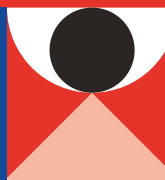




Vroeg begonnen, veel gewonnen

Een onderzoek naar de
langetermijneffecten van BoekStart

Adriana G. Bus & Merel de Bondt



Stichting
Lezen
Reeks



Summary

Point of departure for the research

This publication contains the results of research into BoekStart, the programme to promote reading. As a follow-up to the first effect study of 2014, research commissioned by the Dutch Reading Foundation (Stichting Lezen) was carried out into the long-term effects of BoekStart. Attention was also given to specific effective characteristics, to ways of improving the outreach of the programme and to ways of supporting parents when they read aloud to young children.

BoekStart, the programme to promote reading, is based on the successful British BookStart programme. After several pilots, it was rolled out at libraries in 2010. The aim of the programme is to stimulate parents to start reading aloud to their child at an early stage because this benefits the language and reading development of their child. When their baby is approximately three months old, the parents received a letter with an invitation to collect a small gift from the local library. This is a small BoekStart case, containing two baby books and a brochure with tips for reading aloud. When they fetch the case, they also receive free library membership for their baby. Almost all libraries in the Netherlands have participated since 2014. Before the coronavirus pandemic, they reached 65,000 young parents (approximately 40% of the number of babies born). During the coronavirus pandemic (when libraries were closed for nine months), this figure fell to 55,000 young parents (33% of the number of babies born).

Academic research into BoekStart is important to anchor the programme in Dutch society. In addition, the research will help libraries to improve the services they provide to parents with young children. In recent years, work has been done to professionalise library employees, to develop and offer instruments for parent-child meetings and to improve communication about BoekStart (including communication in more languages).

An important point requiring attention is the search for ways to increase the outreach and awareness of BoekStart, particularly amongst less-educated and less-literate families. Partly for this reason, libraries have intensified their cooperation with youth social services. For instance, since 2017 BoekStart coaches have been working with child health centres.¹ BoekStart coaches are specially trained library employees who give parents tips on reading aloud and linguistic interaction with their child during their visits to the child health centres. From a description of the activities of the BoekStart coaches, it appears that parents, youth doctors and youth nurses experience as pleasant their presence at the child health centres (Sikkema, 2019).

However, more may possibly be gained if the information about reading aloud forms an integral part of the discussion of the child's health. More insight into the effectiveness of the salient features of the programme is therefore necessary. In 2015, the first effect study (Van den Berg & Bus, 2014) took place, in which the language development of BoekStart babies was compared to children of the same age who had not participated in the programme. The research makes clear that BoekStart also had

¹ At the end of 2021, 139 BoekStart coaches from 64 local libraries (46%) were deployed to 178 youth health centres.

added value for highly educated parents. Many parents need encouragement and assistance. Particularly in the case of temperamental children, who cry, complain, kick and hit, parents are inclined to postpone reading aloud. They are afraid that their child will be overstimulated by their reading aloud and that this will manifest itself in negative behaviour. However, BoekStart persuades them nevertheless to read aloud to their child. This subgroup confirms that reading aloud at an early stage promotes language development: the temperamental BoekStart babies had a clear linguistic advantage after fifteen months, compared to babies of a similar temperament in the control group. Unfortunately, the sample used for this research consisted of too few less-educated parents to be able to draw conclusions in this regard. However, these parents are generally thought to start reading aloud later. Participating in BoekStart may change this.

Most important findings

As a follow-up of the first effect study, the long-term effects of BoekStart were considered. Do children maintain their head start with regard to language or does this advantage of reading aloud at an early age dissipate after several years? Four fifths of the parents (471) were willing to participate in a further study four years later. It was possible to compare the scores for the Cito Language Test for preschool children of half of the children (205). This test, which is taken at the end of group 2 (at the age of five or six years), analyses language development and nascent literacy and is therefore an important predictor of reading and learning in the years that follow. The children from the group of temperamental BoekStart babies appeared to score substantially better in the test than the equally temperamental children who did not participate in BoekStart. BoekStart therefore has a long-term effect.

This effect cannot be attributed to routines of reading aloud: all the parents read aloud to their children when they were five or six years old, have children's books at home and also regularly visit the library, as emerged from the survey of the 471 parents. The only difference is that on average the former participants in BoekStart had books read to them aloud longer as the reading aloud sessions lasted longer than a quarter of an hour a day. On an annual basis, this means more books and therefore more language input. It appears from the analyses that this difference explains the long-term effect. It is more likely that BoekStart, due to the early start with reading aloud, lays a firm foundation for language development and gives children a head start which other children lack. BoekStart is therefore an effective instrument for preventing language deficiencies.

To establish what exactly the salient components of BoekStart are and the areas in which improvements can be made, it was compared to two programmes of similar design, namely "Reach Out and Read" and "Imagination Library". As in the case of BoekStart, these are widely distributed programmes that are frequently researched. However, they also differ in a number of respects. All three give away free books to parents, but in the case of BoekStart and Reach Out and Read this is a limited number of books, while in the case of Imagination Library parents receive a book each month from their child's birth until the child's fifth birthday. In the case of Reach Out and Read, books are handed out to the parents in person. As part of the conversation about the health, care and development of the child, the doctor or nurse of the child health centre discusses the importance of talking to one's child and reading aloud at an early stage.

