

Storytime in School



The Farshore Storytime in School research project set out to test the impact of daily storytime at school on children's interest in reading and their motivations to read for pleasure. Our data suggests that nationally, only 24% of children 7–10 years old are read to daily at school, purely for enjoyment.¹ Based on evidence of the transformational power of being read to at home (children who are read to are much more likely to read independently²) our hypothesis was:

Daily storytime in school can change the atmosphere around reading if there is no formal teaching attached to it, no pressure and there are no expectations. With the focus on enjoyment, children will start to think of reading as something pleasurable and aspirational. It will become something that they will choose to do.

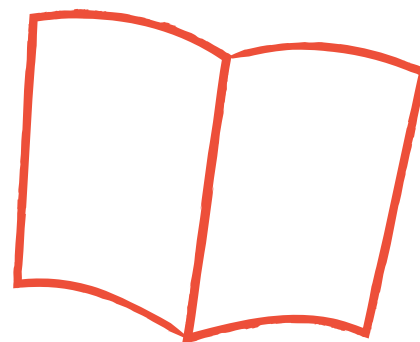
This paper shares the headline findings. The full research paper can be found [here](#).



Photos from Watford St John's Primary CE Primary School.

Who took part?

- 20 primary schools in England
- Children aged 7–10 (Year 3, 4 and 5)
- Circa 3000 children and 86 teachers



What happened?

We asked teachers to allocate 20 minutes to storytime every day during the spring term 2023. Importantly, there was to be no ‘teaching’ attached to this daily session: no worksheets, no testing, no follow-up learning activities or tasks.

Each school was given 200 new books (fiction and non-fiction), 100 from Farshore and 100 from HarperCollins Children’s Books, as both stimulus for the project and a thank you for taking part. These were selected by children’s reading for pleasure experts Professor Teresa Cremin (Co-Director, Literacy and Social Justice Centre, The Open University) and David Reedy (Independent Literacy Consultant and past President of UKLA). Teachers were asked to allow the children to choose what was read to them.

Data collection

- Questionnaires pre- and post-trial, from teachers and from pupils.
- Interviews with teachers after the project in six of the schools.
- Reading and comprehension attainment evaluated pre- and post-trial among Year 4 using the latest edition of Hodder Education’s standardised Salford Sentence Reading and Comprehension Test.

Sample sizes

- 86 teachers completed the questionnaire pre-trial and 67 post-trial
- 2354 pupils returned questionnaires pre-trial and 1558 post-trial
- Reading attainment data for 724 pupils in Year 4
- Comprehension attainment data for 695 pupils in Year 4



Key findings



Increased enthusiasm and positivity towards books and reading

77% of children want **storytime** to continue.

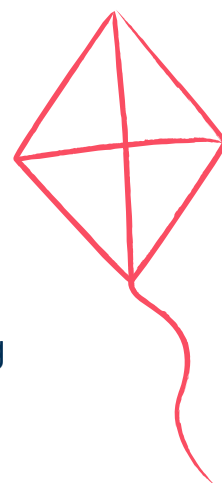
44% of children say they are **reading more**.

All teachers reported seeing **positive impact on children's enjoyment**.



Increased attainment in both reading and comprehension

Across all three year groups, teachers observed **children's increased ability to concentrate** during storytime sessions and children reading more **independently**.



Year 4: average gain in reading age was just under 12 months. **36% gained more than 13 months** on their pre-trial reading age.

Year 4: **49%** were '**well above average/excellent**' for comprehension at the start, rising to **60%** at the end.

Improved well-being among children and their teachers

65% of boys and 76% of girls agreed that **storytime made them feel calm.**

37% of teachers said **storytime made them feel calmer and more relaxed.**



New books and having input in reading choices help build excitement and interest in reading

62 of 67 teachers said the range of books the children chose to read independently increased.

61 of 67 teachers said there was more discussion about books in the classroom.

