



Changing life stories

Children and young people's access to books and educational devices at home during the cost-of-living crisis

A survey of over 3,000 parents and carers in 2023

February 2023

In partnership with



The cost-of-living crisis is affecting household finances across income brackets, with many parents and carers struggling financially under the current circumstances. This report explores the impact of cost-of-living pressures on children and young people's access to reading resources and support at home.

In early 2023, 85.6% of parents¹ reported being worried about the cost-of-living crisis, and, as a consequence, they cut back on energy, food, gas and electricity. While parents recognised the many benefits of reading for their children's learning and well-being, household budgets were under pressure: 1 in 5 (20.0%) were buying fewer books for their children, especially those families who told us that they were struggling financially as a result of the cost-of-living crisis, with 1 in 3 (36.1%) saying this. Around 1 in 10 parents also felt too busy (12.4%) or stressed (10.3%) to engage with their children's literacy at home.

At the same time, a quarter of parents said they were relying more on libraries, such as borrowing more books from the library (25.8%) or asking their children to borrow more books from their school library (25.5%). Indeed, school libraries were valued by the vast majority (92.3%) of parents from all financial backgrounds, suggesting that these libraries can play a vital role in mitigating any impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children and young people's reading and learning.

In partnership with digital bank, Chase, we commissioned YouGov to conduct a nationally representative survey of 3,057 parents of children aged from birth to 18 years old from across Britain. The survey ran from the end of December 2022 to the first week in January 2023². It allowed us to explore how the cost-of-living crisis is affecting children's access to books and educational devices (e.g. child-friendly tablets, e-readers and audio players) at home.

This report looks at responses from all parents surveyed, but will focus in particular on those who are struggling financially due to the increased cost of living. For ease, we will refer to these parents who struggle financially as a result of cost-of-living pressures as 'struggling' (40%) versus those who told us that they were managing, i.e. not struggling financially at present (60%) as a result of the cost-of-living crisis³. 'Don't know' and 'Not applicable' respondents have been removed from these groupings.

1 While we use the term parents throughout the report, this refers to parents and carers.

2 See Appendix A for information about the sample.

3 Parents were asked, "How much, if at all, is the current cost of living affecting your finances?" 40.0% (n=1,183) of parents answered 'I am finding it difficult' or 'I am struggling'; 60.0% (n=1,776) answered 'I am managing' or 'I am not at all affected' ('Don't know' and 'Prefer not to say' responses excluded).

Key findings

Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on household finances

The cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on parents across income brackets, with many struggling financially under the current circumstances.

- The vast majority (91.9%) of parents said they had noticed that their household's cost of living had increased in the past 12 months. 2 in 5 (40.0%) said that they were now finding it difficult to cope with rising costs.
- While financial pressures as a result of the cost-of-living crisis were more prevalent in lower household incomes, a considerable percentage of households with higher incomes were also affected: 2 in 3 (66.6%) families with a household income of below £19,999 told us that they were now struggling with their finances, while nearly 2 in 5 (44.0%) families with an income of between £20,000 and £49,999 said the same. Over 1 in 4 (27.1%) families with a household income of more than £50,000 a year also said that they are now struggling as a result of recent price rises.

Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children's access to books and educational devices at home

Fewer parents are buying books or educational devices for their children, especially families who are struggling financially as a result of the cost-of-living crisis.

- 1 in 5 (20.0%) parents told us that they were spending less on books for their children as a result of the increasing cost of living. This percentage increased to 36.1% for families who felt that they were struggling financially with the increase in the cost of living.
- Three times as many parents who were struggling financially as a result of cost-of-living pressures spent less on educational tech devices, such as child-friendly tablets and audio-players, compared with parents who told us that they were currently managing financially (42.9% vs. 14.0%).

Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on parents' ability to support their children's reading

Parents value the many benefits of reading for their children's learning and well-being, but some now feel too stressed or lack the energy to support their children's literacy at home.

- The cost-of-living crisis hasn't just taken a toll on parents' ability to buy books or educational technology. Overall, 1 in 6 (16.1%) parents felt that their children were struggling more at school compared with 12 months ago.
- 1 in 7 (14.9%) parents also said that they now lacked the energy to engage with their children's literacy. This increased to 1 in 5 (19.1%) parents who were struggling financially. Regardless of their financial situation, 1 in 10 (10.3%) parents told us that they were now too stressed to read with their children.

- 4 in 5 (81.3%)⁴ parents told us that their children enjoyed reading, with reading leading to various positive outcomes, such as better mental well-being. For example, 3 in 5 (59.5%) parents agreed that reading helped their children relax. However, 2 in 5 (40.9%) parents also told us that there was no quiet space for their children to read at home. Slightly more parents who were struggling financially said this (44.3% vs. 37.1%).⁵

Book borrowing and the vital role of school libraries in the current climate

More parents report borrowing books or asking their children to borrow books from their school library. Indeed, parents value school libraries regardless of their financial situation and rate their children having access to a school library as important.

- While parents reported buying fewer books, many parents told us that they were now borrowing more books compared with 12 months ago. For example, nearly 3 in 10 (28.2%) parents told us they were borrowing more children’s books from the library, and 1 in 4 (25.5%) were asking their children to borrow more books from their school library (increasing to 28.0% of struggling parents)⁶.
- Support for school libraries was universal among parents, with more than 9 in 10 (92.3%) saying that their children having access to a good school library was important.
- School libraries were valued regardless of the family’s financial situation or the age of the child.

Parents’ comments highlighted the vital role of libraries in supporting their children’s reading, and as a quiet and safe space for learning, with one saying:

“

The school library is a fantastic resource, wonderful space and essential for primary literacy.

”

(Father of children aged 5 and 8)

4 'Not applicable – My child cannot read' (N=236) have been removed.

5 'Don't know' and 'Prefer not to say' (N=59) have been removed.

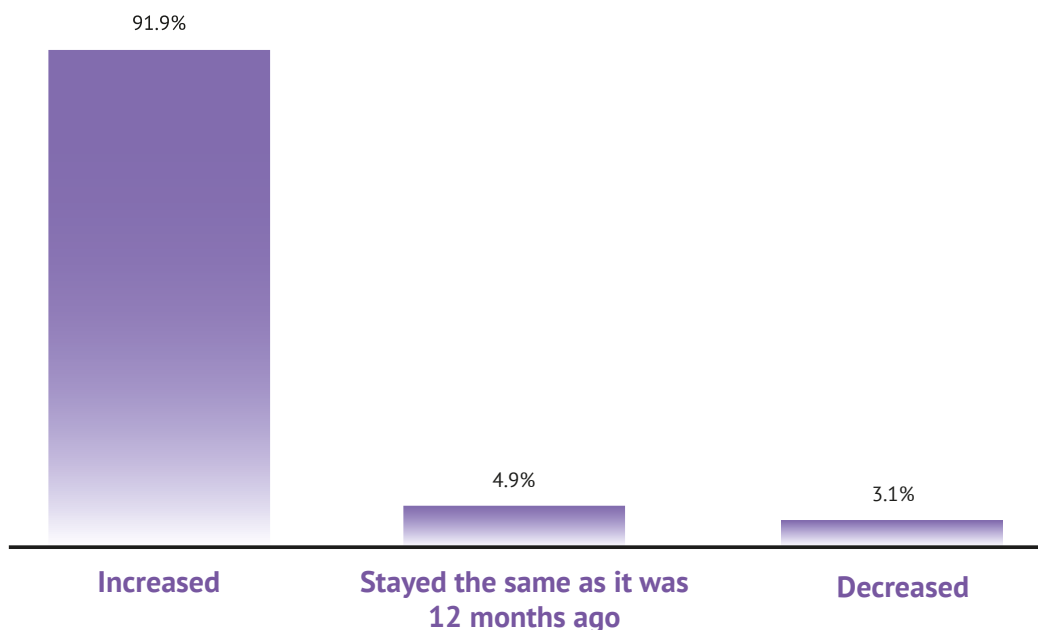
6 'Not applicable – I/my household has never done this' and 'Don't know' (N=872 – 412) have been removed.

