

Role models and their influence on children and young people's reading

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Role models are an important influence in children and young people's lives. Indeed, our data show that the percentage of children and young people who say they have a role model has increased over the past decade, from 78.0% in 2009¹ to 93.4% in 2019². This report looks at children and young people's role models more closely to identify who they look up to, and what seeing their role model read would make them think or feel. For consistency, we use the same definition of a role model as we did in our 2009 research:

*"A role model is someone who a person would like to be like in some way"*³

Some of the key findings include:

Who do children and young people look up to?

- More than 9 in 10 (93.4%) children and young people aged 7 to 18 told us they had at least one role model
- The most popular role models were mums (67.4%) and dads (60.2%)
- More than half (52.6%) of children and young people said that they look up to a YouTuber, while fewer than 2 in 5 looked up to a sibling (38.3%) or teacher (36.5%)
- 3 in 10 (29.8%) children and young people said that they look up to a footballer, while 1 in 4 (25.9%) look up to a sportsperson

How does seeing role models read influence children and young people's reading?

1 in 4 (23.0%) children and young people told us that no one inspires them to read. However, they also told us that role models have a vital role to play in promoting positive reading behaviours and reading attitudes:

¹<https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/reaching-out-role-models-role-models-and-young-peoples-reading-2009/>

² In 2019, we surveyed 5,348 children and young people aged 7 to 18 about role models as part of a wider survey on their reading engagement.

³ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/reaching-out-role-models-role-models-and-young-peoples-reading-2009/>

- More than half (52.9%) of children and young people who had a role model agreed that seeing their role model read would make them think it's okay to read
- More than 1 in 3 (35.5%) said that seeing a role model read would make them want to read more
- 3 in 10 (30.4%) children and young people agreed that seeing their role model read would make them think that reading is cool
- More than 1 in 4 (27.2%) agreed that seeing their role model read would make them think that reading would help them pursue a career they are interested in
- There were some interesting differences in the perceived influence of role models depending on who the role model is. For example, more of those who chose friends as their role models said that seeing their role model read would make them think that reading is cool and would make them want to read more. Those who had footballers or celebrities as their role model were most likely to agree that seeing their role model read would make them think that reading would help them pursue a career they are interested in (38.1% and 32.1%, respectively)

Having a role model by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake

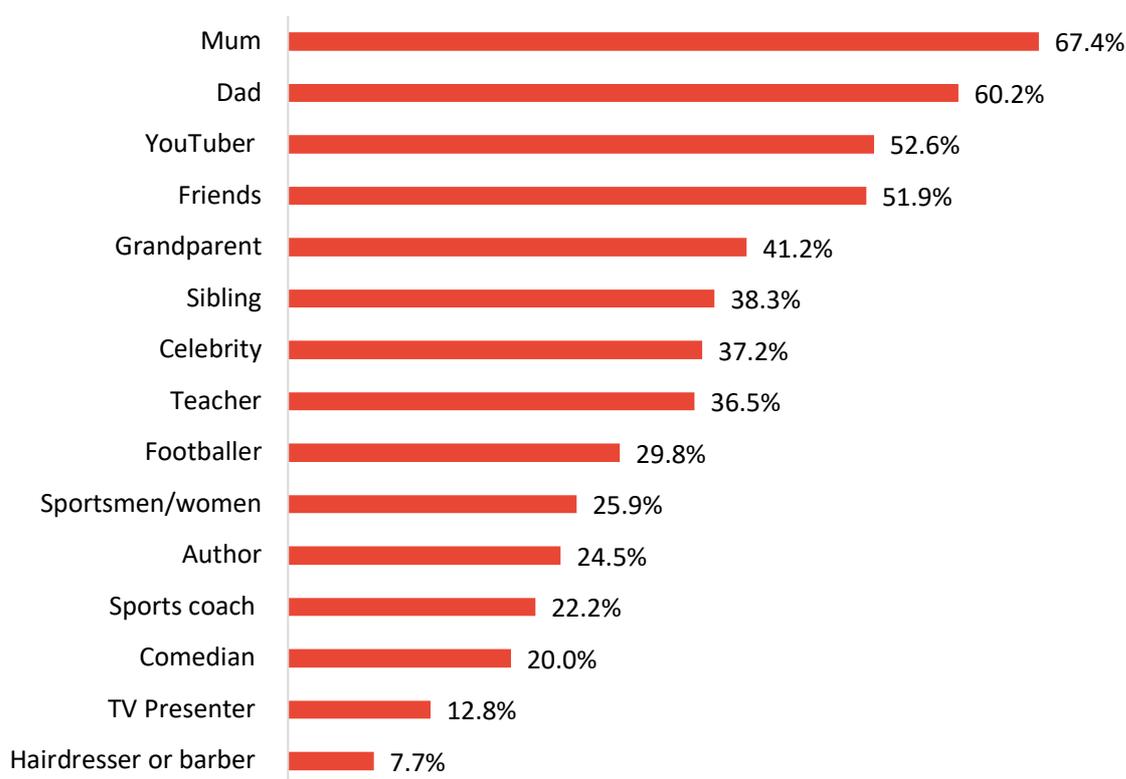
- A similar percentage of boys (93.2%) and girls (95.8%) said that they had a role model
 - More girls looked up to people they were likely in direct contact with, such as their mum (76.0% vs 61.9% of boys) or friends (61.5% vs 44.6% of boys)
 - More boys looked up to famous personalities such as YouTubers (57.9% vs 47.9% of girls) and sportspeople (30.6% vs 22.0% of girls)
 - Almost half (45.8%) of boys said that they looked up to a footballer compared with just over 1 in 8 (13.2%) girls
- A similar percentage of children and young people who did (93.6%) and didn't (94.2%) receive free school meals (FSMs) said they had a role model
 - Slightly more children and young people who receive FSMs identified teachers as role models (38.4% vs. 33.7%)
 - Slightly more children and young people who didn't receive FSMs identified their dad as a role model (61.4% vs 54.3%)
 - While slightly more children and young people who didn't receive FSMs look up to sportspeople (28.1% vs. 22.3%), those who do and do not receive FSMs were equally likely to say they look up to footballers (29.5% vs 30.3%)
- The percentage of children and young people who said they had a role model decreased with age. While more than 9 in 10 of those aged 7 to 11 (95.2%), 11 to 14 (92.9%), and 14 to 16 (92.2%) had a role model, just 3 in 4 (76.2%) of those aged 16 to 18 said that they had a role model
 - More younger children (aged 7 to 11) than older children (aged 16 to 18) said they looked up to their mum (69.2% vs 57.1%) and dad (63.3% vs 45.2%)
 - More younger children (aged 7 to 11) than older children (aged 16 to 18) said that they looked up to a YouTuber (53.8% vs 28.6%)

