

# Parents' support for young children's literacy at home in 2025

Iulia Moisi, Christina Clark, Katerina Stoumpou  
& Irene Picton

March 2026

The resources, relationships and routines that children experience at home play a key role in supporting their learning and development. This includes access to books and other materials, as well as the ways parents and carers engage with children through conversations, shared activities and positive attitudes toward learning<sup>1</sup>. These forms of support are especially influential in the early years but continue to shape children's progress, wellbeing and future opportunities throughout childhood and adolescence<sup>2</sup>. Importantly, research shows that what parents do with their children has a greater impact than their background or circumstances<sup>3</sup>.

Given this vital role, recent national outcomes paint a mixed picture. In 2025, 69.7% of the UK's children achieved expected communication, language and literacy (CLL) levels at the end of Reception, a slight increase from last year's 69.2%. However, 3 in 10 children (30.1%) did not reach these expected levels, rising to almost 1 in 2 (47.5%) among children eligible for free school meals (FSM). While overall attainment has inched upward, fewer children eligible for FSM met expected CLL standards compared with the previous year. This widened the gap between FSM and non-FSM children to 21.4 percentage points, the largest difference in four years. At the same time, recent UK-based longitudinal research found dramatic differences in reported daily reading among parents of 2-year-olds based on income, with 77% of those from the highest-income quartile reading with their child daily compared with 32% of parents from the lowest income quartile<sup>4</sup>.

These inequalities underscore the importance of strengthening support for children's early communication and literacy across all settings, including the home. Everyday activities such as reading, chatting, playing and exploring together can nurture children's language, imagination and confidence. The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE)<sup>5</sup> project identified seven such behaviours – including shared reading, singing rhymes, creative play, outings, library visits, playing with

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Dearing, E. & Tang, S. (2010). The Home Learning Environment and Achievement During Childhood. In S. Christenson & A. L. Reschly (Eds), *Handbook of school-family partnerships*. Routledge; Department for Education (2018) *Improving the Home Learning Environment*

<sup>2</sup> Toth et al. (2020). *Home learning environment across time: The role of early years HLE and background in predicting HLE at later ages*. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 31(1), 7–30; Asmussen, K et al., (2016) *What works to support parent-child interaction in the early years*

<sup>3</sup> Hoyne, C. & Egan, S. M. (2022). *ABCs and 123s: A large birth cohort study examining the role of the home learning environment in early cognitive development*

<sup>4</sup> Fish, L., & Bernardi, M. et al., (2026). *Children of the 2020s: Home learning environment and screen time at age 2: Research brief*. Department for Education.

<sup>5</sup> Sylva, K. et al. (2004). *The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project*

letters and numbers, and social play with peers – that have long-lasting benefits for language development well beyond the early years.

Since 2019, we have been tracking parents' engagement with their children's literacy at home. This period has included profound challenges: national lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic, the ongoing cost-of-living crisis, and mounting pressures on the early years sector. Recent evidence shows that 1 in 5 parents have cut back on buying books for their children because of rising costs, while 1 in 10 feel too busy or stressed to support literacy at home<sup>6</sup>. These pressures intersect with cuts to early intervention services, workforce shortages, and long waiting times for speech and language support, making it more important than ever to understand and strengthen the role of the home learning environment in children's lives.

## This report

In summer 2025, we commissioned a survey in partnership with KPMG UK asking a nationally representative sample of 3,002 parents and carers of children aged five and under how often they engaged in a variety of activities known to support early literacy and learning with their child at home (for a demographic breakdown of the sample, see Appendix 1). Using the EPPE activities as a guide, activities we asked about included chatting, playing, reading, singing, painting/drawing, digital learning activities and playing outside. This report outlines our findings, including any differences relating to age, gender and social grade, and compares findings for 2025 with previous surveys.

## Key findings

---

**In 2025, fewer parents reported engaging daily in most home learning activities compared with 2024, continuing a downward trend seen since 2019:**

- **7 in 10 parents (70.2%) said they had chatted with their child at least once a day in the past week.** This is a decrease of 7.9 percentage points since 2024, and a drop of 20.1 percentage points compared with 2019, when 9 in 10 parents (90.3%) reported chatting daily.
- **Around half of parents (51.2%) said they had played with their child at least once a day in the past week.** This represents a decrease of 4.8 percentage

<sup>6</sup> NLT (2023) *Children and young people's access to books and educational devices at home during the cost-of-living crisis*

points since 2024, and a decline of 25 percentage points compared with 2019 (76.2%).

- **Fewer than half of parents (45.9%) said they had read with their child daily in the past week.** This is a decrease of 4.6 percentage points since 2024, and a decline of 20.2 percentage points since 2019 (66.1%).
- **Fewer than half of parents (46.3%) said they sang songs, shared poems or nursery rhymes with their child daily.** This represents a decrease of 1.2 percentage points since 2024, and a drop of 22.1 percentage points since 2019 (68.4%).
- **Only around 1 in 4 parents (27.9%) said they painted, drew or made things together with their child every day.** Although this is an increase of 4.6 percentage points since 2024, it remains 11.2 percentage points lower than in 2019 (39.1%).

**Apart from shared engagement in early learning activities, we also asked parents about their knowledge around children’s early learning as well as their confidence to engage in early home learning activities and to engage with local support.**

- Overall, parents in this sample reported high levels of knowledge around children’s early language development and ways to support it (80–92%). Somewhat fewer parents felt they had good knowledge about local organisations that could help support early language development (77%) or about talking to practitioners about their child’s language development (76.1%).
- Parents also had high levels of confidence (80–90%) in relation to supporting their child’s early language development. Somewhat fewer parents felt confident about activities such as listening to stories on audio devices (77.8%), attending group activities that support early language (76.3%), or visiting the local library (74.8%).

**Another aspect we explored this year was the barriers parents face that make it difficult to engage in shared learning activities.**

- The most frequently mentioned barrier was lack of time due to work, which was identified by more than 2 in 5 parents (44.8%). This was followed by barriers posed by the cost of activities (30.5%), by a lack of availability of local activities (21.7%), the cost of resources (17.6%), and a lack of additional support (17.5%).

