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Short Report

Listen to This!
Children's Podcasts, Family Engagement, and Opportunities for Learning

Why podcasts?

→ Over the past decade, podcasts rose in popularity among young audiences, and an estimated 46% of children aged 6–12 have listened to them.[1] However, there is limited research on how families engage with podcasts or their potential benefits, especially for low-income households.

Similar to visual media such as videos, games, and apps, podcasts may support children's learning in areas including literacy, science, and social skills.[2] Available at little to no cost on a variety of platforms, podcasts' audio-only format may foster co-listening and parent-child interactions, which can enhance children's opportunities to learn from media.[3] This study explores these potential benefits.

[1] Edison Research. (2024). *Kids podcast listener report* [PowerPoint slides]. https://www.edisonresearch.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Kids-Podcast-Listener-Report-webinar-deck-Exporting-most-updated.pdf

[2] Barr, R., & Kirkorian, H. L. (2023). Reexamining models of early learning in the digital age: Applications for learning in the wild. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition, 12*(4), 457–452. https://doi.org/10.1037/mac0000132

Grindal, T., Silander, M., Gerard, S., Maxon, T., Garcia, E., Hupert, N., Vahey, P., & Pasnik, S. (2019). *Early science and engineering: The impact of* The Cat in the Hat Knows a Lot About That! *on learning*. Education Development Center & SRI Education. https://edc.org/sites/default/files/uploads/Early-Science-Engineering-Report.pdf

Hurwitz L. B. (2019). Getting a Read on Ready To Learn Media: A Meta-analytic Review of Effects on Literacy. *Child development, 90*(5), 1754–1771. https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13043

Rasmussen, E. E., Shafer, A., Colwell, M. J., White, S., Punyanunt-Carter, N., Densley, R. L., & Wright, H. (2016). Relation between active mediation, exposure to Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood, and US preschoolers' social and emotional development. *Journal of Children and Media, 10*(4), 443–461. https://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2016.1203806

[3] Dore, R. A., Hassinger-Das, B., Brezack, N., Valladares, T. L., Paller, A., Vu, L., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2018). The parent advantage in fostering children's e-book comprehension. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 44*(3), 24–33. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.02.002

Strouse, G. A., O'Doherty, K., & Troseth, G. L. (2013). Effective coviewing: Preschoolers' learning from video after a dialogic questioning intervention. *Developmental Psychology, 49*(12), 2368–2382. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0032463

About the Study
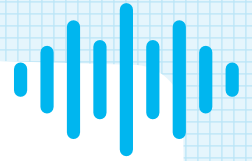
In the study, we explored families' experiences listening to a variety of children's podcasts. The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), in partnership with PRX Productions, supported the podcasts as part of the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. PBS KIDS has also developed podcasts with producer partners to accompany popular children's series such as *Arthur*, *Molly of Denali*, *Odd Squad*, and *Work It Out Wombats!*

This study explored how children and families living in low-income households use and experience podcasts, what podcast features may support engagement, and parents' views on the potential benefits from listening. Specifically, we explored:

1 **Family podcast listening habits**

2 **Podcast features that drive and sustain listening**

3 **Features that encourage family co-listening and interactions, such as conversations and activities during and after listening**

