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Children and young people's reading in 2023

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Introduction

2023 has been a year characterised by notable highs and lows in children and young people's reading.

For example, in May, it was announced that English 10-year-olds had reached their highest ever place in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) rankings, coming in fourth of 43 countries (behind only Singapore, Hong Kong and Russia). Researchers found that the top three predictors of reading achievement were performance in the Year 1 phonics check, number of books at home and home socioeconomic status (SES), with students with higher home SES performing better than those with lower SES ([Lindorff et al., 2023](#)). These findings highlight the importance of supporting early literacy, access to reading resources and initiatives focusing on children from lower-income backgrounds.

Researchers also found that, across all countries, positive reading attitudes (such as liking reading and feeling confident about it) were associated with higher average reading achievement. However, overall reading enjoyment was lower in this PIRLS cycle than in previous years. We have observed this trend in our own research, with reading enjoyment levels decreasing in recent years following a significant uptick during the pandemic in 2020 ([Cole et al., 2022](#)). At the same time, existing gaps in reading enjoyment increased manifold during periods of educational disruption, with boys from disadvantaged backgrounds at particular risk of poor reading engagement.

Now, in 2023, we find children and young people's reading enjoyment is at crisis point. Just 2 in 5 (43.4%) 8- to 18-year-olds told us in early 2023 that they enjoyed reading. This is the lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since 2005. A large part of the reason is that fewer of the children and young people who have traditionally enjoyed reading, such as girls and those aged 8 to 11, now say that they enjoy it.

Declining reading enjoyment across a growing number of children and young people must act as a wake-up call for all who support children and young people's reading for pleasure and the many benefits it can bring. The recent publication of a revised Reading Framework aimed at primary and secondary

schools in England (DfE, 2023) offers some measure of hope. The importance of reading for pleasure is foregrounded in a detailed section devoted to developing a reading-for-pleasure culture, and throughout the document there is reference to the supportive conditions and drivers of volitional reading. However, the gulf between the aims and objectives of the Reading Framework and the findings of this report further underscore the critical importance of urgent action to address these low and declining levels of reading enjoyment.

“Just 2 in 5 (43.4%) 8- to 18-year-olds told us in early 2023 that they enjoyed reading in their free time. This is the lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since 2005.”

Method

We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and the middle of March 2023. We made available two surveys: one for children aged 5 to 8 and one for children and young people aged 8 to 18. The surveys contain similar questions but the one for the younger age group is shorter and more pictorial.

7,285 children aged 5 to 8 and 64,066 children and young people aged 8 to 18 took part. Overall, 71,351 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 285 schools in the UK participated in this online survey.

Key findings for 2023 include:

Reading enjoyment in free time

- Just over 2 in 5 (43.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023.
- This is the lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since we began asking children and young people this question in 2005.
- Fewer boys than girls said they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023, regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or 8 to 18. However, the gender gap in reading enjoyment for those aged 5 to 8 was twice the size of that for those aged 8 to 18 (9.4 percentage points vs. 4.8 percentage points).
 - Overall, the gender gap in reading enjoyment has halved for those aged 8 to 18 over the past 18 years, decreasing from a 10.7-percentage-point difference in favour of girls in 2005 to a 4.8-percentage-point difference in 2023, still in favour of girls. However, this drop is largely because of a greater drop in reading enjoyment in girls than in boys, mirroring findings seen more globally.
- Reading enjoyment in free time decreased with age, with 3 in 4 (75.3%) 5- to 8-year-olds saying that they enjoyed reading in their free time. Interestingly, in 2023, the same percentage of children aged 8 to 11 as those aged 16 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time (56.2%), sandwiching a dip in enjoyment for those aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16 (40.4% and 40.8%, respectively).
 - The number of children aged 8 to 11 who said that they enjoyed reading in their free time has decreased by 11.3 percentage points over the past 18 years. This is in contrast to a more stable percentage of young people aged 11 to 14 who said the same over this period. At the same time, the number of young people aged 14 to 16 who enjoyed reading in their free time increased over the past 18 years, rising from 32% in 2005 to 40.8% in 2023.
- Fewer children who received FSMs said they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023 compared with those who didn't receive FSMs (39.5% vs. 43.8%).

- Since 2005, the gap in reading enjoyment between FSM and non-FSM children and young people has persisted, increasing marginally from a 3.7-percentage-point gap in 2005 to a 4.3-percentage-point difference in 2023.
- Boys who received FSMs in 2023 had the lowest levels of reading enjoyment (38.4%), followed by girls who received FSMs (39.9%). However, levels of reading enjoyment dropped more for girls, regardless of whether they received FSMs or not.
- There was little difference in reading enjoyment between children and young people from England, Wales or Scotland. Fewer children and young people from Northern Ireland said that they enjoyed reading in their free time but, because of the small sample size, this percentage needs to be treated with caution.
- There were regional differences in reading enjoyment across England, with levels being highest in Greater London (51.5%) and lowest in the East Midlands (39.9%).

Enjoying reading in free time versus at school

- In 2023, the same percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time (43.4%) as said that they enjoyed reading at school (44.6%).
- Both types of reading enjoyment were positively related ($r = .626$), indicating that those who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time. Indeed, 3 in 4 (72.6%) children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time also enjoyed reading at school, while 3 in 4 (74.6%) children and young people who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time.
 - This suggests 1 in 4 children and young people didn't enjoy reading in either location.
- Enjoying reading at school was associated with the same demographic profiles as we saw for enjoying reading in free time. Marginally more girls than boys (45.3% vs. 43.0%) said that they enjoyed reading at school, as did younger rather than older (66.4% vs. 44.3%) pupils, and marginally more

children and young people who didn't receive FSMs than their FSM peers (44.3% vs. 41.9%).

- While mirroring the relationships we saw with reading enjoyment in free time, the differences between the groups are much smaller when it comes to reading enjoyment at school. While the gender gap in reading enjoyment in free time was 4.8 percentage points, there was only a 2.8-percentage-point gender gap in reading enjoyment at school. This is largely because more boys enjoyed reading at school, while the percentage for girls was nearly the same regardless of location.
- The gap between those who received FSMs and those who didn't in their enjoyment of reading was smaller at school (2.4 percentage points) than at home (4.3 percentage points). This was largely because more children and young people who received FSMs enjoyed reading at school, while the percentage of non-FSM children and young people remained nearly the same regardless of location.
- However, the age differences increased for reading enjoyment at school, nearly doubling from a 15.4-percentage-point difference to a 32.2-percentage-point difference. This is because more children aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoyed reading at school, while fewer of those aged 14 to 16 said the same.
- More children and young people from Wales told us that they enjoyed reading at school compared with their peers from England, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- More children and young people from the North East (50.6%) and Greater London (50.3%) said that they enjoyed reading at school, while the smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed writing came from the South East (40.3%), the South West (41.0%) and East Midlands (41.2%).

Daily reading in free time

- Fewer than 3 in 10 (28.0%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they read daily in their free time in 2023.

- Levels in 2023 were identical to those seen in 2022. However, overall, there has been a 26% decrease in the number of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time over the past 18 years, decreasing from 38.1% in 2005 to 28.0% in 2023.
- More girls than boys read daily, regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or aged 8 to 18.
 - While there has been some variation in specific years, the gender gap in daily reading has largely remained the same over the past 18 years, only marginally decreasing from a 7-percentage-point gap in 2005 to a 5.5-percentage-point difference in 2023.
- Levels of daily reading decreased with age, with nearly twice as many children aged 5 to 8 saying that they read in their free time compared with those aged 11 to 16 (51.8% vs. 28.0%).
 - Fewer children aged 8 to 11 said in 2023 that they read daily compared with 2005 (36.9% vs 40.5%), while the percentage of those aged 11 to 14 who read daily has remained largely unchanged over that period (25.8% vs. 26.1%). At the same time, the number of young people aged 14 to 16 who read daily in their free time increased slightly over the past 18 years, rising from 21.4% in 2005 to 25.7% in 2023.
- Fewer children who received FSMs read daily compared with those who didn't receive FSMs (24.1% vs. 28.8%).
 - The FSM gap in daily reading has halved over the past 18 years, decreasing from an 8-percentage-point gap in 2005 to a 4.7-percentage-point difference in 2023. This is largely because of a bigger drop in daily reading levels for those from a non-FSM (10.2 percentage points) than an FSM background (6.9 percentage points) over this time period.
 - Boys who received FSMs had the lowest levels of daily reading in 2023 (21.5%). However, daily reading levels improved for boys, regardless of whether they received FSMs or not, between 2022 and 2023, while those for girls dropped regardless of whether they received FSMs or not.
- More children and young people in England said that they read daily, followed by children and young people in Scotland and Wales. Only 1 in 6 (18.1%) children and young people from Northern Ireland said that they read

daily in their free time but, due to the small sample size, this finding needs to be treated with caution.

- More children and young people in Greater London (30.8%), the South West (29.8%), the North East (29.4%) and East of England (29.1%) said that they read daily in their free time, while the East Midlands (24.0%), Yorkshire and the Humber (25.4%) and the South East (25.5%) were the regions with the fewest children and young people who read daily.
- Reading enjoyment in free time and daily reading in free time were linked ($r = .614$): four times as many children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time also said that they read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading (50.0% vs. 11.1%).
 - This relationship was less strong for those aged 5 to 8 ($r = .371$), where twice as many of those who enjoyed reading in their free time said that they also read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading (59.8% vs. 27.3%).

What children and young people were reading in their free time in 2023

5- to 8-year-olds read a variety of materials, although mainly on paper:

- 3 in 4 (73.5%) read stories on paper (21.0% on screen), while nearly 3 in 5 (57.6%) read about facts (15.8% on screen). More than 1 in 3 (37.5%) read magazines on paper (7.2% on screen) or read poems (36.2%, 14.4% on screen).
- Fewer children aged 5 to 8 in 2023 read stories on paper (-3.6pp) or on screen (-0.7pp) compared with 2022. Fewer also read non-fiction on screen (-1.8pp) but more read non-fiction on paper (+4pp).
- More 5- to 8-year-olds read poems on paper (+4.1pp) and more read comics on paper (+2.2pp) in 2023 than in 2022. Those aged 8 to 18 also read a variety of materials on screen and paper.

Screen reading was more common for those aged 8 to 18:

- Half (50.7%) read fiction on paper, while 1 in 4 (25.8%) read it on screen.
- Over 2 in 5 (43.7%) read non-fiction on paper, while 17.1% read it on screen.

- 7 in 10 (69.3%) read song lyrics on screen, while only 8.8% read it on paper.
- Slightly fewer children and young people aged 8 to 18 read any of these materials either on paper or on screen compared with 2022. Exceptions were reading song lyrics or poems on screen and comics on paper, which slightly more children and young people did in 2023 compared with 2022.

What motivated children and young people to read in 2023 (8 to 18 only)?

We grouped children and young people's motivations to read into three categories: curious reader, mindful reader and social reader.

- The curious readers included the 1 in 2 children and young people who read to learn new words (55.6%) or new things (55.3%). 2 in 5 of this group also said that reading helped them understand the views of others (39.2%) and helped them learn about other cultures (38.5%).
- The mindful readers included those who read because it helped them relax (59.4%) or those where reading made them feel happy (46.0%). 3 in 10 also said that reading made them feel confident (29.8%) or helped them with problems (27.3%).
- The social readers included those who read because it helped them learn more about the issues and causes they cared about (29.7%) and those where reading helped them feel connected to the world (25.7%). 1 in 8 also read because it helped them spend time with others (12.6%).
- While boys and girls were equally likely to say that they were curious or social readers, more girls than boys said that they were mindful readers (32.3% vs. 24.4%). More of those aged 8 to 11 were in each category compared with the other age groups, with the exception being those aged 16 to 18 where more said that they were curious or social readers compared with their peers aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16. Marginally more children and young people who received FSMs were found in the three categories compared with their non-FSM peers, but the differences between the two groups were small.

What would make children and young people aged 8 to 18 want to read?

- When asked what would make them want to read, most (38.4%, or 2 in 5) said that having books recommended to them would do this. 1 in 3 said that being given books (32.1%) or having books that represent them (31.5%) would make them want to read. 1 in 4 (23.3%) said that they would read more if their friends or family talked about books, while 1 in 6 (17.6%) said that seeing someone they look up to read or talk about reading would do this.
- More girls than boys and more of those aged 8 to 11 than their older peers said that any of the presented options would make them want to read. There were no differences by FSM uptake in what would make them want to read.

Children and young people's perceptions of their reading environment (8 to 18s only)

- 4 in 5 (79.2%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they had a quiet space at home where they could work, read or take time out. This, however, means that 1 in 5 (20.8%) don't. Similarly, 4 in 5 (81.4%) told us that they had their own desk or table where they could write, draw or do homework, meaning that nearly 1 in 5 (18.6%) didn't.
- Having a quiet space at home was more strongly associated with reading enjoyment and daily reading than having a desk/table of their own. For example, 47.9% of those who had a quiet space at home said that they enjoyed reading compared with 30.9% who didn't have a quiet space.
- Slightly more girls than boys said that they had a quiet space or a desk/table of their own at home. Access to both also increased with age, with more young people aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18 saying that they had a quiet space or a desk/table than their younger peers. Having access to a quiet space or their own desk/table was also associated with FSM uptake, with fewer children and young people who received FSMs saying that they had a quiet space or a desk/table than their non-FSM peers.

We also asked children and young people about the ways they might have been supported in their reading in the past four weeks:

- 1 in 2 (52.9%) told us in 2023 that they had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers, 2 in 5 (40.8%) talked about what they were reading with their family, while fewer (30.7%) talked about what they were reading with their friends. 2 in 5 (39.1%) said that they got reading recommendations from their family, while 1 in 4 said that their friends had helped them find things to read (24.8%). 3 in 5 (58.4%) said that they had seen their parents/carers read, while 1 in 5 (19.9%) had read with their family.
 - More children and young people reported in 2023 that they had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers (+8.1 percentage points) and that their family had helped them find things to read (+11.3 percentage points) compared with 2022. More also reported talking about reading with their family (+2 percentage points) or their friends (+0.7 percentage points).
- There were only a few gender differences in parental support, with an almost equal number of boys and girls saying that they had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers, that their family had helped them find things to read and that they had seen their parents/carers read. An almost equal percentage of boys and girls had also read with their parents/carers. However, more girls than boys said that they had talked about their reading with family and friends, and twice as many girls as boys said that their friends had helped them find things to read.
- Parental encouragement declined with age, as did parental support in finding things to read. Nearly seven times as many children aged 8 to 11 also said that their parent/carer read with them compared with young people aged 14 and older. Friends take on an increasingly important role for the older age group, with more of those aged 16 to 18 saying that they talked about their reading with friends compared with their younger peers. There was no age difference in children and young people seeing their parents/carers read.
- Fewer children and young people who received FSMs said that they were encouraged to read by their parents/carers and fewer saw their parents/carers read compared with those who didn't receive FSMs. Slightly

fewer also talked about their reading with their parents/carers, while more said that their parents/carers read with them.