**This year, we also wanted to understand better who the parents were who chatted, played or read with their children daily, regularly, occasionally or not at all, and to**

**explore differences by demographic background, confidence, knowledge and perceived barriers.**

- **Gender shapes patterns of engagement.** More mothers engaged in the activities daily, especially chatting and reading (around 55-60%), while fathers appeared more often among occasional or non-engagers (53-57%).
- **Differences by social grade create clear divides.** Families from higher social grades made up most of the daily and regular engagers (around 75-80%), whereas non-engagers were disproportionately from lower social grades (around 30-40%).
- **Confidence and knowledge are strongly associated with higher levels of engagement.** While gender and social grade provide important context, parents' beliefs in their ability and their understanding of how language develops show the strongest associations with how frequently they engage in early learning activities with their child. Daily engagers showed very high confidence (over 90%) and strong knowledge (c. 90%), whereas non-engagers were much less confident (around two-thirds) and less knowledgeable (below 70%).
- **Barriers reflect both time and structural pressures.** For daily and regular engagers, lack of time (40-50%) was the main challenge. For occasional and non-engagers, barriers were broader and more entrenched: cost of activities and resources (25-35%), limited availability of provision (20-30%), transport (20%), and the need for additional support (20%).

These findings indicate a concerning, and ongoing, downward trend in the percentage of parents engaging daily with activities known to support early language and literacy in children. Acknowledging the profound and lifelong benefits of a high-quality home learning environment for learning and wellbeing, more must be done to explore and address the factors affecting parental engagement with activities supporting early literacy. Our Early Words Matter campaign is working to support 250,000 pre-school children – with a focus on those growing up in areas of financial disadvantage – as well as early years educators and families, with events, activities and resources designed to support behaviour change at home.

## Frequency of learning activities in the home in 2025

---

When we asked parents and carers in 2025 how often they had engaged in various home learning activities over the last week, traditional activities such as chatting, playing and reading were the most-reported forms of engagement for parents of young children aged 0 to 5<sup>7</sup> (see Figure 1). The most common activity was chatting (i.e., responding to the child's words, babbling, gestures or questions), which 7 in 10 parents did with their child daily. Playing was also a popular activity, although only 1 in 2 parents said this was something they did with their child every day. Just under 1 in 2 parents told us that singing songs, sharing poems or nursery rhymes, and reading (books/ebooks or picture books) with their children were daily activities. In addition, more than 2 in 5 said they shared stories more generally.

Outdoor and creative play were less frequently reported: outdoor play was a daily activity for only around 1 in 3 parents, while fewer than 3 in 10 painted, drew or made something together every day. Findings also suggested some integration of digital tools into shared activities. For example, 3 in 10 parents said they engaged in digital learning activities daily, while more than 1 in 4 said that they used digital tools such as smart speakers or dedicated audio players to listen to stories daily.

<sup>7</sup> Throughout this report, the word 'parents' is used to refer to parents and carers, including other family members or adults who exercise parental responsibility for a child.

**Figure 1: Shared engagement in home learning activities at least once a day in 2025**

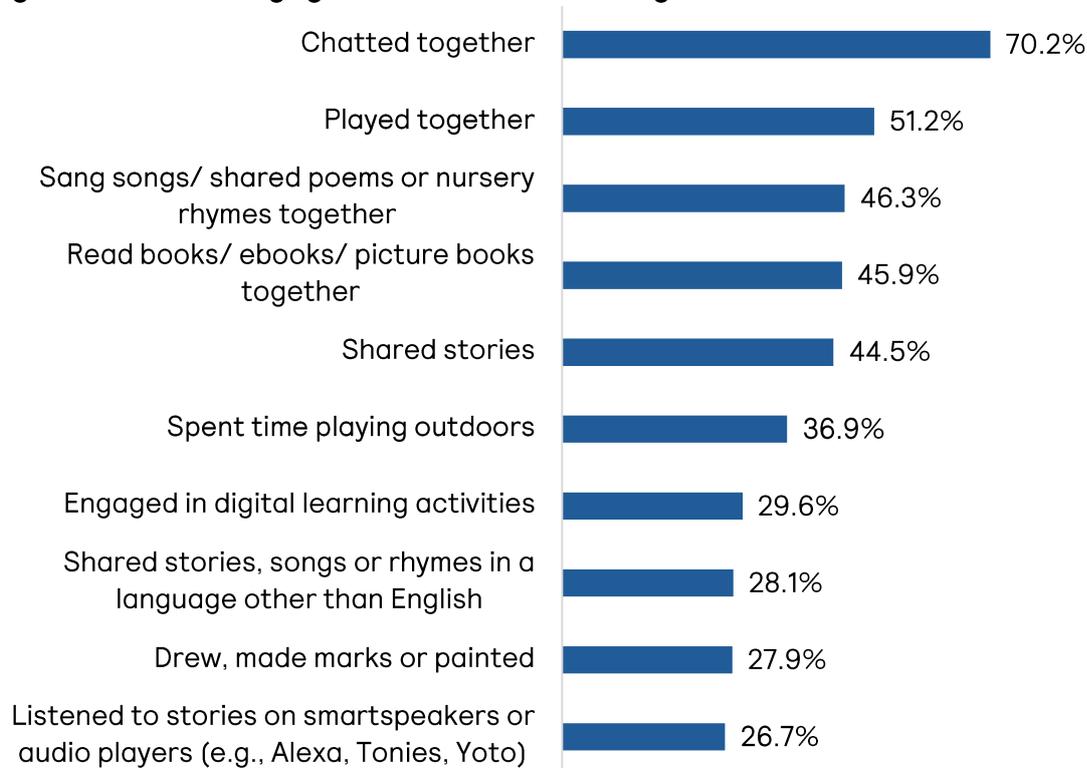


Table 1 provides more detailed information about engagement with daily activities. It shows that parents reported high engagement overall in relational and conversational activities, such as chatting and playing, with these being among the most frequent and consistent across households. Activities with a stronger literacy focus, such as reading books or sharing stories, also happened regularly but with more variation: while a notable percentage did them daily, a sizeable group only engaged once or twice a week.

Creative and hands-on activities (arts, crafts, making things together) were less likely to happen daily; instead, they clustered more in the mid-range (3-4 or 1-2 times a week). Outdoor play showed a similar pattern, often weekly but not necessarily daily. Digital engagement and use of technology for learning was much more polarised: some families did this often, but there was also a higher share that said they didn't engage with this at all compared with more traditional activities like chatting or reading. The same polarisation appeared in the use of audio/story technology (smart speakers, Tonies, Yoto).

