

Children and young people's video game playing and literacy in 2021

Irene Picton and Christina Clark

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We first explored young people's literacy-related interactions both within, and in relation to, video games in 2019¹. We found that video games could provide young people aged 11 to 16 with a route into reading, encourage creativity through writing, support positive communication with friends and family and have potential benefits for increasing empathy. In addition, the benefits of playing video games for literacy were found to be strongest for boys and reluctant readers.

We followed up this research during the first lockdown in late spring 2020², where we found that young people aged 11 to 18 spent more time playing video games during lockdown than before. One activity that was particularly popular was chatting to family or friends as part of playing a video game during this time. More than half (51.7%) of young people responding to the survey said they did this, with boys being nearly twice as likely as girls to say they chatted to friends and/or family as part of playing a video game (70.5% vs. 39.7%). Younger game players were also more likely to say they communicated in this way, with 54.8% of those aged 11 to 14, 45.2% of those aged 14 to 16 and 31.5% of those ages 16 to 18 agreeing. 3 in 5 (59.6%) of parents felt that communicating with friends and family through video game playing during lockdown had been helpful for their child's mental wellbeing.

To further explore the link between video gaming and literacy in early 2021, we embedded some questions in our latest Annual Literacy Survey, conducted between January and mid-March 2021, which reached 42,502 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from schools across the UK. To capture the experiences and opinions of children and young people during the third national lockdown, the survey contained open-text questions to help contextualise findings.

¹ Picton, I., Clark, C. and Judge, T. (2020), Video game playing and literacy, London: National Literacy Trust
https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Video_game_playing_and_literacy_report_final_updated.pdf

² Picton, I. and Clark, C. (2020), Video game playing and literacy during COVID-19, London: National Literacy Trust
https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Video_game_playing_and_literacy_during_COVID-19_.pdf

Key findings from 2021

- Almost **9 in 10** (87.5%) of children and young people said that they read text or messages from friends or family while playing video games. This was the second most popular on-screen text read by respondents after personal/direct messages (e.g. texts, WhatsApp or Instagram), which 92.4% of young people read. Slightly more boys than girls or those who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl read in-game messages from family and friends (90.5% vs. 85.3% and 87.6% respectively). It is also more common in older age groups (11 to 18-year-olds) compared with children aged 8 to 11.
- More than **4 in 5** (84.2%) of children and young people said that they write text or messages to friends or family while playing video games. As with reading, more boys and those who self-describe their gender differently wrote in-game messages compared with girls (88.0% vs. 81.1% and 86.4% respectively). More young people aged 11 to 16 did so compared with those aged 8 to 11.
- **3 in 5** (58.4%) children and young people said that they talked to or messaged friends more while playing video games in early 2021. This was particularly true for those who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl, and those aged 11 to 14. In addition, more children and young people who do not receive free school meals³ than those who do said that they had talked with and messaged friends more while playing video games.
- Comments from children and young people suggest that many felt that communicating while video game playing helped them not only to maintain, but to improve, friendships in 2021. Another strong theme was the place of video game playing alongside engagement with reading, writing, socialising and physical activities. Many comments indicated that while video game playing is an important part of children and young people's leisure time and social lives, it is usually one of a wide range of activities enjoyed by children and young people in their free time.

Reading and writing in-game messages in 2021

Almost **9 in 10** (87.5%) of children and young people said that they read text or messages from friends or family while playing video games. This was the second most popular on-screen text read by respondents after personal/direct messages (e.g. texts, WhatsApp or Instagram), which 92.4% of young people read.