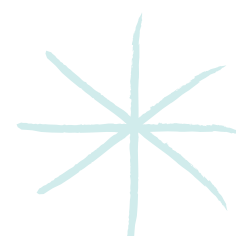


61 of 67 teachers plan to continue with storytime (91%)

Teachers **need permission** to include storytime every day, and **59 of 67 teachers favour** making storytime a curriculum requirement.

Storytime **must be consistent** to be **effective.**

Teachers' professional judgement is **key to success.**





Findings in more detail

Increased enthusiasm and positivity towards books and reading

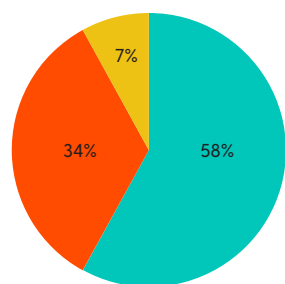
At the start of the trial only 13% of children reported being read to at home by their parents ‘every day’ and 25% said ‘a few times a week’ or ‘once a week’. It’s perhaps not surprising that children found being read to at school every day was enjoyable. They became increasingly enthusiastic, so much so that at the end of the trial, 77% of children said they wanted storytime to continue (80% of Year 3, 78% of Year 4 and 73% of Year 5).

Children’s quotes have not been edited.

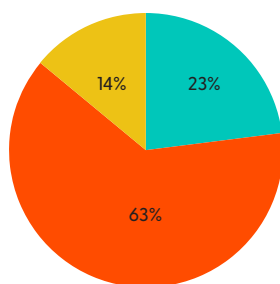
- *Because I can understand story’s more and if a teacher reads I can understand but not wen I read*
- *Yes because it has made me like books a lot more and I feel like if we don’t carry then I will go back to hate reading. Also I feel like it has made a lot of people in my class like reading.*
- *I want it to carry on next term because I want to read more books and find out what happens in all the endings*

All 67 teachers reported seeing some impact on children’s enjoyment. Teachers observed increased confidence in reading and increased independent reading.

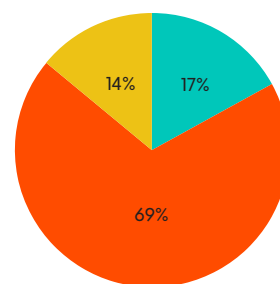
Teachers’ observations of children’s changes in reading attitudes at the end of the trial



Children’s enjoyment of being read aloud to [67]



Children’s confidence as readers increased [64]



Children’s enjoyment of reading independently increased [64]

For all ● For some ● For a few ●

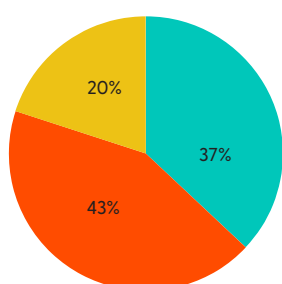
Teachers described how children listened with their full attention – either quietly or expressively. As one put it: *Most of the class sat in rapt silence, completely absorbed, and enjoying the story [...and] some children cannot help but laugh, gasp, and even act out what is happening.*

Teachers described how their class became more interested in discussing books. They reported that children were eager to participate in teacher-led discussion, asking many more questions than in an English lesson. They also wanted to talk about the story and draw pictures of the story in their free time. Their confidence as readers increased.

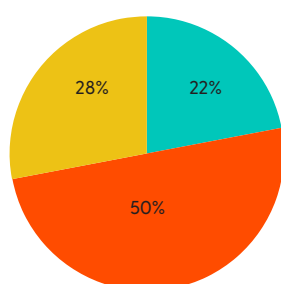
More enthusiastic attitudes led to positive changes in behaviours. Teachers particularly reported seeing children reading more during the school day and at home, spending more time in the book corner or the school library and reading a wider range of books. 63 of 67 teachers reported seeing children choosing to read more during the school day.

