

Early Library Years and Bookstart

Emma Burnside, Families and Out of Schools Services Librarian, writes about the developing role of libraries in Early Years Services and the influence Bookstart has had upon these changes in Kingston Libraries, Early Years Services. This updates an article by Grace McElwee written in 2004.

Early years provision has evolved dramatically since Bookstart became a national programme in 1999, and libraries have adapted their services accordingly. Ten years have now passed and the complementary effect Bookstart and libraries have had upon each other is immense. Naomi Eisenstadt, then Director of the Sure Start Unit recognised the role that libraries and Bookstart could make to the education and development of young children and how they could support parents to help their children learn:

*'Bookstart represents so much of what the Government, through its Every Child Matters programme, is trying to achieve for children. It brings together resources from the private, voluntary and public sectors to ensure that all young children have access to books. And in doing so, provides the best encouragement to parents to read to and with their children. We know that children whose parents read to them, take them to the library, sing songs, and count with them get the best start in life. Bookstart greatly improves the chances that all children will get that boost early in life.'*¹

Unfortunately, the last few years and current climate have seen libraries face growing resource issues, as very often staff are not replaced and yet still these wonderful services grow. This has led to a change in the way we approach our services, whether it be the introduction of RFID and other IT labour saving devices, the increasingly developed role of library assistants or that ever vital growing army of volunteers.

All these challenges have been faced by libraries and are continually met and conquered to ensure we still provide the same level of excellence in early years provision whilst expanding. With ever developing early years provision libraries are a clear integral partner to early years services.

The national roll-out of Bookstart in 1999 confirmed the role of libraries in early literacy development, as did *Framework for the Future*,² the government's 10-year plan for libraries.

'Public Libraries complement and reinforce formal learning, helping to make formal education more effective...the motivation and enjoyment that reading provides is essential in creating lifelong learners.'

Babies Need Books

Libraries have always worked with children under five and there is a solid body of research and evidence that supports these initiatives, from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)³ research to the Bookstart Sighthill research 2007.⁴

The Bookstart research has been enormously influential. The main emphasis of library work with under fives has traditionally been on the 3-5 age range and has centred around traditional storytimes but with most children in that category now in nursery education the focus of library work has had to change. In Kingston this has resulted in a shift towards more services for babies and toddlers. Bookstart was the catalyst for these changes.

'Through becoming familiar with the library via Bookstart, Bookstart children...continued to use and visit the library when they were school age'

'(My daughter) loves books, its one of her favourite things and I would never have thought that if I hadn't come here, maybe wouldn't even have introduced books really'

Focus Group Parent⁵

Bookstart has given us the opportunity to move into Children's Centres. Say the words Bookstart to a Children's Centre and you're in. We are able to support the children's centres not only with Bookstart materials, but by running rhyme and storytimes for parents who otherwise may never have thought to enter a library. We run courses such as *Talk to Me* focusing on the importance of reading to children from a young age. We are looking into partnerships with Every Child a Talker (ECAT) to ascertain children who need assistance in the 18 month – three years age range to help improve their literacy and language skills to the average national level ready for school. No longer are libraries trying to impress on early years services the importance of books and the role libraries can play in early years development. Instead we are a partnership, sharing our skills and resources to enable us to give the youngest children the best possible start in learning we can. I often phone a nursery and ask for the manager to be told she's very busy, but as soon as you say you're the Bookstart co-ordinator the response is 'I'll just get her', people make time for Bookstart and libraries. They recognise the importance of the Bookstart scheme and its role: each pack betokening a stepping stone between library and reading development.

Kingston Libraries have developed a library role play box containing library stamps, labels, an old computer book scanner and other library objects. This is circulated around Early Years Settings, and has encouraged them to

make going to the library one of their key Role Play Sessions. It is very popular and cements us in the children's world as a key experience.

Bookstart and Baby Rhymetime Sessions

The single most important initiative that has redefined the approach in Kingston early years work is Bookstart. Pre-Bookstart babies were welcomed in our libraries and could join from birth to use, what now seems a small collection of board books. It certainly wasn't the essential hub for parents and babies we've become. With the introduction of Bookstart we began to develop services that were appropriate for babies and their carers, and baby rhymetimes were developed specifically to encourage parents to make the leap from receiving the Bookstart pack, which contains a list of all our rhymetimes, to visiting a library. Bookstart Rhymetime sessions are fun, highly interactive sessions using nursery rhymes, songs, action rhymes and an age appropriate story encapsulated with a hello and goodbye song to start developing a love of books, language and listening skills from a young age. Working to the ethos 'Good rhymers make good readers.' Parents and children's librarians see the learning potential of these sessions-the quality of the interaction between parent and baby, the vocabulary building, the preparation for school, the shared enjoyment, the advantage that social interaction from a young age gives their child.

