

Children and young people's reading engagement in 2021

Emerging insight into the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on reading

Christina Clark and Irene Picton

October 2021

Our research during the first national lockdown in spring 2020 showed that more children and young people said that they enjoyed reading and more read more often during lockdown compared with before the pandemic¹. Children and young people's comments suggested that this was because they suddenly had time to (re)engage with reading, having fewer activities vying for their time. However, we also found that existing gaps in reading enjoyment increased manifold during lockdown, with boys in particular at risk of poor reading engagement as a result of the pandemic.

This report builds on those findings by highlighting how children and young people felt about reading in early 2021, a period that coincided with the third national lockdown in the UK (reports are also available on [writing in 2021](#) and [listening to audiobooks in 2021](#)). We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and mid-March 2021. Despite the ongoing pandemic and disruptions to schools, 42,502 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from 117 UK schools participated in this online survey.

Key findings for 2021 include:

- **1 in 2** (51.5%) children and young people said that they enjoyed reading. This is slightly lower than the percentage we recorded during the first spring lockdown in 2020 (55.9%), but higher than levels at the beginning of 2020 when we evidenced the lowest level of reading enjoyment (47.8%) since we first asked this question in 2005.

¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2020-before-and-during-the-covid-19-lockdown/>

- The gap between boys' and girls' reading enjoyment that opened up during lockdown 2020 persisted into early 2021, with more girls than boys enjoying reading.
- The gap between those who received free school meals (FSMs) and those who didn't doubled over the course of the year (from 2.1 percentage points in early 2020 to 4.6 percentage points in early 2021), with more non-FSM than FSM pupils saying that they enjoyed reading.
- Indeed, the year between early 2020 and early 2021 had a particularly detrimental impact on the reading enjoyment of boys who received FSMs, where we saw a drop of 5.2 percentage points in the number of boys on FSMs who enjoyed reading. Only 2 in 5 (41.4%) of these boys said that they enjoyed reading in 2021 compared with 46.1% of boys not receiving FSMs.
- **3 in 10** (30.1%) children and young people said in 2021 that they read something daily in their free time, which is lower than the level we recorded during the first national lockdown in spring 2020 but on a par with levels we evidenced in early 2020.
 - As with reading enjoyment, the gap between boys' and girls' daily reading levels that opened up during lockdown 2020 persisted into early 2021, with more girls than boys reading daily in their free time.
 - The gap in daily reading also widened between those who received FSMs and those who didn't during the first national lockdown in spring 2021, favouring those not receiving FSMs. By early 2021, this gap had narrowed again, but it remains higher than in early 2020.
 - The year between early 2020 and early 2021 also had a particularly detrimental impact on the daily reading levels of boys who receive FSMs, where we saw a drop of 5.7 percentage points in the number of boys on FSMs who read every day in their free time.
- Reading to relax was one of the main reasons why children and young people were reading in early 2021, with 1 in 2 (52.7%) saying this, followed by two educational aspects, namely helping to learn about new things (51.4%) and learning new words (49.8%). One in 3 said that reading made them feel happy, and over 1 in 4 said that reading made them feel better when they were sad. For 1 in 5 young people, reading also provided a connection to the world.
- Reading continues to support children and young people's mental wellbeing, with over **2 in 5** (44.6%) children and young people agreeing that reading made them feel better.
- By far the most popular reading that children and young people do in their free time is text/direct messages (92.4%) followed by in-game communications (87.4%). Still, 1 in 2 (51.0%) read fiction on paper in their free time whereas nearly 3 in 10 (28.1%) also read fiction on screen. Overall, in 2021 more children and young people read various formats on screen compared with the year before. At the same time, fewer children and young people read all the formats on paper.

Reading enjoyment

In early 2020 we recorded the lowest level of reading enjoyment since we began surveying children and young people in 2005 (see Figure 1). A survey we conducted during the first national lockdown in spring 2020 then showed that more children and young people said that they enjoyed reading, with 55.9% of children and young people saying that they enjoyed it. This was an increase of nearly 17% in the number of children and young people who enjoyed reading before and during lockdown, meaning that a sixth more children and young people said that they enjoyed reading during lockdown.

While levels in early 2021 remained above those reported early in 2020, there was nonetheless a dip in reading enjoyment between the first national lockdown and early 2021, when just over 1 in 2 (51.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading either very much (21.6%) or quite a lot (29.9%; see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading either very much or quite a lot from 2005 to 2021



One of the reasons why fewer children and young people enjoyed reading in early 2021 compared with the first national lockdown in spring 2020 is that there was less time to spend reading as more pupils attended school again. Indeed, some children and young people commented on the difference between the first national lockdown and subsequent ones:

During lockdown I believe that I spent more time reading and writing as I could work around my own clock as well as have lots of free time however going back to school, I feel that I don't have time to read.