Who do children and young people look up to?

Our new data showed that in 2019, 93.4% of children and young people aged 7 to 18 had at least one role model, meaning that 1 in 15 (6.6%) did not have someone they look up to.

As shown in Figure 1, most children and young people told us that their parents were their role models, reflecting what has been found in many other studies^{4 5 6 7}. Indeed, more than 2 in 3 (67.4%) children and young people said that they look up to their mum, and 3 in 5 (60.2%) said that they look up to their dad.

Figure 1: 'Who do you look up to?'



While children and young people are most likely to mention someone they know as their main role model^{8 9 10 11 12}, a sizeable percentage of children and young people also mention having role models that they may never meet. Indeed, YouTubers were the most popular role models after parents, with half (52.6%) saying that they look up to a YouTuber, more so even than a friend (51.9%), grandparent (41.2%), sibling (38.3%) or teacher (36.5%).

⁴ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED541596.pdf>

⁵ <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.601.4737&rep=rep1&type=pdf>

⁶ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131880701717230>

⁷ <https://www.fractuslearning.com/reading-role-models-boys/>

⁸ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00094056.2002.10522728>

⁹ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/00131880701717230>

¹⁰ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/reaching-out-role-models-role-models-and-young-peoples-reading-2009/>

¹¹ <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED541596.pdf>

¹² <https://www.fractuslearning.com/reading-role-models-boys/>

Furthermore, nearly 2 in 5 (37.2%) children and young people looked up to a celebrity in 2019. Sporting role models were popular in 2019, with 3 in 10 (29.8%) saying they looked up to a footballer, 1 in 4 (25.9%) to a sportsperson, and 1 in 5 (22.2%) to a sports coach. People in arts and entertainment were also popular with some children and young people, with 1 in 4 (24.5%) saying that they looked up to authors and 1 in 5 (20.0%) to comedians.

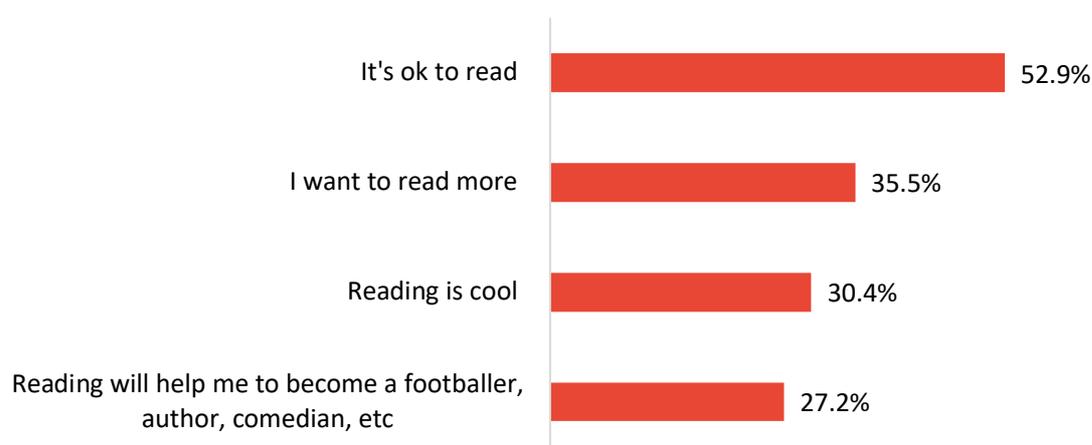
How does seeing role models read influence children and young people's reading?

1 in 4 (23.0%) children and young people told us in 2019 that no one inspires them to read. As such, we looked at the impact of having a role model on reading by asking the children and young people who had a role model what they would think if they saw their role model read.

Most children and young people agreed that seeing their role model read would make them think differently about reading (see Figure 2), with 1 in 2 (52.9%) of those who said that they had a role model¹³ saying that it would make them think that it's okay to read, and 3 in 10 (30.4%) saying it would make them think reading is cool. A sizeable percentage of these children and young people also said that seeing their role model read would have a positive impact on their reading habits, with 1 in 3 (35.5%) saying that seeing a role model read would make them want to read more.