Findings in detail

The impact of the cost-of-living crisis on household finances

The vast majority (91.9%)⁷ of parents said they had noticed that their household's cost of living had increased in the past 12 months (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: 'To what extent, if at all, has your household's cost of living increased or decreased in the past 12 months?' (i.e. since the end of December 2021)?



The cost-of-living increase was a worry for nearly 9 in 10 (85.6%) parents and was naturally impacting many families' household finances, regardless of the age of their children. When asked whether their disposable income had changed as a result, nearly 1 in 2 parents (46.8%) said they had 'much less' disposable income now and 35.8% had a 'little' less.

This change in disposable income had an impact on whether families were now struggling financially. As shown in Figure 2, 3 in 5 (60.0%) parents were affected by the cost-of-living increase but felt they were managing. However, 2 in 5 (40.0%) told us that they were now struggling financially as a result of cost-of-living increases.⁸

Figure 2: 'How much, if at all, is the current cost of living affecting your finances?'



⁷ N = 2,976, 'Don't know' (N=81) have been removed

⁸ 'Don't know' and 'Prefer not to say' (N=98) have been removed.

It is important to note that the cost-of-living crisis is having an impact on parents across income brackets, with many struggling financially under the current circumstances. While financial pressures as a result of the cost-of-living crisis were more prevalent in lower household incomes, a sizeable percentage of households with higher incomes were also affected (see Table 1): 2 in 3 (66.6%) families with a household income of below £20,000 told us that they were now struggling with their finances as a result of cost-of-living increases, while nearly 2 in 5 (44.0%) families with an income of between £20,000 and £49,999 said the same. Over 1 in 4 (27.1%) families with a household income of more than £50,000 a year also said that they were now struggling financially as a result of recent price rises⁹.

Table 1: Income bracket by whether or not parents were struggling financially as a result of the current rise in the cost of living

	Low income (<£19,999 household income per annum)	Medium income (£20,000 to £49,999 household income per annum)	High income (>£50,000 household income per annum)
Not currently struggling	33.4%	56.0%	72.9%
Currently struggling	66.6%	44.0%	27.1%

Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on children’s access to books and educational devices at home

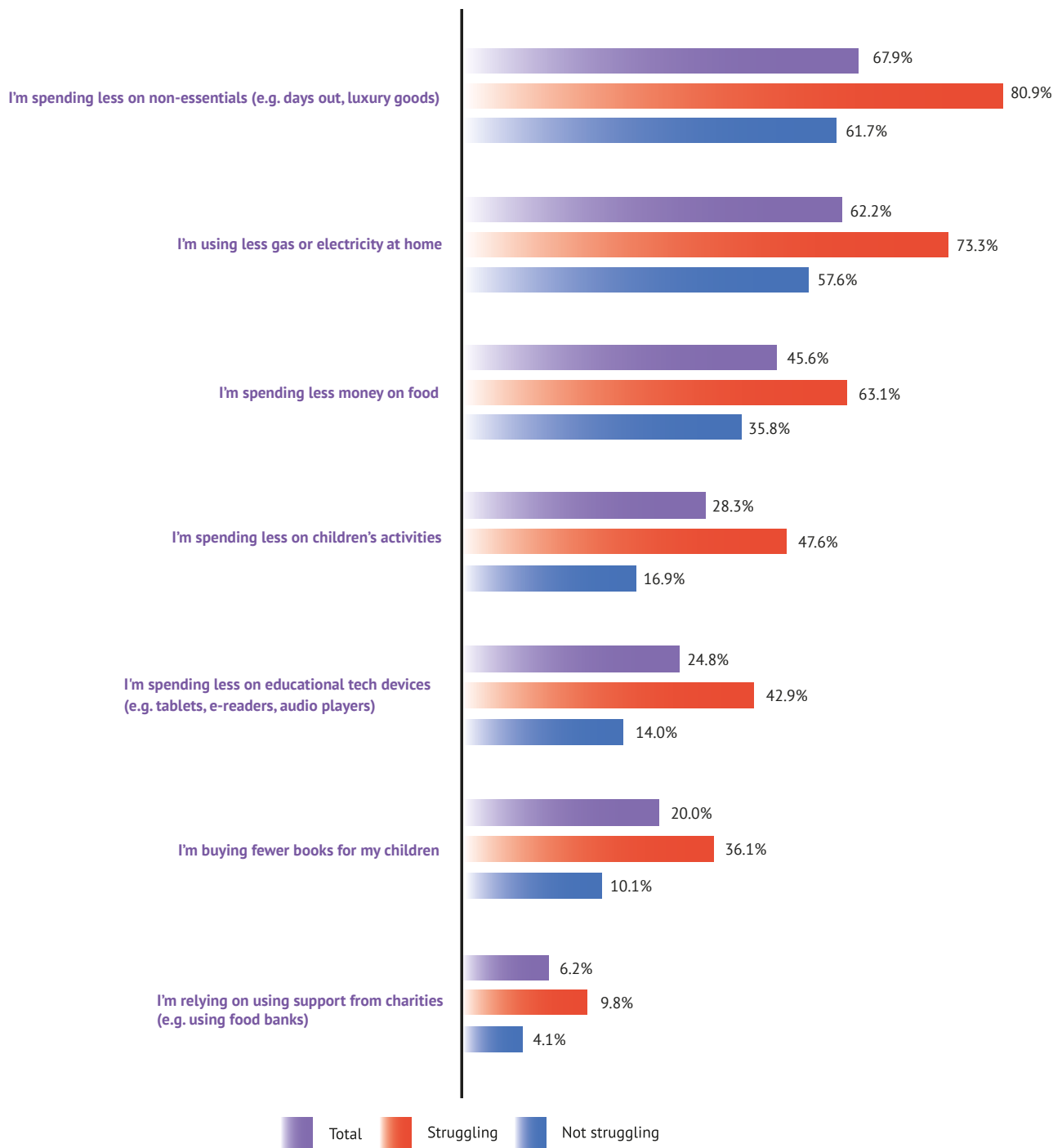
The current rise in the cost of living means families have been forced to cut back on spending in a variety of areas, with most cutting back on non-essentials (67.9%), but also on energy (62.2%) and food (45.6%). 6.2% are having to rely on support from charities, such as food banks (see Figure 3). Many parents also said that they were now spending less on the experiences and resources that support children’s learning, with 1 in 4 (24.8%) telling us they had reduced spending on educational technology and 1 in 5 (20.0%) buying fewer books for their children.

The challenges were greatest for those who were struggling¹⁰ with the current cost-of-living pressures (also Figure 3). Compared with parents who weren’t struggling, three times as many parents who were struggling financially said they were buying fewer books for their children (36.1% vs. 10.1%), spending less on educational technology (42.9% vs. 14.0%) or children’s activities, such as after-school clubs and trips (47.6% vs. 16.9%) as a result of the rising cost of living.

