

Children and young people's book ownership in 2023 A 10-year retrospective

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Introduction

In 2023, more children who received free school meals (FSMs) told us they did not have a book of their own compared with the year before (12.4% in 2023 vs 9.7% in 2022).

Reading for pleasure has lifelong academic and economic benefits (see, e.g., [British Land & WPI Consulting, 2021](#); [Kirsch et al., 2002](#); [Sullivan & Brown, 2015](#)) and children and young people who have books of their own at home report reading more often, and enjoying reading more, than those who do not ([Cole et al., 2022](#)). Research has also found that book ownership is associated with better reading performance ([Clark & Teravainen, 2017](#)); indeed, a 2023 study found it to be one of the top three predictors of children's reading performance, with higher numbers of books in the home associated with higher scores ([Lindorff et al., 2023](#)). Other studies have found that growing up in a home with books can have a lasting impact on life outcomes, with links to increased educational attainment ([Evans et al., 2010](#)) and income in adulthood ([Brunello et al., 2015](#)).

In 2023, the percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said that they didn't have a book of their own at home increased compared with the year before, particularly for those from lower-income homes. While nearly 1 in 10 (9.7%) 8- to 18-year-olds receiving free school meals (FSMs) said they did not have a book of their own in 2022, this year, 1 in 8 (12.4%) told us they did not have a book. This was more than double the percentage of their peers who did not receive FSMs (5.8%). Indeed, the percentage-point (pp) gap in book ownership between children and young people who receive FSMs and their peers who do not (6.6 pp) is now at its largest in a decade.

Pressure on household budgets as a result of increasing food and energy prices has a direct impact on families' ability to support reading at home. In a recent survey, more than 1 in 3 (36.1%) parents who were struggling financially as a result of the cost-of-living crisis told us they were buying fewer books for their children ([National Literacy Trust, 2023](#)). Acknowledging the associations

between book ownership and reading enjoyment, attainment and longer-term outcomes, it is essential that support for book ownership should be targeted at groups with the most to benefit, including children and young people from lower-income backgrounds.

In 2023, 1 in 8 (12.4%) 8- to 18-year-olds receiving free school meals told us they did not have a book of their own.

Method

In 2023, two surveys were made available online, one for children aged 5 to 8 (Year 1 to Year 4, or Primary 2 to Primary 5 for Scotland) and one for children and young people aged 8 to 18 (Year 4 to Year 13, or Primary 5 to Secondary 6 for Scotland). The surveys contained similar questions but the one for the younger age group was shorter and more pictorial. It was up to the teacher to decide which of the surveys their Year 4 pupils completed. 71,351 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 285 schools in the UK participated in these online surveys: 7,285 children were aged 5 to 8 and 64,066 children and young people were aged 8 to 18. Of these, 6,896 children aged 5 to 8 and 50,376 children and young people aged 8 to 18 answered questions about book ownership, which will form the basis of this report.

Key findings from 2023 include:

- In 2023, over 9 in 10 (91.4%) children and young people aged 5 to 18 said that they had a book of their own at home, meaning that 1 in 12 (8.6%) did not.

There were differences by age groups:

- More than 9 in 10 (92.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said in 2023 that they had a book of their own at home, meaning that 1 in 14 (7.1%) did not. The percentage reporting having a book increased slightly between 2016 and 2020, but has decreased since 2021 and is currently at its lowest level for five years.
- Fewer children aged 5 to 8 said they had a book of their own compared with their older peers. In 2023, 4 in 5 (80.8%) children aged 5 to 8 told us they had a book of their own at home, meaning that 1 in 5 (19.2%) did not. This percentage has remained relatively stable since 2019, which was when we first started asking this age group the question.