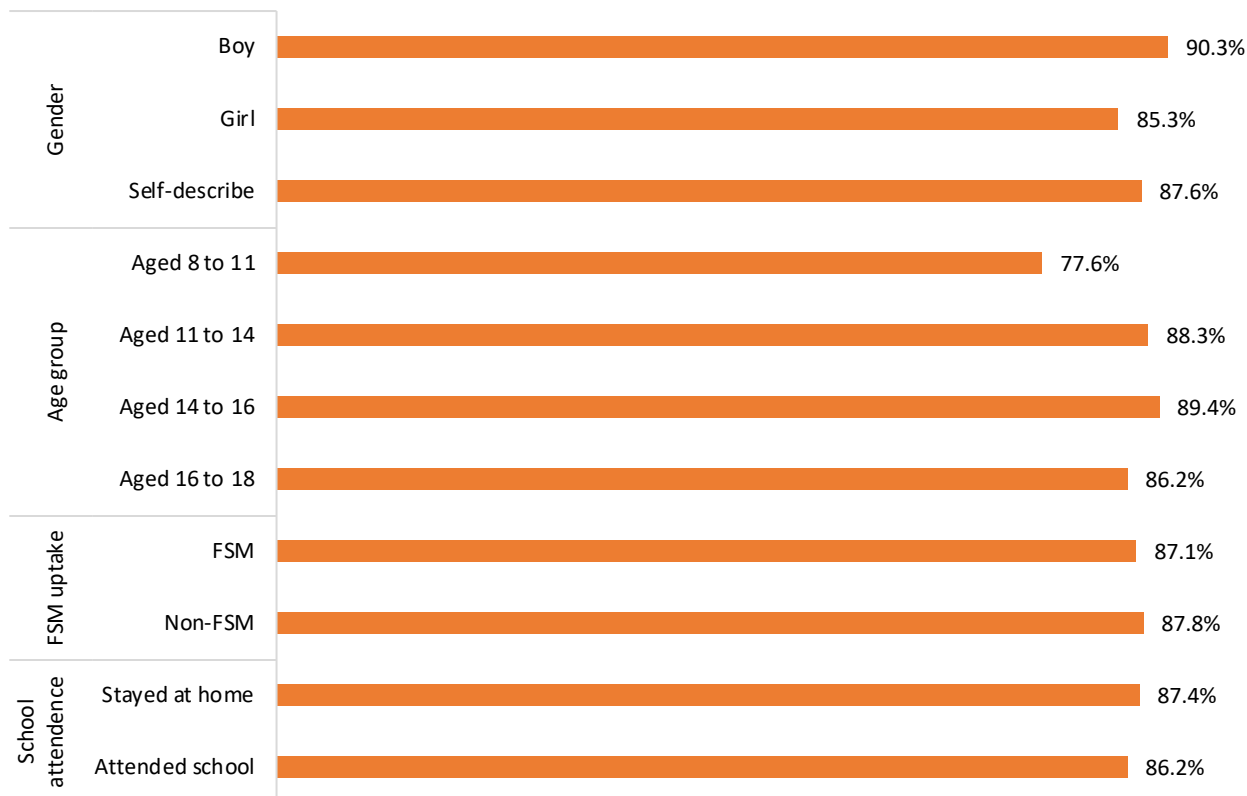
Slightly more boys than girls or those who self-describe their gender differently⁴ said that they had read in-game messages from family and friends (see Figure 1). Reading texts or messages from family and friends while playing video games is also more common in older age groups, with fewer children aged 8 to 11 doing this. There was no difference in reading in-game messages by free school meal (FSM) uptake, our proxy of socioeconomic background. There

³ Our proxy of socioeconomic background

⁴ 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). Stayed at home during lockdown in early 2021: 67.7% (n = 28,790); Attended school: 8.1% (n = 3,451); didn't answer the question: 24.1% (n = 10,261).

was also no difference in this type of reading by whether or not children and young people had stayed at home or attended school during the third national lockdown in early 2021.

