

## Children and young people's diary writing in 2022

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As this short report shows, keeping a diary has many benefits for children and young people, allowing self-expression, boosting creativity, and supporting mental wellbeing and writing engagement. Our [previous research](#) into keeping a diary also suggested that there was a link between keeping a diary and writing skills.

In early 2022, we asked over 70,000 children and young people aged 5 to 18 whether they wrote in a diary as part of a wider survey into their reading and writing habits. This not only allows us to comment on how many children and young people are keeping a diary, and who they are in terms of their demographics, but also how writing in a diary links with other aspects of their writing, such as their motivation and mental wellbeing, questions for which were answered by 56,004 children and young people aged 8 to 18. Over 40,000 children and young people also expressed in their own words what writing means to them, with many of these open-text responses focusing on keeping a diary.

Some of the findings include:

- **3 in 10** (29.7%) children and young people aged 5 to 18 kept a diary in 2022
  - More girls than boys told us that they kept a diary (41.5% vs 16.5%) as did those aged 5 to 8 (45.2%) and those aged 8 to 11 (37.9%) compared with their older peers (around 20%).
- The percentage of children and young people who keep a diary has remained relatively unchanged during the pandemic.
- **Twice as many** children and young people who kept a diary told us that they **enjoyed writing** compared with their peers who didn't keep a diary (51.1% vs. 25.9%).
- **More** children and young people who kept a diary also **wrote something daily** in their free time compared with their peers who didn't keep a diary (23.8% vs. 14.3%), and **more saw themselves as good writers** (77.2% vs. 65.1%).

- 7 in 10 (69.2%) children and young people who write in a diary write because it helps them **feel creative**, with 2 in 3 (64.2%) also saying that they write to **express their thoughts and feelings and their ideas and imagination**.
- Many of those who write in a diary also **engage in other forms of creative writing** in their free time. One in 2 of those who write in a diary also told us that they write letters (52.5%) and stories (49.7%) in their free time, while nearly 1 in 3 (31.8%) write poems.
- Many of those who write in a diary also feel that writing supports their **mental wellbeing**, with 1 in 2 (50.7%) of those who write in a diary saying that they write because it helps them relax, and 1 in 3 (33.4%) saying that they write because it helps them feel better when they are sad.
- Many children and young people also told us in their own words why they keep a diary, with many telling us that they write in a diary to express themselves, to understand themselves and their feelings better, and to deal with their worries and anxieties. For many, a diary was also a safe and private place to express themselves without being judged. Others told us that they keep a diary as a record for their future self.

### Findings in greater detail

Three in 10 (29.7%, n = 20,924) children and young people aged 5 to 18 told us in early 2022 that they write in a diary. Figure 1 shows that the percentage of children and young people who said that they write in a diary has remained stable over the past two years of the pandemic.

**Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who told us they kept a diary in early 2020, 2021 and 2022**

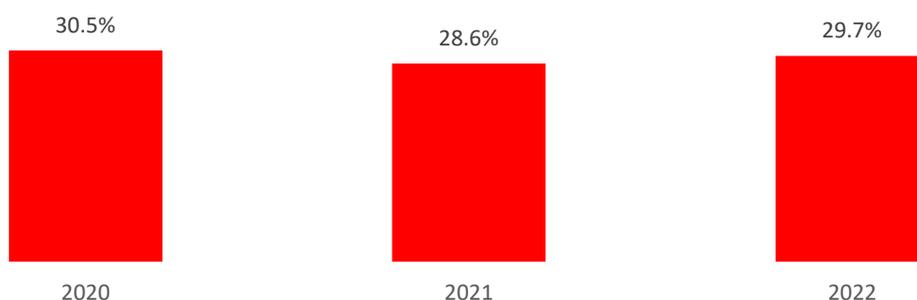


Figure 2 shows that keeping a diary was associated with gender<sup>1</sup>, with over twice as many girls as boys telling us that they kept a diary. Writing in a diary was also strongly associated with age<sup>2</sup>: over 2 in 5 children aged 5 to 8 told us that they write in a diary compared with only 1 in 5 young people aged 14 and over. Marginally more children and young people who receive free school meals (FSMs), a proxy of socioeconomic background, said that they wrote in a diary in early 2022 compared with their peers who don't receive meals<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Boys: n = 6,865; girls: n = 14,059

