

BookTrust
Getting children reading

Libraries RISING

How public libraries contribute to positive early years outcomes

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Executive summary

Public libraries make an important contribution to the lives of babies, young children and their families, and already have substantial reach.

BookTrust's National Family Survey 2025 found that 68% of parents and carers of children aged 0–5 had visited a library with their child in the previous 12 months, including 44% who visited at least monthly.

As free, flexible and welcoming community spaces, libraries give children opportunities to explore, play and learn, and give families opportunities to spend time together and connect with others. Through skilled staff, participatory activities, trusted relationships and access to a wide variety of books, libraries support children's early development and family wellbeing. Libraries are key partners within the wider early years ecosystem, working alongside health visitors, Family Hubs, early education settings and other services supporting babies, young children and families.

This report presents research commissioned by Libraries Rising, in partnership with BookTrust and funded by Arts Council England. It brings together analysis of BookTrust's National Family Survey 2025, wider research evidence, interviews with families and examples of local library practice to explore libraries' contribution to early childhood development and family life. The report also identifies opportunities and makes recommendations to strengthen this contribution through greater investment and integration within early years systems.

68%

of parents and carers of children aged 0–5 had visited a library with their child in the previous 12 months

Libraries provide experiences that support children's early development and family wellbeing

- **Communication, language and emergent literacy**
  Stories, songs, rhymes, play and responsive interaction create language-rich experiences that support vocabulary, communication and the foundations of later literacy.
- **Personal, social and emotional development**
  Participatory activities, storytimes and welcoming spaces give children opportunities to explore, play, express themselves and interact with others, supporting social and emotional learning, confidence and creativity.
- **Home learning environment**
  Access to varied books, trusted recommendations and modelling of playful, interactive, shared reading give families ideas and experiences they can take into everyday life at home.

It is a distinctive combination of people, experiences, place and books that support these outcomes. Families value welcoming, non-judgemental spaces where children can explore and families can spend time together without needing to spend money. They also appreciate the support of knowledgeable and welcoming library staff, opportunities to connect with other families and the freedom for children to follow their interests. Children can choose books for themselves and develop greater independence and ownership over their reading experiences.

There is an opportunity to connect more families with libraries, particularly in children's earliest years

Libraries are already part of many families' lives, yet visiting is less common in children's earliest years. Monthly library visiting was reported by 34% of families with babies aged 12 months or under, compared with 55% of families with five-year-olds. This suggests an opportunity for library services to build relationships with families earlier, address barriers to participation and encourage sustained engagement through welcoming activities, outreach and partnerships.

Libraries are already demonstrating how this can be done. Examples from Brent, Cornwall, Norfolk and Oldham show how library services combine participatory activities, skilled staff and welcoming environments, alongside outreach and partnerships with other early years services, to engage families in their communities. Bookstart Storytime provides another example, bringing children and families together through shared reading experiences while giving library staff opportunities to model approaches that parents and carers can use at home. Together, these examples show how libraries actively connect with communities, support children's transitions and help families access wider opportunities and support.



There is a timely opportunity to build on libraries' contribution to children's early outcomes. In England, the Best Start in Life agenda, including the recognition of libraries as potential Best Start Network Sites, provides an important opportunity to strengthen libraries' position within local early years provision. More broadly, the findings highlight the value of embedding libraries within early years strategies, partnerships and pathways of support, recognising them as active contributors with their own expertise, resources and trusted community relationships.



Realising libraries' full potential requires greater recognition and sustained investment

Libraries' contribution depends on the quality and continuity of the experiences they provide: varied book collections, skilled staff, participatory activities, welcoming spaces, outreach and relationships with other early years services. Sustained investment is needed both to protect this distinctive offer and to enable more families to benefit from it.

The findings highlight five connected priorities for realising libraries' full potential to contribute to positive early years outcomes:

1. Strengthen the visibility and accessibility of the early years library offer
2. Invest in activities and outreach to build sustained engagement
3. Invest in the early years experiences that families value
4. Strengthen libraries' role within local early years systems
5. Build a stronger shared evidence base on libraries' contribution

The research reinforces the importance of recognising public libraries as active early years partners and valuing the contribution they already make to children's early development and family life.

Sustained investment in library staff, resources and activities – alongside stronger integration within early years systems and partnerships and a better understanding of what works for different families – will enable libraries to build on their strengths and extend their distinctive offer to more babies, young children and families.

We are grateful to the library services and partners in Brent, Cornwall, Norfolk and Oldham for sharing their practice and experiences, and to the parents, carers and families who generously contributed to this research.

1 About this report

Libraries Rising and BookTrust are working together through an early years research partnership to understand and communicate the distinctive contribution public libraries make to babies and young children and their families. This report brings together national survey data, examples from library services, wider research evidence and families' experiences to explore the value of libraries in the early years, how they contribute to positive developmental outcomes and how more families can benefit.

Public libraries offer much more than access to books for early years families. They bring together stories, songs, play and opportunities for learning and social connection in free, welcoming community spaces. Families can browse and choose books, take part in storytimes and rhyme times, seek recommendations from librarians, meet other parents and carers, or simply enjoy time together without needing to purchase anything. Library services actively support these experiences through their book collections, skilled staff, delivery of activities and partnerships with other early years services. Together, these create opportunities for language-rich interaction, emergent literacy, play, confidence and social development, alongside parent–child connection and family wellbeing (Local Government Association, 2022; Blanchard et al., 2026).

The current policy context provides a timely opportunity to strengthen this contribution. In England, the Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies guidance explicitly identifies libraries as potential Best Start Network Sites, extending family support into trusted community settings (Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, 2026). The Local Government Association has similarly highlighted the role of libraries within Family Hubs and wider early years systems (Local Government Association, 2022).

