

The Effectiveness of an Enhanced Book-Gifting Intervention for Improving Reading Outcomes for Children in Care

Executive Summary

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Background: There now exists a considerable body of international evidence demonstrating the consistently poor educational outcomes faced by children in care. These poor outcomes emerge early and worsen as children grow older, with the effects lasting longer term into adulthood. One popular intervention aimed at addressing this has been the use of book-gifting. However, there is limited evidence that book-gifting, on its own, is effective in improving reading outcomes for children in care. Moreover, previous research suggests the need for book-gifting programmes to be enhanced through including a direct role for foster carers to support their children's reading when receiving the books.

Objectives and main outcomes: This study sought to design and evaluate the effectiveness of an enhanced book-gifting intervention – 'Reading Together' (see: <https://www.qub.ac.uk/sites/readingtogether/>) – that supplemented existing approaches to book-gifting by incorporating a paired-reading component for foster carers to undertake with their children and also providing the children with choice in relation to the selection of the books they receive.

Within this, the study sought to assess what level of support is required for foster carers and tested two approaches: one that provided foster carers with a Handbook providing guidance on how to undertake paired-reading and access to short online instructional videos; and another that supplemented this with the provision of an in-person training.

The study focused on measuring the effects of Reading Together on the primary outcome of children's levels of reading comprehension and also included a number of secondary outcomes (reading accuracy, reading rate, receptive reading and attitudes towards reading). In addition, the study explored whether any effects found for Reading Together were associated with the children's gender or age and also the foster carers' previous levels of education.

Design: A three-armed randomised controlled trial was employed, with children recruited through local authorities and, within each local authority, randomly allocated to either: the Handbook arm, that provided three book-gifting parcels over the course of nine months together with a Handbook to foster carers; the training arm that included the three book-gifting parcels and Handbook and supplemented these with the provision of a direct training session for foster carers; and a control group.

Children in the control group continued as normal for the duration of the trial and then received the Handbook-only intervention once post-testing was completed. The aim was to secure a final achieved sample of at least 528 children (176 children for each arm of the trial).

Calculations suggested that this would be sufficiently powered (80%) to detect a minimum effect of $d=.19$. Alongside the trial, a qualitative process evaluation was undertaken, interviewing and tracking 30 children and their carers during the course of the programme delivery.

Setting and participants: The original plan was to recruit children through local authorities in Northern Ireland and England. However, it was not possible to undertake the study in Northern Ireland and thus the trial focused on England. English local authorities that agreed to participate in the study were asked to nominate children that met the eligibility criteria of being between 7-9 years of age and in foster care and where their social worker felt that they would benefit from the programme.

Results: The recruitment of local authorities proved to be more difficult than had been envisaged originally due to a number already offering book-gifting programmes and thus not being eligible to participate or citing other existing demands. A total of 22 local authorities eventually agreed to participate in the study helping to secure a final achieved sample of 266 children, randomly allocated evenly within each local authority to one of the three arms of the trial.

The Reading Together programme was delivered in a phased manner in each local authority and the trial ran from July 2019 to December 2020. The latter stages of the delivery of the programme in most local authorities were impacted by the national lockdown caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and post-testing had to be undertaken remotely, using video calling facilities, rather than being conducted face-to-face.

Overall, the trial found no evidence that Reading Together (either with or without the provision of in-person training for foster carers) had any additional effect on the reading skills and attitudes of children that received the intervention as reflected in the measures used. Whilst children did not make gains above and beyond those expected, those in both the intervention groups and the control group did progress on their maturational trajectories as expected over the timeframe. These findings should be viewed with some caution due to the lower sample size that was achieved and hence the fact that the trial was statistically under-powered.

The qualitative process evaluation found that the Reading Together programme itself, including the book-parcels received, the Handbook and the in-person training provided were all well-received by the children and foster carers respectively. However, the delivery of the

programme was fundamentally impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown.

The demands associated with the closure of schools and children learning online from home, supported by their foster carers, were so challenging that foster carers felt it was too much to expect the child to participate in a reading session once they had completed their school work online.

It was not possible to sufficiently monitor and measure levels of programme fidelity but the qualitative interviews suggested that whilst foster carers did engage in some reading activities with their children, this did not tend to follow the guidance provided on paired-reading. Moreover, huge variation was found in foster carers' confidence and capacity to support home learning in general and reading specifically.

Conclusions: Ultimately, the findings of this study are inconclusive regarding whether a book-gifting programme, enhanced with the introduction of paired reading, can be effective in improving the reading skills of children in foster care. Whilst the trial found no evidence that Reading Together was effective, it is not possible to determine whether this was due to the ineffectiveness of the programme itself or the profound impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the national lockdown on the children and their foster carers.

The evidence from this study and elsewhere suggests that book-gifting programmes are popular and well-received. There is also clear evidence that paired-reading, when delivered with fidelity, is effective in improving reading skills amongst children. The hypothesis that underpinned this present study – that a book-gifting programme enhanced with paired reading can be effective in improving reading outcomes for children in care – therefore remains plausible and worthy of further exploration and study.

In reflecting upon the findings of the qualitative process evaluation of this present study, a number of recommendations are made for how such work could be progressed further. These include: giving consideration to more targeting of the programme; strengthening the intensity and fidelity of the programme; reflecting further on the support needs of foster carers and the role that peer support and the supervising social worker may play in relation to this; and considering further potential outcome measures in relation to exploring the more affective components of the programme and their potential impact on attachment relationships.

Trial registration: The trial protocol was registered in the Registry of Efficacy and Effectiveness Studies on 8 September 2019 (Registry ID: 1776.1v1). See: <https://sreereg.icpsr.umich.edu>

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