

# Children and young people's reading in 2026

Understanding how children and  
young people engage with reading

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Reading shapes how children and young people learn, feel and engage with the world. Yet across the UK and internationally, it is becoming less central to everyday life.

This is not a challenge confined to one age group. In the UK, only half of adults now report reading regularly in their free time, with younger adults the least likely to do so. Among children, international evidence points to similar patterns. Findings from the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study show that 10-year-olds in England and Northern Ireland report lower levels of reading enjoyment than the global average.

These trends suggest a broader shift in how reading is prioritised and experienced. Competing demands on time, changing habits and evolving forms of entertainment all play a role, but the result is clear: fewer children, young people and adults are engaging with reading regularly, and many are not experiencing the benefits it can bring.

This matters because reading is linked not only to attainment but also to wellbeing, confidence, empathy and participation in society. When engagement declines, these wider benefits are also at risk, particularly for those who already face the greatest barriers.

In response, 2026 marks the National Year of Reading, a nationwide effort to re-energise reading as a meaningful, accessible, everyday activity. Bringing together partners across sectors, it aims to support more children, young people and adults to find time, motivation and opportunities to read, with a particular focus on those most at risk of disengagement.

## **This report**

This report builds on that context, offering the latest insights into children and young people's reading behaviours, attitudes and experiences in 2026, and providing an early signal of how these may be shifting as the National Year of Reading begins.

We asked 125,375 children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 479 schools across the UK who took part in our Annual Literacy Survey about their reading in 2026 (see Appendix A for more information on the methodology and sample).

The report is structured in two parts. The first part looks at children and young people's reading enjoyment and how often they read in their free time, including

demographic differences and trends over time. These measures provide an overview of current levels of reading engagement and how these have changed in recent years.

The second part looks more broadly at the role reading plays in children and young people's lives. It explores how children and young people experience reading in relation to learning, understanding others, self-understanding and wellbeing, as well as the wider factors that may help support reading, including interest and encouragement at home and at school.

### What this report shows

After several years of decline, 2026 saw a small but important increase in both reading enjoyment and daily reading. However, this report also shows that reading engagement is about more than enjoyment alone. While children and young people who enjoy reading and read regularly are the most likely to see reading as supporting their learning, wellbeing and understanding of themselves and others, many who do not enjoy reading are still reading and still finding value in it. Overall, the findings highlight the continued importance of enjoyment, relevance and encouragement in shaping children and young people's reading lives.

More specifically, it shows that:

#### Reading enjoyment rose in 2026 after four years of decline

- In 2026, 36.1% of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time either very much or quite a lot, which is up from 32.7% in 2025.
- This is the first increase in reading enjoyment since 2021.
- The increase was almost identical for boys and girls and was seen across all ages among 8 to 18s, with the largest rises among those aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18.
- However, the pattern was less positive for some groups. Among children aged 5 to 8, enjoyment fell slightly from 62.6% in 2025 to 61.6% in 2026, driven by a decrease in boys' enjoyment levels.
- There were also signs of widening inequalities by free-school-meal (FSM) uptake. Reading enjoyment rose from 31.0% to 32.1% among children and young people who received FSM, compared with 33.0% to 37.3% among those who did not.

### **Daily reading also increased slightly in 2026**

- In 2026, 20.3% of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they read daily in their free time, which is up from 18.7% in 2025.
- This is the first increase in daily reading since 2023, although levels remain below earlier years.
- Daily reading increased across the older age groups, with the largest rises among those aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18.
- Among children aged 5 to 8, daily reading rose slightly from 44.5% in 2025 to 45.5% in 2026. Within this age group, daily reading changed little among boys, rising from 41.0% to 41.1%, but it increased more markedly among girls from 48.3% to 50.5%.
- Daily reading also rose slightly among both children and young people who received free school meals and those who did not, from 15.8% to 16.3% and from 19.4% to 21.4% respectively.

### **Reading enjoyment and frequency are closely linked but they do not fully overlap**

- Around half of children and young people who enjoyed reading say that they read daily in their free time (49.8%), compared with just 4.5% of those who did not enjoy reading.
- More than 9 in 10 of those who enjoyed reading read at least once a week (92.6%), compared with around 1 in 3 of those who did not enjoy reading (34.6%).
- However, many children and young people who do not enjoy reading are still reading, with more than 3 in 5 reading at least once a month (62.3%).
- This relationship becomes stronger with age, showing that reading enjoyment and reading frequency are more closely aligned among older children and young people.

### **Children and young people who enjoy reading and read regularly are the most likely to say that reading supports different areas of their lives**

- Children and young people who enjoyed reading and read at least weekly were consistently the most likely to say that reading helped them learn new words or things (85.2%) and do better at school (64.6%).
- They were also the most likely to say that reading helped them understand other people's views (63.5%), understand themselves better (38.0%) and relax (64.4%).
- This pattern was also clear for emotional support, with 55.6% saying that reading helped them when they were feeling stressed or anxious.
- These findings underline the continued importance of both enjoyment and regular reading in children and young people's lives.

### **Many children and young people who do not enjoy reading still associate it with learning and other benefits**

- Even among children and young people who read at least weekly but did not enjoy reading, 74.1% said that reading helped them learn new words or things and 52.9% said that it helped them do better at school.
- In this group, 44.4% said that reading helped them understand other people's views and 17.4% said that it helped them understand themselves better.
- Around 3 in 10 said that reading helped them relax (31.1%), while 24.2% said that it helped them when they were feeling stressed or anxious.
- Differences between groups were smaller for learning than for wellbeing.
- This suggests that while enjoyment remains important, it does not fully explain why reading may matter in children and young people's lives.

### **Reading engagement is closely linked to relevance and encouragement from others**

- Nearly half of children and young people said that reading helped them explore their interests (48.7%).
- More than half said that their parents encouraged them to read (54.8%), while almost two-thirds said that teachers encouraged them to read (65.8%).
- Children and young people in the more engaged reading groups were more likely to say that reading helped them explore their interests and that they were encouraged to read, especially by their parents.
- Taken together, these findings suggest a close relationship between reading engagement, seeing reading as meaningful and feeling encouraged to read by the people around them.

As the National Year of Reading begins, these findings offer both encouragement and a clear sense of where more attention is needed. The small rise in reading enjoyment and daily reading is welcome, particularly after several years of decline. But the uneven pattern of change, and the differences between children and young people in how they experience reading, show that progress cannot be taken for granted. Supporting reading will mean continuing to promote enjoyment, while also helping more children and young people to see reading as relevant, worthwhile and part of everyday life.

# Reading in 2026

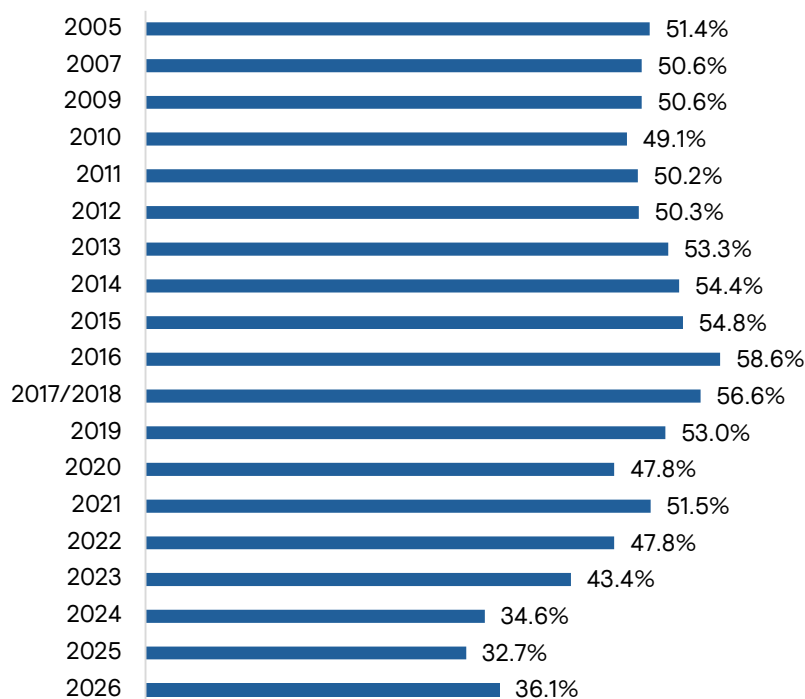
This report focuses on the reading children and young people do in their free time. Before they answered questions on reading, they were reminded that “by reading, we mean books, magazines, newspapers, comics or anything else you might read in print or on a screen (e.g. on your phone, tablet or computer)”.

