

LETTER BOX

the letterbox club



Acknowledgements

The Letterbox Club is managed by Booktrust, and has been funded by the DCSF (Department for Children, Schools and Families) for a national pilot in 2007 and 2008, enabling us to work with over 1500 children and their foster families. Additional funding and staff time have been donated by Penguin, and every participating local authority has provided help in kind. Pearson has helped with maths games, and many publishers have given generous discounts on their books. ESPO and DSI have made sure that purchasing and logistics have kept to time and budget.

In 2007, 22 local authorities in England, and NCH in Wales, took part. Our thanks go to all the children, foster carers and staff who contributed to the testing and questionnaires for this evaluation.

Bath & NE Somerset	Northamptonshire
Bournemouth	North Somerset
Brighton & Hove	Oxfordshire
Bristol	Portsmouth
Dudley	Solihull
Gateshead	Southampton
Gloucestershire	Stoke-On-Trent
Kensington & Chelsea	Suffolk
Leicester City	Wolverhampton
Leicestershire	Worcestershire
Manchester	
Milton Keynes	NCH Wales

In 2008, we were joined by 30 additional local authorities, covering every government region in England. The test results, questionnaires and interviews collected from the 2008 cohort will contribute to a final report in 2009.

Bedfordshire	Luton
Brent	Merton
Bury	Newcastle-Upon-Tyne
Cornwall	NE Lincolnshire
Cumbria	N Tyneside
Dorset	Nottingham City
Durham	Sheffield
Ealing	Slough
Essex	Somerset
Halton	Staffordshire
Hammersmith & Fulham	Sutton
Hartlepool	Tameside
Kirklees	Warwickshire
Knowsley	Wirral
Leeds	Wokingham

From 2009, the Letterbox Club will be open to every local authority in the United Kingdom, on a subscription basis for each child enrolled.

The team at the University of Leicester School of Education who have compiled this report are Rose Griffiths, Dr Sue Dymoke and Dr Chris Comber.

introduction

Getting a parcel through the post is exciting for anyone, and the Letterbox Club uses this excitement to encourage looked after children to enjoy playing games and reading at home. The aim is to enable children to make as much progress as possible in literacy and numeracy in Key Stage 2 (ages 7 to 11), and to support foster carers and family members who would like to help the children do well.

The project was initiated by the University of Leicester in 2002, and developmental pilot work took place from 2003 to 2006 with two local authorities, Leicester City and Suffolk. This helped to establish a successful way of working, leading to a major partnership with Booktrust, the national charity that runs *Bookstart* and other book-gifting schemes, and hence a successful bid for a national pilot for 2007 and 2008, funded by the DCSF.

Each child who joins the Letterbox Club gets a parcel once a month for six months. The parcel is addressed to the child at their foster home or other

residence, and typically includes a letter (personalised with the child's name), two reading books, stationery items such as pencils, an exercise book or drawing book, bookmark or stickers, and a maths game at the child's own level of attainment (for National Curriculum levels 1 to 4). Parcels in 2007 were sent from June to November, to cover the summer holiday period, where there is a dip in attainment for many children. It was hoped that many carers would join in by reading or playing games with the children, but there was no assumption that this was required.

From 2008, parcels were sent from May to October, but this earlier start was not possible in 2007 because of the time needed to set up the national organisation. Children can join Letterbox in Year 3 (and be members across the summer holiday into Year 4) or in Year 5 (to take them into Year 6).

Funding for 2007 was confirmed in February for April 2007. The initial period of establishing the national project, managed by Booktrust, was

successfully completed by the end of May, and included appointing a part-time project manager and assistant, confirming which local authorities would take part, making the book selection for the year, sourcing books and materials for the parcels, and arranging warehousing and distribution. Every local authority took part in Induction Days led by Rose Griffiths from the University of Leicester. This ensured that everyone felt confident about how to administer the reading tests, maths tests and attitudinal questionnaires that were given to participating children during May and early June, before the first parcels were sent out. Children were also tested after the six months had finished, to compare their progress.



