

Teenage reading

(Re)framing the challenge

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Levels of reading enjoyment and daily reading among children and young people have been falling for some time and are now at their lowest point in over 20 years ([Clark et al., 2025](#)). Our evidence, alongside wider research, shows that adolescence is a key point at which reading habits weaken and reading becomes less embedded in young people's everyday lives.

This challenge has been recognised at a national level. In the UK, the [National Year of Reading \(2026\)](#) places renewed emphasis on supporting reading across the life course, including a focus on maintaining reading engagement during adolescence. This has increased attention on how reading fits into young people's lives as they get older.

Adolescence matters because it is a time of significant change: increasing academic demands, reduced free time, greater independence, and shifting interests all affect how young people relate to reading. Longitudinal research highlights the importance of reading during this stage: young people who read regularly between the ages of 10 and 16 show strong cognitive progress ([Sullivan and Brown, 2014](#)) at a time that leads directly into high-stakes examinations in the UK. Evidence also suggests that disengagement during adolescence is rarely about rejecting reading altogether. Instead, reading often becomes harder to maintain as young people juggle competing pressures and priorities ([Clark et al., 2025](#); [Webber et al., 2023](#)).

At the same time, teenage reading is taking place in a changing context. Young people encounter and engage with text across a wide range of formats, including digital, audio, and media-linked content. Studies of adolescents' reading practices highlight the need to look beyond traditional measures of reading to understand how reading fits into young people's lives today ([Loh, 2024](#); [Clark et al., 2024](#)).

Understanding teenage reading: our approach

This report draws on data from the 2025 Annual Literacy Survey, including responses from more than 80,000 young people aged 11 to 16 and over 46,000 written comments. It explores how reading enjoyment and reading habits change during adolescence and uses young people's own words to understand their experiences of reading.

The report looks at what reading offers young people, what makes it harder to read regularly, and what helps reading fit into their lives. It aims to build a clearer picture of teenage reading and how it can be supported during adolescence. While it looks at patterns across all young people, it takes a closer look at boys' experiences, reflecting evidence that boys' reading enjoyment is particularly low during

adolescence and asking questions about how boys relate to reading at this stage of life.

What this report shows

These findings show that adolescence is a critical period for reading engagement. While reading enjoyment and daily reading have declined over time, many teenagers continue to value reading for learning, enjoyment and wellbeing. However, increasing pressure on time, changing routines and competing priorities mean that reading is harder to sustain as young people get older, even when it is viewed positively.

While overall declines in reading are seen across young people as a whole, they are not experienced evenly. Patterns vary by age and gender, with some groups showing steeper drops in reported enjoyment and frequency. Exploring these differences helps to shed light on the conditions that support or undermine sustained engagement.

Our new insight into teenage boys' reading is particularly striking. While reading enjoyment and reading habits decline for both boys and girls in early adolescence, age-related patterns suggest that girls show signs of recovery in later adolescence, whereas boys' engagement remains persistently low. Boys' reading is more often sustained through habit, routine or perceived usefulness, making it more susceptible to disruption as routines weaken and demands increase.

It is important to note that these patterns do not describe all teenagers. Some young people, particularly boys, disengage from reading because it feels uninteresting or irrelevant to them. Taken together, however, these findings reinforce the importance of focusing on teenage reading, and on teenage boys' reading in particular, while challenging assumptions that lower engagement reflects disengagement alone. Instead, the evidence points to multiple pathways into reduced reading, including both lost interest and vulnerability to disruption.

The key evidence underpinning these findings includes:

Reading enjoyment and daily reading are at their lowest levels in over 20 years.

- In 2025, just 32.7% of children and young people said they enjoyed reading in their free time, which is down from 51.4% in 2005.
- Daily reading has fallen even more sharply. In 2025, only 18.7% of children and young people reported reading daily in their free time compared with 38.1% in 2005, meaning rates have halved.

Reading enjoyment and daily reading both decline sharply as children move into adolescence, with the steepest drops occurring in the early teenage years.

- Reading enjoyment falls markedly at the start of adolescence. In 2025, 46.9% of children aged 8 to 11 enjoyed reading, compared with 29.5% of those aged 11 to 14 and 28.6% of those aged 14 to 16.
- Between 2005 and 2025, reading enjoyment fell by around 21 percentage points among children aged 8 to 11 and by nearly 15 points among those aged 11 to 14, compared with much smaller declines among older teenagers.
- Daily reading becomes uncommon by mid-adolescence. In 2025, 31.1% of children aged 8 to 11 read daily, compared with 17.1% of those aged 11 to 14 and 14.0% of those aged 14 to 16.
- Between 2005 and 2025, daily reading fell by around 9 percentage points among children aged 8 to 11 and by over 27 points among those aged 11 to 14, compared with much smaller declines among older teenagers.

Reading enjoyment and daily reading decline for both boys and girls during adolescence, but gender gaps, particularly for reading enjoyment, become more pronounced as young people get older.

- More girls than boys enjoy reading at every age. In 2025, 54.2% of girls aged 8 to 11 enjoyed reading compared with 40.0% of boys; by the age of 14 to 16, this gap had widened, with 37.7% of girls enjoying reading compared with just 18.8% of boys.
- Daily reading is lower for boys at every age. In 2025, 36.0% of girls aged 8 to 11 read daily compared with 26.3% of boys; by the age of 14 to 16, this had fallen to 17.6% of girls and 9.8% of boys.
- Enjoyment and daily reading levels saw a steeper decline among girls than boys as they transitioned from primary to secondary school. However, boys' enjoyment and daily reading remained persistently low from mid-adolescence onwards, while girls' enjoyment partially recovered.

Teenagers associate reading with learning, knowledge and wellbeing, although motivations vary by gender.

- Learning and curiosity are the most commonly reported motivations overall. Among young people aged 11 to 16, the most frequently cited reasons for reading relate to learning and understanding, including learning new words and learning about new things.
- Wellbeing-related motivations are also widespread. Many teenagers associate reading with relaxation and emotional benefits, with many saying they read to relax, while substantial numbers also read to escape, feel happy, or manage their emotions.

- Girls' most commonly reported motivations relate to emotional wellbeing. The three most frequently cited reasons for reading among girls aged 11 to 16 were to relax (48.6%), to learn new words (44.4%), and to escape to another world (39.7%).
- Boys' motivations are more strongly centred on learning, but wellbeing remains important. Boys' most commonly reported reason for reading was to learn about new things (38.8%), followed by learning new words (36.4%). However, over a third of boys (34.9%) also said they read to relax, making wellbeing-related motivation a significant driver for many boys, despite being reported less often than among girls.
- Motivations linked to social connection were least common for both genders. Only 5.5% of girls and 5.4% of boys said they read to spend time with others.

Teenagers are most encouraged to read when reading feels relevant, self-directed and easy to fit into their lives.

