



Change your story

Understanding children and young people's perspectives on reading in their own words

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We have been asking children and young people about reading since 2005. Findings from our surveys show that children and young people's experience of reading, and its place in their lives, has changed considerably over this time, with far fewer children and young people today reporting enjoying reading, and reading frequently, compared with 20 years ago.

However, as this report – based on nearly 60,000 open-ended comments from children and young people on the topic of reading – shows, engagement with reading is not a simple matter of 'likes' or 'dislikes'. Instead, responses indicate a complex interplay of affect, cognitive factors, habitual behaviour, and supportive social and environmental contexts.

For those who are keen readers, these elements come together in strongly positive ways: they feel good about reading, they make reading a regular habit, and they are supported by the people and environments around them. At the other end of the spectrum, averse readers experience these same elements in strongly negative ways, undermining both their confidence and their motivation. Sitting between the two, the group that is ambivalent about reading presents the most complex picture, combining aspects of both extremes. For them, affect, cognition, habitual behaviour and support exert both positive and negative influences, resulting in a mixed and fragile engagement with reading.

Together, these findings highlight the need for tailored strategies that respond to the distinct experiences of each group, especially if we are to rebuild a culture of reading for all.

In 2024, we reported that children and young people's enjoyment of reading in their free time had reached crisis point, with only 1 in 3 children and young people aged 8 to 18 telling us that they enjoyed reading. Similarly, only 1 in 5 said that they read daily in their free time – the lowest levels since we began asking these questions in 2005. Unfortunately, little changed in 2025. In fact, enjoyment of reading and daily reading levels declined slightly, with just 32.7% of children and young people saying that they enjoyed reading either *very much* or *quite a lot* in their free time, and only 18.7% reporting reading daily¹.

To better understand their views, we also invited children and young people who participated in our Annual Literacy Survey in 2025 to tell us in their own words what they thought about reading in their free time. A total of **58,398** children and young people aged 8

¹ Clark, C. et al., (2025). [Children and young people's reading in 2025](#). London: National Literacy Trust.

to 18 answered the open-ended question: *Can you tell us more about why you do or you don't enjoy reading in your free time?*

Understanding children and young people's perspectives on reading – in their own words – is vital for developing effective strategies to engage them and support a lifelong love of reading. Their personal insights help us go beyond statistics to explore the underlying influences on their reading habits, whether it's lack of time, difficulty finding books they enjoy, or struggles with reading confidence. By listening to their voices, we can identify the barriers they face, tailor interventions to their needs, and ensure that reading is presented in ways that feel relevant, accessible and enjoyable. This understanding is essential for all of us working to support children in seeing reading as something that is personally meaningful and relevant.

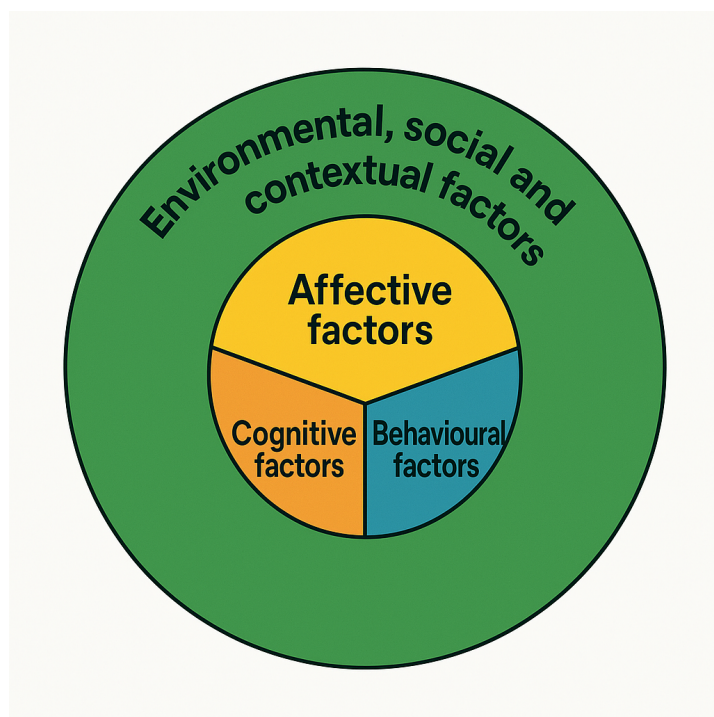
What children and young people told us about reading

Guiding framework

To explore the wide range of influences that shape how children and young people experience reading, we identified four overarching factors (see Figure 2), following Braun and Clarke's (2019) approach of thematic analysis and using Atlas.ti to help with the practicalities of exploring such a large dataset. These factors offer a useful framework for understanding the different elements that may influence reading.

Each factor captures a distinct area of influence, from individual-level factors – such as emotional responses to reading and levels of motivation, cognitive engagement and behaviours – to wider environmental, social and contextual factors that help shape engagement with reading. Together, they help build a fuller picture of what encourages or discourages reading across different groups.