**Table 1: Frequency of parental engagement in the past week across key home learning activities in 2025**

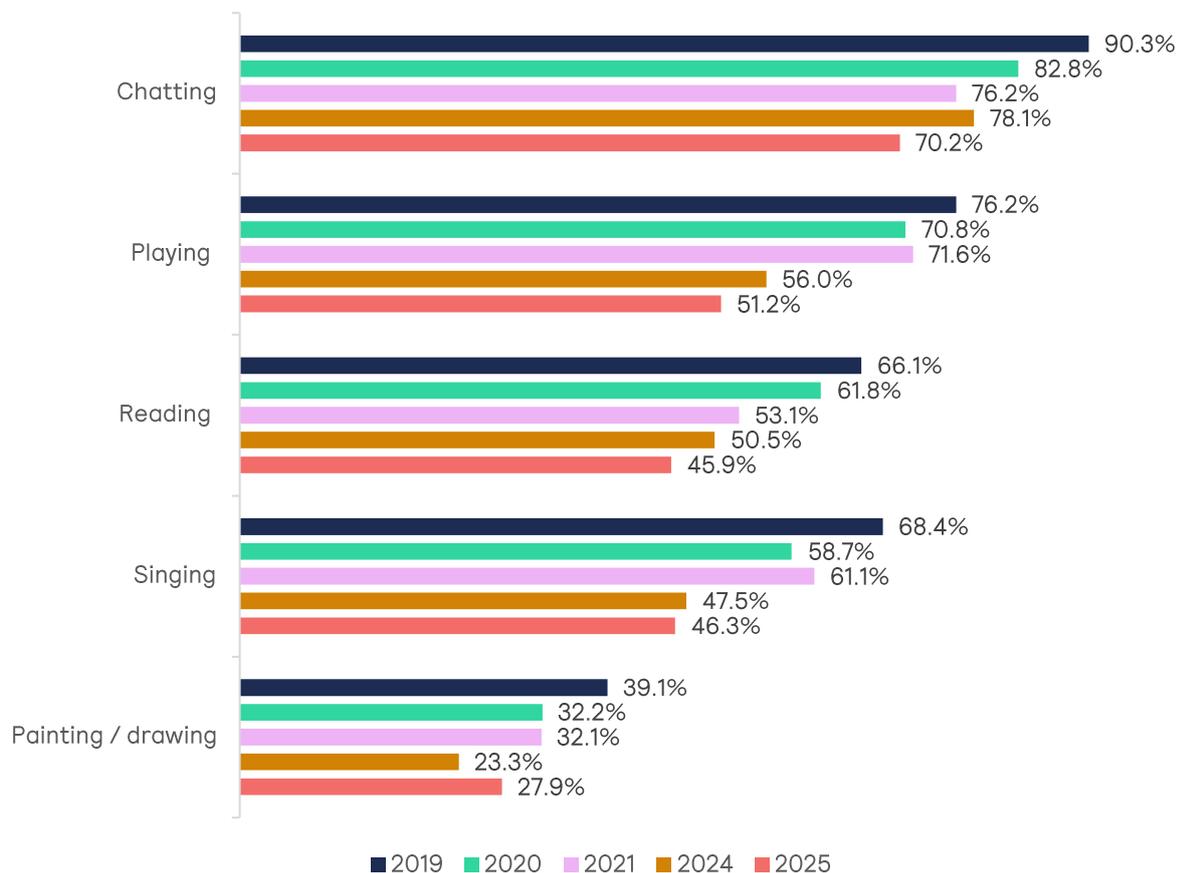
	More than once a day	Every day	5-6 times a week	3-4 times a week	1-2 times a week	Not at all	No one in our household does this	Don't know
Chatted together	38.8%	31.4%	12.1%	9.2%	6.1%	1.5%	0.7%	0.3%
Played together	23.9%	27.3%	15.6%	18.1%	11.3%	2.3%	1.1%	0.4%
Read books/ebooks/picture books together	17.5%	28.4%	16.8%	18.4%	13.8%	4.1%	0.7%	0.4%
Sang songs/shared poems or nursery rhymes together	20.8%	25.5%	16.2%	19.0%	13.8%	3.6%	0.9%	0.3%
Shared stories	16.9%	27.6%	15.2%	17.7%	14.9%	5.4%	1.9%	0.4%
Spent time playing outdoors	15.7%	21.2%	15.7%	23.9%	19.2%	3.1%	1.0%	0.2%
Drew, made marks or painted	11.2%	16.7%	14.1%	21.9%	22.4%	10.7%	2.7%	0.4%
Engaged in digital learning activities	11.5%	18.1%	14.3%	19.8%	17.6%	13.6%	4.6%	0.6%
Listened to stories on smart speakers or audio players	9.8%	16.9%	13.3%	16.9%	16.8%	18.8%	7.2%	0.4%
Shared stories, songs or rhymes in a language other than English	11.8%	16.3%	11.1%	12.9%	12.5%	18.5%	16.3%	0.5%

## Over-time comparisons

We have been asking parents about their engagement with key home learning activities since 2019, which enables us to track changes year on year. Figure 2 shows that over the last year, chatting, playing and reading have all seen significant declines, with the number of parents reporting chatting daily dropping by 7.9 percentage points, playing by 4.8 percentage points and reading by 4.6 percentage points. Engagement in singing saw a smaller decline of 1.2 percentage points and, encouragingly, there was an increase in daily engagement with painting (4.6 percentage points) between 2024 and 2025.

However, when looked at over the last six years, over-time changes are more concerning. Our findings show a clear downward trend across five key activities since 2019. For example, while 9 in 10 parents told us that they chatted with their child at least once a day in 2019, this dropped to only 7 in 10 in 2025, a decrease of 20.1 percentage points. Reading at least once a day has also decreased by 20.2 percentage points over the past six years, dropping from 2 in 3 in 2019 to 2 in 5 in 2025. Even more concerning is the decrease in daily play: while 3 in 4 parents told us in 2019 that they played with their child at least once a day, this had fallen to 1 in 2 in 2025, a decrease of 25 percentage points.

**Figure 2: Engagement in selected home learning activities at least once a day by parents of children aged birth to five between 2019 and 2025**



By contrast, recent research with parents of 2-year-olds found that parents reported similar levels of engagement in home learning activities as parents of 2-year-olds 10 years earlier<sup>8</sup>. This more encouraging finding may reflect variation in

<sup>8</sup> Fish, L., & Bernardi, M. et al., (2026). *Children of the 2020s: Home learning environment and screen time at age 2: Research brief*. Department for Education.