Despite their established role in communities, evidence on public library use among families with children aged 0–5 remains limited. There is also little evidence into how different library experiences contribute to early development and family life. This report addresses these gaps by examining libraries' reach, their value for families and opportunities to strengthen libraries' contribution, particularly for families who are not yet regularly engaged.



The report addresses three questions:

1

How do public libraries contribute to positive early years outcomes?

2

What does library use look like for families with young children, and what are the opportunities to strengthen engagement?

3

What does the evidence imply for local authorities, central government and funders?

About the evidence

The report combines four complementary sources of evidence.

Evidence source	What it contributes	Scope and interpretation
BookTrust National Family Survey 2025	Bespoke analysis of responses from 2,315 parents and carers of children aged 0–5 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland covering: library visiting, registration, differences by age and income, reading culture, other activities and Bookstart Storytime interest (BookTrust, 2026b). The published report, 'Trends, drivers and inequalities in UK childhood reading' (BookTrust, 2026c), draws on responses from 3,508 parents and carers of children aged 0–8 and provides wider context on children's reading habits and the factors shaping shared reading at home.	Provides a nationally representative snapshot of parent-reported library engagement and its associations with other factors. The wider report helps contextualise these findings within broader reading trends and inequalities. Findings describe patterns and associations.
Rapid review of wider evidence	Academic, policy and sector evidence about language and literacy, play, participation, wellbeing, inclusion and the home learning environment.	A focused, structured review of relevant research and sector evidence, bringing together key findings and identifying areas for further investigation.
20 family interviews	Insights on reasons for visiting, valued experiences, children's choices, staff relationships, barriers, family interaction and what travels home.	Provides in-depth accounts of families' experiences and perceptions, drawing on purposively selected participants who opted into the research.
Library practice examples	Cornwall, Norfolk, Oldham and Brent library services illustrate different ways of delivering welcoming, connected and participatory early years provision.	Illustrates how different approaches are being delivered in local contexts, offering learning for wider practice.

2 Libraries' distinctive contribution to early years outcomes

The rapid review of wider evidence identified academic studies of public library programmes, UK policy and sector evidence, and research on library access and participation. Together, this evidence supports a credible case that public libraries contribute to giving children the best start in life by providing experiences associated with positive developmental outcomes. This contribution comes through a combination of book access, language-rich activity, child choice, play, caregiver support and community connection. As widely available community settings, libraries can reinforce developmental experiences around and between families' interactions with formal early years services. High-quality, varied and age- and stage-appropriate collections, refreshed to sustain interest, are an important part of this offer. Staff can also model enjoyable shared reading and offer ideas that build parents' and carers' confidence.

The strongest contribution pathway to early developmental experiences and outcomes seen in the evidence was for communication, language and emergent literacy. Libraries can also contribute to children's personal, social and emotional development through group participation, providing routine and building confidence and relationships, and to early creativity through play and exploration. They can also support the home learning environment by giving caregivers practical ideas for enjoyable shared experiences, alongside opportunities for social contact and access to wider support.

Investing in staff skills and development can help realise these benefits. For example, research has found that professional development can strengthen the use of evidence-informed early literacy practices in library storytimes (Mills et al., 2018).

Communication, language and emergent literacy

Library storytimes and rhyme times expose children to rich and repeated language, stories, songs and responsive interaction, while borrowing extends access into the home.

This is the strongest area of direct library-specific evidence. Analysis of public library storytimes has found use of complex, repetitive and child-focused language, while research on singing shows how songs can combine language with repetition, rhythm, props and participation (Cahill, Joo and Campana, 2020; Joo et al., 2024). These experiences help children become familiar with words, develop vocabulary and recognise patterns and sounds in language, providing important foundations for later reading (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018). The VIEWS2 programme found that children showed early literacy behaviours during storytimes that included evidence-informed content. A related study found that professional development could help staff leading library storytimes use more evidence-informed early literacy practices (Campana et al., 2016; Mills et al., 2018).

These findings align with the wider early years evidence base. Education Endowment Foundation guidance identifies shared reading, vocabulary development, communication and early literacy experiences as important foundations for later literacy, particularly for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Education Endowment Foundation, 2018).

Personal, social and emotional development

Beyond communication, language and emergent literacy, libraries can offer opportunities for children to participate in groups, build confidence and interact with others. Research on infant and toddler storytimes identifies the potential for social–emotional learning, while studies of play-based library programmes highlight imagination, creativity and communication (Kociubuk et al., 2025; Wilson-Scorgie, 2022). Storytimes can also include turn-taking, shared attention and play-based early mathematics (Campana, 2020; Cahill et al., 2022).

The wider library environment can also contribute to positive outcomes for early years families. A study observing families' interactions in redesigned library play-and-learn spaces found increased caregiver–child conversation and interaction, suggesting that the design of the space can shape what families do together (Hassinger-Das et al., 2020). Rhyme time research has also linked attendance with parents' reported mood, routine, social contact and positive time with their child, while research on inclusive storytimes shows that provision can be adapted for children with disabilities and developmental delays, although staff confidence and practice vary (Boulton et al., 2018; Daskalakes and Cahill, 2024).

Home learning environment

A further outcome pathway is through what families take home. Wider early years evidence shows that shared reading, conversation and other learning experiences at home are important for children's development (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.). BookTrust's wider analysis of the National Family Survey also highlights how pressures on families' time, routines, resources and support can make regular shared reading harder to sustain, despite high levels of enjoyment and motivation (BookTrust, 2026c).

Libraries can help by providing access to a wider choice of books, offering recommendations, modelling shared reading and sharing ideas that families can use at home. Some library-specific evidence is now emerging: a preliminary quasi-experimental evaluation of a six-week maths-and-science storytime programme found higher reported use of several caregiver behaviours targeted by the programme, although broader caregiving beliefs and practices did not differ (Gaias et al., 2022). Sections 3 and 4 explore this pathway further through the family interviews and survey evidence.

