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# Children and young people's reading in 2024

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# Introduction

2024 stands out for all the wrong reasons when it comes to children and young people's reading: only 1 in 3 children and young people said that they enjoyed reading in their free time and only 1 in 5 told us that they read something daily in their free time. Last year we talked about reading having hit a crisis point when levels were far less stark than they are now.

Analysis of over 76,000 responses by children and young people to our Annual Literacy Survey in early 2024 shows that just 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time. This is by far the lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since we began measuring this metric in 2005. It is also the steepest year-on-year drop recorded, with an 8.8-percentage-point decline in reading enjoyment compared with 2023, and part of a broad downward trend since 2016 when almost 2 in 3 children and young people said they enjoyed reading.

Reading frequency is similarly at a historic low, with only 1 in 5 (20.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 telling us they read something daily in their free time. Again, what is particularly noticeable is the extent of the decline, a drop of 7.5 percentage points from last year equating to the second steepest drop on record.

Within these shocking statistics, three observations particularly stand out. The first of those is the plight of boys. The gender gap in reading enjoyment nearly tripled from a 4.8-percentage-point difference in 2023 to a 12.3-percentage-point difference in 2024, largely because of a greater drop of reading enjoyment in boys. When it comes to reading frequency, the gender gap remained largely consistent with previous years, but just 17.5% of boys reading daily is by far the lowest we have recorded.

Secondly, analysis by age group shows that this is a particular crisis for secondary school pupils. For instance, while for 8- to 11-year-olds, the proportion of children who said they enjoyed reading in their free time dropped from 56.2% in 2023 to 51.9% in 2024, for 11- to 14-year-olds the drop was over twice as much: from 40.4% to 30.7%. With daily reading levels, those aged 14 to 16 saw a particularly sharp drop of 10.9 percentage points.

Thirdly, we see a narrowing of the free school meal (FSM) gap. Unfortunately, rather than a levelling up, we are witnessing a levelling down, with the drop in reading enjoyment and reading frequency being more pronounced for those who don't receive free school meals.

So, are there any green shoots of optimism we can cling to in this report? To begin with, reading frequency and reading enjoyment are undoubtedly linked. For those aged 8 to 18, over eight times as many young people who enjoyed reading in their free time also said that they read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading. It seems that encouraging a child to enjoy reading will also encourage them to read more frequently and vice versa.

Secondly, school can clearly have an impact. Although this report primarily looks at reading enjoyment and frequency in free time, our Annual Literacy Survey also asks about reading in school. We can see that slightly more children and young people said that they enjoyed reading at school compared with at home: notably, the gender divide here was also far lower, and slightly more children receiving free school meals said they enjoyed reading at school when compared with those who didn't receive them.

Thirdly, there is a demonstrable connection between reading skill and positive reading attitudes and behaviours. Using a subset of schools who agreed to share their participating pupils' reading-skill data with us, we can see that children and young people who enjoyed reading had higher average (mean) standardised reading scores than those who didn't enjoy reading. The same was true when looking at daily reading.

We will explore all of these findings, and more, over the coming pages. The main body of this report will examine:

- Children and young people's reading enjoyment and reading frequency in detail, breaking down the data by characteristics such as age, gender, location and free school meal status
- What motivates children to read by grouping them into three types of readers: curious, mindful and social
- The connection that reading enjoyment and frequency have with reading skill, by using a subset of 3,861 children from schools willing to share Star Reading scores

We will finish by discussing the wider context of this report and answering why, in 2024, children and young people's reading behaviour and attitudes are so important.

## **Method**

### **About the Annual Literacy Survey**

The Annual Literacy Survey, run annually since 2010, includes questions about reading, writing and listening as well as about children and young people's home learning environment and access to resources at home. Questions about speaking were added to the survey in 2024. Other topical questions change each year, with the 2024 survey containing questions about AI.

Three surveys were available in 2024: one for children aged 5 to 8 (Year 1 to Year 4, or Primary 2 to Primary 5 for Scotland), one for children and young people aged 8 to 16 (Year 4 to Year 11, or Primary 5 to Secondary 5 for Scotland) and one for those aged 16 plus. The surveys contained similar questions but the one for the younger age group was shorter and more pictorial, while the one for those aged 16 and over had additional questions more relevant for that age group.

The 2024 survey contained 23 questions for those aged 5 to 8, 48 questions for those aged 8 to 16, and 42 questions for those aged 16 and over. On occasion, the survey has been conducted with schools that have also provided reading attainment data, allowing us to explore associations between reading engagement and skills. However, the main foci of the survey are the affective and behavioural aspects of reading, writing, speaking and listening, including young people's enjoyment, attitudes, behaviour, confidence and motivation, which we believe should be valued in their own right alongside any interaction with attainment.

Running from January to the middle of March every year, schools are recruited from the previous autumn onwards. We recruit schools through our networks, newsletters and social media followers as well as through partner organisations such as World Book Day and Renaissance. Participating schools receive their own school-specific report as a thank you, which means that they can compare their responses with the wider results when we publish the national reports.

# The 2024 sample

**76,131**

children and young people aged 5 to 18 from the UK participated between 3 January and 14 March 2024.

## Gender

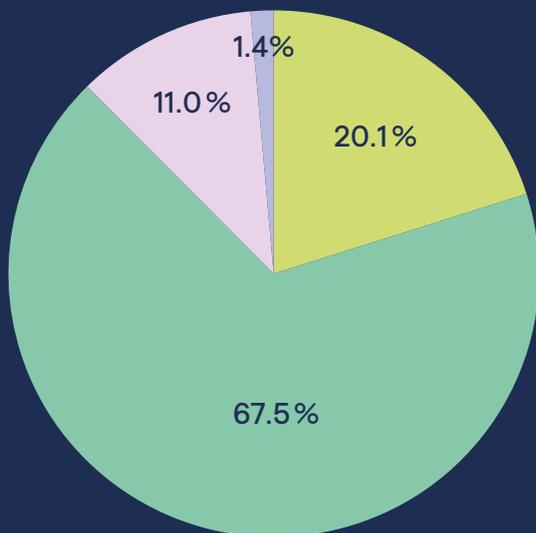
48.6% boy

47.5% girl

3.3% would rather not say

0.6% described themselves another way

## Free school meals (FSM) status



■ FSM      ■ Non-FSM  
■ Don't know      ■ Prefer not to say

## Age of respondents

6.0% 5 to 8 years

26.8% 8 to 11 years

39.8% 11 to 14 years

24.0% 14 to 16 years

3.5% 16 to 18 years

**405**

schools across the UK participated in 2024.

28.7% 5-11s receiving FSM

17.6% 11-18s receiving FSM

## Region in England

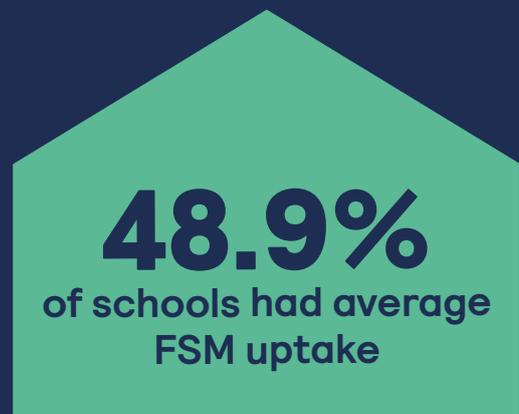
- 8.9% North East
- 12.1% North West
- 9.5% Yorkshire and the Humber
- 8.4% East Midlands
- 12.7% West Midlands
- 13.1% East of England
- 10.6% Greater London
- 14.0% South East
- 10.7% South West

## Type of school

- 55.4% Academy
- 5.1% Foundation School
- 19.4% Community School
- 5.1% Free School
- 2.3% Other Independent School
- 0.1% PRU
- 4.9% Voluntary aided
- 1.5% Voluntary controlled
- 1.2% Other

## School location

- 67.7% Urban
- 16.6% Rural
- 9.6% Coastal



# Key findings

## Reading enjoyment in free time

The number of children and young people who enjoy reading in their free time continues to decline:

- Just 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2024.
- Reading enjoyment levels have decreased by 8.8 percentage points over the past year, making this the lowest recorded level since we began asking children and young people the question in 2005 (when 1 in 2 told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time).
- Enjoying reading in free time in 2024 was associated with gender and age: more girls than boys (40.5% vs 28.2%), more children aged 5 to 8 (66.5%) and those aged 8 to 11 (51.9%) than those aged 11 to 14 (30.7%), those aged 14 to 16 (29.7%) and those aged 16 to 18 (40.0%) said they enjoyed reading. Roughly the same percentage of children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs; 33.9%) said that they enjoyed reading as their peers who didn't receive FSMs (34.6%).
- In 2024, the gender gap nearly tripled compared with the previous year, increasing from a 4.8-percentage-point difference in 2023 to a 12.3-percentage-point difference in 2024. This is largely because of a greater drop in reading enjoyment in boys (12.3 percentage points) than in girls (4.8 percentage points).
- While reading enjoyment levels have dropped regardless of age group over the past year, the drop in reading enjoyment was more pronounced for those aged 11 to 14 (9.7 percentage points) and those aged 14 to 16 (11.1 percentage points) than those aged 8 to 11 (4.3 percentage points). Indeed, any over-time gains we reported last year for those aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16 have been eroded immediately, resulting in the lowest levels of enjoyment we have seen for these age groups over the past 19 years.
- Reading enjoyment levels have dropped over the past year regardless of whether children and young people received FSMs or not. However, the drop in reading enjoyment was more pronounced for those who didn't receive FSMs (9.2 percentage points) than for those who received FSMs (5.6 percentage points), resulting in near identical reading enjoyment levels for both in 2024. The only time the gap had been smaller was in 2016 when it had closed completely.
- There were regional differences in reading enjoyment across England, with levels being highest in the West Midlands (39.5%) and Greater London (38.8%) and lowest in the South East (30.8%).

**1 in 3**

**(34.6%) 8 to 18-year-olds told us in early 2024 that they enjoyed reading in their free time. This is by far the lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since 2005.**

## Enjoying reading in free time versus at school

More children and young people enjoy reading at school than in their free time – but not by much:

- Slightly more children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading at school (40.5%) than in their free time (34.6%). While both levels have decreased since last year, the drop in levels of reading enjoyment in free time (8.8 percentage points) was more pronounced than the drop in reading enjoyment at school (4.1 percentage points).
- Both types of reading enjoyment were moderately positively related ( $r = .439$ ). It is perhaps worth noting that last year, this correlation had been much stronger ( $r = .626$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed reading in one setting also enjoyed reading in the other.
- Contrary to what we saw for reading enjoyment in free time, an almost similar percentage of boys and girls said that they enjoyed reading at school. Also contrary to what we saw for reading enjoyment in free time, slightly more children and young people who said that they received FSMs told us that they enjoyed reading at school. As we saw with reading enjoyment in free time, more of those aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoyed reading in school compared with the other age groups.
- More children and young people from the North East said that they enjoyed reading at school, while the smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed writing came from the South East.