## Reading enjoyment in free time

We have been tracking the reading-enjoyment levels of children and young people aged 8 to 18 since 2005. In 2026, over 1 in 3 (36.1%) said they enjoyed reading either very much or quite a lot in their free time. This marks the first increase in reading enjoyment in four years. After several years of falling levels, enjoyment rose by 3.4 percentage points between 2025 and 2026 (see Figure 1).

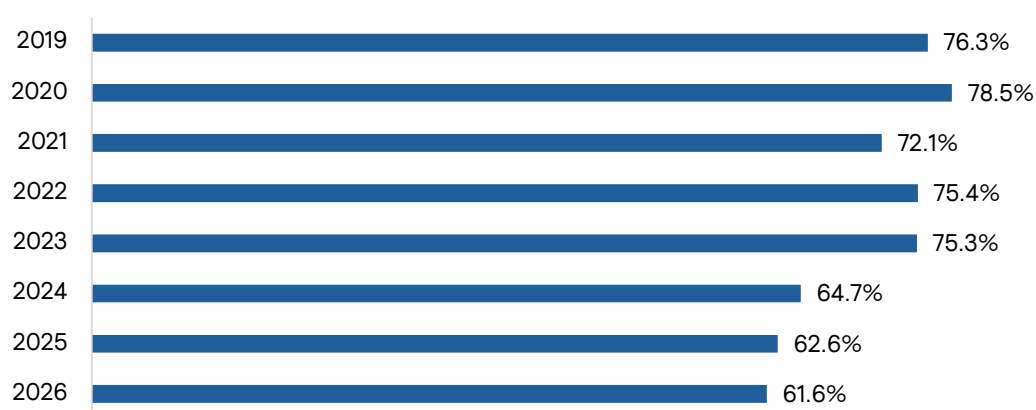
Although the increase in 2026 is encouraging, reading enjoyment remains lower than it was for much of the past two decades. After staying relatively stable in the mid-2000s, levels rose to a peak in 2016 before generally falling again, with a sharper drop after 2019 and particularly low levels in 2024 and 2025.

**Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who told us that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot between 2005 and 2026**



We have also tracked the reading enjoyment of children aged 5 to 8 over the last eight years (see Figure 2), which shows a somewhat different pattern to that seen among older age groups. While levels remain relatively high – and higher than those seen among older children and young people – enjoyment of reading decreased slightly in 2026, falling by 1 percentage point to 61.6%, marking the third consecutive year of decline.

**Figure 2: Percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who told us that they enjoy reading either very much or quite a lot between 2019 and 2026**



### Who enjoyed reading in 2026 and what has changed over the past year?

As shown in Figure 3, more girls than boys reported enjoying reading in their free time in 2026. Reading enjoyment increased for both groups compared with 2025 (see Table 1 for changes over time by group, including comparisons with previous years), rising by just over 3 percentage points for both boys and girls. As a result, the gender gap remained largely unchanged at around 13.5 percentage points.

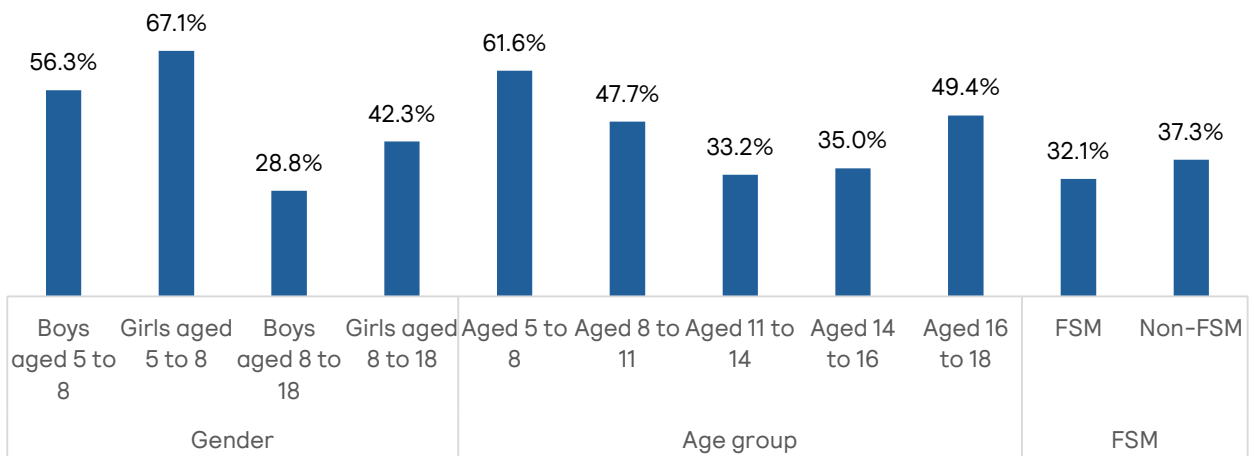
Reading enjoyment also continues to vary by age. Levels are highest among children aged 5 to 8, and then decline as children move into early adolescence. Enjoyment is lowest among those aged 11 to 14, before increasing again among older teenagers. Compared with 2025, reading enjoyment has increased across all age groups, with the largest increases seen among those aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18 where levels rose by around 6 and 8 percentage points respectively.

In 2026, there were also clear differences in reading enjoyment by socioeconomic background, as measured by free-school-meal (FSM) uptake. More children and young people who did not receive FSM reported enjoying reading than those who did. While reading enjoyment has increased for both

groups since 2025, the increase was much greater among those who did not receive FSM (up 4.3 percentage points) than among those who did (up 1.1 percentage points). As a result, the gap between the two groups widened from around 2 percentage points in 2025 to over 5 percentage points in 2026, highlighting renewed inequalities in reading enjoyment.

The breakdown of reading enjoyment by geographical region is shown in Appendix B.

**Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time in 2026 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)**



**Table 1: Reading enjoyment levels for children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2005 and 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake**

	Boys	Girls	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	FSM	Non-FSM
<b>2005</b>	46.1%	56.8%	67.5%	44.3%	32.0%	44.4%	46.5%	50.2%
<b>2010</b>	42.3%	55.4%	68.1%	45.8%	32.5%	45.5%	44.1%	49.7%
<b>2011</b>	43.7%	56.7%	73.0%	47.2%	34.4%	46.3%	45.3%	50.8%
<b>2012</b>	43.9%	56.8%	64.0%	45.5%	36.3%	44.8%	47.7%	50.7%
<b>2013</b>	47.1%	59.8%	65.8%	49.5%	36.7%	40.1%	49.6%	53.9%
<b>2014</b>	47.2%	61.6%	65.6%	50.3%	43.4%	55.3%	50.4%	54.9%
<b>2015</b>	47.8%	61.2%	72.6%	51.7%	40.2%	53.6%	53.4%	55.1%
<b>2016</b>	52.4%	64.9%	77.6%	55.2%	43.8%	56.0%	58.3%	58.3%
<b>2017/18</b>	51.1%	62.6%	77.0%	53.2%	44.3%	54.4%	53.8%	56.3%
<b>2019</b>	46.5%	60.3%	71.9%	49.5%	40.2%	56.5%	51.4%	52.6%
<b>2020</b>	46.6%	48.9%	66.6%	46.2%	42.3%	56.0%	45.9%	48.0%
<b>2021</b>	45.6%	55.9%	62.4%	50.7%	48.1%	58.9%	47.5%	52.1%
<b>2022</b>	42.4%	51.5%	59.8%	45.6%	45.3%	57.5%	43.8%	42.8%
<b>2023</b>	40.5%	45.3%	56.2%	40.4%	40.8%	56.2%	39.5%	43.8%
<b>2024</b>	28.2%	40.5%	51.9%	30.7%	29.7%	40.0%	33.9%	34.8%
<b>2025</b>	25.7%	39.1%	46.9%	29.5%	28.6%	41.4%	31.0%	33.0%
<b>2026</b>	28.8%	42.3%	47.7%	33.2%	35.0%	49.4%	32.1%	37.3%

