

Playful storytelling

The role of interactive audio in building children's literacy skills and engagement

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Exploring and promoting the power of audiobooks has never been more important. The pandemic and lockdowns of 2020 and 2021 have caused unprecedented disruption to schools, acutely impacting children and young people's education, opportunities and wellbeing. At the same time, developments in digital technology have exploded the audiobook landscape, with more devices and entry points than ever for children to hear stories. In this report, we will explore what this might mean for the literacy of children aged 3 to 8 at a time when innovative solutions are more crucial than ever.

In an age when stories are told across a multitude of media and platforms, listening to stories continues to have enduring appeal to children. Indeed, our 2021 Annual Literacy Survey of 4,749 children aged 5 to 8 found that almost all (95.6%) said they enjoyed hearing stories read to them. We also know from research we conducted during the first lockdown in spring 2020 that children had been listening to audiobooks at home more than before (Best et al., 2020).

This report explores the ways in which audiobooks can be particularly beneficial for younger children (from birth to aged 8) through the development of comprehension skills and engagement with stories, building on what we already know about audiobooks as a route into reading and an opportunity for families to engage in stories together at home.

In early 2021 our Annual Literacy Survey also showed that many children in this age bracket identify favourite books that lead with a strong character, showing the potential of characters to increase engagement and to plant themselves in children's memories and imagination. This research therefore also highlights how audiobooks can make the most of opportunities to build on characterisation.

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Lastly, we know from previous research that interactive and multimedia formats can help engage readers (see, for example, Picton & Clark, 2015). As we will show, audiobooks as a multimedia format can also be helpful in this regard.

Some of the key findings from this review include:

- There is a strong appetite for hearing stories, with almost all children in our survey (95.6%) saying they enjoy hearing stories read to them
- Playing audiobooks in the home can help expose children to a wider vocabulary
- The use of audiobooks in the classroom to complement teachers reading aloud can help maximise the benefits of hearing the same content over and over
- The inclusion of multiple voices, sound effects and music can help enrich the experience of a story in audio form
- Strong and recognisable characters can build children’s love of stories, with many young children recalling favourite characters
- Audiobook platforms and devices help extend a story across different media and give children opportunities to engage in a multitude of ways

Defining audiobooks

The term “audiobooks” refers to a vocalised and recorded story transferred from a written text onto an audio device (anything from a cassette or CD to an MP3 file to be played through a speaker), or indeed, the production of a text specifically for audio production. Research across the sector uses the term audiobook to refer to any such content, whether as adapted from a physical “book” or created directly for audio production. In this report, the term “audiobooks” will therefore refer to any audio-based story.

The power of hearing stories

Audiobooks, regardless of format (e.g. on tape, CD, MP3 or streamed) have been shown consistently to impact positively on children and young people’s literacy engagement. Audiobooks can be an effective way of engaging children and young people who have previously lacked interest in physical books, as evidenced in our 2020 review (Best, 2020). For example, the fact that audiobooks are presented on a technology-based format appeals to some demographics (see, for example, Jon Scieszka quoted in Grover & Hannegan, 2012: 12). Meanwhile, listening to stories can also help some children to overcome barriers to reading enjoyment, such as struggling to decode text (Wolfson, 2008). Indeed, this also helps facilitate the sharing of a story across a group – whether in a class or in a family – as children that read at different levels can experience the story at the same rate.

Family learning and sharing stories together

National lockdowns in response to the COVID-19 pandemic over 2020 and 2021 have increased opportunities for many families to spend time together at home. In some cases, they have also led to an increase in listening activities, both for children alone and families listening together. Our 2020 survey of children’s interaction with audiobooks during the first lockdown found that nearly 1 in 4 (23.4%) children and young people said that they had listened to audiobooks more than before lockdown. 12% of children and young people also said that they had listened to audiobooks with their family or friends during lockdown. This was evidenced in comments from the children and young people we surveyed:

“I listen and write more now as I have more time and because me and my family are listening to the book *Animal Farm* together as a family, which means we can also spend time together in more creative ways whereas before we would just watch a movie because we were all too tired to do anything else.”