- Choice and personal relevance are the strongest motivators. Around 40.5% of boys and 50.7% of girls said they would be encouraged to read more if they could find books that matched their interests or hobbies, while 30.7% of boys and 43.1% of girls said being free to choose what they read would make them more likely to read.
- Links to familiar media are particularly motivating. Over a third of boys (36.8%) and over half of girls (51.4%) said they would be encouraged to read the book of a film or TV series they had watched.
- Time and space matter. 24.2% of boys and 37.3% of girls said having time to relax or unwind would encourage them to read more, highlighting the role of pressure and routine.
- Social and external influences are less motivating for boys. Fewer than 1 in 10 boys (9.2%) said they would be encouraged by a social media post or book influencer, compared with 24.8% of girls, and fewer boys were influenced by recommendations or wider conversations about reading.

Young people's own comments help to explain how reading fits into their lives during adolescence.

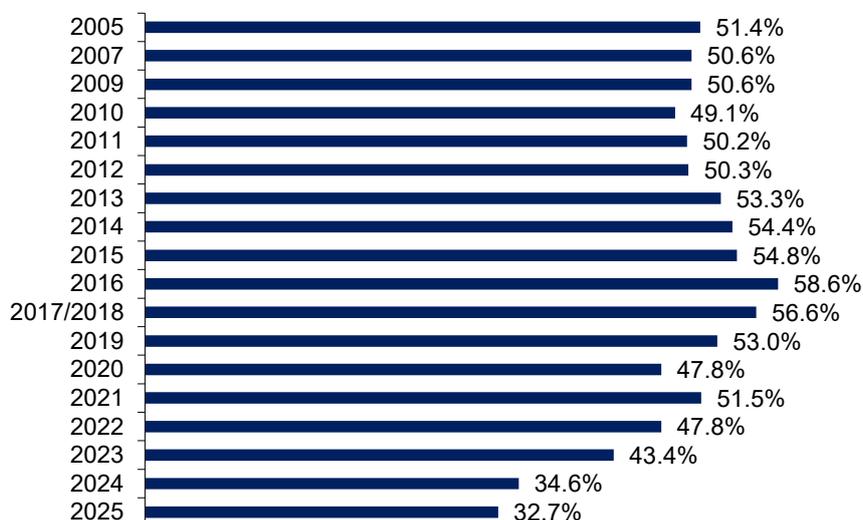
- Enjoyment does not always lead to regular reading. Many young people describe reading as enjoyable, exciting or interesting, but say they struggle to read regularly when time is limited or routines are disrupted.
- Time pressure and competing priorities shape reading habits. Young people frequently mention schoolwork, tiredness, and other activities as reasons why reading is harder to fit into everyday life as they get older.

- Choice and relevance matter. Young people are more likely to describe reading positively when they can choose what they read and when it reflects their interests, rather than being imposed or prescribed.
- Reading takes different forms. Some young people, particularly boys, describe reading digitally or incidentally (such as through games, subtitles or online content) even when they do not identify as regular readers of books.
- Teenage boys' comments provide particularly rich insight into these patterns. Many boys frequently describe valuing reading for learning and wellbeing, but also frame reading as something that depends on routine, time or usefulness, helping to explain why reading may continue to be valued but is more easily displaced when time, routine or structure are disrupted.

What do we know about teenage reading enjoyment and reading habits?

Figure 1 shows how children and young people's enjoyment of reading has changed over time. While enjoyment remained relatively stable through the late 2000s and early 2010s, and even increased to a peak in the mid-2010s, it has fallen sharply in recent years. Reading enjoyment is now at its lowest level in the past two decades, with fewer children and young people saying they enjoy reading than at any point since we first collected these data. This sharp recent decline, following a period of relative stability, signals a significant shift in how reading fits into children and young people's lives and provides important context for understanding current patterns of reading engagement.

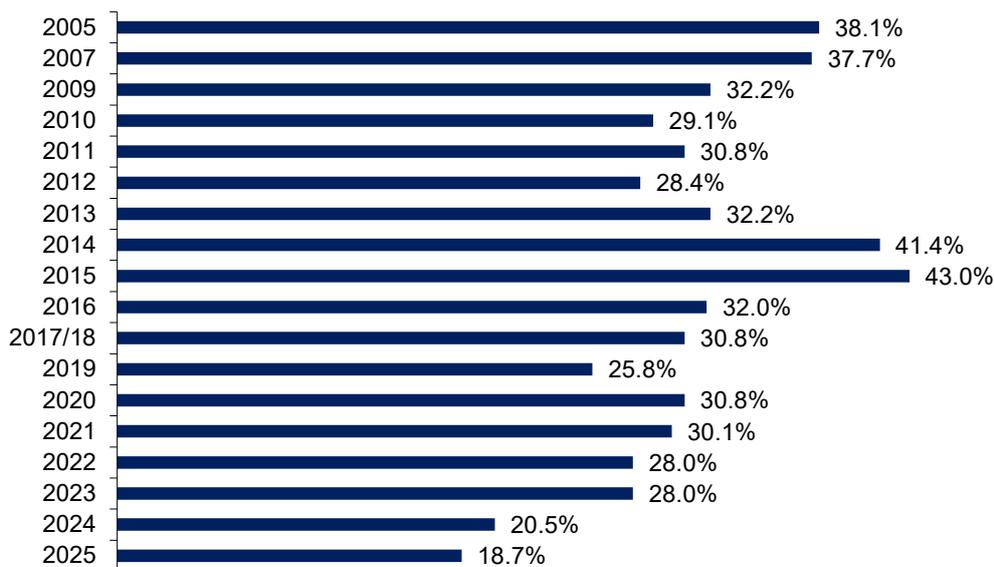
Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 enjoying reading (either very much or quite a lot) between 2005 and 2025



A practical way to understand the role reading plays in children and young people’s lives is to look at how often they choose to read in their free time. Alongside reading enjoyment, we therefore also track how many children and young people read daily (see Figure 2). Viewed through this lens, the picture for daily reading is even more challenging than it is for enjoyment.

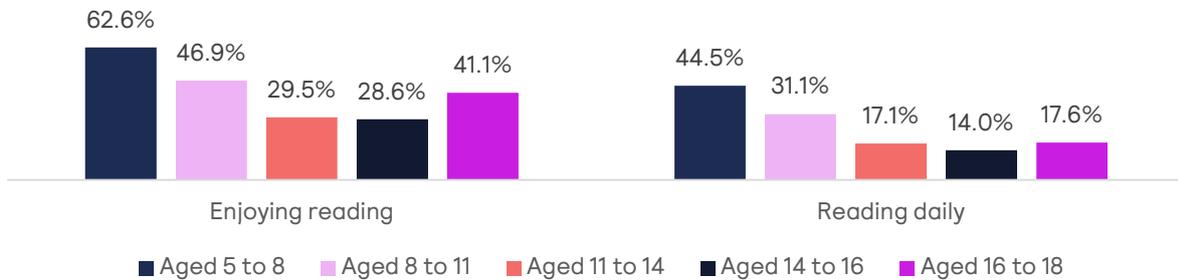
Daily reading declined gradually through the late 2000s and early 2010s, followed by a short-lived recovery in the mid-2010s. In recent years, however, rates have dropped sharply. Today, just under 1 in 5 children and young people say they read something every day in their free time, which is less than half the level seen 20 years ago. This signals a marked weakening of regular reading habits and helps to explain current patterns of reading engagement.