Since returning back to school I haven't had time to read at all because of homework and exam revision

I did a lot of reading in lockdown and then when I went back to school, I lost the free time and the motivation. I used to read 2 books a week but now I have read three books in the last 5 months

When we went back to school, I had less time and didn't have the energy

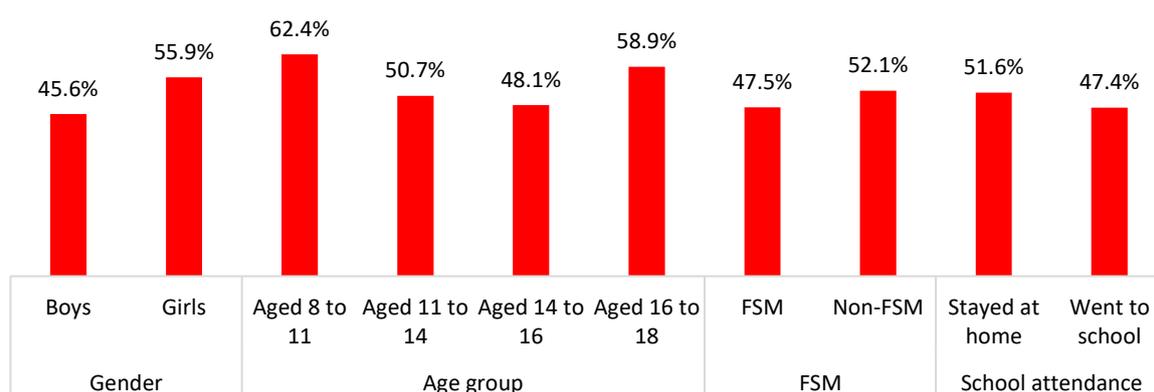
However, for some children, the return to school had the opposite effect, encouraging them to read again:

Reading and writing became a sort of chore and not an enjoyable thing, but when we went back to school in September, I started to enjoy it again and have been reading almost every day

Who enjoyed reading in early 2021?

As Figure 2 shows, more girls than boys said that they enjoyed reading in early 2021². More children aged 8 to 11 also said that they enjoyed reading in early 2021, with reading-enjoyment levels declining in those aged 11 to 16 before rising again. Slightly fewer children and young people who received FSMs compared with their peers who didn't said that they enjoyed reading in early 2021, while slightly more of those who stayed at home compared with their peers who went to school during the lockdown in early 2021 said the same.

Figure 2: Reading-enjoyment levels in early 2021 by gender, age group, FSM uptake and school attendance



² Boys: 44.5% (n = 18,903), Girls: 51.0% (n = 21,696). 2.3% (n = 963) didn't want to specify their gender and 1.7% (n = 728) describe themselves another way. 0.5% (n = 212) didn't answer the question. FSM: 11.6% (n = 4,932); Non-FSM: 78.2% (n = 33,247); Didn't want to say: 1.2% (n = 515); Didn't know: 8.5% (n = 3,616) and didn't answer the question: 0.5% (n = 192). Aged 8 to 11: 8.7% (n = 3,699); Aged 11 to 14: 65.3% (n = 27,761); Aged 14 to 16: 21.8% (n = 9,247); Aged 16 to 18: 4.1% (n = 1,728); didn't answer the question: 0.2% (n = 67). The demographic make-up of our 2021 sample is comparable with that of our 2020 sample. Stayed at home during lockdown in early 2021: 67.7% (n = 28,790); Attended school: 8.1% (n = 3,451); didn't answer the question: 24.1% (n = 10,261).

What changed between 2020 and 2021?

We were also interested to see to what extent dynamics had changed over the past year, particularly as there are concerns that the pandemic has been exacerbating socioeconomic inequalities.

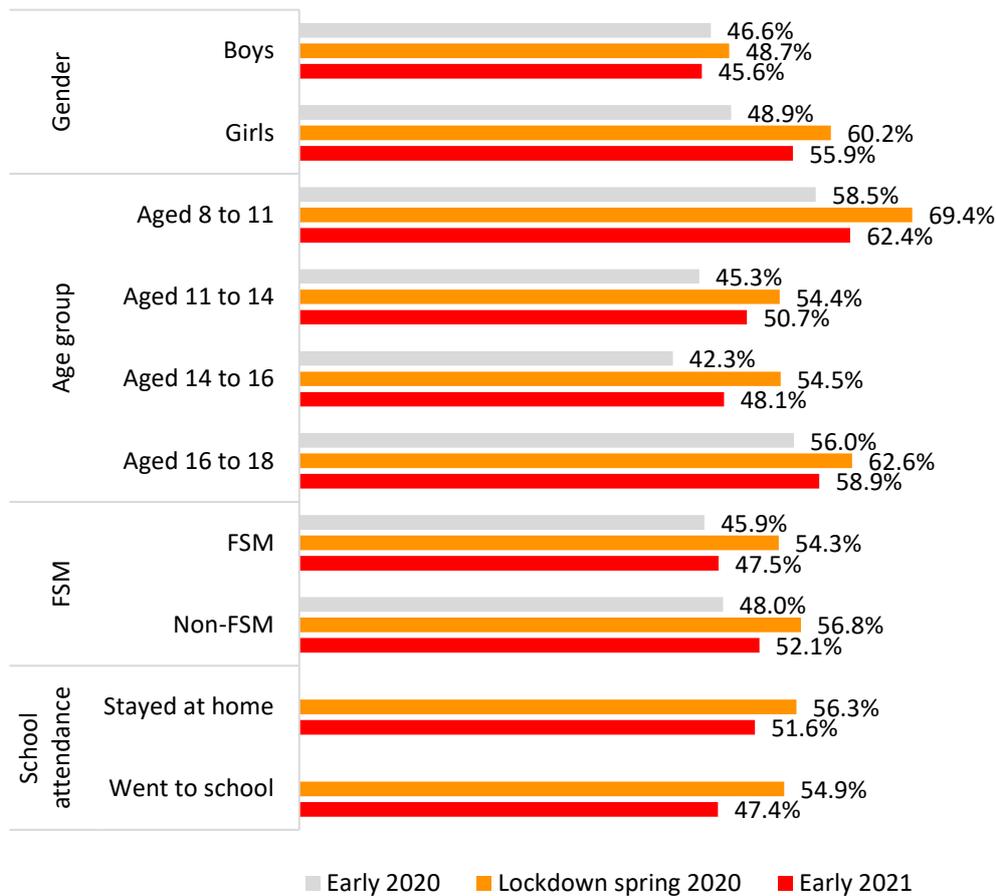
We reported after the first lockdown that the spring lockdown in 2020 had had a particular impact on the reading enjoyment of girls, with more girls than boys saying during lockdown that they enjoyed reading. This suggested that the lockdown had magnified the reading enjoyment gap between boys and girls, increasing it from a 2.3-percentage-point difference at the beginning of 2020 to an 11.5-percentage-point difference during lockdown in favour of girls. Indeed, it is now becoming evident that this gap, albeit slightly smaller, persisted into early 2021, where the gap between boys' and girls' enjoyment of reading was 10.3 percentage points, again in favour of girls (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 also shows that the gap between those who receive FSMs and those who don't doubled over the course of the year. Over the spring lockdown in 2020, the gap between FSM and non-FSM pupils increased from 2.1 to 2.5 percentage points. In early 2021, this gap was 4.6 percentage points, with more non-FSM than FSM pupils saying that they enjoyed reading.