What did children and carers think of the parcels?

Children were sent questionnaires to collect their views of the books and games in the parcels, by rating each item “Liked it”, “It was OK” or “Didn’t use it”. (We realise that the latter category could include “Didn’t like the look of it” or “Haven’t used it yet”, but we felt that it was important to keep the questionnaire as simple as possible). There was space for a comment on each item if wished, and carers were asked their opinions too.

Children in Year 3/4 received a different selection of books to those sent to children in Year 5/6, except *Where’s Wally?* which went to both age ranges. Books had been chosen by a selection panel to include a mixture of fiction, poetry, and non-fiction, with good levels of illustration. The maths games were organised by National Curriculum level, not by age range, and each child was sent a game at level 1, 2, 3 or 4, depending on their initial maths test. The games were chosen to develop the child’s understanding of number and their confidence and fluency with key skills in number.

It was hoped that across the 12 books for each age range, each child would find at least 8 books which they liked or thought were “OK”, and only 3 or 4 that they did not immediately want to use: the target was a “satisfaction rate” of about 67%, and “didn’t use it” of 33% or less.

The questionnaires (from 221 children) show a high level of satisfaction with the books they were sent: 84% “liked it” or “it was OK” and 16% “didn’t use it” on average for each book. Maths games were also well-received: 77% satisfied, and 23% “didn’t use it” for each game on average. Comments indicated that the majority of carers felt the provision of the games and activities had encouraged them to do more with their (foster) child, and there was evidence of brothers, sisters, grandparents, and social workers playing maths games with children, often because the child had asked them to play. Many children used the maths equipment provided in other ways, too – for example, using the token coins to play shops.

Many children and carers commented on the importance of the parcels being addressed to the child and coming through the post over a sustained period of time, and had noticed the excitement their children felt in “being remembered” and in being able to manage things for themselves:

“Loved the fact it was addressed to him, opening and sorting, cutting out game, putting books away etc.”
(Carer of Year 5/6 boy)

“The colour of the envelope is brilliant. Brandon watches the post and can immediately identify “his” package. It’s like a birthday present and the combination of the reading and the doing stuff is excellent.”
(Carer of Year 3/4 boy)

“Danielle really enjoys her parcels – it helps her because she finds concentrating difficult but I have noticed her reading one of the books quietly to herself, which doesn’t happen often!!”
(Carer of Year 3/4 girl)

The most popular book in both age ranges was *Where’s Wally?* for which only 8% of children ticked “Didn’t use it”. Comments on this book (and its accompanying magnifying glass) showed children’s pleasure in owning their own copy of a book, in having to concentrate, and in sharing their enjoyment with others in their family:

“My brother had two *Where’s Wally* books and sometimes wouldn’t let me look at them. Now I have my own it’s great.”
(Year 3/4 girl)

“I liked it but it was very hard to find *Wally* as there are loads of people with red and white on.”
(Year 5/6 child)

“We all had a go at *Where’s Wally* – even the teenagers wanted to have a go.”
(Carer of Year 3/4 child)



One parcel in each age range included a book and accompanying CD: *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* for Year 3/4, and *Journey to the River Sea* for Year 5/6. The CDs were often used at bedtime or on car journeys, and many carers commented that they had not previously thought of using audio stories with their foster child:

“Best gift ever. He was listening to one CD each night at bedtime. He never seems to have enough of it.”
(Carer of Year 3/4 boy)

“Damon especially enjoyed the audio book – he finds reading quite difficult and struggles with comprehension. He’s of an age where he wouldn’t appreciate a bedtime story from me, but he listened to the CD at bedtime.”
(Carer of Year 5/6 boy)

A small number of foster carers (3 out of 221) expressed the opinion that the parcels were “wasted” on their children, but the great majority were very pleased. Some carers made comments that showed they were uncertain about aspects of helping children with reading and number, and we would like to follow this up in the future, to look for further ways of offering support.