There were also differences by socioeconomic background, gender and geographical location:

- Twice as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who received free school meals (FSMs) reported not having a book of their own compared with those who did not receive FSMs (12.4% or 1 in 8, vs 5.8% or 1 in 17). Notably, the percentage-point gap in book ownership between children and young people who receive FSMs and their peers who do not (6.6 pp) is at its largest in a decade.
- Slightly more girls than boys aged 8 to 18 said they had a book of their own at home. While this is also true for those aged 5 to 8, the percentage-point gap in book ownership by gender for 5 to 8s is currently the highest it's been for five years (6.2pp).
- While few differences in book ownership were found between English regions for children and young people aged 8 to 18, there were some for those aged 5 to 8. For example, while more than 4 in 5 (84.5%) children aged 5 to 8 in Greater London said that they had a book of their own at home, this decreased to 3 in 4 (73.7%) children in the South East.

Why does book ownership matter?

- Book ownership is associated with reading enjoyment, frequency and confidence. More than three times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said they had a book of their own at home told us they enjoyed reading compared with those who said they did not have a book (46.6% vs 14.8%).
 - This disparity is higher than the one seen for those aged 5 to 8, where 4 in 5 (77.4%) children aged 5 to 8 who told us they had a book of their own said they enjoyed reading, compared with 2 in 3 (66.5%) of those who did not own a book.
 - Almost three times as many book owners aged 8 to 18 said they read daily compared with their peers who did not own a book (30.3% vs. 10.3%).
 - In addition, more children aged 5 to 8 who owned a book said they read daily, with more than half (54.2%) reading every day compared with 2 in 5 (42.6%) children who did not own a book.
 - While just under half (47.7%) of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who did not have a book of their own described themselves as confident readers, this increased to 4 in 5 (80.5%) children and young people who told us they had a book of their own.
 - 81.0% of children aged 5 to 8 who had a book felt they were a good reader, but this decreased to 72.9% for those who did not have a book.
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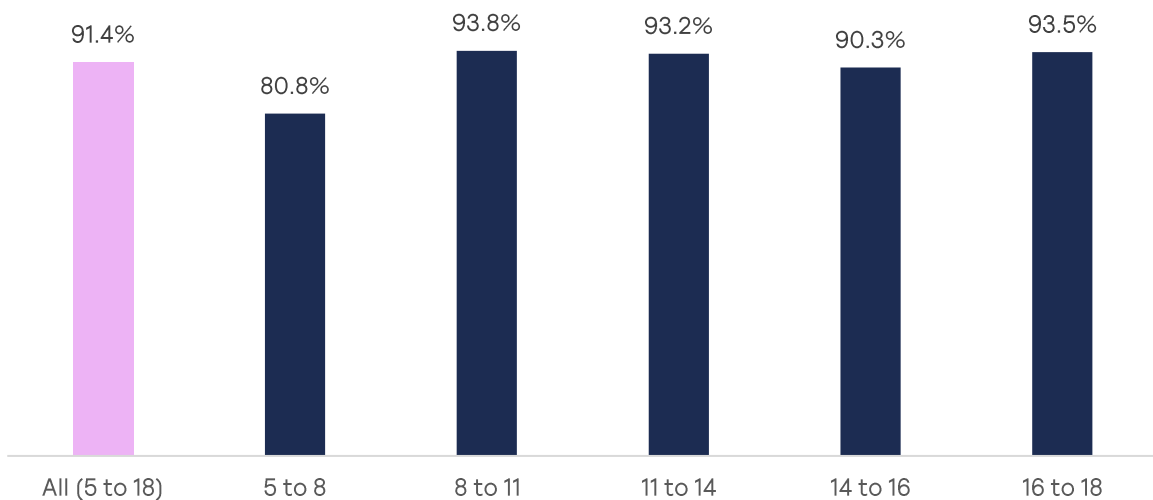
Children and young people’s book ownership in 2023

Book ownership in children and young people aged 5 to 18

More than 9 in 10 (91.4%) children and young people aged 5 to 18 told us in 2023 that they had a book of their own at home, meaning that 8.6% (1 in 12) of those aged 5 to 18 said that they didn’t have their own book.