Looking specifically at children aged 5 to 8 in 2026, more girls than boys said they enjoyed reading in their free time (see Table 2). However, after narrowing in recent years, the gender gap has widened again in 2026. This change is driven by a decrease in reading enjoyment among boys alongside an increase among girls, resulting in a larger difference between the two groups than in 2025.

**Table 2: Reading enjoyment levels for children aged 5 to 8 from 2019 to 2026 by gender**

	Overall	Boys	Girls	Gender gap (percentage points)
2019	76.3%	68.4%	83.9%	15.5
2020	78.5%	73.6%	83.3%	9.7
2021	72.1%	65.8%	78.1%	12.3
2022	75.4%	70.4%	81.0%	10.6
2023	75.3%	70.8%	80.2%	9.4
2024	64.7%	59.7%	69.6%	9.9
2025	62.6%	58.8%	66.4%	7.6
2026	61.6%	56.3%	67.1%	10.8

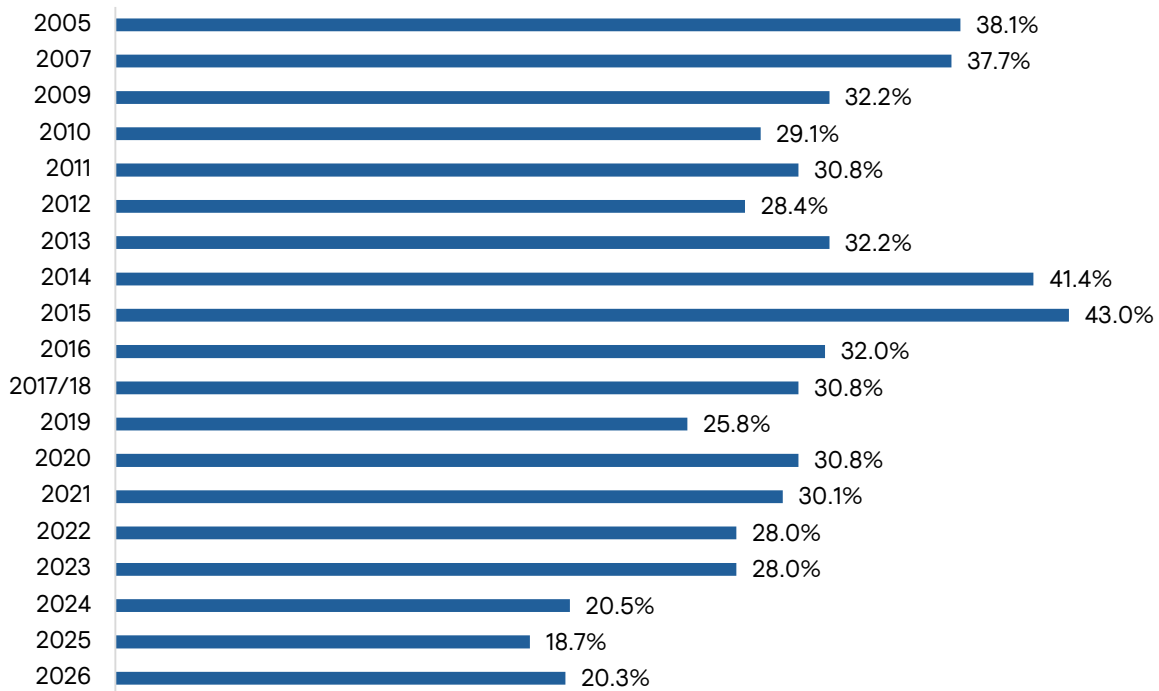
## Daily reading in free time

Reading enjoyment is only one part of the story and, arguably, a more pertinent measure of the role of reading in children and young people’s lives is to look at how often they read in their free time.

In 2026, 1 in 5 (20.3%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said they read something daily in their free time (see Figure 4). This represents a small increase compared with 2025 when fewer than 1 in 5 (18.7%) reported reading daily. However, daily reading levels remain low overall.

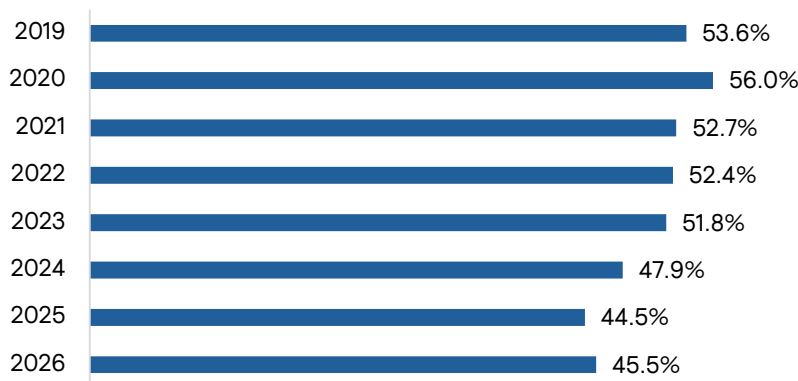
Looking at trends over time, daily reading was more common in the mid-2000s and rose to a peak in the mid-2010s when over 4 in 10 children and young people said they read daily. Since then, levels have generally declined, with a sharper drop in recent years. While the increase in 2026 is encouraging, it is too early to say whether this marks a sustained change.

**Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who read daily in their free time from 2005 to 2026**



Looking specifically at those aged 5 to 8, in 2026, 45.5% said they read something daily in their free time, which remains considerably higher than the rate reported by older age groups (see Figure 5). This represents a small increase compared with 2025 when 44.5% said they read daily. While daily reading among this younger age group remains below levels seen in previous years, this is the first increase since 2023.

**Figure 5: Percentage of children aged 5 to 8 who read daily in their free time from 2019 to 2026**



### Who reads daily and what has changed over the past year?

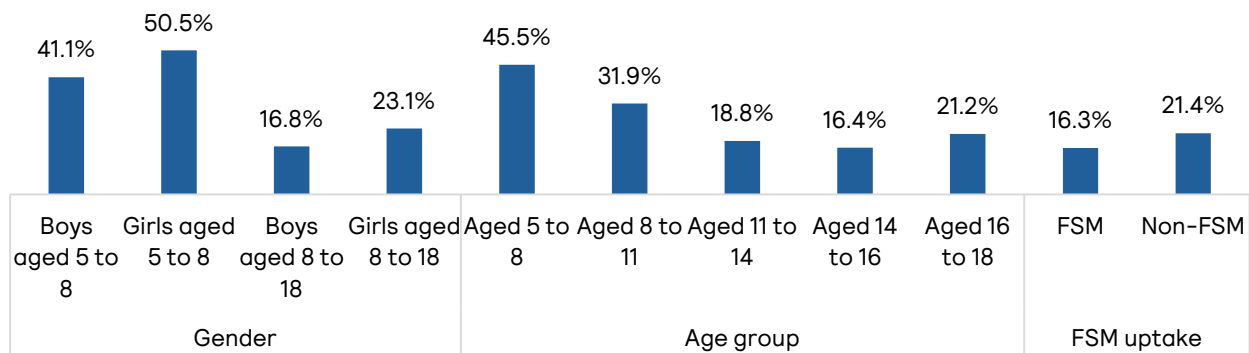
As shown in Figure 6, more girls than boys reported reading something daily in their free time in 2026. Daily reading increased for both groups compared with 2025 (see Table 3 for changes over time by group, including comparisons with previous years), rising by around 1.5 percentage points for both boys and girls. As a result, the gender gap remained largely unchanged at just over 6 percentage points.

