WELCOME TO READING STREET™
CHAPTER TWO
READING AND SCHOOL
Welcome to Chapter Two of Reading Street – our UK study to help us understand the changing nature of children’s reading for pleasure in family life.

We’re looking behind the headlines and the statistics that tell us reading for pleasure is in decline to understand why this is happening, and why, in some families, reading still flourishes.

Since summer 2012 we have studied the reading habits of twelve families across four regions of the UK: Edinburgh, Bristol, London and Manchester.

Many benefits of reading for pleasure are overlooked

Earlier this year we launched Chapter One of Reading Street: Reading and Home. As well as our Egmont families we spoke to 1000 parents of children aged 2–16. We found that the key benefits of children reading for pleasure are being missed. We found that many parents see language development as the most important benefit of reading, not emotional or social development. Our conclusion was that there is not enough focus in the home on the appreciation of the pure pleasure of a great story. It is simply not recognised as an important way to help children grow, develop, or achieve many of the things that parents desire for their children despite evidence to the contrary.

When children start school

For Chapter Two we continue our journey through our families’ reading lives, and look more closely at what happens when children start school.

We spoke to our Reading Street families, and in April our researchers also surveyed 250 teachers across the UK about the reading habits of their pupils, in local-authority-controlled (58%), independent/private (14%), academy (9%), voluntary-aided (8%), special (7%) and free schools (3%). The size of the schools varied, stretching from 50 to 3000 pupils, with the age group of children ranging from early years (8%) and Reception (18%), through to Year 6 (39%).

We were overwhelmed by the response from teachers wanting to take part in our study, and when we reviewed the results we began to see how strongly teachers feel about reading for pleasure.

Reading Street Chapter Two explores how reading for pleasure is being squeezed from another angle, this time school.
Chapter Two: Reading and School

The View from Family Life

Reading for pleasure - before school begins

At pre-school age, we have found that children are absolutely thrilled by books and stories. Parent involvement is usually quite high and some time is made for reading in the family routine. This may not be every single day, but it does feature as part of the family week, especially for first or only children. Pre-school children have no pressure to do anything but experience stories for what they are: pure enjoyment.

Starting school - when reading becomes learning

As well as it being hard, children get the message very early on - from both school and parents - that reading is about learning. They are assigned books, put on the reading programme, and begin to associate reading with school work and homework. Of course children need to be taught to read, but we have found that the pressure from school to learn the skill is compounded by parents, who focus on learning and not storytelling. The result is that many children at this age have stories read to them less often at home, and even children who are engaged with reading for pleasure find the impact of school affects them.

"George really wants to read Alien in My Belly Button, but the sheer amount of school-based reading tasks has made it impossible for him to find time up to now." – Mum to George, aged 7

Reading becomes a skill to tick off the list

As we talked about in Chapter One, parents are very aware of how competitive the world is and they want their child to do well and to succeed. Reading is seen as a life skill or a learning tool – something to achieve. We see that even at the age of 5 reading is becoming task-based, a thing to tick off the list of things to do. It’s not about fun.

"I want him to read more comfortably before buying him any more books. When he has reached the point that reading itself is not onerous." – Father to 5-year-old

Given the pressures on parents and the finite amount of time in a day, their focus not surprisingly shifts away from reading to their child and towards getting their children to read their school books out loud to them. The focus is on getting the words decoded and so there is little sense of pure immersion in a story. The pleasure for the child is lost in the rush to learn the skill.

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When school begins - parents take the first step back

Parents tell us they want their school-aged children to read, but we found that many don’t invest time in making this happen. Instead, when children start school many parents take a step back and leave reading to the school – not always a conscious step, but perhaps a subconscious one that it is the school’s job to make reading happen, or simply because of the perennial issue of lack of time.

“I know other Mums who religiously read to their kids every night, but I suppose I’ve taken a conscious decision not to do that and spend our time doing other things instead”
- Mum to Gemma, 5 years old

At Key Stage 2 - parents take the second step back

Once children can read fairly competently, parents take another, bigger, step back from their child’s reading. This tends to coincide with children starting Key Stage 2 (age 7/8). We might see this as a tipping point. Children are able to read relatively confidently at this point, but many do not choose to read beyond what they are directed to or asked to, usually by the school. Those parents who see reading as a skill to master feel the job is done when their child has grasped the mechanics of it. They feel they can ‘legitimately’ forget about it, and given the huge time pressures modern parents are under it is, perhaps, understandable. So at this point they tend to step back again and their involvement drops steeply.

