



Starting Out with Books

By *admin*

Created *Oct '09*

Article Author:

[Clive Barnes](#) [1]

[116](#) [2]

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Other Articles

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Clive Barnes on the need to support parents.

It seems to be the season for early years projects ending in Start. Well, here are two, anyway: Bookstart and Sure Start; and, in both, 'start' refers to a child's very earliest years, their importance in establishing a secure and healthy beginning in life, and the need to support parents.

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Bookstart, a programme begun by the Book Trust and the Basic Skills Agency, and piloted by Birmingham Libraries, has just been given the boost of £6 million sponsorship by Sainsbury's. This should make sure that, within the next two years, every parent in the U.K. with a new baby will receive free books and information about the value of reading and libraries to very young children.

Sure Start is a government programme that set off with 60 'trailblazing' authorities in April to tackle social exclusion at root and 'offer extra support when it really matters to families keen to learn about parenting skills, nurturing and the development of babies and young children' including, says David Blunkett, 'reading with their children'.

But what else is going on? **Clive Barnes** investigates at the grassroots.

Children's librarians have a key role in local Bookstart schemes, and have long been aware both of the value of books to babies. So it is perhaps a good time to remember what else they have been doing to promote the sharing of books in young families through contacts with parents and carers.

Words on Wheels in Birmingham

Birmingham's Words on Wheels was not the first, and is by no means the only, 'book bus' to spread the gospel of reading by covering itself with head turning artwork and getting on the road. My own authority has one too, and the neighbouring authorities of Hampshire and Portsmouth have 'Family Library Link' vehicles, whose particular remit is to serve pre-school children and their families. Yet 'Words on Wheels' does demonstrate the versatility of the species; for, unlike many mobile libraries, it has always been mainly a promotional vehicle rather than offering a loan service.

Although Words on Wheels was originally funded in 1991 to serve the inner city, its mission has grown over the years and now it boldly goes throughout the city, acting as a flagship for the library's services to younger children. Because it is not committed to a regular timetable of stops, Words on Wheels is able to respond to a variety of demands on its use. Some of these are large community events, like Birmingham Leisure Department's 'Fun in the Park', or Business in Education's 'Learning Day', which gives children with learning difficulties a taste of different work experiences. For World Book Day last year, it became a travelling bookshop, visiting schools at some distance from bookshops to give

children an opportunity to spend their book vouchers. In 1996-7, it took part in a concerted effort to increase the use of libraries by young families in the ethnic minority population. It has become an easily recognised part of the library service. Jo Heaton, one of Birmingham's Children and Youth Librarians who is responsible for booking the bus out, told me that, at the end of February, it was already booked out until July.

Words on Wheels is a large vehicle, bigger than the fire engine, yet its driver, Colin Johnson, regularly manoeuvres it into school playgrounds and health centre car parks. It carries only about 400 books, so there is space for display, for leaflets, some spoken word cassettes, a collection of books on child development intended for carers, 'big books', and, most importantly, space to sit and read. The books are chosen not only to reflect the multicultural background of Birmingham's children but also to be attractive to children of differing abilities and needs: they include novelty and pop-up titles, touch and feel books, and a supporting collection of children's book characters and puppets, which is especially popular with children with special needs.

On the afternoon I visited Words in Wheels, it went out to a pre-school group. In the bus were Ayub Khan, one of the Children and Youth Librarians, and Christine Farelly, from Small Heath library, who acted as a local contact for the pre-school. For the children, the bus itself was the obvious big attraction and they came in, both excited and shy, taking a little time to explore, choose a book and find an adult to share it with. The pop-up and novelty books were most popular and some children took a break from reading to play with the toys. To close the session, Ayub sat them all down for a group storytime. There was plenty of opportunity to talk about books and the library to the pre-school staff and to some of the parents who came on the bus to collect their children.

This was a fairly routine visit, a promotion of books and the local library. But Jo Heaton is keen to make more targeted use of Words on Wheels for those children and families whose access to the library is most limited. The morning visit had been a monthly visit to a nursery that integrated special needs children. Here Jo did leave a small collection of books from which parents were able to choose titles for their children to take home. The bus has been used recently with women's refuges and with older children with behavioural difficulties: and there are plans to work with families in the Birmingham Prison Visitor Centre and with Travellers' children. There is tremendous potential here, which arises, in part, from the library staff's contacts in the wider professional and voluntary network.

Families in Rural Wiltshire

Much the same challenges, although in very different circumstances, face Gail Spence of Wiltshire Library Services. She is responsible for a project, funded by the National Year of Reading, to support shared reading among families with young children in the villages and army bases on Salisbury plain.

The families on the bases are often separated, with the men sometimes deployed abroad. The units are moved regularly, so that the families tend to stay in the area for only a maximum of two years. For those wives without their own transport, it may be difficult to get off the base. It is a life that can have instability and isolation built into it.

Beginning last September, Gail, the Children's Outreach Officer, has only a year to make an impact. She has been concentrating on three bases and their adjacent villages, working with the library in the nearest town, Amesbury, the part-time libraries in the villages, and with the army, which is well aware of the support that its families need. Most of all, she has been working with any organisation that has contact with young children and their families in the area, from the Pre-school Learning Alliance to the British Legion, shamelessly promoting herself through army newsletters and popping up at a variety of venues, including a Christmas Bazaar, where she was lucky enough to meet some dads. Gail may not have a brightly painted vehicle, but she has become, in her own words, a 'roving exhibition centre', with her own table top display boards, leaflets, and bookmarks, all explaining who she is, what she is doing, and giving advice on choosing and sharing books. And, of course, she has the books themselves.

When I met Gail at the beginning of March, she had spoken to health visitors and post natal groups and she had almost finished visiting every playgroup in her area. Local swimming pools and leisure centres were lined up for after Easter. She was buoyed up by a library open day at one of the small part-time libraries, pleasantly surprised that sixty children

and parents had turned up, and she was looking forward to an under fives week in the largest village library at Tidworth in June.

Reaching parents is always the most difficult thing to achieve, even though Gail always arranges her visits to playgroups at a time when parents are encouraged to come early to collect the children. She has found that many people are not aware of the value, or even the possibility of using books with children who cannot yet read, that they are worried about damage to books, and that they still regard the library as an unfriendly place. Most of all, she has found that parents are astonished at the range and quality of the books. She has also found that some voluntary and professional workers are surprised at the library's enthusiasm for shared reading and by the wealth of books available.

This sort of work is not easy, whether on Birmingham streets or in rural Wiltshire and it is impossible to measure its effect in the short-term. As Ayub Khan wrote about Birmingham's promotion to ethnic minority parents with under fives, 'We learnt... that improving the uptake of our service by non-users had to be a long term objective.' Then again, it is something to which librarians are committed and it is heartening to see something like Bookstart, whose value has been proven, take off nationally. What is not so heartening is to look down the list of organisations that the government sees as having a significant role to play in Sure Start to find no mention of libraries. Perhaps we have as much to do to convince the policy makers and professionals as we do some of the parents.

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Page Number:

10

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[1] <http://pop.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/clive-barnes>

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