Book ownership was lowest in the youngest age group (see Figure 1). Just 4 in 5 (80.8%) children aged 5 to 8 told us they had a book of their own compared with more than 9 in 10 children and young people aged 8 to 11 (93.8%), 11 to 14 (93.2%), 14 to 16 (90.3%) and 16 to 18 (93.5%).

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people who told us that they had a book of their own at home in 2023 by age group



Book ownership in children and young people aged 8 to 18

More than 9 in 10 (92.9%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they had a book of their own at home, meaning that 7.1% (1 in 14) 8- to 18-year-olds said that they did not own a book.

As shown in Figure 2, following incremental increases in book ownership levels between 2016 and 2020, the percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said they had a book of their own slightly decreased in recent years and is currently at its lowest level in five years.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who told us that they had a book of their own at home from 2013 to 2023

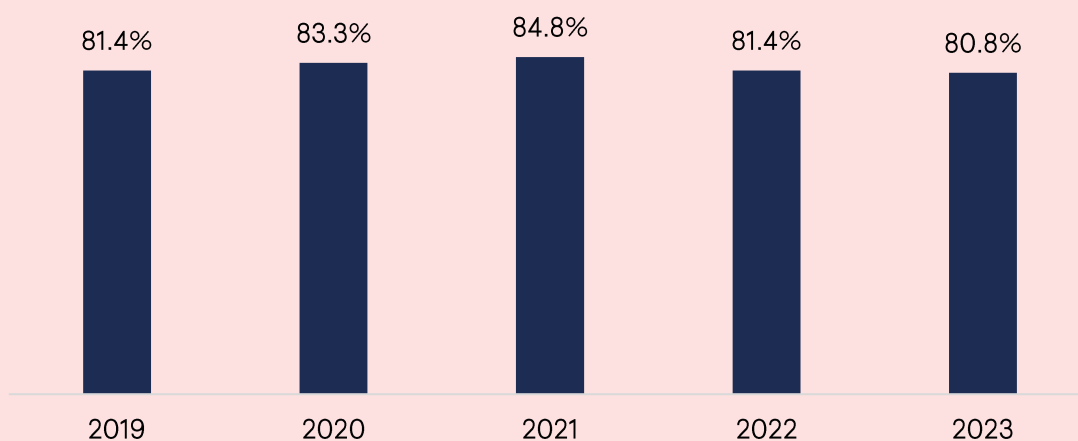


Book ownership in children aged 5 to 8

Compared with their older peers, the percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who told us that they had a book of their own is lower. Generally, around 1 in 5 of this age group tell us that they do not have a book of their own at home, and this percentage has remained relatively stable over the last five years (see Figure 3). The lower levels of book ownership in this age group are concerning given that foundational reading skills, behaviours and attitudes are often being established.

However, following slight increases in reported book ownership in 2020 and 2021, slightly fewer children in this age group (80.8%) said they had a book in 2023, meaning 19.2% did not. This is, by a very slight margin, the highest percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who do not own a book since we first asked this age group in 2019.

Figure 3: Percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who said that they had a book of their own at home between 2019 and 2022