Research by Bowker found that children are read to much less as they get older: 95% of 3–4-year-olds have books read to them, with over a third of parents (42%) reading to them every day. Only 33% of 8–10-year-olds are being read to several times a week.

Many parents don’t realise the role they need to play, especially at this age, to guide and motivate their children to read independently and to help them find things that might interest them.

Increased peer pressure, the clamour of the digital world and the idea that reading is school work mean that as soon as they can do something else, many children will. It’s as if parents let go of their child’s hand too soon, at precisely the time they need to be actively involved with reading.

Reading and School: The Teacher’s View

Over half (58%) of the teachers we spoke to indicated that over the course of their career there has been a decline in the number of children who read for pleasure. The majority of these teachers have observed this trend across the last decade. More Key Stage 1 (78%) than Key Stage 2 (52%) teachers agree, but the statistics clearly show that teachers believe children are reading for pleasure less frequently than ten years ago.

Teachers are concerned about this, and our research highlights the reasons behind this change and what teachers feel needs to be done about it.

The Impact of Government Policy

Many teachers say they would love to focus on reading for pleasure because they understand how important it is. So what’s stopping them?

1. Emphasis on skills
72% agree that the emphasis on reading as a skill and not for enjoyment is affecting how a love for reading is developed among their pupils. For example, the school curriculum concentrates on developing reading and writing skills, rather than reading whole books for pleasure.

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2. Time
Tests and the pressure to measure skills within school are proving a barrier, according to two-thirds (66%) of teachers. Teachers simply don’t have the time to read a class novel and develop a love of books with such a busy curriculum.

"Remove the constant testing from the curriculum and give more time in lessons to work creatively with texts reading for pleasure, free of the fear of yet another test.” – Teacher comment

3. Policy
Although the desire is there to give more attention to reading for pleasure, teachers feel their hands are tied.

“The English curriculum with its focus on constant tests/extracts is too prescriptive, limiting teachers’ capacity to teach some texts of their own choosing that they love.” – Teacher comment

"Until the fear of Ofsted and the need to be seen to make ‘progress’ in targets goes away, then this will not be a priority.” – Teacher comment

"We need a change in the cultural view of reading.” – Teacher comment

The government isn’t doing enough
82% of teachers believe the government is not doing enough to encourage reading for pleasure amongst children. Nearly half (48%) feel their schools do not draw a distinction between encouraging parents to read for pleasure with their children and doing homework such as practising their reading skills.

Over half (61%) of teachers are not required by their school to monitor the extent to which their pupils read for pleasure (or, in other words, above and beyond the class books that they are required to read). Yet some teachers (18%), although they are not required to, are still choosing to monitor this themselves. There is strong feedback from teachers that something needs to change.

"We need a change in the cultural view of reading.” – Teacher comment

The importance of libraries
65% of teachers believe that the simple activity of picking up a book and reading is still something that can be enjoyed by all.

“I have found that once they realise how great reading is they tend to want to continue, but this takes time and a good knowledge of children's books. It is a shame schools don’t have librarians any more.” – Teacher comment

It is interesting to note among our Reading Street families that the most common way for children to acquire books to read for pleasure is from libraries, both school and public.

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Teachers on parents

So why isn’t reading for pleasure a priority?

While there is a strong theme of teachers indicating that parents don’t do enough at home, it’s not all accusatory. Many teachers are parents themselves and they fully understand the multiple challenges modern parents face.

“Life is becoming more and more hectic; parents have less and less time to spend with their children, and the time they do, they want to do ‘nice’ things, not ‘school’ things.” – Teacher comment

Many parents care very much about their children’s education but simply don’t realise that reading for pleasure is central to success and that they can play a big part in making that happen. Of course, some parents do understand the benefits of reading for pleasure, but time challenges can prevent them doing much about it.

Lack of support

68% say the lack of support for children in their home environment is a significant barrier to developing a love for reading. Parents’ own confidence or literacy skills are also believed to be an issue by half (51%) of teachers. There is a broad awareness that some parents lack confidence in supporting their child’s reading (they didn’t learn phonics, after all) and, for some, poor literacy skills can create another barrier.