<sup>2</sup> Aged 5 to 8: n = 3,710; Aged 8 to 11: n = 3,550; Aged 11 to 14: n = 11,166; Aged 14 to 16: n = 1,968; Aged 16 to 18: n = 530

<sup>3</sup> FSM: n = 2,746; non-FSM: n = 12,569

**Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who told us they kept a diary in early 2022 by gender, age group and FSM uptake (8 to 18s only).**

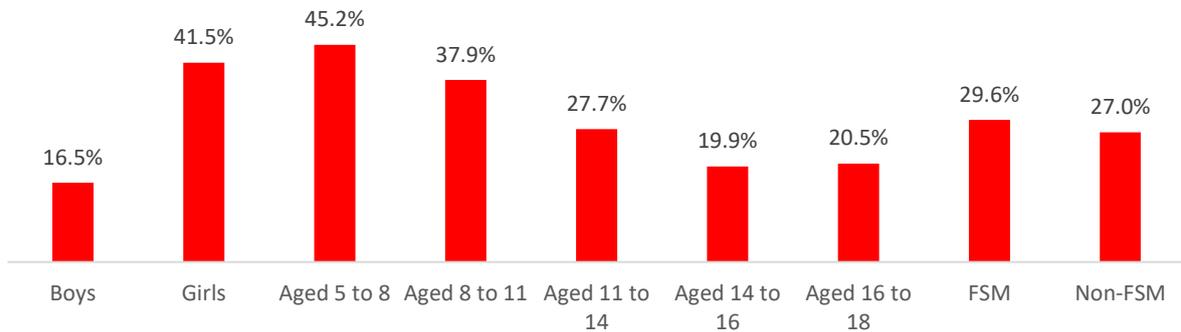
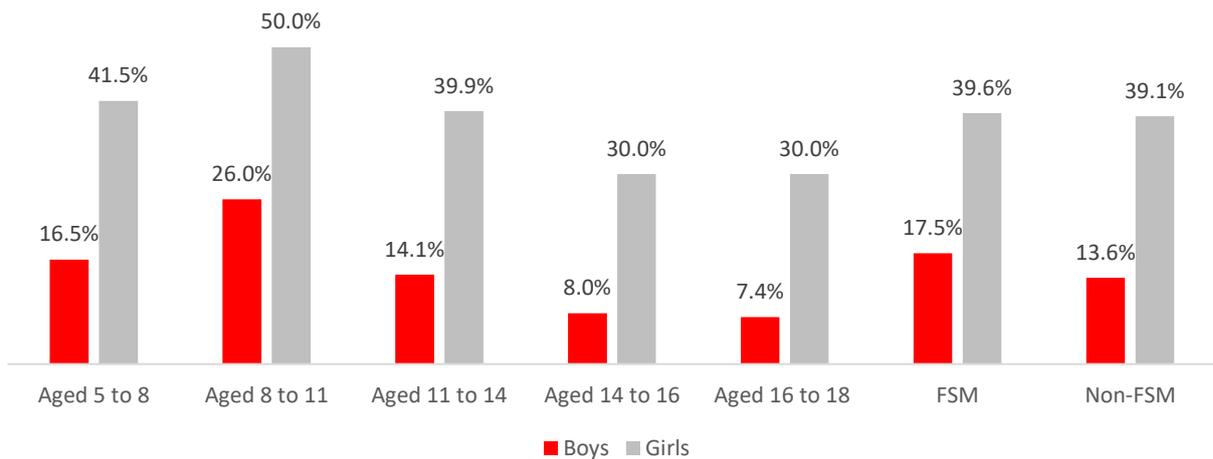


Figure 3 shows that more girls than boys told us that they write in a diary regardless of their age and whether or not they receive FSMs.