Children were more likely to identify as 'readers' by the end of trial. They were also more likely to see themselves as 'a community of readers'.

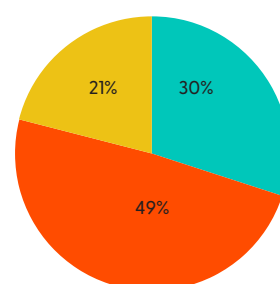
Observed changes in reading behaviours



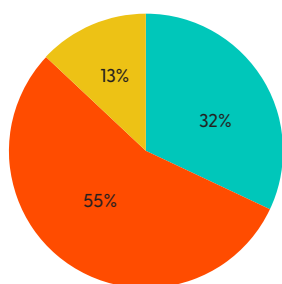
Children's ability to concentrate for the duration of the session increased [65]



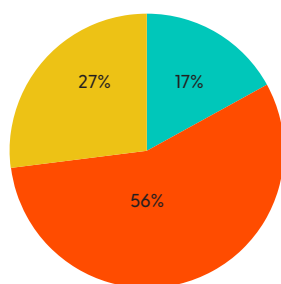
The number of children electing to spend time in the book corner/school library increased [58]



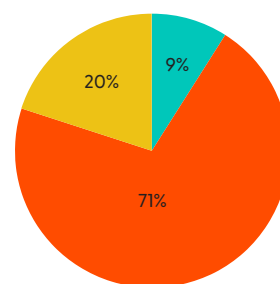
The amount of book talk outside reading sessions increased [61]



The range of books children chose to read increased [62]

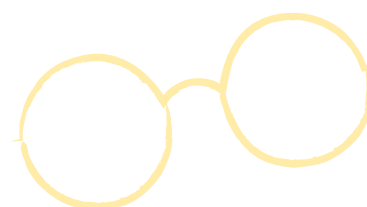


The amount of reading children chose to do during the school day increased [63]



The amount of reading children were doing at home increased [56]

For all ● For some ● For a few ●



Prior to the trial, 28% of children reported reading ‘every day’ at home for fun and enjoyment, and 49% ‘a few times a week’ or ‘once a week’. By the end of the trial, 44% of children said they were reading more than before. Girls were slightly more likely to report a positive change.

Storytime inspired children who weren’t ‘readers’ to start reading. In each of the schools which participated in end-of-trial interviews, teachers talked about children for whom storytime had opened the door to reading for pleasure. For some, it was the discovery of a genre or author, for others who struggled with decoding the words it was the opportunity to experience age-appropriate books, while for a few children with behavioural difficulties, storytime allowed them to immerse themselves in a story, and find the focus that they found challenging in other lessons.

Increased attainment in both reading and comprehension

The exposure to more books and different kinds of books provided gateways to more reading and greater understanding. 65 of 67 teachers noted children’s ability to concentrate during storytime sessions increased.

One Year 3 teacher said *I’d say their comprehension improved because they were more immersed in texts and reading more. We went with more picture books, which they loved. Another teacher said I wanted them to predict... it was reflecting on the story to encourage engagement. So I did pause to reflect on the story. You have to talk about stories and books. But they felt safe asking questions because they knew they wouldn’t be set a task.*



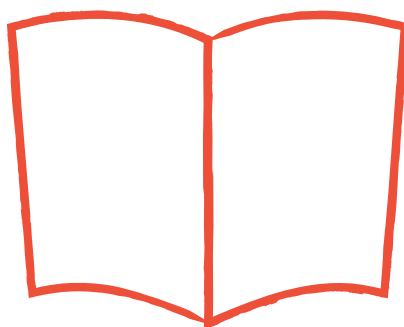
Focus on Year 4

Progress among Year 4 children, who are 8–9 years old, was evaluated using the Salford Sentence Reading and Comprehension Test³ before the trial began and after it had ended. Year 4 was selected for this part of the trial because this is a pivotal age. According to Professor Kate Cain of Lancaster University, a collation of studies show that in the very early stages of reading development, word reading accuracy is the best predictor of reading comprehension and that between 8–10 years it is listening comprehension that becomes the stronger predictor of reading comprehension. However, this is the age where we see dramatic reduction in parents reading to children at home (just 27% of eight-year-olds and 22% of nine-year-olds are read to at home by their parents ‘every day or nearly every day’ (i.e. on 4+ days per week))⁴. This is why being read to at school is so important.