Lack of time

56% of teachers agree that parents not having time to read with their children is a key barrier affecting children’s reading for pleasure. Only 2% of teachers estimate the majority of their pupils are read to on a daily basis by their parents, and nearly half (44%) think that up to one-fifth of parents never read or talk about books to their children.

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Working together

Our research shows that children are inspired and encouraged to read for pleasure by the adults surrounding them. 95% of teachers view parents as the biggest influencers on children’s reading for pleasure, and they unanimously agree that parents and the school need to work together to encourage children to become enthusiastic readers.

“Children who have parental support at home and read for pleasure have a much wider range of vocabulary and their verbal reasoning is much more advanced than those who do not. Their education journey is going to be much more rapid than those children who don’t read for pleasure.” – Teacher comment

Reading for pleasure and the impact of digital

When we asked teachers what the barriers are to developing a love of reading with their pupils over half cited digital media (52%), with 70% suggesting it is more of an issue for boys than girls.

The impact of digital media on encouraging children to embrace the joys of reading is recognised by teachers of all levels of experience: those who have been teaching for less than 12 months (33%) are feeling the competition of digital media, along with teachers who have been educating for over a decade (53%).

“Children are more interested in computers and television, they want immediate entertainment and they don’t have the patience to read a book.” – Teacher comment

However, while digital media may be affecting children’s reading time at home, only 19% of teachers believe that its growth is an insurmountable problem. Most teachers think reading for pleasure can co-exist with the digital world and are adamant children can still be encouraged to be enthusiastic readers.

“There’s the right type of book for every child – it’s just having the time to expose the children to all the different genres and letting them read in order to establish a liking for them!” – Teacher comment

In conclusion

So what happens to reading for pleasure when children start school?

Although we found a real love of reading amongst teachers, and a strong desire to encourage more children to read for pleasure, we found an overwhelming
sense of frustration with the situation they are in.

It’s clear from our study that teachers want to focus more on children’s reading for pleasure but both home and school life are incredibly busy and frustrate this desire.

We know that parents and the education system see reading as a skill to be mastered above all and so it’s not surprising that when children are relatively competent readers many parents step back.

As we finish the second chapter of Reading Street we can draw two key conclusions:

• Children would benefit from more encouragement to help them find the magic of reading.

• Parents and schools need to work together to encourage and inspire a love of reading for its own sake and beyond the mechanics of decoding the words.

The next chapter

In our next chapter we’ll be looking in more detail at the digital world and its impact on reading in family life.

Once again, thank you for reading.

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About Egmont UK

Egmont is the UK’s leading specialist children’s publisher for babies to teens, inspiring children to read through more than 30 million award-winning books, magazines, ebooks and apps each year. We’re proud to be home to many of the world’s favourite stories and best-loved authors, illustrators and characters such as Michael Morpurgo (War Horse), Andy Stanton (Mr Gum), Enid Blyton, Julia Donaldson, Lemony Snicket, Michael Grant (Gone series and BZRK), Winnie-the-Pooh, Tintin, Mr. Men, Thomas & Friends, Ben 10, Angry Birds and Minecraft.

Egmont UK is part of the Egmont Group which was founded in 1878 and owned by the Egmont Foundation, a charitable trust dedicated to supporting children and young people. It is Scandinavia’s leading media group and Europe’s largest children’s publisher telling stories through books, magazines, film, TV, music, games and mobile in 30 countries throughout the world. www.egmont.co.uk

So why Reading Street? And why now?

Like many parents, teachers and authors, we hear every day that children’s reading for pleasure is under threat. Is it? Or is it just changing to reflect a new media environment? As a children’s publisher this question is incredibly important to us, so we’re setting out to find out more.

Now more than ever, reading is hitting the headlines. Libraries are closing, one in three children aged 11–13 don’t own a book (Source: NLT), and the UK is way down in the world literacy rankings. Yet children still love stories and everyone agrees that reading is important.

While the government is taking action in schools, and charities are encouraging people to volunteer as reading helpers, we feel it’s also important to understand reading in the context of family life and what it takes to inspire children to read.

At Egmont we’re already experimenting with new ways of telling stories on the digital devices children love most: games machines, smartphones and tablets. And we’re working with schools to teach literacy through magazines.

We’ll be sharing our findings and thoughts on our Reading Lives blog.

Please join in on our blog: http://readinglives.egmont.co.uk/ and talk to us on Twitter: @EgmontUK #ReadingLives

We hope you’ll enjoy this journey with us.