

“It’s a good way to keep in touch”: Children and young people’s letter writing in 2017/18

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Introduction

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the National Literacy Trust and the 60th anniversary of Blue Peter, the world’s longest running children’s television show.

Since 2010, our Annual Literacy Pupil Survey has asked children and young people in the UK about their writing enjoyment, behaviours and attitudes, including letter writing.

Blue Peter receives around 500 letters a day from children and young people hoping to secure a coveted Blue Peter badge. Taking inspiration from this, we decided to explore children and young people’s letter writing in more depth through our eighth Annual Literacy Pupil Survey. In addition to understanding how many children and young people write letters in their free time, and how often, we also looked at the reasons why children decide to write or not write letters.

Our report is based on the responses of 42,363 pupils aged 8 to 18 who answered questions about letters in our eighth Annual Literacy Pupil Survey, which we conducted between November 2017 and January 2018.

In addition to our research, Oxford University Press’s Children’s Corpus analysed over 1,000 letters sent to Blue Peter in 2016 to find out why children still love writing to the show. They found that the children and young people, aged 6 to 15, who wrote to Blue Peter had high levels of social awareness and sensitivity, and displayed strong persuasive language skills in their explanations of why they should receive a Blue Peter badge.

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Key findings

How many children write letters in their free time and how often?

- Over 1 in 3 (36.7%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us that they write letters in their free time.
- Of those who write letters, more than 2 in 5 (44.6%) say they write letters in their free time at least once a month.

Why do children write, or not write, letters?

- The most common reason children and young people give for writing letters in their free time is to stay in touch with family and friends (52.7%) or to make the person they are writing to happy (47.8%). Others write because it makes them feel happy (33.8%), it helps them remember special things that have happened (34.1%) or it lets them express their feelings (30.7%). Fewer children write letters to say thank you (16.4%) or to improve their writing skills (10.1%).
- The most common reason children and young people give for not writing letters is that they prefer to write emails or text messages (59.4%) or they can't think of what to write (33.6%). A third of children and young people (33.3%) also told us that they don't write letters because they don't have the time.

What are the benefits of writing letters?

- What are the benefits of writing letters? Children and young people who write letters are more likely than those who don't to enjoy writing (65.3% vs 40.4%), to write something daily in their spare time (23.8% vs 13.5%), to rate their writing skills as above average (47.8% vs 33.3%) and to think positively about writing (59.0% vs 28.8%).
- Similar relationships are also found with regard to reading. Compared to children and young people who don't write letters, those who do say they enjoy reading (71.0% vs 48.5%), read something daily in their spare time (41.9% vs 24.5%), rate their reading ability as above average (60.2% vs 49.2%) and think positively about reading (77.6% vs 53.8%).
- Overall, those who write letters are twice as likely to have high literacy engagement than those who don't write letters in their free time (40.5% vs 17.6%).
- Children and young people who say that they write letters in their free time rate their life satisfaction as higher, on average, than their peers who don't write letters (7.69 vs 7.16 out of 10, with a higher score indicating greater life satisfaction).

Sociodemographic differences

- Those aged 8 to 11 are more likely to write letters than those aged 14 and older (62.5% vs 19.1%).
- More girls than boys write letters (41.9% vs 31.4%).
- More children and young people from white or mixed ethnic backgrounds (36.7% and 38.8%) write letters compared with their peers from Asian or black backgrounds (32.4% and 32.5%).
- Children and young people in the West Midlands (41.3%), Greater London (40.0%) and the South West (39.7%) are the most likely to say that they write letters, compared to children and young people in the North West (31.4%) and Yorkshire and the Humber (32.3%) who are the least likely to say that they write letters.