“I like listening to audiobooks sometimes because we have to do a lot of reading and sometimes whilst I’m doing other work I like to listen to stories. We have also been provided audiobook websites that me and my brother like to listen to together.”

Further benefits of using audiobooks in the home include:¹

- **Convenience:** as a ‘hands-free’ way of accessing stories, audiobooks offer families a way of sharing books while engaged in other activities, such as during meals or at bath time, or in the car on the school run.
- **Ease of access:** for families where parents’ own literacy skills and/or confidence mean that they are less comfortable reading to their children, audiobooks mean that children in these families can still benefit from the many advantages of hearing stories from a young age including increased empathy, improved vocabulary and an appreciation of stories that may positively impact on their own reading behaviours as they grow.
- **Modelling reading:** hearing stories read by professional readers demonstrates the rhythm, tone and pronunciation of a narrative, which can help children develop their own understanding of reading behaviours.
- **Facilitating remote reading:** where parents and/or caregivers are separate from their children, either for extend periods (for example, in instances of shared custody or where they are in prison or in the military) or simply where a parent is working a shift that overlaps with bedtime, the ability to record and play stories remotely can help parents and caregivers maintain that connection and read stories to their children albeit in a less direct way. Alongside initiatives such as [Storybook Dads](#) and Little

¹ For more information see Best, 2020

Troopers' [bedtime story app](#), dedicated devices on the market such as [Creative Tonies](#) can help facilitate this.

Sharing stories as a family is a great way of building emotional connections but also of increasing children's exposure to a wide range of texts and vocabulary. Accessing a broad vocabulary is critical for children's school readiness. Research has shown that in households where children hear fewer words, their literacy levels at age 5 are lower than those who have been exposed to a higher number of words, which impacts significantly on longer-term literacy and attainment outcomes (e.g. Gilkerson et al., 2017).

At the National Literacy Trust we encourage parents and caregivers to speak with and read to their children regularly (for example through our [Early Words Together](#) and [Small Talk](#) initiatives) but audiobooks can offer additional opportunities to supplement conversations and shared reading. Even where talk at home is present and/or of a high quality, audiobooks can still extend this: the below experiment found that the variety of words found in a picture book was greater than in day-to-day speech:

“The vocabulary in picture books was more extensive than that found in child-directed speech (CDS) and even adult-directed speech (ADS). The likelihood of observing a rare word not contained in the most common 5,000 words in English was more likely in a corpus of picture books than in two different corpora of CDS.” (Massaro, 2015)

Considering that audiobooks by and large use the same language as that found in a picture book (or even extend it to narrate what would traditionally be shown through pictures), it is not unreasonable to assume that the same would be true of audiobooks.

Hearing stories in the classroom

Hearing and sharing stories as part of the home learning environment makes an important contribution to supporting early communication, language and literacy, and should extend beyond the point that children start school. Reading aloud to a class helps children to develop good listening and comprehension skills (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). The use of audiobooks in the classroom can complement and extend the benefits of “live” reading, such as building fluency and vocabulary (Serafini, 2004), and allowing a class of readers at different reading levels and speeds to experience a story at the same rate (Wolfson, 2008).

One area that has been explored at length in terms of teachers reading aloud is the potential for dialogic reading and learning, that is, shared reading with conversation that encourages pupils to make predictions and inferences about the text. The Education Endowment Foundation guidance noted above goes on to say that “[s]kilful questioning is key to this shared story time and should constantly reinforce how the child can unlock the meaning and joy of the text” (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). Building in this sort of questioning is crucial to the success of story time. For example, Lane and Wright (2007: 669) suggest that “teachers should encourage children to use their background knowledge to develop understanding of the text and ask questions that keep children engaged. Reading in a lively, engaging way, using voices, gestures, and expressions can enhance understanding.” This can

be extended by a well-read audiobook that has a lively and engaging tone – and indeed, may also include multiple voices for different characters.