Implications

Further research is needed to understand how different library experiences contribute to children's development over time. See Recommendation 5.



3 Pathways to family and developmental outcomes

The evidence points to ways in which library experiences are contributing to early years development and family wellbeing. Their distinctiveness lies in the combination of resources, people and place: books and knowledgeable staff are available alongside opportunities of child choice, informal family time, facilitated activities and social connection. Different forms of participation create different experiences and pathways to outcomes. The table opposite brings together these pathways across the evidence.

The interviews with families provide insights into these outcome pathways. Across the interviews, families described the value of welcoming spaces, access to books and opportunities for choice, participatory activities, social connections and support for reading at home.

Library offer	Immediate experience	Relevant developmental or family outcome pathway
1. A free and welcoming space for families	Time together, flexible use and community contact	Parent–child connection, wellbeing and belonging
2. Free, high-quality, varied and age- and stage-appropriate books that are refreshed regularly, alongside trusted recommendations	Browsing, discovery, choice and revisiting favourites Librarians' expertise providing recommendations, reassurance and help to explore unfamiliar interests	Reading enjoyment, vocabulary, narrative and child agency Caregiver confidence and variety in books shared at home
3. Participatory stories, rhymes, songs, play and creative activity	Language, repetition, rhythm, talk, responsive participation and modelling of shared reading for parents and carers Exploration, imagination, making and movement	Communication, emergent literacy and enjoyment Creativity, expression and physical and social participation
4. Group sessions and routines	Shared attention, turn-taking, familiar people and predictable activities	Participation, confidence and social and emotional development
5. Connections to other families and services	Social contact, information and signposting on children's development and family support, introductions to local services and support around transitions such as starting school	Social connection, family support, parental confidence and support for children's transitions into early education

A free and welcoming space for families

A distinctive value of libraries is that they support not only the experiences children have within them, but also the relationships around children. Shared activities provide opportunities for parent–child connection, while regular visits and welcoming spaces bring families into contact with others in their local community.

One of the strongest themes from the interviews was the value of libraries as free and welcoming places where families could spend time together. This was particularly important during parental leave, at weekends and during school holidays, when parents and carers were looking for affordable things to do with young children.

The value went beyond being free. Families appreciated the flexibility to visit on their own terms, without needing to book an activity, make a purchase or stay for a set amount of time. Some contrasted this with cafés or paid children's activities, where they felt greater expectations around children's behaviour or participation.

> "It's a judgement free zone … It's very casual. You can go there on your own terms. You can be a lot more flexible about when you want to attend and there's no time limits."
>
> — Parent of a toddler

Families described libraries as places where children could move around, explore and make noise without feeling judged or unwelcome. The physical environment was important: parents valued dedicated children's areas, safe and clean spaces, room for buggies and layouts that allowed children to explore while adults felt comfortable. Conversely, cramped children's areas or limited space for crawling babies sometimes negatively affected how long families wanted to stay.

For some families, regular library visits or rhyme sessions became part of their routine, providing a familiar place to visit and something their child looked forward to. Parents also valued the welcoming atmosphere and opportunities to spend time alongside other families.

> "The library has its own spirit."
>
> — Parent of a four-year-old

Free and varied books alongside trusted recommendations

Books remained central to the value families described, but their accounts highlighted benefits beyond simply having access to reading materials. Parents valued being able to borrow from a wide and changing selection of books without having to buy them. For some, this made it easier to provide variety at home; for others, it meant being able to explore books and subjects they might not otherwise have chosen.

> "I also have access to different types of children books without having to buy books ourselves."
>
> — Parent of a three-year-old

Children's choice and self-directed exploration were important parts of this experience. Parents described children browsing shelves, selecting books based on their own interests and, as they grew older, becoming involved in checking books out themselves. Some felt that this gave their children a greater sense of independence and ownership over reading.

The changing selection of books was also appealing. One parent described the attraction of finding "new and exciting books that she hasn't seen before … the novelty of the books really."

These accounts suggest that libraries offer children opportunities to explore their interests and take an active role in choosing what they read. Rather than relying entirely on books selected or purchased by

adults, children can browse a wider collection and discover something that attracts their attention. This supports children's agency by giving them greater choice and ownership over their reading experiences.

Families also valued librarians' recommendations, particularly when looking for age-appropriate books or something different from their usual choices. For parents who had developed a relationship with library staff, these recommendations were a valued source of guidance.

These experiences could extend into family life at home, where shared reading, conversation and other learning experiences play an important role in children's development (Education Endowment Foundation, n.d.). Interviewees gave examples of borrowing unfamiliar books, repeating songs and rhymes from sessions and using ideas shared by library staff or people leading activities.

Children's book choices also shaped what families read together at home. Some parents described encouraging their children to choose books and making shared reading more interactive through questions and conversations.

> "Instead of just reading the word, I try to ask her questions about the pictures ... ask her what she thinks might happen ... I also let her choose some of the books ... because I have noticed she's more interested when she has a choice."
>
> — Parent of a three-year-old

Many interview participants already valued reading and had established reading practices before using libraries. Their accounts therefore illustrate how libraries contribute additional books, ideas and experiences to family reading, rather than necessarily introducing these practices for the first time.

BookTrust's National Family Survey provides further evidence of libraries' role as a source of reading support at home. Among parents and carers of children aged 0–5 who visited a library at least monthly, 37% identified libraries or librarians as a source of ideas, tips or support for reading or sharing books.

Together, the survey findings and interviews highlight how libraries are contributing to families' experiences of reading at home: providing a wider choice of books, supporting children's interests, offering recommendations and sharing songs, rhymes and approaches that parents can use themselves.

Participatory stories, rhymes, songs and play

Structured activities were another important part of families' library experiences, particularly for those with babies and toddlers. Parents and carers often described rhyme times, story sessions, baby groups, singing, sensory activities, crafts and play. Importantly, for some, these activities were their initial reason for visiting the library, rather than borrowing books.