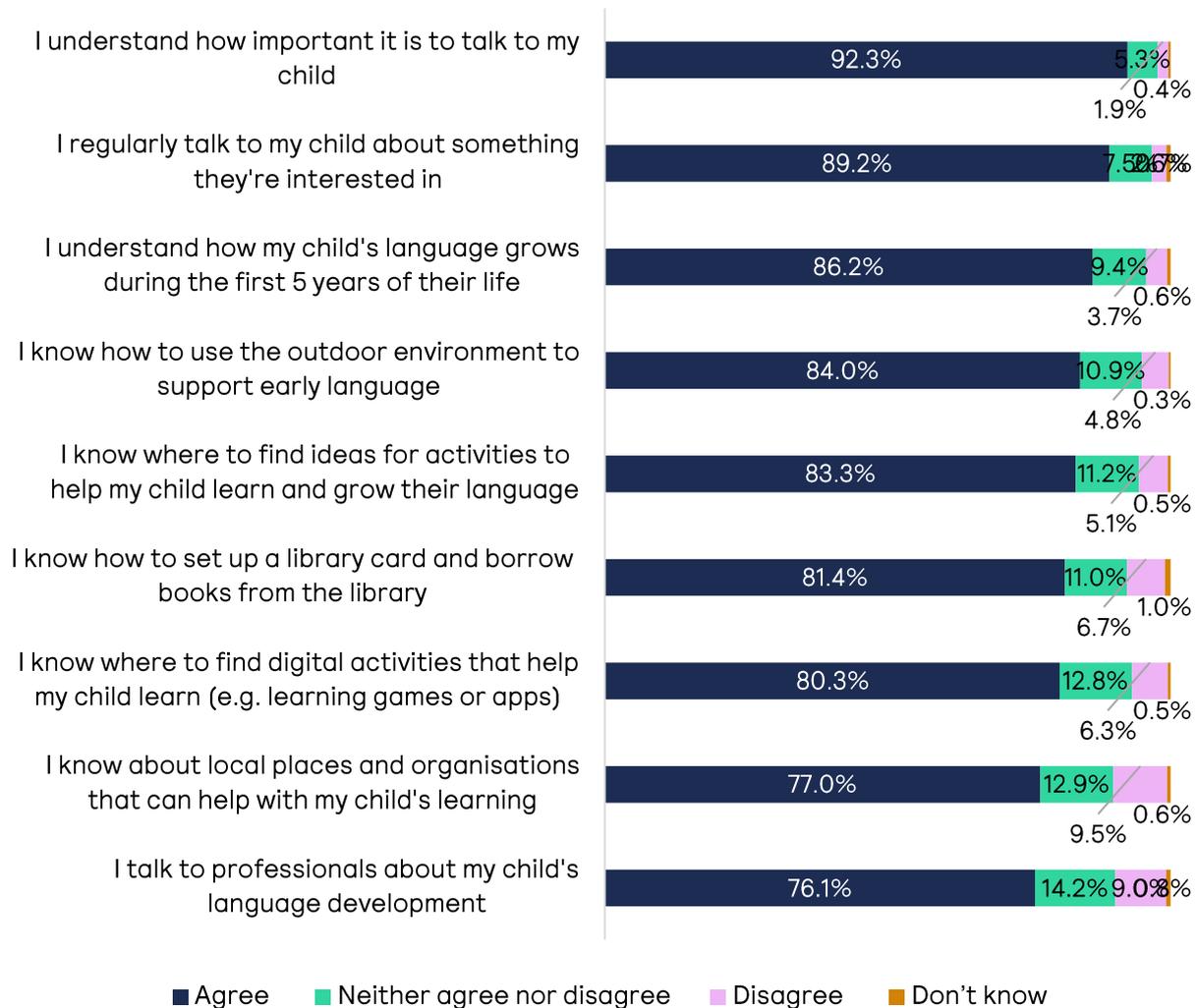
survey methodologies (e.g. how questions were asked, the age group of the children etc.) and the time periods involved.

## Parents' knowledge of supporting early language

As shown in Figure 3, parents' awareness of the foundational role of communication in supporting early language development was high, with more than 9 in 10 agreeing that they understood how important it was to talk with their child (an increase of 6.3 percentage points compared with 2024). In addition, almost 9 in 10 told us they engaged regularly in conversations that reflected their child's interests, showing that most parents were actively applying this knowledge. Most parents felt they understood how language grows in the first five years of life, with nearly 9 in 10 saying this (a 5.7-percentage-point increase since 2024).

Many parents also felt they were aware of how to use a variety of resources in their local environment to support their child's language development, with more than 4 in 5 saying they knew how to use the outdoor spaces, libraries and digital tools for this purpose (all increases on 2024, of 5.4, 4.8 and 3.0 percentage points respectively). However, of the options presented, fewest parents said they knew about local organisations that could help support their child's language development or if they could talk to professionals about this topic. This suggests a potential gap in relation to accessing community and expert support and an opportunity for clearer signposting to external support networks.