4 **Features that support children's learning**

110

A sample of 110 English-speaking families
with children ages 4–8 living in low-income
households participated in the study.
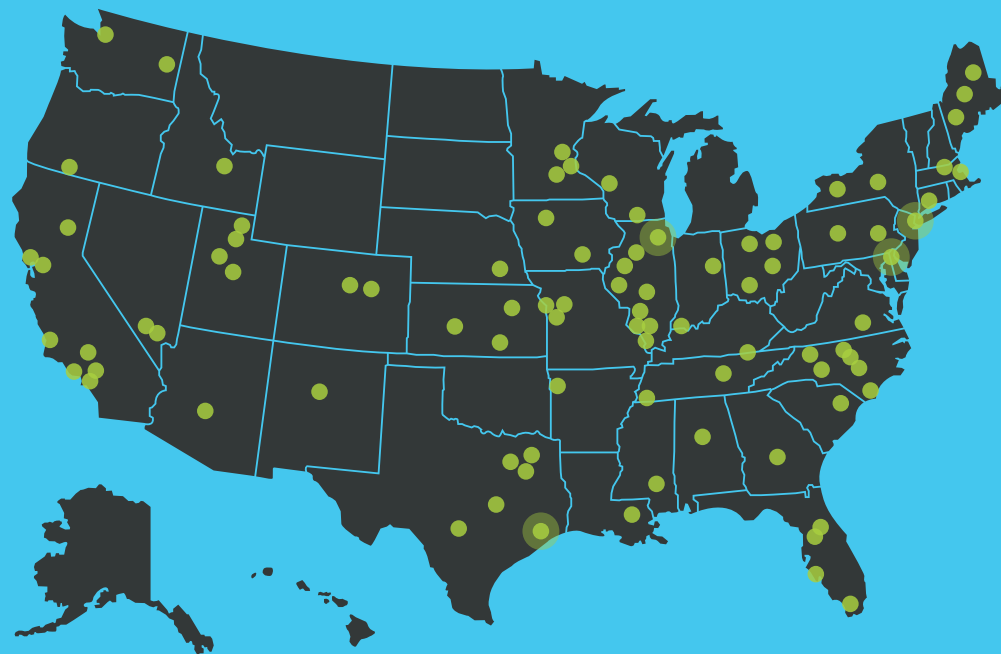
**Participating families
were living in 34 states:**

58%	Urban Areas
25%	Suburban Areas
17%	Rural Areas

Note: Large circles represent areas with four or
more participants.

→ Parents

54% had up to an associate's or technical degree

76% received state or federal benefits

56% Before the study, just over half of the parents reported that they listened to a podcast with their child one or more times in a typical month

→ Children

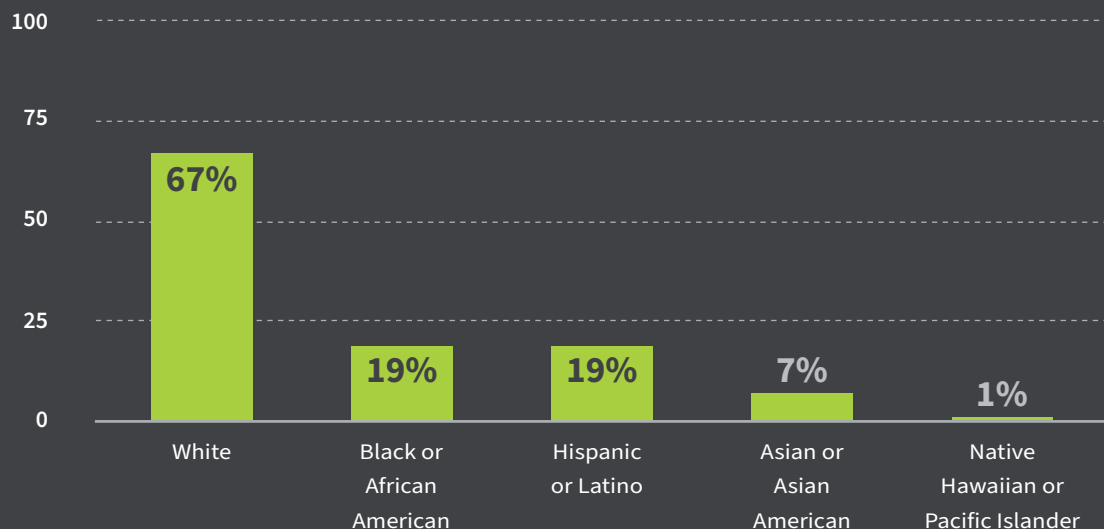Ranged in age from 4 to 8 years (mean age = 6.5 years)

53% girls   **47%** boys

12% had an Individualized Education Program (IEP) or received other special education supports

→ Children's Race and Ethnicity

Note: Parents could select all that apply.