## Daily reading in free time

The number of children and young people who read daily in their free time has decreased significantly:

- Only 1 in 5 (20.5%) 8 to 18-year-olds told us that they read something daily in their free time in 2024.
- While daily reading levels have fluctuated over the past 19 years, they decreased by 7.5 percentage points in the last year alone. This means that we recorded the lowest daily reading level in 2024, with levels nearly halving since we began asking children and young people about their reading habits in 2005.
- More girls than boys said that they read something daily in their free time in 2024, regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or 8 to 18. Levels of daily reading decreased with age, with over twice as many children aged 5 to 8 saying that they read something in their free time daily compared with those aged 11 to 16. As we saw with reading enjoyment in free time, roughly the same percentage of children and young people who received FSMs said that they read daily in their free time as their peers who didn't receive FSMs.
- More girls than boys read something daily in their free time in 2024 as well as in the years before. While there have been variations in specific years, the gender gap in daily reading has largely remained the same over the past 19 years, only marginally decreasing from a 7-percentage-point gap in 2005 to a 5.7-percentage-point difference in 2024.
- In 2024, daily reading levels decreased across all age groups, with a particularly sharp drop for those aged 14 to 16 (10.9 percentage points), resulting in the lowest levels of daily reading we have ever recorded for each of the three age groups.
- Daily reading levels have dropped over the past year regardless of whether children and young people received FSMs or not. However, the drop was more pronounced for those who didn't receive FSMs (8.2 percentage points) than for those who received FSMs (4.8 percentage points), resulting in near-identical daily reading levels for both in 2024. The only time the gap had been smaller was in 2019 when it had closed almost completely.
- More children and young people from Greater London and the West Midlands told us that they read daily in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they read daily in their free time came from the East Midlands and the South East.

- Reading enjoyment in free time and daily reading in free time were linked ( $r = .684$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed reading read more frequently in their free time. Indeed, over eight times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time also said that they read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading. This relationship was less strong for those aged 5 to 8.

**1 in 5**

**(20.5%) 8 to 18-year-olds told us they read daily in their free time, a decrease of 7.5 percentage points in the last year alone.**

### **What motivated children and young people to read in 2024 (ages 8 to 18 only)?**

Children and young people read to support their mental wellbeing and their curiosity, but many also read for social action.

We grouped children and young people's motivations to read into three categories: curious reader, mindful reader and social reader.

- The curious readers included 1 in 2 children and young people who read to learn new words (51.8%) or new things (50.9%). 1 in 3 of this group also said that reading helped them understand the views of others (32.8%) and helped them learn about other cultures (32.4%).
- The mindful readers included those who read because it helped them relax (56.6%) or those where reading made them feel happy (41.0%). Around 1 in 4 also said that reading made them feel confident (26.0%) or helped them with problems (22.6%).
- The social readers included those who read because it helped them learn more about the issues and causes they cared about (24.1%) and those where reading helped them feel connected to the world (20.7%). 1 in 10 also read because it helped them spend time with others (10.2%).
- While a similar percentage of boys and girls were curious (43.0% vs 44.8%) and social (38.9% vs 38.1%) readers, slightly more girls (35.5%) than boys (30.3%) were mindful readers.
- Additionally, more of those aged 8 to 11 and those who received free school meals were found in each of the three categories.

## The link with reading skill (ages 8 to 14 only)

In 2024, we worked with a subset of schools who also agreed to share participating pupils' reading-skill data with us. Overall, we were able to match survey and reading-skill (Star Reading) data for 3,861 children and young people aged 8 to 14. This allowed us to show that in terms of reading enjoyment:

- Children and young people who enjoyed reading (n = 1,211; M = 109.13) had higher average (mean) standardised reading scores than children and young people who didn't enjoy reading (n = 2,593; M = 102.65). This difference was statistically significant.
- More children and young people who didn't enjoy reading read below the average (9.4% vs. 5.0%) and fewer read above the average (15.7% vs. 34.2%) compared with their peers who enjoyed reading.



We also found similar relationships with daily reading:

- Children and young people who read daily (n = 789; M = 109.49) had higher average (mean) standardised reading scores than children and young people who didn't read daily (n = 3,026; M = 103.35). This difference was statistically significant.
- More children and young people who didn't read daily read below the average (9.0% vs. 5.1%) and fewer read above the average (17.7% vs. 36.4%) compared with their peers who read daily.

# Reading in 2024

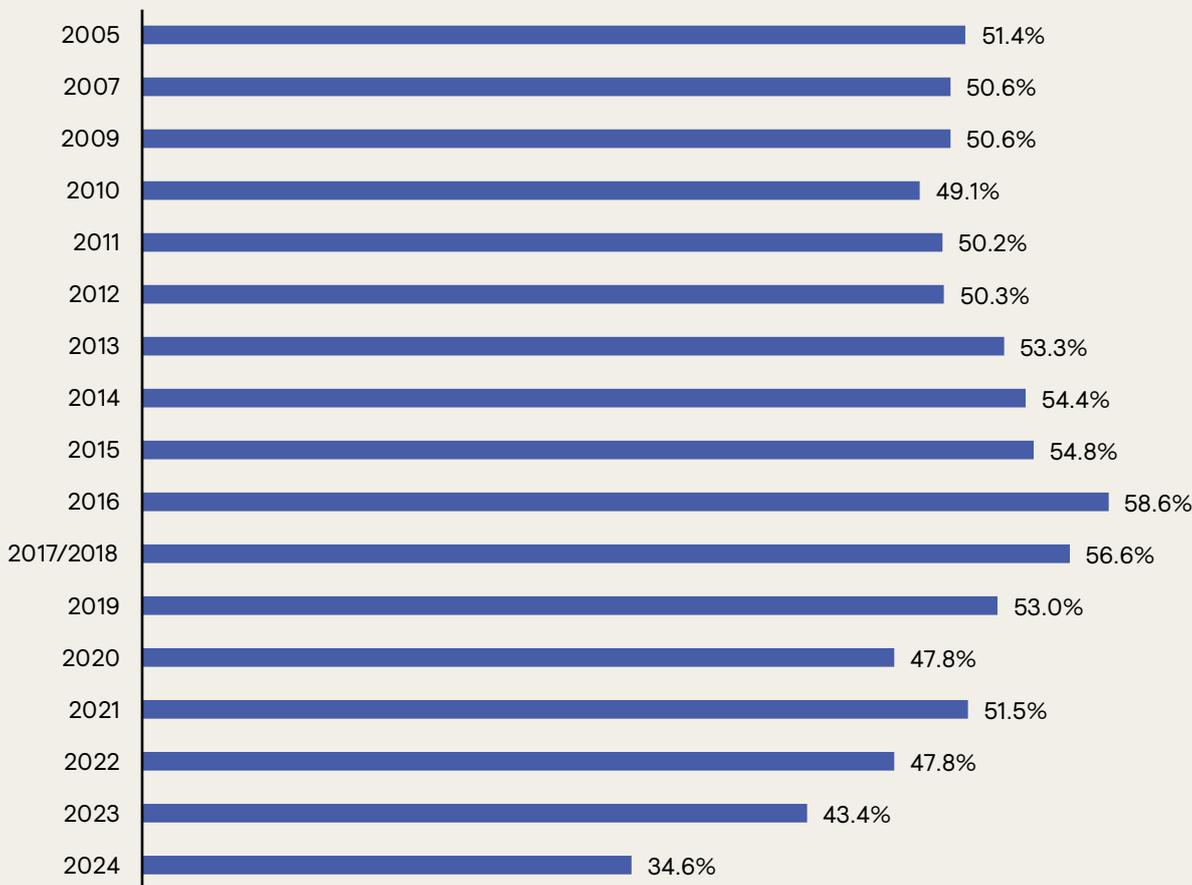
This report focuses on the reading children and young people do in their free time, although we also ask a question about the reading they do at school. Before they answered questions on reading, they were reminded that by reading “we mean books, magazines, newspapers, comics or anything you might read on a screen”.

## Enjoying reading in free time over time

We have been tracking the reading enjoyment levels of children and young people aged 8 to 18 since 2005 and, in 2024, we recorded the lowest level to date for this age group (see Figure 1), with just 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying that they enjoyed reading in their free time.

Figure 1 shows the variability of reading enjoyment levels of those aged 8 to 18<sup>1</sup> over time. After hovering around the 1 in 2 mark for the first few years, reading enjoyment peaked in 2016 when nearly 3 in 5 told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time. Levels dropped to a then all-time low in 2020, which coincided with a period just before the first national lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. Levels rose somewhat during another national lockdown in early 2021 but, by 2022, levels had dropped back to those last seen in early 2020. 2023 set a new all-time-low record for this age group, which has now been surpassed in 2024, with reading enjoyment levels dropping by 8.8 percentage points over the past year alone.

**Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time either very much or quite a lot from 2005 to 2024**

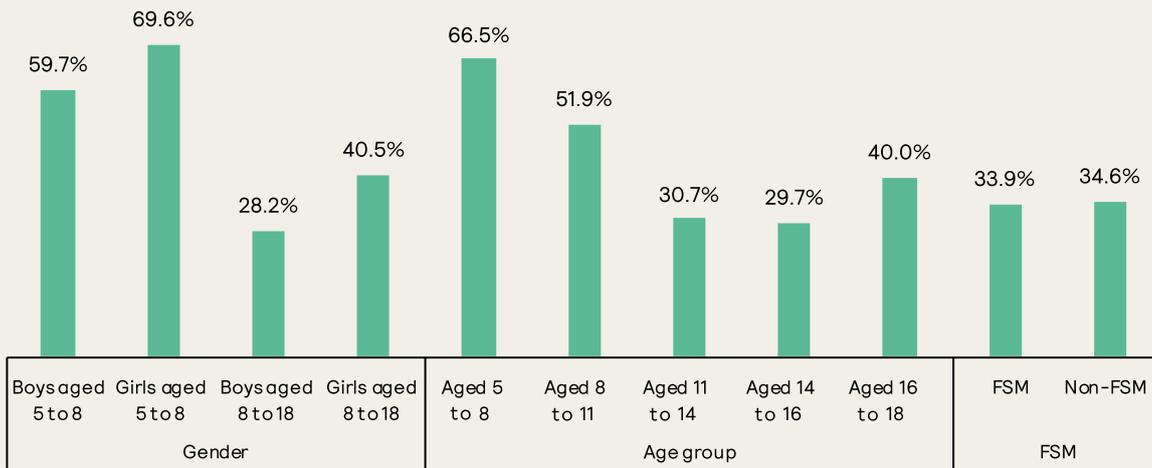


<sup>1</sup> We didn't start collecting information from 5- to 8-year-olds until 2019. For comparison-over-time purposes this analysis only contains data for children and young people aged 8 to 18.

