



A pilot project to determine if telling parents why they need to engage in activities that develop early years language and literacy is more valuable than simply telling them what activities they should engage in

Sarah Cantrill BSc Hons FRSA
Artistic Director & Founder, Story Storks

STORY STARKS

Published January 2020

Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
Introduction	2
Story STARS	2
Results	2
Conclusion	3
INTRODUCTION.....	4
METHOD	5
Story STARS	5
Recruitment	5
Workshop Structure	6
Evaluation.....	7
RESULTS.....	7
Recruitment	7
Home Activities.....	9
Why read to your child?	10
Vocabulary development.....	11
Phonological awareness	12
Why do it vs what to do	12
Reading for pleasure.....	13
Workshop feedback	14
DISCUSSION	14
REFERENCES.....	16

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Story STARs

A previous literature review had revealed that there are four 'at home' activities which have a profound effect on EY language development (STARs activities).

S – Singing to your child (helps to develop phonological awareness, a precursor for phonics and an indicator of how well a child will be able to apply phonics to reading)

T – Talking to your child (helps to develop language skills)

A – Acting out stories, or roleplay (helps to develop language skills, particularly expanding vocabulary)

R – Reading to your child (helps to develop language and literacy skills, and creates an environment in which 'reading for pleasure' can evolve)

This project set out to discover if it is more useful to tell parents why they should engage in STARs activities, rather than simply telling them to do so.

Story Storks designed and delivered 12 workshops to 12 nursery classes and their parents. The first half of the workshop took parents through the events that lead to the commissioning of the EPPE project and the EYFS. The children then joined their parents and the whole group took part in a Story Storks workshop.

Results

After the workshops:

- 57% of parents said that they now thought they needed to read more to their children
- 51% of parents thought they needed to talk more to their children
- 26% of parents felt that they sang to their child enough
- 20% of parents felt that they played with their children often enough

Parents were asked to give the reasons that they read to their child, and these answers were scored against four outcomes.

- 13% stated encouraging their child to Read for Pleasure
- 12% stated literacy outcomes
- 34% stated language outcomes
- 40% stated 'other' outcomes

After the workshop, parents showed an increase in techniques proven to increase a child's vocabulary and a much better understanding of phonological awareness.

91% of the cohort agreed that it was good to be told why they should engage in STARs activities, though half would also like to be given ideas as well.

Whilst 92% of the respondents chose 'reading for pleasure' as an outcome over 'reading for function' after the workshop. Prior to the workshop, only 13% of parents spontaneously listed it as a reason to read.

Conclusion

The results demonstrate that there is value in telling parents 'why' they should engage in STARs activities, though there is still a desire amongst many of the cohort for ideas of 'what' to do.

There is a significant knowledge gap amongst parents regards early years language and literacy skills which the cohort largely filled themselves with some knowledge, and some hearsay. Once explained to them, the parents had a much clearer understanding.

Reading for pleasure is a key message which appears to not be reaching parents currently.

INTRODUCTION

By the time my eldest daughter was one she adored stories, and I wanted to take her to a weekly class where we could explore them more fully. I was surprised to discover that no such class existed. A previous career as an actor/comedienne and my experience as an Early Years (EY) music teacher gave me the skill set to create these workshops – Story Storks was born in 2011.

Nowadays, Story Storks deliver interactive storytelling workshops which are designed to enhance EY language and literacy skills. We tell fairy tales, and intersperse them with exercises which, not unlike musical theatre, help to move the story along. We count the giant's gold, run away from the Big Bad Wolf and slay dragons with St George.

When I first started the business, the workshops were all about bringing a whole range of performing arts to EY children and the story simply linked the exercises together. My initial customer base contained very few first time round parents. Instead, I was joined by teachers on maternity leave, EY trained professionals such as nannies and childminders and second time round parents all of whom were telling me that Story Storks was about early years language and literacy development. Essentially, I was getting kids ready for the day they went to school and learned to read.

At first, I didn't believe them! I was dressed up as Grandma running away from the Big Bad Wolf – how could this be educational! In my head, I couldn't make the link between enjoying stories and the process of learning to read.