Figure 2: Four-factor model of reading engagement



Affective factors relate to how reading makes children and young people feel, including the emotional responses and associations they form with reading experiences.

Cognitive factors involve how reading is understood, processed and experienced as a mental and learning activity, including perceived abilities and challenges.

Behavioural factors relate to the observable actions, habits and effort associated with reading, including how frequently, when and where children and young people read, the routines and patterns they develop around reading, and the motivation or drive that sustains these reading behaviours.

Environmental, social and contextual factors refer to the settings, people and circumstances that surround children and young people's reading experiences, including access, encouragement and social influences.

A focus on those factors aligns closely with existing models of reading engagement. The Read On. Get On. (2017) framework highlighted three individual-level dimensions – affective, cognitive and behavioural – that together shape children's motivation and capacity to read, all of which are reflected in the inner circle of this model. Extending this perspective, Lee et al.'s (2021) and McGeown and Smith's (2023) reading engagement models emphasise the role of social influences, recognising that engagement is not only the product of individual dispositions but also of the relationships, expectations and opportunities that surround the reader. By incorporating both sets of insights, the framework used here brings individual and contextual factors into a single view, underscoring the importance of seeing engagement as both personally driven and socially situated.

While we consider all four factors where relevant for each group in the following sections, the order in which they appear may vary. This reflects the prominence of each factor in the responses from that particular group of children and young people, allowing us to highlight the elements that mattered most to them in shaping their reading experiences.

Reader profiles

In the sections that follow, we explore each of these four factors in relation to three profiles of readers characterised initially by their levels of enjoyment: **keen readers** (n = 21,010) who enjoyed reading either very much or quite a lot, **ambivalent readers** (n = 24,063) who enjoyed reading a bit, and **averse readers** (n = 13,325) who didn't enjoy reading at all.

Across these three profiles, children and young people's reading reflects a complex interplay of affect, cognitive factors, habitual behaviour, and supportive social and environmental contexts. In the keen reader group, these elements were experienced in strongly positive ways, whereas in the averse group they were experienced in strongly negative ways. The group that was ambivalent displayed the most complex pattern: affect, cognition, habitual behaviour and support were each experienced in both positive and negative ways, creating a blended profile that draws from the characteristics of both the keen and averse reader groups.

Group 1: Keen readers

Children and young people who were keen readers described reading as a deeply positive and personally meaningful activity. Emotionally, reading brought joy, calm and a welcome escape from everyday stress. Their motivation to read was also strongly tied to their personal interests and preferences; being able to choose what, how and where they read allowed them to connect with content that reflected their identity and curiosity. Cognitively, reading was seen as stimulating and enriching, helping them build skills, spark imagination, and deepen their understanding of the world. Just as importantly, reading was often supported by social and environmental factors, including encouragement from family, friends and teachers. Overall, reading was not only an enjoyable experience, but a valued and integrated part of their lives.

Profile background

Enjoyment: Enjoyed reading either very much or quite a lot.

Demographics: More girls than boys, more younger than older age groups, equally likely to be receiving free school meals (FSM) as not receiving FSM.

Reading habits: 47.0% read daily in their free time, with 92.5% reading in their free time at least once week. 92.0% rated themselves as very good (44.2%) or good (47.8%) readers. When asked what they read in their free time, 73.7% said that they read fiction (on paper), followed by song lyrics (on screen, 60.6%), non-fiction (on paper; 57.4%) and comics (on paper, 42.0%).

Reading support: 62.5% told us that their parents/carers encouraged them to read, 61.8% talked with their parents/carers about what they were reading, while slightly fewer (51.3%) talked with their friends about what they were reading. 1 in 2 (47.5%) said that their parents/carers helped them to find things to read, while 2 in 3 (65.3%) told us that they saw their parents read. Almost all (95.1%) said that they chose their own books to read. Almost all (97.2%) also told us that they had books of their own at home and almost all (97.5%) said that there were books at home that they could read.

Affective factors

Keen readers considered reading to be deeply personally meaningful, citing a variety of reasons.

Sense of joy

Many children and young people who were keen readers described reading as simply a source of joy. It sparked positive emotions and was described as fun, exciting and entertaining. The act of reading itself was emotionally rewarding:

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

“It can be really entertaining and hooking to read a really good book.”

“I love reading in my free time or not even in my free time sometimes when I’m doing a job, I drop that and read.”

Sense of escape

Reading also provided a powerful sense of escape – stories offered an opportunity to leave behind the everyday and immerse themselves in another world:

“It’s like a passport to another world where anything can happen.”

“It can transport you to another world in different scales: if you read you live a thousand lives in one.”

“I just love to read because it is like I am escaping reality for a few hours and diving into many new worlds, and I could go anywhere I want depending on what my mood is or what I’m reading.”

Sense of calm

Equally, many children and young people said they turned to books when they were feeling stressed or overwhelmed, using reading to find a sense of calm, relief or emotional comfort:

“When I’m stressed or I want to get away from a problem, I can pick up a book and forget everything happening, to focus on the characters, I like reading and getting lost in the book.”