Bookstart Rhymetime sessions were a beginning and have grown in Kingston beyond expectations. We started by holding one rhymetime a week in one of our larger libraries in 2001. By 2005 it was attracting close to 1000 people a year and rhymetimes were started in two of our other libraries. Bookstart Rhymetime sessions were gradually introduced into all seven libraries some with two sessions a week and outsourced to our local theatre the Rose. Figures for all the libraries average around 1700 a year topping at 2220 visits to rhymetime a year at the Rose Theatre. Footfall rhymetime figures have risen by 3000 each year topping at a 4000 increase in 2008-9 with 11584 children attending rhymetimes in Kingston with their parents or carers. Sessions are also held regularly at a local parents and children's *Café au Play*, where we have the opportunity to meet new families who previously may not have come into the library.

Building Blocks of Literacy

Gifting Bookstart at Bookstart Rhymetime sessions to families is a wonderful experience, children can't wait to delve in and start turning the pages of their new books. It is amazing the amount of parents who when given the first Bookstart pack ask at what age they can start sharing books with their baby or coming to the library and are surprised when the answer is from birth. It is an interesting and sober fact to think of the parents who, before Bookstart arrived, did not share books with their babies from birth because they didn't think they were old enough. The Bookstart packs give us the opportunity to reach out to these families and explain how the simple

skill of turning the pages of a book develops the knowledge of how books work and hones fine motor skills. That trailing your thumb under words as you speak creates sound to visual recognition. That at the core of Bookstart the simple act of bonding with your child is achieved, as your voice reads the story and that shared precious time given from birth creates a love of books for life and is their child's first step towards reading. Most importantly for libraries by bringing children into rhymetimes, the library becomes a natural, fun, safe environment that grows with the child.

Bookstart Rhymetime sessions are a simple concept but they are part of the building blocks of literacy and can have an enormous impact on children's development. By encouraging an early love of language parents are providing a firm foundation for learning to read. The rhyme, rhythm and repetition set down patterns that are vital when children come to learn to read. The EPPE research found: 'What parents and carers do makes a real difference to young children's development... There are a range of activities that parents undertake with pre-school children that have a positive effect on their development. For example reading with the child, teaching songs...visiting the library....In other words what parents do with their children is more important than who parents are'⁶.

The first teacher

Most importantly, Bookstart Rhymetime sessions reinforce the role of the parent.

'Studies have demonstrated that the better children are at detecting rhymes the quicker and more successful they will be at learning to read'⁷.

'Parents from all types of background can give their children a real head start in their education by introducing them to rhymes at a young age. The evidence gives an emphatic endorsement to Bookstart Rhymetime sessions and the rhyming activities between parents and young children taking place in homes and in libraries across the country'⁸.

Partnership with health visitors

The partnership between health visitors and libraries has played a fundamental role in the development of early years services. Bookstart Bags are gifted predominately at the nine month health check and with the inclusion of our activities leaflet in the pack this is often the family's first introduction to the library. The Bookstart pack fulfils its core remit of introducing families to books, creating a stepping stone to libraries and the benefits of sharing books with your children from a young age. The introduction of a Bookstart page into the red health book and Bookstart inclusion in *The Child Health Promotion Programme* and *Healthy Lives and Brighter Futures*, two key health strategies, has cemented the partnership

agreement between libraries, Bookstart and the PCT, making health a strong partner in early years outreach. On a local level health visitors in Kingston sit on our Early Years Cluster which includes all local early years settings and libraries and we have just established a Bookstart Steering Group with libraries, health visitors, heads of early years and hard to reach target groups. With these links Kingston continues to work in partnership with early years providers to ensure that at a local level we are reaching out through as many channels as possible to ensure every child gains the advantages of early book sharing Bookstart and libraries can give.