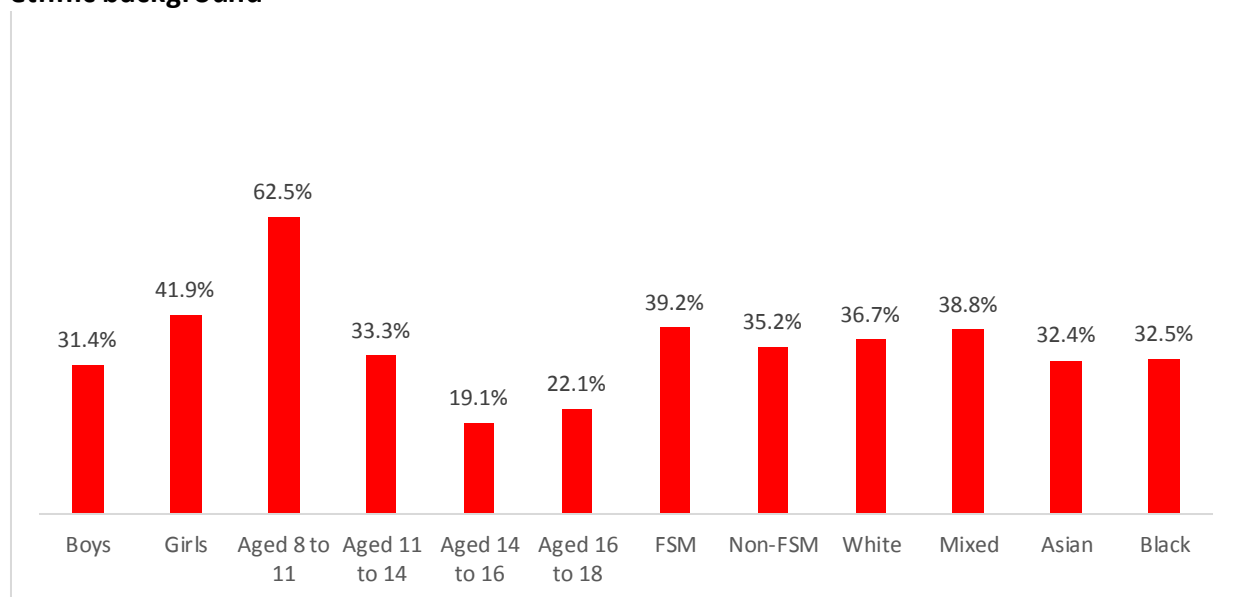
How many children and young people write letters in their free time?

Of the 42,363 children and young people who answered questions about letters in our Annual Literacy Pupil Survey, **over a third** (36.7%, N = 16,970) say that they **write letters in their free time**. However, this also means that nearly 2 in 3 children and young people say that they don't write letters.

Figure 1 shows the percentage of children and young people who say that they write letters in their free time broken down by demographic group. It shows that **more girls than boys** say that they write letters in their free time; a difference that was statistically significant. Perhaps the most **pronounced differences in terms of letter writing relate to age group**, with three times as many children aged 8 to 11 saying that they write letters in their free time as those aged 14 and older.

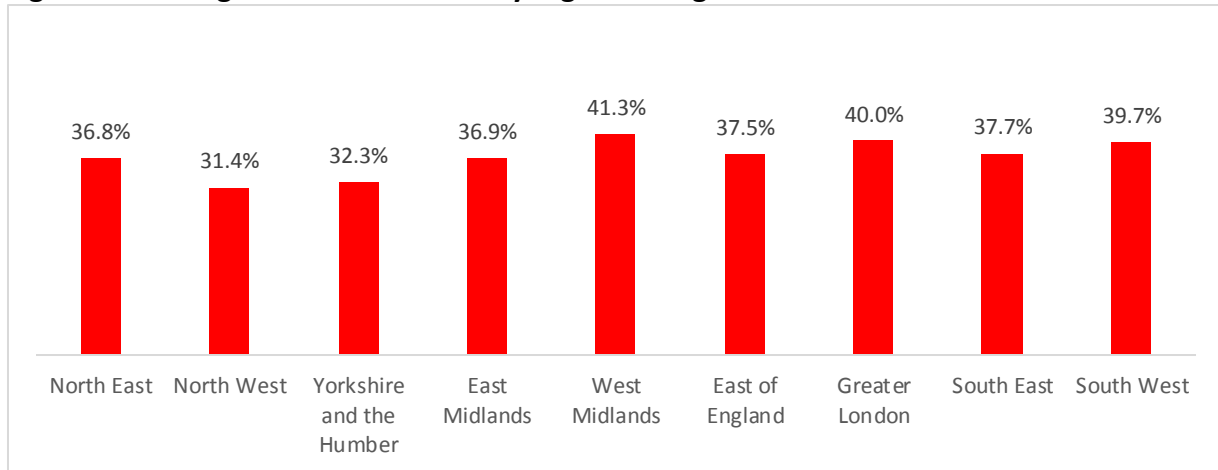
Although more pupils who receive free school meals (FSM), our proxy for social disadvantage, say that they write letters in their free time compared with their peers who do not receive free meals, this difference was not statistically significant. However, more children and young people from white and mixed **ethnic backgrounds** say that they write letters in the spare time compared with their peers from Asian or black ethnic groups.

