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“It makes me feel like I'm in a different place, not stuck inside.”

Children and young people's reading in 2020 before and during the COVID-19 lockdown

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We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and mid-March 2020. Indeed, the survey closed the week before the UK went into lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that schools closed for all but children of key workers and those deemed most vulnerable. This year's Annual Literacy Survey was our most popular to date, with 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18 from 315 schools in the UK participating between January and March 2020.

However, given the suddenly changed environment we found ourselves in, we were also keen to capture any possible changes to children and young people's reading practices as a result of lockdown. We therefore re-approached the schools that had previously taken part in our research to see whether they would be interested to survey their pupils while they were largely staying at home. 4,141 pupils aged 8 to 18 from 51 schools took part in an online survey between May and early June 2020.

This report focuses on the reading practices of children and young people before and during lockdown. To better capture the experiences and opinions of children and young people during lockdown, the online survey also contained numerous open-text questions, which have been themed and analysed to help contextualise findings in this report. Given concerns about the literacy outcomes of disadvantaged children as a result of the lockdown we will also produce a report exploring this, and we will publish reports focusing on children and young people's writing practices and engagement with audio before and during lockdown.

Key findings

Children are reading and enjoying reading more during lockdown but boys may be losing out.

- Children's enjoyment of reading has increased during lockdown (from 47.8% pre-lockdown to 55.9% post-lockdown), having reached a 15-year low before lockdown.
- More than a quarter (27.6%) of children and young people say they are enjoying reading more during lockdown.
- A third (34.5%) of children and young people say they are reading more during lockdown.
- Lockdown has increased the literacy engagement gap between boys and girls, with the gap in reading enjoyment widening from 2.3 percentage points at the beginning of 2020 to 11.5 percentage points during lockdown. The gender gap in daily reading also widened during lockdown, increasing from a 4.3 percentage point difference at the beginning of 2020 to a 7.4 percentage point difference during lockdown.

Audiobooks as a way in for boys?

- Audiobooks might be a way to re-engage boys with stories, as this is the only format where more boys than girls said that they enjoy it more and are doing it more often.
- Overall, slightly more boys (25.0% vs. 22.4%) than girls said that they had listened to audiobooks more during lockdown than before.
- Audiobooks also appear to offer a way into literacy for boys, with 1 in 2 (51.1%) boys saying that listening to audiobooks has increased their interest in reading, and 2 in 5 (43.2%) saying that it has made them more interested in writing.

Lockdown has given many children the opportunity to discover or re-discover themselves as readers, due to having more time to read (due to less competing priorities) and increased access to stories online.

Children have turned to adventure, comedy, fantasy and real life stories during lockdown and have found joy in discovering books they'd never read before.

- Children are reading more fiction (genres: adventure, funny books, realistic stories and magical/fantasy), song lyrics, news, non-fiction, etc. with a real uplift in reading on screen, compared with before lockdown.
- Almost 1 in 2 (46.3%) children said that they had read new books during lockdown and 1 in 7 (14.1%) had re-read books they have at home.

Reading has also provided refuge in this difficult time, supporting children's mental wellbeing and enabling them to dream about the future.

- 3 in 5 (59.3%) children and young people told us during lockdown that reading makes them feel better.
- 3 in 10 (31.6%) said that reading helps them when they feel sad because they cannot see their family and friends.
- Reading is encouraging half of children (50.2%) to dream about the future.

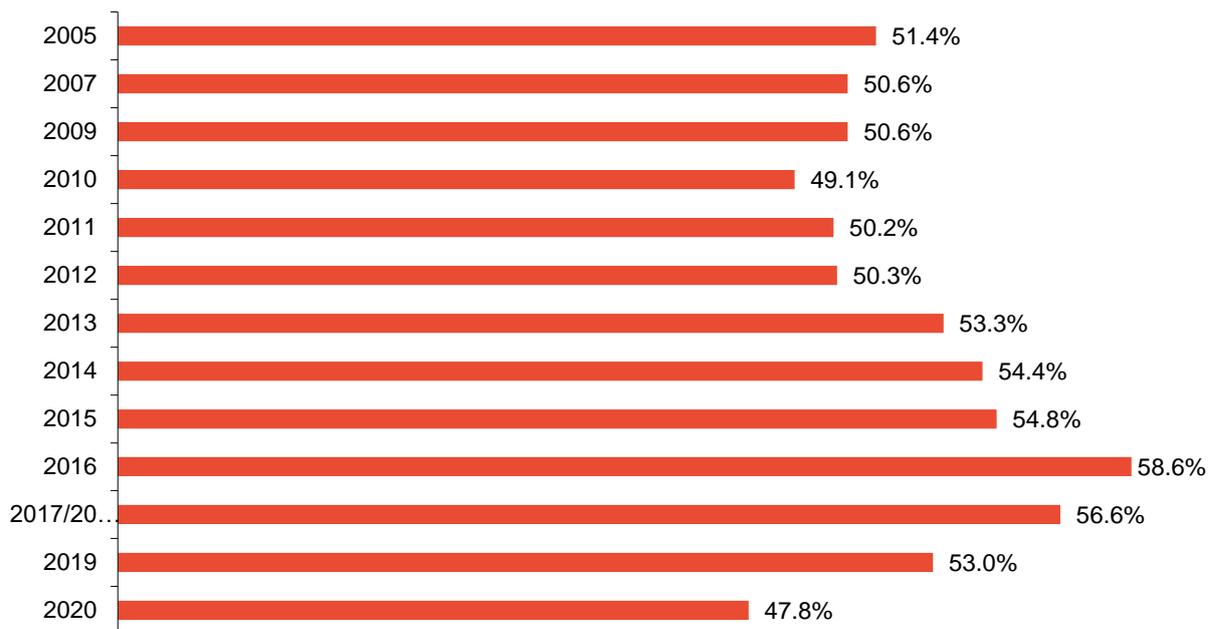
However, barriers including a lack of access to books (with schools and libraries closed), a lack of quiet space at home and a lack of school/peer support have negatively affected some children's ability to read and their motivation to read for enjoyment.