“It gets me very relaxed and calm when I’m stressed sometimes or not sure what to do, sometimes I get engrossed in my books.”

“For me, reading books let 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.”

Choice

Having the freedom to choose what they read was key. Whether it was selecting a favourite genre, author, format or platform, personal choice allowed them to engage with material that reflected their individual interests and to tailor the reading experience according to their preferences. This sense of autonomy made reading exciting, deepened both enjoyment and commitment to reading, and created motivation to read more:

“I prefer choosing when and what I read not being made to read specific books or texts.”

“I like reading books like horror or thriller, as that’s what I enjoy.”

“I usually read on my phone as I can select what type of story I want with characters from games or movies I enjoy, for example I go on Ao3 which is a popular fanfiction website which I love a lot.”

Cognitive factors

For many keen readers, reading was valued as a means of learning and self-improvement. They read because it helped them do better in school, expand their vocabulary, and become more knowledgeable about the world.

Language

One of the main reasons keen readers reported reading related to its role in supporting language development and academic success. Many noted how reading helped them expand their vocabulary, improve their speaking and writing skills, and achieve better outcomes in school:

“I love reading in my free time because it has many benefits, such as improving your vocabulary.”

“I enjoy reading because it helps me understand words better and improves my writing skills.”

“I enjoy reading because it gives me a better understanding in creative writing and English. Another reason is because it expands my vocabulary and helps me with work at school.”

Knowledge

Beyond academic utility, many of the children and young people in this group emphasised reading as a way of acquiring knowledge and deepening their understanding of the world:

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

“Reading provides me with new information and new vocabulary and helps me grasp different views of the world we live in.”

Empathy

Many keen readers also described reading as an enriching activity that can act as a window to the world, broadening perspectives and developing empathy. Some felt that the opportunity to learn about lives other than their own helped to develop critical thinking skills. Reading became a tool for interrogating the world as it allowed them to question and analyse external perspectives:

“It’s a way for me to understand and experience stuff that I never have, e.g. individuals’ suffering.”

“I like reading because it is a different way to view the world we live in from the perspective of different characters.”

“I love reading because it’s like another universe where you can be both heartbroken but also so warm. I get invested in the characters and love to understand their difficult personalities and the way they think.”

Identity

For others, reading also provided a way to reflect on and evaluate their own identities. Children and young people connected deeply with characters whose experiences mirrored their own or helped them make sense of themselves, and they emphasised how stories supported self-acceptance and allowed them to affirm their own identities:

“I enjoy reading because it helps to open my mind to different perspectives and ways of life. It also can help me to accept who I am, and it’s helped me regulate my emotions and become a better person.”

“I usually get books about LGBTQIA+ topics and it helps me to understand the topic and my identity so I find books beneficial.”

Intellectual stimulation

Equally, within this group of keen readers, the experience of reading was also intrinsically enjoyed because of the intellectual stimulation offered by well-crafted texts. Readers highlighted features such as complex plots, foreshadowing and detailed world-building as sources of pleasure because it required them to follow intricate storylines, uncover hidden meanings or identify subtle hints. Reading here was appealing due to the mental engagement and appreciated for its depth and intellectual rewards:

“It depends on the book but I mainly like reading because of the plot twists and convoluted schemes... I find some books very interesting and gripping, and I love detailed worldbuilding.”

“Most of the books I read are good... if I want to stop or go back and check something that had happened before in the book, it’s easy to check, or find some hints or foreshadowing hidden.”

Focus

Engaging with characters and stories also supported focus, sparked imagination, and encouraged creative thinking:

“I enjoy reading in my spare time because it helps me concentrate.”

“Reading lets my imagination come out and it helps me make stories and ideas of my own.”

Behavioural factors

Reading was an integral part of their daily life – a fixture.

Routine

For keen readers, reading was often a regular and established behaviour, embedded in their daily routines. It often took place at specific times or in familiar settings, such as during commutes, quiet moments at school, or before bed, providing a sense of structure, relaxation and consistency in their day:

“I have been reading since I’ve been younger so for me it’s kind of a habit, one thing I love about books is the journey they take us through.”

“I find reading very relaxing and calming so I always do it when I get home from school, after a sports fixture, and just before bed.”

“I constantly read in any free time I get. Before the teacher arrives at class, after I finish work and at lunch. I read for around an hour in the morning to school and an hour on the way back. And I finish the day by reading half an hour in bed before bed.”

Not a screen

Reading for some children and young people in this group also acted as a counterbalance to screen use. Reading was often associated as a preferred alternative to using digital devices:

“It calms me down and I enjoy it because I get headaches from looking at a screen too much, so a book is a nice change.”

“I enjoy reading because it helps me refresh my mind and make me stay away from blue light such as phones, computers, or video games etc. and I’d rather read in my free time other than do something useless.”

Digital reading

However, technology and digital media also both offered and shaped their reading choices and practices, with some keen readers recognising that screen time did not preclude reading. In addition, online spaces such as TikTok and Instagram influenced what young people read and exposed them to recommendations:

“I read text or on TikTok, read messages, read Instagram.”