Listening to audiobooks that include multiple voices is one way of achieving this, but also having a range of titles exposes children to a variety of different voices. Indeed, an assortment of titles spanning different subject areas can be crucial to maximising efficacy of this approach (Lane and Wright, 2007). There has never been a better time for this: in the US, the number of audiobook titles published per year went from 3,073 in 2003 to 60,303 in 2019 (Watson, 2020). While such statistics are not available for UK publishing, the continued sales growth would suggest a similar trend, with sales increasing by 42% in the first half of 2020 (Sweney, 2020).

However, while a wide variety of texts can maximise the impact of sharing stories read aloud, repetition of the same story can also be beneficial. Children tend to choose familiar books both to read and to have read to them, the benefits of which have been explored extensively. For example, through multiple readings of the same book children become more familiar with the vocabulary and are more likely to memorise it (see e.g. Corneal, 2015). Similarly, this familiarity can aid fluency: as a child hears the same story over and over, they are able to read it themselves without stopping as much and will have a sense of having ‘mastered’ a book (Corneal, 2015). There are also emotional benefits to repeated reading: a book can become like a friend insofar as, as they get to know elements of the book they feel more connected to it (Rodriguez, 2018).

Using a pre-recorded audiobook where the content will be identical on every play – but where interactive functions would facilitate the player stopping, starting and skipping to different sections – might help build familiarity with the story while also mitigating possible reader fatigue of the teacher having to read the same story multiple times. Indeed, the exactitude with which an audiobook repeats a story provides an infallible familiarity and predictability.

This also means that children can replicate the story themselves, building their own speaking and vocabulary skills as well as working memory. For example, building on Whitehead’s (2002) work on dialogic reading, Horst and colleagues (2019: 14) note that “Many teachers [...] engage in repeated read alouds of the same book so that they can use dialogic reading techniques, which draw listeners into a conversation about the story and help children become tellers of the story”. Where schools and classes have the facility to record their own audio, getting students to recite a story that they have heard multiple times as a recorded object may also be beneficial and build engagement.

The power of story characters to engage children across different media

Memorable characters

An identifiable character that children recognise can have immense power – indeed, as Rodriguez suggests above, the character in a familiar story can become like a friend as we bond with them. Part of the enduring appeal of World Book Day, which offers children the opportunity to choose and keep free books by exchanging a token, is the chance to dress up

Literacy benefits of strong characterisation

Books that have a powerful and engaging protagonist can be a powerful way of building children's engagement with a story and maximising the benefits inherent to sharing stories. These include empathy, as children learn to identify with a character both through shared experiences or characteristics and, conversely, through experiences that differ from their own (Empathy Lab, 2020). This may be enhanced through listening to an audiobook where the character's voice is either acted in a dynamic way (where a single actor narrates the whole book, but with differentiation in tone, pitch or accent for a particular character) or where characters are voiced by different actors (often referred to as full-cast audiobooks; e.g. Stepaniuk, 2017). By building an understanding of and identification with a protagonist or key character children can develop their empathy skills. Kucirkova (2019:7) notes that "[w]hen paying attention to narratives, people tend to follow the experience of the protagonist, whether the narrative is represented in a written, pictorial or oral mode, thus directly practising perspective-taking."

In addition to developing empathy, characters give the reader an anchor in the story that they can use in the development of the five key comprehension skills, i.e. predicting, questioning, clarifying, summarising and activating prior knowledge (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020).

The national curriculum recommends that as pupils move towards the end of Key Stage 1 (aged 5 to 8) and into Key Stage 2 (aged 9 to 11), they should develop a focus on characters, exploring their motivations and making predictions about them. As Roser and colleagues suggest below (2007: 548), the more pupils can build an understanding of a character and form emotional attachments to them, the more they are able to engage and develop these skills:

"We've met some of our best 'friends' in the pages of children's books [...] Such characters draw us in and seem to claim us for a lifetime. Truth is, the 'care-actors' in stories cause us to care about what happens to them. But the best characters may do even more: [t]hey may cause us to occupy their world a bit longer. And while we linger—reflecting on their traits, mulling their relationships, gauging their development, or even weighing their goals—we find ourselves reading more deeply. The characters we pause to consider can guide us through their stories, helping us to understand plots and ponder themes (Golden & Guthrie, 1986; Lehr, 1991): Characters can make us better comprehenders."