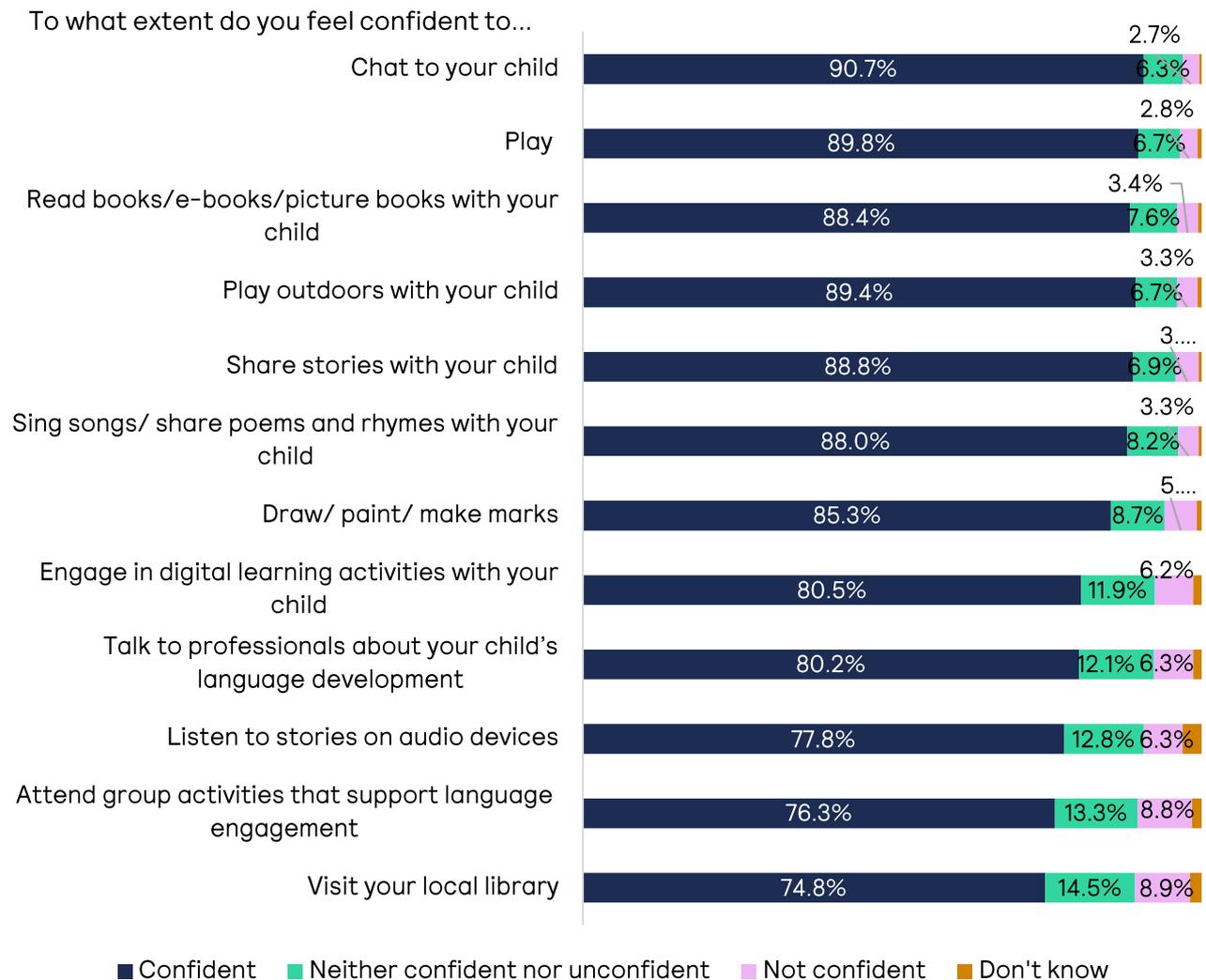
**Figure 3: Parental agreement with statements about knowledge of supporting early language development in 2025**



## Parents' confidence around supporting early language

As shown in Figure 4, parents were very confident about most activities supporting their child's early language, with 9 in 10 feeling confident to chat with their child, play generally or outdoors, read books, share stories or sing songs with their child at home. Slightly fewer (4 in 5) were confident about drawing and painting, engaging in digital learning activities and talking to professionals about their child's language development, and just under 4 in 5 were confident about listening to stories on audio devices. Fewest (3 in 4) felt confident about activities that involved going out or were more social, such as attending group activities and visiting the library. However, 1 in 11 were not confident visiting the library or attending group activities with their child.

**Figure 4: Parents' confidence to support early learning**



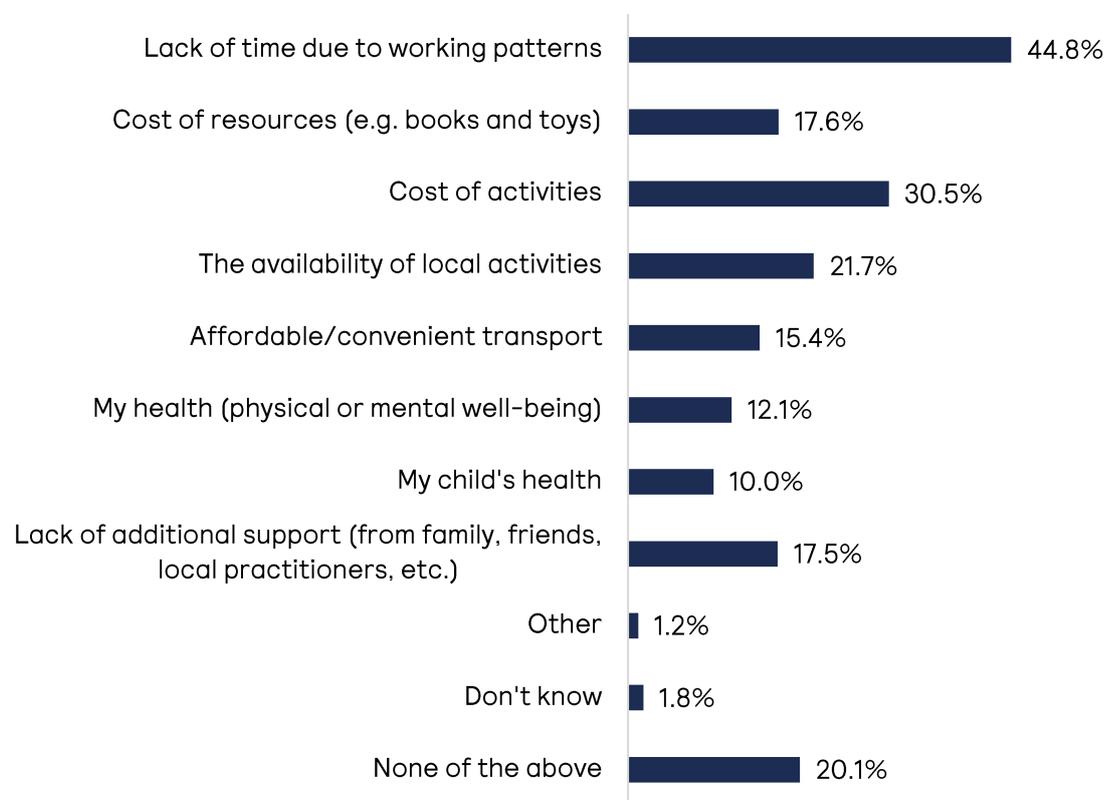
## Barriers to supporting early language

We also asked parents about the barriers they face in supporting their young child's learning at home to better understand the practical, financial and personal challenges that may limit engagement, and to identify where additional support could make the greatest difference.