Families particularly valued activities that encouraged children to take part. Group story sharing, songs, movement, props, questions and opportunities to join in were described as helping to hold children's attention and providing experiences that were different from reading together at home.

> "Being read to, being sung to by people that aren't family has definitely helped her."
>
> — Parent of a 21-month-old

These accounts align with the wider evidence discussed in Section 2, which highlights the language-rich experiences created through stories, songs, repetition, rhythm and interaction. Library activities also bring children into contact with other adults and children, creating opportunities for shared participation.

Importantly, activities could also introduce families to the wider library offer. Some parents described staying afterwards to read or play, borrowing books while attending a session, or returning for other activities once they had become familiar with the library.

In practice: Brent Libraries, bringing families together through stories and play

At Willesden Green Library, weekly creative sessions brought together stories, music, movement, props and simple activities that parents could repeat at home. Library staff described how regular attendance helped families develop routines and familiarity with the library and its staff, while children became increasingly comfortable joining in.

Brent Libraries also delivers Bookstart Storytime, supported by selected picture books and physical and digital resources that staff can adapt to local families. Sessions bring stories to life through expressive reading, rhymes, questions and playful participation. By watching adults share books and seeing other families join in, parents and carers can discover simple approaches to try themselves, such as using different voices, talking about illustrations and encouraging children to respond. These experiences can help build confidence in sharing stories at home, while introducing families to new books and encouraging browsing and borrowing.

Together, these approaches illustrate how regular, engaging activities can make shared reading enjoyable and accessible, provide families with ideas to take home and help them develop lasting connections with their local library.

Group sessions and routines

Parents and carers described a range of ways in which they felt library experiences supported their children's communication, confidence and social participation – all relevant experiences for personal, social and emotional development. They talked about children hearing stories and songs repeatedly, encountering new vocabulary, but also about listening to adults outside their immediate family and interacting with other children. Some also described children becoming more comfortable in group settings, joining in with songs or questions, and growing more confident in exploring independently.

> "She became more comfortable being around other children ... at first she could just be a little shy ... but now she's more willing to explore."
>
> — Parent of a three-year-old

For some parents, these experiences were particularly relevant to preparing children for nursery or school. They described opportunities for children to become familiar with participating in a group, paying attention, interacting with other children and adults, and spending time in an environment outside the home. The interviews therefore highlight the value families place on library experiences that combine stories and learning with opportunities for children to interact, participate and build confidence.

In practice: Cornwall, connecting libraries with early years transitions

Cornwall Libraries works with Family Hubs, nurseries, early years teams, health services and other local partners.

At Callington Library, children moving from nursery into Reception visit the library and meet their future teachers, alongside taking part in stories and becoming familiar with the library itself.

Andrew Varker, Cornwall Libraries' Young People's Library Service Specialist, called the library "a neutral ground for them to meet their teacher and get familiar with the adults before they go into the school setting". The initiative began with a local enquiry and expanded to involve another primary school after initial positive experience. The service situates this work alongside wider relationships with nurseries, Family Hubs, parenting teams and health colleagues. As well as introducing books and the library, the sessions give children a familiar community setting in which to encounter new adults before starting school.

Connections to other families and services

Alongside children's experiences, parents, carers and other family members described the value of libraries for their relationships and social wellbeing. Some parents appreciated having dedicated time away from household distractions to read, sing, play or explore alongside their child. They described these shared experiences as enjoyable opportunities to spend time together and strengthen their connection.

> "I needed something that will create more bonds with my child. You know, when we read or we sing together, I tend to see ourselves bonding more."
>
> — Parent of a three-year-old

Libraries also provided opportunities for social contact between parents and carers, particularly during parental leave. Some families described regular activities as a reason to leave the house, meet other local parents and spend time with familiar faces.

> "I just really felt that sense of community ... I think when you're a new mum, that's really, really valuable."
>
> — Parent of a two-year-old



For some families, these connections developed over time as staff came to recognise children, and parents became familiar with one another.

A further example comes from Oldham Heritage, Libraries and Arts, where staff described a mother who initially attended with her baby and had little local support. Over time, she developed relationships with staff and other families, began volunteering and later trained as a midwife. This individual account illustrates the meaningful connections that library services described developing with families.

In practice: Oldham Heritage, Libraries and Arts, connecting families through culture

Oldham's Heritage, Libraries and Arts service brings together libraries, galleries and cultural activities to offer families a wide range of early years experiences. These include Go Baby sensory sessions, Extra Small Cinema, early years theatre and Little Reads, delivered in partnership with Manchester Literature Festival.

Staff described deliberately creating an environment where babies could crawl, make noise and be fed, challenging expectations that libraries and cultural spaces should be quiet or formal.

This relaxed approach helps parents feel comfortable introducing their children to cinema, theatre and other cultural experiences. By offering these experiences from an early age, the service helps children grow into confident, curious adults who feel comfortable accessing libraries, galleries and other cultural spaces throughout their lives.

The service also works with health visitors, Family Hubs and voluntary organisations to connect families with wider support. Staff described how the library offers a place where families could encounter support without entering a more formal service setting. Working with health visitors and community organisations can help introduce parents to activities, information and other local families. Regular visits allow relationships with library staff and other parents to develop over time, contributing to a sense of familiarity and belonging.

One staff member described the library as "a real lifeline, just getting out of the four walls", particularly for parents with young babies.

Oldham shows how libraries can bring together welcoming environments, cultural opportunities and connections to family support to promote children's development and strengthen family wellbeing.

Implications

The evidence highlights the importance of investing in the distinctive combination of skilled staff, participatory activities, welcoming spaces and books that libraries offer. It also shows the value of connections to other families and services in strengthening libraries' role within local early years systems. See Recommendations 3 and 4.

