

Children and young people's non-fiction reading and environmental engagement

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We have been asking children and young people about their reading, writing, speaking and listening enjoyment, behaviour and attitudes since 2005. Throughout this time, non-fiction has remained a popular reading material for children and young people, with more than half saying they chose to read it in their free time in 2022. For National Non-Fiction November¹, we looked not only at whether children and young people said that they engaged with non-fiction, but also whether those who read non-fiction showed different motivations to read when compared with those who didn't read non-fiction. We found a number of interesting differences between children who did, and did not, read non-fiction, most notably in relation to environmental engagement, which we asked about for the first time in 2022.

Key findings include:

Non-fiction reading

- Over half (55.7%) of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they read non-fiction in their spare time in 2022.
 - Many children and young people read non-fiction regardless of gender (boys = 54.5%, girls = 56.7%) and free-school-meal background (FSM = 54.1%, non-FSM = 55.7%).
 - While 7 in 10 (69.1%) children aged 8 to 11 read non-fiction, this decreased to less than half (44.4%) of 14- to 16-year-olds.

¹ <https://fcbg.org.uk/nfn/>

- Children who did and did not receive free school meals (FSMs) were equally likely to say that they read non-fiction (54.1% vs. 55.7%).
- More of those who read non-fiction compared with those who didn't said that they read for educational reasons, for social connection or for mental-wellbeing purposes.
 - Twice as many children and young people who read non-fiction compared with those who don't said that they read to learn more about the causes they care about (34.3% vs. 14.6%).
 - More of those who read non-fiction said that they read to feel connected to the world (28.3% vs 11.7%) and to spend time with others (12.7% vs 4.9%).
 - Twice as many of those who read non-fiction, compared with those who didn't, said that they read to relax (62.0% vs. 33.4%), that reading makes them feel better (53.2% vs 26.0%) and that reading makes them feel more confident (31.9% vs 13.3%).

Non-fiction and the environment

- More than 1 in 4 (25.6%) children and young people said that they read to learn more about the issues and causes they care about. This rises to more than 1 in 3 (34.3%) children and young people who read non-fiction.
- More children and young people who read non-fiction showed environmental awareness.
 - More non-fiction readers shared that taking care of the environment was important to them (68.7% vs 48.6% of those who didn't read non-fiction) and that they knew what to do to help look after the environment (69.2% vs 55.7%).
- More children and young people who read non-fiction also said they engaged in environmental action.
 - More non-fiction readers said that they spoke to friends or family about the environment (56.5% vs 39.3%).
 - More non-fiction readers also said that they had read (43.4% vs 18.7%) or written (18.4% vs 7.7%) about the environment in their spare time.
 - Less than 1 in 7 (13.8%) of those who read non-fiction said that they hadn't engaged in any of the environmental actions we listed, compared with 3 in 10 (30.3%) of those who didn't read non-fiction.

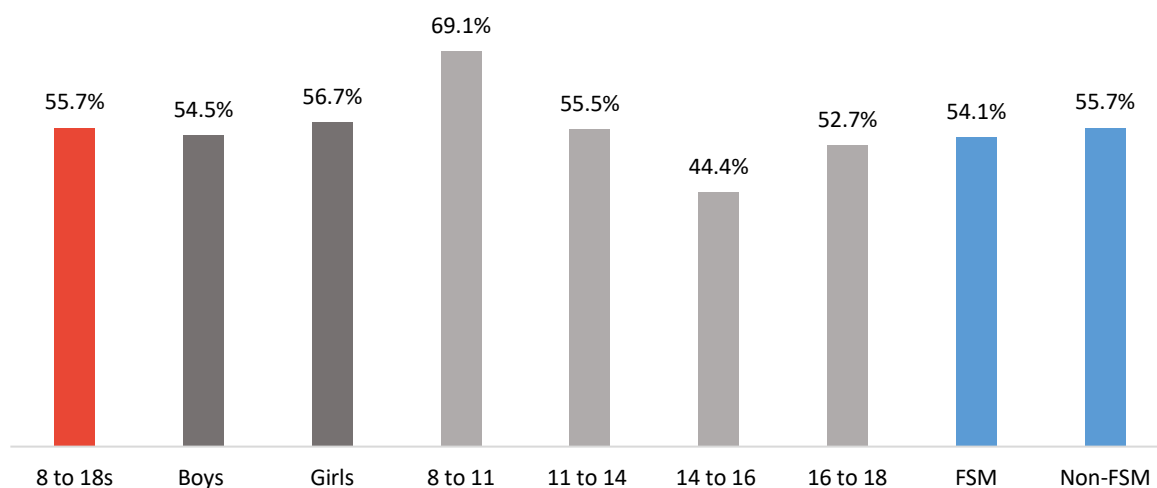
Who reads non-fiction?