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading daily in their free time between 2005 and 2025



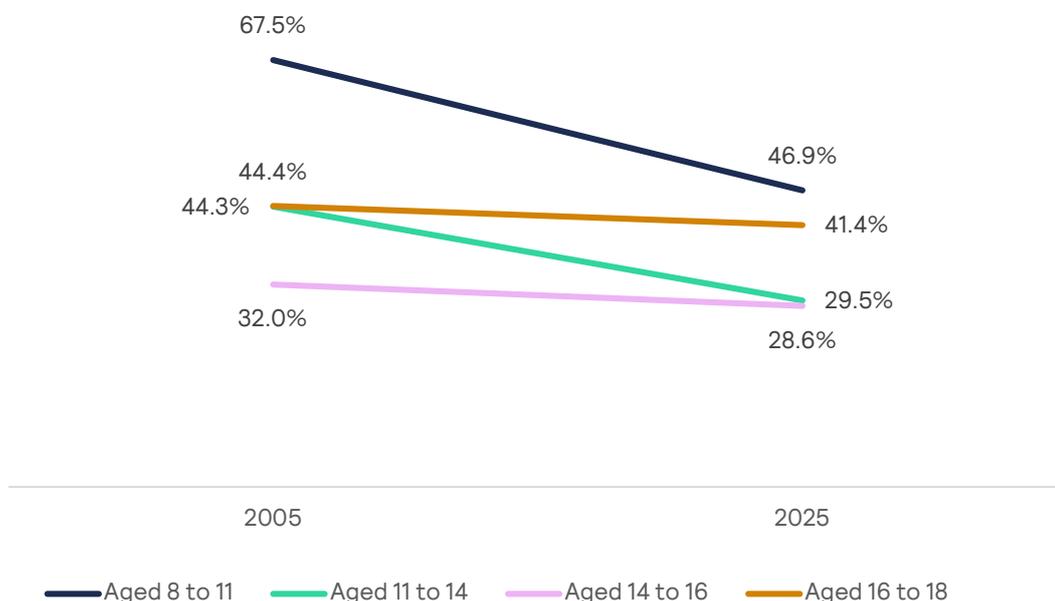
Looking at reading enjoyment and daily reading by age (see Figure 3), we can see that the decline in reading is closely tied to early adolescence (ages 11 to 14). Levels of enjoyment and daily reading are relatively high in childhood but begin to fall from around the start of the teenage years. As young people move through adolescence, fewer say they enjoy reading and fewer read every day in their free time. By the mid-teen years, daily reading has become uncommon, and enjoyment has dropped sharply. This pattern highlights adolescence as a key point at which both positive feelings about reading and regular reading habits begin to weaken, helping to explain why reading can drift out of young people’s lives during this stage.

Figure 3: Reading enjoyment and daily reading by age group in 2025



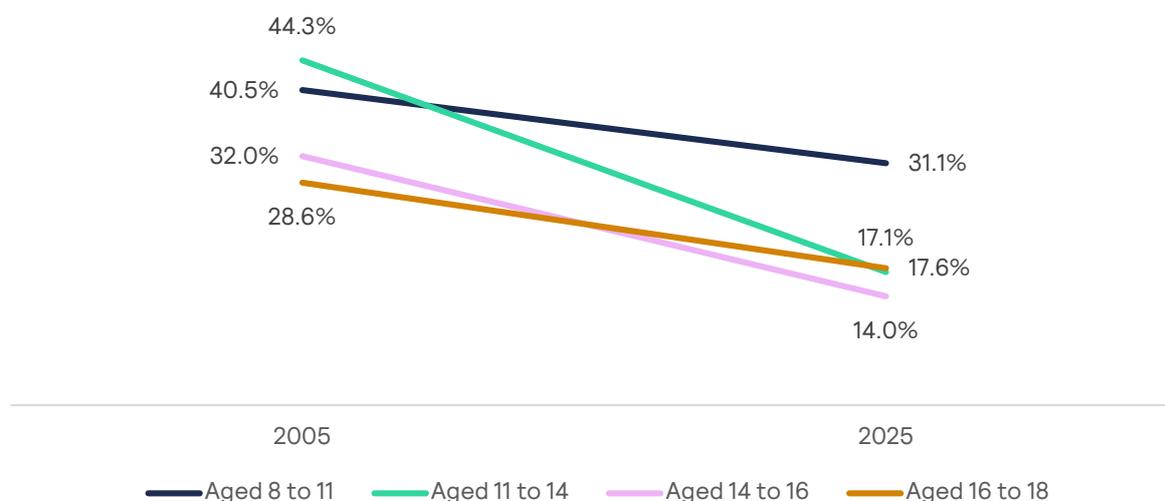
So far, we have looked at how reading enjoyment and daily reading have changed over time. Examining these trends by age group shows that lower enjoyment among adolescents is not a recent development (see Figure 4). In both 2005 and 2025, older children and teenagers consistently reported lower enjoyment than younger age groups, alongside an overall decline over time. However, the scale of decline varies markedly by age: between 2005 and 2025, enjoyment fell by around 21 percentage points among those aged 8 to 11, and by nearly 15 points among those aged 11 to 14, compared with much smaller reductions of around 3 to 4 points among those aged 14 to 18. Overall, this highlights adolescence as a period when reading enjoyment is especially fragile, with recent data showing sharper declines set against a long-standing pattern of lower enjoyment among young people aged 11 to 16.

Figure 4: Enjoyment of reading in 2005 and 2025 by age group



The long-term picture for daily reading is even more striking (see Figure 5). In both 2005 and 2025, daily reading was less common among older children and teenagers than among younger age groups, indicating that lower rates of habitual reading in adolescence are also not a recent phenomenon. Again, the scale of decline varies substantially by age. Between 2005 and 2025, the number of young people reading daily fell by around 9 percentage points among those aged 8 to 11, compared with a much sharper drop of over 27 points among those aged 11 to 14, and declines of around 18 points among those aged 14 to 16. Among those aged 16 to 18, daily reading fell by around 11 points. This suggests that the transition into early adolescence is also a critical period for disengagement from daily reading, with particularly steep recent declines layered onto an already age-related reduction in reading frequency.

Figure 5: Daily reading in 2005 and 2025 by age group



Is it a gender issue?

Looking at reading enjoyment by age for boys and girls shows clear gender differences that become more pronounced during adolescence (see Figure 6). Across all age groups, more girls than boys reported enjoying reading, although the size of this gap varies by age.

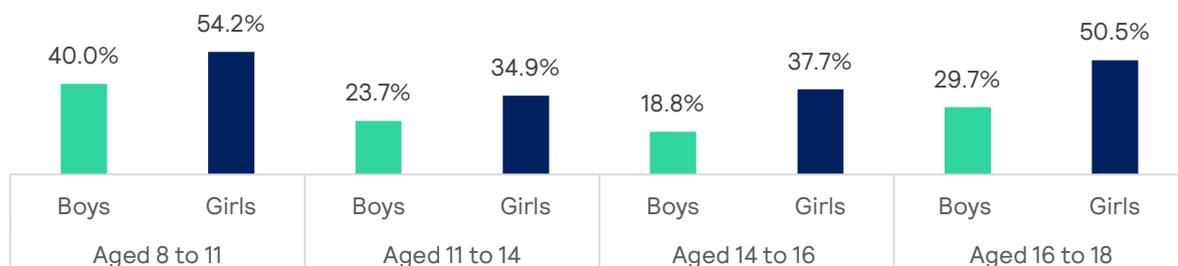
Among younger children aged 8 to 11, around 2 in 5 boys said they enjoyed reading compared with over 1 in 2 girls, a difference of around 14 percentage points. By early adolescence (ages 11 to 14), enjoyment has fallen for both boys and girls. However, the overall decline over this period is larger among girls than boys,

resulting in a temporary narrowing of the gender gap to around 11 percentage points, with fewer than 1 in 4 boys and just over 1 in 3 girls reporting that they enjoy reading.

