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Fathers' engagement in young children's literacy in 2024

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Summary

Fathers today are more involved in their children's lives than ever before (Topping & Aguilar García, 2022; Vagni, 2023). Their engagement in early learning activities like playing, reading, singing, drawing and visiting parks or libraries not only impacts their children's emotional, cognitive and educational development (e.g., Zhong, 2023; Norman & Davies, 2023) but also their early language and literacy skills (Liu & Chung, 2022; Quach et al, 2018; Varghese & Wachen, 2015).

We last explored the important role fathers play in the literacy lives of their children in 2009. Much has happened in the past 15 years, including changes in family patterns, a COVID-19 pandemic, a cost-of-living crisis, and a workforce crisis across the early years sector. This report revisits and updates what we know about fathers' engagement in their children's early language and literacy. It uses findings from a series of surveys we conducted between 2019 and 2024 to explore fathers' engagement in key early learning activities with children aged from birth to five.

Key findings:

Engagement in activities in 2024

- 3 in 4 (76.8%) fathers said they had chatted with their child daily in the last week. Almost 3 in 5 (57.6%) had played and about 1 in 2 (47.4%) read with their child every day, while 2 in 5 (40.7%) had sung songs daily.
- 1 in 3 fathers said they had taken part in digital learning activities (32.3%) and played outside with their child daily (29.7%), while 1 in 5 (21.3%) had painted, drawn or made things together daily.
- In 2024, more mothers than fathers engaged in home learning activities daily, with the largest gap in singing (12.2 percentage points). However, slightly more fathers than mothers engaged in play activities (by 2.2 percentage points).

Yearly trends

- There was a downward trend in the percentage of both mothers and fathers saying they engaged at least daily in learning activities with their child between 2019 and 2024.

- There were notable differences in the magnitude of change over time. For example, while there were significant declines in both fathers' and mothers daily engagement over the last five years, declines were more pronounced for mothers in play (-23.0 percentage points for mothers vs. -12.2 for fathers) and chatting (-12.4 for mothers vs. -8.4 for fathers). By contrast, the decline in singing was sharper for fathers (-21.7 percentage points) than mothers (-13.7).
    - The downward trend in daily engagement in activities by both fathers and mothers is concerning, but it is important to avoid simplistic narratives that suggest parents are simply 'doing less'. The Covid-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and cuts to funding for early years services are likely to have played a significant role in this decline.

Given the lasting benefits of shared father-child engagement in early learning, these findings underscore the need to encourage and support it both at home and in the community. To address this, the NLT has launched *Early Words Matter* (EWM), a national five-year campaign focused on helping families, practitioners and early years systems ensure all children have access to environments that support their early learning and literacy.

Introduction

Impact of fathers' engagement in children's early learning

Children who grow up with fathers who are involved in their early learning often experience better physical, emotional, social and educational outcomes, both in early childhood and later in life (Chung, 2021; Dubowitz et al., 2001; Paquette & StGeorge, 2023; Seo, 2007; Zhong, 2023). Research shows that fathers who actively engage in activities such as talking, reading and playing with their children contribute significantly to their language, literacy and overall development (Varghese & Wachen, 2015).

Indeed, fathers who use rich and varied language, participate in shared reading and writing, and respond warmly and sensitively to their children can support the development of vocabulary, language comprehension and reading and writing skills (Cutler & Palkovitz, 2019; Leech et al., 2013; Liu & Chung, 2022; Quach et al, 2018).

Studies from the US provide clear examples: “serve and return” interactions between fathers and babies at nine months were linked to better language skills at 18 months (Chen et al., 2023), while shared reading and talking at 24 months predicted stronger language and cognitive skills at 36 months (Duursma, 2014; Pancsofar & Vernon-Feagans, 2006). These findings underscore the important role fathers play in supporting their children’s early development.

Fathers’ engagement in educational and enrichment activities is particularly important (Chung, 2021). For example, an Australian study of over 400 families found that fathers reading to their two-year-olds led to better language skills by age four, even when factors like family income, parents’ jobs, education levels and mothers’ reading habits were considered (Murdoch Children’s Research Institute, 2018). Similarly, a global study involving over 77,000 children aged from three to five across 26 countries found that kids whose fathers took part in engaging activities scored higher in literacy and numeracy (Frongillo et al., 2017).

Key activities that significantly benefit children’s early and long-term development include playing together, reading stories, singing songs and rhymes, painting and drawing, visiting places like parks or libraries, playing with letters and numbers, and encouraging regular play with other children (Sylva et al., 2004). These everyday actions can make a big difference in helping children learn and grow.