Helping children sustain a love of reading beyond lockdown is crucial to supporting children's literacy skills, wellbeing and life chances.

Reading enjoyment before and during lockdown

Data from our survey that was completed before lockdown showed that fewer than 1 in 2 (47.8%) children and young people aged 9 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading either very much (18.4%) or quite a lot (29.4%), which is lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since we began surveying children and young people in 2005 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 9 to 18 who enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot from 2005 to early 2020



So, what happened to reading enjoyment during lockdown¹? More children and young people said that they enjoy reading when asked during lockdown, with 55.9% of children and young people saying that they enjoy reading either very much (24.2%) or quite a lot (31.7%) (see Figure 2). This is an increase of nearly 17% in the number of children and young people who enjoy reading before and during lockdown, meaning that a sixth more children and young people said that they enjoy reading during lockdown.

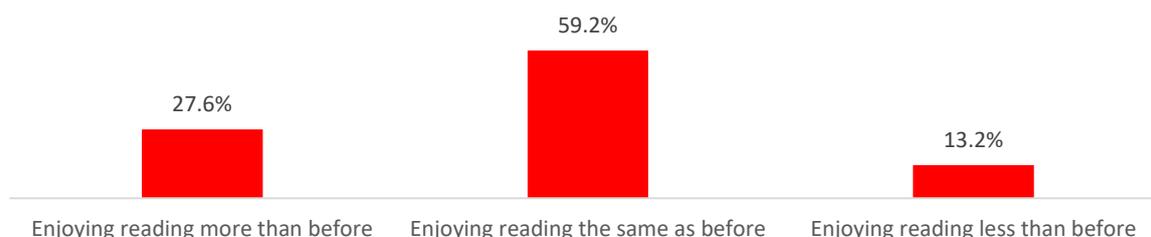
Figure 2: Enjoying reading either very much or quite a lot before and during lockdown 2020



¹ The two survey samples, though very different in terms of sample size, were comparable in terms of gender, age group and free school meal splits.

Indeed, when asked whether they now enjoy reading more, the same as or less than before lockdown, nearly 3 in 10 said that they now enjoy reading more than before, while 3 in 5 said they enjoy it just as much and 1 in 8 said they enjoy reading less now than before (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Children and young people’s self-reported changes in reading enjoyment during lockdown



Are the children and young people who enjoyed reading before also the ones who enjoy reading more now?

While it is somewhat true that those who generally enjoy reading are more likely than those who don't generally enjoy reading to say that they now enjoy reading more (see Table 1), we have 1 in 7 (13.9%) children and young people who didn't generally enjoy reading but who now enjoy reading more than before.

Table 1: General reading enjoyment x whether or not children and young people enjoy reading more during lockdown

	Enjoy reading more than before	Enjoy the same as before	Enjoy reading less than before
Generally enjoy reading	38.3%	54.1%	7.5%
Generally don't enjoy reading	13.9%	65.6%	20.4%

Who enjoyed reading before and during lockdown?

As Figure 4 shows, more pupils aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoy reading pre and during lockdown, with reading enjoyment levels declining between ages 11 to 16, before rising again. As with gender, lockdown has exacerbated the gap between younger and older pupils. For example, the gap between those aged 8 to 11 and those aged 11 to 14 increased from 13.2 percentage points to 15 percentage points.

