

Read your child a book this Christmas, says Children's Minister

Families have been urged to reach for a book this Christmas in a bid to boost early literacy skills.

With gadgets and technology likely to be top of most children's Christmas lists, Minister for Children and Families Michelle Donelan has urged parents and grandparents not to forget that reading is an important Christmas pastime too, opening up "a world of learning and imagination" for the family.

Minister for Children and Families Michelle Donelan said:

All children deserve the opportunity to enjoy reading. The act of reading a book can build a child's vocabulary, spark their imagination, and help set them up for the rest of their lives. Families have an important role to play in encouraging this.

This festive period is a wonderful opportunity to spend more time reading with children and bonding over your favourite stories. I still remember being read to by my family at Christmas, and the many wonderful hours spent devouring new stories. Reading to your children this Christmas will not only help them develop a vital life skill, but also give them a passport to a world of learning and imagination.

Reading at home is important to a child's development. Findings from the National Literacy Trust's survey of 56,906 UK children released earlier this month, found that those who own their own books at home are six times more likely to be above the reading level expected of them and three times more likely to enjoy reading than those who do not.

Jonathan Douglas, Chief Executive of the National Literacy Trust, said:

Books have the power to transform children's reading skills, enjoyment and mental wellbeing. Yet far too many children are missing out on the chance to reach their full potential, simply because they don't have a book of their own at home. What's more, our research shows that the more books children have, the better equipped they are to enjoy reading and go on to succeed in life. The National Literacy Trust has taken huge strides to get books into the hands of children who need them most.

The National Literacy Trust has also launched its own list of recommended books for children of all ages. For more information on the importance of home learning and activities to encourage reading from new born to five year

olds, please visit our Hungry Little Minds resource page.

[Update on the closure of Concept House](#)

Published 24 December 2019

Last updated 3 February 2020 [+ show all updates](#)

1. 3 February 2020

Update on the temporary closure of Concept House.

2. 3 February 2020

Concept office is closed due to a water supply issue.

3. 26 December 2019

We have added further information regarding the temporary closure of Concept House.

4. 24 December 2019

First published.

[How can the FCO support you in international parental child abduction cases?](#)

As families enjoy time away from school and work over Christmas and New Year, the Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) is reminding people of the support available in cases of international parental child abduction.

International parental child abduction is when one parent removes or keeps a child from the country they normally live in, without the consent of the other parent or in breach of a court order.

Parents do not always realise their actions could be classified as abduction or that abduction is a criminal offence.

How can the FCO help?

The FCO can help those affected by child abduction and in custody cases where the child is under 16 and where there is a British link within the family, including in cases where the child is a dual national. FCO support can include:

- Informing a parent whether the country which their child has been taken to is operating the 1980 Hague Convention. If the country is a signatory, the FCO can put parents in touch with the relevant authorities in the UK so they can submit the applications.
- Providing a list of English speaking lawyers in a particular country, if parents need to apply for custody and permission to bring their child back to the UK through overseas courts.
- Trying to verify whether a child has arrived in a particular country if parents do not know where they are.
- Contacting the relevant authorities to check what progress has been made in finding children reported missing with the police overseas.

The FCO has provided assistance in 260 international parental child abduction cases so far this year , and in 2,425 cases since 2010. The FCO is contactable on 020 7008 1500 seven days a week and 24 hours a day. You can also read FCO advice on International Parental Child Abduction [here](#).

Andrew Stephenson MP, Minister for Consular Policy, said:

The break over Christmas and New Year, when schools have broken up, is sadly a time where we tend to see a spike in parental child abduction. Abduction can be a devastating ordeal for all involved, in particular the child.

If people do need assistance as a result of parental child abduction, they can contact our consular staff and reunite who we partner with, who will do everything they can to help.

If you suspect that your child may be abducted, you should also contact the charity reunite, which provides advice and information to parents and families whose children have been, or might be, abducted overseas. You can call them at any time on 01162 556 234 or visit their [website](#).

Alison Shalaby, CEO of reunite, said:

A child who is parentally abducted often experiences serious emotional distress, which can have a life-long impact. Parents and the wider family are suddenly thrust into an uncertain and unfamiliar situation which, in some cases, is completely unexpected and seems impossible to resolve.

However, many of these cases can be resolved, whether that be through mediation or the legal process, and children are able to

maintain a meaningful relationship with both parents. Through our telephone advice line we can provide specialist, confidential advice and support, and assist parents in resolving the situation in the best interests of their child. We would urge any parent whose child has been abducted, or who fears their child may be abducted, or any parent who is considering abducting their child, to call us on 0116 2556 234.

Parental child abduction has such harmful consequences that we would urge parents, whatever their situations, to seriously consider what actions are in the best interests of their child.