“Usually I play games or watch videos that include subtitles which count as reading.”

“I use BookTok a lot and get a lot of recommendations and enjoy seeing what other people think of books I did or didn’t enjoy.”

“I find that I watch the films and then read the books because I see online that there is so much that they missed out in the films that are in the book.”

Environmental, social and contextual factors

For many keen readers, their positive experiences were often shaped by the people around them. They recognised that reading was not just a personal activity but was also influenced by supportive environments in which parents and teachers provided encouragement to read and where family and friends shared and discussed books.

Family support

Family members were central to children and young people's reading journeys. Having books readily available at home and witnessing family members' enthusiasm for reading normalised it as a valued activity and reinforced positive reading habits. Children and young people in this group not only benefitted from this social support for their reading but also found reading offered a way to connect, bond and strengthen social relationships:

"I like reading because my family does [it] and I have lots of books."

"I enjoy reading with my sister and cousin and read my schoolbook with my mum and sister."

"I also enjoy it because it helps me get closer to family members."

Teacher support

Teachers also shaped their students' attitudes toward reading. When teachers took an interest in children's reading or shared their own love of books, they could transform children and young people's perceptions of reading:

"I really like reading because it really draws you into the book and my teacher really supports us to read."

"I used to not like reading much but then Miss O taught me to love books."

Peers

Children and young people's reading was also connected to friendships and peer relationships. They enjoyed exchanging book recommendations, reading the same books as their friends, and discussing books together, and this strengthened social connections and boosted reading motivation:

"I like reading in my free time because it's fun and it makes me smarter. It's also relaxing, and I can talk to my friends about what I read."

"I read the same books as my friends so we can talk about it."

Solitary

However, for some keen readers, the solitary nature of reading was valued as an escape from social activity, offering a private space away from family dynamics:

"It's peaceful and away from family."

"Because it helps me relax from my family because they are a bit nosey."

In sum, comments showed that keen readers found deep personal meaning in reading, describing it as a source of joy, relaxation, intellectual stimulation and social connection that also supported language, learning and personal growth. Reading routines were often strongly embedded in daily life and spanned print, digital and audio media. The autonomy to choose what and how they read, alongside supportive relationships and environments, reinforced reading as a valuable and rewarding activity.

The accounts of keen readers show what can happen when the conditions for reading align positively. Yet, as the next section shows, these conditions are not universal. For many children and young people, the picture is more mixed. Ambivalent readers, in particular, reveal what it looks like when the same factors are experienced in both enabling and constraining ways, often at the same time.

Group 2: Ambivalent readers

Sentiment analysis of the responses from ambivalent readers suggested that this diverse group of children and young people expressed the broadest range of (often-overlapping) positive, neutral and negative opinions or experiences of reading.

This differentiation was most obvious for affective factors. Among those who expressed broadly positive views, many of the affective themes mirrored those of keen readers: reading was often described as a calming and enjoyable way to spend free time, particularly with the right book or reading material. Reading provided emotional benefits, such as relaxation, escapism or comfort, and was sometimes used intentionally to aid sleep or to manage feelings like stress or anger. However, many expressed co-existing contradictory feelings: while they acknowledged that reading could be enjoyable, it could also feel boring, overly difficult, or too time-consuming. For those with neutral views, reading was tolerated rather than chosen – it was something to do when bored, but rarely a preferred activity. Those with negative views described it simply as boring, stressful or mentally demanding.

Environmental, social and contextual factors were important influences for ambivalent readers, more so than for those of the other two profiles. Many of their comments provided insight into how their reading behaviours and preferences could be positively or negatively shaped by the environments around them – at home, in school and within their cultural context.

The lines between the different types of ambivalent readers blurred more when we explored cognitive factors. For some, particularly those with positive views, reading was linked to academic or cognitive skill development as it supported learning and personal growth. However, some, particularly those with more negative views, found it difficult to sustain focus and linked this to broader attention challenges, including conditions such as ADHD. Others pointed to reading struggles tied directly to the texts themselves, including difficulties with reading comprehension or engaging with complex material.

Reading habits were inconsistent across the board, shaped by fluctuating motivation and competing interests and frequently displaced by more appealing alternatives, such as sports, gaming or creative hobbies. Digital reading also emerged as a theme for this group, with children and young people mentioning reading digital content and materials or listening to audiobooks.

Taken together, the experiences of ambivalent readers highlight the fragile and conditional nature of reading for this group. For many children and young people, reading is not a stable or self-sustaining practice, but one that requires the right conditions to flourish and is vulnerable to disruption when those conditions are absent.

Profile background:

Enjoyment: Enjoyed reading a bit.

Demographics: More girls than boys, more younger than older children, equally likely to be FSM and non-FSM.

