

**The Children’s Library Journey: Early Years**

Public libraries welcome children from the very earliest months of life, helping parents and carers to support their child as they grow and learn.

Libraries do this by supporting the development of:

* **children’s early learning and cultural development**
* **children’s speaking, listening and early literacy**
* **children’s social and emotional skills**
* **parent/child bonding**
* **school ready children**
* **improved mental wellbeing in parents and carers**

**Children’s Early Learning and Cultural Development**

In 2004 the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project (Institute of Education, 2004)[[1]](#footnote-1) identified that “the frequency of library visits shows a positive association with language, literacy and early number attainment at school entry.” The research demonstrated that a child taken to the library regularly from ages two to five is 2.5 months ahead of an equivalent child who did not visit the library frequently by the age of five.

**Parent/Child Bonding**

**Improved Mental Wellbeing in Parents and Carers**

Library rhyme times help to build relationships between children and their parents and can have a positive impact on a mother’s mental health. Research has shown that one in five mothers of children aged three years or under suffer from mental health difficulties.[[2]](#footnote-2) First time mums are most likely to suffer in silence. This has a negative impact on children and has significant risks for children which include cognitive, developmental and language delay and increased risk of mood disorders. An unhappy, unresponsive adult carer limits a baby’s ability to develop their social and emotional capabilities.

A study of the impact of rhyme times on the mental health of mother’s was carried out in libraries in Essex during 2017. Analysis of the results revealed a very noticeable improvement in mother’s mood immediately after the rhyme time with the percentage describing themselves as ‘very happy’ more than doubling from 25% to 59% in the space of 30 minutes[[3]](#footnote-3)

For parents and carers libraries provide opportunities to meet other parents and carers and enables them to develop new friendships reducing social isolation and supporting mental wellbeing.

**Children’s Speaking, Listening and Early Literacy**

**School Ready Children**

Sharing stories with young children helps to develop their speech, language and early literacy skills, encourages word association and helps them to learn about the world in which they live.

In 2018 Why Closing the Gap Matters was published online by Oxford University Press.[[4]](#footnote-4) This report highlights the significance of the “word gap”. Language and literacy skills have a huge impact on a child’s life outcomes. There is a significant gap between children with good language skills and those with poor language skills when they start school and this gap remains consistent throughout their schooling. Children with language difficulties at age five are:

* Four times more likely to have reading difficulties in adulthood
* Three times more likely to have mental health problems
* Twice as likely to be unemployed whey they reach adulthood

The Word Gap research highlights that children growing up in the poorest of households in the UK are likely to have fewer words when they start school than children from more affluent homes. Libraries are free and welcome everyone.

**Children’s Social and Emotional Skills**

Library activities that introduce children to music, dance, theatre, art and crafts, and which encourage play, support the development of speech and language, listening skills and social interaction with other children. For some children these activities may be their first cultural experience.

Early learning in STEM subjects is supported by activities using products like Duplo and Code-a-pillars – which promote the development of a wide range of skills[[5]](#footnote-5) including creativity, problem solving, motor-skills and hand-eye coordination, spatial reasoning, sequencing[[6]](#footnote-6) and basic commands to support coding skills.

Research shows that young children learn best in a home learning environment which is “rich in language, joy and playfulness” (Mullen, G., 2017).[[7]](#footnote-7) A quality home learning environment includes parents reading to their child, teaching letters and numbers, visiting the library and teaching songs and nursery rhymes. Families participating together in activities at the library and which can easily be replicated at home can help parents to support their child’s learning.

Bookstart is a national free book gifting programme that can be accessed through libraries and which encourages families to share books, stories and rhymes as early as possible. It is based on the premise that children who have an early introduction to books and are read to every day benefit educationally, culturally, socially and emotionally.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Libraries play a key role in supporting families and delivering a range of benefits that improve lives beyond supporting literacy and giving universal access to free books. Libraries are safe spaces, easily accessible and welcoming to everyone.

1. Institute of Education (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project [online] DfES Publications. Available at [http://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/oxed/Oxford-Language-Report.PDF?region=uk](http://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/oxed/Oxford-Language-Report.PDF?region=uk%20)  [Accessed 8 Oct 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Boulton, C et al (2018) Library rhyme times and maternal mental health: results of an action research project. [online] Shared Intelligence. Available at: <https://sharedintelligence.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/rhyme-times-and-mmh-2018-final4.pdf> [Accessed 8 Oct 2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://sharedintelligence.net/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/rhyme-times-and-mmh-2018-final4.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Oxford University Press (2018). Why Closing the Word Gap Matters. [online] Oxford University Press. Available at: <http://fdslive.oup.com/www.oup.com/oxed/Oxford-Language-Report.PDF?region=uk> [Accessed 8 Oct.2018] [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Dewar, G (2018). The Benefits of Toy Blocks: The Science of Construction Play. Available at: <https://www.parentingscience.com/toy-blocks.html> [Accessed Jan.2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Dewar, G (2018). Can Lego Bricks and Other Construction Toys Build Your Child’s STEM Skills. Available at: <https://www.parentingscience.com/Lego-bricks-construction-toys-and-STEM-skills.html> [Accessed Jan.2019] [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mullen, G (2017). More than Words: Using Nursery Rhymes and Songs to Support Domains of Child Development. Journal of Childhood Studies, vol.42 no 2, pp.42-52 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. <https://www.booktrust.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-and-campaigns/bookstart/> [↑](#footnote-ref-8)