Finally, a quarter of children and young people also said that seeing their role model read would make them more aware of the link between reading and job opportunities, with more than 1 in 4 (27.2%) agreeing that it would help them pursue a career they are interested in (such as that modelled by their role model, i.e. a footballer, author or comedian).

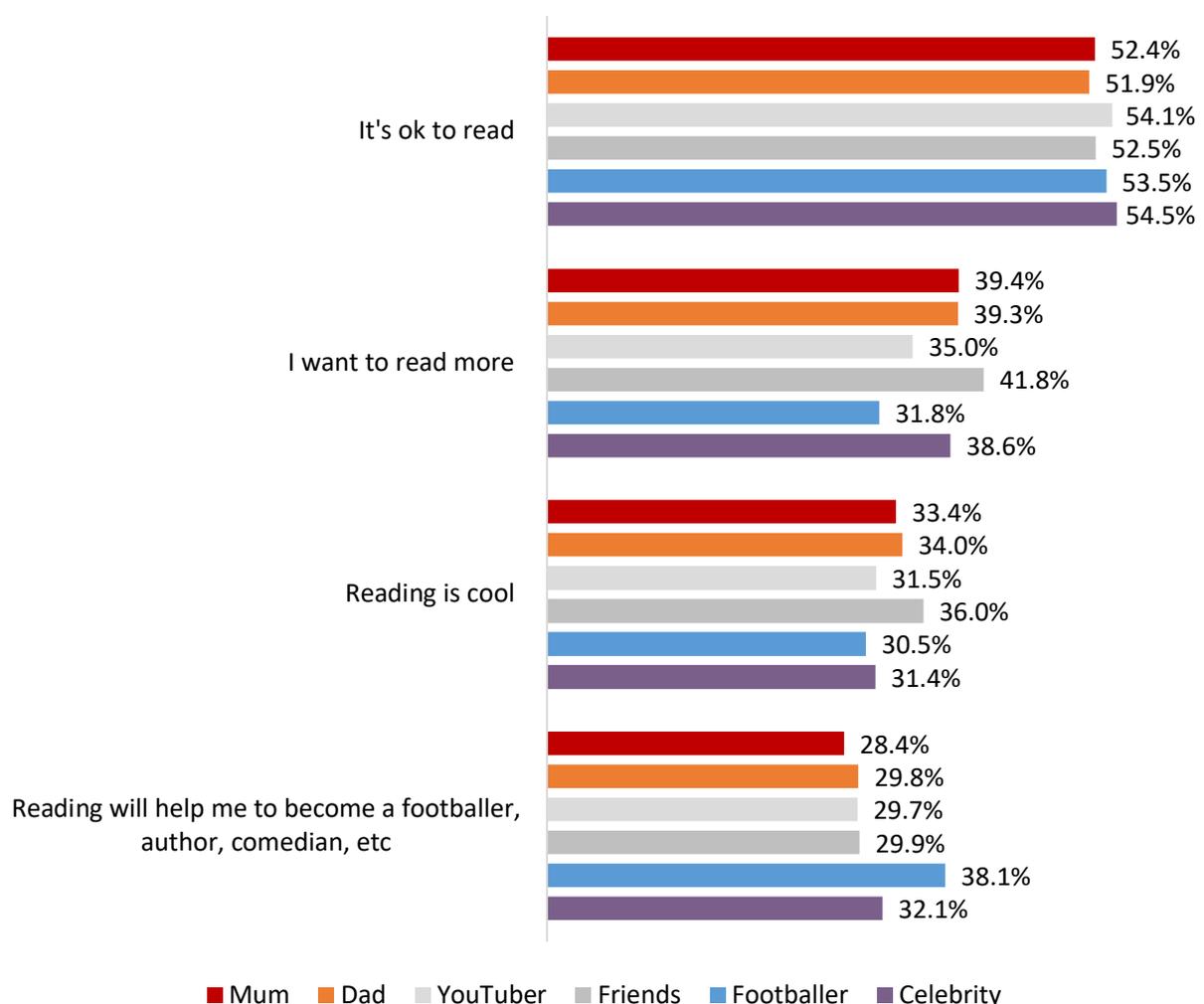
Figure 2: 'What would you think if you saw your role models reading?'



¹³ n= 5115 (93.4% of total participants)

We also wanted to see whether there were differences in the benefits of seeing a role model read by type of role model. Figure 3 shows that a similar percentage of children agree that seeing their role model read would make them think it is okay to read, regardless of who their role model is. However, more of those who looked up to their friends said that seeing them read would make them want to read or that reading is cool, indicating the power of peers in promoting positive reading habits and attitudes. There was also an interesting link between who a child or young person looked up to, and whether seeing them read would make them think that reading could help them follow a career of their dreams in the future (e.g., a footballer, author or comedian). Indeed, those who had footballers or celebrities as their role model were most likely to agree that seeing their role model read would make them think that reading would help them pursue a career they are interested in.

