

A young girl with blonde hair and a pink bow, wearing a green dress with a white tutu, is clapping her hands and smiling in a museum hallway. The hallway has a checkered floor, large columns, and framed paintings on the walls. A sign on the wall reads "Dutch Art".

playtalkread

Changing children's future
by changing today's culture

Category 3.3: Digital Communications

Authors: Scottish Government & The Gate Interactive.





Executive summary

By the time they start school, the most disadvantaged children in Scotland can be as much as 18 months behind their better off peers in vocabulary.¹ As babies, their parents were 25% less likely to read stories to them every day. In their little lives, they've heard 32 million fewer words than their better off classmates.²

'Life chances'. That's a phrase you hear, but perhaps don't always pause to consider the full implications. We all believe in fairness and in equal opportunities for every child. Yet some babies are dealt a losing hand, even before they're born.

The background to the PlayTalkRead project begins in a long-range study called 'Growing Up in Scotland'. The research tracks the progress of thousands of children (and their families) in health and wellbeing, in financial security and educational attainment.

The study highlights a range of social phenomena but probably the most interesting insight surrounds the social divide in learning and development.

Predictably, poverty is a powerful factor in under-achievement. But it also masks deep-seated social and cultural effects: the mother's age; health inequality and mental welfare; and the parents' level of education.

Indeed, some of the poorest parents may not have had a great experience at school, or even a good example of parenting at home.

1. Bradshaw (2011) Growing up in Scotland 2. Anderson, S et al (2007) Growing Up in Scotland

Yet, the Growing Up in Scotland research pointed towards one surprisingly simple conclusion. When you account for all the socio-economic factors, one thing helps bridge the gap in educational attainment between the rich and poor.

And that's enjoying simple daily activities with your child: just playing, talking, reading.

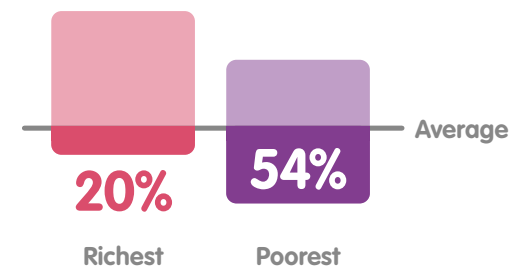
This is the story of how, with limited resources, we set out to help change Scottish culture and, in turn, the future of thousands of children.

We used innovative digital communications to encourage ordinary parents and carers to do more with their kids. And, slowly but surely, the evidence is that the culture of PlayTalkRead is catching on. Mums and dads are starting to do something a bit different.

To find out more, read on.

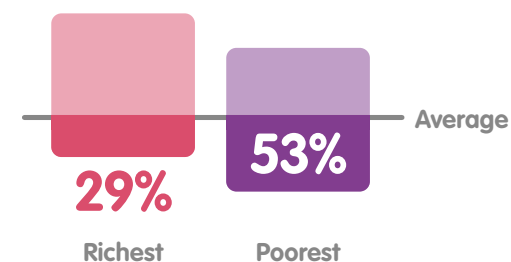
Vocabulary aged 5

Comparing children in lowest income quintile / highest income quintile



Problem solving aged 5

Comparing children in lowest income quintile / highest income quintile



There's a surprisingly strong association between proportions of parents who read to their children in the early years and life-long levels of adult literacy.

How often parents read to their children
10 month olds

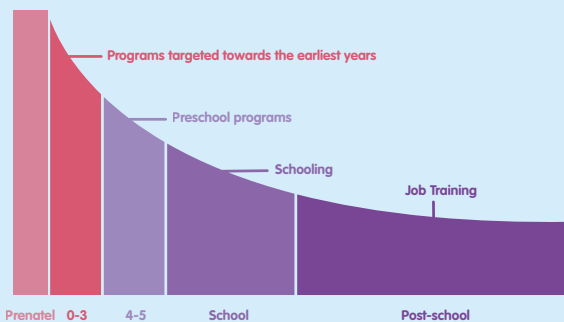


Scottish Survey of Adult Literacy
16-65 year olds



Returns on early childhood investment

Rate of return to investment in human capital



The idea behind PlayTalkRead is supported by research from Chicago University's Nobel prize-winning Professor of Economics, James Heckman. His equation shows that focus on 'early years' pays the greatest dividends.³

1. Essential background

Why the 'Early Years' make such a difference to children's future as they grow up, and to the wellbeing of Scottish society.

In the 18th century, the age of Robert Burns, Scotland was Europe's most literate society.¹

According to the UK's Office of National Statistics, we're still the most highly educated nation in Europe.²

Yet, behind this happy news lies a sad truth. Educationally, a huge gap has opened up between the 'haves and have-nots'. Scotland's Survey of Adult Literacies found that one in four people may struggle with literacy, and 3.5% had serious problems.

Inevitably, poor literacy limits people's prospects: employment and income, housing and health; social inclusion and wellbeing.

More depressingly, illiteracy is associated with crime – around 60-70% of people in

prison have a reading age lower than the average 10 year old.

