

Children and young people's book ownership in 2021

The impact of book gifting on children and young people's reading engagement

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Summary

We included a question on book ownership in our Annual Literacy Survey, which was conducted between January and March 2021. Based on the responses of the 34,435 children and young people who answered this question:

- Almost **6%** of children and young people said they didn't have a book of their own at home – this equates to **413,068** children and young people in the UK
- More children who receive free school meals (FSMs) said that they didn't have a book of their own at home compared with their peers who don't receive FSMs (**9.2% vs. 5.3%**)
- Book ownership was associated with greater reading enjoyment and frequency. More than twice as many of those who had a book of their own said that they enjoyed reading (**52.8% vs. 21.1%**), and more than twice as many read daily in their free time (**31.8% vs. 13.5%**) compared with those who didn't have a book of their own.

Introduction

Research has shown that book ownership has a significant impact on life outcomes. In 2019, we found that children who reported that they had a book of their own were not only more engaged with reading but also six times more likely to read above the level expected for their age than children who didn't own a book (22% vs. 3.6%).

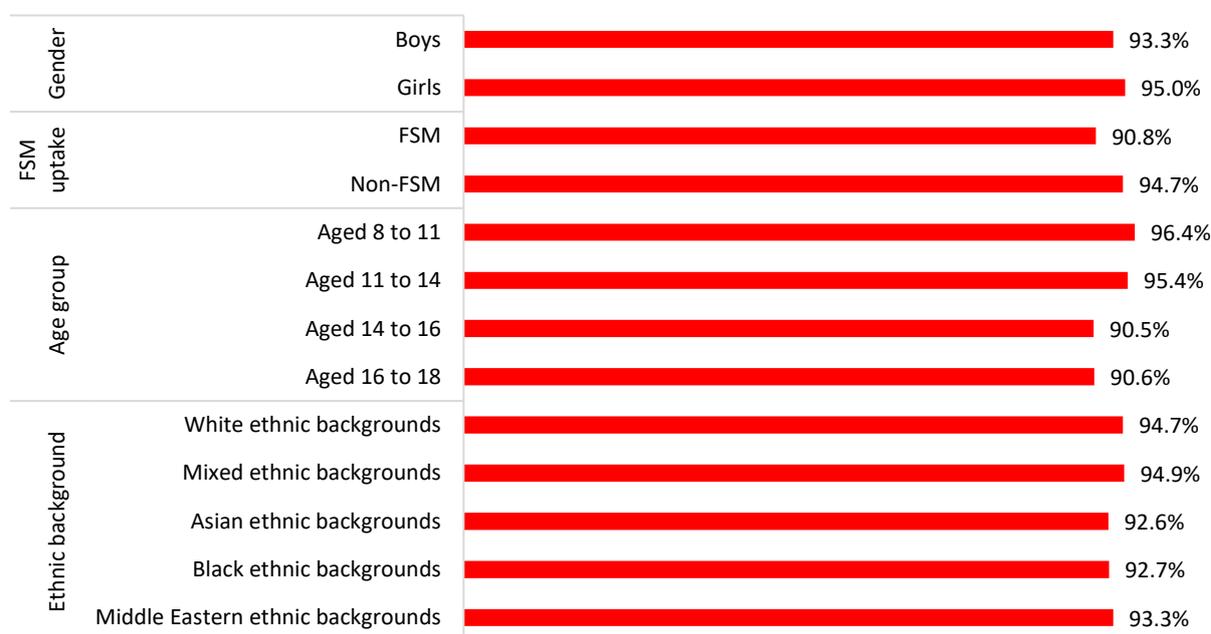
Indeed, a 20-year study of children across 27 nations found that children who grow up in homes with many books receive three years more schooling than those who grow up without books, irrespective of their parents' education, occupation, and class (Evans et al., 2010). Another study found similar results, where children with access to books can expect a higher income in adulthood than those who grow up with few or no books at home (Brunello et al., 2015).

It is therefore encouraging to see that book ownership was high in 2021, with **94.2%** of children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying that they had their own books¹. However, this also means that nearly 6%² (1 in 17) of children and young people said that they don't have a book of their own, which is the equivalent of 413,068³ children and young people in the UK.

Book ownership was associated with socioeconomic background: more children and young people who receive free school meals (FSMs), a proxy of economic background, said that they don't have a book of their own compared with those who don't receive FSMs (see Figure 1). Overall, 1 in 11 FSM pupils said that they don't have their own book compared with 1 in 20 non-FSM pupils.