Parents reported that the most common barrier to supporting their child's learning was lack of time, which was often linked to working patterns (see Figure 5). Alongside this, the cost of activities and resources emerged as a significant constraint, highlighting the financial pressures families face. A notable group also pointed to challenges in accessing opportunities locally, including the availability of activities and affordable or convenient transport.

For some families, personal or family health issues acted as obstacles, while others mentioned the absence of additional support from relatives, friends or local practitioners. Still, it is important to note that a sizeable proportion of parents said they faced none of these barriers, suggesting both variation in family circumstances and the potential for targeted support to make the biggest difference for those encountering multiple challenges.

**Figure 5: Parental agreement with statements about barriers to supporting early language development in 2025**



## A focus on chatting, playing and reading

The National Literacy Trust’s early years work is grounded in the principle of *Chat, Play, Read*, simple everyday interactions that build the foundations of literacy. Talking with children develops communication and language skills<sup>9</sup>; play strengthens cognitive, social and emotional development<sup>10</sup>; and sharing books

<sup>9</sup> Lieven, E., Theakston, A. & Rowland, C. (nd). *Quantity vs quality of child-directed speech: Which matters most?*

<sup>10</sup> Hà (2020) *Pretend Play and Early Language Development—Relationships and Impacts: A Comprehensive Literature Review* *Journal of Education* 202(1)

nurtures vocabulary, imagination and a love of reading<sup>11</sup>. Together, these activities empower parents and carers to support their child's learning from birth, ensuring more children start school ready to thrive while also helping to break the cycle of disadvantage.

To deepen our understanding, we are examining who the parents are who do – or do not – engage in these activities with their children every day, with the aim of finding better ways to support families. The following section explores who engaged in these activities daily, regularly (3 to 6 times a week), occasionally (1 or 2 times a week) or not at all in the previous week. This comparison highlights how frequency of engagement relates to factors such as parent and child gender, social grade, confidence in supporting literacy, and the barriers families experience in relation to supporting reading and related activities. Age of the parent and geographical location, however, did not emerge as a key indicator of engagement frequency.

### Chatting with children

Early parent-child interactions are foundational to early language development<sup>12</sup>, and shared parent-child talk, such as conversational turn-taking and serve-and-return interactions, questions and infant-directed speech, strengthen both the quantity and quality of children's early language<sup>13</sup>.

Parents who chatted with their child daily were more often mothers, tended to be from higher social grades, and showed both very high confidence and strong understanding of how children's language develops. Their main barrier was lack of time, which was often linked to work commitments. Those who chatted regularly (but not daily) looked quite similar: also largely from higher social grades, confident and knowledgeable, but not quite to the same extent as daily chatters. They too indicated that time pressures were their biggest barrier.

Parents who chatted only occasionally included a greater number of fathers, and while still often from higher social grades, their confidence and understanding of

<sup>11</sup> Andeweg et al. (2025) *What Shared Reading Can Do: A Review of the Literature Narrative Works 14(1)*, 83-110

<sup>12</sup> See, e.g., Alharbi (2023). *Insight into the Role of Interaction in Language Acquisition: Vygotsky's Interactionist Theory of Language*; Christi (2013). *Vygotsky, Cognitive Development and Language*.

<sup>13</sup> See, e.g., Donnelly & Kidd (2021). *The Longitudinal Relationship Between Conversational Turn-Taking and Vocabulary Growth in Early Language Development*; Anderson et al. (2021). *Linking Quality and Quantity of Parental Linguistic Input to Child Language Skills: A Meta-Analysis*; Fu & Zheng (2024). *A Three-Level Meta-Analysis of the Relationship Between Parental Language Input and Child Language Outcomes*.

language development were somewhat weaker than more frequent chatters. Again, time constraints were the most common barrier mentioned.

Finally, non-chatters stood out: more likely to be fathers and more likely to come from lower social grades. Their confidence and understanding of the importance of chatting were lower compared with other groups, and, unlike the others, they were more likely to highlight the cost of activities as a barrier rather than just a lack of time.

**Table 2: Parents chatting with their children: Exploring patterns of engagement by demographic background, confidence in supporting literacy and reported barriers**

		Daily chatters	Regular chatters	Occasional chatters	Non-chatters
<b>Demographic background</b>	<b>Parent gender</b>	More mothers than fathers (56.0% vs 44.0%)	More fathers than mothers (61.4% vs 38.6%)	Marginally more fathers than mothers (53.5% vs 46.5%)	More fathers than mothers (58.0% vs 42.0%)
	<b>Child gender</b>	Marginally more likely to have girls than boys (51.7% vs 48.1%)	Somewhat more likely to have girls than boys (52.4% vs 47.3%)	Marginally more likely to have boys than girls (51.4% vs 48.6%)	Marginally more likely to have boys than girls (51.1% vs 48.9%)
	<b>Social grade</b>	Largely from higher social grades (74.9%)	Largely from higher social grades (81.3%)	Largely from higher social grades (80.4%)	1 in 3 from lower social grades (33.3%)
<b>Confidence and knowledge</b>	<b>Confidence</b>	Very high confidence chatting (95.6%)	High confidence to chat (82.6%)	Somewhat lower confidence chatting (74.3%)	Somewhat lower confidence chatting (75.6%)
	<b>Knowledge</b>	High understanding of why talking to the child is important (96.1%) and high understanding of how language develops in early childhood (89.7%)	High understanding of why talking to the child is important (86.2%) and high understanding of how child language develops in early childhood (81.8%)	High understanding of why talking to the child is important (81.4%) but lower understanding of how language develops during early childhood (69.9%)	Somewhat lower understanding of why chatting to the child is important (71.1%) and of how language develops in early childhood (75.6%)
<b>Barriers</b>		Most likely to mention lack of time due to work (45.5%)	Most likely to mention lack of time due to work (46.7%)	Most likely to cite lack of time due to work (41.5%)	Most likely to cite cost of activities (24.4%)

## Playing

Shared play is another activity with well-documented benefits for early language development as well as other child outcomes<sup>14</sup>. Here, too, the characteristics of parents who engage in shared play daily, regularly, occasionally or not at all vary across groups.

Parents who played with their child daily were more often mothers, tended to be from higher social grades, and showed very high confidence and understanding of children's development (see Table 3). While time was the main barrier, some also mentioned cost.

Those who played regularly (several times a week) were more likely to be fathers, but also largely from higher social grades. They too felt confident and knowledgeable, although slightly less so than daily players, and they again highlighted a lack of time and cost as barriers.