So, literacy doesn't just have the power to change your life. It can also have massive social impacts and huge costs for society.

Still, like charity, literacy begins at home.

Tracking thousands of children over 10 years, the Growing Up in Scotland study made a surprising discovery:

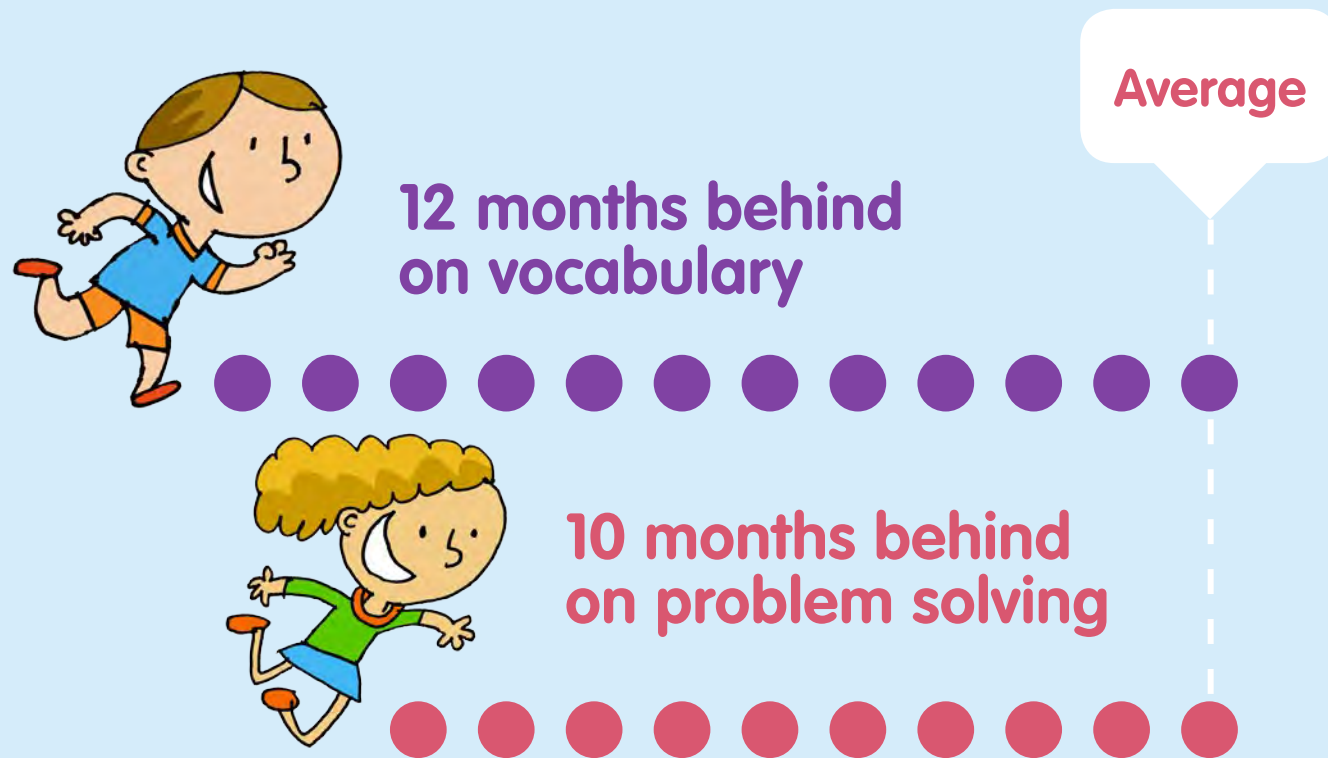
A parent – regardless of socio-demographic factors such as income, age, education or housing – can help bridge the attainment gap through daily activities with their child.

In short, they can PlayTalkRead.

1. Arthur Herman (2003): How Scotland Invented the Modern World.

2. www.independent.co.uk/news/education/education-news/scotland-the-best-educated-country-in-europe-claims-ons-report-9497645.html

Children from deprived families can arrive on their first day at school well behind classmates in mental development.⁴ And it's incredibly difficult to catch up.



3. The Campaign

Behaviour change is difficult. Even more so when you're talking about parenting practices that are ingrained across generations, fed by distrust of 'education', and shot through with self-doubt. How can a simple digital campaign, on a limited budget, address such large cultural issues?

Contrary to the impression given by pulp TV shows like *Benefit Street*, impoverished parents want the best for their children. Families are often tight-knit, but can have limited horizons. They may express love by giving children what they want (even if, developmentally, that's not what they need).

As a result, generations can unwittingly pass on patterns of 'learned' failure: leaving school early, becoming a young parent, poverty, worklessness and dependency. So, how do you communicate with a 'hard-to-reach' audience that isn't keen on reading?

Thank goodness for the smartphone and social media.

PlayTalkRead was first launched in 2009. In 2013-2014, the programme was backed by awareness-building advertising on TV and outdoor posters.

However, for 2015, we conducted research into the changing needs of the audience.

Traditionally, TV works for less advantaged groups, but social media had exploded.