When my daughter started nursery, it finally became apparent that all of the singing, talking, acting and reading my daughter and I enjoyed had developed her language skills to the point where she found it extremely easy to read and was streets ahead of the other kids.

I started researching the Early Years, beginning with my daughter's nursery teacher who told me about the events which lead to the commissioning of the EPPE project¹, and the results from that which lead to the creation of the EYFS². I continued to research EY language acquisition and, learned that singing³, talking⁴ and acting/roleplay⁵ also help to develop the skills an EY child will need to learn to read. Moreover, I learned the value of teaching a child not just to read, but to read for pleasure; readers for pleasure get higher exam grades than those who don't⁶. Now fully understanding the importance of 'priming' EY kids for reading before they reach school age, I launched a Story Storks curricula for babies when my second daughter was just 12 weeks old.

Talking to my customers week in week out, it became apparent that it wasn't just me; most first time round parents didn't seem to understand why they should be reading to their children, just that it was good for them. Knowing that learning 'why do it' rather than 'what to do' finally brought me understanding as a parent, I decided to ask the same question to a larger audience in the hope of determining a better strategy for improving EY literacy and language development, and thus better literacy rates over the population as a whole.

A big thank-you to Kingston Council who awarded the project a New Initiatives Grant to carry out this work. An even bigger thank-you to the schools who took part in this project.

METHOD

Story STARs

A previous literature review had revealed that there are four 'at home' activities which have a profound effect on EY language development.

S – Singing to your child (helps to develop phonological awareness, a precursor for phonics and an indicator of how well a child will be able to apply phonics to reading)

T – Talking to your child (helps to develop language skills including expanding vocabulary)

A – Acting out stories, or roleplay (helps to develop language skills, particularly expanding vocabulary)

R – Reading to your child (helps to develop language and literacy skills, and creates an environment in which 'reading for pleasure' can evolve)

These four activities gave rise to the acronym STAR, which was then put into the project title – Story STARs – and used throughout the project presentation to aid recall of the four activities.

Recruitment

Five Nursery settings familiar with Story Storks storytelling workshops were approached by e-mail to take part in the project. All of the nurseries were attached to a primary school within the borough of Kingston upon Thames, UK.

The schools took on the role of recruiting parents to the workshops, using their usual methods of communication.

School	No. of Classes	Children per Class	NRS Scale Grade
School 1	4 (x2am & x2pm)	20	BC1C2
School 2	2 (am & pm)	46	DE
School 3	2 (am & pm)	19	ABC1
School 4	2 (am & pm)	26	ABC1
School 5	2 (am & pm)	26	C1C2DE
TOTALS	12		

Table 1 – Recruitment numbers by schools, classes and children

School 2 have the largest nursery class. Ideally, this school should have received four sessions rather than two, but failure to ask the number of children in the class at the time of booking led to a misunderstanding.

Workshop Structure

Parents were invited to attend a Story STARs workshop (without their children) at drop off. This involved a 20 minute PowerPoint presentation where I relayed my own experience as a parent, and how I came to understand the importance of the STARs activities in developing EY language skills. The presentation took a storytelling approach, taking the audience through the events that lead to the EPPE project and the subsequent creation of the EYFS. Optional discussion time followed this session where parents could raise any concerns they had.

Once completed, the children joined us and parents were invited to stay for a Story Storks interactive storytelling workshop. In all cases bar one, I told the story of The Gingerbread Man, incorporating STARs activities so that the parents could see them in action. In school 2 I told the story of The Three Billy Goats Gruff which nursery had been reading in class, again incorporating STARs activities.

Story Storks workshops last around 45 minutes.

All 12 workshops were carried out between 26th Feb 2019 and 7th Jun 2019

Evaluation

Parents were asked to fill out a questionnaire before the Story STARs workshop to evaluate their knowledge and application of the different areas of early years language and literacy development. These areas were identified as:

1. Levels of STARs activities being carried out at home
2. Why read to your child?
3. Measuring the awareness and perceived importance of vocabulary development, and how STARs activities relate
4. Measuring the awareness and perceived importance of phonological awareness and how STARs activities relate
5. 'What' to do vs 'why' to do it
6. Reading for pleasure

After the workshops, parents were asked to fill in a second evaluation form to see if there had been any movement in their understanding of STARs activities and if that would lead to a change in their thinking and behaviour at home.