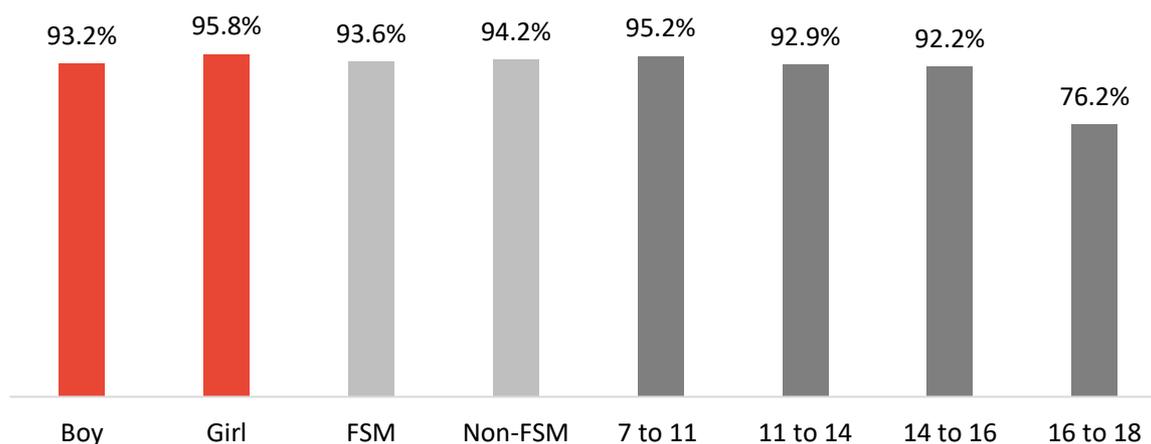
Figure 3: 'What would you think if you saw your role models reading?' by role model



Role models and their influence by demographic

As shown in Figure 4, a similar percentage of boys and girls and those who received FSMs and didn't receive FSMs said that they had a role model. Interestingly, however, fewer of those aged 16 to 18 said that they had a role model compared with those aged 7 to 11, 11 to 14 or 14 to 16.

Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people who have at least one role model



Role models by gender

Several studies have shown differences in choices of role models outside the family by gender. For example, one German study found that more boys said that they looked up to sportspeople, while more girls said that they looked up to movie stars or musicians¹⁴. This reflects what was found in our 2009 survey, where 24% of boys said they looked up to a sports person compared with 4% of girls, and also the findings of this report, whereby almost half (45.8%) of boys said they look up to a footballer compared with 13.2% of girls. More recently, a study on the influence of YouTubers on pre-adolescents found that boys were more likely to be attracted to certain YouTubers for their similarities in terms of their own interests, while girls placed more value on YouTubers who were seen as entertaining to them¹⁵.

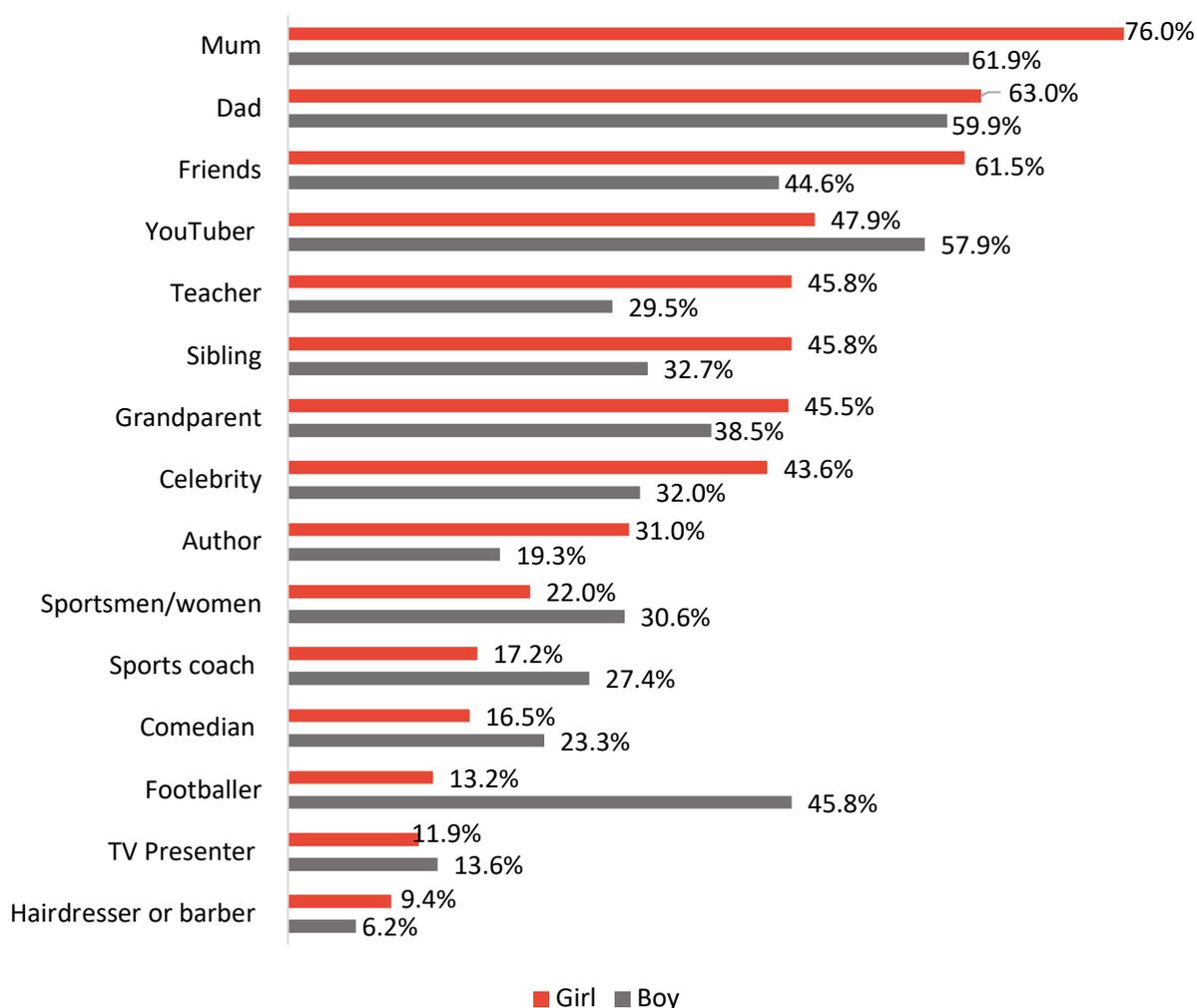
Looking at our own data, more girls looked up to people they were likely in more direct contact with, such as their mum, dad, friends, teacher, grandparents, and hairdresser (see Figure 5). However, a sizeable percentage also looked up to a celebrity or author. At the same time, more boys said that they looked up to famous personalities such as a YouTuber, sportsman/woman, sports coach, comedian, footballer or TV presenter. It is also interesting to see that the percentage-point difference between gender for looking up to their mum

