

The role of audiobooks to engage reluctant readers and underrepresented children and young people

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Introduction

Since March 2020 we have explored the various benefits of audiobooks for children and young people, from building comprehension skills to sharing stories across generations. Time and again, two key themes have arisen: the power of audio to engage reluctant readers, and the role of audiobooks in promoting and furthering diversity in publishing.

During the first lockdown of the COVID-19 pandemic in spring 2020, we found that audiobooks were a lifeline for many children and young people, particularly those for whom access to print books was limited. This was reflected in quotes from children and young people in our previous report (Best, E., Clark, C. and Picton, I., 2020):

“I have...never listened to [audiobooks] before but I’m really liking them now.”

As the pandemic and school closures continued, it became clear that we needed to focus on these key themes in our 2021 Annual Literacy Survey. We are therefore delighted to have been supported by Audible to conduct this piece of research.

This report builds on the findings from our previous report, which showed that audiobooks could help build reading enjoyment and provide a complement to physical books in the classroom (Best, 2020). Our survey responses show that when school libraries, public libraries and shops were closed because of the pandemic, children and young people’s listening reflected this trend, with 1 in 5 (20.4%) children and young people saying that they listened to an audiobook for the first time or listened to more audiobooks during this time.

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This report shows that there is still progress to be made: while 2 in 5 (43.6%) children and young people say they enjoy listening in their free time, 1 in 4 (25.4%) said they listened specifically to audiobooks. This suggests that there is a much bigger receptive audience to whom audiobooks could be promoted and made available, for example for those who enjoy listening but for whatever reason are not in the habit of doing so. For the purposes of this report, unless otherwise stated, we will focus on the children and young people who said that they enjoyed listening, rather than those who listened to audiobooks regularly, as a starting point to explore the growing power and potential of audiobooks.

Key findings include:

Listening enjoyment and behaviours

- 1 in 4 (25.4%) children and young people are listening to audiobooks, with 1 in 8 (12.8%) listening to just audiobooks and a further 1 in 8 (12.6%) listening to both audiobooks and podcasts.
 - A further 1 in 4 (23.3%) children and young people listened to just podcasts, meaning nearly 1 in 2 (48.7%) listened to some form of audio.
- Over 2 in 5 (43.8%) children and young people said that they enjoyed listening to audio.
- Nearly 1 in 5 (18.9%) said they either listened to an audiobook for the first time in lockdown (9.3%), or they listened more than before (9.6%).
- There is a smaller gender gap in listening enjoyment than there is in reading. Boys are much less likely than girls or those who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl to say they enjoy reading (45.6% vs 55.9% and 60.7%). However, boys are more likely than girls, and almost as likely as those who self-describe their gender differently to say they enjoy listening (45.9% vs. 41.8% and 48.0%).
- Most children and young people have access to technology that would enable them to access audiobooks, with 4 in 5 (82.5%) accessing websites online. This also increases with age, with 71.7% of children aged 8 to 11 accessing websites compared with 92.8% of young people aged 16 to 18.

Audiobooks and engagement with reading

- Of those who listen to audiobooks, 2 in 5 (44.5%) children and young people said that listening to an audiobook or podcast has got them interested in reading books.
 - More children and young people who enjoy listening say that they also enjoy reading, compared with children who do not enjoy listening (58.3% vs. 46.1%).
- Of those who listen to audiobooks, 3 in 5 (61.0%) children and young people agree that listening to audiobooks helps them understand a subject.
 - Also in this group, 3 in 5 (64.7%) children and young people agreed that when they listen to stories they use their imagination more than when watching videos.

- Boys who do not enjoy reading are more likely to say they enjoy listening to audio (46.6%) than girls who do not enjoy reading (37.8%) or those who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl (33.0%).

Audiobooks and diversity

- There is a link between listening enjoyment and an interest in diversity, with more children and young people who enjoy listening saying that they like to read or hear about characters or people that are different from them, compared with their peers who do not enjoy listening (65.1% vs. 51.7%).
- When asked whether it was important for story and information books to include characters or people from different backgrounds, 7 in 10 (70.6%) children and young people who enjoyed listening agreed, compared with 6 in 10 (62.2%) who did not enjoy listening.
- Children and young people who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl are the most likely to say that it is difficult for them to find characters in books that are like them (54.2% vs 34.7% of girls and 32.2% of boys).
 - Meanwhile, this group are also the most likely to enjoy listening (48% vs 45.9% of boys and 41.8% of girls).