RESULTS

Recruitment

The workshop attendance was higher than anticipated given that they were taking place during working hours (see table 2). Schools 1, 2 and 3 had a percentage attendance in line with the overall result. School 4 had the highest % attendance, with over half the children in the nursery represented by a parent. School 5 had the lowest % attendance.

Notes on scheduling

The time at which the workshops were scheduled clearly affected attendance. It became obvious during School 1's recruitment process that Friday was the best day, with many parents citing that it was easier to rearrange work to be in attendance on that day.

The difference in attendance between morning nursery and afternoon nursery was stark across the board. The morning workshops were attended by parents of 43% of children; in the afternoon that dropped to 24%.

School 3 offered both morning and afternoon sessions in order to explore the more popular time slot – the afternoon slots were only booked by 1 person; they were asked to attend a morning session instead.

School	Morning or Afternoon	No. of children represented by an adult	No. of children in the class	% Attendance	NRS Scale
School 1 – day 1	Tues am	5	20	25%	BC1C2
	Tues pm	3	20	15%	BC1C2
School 1 – day 2	Fri am	11	20	55%	BC1C2
	Fri pm	7	20	35%	BC1C2
School 2	Fri am	23	46	50%	DE
	Fri pm	7	46	15%	DE
School 3	Tues am	6	19	32%	ABC1
	Thurs pm	6	19	32%	ABC1
School 4	Fri am	15	26	58%	ABC1
	Fri pm	13	26	50%	ABC1
School 5	Fri am	9	26	35%	C1C2DE
	Fri pm	3	26	12%	C1C2DE
TOTAL		108	314	34%	

Table 2 – Number of attendees per session

Observations on NRS Scale Grades, Ethnicity and Attendance

Whilst ethnicity and individual socio-economic background were not measured as part of the project, it was observed that they were influencing attendance at the workshop.

The school with the most well-attended workshops also has the highest NRS scale grade of all the states schools that took part. The school with the lowest attendance has a mixed NRS scale grade featuring the lowest grade.

The workshops were well attended by parents who have English as a second language, and this very much drove the morning attendance in school 2. It was also a topic of discussion during all of the workshops.

Notes on attendees vs data set

Although 108 parents attended the workshops in total, only 99 filled out the form before the workshop and 105 after the workshop. Some parents came late, or left early, which meant that I was unable to capture their data.

Home Activities

Parents were asked before and after the workshops which activities proven to develop early years language and literacy development they took part in at home.

Reading

Before - 71% of parents responded often (29% sometimes).

After - 40% of parents felt that they were reading with the correct frequency, with 57% stated that they felt they needed to read to their children more often.

Talking

Before - 87% of parents talk often with their children.

After - 51% felt they needed to talk more to their children

Singing

Before - 61% of parents responded they sang often with their child

After - only 26% of parents felt they'd had this about right, with most thinking they needed to sing more to their children

Acting/Roleplay

Before - 55% often, 37% sometimes and 8% never engaged in roleplay with their children

After - only 20% felt that they had been getting this right, with 76% responding that they needed to play more with their children