From mid-adolescence onwards, gender differences widen substantially. Among those aged 14 to 16, enjoyment among boys continues to fall, while girls' enjoyment stabilises, leading to a gap of nearly 19 percentage points, with fewer than 1 in 5 boys enjoying reading compared with over 1 in 3 girls. By the ages of 16 to 18, girls' enjoyment increases further, while boys' enjoyment remains comparatively low. At this stage, around 3 in 10 boys say they enjoy reading compared with around 1 in 2 girls, widening the gap to over 20 percentage points.

These findings show that while reading enjoyment declines for both boys and girls in early adolescence, and particularly sharply for girls aged 8 to 11 and 11 to 14, girls' enjoyment subsequently recovers, whereas boys' enjoyment remains persistently low. It is this divergence from mid-adolescence onwards that drives the widening gender gap in reading enjoyment during the teenage years.

Figure 6: Reading enjoyment in 2025 by gender and age group



Looking at daily reading by age for boys and girls shows consistent gender differences across childhood and adolescence, although these differences are smaller and less pronounced than those observed for reading enjoyment (see Figure 7). At every age, more girls than boys reported reading daily, but the size of the gap varies across developmental stages.

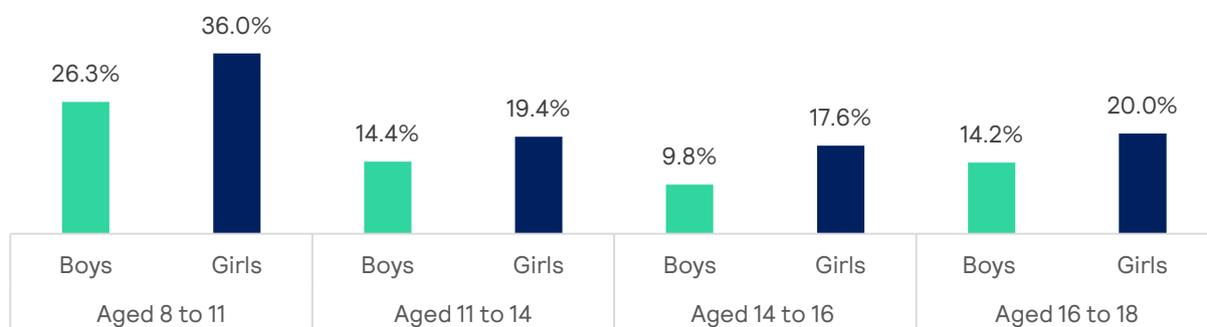
Among children aged 8 to 11, around 1 in 4 boys reported reading daily compared with just over 1 in 3 girls, a difference of around 10 percentage points. By early adolescence (ages 11 to 14), daily reading declined sharply for both boys and girls. Echoing patterns seen in reading enjoyment, the reduction over this period was

larger among girls than boys, resulting in a narrowing of the gender gap to around 5 percentage points, with around 1 in 7 boys and around 1 in 5 girls reading daily.

From mid-adolescence onwards, daily reading remained at low levels for both groups. Among those aged 14 to 16, fewer than 1 in 10 boys reported reading daily compared with around 1 in 6 girls, widening the gap again to nearly 8 percentage points. By the ages of 16 to 18, daily reading increased slightly for both boys and girls, although girls remained more likely to read daily, with around 1 in 7 boys compared with around 1 in 5 girls, a difference of around 6 percentage points.

Again, we saw a steeper decline in daily reading among girls than boys as they transitioned from primary to secondary school. However, boys' daily reading remained persistently low from mid-adolescence onwards, while girls' reading stabilised and partially recovered. It is again this divergence that contributes to ongoing gender differences in reading frequency during the teenage years, despite generally low levels of daily reading among both groups.

Figure 7: Daily reading in 2025 by gender and age group



Taken together, these findings suggest that falling reading engagement during adolescence cannot be understood as a gender issue alone. Reading enjoyment and daily reading both decline for boys and girls as they get older, pointing to wider changes in how reading fits into young people's lives during the teenage years. While the decline is initially steeper for girls, they also tend to recover more than boys, resulting in widening gaps in both enjoyment and regular reading as young people move through adolescence.

To understand why these differences emerge and persist, it is important to look beyond reading behaviours alone and consider what motivates boys and girls to read, and what they value about reading during adolescence. Given the strong similarities in how reading enjoyment and daily reading change across adolescence,

the analysis that follows focuses on boys' and girls' reading motivations across the 11 to 16 age range as a whole.

How do boys' and girls' reading motivations differ during adolescence?

Looking more closely at reading motivations helps to explain why similar patterns of declining enjoyment and daily reading can be experienced differently by boys and girls during adolescence. While boys and girls aged 11 to 16 share many reasons for reading, the strength of these motivations varies, particularly in relation to emotional and reflective aspects of reading.

To explore motivations for reading in more detail, young people were asked about a range of reasons why they might choose to read (see Figure 8). These motivations were grouped into three broad categories: **curious readers** are motivated by learning and understanding; **mindful readers** associate reading with emotions, wellbeing and self-reflection; and **social readers** see reading as a way to connect with others or with wider social issues.