## Reading enjoyment in free time by gender, age group and free school meal uptake

As shown in Figure 2, more girls than boys said that they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2024 regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or aged 8 to 18. Figure 2 also shows that reading enjoyment declines with age, with 2 in 3 of those aged 5 to 8 saying that they enjoyed reading compared with 1 in 2 of those aged 8 to 11. Only 3 in 10 of those aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16 said the same. However, levels recovered somewhat for those aged 16 and above, with 2 in 5 saying that they enjoyed reading. The difference in reading enjoyment by whether or not children and young people received FSMs, our proxy of socioeconomic background, was negligible, with a similar percentage saying that they enjoyed reading in 2024.

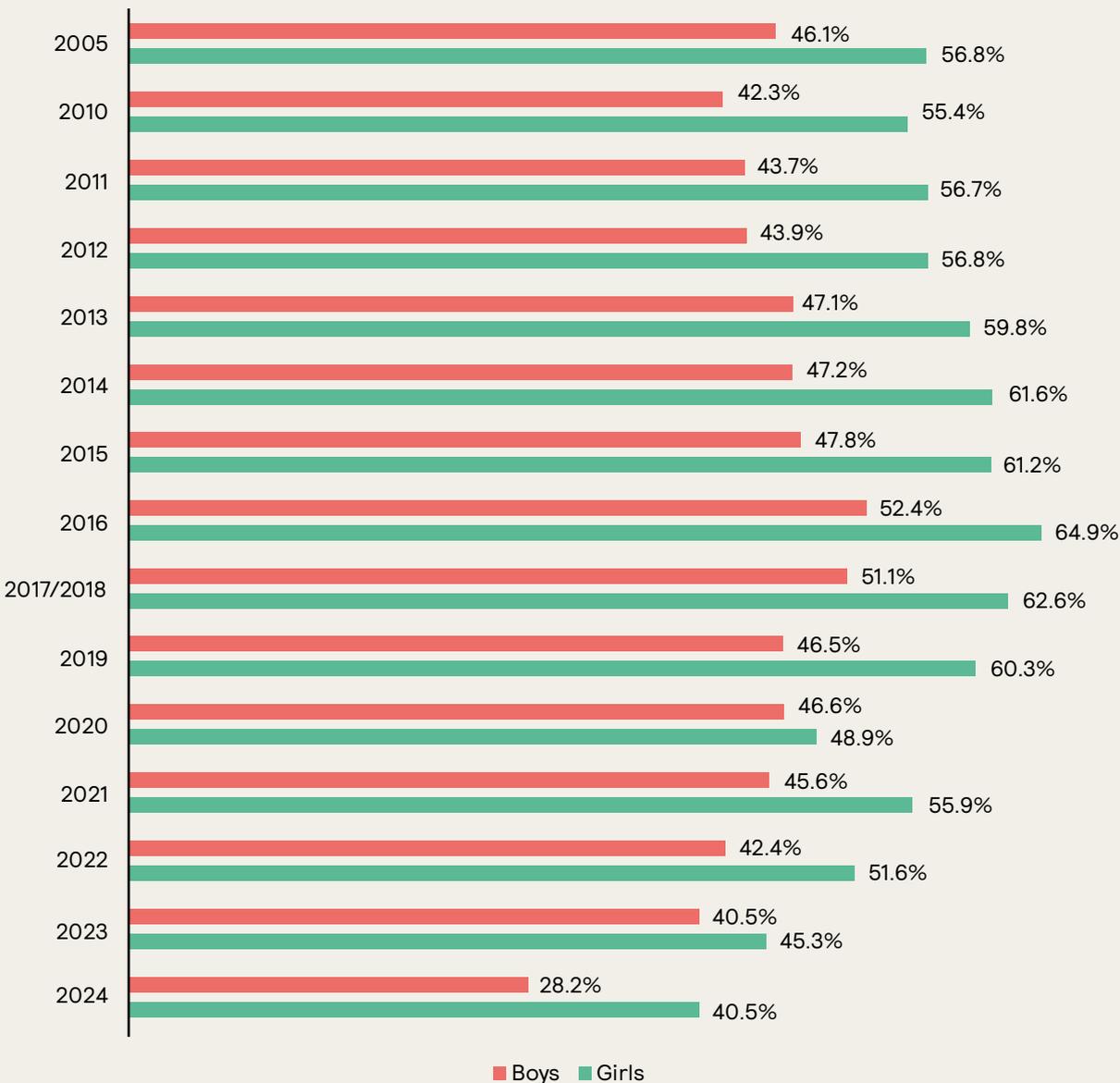
**Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time in 2024 by gender, age group and free school meal uptake (8 to 18s only)**



### Comparison of free-time reading enjoyment levels over time by gender, age group and FSM uptake

In 2024, more girls than boys aged 8 to 18 told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time. Figure 3 shows that there have been notable changes over the past year as well as over time. Last year we reported the gender gap in reading enjoyment had halved between 2005 and 2023, reducing from a 10.7-percentage-point difference in 2005 to a 4.8-percentage-point difference in 2023. Indeed, in 2023, the gender gap in reading enjoyment was one of the lowest we had seen in the past 18 years, largely because of a greater drop in reading enjoyment in girls than in boys in 2023, a finding that mirrored a trend also seen more globally (see PIRLS, 2023). In 2024, the gender gap increased again – in fact it nearly tripled – from a 4.8-percentage-point difference in 2023 to a 12.3-percentage-point difference in 2024, largely because of a greater drop in reading in boys (12.3 percentage points) than in girls (4.8 percentage points).

**Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time by gender from 2005 to 2024**



As mentioned earlier, in 2024, fewer young people aged 11 to 14 and aged 14 to 16 enjoyed reading compared with their primary-aged peers. While reading enjoyment levels have dropped regardless of age group compared with the previous year, the drop in reading enjoyment was more pronounced for those aged 11 to 14 (9.7 percentage points) and 14 to 16 (11.1 percentage points) than for those aged 8 to 11 (4.3 percentage points; see Figure 4). Indeed, any over-time gains we reported last year for those aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16 have already been eroded, resulting in the lowest levels of enjoyment we have evidenced for these age groups over the past 19 years.

**Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time by age group from 2005 to 2024**

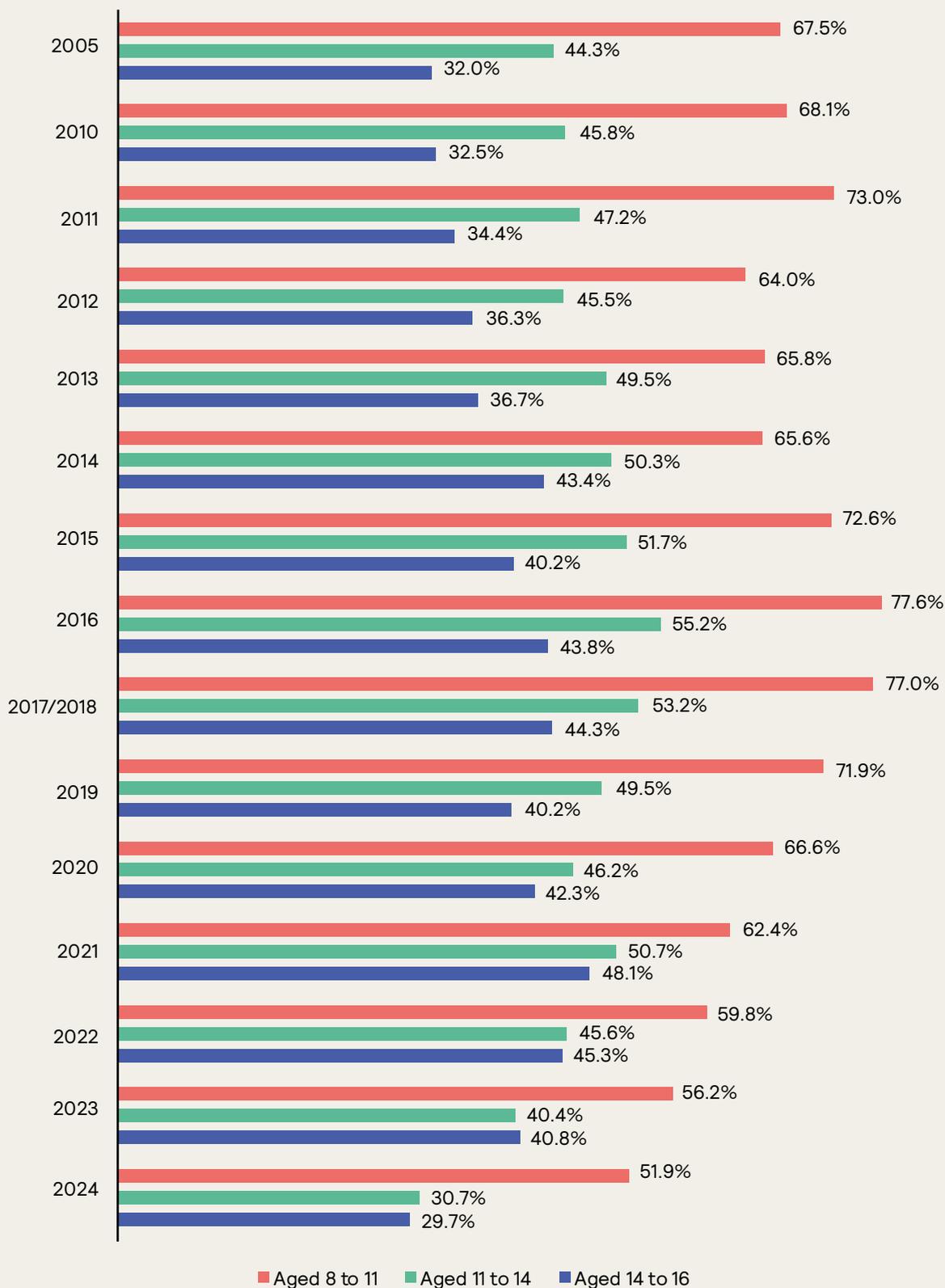
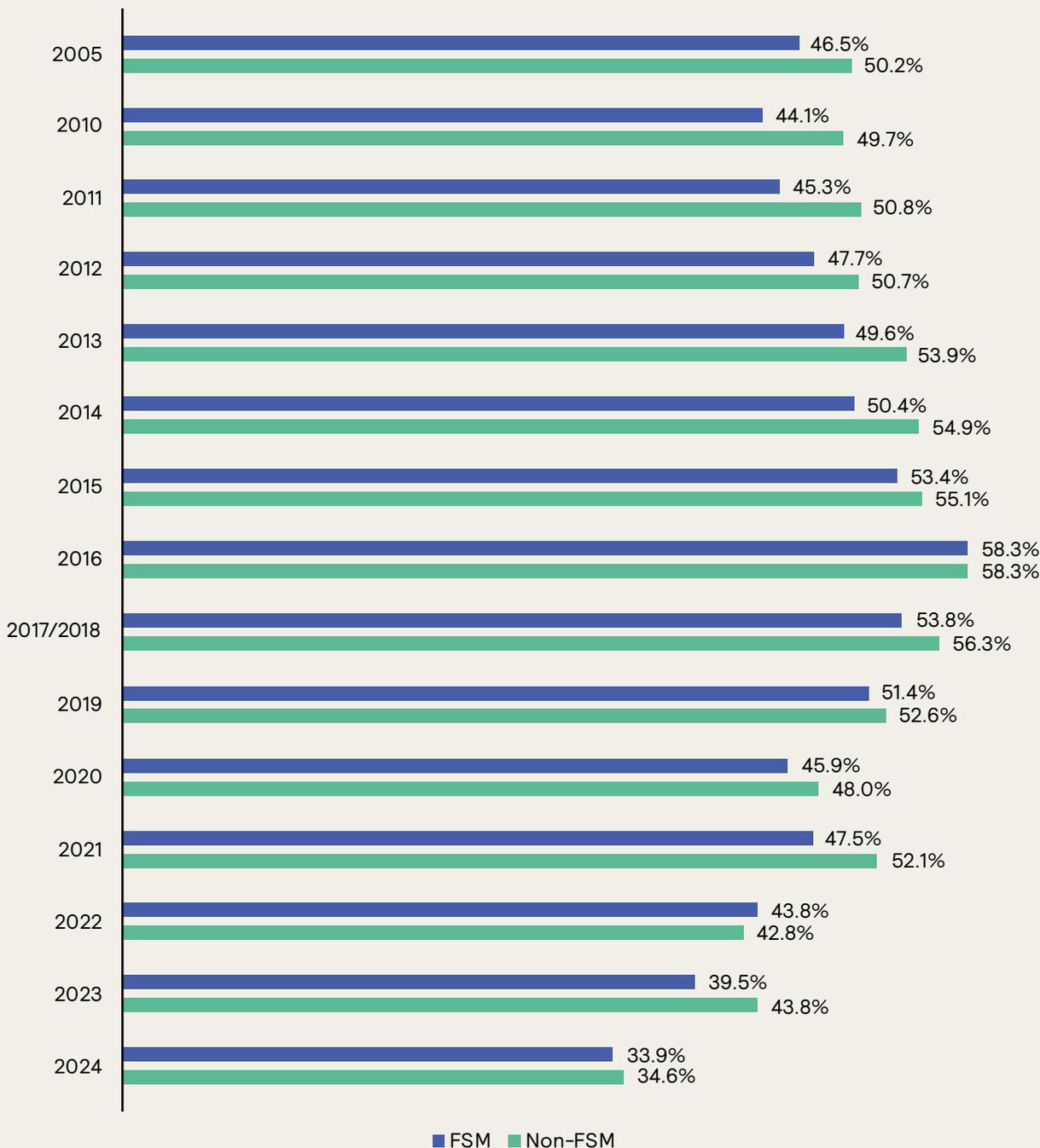


Figure 5 shows that reading enjoyment levels have dropped over the past year regardless of whether children and young people received FSMs or not. However, the drop in reading enjoyment was more pronounced for those who didn't receive FSMs (9.2 percentage points) than for those who received FSMs (5.6 percentage points), resulting in near identical reading enjoyment levels for both in 2024. The only time the gap has been smaller was in 2016 when it had closed completely.

**Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time by FSM uptake between 2005 and 2024**



## Reading enjoyment in free time and the interplay between gender, age and FSM uptake

Looking at the interplay between gender, age group and FSM uptake, Table 1 shows that boys aged 14 to 16 least enjoyed reading in their free time. It also shows that fewer boys than girls enjoyed reading in their free time in 2024 regardless of whether they received FSMs or not.

*Table 1: Reading enjoyment in 2024 by gender, age group and FSM uptake*

	Boys	Girls
Aged 8 to 11	41.0%	54.0%
Aged 11 to 14	26.2%	35.0%
Aged 14 to 16	21.6%	36.9%
Aged 16 to 18	26.9%	50.0%
FSM	28.3%	39.0%
Non-FSM	28.0%	40.8%

## Reading enjoyment in free time by geographical region in England

There were also differences in how much children and young people enjoyed reading in their free time depending on where in England they went to school. Figure 6 shows that more children and young people from the West Midlands and Greater London said that they enjoyed reading in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed reading came from the South East, East Midlands and East of England.

*Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time in 2024 by region in England*

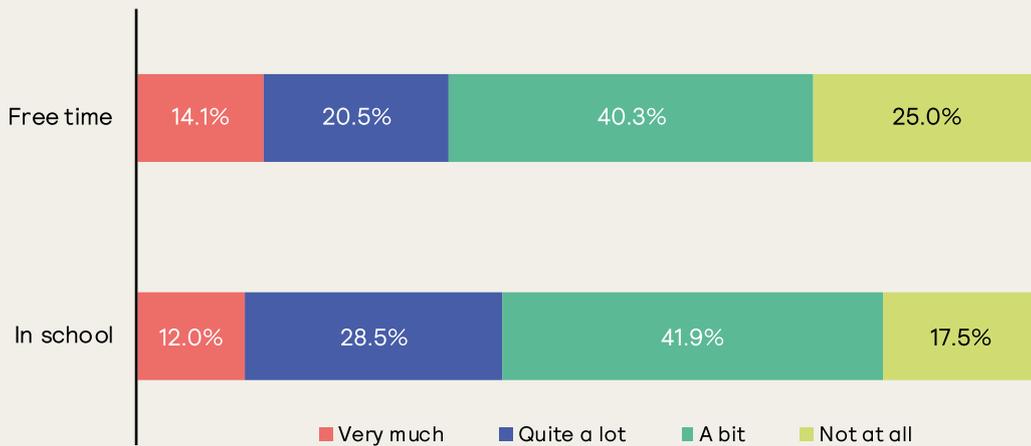


## Reading enjoyment in free time versus enjoyment of reading in school time

Since 2023, the Annual Literacy Survey has also included a question to see how children and young people’s enjoyment of reading in their free time compares with the reading they do at school.

Figure 7 shows that slightly more children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading at school (40.5%) than in their free time (34.6%). While both levels have decreased since last year, it is perhaps worth noting that the drop in levels of reading enjoyment in free time (8.8 percentage points) was more pronounced than the drop in reading enjoyment at school (4.1 percentage points).

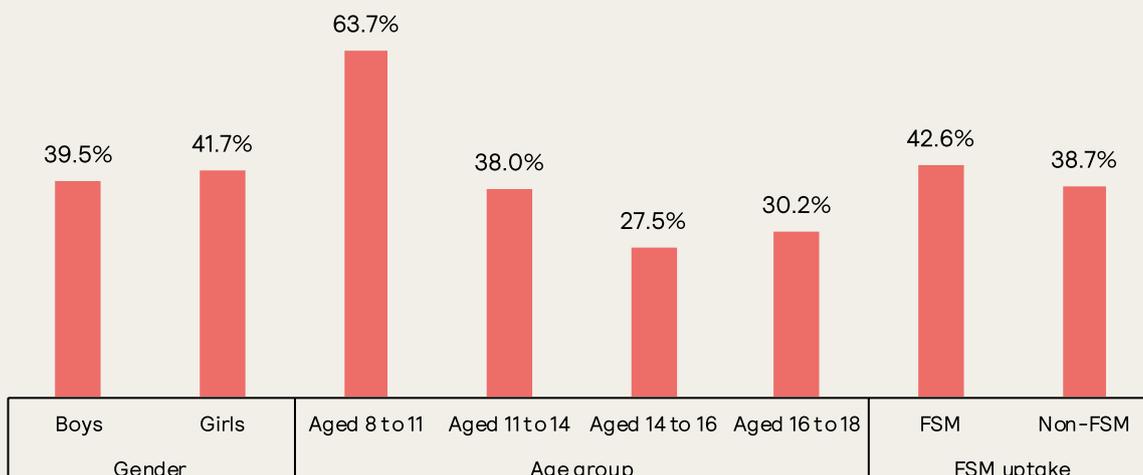
**Figure 7: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in 2024 in their free time versus reading at school**



Both types of reading enjoyment were moderately positively related ( $r = .439$ ). It is perhaps worth noting that last year, this correlation had been much stronger ( $r = .626$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed reading in one setting also enjoyed reading in the other.

Figure 8 shows that enjoying reading at school is associated with different demographic profiles than we saw for reading in free time. Perhaps the most important difference is in terms of gender, with a similar percentage of boys and girls saying that they enjoyed reading at school. As we saw with reading enjoyment in free time, more of those aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoyed reading in school compared with the other age groups. Contrary to what we saw for reading enjoyment in free time, slightly more children and young people who said that they received FSMs told us that they enjoyed reading in school compared with their peers who didn’t receive FSMs.