As is apparent from a meta-analysis of 44 effect studies, the number of books does not play a significant role in the effectiveness of the programme. Personal contact, however, does play a significant role. The Reach Out and Read programme stimulates children's interest in reading and reading proficiency more than both of the other programmes. A characteristic feature of this programme is that parents receive information about the importance of reading during the same consultation at the child health centre in which they are given medical advice.

In a final part of the study, consideration is given to the question whether a digital reading aloud trainer could help parents make the best possible use of a reading aloud session with their young child. Reading aloud to young children (up to approximately two years of age) makes considerable demands on parents. It is still difficult for young children to follow the development of a story and they are not yet able to respond (well). This is a reason that some parents decide not to start. However, parents can be encouraged and assisted with tips for more child-centred reading aloud, such as allowing oneself to be guided by the child's response and relying strongly on pictures.

The first version of a digital trainer for reading aloud developed by the researchers did have some effect, but appeared to be insufficient to enable parents to read aloud in a way that was really child-centred. The research made it clear that tips were welcome, but that the trainer for reading aloud must give a few more specific guidelines.

Practical implications

The research makes it clear that BoekStart makes a contribution to language development and that it gives temperamental children, in particular, a foundation for their later school career. Thanks to early contact with picture books and rich language, these BoekStart babies have a head start in their language development. They retain this head start until they are five or six years old and benefit from it when they learn to read at school. As a result, BoekStart is an effective programme for the preventive combating of language deficiencies and for offering equal opportunities to all children. Parents who do not read to their child at an early stage of their own accord are given the necessary encouragement and assistance when they participate in BoekStart. This applies to parents who avoid reading aloud for the time being because they have a temperamental baby, but perhaps also less-educated parents.

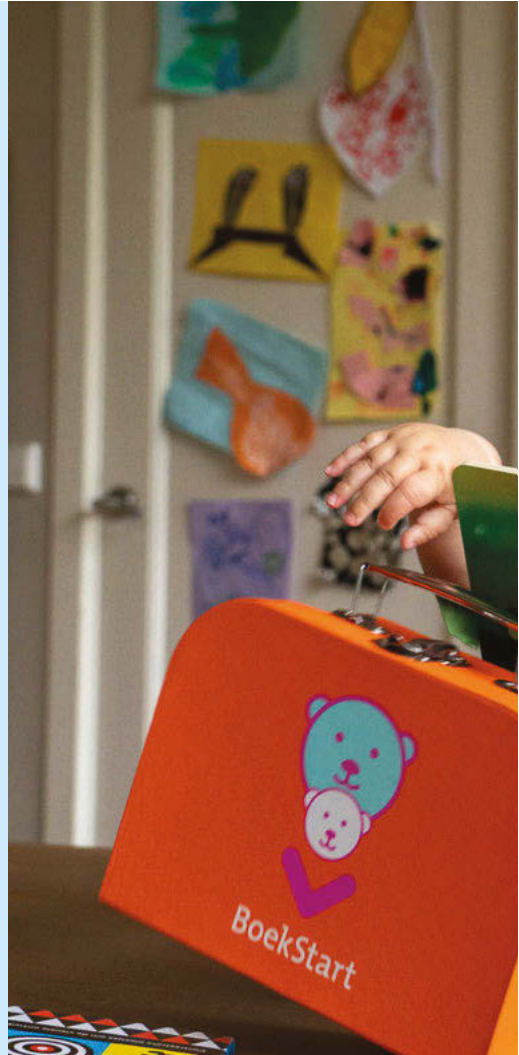
The research also offers a basis for improving BoekStart. The design with two free booklets and a library subscription is sufficient. However, more attention could be given to providing parents with guidance. It is important to enthuse the parents immediately when they visit the library for the first time and when they collect the BoekStart case. At present, the contact with parents is often limited to practical matters, but more could be achieved through this contact.

To reach as many parents as possible, it is recommended that the importance of reading aloud be made a permanent part of the conversations with parents at child health centres, as is done in the Reach Out and Read programme. The youth health centre employees discuss reading aloud during the conversation about nutrition and exercise. According to the researchers, this message, conveyed in a medical setting, would sooner convince parents that reading aloud is not a side issue, but rather a necessity. Finally, there are indications that a good and low-threshold training app for reading

aloud may help parents learn to get the most out of a reading aloud session with their baby and toddler.

Sinds 2009 bieden bibliotheken BoekStart aan. Sinds 2022 doen alle bibliotheken in Nederland mee. Dit leesbevorderingsprogramma stimuleert ouders om te beginnen met voorlezen als hun kind nog heel jong is, omdat dit de taalontwikkeling van hun kind ten goede komt. Het in deze publicatie beschreven onderzoek laat zien dat die vroege start inderdaad belangrijk is. Vroeg voorlezen loont, niet alleen op jonge leeftijd, maar ook op de lange termijn: BoekStartouders geven hun baby's en dreumesen waardevolle kennis en ervaring mee waarvan ze later op school profiteren.

In opdracht van Stichting Lezen hebben Adriana Bus en Merel de Bondt onderzoek gedaan naar de langetermijneffecten van BoekStart en de werkzame elementen van het programma. Hun bevindingen tonen aan dat het programma belangrijk is voor het voorkomen van leesachterstanden en het bieden van gelijke kansen aan alle kinderen. De onderzoekers laten bovendien zien dat voorlezen aan jonge kinderen andere eisen stelt dan 'gewoon een verhaaltje voorlezen'. Ze besluiten met duidelijke conclusies en aanbevelingen voor het beleid en de praktijk.



ISBN: 978-94-6301-418-2



Lezen
STICHTING LEZEN

Eburon
Academic Publishers