Further information

200 people to spend Christmas off the streets and in their own homes thanks to innovative government programme Housing First

- Government-backed Housing First pilots in Greater Manchester, Liverpool and West Midlands have helped 200 rough sleepers to date
- Specialist scheme supports vulnerable people into their own homes where they can rebuild their lives
- Part of the government's £1.2 billion investment to combat rough sleeping and homelessness
- Secretary of State, Robert Jenrick met one resident in her new home in Walsall yesterday (23 December 2019)

Hundreds of vulnerable people across the country will be spending Christmas off the streets and in their own home this year, thanks to a government funded pilot.

Housing First works by getting rough sleepers into safe and affordable housing where they can get the specialist support they need to rebuild their lives.

To date, pilot schemes in Greater Manchester, Liverpool City Region and the West Midlands have helped 200 people into homes where they have received vital support to recover from complex mental health issues, substance misuse and the physical effects of living on the streets.

Residents also receive support in maintaining the tenancy and finding a permanent home – ensuring they can stay off the streets for good.

The Housing Secretary, Robert Jenrick met one resident, Claire, in her new home in Walsall to hear about her experience.

Housing Secretary Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP, said:

Housing First is making a real difference to rough sleepers this Christmas. This programme is based on the simple principle of helping people into safe and secure homes first, and then providing intensive support, including for addiction, physical and mental health.

It was a privilege to meet Claire at her new home in Walsall, hear her experiences and wish her a happy Christmas in her new home.

Rough sleeping fell last year for the first time in several years, but there is a lot more to do and the Prime Minister and I have made this a priority of the new government.

We have invested over £1.2 billion to reduce all forms of homelessness and have set out to end rough sleeping during this Parliament.

This comes a day after the government confirmed an [additional £260 million](#) to support people who are homeless, or at risk of homelessness.

The funding will be shared among 317 councils across England to help families to find a place of their own, whilst also providing the necessary services for people to improve their lives and get back on their feet.

Housing First differs from other rough sleeping outreach support, in that case workers look after a much smaller number of people, allowing them to fully understand and get to grips with their specific needs, offering a much more personal approach.

The flexible support gives people a chance to move into the Housing First scheme and are offered the help to move on again once they are ready.

This scheme is replicating the success seen across Europe, where Housing First projects have been successful at ending homelessness for at least 8 out of 10 people in the scheme.

[Northern Ireland cheese producer enjoys boost in Christmas sales](#)

This Christmas, thousands of people across the world will indulge in cheese

from Northern Ireland thanks to Portadown producer Ballylisk of Armagh. The company has been receiving Christmas orders since September and will have sold 75,000 rounds of its triple cream cheese by 25 December. With cheese lovers getting ready to create the perfect Christmas cheeseboard, the business has already seen a 30% increase in sales.

Founded in 2016 by Dean Wright, Ballylisk of Armagh launched its very first product at Balmoral Show 2018 – Northern Ireland’s largest agricultural and food show. Its Triple Rose cheese went on to win the Best New Product award on the same day and remains the company’s flagship product. It also won 2 Gold Stars at the 2019 Great Taste Awards and was a finalist in the 2018 Great British Cheese Awards.

To ensure top quality, Ballylisk of Armagh has full control over the production process from farm to fork. With Dean being a fifth-generation farmer, the company grows its own grain and breeds its own cows. The Triple Rose cheese is processed daily using milk freshly produced on a farm that has been in the Wright family since 1820. With just 4 employees based in its Portadown factory, exports account for 40% of the company’s turnover, expected to reach 70% in the next 12 months.

Dean Wright, Founder of Ballylisk of Armagh, said:

Exporting is a big part of our business at this stage and we see it as a huge area for growth, so we certainly won’t limit our boundaries to Northern Ireland. We have seen a significant increase in sales since September and we hope this continues at the same rate throughout 2020.

The Ballylisk brand is recognised in the UK and further afield for its high quality, and we have already had enquiries from clients in Dubai, China and the United States; our first shipment will be leaving Portadown early next year. We are also in discussions with one of the largest cheese distributors in the UK, which will boost our sales figures again.

Besides exporting to Portugal, Italy and France this Christmas, Ballylisk of Armagh has sold 1,000 rounds of cheese to long-standing customer Fortnum & Mason. Its top clients also include five-star hotels, Michelin star restaurants, and high-end delis across Northern Ireland.

Ballylisk of Armagh currently receives 10% of orders online but is looking to increase this to 50% by next year. To keep up with demand, the company plans to transform its online business and employ additional staff to help manage the increase in production and sales.

With huge growth year on year, Ballylisk of Armagh is diversifying its product range and will launch a new brie and smoked brie for the first time just after Christmas. The business is also looking to enter new markets in 2020, including Japan, Dubai, China and America.

International Trade Secretary, Liz Truss said:

Christmas is a great opportunity for UK businesses to boost sales, so it's great to see Ballylisk of Armagh giving people across the world a taste of cheese from Northern Ireland.

I would encourage other cheese producers to tap into this growing industry and get in touch with the UK Government for export support.