Figure 1: Writing letters in free time by gender, age group, free school meal uptake and ethnic background



There were also **regional differences** in letter writing (see Figure 2), with more children and young people in the West Midlands, Greater London and the South West saying that they write letters in their spare time than their peers in other parts of the country. Overall, children and young people in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber were least likely to say that they write letters.

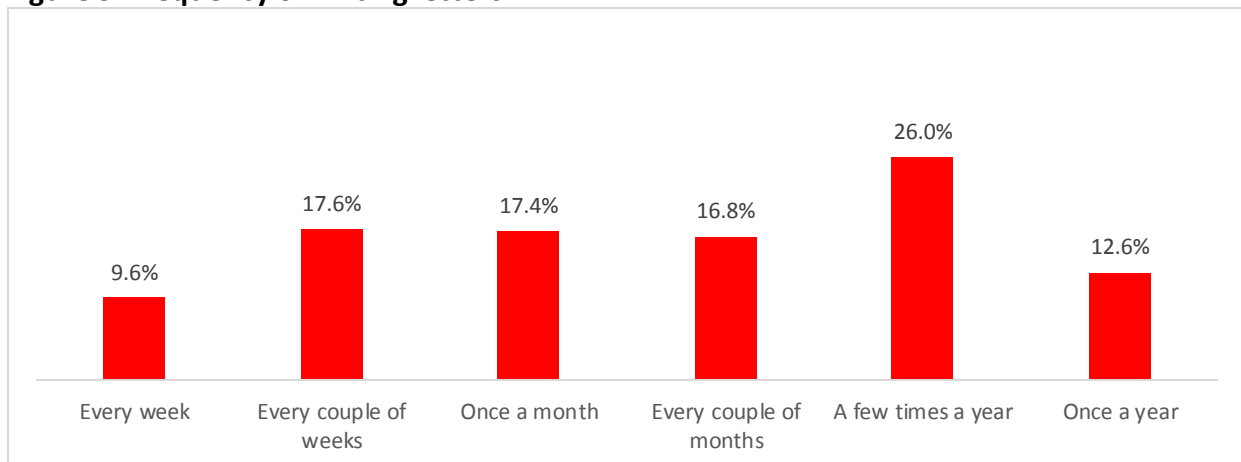
Figure 2: Writing letters in free time by region in England



How often do children and young people write letters in their free time?

Of those who write letters in their free time (36.7%, N = 16,970), nearly 1 in 10 (9.6%) say that they write a letter every week, and 1 in 8 say that they either write letters every couple of weeks (17.6%) or once a month (17.4%). Overall, **44.6% of children and young people say that they write a letter at least once a month** (see Figure 3). 1 in 4 (26%) say that they write letters in their free time a few times a year, with 1 in 10 (12.6%) only writing a letter once a year.