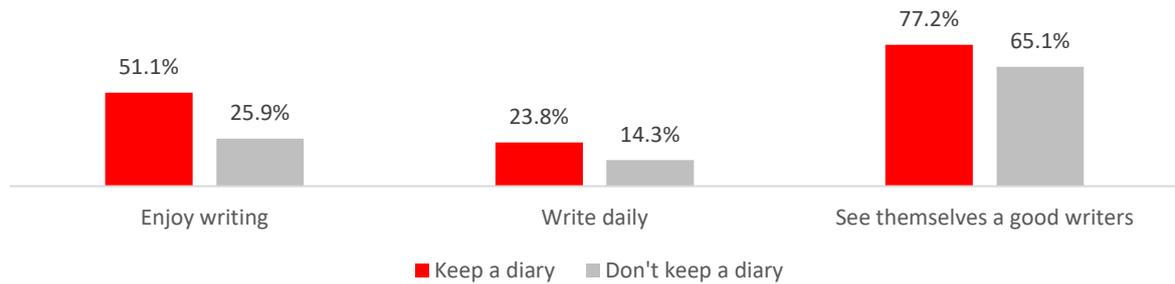
**Figure 3: Percentage of boys and girls who told us they kept a diary in early 2022 by age group and FSM uptake (8 to 18s only)**



Keeping a diary was also associated with wider writing engagement. Nearly twice as many children and young people who told us that they write in a diary said that they enjoy writing compared with their peers who told us that they didn't keep a diary<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 4). More children and young people who keep a diary also said that they write something daily in their free time and consider themselves to be good writers compared with their peers who don't keep a diary.

<sup>4</sup> n = 32,861

**Figure 4: Writing enjoyment, writing frequency and self-perceptions of writing skill of children and young people who keep a diary compared with those who don't**

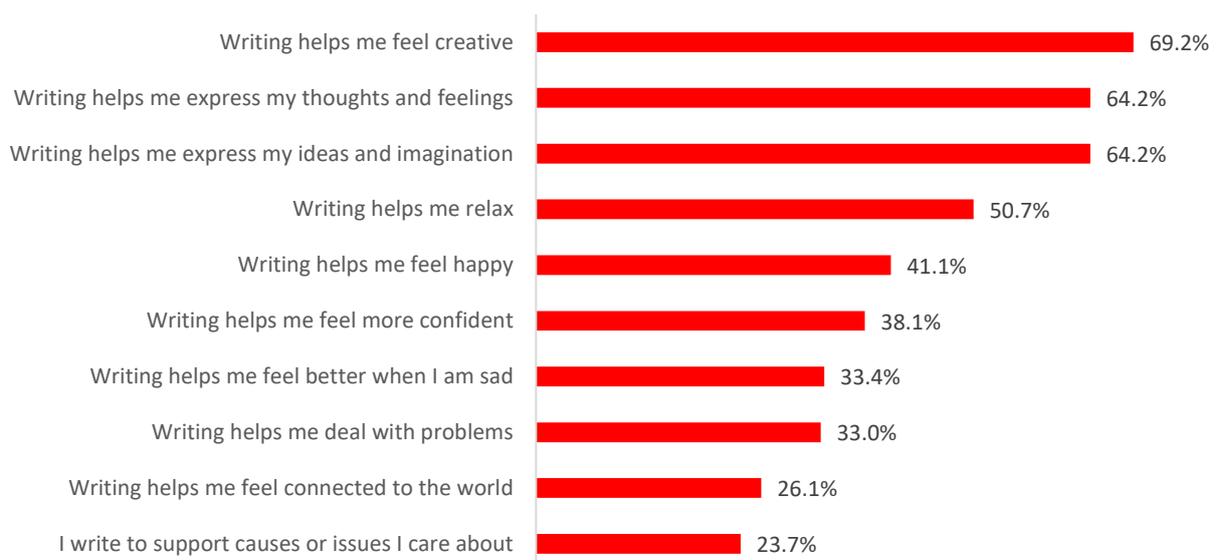


We also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 to indicate some of the reasons why they write. Figure 5 highlights those responses for those who told us that they write in a diary and shows that most of those who keep a diary said that writing helps them feel creative, followed by writing helping them to express their thoughts and feelings as well as their ideas and imagination.