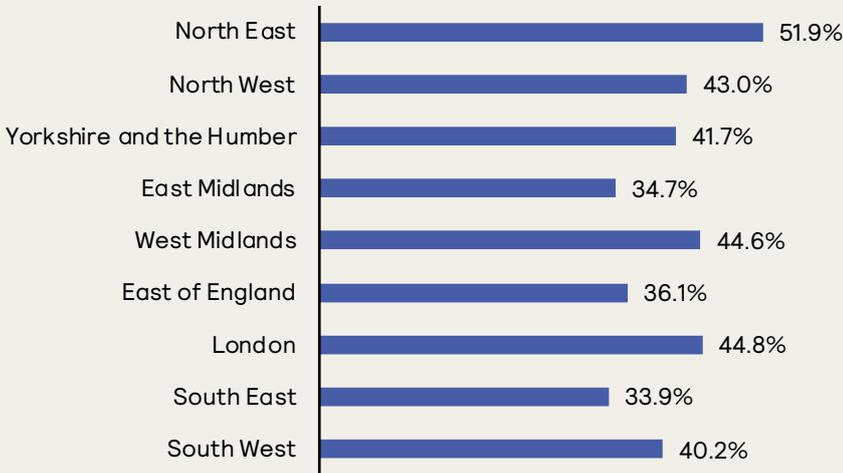
**Figure 8: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading at school in 2024 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake**



## Reading enjoyment at school by geographical location in England

There were also differences in how much children and young people enjoyed reading at school depending on where they went to school in England. Figure 9 shows that more children and young people from the North East said that they enjoyed reading at school compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they enjoyed reading at school came from the South East and the East Midlands.

Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading at school in 2024 by region in England

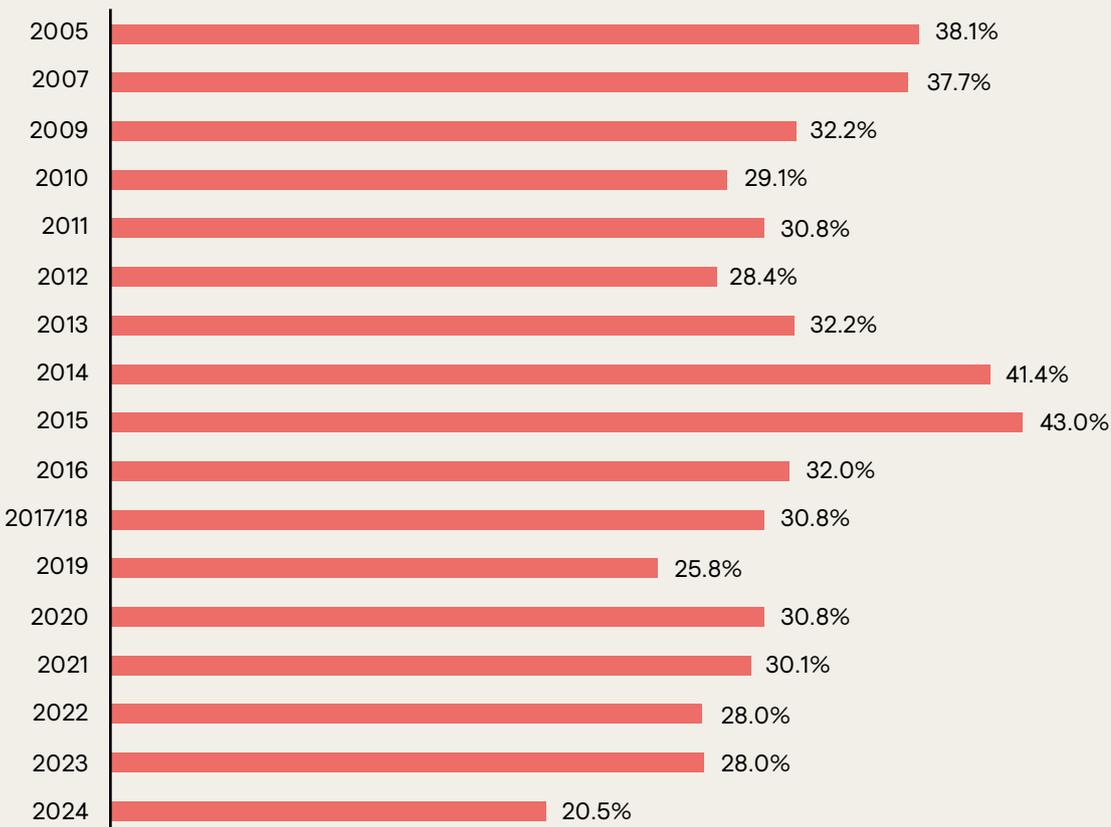


## Daily reading in free time

Only 1 in 5 (20.5%) 8- to 18-year-olds told us in 2024 that they read something daily in their free time.

Figure 10 shows the percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading daily over time. While daily reading levels have fluctuated over the past 19 years, levels have decreased by 7.5 percentage points in the last year alone. This means that we recorded the lowest daily reading level in 2024, with levels nearly halving since we began asking children and young people about their reading habits in 2005.

Figure 10: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time from 2005 to 2024



## The link between reading enjoyment in free time and reading frequency in free time

For those aged 8 to 18, there was a strong positive relationship between enjoying reading in free time and reading frequency in free time ( $r = .684$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed reading read more frequently in their free time. Indeed, as shown in Table 2, over eight times as many children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time also said that they read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading. Instead, 1 in 3 of those who said that they didn't enjoy reading also rarely or never read.

**Table 2: Reading enjoyment in free time by reading frequency in free time in 2024 for children and young people aged 8 to 18**

	Daily	A couple of times a week	Once a week	A couple of times a month	Once a month	Rarely or never
Enjoyed reading	48.2%	28.5%	14.7%	5.2%	1.8%	1.5%
Didn't enjoy reading	5.9%	13.9%	19.4%	15.0%	13.6%	32.1%

The relationship between reading enjoyment and reading frequency was less strong for those aged 5 to 8 ( $r = .409$ ), but Table 3 shows that twice as many 5- to 8-year-olds who enjoyed reading also read something daily in their spare time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading.

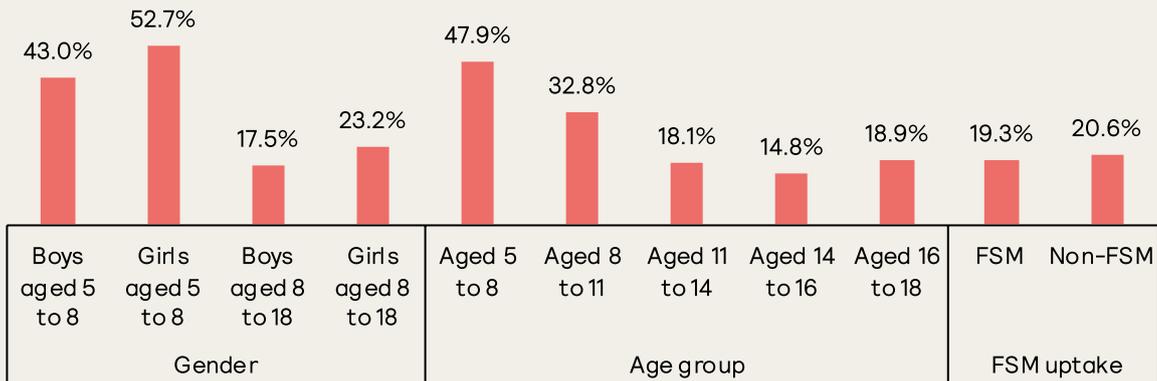
**Table 3: Reading enjoyment by reading frequency in 2024 for children aged 5 to 8**

	Daily	A couple of times a week	A couple of times a month	Rarely or never
Enjoyed reading	59.6%	29.6%	6.6%	4.2%
Didn't enjoy reading	26.5%	36.8%	16.0%	20.7%

## Daily reading in free time by gender, age group and free school meal uptake

More girls than boys said that they read something daily in their free time in 2024, regardless of whether they were aged 5 to 8 or 8 to 18 (see Figure 11). As with reading enjoyment, levels of daily reading decreased with age, with over twice as many children aged 5 to 8 saying that they read something in their free time daily compared with those aged 11 to 16. As we saw with reading enjoyment in free time, roughly the same percentage of children and young people who received FSMs said that they read daily in their free time as their peers who didn't receive FSMs.

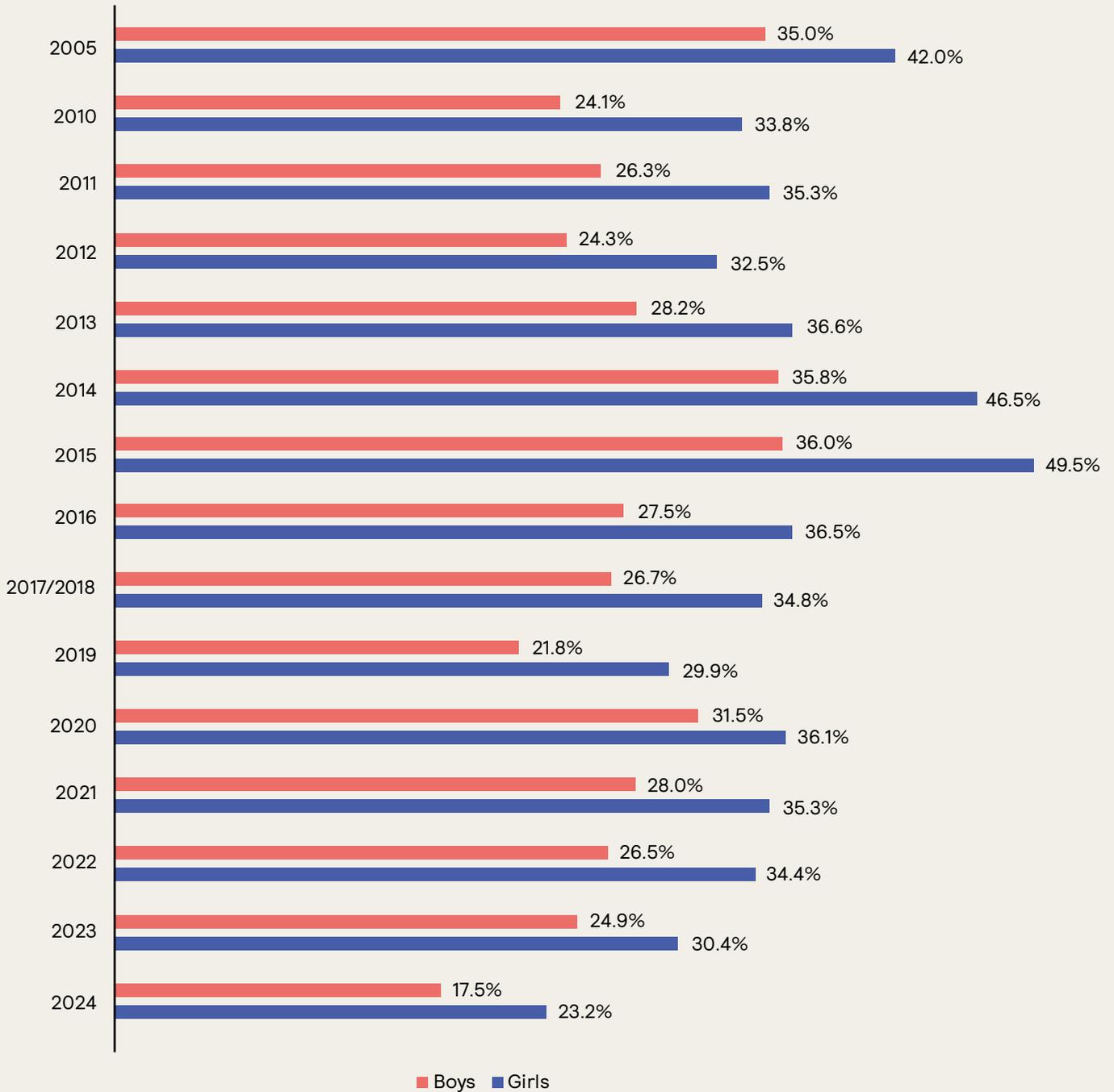
**Figure 11: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who said they read daily in 2024 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)**