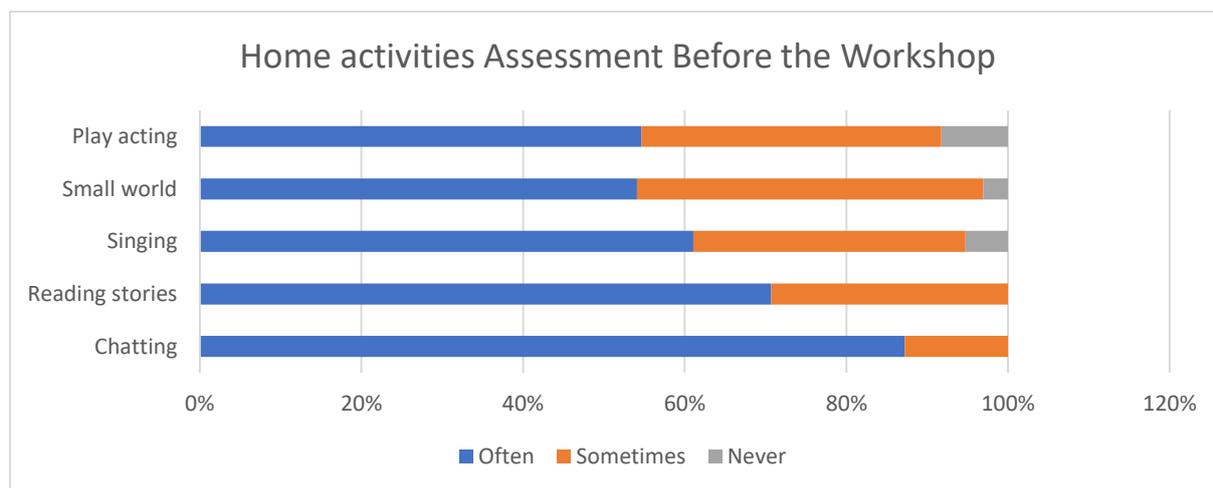


Fig. 1 - Results of the survey of home activities undertaken before the workshop

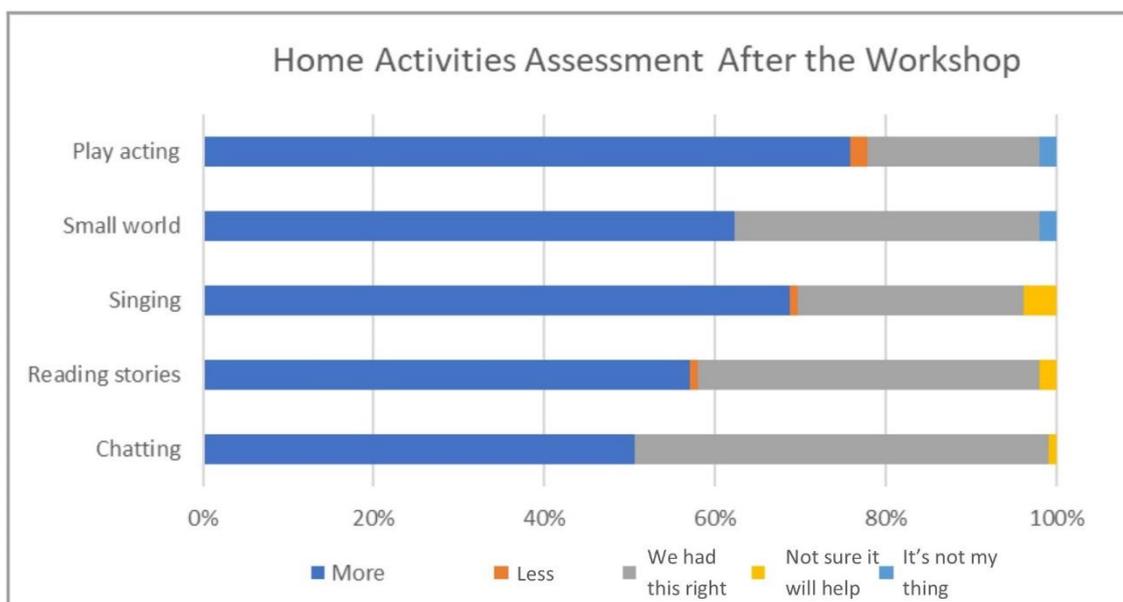


Fig 2 – Results of the survey of home activities undertaken after the workshops

Reading and talking were the most commonly cited STARS techniques being carried out at home before the workshop took place, with singing and acting/roleplay falling significantly further behind. National statistics indicate that around 1/3 of parents regularly read to their children⁷. Our results indicate that parents in the borough buck that trend, though this may be an anomaly as the parents who were likely to sign up for the workshops are interested in teaching their children to read, and are likely already invested in the process.