Daily reading also continues to vary by age. Levels are highest among children aged 5 to 8 and decline with age. Compared with 2025, daily reading increased across all age groups, with the largest increases seen among older children and young people, particularly those aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18.

In 2026, there were also clear differences in daily reading by FSM background. More children and young people who did not receive FSM reported reading daily than those who did. While daily reading has increased for both groups since 2025, the increase was greater among those who did not receive FSM (up 2.0 percentage points) than among those who did (up 0.5 percentage points). As a result, the gap between the two groups widened from around 3.5 percentage points in 2025 to just over 5 percentage points in 2026, highlighting widening inequalities in daily reading.

The breakdown of daily reading by geographical region is shown in Appendix B.

**Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who said they read daily in 2026 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake (8 to 18s only)**



**Table 3: Daily reading levels for children and young people aged 8 to 18 between 2005 and 2026 by gender, age group and FSM uptake**

	Boys	Girls	8-11	11-14	14-16	16-18	FSM	Non-FSM
<b>2005</b>	35.0%	42.0%	40.5%	44.3%	32.0%	28.6%	31.0%	39.0%
<b>2010</b>	24.1%	33.8%	40.9%	26.7%	21.7%	28.9%	22.9%	30.2%
<b>2011</b>	26.3%	35.3%	42.9%	29.0%	22.9%	25.9%	28.6%	31.2%
<b>2012</b>	24.4%	32.5%	37.7%	24.8%	20.7%	27.9%	24.9%	29.0%
<b>2013</b>	28.2%	36.6%	40.7%	28.4%	24.6%	32.7%	28.7%	32.8%
<b>2014</b>	35.8%	46.5%	45.9%	38.5%	38.2%	47.6%	36.5%	42.1%
<b>2015</b>	36.0%	49.5%	45.5%	42.0%	42.4%	50.7%	38.2%	44.0%
<b>2016</b>	27.5%	36.5%	46.3%	28.9%	22.6%	30.7%	28.8%	32.0%
<b>2017/18</b>	26.7%	34.8%	46.7%	28.0%	21.9%	27.4%	28.6%	31.1%
<b>2019</b>	21.8%	29.9%	41.3%	23.2%	16.3%	19.2%	25.5%	25.4%
<b>2020</b>	28.6%	32.9%	39.8%	29.0%	26.6%	34.3%	27.9%	31.3%
<b>2021</b>	28.0%	35.3%	42.9%	29.5%	26.5%	31.5%	25.4%	31.1%
<b>2022</b>	26.5%	34.4%	39.1%	26.0%	27.1%	31.6%	24.7%	28.9%
<b>2023</b>	24.9%	30.4%	36.9%	26.1%	25.7%	34.0%	24.1%	28.8%
<b>2024</b>	17.5%	23.2%	32.8%	18.1%	14.8%	18.9%	19.3%	20.6%
<b>2025</b>	15.4%	21.6%	31.1%	17.1%	14.0%	17.6%	15.8%	19.4%
<b>2026</b>	16.8%	23.1%	31.9%	18.8%	16.4%	21.2%	16.3%	21.4%

Looking specifically at those aged 5 to 8 (see Table 4), in 2026 a higher percentage of girls reported reading daily in their free time compared with boys, mirroring the gender pattern seen in older age groups.

Compared with 2025, daily reading remained largely unchanged among boys, while it increased among girls. As a result, the gender gap widened again in 2026, rising from 7.3 percentage points in 2025 to 9.4 percentage points.

**Table 4: Daily reading levels for children aged 5 to 8 between 2019 and 2026 by gender**

	Overall	Boys	Girls	Gender gap (percentage points)
2019	53.6%	46.5%	60.5%	14.0
2020	56.0%	51.1%	61.2%	10.1
2021	52.7%	49.5%	56.1%	6.6
2022	52.4%	48.2%	56.9%	8.7
2023	51.8%	48.0%	55.2%	7.2
2024	47.9%	43.0%	52.7%	9.7
2025	44.5%	41.0%	48.3%	7.3
2026	45.5%	41.1%	50.5%	9.4

## Linking enjoyment and frequency

Having looked separately at reading enjoyment and how often children and young people read, we now consider how these two aspects relate to one another.

There is a clear positive relationship between reading enjoyment and how often children and young people read in their free time. As shown in Table 5, those who enjoy reading are more likely to read regularly, with around half (49.8%) reading daily compared with just 4.5% of those who do not enjoy reading.

However, this relationship is not absolute. Many children and young people who do not enjoy reading are still engaging with it. Around 1 in 3 (34.6%) read at least once a week and, overall, more than 3 in 5 (62.3%) read at least once a month in their free time. This suggests that enjoyment alone does not fully explain why children and young people read.

**Table 5: Reading enjoyment in free time by reading frequency in free time in 2026 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
<b>Enjoyed reading</b>	49.8%	34.1%	8.7%	4.6%	1.4%	1.4%
<b>Didn't enjoy reading</b>	4.5%	15.2%	14.9%	14.4%	13.3%	37.7%

What is also notable is that the strength of this relationship varies across groups (see Table 6). It is weaker among younger children aged 5 to 8 but becomes progressively stronger with age, peaking among those aged 14 to 16. This indicates that as children grow older their reading behaviour becomes more closely aligned with their enjoyment.

Differences by gender and socioeconomic background are less pronounced but follow a similar pattern. The relationship between enjoyment and frequency is slightly stronger for girls than boys, and for children and young people who do not receive free school meals compared with those who do.

**Table 6: Relationship between reading enjoyment and reading frequency by gender, age group and FSM uptake**

<b>Boys</b>	.707
<b>Girls</b>	.738
<b>Aged 5 to 8</b>	.448
<b>Aged 8 to 11</b>	.610
<b>Aged 11 to 14</b>	.733
<b>Aged 14 to 16</b>	.780
<b>Aged 16 to 18</b>	.765
<b>FSM</b>	.705
<b>Non-FSM</b>	.739

These findings show that while enjoyment is closely linked to how often children and young people read, it does not fully explain reading behaviour. Many continue to read without enjoying it, while others who enjoy reading do not read frequently.

After looking at changes in reading enjoyment and reading frequency over time, we turn to a broader question: what role does reading play in children and young people's lives today?

## How children and young people engage with reading

While enjoyment and frequency remain important, they do not tell us everything about how children and young people experience reading. Many who enjoy reading also read regularly, but this is not always the case. Some continue to read at least weekly even though they do not enjoy it, while others read less often and report low enjoyment. Looking across these patterns helps us understand not just whether children and young people read, but how reading fits into their lives.

To capture the main ways in which enjoyment and reading frequency intersect, we focus on four broad patterns of reading engagement. Around a third of children and young people both enjoy reading and read at least weekly (34.1%, n = 39,221), while just under a quarter read weekly but do not enjoy it (22.6%, n = 25,953). A further 17.6% (n = 20,337) read monthly but do not enjoy reading, while 25.7% (n = 29,466) read rarely or not at all and do not enjoy it.

The analysis that follows focuses on differences among those who do not enjoy reading to better understand how reading is experienced when enjoyment is low. For this reason, less-frequent readers who do enjoy reading are not included in these comparisons. Instead, the sections that follow concentrate on patterns that more clearly illustrate how enjoyment and reading frequency shape children and young people's reading experiences.