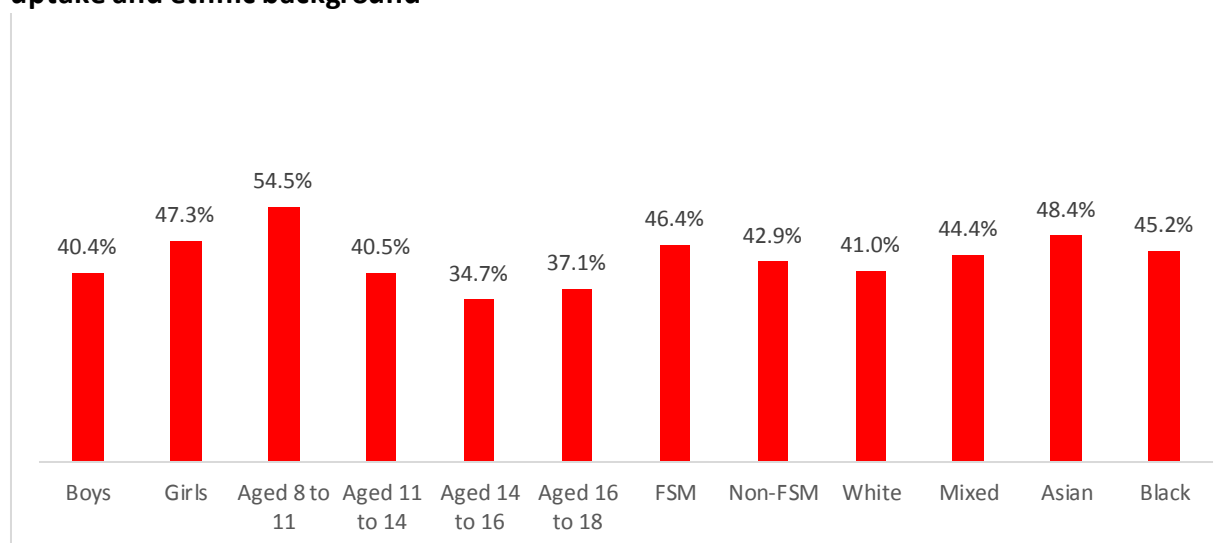
Figure 3: Frequency of writing letters



More girls than boys say that they write letters in their free time at least once a month (see Figure 4), as do pupils who receive free school meals compared with their peers who do not receive free school meals. Children and young people from Asian ethnic backgrounds are more likely to say that they write a letter at least once a month than their peers from white ethnic backgrounds.

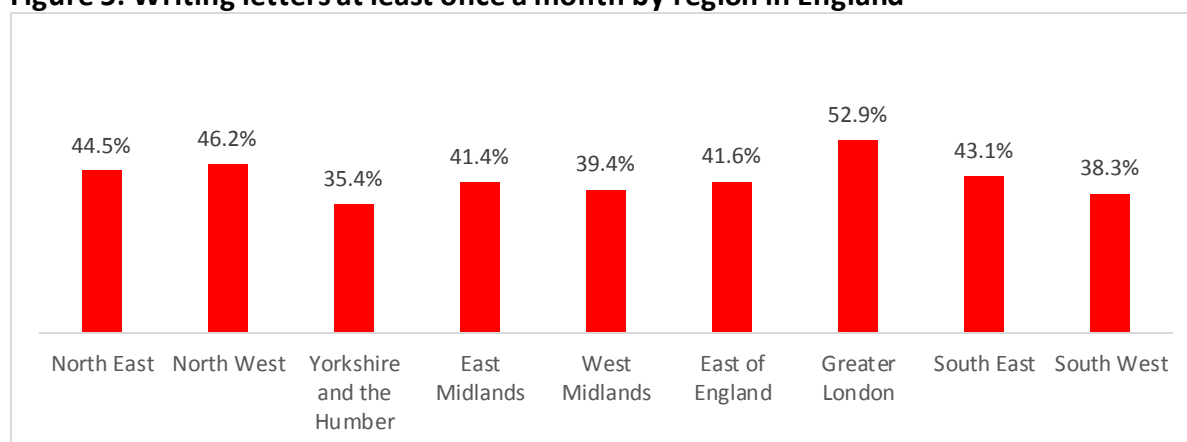
The biggest differences, however, are evident with regards to age, where more than half of children aged 8 to 11 say that they write a letter at least once a month compared with a third of those aged 14 or older (54.5% vs 34.7%).

Figure 4: Writing letters at least once a month by gender, age group, free school meal uptake and ethnic background



As Figure 5 shows, children and young people living in Yorkshire and the Humber, the South West and the West Midlands were the least likely to say that they write a letter at least once a month, while children and young people from Greater London were most likely to say that they do this.