Audiobooks and wellbeing

- Comments from children and young people suggest that listening to audiobooks and/or podcasts can help them relax and ease anxiety.
- Many children and young people discussed listening with family and friends as a form of connection and/or shared activity.

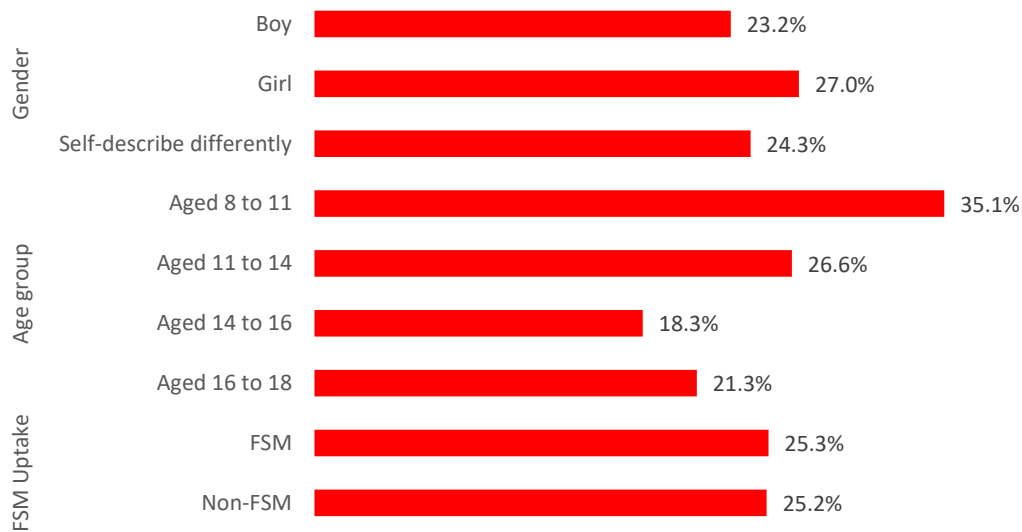
Audiobooks in 2021

With audiobooks being available on a range of different formats and platforms, children and young people have more entry points than ever before. 1 in 4 (25.4%) children and young people listened to audiobooks in 2021, with 1 in 8 (12.8%) listening to just audiobooks and another 1 in 8 (12.6%) listening to both audiobooks and podcasts.

In 2021, slightly more girls than boys or those who self-describe their gender differently said that they listen to audiobooks (see Figure 1). Listening to audiobooks also declined with age, with more children aged 8 to 11 saying that they listen to audiobooks compared with their older counterparts. There was no difference in audiobook listenership by free school meal uptake, our proxy of socioeconomic background¹.

¹ 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).

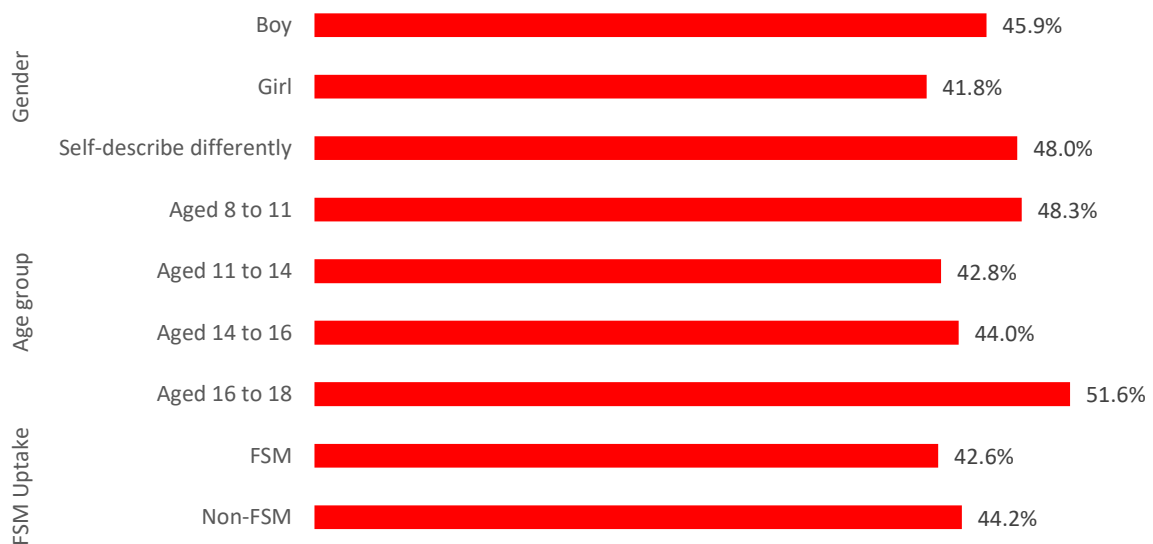
Figure 1: Listening to audiobooks by gender, age groups and free school meal uptake