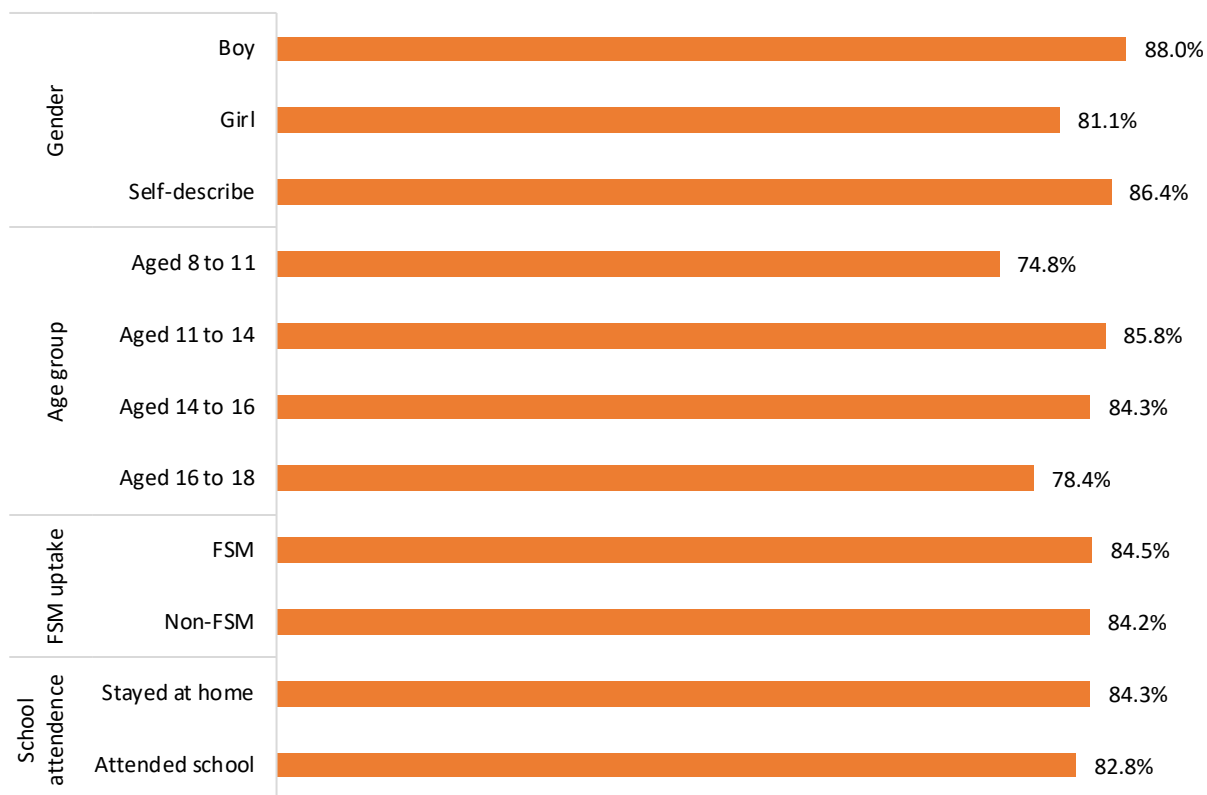
Figure 1: Reading in-game messages by gender, age group, free school meal background and whether or not children and young people attended school during early 2021



While reading in-game messages was popular amongst children and young people in early 2021, so was the writing of texts and messages to friends and family during video game playing, with more than **4 in 5** (84.2%) saying that they were doing this in early 2021.