¹⁴https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265193172_The_impact_of_the_leisure_reading_behaviours_of_both_parents_on_childrens_reading_behaviour_Investigating_differences_between_sons_and_daughters

¹⁵[YouTubers' social functions and their influence on pre-adolescence \(scipedia.com\)](https://scipedia.com/YouTubers-social-functions-and-their-influence-on-pre-adolescence)

(14.1pp) is so much larger than for looking up to their dad (3.1pp), where girls and boys are relatively similarly likely to say that they look up to their dad.

Figure 5: 'Who do you look up to?' by gender



Role models by age group

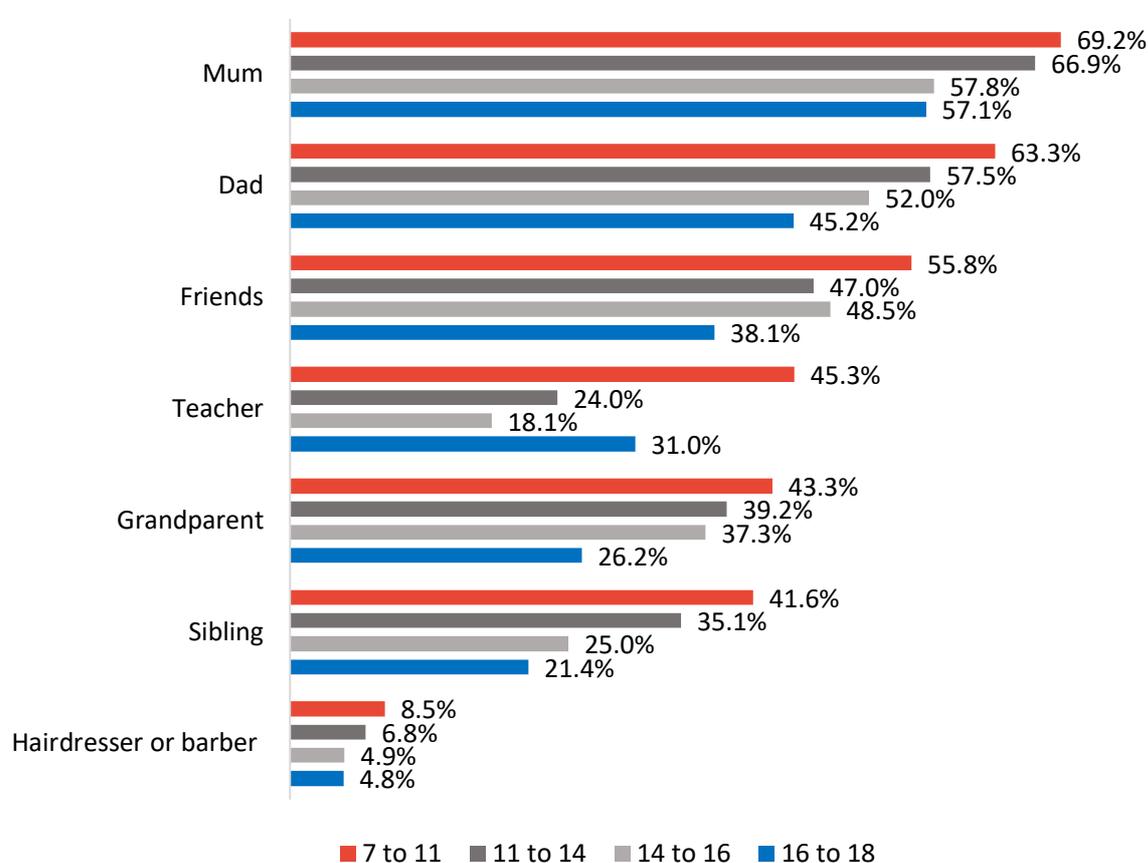
Findings from our 2009 study indicated that, overall, more primary pupils than secondary pupils had a role model, something that was also found in our new data from 2019. Additionally, more secondary than primary pupils referenced their friends as important role models in inspiring them to read, suggesting a shift in the choice of role models according to age.