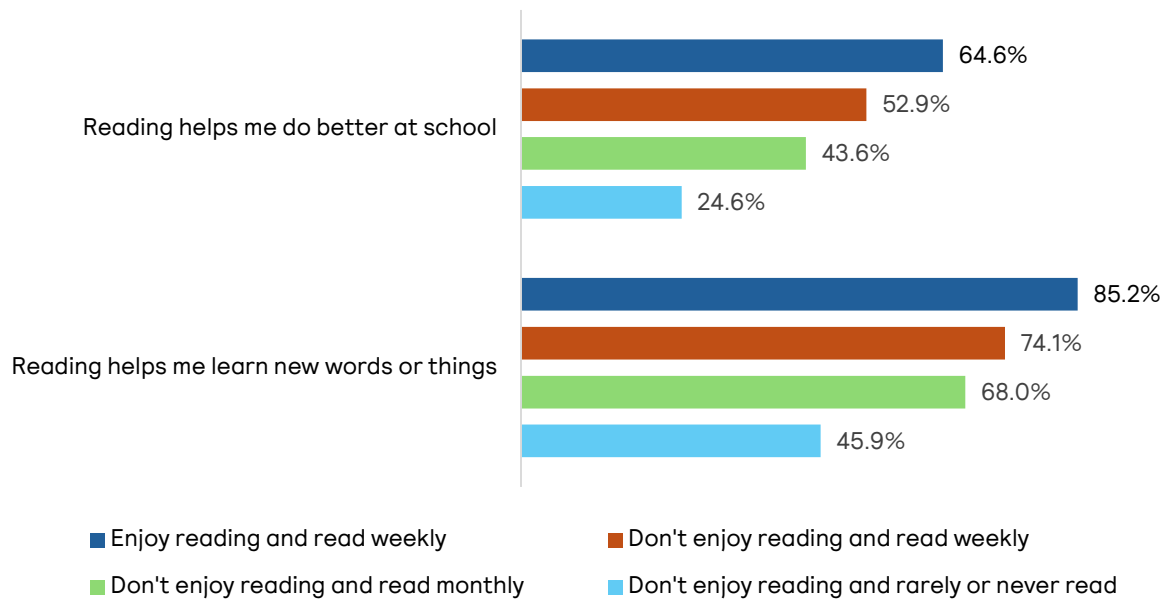
## Reading supports learning and discovery

Reading is widely seen by children and young people as helping them learn. Overall, 48.1% said that reading helps them do better at school, while 69.8% said that it helps them learn new words or things.

These views were most common among those who enjoyed reading and read at least weekly (see Figure 7). However, they were not limited to this group. Among those who read at least weekly but did not enjoy reading, 52.9% still said that reading helps them do better at school, and 74.1% said that it helps them learn

new words or things. Even among those who read less often, substantial percentages continued to associate reading with learning, suggesting that this is one of the most widely recognised roles of reading.

**Figure 7: Percentage agreement with reading supports learning and discovery statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement**



Differences by gender and socioeconomic background were generally small. By contrast, there were clearer differences by age within each engagement group. Across all groups, more younger children said that reading helps them do better at school, while more older young people said that it helps them learn new things or words (see Table 7).

This suggests that, while the overall pattern is consistent, how children and young people describe reading's role in learning shifts with age, from a stronger focus on school in childhood to broader learning in adolescence.

**Table 7: Percentage agreement with reading supports learning and discovery statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement and gender, age group and FSM uptake**

	Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM	
<b>All</b>	45.7%	51.1%	58.6%	46.0%	46.1%	55.6%	45.0%	49.3%	
<b>Better at school</b>	<b>Enjoy/weekly</b>	66.1%	64.6%	70.8%	63.4%	61.6%	64.7%	63.6%	65.0%
	<b>Don't enjoy/weekly</b>	52.1%	54.8%	57.0%	51.6%	53.3%	61.5%	52.4%	53.6%
	<b>Don't enjoy/monthly</b>	43.3%	44.3%	46.9%	42.0%	47.0%	53.0%	42.2%	44.5%
	<b>Don't enjoy and don't read</b>	23.3%	27.0%	31.0%	29.7%	26.4%	35.1%	22.4%	25.7%
<b>Learn new things or words</b>	<b>All</b>	67.6%	72.5%	76.9%	68.0%	68.8%	79.9%	66.4%	71.1%
	<b>Enjoy/weekly</b>	84.9%	86.0%	85.9%	84.6%	85.4%	89.4%	83.2%	85.9%
	<b>Don't enjoy/weekly</b>	74.2%	74.8%	77.0%	73.2%	74.1%	81.4%	73.7%	74.7%
	<b>Don't enjoy/monthly</b>	68.1%	68.6%	70.5%	66.6%	70.4%	80.0%	66.6%	68.8%
	<b>Don't enjoy and don't read</b>	46.1%	47.2%	52.8%	44.1%	47.8%	58.7%	44.0%	47.3%

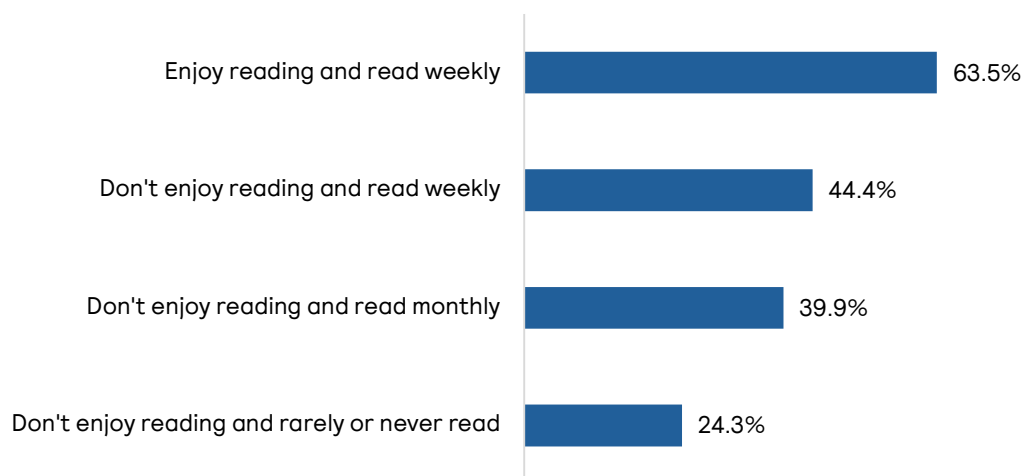
### Reading supports understanding of others

Reading can help children and young people understand the views and experiences of other people. Overall, 45.3% said that reading helps them understand the views of others.

This was most common among those who enjoyed reading and read at least weekly, with 63.5% agreeing that reading helps them understand other people's views (see Figure 8). However, this was also reported by 44.4% of those who read at least weekly but did not enjoy reading.

Compared with some other aspects of reading, this pattern declines more gradually across the engagement groups. Around 2 in 5 of those who read monthly (39.9%) still said that reading helps them understand others, and, even among those who rarely read, around a quarter (24.3%) reported this. This suggests that reading’s role in supporting social understanding may be more widely shared and less closely tied to enjoyment than some of its other perceived benefits.

**Figure 8: Percentage agreement with reading supports understanding of others statement in 2026 by level of reading engagement**



Differences by gender and socioeconomic background were again relatively modest (see Table 8). More girls than boys said that reading helps them understand other people, while fewer children and young people receiving FSM said this than their peers. However, there were clearer differences by age. Across all groups, more older than younger children said that reading helps them understand others, with the highest levels consistently seen among those aged 16 to 18. This pattern is evident regardless of enjoyment or reading frequency, although levels remain highest among those who both enjoy reading and read regularly, and lowest among those who do not engage with reading at all.