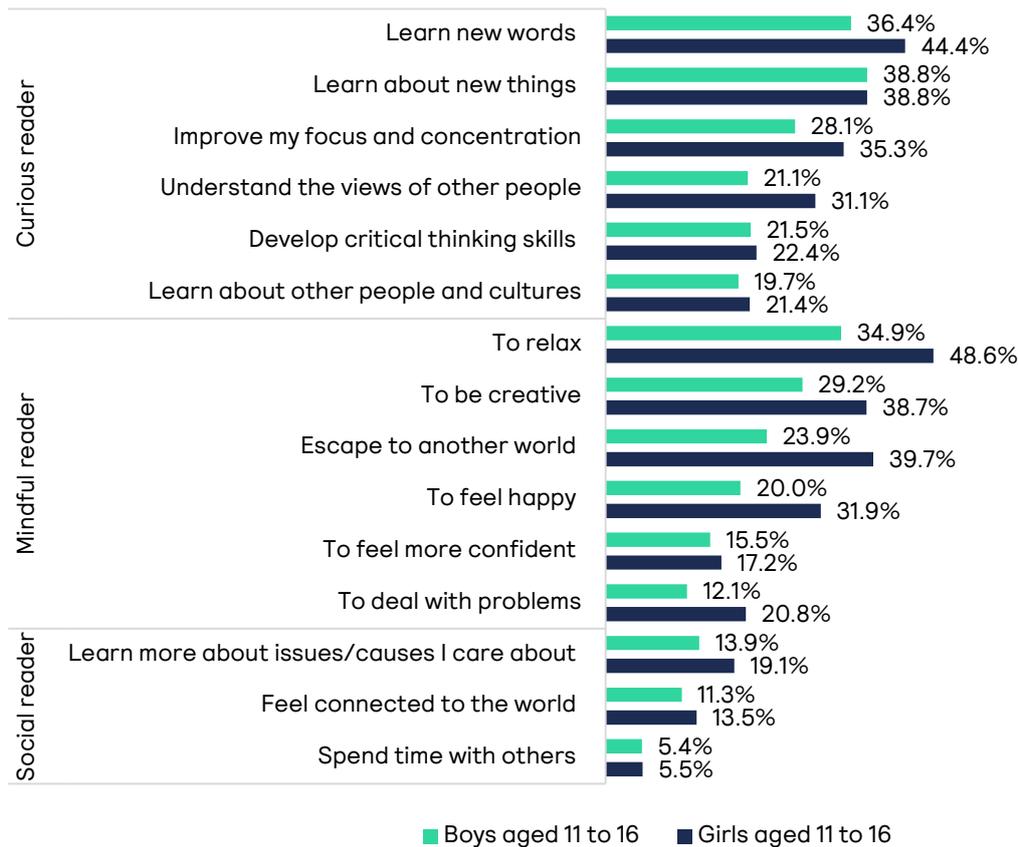
Across the curious reader motivations, boys' and girls' responses are broadly similar. Boys and girls are equally likely to say they read to *learn about new things* and there are only small differences in motivations, such as *developing critical thinking skills* and *learning about other people and cultures*. It is also worth noting that, when looking at boys' top reading motivations alone, reading to learn new things and new words are cited by most boys, emphasising the importance of reading for increasing knowledge. However, larger gaps emerge where curiosity overlaps with perspective-taking. For example, nearly 1 in 3 girls say they read to *understand the views of other people* compared with just 1 in 5 boys, a difference of 10 percentage points.

The largest differences appear within the mindful reader motivations, which relate to emotional wellbeing and self-regulation. More girls than boys associate reading with these outcomes. Nearly 1 in 2 girls say they read to *relax* compared with just over 1 in 3 boys (a 13.7-percentage-point gap). Similarly, more girls than boys say they read to *escape to another world* and *to feel happy*. Reading as a way to *deal with problems* also shows a notable difference, with 1 in 5 girls identifying this motivation compared with around 1 in 8 boys. At the same time, reading to relax was the third most chosen motivation among boys, making it only slightly less important as a motivator for boys than learning.

Differences are smaller, but still present, within the social reader motivations. Relatively few young people identify reading as a way to *spend time with others*, with almost no difference between boys and girls. However, more girls than boys say they read to *feel connected to the world* and to *learn more about issues or*

causes *they care about*, suggesting that reading may play a slightly stronger role in supporting social awareness and connection for girls.

Figure 8: Motivations to read among boys and girls aged 11 to 16



These findings show that while boys and girls share many motivations for reading during adolescence, more girls associate reading with emotional wellbeing, relaxation and connection to others. Boys are just as likely as girls to value reading for learning and curiosity, but fewer identify reading as a tool for managing emotions or personal challenges. This may help to explain why boys' reading enjoyment and habits decline more sharply during adolescence, even when they continue to value reading for information or learning.

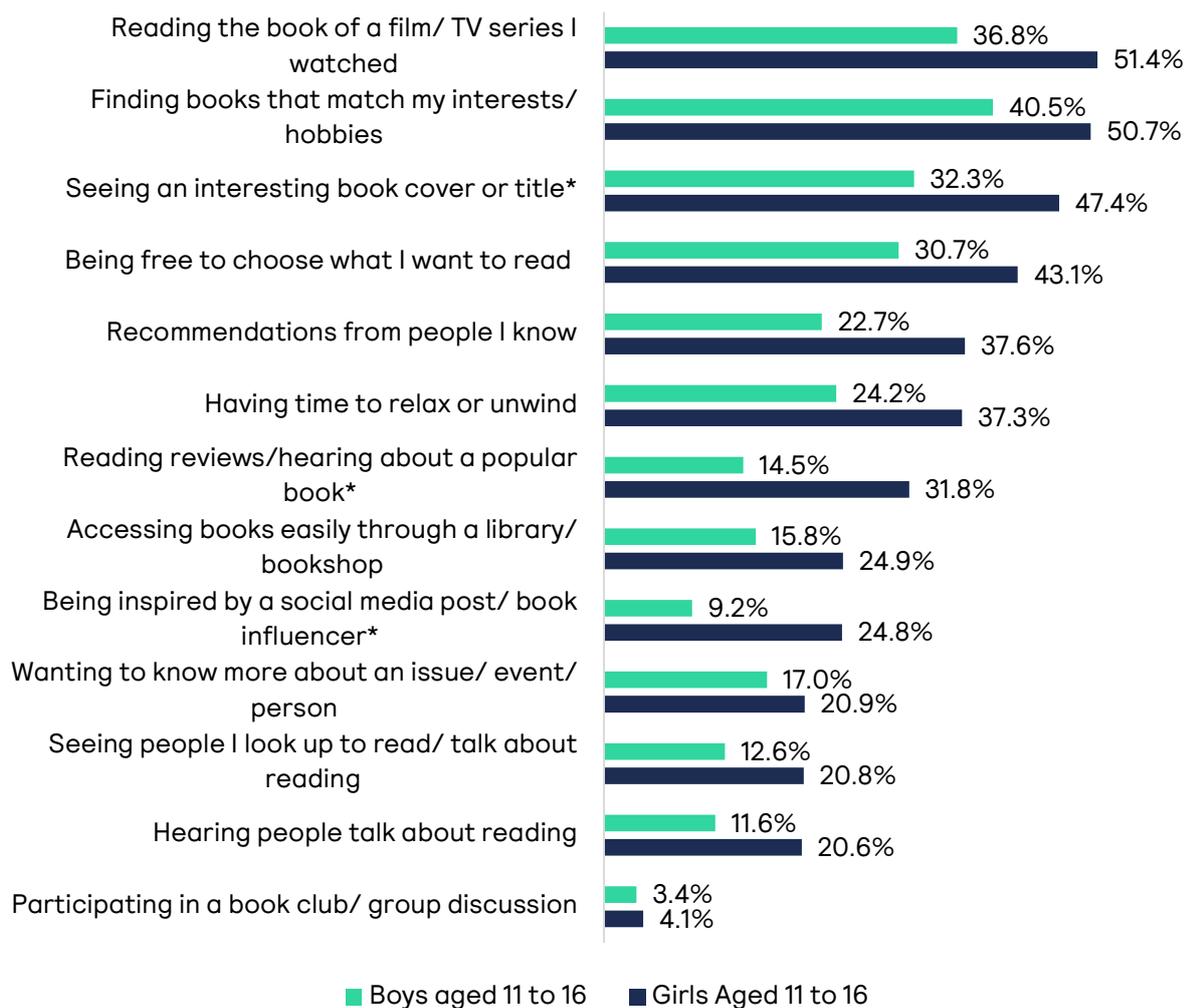
What would encourage young people to read more?