Indeed, many of those who write in a diary also engage in other forms of creative writing in their free time. One in 2 of those who write in a diary also told us that they write letters (52.5%) and stories (49.7%) in their free time, while nearly 1 in 3 (31.8%) write poems.

Writing was also linked to mental wellbeing for those who write in a diary, with 1 in 2 saying that writing helps them relax, while 2 in 4 said that writing makes them feel happy and more confident. One in 3 of those who write in a diary also told us that writing makes them feel better when they are sad and that writing helps them deal with problems.

**Figure 5: Motivations for writing by those aged 8 to 18 who told us that they kept a diary in early 2022**



We also asked children and young people to tell us in their own words why they write in a diary, and many children and young people shared that they write in a diary in order to express their thoughts and feelings, with some saying that writing in a diary helps them put their feelings into words and understand themselves better:

#### **To express themselves:**

- My favourite type of writing is diary entries. If I feel distressed or depressed about something and kind of frightened to talk to someone, I like to write in a diary to express my emotional feelings. (Girl, Y7)
- I write in a journal/diary because it allows me to be free with my writing. I can spill all my thoughts and emotions on a few pages. It helps to process things and think back on things that I may have done that aren't right. (Girl, Y8)
- I write in diary when I'm upset to express my feelings. (Girl, Y9)
- In my diary I write so I can express my feelings and so that I can get all the negative energy out on a piece of paper. (Girl, Y7)

#### **To clear their heads:**

- I use writing as a way of letting my thoughts out so they're not kept up inside and stress me out. Writing them out makes me feel much better and being able to include them into a story or a diary entry is the best thing ever. (Girl, Y10)
- I write because it is better than me keeping everything inside of my head as it is full of thoughts so I write it in my diary. (Girl, Y7)

#### **To understand themselves and put their feelings into words:**

- I write in a diary to express my emotions when I feel I can't articulate them. (Girl, Y11)
- I write a diary because it helps me put my feelings into words. (Girl, Y9)
- I write in a diary and have done [so] since I was 7 or 8. I do it to escape from the world and it helps me get out all the things I want to say, but I feel like I can't. (Girl, Y7)
- I write because it helps me figure out my feelings. For example, I write a diary every week or something so I can figure out what I actually am feeling and put in to words. (Girl, Y9)

Additionally, some children and young people said that writing in diaries helps them relieve stress and anxiety, while others said they write in diaries to feel more relaxed:

#### **To relieve stress and anxiety:**

- I write because it's a bit like telling someone something and it helps when I am worried. Writing in a diary is a great help. (Girl, Y8)
- Sometimes I write in my diary [because] I find it relaxing and therapeutic after a long day and it helps ease my mind if I'm stressed. (Girl, Y10)
- I definitely recommend having a journal or diary because it can help a lot with stress levels and makes you feel more at peace. (Girl, Y8)
- Sometimes I write to relieve anger or stress in my diary. (Girl, Y7)

#### **To feel calm and relaxed:**

- I like writing in a diary/journal because I find it relaxing. (Girl, Y11)

- Also when I write in my diary all my emotions are able to relax in my head and I don't think about them much. It's like a friend that helps you carry the big box of life. (Girl, Y7)
- I sometimes like writing diary or poems about my life because it makes me feel relaxed and happy when nobody is interrupting me as I go through. (Boy, Y8)
- I write sometimes to calm down so I write in my diary. (Girl, Y7)
- It helps me calm down and it makes me relaxed. No matter how angry or sad I am, I still write in my diary. (Girl, Y7)

A common theme within the comments was that diaries serve as a **safe place** where children and young people can express themselves freely and privately, **without fear of judgement from others**. This seemed to be a strong motivator for children and young people to write in diaries:

- I write a diary because I can speak about my day and I don't have to worry about what I say. (Girl, Y7)
- I like to write in my diary because that is a place where I can freely express my emotions and not worry about what other people think. (Girl, Y9)
- I like writing because it feels personal to me; especially diaries, because it belongs to me and is 'secret' from everyone else. (Girl, Y11)
- I love to write as I find it a controlled anti-pressured way to express how I feel and my opinions (Girl, Y8)
- I write because it helps me express my thoughts when I feel like I cannot tell people about them – this is why I have a diary. (Girl, Y8)
- I enjoy writing in my diary because I can tell it how I feel and it won't tell anyone. (Girl, Y8)
- I write in a diary because I like to look back on it, and I can talk about everything in it knowing it will not share my secrets. (Girl, Y9)
- I write a diary because it lets me be myself and I can rant easily this way. (Girl, Y9)
- I write things that I don't want to say aloud in a diary. (Girl, Y7)
- I write diaries to remember all my memories but also to get all my emotions out into a book and no one is going to know of them because they will be private. (Girl, Y8)
- I also feel more comfortable if I write in a diary as it is private. (Girl, Y6)

Conversely, one girl explained she does not write in a diary due to the fear that someone may read what she has written:

- I don't like to write diaries because what if like one day someone finds [it] and then someone knows all your secrets. (Girl, Y5)

Finally, children and young people also described writing in a diary for reasons other than mental wellbeing. Many described writing in a diary for nostalgic purposes so that they can look back at their lives when they are older. Some also use diaries to stay organised and keep track of their goals for the future.

#### **For nostalgic reasons:**

- I like to write in a diary so when I grow up I can look back when I'm older and see what I have done and I like to look in a book that is full of happiness (Girl, Y5)

- Writing (especially a diary) helps me look back at what achievements I have made and what I aim to do. It is also interesting to see what my views were on certain topics and if I still feel the same way. And, in general, it's just fun! (Girl, Y9)
- I write in my diary sometimes because I know that in the future I will have something to look back on and remember all of the things I did when I was younger. (Boy, Y7)
- I write in a diary to recap and reflect. (Girl, Y9)
- I like to write especially journals and diaries because I can look back on them later down the year and see how my life has changed. (Girl, Y7)
- I write a diary because when I look back at it, it's very interesting to learn how much I've changed. (Girl, Y9)
- I like writing diary entries at least once or twice a week or on special events so I can look back on them and read about my previous experiences. (Girl, Y7)
- I often write in my diary because it helps me process what has recently happened, and it's nice to write about how I feel. Plus it's nice to read for nostalgia purposes. (Girl, Y11)
- I also just want to be able to look back in years to come on how my writing has improved and give an idea on my mindset years ago. (Girl, Y11)
- I also write to remember important events that have taken place, like I did a diary throughout lockdown about how I felt and all of the rules that went on. (Girl, Y8)
- I like to keep track of my feeling and thoughts in a diary just so I can look back on the memories and what was happening in that sort of time period. (Girl, Y7)
- I like to write in my diary so when I'm older I can read about the things I used to like or things and events that have happened to me. (Girl, Y7)
- I write a diary to remember important or funny memories to remember in the future. (Girl, Y7)

### To stay organised:

- I write because it give me ideas what to do with my life. I like to plan things out and write in my diary about things I want to do when I grow up. (Girl, Y5)
- I occasionally write in a journal/diary to either get things out of my head, write down something I don't want to forget, or a goal in life. (Girl, Y9)
- I write in my diaries/journals because it can help me to be organised. (Girl, Y7)

### In sum

This report has shown that keeping a diary not only offers children and young people a space to express themselves, their thoughts, emotions as well as creativity, but that for many it is also a form of writing that supports their mental wellbeing, which helps relieve anxiety and makes those who keep a diary feel calmer and happier.

At the same time as offering all of these benefits, and more, keeping a journal is also a way for children and young people to practise their writing, supporting writing enjoyment and writing frequency as well as confidence. Indeed, many of those who keep a diary also engage in other forms of creative writing, such as poems and stories. However, many of those who keep a diary also told us that it's different from other forms of creative writing because it's private, often including a lock to keep out prying eyes. As a girl in Y8 told us:

I write in a diary because I know I'm not going to let anyone see it, so I can write exactly what I want in it and say what I want about who I want and no one can judge me.

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