Again, the way that an audiobook can build a strong sense of voice and personality through dramatisation and expression – and indeed, the fact of the narrator in the story having a voice specific to that story – can help build an idea of a character in a story as a distinct entity.

Characters and stories across multiple platforms

Audiobooks offer a story in another format that can both complement the reading of physical books and act as a way in for reluctant readers (Best, 2020). Indeed, research has shown that where stories are accessed across multiple platforms, for example on screens as well as in print, the combination can in itself have a positive impact on literacy outcomes. For example, Formby (2014: 9) found that:

“In general, young children are more likely to have above average vocabulary attainment if they look at or read both printed stories and stories on a touch screen compared with those who read printed stories only (19.5% vs. 14.5%). This dynamic holds true both for children from low-income families (9.1% vs. 0.0%) and high-income families (50.0% vs. 20.0%).”

It is interesting to consider, however, how a memorable character might play a role in this, especially in an age where a popular character might span across multiple media, often facilitated by a ‘franchise’ model. Indeed, many of the characters in Figure 1 are known not just for their appearance in books but in films and video games, as toys, and even a mix tape.² This creation of a universe centred around a character or world is often described as transmedia and is particularly pertinent in the 21st century – and indeed, post-lockdown – where children and young people are connecting to the world in a range of different ways. Jenkins (2013: page number) remarks that:

“The implementation of transmedia is crucial for today’s students to develop along with a comprehensive understanding of 21st-century tools. More importantly, it helps erase the boundaries between learning and play in the most exciting ways—by engaging children in interactive media they love and can learn from.”

A familiar character appearing in a new format can be a great hook to engage children in stories, whether they come to them new or are following them across platforms: whether seeing a character in a film leads a new reader to the original book, or the availability of a story in audio form gives children the ability to listen to their favourite story again and again. This is particularly useful in considering the availability of audiobooks during lockdown in downloadable formats, where access to traditional print books via public and school libraries was limited (Best et al., 2020).

Interactivity and user agency

The possibilities of interactivity in multimedia storytelling are also worth considering. Opportunities for children and young people to engage with a story – for example the interactive features of an ebook – can have a positive impact on their engagement with and attitudes towards reading, particularly for reluctant readers (Clark and Picton, 2019). This is also reinforced by teachers’ attitudes to the power of technology. In a 2018 survey, the National Literacy Trust found teachers considered the ability to engage (86.8%) and enable

² See, for example, <https://lizp.bigcartel.com/product/tom-gates-mix-tape>

(66.7%) pupils to be the principal benefits of using technology in the classroom (Picton, 2019). As technology around audiobooks continues to develop, with availability spanning a range of devices and platforms, we are likely to see these benefits increase and deepen.³

Play

As noted by Picton and colleagues (2019: 1) in a study on the uses of technology among teenage boys, “[i]n recent decades, a growing dependence on digital forms of communication has brought with it exciting visions of the potential for technology to support learning” (Picton et al., 2019). Such visions are equally as exciting for the early years and Key Stage 1 classrooms, particularly considering what this might mean for play. Audiobooks in technological forms give children the freedom to interact with what they listen to, for example stopping and starting a story or switching between stories. As Jenkins (2013) says, this blurs the line between learning and play.

Play is a crucial part of learning in both the early years and in Key Stage 1. Though sometimes given less attention in Key Stage 1, there are increasing calls for non-structured and informal play to be considered as part of the Key Stage 1 learning experience (Rawstrone, 2017). Audio devices can, of course, play a crucial role in this – but not just because the interaction is seen inherently as a play-based activity but through their role as a ‘literacy object’. In a 1992 study, Neuman and Roskos (1992: 204, 220) found that where play areas included objects that had been “purposely designed to facilitate natural interactions with written language”, children’s language and questioning became more varied and complex. While this study focused on written language, there could be potential for audio players - perhaps alongside physical books – to be embedded as part of a valuable play experience.