Reading attainment Year 4

18 schools submitted reading age standardised scores for their Year 4 children (results for 724 children).

- **All 18 schools found the average reading attainment across the sample increased from 'average/age appropriate' to 'well above average'.**
- **The median gain in reading age across the sample was 7 months and the average gain was just under 12 months.**
- **36% of the children gained more than 13 months on their pre-trial reading age.**



Comprehension attainment Year 4

17 schools submitted comprehension attainment data for their Year 4 children (results for 695 children).

- **All 17 schools saw their average scores for comprehension go up over the duration of the trial.**
- **Schools saw a shift towards 'excellence'. At the start of the trial, 49% of the sample was deemed 'well above average/excellent'; at the end of the trial this had gone up to 60%. Three schools saw a shift from 'average' to 'well above average'.**

There were considerable variances across the 17 schools, with some scoring below the 'average performance' score band for the national standardisation sample for children of this age, and others already scoring in the 'well above average' band at the start of the trial. However, every school showed a shift towards a higher performing band. There were some exceptional changes:

- **One school, with 59% Pupil Premium, went from 4% to 52% of their pupils scoring 'excellent'.**
- **Another school, with 31% Pupil Premium and 69% English as Additional Language, rose from 29% to 61% scoring 'excellent'.**
- **Another school, with 26% Pupil Premium, increased from 7% to 21% scoring 'excellent'.**

Others saw the biggest increase in the percentage scoring in the 'higher average' bands:

- **In one school, with 43% Pupil Premium and 57% English as Additional Language, none of their pupils achieved in the 'higher average' band at the start, but by the end 24% were deemed 'higher average'.**

Teachers' comments include:

- ***We have seen an increase in inference skills as well as increasing their vocabulary.***
- ***This 3-month trial was brilliant for the exposure of literature to the children. It lends itself to comprehension. Simply the fact of having a story without the pressure of having to do language work on it.***
- ***They definitely saw a much-improved comprehension at the end, because we'd discuss the story at the end of the sessions.***

Improved well-being among children and their teachers

Teachers and pupils believed that storytime had boosted children's mental well-being and supported the development of social skills.

Teachers frequently commented on the calming effect of storytime, that it allowed children to focus, for example, it was helpful to settle and calm them for the afternoon, ready for their learning. The feeling of being 'calm' in turn allowed them to inhabit their own imaginations more freely, for example, the children made a 'shift' to reading books without pictures and creating their own pictures in their minds instead.

Storytime was a gateway for children to explore their own emotions, boosting their empathy for their classmates. Several said they believed that their children were more emotionally literate by the end of the trial.

Storytime was also a bonding experience for many, with teachers saying it had strengthened their relationship with their pupils.

- ***It's strengthened the bond with the children, so thank you. They felt very special having the reading experience every day. I got to know them better.***

Children's self-reported feedback corroborates this finding. When asked, at the end of the trial, whether they agreed that 'storytime makes me feel calm', 65% of boys and 76% of girls agreed. Children's quotes have not been edited.

- ***it calms me down before I go home***
- ***it makes me concentrate and makes me feel better when mad or sad***
- ***Story time makes me feel ready for the rest of the day***



Teachers (61 of 67) commented on how much they enjoyed reading aloud to the children in storytime. As well as enjoying it, 25 teachers (37%) shared that storytime made them feel calmer and more relaxed.