Reading habits: Only 6.8% read daily in their free time, with 48.4% reading in their free time at least once week. 75.0% rated themselves as very good (15.5%) or good (59.4%) readers. When asked what they read in their free time, 62.6% said that they read song lyrics (on screen), followed by fiction (on paper, 50.1%) and non-fiction (on paper; 42.2%).

Reading support: 56.3% told us that their parents/carers encouraged them to read and 1 in 3 (36.4%) talked with their parents/carers about what they were reading, while 1 in 4 (25.6%) talked with their friends about what they were reading. 2 in 5 (40.6%) said that their parents/carers helped them to find things to read, while 2 in 3 (62.1%) told us that they saw their parents read. 4 in 5 (84.4%) said that they chose their own books to read. 9 in 10 (92.6%) also told us that they had books of their own at home, and slightly more (94.3%) said that there were books at home that they could read.

Affective factors

Among ambivalent readers, there was a noticeable divide in attitudes – some expressed positive emotions towards reading, while others associated it with boredom and discomfort. Others were sitting on the fence:

“I don’t like nor dislike reading.”

“I am in the middle, I neither like nor dislike it.”

↑ Sense of escape

Those with more positive perceptions often echoed sentiments shared by peers who were keen readers, describing reading as a form of escape from the routines and pressures of everyday life. In this subgroup, responses often highlighted the immersive nature of reading and its ability to transport them to alternative worlds:

“It’s a whole different universe I get to escape reality in.”

“Very good way to escape reality and enter a world of adventure.”

“I do read sometimes. Often, I use reading as an escape or vacation from reality.”

↑ Wellbeing

Beyond escapism, many also spoke about the general pleasure they derived from reading, even if only occasionally. Again, echoing comments from keen readers, these responses emphasised associations between reading and feelings of calm, relaxation and wellbeing:

“I sometimes enjoy reading because then I get some peace and it’s very relaxing.”

“I like reading because it makes me feel happy.”

“Sometimes I just read books to cheer me up.”

↑ Emotional regulation

Reading served a more intentional purpose as a strategy for emotional regulation for some children and young people in this group. Indeed, they used reading to manage stress, anger or sadness:

“If I am in an angry situation, I might take a couple of deep breaths or go and read a book.”

“I like reading once or twice a week to get rid of stress and calm myself down.”

“Reading makes me feel a bit calmer when I feel upset or agitated.”

“I enjoy reading because it’s my way to relax when I am stressed or sad.”

Conflicted

However, although ambivalent readers valued reading as a chance to escape or for its ability to regulate emotions, many coupled this with remarks about the negative aspects of reading, such as finding it boring, confusing, or difficult to fit into their busy lives:

“It’s a way to escape but it can get boring and confusing sometimes.”

“I love reading a lot because it’s interesting and an easy way to escape to another world however I do not do it as much as I used to because I have homework.”

“It’s time consuming but also relaxing.”

“I enjoy reading because it can relax me but I find it hard sometimes to get into a book or just reading in general.”

Choice

Overall, many ambivalent readers included caveats that suggested their engagement with reading was conditional. Their interest often depended on factors, such as the topic, the availability of free time, or whether the book was engaging or exciting. This mirrors findings from those who were keen readers, who also emphasised the importance of choice:

“I enjoy reading if I like the book a lot, but I struggle focusing on reading if it doesn’t appeal to me.”

“When it’s a good book, I can read it for ages but when it’s a boring book, I struggle to read even a page.”

“When I read, I get bored when it’s a book that isn’t funny or exciting.”

Reading when bored

For some, reading was enjoyed only in comparison to doing nothing, serving to avert boredom but only when there were no better alternatives:

“I just like to do it when I’m bored and have got nothing else to do.”

“I like reading if I am not doing anything as a way to pass time.”

“When I have nothing to do, I like reading but when I could do something else more funner, I would rather do that.”

↓ Boring

Among those who viewed reading negatively, the act of reading itself was synonymous with boredom:

“It’s sort of boring.”

“I don’t read in my free time because I don’t enjoy it – boring.”

“I find it boring and not very entertaining.”

↓ Chore

Exploring why reading may be perceived as boring, some children and young people in this group described reading as something they did only because it was required by their teacher, often as homework. This framing of reading as a required task distanced it from being seen as an activity one might want to engage in voluntarily:

“Seems more of a chore than a hobby.”

“[Reading] is set as homework so I see it as a chore.”

“I don’t read at all at home except for reading homework.”

↓ Negative experiences

Other responses pointed to more specific barriers to engagement with reading, such as negative experiences with group reading or the stress associated with reading aloud:

“I started disliking [reading] a bit more after we had tutor group reading because I always get nervous when it’s my turn to read and I feel really nervous and embarrassed as well as anxious about what others think.”

“I don’t like reading because I’m scared people will make fun of me if I make a mistake.”

“I have to read aloud sometimes and I get out of breath and I don’t want to do it since it [brings me] a lot of a stress.”

↓ Physical and mental effort

Finally, some described reading as physically or mentally effortful, which deterred them from engaging with it:

“It hurts your eyes after a while and gets boring.”