In contrast with gender and FSM, the growing gap between the key stages as a result of the spring lockdown reversed over the course of the year, largely because fewer children aged 8 to 11 said in early 2021 that they enjoyed reading. This means that the gap between those aged 8 to 11 and those aged 11 to 14 that had increased from 13.2 percentage points to 15 percentage points between the spring lockdown narrowed again to 11.7 percentage points in early 2021.

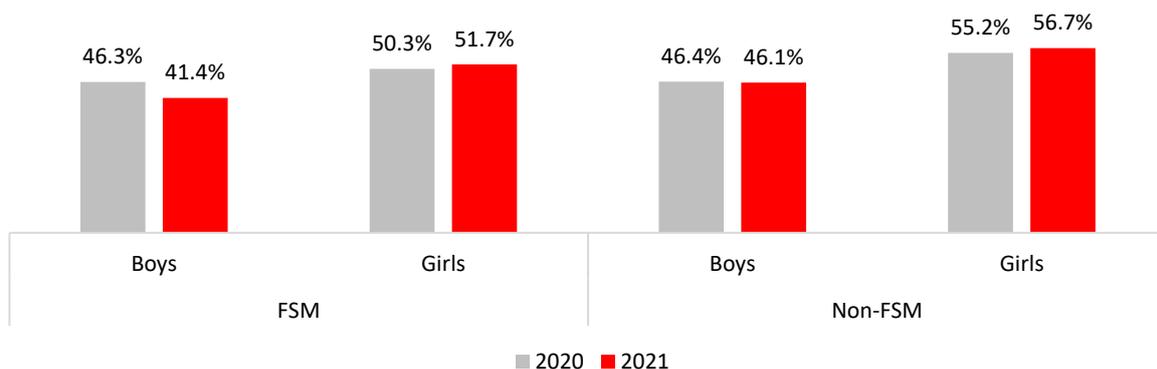
Similarly, the reading-enjoyment gap between those who stayed at home during the lockdowns and who went to school also increased over time, widening from a 1.4-percentage-point difference during the spring lockdown in 2020 to a 4.2-percentage-point difference in early 2021.

Figure 3: Reading-enjoyment levels in early 2020 (pre-pandemic), during the spring lockdown in 2020 and early 2021 by gender, age group, FSM uptake and school attendance



Looking more closely at the interplay between gender and FSM uptake over the past year, Figure 4 shows that the year between early 2020 and early 2021 had a particularly detrimental impact on the reading enjoyment of boys who received FSMs, where we saw a drop of 5.2 percentage points in the number of boys who enjoyed reading. In comparison, the reading enjoyment of boys not receiving FSMs was much more stable over this time period, as was the reading enjoyment of girls, regardless of whether or not they received FSMs.

Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in early 2020 and early 2021 by gender and FSM uptake



Reasons for reading in 2021

During the first lockdown in spring 2020, many children and young people told us that they had turned to reading to help their mental wellbeing. Indeed, 3 in 5 (59.3%) children and young people told us during the spring lockdown in 2020 that reading made them feel better. This fell slightly in early 2021, with 44.6% of children and young people saying the same. While the percentage might be lower, over two-fifths of children and young people still read to feel better.

Indeed, reading to relax was one of the main reasons why children and young people were reading in early 2021, followed by two educational aspects, namely helping to learn about new things and learning new words (see Figure 5). One in 3 said that reading made them feel happy, and over 1 in 4 said that reading made them feel better when they were sad. For 1 in 5 young people, reading also provided a connection with the world.