Many children wrote comments about why they liked particular books, and told us whether they had been able to read them independently or if a family member had read the book to them. The children’s and carers’ comments for 2007 were used by the Book Selection Panel to help choose books for 2008.



Improvements in reading

Children's maths and reading were tested before and after the children became members of the Letterbox Club. 16 local authorities have been able to provide full results for analysis, for a total of 316 children (147 girls and 169 boys).

The process of assessing the children's reading and number work in Year 3 and Year 5 at the beginning of the Letterbox Club has been valued by many participating authorities, as it provided additional information about children's attainment. Many authorities have said they intend to continue using the assessments after 2008, as they find the information useful when planning future provision for each child.

Reading scores were assessed using the Neale Analysis of Reading Ability. These were recorded as standardised scores. For a typical child of any age, a standardised score of 100 is average; if the child makes normal progress over any period of time, their score will stay as 100, because it is adjusted for age. If a child aged 8 has a standardised score of 90, they are about a year behind expectations for their age, with a reading age of 7. If a child's standardised score goes up, it means they are making faster progress than average. Our cohort of children had

lower scores overall at the beginning of Letterbox than would be expected for children of their age nationally. For example, 36% of the Year 3 children and 33% of the Year 5 children had scores of under 90; nationally, for all children, this figure would be 23%. Some of our children were very good readers: 10% of Year 3 and 18% of Year 5 scored over 110 (compared to 23% nationally).

If all the children had made average progress over the period between their two tests (ie 7 or 8 months' progress in 7 or 8 months), they would have a "gain score" of zero; this would have been good, as many had been working at slower rates before that, and this period included the summer holiday and a change of class. In fact, our 2007 cohort of Year 3/4 children made a mean gain score of 4.35, and the Year 5/6 children gained a mean of 2.53. Both gains are statistically significant (ie very unlikely to have been caused by chance).

Standardised Reading Scores are the most reliable scores to use when looking at children's progress, but many people find it helpful to think of a child's situation using "reading ages". These give a rough guide, as shown in these two case studies:

Case study 1 - Jamie

Jamie was aged 10 years 5 months when his reading age was tested before he had his first Letterbox parcel. He scored a reading age of 8 years 11 months (so he was about 18 months behind the average for his age, with a standardised score of 92).

A month after his last Letterbox parcel, when he was aged 11 years 1 month, he was tested again, and scored a reading age of 10 years 1 month (so he was now only 12 months behind, with a standardised score of 95).

In the 8 months between his two tests, Jamie made about 14 months progress.

Case study 2 - Leanne

Before she started getting Letterbox parcels, Leanne was 8 years 6 months old, with a reading age of 7:10 (so she was about 8 months behind average).

Her standardised score was 94.

A month after her sixth parcel, Leanne was 9 years 2 months old, and scored a reading age of 9:10. She had made about 16 months progress in 8 months. Her standardised score was now 105.

It would not be reasonable to attribute all of the children's progress to the Letterbox Club, as most children were also attending school, but the project has acted as a catalyst for many children and their carers, providing them with additional support and encouragement to read:

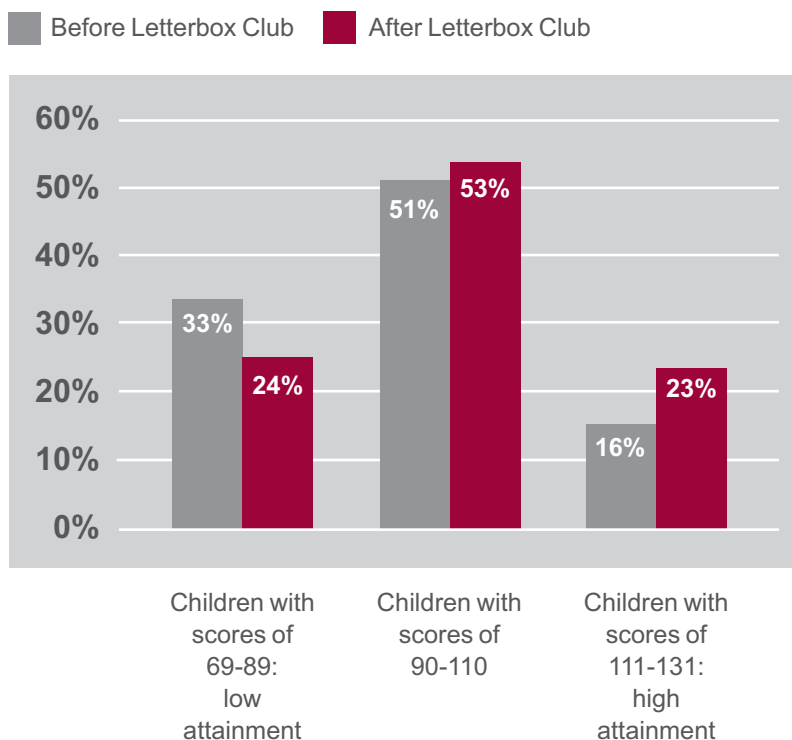
"The parcels have played a big part in Hamza becoming more enthusiastic about reading. Even made him keen to bring home school books."
(Carer of Year 3/4 boy)

"It has been great to see him getting excited about new books. We have spent more time sharing stories."
(Carer of Year 3/4 boy)

"It has got her interested in different types of books, and it helps her with her reading. Also, the younger children have started to get more interested in reading because of this."
(Carer of Year 3/4 girl)

Improvements in Reading

(using standardised reading scores) results from 316 children





Improvements in number

The mathematics tests we used were devised to check children's ability to complete number problems successfully, and also to check their fluency with mental arithmetic (in other words, over a period of time the tests check not just whether a child can get the right answer to a problem, but also whether they can get it right more quickly and confidently).

This means that the maths scores are more difficult to compare to national figures, because unlike the reading scores, they are not standardised. However, the results do show that about 40% of the Letterbox children had scores in number that increased by at least one National Curriculum level from late May to early January. For children progressing at an average rate, the usual expectation over that time would be that about 33% of pupils would make such an improvement. Since the period of the intervention included several weeks of school holiday, and many of the children have quite entrenched difficulties, this is encouraging.

"Carl was very pleased with the pencil case, pens and calculator which he uses for his homework."

(Carer of Year 5/6 boy)

"We've played the game from the first parcel lots, and Shaun can now do his number bonds to 10!"

(Carer of Year 5/6 boy)

"The variety in the parcels is fantastic and we all enjoyed the maths bingo game."

(Carer of Year 5/6 girl)

"Damon enjoyed the maths bingo - wanting to play with everyone who came to the house."

(Carer of Year 5/6 boy)

Which children gain the most from Letterbox Club?

We examined children's "starting points" to see which groups of children gained most in maths or reading scores over the time they took part. The project made least difference to the reading scores of children who failed to score at all on the initial test. There were 32 children included who had not yet started to read, and only four of these children made progress that could be measured by the Neale test. However, some of these children did make progress in number work, and some made very enthusiastic comments about receiving parcels and having stories read to them. The maths and reading results have been analysed according to each child's starting point, and there seems to be as much advantage to children in all three initial categories (below average, average, and above average attainment for age) in being a member of the Letterbox Club.