- There was a moderate positive relationship between reading enjoyment ($r = .367$), reading frequency ($r = .402$) and children and young people's perceived reading environment score. Nearly three times as many children and young people who perceived their reading environment to be supportive said they enjoyed reading compared with those who perceived their environment to be less supportive (63.9% vs. 25.4%), while twice as many read daily in their free time (41.7% vs. 17.7%).

Reading in 2023

Enjoying reading in free time over time

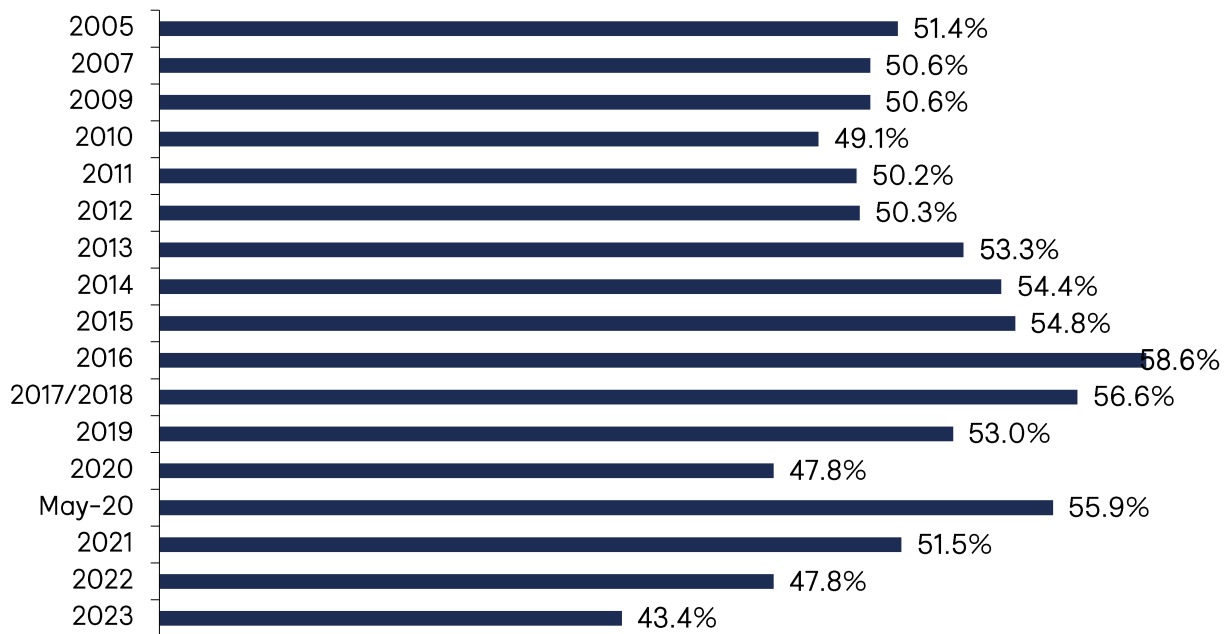
We have been tracking the reading enjoyment levels of children and young people aged 8 to 18 since 2005 and, in 2023, we recorded the lowest level to date for this age group (see Figure 1), with just over 2 in 5 (43.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying that they enjoyed reading in their free time. This is substantially lower than the 3 in 4 (75.3%) children aged 5 to 8 who told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023.

Figure 1 shows the variability of reading enjoyment levels of those aged 8 to 18¹ over time. Reading enjoyment peaked in 2016 when nearly 3 in 5 told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time. Levels dropped to a then all-time low in 2020, which coincided with a period just before the first national lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Levels rose somewhat unexpectedly during the first national lockdown but, by 2022, levels had dropped back to that last seen in early 2020 when we recorded the then-lowest level of reading enjoyment since we

¹ We didn't start collecting information from 5- to 8-year-olds until 2019. For comparison-over-time purposes this analysis only contains data for children and young people aged 8 to 18.

began surveying children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2005. As mentioned above, 2023 set a new all-time low record for this age group.

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time either very much or quite a lot from 2005 to 2023



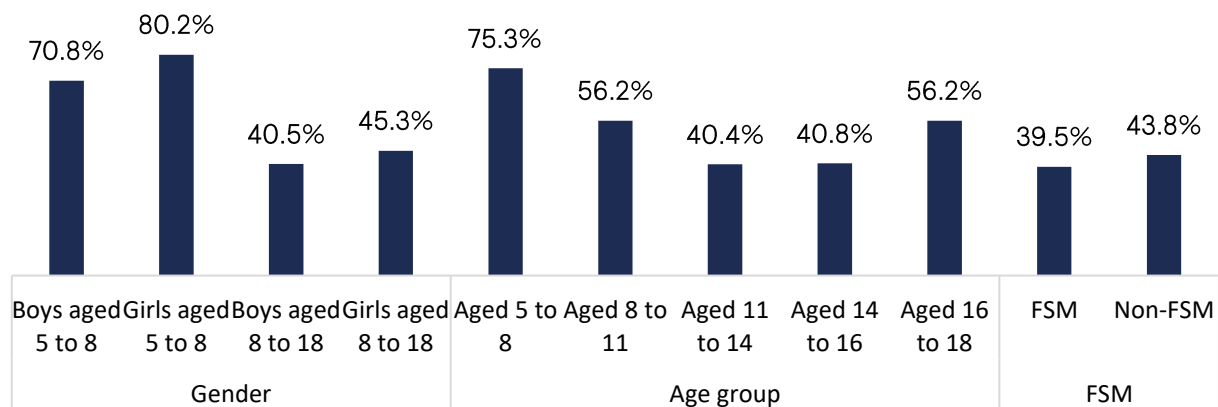
Reading enjoyment in free time by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake

Who enjoyed reading in 2023? As shown in Figure 2, more girls than boys said that they enjoyed reading² in 2023 regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or aged 8 to 18. Figure 2 also shows that reading enjoyment declines with age, with 3 in 4 of those aged 5 to 8 saying that they enjoyed reading compared with 3 in 5 of those aged 8 to 11. Only 2 in 5 of those aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16 said

² Boys aged 5 to 8: 46.4% (n = 3,383), girls aged 5 to 8: 49.2% (n = 3,587), 0.7% (n = 54) described themselves another way, 3.6% (n = 261) didn't want to state their gender. Boys aged 8 to 18: (n = 30,077, 46.9%), girls aged 8 to 18: (31,076, 48.5%), 2.3% (n = 1,485) didn't want to specify their gender and 2.2% (n = 1,428) described themselves another way. Aged 5 to 8 = 9.2% (n = 6,444); aged 8 to 11 = 15.8% (n = 10,127); aged 11 to 14 = 66.4% (n = 42,523); aged 14 to 16 = 15.1% (n = 9,667); aged 16 to 18 = 2.7% (n = 1,749). For those aged 8 to 18 only: FSM: 16.3% (n = 10,418); non-FSM: 72.0% (n = 46,116); didn't want to say: 1.6% (n = 1,046); didn't know: 10.1% (n = 6,486). The demographic make-up of our 2023 sample was largely comparable to that of our 2022 and previous samples.

the same. However, levels recovered somewhat for those aged 16 and above, with nearly 3 in 5 saying that they enjoyed reading. Indeed, in 2023, the same percentage of children aged 8 to 11 as those aged 16 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time. Fewer children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs), our proxy of socioeconomic background, said that they enjoyed reading compared with their peers who didn't receive FSMs.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023 by gender, age group, and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)

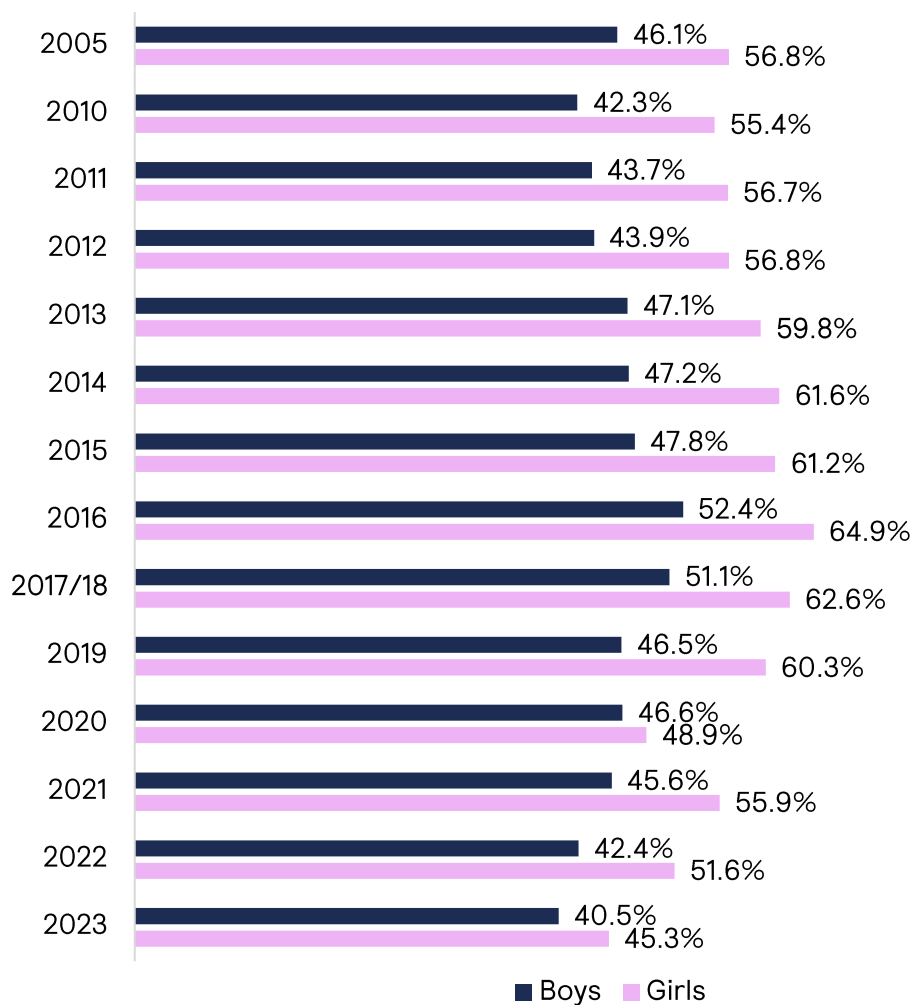


Comparison of free-time reading enjoyment levels over time by gender, age group and FSM uptake

In 2023, more girls than boys aged 8 to 18 told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time. Figure 3 shows that this has been the case since we first asked boys and girls this question in 2005. However, there have been some notable changes between 2005 and 2023. Firstly, the gender gap in reading enjoyment has halved over the past 18 years, reducing from a 10.7-percentage-point difference in 2005 to a 4.8-percentage-point difference in 2023. With the gender gap in reading enjoyment now being one of the lowest we have seen in the past 18 years, it should be noted that this is largely because of a greater drop in reading enjoyment in girls than in boys in 2023, a finding that mirrors a trend also seen

more globally (see PIRLS, 2023). The graph also shows that girls' reading enjoyment has been more variable across this period than that of boys.

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time by gender 2005 to 2023



As mentioned earlier, in 2023, fewer young people aged 11 to 14 and aged 14 to 16 enjoyed reading compared with their primary-aged peers. This seems to suggest that we ought to focus our efforts on those two age groups. However, a comparison of reading enjoyment by age group that goes all the way back to 2005 paints a more complex picture.

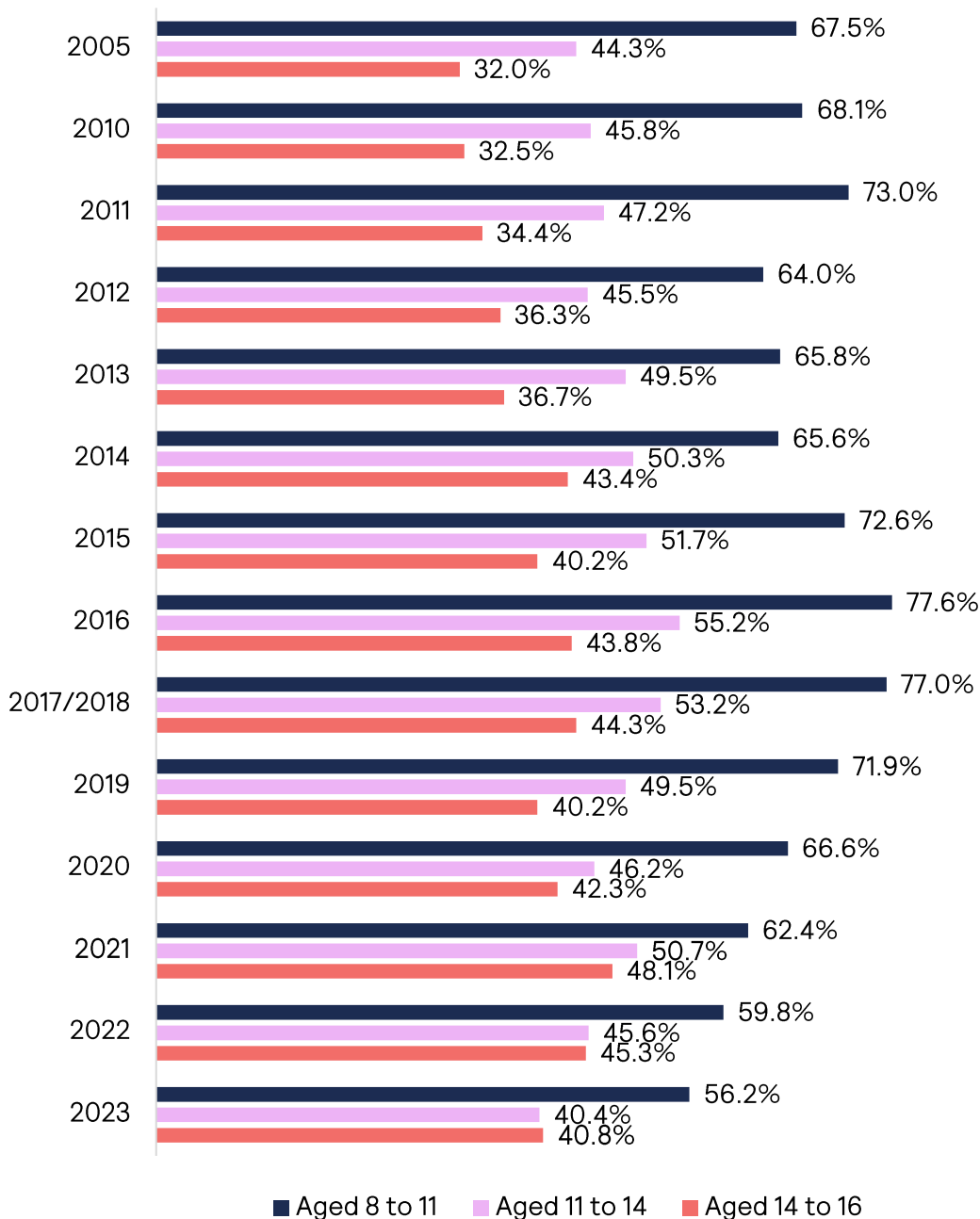
As shown in Figure 4, while more of those aged 8 to 11 told us that they enjoyed reading compared with the other age groups regardless of when we asked them,

there was a decrease of 11.3 percentage points in the number of children in this group who told us that they enjoyed reading between 2005 and 2023. In other words, this means that there was a reduction of 16.7% in the number of children aged 8 to 11 who enjoyed reading over the past 18 years. By contrast, the percentage of young people aged 11 to 14 has remained more stable over that same time period, with *only* a 3.9-percentage-point reduction between 2005 and 2023. Perhaps the biggest surprise, though, is that the number of young people aged 14 to 16 who enjoyed reading has actually increased over the past 18 years, rising from 32.0% in 2005 to 40.8% in 2023, an increase of 27.5%.