Figure 5: Children and young people's reasons for reading in 2021



Echoing comments from the first lockdown, immersion and escapism featured heavily in children and young people's comments on the reasons why they read:

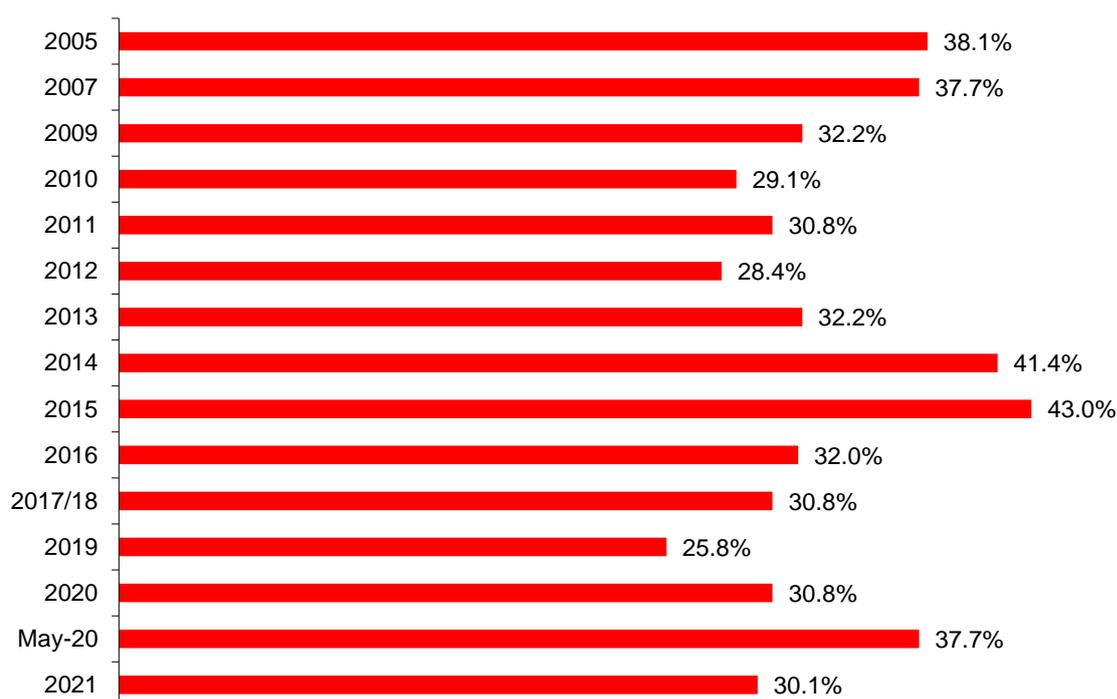
Reading allows me to immerse myself in the impossible, implausible and everything in between

It helps me be in my own world where everything that's happening in the world doesn't matter so much

Levels of daily reading in 2021

After recording the lowest daily reading rate in 2019 since 2005, the percentage of children and young people who said they read outside class on a daily basis recovered between 2019 and 2020. Daily reading levels further improved during the first national lockdown in spring 2020, meaning that over 1 in 3 children and young people then said that they read daily in their free time. These gains were not sustained over the year, with levels in early 2021 dropping slightly below those we saw in early 2020 (see Figure 6).

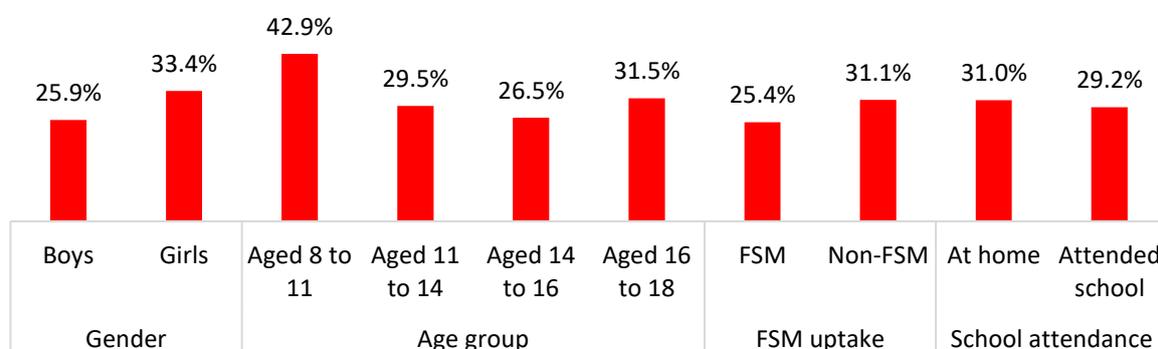
Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people who read daily outside class from 2005 to 2021



Who was reading daily in their free time in early 2021?

More girls than boys said that they read daily in their free time in early 2021 (see Figure 7). More children aged 8 to 11 also said that they read daily in early 2021, with daily reading levels declining between the ages of 11 and 16 before rising again slightly. Fewer children and young people who received FSMs compared with their non-FSM peers said that they read daily in early 2021, while slightly more of those who stayed at home compared with their peers who went to school during the lockdown in early 2021 said the same.

Figure 7: Daily reading levels in early 2021 by gender, age group, FSM uptake and school attendance



What changed between 2020 and 2021?

