

Shared Reading

A guide for Foster Carers



Books are a way of being together.

We don't need to be 'teaching' all the time.

Sometimes we just need to be 'being'.

Michael Rosen



What is shared reading?

The term *shared reading* describes a reading experience where adult and child engage with a text together in a relaxed, interactive and enjoyable way. It involves meaning, pleasure and connection.

The format will vary according to what feels comfortable to you both. In essence, shared reading is a moment of togetherness, encouraging joint attention, a tuning-in to each other. It is a moment of emotional closeness, where the adult enters the child's inner world and responds with warmth. That simple, structured act helps a child develop trust and gives them a safe base from which to explore — both the story and the world beyond it.

The books in this bundle have been chosen with care — to spark curiosity, explore feelings and give you and the child in your life something to share.

It is, in short, one of the simplest, most pleasurable and effective things a carer can do.

Why shared reading matters

Building secure attachments and connection

Shared reading is a powerful, low-pressure way to build warmth, consistency, and a secure bond with a child. For children who have experienced instability or trauma, the close proximity of reading together offers a low pressure, predictable moment of trust and reassurance. This routine sends a clear, comforting message: *you are safe here, you matter, and I am here with you.*

Supporting executive function, self-regulation and healthy sleep patterns

Evidence shows that shared reading improves children's memory, attention, flexibility and self-regulation and that it has the greatest impact when adults share books frequently, responsively and interactively.

When children follow a character navigating a difficult situation, making a choice, or managing strong feelings, they are quietly practising those same skills themselves in a safe, low-stakes space.

Reading together as part of a bedtime routine creates a calm, predictable signal that the day is ending. BookTrust's research shows that children who read regularly are more likely to experience healthy routines and habits.

Development of vocabulary, language and communication

The gap between children with rich early language experience and those without is significant by the time they start school. Research shows that children who are read to at home hear over 1.4 million more words at school entry than those who aren't. Children who hear stories develop richer understanding of how the world works, how people think and feel, and how ideas connect.

Development of emotional literacy – understanding and naming feelings

Children cannot always find the words for what they are feeling. Children can develop emotional vocabulary directly from picture books; identifying emotions, connecting the faces of characters to feelings, and relating what they saw on the page to their own experiences. This is emotional literacy in action. When children meet characters who are angry, frightened, confused, lonely or overjoyed, they see their own inner world reflected back at them; named, normalised and navigated safely.

Cultivating empathy and social belonging

Reading fiction allows children to step into someone else's life, naturally building empathy as they experience a character's joy, fear, or loss. For children who find it difficult to trust others, stories offer a gentle, pressure-free way to explore relationships, social skills, and the classroom environment. Finding stories that reflect their own lived experiences reassures them that they are not alone and that they truly belong.

Affirming cultural identity and self-worth

Seeing themselves, their family structure or their heritage reflected in a book sends a powerful message to a child: *your life matters, and you belong*. Conversely, a lack of representation can make children feel invisible or undervalued. For children in foster care who may have questions about identity, choosing diverse books is an act of deep care that celebrates who they are.

Wellbeing and mental health

Against the backdrop of rising mental health challenges for young people—affecting one in five children in England (NHS England, 2023)—shared reading offers a safe space. It's a simple, everyday way to build security and resilience.

Regular reading is a powerful, protective tool that significantly boosts a child's mental wellbeing, self-esteem, and emotional resilience. It offers a comforting retreat where difficult experiences and big feelings can be explored and processed at a safe, healthy distance through the lives of characters.

Improved life chances and school performance

Children who read regularly develop a broad general knowledge and creative problem-solving skills that help them make more progress across the entire school curriculum. Long-term studies show that developing a reading habit in childhood is one of the most powerful levers for reducing inequalities and increasing social mobility. Ultimately, this simple daily habit sets young people up to achieve higher qualifications and greater success later in life.

The reward cycle and benefits for the carer

Shared reading is highly beneficial for carers, proven to increase warmth, enhance engagement, and significantly reduce stress. Reading interactively creates a positive reward cycle: when a child enjoys the book, it boosts your own sense of achievement and parenting confidence. On difficult days when connection feels strained or a child is testing boundaries, sitting down for a ten-minute story serves as a gentle, low-pressure bridge to restore and repair your relationship. You don't need to get it right; you just need to show up, open a book, and begin.