This suggests that while concerted efforts ought to be made to (re)engage all children and young people with reading for enjoyment, regardless of their age group, particular attention should be paid to more rapidly declining reading enjoyment in children aged 8 to 11.

There was a reduction of 16.7% in the number of children aged 8 to 11 who enjoyed reading in their free time over the past year, decreasing from 67.5% in 2005 to 56.2% in 2023.

Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time by age group from 2005 to 2023

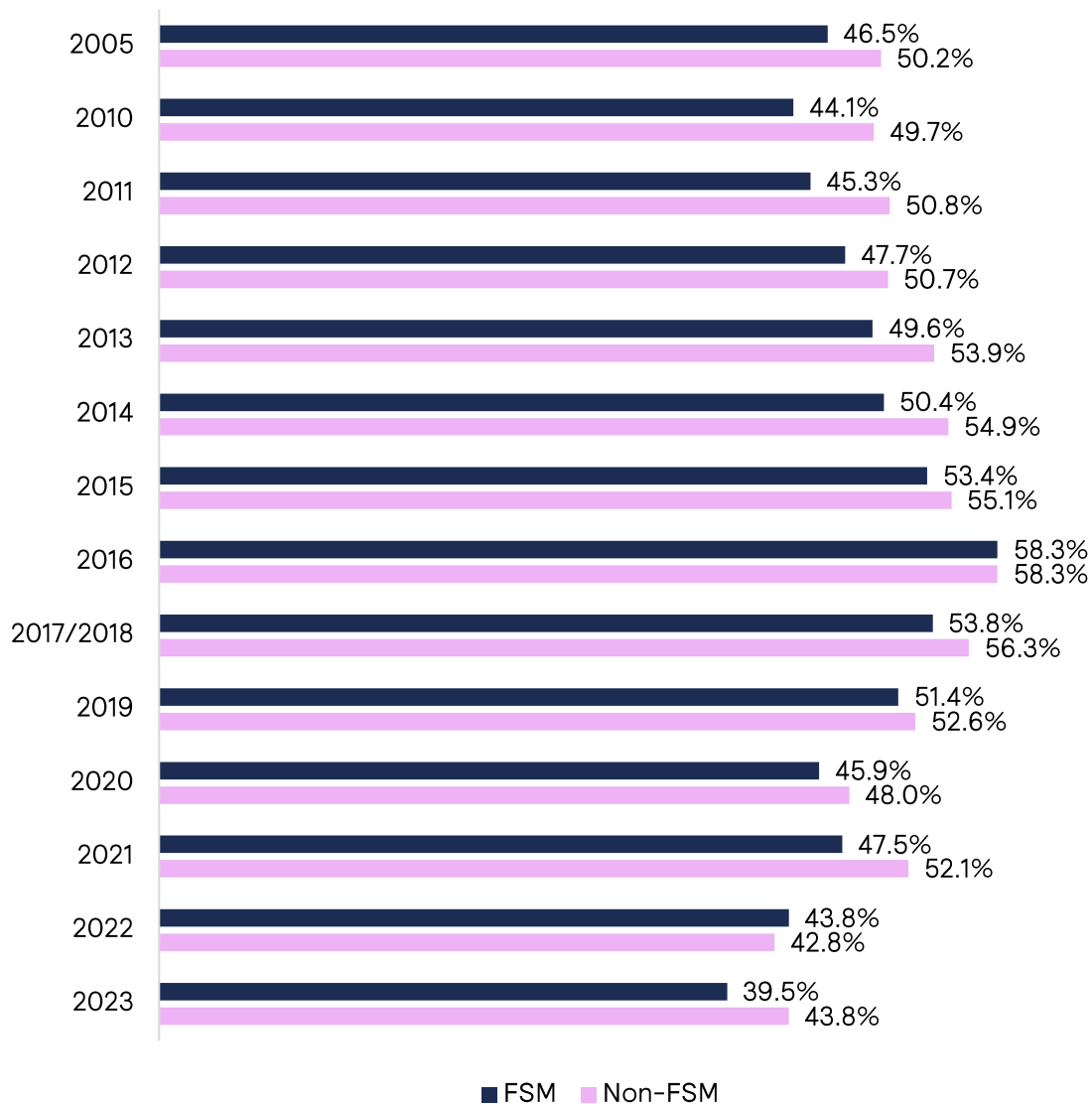


While reading enjoyment levels have started to converge across the age groups over the past 18 years, the gap in reading enjoyment by FSM uptake has remained more stable over this time (see Figure 5). There was a difference of 3.7 percentage points in reading enjoyment between those who received FSMs and

those who didn't in 2005. In 2023, this difference was 4.3 percentage points. In 2016, the gap between them had closed.

Having said this, the loss in reading enjoyment levels was marginally larger for children and young people who received FSMs over this time period (7 percentage points) compared with their non-FSM peers (6.4 percentage points).

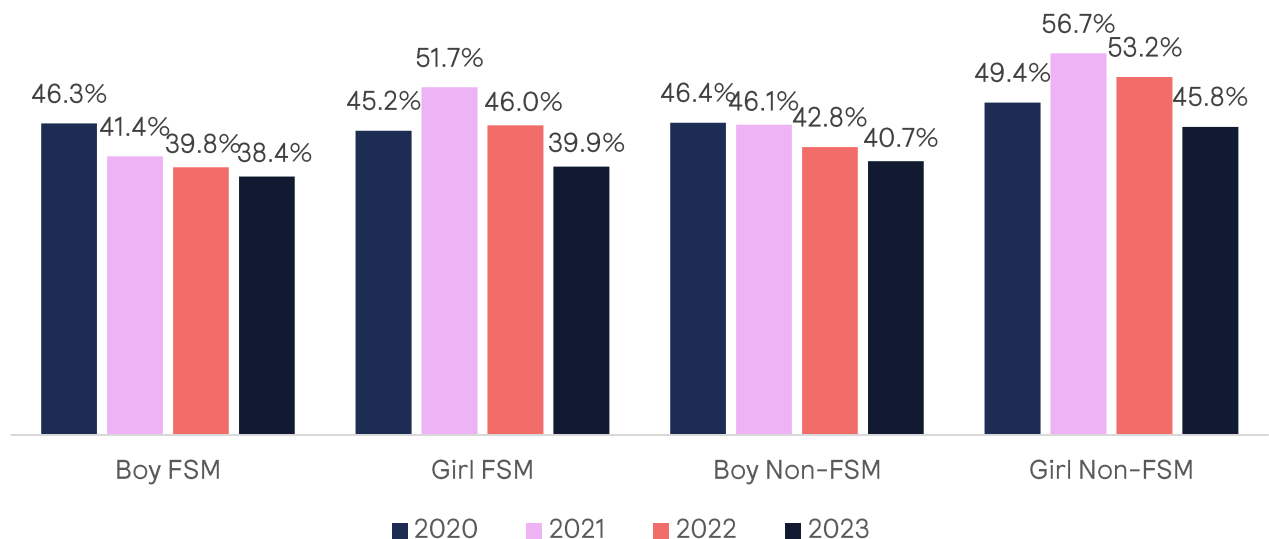
Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time by FSM uptake between 2005 and 2023



Reading enjoyment in free time and the interplay between gender and FSM uptake

We have been particularly interested in tracking the impact of the pandemic on the reading enjoyment of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Figure 6 shows levels of reading enjoyment in free time between 2020 and 2023 by gender and whether or not they received FSMs. It shows that levels of reading enjoyment have gradually declined for all, regardless of gender or FSM background. However, the drop in reading enjoyment has been more pronounced for both girls who received FSMs and those who didn't between 2022 and 2023.

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time between 2020 and 2023 by gender and free-school-meal-uptake



Reading enjoyment in free time by geographical region

There were also differences in how much children and young people enjoyed reading in their free time depending on where in the UK they were. As shown in Figure 7, there was little difference in reading enjoyment levels between children and young people from England, Wales or Scotland. The percentage for Northern Ireland needs to be treated with caution as only a small number of children and young people from NI took part in this year's survey³.

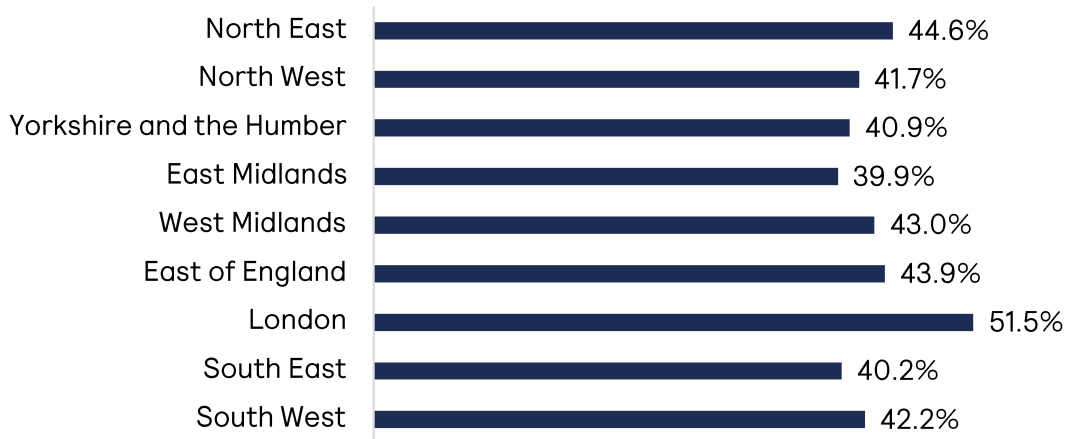
Figure 7: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023 by UK nation



Differences in England are further broken down by region in Figure 8. It shows that more children and young people from Greater London, the North East, East of England and West Midlands said that they enjoyed reading in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed reading came from the East Midlands, the South East and Yorkshire and the Humber.

³ 61,329 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from England; 1,141 from Scotland; 1,058 from Wales and 138 from Northern Ireland participated in 2023.

Figure 8: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023 by region in England

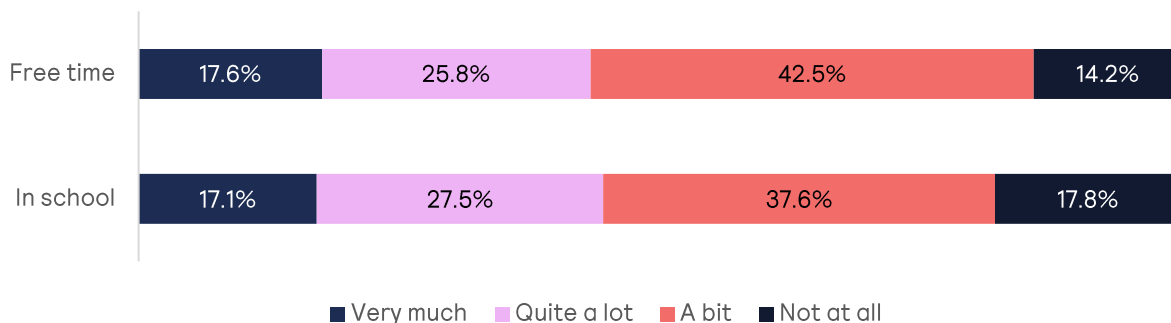


Reading enjoyment in free time versus enjoyment of reading in school time

Traditionally, our survey has focused on how much children and young people enjoy reading in their free time. In 2023, we also included a question to see how this compared with the reading they did at school.

Figure 9 shows that roughly the same percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time (43.4%) as said that they enjoyed reading during school time (44.6%). However, a slightly larger percentage of children and young people said that they didn't enjoy reading in school compared with reading at home.

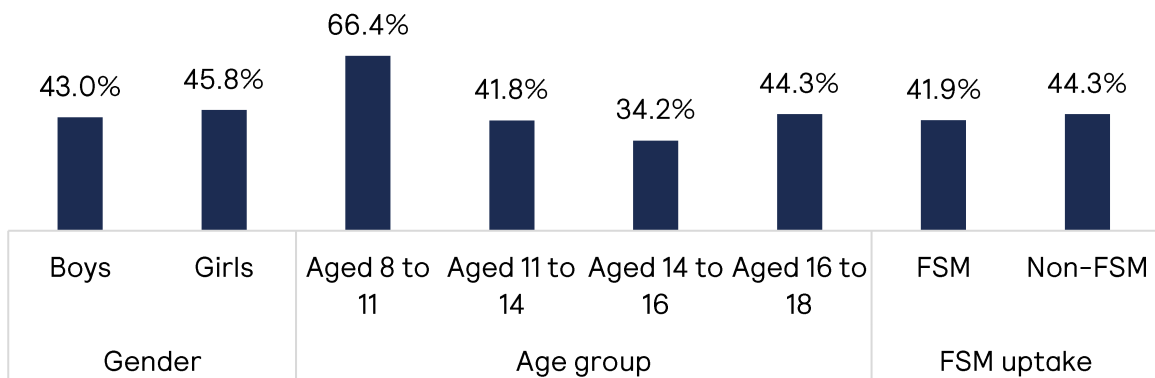
Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in 2023 in their free time versus reading at school



Both types of reading enjoyment were strongly positively related ($r = .626$), indicating that those who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time. Indeed, 3 in 4 (72.6%) children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time also enjoyed reading at school, while 3 in 4 (74.6%) children and young people who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time. This suggests that 1 in 4 children and young people didn't enjoy reading at school or in their free time.

Figure 10 shows that marginally more girls than boys said that they enjoyed reading at school. Similarly, more of those aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoyed reading at school compared with the other age groups, with fewest of those aged 14 to 16 saying the same. Slightly more children and young people who didn't receive FSMs said that they enjoyed reading at school compared with their peers who received FSMs.

Figure 10: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading at school in 2023 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake



It is perhaps worth noting that even though these relationships mirror those we saw with reading enjoyment in free time, the differences between the groups were much more suppressed when it comes to reading enjoyment at school. For example, while the gender difference in reading enjoyment in free time stood at 4.8 percentage points in 2023, the gender difference in reading enjoyment at school was only 2.8 percentage points. This is largely because more boys told us

that they enjoyed reading at school than they did in their free time, while the percentages for girls were nearly identical.