The results for Singing and Acting/Roleplay indicate that parents on the whole simply don't know that these two activities play a part in developing EY language, and how they help to lay the foundations upon which reading is based. This is reflected in the post-workshop results, where the vast majority of parents felt they needed to do more.

Why read to your child?

Despite only 82% of parents reporting that they had been advised to read to their child, 89% of parents reported before the workshop that they knew why they should do so. Parents were asked to tell us those reasons, which were then scored against EY language and literacy outcomes.

- 13% stated encouraging their child to Read for Pleasure
- 12% stated literacy outcomes
- 34% stated language outcomes
- 40% stated 'other' outcomes

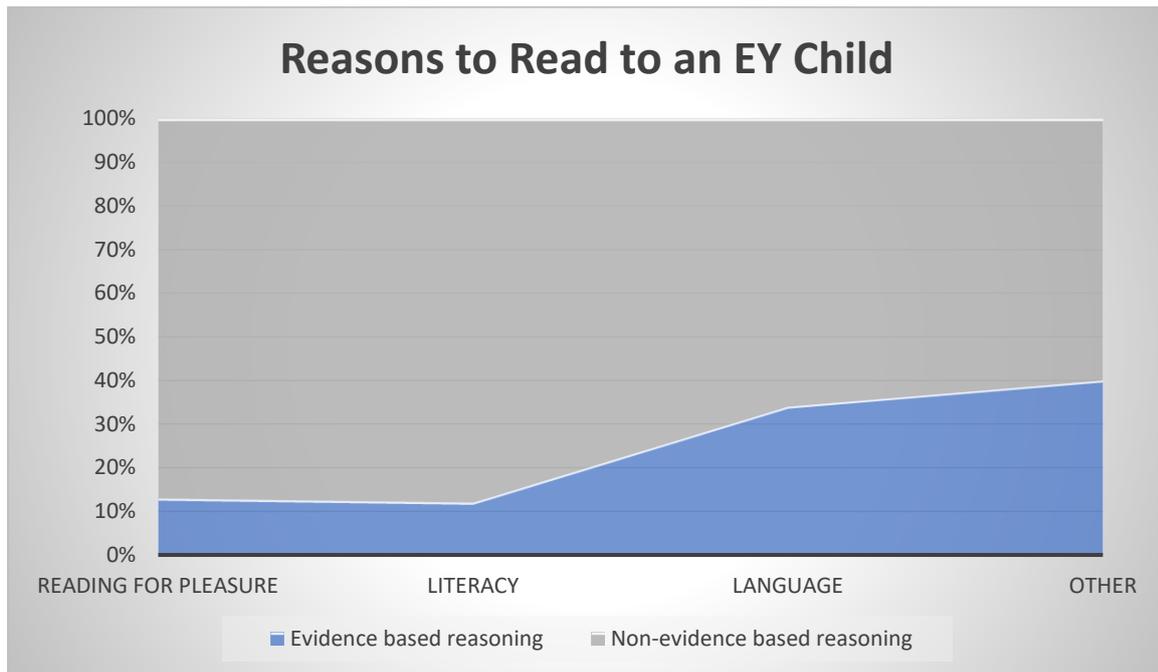


Fig 3 – Parental responses as % for reasons they read to their children, scored against evidence based outcomes. The grey area at the top represents the lack of understanding of ‘why’ parents should read to their children

‘Other’ reasons included bonding and assisting with a bedtime routine. Whilst these are certainly valid reasons in their own right, it was clear that the benefits to the child’s reading potential were largely unknown.

After the workshop, 97% of respondents answered that they now understood why they should be reading to their child, with 3% answering maybe.

Vocabulary development

The parents were asked to state how a child develops their vocabulary, and the answers scored against the STARs criteria.

Before the workshops, the average number of STARs reasons given per parent was 1.5 out of 4. Post the workshop this went up to 2.7 out of 4.

Before the workshop, talking and reading to your child were the most commonly cited STARs techniques for increasing vocabulary. Post the workshop, all the STARs techniques were cited more evenly.