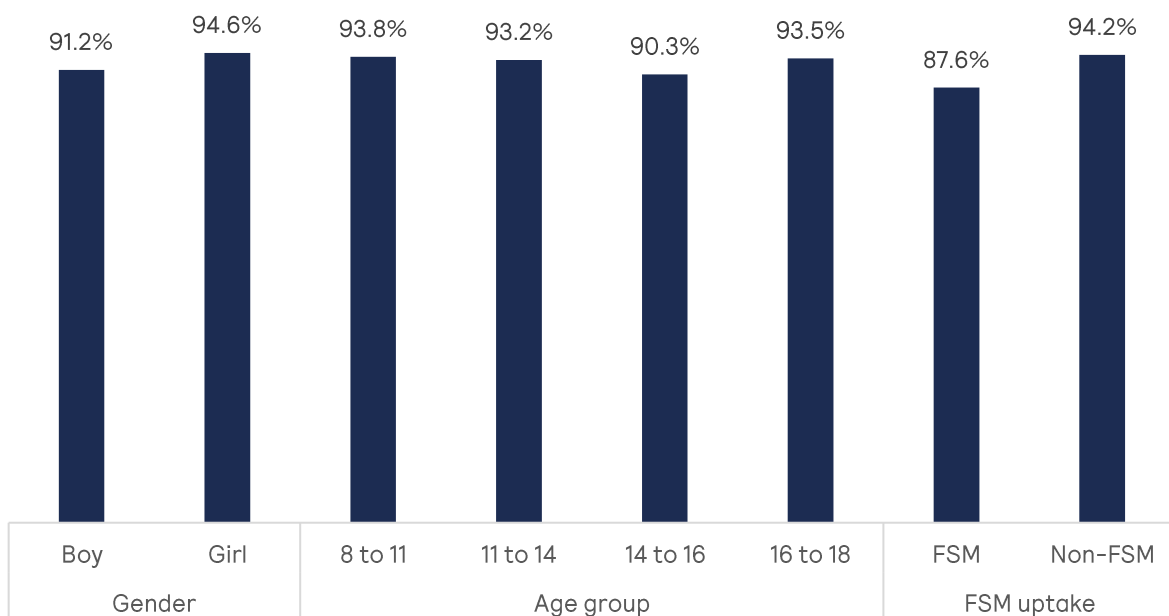
Who had a book of their own at home in 2023?

There was some variation in book ownership in children and young people aged 8 to 18 by gender, age and socio-economic background (see Figure 4)¹. As in previous years, more girls than boys aged 8 to 18 said they had a book of their own at home in 2023, and fewer young people aged 14 to 16 had a book compared with other age groups.

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

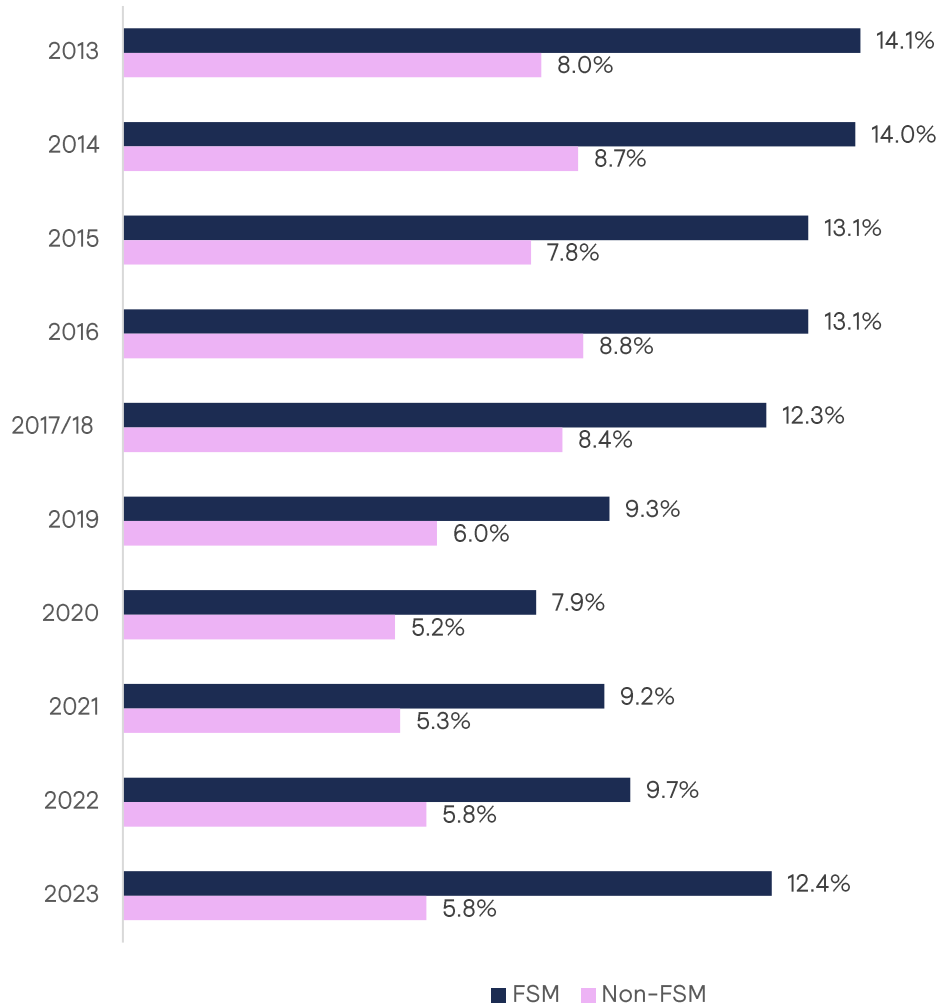
The most pronounced difference, however, related to young people who did and did not receive FSMs, with a 6.6-percentage-point (pp) gap between these groups. While 1 in 17 (5.8%) children and young people who did not receive FSMs said they did not have a book of their own at home, this doubled to 1 in 8 (12.4%) children and young people who received FSMs.

Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said that they had a book of their own at home in 2023 by gender, age and FSM status



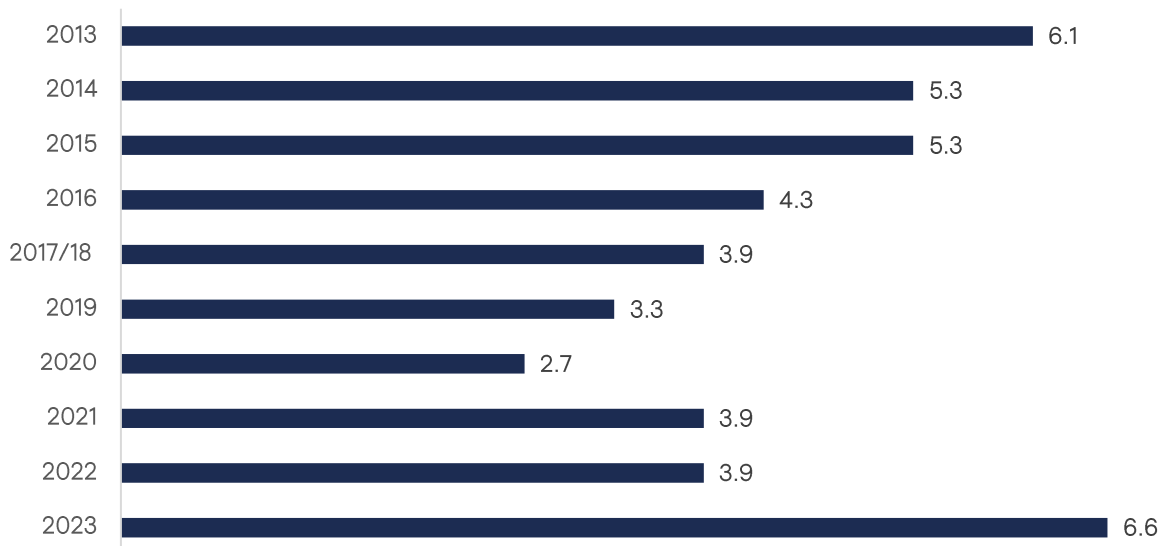
As shown in Figure 5, the percentage of children and young people who received FSMs and did not have a book of their own in 2023 is the highest in six years.

Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said that they did not have a book of their own at home by FSM status between 2013 and 2023



Looking at the data differently shows that the percentage-point gap between children and young people who receive FSMs and their peers who do not, and who don't own a book, is at its largest in a decade (see Figure 6).