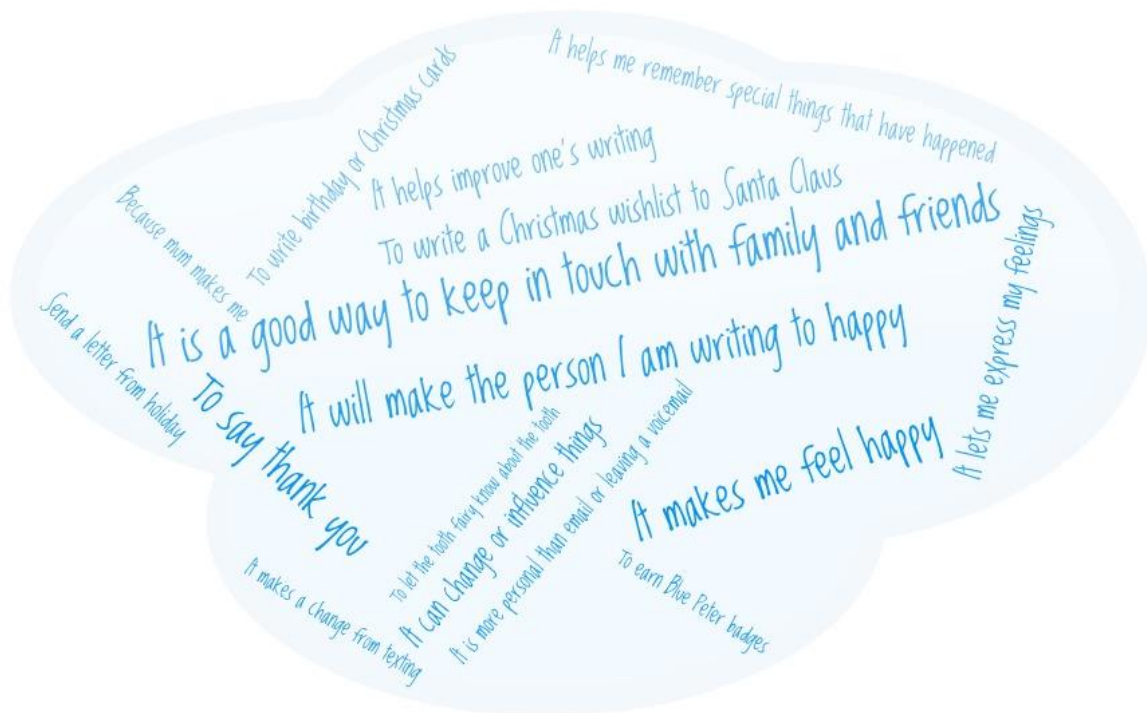
Figure 5: Writing letters at least once a month by region in England



Why do children and young people write letters?

One of the most common reasons for children and young people to write letters in their free time is to stay in touch with family and friends (52.7%) or to make the person they are writing to happy (47.8%; see word cloud in Figure 6). Others write because it makes them feel happy (33.8%), it helps them remember special things that have happened (34.1%) or it lets them express their feelings (30.7%). Fewer children write letters to say thank you (16.4%) or to improve their writing skills (10.1%).

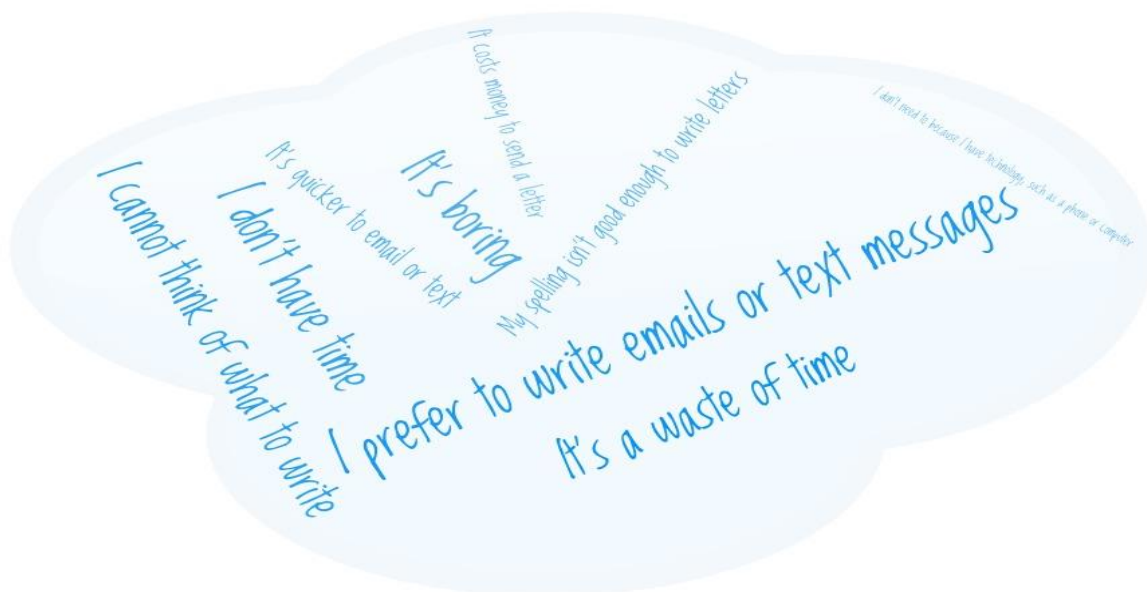
Figure 6: Children and young people’s reasons for writing letters



Why don't children and young people write letters?

Children and young people who told us that they don't write letters in their free time were asked why that was. The word cloud in Figure 7 shows that most said that they didn't write letters because they prefer to write emails or text messages (59.4%) or that they can't think of what to write (33.6%). A third of children and young people (33.3%) also told us that they don't write letters because they don't have the time.