Equally, in today's straitened circumstances, finances are inevitably finite. To enable investment in social media (and the necessary content creation), we decided to shift resources from TV advertising to digital channels.

Coupled with financial constraints, we needed to find innovative digital ways to engage directly with our key demographic.

Our ambitions remained high, even if the budgets weren't. The objectives were clear. We could make a difference to the lives of ordinary Scottish children by:

- Delivering a 'digital-first' strategy
- Engaging less advantaged audiences
- Targeting early adopters
- Showing (not telling) how PlayTalkRead activities support child development
- Being realistic about how PlayTalkRead could make life better for parents too

However, we were also aware of the traps which we wished to avoid for PlayTalkRead:

Firstly, no preaching. We wanted to find easy ways for people to engage positively with PlayTalkRead – to help them be in the vanguard in their own communities.

Second, no overt appeals to 'education'. We needed to suggest that PlayTalkRead was a fun part of normal family life. It's not about being a 'pushy parent'.

Third, as little 'reading' as possible. We'd lead by example. By modelling the behaviour of ordinary parents in film, photos, in memes and easy 'how-tos', people could see what good parenting looked like.

The Scottish Government hired its first ever Social Media Manager to increase and improve online engagement.

We had the chance to build up our presence on social media – developing the **Facebook** fanbase and talking directly to 'early adopters'.

On **Twitter**, we could also address the professional audience, broadening our reach and deepening connections into communities.

Equally, rather than try to change attitudes with traditional TV ads, we could support **behaviour change** by giving people online tips, tools and real life examples.

Acting as a **content hub**, the PlayTalkRead website gives a coherent overview of the project, curate tips, tools and videos – and provides balance for the 'flash in the pan' nature of social channels.

Email updates also bridge the gap between comms and real life PlayTalkRead activities:

- The PlayTalkRead bus (which travels to disadvantaged communities) bringing almost 12,000 children on board
- Free PlayTalkRead gifts
- PR ideas like "30 things to do before you're 3"



Key insight

**PlayTalkRead
should show parents that
'the everyday things
YOU DO TOGETHER
make a big difference'.**



Innovation: Creating 'Together time'

The commitment to digital communication also gave us more **innovative opportunities** – creating relevant content, amusing memes and even a mini '**online TV series**' to help model good parenting.

To demonstrate the impact of PlayTalkRead on child development for ordinary families, we developed the idea of '**Together time**'.

This series of filmed 'webisodes' (TV episodes online) tracked the real lives of pre-nursery children over 6 months. We cast for families which weren't awash with money, and where the parents faced significant challenges on a daily basis.

Our cast featured:

- a young single woman with a toddler;
- a stay-at-home-dad with an energetic boy;
- a new mum whose husband works away from home.

Each unscripted 'webisode' highlights the **real life challenges** experienced by the families – in their own words – and shows an achievable **daily activity**.

The webisodes would be promoted via our social channels and, over time, would build into a short documentary about the impact of fun, simple daily activities on the lives of ordinary children and their parents.

Over a few months, you can see the children growing and changing, learning to communicate – and witness the parents' self-evident pride in their progress.

We're still in process of making the final episodes but the first films already have over 150,000 views on social channels with hundreds of 'likes', 'shares' and positive comments.



4. What we did

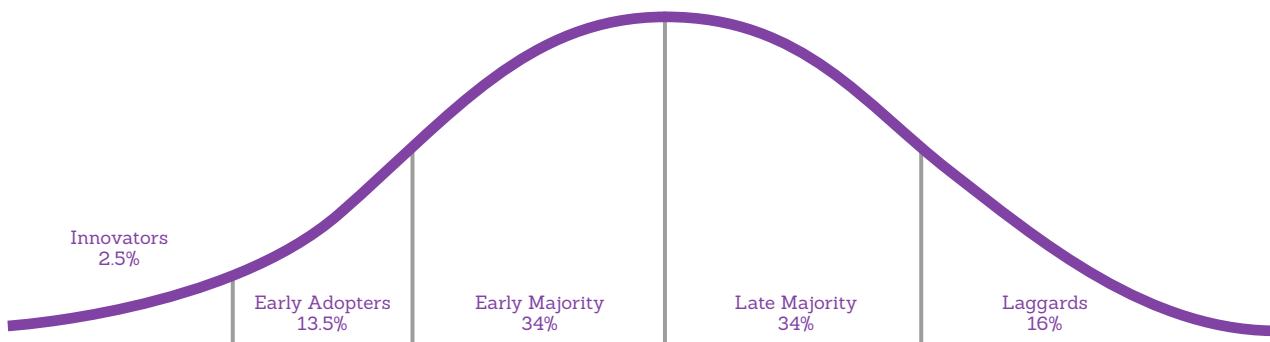
Based on robust research and strong planning insight, we developed an integrated approach to community engagement through digital communications.

Using a combination of long-range academic research, focus groups, expert consultation, online metrics and 'ethnographic' observation, we balanced deep insight with a practical economic plan.

We recognised that, with our budget, we could not reach everyone. Indeed, many of the most obvious candidates would be likely to reject our message.