“It gives me headaches when I read for 15 minutes or more.”

“It’s hard to concentrate on reading and it takes some effort as you need light and to be comfortable and my eyes get really tired after some time”.

Environmental, social and contextual factors

Ambivalent readers experienced their reading environment very differently.

↑ Home experiences

Parental influence played a role in supporting reading, particularly for those with positive views. Some described how positive parental modelling and encouragement helped build their love of reading. Others enjoyed reading with their siblings. They all described being motivated to read due to the influence of those around them:

“My mum loves reading and has always tried to rub it off on me and it worked.”

“My mum sometimes tells me to read 20 pages and I sometimes love it.”

“I do like when I am reading a book to my sister.”

↓ Home environment

However, for many others, particularly those with negative views, reading at home was associated with pressure and obligation. Being forced to read, often through routines and parental expectations, were reasons for not wanting to read in their free time:

“I don’t really like it only because my parents force me to read for 30 minutes every weekday and an hour on every weekend and it sucks all the interest out of it.”

“My family want me to read books, so I feel like I am forced to read books.”

“When I choose to read it still always feels like I’m being assessed/ forced to so I don’t enjoy it that much.”

↓ Societal expectations of what counts as reading

In some cases, children and young people also felt restricted by others’ expectations about what counts as reading, which limited their ability to explore formats they might enjoy:

“When I find [a book] that interests me, I’m told I can’t read it because there are too many pictures or because it’s not within my age range.”

“If I were to read in my free time, I would read graphic novels or manga but I’m told they aren’t proper books so I don’t read many.”

↓ Access to (appropriate) books

A lack of access to suitable reading materials was a barrier for some ambivalent readers, with many comments suggesting that a lack of books at home – including those that were appropriate or culturally relevant – had a direct impact on their reading engagement:

“I don’t have books at home to read.”

“I would like to read some books, but I do not have any books at home that are my age.”

“Because I don’t have many books and I don’t like reading from the screen.”

“Can’t find books in my language, Urdu, that I might like reading. Also, I never found anything related to my country history type which I am really interested in.”

↓ Cost

The cost of books was another frequently mentioned issue. Some children and young people described books as unaffordable or not worth the price, especially when compared with other forms of media or entertainment.

“Books are expensive and the library is far away.”

“When it interests me, I read articles on the internet but not books because it is a bit of a waste of money like £15 for something you only use once.”

↓ Borrowing books

Even when schools provided books, the fact that they could only borrow them temporarily reduced their ability to read them as well as their sense of ownership, limiting their engagement with reading:

“Most of the time, I borrow books... I don’t have enough time to finish it if it’s a long one.”

“School gives free books but when you are finished with the book you have to bring it back.”

↓ Conditions at home

Finally, another barrier identified by some children and young people in this group was difficulty finding suitable conditions for reading:

“I can never usually find a calm space.”

“I find it hard to read as I need to be alone in a quiet space and I find it quite hard to get that.”

“Because I never really have time to read plus my house is never quiet enough with all my animals and family being loud so I can never concentrate.”

Cognitive factors

Ambivalent readers also highlighted different cognitive factors, depending on whether their wider reading experience was positive or negative.

↑ Academic benefits

Many ambivalent readers acknowledged its role in supporting their schoolwork and learning. They described how reading helped them improve vocabulary and spelling, enhance their speaking and writing skills, build confidence in reading, and learn new information relevant to school topics:

“It’s good to read because you find and learn new words that you have not learnt or seen before.”

“I do it sometimes because it helps me with my English, my speaking and my spelling.”

“I don’t really enjoy reading but when I do, I see an improvement in my reading confidence.”

↑ Personal growth

Beyond academic benefits, some ambivalent readers also saw reading as a way to grow personally and expand their thinking. They valued how reading could stimulate their imagination and provide access to new ideas and perspectives:

"Reading gives you a good imagination and can help with confidence."

"I like [reading] because it makes me think more and grows my brain."

"I enjoy it a bit because it will teach me new things. Because it gives me information that I never knew about."

↓ Challenges

However, some mentioned difficulties with reading that related to trouble understanding, interpreting, or maintaining engagement with reading. These challenges were sometimes related to complex vocabulary, dense paragraphs, or difficulties with comprehension:

"I don't know much vocabulary and don't really [understand] some phrases/sentences/paragraphs."

"Long paragraphs are often confusing for me to read and I find it exhausting that I'm constantly having to re-read stuff to properly understand it."

"I can't concentrate like others and when I read it doesn't register in my brain so I forget what I read so it's hard."

SEND

Some also mentioned that they struggled to read because of broader attention and concentration difficulties (e.g., ADHD) or learning conditions like dyslexia:

“I find it difficult to read because I have a slow processing speed so it takes me longer to read books.”

“Because I have ADHD I struggle focusing and keeping my attention on what I’m reading therefore reading is quite exhausting for me.”

“Because of my dyslexia, I struggle when reading and it takes me a lot of effort and time. This often means it becomes more of a chore than a fun activity. However occasionally I find a book that seems worth the effort and I will read it but this can be rare.”