Membership of Library

Bookstart Rhymetime sessions have had a measurable effect upon library membership. With the introduction of rhymetimes in 2005 library membership increased by 30% in 0-2 age range and increased again by 19% in 2008 with the introduction of rhymetime at the Rose Theatre. For the 0-5 age range membership increased by 33% in 2005, but only 4% in 2008, which shows the effect the introduction of children attending nursery from three has had on changing service provision. The evidence proves that rhymetimes bring parents and their babies into the libraries and the shift from libraries to concentrate heavily on 0-3 years activity provision was correct.

Bookstart Plus and My Bookstart Treasure Chests

Bookstart Plus and My Bookstart Treasure Chests were introduced in September 2005 and Kingston Library Service was on board with the extended programme from the start.

The treasure chests were instantly popular, predominantly rolled out through nurseries, school reception classes and other early years settings, with the focus on the packs as a starting point for book sharing and a stepping stone to the library. Bookstart Plus proved to be harder to gift for the first year. At the time the two year health check was becoming optional and where this had been anticipated as a large source for pack distribution it proved otherwise. Plus packs are now gifted through early years settings predominantly and I am pleased to say it is now the pack in Kingston which is most in demand. Kingston has achieved 99-100% gifting rate across all three packs for 2007-08 and 2008-09 and is on target to achieve the same this year. More importantly than any statistics this means through Bookstart we are introducing the message of the importance of reading to as many families as we can at an early age, when the best ground work in encouraging literacy, language and listening skills can be achieved. Bookstart enables us to show parents that libraries are there for families from birth. Bookstart Plus and My Bookstart Treasure Chest demonstrate how libraries will continue and maintain their child's development. Once families come into the library and see the range of books, activities and advice they have access to, they join the library and continue to reap the

benefits. Bookstart Plus and My Bookstart Treasure Chest have become guidelines for the parent in their child's literacy development triggering questions for the parent when a Bookstart Plus or My Bookstart Treasure Chest pack is too difficult or easy for their child and prompting the parent to ask the librarian for help addressing issues of age suitability and book suggestions. Of course all children learn at different stages, but if any difficulties or an advanced child can be spotted early this helps enormously.

Bookcrawl

Bookcrawl has developed in Kingston from its first year in 2006, showing a yearly footfall increase of 32%. At first it was a way to entice families into book borrowing, but the rhymetimes and early introduction through health centres have taken over this role. Bookcrawl now performs the essential task of keeping families borrowing. The children and parents love to collect the colourful posters designed by famous illustrators. It says a lot for the prowess of Bookstart that such big hitters in the world of children's illustration choose to work and support the cause of Bookstart. The change to a credit card style collection card and reducing the sticker amount to four for a poster proved popular. Families find the card far easier to keep hold of and the posters are earned quicker which is a plus for impatient little ones. The golden certificate is an extra incentive. *'I have decorated my child's room with all the lovely Bookcrawl posters, we are hoping some new posters will come out so we can finish off the room, are they? If not please do some more'* Mother of Thomas aged 3 and a half.

Bookstart freebies of balloons, colouring books, height charts, to name but a few, all help to spread the Bookstart message and make it attractive and fun, which is so important, after all reading should be fun and if it isn't then we're doing something wrong. If children are shown by their parents, educators and library staff that reading and rhyming is fun then the educational benefits will come naturally. One of the most important messages and changes Bookstart has helped to bring about to families and into libraries is that reading should be fun from birth. Rhymetimes let parents know that libraries are no longer monuments to silence, they are engaging, fun learning environments where children and their families feel welcomed to enjoy all that we have to offer. Bookstart rhymetimes brought noise into libraries, but a good noise, it's the sound of children learning how to talk, building their vocabulary, listening, learning, bonding, developing a love of books and libraries which will last a lifetime. The best time to hook people into libraries is while they are young and if you don't then you might as well put up your for sale sign now. We are constantly trying to attract the 25-40 age group into the libraries, but if we keep them with us from birth we'll never lose them.

Bookshine and Booktouch

The introduction of Bookshine and Booktouch packs has enabled us to form links with Kingston's visual and hearing impairment teams and local

specialist long term hospital units in ophthalmology and audiology. This has given library staff the opportunity to introduce families of children with hearing and visual impairments to the library and ensure they realise that library services are there for them and accessible to them too. Rhymetimes are action filled, often corresponding the actions to British Sign Language. Spoken word and nursery rhyme CDs are available for visually impaired children to share at home. Bookshine and Booktouch have widened our audience and made us think about how libraries can be more accessible to visual and hearing impaired children from birth.

