme is not being realised due to resource and organisational changes of the children's centres in many areas of England. Bookstart Corner could reach many more parents if some of the difficulties experienced by children's centres are addressed.
- As a first step to help improve the effectiveness of the programme we recommend a telephone audit in order to gain an accurate picture of the organisational changes affecting children's centres within different local authority areas around the country. This would look at each local authority area and review how many are actively delivering the programme and how the changes are affecting what the programme is able to achieve.
- More Bookstart Corner trained staff are required to increase capacity and enable more centres to deliver the programme/regularly deliver the programme. The online training is open and universal, and we recommend that more staff at all levels should be encouraged to complete it. We also suggest that confident volunteers are also considered as a potential resource for delivering the programme.
- With the recent and on-going re-organisation of children's centres into clusters in many regions (in many cases several centres in a town have been combined into one), we recommend that Booktrust make revisions/updates to the existing training programme to make it more cluster friendly. Booktrust could also introduce a new version of the training programme specifically for this new cluster-based organisational structure.
- Although Bookstart Corner is designed to be delivered as a dedicated course of four visits/sessions in home, it appears that in many instances this does not happen. In addition some packs are gifted with little or no guidance for parents. This is likely to reduce the impact of the programme.

To help ensure Bookstart Corner is delivered in the way intended, we recommend that each children's centre should be asked how many packs they can use within a Bookstart Corner programme and if they have sufficient staff resources to deliver the programme, before the packs are delivered to their centre. Where it is not feasible to ask each centre individually, it would be wise to give an additional lower option of 10 packs in addition to the current 50 or 25.

- Evidence of measurable impacts on children and parents is a motivator for practitioners who are delivering the Bookstart Corner programme. To further motivate staff, we recommend that it should be a requirement that practitioners complete a pre and post evaluation report/form. This would raise awareness of the positive outcomes for both the practitioners, Booktrust and associated stakeholders and also for Ofsted visits.
- It is recommended that Booktrust email the findings of this research to all centres. The evidence of positive benefits to parents on a wider scale around the country will be encouraging particularly in the case where the programme has lapsed or is very ad hoc. It would also encourage practitioners who are less engaged with the programme to realise what a positive effect it can have on young children's reading and literacy skills going forwards.
- To ensure that Booktrust resources are used efficiently, an onsite audit should be performed each year. This should gather information on packs received and used, pre and post evaluation reports and training records for staff who have been trained to deliver the programme. Where this is impractical due to cost, then a continuation of the existing annual online audit would be acceptable, although less rigorous.
- The Bookstart Corner programme has a low national and a low local authority profile in many areas according to some of the practitioners we have spoken with during the research programme. We recommend Booktrust build on and extend the existing annual stakeholder events (for relevant people in local authorities and the healthcare sector) to seek to raise the profile of the Bookstart Corner further, and communicate its positive outcomes for parents and their children. This would add credibility and weight to the programme amongst a wider audience in particular Local Authorities.
- More guidance on ways to encourage parents to participate in Bookstart Corner would be welcomed by practitioners. Having a larger tool box of ideas with which to engage families may help practitioners to continue running the Bookstart Corner programme at their children's centre.
- Given the positive feedback on Bookstart Corner, we recommend that Booktrust also consider developing an additional targeted programme aimed at babies (0-12 months) with the same or similar eligibility criteria as Bookstart Corner. This could supplement the existing universal Bookstart baby programme.