Overall, in 2022, over half (55.7%)² of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they read non-fiction in their spare time (see Figure 1). Interestingly, this didn't vary much by gender, but did by age group. 7 in 10 8- to 11-year-olds said that they read non-fiction, reducing to just over half of 11- to 14-year-olds, and less than half of 14- to 16-year-olds. Non-

² [either on screen or on paper or both] n = 34,624

fiction reading did increase slightly for 16- to 18-year-olds to just over half. A similar percentage of children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs) and those who don't said that they read non-fiction in their spare time.

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people who read non-fiction in their spare time, by gender, age group and FSM uptake



Reading motivations

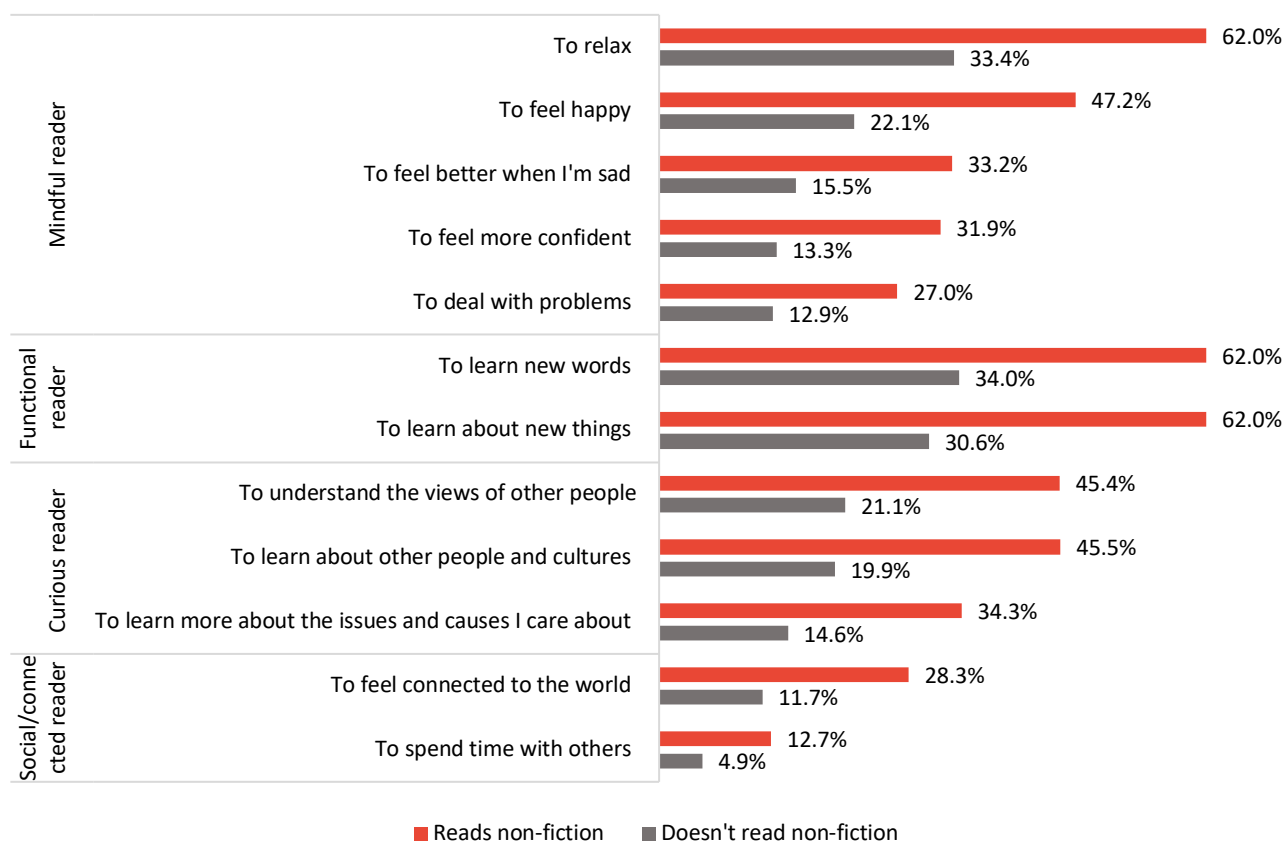
With a large percentage of children and young people saying that they read non-fiction, we were keen to identify if those who did showed different motivations towards reading when compared with those who didn't read non-fiction.

Looking at motivations to read (see Figure 2), more of those who read non-fiction compared with those who didn't could be considered to be functional readers. Indeed, more said that they read to learn new words or to learn about new things. Additionally, more could be considered curious readers, with more saying that they read to understand the views of others, to learn about other people and cultures, and to learn more about the issues and causes they care about.

Those who read non-fiction were also more likely to say they were mindful readers, as in they read for mental-wellbeing purposes. Indeed, more said that they read to relax, to feel happy, to feel better when they are sad, to feel more confident and to deal with problems.

