

Summer Reading Challenge family impact evaluation 2015

Introduction

In 2015 we ran a short survey with participating families to evaluate the impact of the Summer Reading Challenge. The survey was available online via the Survey Monkey website, and was publicised by libraries and on social media. It was designed for parents or carers to complete the survey with their child, discussing any answers as necessary. The survey was accessible by smart phone to facilitate easy completion.

It was completed by 354 respondents between the start of August and the end of October 2015. The sample size is small and because respondents volunteered to complete the survey they are likely to be slightly more positive and proactive than other participants. The findings are therefore indicative rather than generalisable.

In terms of demographics, 57% of respondents were answering related to a child aged four to seven, and 38% were answering in relation to a child aged eight to eleven. A small number were referring to a child aged three and under or twelve and older.

Findings

The Summer Reading Challenge and library use

In the survey we asked when families had first heard about the Summer Reading Challenge and about their library membership. The vast majority of respondents had first heard about the Summer Reading Challenge at the library (57%). Substantial numbers had heard about it at school (37%) with small numbers hearing about it from a friend (3%), on television or radio (1%) or in the local newspaper (1%).

Most respondents (72%) reported that their child had taken part in the Summer Reading Challenge before the 2015 Challenge, and that their child already had a library card when they started the Challenge (90%). Just under 10% of respondents reported that their child first got a library card when they started the Challenge and 10% of respondents reported that they had joined the library themselves as a result of their child taking part.

Together, these findings indicate that the Summer Reading Challenge is predominantly used by families who are already accessing the library. However, the results do highlight the important role played by outreach activity that takes place in schools, with a substantial minority of families finding out about the Challenge via schools. For about one in ten families the Challenge acts as a catalyst for library membership; either for children or parents/carers.

The comments made about the Challenge indicate that even active for existing library members taking part promoted library usage:

"It was brilliant. I love reading but this helped me want to read more books than I would have done. I love going to the library and love it even more now. I read 18 books over the summer."

Comment from a child

"As my son started school this year he has begun to read more. The challenge has given him more confidence and his reading has greatly improved over the summer. We used the library before but will now try and use it more regularly." Comment from a parent/carer



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

**SUMMER
READING
CHALLENGE**

**THE
READING
AGENCY**

And for some it had prompting them to start using the library for the first time:

“My son has had a library card since he was a baby that we have never used before. The challenge gave us our kick start and now we will keep coming. My son especially loved receiving his medal and bits at the end of the challenge.” Comment from a parent/carer

The activities the Summer Reading Challenge encourages

The research found that as part of the Summer Reading Challenge families read in a variety of ways: large numbers of children read on their own (82%), family members listen to their child read (76%) and family members read to their children (72%). Small numbers also used audio books/story tapes (18%) and ebooks/book apps (7%).

This demonstrates that the Summer Reading Challenge effectively encourages a range of reading activities, with a slightly larger focus on children reading by themselves. Reading a book on their own for the first time can be a proud moment for children, as illustrated in this comment:

“The Reading Challenge was great for encouraging my son (Year7) with special needs and a reading age of Year2. He was so pleased with himself for reading a book all by himself (Roald Dahl's The Twits). This was largely due to the Librarian...who is fantastic with the children and always goes out of her way to help them find the right book and encourage them to take part in the Reading Challenge.” Comment from a parent/carer

The impact of participation

We asked respondents if they agreed or disagreed with a number of statements about the impact of the Summer Reading Challenge and the results were as follows:

	Strongly agree	Agree	Not sure	Disagree	Strongly disagree
The Challenge helped my child enjoy reading	35%	48%	8%	7%	2%
We talked more about books and reading	35%	45%	9%	10%	2%
My child read more this summer because of the Challenge	39%	38%	6%	14%	3%
We used the library more than before	44%	32%	6%	16%	3%
We plan to continue using the library more than before	35%	38%	14%	12%	2%
My child read different types of books because of the Challenge	38%	31%	11%	18%	2%
My child felt more confident about reading after the Challenge	26%	30%	27%	15%	2%

This shows that respondents were most likely to agree that the Challenge has strong positive impacts in the following areas:

- helped their child enjoy reading (83% either agreed or strongly agreed)
- increased conversation about books (80% either agreed or strongly agreed)
- encouraged children to read more over the summer (77% either agreed or strongly agreed)
- increased library usage (76% either agreed or strongly agreed – with 44% strongly agreeing).