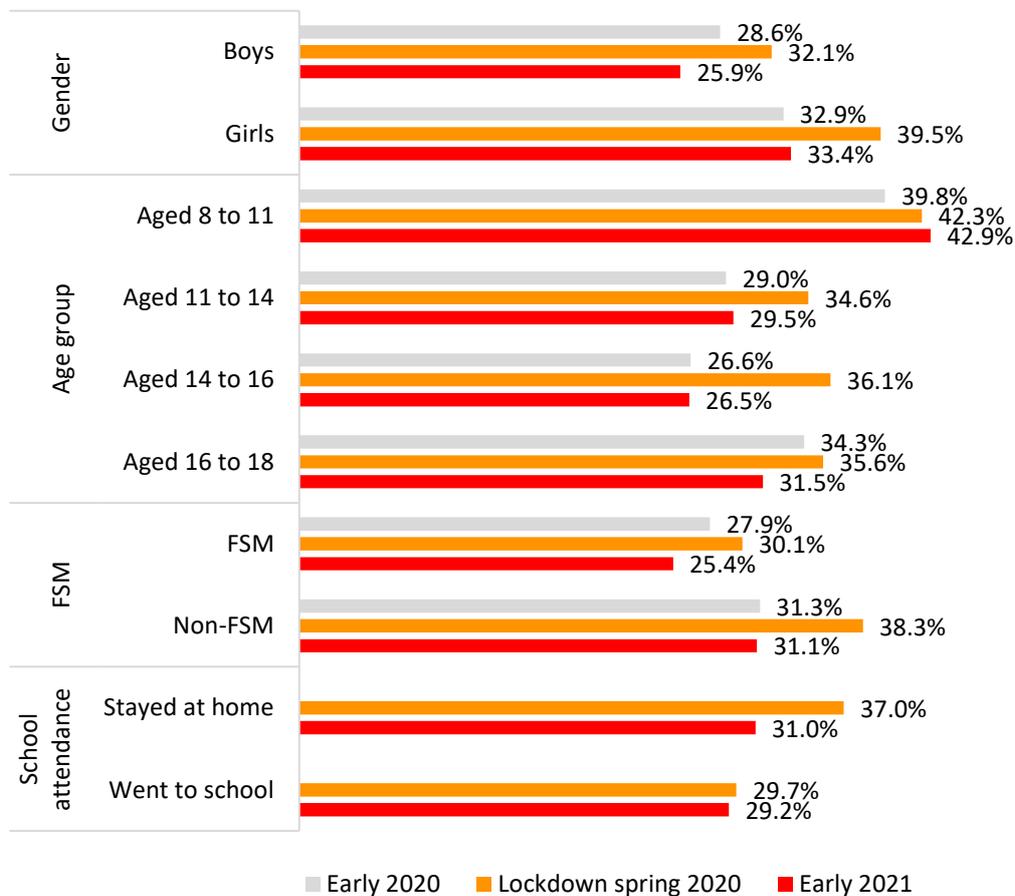
Figure 8 shows that in early 2020 more girls than boys said that they read daily in their free time. Indeed, the gap between boys and girls in terms of their daily reading widened during the spring lockdown in 2020, increasing from a 4.3-percentage-point difference at the beginning of 2020 to a 7.4-percentage-point difference during lockdown. This gap, favouring girls, has been sustained into early 2021 where it stands at 7.5 percentage points.

While the age gap in daily reading decreased slightly during lockdown, it widened again in early 2021. This is largely because daily reading levels remained constant for those aged 8 to 11 but declined for the other age groups between the spring lockdown in 2020 and early 2021. For example, the gap between those aged 8 to 11 and those aged 11 to 14 decreased from a 10.8-percentage-point difference in early 2020 to a 7.7-percentage-point difference in spring 2020. In 2021, the gap had widened again to a 13.4-percentage-point difference.

The gap in daily reading also widened between those who received FSMs and those who didn't during the first national lockdown in spring 2021, with the gap more than doubling from a 3.4-percentage-point difference in early 2020 to an 8.2-percentage-point difference in spring 2020, favouring those who didn't receive FSMs. By early 2021, this gap had narrowed again to a 5.7-percentage-point gap, favouring those not receiving FSMs. It is, however, worth noting that the gap remained higher in early 2021 than in early 2020.

Similarly, while the gap in daily reading was 7.3 percentage points, favouring those who remained at home compared with those who continued going to school during the first national lockdown in spring 2020, the gap reduced almost completely to a 1.8-percentage-point difference in early 2021, still slightly favouring those who stayed at home.

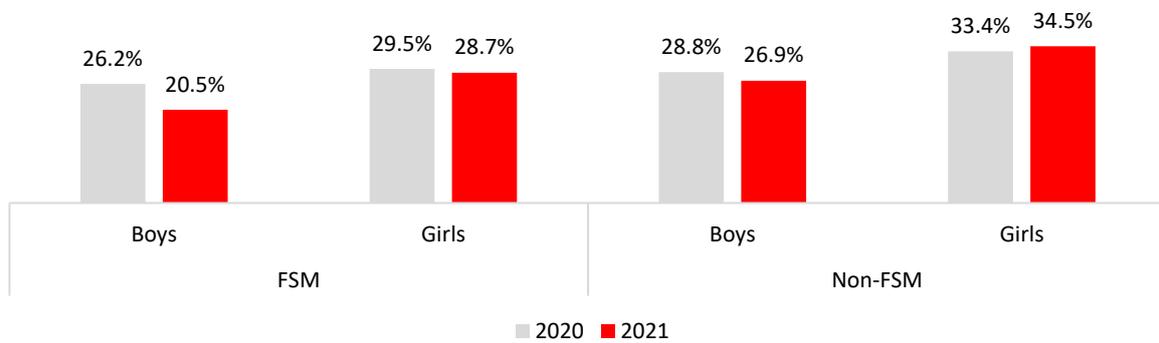
Figure 8: Percentage of children and young people who read daily outside class in early 2020 compared with during lockdown and early 2021 by gender, age group, FSM uptake and whether or not they attended school



Overall, fewer boys and girls who received FSMs than their peers who didn't said that they read daily in their free time (see Figure 9). Indeed, only 1 in 5 boys who received FSMs said that they read something in their free time every day.