A similar percentage of boys and girls said at the beginning of the year that they enjoy reading. The lockdown had a particular impact on the reading enjoyment of girls, with more girls than boys saying during lockdown that they enjoy reading. This suggests that lockdown has magnified the reading enjoyment gap between boys and girls, increasing it from a 2.3 percentage point difference at the beginning of 2020 to an 11.5 percentage point difference during lockdown.

The impact of time on reading enjoyment

Many children and young people say that extra time at home, away from busy school and social schedules, allowed them to feel properly engaged with books and stories. Comments suggest that many children and young people found that, even if they had not enjoyed reading before the lockdown, having more time to read enabled them to feel more immersed in a story and enjoy reading more as a result:

“Now that I’m at home I have more free time...before we started home schooling I didn’t read very often but now I have found that I love reading again.”

“I have had more time to focus on reading and really engage with a book.”

“I found that I like to read and write. I was able to have more time to absorb what I was reading, and apply this to my writing.”

Many children and young people used words indicating a change in behaviour or attitude associated directly with the conditions of lockdown prompting them to try or go back to reading, such as “started” and “unearthed”:

“I think before I read ...because I was made to. When the coronavirus came, sometimes I was bored, and I started to read. Now I read because I like to read.”

“I have had more free time during quarantine, so I have been reading more and have unearthed, once again, my love for reading.”

Not all children and young people report having extra time to read, indeed, there is a stark contrast between those who are enjoying reading more as they now have lots of time to read and those who don’t, for example, as they have family responsibilities or feel overwhelmed with schoolwork:

“...I have been doing a lot of help around the house as my dad is a key worker and have been helping at food shopping and have just not had the time.”

“We got set so much work at home I didn't want to read and write as much.”

Some children and young people also highlighted the importance of adult support in their own reading enjoyment:

“I enjoy reading more because I am able to read every day to my parents.”

“[I] enjoy reading to grandparents over video calls. Also as I have a new reading corner in my bedroom...”

Increased autonomy

For many children and young people, the increased autonomy around reading choices, along with the opportunity to read for its own sake, rather than for recognition, competition or judgement, was given as a key reason for increased reading enjoyment:

“Reading is much easier without the stress of teachers and other students – there’s a big burden on us to be brilliant reader and writers.”

“I am more able to choose what I want to read...without any pressure from having to analyse...and write lots of essays...”

“At home I can be myself and read, write and listen to what I want and need to. By myself and not get interpreted.”

Others, however, missed the scaffolding offered at by their teachers and through social learning with peers at school:

“When I was at school, my teacher ...helped ...but when you are at home your parents are working and sometimes they do not even know how to [do] the things we do.”

“It is more fun with friends and it is nice when the teachers read it out loud.”

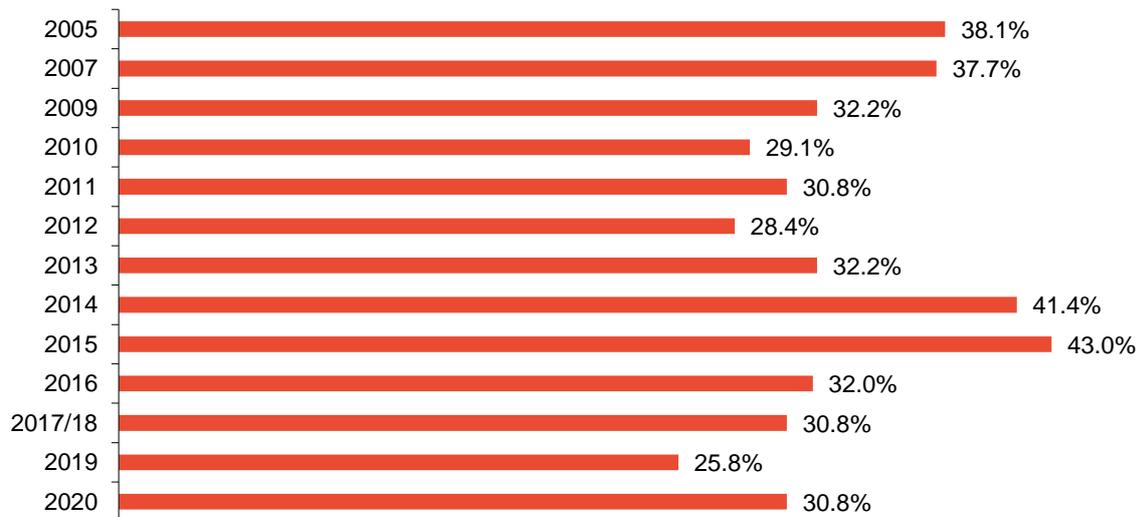
“I find it more enjoyable in class where I can discuss what others ...think about certain pieces of an extract and can help each other to further understand things we may struggle with when we don't fully get it.”

Levels of daily reading before and during lockdown in 2020

Not only did we find a difference in reading enjoyment but children and young people’s reading behaviour also changed during 2020.