However, our survey also indicates that the possible listenership of audiobooks is much bigger as we found that over 2 in 5 (43.8%) children and young people enjoyed listening to some sort of audio in their spare time in early 2021.

More boys than girls say that they enjoy listening to audio in their spare time (see Figure 2) and nearly half of those who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl say that they enjoy listening to audio. While we still see a slight decline with age in listening enjoyment, over half of those aged 16 to 18 say that they enjoy listening to audio in their free time.

Figure 2: Enjoyment of listening by gender, age groups and free school meal uptake



Accessing audiobooks in lockdown

In 2020 we found that audiobooks provided a lifeline for many children and young people during the first lockdown (Best et al., 2020a). This continued to be the case in 2021: 1 in 10 (9.3%) children and young people said they downloaded an audiobook for the first time during lockdown, while a further 1 in 10 (9.6%) said they downloaded more audiobooks.

The range of platforms mentioned by children and young people in their comments suggests not only that these access points are growing, but that children and young people also streamed audiobooks online, which, in turn, suggests that these numbers could be higher if they did not conceptualise streamed content as an audiobook per se:

“I used Epic (a reading app) to read books and listen to them being read.”

“I didn't download audiobooks, I found them on Google.”

“[I] started to listen to [A]lexa tell me free audible stories.”

“I went online, mainly on YouTube, for free audio storytelling.”

“I listened to physical audiobook CDs.”

Most children and young people have access to some sort of digital technology, with 9 in 10 (92.1%) saying they read personal/direct messages in their free time and 4 in 5 (82.5%) accessing websites. Engagement with digital technology also increases with age, with 71.7% of children aged 8 to 11 accessing websites compared with 92.8% of young people aged 16 to 18.

During lockdown, the affordances of digital technology meant that audiobooks could be accessed remotely, and free of charge, for children and young people who could perhaps not access books in traditional ways, for example via public or school libraries. Services like BorrowBox and Libby enable people to borrow audio and ebooks from their local library, and Libraries Connected reported that between the end of March and mid-August 2020, owing to ebooks, audiobooks and e-comics, there was an increase of five million digital items borrowed (Davies, 2020).

Meanwhile, Audible have provided access to free audiobooks via their Audible Stories programme: this was particularly popular in the United Kingdom, with millions of UK visits representing the second-highest number of visitors worldwide. Additionally, the UK Government joined several others around the world in recommending Audible Stories as a resource available for parents and families to take advantage of during the pandemic lockdowns.

Listening enjoyment and reading engagement

Findings from 2021 suggest that there is a relationship between reading enjoyment and enjoyment of listening. Of those who listen to audiobooks, 2 in 5 (44.5%) children and young people saying that listening to an audiobook or podcast has got them interested in reading books. Similarly, as shown in Figure 3, more children and young people who enjoy listening say that they also enjoy reading, compared with children who do not enjoy listening (58.3% vs. 46.1%).

Figure 3: Percentage of children who enjoy reading based on their listening enjoyment



Comments suggest that these children and young people are a captive audience for audiobooks as well. For example, children and young people who said that they listen to audio daily told us that:

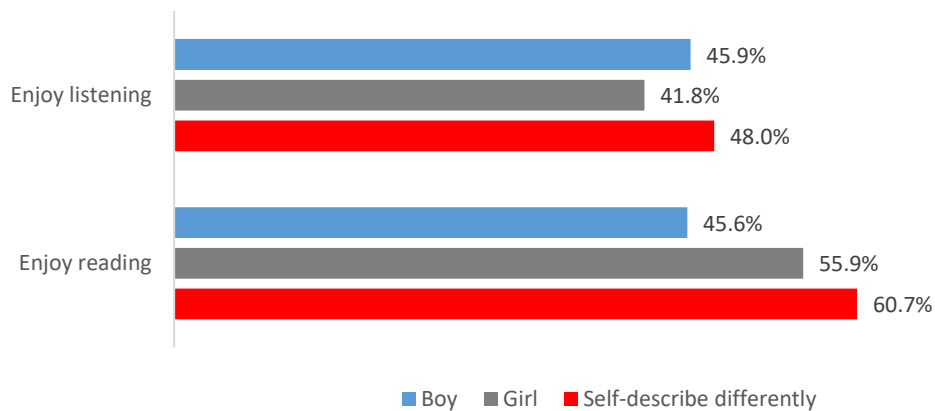
“Reading is a cure to boredom. I feel free when I read”

“Reading helps me let all my worries out”

“[R]eading makes me learn loads of different words that [I] have never heard of before”

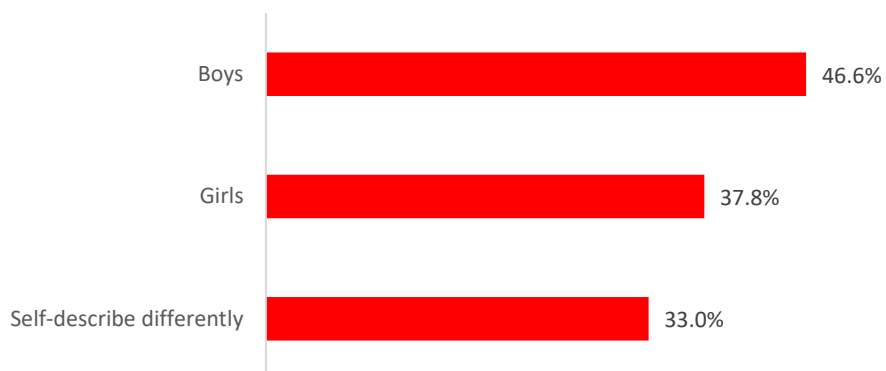
Conversely, audiobooks might be a way in for reluctant readers (Best et al, 2020), and a way to help narrowing the gender gap. In 2021, as shown in Figure 4, boys are much more likely than girls or those who self-describe their gender differently to say they do not enjoy reading (54.4% vs 44.1% and 39.3%) but are more likely than girls and almost as likely as those who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl to say they enjoy listening (45.9% vs.41.8% and 48.0%). Further, while girls and those who self-describe their gender differently are overall more likely to enjoy reading than listening (55.9% vs. 41.8% and 60.7% vs. 48% respectively), boys are slightly more likely to say they enjoy listening than reading (45.9% vs 41.8%).

Figure 4: Listening and reading enjoyment by gender



In detail, as shown in Figure 5, of those children that said they did not enjoy reading, boys were more likely to say they did enjoy listening to audio (46.6%) than girls (37.8%) or those who self-describe their gender differently (33.0%).

Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people who don't enjoy reading but do enjoy listening by gender



As well as enjoyment of listening, some children and young people recognise the power of an audiobook to help them access information, with 3 in 5 (64.7%) who listen agreeing that audiobooks help them understand a subject. This shows the potential for audio to act as a complement to reading. Indeed, some of the comments suggest that children and young people who do not enjoy reading find an appeal in listening instead, or indeed, as an addition to reading:

“Personally, I hate reading and writing. Basically anything to do with English skills because I always get bad grades and it is soooo boring. I probably should have read more books during lockdown but I did listen to tons of podcasts and audiobooks so I can enjoy books without reading them.”

“During lockdown I reread a lot of books over and over again but I got quite bored so I started to download audiobooks and listened to one each day. I didn't write very much because I was listening to audiobooks all the time.”

“I listen to audiobooks, this is because with audiobooks - unlike reading - I don't need to strain or over use my eyes reading while instead I can use my ears and just listen to what it says.”

“Reading makes me feel incredibly stressed. As I'm dyslexic I don't know [whether] what I'm reading is right or wrong [...] [audiobooks] are easier to listen to.”