So, our focus was on the 'early adopters' in the community, the trend-setters who could lead cultural change among their friends and peers. There are about 170,000 children in Scotland aged 0-3 years. According to the standard model of change adoption, we'd only need to reach about 16% of the audience to get the ball rolling...

Here's what we did.



Integrated digital campaign

Facebook social media

Facebook advertising

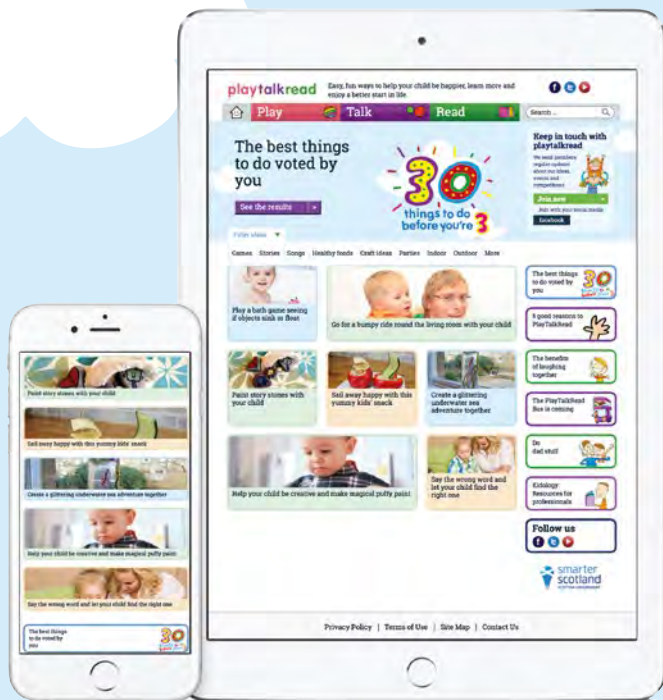
Twitter social media

Email marketing

Content marketing

Youtube 'webisodes'

Web and mobile development



Going mobile



Together
time

5. Creative work

30
things to do
before you're 3



Social media

Emails



Going mobile

The original PlayTalkRead site launched in 2009, and was supported by traditional TV ads. The campaign worked well in driving traffic. However, technology and user expectations move fast.

Research suggested that the forward-thinking young mums we wished to target found the site relatively static, with limited content development and social engagement. In short, users expect a different experience compared to just a few short years ago. They expected:

- mobile usage
- richer content / ideas
- social media / interaction
- online video

In research*, 97% of respondents said they understood the importance of playing talking and reading with their child/children after visiting the website; 85% said they will play, talk and read more with their child/children.

(*919 respondents.)



Click to view: <http://playtalkread.scot/>

30 Things

The challenge of creating a stream of kid-friendly activity led to the concept of '30 things to do before you're 3'.

Based on the fashionable 'bucket list' ideas on platforms like BuzzFeed, the concept gives a ready framework for simple, cheap activities and for creating interaction.

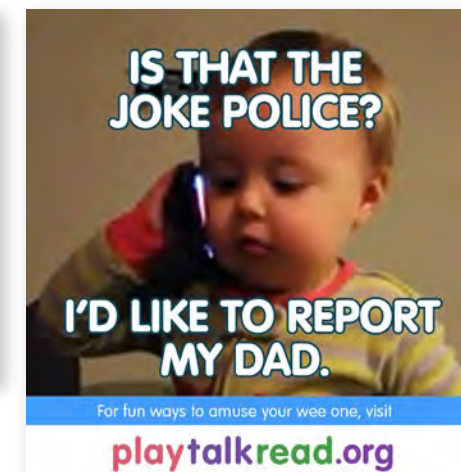
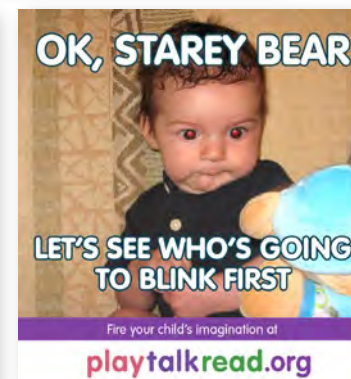
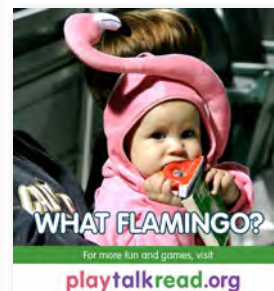
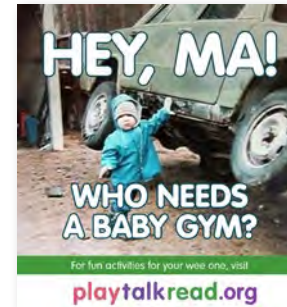
We created 15 different '30 Things' lists. Over 3,000 votes were cast by parents with local recommendations. '30 Things' had an online reach of almost 490,000 – with 97% including a picture.