Non screen-based play

While the research cited above suggests that the use of devices in multimedia reading activities can have a positive impact on children’s learning, many families and teachers are reluctant to over-expose children to screens. In such cases, audiobooks can offer children and families opportunities for story-based interaction that is playful and yet avoids screens. As with all things, moderation is key: with the multitude of dynamic and exciting apps available, screen time can be deployed in many beneficial ways.⁴ Audio stories, meanwhile, can offer an alternative: in a review of different audio players on the market, Alexander (2020) refers to audio as “definitively screen free, but [allowing] children a dose of technology”. Responses to the National Literacy Trust’s 2020 survey suggest that young people also recognise this, as one child commented:

³ The National Literacy Trust’s resource on sharing audiobooks as a family signposts a range of interactive apps and games that can support this: https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Audiobooks_resource_-_Parents_-_final_6YNgSVJ.pdf

⁴ See the National Literacy Trust’s *Literacy Apps* site for more information: <http://literacyapps.literacytrust.org.uk>

“Since there is a lot of time on our hands at home instead of watching a screen, an audiobook helps us understand expressions in the book more.”

Conclusion

This report summarises the ways in which audiobooks can be especially beneficial to children aged from birth to 8 at home and at school. Our previous research with children aged 8 to 18 found that during lockdown, nearly 1 in 4 (23.4%) children and young people said that they listened to audiobooks more than before lockdown. Children and young people cited various reasons for their greater engagement with audiobooks, including having more time, being able to access audiobooks more easily than other book formats and being able to access wider content (Best et al., 2020). We also know that audiobooks can be a ‘way in’ for reluctant readers, and can increase and develop children’s exposure to stories in ways that can help overcome barriers to reading in traditional formats (Best, 2020). In recent years, we have begun exploring the attitudes and behaviours of children aged 5 to 8 (e.g. Teravainen-Goff, 2019) so it is encouraging to see from the findings evidenced here that there is further potential to explore the literacy benefits of audiobooks and listening for enjoyment in the context of a younger audience.

Our most recent survey told us that almost all children aged 5 to 8 enjoy hearing stories. It also told us that many of these children have favourite books with memorable characters in the title, highlighting the power of characters to act as a hook for reading. The research shown here explores how audiobooks can harness this potential and make the most of the appetite for hearing stories. As well as complementing and acting as an extension to parents and teachers reading aloud, the use and production of strong characters and the role of interactivity and play-based engagement can help maximise the literacy outcomes such as empathy, comprehension and reading enjoyment. An audiobook can be played again and again, stopping and starting and repeating to a child’s heart’s content as they grow to love it, recognising features and anticipating what comes next. They can even record themselves, or their family, telling their own stories. A love of hearing stories is as old as time, but the affordances of modern audiobooks can help bring it into the 21st century.

Audiobooks and the recovery curriculum

At least 200,000 children will leave primary school in 2021 unable to read and write properly (Shipman & Griffiths, 2021). School closures have disproportionately impacted children from the most disadvantaged communities, who may lack access to books and technology, and where parents are less confident in supporting home learning. This disparity exacerbates the educational attainment gap between richer and poorer students.⁵

This is an extraordinary challenge, which requires an extraordinary response. At the National Literacy Trust, we will deliver outstanding literacy programmes in communities, schools and

⁵ *Impact of school closures on the attainment gap: Rapid Evidence Assessment*, Education Endowment Foundation, 2020

early years settings, which we know can play a crucial role in children’s literacy recovery. To achieve this, we are mobilising the corporate sector to help amplify the reach of our work and harness the unique resources of each business to help reignite children’s love of learning. For this reason, we are delighted to have been commissioned by [Tonies](#) to explore what fun and engaging stories mean for the literacy of children aged 3 to 8 at a time where innovative solutions are more crucial than ever.

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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.

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