Parents who played only occasionally were split fairly evenly by gender, although a greater share had daughters. They mostly came from higher social grades but had somewhat lower levels of confidence and knowledge compared with more frequent players. They were the group most likely to point to the availability of local activities as a barrier, alongside time and cost.

Non-players looked quite different: they were more likely to be fathers and more likely to come from lower social grades. They had noticeably lower confidence and weaker understanding of children's language development. They indicated a wider set of barriers than other groups, including time, cost, availability of activities, need for additional support, and affordable transport.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., Hà (2020) [Pretend Play and Early Language Development—Relationships and Impacts: A Comprehensive Literature Review](#) *Journal of Education* 202(1)

**Table 3: Parents playing with their children: Exploring patterns of engagement by demographic background, confidence in supporting literacy and reported barriers**

		Daily players	Regular players	Occasional players	Non-players
<b>Demographic background</b>	<b>Parent gender</b>	More mothers than fathers (54.9% vs 45.1%)	More fathers than mothers (53.6% vs 46.3%)	As many mothers as fathers (50.9% vs 49.1%)	More fathers than mothers (53.6% vs 46.4%)
	<b>Child gender</b>	As likely to have boys as girls (49.8% vs 49.9%)	Marginally more likely to have girls than boys (52.7% vs 47.2%)	More likely to have girls than boys (58.3% vs 41.7%)	As likely to have boys as girls (49.3% vs 49.3%)
	<b>Social grade</b>	Largely from higher social grades (74.2%)	Largely from higher social grades (80.4%)	Largely from higher social grades (82%)	Over 2 in 5 from lower social grades (43.4%)
<b>Confidence and knowledge</b>	<b>Confidence</b>	Very high confidence to play (94%)	Very high confidence to play (88.4%)	Very high confidence to play (85.5%)	Lower confidence to play (68.1%)
	<b>Knowledge</b>	Very high understanding of how language develops during the early years (89.6%)	Very high understanding of how language develops during the early years (86.2%)	High understanding of how language develops during the early years (78.7%)	Lower understanding of how early language develops (68.1%)
<b>Barriers</b>		Most likely to cite lack of time (41.9%) and cost of activities (29.7%) as barriers	Most likely to cite lack of time (48.1%) and cost of activities (31.9%) as barriers	Most likely to cite availability of local activities (78.1%), lack of time (52.4%) and cost of activities (29.6%) as barriers	Most likely to cite lack of time (39.1%), cost of activities (37.7%), lack of additional support (21.7%), availability of activities (20.3%), and affordable transport (20.3%) as barriers

## Reading with their children

Shared parent-child reading supports children's early development, contributing to gains in language and literacy as well as broader cognitive and socio-emotional skills<sup>15,16</sup>, and helps build attention, problem-solving and executive function<sup>17</sup>.

Parents who read with their child daily were more often mothers, mostly from higher social grades, and showed both very high confidence and strong knowledge about children's language development (see Table 4). Time pressures and costs were mentioned as barriers but, overall, this group was the most secure and consistent in their reading habits.

Those who read regularly (several times a week) were more likely to be fathers who were still largely from higher social grades. They retained high levels of confidence and knowledge, albeit slightly lower than daily readers. Their main barriers again centred on time and cost, with availability of activities also a factor.

Parents who read only occasionally included a larger share of fathers and showed weaker confidence compared with daily or regular readers. They were more evenly split across child gender, and, while many still came from higher social grades, their knowledge of language development was less strong. Lack of time, cost, and availability of local opportunities were key barriers.

Non-readers were distinct: they were more likely to be fathers, more likely to have sons, and more likely to come from lower social grades. They reported much lower confidence in both reading with their child and in using libraries, and they had the weakest understanding of early language development. Their barriers were broader and more structural, including not just time and cost but also the affordability of resources, availability of activities, and need for additional support.

<sup>15</sup> See e.g., Batini et al. (2021). *The Association Between Reading and Emotional Development: A Systematic Review*. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*; Galea et al. (2025). *Home-based shared book reading and developmental outcomes in young children: a systematic review with meta-analyses*, *Frontiers in Language Sciences*

<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., McNally et al. (2024). *Indirect Effects of Early Shared Reading and Access to Books on Reading Vocabulary in Middle Childhood*. *Scientific Studies of Reading*.

<sup>17</sup> Galea et al. (2025). *Home-based shared book reading and developmental outcomes in young children: a systematic review with meta-analyses*, *Frontiers in Language Sciences*

**Table 4: Parents reading with their children: Exploring patterns of engagement by demographic background, confidence in supporting literacy and reported barriers**

		Daily readers	Regular readers	Occasional readers	Non-readers
<b>Demographic background</b>	<b>Parent gender</b>	More mothers than fathers (58.4% vs. 41.6%)	More fathers than mothers (54.1% vs. 45.8%)	More fathers than mothers (53.5% vs. 46.5%)	More fathers than mothers (57.3% vs. 42.7%)
	<b>Child gender</b>	Marginally more girls than boys (52.1% vs. 47.6%)	Marginally more girls than boys (52.8% vs. 47%)	As likely to have boys as girls (50.6% vs. 49.2%)	More likely to have boys than girls (54.8% vs. 45.2%)
	<b>Social grade</b>	Largely from higher social grades (75.9%)	Largely from higher social grades (79.9%)	Largely from higher social grades (73.1%)	More parents from lower social grades than in any of the other profiles (34.7%)
<b>Confidence and knowledge</b>	<b>Confidence</b>	Very high confidence reading with their children (93.5%) High confidence visiting the library (80.2%)	High confidence reading with their children (89.6%) High confidence using library (77.4%)	High confidence reading with their children (85%) Lower confidence visiting the library (66.1%)	Lower confidence reading with their children (65.3%) Lower confidence using the library (53.2%)
	<b>Knowledge</b>	Very high understanding of how language develops during the early years (90.6%)	Very high understanding of how language develops during the early years (85.4%)	High understanding of how language develops during the early years (80.9%)	Lower understanding of how language develops during the early years (67.7%)
<b>Resources</b>		Least likely to say they had fewer than 10 books (19.8%). Most (56.7%) had 11-50 books; 13.4% had 51-100; and 9.5% had 100+	Similar to daily readers, but slightly more had fewer than 10 books (24.6%). However, more also had 11-50 books (61.6%); only 4.3% had over 100 books	More likely to have fewer than 10 books (32.4%), while 2 in 3 (63.4%) had between 11 and 100; and 3.4% had more than 100 books at home	Most likely to report having fewer than 10 books at home (47.6%). 2 in 5 (44.2%) had 11-100 books and 2.8% had over 100 (5.5% don't know)