Similarly, the differences between those who received FSMs and those who didn't were much smaller for reading enjoyment at school compared with that of reading enjoyment in free time (2.4 percentage points vs. 4.3 percentage points). This is mainly because more children and young people who received FSMs told us that they enjoyed reading at school than reading at home, while the percentages for those who didn't receive FSMs were nearly identical.

By contrast, age differences increased when we looked at the reading enjoyment at school. While the difference in reading enjoyment in free time between those aged 8 to 11 and those aged 14 to 16 was 15.4 percentage points, this doubled to a 32.2-percentage-point difference when looking at reading enjoyment at school between those age groups. This is because more children aged 8 to 11 enjoyed reading at school compared with reading in their free time, while fewer of those aged 14 to 16 said the same.

Nearly the same percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they enjoyed reading in their free time as said that they enjoyed reading during school (43.4% vs 44.6%)

Reading enjoyment at school by geographical location

There were also differences in enjoying reading at school depending on where in the UK the children and young people were. As shown in Figure 11, more children and young people who were in Wales said that they enjoyed reading at school compared with the other three nations. As before, the percentage for Northern Ireland needs to be treated with caution as we only had a small number of children and young people from NI taking part in this year's survey.

Figure 11: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading at school in 2023 by UK nation

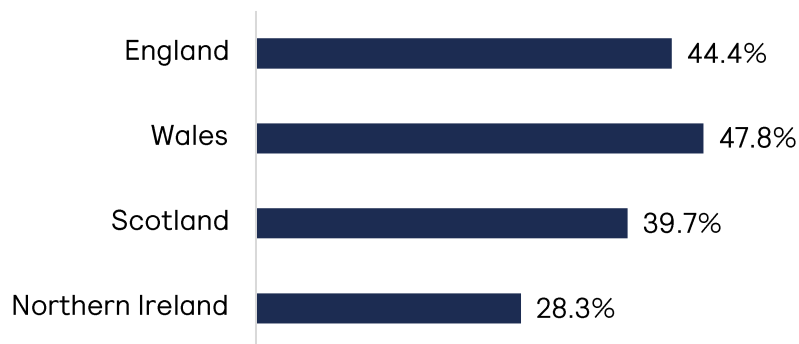
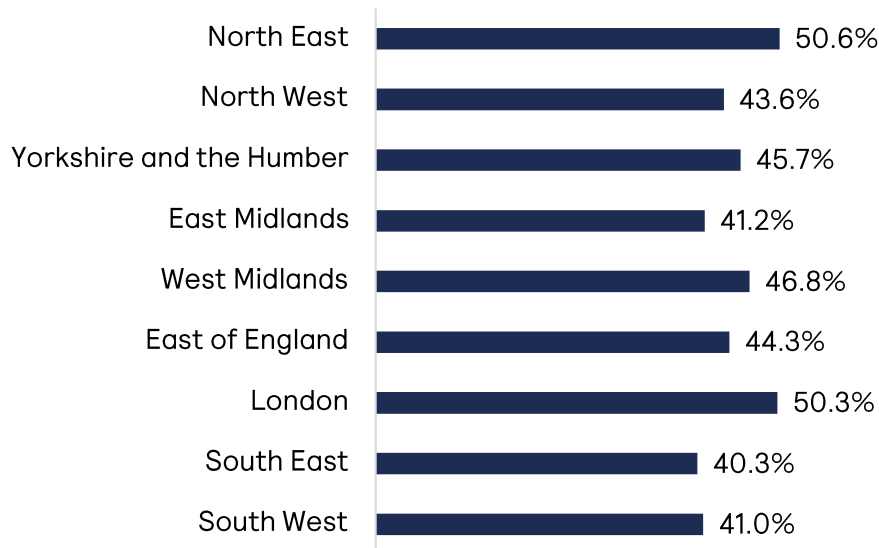


Figure 12 shows that more children and young people from the North East and Greater London said that they enjoyed reading at school compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed reading at school came from the South East, the South West and the East Midlands

Figure 12: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading at school in 2023 by region in England



Daily reading in free time

1 in 2 (51.8%) 5- to 8-year-olds said in 2023 they read daily or almost daily in their free time. In comparison, only 3 in 10 (28.0%) 8- to 18-year-olds said the same.

Figure 13 shows the percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading daily over time. It shows that levels in 2023 were identical to those seen the previous year. The figure also highlights the variability in daily reading rates since 2005. Overall, there was a 26% decrease in the number of children and young people who said that they read daily in their free time over the past 18 years, decreasing from 38.1% in 2005 to 28.0% in 2023.

Figure 13: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time from 2005 to 2023

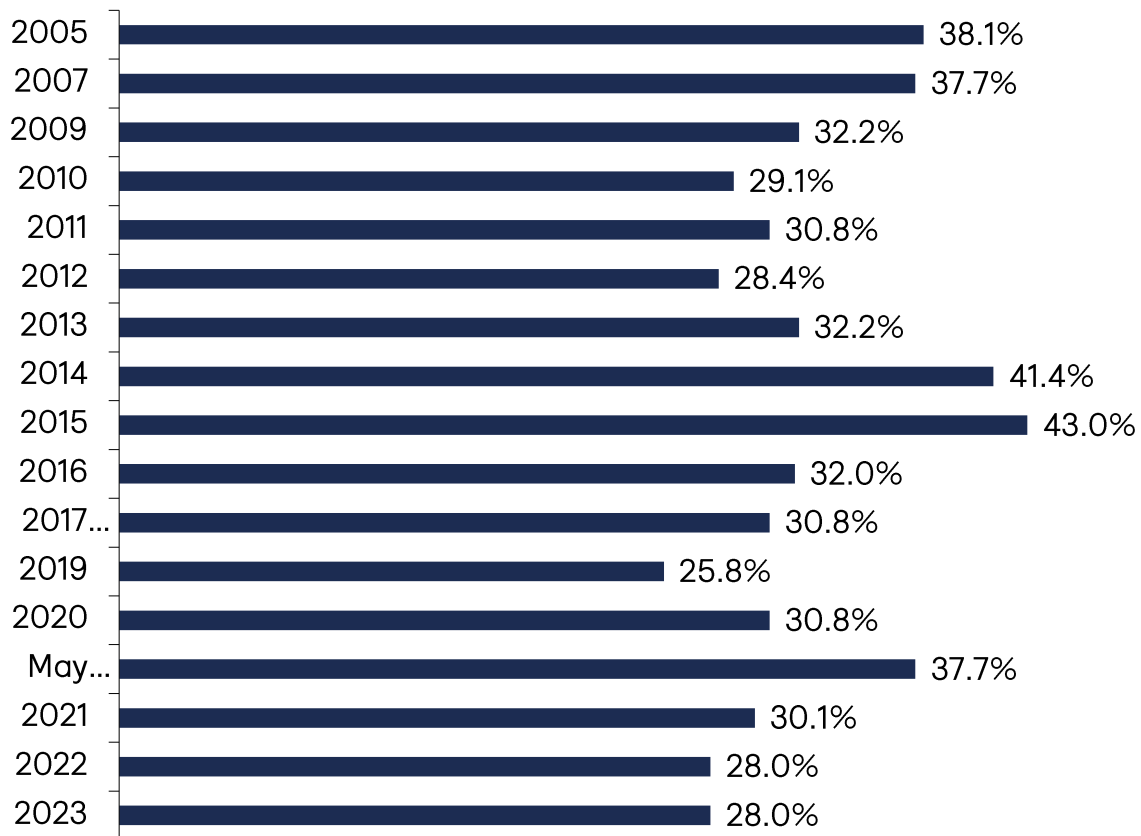
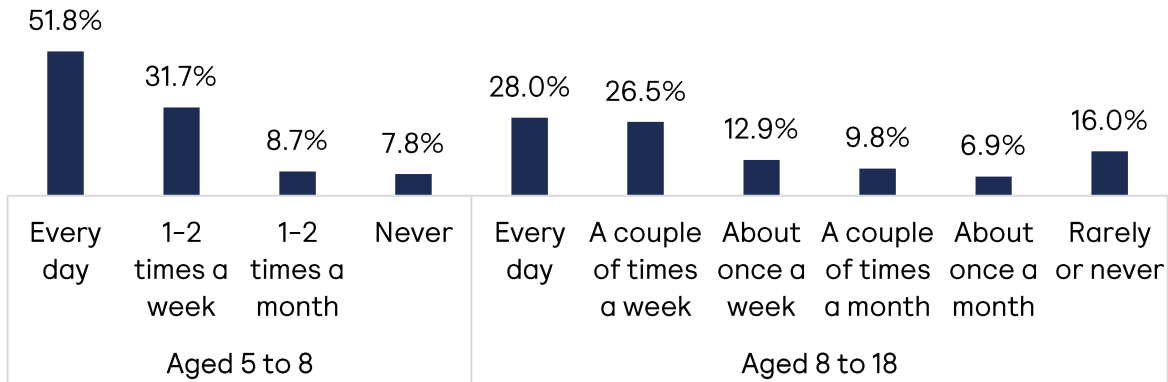


Figure 14 shows the frequency with which children and young people read in their spare time in 2023 in more detail. As children aged 5 to 8 had different response options from their older peers, both are shown in this figure. It shows that almost twice as many children aged 5 to 8 said that they read something daily compared with their older peers. Conversely, twice as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they rarely or never read in their free time compared with those aged 5 to 8.

Figure 14: Frequency of reading in their spare time for children aged 5 to 8 and children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2023



The link between reading enjoyment in free time and reading frequency in free time

For those aged 8 to 18, there was a strong positive relationship between enjoying reading in free time and reading frequency in free time ($r = .614$), indicating that those who enjoyed reading read more frequently in their free time. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, over four times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time also said that they read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading. Instead, over 1 in 4 of those who said that they didn't enjoy reading also rarely or never read.

Table 1: Reading enjoyment in free time by reading frequency in free time in 2023 for children and young people aged 8 to 18

	Daily	A couple of times a week	Once a week	A couple of times a month	Once a month	Rarely or never
Enjoyed reading	50.0%	33.4%	8.9%	4.2%	1.5%	2.0%
Didn't enjoy reading	11.1%	21.1%	15.9%	14.1%	11.1%	26.7%

The relationship between leisure reading enjoyment and reading frequency was less strong for those aged 5 to 8 ($r = .371$), but Table 2 shows that twice as many 5- to 8-year-olds who enjoyed reading also read something daily in their spare time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading.

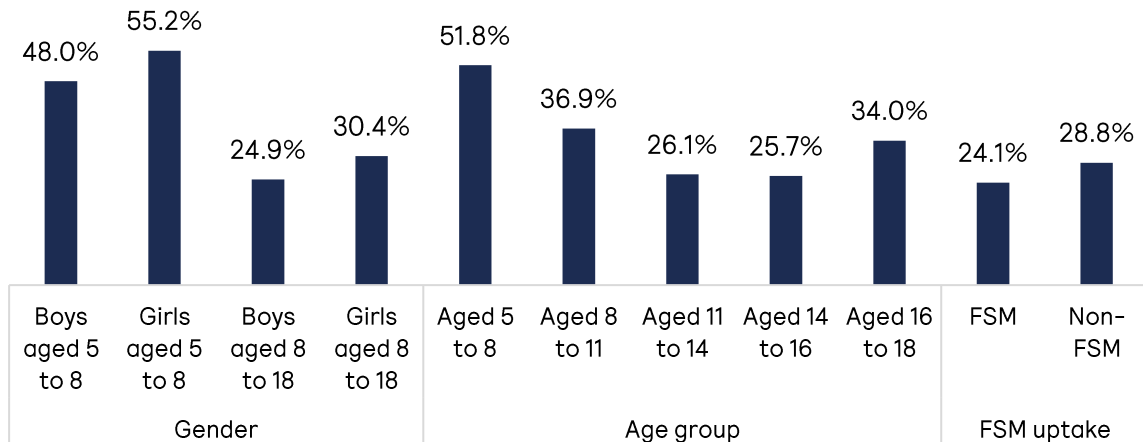
Table 2: Reading enjoyment by reading frequency in 2023 for children aged 5 to 8

	Daily	1 – 2 times a week	A couple of times a month	Never
Enjoyed reading	59.8%	29.6%	6.5%	4.0%
Didn't enjoy reading	27.3%	38.1%	15.3%	19.4%

Daily reading in free time by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake

More girls than boys said that they read something daily in their free time in 2023, regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or 8 to 18 (see Figure 15). As with reading enjoyment, levels of daily reading decreased with age, with nearly twice as many children aged 5 to 8 saying that they read something in their free time daily compared with those aged 11 to 16. Not only did more children and young people who received FSMs say that they enjoyed reading, more also said that they read something daily in their free time compared with their peers who didn't receive FSMs.

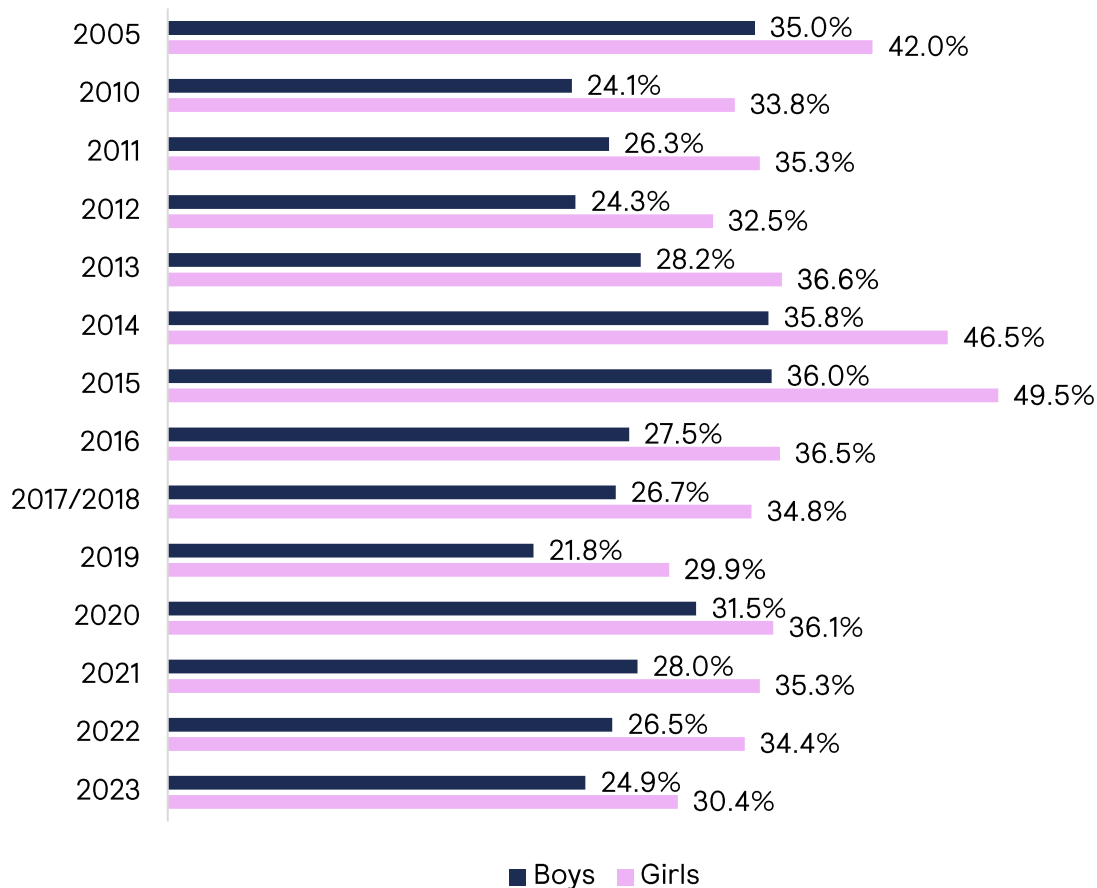
Figure 15: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who said they read daily in 2023 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)