We have been tracking parents’ engagement with their children’s early language and literacy at home since 2019, with our most recent survey conducted in 2024. Coincidentally, this timeframe captures the pre-pandemic era, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, the latter two of which have significantly affected the lives of many UK parents and their children. For example, in 2023, 1 in 5 parents (20.0%) reported reducing their spending on books, while 1 in 4 (24.8%) cut back on educational devices such as child-friendly tablets and audio players due to rising costs (National Literacy Trust, 2023). Many parents also decreased their spending on activities like after-school clubs and trips, with 1 in 10 feeling too busy or stressed to support their child’s literacy at home. Additionally, within these larger-scale events exist the challenges of a strained national early years education sector, cuts to funding for early intervention, an ongoing workforce crisis, and long waiting lists for speech and language support (Early Education and Childcare Coalition, 2023; Early Years Alliance, 2021; Institute for Fiscal Sudies, 2022; Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, 2023).

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Methodology

We commissioned Survation in June 2024 to conduct a survey of parents of children from birth to the age of five across the UK (n = 2,021[1]). It aimed to explore the extent to which parents reported engaging in a variety of learning activities with their child, including chatting, playing, reading, singing, painting/drawing, digital learning activities and playing outside. The survey was in the field between 19 June and 25 July 2024.

For this report, we focused on fathers' responses (n = 858). Results were compared with fathers' responses to surveys commissioned from One Poll in 2019 (n = 527) and 2020 (n = 637), and from Savanta ComRes in August 2021 (n = 294). All surveys included the same questions about how frequently a subset of learning activities were taking place in the home, and the activities we asked about were chosen based on research by Sylva et al. (2004). Comparing results between 2019 and 2024 gives insight into changes in home learning activities across the pre-pandemic, pandemic and post-pandemic time periods. The 2024 survey also asks additional questions about local support, parents' knowledge and confidence, and child enjoyment.

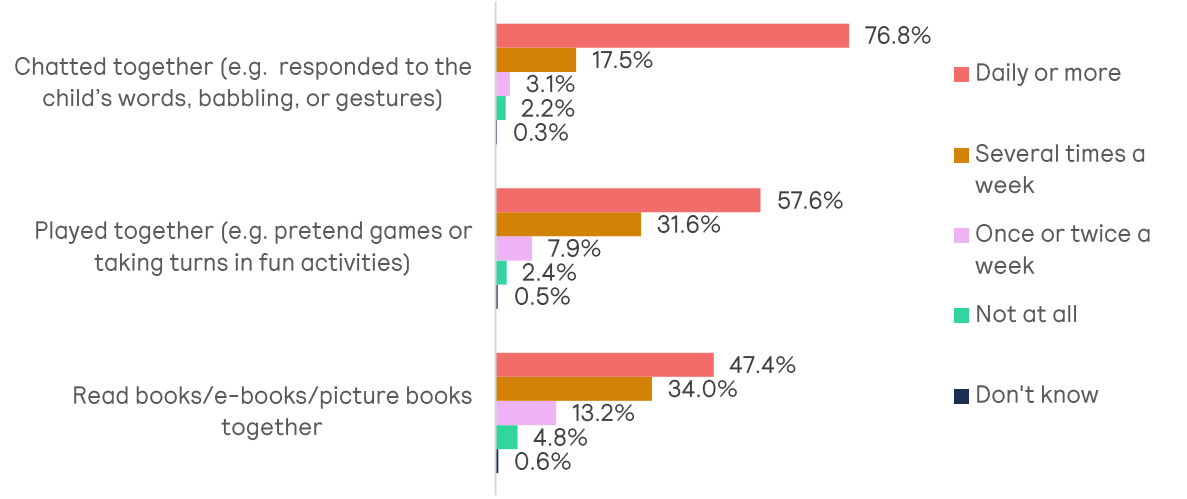
Findings in detail

Frequency of fathers' engagement in home learning activities in 2024

When asked in 2024 how often they had engaged in key home learning activities in the previous week, 3 in 4 fathers (76.8%) had chatted at least daily with their child, almost 3 in 5 had played with them at least daily (57.6%), and almost half (47.4%) had read with their child at least daily (see Figure 1).