After recording the lowest daily reading rate in 2019 since we started asking the question in 2005, the percentage of children and young people who say they read outside class on a daily basis has recovered over the past year (Figure 6), increasing by 5 percentage points from 25.8% in 2019 to 30.8% in 2020.

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people who read daily outside class from 2005 to 2020



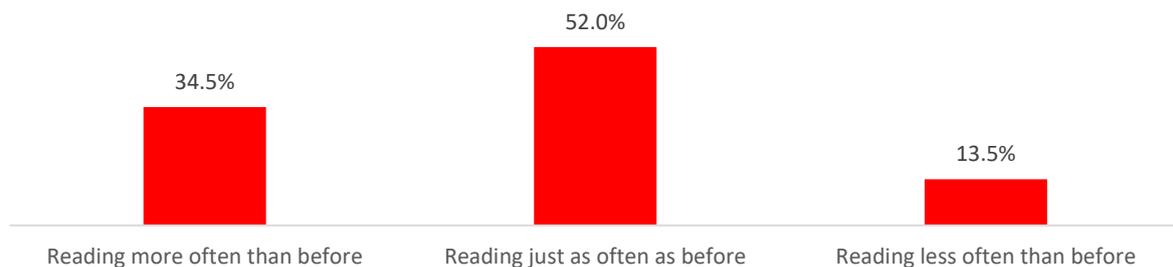
And what happened to daily reading levels during lockdown? In fact, over a fifth more children and young people said that they read in their free time during lockdown: there was a 22% increase in the number of children and young people who said that they read daily during lockdown compared with the beginning of the year, increasing from 30.2% before to 37.7% during lockdown (see Figure 7).

Figure 7: Reading daily in their free time before and during lockdown 2020



Overall, when asked whether they now read more often, as often, or less often than before, a third of children and young people said that they now read more often in their free time, with 1 in 2 reading just as much as before and 1 in 7 now reading less often than before (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Children and young people’s self-reported changes in reading behaviour during lockdown



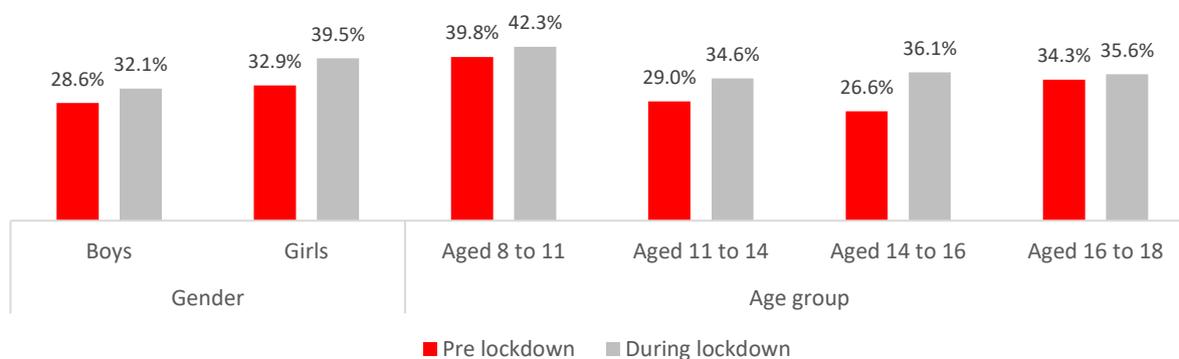
We also wanted to see whether children and young people who say that they now read more often than before are also the ones who say that they now enjoy reading more. As can be seen in Table 2, nearly 9 in 10 of those who say that they now enjoy reading more also say that they read more often than before.

Table 2: Reading enjoyment x reading frequency during lockdown

	Read more often	Read just as much	Read less often
Enjoy reading more	85.2%	13.0%	1.8%
Enjoy reading just as much	16.2%	76.3%	7.6%
Enjoy reading less	7.1%	23.5%	69.4%

Figure 9 shows that before lockdown more girls than boys said that they read daily in their free time. This continued into the lockdown. Indeed, the gap between boys and girls in terms of their daily reading widened, increasing from a 4.3 percentage point difference at the beginning of 2020 to a 7.4 percentage point difference during lockdown.

Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people who read daily outside class in early 2020 compared with during lockdown by gender and age group



Similarly, while more children aged 8 to 11 said that they read daily in their free time compared with the other age groups, which continues into lockdown, the rise in the number of children and young people who read daily during lockdown is greater for the age groups that started with the lowest rates, namely those aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16. This means that the age gap in daily reading decreased slightly during lockdown. For example, the gap between those aged 8 to 11 and those aged 11 to 14 decreased from a 10.8 percentage point difference to a 7.7 percentage point difference.

Why children choose to read more often during lockdown

Perhaps unsurprisingly, having more time was the primary factor children and young people gave for reading more often (see Figure 10), with this additional time spent reading often leading to increased reading enjoyment.