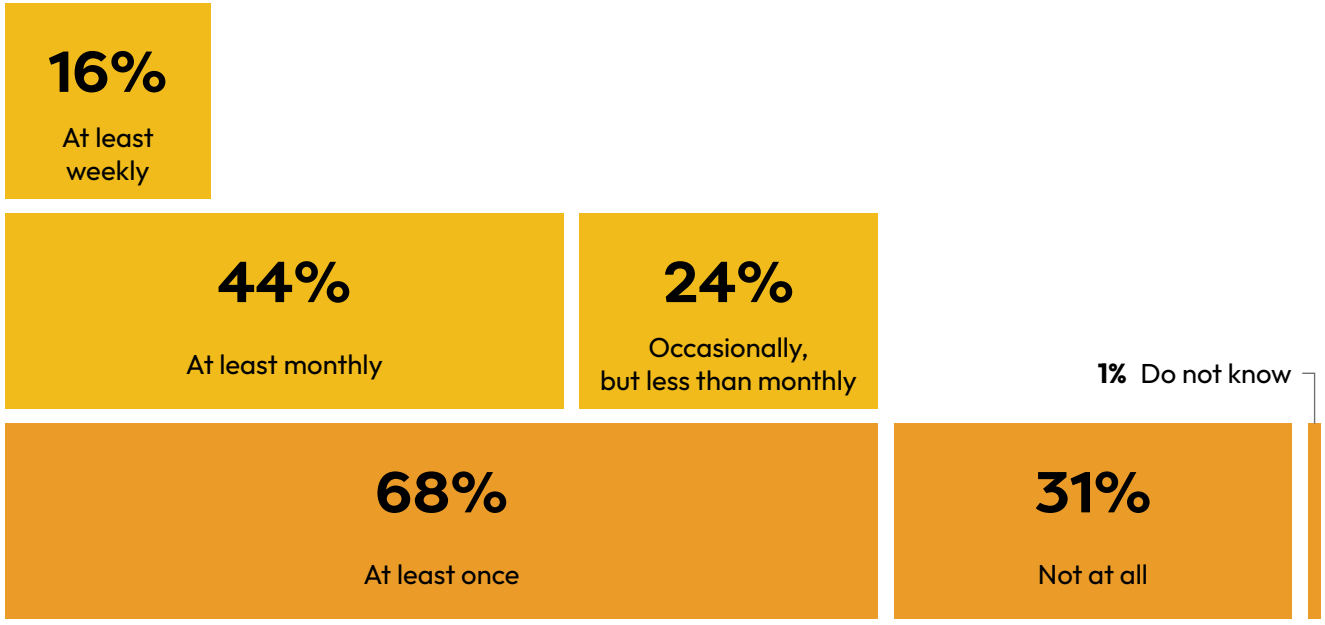
4 Library use in the early years: reach and engagement opportunities

Understanding who libraries reach and how families with young children use them helps identify where their role within the wider early years system can be strengthened. Analysis of BookTrust's National Family Survey 2025 shows that public libraries already reach a substantial proportion of families with children aged 0–5, but patterns of use vary between families. Visiting is less common in children's earliest years, particularly for families from low-income households. Regular library use also sits within a wider pattern of family participation: it is associated with parents' own positive relationships with reading and with participation in other early years, community and cultural activities. Together, these findings highlight the importance of reaching families early, helping them connect with library services and encouraging continued engagement. Outreach and partnerships can also play an important role in reaching families beyond library buildings, although delivering these activities requires sufficient staff time and resources.

Visiting patterns for families with 0–5-year-olds

In the survey, 68% of parents and carers had visited a library with their child in the previous 12 months. Many were regular visitors (44% visiting at least monthly), while others visited more occasionally (24%).

Figure 1. Library visiting frequency among families with children aged 0–5



Note: 'At least once' includes both monthly and occasional visitors. 'At least weekly' is a subset of 'at least monthly', not an additional category.

Variations in patterns of use between families

Child age

Library visiting increases steadily with children's age. Many families with babies and toddlers share books, songs and rhymes at home and attend other early years activities. Library visiting follows a different pattern, becoming progressively more common as children approach school age. Monthly visiting rises from 34% among families with babies aged 12 months or under to 55% among families with five-year-olds. Over the same period, library registration rises from 47% to 72% and the proportion who have not visited in the past year falls from 49% to 18%.



Table 1. Library visiting and registration by child's age

Child's age	Visited at least monthly	Did not visit in past year	Registered with a library
12 months or under	34%	49%	47%
13–23 months	40%	36%	52%
Age two	42%	35%	55%
Age three	44%	27%	60%
Age four	49%	21%	67%
Age five	55%	18%	72%

Note: Percentages are based on families with children in each age group. Visiting refers to visits with the child in the past 12 months. Registration refers to the parent/carer and/or child being registered with a library. These are separate measures and do not add up to 100%.

Household income

Overall, 40% of low-income families said they visited the library monthly compared with 47% of non-low-income families, while weekly use was identical at 16%. The difference was most pronounced among younger children. Among those with children aged 0–3, 35% of low-income families visited monthly compared with 44% of non-low-income families. Low-income families were also more likely not to have visited at all during the year (42% compared with 32%).

Among families with slightly older children, ages four and five, the differences between income groups largely disappear: monthly use was 52% in both income groups, and occasional visiting was 27% in both groups.

Table 2. Library visiting frequency by child's age and household income

Child age	Household income	Monthly visits	Occasional visits	No visit
0–3	Low income	35%	21%	42%
0–3	Not low income	44%	23%	32%
4–5	Low income	52%	27%	19%
4–5	Not low income	52%	27%	21%

Note: Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding, missing responses or 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' responses.

Location and deprivation

Library visiting also varies by location. Area deprivation alone was not significantly associated with library use in the survey. However, among families in the three more deprived quintiles of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), monthly visiting was lower in rural areas (32%) than in urban areas (44%).