Figure 7: Reasons for not writing letters



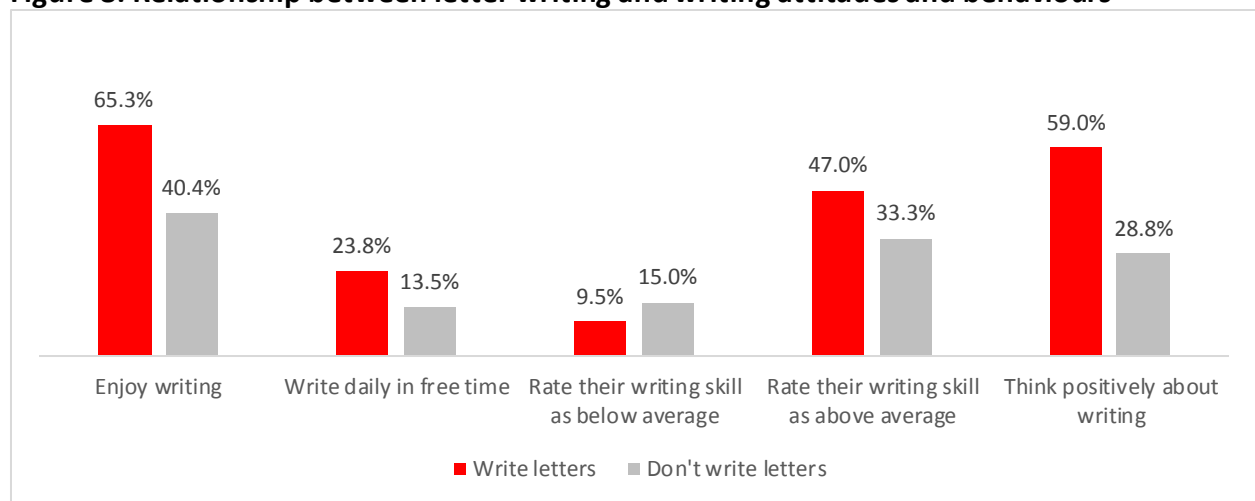
The wider literacy benefits of writing letters

Whether or not children and young people write letters in their free time was related to how much they **enjoy writing**, **how often they write in their spare time**, **how good a writer they think they are** and **whether they think positively about writing**.

As Figure 8 shows, nearly 2 in 3 (65.3%) children and young people who write letters in their free time say that they enjoy writing compared with only 4 in 10 (40.4%) children who say that they don't write letters. They are also nearly twice as likely to write something daily in their spare time compared with their peers who don't write letters (23.8% vs 13.5%). They are less likely to rate their writing skill as below average (9.5% vs 15.0%) and more likely to rate it as above average (47.0% vs 33.3%).

Children who write letters in their free time are also twice as likely to think positively about writing as their peers who don't write letters (59.0% vs 28.8%). For example, half (50.7%) of those who say they write letters agree that writing is cool compared with fewer than a quarter (23.9%) of their peers who don't write letters.

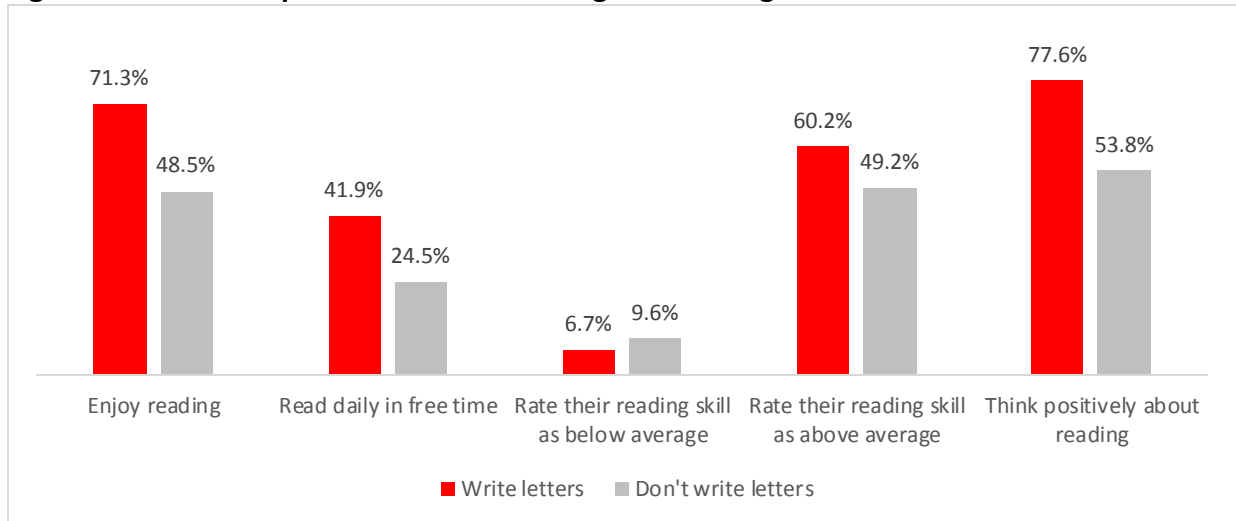
Figure 8: Relationship between letter writing and writing attitudes and behaviours