National Bookstart Day

National Bookstart Day has become a celebration of early years and libraries together. For years there has been a World Book Day and Children's Book Week, which mainly focused on adults or school age children. Bookstart's National Bookstart Day has given children under five their own day to celebrate rhyming and reading and for libraries to celebrate the youngest children using and benefiting from the service. They are fun, celebratory days which give us the opportunity to advertise widely in the press and other sources and attract more people into libraries. MPs and Councillors are also invited so they can see the positive effect Bookstart and libraries have on young children and their families. This gives us the opportunity to cement the Bookstart programme and libraries firmly into government plans, making us an integral cog in the delivery of early education and ensuring our place for years to come.

Outreaching Further

Due to popular demand the Rose Theatre in Kingston had a rhymetime in September 2008. Taking into account that the 2008-09 figure does not represent a whole year the figure of 2220 people attending a rhymetime at the theatre is impressive and looks set to increase this year. So much so that an attendance limit has had to be set due to overcrowding. Families at these sessions are introduced to Bookstart and directed to the local library to collect the packs so the library and Bookstart experience is not lost.

Rock and Rhyme is run once a month on a Saturday. It was created to enable more fathers and male carers to be able to attend and share a rhymetime with their child. For young children Daddy sharing rhymes and stories with them is not only an important bonding experience, but teaches the child that literacy is a skill everyone needs and the important message of reading does not just come from the female role model. Rock and Rhyme is also open to mothers and grandparents who may otherwise be unable to attend a week day session. It is proving popular with dads and is steadily growing in membership.

Early Years Quality and Equality

The way staff embrace Bookstart is central to our ability to promote reading and libraries to as many families as possible. Remembering to ask each family who takes a book out if they've had their pack, going to fairs and outreach events where the Bookstart message and libraries can be promoted. In the past we have had one librarian responsible for Bookstart. To increase staff awareness and ownership for Bookstart we have this year created a Bookstart Steering Group with a member of staff from each library neighbourhood, health and early years settings sitting as members. The group will enable us to spread the Bookstart message further whilst keeping it strong with greater emphasis on the Bookstart packs and reading being a shared family experience.

Kingston libraries sit on the Early Years and Children's Centre Cluster Groups along with every early years setting and school borough wide. It is a good platform from which to pass new information and sustain the message of Bookstart and libraries to often hard to reach specialist groups, childminders, young Mums, travelling families. It is an opportunity for us to be aware of the needs of early years settings and families and how libraries can help meet them. Through the Steering Group we will be able to address these needs and pass on development information to Bookstart.

The most important development to have come out of this partnership has been the improvement to early years education. Bookstart kick-started libraries to form partnerships with early years and health, creating a multi-agency support network for families with young children, re-enforcing and underpinning the role of parent as the child's first teacher. Libraries have become a central early years provider for all families regardless of class, wealth, background or education. Libraries are able to give all children an equal start in life and parents recognise this.

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<http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/earlyyears/childcare/bookstart/bookstartscheme/bkstartscheme/> Updated 30/03/2006

² Framework for the Future: libraries, learning and information in the next decade. DCMS, 2003.

³ Kathy Sylva, Edward Melhuish, Pam Sammons, Iram Siraj-Blatchford, Brenda Taggart and Karen Elliott. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: findings from the pre-school period 1997-2000. Institute of Education.

http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/SSU_SF_2004_01.pdf

⁴ An Appraisal of Bookstart in Sighthill: Research Highlights. Adapted from – Final Report to Bookstart Scotland by J Spratt and K Phillip. October 2007

⁵ As Footnote 3

⁶ As Footnote 2

⁷ Bradley, L. (1988). 'Rhyme recognition and reading and spelling in young children'. In R. L. Masland & M. R. Masland (eds.), *Pre-school prevention of reading failure*. Parkton, MD: York Press.
Bradley, L. & Bryant, P.E. (1983). 'Categorising sounds and learning to read- A casual connection'. *Nature*, 301, 419-421.

Ellis, N. & Large, B. (1987). 'The development of reading: As you seek you shall find.' *British Journal of Psychology*, 1, 329-342.

⁸ The Benefit of Rhymes. Booktrust 2008. <http://www.bookstart.org.uk/Press-and-research/Research/Bookstart-reviews>