Phonological awareness

Before the workshop, 18% of parents knew confidently what phonological awareness was, with 45% having never heard of it.

After the workshop, 72% could explain the term confidently to others, with an additional 24% understanding it's meaning.

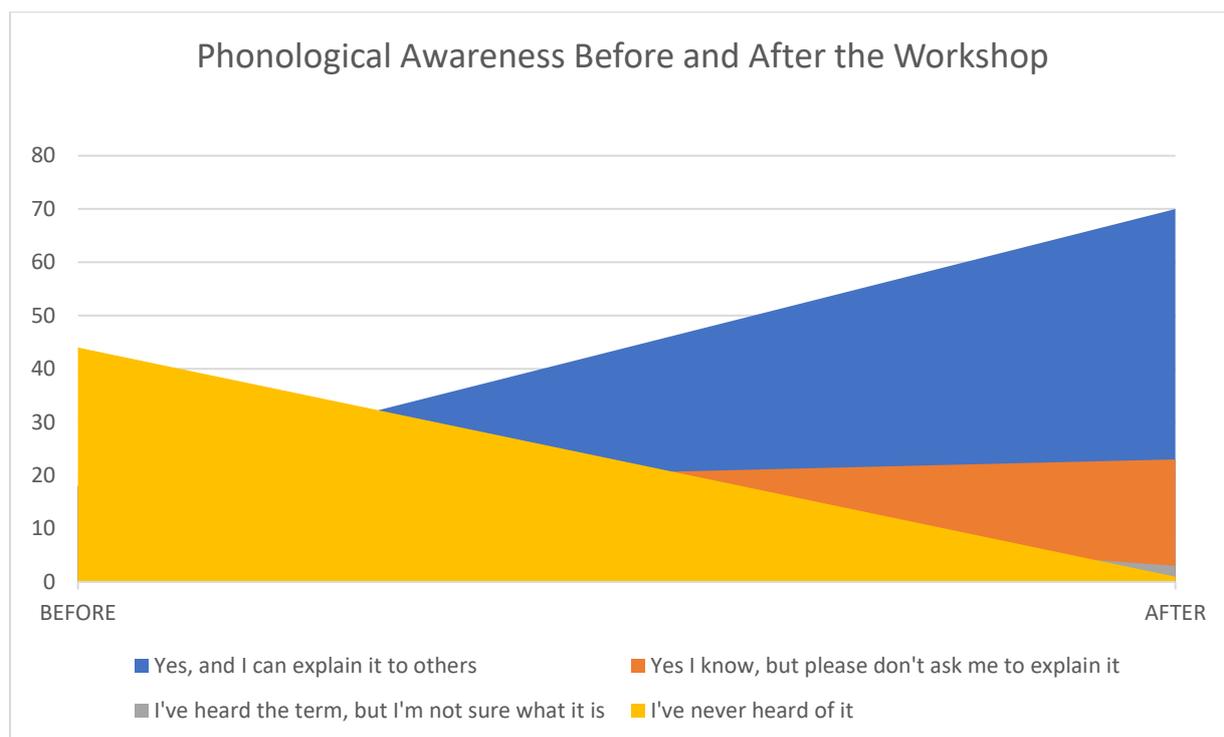


Fig. 4 - Parents understanding of phonological awareness before and after the workshop

Why do it vs what to do

91% of respondents thought it as good to be told why instead of simply what.

However, nearly half the cohort also wanted to hear 'what they should do.'