## Comparisons of daily reading levels by gender, age group and FSM uptake over time

More girls than boys read something daily in their free time in 2024 as well as in the years before. Indeed, while there have been variations in specific years, the gender gap in daily reading has largely remained the same over the past 19 years, only marginally decreasing from a 7-percentage-point gap in 2005 to a 5.7-percentage-point difference in 2024 (see Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time by gender between 2005 and 2024**



In 2023 we reported that fewer children aged 8 to 11 said that they read daily compared with children in 2005 (36.9% vs 40.5%), while the percentage of those aged 11 to 14 who read daily had remained largely unchanged over that period (25.8% vs 26.1%; see Figure 13). At the same time, the number of young people aged 14 to 16 who read daily in their free time increased slightly, rising from 21.4% in 2005 to 25.7% in 2023. In 2024, daily reading levels decreased across all age groups, with a particularly sharp drop for those aged 14 to 16 (10.9 percentage points), resulting in the lowest levels of daily reading we have ever recorded for each of the three age groups.

**Figure 13: Percentage of children and young people who read daily in their free time by age group between 2005 and 2024**

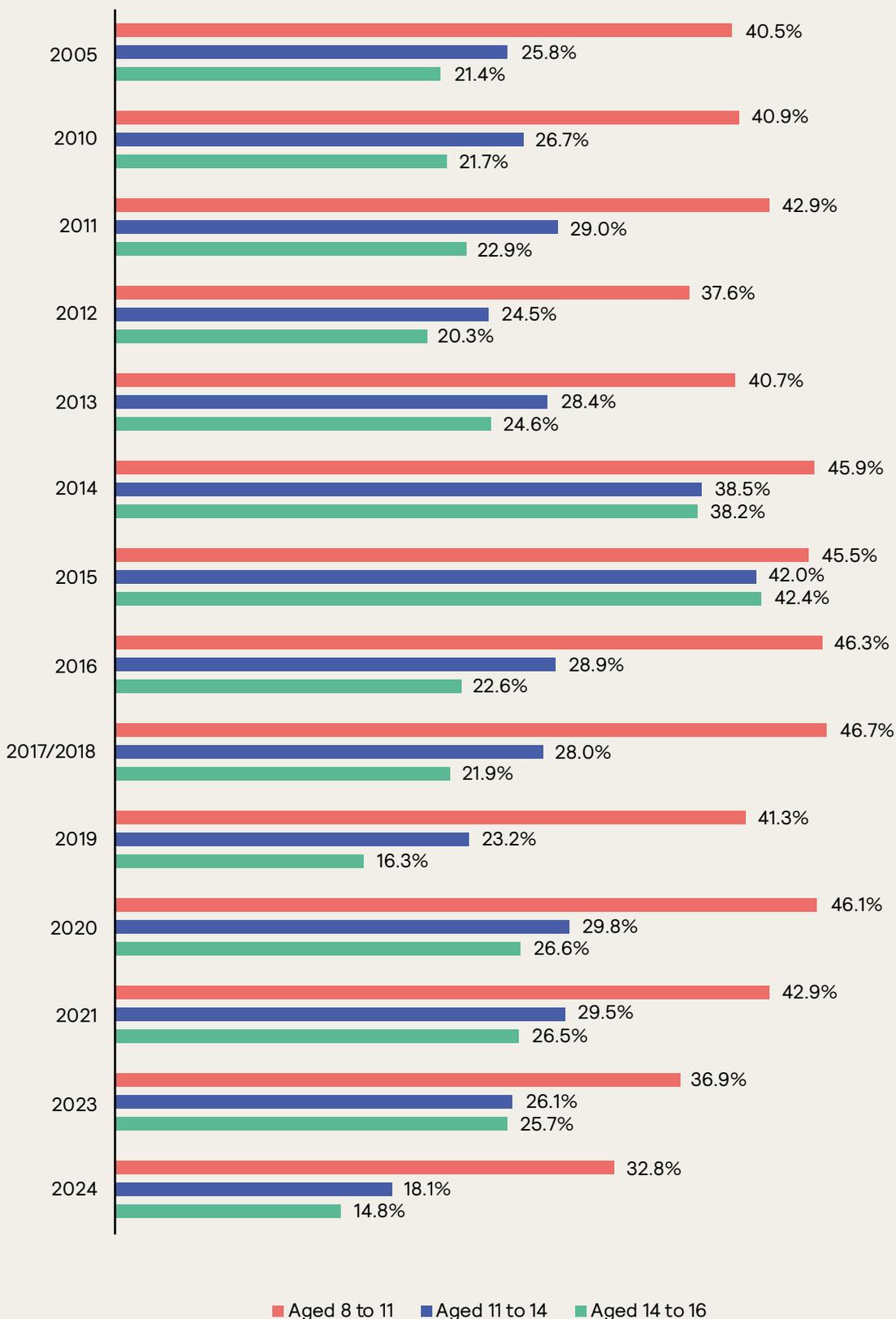
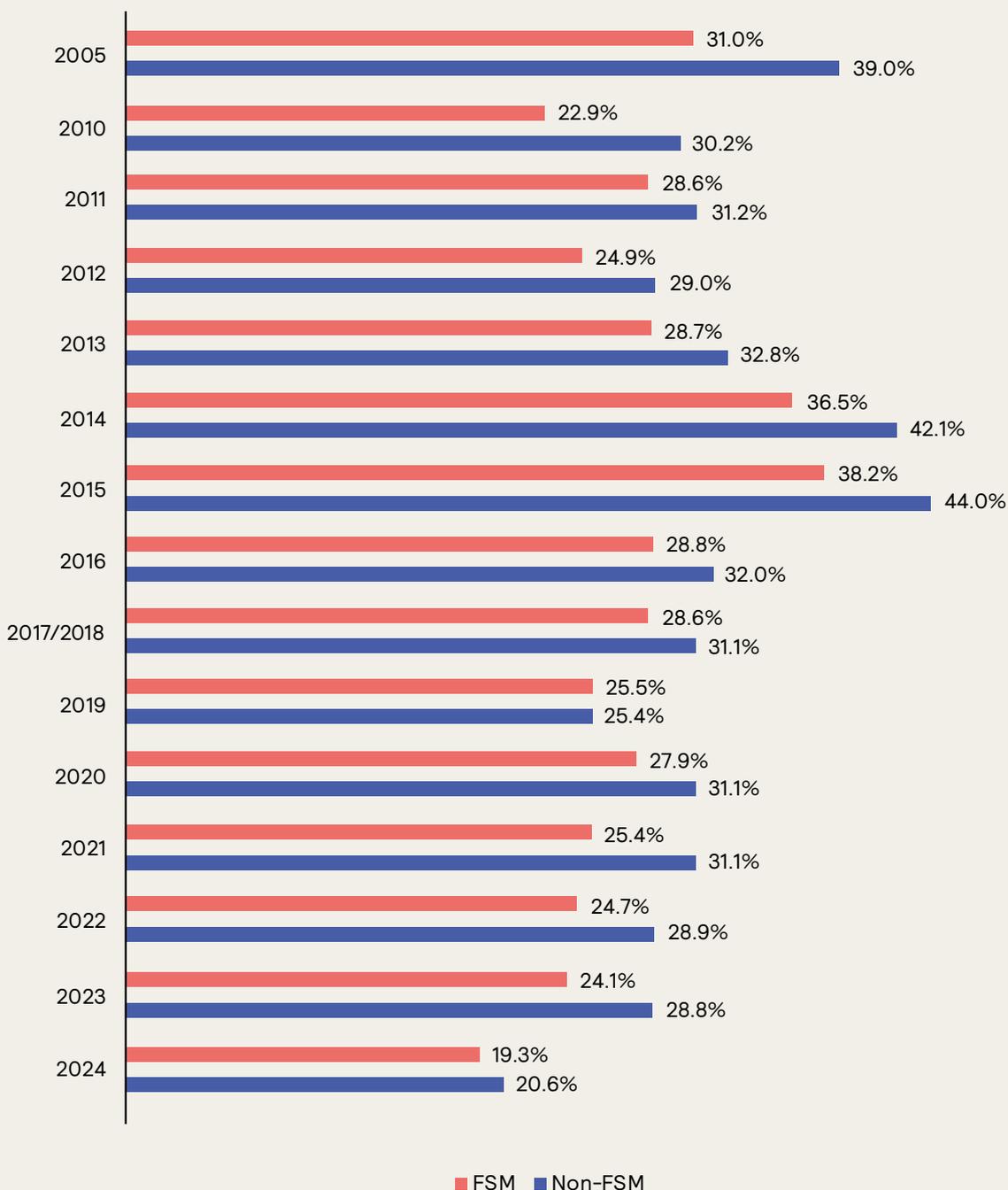


Figure 14 shows that daily reading levels have dropped over the past year regardless of whether children and young people received FSMs or not. However, the drop was more pronounced for those who didn't receive FSMs (8.2 percentage points) than for those who received FSMs (4.8 percentage points), resulting in near-identical daily reading levels for both in 2024. The only time the gap has been smaller was in 2019 when it had closed almost completely.