Comparisons of daily reading levels by gender, age group and FSM uptake over time

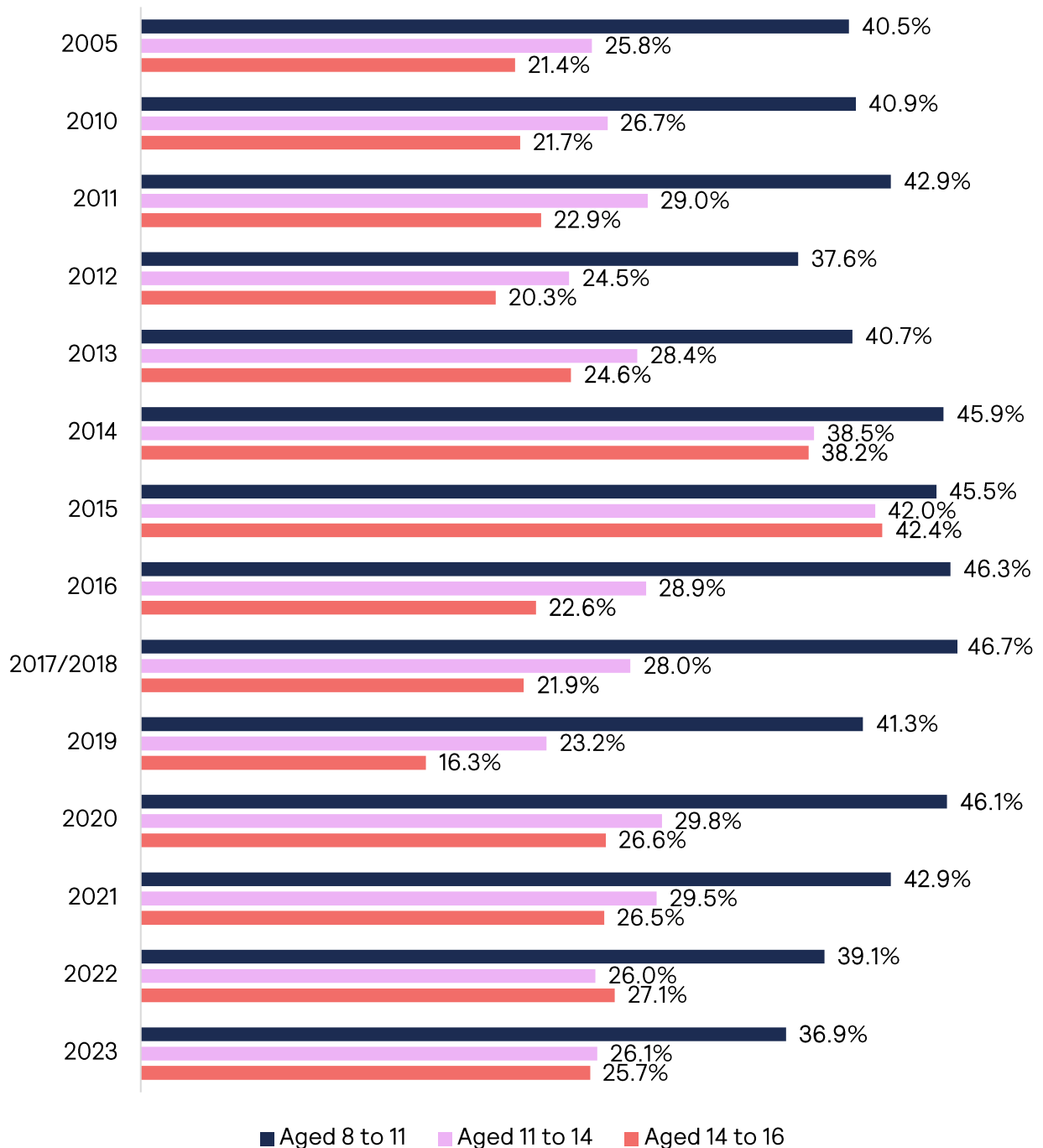
While there have been variations in specific years, the gender gap in daily reading has largely remained the same over the past 18 years, only marginally decreasing from a 7-percentage-point gap in 2005 to a 5.5-percentage-point difference in 2023 (see Figure 16).

Figure 16: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time by gender between 2005 and 2023



Fewer children aged 8 to 11 said in 2023 that they read daily compared with children in 2005 (36.9% vs 40.5%), while the percentage of those aged 11 to 14 who read daily has remained largely unchanged over that period (25.8% vs. 26.1%; see Figure 17). At the same time, the number of young people aged 14 to 16 who read daily in their free time increased slightly over the past 18 years, rising from 21.4% in 2005 to 25.7% in 2023.

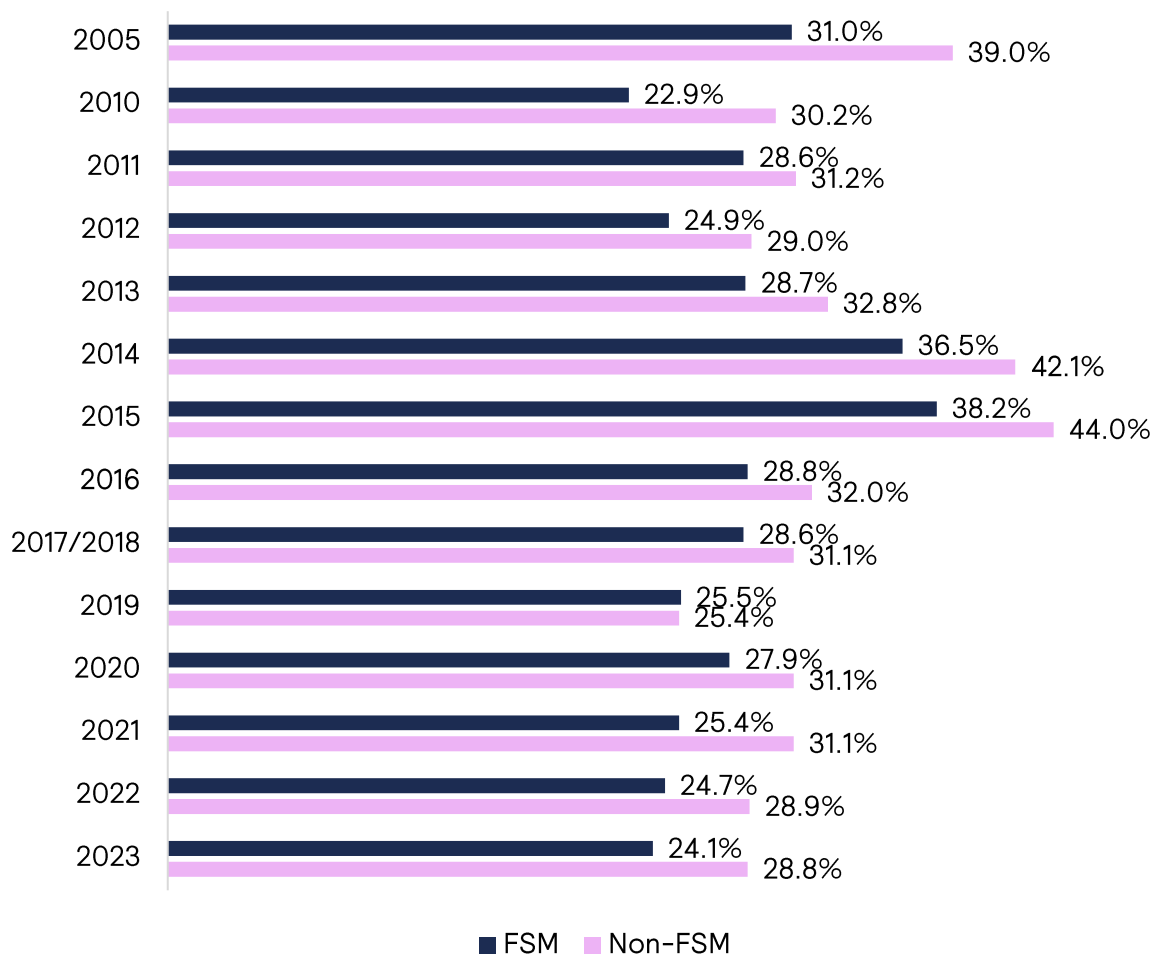
Figure 17: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time by age group between 2005 and 2023



The FSM gap in daily reading has halved over the past 18 years, decreasing from an 8-percentage-point gap in 2005 to a 4.7-percentage-point difference in 2023

(see Figure 18). This is largely because of a bigger drop in daily reading levels for those from a non-FSM (10.2 percentage points) than an FSM background (6.9 percentage points) over this time period.

Figure 18: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time by FSM uptake between 2005 and 2023

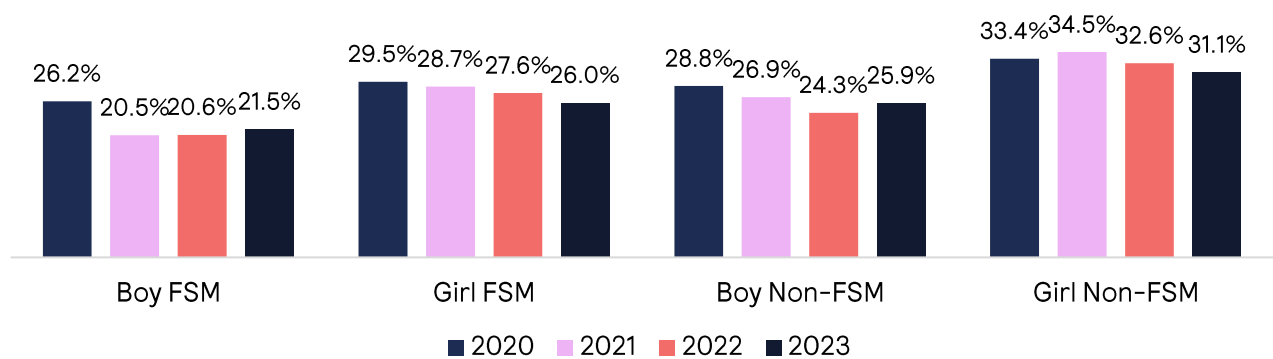


Daily reading and the interplay between gender and FSM uptake

We have also been particularly interested in tracking the impact of the pandemic on the reading behaviours of children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Figure 19 shows levels of daily reading by gender and whether or

not they received FSMs since 2020. It shows that from 2020 to 2021 there was a detrimental impact on daily reading levels for all groups with the exception of girls who didn't receive FSMs, whose levels increased slightly over this period. Levels continued to drop in 2022 regardless of gender or FSM status. In 2023, daily reading levels improved for boys regardless of whether they received FSMs or not, while those of girls continued to drop regardless of whether they received FSMs or not.

Figure 19: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023 by gender and free-school-meal uptake



Daily reading in free time by geographical location

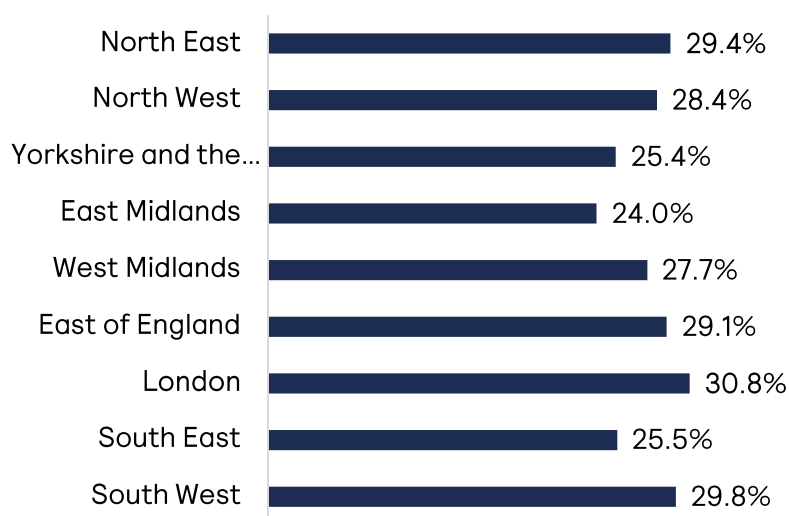
There were also differences in how many children and young people read daily in their free time depending on where in the UK they were. As shown in Figure 20, more children and young people who were in England said that they read daily in their free time, followed by those in Scotland. Fewer children and young people in Wales said the same. The percentage for Northern Ireland needs to be treated with caution as we only had a small number of children and young people from NI taking part in this year's survey.

Figure 20: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time in 2023 by UK nation



More specifically, there were differences in daily reading by regions in England (see Figure 21), with more children and young people from Greater London, the South West, the North East and East of England telling us that they read daily in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they read daily in their free time came from the East Midlands, Yorkshire and the Humber and the South East.

Figure 21: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time in 2023 by region in England

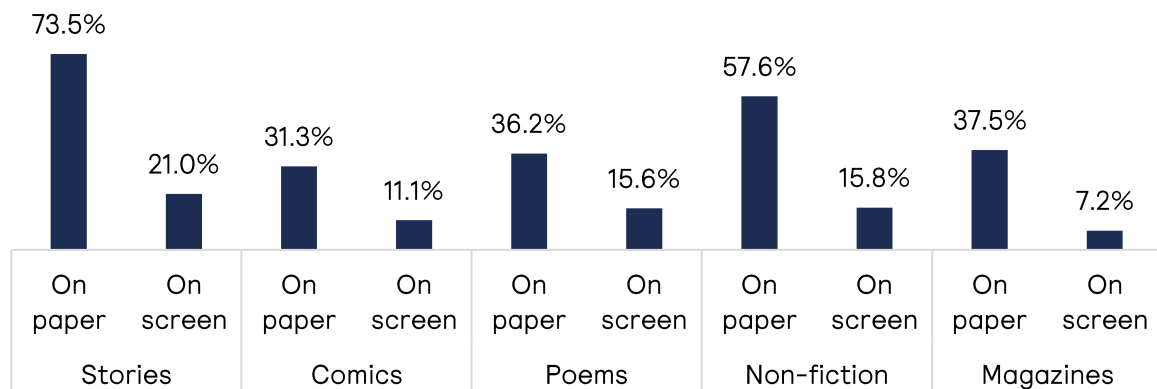


What do children and young people read?