⁹ ‘Don’t know’ or refused to answer N = 171 for struggling and N = 241 for not struggling

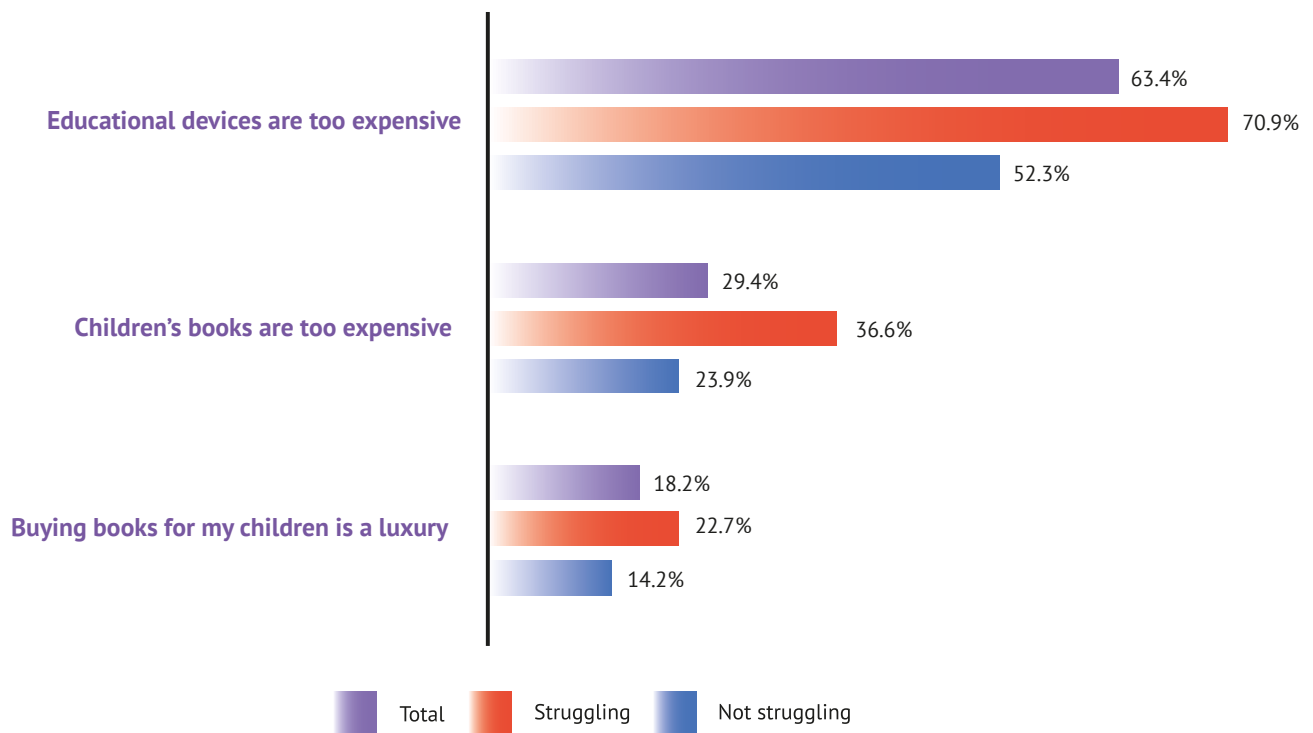
¹⁰ Other N = 53, Don’t know N = 88 and not applicable N = 268

Figure 3: 'Which, if any, are you doing to help save money?' – comparing parents who are and are not struggling financially with the current cost-of-living increases



While 1 in 3 (36.1%) parents who were struggling financially as a result of cost-of-living increases said that they were buying fewer books for their children, a similar percentage felt that children’s books were too expensive (36.6%), and nearly 1 in 4 (22.7%) felt that buying books for their children was a luxury (see Figure 4). Additionally, 7 in 10 (70.9%) parents who were struggling financially felt that educational tech devices, such as tablets, e-readers and audio players, were too expensive.

Figure 4: Percentage agreement with statements by whether or not families were struggling financially with the current cost-of-living increases¹¹



Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on parents' ability to support their children's reading

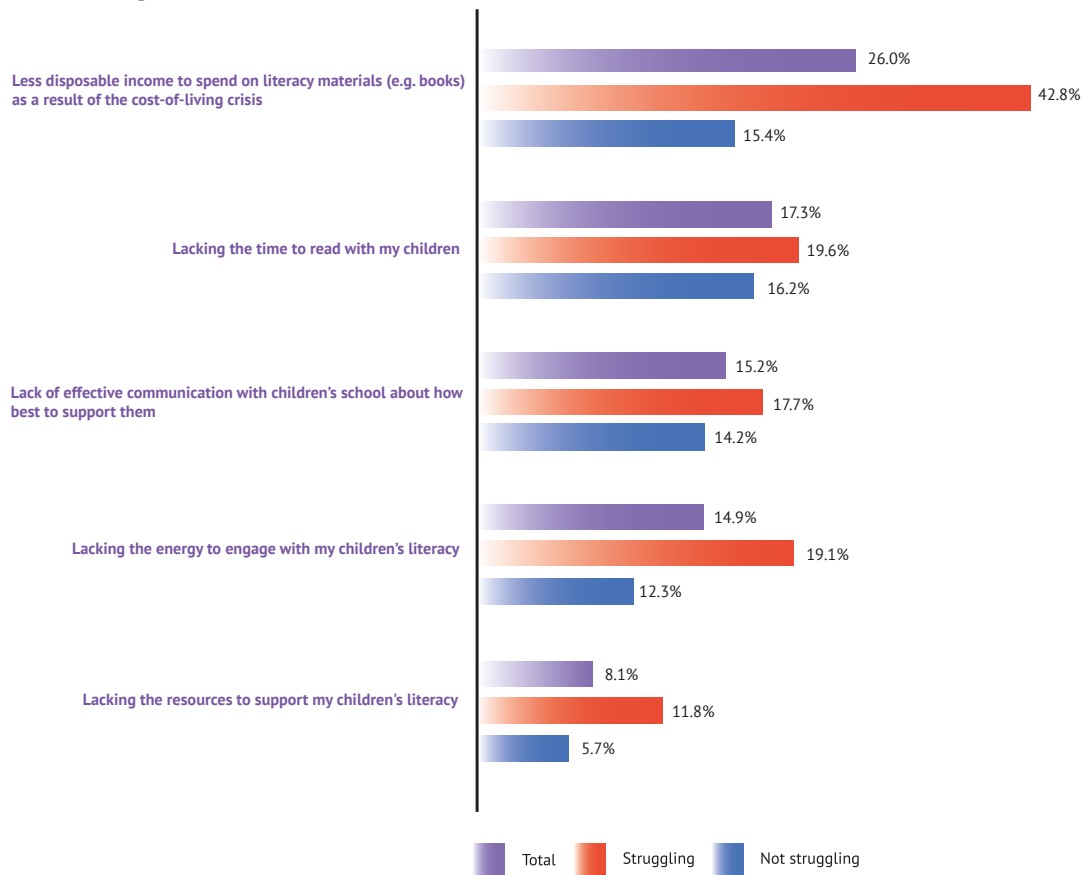
Alongside more limited spending on learning resources, such as books and educational technology, the rising cost of living is having an impact on parents' ability to support their children's literacy and learning at home. For example, when asked about the challenges faced in supporting children's literacy, having less disposable income to spend on literacy materials was the most cited, with a quarter (26.0%) of parents telling us this (see Figure 5)¹².

More parents who described themselves as struggling with the rising cost of living said they faced various literacy challenges compared with parents who were not struggling (see also Figure 5). In particular, they were nearly three times more likely to say that the biggest literacy challenge they faced was less disposable income to spend on literacy materials like books (42.8% vs. 15.4%). Slightly more also said that they lacked the time to read with their children (19.6% vs. 16.2%) and more said that they lacked the energy to engage with their children's literacy (19.1% vs. 12.3%).