Comments in the survey supported these findings:

"I wasn't the biggest fan of reading. But when I started the Record Breaking Summer Reading Challenge reading is now my best friend!" Comment from a child

"The reading challenge is great. [My son] had previously been a very reluctant reader but the great choice at the library meant he was able to find books which captured his imagination. He likes to read for a purpose, and so the wide range of fact books about dinosaurs, animals and the world kept him interested. I'm hoping this continues into the new school year!"
Comment from a parent/carer

"I enjoyed picking out the books to take home and read. I think it was good fun and helped me with my reading." Comment from a child

"I like the challenge because it has helped me to read more and has given me more confidence. I will read more and more even after." Comment from a child

The above comments indicate that the Challenge also helped increase reading confidence. The quantitative findings support this case, but indicate that respondents were slightly less sure about this area impact: 56% agreed or strongly agreed that their child felt more confident after the Challenge, but 27% were not sure and 17% disagreed or strongly disagreed. This might relate to parents not feeling able to attribute changes directly to participation in the Challenge or to children already being confident readers, as indicated by this comment:

"In truth my eldest child loves reading and would have read this summer, challenge or not. She has been a regular library user for many years and we encouraged her to take part in the challenge to support the library service as it has been and will continue to be such a great asset for her educational development." Comment from a parent/carer

This suggests that for some families that are already active library users and prolific readers, the Challenge might have less of an impact. However, the comments included in the survey made it very clear that the Summer Reading Challenge is still a highly valued activity. It is clearly enjoyed by children and the structure of rewards and medals was valued by parents and children alike:

"Awesome, it was the coolest thing ever." Comment from a child

"I enjoyed the challenge as it made the summer fun with all the rewards and the gold medal." Comment from a child

"Was pleased there is a goal in the holidays for reading. Without it we would not have read any." Comment from a parent/carer

However, some of the comments suggested areas for improvement, with a small number stating that the prizes, rewards or theme were not engaging enough:

"I just wonder if the whole thing needs a fresh look at, to update it, maybe with online reviewing for the children or a booklet with traffic system for reviewing for the reluctant writers & talkers, blank page for draw your favourite character, I just feel that there are so many different ways to engage children in reading than just collecting stickers & certificates." Comment from a parent/carer

There were also some comments about the way in which the Challenge was run in different areas. A small number of respondents found the way that children were questioned about the books they

have read off-putting and others suggesting more intensive questioning and engagement from library staff in what their child had read was necessary. Similarly, there were some conflicting views about the number of books to read: for some six was felt to be too many and for others not challenging enough. However, there did not seem to be a consensus on these issues.

Conclusion

Overall, the survey results present a positive picture of the impact of the Summer Reading Challenge, and show that the vast majority of respondents had found the Challenge a worthwhile programme to take part in.

The key impacts of the Challenge are that it encourages the enjoyment of reading, increases the amount that families talk about and read books over the summer and it promotes library usage. Due to the small sample size and the survey methodology (completing one survey after the Challenge, rather than comparing a pre and post intervention survey) further research would be necessary to investigate these areas of impact in more depth.

The comments about the Challenge were overwhelmingly positive. The comments that identified areas for improvements for the Challenge were small in number and there was not a consensus about changes that were required, which suggests that the Challenge is broadly structured as it should be.

One key theme that did emerge from the comments and the question responses was that often participants in the Challenge are already frequent readers and library users. Further work could be done to investigate this finding and to identify ways to encourage the participation of children who would not otherwise be reading or using the library over the summer.