Race/Ethnicity	Percentage
White	67%
Black or African American	19%
Hispanic or Latino	19%
Asian or Asian American	7%
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1%

Study Design

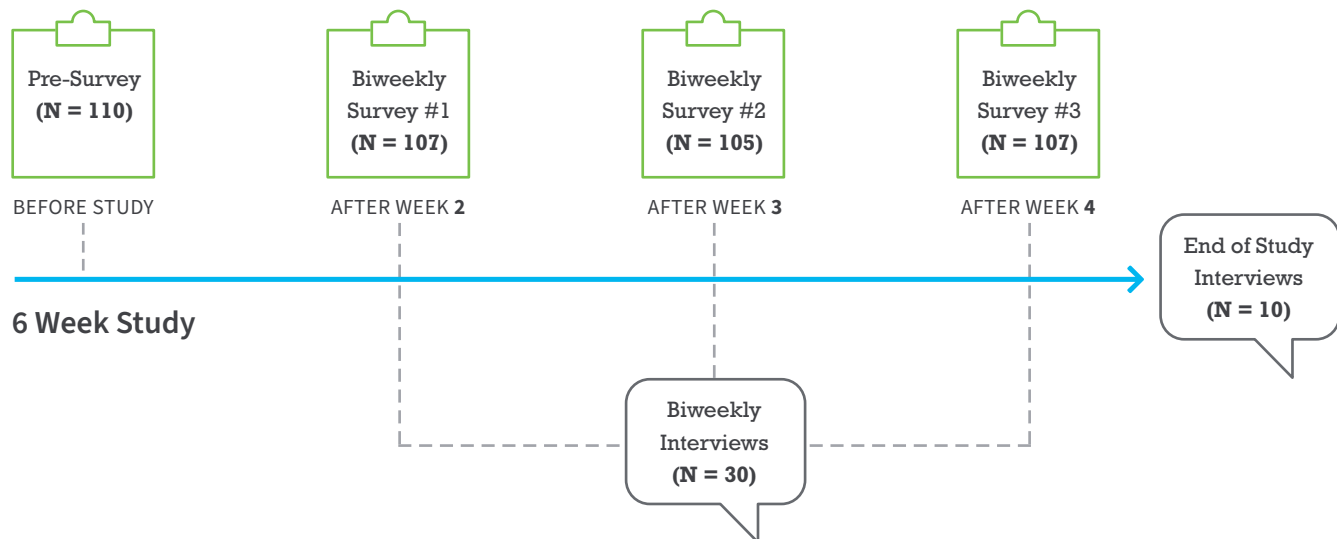## We conducted a descriptive, mixed-methods study.

We provided families with eight podcasts over six weeks (three in Week 1, two in Week 3, and three in Week 5).

The study team asked families to choose one podcast to listen to every two weeks (for a total of three) and to spend about one hour per week listening. Most podcasts had 7–8 episodes, and episodes were 11–23 minutes long on average.

eight podcasts shared over six weeks

Study Design

Pre-Survey (N = 110)	Biweekly Survey #1 (N = 107)	Biweekly Survey #2 (N = 105)	Biweekly Survey #3 (N = 107)
BEFORE STUDY	AFTER WEEK 2	AFTER WEEK 3	AFTER WEEK 4

6 Week Study

End of Study Interviews (N = 10)

Biweekly Interviews (N = 30)

→ We used parent surveys and interviews to collect information about perceptions and experiences listening to the study podcasts.

Surveys

The study team collected a total of 110 pre-surveys and 319 biweekly surveys from parents across the six-week study.

- **Pre-surveys** collected information about family demographics and baseline technology use and media habits, especially regarding podcasts.

- **Biweekly surveys** gathered information on reasons for choosing a podcast, child interest, features enjoyed, and conversations or activities sparked by podcasts.
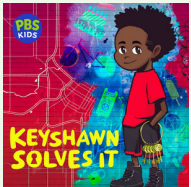
Interviews

A total of 40 parents were selected to participate in either a biweekly interview (n = 30) or an end-of-study interview (n = 10) to collect in-depth information about family experiences throughout the study.

Study Podcasts

Throughout this report, we refer to "features" of podcasts. The features described are the characteristics we used to categorize study podcasts to ensure that we presented a wide variety of podcasts to families.

Podcast	Description	Formats and Features	Specifications
Jamming on the Job	A music-inspired podcast that explores the World of Work through interviews with various professionals. *†	Episodic interviews, recurring segments, recurring host(s), adult guest stories, musical segments	→ 2 seasons; 12 episodes → Runtime: 17–24 minutes → Ages 4-8 → English with Spanish phrases
Keyshawn Solves It (PBS Kids)	A mystery podcast that highlights teamwork and perseverance as friends work to solve a mystery while also learning about life skills and U.S. history. *†	Serial narrative, family traditions and heritage, mystery, complex storyline	→ 1 season; 8 episodes → Runtime: 10–17 minutes → Ages 5-8 → English
Molly of Denali Podcast	An adventure podcast that centers on life in Alaska as Molly and friends try to solve mysteries. ‡	Serial narrative, family traditions and heritage, recurring segments, recurring host(s), mystery, connected to a show, complex storyline	→ 3 seasons; 24 episodes → Runtime: 6-15 minutes → Ages 4-8 → English with Gwich'in phrases

Note: The episode counts listed in this chart reflect the number of episodes available to participants at the time of the study, which ran from May to June 2024. Some podcasts have since released additional episodes.