As we saw earlier with reading enjoyment, Figure 9 shows that the year between early 2020 and early 2021 also had a particularly detrimental impact on the daily reading levels of boys who received FSMs, where we saw a drop of 5.7 percentage points in the number of boys who read every day in their free time. While daily reading levels also dropped for girls who received FSMs and boys not on FSMs, these drops were much more muted (0.8 percentage points and 1.9 percentage points respectively). In comparison, the gap in daily reading levels for girls not on FSMs increased slightly between 2020 and 2021 by 1.1 percentage points.

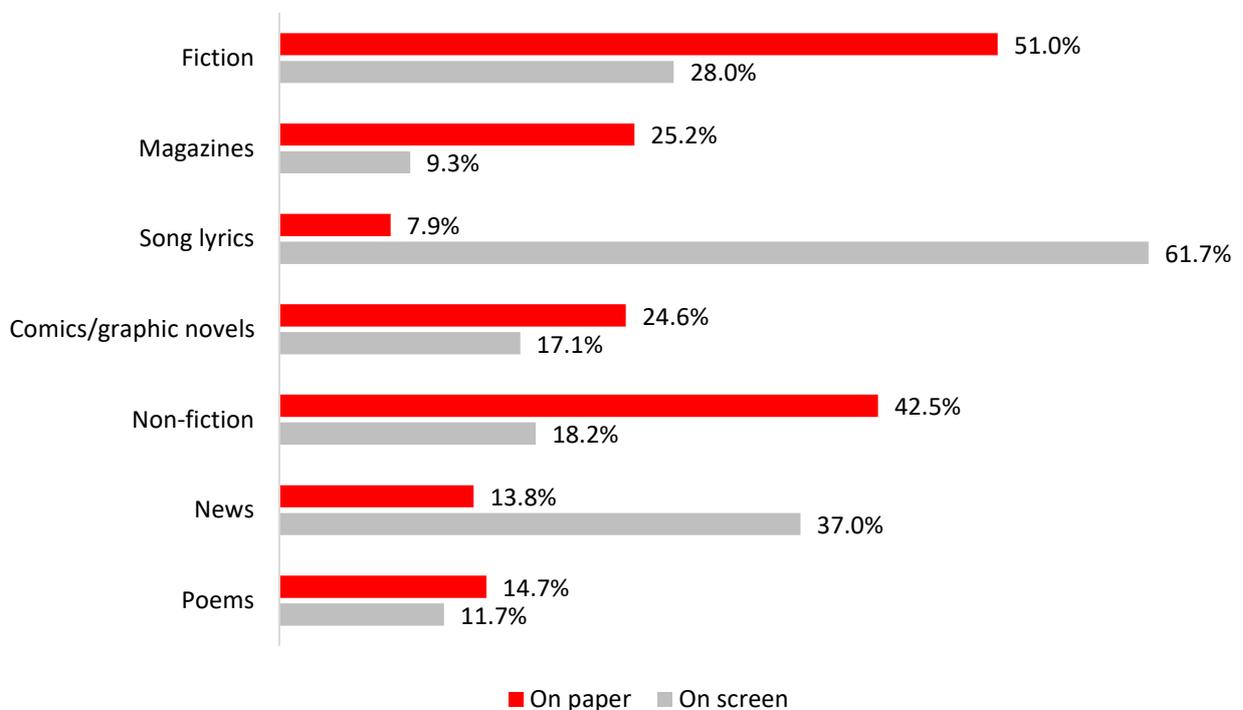
Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time in early 2020 and early 2021 by gender and FSM uptake