¹¹ 'Don't knows' have been removed from the total: educational devices too expensive N = 206; children books are too expensive N = 57; Books are a luxury N = 49

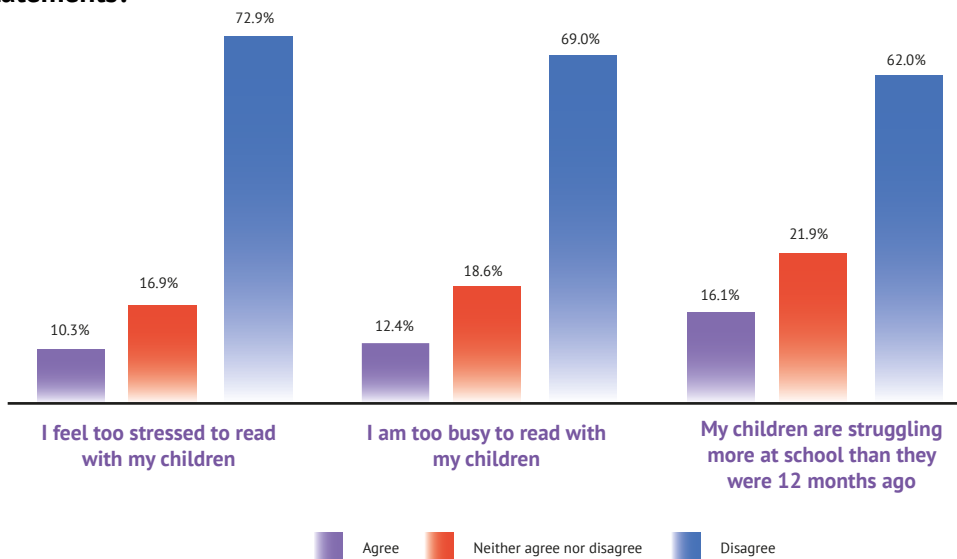
¹² Other N = 128; Don't know N = 167; Not applicable - I don't have challenges N = 1254; Not applicable - I don't support my child N = 42

Figure 5: Literacy challenges: comparing parents who are and are not struggling financially with the current cost-of-living increases



Parents also reported some changes in home literacy behaviours over the last year, with 1 in 10 (10.3%) sharing that they felt too stressed to read with their children, 1 in 8 (12.4%) sharing that they were too busy to read with their children, and 1 in 6 (16.1%) sharing that their children was struggling more at school than they were 12 months ago (see Figure 6). There were no differences in agreement by financial situation, with a similar percentage of parents agreeing with these statements regardless of whether they were struggling financially or not. This suggests that literacy support for all parents is more important than ever.

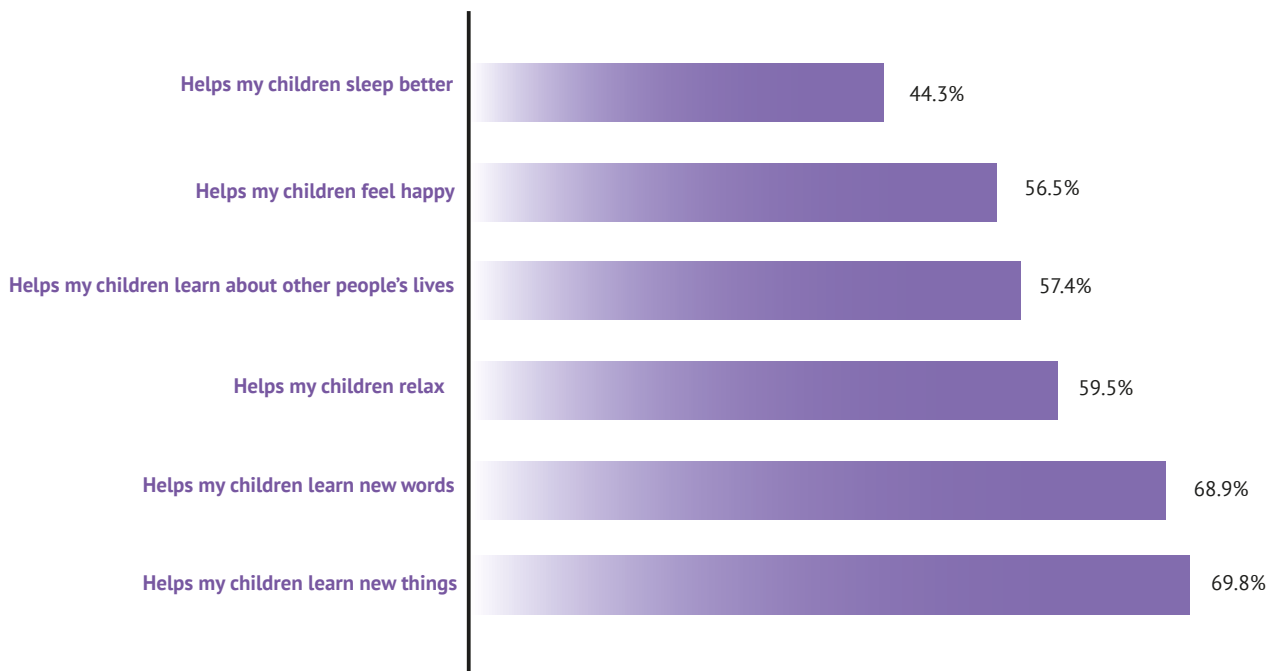
Figure 6: 'Thinking about the past 12 months... To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?'¹³



13 'Don't knows' removed: I feel too stressed: N = 85; I am too busy N = 80; My child is struggling N = 80

Nonetheless, 4 in 5 (81.4%)¹⁴ parents also told us that their child enjoys reading, with this being true regardless of financial situation. Most parents also saw the benefit of reading for their children. As shown in Figure 7, over 2 in 3 parents agreed that reading helps their child learn new things (69.8%) or that it helps their child learn new words (68.9%). Over 1 in 2 (57.4%) also believed that reading helps their child learn about other people’s lives. A similar percentage also believed that reading helps their child relax (59.5%) or feel happy (56.5%). Over 2 in 5 (44.3%) believed that reading helps their child sleep better.¹⁵ There were no notable differences between families who struggled financially and those who didn’t in the perceived benefits of reading.

Figure 7: Percentage agreement with benefits of reading to their child



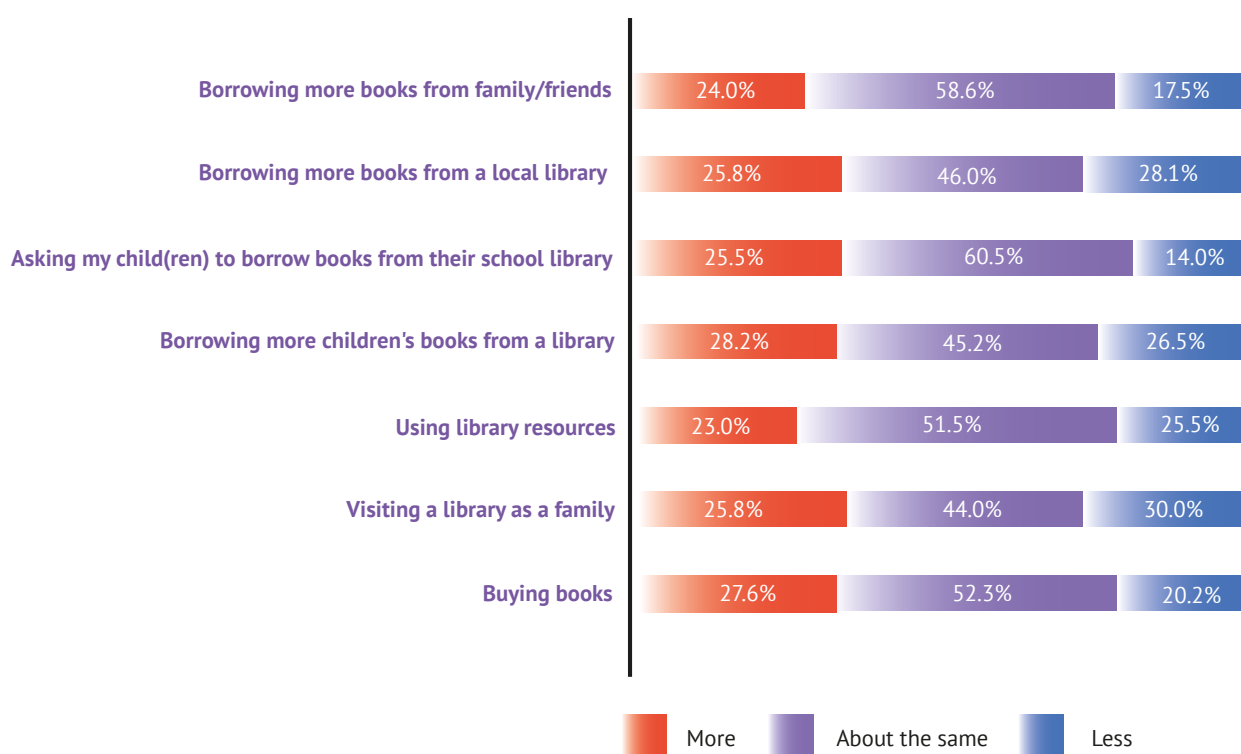
While many parents recognised the importance and the benefits of their children reading, 2 in 5 (40.9%) parents also told us that there was no quiet space for their children to read at home. Slightly more parents who were struggling financially said this (44.3% vs. 37.1%).