Finally, we found that more of those who read non-fiction compared with those who didn't said that they read to connect with others. For example, more said that they read to feel connected to the world and to spend time with others. Engaging with non-fiction may therefore provide a gateway to connecting with others.

Figure 2: “Reading helps me...”, by non-fiction readers



Getting behind a cause: the environment

Overall, 1 in 4 (25.6%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us they read to learn more about the issues and causes they care about. This rises to more than 1 in 3 (34.3%) children and young people who read non-fiction (see Figure 2).

To understand this better, we asked specific questions in 2022 about environmental awareness and engagement and the role of literacy in supporting these. We found that a higher percentage of those who read non-fiction also engaged with environmental issues (see Figure 3), whether this was just knowing more about why it is important to look after the environment or feeling that their actions could have an influence on the environment.

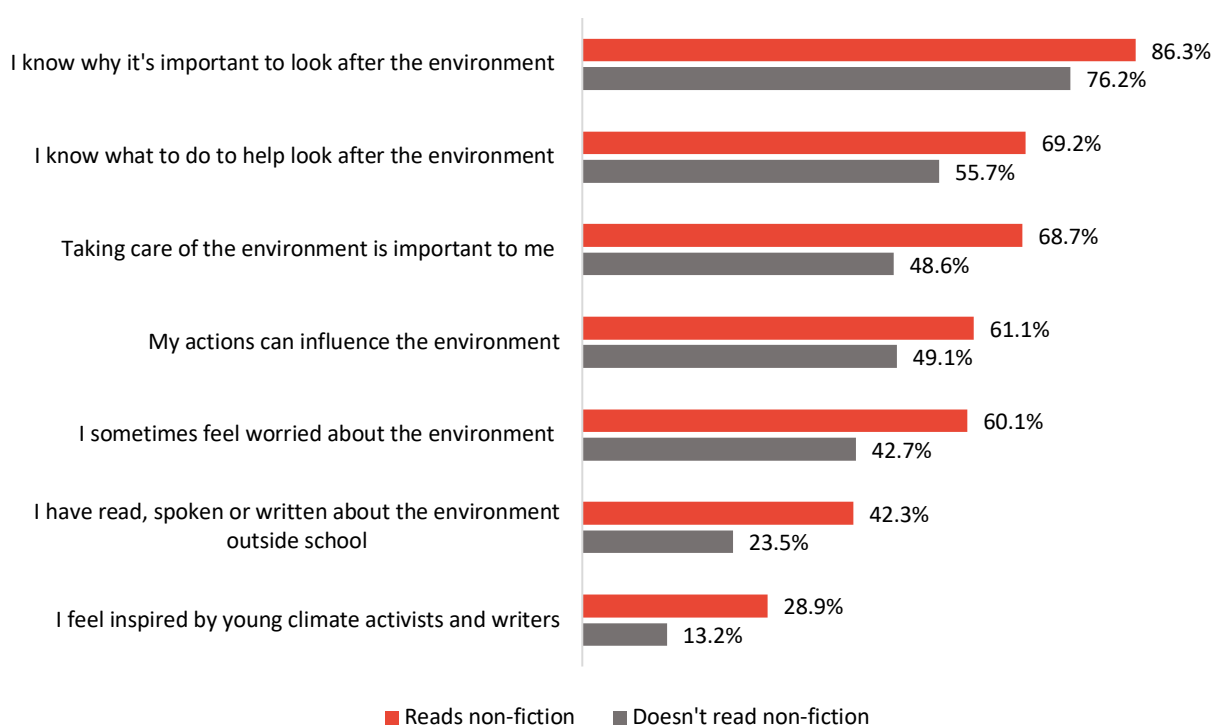
Starting with general environmental awareness, more non-fiction readers said that they know why it's important to look after the environment, that taking care of the environment was important to them, and that their actions could influence the environment.

In terms of how children and young people engaged personally with environmental issues, more of those who read non-fiction said that they knew what to do to help look after the environment, that they sometimes felt worried about the environment, and that they felt inspired by young climate activists and writers. As we will look at in more detail (see Figure

4), more of those who read non-fiction also said that they have read, spoken or written about the environment outside school.

As such, non-fiction readers showed greater awareness of environmental issues, suggesting that non-fiction texts could be a source of environmental awareness.