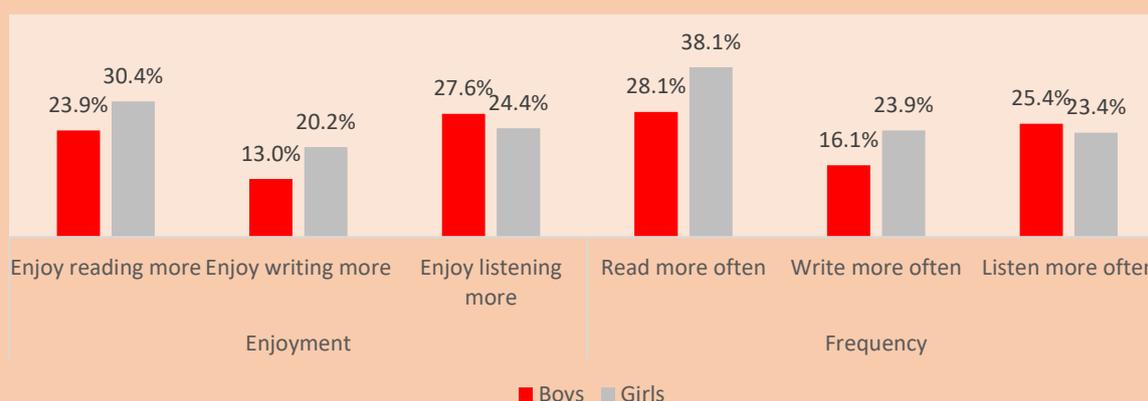
It will be interesting to see to what extent reading habits return to pre-lockdown levels once greater numbers of children return to school, daily schedules get busier and outdoor sports and activities become more possible.

Audiobooks supporting boys

As shown above, fewer boys than girls say that they enjoy reading and have read daily during lockdown, which means that the gender gap in each has widened. However, audiobooks appear to be a medium that has been relevant for both boys and girls during the pandemic – particularly for boys³.

Figure 11 explores how boys and girls responded when they were asked whether they now read, write or enjoy listening more than before lockdown and whether they now engage in these activities more often. As the figure shows, while more girls than boys say that they now enjoy reading and writing more and do both more often, this trend is reversed with respect to listening (e.g. to audiobooks), with marginally more boys than girls now saying that they enjoy it more and do so more often than before.

Figure 11: Greater enjoyment of reading, writing and listening and doing each more often than before lockdown by gender



Indeed, slightly more boys than girls (25.0% vs. 22.4%) said that they had listened to audiobooks, specifically, more during lockdown than before. Audiobooks also appear to offer a way into literacy for boys, with 1 in 2 (51.1%) boys saying that listening to audiobooks has increased their interest in reading, and 2 in 5 (43.2%) saying that it has made them more interested in writing.

Mental wellbeing and reading

Another reason why children and young people might have turned to reading during lockdown relates to their mental wellbeing. 3 in 5 (59.3%) children and young people told us during lockdown that reading makes them feel better, and 3 in 10 (31.6%) said that reading helps them when they feel sad because they cannot see their family and friends. 1 in 2 (50.2%) also said that reading encourages them to dream about the future.

³ For our full report on children, young people and audiobooks in 2020 see: <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-young-people-and-audiobooks-lockdown/>

The impact of reading on mental wellbeing was also a theme that emerged from children and young people's comments. Reading has, for many children and young people, offered a refuge in this difficult time, providing a valuable source of calm, escapism and relaxation:

"I like reading because it calms me down about this pandemic."

"...it is more important than ever to read books and go into fictional worlds because we can't really go outside and do much in real life at the moment."

"There's not really much to do...so I read, and when I do it makes me feel like I'm in a different place, not stuck inside."

"I did used to read at night time before going to bed but I stopped. I have started doing that again and...noticed that I've been getting a better sleep."

However, for some children and young people, anxiety precludes reading:

"I enjoy reading less because I just find it hard to concentrate with all the thoughts going through my head."

"I enjoy reading less than before because I just feel really different and it almost feels like I'm stuck in a nightmare. Also, I get really distracted."

Related to this is the availability of a quiet space to work, read and relax. Unfortunately, only 3 in 4 (74.4%) children and young people said that they have such a space at home, with fewer children and young people who receive free school meals than those who do not saying that they have access to a quiet space (68.2% vs. 75.6%). Teenagers aged 16 to 18 were least likely to say that they have such a space, with only 2 in 3 (66.4%) saying this compared with around 3 in 4 (around 75%) of the other age groups. More girls than boys also said this (76.3% vs. 71.3%).

Equally, children and young people's comments indicated a divide between those who had home environments that supported and encouraged reading and those who did not. For example, some had access to quiet space:

"...it's quieter to read at home than school."