14 Not applicable - my child cannot read' N = 236 was removed
 15 'Don't knows' N = 130 and 'None of these' N = 197 have been removed

Impact of the cost-of-living crisis on book borrowing

In response to the pressures on household finances, parents reported borrowing more books now compared with 12 months ago, whether from libraries or family and friends. 1 in 4 (25.7%) parents said they had been visiting the library as a family more together (see Figure 8), while nearly 3 in 10 (28.2%) parents said they were borrowing more children's books from the library. There were no differences in library visits or library borrowing between parents who were struggling financially as a result of the current price increases and those who weren't currently struggling in this respect.¹⁶

Figure 8: 'Thinking about the past 12 months (i.e. since December 2021)... To what extent are you now doing more, less or about the same for each of the following?'



1 in 4 (25.5%) had asked their children to borrow more books from their school library, and this increased slightly to almost 3 in 10 (28.0%) for families who were struggling financially due to the cost-of-living crisis.¹⁷

In addition to borrowing books, 16.6% of parents said they themselves were also lending books out more to friends and family than 12 months ago, and 27.5% also said they were donating books more to charity, suggesting that there is some mutual support for sharing reading resources during this straitened financial period.¹⁸

¹⁶ 'Not applicable – I/my household has never done this' and 'Don't know' (N=872 – 412) have been removed

¹⁷ 'Not applicable – I/my household has never done this' and 'Don't know' (N=206) have been removed

¹⁸ Not applicable – I've never done this' and 'Don't know' (N=1119-744) have been removed

The vital role of school libraries in the current climate

Primary school libraries play an essential part in supporting children's education, with studies highlighting the link between good school libraries and children's academic achievement, reading enjoyment and attitudes to learning¹⁹. School libraries can particularly benefit pupils who are eligible for free school meals²⁰, suggesting that they may have an increasingly vital role to play in supporting children while many families are facing growing financial pressures.

The role of school libraries was recognised by many parents in our survey. Most parents felt that school libraries were important to their child, with 2 in 5 (41.7%) sharing that it was very important²¹ to them that their child had access to a good school library, and more than 9 in 10 (92.3%) rated the value of a school library as important.

School libraries were valued highly,²² regardless of the parents' financial situation; parents who were and were not struggling financially with the increase in the cost of living were equally likely to rate their child having access to a school library as important (92.4% vs. 92.2%). There were no differences in perception of the value of school libraries by the age of the child.

We also received 1,998 responses when we asked parents to comment on the topic of school libraries as part of our survey, suggesting it is an area many parents have strong feelings about.

Many shared that they felt the library is an important place within a school:

“
It is good with a variety of books for primary school ages and abilities. The school sees it as very important and children are well supported to use it and families encouraged in using it after school
”

(Mother of a child aged 7)

“
I love how they have a special section for children to really entice them to read as well as holding special events for them to come and read
”

(Father of children aged 1, 6 and 7)

“
It's an essential part of school life. No school should be without one
”

(Mother of a child aged 11)

“
I think school libraries are utterly essential. My son, whom I struggle to get to read at home, always uses the school library
”

(Mother of a child aged 12)

19 See cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/The_Future_of_Primary_School_Libraries.pdf

20 files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1265487.pdf

21 Based on respondents rating the importance as 10

22 Based on respondents rating the importance as 6 and above

4 in 5 (80.0%) parents with school-aged children reported that their school had a library from which their child could borrow books to take home, and a further 13.5% told us that they had a school library from which children could not bring books home. 6.5% of parents said their children did not have a school library at all²³. This is corroborated by our earlier research showing that 1 in 7 (14%) state primary schools across the UK do not have a library²⁴.

The benefits of children being able to take books home were also mentioned in open-ended comments:

“
They bring home a book that's reading stage applicable.
”
(Mother of a child aged 5)

“
My child likes to go to the library and find books and he brings them home to read. He enjoys [the] library experience.
”
(Mother of a child aged 8)

“
Excellent, a wide range of books of different genres, interests and reading abilities. Children are encouraged to take books home regularly.
”
(Mother of children aged 2 and 9)

Other benefits of the school library were also mentioned, including providing a quiet, safe space for children to work:

“
It has a range of books and it is a nice environment to be in/read in.
”
(Mother of a child aged 4)

“
It is a good resource and offers quiet space for work or reading.
”
(Father of children aged 14 and 17)

“
My child loves it, uses it after school to complete homework, as a safe space in break time if needed. Library staff are approachable and supportive.
”
(Mother of children aged 12 and 17)

23 'Don't know' N = 192 have been removed
24 cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/PSLA_report_2022_V12_SCREEN.pdf

And contributions to improvements in their children's reading ability:

“
Very important as they can be a gateway to further learning and improve reading.
”
(Father of children aged 7 and 11)

“
I think they are essential in the development of children's ability to become keen readers.
”
(Father of a child aged 15)

Of those parents who said their child had a school library, 3 in 4 were happy with the number of books available (74.8%), the quality of the books available (75.4%) and the range of books available (72.6%): see Figure 9.²⁵

Figure 9: 'How happy or unhappy are you with each of the following?'



25 'Don't know' removed, number of books N = 333; Quality of books N = 314; Range of books N = 334

Those who were happy with the books in the school library shared:

“
I love that the children get to see so many different styles of book and enjoy picking what they would like to look at.

”
(Mother of a child aged 5)

“
It has a vast collection of various types of books and is well stocked for all ages.

”
(Mother of children aged 10, 12 and 18+)

“
It's a good source of reading materials, both fiction and nonfiction. A lot of good solid educational tools that help save families having to purchase them themselves.

”
(Father of a child aged 16)

Those who were unhappy with the books in their library explained why:

“
Its choices are quite limited and my child struggles to find books he hasn't read.

”
(Mother of a child aged 9)

“
It's not great. The school is in a low-income area and it is reflected in school provisions. The choice is limited but at least children have access to books.

”
(Mother of a child aged 9)

“
It is severely underfunded relying on second-hand books to be donated.

”
(Father of children aged 5 and 9)

Conclusion

To conclude, our survey showed that parents across Britain are feeling the impact of rising costs and this is influencing their ability to support their children's literacy. Recent rises in the cost of living are affecting parents across all income brackets, meaning many more families are struggling financially under the current circumstances than in previous years. The impact is particularly pronounced for parents on lower incomes, and, while many parents recognise the benefits of reading for their children's learning and well-being, pressure on household finances means they are buying fewer books, educational technology and other literacy resources.

During difficult times, libraries offer a vital means of access to books and devices, and our survey found that school libraries were viewed as very important by all parents, particularly parents who were struggling most with the rising cost of living. Parents reported that the benefits of libraries extended beyond just the provision of books, but also as an important space for learning within a school. The vast majority of parents were happy with the quantity, quality and range of books provided by their child(ren)'s school library. Together, the findings suggest that school libraries may play a vital role in supporting children's literacy at a time when home resources are perhaps limited.