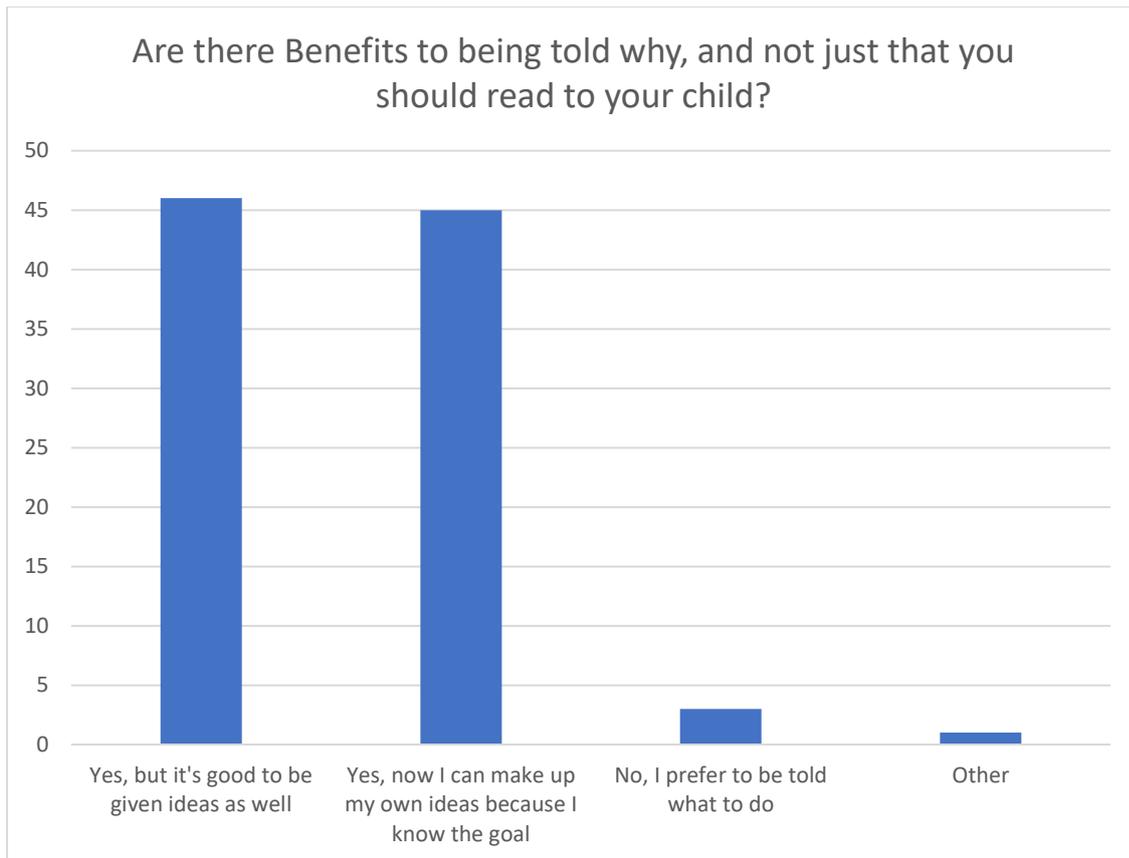


Fig. 5 – Results of the questions ‘Are there benefits to being told why, and not just that you should read to your child?’

Reading for pleasure

Parents were asked both before and after the workshop to choose which of the two options they perceived to be more important. After the workshop, the number of people choosing reading for pleasure increased slightly. Those who chose the latter option tended to have English as a second language.

	Before	After
Teaching your child that reading is good fun	87%	92%
Teaching your child to read so that they can read information for themselves	13%	8%

Table 3 – Results of multi-choice reading for pleasure vs reading for information

Workshop feedback

The participants were asked to rate how the workshop measured against their expectations.

It exceeded them. I am leaving with more info than I thought I would and I'm inspired!	54%
It met them. It told me everything I hoped it would to help my little one.	29%
It was OK.	12%
I'm not sure it was that helpful, but I had fun.	1%
Not helpful at all	0%
Did not respond	4%

Table 4 - Workshop feedback

DISCUSSION

This project set out to answer the question 'is it better to tell parents why they should engage in STARS activities with their children, rather than simply telling them to do so'? The answer is a resounding yes. Indeed, 45% of the total cohort felt that armed with the 'why' they were empowered to come up with their own 'what'. However, there are still a significant number who would like to be given ideas as well. The reasons for this vary from person to person but during this project, and my wider work with families, one of the most common reasons observed is a lack of confidence in their ability to add value to their child's education. This is particularly prevalent at the lower end of the socio-economic scale, where the parent has a low level of education or where English is a second language. Whilst this project was not designed to capture data that could back up these observations, the data generated certainly doesn't discredit the theory, and further investigation might prove useful in determining why there is a growing gap in academic attainment between children at the top and the bottom of the economic scale.