- *I have giggled with them and it put me in a good mood.*
- *The sessions certainly contributed to my well-being, finishing each day calmer and with a greater sense of connection with my class.*
- *Reading aloud every day made me feel more like a storyteller than a teacher. There is something very pure, almost primal, about having a storytime. It provides a space, a connection point, to dream, imagine and empathise. The sessions certainly contributed to my well-being, finishing each day calmer and with a greater sense of connection with my class.*
- *I have personally started reading more at home [...and] have enjoyed reading aloud to the class as well. I will continue to rave on about the benefits of reading for our mental health to the class, as they are a particularly sensitive group of children.*

New books and having input in reading choices help build excitement and interest

All schools were gifted 200 new books at the start of the trial. They generated excitement and goodwill from the teachers.

- *We needed the books, and the documentation about reading for pleasure – it reminded us why it was important. That perfect harmony of the books and the reason for doing it.*
- *THANK YOU so much for all our wonderful books. Teachers had a fabulous meeting discussing the books and picking books they know their classes will love.*
- *The books are amazing – our teachers are delighted!*

The children were equally delighted.

- *Thank you so much for ... all the beautiful books we received this week. The children are over the moon.*
- *Since the trial, we've had access to incredible texts especially for children who don't get taken to libraries. They've been exposed to brand new books, exciting titles – some have never held a new book.*
- *The majority of the children were inspired by the new books and they all couldn't wait to try a new book!*

62 of 67 teachers said the range of books the children chose to read independently increased.



As objects in themselves, new books were highly valued, and this is to be expected. But having them delivered as a marker and precursor to the term of storytime multiplied their impact further. Their arrival was an unusual and special event. The psychological impact on the children of their arrival and knowing they would be read to was huge. The new books, the children's involvement through having the opportunity to choose what was read to them, the sense of agency this brought and the 'down time' of daily storytime all contributed to children having a wholly different idea about reading. It was thought of with positivity: great excitement, anticipation and enthusiasm. As one teacher said: *reading for pleasure became significant and not incidental*. 61 of 67 teachers said there was more discussion about books in the classroom.

Teachers commented on the benefits of allowing the children to choose the storytime books.

- ***I have really enjoyed taking part in the trial and I have really learnt the importance of allowing the children to choose their own books. So often we are told that our books must be carefully chosen and fulfil set criteria. Being allowed to let the children choose was exhilarating and demonstrated to me how important this is in developing a love of reading.***
- ***Being exposed to new and existing texts meant that they read more. The reading records went from 1 sentence a day to paragraphs, and drawing. They were inspired by the reading. We did it at the start of every day. They saw it as a core subject, and the choice to pick books really helped. They felt in charge.***



Most teachers plan to continue with storytime

It wasn't just the children who benefitted from storytime. Teachers said that they loved doing it too, and 61 of the 67 teachers who completed the end-of-trial questionnaire said they plan to continue.

However, teachers talked of the difficulty of finding a place for it in the packed curriculum and that prior to the study many felt pressured, wanting to read to the children but feeling unable to fit it in or justify the time. Many said they felt guilty if they did spend time reading aloud to the children. When setting up this trial, it was emphasised that storytime should be daily and for 20 minutes. We found that setting these parameters enabled teachers to deliver storytime. This project in effect gave them permission to make time in the day:

- ***I was a bit of a convert after the trial. When (I was told) 20 minutes a day I had my doubts. We made it happen – every day. We saw a massive a change in the culture of reading in the class.***
- ***I loved the freedom to come off the curriculum.***
- ***Before I would read aloud to the children, I always had a classbook that wasn't attached to English lessons and I would dip in and out when I had spare time. With the trial we were allowed to spend longer reading. It's being allowed to spend that time. During the trial, it was 20 minutes every day, and it was part of the timetable. We looked forward to it, and they knew they could switch off. I've continued with it, and they love it. Before there was no way I would get through the book. Before we did this, I loved it but felt guilty reading to the children. But this gave us permission to read for pleasure. I still attached a learning objective to it. It's become infectious: a lot more are reading.***