Appendix A - Sample characteristics

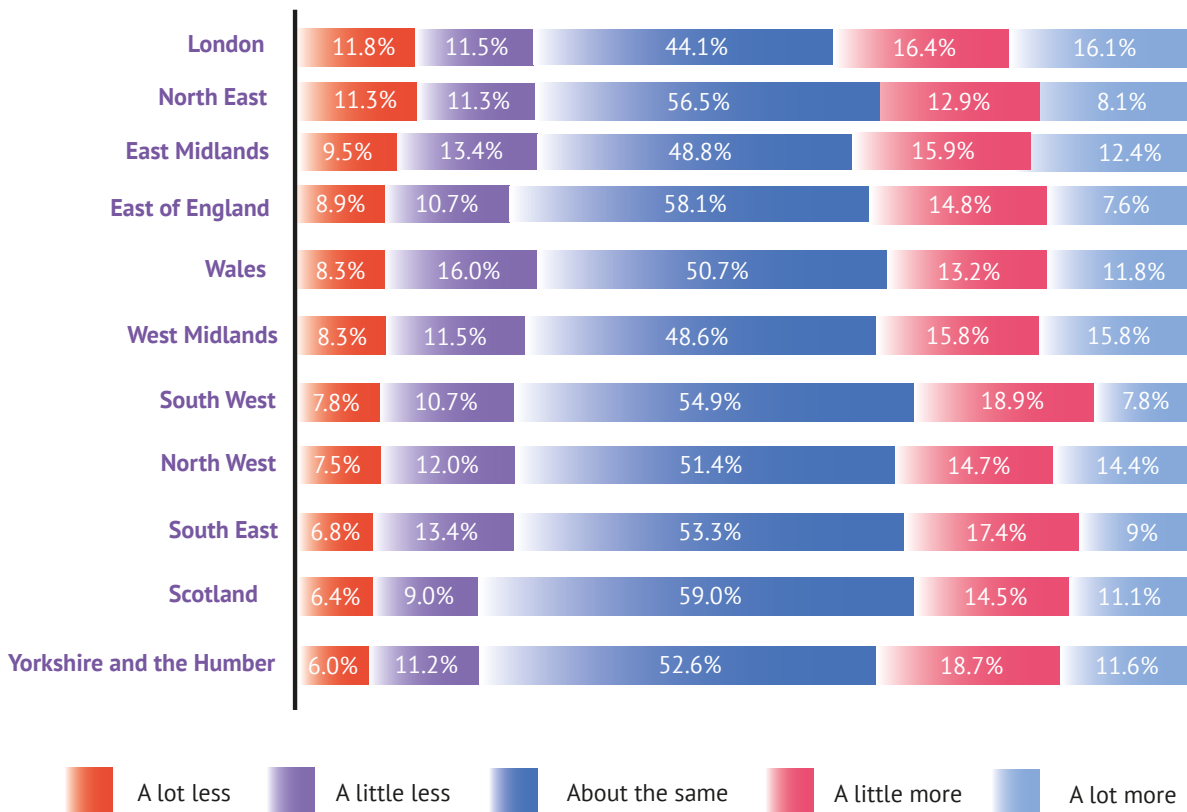
The survey ran in late December 2022, receiving responses from 3,057 parents aged 18-24 (n = 122), 25-34 (n = 703), 35-44 (n = 1,345), 45-54 (n = 703) and 55+ (n = 183) across Great Britain. Respondents were (female n = 1,651 [54.0%]; male n = 1,406 [46.0%]). Respondents' children were in the following age brackets: 4 years and under (n = 1,192), 5 to 11 years (1,477), 12 to 16 years (n = 1,103), and 17 to 18 years (n = 392). Children were at preschool/nursery (n = 686), in primary school (n = 1,403), in secondary school (n = 1,109), home-schooled (n = 108), working full time or in an apprenticeship (n = 74) and not currently in full-time education (n = 108).

Most respondents identified themselves as White British (n = 2,439), White Irish (n = 22), Gypsy or Irish traveller (n = 9) or other White backgrounds (n = 144); White and Black Caribbean (n = 19), White and Black African (n = 19), White and Asian (n = 22), Any other mixed/multiple ethnic backgrounds (n = 23); Indian (n = 58), Pakistani (n = 62), Bangladeshi (n = 19); Chinese (n = 15), any other Asian background (n = 12); African (n = 50), Caribbean (n = 19), any other Black/African/Caribbean background (n = 4), Arab (n = 5), any other ethnic group (n = 10), prefer not to say (n = 35).

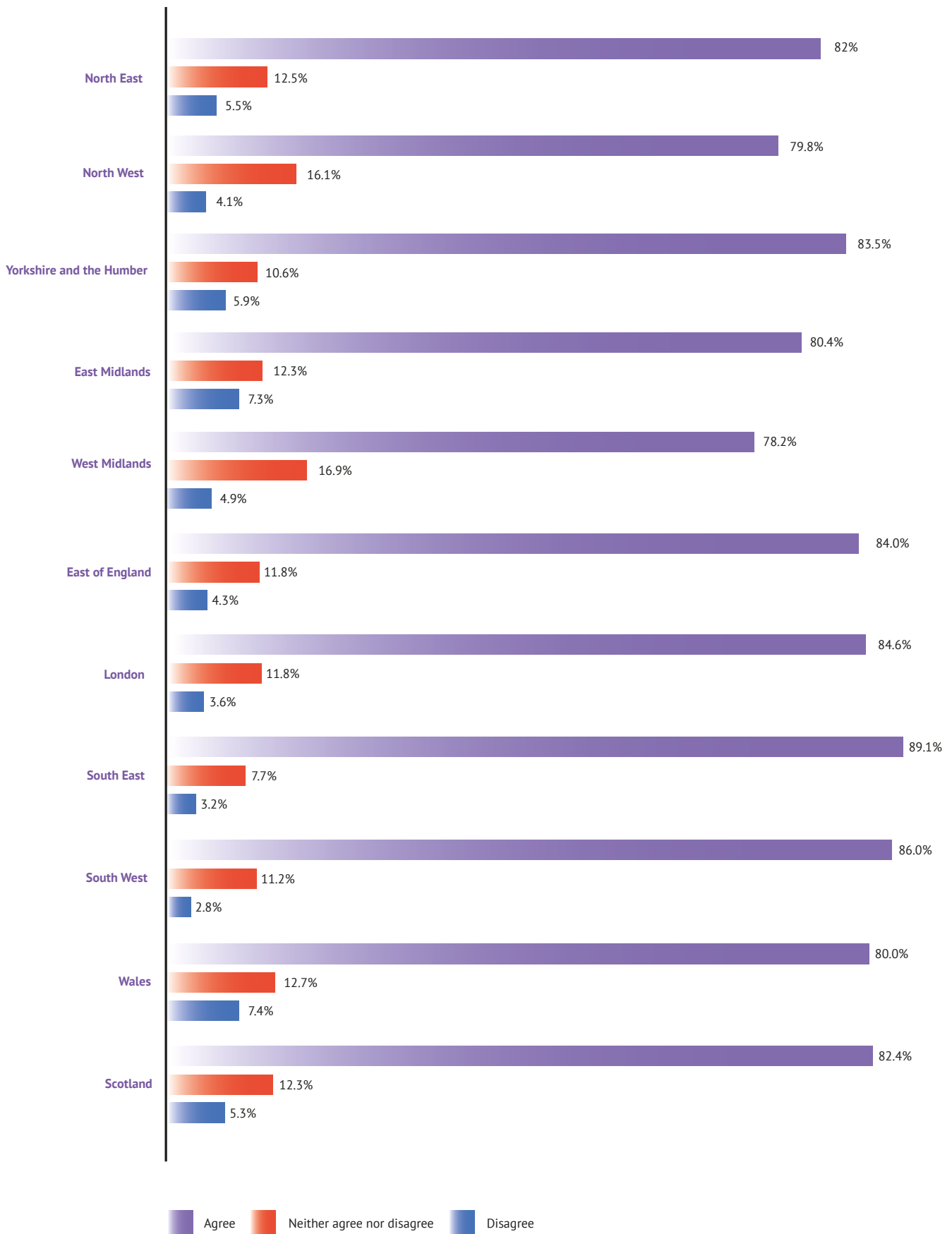
Further characteristics (e.g. income brackets) are provided in the footnotes.