The project also sought to go some way towards measuring the parents' knowledge of early years language and literacy development techniques. There appears to be a significant knowledge gap for most of the parents, which they had filled with their own version of the truth. Many of the answers before the workshop were 'woolly' or very overly specific, almost as if they were guessing and trying to save face i.e. 'read the shopping list to the child', where 'read to the child' would have been more accurate.

It came as no great surprise that this knowledge gap extended to 'phonological awareness', but perhaps this of all the markers measured is the most significant indication of the extent of that gap. A child needs phonological awareness to be able to decode phonics. Phonological awareness is an important measure of how difficult (or easy) a child will find the process of learning to read. The perception that children only start the process of learning to read when they get their first reading book is typical amongst parents. In reality, reading is another part of acquiring the English language and relies on a good foundation of 'language skills' (defined here as listening and speaking) to flourish, with phonological awareness and a broad vocabulary proven to be crucial in that skillset. There is an opportunity in talking to parents about phonological awareness as they can begin to work on it from birth, and the established methods of enhancing it, such as singing and rhyme, are easily achievable by all regardless of their own academic successes or failures. Whilst current ante-natal classes focus on the immediate needs of a baby, perhaps there is scope for broadening the curricula to include early years literacy.

But possibly most concerning was the level of understanding of the benefits of reading for pleasure amongst the cohort. Whilst 87% of parents selected 'reading for pleasure' as a multiple-choice answer, only 13% listed it spontaneously as a reason to read with their child. This would suggest that the message on the benefits of reading for pleasure are not yet being accepted as important or fully understood by parents.

The top hits in Google⁸ on 'reading for pleasure' are either literacy agencies or government bodies. Ofsted have recently included 'reading for pleasure' in the National Curriculum⁹, encouraging teachers to foster the habit in children. Other organisations such as libraries run schemes during school holidays to encourage children to read too¹⁰. These institutions play an important role in improving literacy outcomes, but new parents tend to seek information from alternative sources which are dedicated to all aspects of parenting. Whilst the message of 'reading for pleasure' is unknown, parents won't seek information on it.

The results of this project tend to the conclusion that the message of the benefits of reading for pleasure still sits in the world of experts. It could make a huge difference to the home activities of parents if only they knew about it. To achieve this, the message needs to be passed on to influencers in the parenting world and spelt out as the objective of schemes that aim to increase it. In other words, we should be telling our audience 'why' they are doing it, and not just 'what' to do.

REFERENCES

1. Sylva, K., Melhuish, E.C., Sammons P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Taggart, B., **The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Finding from Pre-school to end of Key Stage 1**, *SureStart*, November 2004
2. The British Association for Early Childhood Education, **Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)**, *Early Education*, 2012
3. Mizener, C. P., **Enhancing Language Skills Through Music**, *General Music Today Vol: 21, issue:2, page(s):11-17, Feb 2008*
4. Roulstone, S., Law, J., Rush, R., Clegg, J., Peters, T., **Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes**, *Research Report DFE-RR134*
5. Bergen, D., **The Role of Pretend Play in Children's Cognitive Development**, *Early Childhood Research & Practice, V4 n1 Spr, 2002*
6. Department for Education, **Research evidence on reading for pleasure**, Education Standards research team, May 2012
7. Catriona Wightman, **Parents swap books for tech at bedtime**, new BookTrust research discovers, www.booktrust.org.uk, May 2019
8. www.google.co.uk
9. The Reading Agency, **Reading for pleasure in schools**, <https://readingagency.org.uk/news/blog/reading-for-pleasure-in-schools.html>,
10. Summer Reading Challenge, <https://summerreadingchallenge.org.uk/>



With thanks to Kingston Council for awarding the project a
New Initiatives Grant.

www.storystorks.co.uk

January 2020