The appeal of an audiobook device

While for some listeners, listening to a book is an alternative to reading because it is less of a strain, for others the 'tech' element is particularly compelling. We know that technology can be especially useful in closing the gap, particularly among boys: in 2020 we found that half (49.5%) of disengaged boy readers said that reading on a screen is cooler than reading a book (Picton et al., 2019). As noted earlier, boys in the current survey were slightly more likely than girls to enjoy listening (45.9% of boys and 41.8% of girls), suggesting there is potential to mobilise this interest.

The possible benefits of the technological element of audio in the classroom has emerged through our programmatic work. Our school-facing programme Puffin World of Stories, in partnership with Puffin (Penguin Random House UK) equips primary schools with the books, materials, training and resources they need to champion reading for pleasure across the whole school. Access to audiobooks in the form of [Yoto Players](#) was a key part of the project, and comments from the evaluation found that they could offer a fun extension to reading in free time:

“I think having the audiobook outside will be great for lunchtime”

Alongside this, the autonomy of children and young people engaging with the audio device themselves was also noted:

“And just straight away that curiosity [...] that magic”

While research has shown that audiobooks are not 'cheating' (Dahl, 2016), encouraging reluctant readers feel that they are accessing something as a treat may be another way in. As noted in our 2020 literature review, Jon Scieszka (quoted in Grover & Hannegan, 2012, p. 12) remarks that:

“I think it's partially because audiobooks appeal to a lot of guys' love for messing around with any kind of technology. ... Guys also think they are getting away with something by listening instead of reading.”

This sense of audiobooks and hearing stories being a novelty or fun activity is reflected in some of the comments:

“My parents said 'you can have another audiobook but you have to read a book first' and I love audiobooks”

“I would let my sister read the book sometimes so I could just listen”

It is important to note, meanwhile, that framing audiobooks in this way does not detract from their value as a storytelling tool. Children and young people themselves recognise this, with 3 in 5 (61.0%) who listen to audiobooks agreeing that when they listen to stories they use their imagination more than when they are watching videos.

“I love audiobook[s]. I can listen to stories and close my eyes to imagine what it felt, looked or sounded like, even what it would taste like”

“I like drawing what I read or listen to.”

This sense that stories transcend modality, and a thematic connection between stories and hearing, also emerges in the way many children conceptualise why they read, with the word ‘hear’ coming up again and again:

“I like reading because I like to hear about stuff”

“[I read] to hear about other people's interests”

“I enjoy hearing people's stories”

Diversity

It is crucial that children and young people can see themselves in what they read – and that is just as important for the stories that they hear. We know that there is a long way to go in this regard: in 2020 we found that 32.7% of children and young people aged 9 to 18 said that they did not see themselves in what they read, and 39.8% would have liked more books with characters who are similar to them. This was particularly pronounced for children and young people from ethnic minority backgrounds, with 40% of children and young people from mixed, Black or Asian ethnic backgrounds saying that they don't see themselves in what they read compared with 30.5% of children and young people from White backgrounds (Best et al., 2020b).

We also found a link between an interest in diversity and a love of listening in 2021. For example, more children and young people who enjoy listening say that they like to read or hear about characters or people that are different from them, compared with their peers who do not enjoy listening (65.1% vs. 51.7%). Children and young people who listen to audio also seem more likely to recognise the importance of diversity: when asked whether it was important for story and information books to include characters or people from different backgrounds, 7 in 10 (70.6%) children and young people who enjoyed listening agreed, compared with 6 in 10 (62.2%) who did not enjoy listening.

While there is huge potential for audiobooks to promote diversity, there is perhaps more work to be done in making this visible to children and young people. In 2021, more children and young people who enjoy listening said that reading about characters like them makes

them feel more confident about themselves, compared with their peers who do not enjoy listening (41.1% vs. 32.3%).

In 2019, a report from BookTrust found that while small improvements had been made – in 2017, 4.02% of unique titles published were written and/or illustrated by people of colour compared with 2.27% in 2007 – there is still much work to be done for these numbers to be representative of the wider population, and 2017 was the least representative year since 2008 (Bold, 2019). Audiobooks could provide a key part of the solution: there is a growing movement across publishing for authenticity and for people with lived experience to tell their own stories. The #OwnVoices project is part of this:

“[The #OwnVoices project] draws attention to the need for justice in publishing: narratives from and about marginalized experiences and characters from *authentic sources* should be sought and supported. Those who live beyond and beside the empowered culture’s contours are the ones whose voices need to be heard. Inclusivity is necessary to all of us if we are to inhabit a cultural home that has windows, mirrors, and doors.”