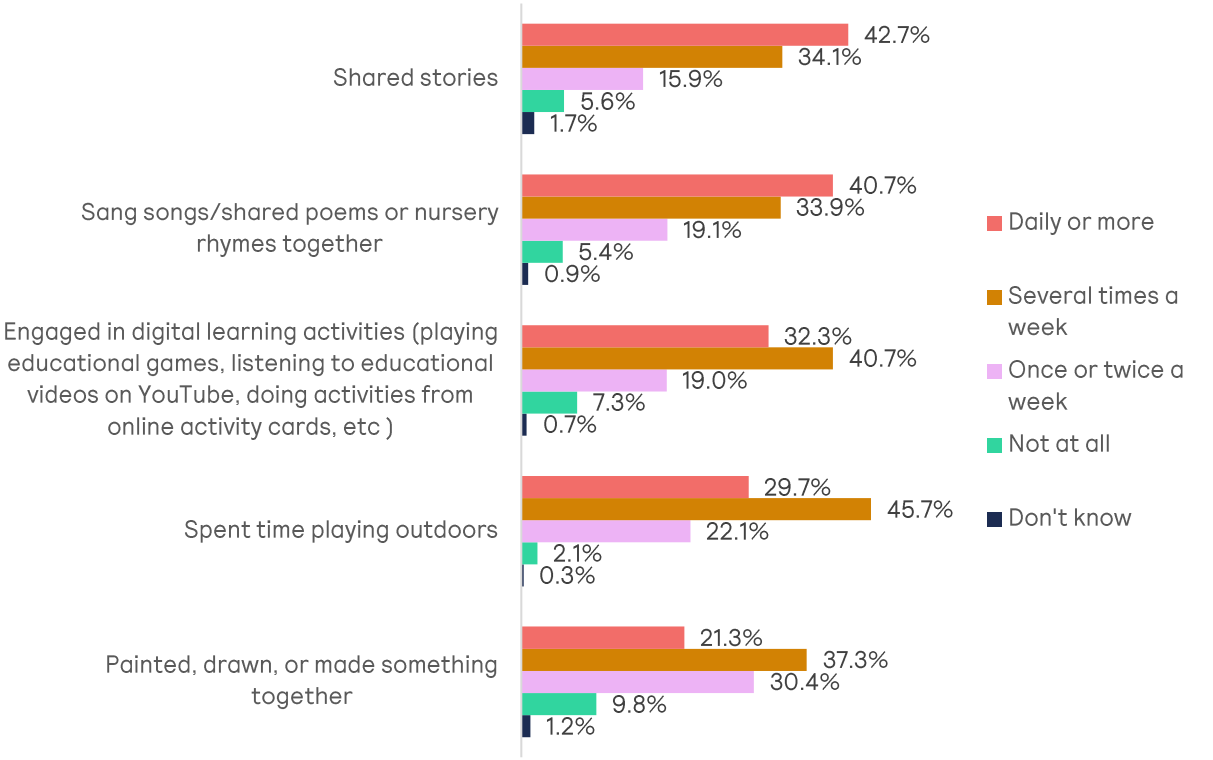
[1] Overall sample (n = 2,487 – over-sampled for delivery areas); parent gender: female 57.2% (n = 1,157), male 42.8% (n = 864), child gender female 49.6% (n = 1,002), male 49.6% (n = 1,003), prefer not to say 0.8% (n = 16).

Figure 1. Frequency of shared father-child key home learning activities engaged in over the last week in 2024



Fathers' daily engagement in other activities varied (see Figure 2): 2 in 5 parents reported sharing stories (42.7%) and singing (40.6%), 3 in 10 engaged in digital learning activities (32.3%) and played outdoors (29.7%), while 1 in 5 (21.3%) painted, drew or made something with their child.

Figure 2. Frequency of other shared father-child home learning activities engaged in over the last week in 2024