Book ownership also declined with age, with fewer young people aged 14 and over saying that they had a book of their own at home compared with their younger counterparts. However, there are similar levels of book ownership regardless of ethnic background.

Figure 1: Book ownership by gender, free-school-meal uptake, age group and ethnic background in 2021



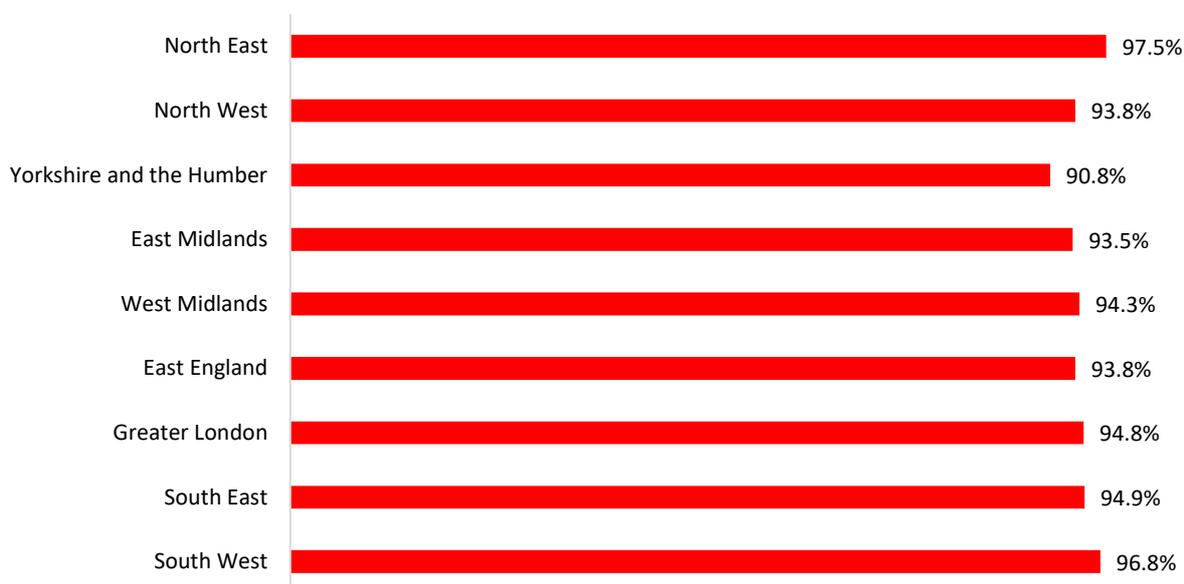
¹ Based on 34,435 children and young people who answered a question on book ownership in the Annual Survey that we conducted between January and March 2021

² n = 1,994

³ For the year 2019/2020, there were 6,884,478 pupils aged 8-18

Book ownership in England was roughly the same across different geographical regions (see Figure 2), with the exception of Yorkshire and the Humber, which had the lowest level of book ownership, and the North East, which had the highest levels of children and young people who said that they had books of their own at home.

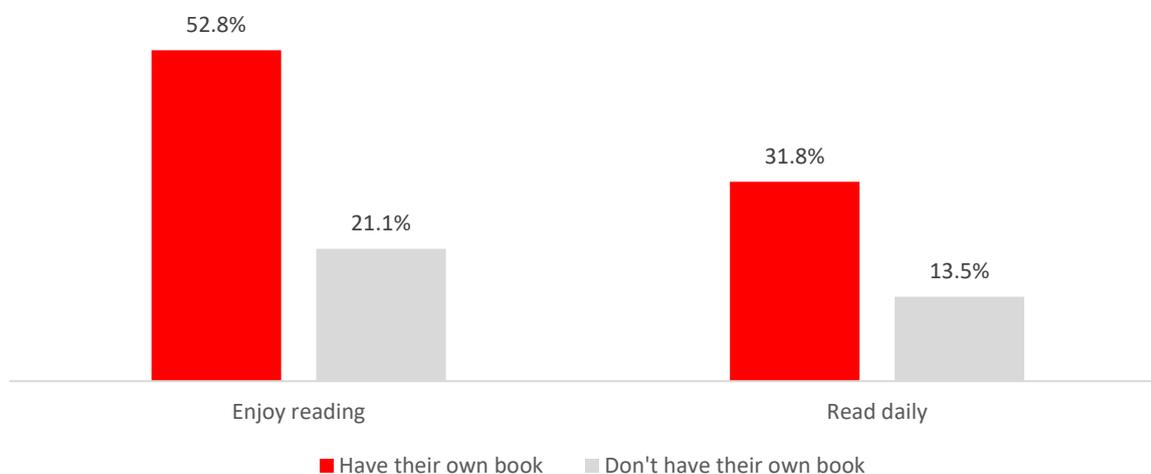
Figure 2: Book ownership by geographical region in England in 2021



Why does book ownership matter?