* Podcast was developed with funding at least in part by the U.S. Department of Education through the CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative.

† Podcast was developed as part of a CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative podcast accelerator program with PRX.

‡ Podcast was connected to a series developed with funding in part by the U.S. Department of Education throughthe CPB-PBS Ready To Learn Initiative.
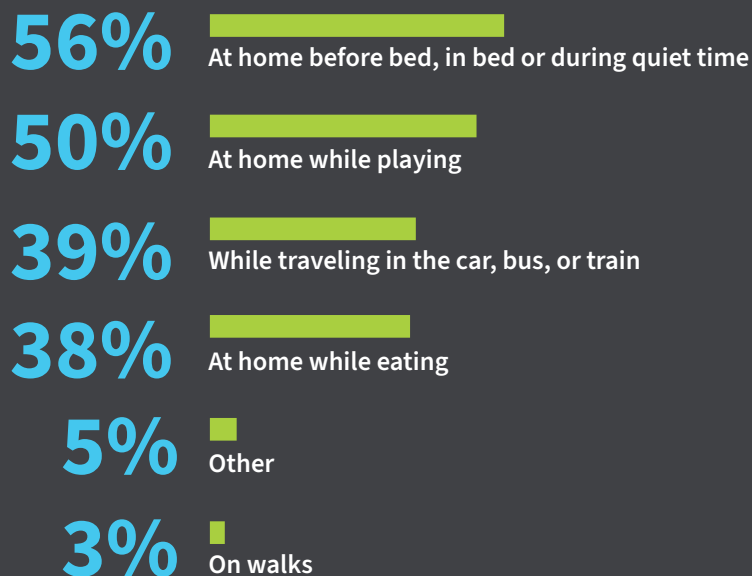
Podcast	Description	Formats and Features	Specifications
ODD SQUADCAST	A news broadcast-style podcast where The Big O addresses agents all over the world while trying to solve a mystery at headquarters. ‡	Serial narrative, broadcasts, recurring segments, recurring host(s), mystery, connected to a show, complex storyline	→ 1 season; 7 episodes → Runtime: 7–10 minutes → Ages 5-8 → English
Pinkalicious & Peterrific Podcast PBS KIDS	A creativity-focused podcast where two siblings share fun stories while encouraging listeners to dance, sing, draw, and make believe.	Episodic narratives, recurring host(s), listener prompts, questions or stories from kids, musical segments, connected to a show	→ 2 seasons; 18 episodes → Runtime: 13–16 minutes → Ages 3-8 → English
The Arthur Podcast PBS KIDS	A story that highlights the adventures of Arthur and friends with commentary from Arthur and submissions from listeners.	Episodic narratives, recurring host(s), listener prompts, questions or stories from kids, connected to a show	→ 3 seasons; 20 episodes → Runtime: 15–18 minutes → Ages 4-8 → English
The PLATE Show	A comedy podcast where Spoonie, a talking spoon, and her BFF, Tongs, interview guests and learn about food and cultures from around the world. *†	Episodic interviews, recurring segments, recurring host(s), family traditions and heritage, adult guest stories, questions or stories from kids	→ 1 season; 8 episodes → Runtime: 22–28 minutes → Ages 6-9 → English
Work It Out Wombats! Podcast PBS KIDS	An interactive podcast where listeners play along with the Wombats as they make believe, dance, sing, and solve problems.*	Episodic narratives, recurring host(s), listener prompts, musical segments, connected to a show	→ 1 season; 8 episodes → Runtime: 9–12 minutes → Ages 3-6 → English

→ How do families listen to podcasts?

The study explored where, when, and how families listened to podcasts throughout the study.

Most families reported that it was easy to fit podcasts into their daily routines and that 10–15 minutes was an ideal episode length for children to stay engaged.