This suggests that, while the overall gradient by engagement remains consistent, the role of reading in supporting social understanding becomes more pronounced with age, particularly in later adolescence.

**Table 8: Percentage agreement with reading supports understanding of others statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement and gender, age group and FSM uptake**

	Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
<b>All</b>	40.4%	50.0%	44.5%	43.6%	48.7%	63.9%	43.1%	46.8%
<b>Enjoy/weekly</b>	58.9%	66.5%	55.3%	63.2%	70.9%	77.8%	62.6%	64.8%
<b>Don't enjoy/weekly</b>	42.6%	46.8%	39.8%	44.0%	51.5%	68.0%	44.2%	45.6%
<b>Don't enjoy/monthly</b>	37.8%	42.2%	35.1%	38.1%	45.7%	58.6%	39.8%	40.7%
<b>Don't enjoy and don't read</b>	23.2%	26.5%	25.8%	23.3%	25.4%	37.4%	24.1%	24.9%

### Reading helps children and young people understand themselves

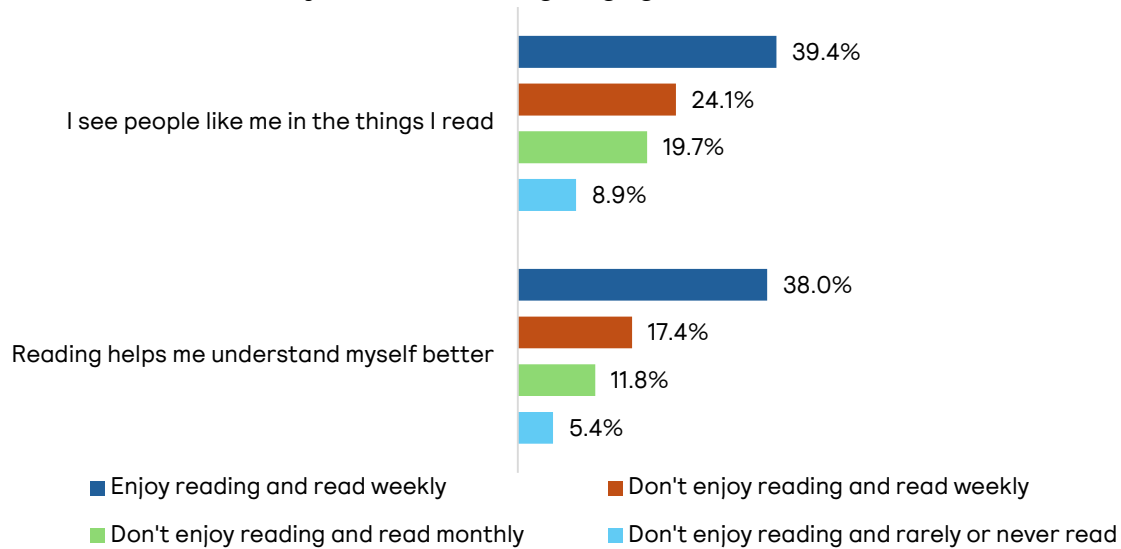
Reading can also help children and young people see themselves and their experiences reflected in what they read. Overall, 24.9% said that they see people like them in what they read, while 20.6% said that reading helps them understand themselves better.

These experiences were most common among those who enjoy reading and read at least weekly. Among this group, 39.5% said that they see people like them in what they read and 38.0% said that reading helps them understand themselves better (see Figure 9).

However, this was not limited to those who enjoy reading. Among those who read at least weekly but did not enjoy reading, 24.1% said that they see people like them in what they read, and 17.4% said that reading helps them understand themselves better.

These percentages were lower among those who read less often, suggesting that this more personal connection to reading becomes less common as engagement declines. Compared with learning or understanding others, these aspects of reading also appear to be more closely tied to enjoyment, while still remaining meaningful for some children and young people who do not enjoy reading.

**Figure 9: Percentage agreement with reading supports understanding of self statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement**



Differences by gender and socioeconomic background were again relatively modest (see Table 9). More girls than boys said that they see people like themselves in what they read and that reading helps them understand themselves better, while fewer children and young people receiving FSM reported these aspects than their peers. However, these differences were small.

Differences by age were less consistent than in previous sections. While more of the oldest group (aged 16 to 18) said that reading supports their self-understanding, responses relating to seeing people like themselves in what they read varied more across age groups, without a clear gradient. This suggests that, although engagement remains closely linked to these aspects of reading, the role of reading in supporting identity and self-understanding may be less uniform and more dependent on individual experience.

**Table 9: Percentage agreement with self-representation and understanding of self statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement and gender, age group and FSM uptake**

		Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
<b>I see people like me in the things I read</b>	All	19.4%	29.4%	32.2%	23.4%	23.5%	30.6%	25.0%	24.8%
	Enjoy/weekly	32.4%	43.4%	41.4%	38.0%	42.4%	43.9%	41.7%	39.0%
	Don't enjoy/weekly	21.1%	26.8%	28.2%	23.1%	22.7%	28.6%	25.1%	24.0%
	Don't enjoy/monthly	16.7%	22.3%	24.3%	19.4%	18.3%	22.2%	21.6%	19.2%
	Don't enjoy and don't read	7.4%	10.4%	15.3%	8.6%	7.3%	10.4%	8.9%	8.8%
<b>Reading helps me understand myself better</b>	All	17.5%	23.0%	32.5%	18.0%	19.3%	29.7%	23.1%	19.7%
	Enjoy/weekly	34.8%	39.4%	44.8%	35.2%	39.1%	46.4%	44.9%	36.2%
	Don't enjoy/weekly	16.6%	17.9%	25.7%	15.0%	17.8%	28.2%	21.2%	16.0%
	Don't enjoy/monthly	11.8%	11.5%	20.9%	10.7%	11.7%	16.3%	14.8%	10.8%
	Don't enjoy and don't read	5.4%	5.4%	13.6%	4.9%	4.1%	6.7%	7.2%	4.6%

### Reading can support relaxation and emotional wellbeing

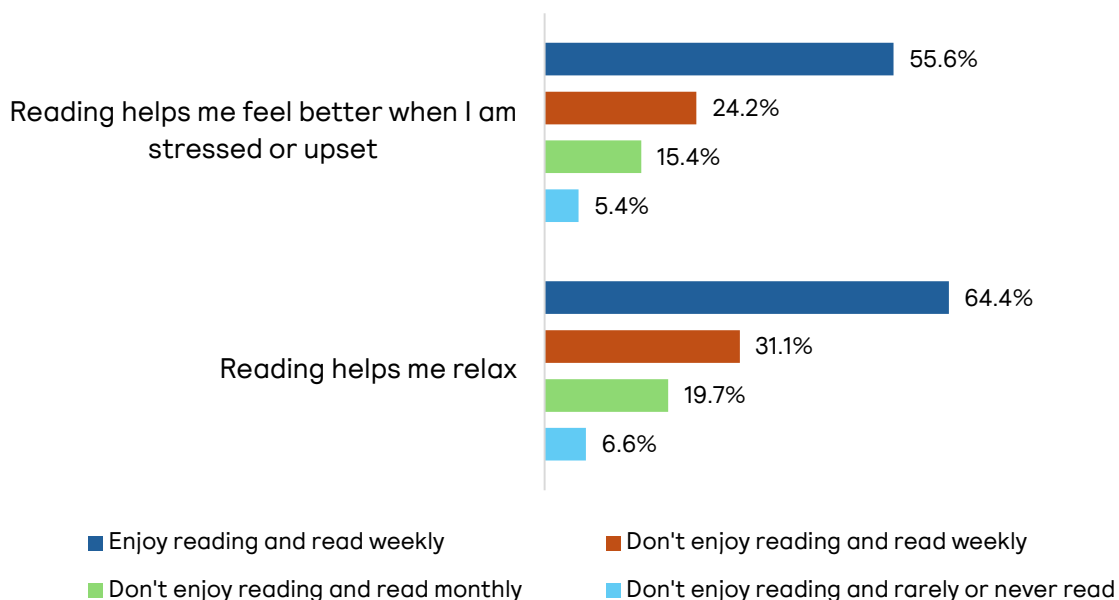
Reading can offer children and young people a way to relax and feel better when they are stressed. Overall, 34.4% said that reading helps them relax, while 28.8% said that it helps them feel better when they are stressed.