Click to view: <http://playtalkread.scot/edinburgh-lothians>

Creating engagement

Our research showed the kind of content which young mums and dads liked and shared: fun ideas, jokes, memes and inspirational quotes. Our Facebook fanbase has **grown by 26% year on year.**



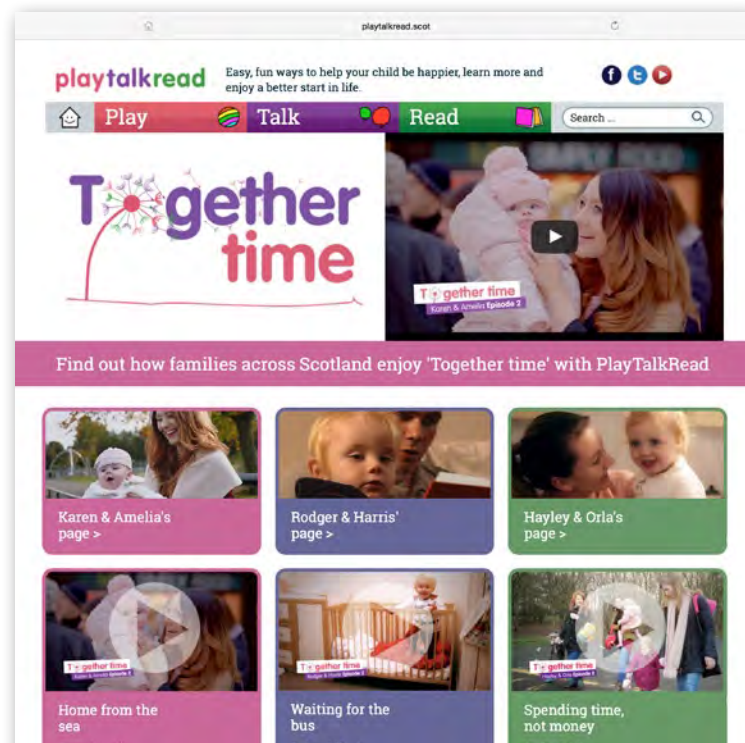
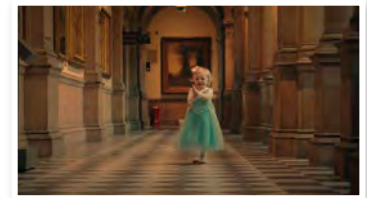
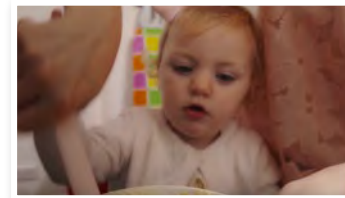
Together Time TV

Part of the challenge for PlayTalkRead is:

- a) Showing people what good parenting looks like in a way that isn't preachy or heavy-handed
- b) Showing that PlayTalkRead works – that the effects on a child's development are quite quick and obvious to you as a parent.

Our first films with single mum Hayley and toddler Orla; new mum Karen and baby Amelia; and stay-at-home dad Rodger with his son Harris have racked up over 150,000 views.

Click to view films: <http://playtalkread.scot/together-time>



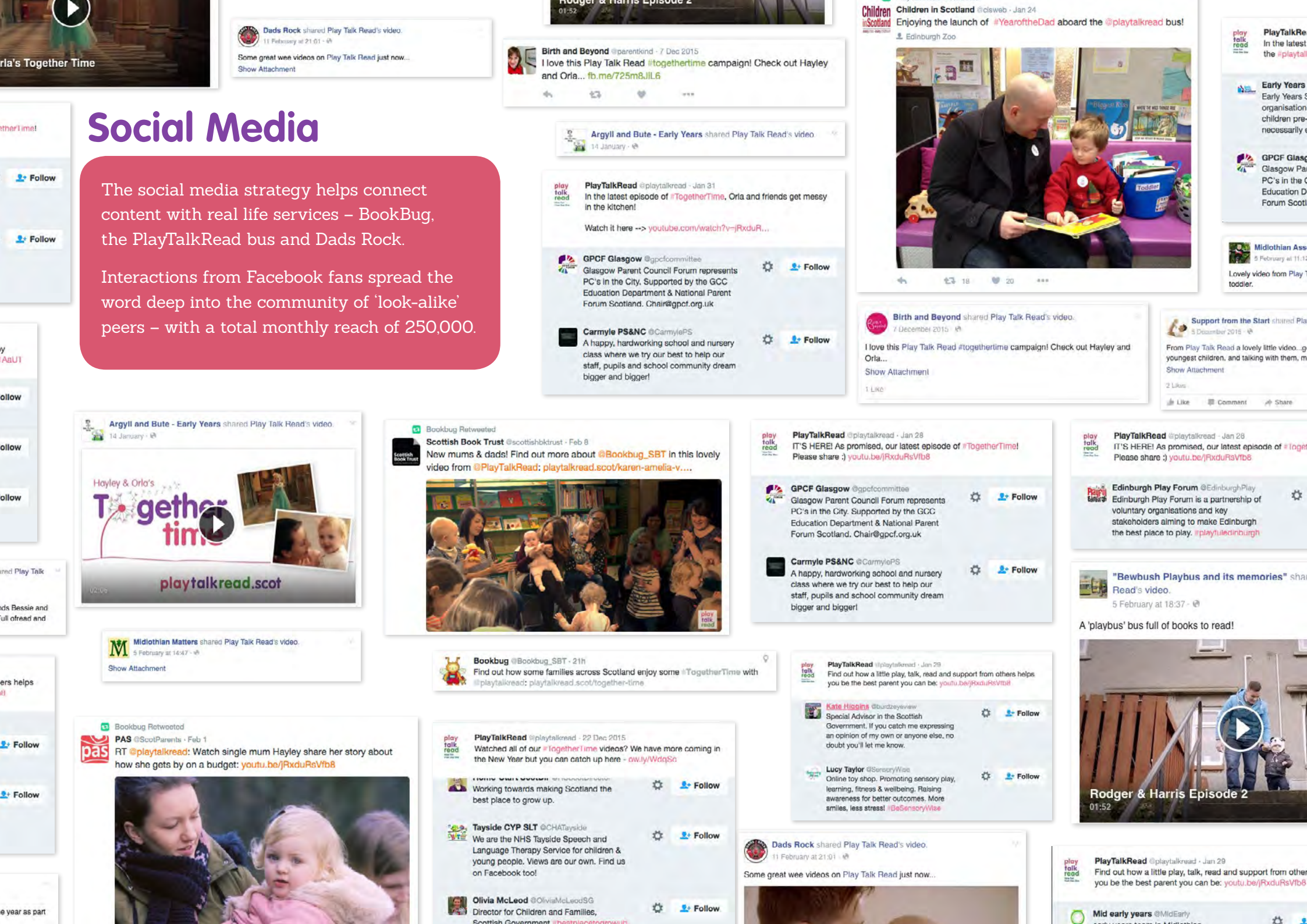
Together time makes the difference: Our online 'TV series' follows three families: a single mum with a toddler; a new mum with a small baby; and a stay-at-home dad with a boisterous boy.



