

Letterbox learning

Children in care sometimes miss on opportunities other children are offered – but the Letterbox Club is helping to address that. **Caroline Lindsay** finds out more...

IN THIS age of computers and hi tech, there's still nothing more exciting than a proper letter popping through the letterbox, so imagine the excitement a parcel of books would bring.

And thanks to the brainwave of mum and foster carer Rose Griffiths, hundreds of children in care across the UK are now experiencing that excitement for themselves. Rose, a former maths teacher and now a senior lecturer in education at Leicester University, and who has fostered over 70 children, adopted seven and had two of her own, recognised that her own foster children needed help with their numeracy and literacy and developed the Letterbox Club. Now an award-winning programme, managed by Booktrust in partnership with the University of Leicester, the scheme offers a brightly-coloured parcel — there are four different coloured parcels, each matched to the child's age and ability — containing books, maths activities, stationery and games, on a subscription basis, to children in care aged 5-13 years old, who have been recommended for the scheme by their local authority via social services.

The personalised parcels are delivered directly to looked-after children at their foster homes every month for six months, and aim to encourage a love of reading and provide fun education support to improve attainment. All the books within the parcels are carefully selected by expert panels to ensure the best books possible reach the children taking part. The scheme has now been rolled out in Scotland, much to the delight of Edinburgh-based children's author Lari Don: "I was very impressed by the work that the Letterbox Club does to bring books to looked

after children and very moved by the effect these brightly coloured packages have on the children and families who receive them. Reading for pleasure is a very powerful way of empowering children, as well as a vital and fun part of childhood. I hope that the Letterbox Club is successful in getting the support and funding they need to open this scheme up right across Scotland."

Leanne Cobb, project manager for the Letterbox Club, explains: "The most important part of the programme is that the parcels are delivered personally to the children and gives them pride in ownership as well as making them feel as if someone cares about them. It's such a simple idea but it really works — children assessed before and after receiving the parcels showed a significant increase in their reading, writing and numeracy. But the Letterbox Club isn't just about simply increasing children's attainment levels, there are lots of other benefits too. For example when a child goes into a new family home books can break down barriers, they give kids something to



Above: a delivery from the Letterbox Club can brighten any child's day. Below: brightly-coloured packets grab attention!



talk about and share and the confidence to talk about what they're reading with their peers and at school.

"We spend a lot of time on our book selection process and consult with teachers, carers, social workers and educational psychologists. Lots of authors and illustrators are behind the scheme and keen for us to include their books in the selections."

Lorraine Kelly adds: "This is a fantastic scheme — it's not just the educational improvement it offers for the children involved, but it's heart-warming to see the emotional impact of receiving these lovely brightly coloured parcels in the post. I'm thrilled this programme is extending to Scotland."

CASE STUDY

CAITLIN IS 10 and lives with her foster carers Tom and Grace, and Jack aged seven who is also a looked-after child. Caitlin enjoys reading, swimming, playing music and using her iPad. She

is a Girl Guide and recently took part in the Great Girl Guide Bake Off. Both children are members of various clubs as their carers explained they wanted the children to get as many experiences as possible, and encourage them to be confident on their own.

She was keen to take part in the Letterbox Club from the start. She said she loves reading and reads every day even in the middle of getting ready in the morning! Her favourite author is Jacqueline Wilson and recently her carer bought her the complete set of this author's books, which she said was amazing. She also buys books from charity shops.

Caitlin believes that being a member of the Letterbox Club has been very good for her in terms of extending her vocabulary. She described how sometimes she came across words in the books from the parcels that she wasn't sure of and would ask her carers to explain the meaning. She continued: "They explain it and then I explain it back to them, and then I get a sort of idea in my head".

CASE STUDY

MICHAEL IS eight and lives with his grandmother. He is a very active boy who enjoys football, playing outside with his friends and going swimming. At school he receives additional support for learning. Michael said he is good at maths, but that he doesn't like reading because it's hard. He talked about how Gran helped him with his reading. Gran explained that she encourages him to read at home, but said it was a fight. She talked about trying to get him to do his reading homework at night, and described how Michael would often say he had left the book at school and then she would have to search in his bag for it.

Michael said that it felt good being in the Letterbox Club because everyone was asking him where he got the books from. He particularly liked the Ancient Egypt sticker book because this was his topic at school. When the book arrived in the parcel this prompted him to talk to Gran about what he was learning at school. Before he got this book Gran explained that she had no idea that he was studying Egypt at school and that he had never told her about it.

● www.letterboxclub.org.uk