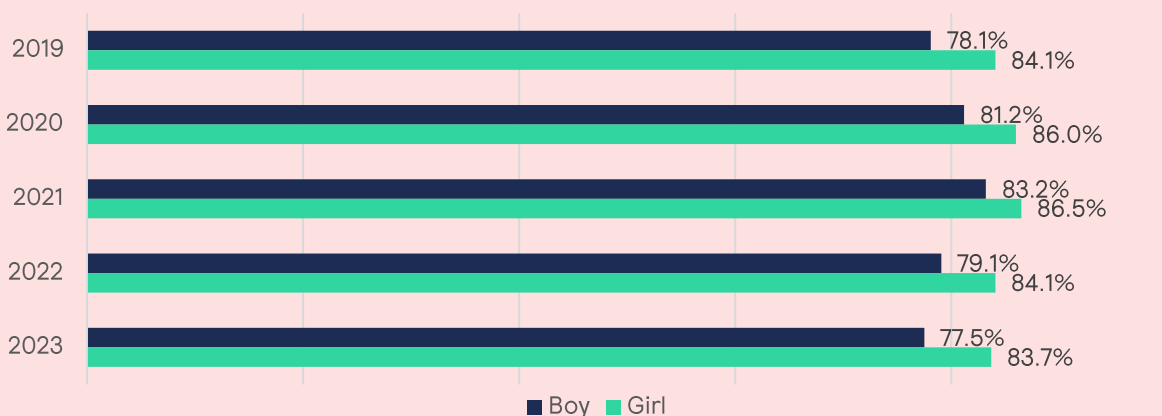
Figure 6: Percentage-point gap between children and young people aged 8 to 18 who had a book of their own at home by FSM status between 2013 and 2023



Who of those aged 5 to 8 had a book of their own at home in 2023?

As with their older peers, more girls than boys aged 5 to 8 reported having a book of their own (83.7% vs. 77.5%) in 2023. This reflects the pattern seen in previous years (see Figure 7), with an average percentage-point gap of 5pp between boys and girls between 2019 and 2023. The gap was at its lowest at 3.3pp in 2021 and is at its highest this year at 6.2pp.

Figure 7: Percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who said that they had a book of their own at home by gender between 2019 and 2023



There was little variation in book ownership across age groups within 5 to 8s. 82.4% of 5- to 6-year-olds said they had a book of their own, compared with 78.4% of 6 to 7s, 81.5% of 7 to 8s and 80.6% of 8 to 9s.

Regional differences in book ownership in 2023

There were also differences in children and young people’s book ownership depending on where in the UK they went to school². As shown in Figure 8, more children and young people aged 8 to 18 who went to school in England said that they had a book of their own at home compared with the other three nations. The percentage for Northern Ireland needs to be treated with caution as only a small number of children and young people from Northern Ireland took part in the survey this year and answered this question (n = 122).

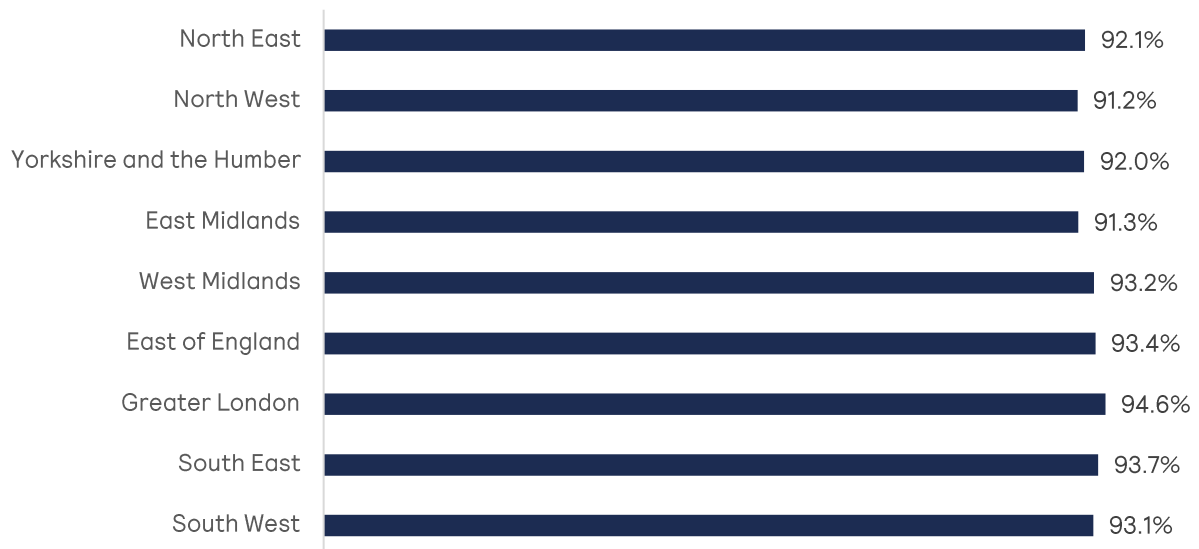
Figure 8: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said that they had a book of their own at home in 2023 by UK nation



