

Young children in Scotland and their experience of books and stories:

Findings from the Growing Up In Scotland study (GUS)



Background

Growing Up in Scotland is the longitudinal research study following the lives of over 10,000 children and their families across Scotland from birth through to the teenage years. The aim of the study is to find out how the circumstances and experiences of children growing up in Scotland are changing and to provide new evidence about how early experiences affect later outcomes.

GUS has been collecting data on a wide range of topics from participating families since 2005. There are two main groups of children taking part in the study – one group born during 2004/05 and a further group born during 2010/11. Since the children were just 10 months old, data has been collected on their experiences of being read to and other activities in the home. Parents have been asked about visits to libraries with their child(ren). GUS also collects detailed information about child development – communication and language development, cognitive development (vocabulary and problem solving) and social, emotional and behavioural development.

This briefing has been produced to coincide with the conference ‘Turning the page: improving literacy for all’ organised by Children in Scotland in partnership with West Dunbartonshire Council in January 2013. It provides some of the key findings from GUS in relation to reading and language development. Further detail is available from the study website www.growingupinScotland.org.uk

Key findings

58% of families in Scotland with a child aged 3 years have more than 30 children’s books in their home (including library books). 9% of all families have less than 10 books but 40% of families in the lowest income quartile have less than 10 books¹.

Two thirds of parents with a child aged 10 months read stories or look at books with their child every day or most days. One fifth do this once or twice a week while 13% do so less often. For children aged nearly 3 years, 84% have stories read to them every day or most days. 12% experience this once or twice a week and only 4% are read to less often².

Three quarters (76%) of parents of babies in the highest income group read stories to their child every day, compared with 57% of parents in the lowest income group³.

Only children are read to more often than children with siblings, particularly when compared to those in households of four or more children (84% of only children looked at books everyday compared with 57% of those in a household with three or more other children)⁴.

There appears to be a link between adult literacy and children's reading habits: 85% of parents who had read a book for pleasure in the last week read stories to their child every day, compared with 72% of parents who had not read themselves. However, three-quarters of mothers who had not read themselves still read to their child every day, suggesting an awareness of the benefits of reading to children⁵.

55% of 3-year-olds have never visited their local library. 18% visit the library at least once a fortnight, while 27% visit less often than once a fortnight. Mothers with degrees are significantly more likely to take their child to the library than mothers with lower qualifications⁶.

Children who are read to often, and those who had visited a library by the time they were 10 months old score higher in assessments of cognitive ability at age 34 months than children who have less experience of these activities. Doing frequent home learning activities such as reading and singing from an early age is associated with better cognitive ability (vocabulary and problem solving) at age 3, even after taking account of socio-demographic factors⁷.

At age 5, compared with children whose parents have no qualifications, children with a degree-educated parent are around 18 months ahead on vocabulary. Children who display better communication skills at an early age are more likely to see their cognitive skills improve during the pre-school period (between the ages of 3 and 5). This relationship is stronger for children whose parents have no or low educational qualifications – children from less educated backgrounds whose relative vocabulary ability improves are those who were already demonstrating better communication skills at an earlier age. This reinforces the need to support communication skills and language development before the age of 3⁸.



GUS is commissioned by the Scottish Government and is carried out by ScotCen Social Research in partnership with the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) at the University of Edinburgh and the MRC Social and Public Health Sciences Unit in Glasgow.

References

- ¹ Anderson, S et al (2007) *Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 1 Overview Report* p128,129
- ² Anderson, S et al (2007) *Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 1 Overview Report* p128
- ³ Anderson, S et al (2007) *Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 1 Overview Report* p129
- ⁴ Bradshaw et al (2008) *Growing Up in Scotland: Year 2 Report* p58
- ⁵ Bradshaw et al (2008) *Growing Up in Scotland: Year 2 Report* p58
- ⁶ Anderson, S et al (2007) *Growing Up in Scotland: Sweep 1 Overview Report*
- ⁷ Bromley, C (2009) *Growing Up in Scotland – The impact of children's early activities on cognitive development*
- ⁸ Bradshaw, P (2011) *Growing Up in Scotland – Changes in child cognitive ability in the pre-school years*

Contact: Lesley Kelly, GUS Dissemination Officer, lesley.kelly@ed.ac.uk