Alongside reflecting on their current reading motivations, young people were also asked what might encourage them to read more. As shown in Figure 9, more girls than boys aged 11 to 16 selected every listed influence. However, the size of these

differences varies, revealing important nuance in what supports reading for different groups.

The largest gaps relate to social and external motivators. Fewer boys than girls said they would be encouraged to read by book-related content on social media, recommendations from others, or wider conversations about reading. For example, fewer than 1 in 10 boys said they would be inspired by a social media post or book influencer compared with around 1 in 4 girls, a gap of 15.6 percentage points. Similarly, only 1 in 7 boys said they would be influenced by reading reviews or hearing about a popular book compared with nearly 1 in 3 girls, a difference of 17.3 percentage points. These findings suggest that social endorsement and visible reading cultures play a stronger role in encouraging reading among girls than boys during adolescence.

Figure 9: What would motivate boys and girls aged 11 to 16 to read



Despite these differences, several motivators were important for both boys and girls. The most commonly selected factors related to choice and personal relevance. Around 2 in 5 boys said they would be encouraged to read more if they could find books that matched their interests or hobbies, and over 1 in 3 said they would be more likely to read a book linked to a film or television series they had watched. While more girls selected these options, they were also among the most popular influences for boys, highlighting the central role of relevance, familiarity and free choice in supporting teenage reading. In addition, a similar percentage of boys and girls cited *wanting to know more about an issue/event/person* as something that would make them want to read, emphasising the continuing relevance of reading for accessing news and biographical information.

Taken together, these findings suggest that while girls are more responsive to a wide range of social, emotional and external motivators, boys are particularly motivated by reading that connects directly to their existing interests and media habits. This reinforces the importance of offering choice, recognising different routes into reading, and avoiding one-size-fits-all approaches when seeking to support reading engagement during adolescence.

What young people tell us about barriers and routes into reading

To complement the survey findings, we analysed young people's written reflections on their experiences of reading. In total, this analysis draws on **46,529 open-ended comments** from young people aged 11 to 16 who took part in the 2025 Annual Literacy Survey. These responses offer rich insight into how reading fits into teenagers' everyday lives, in their own words.

Rather than talking about reading in abstract terms, young people described what drew them towards reading and what pushed it out of their everyday lives. When we analysed these reflections, three broad and overlapping themes emerged that help explain how reading engagement is shaped during adolescence: facilitators, influences and barriers.

Facilitators: what reading gives young people

Facilitators are the benefits young people associate with reading; in other words, the reasons reading feels worthwhile when it happens. Reflecting the findings around motivation above, teenagers frequently described reading as enjoyable, calming and entertaining:

“Reading helps me relax when I’m stressed.”

“It puts my mind at peace – I don’t think about anything else when I’m reading.”

“I enjoy reading because I feel like it has way better description than movies. It helps me relax and I find it really fun, entertaining, and enjoyable.”

Specifically described as an ‘escape’, reading helps teenagers take a break from everyday pressures, regulate negative emotions, and experience a sense of thrill and adventure by immersing in other worlds:

“I like reading so much because it’s so relaxing and peaceful. I get to escape reality and go into another world when really into a book. It also helps me calm down when angry, stressed, or sad.”

“I enjoy reading because I like to immerse myself in something else other than my life. I find fantasy worlds much more intriguing and interesting.”

“I enjoy reading because I feel as if it is a form of entertainment. For me, reading books lets me escape into a world that is rid of my personal problems. By reading, I can imagine my life in different realities than this one.”

Learning and curiosity also featured strongly, particularly reading to gain knowledge, new words or understanding:

“I love reading. It allows me to learn new things, stretch my vocabulary to its limits, challenge my viewpoints, and stimulate my imagination.”

“I enjoy reading in my free time because it allows me to learn something new. Books give me the chance to explore different ideas, cultures, and perspectives. It’s a way to expand my mind and think more deeply about the world around me, all while enjoying a good story or gaining useful knowledge.”

“I like learning about the world, people, and relationships by just sitting down and reading a few paragraphs.”

These facilitators help explain why, even as reading enjoyment declines overall during adolescence, many young people continue to recognise the value of reading in their lives.

Influences: what shapes whether reading happens

Influences are the factors that shape whether reading fits into young people’s lives at all. These include time pressures, routines, competing activities, and how much control young people feel they have over what they read.

Time emerged as a shared pressure across teenagers' accounts. Many described reading as something that had to fit around schoolwork, clubs, sports and other preferences in free time:

"I don't have much time to read these days."

"Schoolwork and other hobbies mean I quite often do not get round to it."

This included activities involving digital devices:

"I enjoy reading things on my phone but prefer to watch stories on TV. I feel that they are easier to follow and believe."

"I like to [read] a bit, but I usually prefer to watch football [or] YouTube, use my Xbox, or be on my phone."

"I start to read it just gets boring and I just don't like it cause I've got other stuff to do (go on my Xbox, phone, tablet, iPad, witch and some more electronics)."

For some, reading happened only when nothing else was competing for their attention:

"I only read when I have a lot of free time."

"I'll read when there's nothing else to do."

Choice and autonomy also strongly shaped engagement. While we know these are important factors across all age groups, it is perhaps especially relevant in adolescence as a time of increasing independence. Young people across genders stressed that reading was more enjoyable when it felt self-directed rather than imposed:

"I like reading when I am not forced to read."

"I only enjoy reading when I pick up a book I really like."

These influences help explain why reading can feel fragile during adolescence, even for young people who recognise its benefits.

Barriers: what gets in the way of reading

Barriers are the factors young people described as getting in the way of reading in their everyday lives. Many talked about struggling to find the time, energy or

motivation to read, particularly when other activities felt easier or more immediately engaging. For some, this was closely linked to difficulty finding books they enjoyed, making reading feel effortful and hard to sustain:

“I don’t really enjoy the books I have read in the past and that has put me off books quite a bit.”

“I don’t really have enough time and can’t really find a book that interests me.”

“Because I don’t find a time or a mood to be in to read and the books I want to read are never here.”

“My parents say find a book you enjoy, and I can’t find a book I enjoy even if it’s a football book.”

Some young people described reading as something that was hard to get into, easy to abandon, or dependent on feeling emotionally inclined to do so:

“I get distracted easily, so when I’m meant to be reading, I end up doing something else.”

“Sometimes I’m just not in the mood to pick up a book.”

At the same time, some described moments of deep immersion when they did find a book that really captured their interest, highlighting how reading can shift quickly from effortful to absorbing under the right conditions:

“No time, and even if I do then I don’t have the energy nor motivation to read when other options are more convenient and actively engaging. When I find a book I love I demolish it within days though, 300 pages a day.”

Others described difficulties with the mechanics of reading, including decoding words, tracking text on the page and reading fluently:

“The words are a bit too hard to understand.”

“I find some of the words really hard to read since they [are] all too small so I mix up where the words are in the sentence. It is also the fonts in different words that make it difficult to read.”

“I can’t read right. I either read the wrong line, read the wrong word, read it backwards, skip words, [or] skip sentences and it annoyed me. I am also a slow reader.”

For many, barriers were framed as fixed or unavoidable, reinforcing the sense that reading can be squeezed out of everyday life during the teenage years.