Children and young people who write letters are, on average, more likely to **write more widely** than their peers who say that they don't write letters in their free time (7 types of different materials per month vs 6 types of different materials).

The difference also extends into children and young people's **reading attitudes and behaviours**. Figure 9 shows that children and young people who say that they write letters in their free time are more likely to enjoy reading, to read daily in their spare time, to rate their reading skill as above average and to think positively about reading than their peers who say that they don't write letters.

Figure 9: Relationship between letter writing and reading attitudes and behaviours



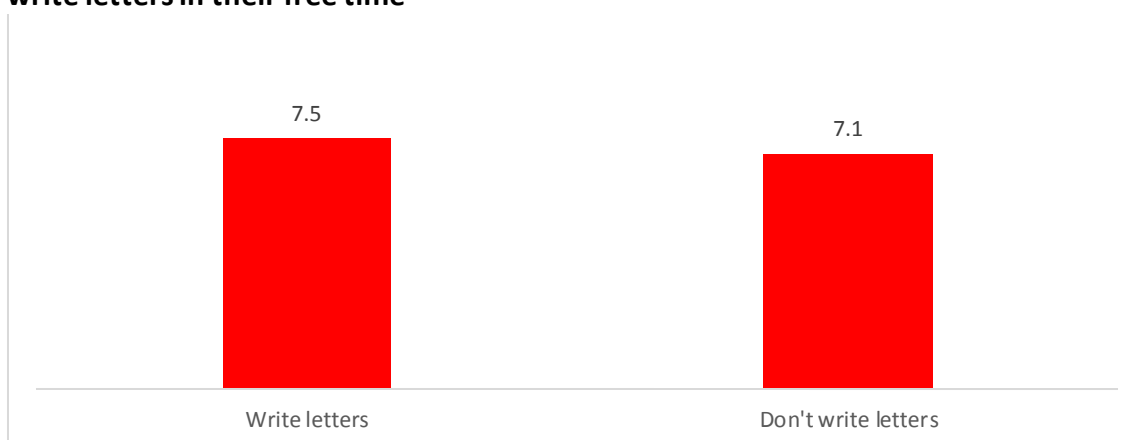
Letter writing and mental wellbeing

Our eighth Annual Literacy Pupil Survey also looked at the relationship between mental wellbeing, reading and writing for the first time (see our [mental wellbeing, reading and writing report](#)).

We included questions in our survey focusing on three particular aspects of mental wellbeing: life satisfaction, coping skills and self-belief. To explore how mental wellbeing is associated with letter writing, we combined responses across these three components to create an overall Mental Wellbeing Index with a range of 1 to 10, where a higher score equals a higher level of mental wellbeing.

Children and young people who say that they write letters in their free time rate have, on average, higher mental wellbeing scores than their peers who don't write letters (see Figure 10).

Figure 10: Average Mental Wellbeing Index scores (out of 10) by whether or not pupils write letters in their free time



In terms of the individual components that make up the Mental Wellbeing Index, we found the strongest relationship to be between letter writing and life satisfaction. Children and

young people who write letters in their free time are happier with their lives than children and young people who don't write letters in their spare time (7.69 vs 7.16 out of 10, with a higher score indicating greater life satisfaction).

Letter writing and literacy engagement

In addition to exploring how letter writing is associated with the individual components of writing and reading as we have done earlier in the report, we also wanted to explore how letter writing relates to children and young people's general engagement with literacy (reading and writing). To this end, we constructed a literacy engagement score that summed the responses across all the reading and writing variables in our Annual Literacy Survey, with positive responses being allocated higher scores (out of a total of 52).