Social Media

The social media strategy helps connect content with real life services – BookBug, the PlayTalkRead bus and Dads Rock.

Interactions from Facebook fans spread the word deep into the community of 'look-alike' peers – with a total monthly reach of 250,000.

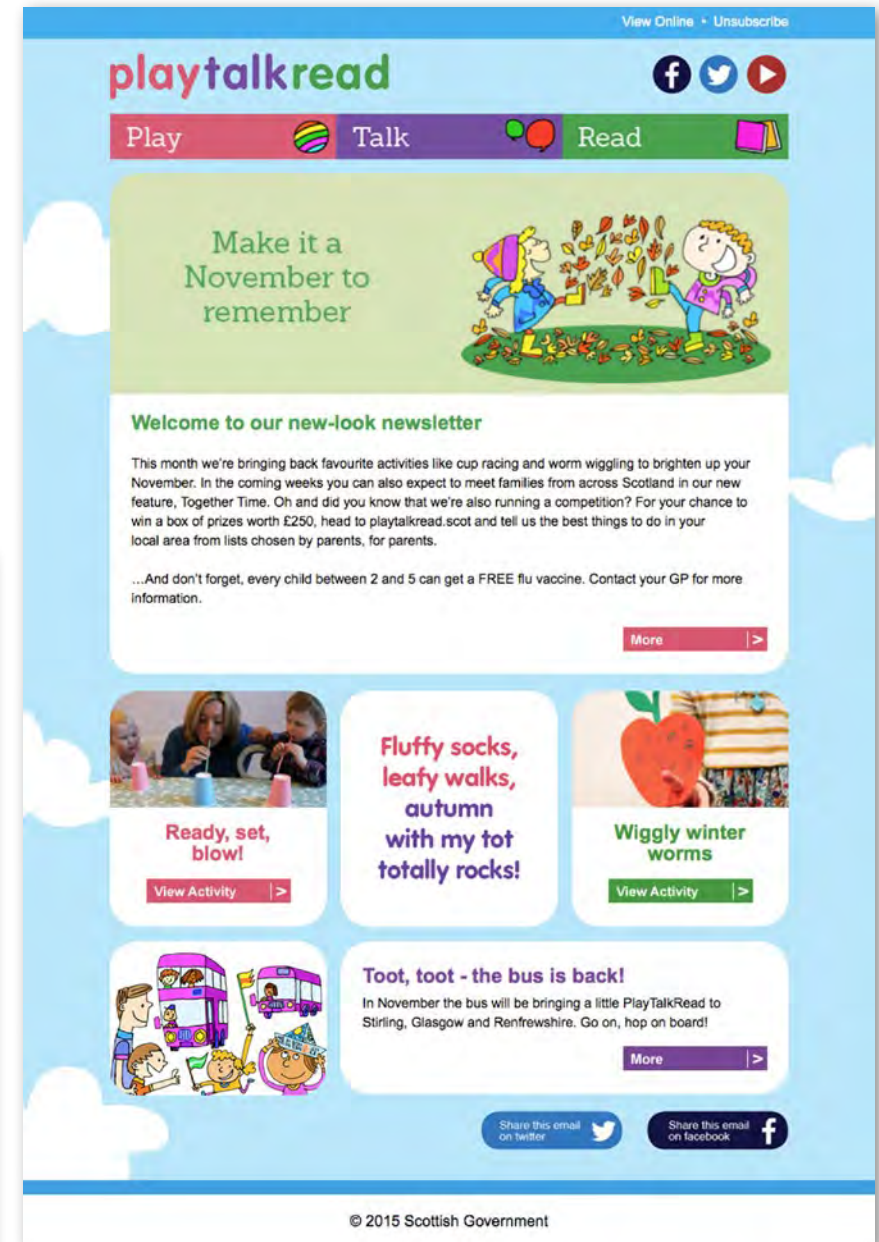
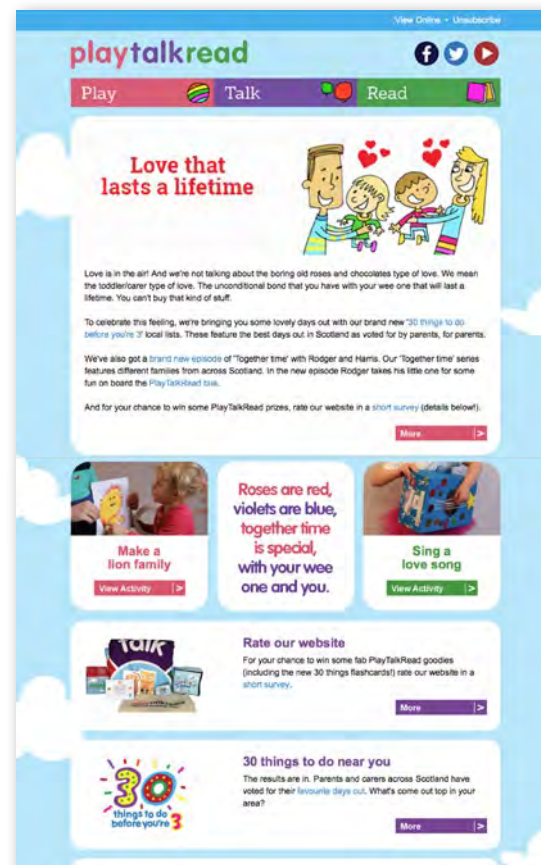
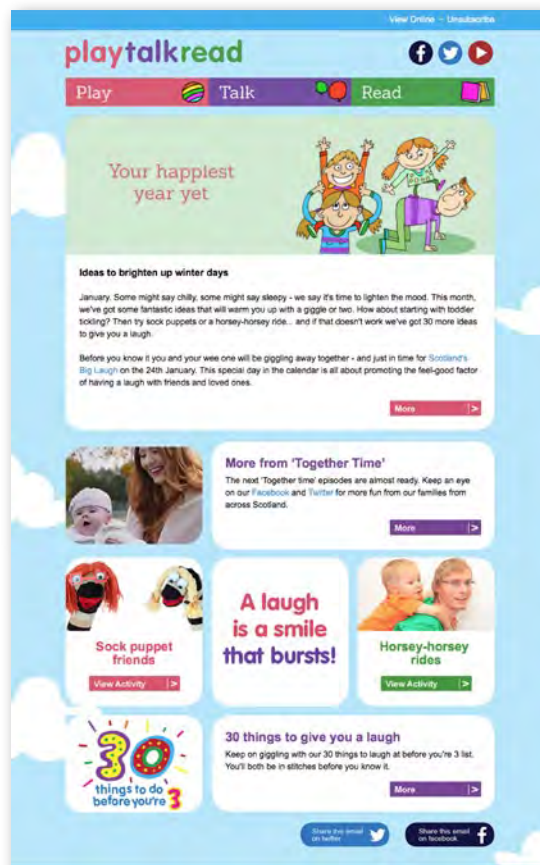


Email marketing

With a 'permission-based' e-marketing database of around 25,000 users, we developed a new, more engaging style of communication.

Monthly emails created a total of around 26,500 interactions.

The CTR (click-through rate) increased ten-fold.



5. What happened next

It's possible to imagine that PlayTalkRead is preaching to the choir; that it's the middle classes mopping up a service intended for the under-privileged.

Yet the profile of our online audience suggests something dramatically different.

Since the launch of the new mobile friendly site and social strategy, site visits have grown by 680%. Year on year, our Facebook fans have grown – now representing about 16% of the 170,000 children aged 0-3 years in Scotland.

But what's interesting is the profile of the audience. About 60% of the Facebook fans for PlayTalkRead are unmarried – with one in four being single parents.

That's not a middle class demographic. But what's equally revealing is the cultural world our audience lives in.

It's young. It's fun. It's on a budget. It's very populist, not to say down-market.

This suggests that PlayTalkRead represents a remarkable way to reach audiences who would otherwise find policy initiatives like education and child development as sensible, dull and boring.