**Figure 14: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time by FSM uptake between 2005 and 2024**



## Daily reading and the interplay between gender, age group and FSM uptake

Looking at the interplay between gender, age group and FSM uptake, Table 4 shows that only 1 in 10 boys aged 14 to 16 read daily in their free time. It also shows that fewer boys than girls read daily in their free time in 2024 regardless of whether they received FSMs or not.

**Table 4: Daily reading in 2024 by gender, age group and FSM uptake**

	Boys	Girls
<b>Aged 8 to 11</b>	28.7%	36.5%
<b>Aged 11 to 14</b>	16.0%	20.0%
<b>Aged 14 to 16</b>	11.7%	17.2%
<b>Aged 16 to 18</b>	14.0%	22.3%
<b>FSM</b>	16.6%	21.8%
<b>Non-FSM</b>	17.5%	23.4%

## Daily reading in free time by geographical location in England

There were also differences in daily reading by regions in England (see Figure 15), with more children and young people from London and the West Midlands telling us that they read daily in their free time compared with their peers in other regions. The smallest percentage of children and young people who said that they read daily in their free time came from the East Midlands and the South East.

**Figure 15: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time in 2024 by region in England**

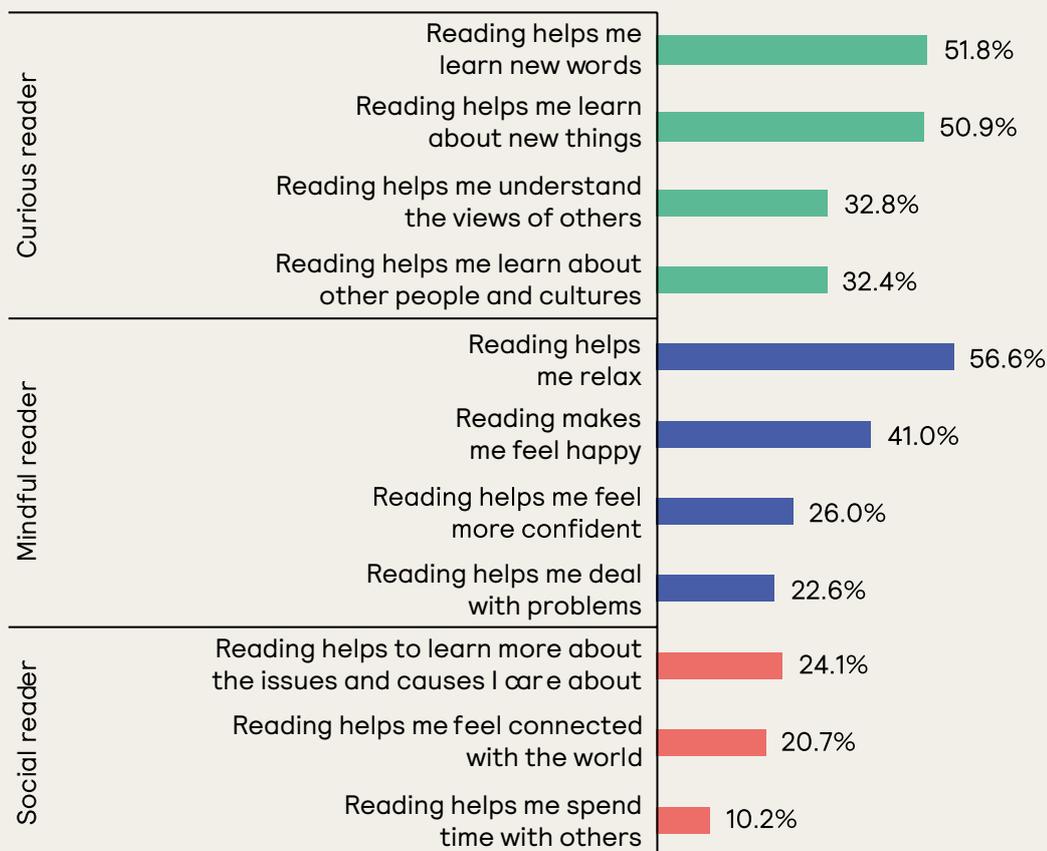


## What motivates children and young people to read (aged 8 to 18 only)?

We also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 to reflect on the reasons why they read. We presented children and young people with 11 different motivations to read, which we grouped to form three categories: the curious reader<sup>2</sup>, the mindful reader<sup>3</sup> and the social reader<sup>4</sup>.

Of those who read in their free time at least once a month<sup>5</sup>, 1 in 2 (51.8%) read because it helped them learn new words or new things (see Figure 16). 1 in 3 told us they read to help them understand the views of others (32.8%) or to learn more about other people or cultures (32.4%). Looking at the mindful reader, 56.6% said that they read because it relaxed them, and around 2 in 5 (41.0%) read because it made them feel happy. Around 1 in 4 (26.0%) read because it made them feel more confident and 22.6% read to deal with problems. Finally, as social readers, 1 in 4 (24.1%) read to learn more about the issues and causes they cared about, while 1 in 5 (20.7%) read to feel connected with the world. 1 in 10 (10.2%) read because it helped them spend time with others.

**Figure 16: Children and young people's (aged 8 to 18) motivations for reading in 2024**



2 Combining four items: Reading helps me learn about new things; Reading helps me learn about other people and cultures; Reading helps me learn new words; and Reading helps me understand the views of other people. Cronbach's alpha = .764. The top quartile of responses being described here as the curious reader (44.1%).

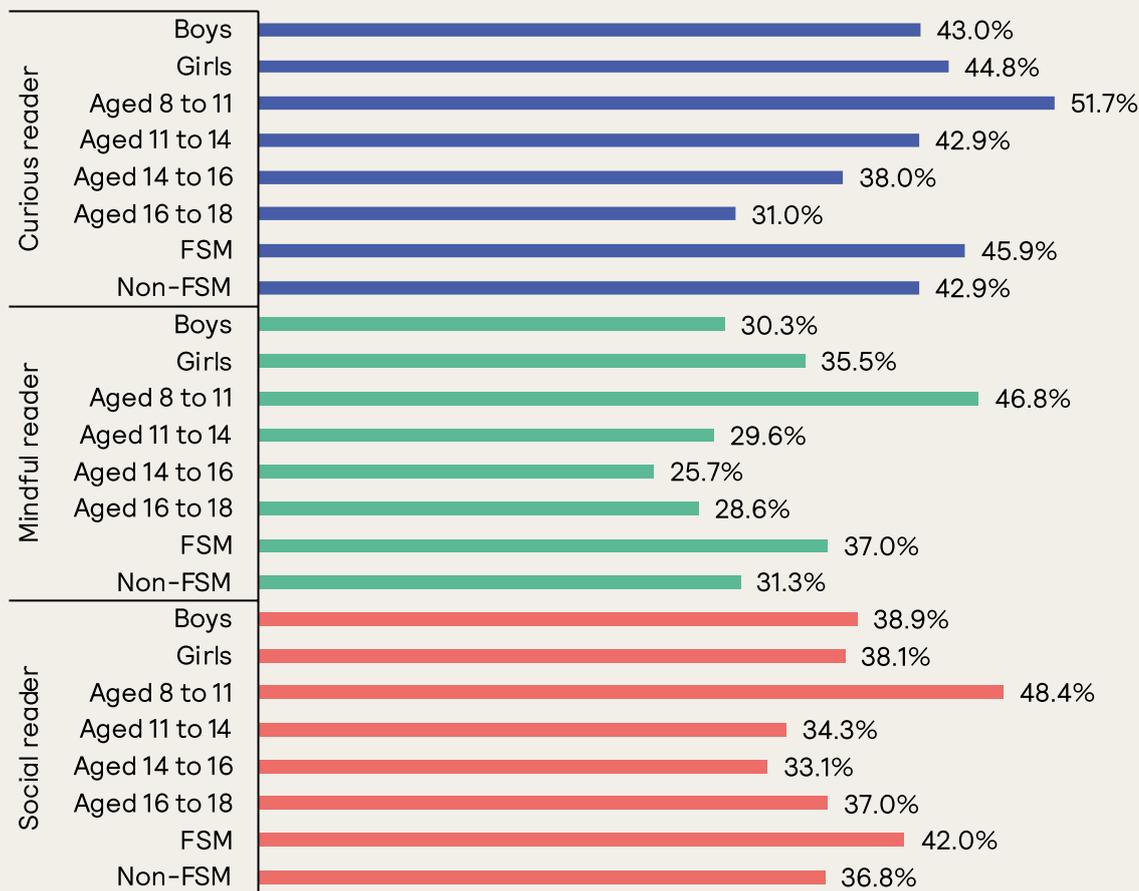
3 Combining four items: Reading helps me relax; Reading helps me feel more confident; Reading makes me happy; and Reading helps me deal with problems. Cronbach's alpha = .711. The top quartile of responses being described here as the mindful reader (33.6%).

4 Combining three items: Reading helps me feel connected to the world; Reading helps me spend time with others; and Reading helps me learn more about the issues and causes I care about. Cronbach's alpha = .603. Top quartile of responses being described here as the social reader (38.8%).

5 n = 51,815

Looking at the demographics of the different types of readers, while boys and girls were similarly likely to say they were curious or social readers, more girls than boys said they were mindful readers (35.5% vs 30.3%; see Figure 17). Additionally, more of those aged 8 to 11 were found in each of the three categories compared with the other age groups, with the exception of those aged 16 to 18 where more said that they were social readers compared with their peers aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16. Slightly more children and young people who received FSMs were found in the three categories compared with their non-FSM peers.

**Figure 17: Being a curious, mindful or social reader in 2024 by gender, age group and FSM uptake**



## The link with reading skill

Why does it matter that reading enjoyment and reading frequency are at an all-time low?

Both the immediate and the longer-term benefits of reading enjoyment for children and young people's reading skill, learning and mental wellbeing are well-established<sup>6,7</sup>. Reading enjoyment has been more closely linked to educational success than socioeconomic background<sup>8</sup>, while national cohort studies have found that the positive influence of reading enjoyment on young people's cognitive development was greater than that of having a degree-educated parent<sup>9</sup>.

The potential benefits of reading enjoyment extend beyond performance in reading assessments. In our surveys, children and young people tell us consistently that they enjoy reading to learn, to relax, to find out more about issues or causes they care about and to support their mental wellbeing<sup>10,11</sup>, something also evidenced by large-scale cohort studies<sup>12</sup>. Nevertheless, links between reading enjoyment, frequency and skills are perhaps of most interest to those working to support children and young people's literacy, and in order to update our previous research exploring these relationships<sup>13</sup> we were keen to look at these again in this year's survey.