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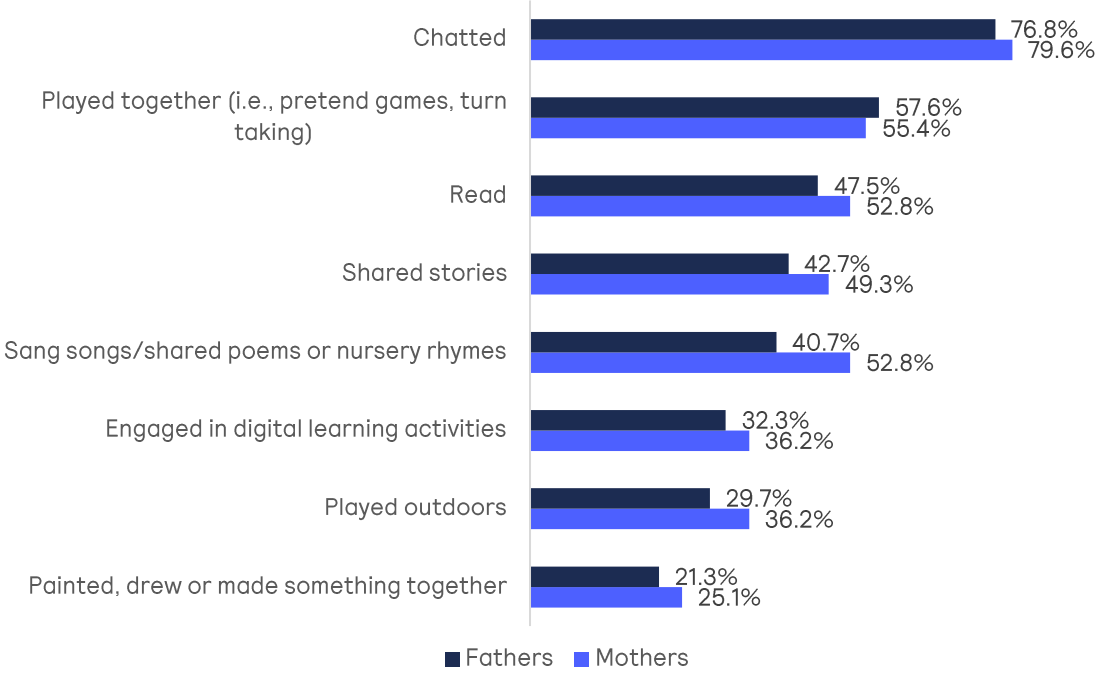
Comparing fathers' and mothers' engagement in home learning activities in 2024

Fathers have become more involved in childcare over the past few decades (e.g. Fatherhood Institute, 2022). However, research suggests that mothers still tend to engage in early learning activities more often than fathers (Chung et al., 2022; Murphy et al., 2022). This difference may vary depending on the type of activity. For instance, mothers are more likely to read to their toddlers (Duursma, 2014; Kiernan, 2016), whereas fathers often participate in more play-based activities (Potter, 2017; Zhong, 2023).

Parental involvement also differs based on the child's gender and age. For example, a US study examining fathers' interactions with children aged two, three and preschool age found that fathers of boys engaged more frequently in physical play, while fathers of girls were more involved in literacy activities (Leavell et al., 2012).

Our survey found that fathers engaged in learning activities somewhat less often than mothers, except for shared play, which marginally more fathers (57.6%) than mothers (55.4%) did at least once a day over the previous week (see Figure 3). It is worth noting, however, that these differences were between 3 and 7 percentage points except for singing, where the difference was 12pp.

Figure 3. Frequency of daily engagement in activities by gender



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Changes in fathers' engagement over the last five years

To explore changes in fathers' engagement in home learning activities over the past five years, we compared data about engagement in five key learning activities in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2024. Our analysis found a downward trend for all key activities between 2019 and 2024 (see Figure 4). This may reflect the impact of lockdown restrictions being lifted, early years settings opening again, and employment or working hours increasing again, although additional research would be needed to explore this.

Figure 4: Percentage of fathers of children aged birth to five engaging in selected home learning environment activities at least once a day between 2019 and 2024