Aligning with this, research has found that children of different ages look for different characteristics in their role models. For example, our 2009 study found that more primary pupils emphasised values like bravery, fame, sports ability and appearance in their role models, while more secondary pupils valued internal qualities like honesty and working hard. This reflects findings from an earlier study of US adolescents, which found that older adolescents were more likely than younger adolescents to admire their role models because

of their values and qualities¹⁶. Furthermore, studies have shown that as adolescents mature, they rely more on teachers, coaches and their friends as role models in place of parents¹⁷, and our 2009 study indicates the same.

When looking at the differences in who children and young people look up to by age group in our new data, we see some variation (see Figure 6). First, looking at role models that they are likely to know personally, more younger children (aged 7 to 11) than older children (aged 16 to 18) said they looked up to their mum, dad, friends, teachers, grandparents and siblings. While only 3.6% of those aged 7 to 11 said they look up to no one, more than 1 in 10 of those aged 16 to 18 said the same.

Figure 6: ‘Who do you look up to?’ by age group (people they know)



Looking at the role models they are less likely to know, we see smaller differences between age groups than we did with role models that they do know (see Figure 7). However, while around half of 7- to 11-year-olds, 11- to 14-year-olds and 14- to 16-year-olds said that they look up to a YouTuber, only 1 in 4 of those aged 16 to 18 said the same, indicating that this age group may be less engaged with YouTubers. Children aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16 were

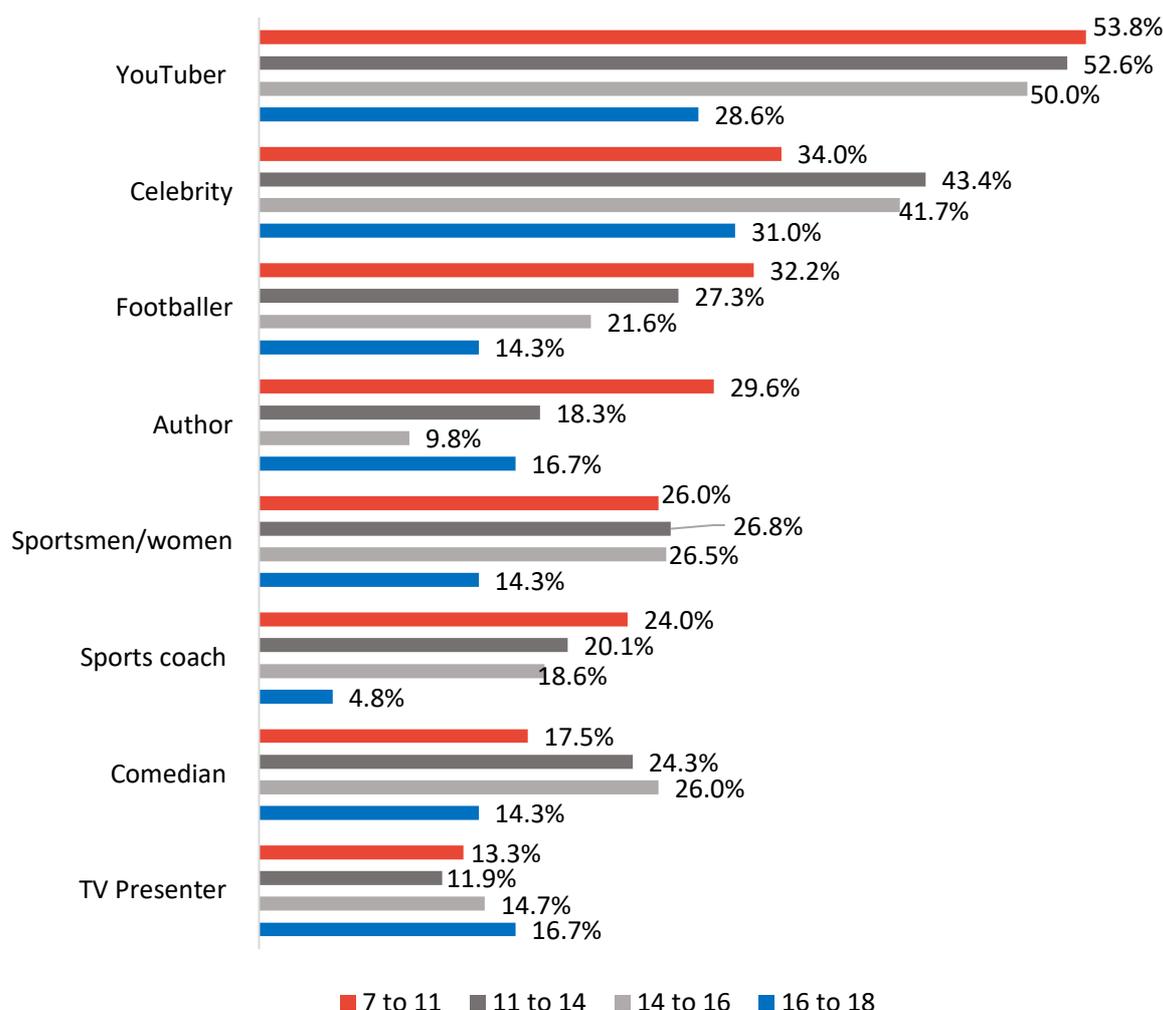
¹⁶ [ecclcs96j.pdf \(education-webfiles.s3-website-us-west-2.amazonaws.com\)](https://www.ecclcs96j.pdf)

¹⁷ see: Ibid

slightly more likely to say that they looked up to a celebrity than those aged 7 to 11 and 16 to 18.