Our Facebook fans

Female bias

Peak age 25-34

41% married

8% engaged

24% in a relationship

27% single

Likes

Itison Deals,
Boogie in the Morning,
T in the Park,
IRN BRU,
Kevin Bridges,
Daily Record,
Heart Scotland,
Clyde 1



6. Results

Monthly metrics*

Approx.
40,000
visitors per month

Website visits
+604%
(Unique visits: +645%)

New visits
+680%
(Returning visits: +376%)

Mobile users
+1,363%


Twitter followers
+189%


Facebook fans
+131% to 26,541

Facebook engagement

May 2014
313 interactions
115,779 total reach
60% engagement
on PTR page

November 2015
2,209 Interactions
245,133 total reach
92% engagement
on PTR page

Tablet users
+605%

Together Time videos watched by
+150,000

YouTube
facebook

Email open rate
+20%

*Pre-campaign benchmark May 2014 / Post-launch review November 2015

7. Qualitative Tracking Research

97% understand the importance of playing, talking and reading after visiting the website.

85% will play, talk read more with their children

"Fun things to do you wouldn't always think of yourself."

"Brilliant website for the first time mum"

"I think it's great. Love that it uses 'real' people."

91% found the 'Together time' videos useful and enjoyable

8. The Outcome

In a world of growing inequality, unfairness seems hard-wired into our society. Some people think it's just a price we have to pay for success. Yet the evidence suggests the opposite.

The gap between rich and poor prevents low income groups from fulfilling what the OECD calls their 'human capital potential', and drags down a country's overall GDP growth.

With a widening gap globally between the rich and poor, fairness feels like an impossible dream. Faced with real world complexities (and strong interest groups who like the world the way it is) policymakers struggle to make a difference.

So, it seems even more remarkable that a small, low-cost initiative can help close the gap between the rich and poor at all.

The underlying question is how you think cultural change happens. In our view, it doesn't happen by top-down dictat. Indeed, for our audiences, that would be counter-productive.

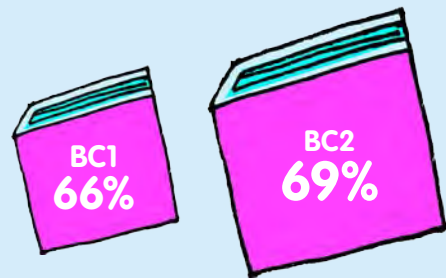
Like fashion, change happens by osmosis. A few trend-setters lead by example. They spread new ideas and activities into their community, until these new behaviours become the norm.

"Inequality can no longer be treated as an afterthought. On the contrary, opening up opportunity can spur stronger economic performance and improve living standards across the board."

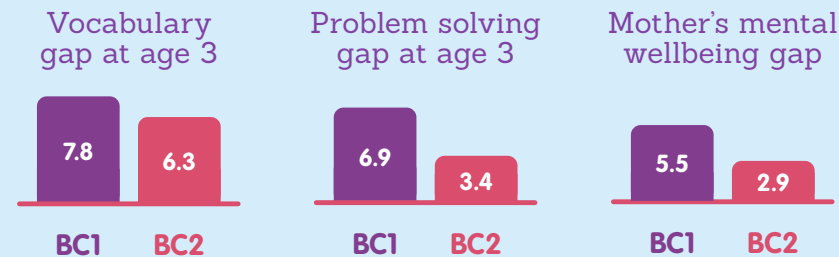
José Ángel Gurría, Secretary-General, OECD,
Organisation for Economic Cooperation and
Development



Parents now read more regularly to their children.



The gap between rich and poor is getting smaller



Mean vocabulary scores at age 3



Mental wellbeing scores among main carers when child aged 3



1. BC1 (Birth Cohort 1) is a group of children tracked since birth in 2004/5; BC2 is a comparable group born in 2011.

Our PlayTalkRead programme is proof that a targeted, 'gently-gently' approach to behaviour change works. We are not blasting people with 'do-gooder' instruction. We focus on the 'early adopters' – the open-minded and forward-thinking – blending new ideas and good example.

The evidence is it's working. The metrics for digital engagement show strong growth. Yet what we're looking for isn't virtual online behaviour – it's real world change.

And, remarkably, something is happening.

Between the first wave research in the Growing Up in Scotland study in 2007, and the most recent report, families who say they read regularly with their children have increased by 5%.

That might not sound much, but represents an extra 5,100 children aged 0-3 years – nearly 2 million extra stories a year – giving each child vastly improved life chances.

This cultural change is beginning to show up in other ways too. By the age of three – before most children go to nursery – parents are making the difference.

Overall vocabulary scores are improved at age three, and the skills gap between rich and poor is narrowing.

Again, before nursery school begins, the

divide between children from the high income group and the low income group is shrinking for both vocabulary and problem solving.

What's also surprising, and immensely pleasing, is that underprivileged mothers also appear to be happier. Maybe mums simply enjoy seeing their children do better.

However, a feeling of having control in your life is an important part of wellbeing. So perhaps the idea that parents can influence their child's future also builds self-efficacy and mental resilience into the family home.

Or could it just be that life's more fun when you PlayTalkRead?