However, others were missing the formality of the school environment:

"I find it difficult to concentrate at home."

"It's more stressful at home...I have more distractions."

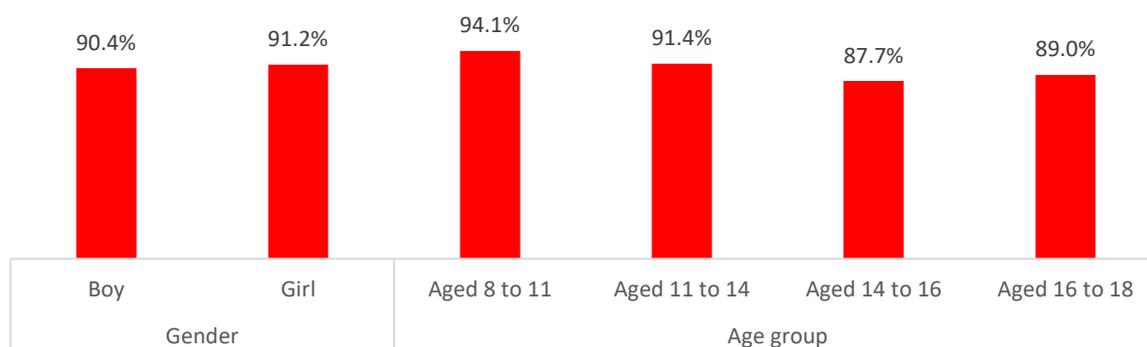
"There is too much noise going on at home. It's...easier to do work at school."

Children and young people’s access to books at home

Another theme that emerged from children and young people’s responses relates to their access to books at home. Overall, book ownership was high, with 90.9% of children and young people telling us that they have their own books at home.

Figure 12 shows that boys and girls report very similar levels of book ownership. However, more children aged 8 to 11 say that they have their own books compared with the other age groups, with teenagers aged 14 to 16 being least likely to say that they have books of their own at home.

Figure 12: Book ownership during lockdown in 2020 by gender and age group



Indeed, a prominent theme emerging from children’s reflections on their reading experiences under lockdown is inequality in access to books. For children with books of their own at home, school closures allowed them an opportunity to read or re-read at their leisure:

“I am now fortunately able to read most books I have bought at home – finishing and enjoying the stories one by one :)”

However, others described a lack of access to books due to school and public library closures, and the impact this had on their opportunities to read and their reading enjoyment:

“I used to get books from the school library and now I just read anything at home which is making reading more like a chore and less for enjoyment.”

“I honestly am finding it very difficult to read since I don’t have reading books. I wish the libraries would open so I could stay on top of my reading and vocab skills since I desperately need to improve.”

Children and young people’s reading choices before and during lockdown

What are the types of material that children and young people were reading before and during lockdown? In early 2020 we asked children and young people to indicate which, if any, of seven formats they read either in print or digitally. As can be seen in Figure 13, print was the dominant format for most children and young people’s reading in 2020. More children and young people aged 9 to 18 say that they read fiction, non-fiction, comics, magazines and

poems on paper than on screen. However, song lyrics and news were more likely to be read on screen. This pattern is the same as the one we observed in 2019⁴.

Figure 13: Materials read either on screen or on paper outside school at least once a month in early 2020 by children and young people aged 9 to 18