Overall, children aged 7 to 11, 11 to 14, and 14 to 16 were all most likely to say that they looked up to a YouTuber out of the options for people they don't personally know. Conversely, those aged 16 to 18 were most likely to say that they looked up to a celebrity (31.0%).

Figure 7: 'Who do you look up to?' by age group (people they likely don't know)



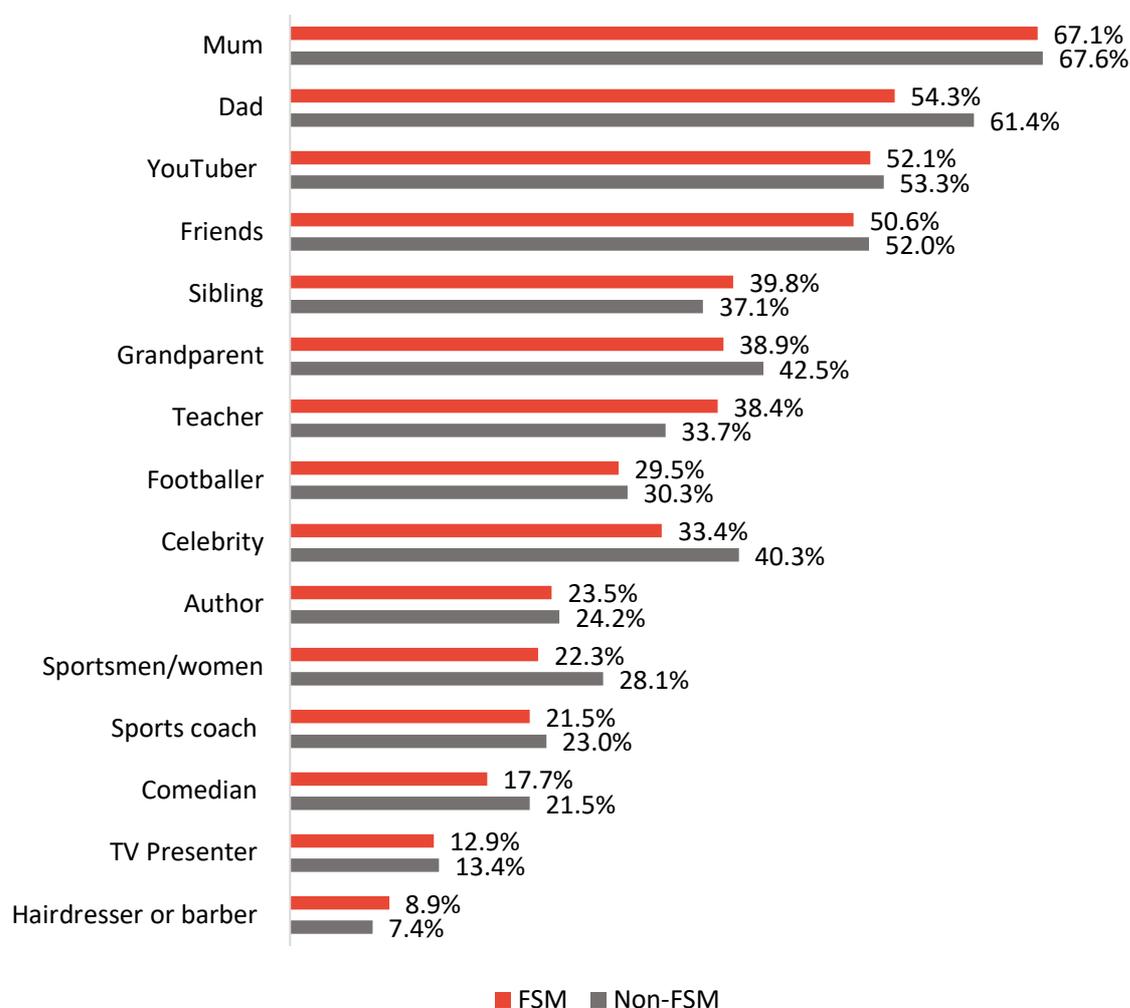
Role models by free-school-meal status

Fewer differences were found when looking at reading role models and socioeconomic background, using free-school-meal (FSM) status as our indicator of socioeconomic background (see Figure 8).

For example, children and young people who do or do not receive FSMs were equally likely to name family members as role models. Dads were the exception to this, with more children and young people who don't receive FSMs saying that their dad is their role model compared with their peers who receive FSMs.

Looking outside the family, slightly more children and young people who receive FSMs identified teachers as role models, while slightly more of those who do not receive FSMs identified celebrities as role models. While more of those who do not receive FSMs looked up to sportspeople, those who do and do not receive FSMs were equally likely to say they look up to footballers.