Behavioural factors

There were multiple behavioural factors that affected this group’s engagement with reading. However, these were experienced equally by all and not differentiated by their wider experience of reading.

Deprioritisation

Reading was deprioritised when external demands limited their time or energy. Many ambivalent readers felt that they didn’t have the free time to read:

“I’m busy with school work or taking care of young family members.”

“I don’t have much time to read because I’m always at some sort of club or training.”

Competing with other activities

Even when they felt that there was time to read, for many, physical or leisure activities, such as sports, gaming or socialising, were seen as more appealing, immediately rewarding or easier to engage with, making reading a less attractive option:

"I like to do active things not reading."

"Gaming is more entertaining because more happens in a shorter period of time."

"I don't have the energy nor motivation to read when other options are more convenient and actively engaging."

"There are other forms of dopamine that are much quicker and more fun but I do understand the benefits of reading."

Digital reading

Specifically, some of the ambivalent readers expressed a preference for reading digital content and materials or listening to audiobooks. Others mentioned the intentional or incidental reading that happened when they were engaging with visual or social media channels:

"I read things online, but I don't enjoy books."

"I enjoy reading up about my interests online."

"I read online comics in my spare time."

"I like listening to true crime audiobooks."

"I enjoy reading creep stories on TikTok."

"I don't really like doing it because I know I could be doing other things that I actually enjoy, but I do read things on TikTok."

"I would rather watch a video/film etc. But I do like reading the subtitles and text messages and my teachers say that it helps when we do that."

In sum, comments from ambivalent readers featured the broadest range of feelings towards reading, spanning from happiness and wellbeing to boredom and discomfort, and often

conditionally linked to choice, content and environment. Notably, the significance of reading as a way of managing difficult emotions was particularly evident in this group, echoing findings from wider research and suggesting more could be done to highlight the benefits of reading for emotional regulation. While some enjoyed books, others preferred digital and audio formats, with reading sometimes incidental while following personal interests online. This group also faced challenges relating to attention, comprehension and access to engaging reading material, and comments suggested inconsistent reading habits, often dropped in favour of other leisure options.

If ambivalent readers reveal the fragility of engagement with reading, averse readers illustrate what happens when that fragility tips towards sustained disengagement. For this group, as the next section will show, the barriers outweigh the benefits: reading is more often endured than enjoyed, and their accounts point to a relationship with reading that has broken down almost entirely.

Group 3: Averse readers

Children and young people who were averse readers described reading as boring, effortful or irrelevant to their lives – mirroring the themes already highlighted when we discussed the ambivalent readers who also held negative views of reading. However, in this group these themes are amplified. Reading was tied to schoolwork and pressure, which left them disengaged from reading in their free time. Some struggled with confidence, comprehension or focus, while others simply preferred more interactive or social activities. Their accounts suggest that reading aversion rarely stems from a single cause, but from the way multiple challenges combine to make reading an activity they actively avoid.

Profile background

Enjoyment: Did not enjoy reading at all.

Demographics: More boys than girls, more older children, equally likely to be FSM and non-FSM.

Reading habits: Only 1.7% read daily in their free time, with 9.1% reading in their free time at least once week. 1 in 2 (52.9%) rated themselves as very good (11.2%) or good (41.7%) readers. When asked what they read in their free time, 56.8% said that they read song lyrics (on screen) followed by news (on screen, 19.3%).

Reading support: 1 in 3 (34.4%) told us that their parents/carers encouraged them to read, 1 in 8 (11.8%) talked with their parents/carers, and 1 in 12 (8.4%) talked with their friends about what they were reading. 1 in 5 (21.9%) said that their parents/carers helped them to

find things to read, while 1 in 2 (47.3%) told us that they saw their parents read. 1 in 2 (49.2%) said that they chose their own books to read. 7 in 10 (71.6%) told us that they had books of their own at home and slightly more (79.5%) said that there were books at home that they could read.

Affective factors

Among averse readers, many expressed a strong dislike of reading as an activity.

Boredom

Many simply described reading as boring or rubbish and lacking any sense of fun. Comments from children and young people in this group showed that many found it difficult to engage with reading or sustain interest in it over time:

“I find reading boring.”

“I’ve tried [reading] but nothing interests me.”

“It is just a bit boring and it makes me feel like I want to just stop.”

Lack of value or relevance

Beyond boredom, many questioned the value of reading altogether. For them, reading was not seen as a worthwhile use of time, especially compared with other activities they considered more important or enjoyable. Some even suggested that reading had lost its relevance:

“It’s a waste of useful time.”

“People have more important things to do than reading.”

“Reading is not as important as it used to be.”

Chore

Some responses hinted at why reading might be perceived as boring or unappealing for this group. Mirroring findings from the ambivalent readers group, for many children and young people in the averse group, reading was closely associated with school and homework, making it feel like a chore rather than a leisure activity. This perception discouraged them from engaging with reading in their free time:

“It feels more like a chore than an enjoyable pastime.”