Where experiences diverge by gender

While these facilitators, influences and barriers appeared across young people's accounts, there were clear differences in how boys and girls described and experienced them.

When talking about finding books, many boys emphasised familiarity and relevance, often preferring reading linked to films, games or online formats:

"I don't enjoy reading books, but I enjoy reading things on my phone and computer."
(Boy, Year 7)

Girls, by contrast, more often described wanting to read but they struggled to find books that matched their interests:

"I can never find a book that interests me." (Girl, Year 8)

Social influences also featured differently. Many boys expressed a preference for spending time with family or friends rather than engaging in reading activities, suggesting their perception of reading was as a solitary activity:

"Because I prefer to be social with friends than read alone." (Boy, Year 10)

"Because I don't really like spending alone time. I would rather be spending time with my family or going out with my friends." (Boy, Year 7)

"I prefer to either play video games online with friends or do sports as it is much more fun and social than reading in my opinion." (Boy, 11-16, Year 8)

"I would just much rather play games with my friends and socialise rather than read." (Boy, Year 9)

Moreover, fewer boys framed reading as socially driven, instead describing it as an individual activity:

"I find it intriguing, and it is very nice, alone just reading a book." (Boy, Year 8)

"[Reading] gives me alone time to enjoy myself." (Boy, Year 7)

"I like reading as a way to unwind and to just enjoy the book. I prefer reading alone."
(Boy, Year 7)

“I think [reading] is a good way to have some alone time perhaps after a stressful day at school or after you have finished homework.” (Boy, Year 8)

Comparatively, more girls mentioned friends, recommendations or shared reading experiences:

“I use BookTok a lot and get a lot of recommendations and enjoy seeing what other people think of a book I did or didn’t enjoy.” (Girl, Year 11)

“I enjoy reading because I like the characters and the plot. It is also fun when my friends and I read the same book and we can talk about it. Also, I like it when people recommend me books and they are actually good.” (Girl, Year 11)

Differences also emerged around mood and routine. Many girls described needing to be in the ‘right mood’ to read, while boys more often framed reading as something that either fitted into a fixed routine or did not happen at all:

“It depends on my mood. Normally, I don’t read much but sometimes I love to read.” (Girl, Year 7)

“I think that reading is a great thing to do... yet sometimes I am just not in the mood for reading or I’m just not quite interested.” (Girl, Year 7)

“I enjoy reading, but I only do it before bed.” (Boy, Year 6)

Taken together, these reflections help explain why reading engagement declines for many young people during adolescence, and why this decline often looks sharper for boys. Teenagers are not rejecting reading outright; rather, reading competes with time, relevance, routines and emotional readiness in different ways. Understanding these lived experiences is essential when identifying realistic routes into reading that align with how young people actually live their lives.

Spotlight: What shapes teenage boys’ reading during adolescence

The sections above show that while many of the pressures shaping teenage reading are shared, boys’ enjoyment and reading habits tend to decline more sharply during adolescence. To explore why, this section looks more closely at how boys themselves talk about reading and the role it plays in their lives. Many boys describe positive relationships with reading, but their accounts also reveal recurring tensions between enjoyment, effort, time and choice.

Reading for escape and emotional regulation

As earlier findings in the report show, although mindful reading motivations are more commonly reported by girls overall (see Figure 8), they are also important for many boys who describe reading as supporting calm, relaxation and emotional regulation. Even where boys did not describe reading as a regular habit, they often spoke about its ability to help them unwind, manage stress or switch off at the end of the day. Reading was frequently described as peaceful, grounding and mentally restorative:

“It’s peaceful... it is a good way to wind down after a long day.”

“Reading is amazing, it puts my mind at peace.”

“I enjoy reading because it gives me some time to relax and not really think about anything other than what the book is about.”

For some boys, reading played an active role in managing difficult emotions, including stress, anger or anxiety. In these accounts, reading was not simply entertainment but a coping strategy:

“If I’m upset, I can read a book to calm down.”

“Reading... calms me down when I am angry.”

“Reading is great for when you have a bad day at school. You can just read a book to... stop you from being worried.”

Closely linked to this was the theme of escapism. Boys often described reading as a way to step outside the pressures of everyday life and immerse themselves in alternative worlds, perspectives or experiences:

“It’s an escape from the harsh reality into a zone of comfort and enjoyment.”

“I enjoy reading every night. It brings me into an alternative world [and] takes my mind off things.”

“It can transport you to another world... you live a thousand lives in one.”

“It’s nice exploring another world through the lens of someone else.”

Reflecting earlier findings about many boys being motivated to read to increase their knowledge, some also highlighted how reading helped them learn about different topics and stay informed on current affairs:

“I enjoy reading in my free time because... it helps me learn facts.”

“Reading... allows me to learn new things and discover interesting topics.”

“I like reading because I gain better knowledge.”

“I enjoy reading because I learn about many topics.”

“It helps me stay updated on global topics.”

“Reading [helps me be] informed on world issues.”

These responses show that many boys see reading as a way to learn about issues and topics that matter to them. At the same time, they challenge the assumption that teenage boys do not value reading for emotional or imaginative reasons. Instead, they suggest that many boys recognise and value the varied benefits of reading, even if this does not always translate into frequent or sustained engagement.

Enjoyment without habit: why reading is hard to sustain

Many boys described reading as enjoyable, exciting or fun, contradicting the idea that boys disengage because they simply dislike reading. Boys spoke about curiosity, thrill and stimulation, often in enthusiastic terms:

“I love reading purely due to the excitement and curiosity I have.”

“It gives me a sense of thrill and is generally just very fun.”

“I read because it is stimulating and fun.”

However, enjoyment did not always translate into regular reading habits. For many boys, reading was something they liked in principle but struggled to sustain in practice. This gap between enjoyment and habit helps explain why boys’ reading enjoyment can coexist with low levels of daily reading.

A defining feature of boys’ accounts was the way reading had to compete with time pressures and expectations of productivity. Schoolwork and related extracurricular activities were frequently cited as crowding out time for reading:

“Due to schoolwork, I barely have any time to balance my recreational activities, preventing me from reading.”

“I don’t have the time to enjoy books when I am already drowning in textbooks.”

Moreover, in their free time, boys demonstrated a stronger preference for physical and digital leisure activities (e.g., sports and gaming) and engaging with family or friends:

“I don’t have a lot of free time, and I’d rather use my minimal spare time to do things more useful such as going for a walk, just gaming, or chatting with family.”

“I like reading a bit but also I would like to spend time with my family and sit down and watch a movie, play with my toys, go on my phone, ipad, or laptop, and play board games with friends and family.”

“I have other means of having fun via the internet, gaming, going outside, talking to friends etc.”

Some boys described reading as a ‘last resort’, something that only felt acceptable when there was ‘nothing else to do’, or when all other responsibilities had been met. This framing suggests that reading was often positioned as a lower-priority activity, even when it was enjoyed:

“Reading can be interesting to do however I prefer other things like sport and gaming so I only read books when I am bored mostly.”

“Sometimes when I am bored and have nothing to do, I just go on a laptop and start reading on the screen.”

“I enjoy reading a bit because it is basically a last resort activity for me. So if I’m really bored and have nothing to do then I would get out a book or magazine to read.”