## Where and When Children Listened to Podcasts (N=319)

56% At home before bed, in bed or during quiet time

50% At home while playing

39% While traveling in the car, bus, or train

38% At home while eating

5% Other

3% On walks

Percent of Biweekly Responses

- Children listened on their parents' smartphones **(68%)**, tablets **(24%)**, and car radios **(23%)**.

- Families used YouTube **(39%)**, Spotify **(30%)**, and the PBS KIDS website **(25%)** to listen to podcasts together.

- Children usually listened at home around bedtime, quiet time, while playing, or in the car.

- Most children listened to more than a couple of episodes every two weeks, and many listened to several episodes.

- While most listened to one podcast every two weeks, as the study requested, some families listened to two or more podcasts.

> "Some of them are, like, 13 to 15 minutes. I think it's a good cap because it would be a car ride, a little errand, or the walk to school or falling asleep. They managed to complete a whole episode and have a resolution." –Parent of a 7-year-old

What Podcast Features Support Engagement?
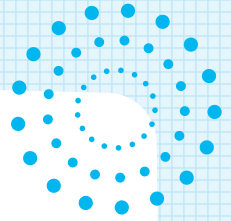
Choosing podcasts: Most often, children chose the podcasts that families listened to. Reasons for choosing podcasts:

→ **Familiarity with the show**

→ **Interest in the description or previews**

→ **Engaging thumbnail visual design**

→ **Characters that shared similarities with the child or family**

CONTINUED ENGAGEMENT

In 95% of biweekly responses, parents indicated that children were interested in the podcasts. Parents reported many podcast features that made their child want to continue listening to podcasts:

- **Character Appeal**
Characters familiar to children from other shows, featuring child voices, or with relatable backgrounds or situations

- **Specific Features**
Musical segments, interactive elements such as problem solving, and direct prompts to children

- **Format and Content**
Serial narratives, especially mysteries, and content about family traditions and heritage

"He is very interested in food, finding out about new foods, and helping me prepare food in the kitchen. He wanted to learn more about food."

–Parent of a 7-year-old (*The Plate Show*)

"She likes mystery and Keyshawn is from Minneapolis, like her."

–Parent of a 7-year-old (*Keyshawn Solves It*)

"She liked how it asked a lot of questions and was interactive."

–Parent of a 5-year-old (*Work It Out Wombats!*)

How do podcasts support shared family listening, conversations, and activities?

Children and parents often listened together.

Most parents **(81%)** reported listening with their child in all three biweekly surveys. Children also often listened with other family members **(44%)**, especially siblings; less often, children listened alone **(17%)**.

Podcasts provided opportunities for families to connect with and deepen their understanding of the content. Parents indicated in **83%** of responses that they had a conversation with their child about a podcast.

→ **Many recapped or clarified the storyline.**

→ **Many discussed podcast themes or content:**

» Problem-solving and related skills, such as persistence, courage, and teamwork

» Literacy, math, and science concepts

» Different cultures

→ **Some discussed how certain podcast episodes related to situations in their own lives.**

"The sound effects were really cool. The way that it was written and how they had people come in and interview actual real people was really neat. I think if you have content that's more relatable, it's going to be easier for people to connect to."

–Parent of a 7-year-old (*The Plate Show*)

"We talked about how it's important in a family for everyone to help out with chores and other things because parents can't do it all alone and kids can help too."

–Parent of a 7-year-old (*The Arthur Podcast*)

"I think it helped solidify some math ideas for her. In one of the episodes they talked about weather, so she was asking, 'How does that work? Do we get hurricanes here?'"

–Parent of a 4-year-old (*Odd Squadcast*)

→ More than half (55%) of parent responses indicated that their child did an activity sparked by a podcast.

Play

Children engaged in both independent free play and guided play. Each study podcast inspired some children to do pretend play.

Research

Families researched podcast topics together.

Exploration

Families attended related events or explored their neighborhoods.

"The dance-out-loud one, whenever there was painting and being creative or something there, she sat down and she actually acted it out, out loud, and danced noisily or [during] one gesture was, like, 'Mommy, can you pull out my paint? I wanna paint.' And she painted a scene from that."

–Parent of a 7-year-old
(*Pinkalicious & Peterrific*)

"After listening to *Wombats*, he would always engage in make-believe play with his brother, and their play was far more exciting than previously."