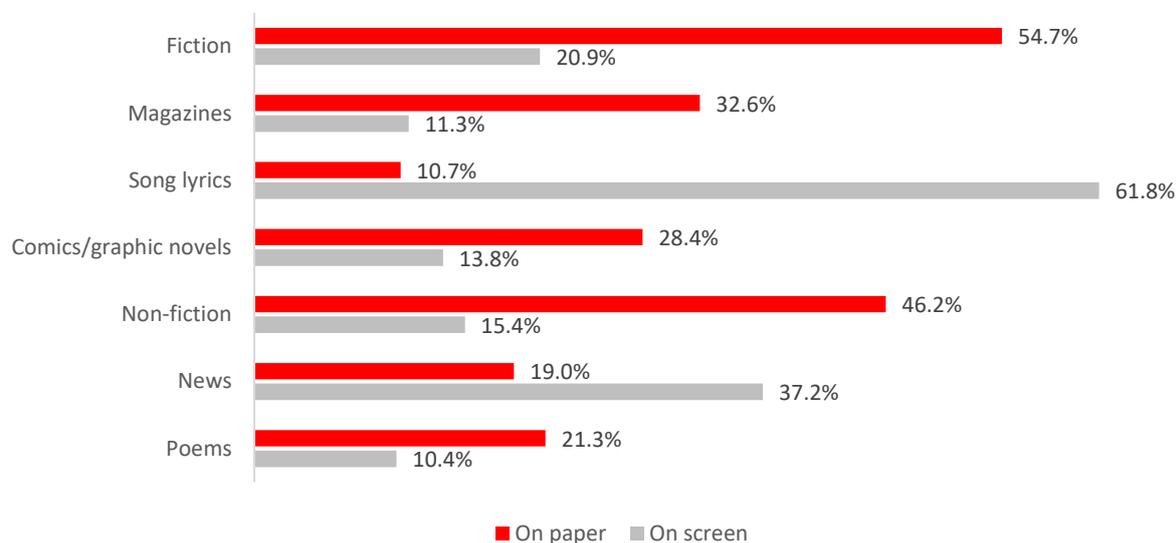
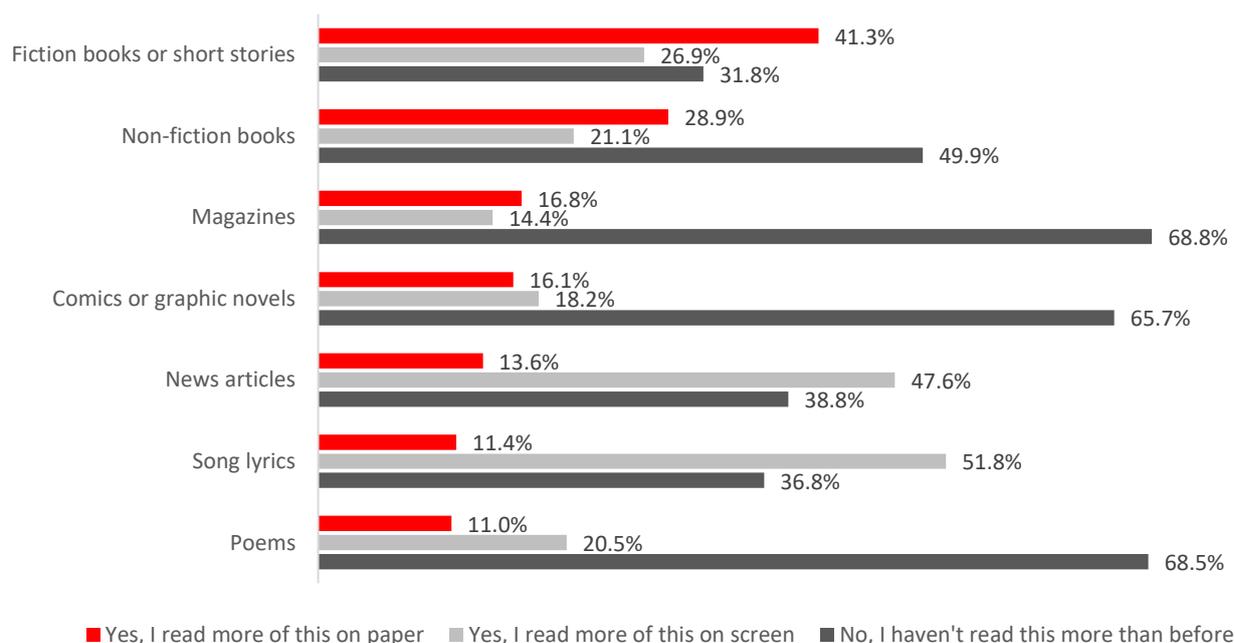


Figure 14 shows the percentage of children and young people who said that they read more of these seven materials either on paper or on screen during lockdown. It shows that 2 in 5 children and young people read more fiction books, with 1 in 4 also saying that they read more fiction on screen. Nearly 3 in 10 also said that they read more non-fiction books in print with 1 in 5 saying that they read more non-fiction on screen. A significant percentage of children also read more news articles, song lyrics and poems on screen than before.

Figure 14: Materials read more during lockdown in 2020 by type and medium



⁴ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-reading-in-2019/>

The increase in formats being read on screen chimes with children and young people’s comments, some of which highlight technology as supporting their reading:

“I downloaded a virtual library app with audiobooks.”