Figure 8: 'Who do you look up to?' by FSM status



Impact of role models on reading by gender, age group and FSM background

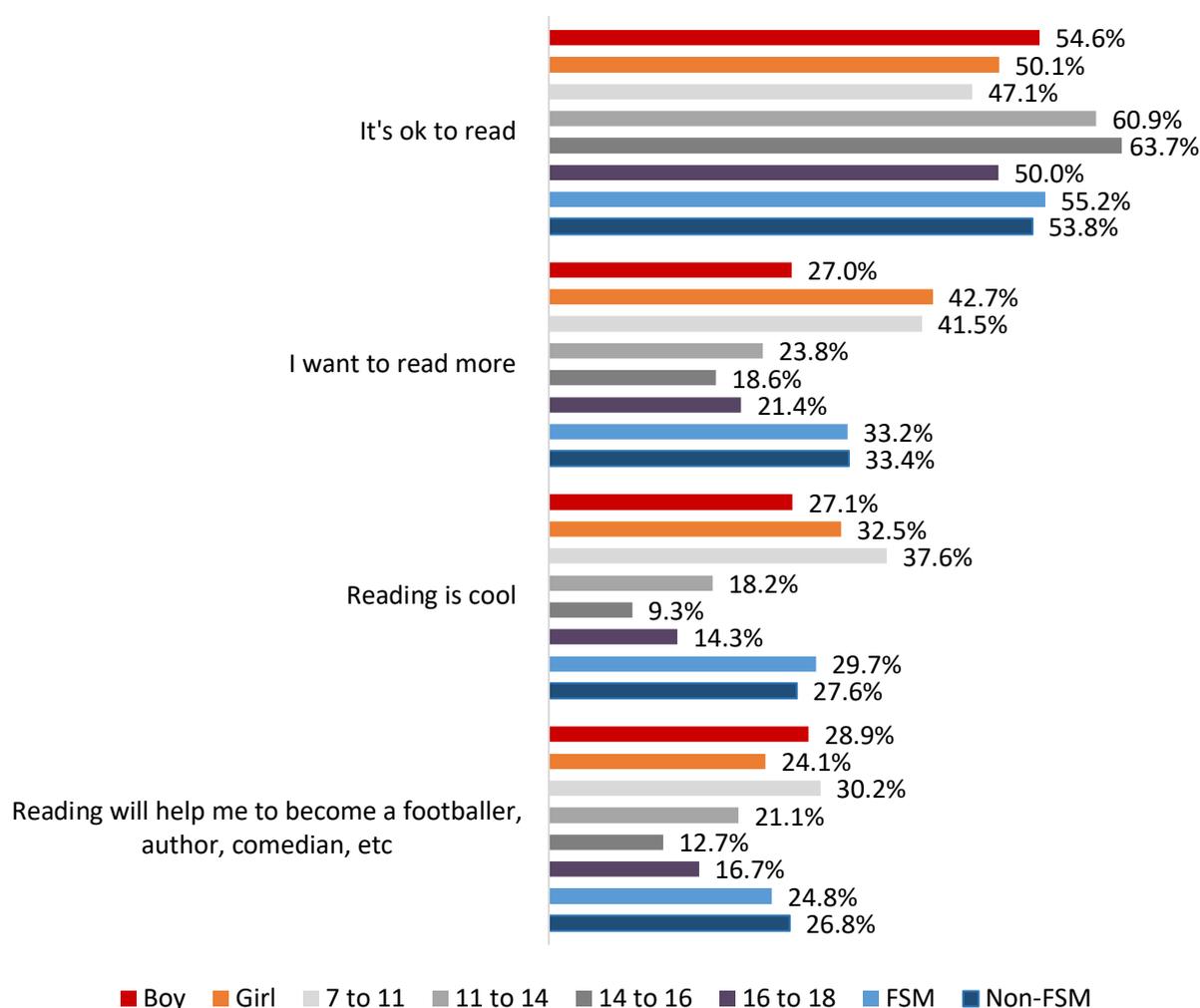
There were some interesting differences in gender when looking at what children and young people would think if they saw their role model reading (see Figure 9). Indeed, slightly more boys than girls said it would make them think it was okay to read, or that it would help them pursue their dream career. At the same time, more girls than boys said that seeing their role model reading would make them want to read more, or think that reading is cool.

We also see some variation across the age groups. Interestingly, while more of those aged 11 to 14 and 14 to 16 felt that it would make them think it is okay to read, less than half of those aged 7 to 11 and half of those aged 16 to 18 said the same. While 2 in 5 of those aged 7 to 11

said that their role model reading would make them want to read more, fewer older children said the same. More younger children also said that reading is cool and that reading will help them pursue their dream career than those aged 16 to 18.

No differences were found in terms of what children and young people would think if they saw a role model reading by FSM uptake. This suggests that children from all backgrounds would be equally influenced by reading role models in terms of reading attitudes and behaviours.

Figure 9: 'What would you think if you saw your role model reading?' by gender, age group and FSM uptake



Discussion

Overall, parents continue to be the most important role models for children and young people. However, this report has also shown that celebrity role models, including YouTubers, have become more prevalent than they were a decade ago. Aligned with this is the rise of

platforms including BookTok and Bookstagram¹⁸, which provide online spaces for young people to share book recommendations and form a reader community¹⁹.

Insight into reading role models is not only important for improving children and young people's attitudes and engagement with reading, but it also provides support and guidance for the parents, teachers and other adults who act as role models. Boys' and older students' engagement need particular focus to align with younger pupils who have consistently shown to be more likely to engage with, and benefit from, reading role models. More needs to be done in the UK field of reading-role-model research, including evaluations of programmes that position role models at the forefront of their work, to encourage the development of the most effective role-model-based initiatives in the literacy space.

¹⁸ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/17439884.2022.2068575>

¹⁹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0740818821000219>

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