These findings show variation by both geography and household circumstances, although some geographical subgroup estimates are based on small sample sizes and should be interpreted with caution.

Parents' relationships with reading

Regular library visiting is associated with parents' own reading enjoyment, childhood experiences of books and perceptions of their role in supporting their child's reading. For example, 48% of parents and carers who enjoyed reading themselves visited at least monthly, compared with 32% of those who did not. Monthly visiting was also higher among parents who reported that books had been a big part of their own childhood (48% compared with 36%), and among those who felt they played a vital role in their child's reading development (46% compared with 33%).

Opportunities for strengthening reach and engagement

The interviews with families provide further insight into how practical circumstances, awareness and expectations shape families' experiences. Together, these findings help identify what supports engagement and how libraries and their partners can build on their existing strengths.

Overcoming barriers

The family interviews reflected wider research on library participation, highlighting practical access, time, awareness and perceptions of the library offer as factors shaping engagement (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2025; Zhang and Stansbury, 2025).

- **Time and accessibility**
  Interest did not always translate into participation. Family routines and demands, session times, transport, location and opening hours could all limit their ability to attend. Within libraries, parents valued clean, safe children's spaces with room for buggies and younger children to explore. Limited space for crawling babies or children sometimes affected how long families stayed.
- **Feeling welcome**
  Although many families felt welcome when visiting libraries, some initially expected strict quiet behaviour and worried that their children might disturb other visitors. Positive encounters with staff and spaces where children could move, explore and make noise helped challenge these preconceptions.
- **Awareness**
  Some families found information about activities difficult to locate, while others discovered library provision through friends, parenting groups or other local contacts.

Promoting library services and spaces to those who aren't yet using them

Although core public library services are free and open to all, some families do not know what is available without charge, how registration and borrowing work, or what to expect when visiting with young children. Local authorities should focus on making families not only aware of libraries but also building knowledge of what is available that is of relevance to them. For some families, clear reassurance about children's behaviour and the welcoming nature of library spaces as well as information about free access and fines can help address misconceptions.

Local library services and early years partners also have a role in ensuring that messages are consistent across services, and that families experience the same welcome when they visit. Universal library membership schemes should be accompanied by activities and support that help families overcome barriers, build regular connections with libraries and sustain their engagement.

The recently published Poverty Proofing® framework for libraries, developed by Libraries Connected and Children North East, provides a practical resource for considering how policies, communications and service arrangements affect families experiencing financial pressures, including hidden costs or assumptions that may discourage participation (Children North East, 2026).

In practice: Norfolk Libraries and early years outreach

Norfolk Libraries illustrates how library services can introduce their offer through settings families already attend.

The service has extended Bookstart Storytime delivery into nurseries and parent-and-toddler groups, alongside its library-based provision. Staff bring equipment that allows families to register with the library during these visits and invite them to attend follow-up sessions in library spaces.

This outreach makes it possible to share books, songs and activities with families who may not be regular library visitors. Library staff can answer questions about borrowing and reassure those concerned about noisy or active children or damaged books. The work also sits alongside relationships with Family Hubs and other early years services, offering families more than one route into support.

This approach combines an introduction to library activities with opportunities for registration and continued engagement.

Connecting with families in their children's earliest years

The survey findings highlight an opportunity to connect with families earlier in children's lives. Just 34% of families with children aged 12 months or under visited a library at least monthly, compared with 55% of those with five-year-olds. Yet the benefits of libraries are relevant from the earliest years. Regular visiting among families with children aged 0–5 is also more common among parents and carers who enjoy reading themselves or grew up with books.

Making the breadth of the early years library offer more visible could help reach families with different interests and relationships to reading, including those who may not yet see libraries are relevant for babies and very young children. Books and borrowing remain at the heart of the offer, but activities, play, family time and social connection may be equally relevant reasons for families to visit.

The interviews show that structured activities can play an important role in initiating families' connection with libraries. Some families first visited for a rhyme time or story session, then began borrowing books, using other areas of the library or returning for further activities. For others, regular sessions became a familiar part of family routines. These experiences highlight the value of combining initial contact with opportunities for families to return, participate and discover more of what libraries offer.

The interviews also highlighted the role of personal recommendations and local parenting networks in helping families discover library activities. Partnerships between libraries and health visitors, Family Hubs, nurseries, schools, community organisations and other family services provide opportunities to introduce families to each other's services, building on trusted relationships and familiar places. In England, the Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies guidance provides a policy framework for this approach by identifying libraries as potential Best Start Network Sites (Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care, 2026).

Bookstart Storytime: a route into library engagement

Bookstart Storytime shows how structured, participatory activities can enrich the experiences of existing library users and, with the right outreach, introduce more families to the wider library offer. The early years programme is intended to help encourage families into libraries through enjoyable group storytelling experiences, particularly those who may not otherwise attend or those who may face greater barriers to reading. The programme, which is one element of the wider Bookstart early years reading support, is designed to connect into and support local multiagency partnership working to inspire families with ideas and activities to support shared reading practice in the home learning environment. Overall, it is estimated that among families who attended Bookstart Storytime sessions in 2025/26, 37% were new to the setting and 66% returned to the library after their initial visit (BookTrust, 2026a).

Over 90% of public libraries in England and Northern Ireland are using Bookstart Storytime – 2,400 libraries in total in 2025/26. The programme provides new early years books and physical and digital resources each year to support enjoyable group reading and story sharing in libraries. In group storytime sessions library staff or activity leaders can model shared reading approaches, including expressive reading, questions and encouraging children to participate. Bookstart Storytime sessions are supported by a range of resources including large-format picture books to support whole group engagement. The Brent Libraries practice example in Section 3 illustrates how Bookstart Storytime can be delivered alongside other regular early years activities, bringing together books, storytelling and playful participation to engage families.