For some of the analyses we then also divided the sample into four quartiles to explore how those with low literacy engagement (bottom quartile) differ from those with high literacy engagement (top quartile)¹ in terms of their letter writing engagement. Figure 11 shows that those who write letters in their free time, on average, have a **higher literacy engagement score** than those who don't. This difference is statistically significant.

Figure 11: Average (mean) literacy score (out of 52) by whether or not pupils write letters in their free time

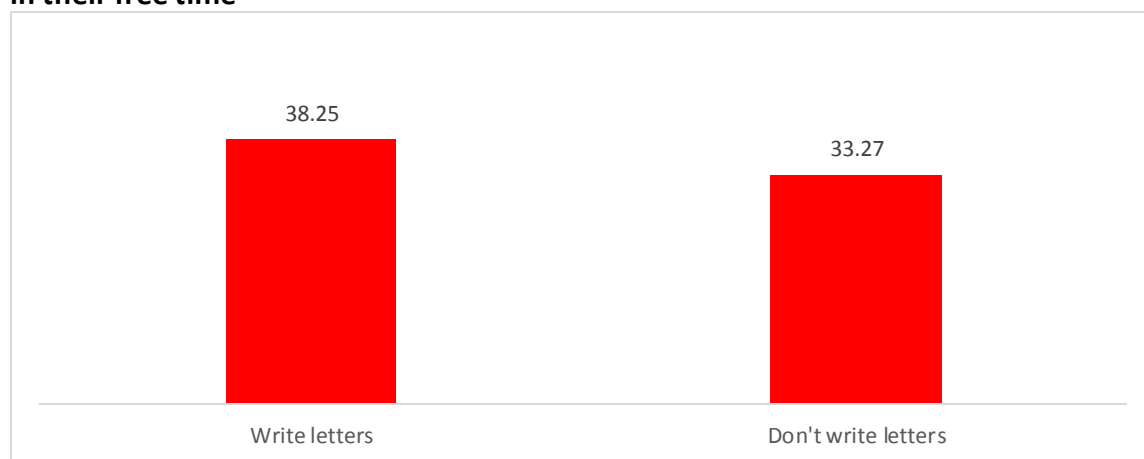


Table 1 cross-tabulates those who write or don't write letters in their free time with who score in the top and bottom quartiles for literacy engagement. It shows that 2 in 5 of those who write letters also have high literacy engagement (40.5%). Indeed, those who write letters are twice as likely to have high literacy engagement than those who don't write letters in their free time (40.5% vs 17.6%).

¹ Quartiles look at the distribution of responses and divide those into four roughly equal parts. The first quartile (also called the lower quartile) is the number below which lies the bottom 25 percent of data. The second quartile (the median) divides the range in the middle and has 50 percent of the data below it. The third quartile (also called the upper quartile) has 75 percent of the data below it and the top 25 percent of the data above it. In our study, the quartile scores are divided into the following four groups: bottom = 0-29.75; lower middle = 29.76-35.60; upper middle = 35.61-40.58; top = 40.59-52.

Table 1: Cross-tabulation of pupils who write or don't write letters and whether they have high or low literacy engagement scores

	Low literacy engagement (bottom quartile)	High literacy engagement (top quartile)
Write letters	11.7%	40.5%
Don't write letters	29.0%	17.6%

Conclusion

Letter writing is on the rise. 36.7% of children and young people who took part in our Annual Literacy Survey this year said that they write letters in their free time, compared with 28.9% in 2011². What's more, over this same time period, Blue Peter has seen a monumental rise in the number of correspondences it receives from children and young people, rocketing from 44,000 in 2011 to 104,000 so far this year.

The benefits of letter writing for children and young people are far reaching. This report shows that children and young people who write letters in their free time are more likely to have higher levels of writing enjoyment, confidence in their writing skills, and positive attitudes towards writing compared to their peers who don't write letters. What's more, we found that these young people are also more likely to benefit from higher levels of literacy engagement and tend to be more satisfied with their lives.

Alongside this, analysis of letters to Blue Peter by Oxford University Press's Children's Corpus found that the children and young people who wrote the letters have high levels of social awareness and sensitivity, and displayed strong persuasive language skills in their explanations of why they should receive a Blue Peter badge.

It is fitting that children and young people's letter writing is at an all-time high in 2018, the same year that the National Literacy Trust is celebrating its 25th anniversary and Blue Peter is turning 60.

² Clark, C. (2016). [Children and Young People's Writing in 2015](#). London: National Literacy Trust.

About the National Literacy Trust

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