- *Before it was something we felt we should do, but it wasn't monitored, but once part of the trial we knew we had to do it. (Before) it was the first thing to go if time was short. No one would think of dropping maths, but they would drop (reading aloud) because it was seen as less important.*
- *I am literacy lead and I would like to run it through the whole school but I now need to sell the idea to members of the Senior Leadership Team. It is a substantial amount of time out of the curriculum, but I strongly feel the benefits have shown through in assessments. I'm going to be hard pushed to get 20 minutes every day but maybe 3 days a week, that is what I am going to push for. I'll be using this trial and other research to make the case. Our SLT do believe in it, it's just carving out the time.*
- *It enabled us – gave permission to do it – so we did it. (Before) it felt as if the curriculum came first, and then if we had five minutes (we could read aloud). I wanted more but felt guilty. Now we prioritise storytime; other things can wait. Because storytime really matters to us. From speaking to colleagues, there was some initial apprehension about the timetable but they found it gave them space, calm and focus, and they could fit it in, and the children really wanted it and they could see the benefits.*

After the trial, when asked for their views on whether storytime should be mandated, most teachers (59 of the 67) favoured making it a curriculum requirement. They believed this would mitigate the 'guilt' of allocating time to reading for pleasure and ensure that its place in the day was ringfenced. Others (eight), however, expressed concern that mandating it would detract from the enjoyment, making it just another task to do, rather than something teachers and pupils chose to do.

- *Storytime has an immediate impact on children's well-being, their enjoyment of reading and they want to go and discover books for themselves. It should form part of a wider reading for pleasure culture. If you started with storytime, it's the point at which book chats emerge organically. It's your way in to a reading for pleasure culture, children wanting to discover books. Storytime is that beating heart for other reading for pleasure practices that should go on in school.*



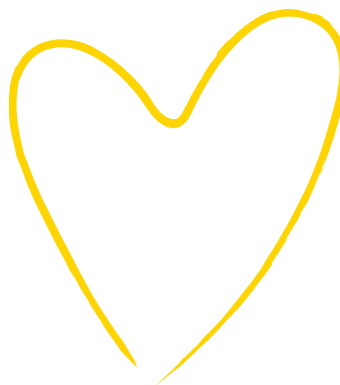
It was also clear that storytime must be consistent to be effective and that doing it every day is absolutely key to its success and impact. Teachers who were interviewed said that one of the main differences between their approach to storytime during the trial, compared with reading aloud previously was the daily routine. As one trial lead said: *It needs to be every day: it's a ritual.* Teachers talked about children's sense of anticipation, and the importance of knowing it was scheduled into the day. The daily regularity meant that the story didn't lose momentum.

- ***Because we were doing it constantly, they were so engaged with the story. When we've done it before you might have read it on Monday and then Friday, it was too long in between. This was every day – so they were really involved in the story. I would leave it on a cliff hanger. They were talking about it. No time lapse. You didn't break the engagement. Even now – this week I haven't done it and I can see the disengagement.***
- ***Consistency of doing it every day is important. The children are able to regulate their emotion for 20 minutes. They like the routine, it's helpful. It's also important because every day means they're excited about doing it. They were disappointed if we didn't do it because of a trip.***
- ***With the consistency that's the most crucial element in keeping them engaged. When you have gaps they forget and their enthusiasm drops.***

While we had specified 20 minutes daily, it was also clear that teachers' professional judgement and ability to be flexible is key to success. Sometimes a shorter amount of time was appropriate, depending on the age of the children, their stamina and ability to concentrate, and the type of book read. Others believed that teachers should use their professional judgement to decide when to end storytime, by observing children's behaviour and choosing an exciting moment to heighten children's anticipation for the next instalment.