Aged 5 to 8

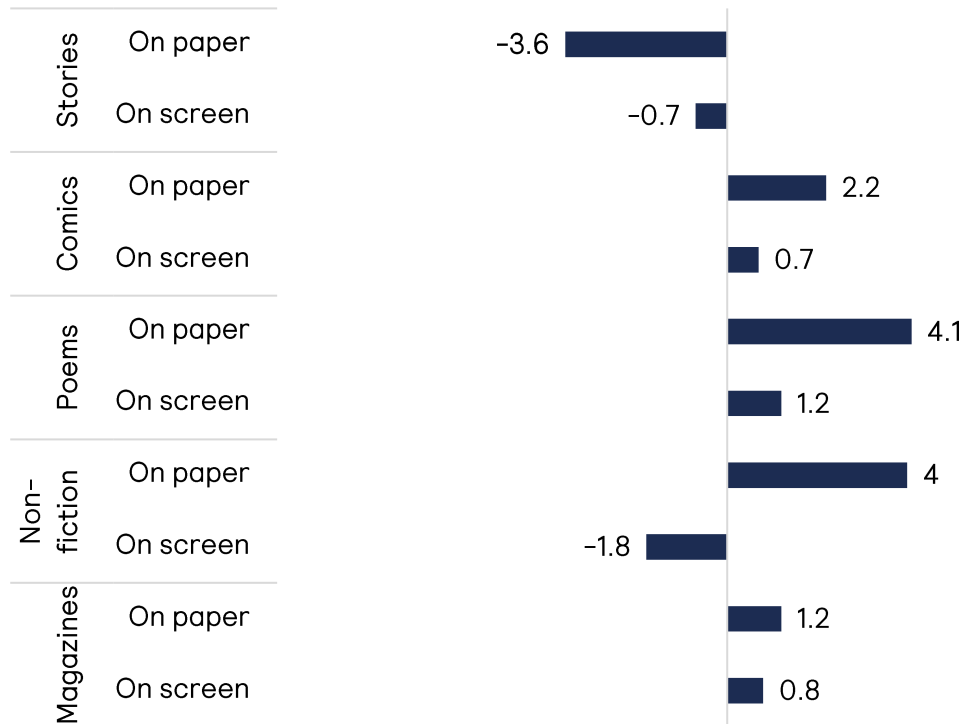
We asked children and young people what they read in their spare time, both on paper and on screen (see Figure 22). For those aged 5 to 8, 3 in 4 said that they read stories, nearly 3 in 5 read facts (i.e. non-fiction), and 1 in 3 read magazines, poems or comics on paper. Although less common, some children did read on screen, with 1 in 5 saying that they read stories on screen, and 1 in 6 saying that they read non-fiction on screen.

Figure 22: Materials read either on screen or on paper in their spare time by children aged 5 to 8 in 2023



Comparing reading formats with last year, fewer children aged 5 to 8 were reading stories, both on screen and on paper (see Figure 23). Fewer were also reading non-fiction on screen but more were reading non-fiction on paper. Overall, more children and young people were reading the other materials across the two different formats in 2023 compared with the previous year.

Figure 23: Percentage-point difference in various formats being read either on a screen or on paper by children aged 5 to 8 between 2022 and 2023

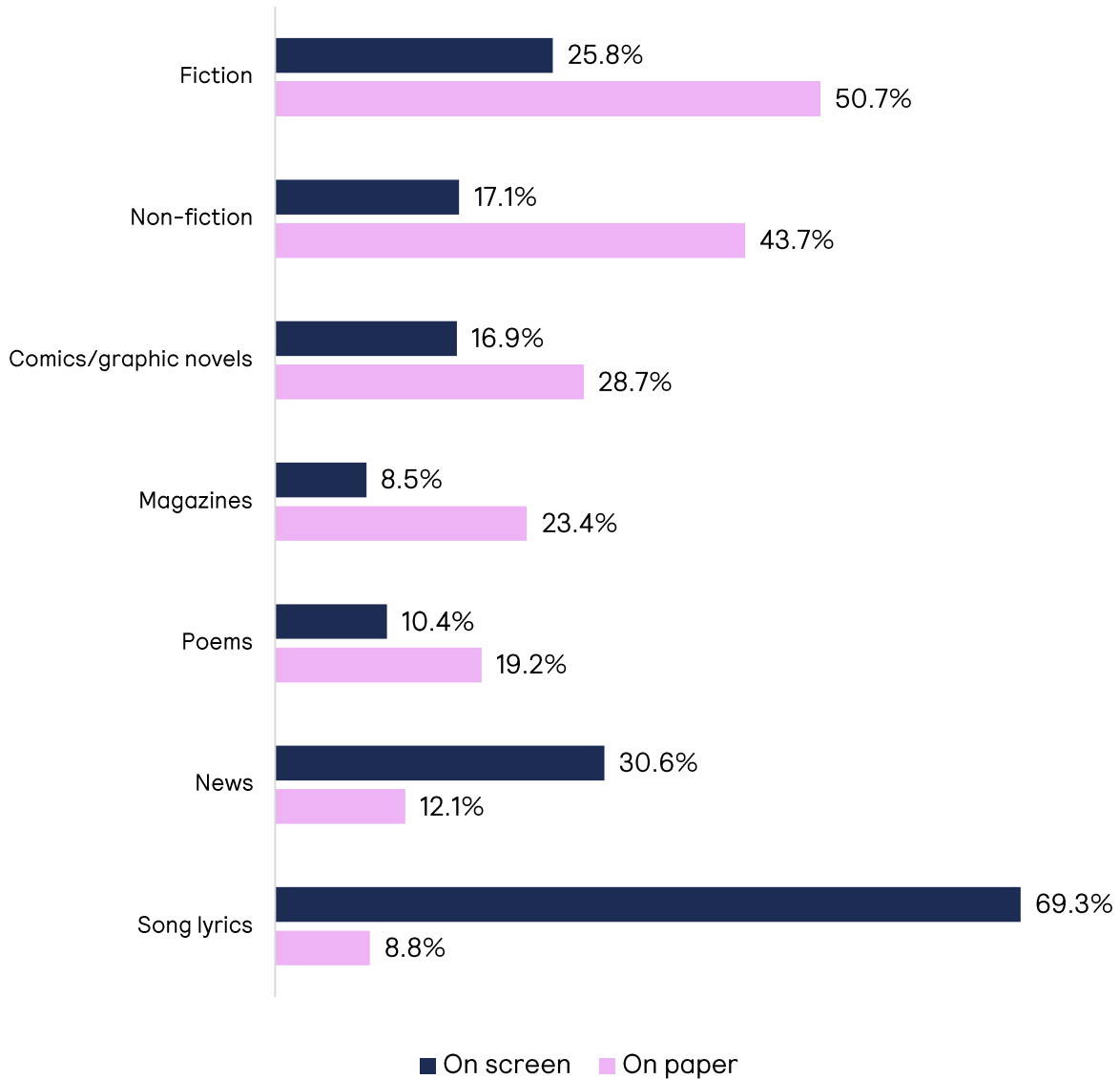


Aged 8 to 18

For those aged 8 to 18, half said that they read fiction on paper in their spare time, with 2 in 5 saying that they read non-fiction on paper (see Figure 24). Nearly 3 in 10 said they read comics/graphic novels on paper, while 1 in 4 read magazines. 1 in 5 said that they read poems on paper, while 1 in 8 read the news, and 1 in 12 read song lyrics.

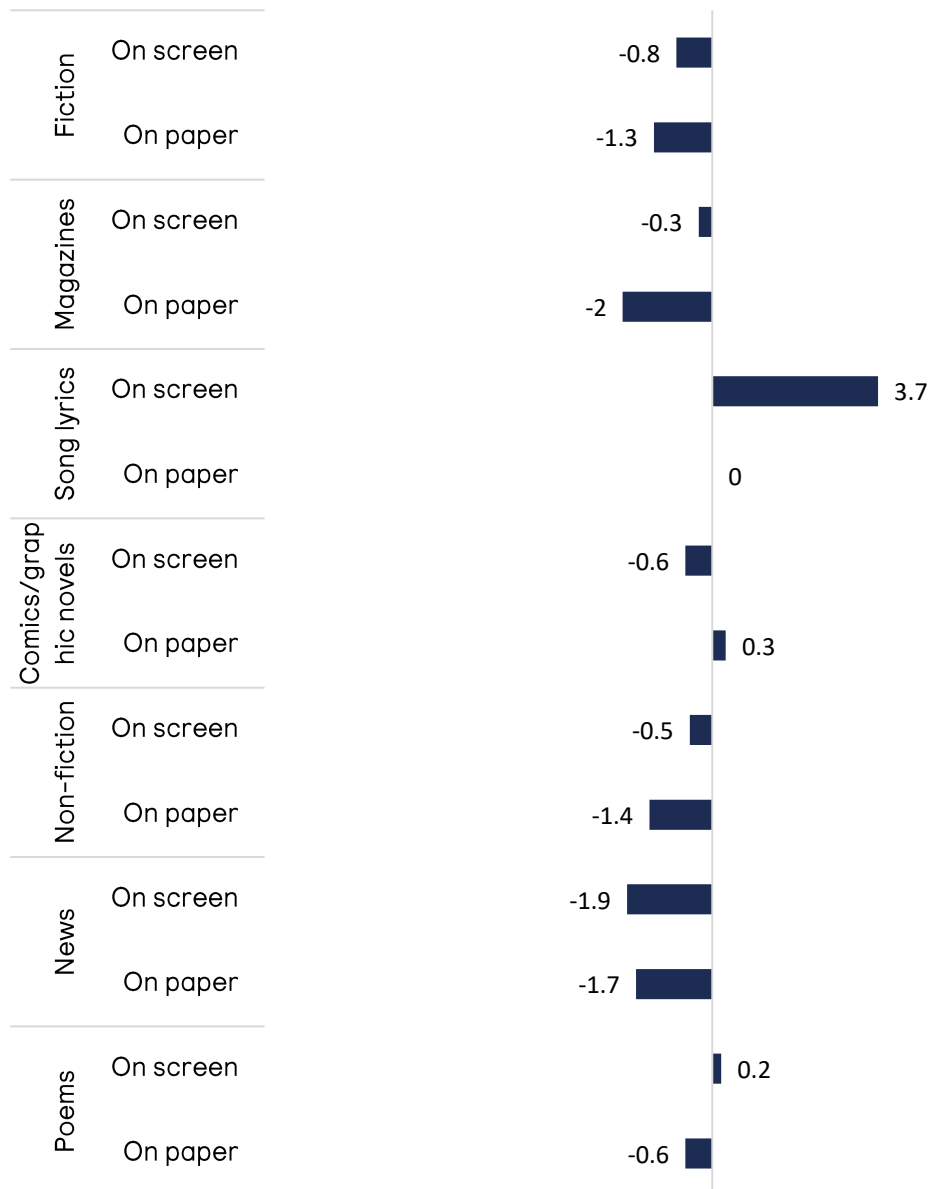
Screen reading was more common for those aged 8 to 18 than those aged 5 to 8. Indeed, 1 in 4 said that they read fiction on screen, while 1 in 6 said that they read non-fiction and comics/graphic novels. Three times as many children and young people told us that they read news on screen than did on paper. The biggest difference was seen with respect to song lyrics, with eight times as many children and young people saying that they read song lyrics on screen than on paper, making it the most popular material being read on screen.

Figure 24: Materials read either on screen or on paper in their spare time by children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2023



Comparing reading habits with last year, slightly fewer children aged 8 to 18 read any of the materials both on screen and on paper (see Figure 25). Exceptions to this were reading song lyrics and poems on screen and comics on paper, which slightly more children and young people said that they were reading in 2023 compared with the year before.

Figure 25: Percentage-point difference in various formats being read either on a screen or on paper by children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2022 and 2023



For differences in what children and young people aged 8 to 18 were reading in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake please see Appendix A.

As shown in Figure 26, we also asked children aged 8 to 18 to tell us whether they read any formats that were exclusively on screen. 9 in 10 children and young people read personal/direct messages and messages while playing video games. 4 in 5 read social media content and websites, while nearly 2 in 3 read emails, and

1 in 4 read blogs or forums. As shown in Figure 26, we also asked children aged 8 to 18 to tell us whether they read any formats that were exclusively on screen. 9 in 10 children and young people read personal/direct messages and messages while playing video games. 4 in 5 read social media content and websites, while nearly 2 in 3 read emails, and 1 in 4 read blogs or forums.

Figure 26: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2023

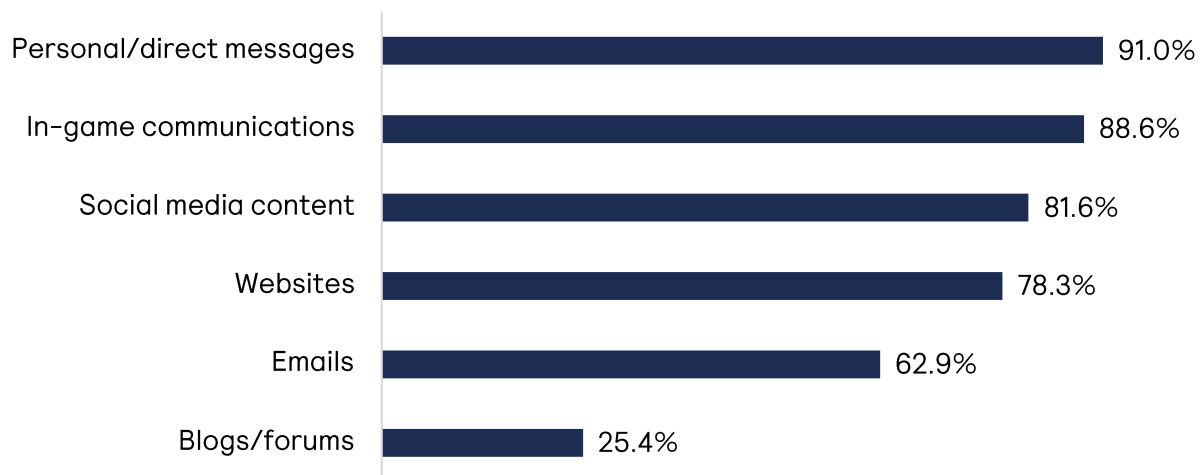
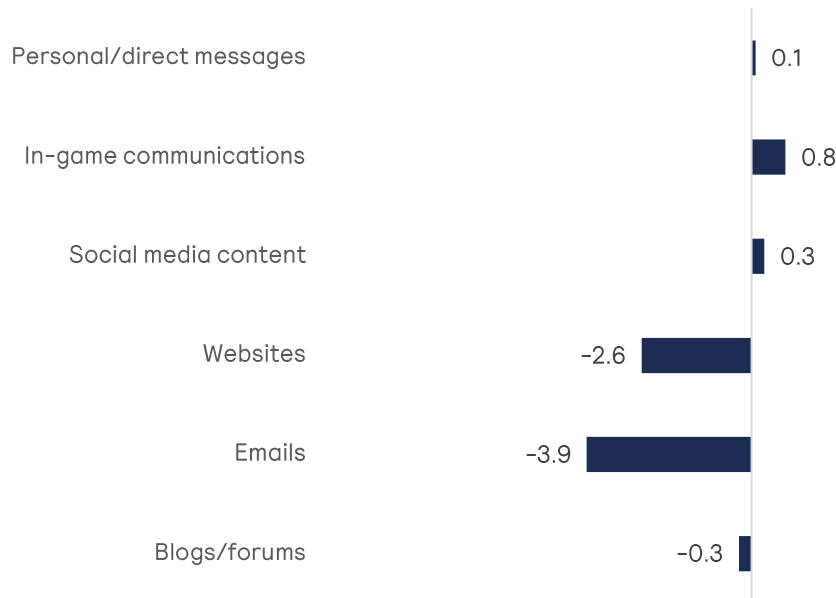


Figure 27 shows the difference in percentage points in children and young people’s reading of these exclusively online formats between 2022 and 2023. It shows a mixed picture, with slight increases in the number of children and young people reading personal/direct messages, messages while gaming and social media content. Conversely, we saw a marked decrease in the number of children and young people telling us that they read emails or websites, while fewer also said that they read blogs/forums.