These experiences were most common among those who enjoy reading and read at least weekly. Among this group, 64.4% said that reading helps them relax and 55.6% said that it helps them feel better when they are stressed (see Figure 10).

These percentages were notably lower among those who read at least weekly but did not enjoy reading, with 31.1% saying that reading helps them relax and 24.2% saying that it helps them feel better when they are stressed. This suggests that while reading can provide emotional support for some children and young people, these experiences are much less common when reading is not viewed positively.

Among those who read less often, these connections became less common still, suggesting that reading is less likely to play a role in supporting wellbeing where engagement is more limited. Compared with some other perceived benefits of reading, relaxation and emotional support appear to be more closely tied to enjoyment.

**Figure 10: Percentage agreement with reading supports relaxation and wellbeing statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement**



More girls than boys said that reading helps them feel better when they are stressed or upset, as well as helping them relax (see Table 10). Similarly, fewer children and young people receiving FSM reported these benefits than their peers. Overall, these differences were small.

Again, there were clearer differences by age. More children aged 8 to 11 said that reading supports relaxation and wellbeing than those in the middle age groups, with levels then increasing again among those aged 16 to 18. This suggests a dip in early to mid-adolescence before rising again in later teenage years.

**Table 10: Percentage agreement with reading supporting wellbeing and relaxation statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement and gender, age group and FSM uptake**

		Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
Reading helps me feel better when I am stressed or upset	All	24.2%	32.9%	40.2%	26.7%	25.3%	38.3%	26.4%	29.4%
	Enjoy/weekly	51.0%	58.7%	57.8%	54.2%	56.3%	63.9%	53.5%	56.4%
	Don't enjoy/weekly	23.9%	24.5%	32.4%	22.8%	18.4%	27.5%	25.2%	23.4%
	Don't enjoy/monthly	15.3%	15.6%	21.1%	15.0%	13.7%	19.4%	15.3%	15.4%
	Don't enjoy and don't read	5.4%	5.4%	11.6%	5.0%	3.7%	8.3%	6.3%	5.0%
Reading helps me relax	All	29.1%	39.5%	49.5%	31.8%	30.5%	42.0%	31.9%	35.1%
	Enjoy/weekly	60.6%	67.3%	69.9%	62.6%	65.0%	66.8%	63.3%	64.9%
	Don't enjoy/weekly	29.4%	33.1%	40.7%	29.4%	25.5%	33.1%	32.3%	30.6%
	Don't enjoy/monthly	18.6%	21.0%	29.6%	18.5%	18.5%	25.4%	19.3%	19.7%
	Don't enjoy and don't read	6.2%	7.2%	15.1%	6.0%	4.9%	8.6%	7.3%	6.2%

### What helps keep reading going?

While the previous sections focused on the different roles reading can play in children and young people's lives, this final section looks beyond the act of reading itself to the wider environment.

In particular, it explores whether reading connects with children and young people's interests, and the extent to which they feel encouraged to read at home and at school. Looking at these factors alongside patterns of reading engagement provides further insight into the contexts in which reading is experienced by children and young people.

Overall, 48.7% said that reading helps them explore their interests, 54.8% said that their parents encourage them to read, and 65.8% said that their teachers encourage them to read.

The clearest differences were seen in whether children and young people felt that reading helped them explore their interests (see Table 11). This was most common among those who enjoy reading and read at least weekly (72.1%), but was lower among those who read at least weekly but did not enjoy reading (50.6%), and lower still among those who read less often.

These patterns suggest a close relationship between reading engagement and whether children and young people feel that reading connects with their interests.

Encouragement at home also varied across the engagement groups. While it was most common among those who enjoy reading and read weekly (70.1%), it remained relatively high among those who read at least weekly but did not enjoy reading (63.3%). This suggests that support from home is more commonly reported by children and young people who continue to read regularly despite lower enjoyment.

By contrast, encouragement from teachers was high across all groups, and especially similar among those who read regularly whether or not they enjoyed reading (70.3% and 71.5%). This suggests that schools provide a widespread source of encouragement for reading, although this appears less closely tied to differences in reading engagement in free time than interest or support from home.

**Table 11: Percentage agreement with reading interest and encouragement statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement**

	Enjoy/weekly	Don't enjoy/weekly	Don't enjoy/monthly	Don't enjoy/rarely or never
<b>Find things to read that interest them</b>	72.1%	50.6%	39.6%	20.9%
<b>Encouraged at home</b>	70.1%	63.3%	50.2%	30.4%
<b>Encouraged by teacher</b>	70.3%	71.5%	65.2%	55.9%

These findings point to the importance of both personal relevance and encouragement in shaping children and young people’s reading. Reading appears more closely tied to regular engagement where it connects to children and young people’s interests, while encouragement – particularly at home – may help sustain reading even when enjoyment is lower.

Differences by gender were minimal across all three statements, with similar percentages of boys and girls saying that they can find things to read that interest them, and that they are encouraged to read at home and at school (see Table 12).

By contrast, there were clearer differences by age. More children aged 8 to 11 and those aged 16 to 18 said that they can find things to read that interest them, while fewer in the middle age groups reported this. A similar age pattern is evident for encouragement at school, with fewer older children saying that they are encouraged to read, particularly among those aged 16 to 18.

Differences by socioeconomic background were more apparent for encouragement at home than for the other statements. Fewer children and young people receiving FSM said that they are encouraged to read at home than their peers, while levels of encouragement at school were more similar across groups.

**Table 12: Percentage agreement with reading interest and encouragement statements in 2026 by level of reading engagement and gender, age group and FSM uptake**

		Boy	Girl	8 to 11	11 to 14	14 to 16	16 to 18	FSM	Non-FSM
Find things to read that interest them	All	47.1%	50.0%	64.3%	45.1%	46.1%	60.5%	47.6%	49.0%
	Enjoy/weekly	73.7%	70.8%	79.5%	69.5%	71.1%	79.8%	74.2%	71.6%
	Don't enjoy/weekly	52.0%	49.2%	60.4%	47.4%	51.5%	69.5%	51.3%	50.1%
	Don't enjoy/monthly	41.1%	38.2%	48.9%	37.0%	42.0%	60.3%	41.0%	39.9%
	Don't enjoy and don't read	22.2%	19.6%	33.9%	19.0%	20.0%	36.8%	21.6%	20.8%
Encouraged to read at home	All	53.3%	56.9%	57.7%	55.7%	48.9%	50.3%	45.7%	58.2%
	Enjoy/weekly	71.7%	69.9%	67.1%	73.1%	64.2%	58.5%	61.4%	73.0%
	Don't enjoy/weekly	63.9%	63.5%	60.8%	64.9%	57.1%	57.2%	56.5%	66.3%
	Don't enjoy/monthly	50.8%	50.1%	44.8%	51.0%	50.0%	47.8%	41.3%	53.1%
	Don't enjoy and don't read	30.0%	31.6%	31.8%	30.6%	28.8%	31.9%	25.4%	32.8%
Encouraged to read at school	All	66.1%	66.4%	72.1%	67.8%	55.8%	45.5%	64.2%	66.7%
	Enjoy/weekly	72.4%	69.6%	74.9%	72.8%	59.8%	49.3%	69.6%	70.7%
	Don't enjoy/weekly	71.7%	72.1%	74.5%	72.5%	62.1%	50.0%	70.3%	72.5%
	Don't enjoy/monthly	65.5%	65.5%	69.6%	67.5%	57.3%	45.0%	63.4%	66.1%
	Don't enjoy and don't read	56.4%	56.3%	62.1%	58.1%	48.2%	34.5%	55.2%	56.7%

## Discussion

After four consecutive years of decline, 2026 marks a small but notable increase in reading enjoyment and a slight rise in daily reading. These are encouraging signs at the start of the National Year of Reading.