A small minority of teachers, however, believed it had exacerbated the stress and pressure they were under, as it was yet another thing to fit into their day. Comments associated with this heightened feeling of anxiety included:

- ***I became worried I would not fit everything else I needed to fit into the day as we also have other class books we have to read.***
- ***If a typical school day wasn't so busy, this would be a fantastic contribution to the day but at the minute it is another pressure.***





Summary

The benefits associated with storytime are compelling. Based on this one-term trial, it delivered quick, tangible wins for teachers and their pupils, evidenced through a range of positive outcomes. As a strategy for boosting reading for pleasure it worked for most children. Across the trial sample, children and teachers enjoyed storytime, and felt it had made the classroom a calmer, happier place in which reading for pleasure was seen as a worthwhile and valuable activity.

Storytime is highly effective in encouraging a love of reading and raising standards when it is consistent. It needs to happen every day. Access to a range of high-quality children's books is intrinsic to children's and teachers' enjoyment, and an important success criterion.

- ***Our kids don't get storytime at home, they don't read with their parent, so it was so important to give them this experience to learn to love to read.***
- ***It should be made mandatory. It's been good for the teachers' well-being as much as the children's. It's not just another curriculum area. Its benefits are bigger than the time it takes.***
- ***We would all love 20 mins a day. Sometimes it is a choice between foundation subjects and storytime. But making the time was worthwhile – I was sceptical at first, but I've been won over. Doing it every day has helped. If it wasn't every day, it wouldn't have the same impact. For my mental health, it has been great!***

Comment from Professor Teresa Cremin, The Open University:

“In school, reading aloud for pleasure is essential. This is in addition to reading aloud as part of English teaching (DfE, 2023). Reading aloud for pleasure can enable children to access rich, challenging texts, offer a model for silent reading, and prompt deep affective engagement and discussion. It can also create a valuable communal experience that connects young readers and nurtures new relationships. This is exactly what you can see in this exciting Farshore Storytime Trial. What is particularly potent here is the professional flexibility offered within the set time, enabling teachers to be responsive to the interests and needs of their learners, and to sometimes read without discussion and at others to invite dialogue around the text. What is also very striking is the children's accelerated progress in reading and comprehension, and the highly positive impact on their attitudes towards books, and their reading dispositions and behaviours.”





Conclusion

As a simple intervention, it's clear that storytime is a low cost, high value proposition. It requires little or no training. It has an astonishingly positive effect on children's motivation to read, their reading and comprehension attainment and their well-being. And in the Department for Education's recently published 'The reading framework'⁷⁵ the case for reading aloud to children as part of a reading for pleasure culture is clearly stated:

As with younger children, reading aloud to older pupils is a key way of supporting their development as readers, 'even though pupils can now read independently'. Teachers should consider providing story time for every key stage 2 class, at least four times a week for 20 minutes.... Daily 'story time' might sometimes be viewed as an indulgence at key stages 2 and 3 or it can find itself being squeezed or skipped to accommodate other demands. However, if done well, it is a powerful driver for improving pupils' reading and all-round education, as well as having a positive impact on their social and emotional well-being. It can also be a time of genuine enjoyment for the whole class, a shared experience sparking reflection and discussion.

From the Department for Education's 'The reading framework', section 8 (July 2023)

But daily storytime is not mandated. Should it be? Statutory and non-statutory have different benefits and drawbacks. Mandating it would ensure every child is read to every day at school, thereby unlocking the benefits that reading for pleasure brings. (If mandated, teachers' professional judgment and flexibility on delivering storytime is key to its success.) However, mandating storytime may make some teachers feel they are doing it because they must, not because they want to. And the challenges teachers face in delivering an already jam-packed curriculum may mean that even if mandated, it's simply not possible to achieve and it would put even more pressure on teachers.

Given the impact that reading for pleasure has on children's outcomes, and that storytime can help turn children into readers, this feels like a worthy debate.





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