6 Cheema, J. (2018) *Adolescents' enjoyment of reading as a predictor of reading achievement*

7 Cremin, T. (2023) *Reading for pleasure: Recent research insights*

8 Kirsch, I. et al., (2002) *Reading for Change: Performance and Engagement across Countries: Results from PISA 2000*

9 Sullivan, A. & Brown, M. (2013), *Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: The role of reading*

10 Clark, C. & Teravainen-Goff, A. (2018) *Mental wellbeing, reading & writing*

11 Clark, C. et al., (2023) *Children and young people's reading in 2023*

12 Sun, Y. et al., (2023) *Early-initiated childhood reading for pleasure: associations with better cognitive performance, mental well-being and brain structure in young adolescence*

13 Clark, C. & Teravainen-Goff, A. (2019) *Children and young people's reading in 2019*

In 2024, we had reading skill data for 3,861 children and young people aged 8 to 14, which allowed us to explore the link between reading enjoyment, reading frequency and reading skill. When we last explored this in 2019, using data from a much smaller sample of 712 children and young people aged 11 to 14, we found that there was a link between reading enjoyment and reading skill, and between reading frequency and reading skill.

To make this research possible, we worked with 15 schools who all were using the same reading skill measure routinely to assess their pupils' reading ability – namely Star Reading<sup>14</sup>. Star Reading provides a standardised reading score that takes into account children and young people's ages and compares children and young people with others nationally of the same age. Like most other educational skill tests, it is standardised so that the average score is 100, while the spread of scores (the standard deviation) is set for 15. This means that children and young people who have standardised scores of 85 to 115 fall within the average reading-skills band, while those scoring below 85 are below average and those scoring 115 and above are above average.

### Reading skill and reading enjoyment

In 2024, we found a positive, albeit weak, relationship ( $r = .257$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) between children and young people's standardised reading scores and their reading enjoyment. While this relationship is less strong than what we saw in 2019 ( $r = .417$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), it is in line with other studies in this field<sup>15</sup>.

This relationship is also seen in the differences in standardised reading scores by whether or not children and young people enjoy reading. As shown in Figure 18, children and young people who enjoyed reading ( $n = 1,211$ ) had higher average (mean) standardised reading scores than children and young people who didn't enjoy reading ( $n = 2,593$ ). This difference was statistically significant<sup>16</sup>.

**Figure 18: Average (mean) standardised reading score by whether or not children and young people aged 8 to 14 enjoyed reading in 2024<sup>17</sup>**



<sup>14</sup> <https://uk.renaissance.com/products/star-reading/>

<sup>15</sup> Van Bergen et al., (2022) *Literacy skills seem to fuel literacy enjoyment, rather than vice versa*

<sup>16</sup>  $t(3,802) = 13.916$ , ( $p < 0.001$ ), Cohen's  $d = .484$

<sup>17</sup> Enjoy SD = 13.80; don't enjoy SD = 13.18

As we did in 2019, to further compare children and young people with different reading scores, we divided them into three groups based on their standardised reading score: having a below average score (<85, n = 305), an average score (85 to 115; n = 3,678) and an above average reading score (>115; n = 821).

Table 5 shows that more children and young people who didn't enjoy reading read below the average and fewer read above the average compared with their peers who enjoyed reading.

**Table 5: Percentage of children and young people reading below, at or above the average by whether or not they enjoyed reading in 2024**

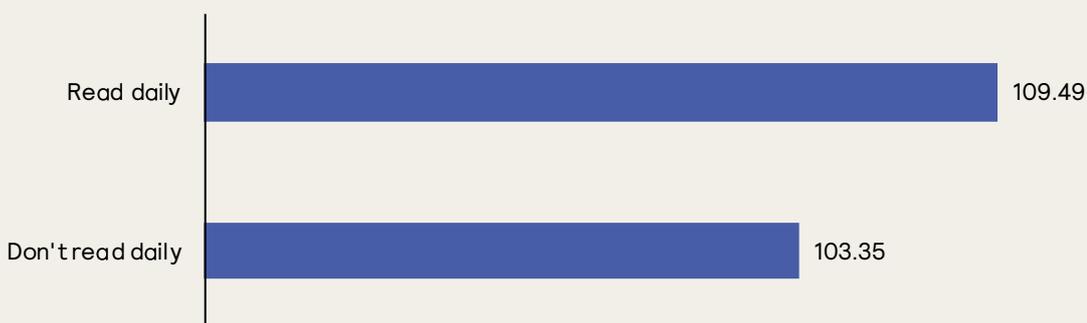
	Below average	Average	Above average
Enjoyed reading	5.0%	60.8%	34.2%
Didn't enjoy reading	9.4%	74.8%	15.7%

### Reading skill and daily reading

In 2024, we found a positive, albeit weak, relationship ( $r = .188, p < 0.001$ ) between children and young people's standardised reading scores and their reading frequency. Again, this relationship was somewhat stronger in 2019 ( $r = .286, p < 0.001$ )

As we had done with reading enjoyment, we also explored whether there was a difference in standardised reading scores by whether or not children and young people read daily. As shown in Figure 19, children and young people who read daily (n = 789) had higher average (mean) standardised reading scores than children and young people who didn't read daily (n = 3,026). This difference was statistically significant.<sup>18</sup>

**Figure 19: Average (mean) standardised reading score by whether or not children and young people aged 8 to 14 read daily in 2024<sup>19</sup>**



<sup>18</sup>  $t(3813) = 13.323, (p < 0.001), \text{Cohen's } d = .453$

<sup>19</sup> Read daily SD = 13.92; don't read daily SD = 13.45

Again, looking at this differently, Table 6 shows that more children and young people who didn't read daily read below the average and fewer read above the average compared with their peers who read daily.

**Table 6: Percentage of children and young people reading below, at or above the average by whether or not they read daily in 2024**

	Below average	Average	Above average
Read daily	5.1%	58.6%	36.4%
Don't read daily	9.0%	73.4%	17.7%



# Summary

For a report focused largely on reading enjoyment, much of this is not an enjoyable read. The declining levels of reading enjoyment and reading frequency are, frankly, shocking and dispiriting.

We are not a lone voice. The Reading Agency's 2024 report into adult reading was similarly concerning, with only half of UK adults now reading regularly for pleasure and those aged 16 to 34 being least likely to do so<sup>20</sup>. Our report should also be seen in the context of the most recent Progress In International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which saw England and Northern Ireland to have relatively low levels of reading enjoyment, with 1 in 4 (24% and 25%, respectively) 10-year-olds reporting that they did not like reading, compared with an international average of 1 in 5 (18%)<sup>21</sup>. In addition, our recent sister report on Children and Young People's Writing in 2024 showed that writing enjoyment is also at a historic low in the UK, with fewer than 3 in 10 children and young people aged 8 to 18 saying that they enjoy writing in their free time.<sup>22</sup>

One question that must be asked is what value we place on enjoyment? This is particularly pertinent given the oft-repeated line from the last government that English school children were the best readers in the Western world, despite our relatively low reading enjoyment levels. However, using the PIRLS data, upon which this claim is based, must be done with caution. On closer inspection, it showed England's most recent reading ability scores to be static when compared with the country's results in previous years. Our climb up the international league table is thus best explained by other countries' reading ability results declining in 2021, likely due to disruption caused by the pandemic (something the Department for Education's PIRLS report acknowledged). Northern Ireland's PIRLS 2021 reading score was also very similar to its results in 2016.

Indeed, one notable finding from the PIRLS data was that those pupils in England and Northern Ireland who had more positive attitudes to reading had higher reading attainment. Our report, too, shows this connection between reading enjoyment, reading frequency and reading skill. Evidence of this link is important because we believe that when it comes to our children and young people's reading, attitudes, behaviour and ability, they are reciprocal, each fuelling the other to create a rounded reader.

Of course, the impact of enjoying reading and reading frequently extends beyond improved reading ability. Established research has linked reading enjoyment to attainment in other subject areas, including vocabulary development, cognitive performance, building empathy and mental wellbeing. Our report points to the varied motivations that children and young people have for reading. Whilst 1 in 2 children and young people said that they read to learn new words (i.e. are motivated to read at least to some extent to improve their reading ability), a similar proportion read to help them relax, and other high scorers included reading to learn about issues and causes they cared about, reading to understand the views of others, or reading simply because it made them happy. Our own research has demonstrated that three times as many children and young people who are most engaged with literacy have better mental wellbeing than those who are least engaged.<sup>23</sup>

20 The Reading Agency (2024) *The State of the Nation's Adults Reading Report*

21 Lindorff, A. et al. (2023) *PIRLS 2021: National Report for England*

22 Clark, C. et al. (2024) *Children and young people's writing in 2024*

23 Clark, C. and Teravainen-Goff, A. (2019) *Mental wellbeing, reading and writing*

While our Annual Literacy Survey doesn't provide an explanation for the continued decline in reading enjoyment, perhaps we should consider what can be done to provide more space for children to read for enjoyment. Perhaps a packed curriculum, high academic expectations, and the perception of a challenging future all contribute to children having less time for reading for enjoyment and less mental space to do it. It's likely, too, that the recent pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis have exacerbated these challenges, with many children and young people struggling to access high-quality reading materials.

A new government represents a new opportunity to prioritise positive reading behaviours. This report demonstrates that reading enjoyment and frequency are a concern regardless of socioeconomic background. It is a challenge right across the UK, and despite there being a particular problem for boys and those aged 11+, reading is in decline regardless of gender or age. Different or adapted solutions may be needed for different demographic groups, but a concerted multi-sector approach is vital.

Given the broad educational and socioeconomic factors known to influence children and young people's enjoyment of reading, the National Literacy Trust is galvanising support from all corners of society in a movement to make reading for pleasure a social and political priority – from authors, educators, influencers and families, to schools, libraries, charities, publishers, businesses and government.

We are also calling on the government to urgently form a reading taskforce and action plan with multi-sector partners to address declining rates of reading enjoyment and, in its curriculum and assessment review, prioritise reading for pleasure alongside the skills that are vital in the development of confident, motivated readers.



# National Literacy Trust

Change your story

## About the National Literacy Trust

Literacy changes everything. It opens the door to the life you want. It's the key to knowledge, confidence and inspiration. It's better results at school, and better jobs. If you grow up without the tools to communicate, without books to read or opportunities to write, it's harder to get where you want to go.

We're a charity helping people overcome these challenges and change their life chances through the power of words – reading, writing, speaking and listening. From first words, through school days to training, jobs and beyond.

## Together, we're helping people change their stories

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