Figure 27: Percentage-point difference in exclusively online formats being read by children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2022 and 2023



Looking at how reading exclusively on-screen formats varies by gender and FSM status, Table 3 shows that slightly more girls than boys said that they read personal/direct messages and social media content, while slightly more boys said that they read in-game messages. Across the board, the number of children and young people who said that they read any of the exclusively online formats in their free time increased with age, with those aged 16 to 18 being the most avid readers of these formats.

Table 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Personal/ direct messages	In-game communica tion	Social media content	Websites	Emails	Blog/ forum posts
Boys	88.9%	90.3%	78.9%	78.7%	63.3%	24.5%
Girls	93.4%	87.3%	84.5%	78.2%	62.8%	25.9%
Aged 8 to 11	68.5%	80.2%	56.9%	66.6%	38.0%	23.6%
Aged 11 to 14	94.6%	90.5%	84.8%	79.0%	63.9%	24.3%

Aged 14 to 16	97.4%	89.5%	91.3%	85.2%	79.2%	28.7%
Aged 16 to 18	97.8%	85.1%	93.7%	92.8%	92.8%	41.7%
FSM	87.8%	89.7%	81.1%	73.4%	57.3%	25.4%
Non-FSM	93.2%	88.8%	83.5%	80.0%	66.4%	25.7%

With the exception of blog/forum posts, social media content and in-game messages, more children and young people who didn't receive FSMs said that they read personal/direct messages, websites and emails than their peers who received FSMs.

What motivates children and young people to read (aged 8 to 18 only)?

We also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 to reflect on the reasons why they read. We presented children and young people with 11 different motivations to read, which we grouped to form three categories: the curious reader⁴, the mindful reader⁵ and the social reader⁶.

Of those who read in their free time at least once a month⁷, over 1 in 2 read because it helped them learn new words or new things (see Figure 28). 2 in 5 told us they read to help them understand the views of others or to learn more about other people or cultures. Looking at the mindful reader, 3 in 5 said that they read because it relaxed them, and nearly 1 in 2 read because it made them feel happy.

⁴ Combining four items: Reading helps me learn about new things, Reading helps me learn about other people and cultures, Reading helps me learn new words and Reading helps me understand the views of other people. Cronbach's alpha = .810. Top quartile of responses being described here as the curious reader (38.5%).

⁵ Combining four items: relax, happy, confident, problems. Cronbach's alpha = .795. Top quartile of responses being described here as the mindful reader (29.0%).

⁶ Combining three items: connected, time, causes. Cronbach's alpha = .786. Top quartile of responses being described here as the social reader (42.3%)

⁷ n = 43,103

3 in 10 read because it made them feel more confident or because it helped them deal with problems, express their ideas and imagination, and express their thoughts and feelings. Finally, as social readers, 3 in 10 said that they read to learn more about the issues and causes they cared about or because it helped them feel connected with the world. 1 in 8 read because it helped them spend time with others.

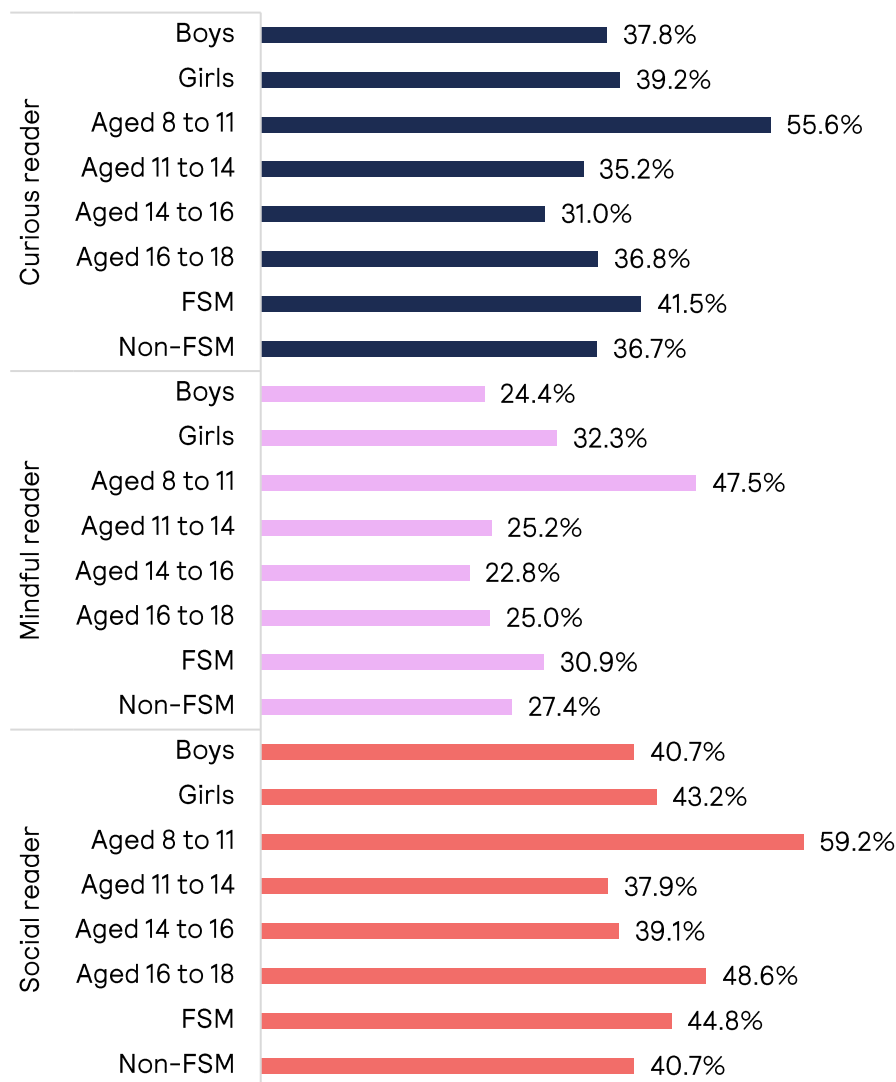
Figure 28: Children and young people’s (aged 8 to 18) motivations for reading in 2023



While boys and girls were almost equally likely to say that they were curious or social readers, more girls than boys said that they were mindful readers (see Figure 29). More of those aged 8 to 11 were found in each of the three categories compared with the other age groups, with the exception of those aged 16 to 18 where more said that they were curious or social readers compared with their peers aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16. Marginally more children and young

people who received FSMs were found in the three categories compared with their non-FSM peers, but the differences between the two groups were small.

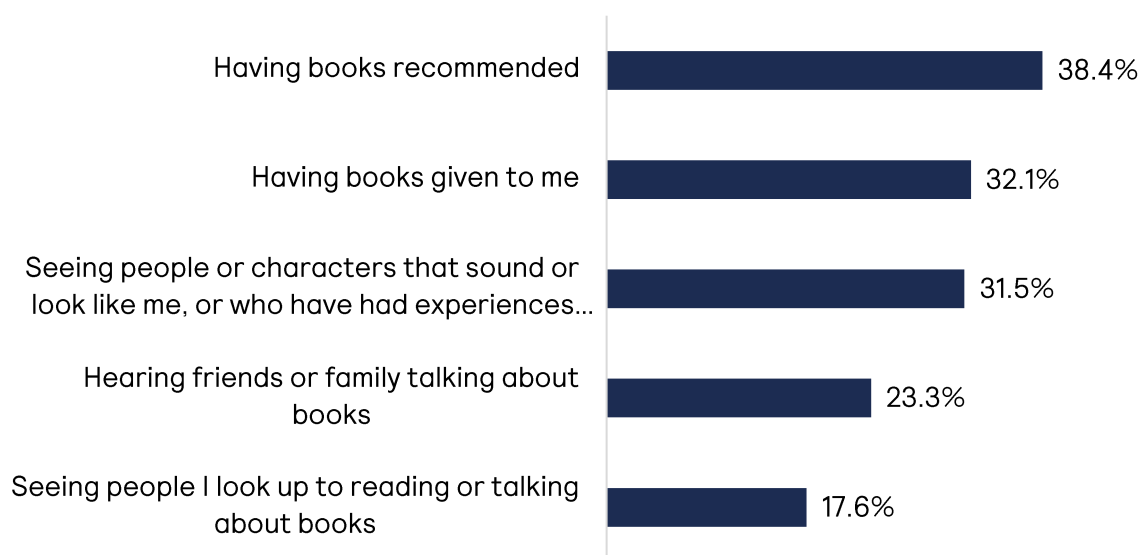
Figure 29: Being a curious, mindful or social reader in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake



What makes children and young people read more (aged 8 to 18 only)?

When asked what would make them want to read, 2 in 5 told us that having books recommended to them would make them read more (see Figure 30). 1 in 3 said that being given books and having books that represent them would be reading motivators. 1 in 4 said that they would read more if their family and friends talked about books, while 1 in 6 mentioned that seeing someone they look up to reading or talking about books would make them want to read.

Figure 30: What would make children and young people aged 8 to 18 read in 2023?



There were some differences in what would make children and young people want to read by gender, age group and FSM uptake. As shown in Table 4, more girls than boys said that any of the activities would make them want to read. In particular, however, more girls than boys said that seeing themselves represented would make them want to read.

Similarly, more of those aged 8 to 11 said that any of those activities would make them want to read compared with their older peers. For example, twice as many of those aged 8 to 11 said that having books given to them would make them want to read compared with those aged 14 and older. By contrast, there were no significant differences in what would make them want to read by FSM uptake.

Table 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Having books recommended	Having books given to them	Seeing themselves represented in what they read	Hearing friends / family talk about books	Seeing people they look up to read or talk about books
Boys	33.0%	30.4%	24.7%	19.6%	15.6%
Girls	44.0%	34.0%	37.2%	27.0%	19.4%
Aged 8 to 11	49.6%	50.4%	42.4%	35.3%	29.9%
Aged 11 to 14	36.4%	30.0%	30.2%	20.7%	15.1%
Aged 14 to 16	35.0%	23.9%	26.8%	21.0%	15.3%
Aged 16 to 18	41.5%	24.9%	26.4%	28.4%	18.6%
FSM	31.2%	35.1%	32.1%	22.8%	18.9%
Non-FSM	31.5%	38.8%	30.8%	22.9%	16.7%

The reading environment (aged 8 to 18 only)

So far, we have looked at how many children and young people enjoy reading, both in and out of school, how often they read in their free time, what motivates them to read, and, if and when they read, what formats they are most likely to read, either on screen or on paper. We have also explored how any of these are associated with some of their background characteristics.

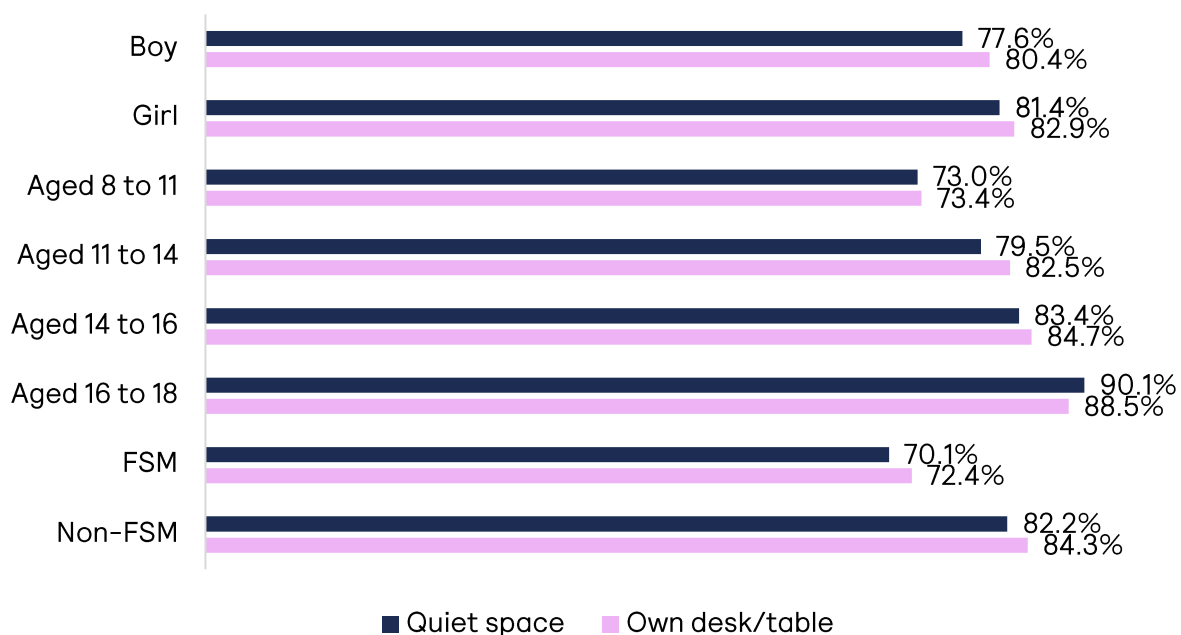
We were also interested to explore to what extent environmental factors had an association with children and young people’s reading. We know that having access to reading materials (see our report [on book ownership](#)) is linked with

reading engagement, but what about access to a quiet space to work, read or take time out, or access to a desk or table to work on?

4 in 5 (79.2%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they had a quiet space at home where they could work, read or take time out. This, however, means that 1 in 5 (20.8%) didn't have a quiet space. Similarly, 4 in 5 (81.4%) told us that they had their own desk or table where they could write, draw or do homework, meaning that nearly 1 in 5 (18.6%) didn't.