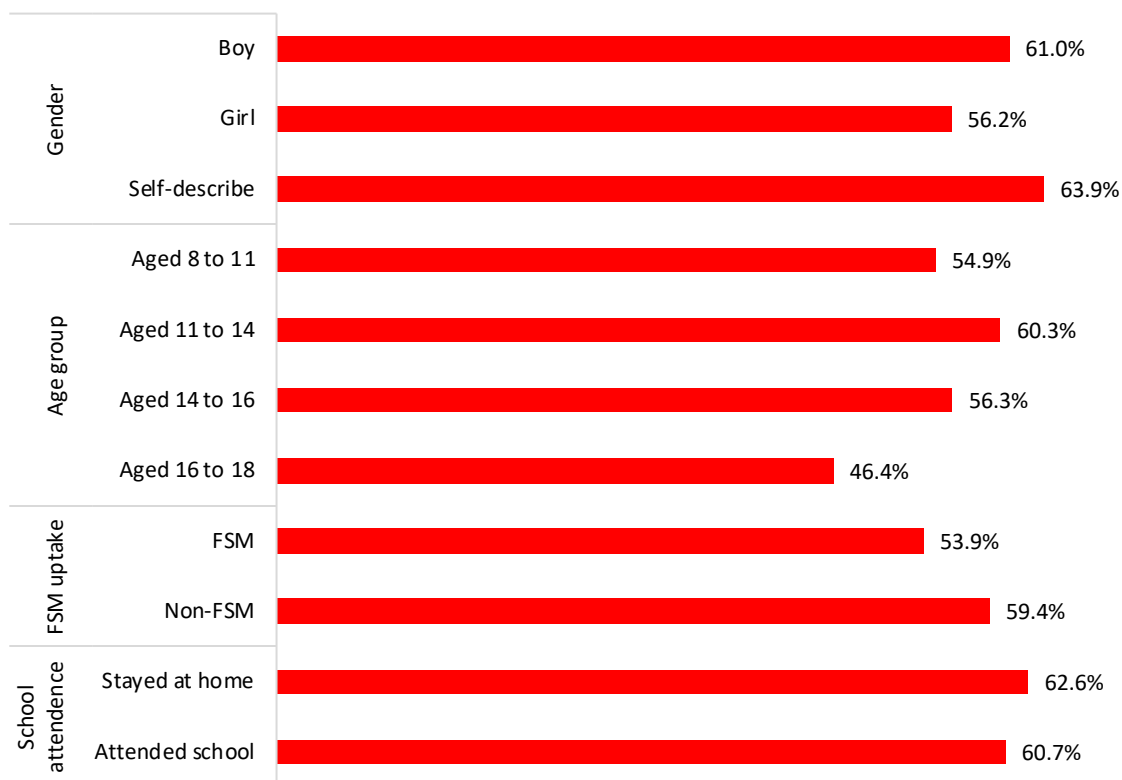
More boys and those who self-describe their gender differently said that they had been writing texts and messages to family and friends during video game playing compared with girls (see Figure 2). Fewer children aged 8 to 11 than those aged 11 to 16 said this. Interestingly, fewer young people aged 16 to 18 said that they were writing in-game messages than said that they were reading them (see Figure 1). Again, there was no difference in in-game writing of messages to family and friends by FSM background or whether or not they had attended school in early 2021.

Figure 2: Writing in-game messages by gender, age group, free school meal background and whether or not children and young people attended school during early 2021



Children and young people reported an increase in in-game communication during early 2021, with almost **3 in 5** (58.4%) saying they talked to or messaged friends more while playing video games during the lockdown. This was particularly true for those who self-describe their gender as other than boy or girl, and those aged 11 to 14 (see Figure 3). Similarly, more children and young people who do not receive FSMs than those who do said that they had talked and messaged with friends more while playing video games.

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people who said that they had talked/messed their friends more while playing videogames in 2021 by gender, age group, free school meal background and whether or not children and young people attended school during early 2021



Reflecting findings from our previous research on the social element of video game playing, some children and young people felt that communicating while video game playing helped them not only to maintain, but to improve, friendships in 2021. Others considered how this had also supported their mental wellbeing:

“I mostly played video games to keep in touch with my friends.”

“All my interactions with friends were over text or over video games (talking through a mic so we can hear each other instead of typing).”

“I started talking to my friend over video games this made our friendship much better.”

“I played video games to chat and catch up with my friends. It was good for mental health.”

Again, mirroring findings from our earlier research, some children and young people in 2021 explained how they could feel more ‘part of the story’ when playing video games than when reading books:

“I followed in-depth immersive stories in video games which stimulate the brain more than books for me.”

“I play for a video games team and I played the FNCS (a tournament where you can win money). I don’t read books because they are boring and have no action, that’s why I normally play games or watch Netflix.”

However, the strongest theme emerging from children and young people’s comments in 2021 was the place of video game playing in children’s free time. Very few described playing video games in isolation, indeed, most comments shared experiences of playing games alongside engagement with reading, writing, keeping up with friends over video calls, watching films and physical activities:

“I went out to buy more books and spent lots of time on calls with my friends mostly while playing video games.”

“I listened to stories whilst playing video games.”

“I got a few books for Christmas, so I have been reading a few of them before bed. I have also been playing loads of video games with my cousins and sister, so I was talking to them almost every day, and I still am today.”

“I ...ordered more books using online stores, as well as video calling my friends through the whole lockdown. I also wrote my own stories outside of schoolwork and played video games a lot.”

“I played video games, I went for lots of bike rides and walks, I read books and watched movies and FaceTimed my friends.”

It is encouraging to see that, based on comments made in 2021, video game playing appears to be an important part of children and young people’s leisure time and social lives, but is often just one among several activities that children and young people take part in during their free time. We look forward to providing further insights into this area in future research.

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.

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