Figure 3: Percentage agreement with environmental-awareness statements by whether or not they read non-fiction

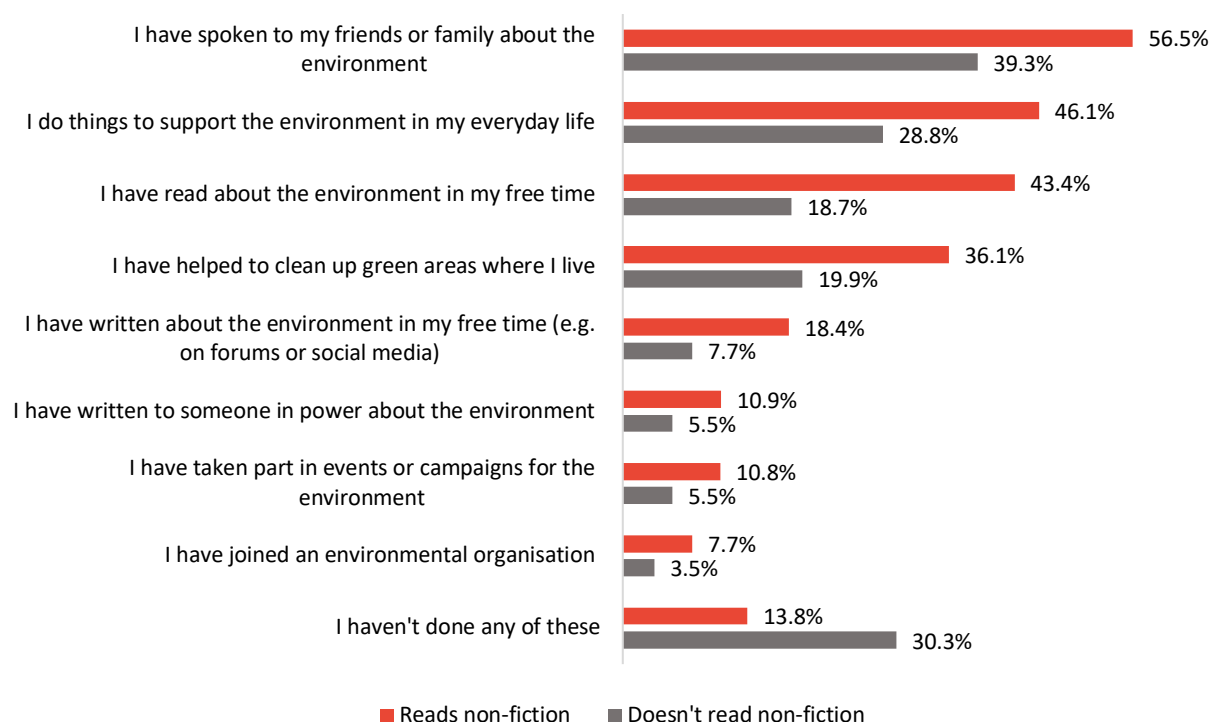


Additionally, there were differences in environmental action by whether or not children and young people shared that they read non-fiction (see Figure 4). More of those who read non-fiction in their spare time shared that they engaged in activities to support the environment, including speaking to friends or family about the environment, helping to clean up green areas, or taking part in events or campaigns for the environment.

Engaging in reading and writing to support the environment was also more likely for those who read non-fiction, with more than 2 in 5 saying that they have read about the environment in their spare time, compared with fewer than 1 in 5 of those who didn't read non-fiction. Additionally, more of those who read non-fiction said that they had written about the environment in their free time, and that they have written to someone in power about the environment.

Finally, while just less than 1 in 7 (13.8%) of those who read non-fiction said that they haven't done any of the activities we listed for environmental action, 3 in 10 (30.3%) of those who didn't read non-fiction said the same.

Figure 4: Percentage agreement with environmental-action statements by whether or not they read non-fiction



Conclusion

Overall, this report shows that a considerable percentage of children and young people choose to read non-fiction in their free time, regardless of their gender and socioeconomic background. Indeed, girls were as likely as boys to read non-fiction in their spare time, which is contrary to what some might expect to see. Notably, we found that more children and young people who read non-fiction were motivated to read for educational purposes, to satisfy curiosities, to foster social connections and to support their mental wellbeing. It is perhaps unsurprising that many non-fiction readers said that they read to learn more about the issues and causes they care about. However, links between non-fiction reading and wellbeing are perhaps more unexpected. For example, compared with children and young people who didn't read non-fiction, double the percentage of those who read non-fiction said that they read to relax and that reading makes them feel better. While links between fiction reading and mental wellbeing are well-known³, it would be interesting to explore non-fiction reading for relaxation in more depth.

At the same time, we found a clear link between non-fiction reading, and environmental awareness and action. More of those who read non-fiction shared that they were aware of

³ e.g., see https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Mental_wellbeing_reading_and_writing_2017-18_-_FINAL2_qTxyxvg.pdf

environmental issues, knew what they could do to support the environment, and shared key ways that they did so. These included speaking to friends and family and reading and writing about the environment in their free time, and emphasising the important role of literacy and non-fiction reading in helping children and young people engage with their interests and with the world around them.

Our sincere thanks to all of the schools that, despite really challenging times, 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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