<b>Barriers</b>	Most likely to cite time pressure due to work (41.8%), cost of activities (30.9%) and availability of activities (22.1%) as barriers	Most likely to cite lack of time due to work (48%), cost of activities (30.6%) and availability of local activities (21.2%) as barriers	Most likely to cite lack of time (50.6%), cost of activities (31%) and availability of local activities (22.3%) as barriers	Most likely to cite lack of time (37.9%), cost of activities (24.2%), cost of resources (21.8%), lack of additional support (21.8%) and availability of local activities (20.2%) as barriers
-----------------	--	---	---	--

These profiles suggest that parental reading practices are closely linked to social and economic context, gendered dynamics, and confidence in using literacy-related resources, a finding in line with existing research. While more frequent engagement is associated with higher confidence and access to support, less frequent engagement overlaps with greater structural barriers and lower self-assurance, factors that may reinforce existing inequalities in young children’s reading opportunities.

## Discussion

Findings from our 2025 survey demonstrate a significant and ongoing decline in parents’ engagement with key home learning activities, particularly chatting, playing and reading with their young children. Daily participation in these interactions, which are known to support early language and literacy, has fallen compared with both 2024 and 2019, indicating a sustained reduction in opportunities for shared learning at home.

This downward trend occurred despite parents continuing to report high levels of confidence and knowledge about how to support their child’s early learning. Many parents said they understood how language develops and felt able to engage in activities that nurture it, yet they still faced challenges putting this into practice. Lack of time, often linked to work and caring responsibilities, was the most frequently cited barrier, while others pointed to the cost of activities and resources, limited local opportunities, transport difficulties, or the need for additional support. Together, these findings suggest that awareness and motivation alone may not be enough to sustain daily engagement without tackling the broader practical and structural barriers families experience.

Across chatting, playing and reading, a consistent pattern emerges: parents who engage daily tend to report the highest levels of confidence and knowledge about how children’s language develops. However, confidence remains relatively high even among occasional or non-engagers, suggesting that belief in their ability is not the only factor shaping behaviour. Lower-frequency engagers are more likely to report weaker knowledge and face broader practical and structural barriers. Helping parents build their understanding of child development, feel supported in their role, and access simple, practical ways to integrate learning into daily life may therefore help encourage greater engagement.

Recent longitudinal research with parents of 2-year-olds found that while there was a 12 percentage-point difference in language scores between children with the highest and lowest quintiles of reported screen time, this increased to a 15 percentage-point difference in relation to parental income and to a 30 percentage-point difference in relation to the variety of home learning activities, highlighting “the complex and interrelated influences of economic circumstances, caregiver wellbeing, and the home environment on early development.” Taken together, such findings emphasise the urgency of addressing early disadvantage and supporting parents with advice about home learning activities, alongside providing guidance on screen use.<sup>18</sup>

Families’ social and economic circumstances as well as gender shape patterns of engagement. Reflecting wider research<sup>19</sup>, daily engagers are more likely to come from higher social grades, while families from lower social grades are over-represented among occasional and non-engagers. Mothers are more prominent among daily chatters, readers and players, while fathers feature more among those who engage less often. The barriers families face also differ depending on engagement level: regular engagers most often cite lack of time, while occasional or non-engagers point to broader structural challenges such as the cost of activities, availability of local provision, transport, or the need for additional support.

Overall, these findings show that families are not starting from the same place. Simple, practical and flexible tips to integrate early learning moments into busy schedules may be useful overall and might even be sufficient for more confident parents. However, more systemic support is needed for those facing entrenched disadvantage, particularly to make early learning activities in the home and across

<sup>18</sup> Fish, L., & Bernardi, M. et al., (2026). *Children of the 2020s: Home learning environment and screen time at age 2: Research brief*. Department for Education.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

communities more accessible to families on lower incomes, and to carers or families who might face additional barriers or lack of confidence, such as fathers, families speaking multiple languages, or carers of children with special needs.

Our vision is for every child to achieve a good level of development in communication, language and literacy by the age of five. To make our vision a reality in the current context, we launched Early Words Matter, a pioneering five-year campaign to support 250,000 pre-school children in some of the country's most disadvantaged areas. The campaign will transform the life chances of these children using a tried-and-tested place-based approach that will deliver sustainable change through direct support for parents, capacity building in the early years sector, and long-term systemic change. The ultimate goal is to increase the number of children who achieve at least the expected levels across communication, language and literacy at the end of Reception.

## **Appendix 1**

### **Methodology**

In 2025 we commissioned Savanta to conduct a survey of parents and carers of children aged from birth to five across the UK. A nationally representative sample of 3,002 parents and carers took part, including respondents from England (84.2%, n = 2,528), Scotland (8.4%, n = 251), Wales (4.7%, n = 140), and Northern Ireland (2.8%, n = 83). The survey was conducted between 24 June and 22 August 2025.

The sample included parents of children across the full 0–5 age range. Parent gender was evenly distributed (48.4% female, 51.6% male), and child gender was similarly balanced (51.7% female, 48.1% male).

Social grade, based on the occupation of the chief income earner (ABC1 and C2DE), was used as an indicator of families' social and economic circumstances.

Results were compared with findings from previous surveys conducted in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2024, which included comparable questions about how frequently parents engaged in home learning activities with their child. Questions were designed to be comparable across survey waves, allowing trends over time to be examined.

Differences between groups and survey years were tested for statistical significance using standard survey analysis techniques.

## 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.

Visit [www.literacytrust.org.uk](http://www.literacytrust.org.uk) to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on X.

## Copyright

© National Literacy Trust 2026. You may report on findings or statistics included in this report if you accredit them to the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is Moisi, I., Clark, C., Stoumpou, K. & Picton, I. (2026). *Parents' support for young children's literacy at home in 2025*. London: National Literacy Trust.

We will consider requests to use extracts or data from this publication provided that you:

- Acknowledge that the content is the work of the National Literacy Trust and provide appropriate references in any publications or accompanying publicity;
- State that any views expressed are yours and not necessarily those of the National Literacy Trust.