(Goldsmith, 2017)

Audiobooks can support #OwnVoices in that they offer opportunities for narrators who have “lived apprehension of cultural nuances”, even if the narrator is not the author (Goldsmith, 2017).

Gender identity in audiobooks

Extending the question of diversity beyond ethnicity, it is useful to consider the impact of diverse representation on children and young people who do not identify as male or female, who as shown earlier in Figures 2 and 4 are more likely than boys or girls to say they enjoy listening. Meanwhile, as shown in Figure 6, 54.2% of children and young people in this group said that they struggle to find characters that are like them in what they read, compared with 34.7% of girls and 32.2% of boys.

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people who agreed that it is difficult for them to find characters like them in what they read by gender



There has certainly been a growth in the promotion of trans and non-binary voices in audiobooks: in 2021, for example, both Audible and Penguin Random House US have released reading lists on trans, non-binary and gender non-conforming voices on audio.² However, again, there is space for more of these voices in the children's and young adult space, even if strides have been made. Casting narrators with a shared experience can be crucial for children and young people recognising themselves (Bondi, 2021).

Wellbeing and relaxation

In 2020, we found that for many, listening was a lifeline in times of high stress, anxiety and isolation. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on the wellbeing of younger people; a recent survey by Young Minds (2021) found that of 2,438 young people aged 13 to 25 who had looked for mental health support at some point in their lives, 67% believed that the pandemic will have a long-term negative effect on their mental health. Indeed, comments by children and young people demonstrated that wellbeing, connection and relaxation figured highly for many in 2021. For some, particularly in lockdown, listening was a great way of connecting as a family, whether through readily available recordings or from telling their own stories or reading aloud:

“I listen to audiobooks whilst I'm on a walk with my mum.”

“My grandad made me and my family an audiobook to listen [to].”

“Before bed, my family and I usually read a story together. I really liked it because we would take turns in reading it and when it wasn't my turn, I liked to listen to the other people's voices. It was calming.”

Similarly, audiobooks can have the power to settle and relax young people.

“When i first found out about audiobooks, i started to use them to help me fall asleep since i find them relaxing to listen to.”

“I have sleeping problems where I can't sleep in silence because I think I hear thing[s] and panic but listening to music and audiobooks help me relax and able to sleep”

To sum up

Our findings from 2021 show that many children and young people have engaged with audio in some form, and that there is potential to engage more when we look at the attitudes and behaviours of children and young people who enjoy listening. There is already a receptive audience in place: children who say they enjoy listening are also more likely to enjoy reading,

² See, for example, <https://www.audible.com/blog/playlisted/article-best-trans-nonbinary-books> and <https://www.penguinrandomhouseaudio.com/blog/trans-nonbinary-and-gender-nonconforming-voices-on-audio/>

to want to hear stories about people different from them, and to agree that audio helps them understand a subject. Meanwhile, the comments suggest that more and more devices are being used to access audio.

Audiobooks continued to provide a lifeline during lockdown, with many children and young people listening for the first time, and others listening more than they had previously. Many used audio to connect with family, while the comments confirmed that audio can support wellbeing as a way of connecting, soothing and calming those children and young people who felt isolated, anxious or stressed.

Our research suggests that the link between reading enjoyment and audio continues to grow, particularly where audio is offered as an alternative to reading print books. A story has legitimacy in whatever format, whether in print, on screen or spoken. Indeed, the comments from children and young people suggest that they are beginning to recognise the power of audio themselves, either as a complement or an alternative to reading.

Audio holds the potential to help close the gender gap, with boys showing a much stronger interest in listening relative to reading than other genders. In particular, boys who dislike reading listening are more likely than girls who dislike reading to choose to listen. Further, audio is a welcome alternative for those who struggle to see themselves in what they read, with children and young people who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl being the most likely both to agree with this statement and to say they enjoy listening. In general, those children and young people who enjoy listening are more likely to agree that seeing or hearing themselves in what they read makes them feel more confident. Developments in the audiobook industry also suggest that increased representation across gender, race and experience are set to improve further to help support those who feel underrepresented.

At a time when the outside world is putting a strain on mental wellbeing, on social connection and on access to resources, recorded audio can help us ensure that stories continue to be told.

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