Differences in England are further broken down by region in Figure 9. It shows little variation in children and young people’s book ownership across different regions in England. However, slightly more children and young people from Greater London said they had a book of their own at home compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said they had a book of their own came from the North West and East Midlands.

² 48,133 children and young people from England; 882 from Wales; 914 from Scotland; and 122 from Northern Ireland answered the question about book ownership in 2023. The geographical location of 325 children and young people couldn’t be identified.

Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who said that they had a book of their own at home in 2023 by English region



Regional differences in book ownership for those aged 5 to 8

Similarly, few differences were found between nations, with children equally likely to say they had a book of their own whether they were from England (80.5%), Scotland (80.5%) or Wales (82.2%)³. Differences were more noticeable in relation to English regions (see Figure 10), with a 10-percentage-point gap in book ownership between the regions with the highest and lowest percentage of children reporting having a book of their own (Greater London [84.6%] and the South East [73.7%] respectively).

³ No responses were received for this age group from school in Northern Ireland

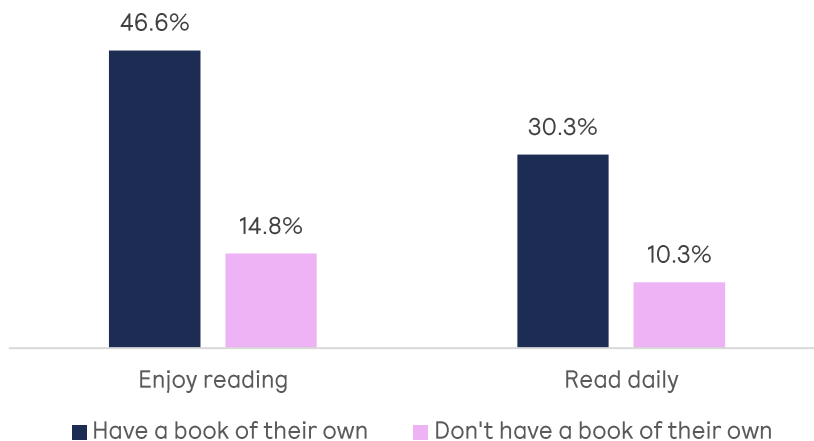
Figure 10: Percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who said that they had a book of their own at home by gender between 2019 and 2023



Book ownership and reading enjoyment, frequency and confidence

Our research has consistently found a link between having a book of your own and increased reading enjoyment and frequency. 2023 was no exception, with more than three times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who had a book of their own at home saying that they enjoyed reading compared with those without a book (46.6% vs 14.8%). Almost three times as many children and young people who had a book also said they read daily (30.3% vs 10.3%; see Figure 11).

Figure 11: Book ownership, reading enjoyment and reading frequency in 2023 for those aged 8 to 18



Conversely, the percentage of children and young people who said they rarely or never read was significantly higher in those who didn't have a book of their own, with four times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who did not have a book of their own at home saying they 'rarely or never' read compared with those who did have a book (50.5% vs. 12.6%).