The survey data indicates substantial interest in Bookstart Storytime across different groups of families, including those who do not currently visit libraries regularly. Among those who had not visited a library in the last 12 months, 64% said they would be very or fairly likely to attend if a group were available locally.

Interest was also high among families with younger children, with 78% of parents and carers of children aged 0–3 reporting that they would be likely to attend. Among low-income parents and carers of children aged 0–3, this figure was 70%.

Bookstart Storytime is one approach within a wider range of library activities. The broader finding is the value of regular, welcoming and participatory experiences that provide a reason to visit, introduce families to library resources and create opportunities for continued engagement.

5 Recommendations: strengthening libraries' contribution in the early years

The findings highlight five connected priorities for realising libraries' full potential to contribute to positive early years outcomes:

1. Strengthen the visibility and accessibility of the early years library offer
2. Invest in activities and outreach to build sustained engagement
3. Invest in the early years experiences that families value
4. Strengthen libraries' role within local early years systems
5. Build a stronger shared evidence base on libraries' contribution

The recommendations are intended for local authorities, library services, central government, funders and early years partners. Each draws on findings presented in the preceding sections.

Recommendation 1
Strengthen the visibility and accessibility of the early years library offer



For local authorities and library services

Prioritise making libraries' early years offer more visible and accessible, particularly to families who are not currently using libraries. Promote the full range of services and spaces available, including free access to books, storytimes, play, songs, activities, family time and opportunities for social connection. Work with local parents and carers to understand their needs, interests and barriers to participation, and use these insights to shape provision and communication to address practical and perceived barriers to participation.

Local library services and early years partners should work together to raise awareness and challenge misconceptions about libraries. This could include clear, reassuring information that young children are welcome to explore, play and make noise, and that families can visit without needing to purchase anything.

Library staff also play an important role in ensuring that families experience this welcome when they visit.

The Poverty Proofing® framework for libraries (Children North East, 2026) offers a practical tool for identifying and addressing financial barriers to participation.

For central government and funders

Support library services to engage more with local communities to make early years provision welcoming, accessible and responsive to different families' needs. Recognise that universal provision needs to be accompanied by clear communication and actions to address practical barriers to participation for children and families in greater need of support.

Evidence underpinning this recommendation

Section 4 shows that monthly library visiting is lower among families with babies, and that income differences of visitors are greatest among families with children aged 0–3. This highlights the importance of understanding and addressing barriers to library engagement, particularly for low-income families with very young children. Sections 3 and 4 highlight the importance of welcoming spaces and the practical and perceived barriers affecting participation, including timing, access, awareness and expectations about children's behaviour.

Recommendation 2
Invest in activities and outreach to build sustained engagement



For local authorities and library services

Ensure that universal library membership programmes are accompanied by activities and outreach that encourage families to visit, participate and return, making best use of existing programmes that support this. Structured, participatory activities, such as storytimes, rhyme times, play and creative sessions, can provide a route into the wider library offer, including books and borrowing, staff recommendations and opportunities for social connection.

Shape ongoing engagement around families' needs and circumstances, particularly where they face practical barriers to participation. This could include flexible activity times, outreach through Family Hubs and other community partners, and opportunities to discover more of what the library offers.

For central government and funders

Where universal library membership initiatives are supported or commissioned, they should be designed to include support and resources for engagement and outreach, helping families overcome barriers and supporting them to return and participate over time. Indicators of success should prioritise continued participation and families' experiences of libraries alongside registration numbers.

Evidence underpinning this recommendation

Section 4 shows that library registration becomes more common as children grow older and that interest in Bookstart Storytime extends beyond existing library users: 64% of non-users said they would be likely to attend a local group. The family interviews in Section 3 and the Bookstart Storytime findings in Section 4 illustrate how participatory activities can introduce families to books, borrowing and further library visits

Recommendation 3
Invest in the early years experiences that families value



For local authorities and library services

Protect and strengthen the combination of skilled staff, participatory activities, welcoming spaces and books that makes libraries distinctive for families in the early years. This includes:

- maintaining varied and accessible children's book collections that encourage browsing, discovery and children's choice.
- investing in staff skills and expertise, including in recommending books, delivering storytimes and other participatory activities, and sharing books, ideas, songs and activities that families can enjoy together at home.
- providing books, songs, rhymes, play and creative activities that appeal to children at different stages of early childhood and resources for staff to deliver impactful participatory sessions.
- creating welcoming spaces where babies and young children can explore and families can spend time together.

Provision should also reflect the different interests and needs of families, including children with special educational needs and disabilities.

For central government and funders

Recognise and invest in the quality, breadth and continuity of early years library experiences that families value.

Support the workforce, inclusive practice and the resources needed to deliver high-quality engaging experiences for young children and families.

Evidence underpinning this recommendation

Section 2 identifies strong library-specific evidence for language-rich storytimes and the value of developing staff practice. Section 3 shows that families value varied books, children's choice, trusted recommendations, participatory activities and welcoming spaces, alongside books and ideas they can take home.

Recommendation 4
Strengthen libraries' role within local early years systems



For local authorities and early years partners

Embed libraries within local early years strategies, partnerships and pathways connecting families with support.

Strengthen collaboration with health visitors, Family Hubs, nurseries, schools, community organisations and cultural services, enabling families to discover library provision through places and professionals they already know.

Use these partnerships to connect families with libraries earlier in children's lives, including through services that reach parents during pregnancy, infancy and toddlerhood.

Support joint planning and locally developed approaches that respond to families' needs and circumstances, including outreach, shared activities and support around key transitions.

For central government and funders

Recognise public libraries and programmes within them as part of the wider infrastructure supporting early childhood development and family wellbeing.