Our data from 2021 showed that over twice as many children and young people who said that they had a book of their own at home said that they enjoyed reading compared with their peers who didn't have a book of their own at home (see Figure 3). Additionally, almost three times as many of those who had their own book also said that they read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't have a book of their own.

Figure 3: Enjoying reading and reading daily by whether or not children and young people had their own book at home in 2021



Our own research, as well as that of others, has shown that those who enjoy reading and who read daily are better readers than their peers who don't enjoy reading or who read less frequently. For example, Torppa and colleagues (2020⁴) found a reciprocal relationship between leisure reading and reading skill. Similarly, our own research⁵ has shown that children and young people who enjoy reading are five times more likely to read above the level expected for their age compared with their peers who don't enjoy reading (17.0% vs. 3.5%), while children and young people who read daily are four times more likely to read above the level expected for their age compared with their peers who don't read daily (22.3% vs. 5.7%).

In addition, recent research has found that if all school-aged children in the UK read for pleasure every day, the number of pupils getting five good GCSEs could increase by 1.1 million within 30 years, boosting their average lifetime earning potential by £57,500⁶.

The impact of receiving books

Insight from our book-gifting programmes, such as the Young Readers Programme, which has gifted 1.2 million books since 1996, bears testament to the value of children and young people receiving books to keep. The most recent data from the evaluation of the programme show that 82.9% agreed [very true] that it's good to have new books of their own, and 77.3% said it is important for them to have books that are theirs to keep.

In addition, children and young people told us that keeping the books they had chosen impacted their reading enjoyment and frequency. Over half (52.5%) agreed that reading is more fun now than before receiving their books, and 43.5% agreed they read more in their free time now than before receiving their books. Furthermore, 62.5% agreed that there are lots more things they want to read now than before receiving their books, while nearly 3 in 4 (72.5%) agreed that they know more about what kind of things they like to read now than they did before receiving their books. Receiving their own books also impacted children's reading ability, with nearly 6 in 10 (57.3%) young people agreeing that they are better readers now than before they received their books.

Children and young people also told us how important it was to receive books:

“[Receiving a book] was so special because it is now mine forever.”

“I felt really happy and grateful to have a free book.”

“I felt overjoyed as I don't really own many books at home and I wanted new ones.”

“[Owning a book] is important because I have something to keep and cherish for ever.”

⁴ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30927457/>

⁵ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-201718/>

⁶ <https://www.britishland.com/news-insights/press-releases/new-research-shows-supporting-childrens-reading-outside-school-could-lead-ps46-billion-boost-uks-gdp>

They also reflected on the wider benefits of book ownership, such as the opportunity to re-read their books, to read at their own pace, and to learn more about their own reading identity:

“I felt happy because I could read my books anytime I want and how[ever] many times I want.”

“Important because I don’t have to give it back – I can just take my time to read.”

“I was very happy to receive these books because it helped me discover the type of book I enjoy.”

In sum

Hearteningly, our latest research shows that a relatively high percentage of children and young people in the UK have a book of their own at home. However, more than 400,000 children do not have this privilege, and they may be missing out on a host of associated benefits, with children who have their own books significantly more likely to say that they enjoy reading and read every day. Wider research has found reading enjoyment and frequency to be associated with higher reading skill (see Clark and Teravainen-Goff, 2019), which gives children a better chance of succeeding at school and in life. Increasing book ownership not only has the potential to support the positive literacy outcomes arising from greater reading engagement, but it has also been linked to a range of economic and social benefits, including higher lifelong earnings.

However, children from the lowest-income homes, who have the most to benefit from support for reading engagement, are most likely to miss out on the advantages of book ownership. One in 11 pupils eligible for free school meals don’t have a book of their own at home, compared with 1 in 20 of their more financially advantaged peers. Evaluation of our book-gifting programmes indicates that giving children in areas of disadvantage the opportunity to access new high-quality books of their choice to keep forever means they read more and enjoy reading more in their free time. For children from less financially secure homes, a book of their own (particularly one that matches their interests and reading ability) may be a powerful way to increase reading enjoyment, frequency and skill.

About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

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