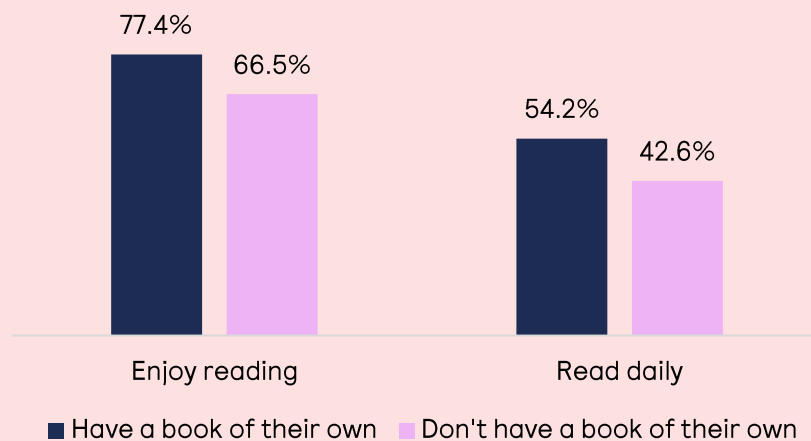
We also found differences in self-reported reading confidence between children and young people who did and did not have a book of their own at home, with just under half (47.7%) of children and young people who did not have a book of their own rating themselves as confident readers compared with 4 in 5 (80.5%) of those who did have a book.

Four times as many 8 to 18s who did not have a book 'rarely or never' read compared with those who did (50.5% vs 12.6%)

Book ownership, reading enjoyment and frequency in those aged 5 to 8

The differences between those who had a book of their own at home and those who hadn't in terms of reading enjoyment and daily reading were less pronounced for children aged 5 to 8. As shown in Figure 12, nearly 4 in 5 (77.4%) children aged 5 to 8 who owned a book said they enjoyed reading compared with 2 in 3 (66.5%) of those who did not own a book. More children who owned a book also said they read every day, with more than half (54.2%) reading daily compared with 2 in 5 (42.6%) of those who did not own a book.

Figure 12: Book ownership, reading enjoyment and reading frequency in 2023 for those aged 5 to 8



Additionally, twice as many children aged 5 to 8 who did not have a book said they 'never' read compared with children who did have a book of their own at home (13.2% vs 6.3%).

While 81.0% of children aged 5 to 8 who had a book felt they were a good reader, this decreased to 72.9% for those who did not have a book.

Summary and discussion

Having ready access to books at home offers children opportunities for regular reading for pleasure that they may otherwise not have. While reading for pleasure is, of course, not confined to books that you own because it includes those that you borrow, a number of studies have found that having a book of your

own at home is associated with a variety of benefits for children and young people's reading engagement, skills and life outcomes. Indeed, a study of a recent international assessment of 10-year-olds' reading (PIRLS) found that book ownership was one of the top three predictors of children's reading performance, with higher numbers of books in the home associated with higher scores (Lindorff et al., 2023).

Asking children and young people about their book ownership provides important insight into which children are more and/or less likely to have a book of their own at home. We have been asking children and young people about this topic for many years, and a look back at the last decade suggests that, after some incremental increases in book ownership, this has taken a downward trend in recent years. Furthermore, book ownership in children and young people from lower-income backgrounds has consistently lagged behind that of their peers from more financially advantaged homes, with the gap at its largest for a decade in 2023.

It is also important to note that a concerning number of children aged 5 to 8 say they do not have a book of their own at home. At an age at which foundational reading skills, behaviours and attitudes are often being established, around 1 in 5 of this age group tell us that they do not have a book of their own.

Pressure on household budgets due to increasing food and energy prices has a direct impact on families' ability to support reading at home. School and public libraries play a crucial role in facilitating and encouraging children and young people's reading for pleasure. At the same time, we must acknowledge the associations between book ownership and reading enjoyment, attainment and longer-term outcomes. Support for book ownership should therefore be targeted at groups with the most to benefit, including younger children and those from lower-income backgrounds, allowing them the same opportunities as their peers to enjoy reading their own books at home.



More than three times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who had a book of their own at home said that they enjoyed reading compared with those without a book (46.6% vs 14.8%), and almost three times as many of those with books said they read daily (30.3% vs. 10.3%).



Our sincere thanks to all of the schools that participated in our survey this year. We couldn't do it without you!

About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

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