Ensure libraries are designed into local plans for joined-up early years provision from the outset, recognising and strengthening their place in multi-agency approaches and in supporting national early years policies and frameworks. These include Best Start in Life and EYFS (England), The Learning to Learn Framework (Northern Ireland) and the Curriculum for Wales.

Evidence underpinning this recommendation

Section 4 highlights the opportunity to connect with families earlier in children's lives through trusted services and community networks, illustrated by Norfolk's outreach approach. The Cornwall and Oldham examples in Section 3 show how libraries work alongside schools, Family Hubs and other local partners to support families.

Recommendation 5
Build a stronger shared evidence base on libraries' contribution



For local authorities, library services and research partners

Develop proportionate approaches to understanding who libraries reach, how families engage and what they gain from their experiences. This could include measures such as visiting frequency, registration, activity participation, borrowing and families' accounts of their experiences, including children's choice, social connection, reading support and activities continued at home.

Where feasible, follow families over time to understand how engagement develops and is sustained, and how experiences vary between different groups. This would help identify what encourages families to continue using libraries, what barriers emerge over time and how services can better support sustained engagement.

Work with families, practitioners and research partners to identify meaningful outcomes and practical ways to measure them, including communication and language, reading enjoyment, parental confidence and family wellbeing.

For central government and funders

Support shared, proportionate approaches to monitoring, evaluation and learning that help library services understand and demonstrate their contribution to outcomes for families with young children.

Invest in research that strengthens the evidence on what works, for whom and over time, including how different forms of library engagement contribute to outcomes and how participation can be extended among families who are less engaged.

Evidence underpinning this recommendation

Section 2 brings together evidence on libraries' contribution to language-rich experiences and other early years pathways, while identifying priorities for further research. Sections 3 and 4 add families' experiences and national patterns of engagement, providing a basis for tracking who participates, what they experience and how this develops over time.

Appendix: Methodology and key definitions

This report draws on four complementary sources of evidence to understand public libraries' contribution to positive early years outcomes: a focused review of wider research, qualitative interviews with families, examples of library practice and bespoke analysis of BookTrust's National Family Survey 2025.

Review of wider research

A focused, structured review brought together relevant academic research, UK policy and sector evidence on public libraries and early childhood development. It explored evidence relating to communication and language; emergent literacy, play, social and emotional development; family wellbeing; participation; and the home learning environment.

The review was used to identify key findings, understand how different library experiences contribute to early years outcomes and highlight priorities for further research.

Qualitative interviews

Twenty qualitative interviews were conducted with parents and other family members caring for children aged 0–5. Participants were purposively selected to provide variation in geography, household income, household type, ethnicity and rural or urban location.

Interviews explored families' experiences of libraries, including how they first became involved, what they used libraries for, the value they experienced, relationships with staff and other families, and factors shaping their engagement. They also explored whether books, activities or ideas from libraries influenced family life at home.

The findings were organised into themes reflecting distinctive aspects of the library experience and considered alongside the survey findings and wider evidence. Quotations were selected to illustrate these experiences in families' own words.

The interviews provide in-depth insights into families' experiences and perceptions, complementing the broader patterns identified through the survey and themes from the wider research. The purposively selected participants provide varied perspectives rather than population-level estimates of how common particular experiences are.

Library practice examples

Examples from Cornwall, Norfolk, Oldham and Brent illustrate different approaches to early years library provision, including welcoming environments, participatory activities, outreach, partnership working and connections with wider family support.

They provide practical illustrations of how library services are responding to local needs and delivering experiences relevant to young children and families.

BookTrust National Family Survey 2025

BookTrust's third National Family Survey was conducted online between 16 October and 5 November 2025 with 3,508 parents and carers of children aged 0–8 across England, Wales and Northern Ireland. The survey used a nationally representative quota sample, with weighting applied to reflect the population across key demographic characteristics.

Quotas were set for child age and gender, parent or carer gender, region, working status and household income. Weighting also incorporated child ethnicity and parental education.

Bespoke analysis for this report focused on 2,315 parents and carers of children aged 0–5. It examined library visiting patterns and registration, differences across family characteristics, relationships with reading, participation in other activities, and awareness of and interest in Bookstart Storytime.

The analysis provides a national picture of library engagement among families with young children and identifies patterns and associations that inform understanding of libraries' reach and contribution.

Survey findings are presented as weighted percentages, with comparisons calculated within the relevant population or subgroup. Percentages are rounded and may not always total 100% because of rounding, missing responses or 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' responses. Some geographical and combined subgroup analyses have smaller bases, which are taken into account when interpreting differences.

The National Family Survey provides a cross-sectional picture of parent-reported experiences and behaviours. Relationships between library visiting and other factors, such as reading enjoyment or parental confidence, are reported as associations.

Key definitions

Concept	Definition
Low-income household	Annual household income before tax of £28,000 or below where income comes from one adult, or £42,000 or below where income comes from two or more adults. These thresholds are informed by Household Below Average Income data.
Area deprivation	Measured using postcode-derived Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles, describing the relative deprivation of the area in which the family lives.
Reading identity and attitudes	Parent- or carer-reported reading enjoyment, experiences of books during childhood and beliefs about their role in supporting their child's reading.
Age-appropriate books	Books suited to children's ages, taking account of their interests and the suitability of the content, language, illustrations and format.
Stage-appropriate books	Books suited to children's developmental needs and abilities, including their language, communication, understanding and emerging literacy skills, recognising that children develop at different rates.

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About BookTrust

BookTrust
Getting children reading

We get children reading from their earliest days, especially those from low-income households or vulnerable family backgrounds. As the UK's largest children's reading charity, we know that sharing books builds language, belonging and connection, and shapes how children think, feel and connect as they grow. That is why we design reading programmes for every stage of childhood, supporting families to start sharing stories and books together from the earliest possible age. We work in every community in England, Wales and Northern Ireland through over 45,000 local partners to reach 1.4 million children every year.

To find out more visit our website
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Libraries RISING

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