–Parent of a 6-year-old
(*Work It Out Wombats!*)

"We set up an imaginary airport and the siblings took turns being a pilot and an air traffic controller."

–Parent of a 7-year-old (*Jamming on the Job*)

What Do Families Gain from Listening to Podcasts?

Almost all (92%) parents' responses indicated that they thought the podcast they listened to was "very" or "a little" educational.

Parents reported benefits for their children from listening:

- Awareness of and appreciation for other cultures

- Critical thinking and problem-solving skills

- Academic content knowledge and skills related to math, literacy, and science

- Creativity and imagination

- Ability to engage with audio-only media, building listening comprehension skills

"She's already a pretty imaginative child, but following melodies and rhythms allows her to use her imagination in a way she might not have on her own."

–Parent of a 7-year-old
(*Pinkalicious and Peterrific*)

"I think he learned about problem solving and asking good questions."
–Parent of a 5-year-old (*Keyshawn Solves It*)

"He learned that sometimes you have to compromise and you have to be kind to everyone."
–Parent of a 6-year-old *(The Arthur Podcast)*

→ **Parents also benefited from listening to the podcasts with their children.**

- Learned about new topics

- Learned about their child's capacity to listen to and enjoy podcasts

- Gained insights into new ways to communicate with their child

- Appreciated the opportunity to bond with their child and share a new experience

"That jingle, that little sound was a helpful redirection pause-type moment that I could apply to myself and interacting with [my children]."

–Parent of a 5-year-old
 (*Work It Out Wombats!*)

"I learned that she can listen better than she does. That she can focus on something. When they're watching TV, they're playing around, so they really don't have to listen, they can see what's going on. But, she *can* listen and hear the story and look forward to it." –Parent of a 7-year-old (*Keyshawn Solves It*)

Features that Promote Joint Media Engagement

Challenges to engagement

Only a small number of parent survey responses (10%) indicated that their family experienced challenges engaging with the podcasts, for reasons including

- too many things in the episode competing for their attention;

- discomfort with the interactive components; or

- unfamiliarity with the lack of visuals.

However, many parents described how their child was able to adjust to the audio-only medium with parent support to understand how to listen and imagine the podcast in their mind, highlighting the importance of listening together.

While families enjoyed listening to the podcasts together in general, parents reported that there were specific aspects that made them want to listen with their child. Parents most readily engaged when the podcast:

- Featured content that was interesting to both parent and child

- Taught something new or led to activities

- Offered complex storylines or character development, which sparked conversations

- Featured relatable experiences or connected to everyday situations

"[My daughter said], 'Turn on the picture, turn on the picture.' And I said, 'No, this one's just a listening podcast.' And then she'd ask, 'Okay, well, Mommy . . . how do we know? We can't see what they're putting on the pizza.' And I explained, 'Well, you have to listen to what they're saying.'" –Parent of a 5-year-old (*The Plate Show*)

→ Why are these findings important?

This research sheds light on how children and families use podcasts and the potential benefits they can gain from listening.

This study shows that podcasts hold the potential to engage families, promote imaginative play, support children's listening comprehension and learning, and help families explore new topics together. Participating families were drawn to a range of features, suggesting that the podcasts had broad appeal. Families from low-income households were highly engaged with podcasts. Podcasts are easily accessible, affordable, and can be seamlessly integrated into daily routines, making them a valuable resource for families with limited means.

Previous research suggests that children learn more when media is used with their parents[4], and this study supports that idea. Families who actively engaged with the podcasts and interacted with each other created valuable opportunities for extended learning. Parent feedback indicates that podcasts with episode lengths of around 10 to 15 minutes, a narrative storytelling format, familiar characters and content, and interactive features that prompted children's responses were particularly effective in maintaining children's attention. Podcasts with plots that connected to children's experiences sparked meaningful family discussions. Additionally, podcasts that encouraged creative activities or exploration motivated some families to participate in these activities together while listening. This research highlights how podcasts can enhance children's learning, offering an enriching, enjoyable, and accessible medium for families to explore new ideas together.

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[4] Dore, R. A., Hassinger-Das, B., Brezack, N., Valladares, T. L., Paller, A., Vu, L., Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2018). The parent advantage in fostering children's e-book comprehension. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 44*(3), 24–33. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2018.02.002

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