However, these improvements are not evenly spread. Among children and young people aged 8 to 18, reading enjoyment increased for both boys and girls, with the largest rises among those aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18. Daily reading also increased across the older age groups. By contrast, the picture for younger children is more mixed. Among those aged 5 to 8, enjoyment fell slightly compared with 2025, while daily reading changed little overall. There are also signs that inequalities deepened, particularly for reading enjoyment, where the increase was greater among children and young people who did not receive free school meals than among those who did.

The findings also underline the continued importance of enjoyment. Children and young people who both enjoy reading and read at least weekly were consistently the most likely to say that reading supports different areas of their lives, including learning, understanding others, understanding themselves and wellbeing. This pattern was especially clear in relation to relaxation and emotional support.

At the same time, the report shows that reading cannot be understood through enjoyment alone. Many children and young people continue to read regularly even when they do not strongly enjoy it. These children and young people still often say that reading helps them learn, build knowledge and, to a lesser extent, understand other people and themselves. This suggests that enjoyment is a central part of reading engagement, but not the only way in which reading matters in children and young people's lives.

The thematic findings also point to differences in the kinds of value children and young people attach to reading. Reading's role in learning and achievement remains evident beyond the most engaged readers. By contrast, reading's role in helping children and young people relax, feel better when stressed, or reflect on themselves appears to be more closely tied to enjoyment. Together, this suggests that reading engagement is not one single experience, but something shaped by different kinds of connection to reading.

One of the clearest differences between engagement groups relates to whether children and young people feel that reading connects with their interests.

Children and young people who said that reading helps them explore their interests were much more likely to be among the more engaged readers. The report also highlights the importance of encouragement, particularly at home. Encouragement from parents and carers was more common among children and young people who read regularly, even where enjoyment was lower, while encouragement from teachers was high across all groups. Taken together, this suggests that reading is more likely to become part of children and young people's lives when it feels meaningful and is supported by the people around them.

As the National Year of Reading begins, this report offers both encouragement and a clear reminder that progress cannot be taken for granted. The small rise in reading enjoyment and daily reading is welcome, particularly after several years of decline. But the uneven pattern of change shows that continued attention is needed to ensure that more children and young people can find reading enjoyable, relevant and worthwhile.

## Acknowledgements

A huge thank you to all the schools that took part 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.

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

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## Appendix A

### 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 reading relate back to 2005 when we first asked children and young people about their reading enjoyment, behaviours and attitudes in a large-scale survey. Questions about young people's use of AI to support their literacy have been included since 2023, and questions about speaking and listening were added to the survey in 2024.

We made two surveys available in 2026: 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 18 (Year 4 to Year 13, or Primary 5 to Secondary 6 for Scotland), and their translations into Welsh. The surveys contain similar questions but the one for the younger age group is shorter and more pictorial, while the one for those aged over 8 had questions more relevant for that age group. The 2026 survey contained 18 questions for those aged 5 to 8 and 43 questions for those aged 8 to 18.

Taking place from January to the middle of March every year, schools are recruited from autumn onwards through our networks, newsletters and social media followers, as well as through partner organisations. Participating schools receive a school-specific report as a thank you, which means that they can compare their responses to those received nationally once we've published the national reports.

**125,375** children and young people aged 5 to 18 from 479 schools took part in our Annual Literacy Survey in 2025. 7,050 answered a shorter survey for those aged 5 to 8, while 118,325 answered longer surveys intended for those aged 8 to 18.

### Sample description

The make-up of our 2026 sample was largely comparable with that of 2025 and previous samples. Tables A1 and A2 outline the sample in detail.

**Table A1: Sample breakdown of children and young people aged 8 to 18 in 2026**

		n	%
<b>Gender</b>	Boys	55,039	46.5%
	Girls	58,692	49.6%
	Would rather not say	2,567	2.2%
	Describe themselves another way	2,027	1.7%
<b>Age</b>	8-11	15,888	13.4%
	11-14	81,412	68.8%
	14-16	16,326	13.8%
	16-18	4,699	4.0%
<b>Free-school-meal uptake (FSM)</b>	FSM	19,417	16.4%
	Non-FSM	83,186	70.3%
	Don't know	11,255	9.5%
	Would rather not say	4,467	3.8%
<b>UK region (by nation)</b>	England	108,571	91.8%
	Wales	2,933	2.5%
	Scotland	4,248	3.6%
	Northern Ireland	2,067	1.8%
<b>England region</b>	North East	6,214	5.3%
	North West	12,600	10.6%
	Yorkshire and Humberside	7,406	6.8%
	East Midlands	7,928	6.7%
	West Midlands	8,345	7.1%
	East of England	16,249	13.7%
	London	11,705	9.9%
	South East	23,320	19.7%
	South West	14,760	12.5%

**Table A2: Sample breakdown of children aged 5 to 8 in 2026**

		n	%
<b>Gender</b>	Boys	3,167	44.9%
	Girls	3,376	47.9%
	Would rather not say	149	2.1%
	Describe themselves another way	65	0.9%
	No response	293	4.2%
<b>UK region (by nation)</b>	England	5,174	75.3%
	Wales	333	4.8%
	Scotland	1,183	17.2%
	Northern Ireland	182	2.6%

		n	%
England region	North East	737	14.3%
	North West	530	10.3%
	Yorkshire and Humberside	366	7.1%
	East Midlands	350	6.8%
	West Midlands	729	14.1%
	East of England	944	18.3%
	London	895	17.3%
	South East	125	2.4%
	South West	493	9.5%

## Appendix B

### Reading enjoyment in free time by geographical location

There were differences in reading enjoyment across the four nations. As shown in Table A3, more children and young people in Scotland and England said that they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2026 than in Wales and Northern Ireland, where levels were lower.

Within England, regional variation was also evident. More children and young people in London said that they enjoyed reading compared with those in other regions. Elsewhere, levels were broadly similar across much of England, although lower levels were seen in the North East and West Midlands.

**Table A3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoying reading in their free time in 2026 by geographical region**

<b>ENGLAND</b>	<b>36.2%</b>
North East	29.9%
North West	34.0%
Yorkshire and the Humber	35.4%
East Midlands	34.8%
West Midlands	34.4%
East of England	36.2%
London	43.5%
South East	36.3%
South West	36.7%
<b>WALES</b>	<b>32.9%</b>
<b>SCOTLAND</b>	<b>37.5%</b>
<b>NORTHERN IRELAND</b>	<b>31.4%</b>

## Daily reading in free time by geographical location

There were differences in daily reading across the four nations. As shown in Table A4, more children and young people in England and Scotland said that they read daily in their free time in 2026 than in Northern Ireland and Wales, where levels were lower. Within England, regional variation was also evident.

More children and young people in London said that they read daily compared with those in other regions. Elsewhere, levels were broadly similar across much of England, although lower levels were seen in the North East and East Midlands.

**Table A4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading daily in their free time in 2026 by geographical region**

<b>ENGLAND</b>	<b>20.4%</b>
North East	15.9%
North West	19.1%
Yorkshire and the Humber	20.2%
East Midlands	17.2%
West Midlands	19.0%
East of England	20.6%
London	25.3%
South East	20.9%
South West	21.3%
<b>WALES</b>	<b>16.4%</b>
<b>SCOTLAND</b>	<b>20.1%</b>
<b>NORTHERN IRELAND</b>	<b>19.3%</b>