The Letterbox Club Parcel Contents, June - November 2007

Year 3-4 Books

- Eyewonder, Rainforest (Dorling Kindersley)
- Hilary McKay, Charlie & The Cat Flap (Scholastic)
- Eoin Colfer, The Legend of Spud Murphy (Puffin)
- Doctor Who, Glow In The Dark Monsters Sticker Book (BBC/Penguin)
- Martin Handford, Where's Wally? (Walker Books)
- Roald Dahl, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Book (Puffin)
- Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, CD (Puffin)
- Dick King-Smith, The Hodgeheg (Puffin)
- Eve Garnett, The Family from One End Street (Puffin)
- Jeremy Strong, The Hundred Mile An Hour Dog (Puffin)
- Eyewonder, Mammals (Dorling Kindersley)
- Jacqueline Wilson, The Story of Tracy Beaker (Corgi)
- Paul May, Billy and the Seagulls (Corgi)
- Francesca Simon, Horrid Henry and the Secret Club (Orion)

Year 5-6 Books

- Eyewonder, Reptiles (Dorling Kindersley)
- Roald Dahl, The BFG (Puffin)
- Roger McGough, Bad, Bad Cats (Puffin)
- Paul Stewart and Chris Riddell, Fergus Crane (Corgi)
- Martin Handford Where's Wally? (Walker Books)
- Eva Ibbotson, Journey to the River Sea Book (Macmillan)
- Eva Ibbotson, Journey to the River Sea CD (Macmillan)
- Jacqueline Wilson, The Worry Website (Corgi)
- Jeremy Strong, Beware Killer Tomatoes (Puffin)
- Philip Pullman, I Was a Rat! (Corgi)
- Eyewonder, The Human Body (Dorling Kindersley)
- Jacqueline Wilson, The Cat Mummy (Corgi)
- Clive King, Stig of the Dump (Puffin)
- Michael Morpurgo, The Amazing Story of Adolphus Tips (HarperCollins)

Maths Games

- £30 Maths game
- £100 Maths game
- One to Nine Bingo
- Tens and Teens Bingo
- Times Tables Bingo
- One Hundred Bingo
- Counting Cats game
- Sums which make 10 game
- Rough Total game
- Make 5 game
- Fifty Pence game
- Eighteens game
- 999 game
- Add or take away game
- Elevens game
- What's Missing game
- Forty Nine game
- £20 game
- £50 game
- £500 game
- £600 game

Stationery

- Pencil case
- Scissors
- Exercise book (lined)
- Black handwriting pen
- A4 zip-top wallet x6
- Felt pens (set of 12)
- Pencil
- Rubber
- Pencil sharpener
- Calculator
- Ruler (15 cm)
- Blue/black biro
- Highlighter pen

Other Items

- Letter to child
- Library item about membership
- Personalised name labels for books
- £10 notes (5 sheets stapled), Bag of 100 £1 coins
- Dice (coloured spotted 1-6)
- 32 counters (assorted colours)
- Bag of 50 £2 coins
- Dice (b/w numbered 1-6)
- £5 notes (4 sheets, stapled)
- £50 notes (4 sheets, stapled)
- Bookmark x2
- Sticky notes

Nearly 1000 children are members of the Letterbox Club for 2008, across 52 local authorities, and we hope there will be even more members in 2009. If you are interested in knowing more about Letterbox, please see our website: www.letterboxclub.org.uk or contact us at Book House.

Our office is open:
9am – 5pm Monday to Friday
Outside these hours, please leave a message and we will call you back.

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"It is brill."

(Child aged 8, 2007)

"He's loved receiving the Letterbox parcels. He said it feels like Christmas. The BFG's a bit hard for him at the moment, but his reading has improved so much, won't be long! We've read it to him. We've also very much enjoyed the parcels."

(Carer of Year 5/6 boy)

The Letterbox Club is a project managed by Booktrust in partnership with the University of Leicester. It focuses on improving the educational outlook for children aged 7 to 11 in foster care by providing them with a parcel of books, maths games and educational materials once a month for six months, addressed to them personally through the post.

This report summarises some of the main findings for 2007, in the first year of a national pilot funded by the DCSF, involving 22 local authorities and over 500 children and their foster families.

The key benefits of taking part in the Letterbox Club were:

- Increased involvement of children in their own learning
- Gains in reading and number for many children
- Enjoyment for the child in receiving a series of personalised parcels
- Increased involvement of carers

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