Appendix B - Regional Differences

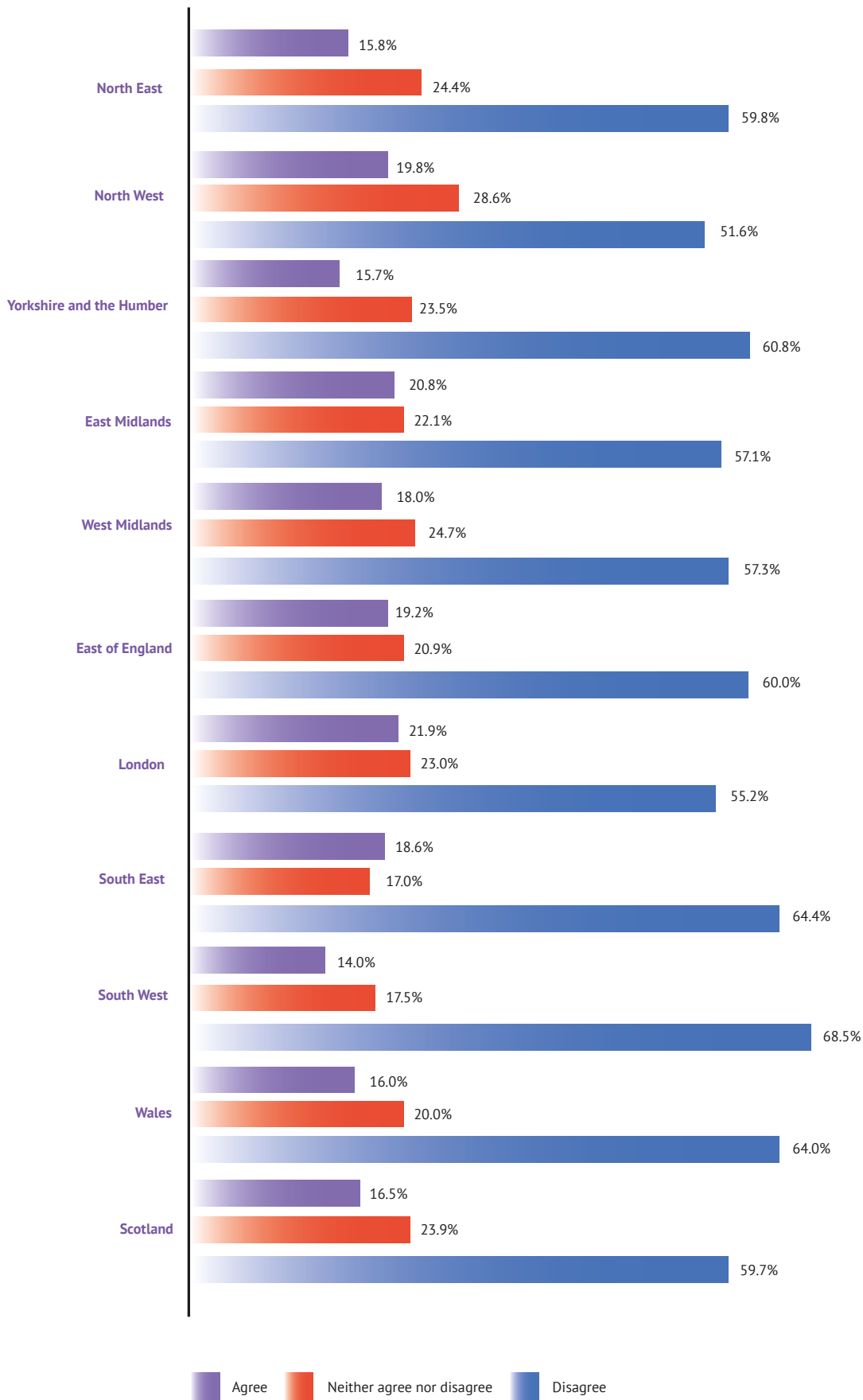
Buying books compared to 12 months ago, by region:



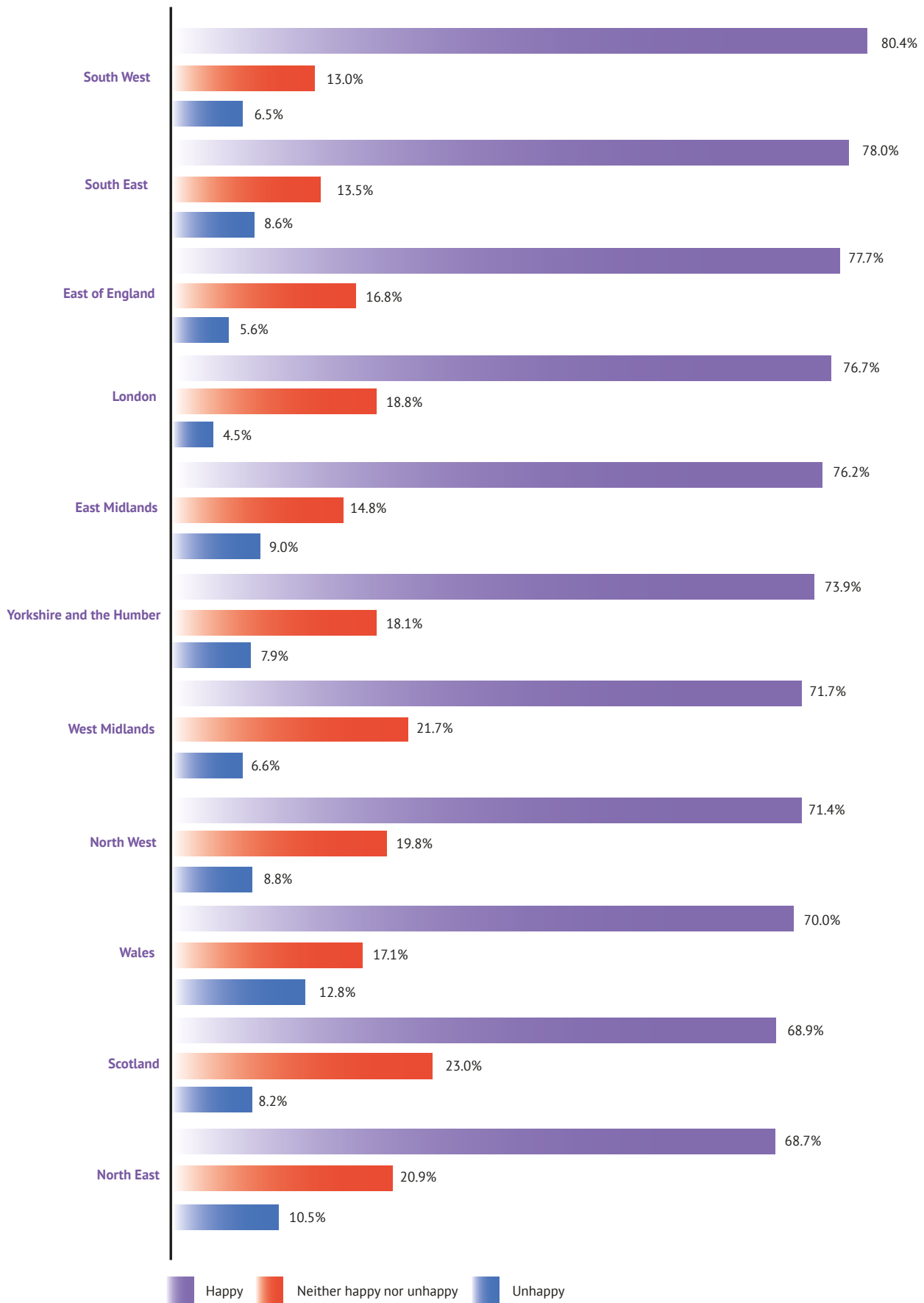
'Buying books for my children is important to me', by region:



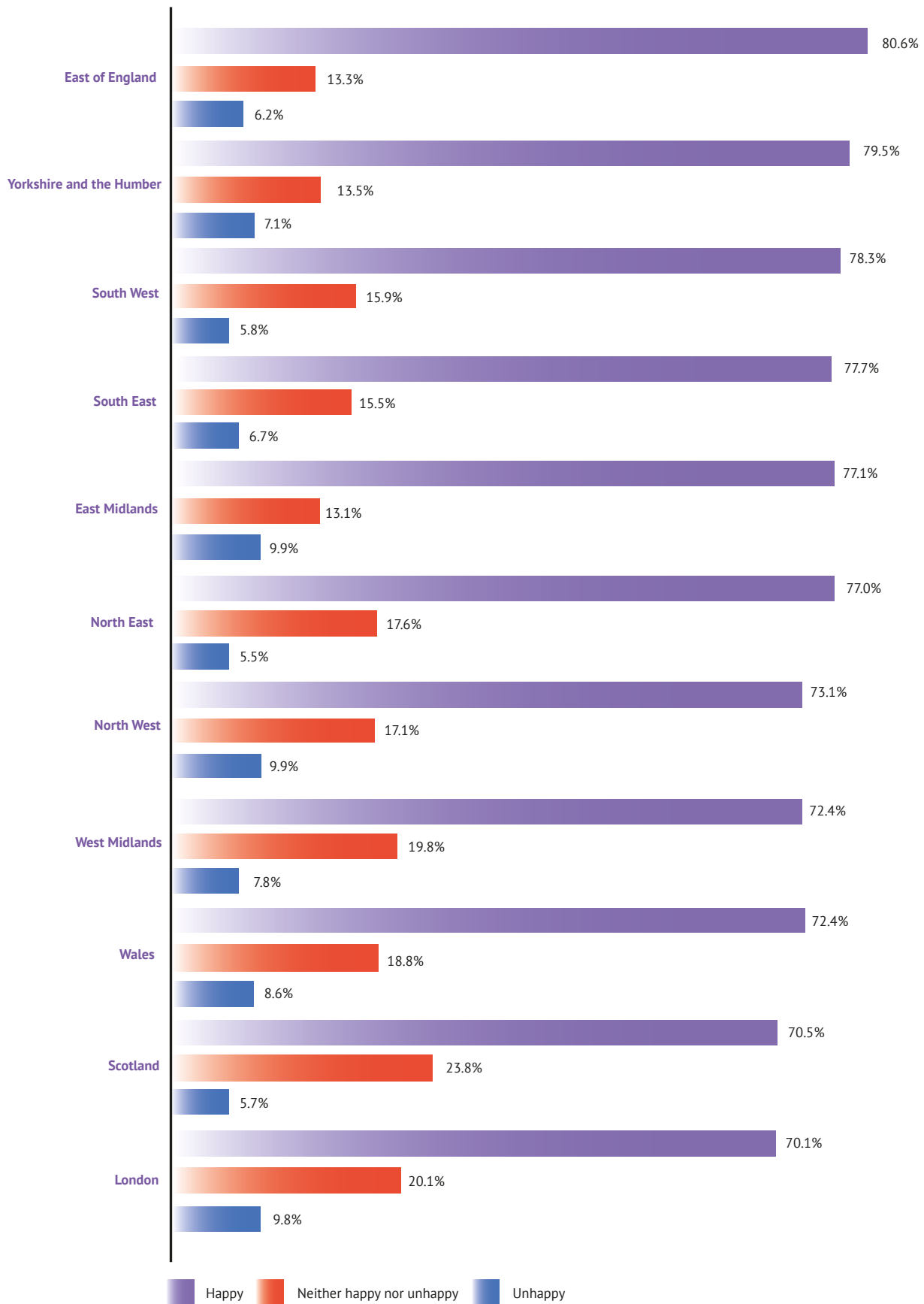
'Buying books for my children is a luxury', by region:



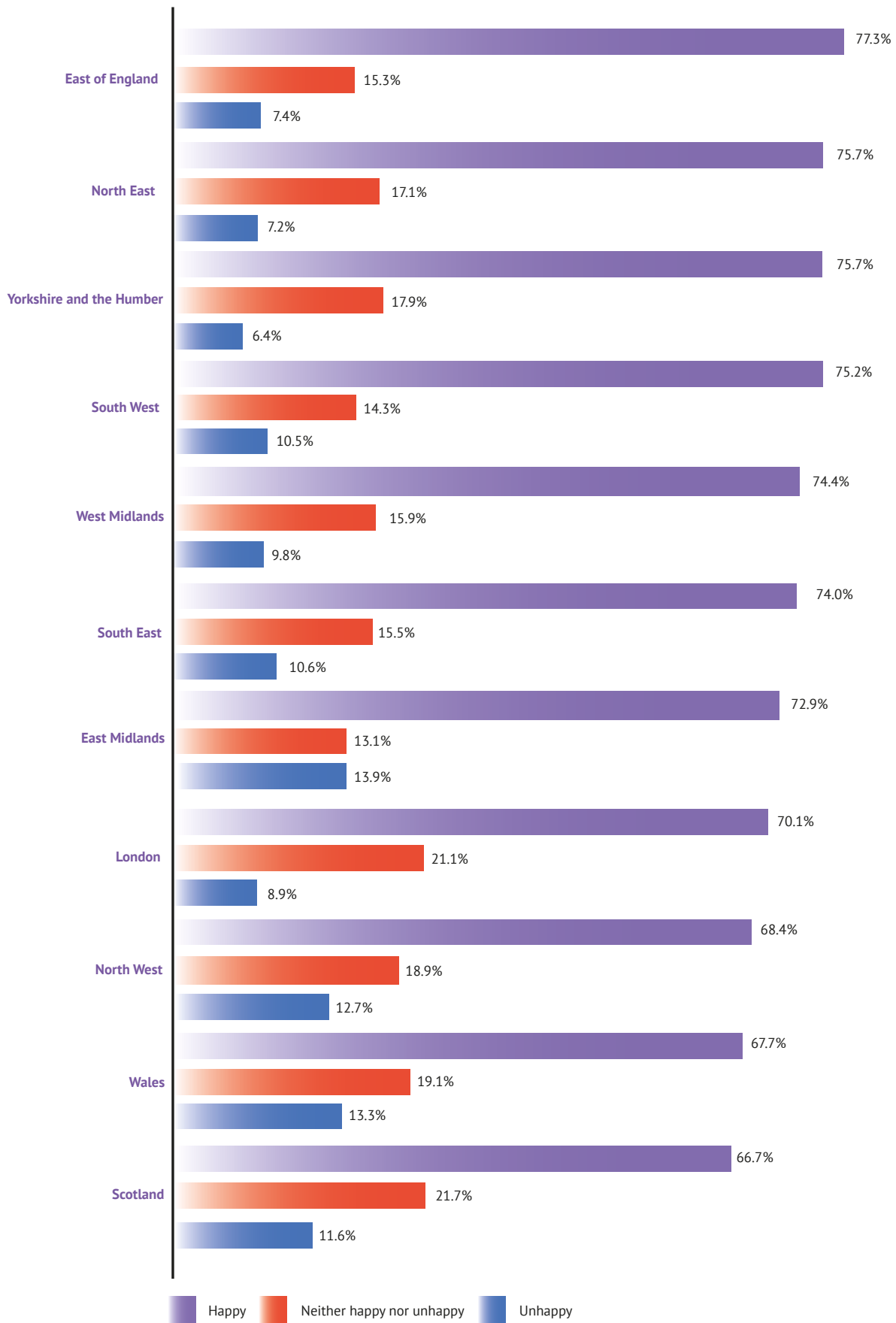
'How happy are you with the number of books available in your child(ren)'s school library?', by region:



'How happy are you with the quality of books available in your child(ren)'s school library?', by region:



'How happy are you with the range of books available in your child(ren)'s school library?', by region:



Note to editors

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 3,057 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 30th December 2022 - 6th January 2023. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all parents in Great Britain with children aged 18 and under.

For certain groups and statistics, 'Don't know' and 'Not applicable' respondents have been removed and percentages rebased.

Acknowledgement

This research would not have been possible without the kind financial contribution from digital bank, Chase.

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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