Children and young people’s reading choices

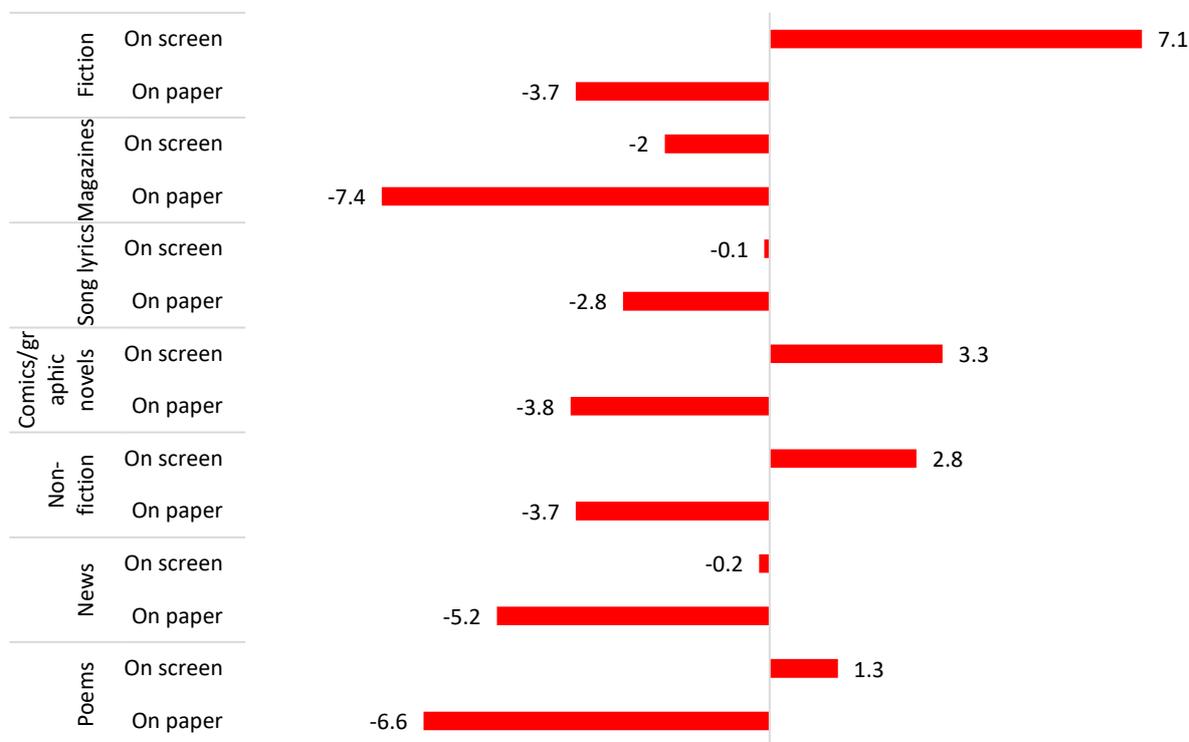
What are the types of material that children and young people were reading in 2021? As Figure 10 shows, 1 in 2 children and young people said that they read fiction on paper, with nearly 3 in 10 also reading fiction on screen. Over 2 in 5 said that they read non-fiction on paper, with 1 in 5 saying that they read non-fiction on screen. Over 3 in 5 said that they read song lyrics on screen, with only 1 in 13 saying that they read song lyrics on paper.

Figure 10: Materials read either on screen or on paper outside school at least once a month in early 2021 by children and young people aged 8 to 18



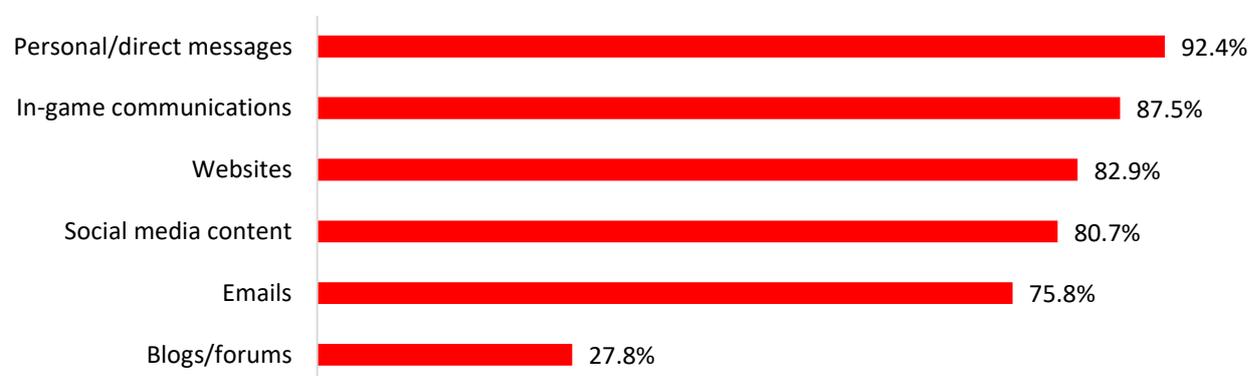
Overall, Figure 11 shows that in 2021 more children and young people read various formats on screen compared with the year before. At the same time, fewer children and young people read all the formats on paper between 2020 and 2021.

Figure 11: Reading on various formats in 2021 compared with 2020



We also asked whether children and young people read a variety of exclusively on-screen formats. As Figure 12 shows, most children and young people said that they read personal/direct messages in their free time, followed by nearly 9 in 10 who said that they also read messages as part of video-game playing. Around 4 in 5 also read websites and social-media content in their free time, while 3 in 4 read emails. Nearly 3 in 10 read blog/forum posts in their spare time.