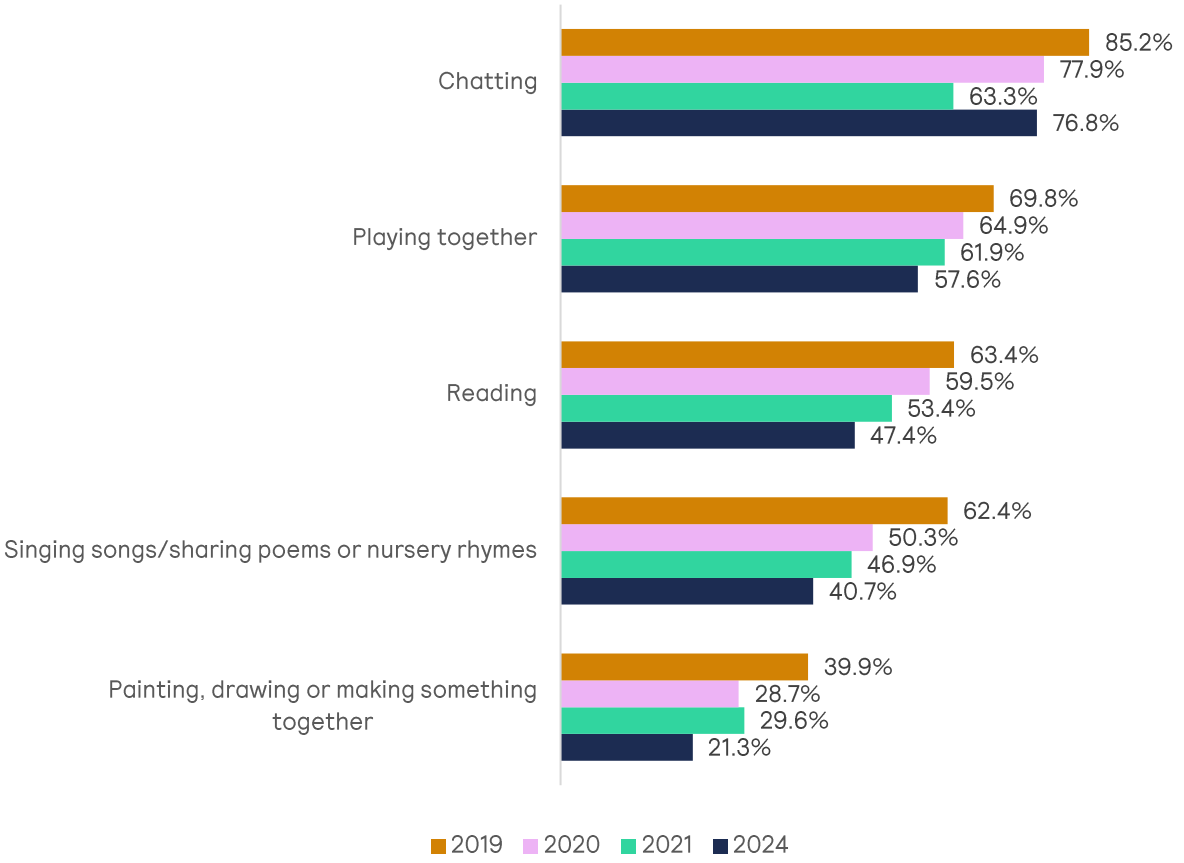

Table 1 shows the percentages of fathers and mothers who reported daily engagement in 2019 and 2024. Mothers consistently reported higher engagement levels than fathers across all activities in both 2019 and 2024. However, the data also reveal notable differences in the magnitude of change over time. For example,

the decline in daily engagement between 2019 and 2024 was more pronounced for mothers in activities like play (-23.0 percentage points for mothers vs. -12.2 for fathers) and chatting (-12.4 for mothers vs. -8.4 for fathers). By contrast, while both fewer mothers and fathers sang daily, the decline between 2019 and 2024 was sharper for fathers (-21.7 percentage points) than mothers (-13.7).

Table 1. Percentage of fathers and mothers engaging in key activities at least daily in 2019 and 2024, and the percentage-point difference

		2019	2024	Percentage point difference
Chat	Fathers	85.2%	76.8%	-8.4
	Mothers	92.0%	79.6%	-12.4
Play	Fathers	69.8%	57.6%	-12.2
	Mothers	78.4%	55.4%	-23.0
Read	Fathers	63.4%	47.4%	-16.0
	Mothers	67.0%	52.8%	-14.2
Sing songs/shared poems or nursery rhymes	Fathers	62.4%	40.7%	-21.7
	Mothers	70.4%	52.9%	-13.7
Painted, drawn, or made something together	Fathers	39.9%	21.3%	-18.6
	Mothers	38.8%	25.1%	-17.5

Discussion

The downward trend in daily engagement in early literacy activities by both fathers and mothers is deeply concerning. However, it is important to avoid simplistic narratives that suggest fathers are 'doing less', particularly within the context of decreasing levels of daily parental engagement overall.

Several factors are likely to have influenced both fathers' and mothers' ability to support their child's early learning and literacy in recent years. Early years settings have been affected by lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, followed

by the lifting of these restrictions and subsequent changes in parents' employment or working hours. More recently, families with young children in the UK have faced further challenges, including the rising cost of living and the pressures of a strained early years system. Additional research is needed to fully explore these dynamics and investigate the underlying factors shaping both fathers' and mothers' engagement in their child's early literacy and learning.

We are committed to continuing to monitor these trends through our regular surveys of parents of children aged from birth to five, providing vital insights into how parental engagement evolves in response to societal changes.

Given the well-documented benefits of shared father-child engagement in early learning activities, including improved language, literacy and overall wellbeing for children, these findings demand immediate and thoughtful action. Addressing this challenge requires concerted efforts to encourage and enable meaningful engagement, both at home and within the broader community.

To this end, the National Literacy Trust has launched *Early Words Matter*, a transformative nationwide five-year place-based campaign designed to support families, practitioners and local early years systems. Through tailored consultancy, targeted activities and programmes, and a wealth of resources, the campaign aims to foster positive behaviours, interactions and relationships that underpin children's early learning.

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About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions. Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

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