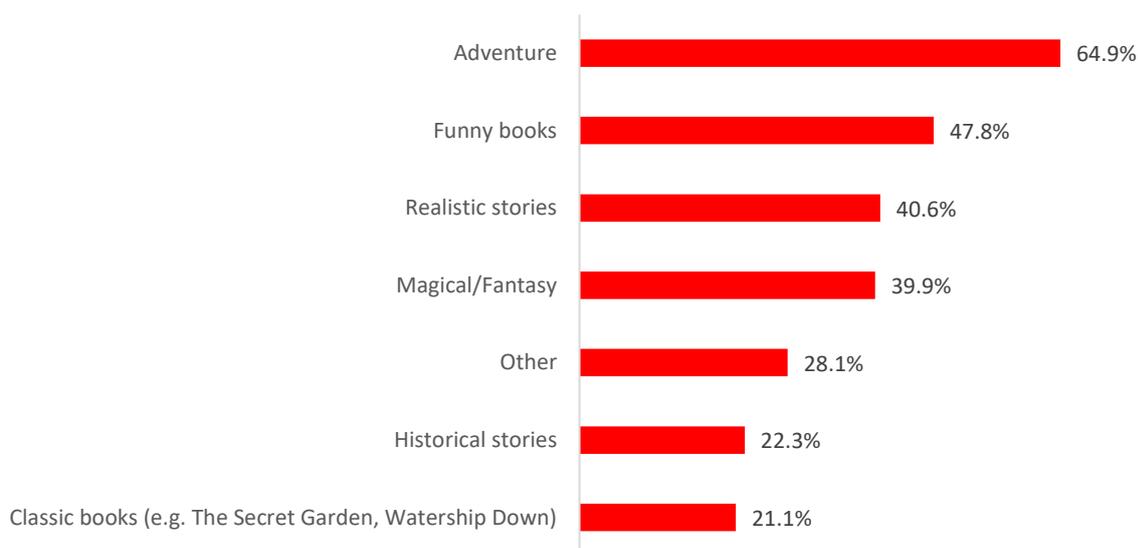
“Sometimes I have to read to my cousin on FaceTime because he suffers from dyslexia.”

“I love reading however I have read most of the books I own already and now I am using reading apps and spend pretty much all day reading.”

“I have got into reading things online such as Webtoons, stories made by others.”

As shown above, nearly 7 in 10 children and young people said that they had read more fiction either on paper or on screen during lockdown. Figure 15 shows that adventure stories were by far the most popular fiction genre being read by children and young people during lockdown, followed by funny books. Other genres mentioned by children and young people not included in the list included horror, crime, mystery, action, romance, science fiction, dystopia, mythology and fan fiction.

Figure 15: Types of fiction genres read during lockdown



Another positive aspect of having more time to read during lockdown was children’s joy in discovering new books, authors or series they enjoyed. Indeed, when asked whether they were more likely to read new books or turn to ones they had read before, almost 1 in 2 (46.3%) said that they had read new books, and 1 in 7 (14.1%) said that they had read the same books again. 2 in 5 (39.6%) had read both. Children’s comments highlight the positive impact of having access to a wide range of high-quality titles on reading enjoyment, frequency and ability:

“I'm reading more because I'm reading *Percy Jackson and the Battle of the Labyrinth*. I'm learning...about Greek mythology and it's interesting me.”

“I decided to buy a book...I fell in love with it. Since that book, I have been reading many others. It feels like a new world I have entered.”

“I never really enjoyed reading before because it took me too long to finish a book. At the start of lockdown I found a series of books that I really liked and since then I have been reading as much as possible in my spare time. According to my 'Star Reading test' my reading age has gone up by 3 years in the past 3 months!”

To sum up

More children and young people said that they enjoyed reading more and also read more during lockdown compared with before the start of the pandemic. While there are many positive take-outs in this report, there is also a suggestion that a group of pupils, namely boys, are at particular risk of losing out in terms of their reading as a result of the pandemic. Compared with girls, fewer boys say that they enjoy reading and fewer read in their free time. While this was true before lockdown, disparities have increased manifold during lockdown. It remains to be seen whether these changes are sustained or whether a return to school and a degree of known normality will help boys catch up. Audiobooks might offer a way into literacy for boys. Not only have a quarter of boys been listening to audiobooks more during lockdown, but over half of those also said that audiobooks made them more interested in reading and writing.

Overall, listening to children's experiences of reading during lockdown provides valuable insight into the opportunities we now have to engage, or re-engage, children with reading for enjoyment. If we are to support and sustain children's newly re-discovered love of reading, it is essential that we create the conditions that children tell us support them. This includes, at the most basic level, the time and space to read, and access to books and stories, whether in print or digital format.

Reading has, for many children, offered a refuge in this difficult time, providing a valuable source of wellbeing while helping them keep up with their reading skills during school closures. However, for others, and in particular those with few or no books of their own at home, school and library closures have cut off an essential source of reading material, while a lack of time, quiet space, school and peer support has affected both their ability and their motivation to read for enjoyment.

It is clear that school and public libraries play a vital role in supporting these children, not only by providing access to reading material, but by connecting potential readers with books that will inspire them and capture their interest. Increasing children's access to high-quality books should be a priority during school re-opening, and the contribution that reading for enjoyment can make to children's mental wellbeing should be recognised and valued.

This suggests that our programmes, campaigns and policy work on enjoyment and positive behaviours around reading are more crucial than ever.

Our sincere thanks to Slaughter and May for their generous financial contribution that enabled us to conduct our Annual Literacy Survey between January and March 2020.

Thank you to Puffin for contributing towards the survey we conducted during lockdown.

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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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