Where reading was sustained, it was often supported by routine, particularly bedtime reading. Boys who had incorporated reading into a regular daily structure were more likely to describe consistent engagement:

“It’s part of my routine. I read for one hour minimum per day.”

“I only read for when I go to bed, and it is just a nice habit to get into and helps me fall asleep.”

“I read a bit in my free time because I have goals to read every day. For example, I read every day from about 8.30 to 9.30. This helps me to get into the habit of reading.”

“I do have a routine of reading for at least 20 minutes before bedtime and I do that just so then I can talk to myself in bed about the story.”

This highlights the importance of structure in supporting boys' reading, particularly in the context of busy and demanding daily schedules.

Choice, relevance and format matter

Perhaps the most consistent theme across boys' responses was the importance of choice and relevance. Boys repeatedly emphasised that they were more motivated to read when they could choose material that matched their interests, preferred genres or familiar worlds:

“I quite like it when I get to read my own books.”

“I enjoy reading a lot less if I'm not the person to choose the book.”

“I prefer reading at home rather than reading at school because I can choose the books I read.”

“I quite like it when I get to read my own books because I don't like when someone picks a book for me because they usually pick books I don't like.”

On the flipside, the lack of autonomy and being forced to read was a big deterrent for many:

“I actively despise how schools force you to write a summary of your reading... I would read a book a day if I weren't forced to write in my journal.”

“I don't find reading enjoyable when I am forced to read.”

Many boys described strong preferences for specific genres, such as action, mystery, mythology or humour, and expressed disengagement when books failed to spark their interest.

Reading digitally featured prominently in comments from boys, with many describing reading online through games, subtitles, articles or digital platforms, even when they did not enjoy or identify with reading printed books:

“I enjoy reading funny articles online, and I research different things lots so I'm always on Wikipedia.”

“I don't enjoy reading a book, but I enjoy reading things on my phone, computer and more.”

“I read on my phone, computer, and any other electronics a lot. Usually, I play games or watch videos that include subtitles which counts as reading.”

“I enjoy reading subtitles and text messages and comment sections.”

“I read fanfic on websites like Archive of Our Own and Fanfic.net. I enjoy reading because I can read things online from fandoms I actually like.”

These responses suggest that boys’ reading may be broader and more fragmented than traditional definitions capture, and that reading is often embedded in other activities rather than experienced as a standalone practice.

When reading becomes effortful or frustrating

Finally, some boys described personal challenges that made reading harder to sustain, including difficulty concentrating, slow reading or frustration with dense text:

“Because I get very distracted easily, so when I am meant to be reading, I’m doing something else.”

“The words are a bit too hard to understand.”

“I find it fairly hard to read as it requires a lot of my attention and if I lose concentration, I find that I have not absorbed the information of the book and have seemed to just skim read it.”

“I am dyslexic and don’t enjoy it as it’s too hard my attention span is too short and I find other things more entertaining.”

These difficulties often interacted with time pressure and negative perceptions of reading, reinforcing disengagement. Even boys who expressed an interest in reading described these barriers as hard to overcome.

These responses show that disengagement from reading during adolescence is rarely about a lack of interest alone. Many boys value reading for enjoyment, escape, learning and wellbeing, but struggle to sustain engagement in the face of time pressures, effort, competing priorities and limited choice. Understanding these tensions is important for developing approaches that support boys’ reading in ways that reflect how their lives are structured during adolescence, rather than assuming a lack of motivation or interest.

Conclusion

This report shows that across the past two decades, reading enjoyment and daily reading have declined for children and young people, with the drop especially marked during the teenage years. As young people move through adolescence, reading becomes less embedded in everyday life, with fewer teenagers choosing to read regularly in their free time. This matters because our research has found that daily reading is associated with above-average reading performance ([Clark et al., 2024](#)), while others have shown regular reading in adolescence has substantial wider cognitive benefits ([Sullivan and Brown, 2014](#)), meaning that declining reading frequency has implications not only for engagement but for learning outcomes more broadly.

These patterns are not driven by a simple loss of interest in reading. Many teenagers continue to recognise reading as enjoyable, meaningful and valuable for learning, relaxation, escapism and understanding the world around them. In particular, when looking at boys' motivations alone, reading to learn new things and new words is cited by most boys, emphasising the importance of reading as a source of knowledge and understanding. This is significant because wider research shows that reading introduces young people to new vocabulary and new ideas, helping them to better understand and absorb information and concepts across the curriculum (e.g. [Sullivan & Brown, 2014](#)). However, as young people get older, reading increasingly competes with time pressures, changing routines, and a growing range of alternative activities (see [Webber et al., 2023](#)). When reading no longer fits easily into young people's lives, even positive orientations towards reading may not be enough to sustain regular engagement.

The findings also show that falling reading engagement during adolescence cannot be understood as a gender issue alone. Boys and girls follow broadly similar trajectories as they get older, with declines in both enjoyment and daily reading during early adolescence. However, the decline at this stage is initially steeper for girls, contributing to widening gender gaps in mid-adolescence. Over time, girls' reading enjoyment and engagement show signs of recovery, while boys' engagement remains persistently low at a population level. Boys therefore matter in this conversation not because they disengage more sharply, but because they are less likely to recover once engagement drops.

Looking more closely at boys' reading motivations and experiences helps to explain why boys' reading engagement appears particularly fragile during adolescence. Many boys value reading for calm, escape, learning and wellbeing, but they also tend to frame reading as something that depends on routine, time or perceived

usefulness rather than as a self-sustaining or habitual practice. While these supports can help maintain reading in the short term, they are especially vulnerable to disruption as academic demands increase, routines weaken and alternative activities compete for attention. As a result, reading may remain valued but be readily displaced, helping to explain why boys' engagement is less likely to recover once it declines.

The largest gender differences appear within mindful reader motivations, which relate to emotional wellbeing and self-regulation. This is particularly important given that adolescence is associated with declining mental wellbeing (e.g. [Marquez & Long, 2021](#)), while both our own research (e.g. [Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018](#)) and wider evidence (e.g. [Sun et al., 2023](#)) show that reading for pleasure is associated with higher mental wellbeing. Comments from young people also suggest that reading during adolescence continues to support emotional regulation and wellbeing for many teenagers, building on evidence that early childhood reading is associated with greater wellbeing later in adolescence (e.g. [Sun et al., 2023](#)).

Finally, many young people, particularly boys, described reading online through games, articles or digital platforms, even when they did not enjoy or identify with reading books. While concerns are often raised about differences between digital and print reading, recent research suggests these relationships vary by age. Although digital leisure reading is negatively associated with comprehension for younger children, this relationship becomes positive for students of secondary age and above (e.g. [Altamura et al., 2025](#); [Salmeron et al., 2025](#)). This provides important context for interpreting changing reading practices during adolescence, without diminishing the importance of sustained reading engagement.

Overall, these findings suggest that supporting teenage reading requires approaches that reflect how young people actually live their lives. Adolescence is not a period of rejection of reading, but one characterised by increasing pressure, competing priorities and shifting identities. Supporting reading during the teenage years therefore means recognising these realities and creating conditions in which reading can remain relevant, accessible and rewarding for boys and girls alike.

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