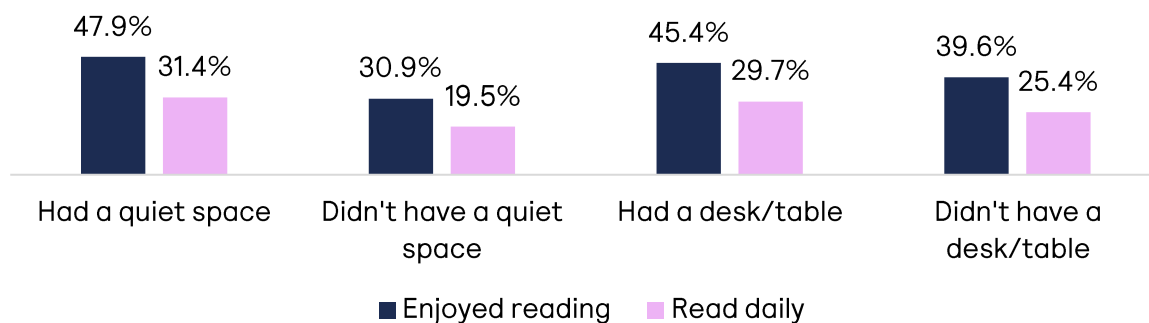
Slightly more girls than boys said that they had a quiet space or a desk/table of their own at home (see Figure 31). Access to both also increased with age, with more young people aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18 saying that they had a quiet space or a desk/table than their younger peers. Having access to a quiet space or their own desk/table was also associated with FSM uptake, with fewer children and young people who received FSMs saying that they had them compared with their non-FSM peers.

Figure 31: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who have access to a quiet space or their own desk/table at home by gender, age group and FSM uptake



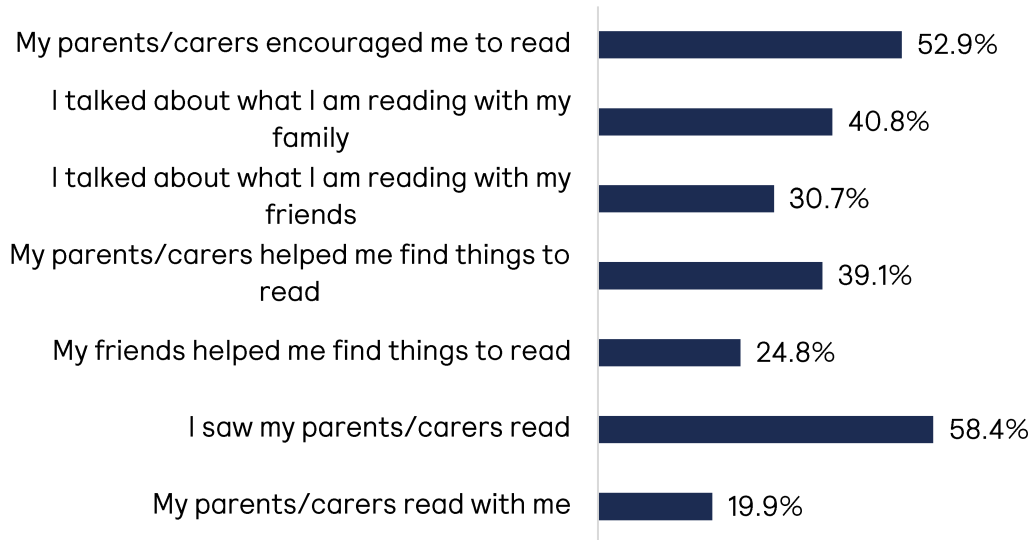
While having your own desk or table to write, draw or do homework on was weakly but positively associated with reading enjoyment ($r = .059$) or daily reading ($r = .082$), a stronger association was found between having a quiet space to work, read or take time out and enjoyment ($r = .167$) or daily reading ($r = .181$; also see Figure 32).

Figure 32: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoying reading in their free time or reading daily in their free time by whether or not they have access to a desk/table of their own or access to a quiet space at home



In addition to asking about some of the resources they might have at home to support their reading, we also asked children aged 8 to 18 about the ways in which they had been supported to engage in reading in the past four weeks, whether by family or friends (see Figure 33). 1 in 2 told us in 2023 that they had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers, 2 in 5 talked about what they were reading with their family, while fewer (3 in 10) talked about what they were reading with their friends. 2 in 5 said that they got reading recommendations from their family, while 1 in 4 said that their friends had helped them find things to read. Encouragingly, 3 in 5 said that they had seen their parents/carers read, while 1 in 5 had read with their family.

Figure 33: Children and young people’s perceived access to a supportive reading environment in 2023



We had asked about some of these in 2022, and, compared with the previous year, more children and young people reported in 2023 that had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers (+8.1 percentage points) and that their family had helped them to find things to read (+11.3 percentage points). More also reported talking about reading with their family (+2 percentage points) or their friends (+0.7 percentage points).

Exploring differences by gender, age group and FSM uptake, Table 5 shows that there were only a few gender differences in parental support, with an almost equal number of boys and girls saying that they had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers, that their family had helped them to find things to read and that they had seen their parents/carers read. An almost equal percentage of boys and girls had also read with their parents/carers. However, more girls than boys said that they had talked about their reading with family and friends, and twice as many girls as boys said that their friends had helped them find things to read.

Table 5: Children and young people’s perceived access to a supportive reading environment in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Encouraged to read	Talk about reading with family	Talk about reading with friends	Family helped find things to read	Friends helped find things to read	Saw parents/carers read	Read with parents/carers
Boys	53.3%	37.6%	23.5%	40.0%	18.1%	58.6%	20.6%
Girls	53.9%	44.4%	36.9%	39.2%	31.2%	59.0%	19.5%
Aged 8 to 11	59.4%	54.5%	37.2%	52.9%	33.9%	59.3%	45.0%
Aged 11 to 14	53.8%	39.3%	28.4%	38.7%	22.7%	58.4%	17.1%
Aged 14 to 16	44.4%	32.5%	31.2%	28.4%	23.5%	57.1%	7.7%
Aged 16 to 18	38.3%	40.6%	45.4%	24.0%	31.5%	60.8%	6.7%
FSM	46.7%	37.4%	30.6%	37.9%	26.8%	52.6%	23.1%
Non-FSM	54.7%	41.3%	30.7%	38.8%	24.2%	60.4%	17.9%

Parental encouragement declined with age, as did parental support in finding things to read. Nearly seven times as many children aged 8 to 11 also said that their parent/carer read with them compared with young people aged 14 and older. Friends take on an increasingly important role for the older age group, with more of those aged 16 to 18 saying that they talked about their reading with friends compared with their younger peers. There was no age difference in children and young people seeing their parents/carers read.

Fewer children and young people who received FSMs told us that they were encouraged to read by their parents/carers and fewer saw their parents/carers read compared with those who didn’t receive FSMs. Slightly fewer also talked about their reading with their parents/carers, while more said that their parents/carers read with them.

To explore the link between a perceived supportive reading home environment and reading enjoyment or behaviours, we first constructed a home reading score – a variable that sums six of our environmental variables⁸. This composite value had a minimum score of 6 and a maximum of 12, with an average of 8.68 (SD = 1.84).

We found that there was a moderate positive relationship ($r = .367$) between reading enjoyment and our reading environment score, indicating that children and young people who scored higher on reading enjoyment also scored higher on the reading environment score. The relationship was marginally stronger for reading frequency ($r = .402$), indicating that those children who read more frequently also had scored more highly on the reading environment variable.

To explore this link further, we divided the reading environment score into four equal parts called quartiles. This allowed us to look at the reading enjoyment and reading frequency for those children and young people who scored in the bottom 25% in the environment score and those who scored in the top 25% (i.e. the bottom and top quartiles), as well as those who scored in the two middle quartiles⁹.

Table 6 suggests that three times as many children and young people who perceived their reading environment to be supportive (top quartile) said that they enjoyed reading compared with their peers who came from a home that was, in their perception, not supportive (bottom quartile).

⁸ Correlations suggested that reading with parents wasn't strongly linked to any of the other environmental variables.

⁹ Quartiles look at the distribution of responses and divide those into four roughly equal parts. The first quartile (also called the lower quartile) is the number below which lies the bottom 25 percent of data. The second quartile (the median) divides the range in the middle and has 50 percent of the data below it. The third quartile (also called the upper quartile) has 75 percent of the data below it and the top 25 percent of the data above it. In our study, the quartile scores are divided into the following four groups: bottom = 6 to 6.99; lower and upper middle = 7 to 9.99; top = 10 to 12.

Table 6: Perceived reading environment (quartiles) by whether or not children and young people enjoyed reading in their free time

	Bottom reading environment quartile	Middle reading environment quartiles	Top reading environment quartile
Enjoyed reading	25.4%	46.9%	63.9%
Didn't enjoy reading	74.6%	53.1%	36.1%

Similarly, Table 7 shows that twice as many children and young people who perceived their reading environment to be supportive (top quartile) read daily in their free time compared with their peers who came from a home they didn't perceive to be supportive of their reading.

Table 7: Perceived reading environment (quartiles) by children and young people's reading frequency in free time

	Bottom reading environment quartile	Middle reading environment quartiles	Top reading environment quartile
Reads daily	17.7%	30.0%	41.7%
Reads a couple of times a week	16.1%	28.7%	33.0%
Reads once a week	10.9%	13.6%	12.0%
Reads a couple of times a month	10.6%	10.3%	6.5%
Reads about once a month	10.3%	6.4%	3.0%
Rarely or never reads	34.4%	11.0%	3.9%

To sum up

With England's 10-year-olds performing well on the global stage, recent international reading assessments suggest some cause for celebration. At the same time, while the government has set ambitious targets for increasing the percentage of children reaching the level expected in Key Stage 2 SATs, national tests have shown a slight decrease in the percentage of children leaving primary school reading at the expected level in 2023; indeed, reading was the only subject in which a lower percentage of children reached the expected level compared with the year before¹⁰.

Associations between reading attitudes and reading performance, and the many wider benefits of reading for pleasure, have been much-explored (see, e.g. [Van Bergen et al., 2022](#), [Cremin, 2023](#)). Our own research has also found a consistent link between reading enjoyment and reading frequency, with four times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading saying they read for pleasure daily in 2023 compared with those who didn't enjoy reading. However, we have also observed an alarming decrease in children and young people's reading enjoyment in recent years, with this report showing the percentage of 8- to 18-year-olds who enjoy reading is at 43.3%, its lowest point in almost two decades.

We can see that the combined effect of gender and socioeconomic background, which has previously led to particular concern around very low levels of reading enjoyment in boys who receive free school meals (FSMs), is now also the case for girls who receive FSMs, within which group a similarly low percentage say they enjoy reading. It is also worth noting considerable regional differences in children and young people's reading enjoyment with, for example, a 10-percentage-point difference between those who say they enjoy reading in Greater London and the East Midlands. This suggests that targeted approaches to supporting reading

¹⁰ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/key-stage-2-attainment-national-headlines>

enjoyment should not only take into account age, gender and socioeconomic background but also geographical location.

More broadly, this report also begins to explore how, and to what extent, children and young people's reading environments are linked with their reading enjoyment and their reading frequency. It is clear that schools can play a particularly supportive role in inspiring reading enjoyment in younger children, with 2 in 3 of those aged 8 to 11 saying they enjoy reading at school compared with 2 in 5 of those aged 11 to 18. Similarly, we can see that gaps in reading enjoyment relating to gender or receipt of FSMs are narrower in school settings than in relation to reading at home, suggesting that school settings can act as a supportive environment for groups that otherwise have lower levels of reading enjoyment.

Also of note is the finding that fewer children and young people who received FSMs said they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023 compared with those who didn't receive FSMs (39.5% vs. 43.8%). Though this gap has increased, it is still relatively small. Nonetheless, it stands in contrast to findings in relation to writing. Our report on writing ([NLT, 2023](#)) showed an inverse relationship could be traced for writing: 38.6% of children and young people who received free school meals enjoyed writing compared with 32.9% of those not receiving free school meals. Despite these relatively small differences, the variations suggest that there may be some value in exploring the differing and congruent perceptions of reading and writing across the range of social groups of children and young people.

Along similar lines, both this reading report and its earlier writing counterpart consider the question of motivation in relation to reading and writing. Volitional reading and writing can be considered along thematic lines (writing: creative, mindful and social; reading: curious, mindful, social). Given the well-established interactivity between reading and writing ([Graham et al., 2018](#)), further exploration of what makes a reader, a writer and a reader/writer may well yield important insights in developing literacy skills in the round. Such exploration will likely benefit from greater understanding of motivational drivers of reading and writing for enjoyment. The Reading Framework ([DfE, 2023](#)) highlights the importance of choice, peer and adult role models, and representation in a productive school reading culture. Figure 30 of this report underscores the

importance of book recommendations, book ownership and role models, and it should continue to inform our collective work to improve life chances through improving literacy.

Turning to the home reading environment, we can also see that children and young people who perceive themselves to have a supportive reading environment (based on a score relating to literacy resources and interactions at home) are nearly three times as likely to say they enjoy reading and twice as likely to say they read daily as those who do not have a supportive reading environment. The impact of school and home reading environments on children and young people's reading engagement will be explored in greater detail in a forthcoming report. In the meantime, this would appear to be a watershed year in our 18 years of reporting on children and young people's reading attitudes and experiences. Our previous reports cautioned that increasingly visible downward trends in reading enjoyment and frequency should be addressed urgently. With reading enjoyment levels now decreasing across the board, most concerningly in the groups usually most likely to say they enjoy reading, it is essential that policymakers, schools, families and the wider community make every effort to provide children and young people with supportive and encouraging reading environments.



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In loving memory of Sid.

Our sincere thanks to all of the schools that 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.

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Appendix A

Table A: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various formats in their free time either on a screen or on paper in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

	Fiction		Non-fiction		Comics		Magazines		Poems		News		Song lyrics	
	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper	On screen	On paper
Boys	21.9%	46.6%	17.1%	43.9%	18.4%	31.5%	8.7%	22.4%	8.0%	15.6%	31.8%	13.0%	59.6%	7.4%
Girls	28.4%	54.8%	16.5%	43.7%	14.1%	25.3%	8.2%	24.5%	12.3%	22.6%	29.4%	11.2%	78.7%	9.9%
Aged 8 to 11	28.8%	58.5%	23.3%	54.9%	19.1%	35.9%	10.8%	30.4%	18.0%	33.3%	21.5%	15.8%	66.0%	14.8%
Aged 11 to 14	24.0%	51.5%	15.1%	43.5%	15.8%	29.9%	7.5%	23.4%	8.8%	17.0%	28.4%	11.6%	69.7%	8.1%
Aged 14 to 16	28.9%	40.7%	17.6%	33.0%	18.2%	18.5%	9.7%	17.7%	9.2%	15.2%	43.6%	10.3%	71.1%	6.1%
Aged 16 to 18	33.9%	42.7%	25.7%	40.7%	22.7%	15.7%	13.8%	15.3%	13.0%	13.5%	63.8%	12.8%	68.6%	5.9%
FSM	28.2%	43.1%	19.4%	39.3%	20.7%	27.0%	9.7%	20.0%	12.9%	22.3%	26.1%	12.2%	70.7%	9.0%
Non-FSM	24.9%	52.4%	16.3%	44.2%	15.7%	28.6%	8.2%	23.8%	9.4%	17.7%	32.6%	12.0%	69.3%	8.3%