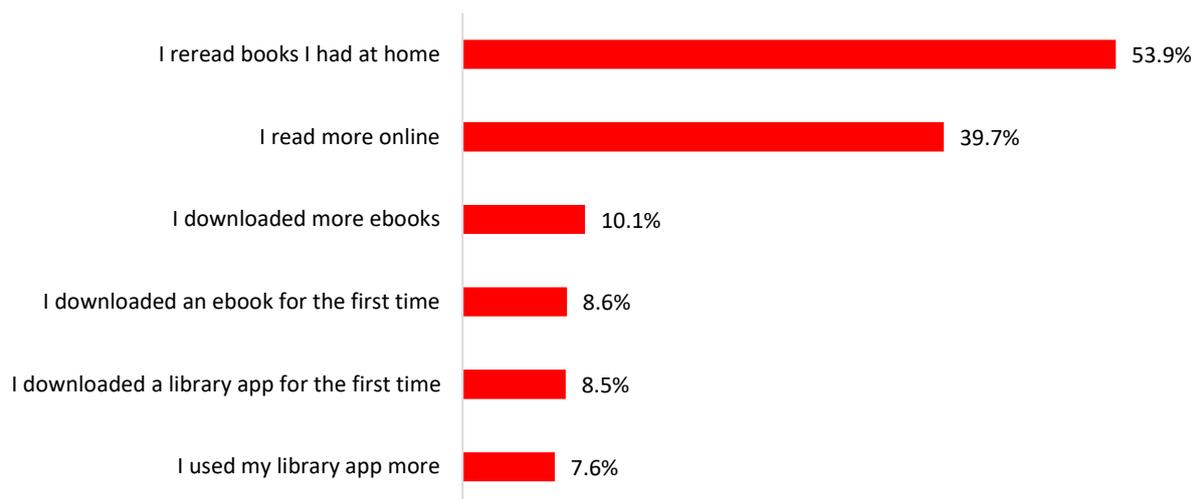
Figure 12: Percentage of children and young people reading various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2021



Access to reading materials

Book ownership was high in 2021, with 94.2% of children and young people saying that they had their own books, and 95.4% saying that there were books at home they could read. Indeed, when asked what they did during the pandemic when shops and libraries were closed, over 1 in 2 said that they had re-read books they had at home, and 2 in 5 said that they read more online. A small percentage also downloaded an eBook or a library app for the first time (see Figure 13).

Figure 13: Sources of access to reading materials during the Covid-19 pandemic



More limited access to reading materials that matched their interest over the course of extended periods of lockdown was also mentioned by some children and young people:

I read a lot but after the lockdown became too long, I couldn't go to any libraries to borrow some so books I stopped reading books and lost interest in them.

Summary and discussion

Our survey of children and young people's reading in early 2020 found that reading-enjoyment levels prior to the first national lockdown were at their lowest since we started surveying children and young people in 2005. Less than half (47.8%) of the 8- to 18-year-olds responding to the survey said they enjoyed reading in early 2020. However, research carried out just a few months later, in late spring 2020, found that reading-enjoyment levels had increased significantly, with 55.9% of children and young people saying they enjoyed reading at this point. Children's comments indicated that simply having more time to read during school closures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic had given many a chance to rediscover a love of reading.

We were curious to see to what extent this uplift in reading-enjoyment levels might be sustained once children returned to school, and while this report covers a third period of national lockdown in early 2021, children's comments indicated that the nature of this

lockdown was somewhat different to the first. For example, children felt more ‘at school’, regardless of school closures (perhaps reflecting an increased use of remote learning at this point), with several comments highlighting the pressures of schoolwork, homework and revision. Nevertheless, more than half (51.5%) of the children said they enjoyed reading in early 2021, indicating that reading-enjoyment levels had been sustained to a degree for many children and young people.

However, this was not the case for all children. Notably, between early 2020 and early 2021, the gap in reading enjoyment between pupils from lower-income households and their peers doubled, from 2.1 to 4.6 percentage points. When combined with poorer findings in relation to gender, it is possible to see that reading enjoyment in boys eligible for free school meals declined in particular over the past year, while girls’ reading-enjoyment levels (including those eligible for FSMs) appeared to show greater resilience. This is reflected further in daily reading levels for this group, which also decreased by 5.7 percentage points over this period.

It is essential that every effort is made to support the reading enjoyment of children and young people from lower-income households to prevent further decreases in reading engagement over the summer and forthcoming academic year. As our other findings show, reading engagement is not only important for children’s learning but also for their mental wellbeing. More than half of children say they read to relax, over 2 in 5 believe that reading makes them feel better, one third say it makes them feel happy and a quarter feel reading can make them feel better when they are sad.

It is also worth recognising that children’s reading has become increasingly broad in terms of format. For example, while just over half (51.0%) of children and young people say that they read fiction on paper in their free time in 2021, almost 3 in 10 (28.0%) read fiction on a screen. Furthermore, many children reported being fortunate enough to have access to books at home, or being able to read more online or through library apps during extended periods of lockdown, indicating the importance of supporting access to books and stories through both print and digital formats. However, it is also important to note that many children still have no books of their own at home, and some comments suggested that restricted access to school and public libraries, and the consequent lack of opportunity to access reading material that suited their interests, had a detrimental impact on children’s interest in books and reading. This highlights the vital role of book-gifting programmes and school and public libraries in supporting children most in need by connecting them with books that will inspire them.

Our sincere thanks to all of the schools that, despite really challenging times, participated in our survey this year. We couldn't do it without you!

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.

Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

Copyright

© National Literacy Trust 2021. You may report on findings or statistics included in this report if you accredit them to the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is: Clark, C. and Picton, I. (2021). Children and young people's reading in 2021: Emerging insight into the impact of the pandemic on reading. London: National Literacy Trust.

We will consider requests to use extracts or data from this publication provided that you:

- Acknowledge that the content is the work of the National Literacy Trust and provide appropriate references in any publications or accompanying publicity;
- State that any views expressed are yours and not necessarily those of the National Literacy Trust.