“Because it is set as homework so I see it as a chore.”

“I used to like reading until school made it more of a chore... instead of something you do in your free time for fun.”

Lack of interesting books

For many, however, a lack of engagement stemmed from a struggle to find books that matched their interests:

“I honestly do not enjoy reading because I can’t find an interesting book that I enjoy reading.”

“I can’t find a good book.”

“There’s nothing interesting to read.”

Uncertainty

The struggle to find books that interest them was often linked to the idea that many hadn’t yet discovered what types of books they enjoy. This uncertainty, combined with a lack of suitable recommendations, appeared to contribute to their disengagement from reading as a pastime:

“I get bored of reading very easily because I don’t know what to read.”

“I don’t know what type of books I like so when I read ones that I don’t, I find it really hard to keep concentrated.”

“The books I read are never what I like, but I don’t know what I like yet, so I don’t know what to do.”

Cognitive factors

Like ambivalent readers, many averse readers cited a range of cognitive and psychological challenges that made reading difficult or inaccessible for them.

Challenges with comprehension

For some, the core issue was difficulty understanding or following the text. They struggled to make sense of what they were reading, often feeling confused or overwhelmed by the volume of words, or having difficulty following the narrative of a book or text:

“It’s hard for me to understand and I get confused a lot because there are so many words on the book.”

“Most books I don’t understand and struggle to follow the storyline.”

“I can’t retain the information that I read so I find it very boring. I can read the words but I don’t understand a story.”

Visualisation challenges

Others highlighted challenges with visualisation, noting that they found it hard to imagine stories, characters or scenes, especially when books lacked illustrations:

“I don’t enjoy it purely because I can’t visualise it very well.”

“I don’t like books without pictures because it can be hard to visualise what is going on.”

“I can’t visualise the characters in my head with a book that only has words.”

“I can never really understand a book... I always like to visualise what’s happening like a movie.”

Focus

Additionally, reflecting comments from the ambivalent group about the need for a quiet space to read, reading was often perceived as an activity that requires uninterrupted focus, which can be difficult to achieve in busy or noisy environments. This perception made reading feel effortful and less accessible:

“It can be hard to focus sometimes and reading does require a lot of focus.”

“I don’t like reading because it often feels like... an activity that requires a lot of focus.”

“I can’t stay focused if there is any background noise.”

“I find that reading takes too much effort for me.”

“I hate reading because it takes too much time and effort.”

SEND

In addition to these reading-specific challenges, many described broader attention and concentration challenges, including (as in the ambivalent reader group) conditions such as ADHD and dyslexia:

“I have no attention span.”

“I have ADHD so it’s really hard to focus when I read.”

“I am dyslexic and it’s very hard to concentrate.”

“I struggle [with] reading and I just find it boring and hard because the words jump up and down.”

Physical discomfort

Finally, and again directly reflecting comments from children in the ambivalent group, in the averse group, physical discomfort contributed to a lack of engagement with reading. Several children and young people described symptoms such as eye strain and headaches, which made reading an unpleasant experience:

“I don’t like reading because it hurts my head.”

“[Reading] hurts my head unless it’s a short book.”

“Reading loads of words hurts my eyes.”

Behavioural factors

Averse readers tended to see reading as incompatible with their routines, with many of their comments echoing those of ambivalent readers – but with more frequency and greater intensity.

Time constraints

Time constraints and busy schedules meant that reading was often pushed aside, or competed unsuccessfully with other interests and activities that they found more engaging or enjoyable:

“I have a lot going on at home, so I don’t have the time.”

“Most of the time I am catching up with schoolwork and if I do have free time I like to socialise with my friends.”

“I’d rather spend my time doing more useful and fun things.”

“I [want] to do other things that I really like such as playing Fortnite and football.”

“I’d rather watch things for entertainment and also I think it’s too much effort.”

Too solitary

For some, reading was seen as lacking the interactivity or social connection, making it less appealing than other pastimes:

“I prefer to be social than read alone.”

“[Reading] means I can’t interact with friends.”

“I’d rather do something more engaging like playing a game or talking to friends rather than reading a book.”

Environmental, social and contextual factors

For averse readers, a range of environmental, social and contextual factors appeared to act as barriers to their reading engagement. These included their home setting, limited access to suitable reading materials, and negative associations with reading shaped by external pressures. Many of these themes echoed the experiences of those who were ambivalent readers but, again, with greater frequency and intensity.

Lack of books

Not having access to books of their own was a major barrier to reading engagement for many of these children and young people. Even when books were accessible, many felt that they didn’t match their interests or weren’t age-appropriate:

“I have no books at home.”

“I can’t find any books that interest me.”

“Whenever I read, I forget lots and I only like non-fiction type of books or comics but don’t own any.”

Cost

Cost was another barrier for some, often in combination with other factors, with several children and young people noting that books were too expensive or that they lacked the time to read:

“I just think there are better things to do with my time. Also, books are expensive.”

“Takes time of the day and books are expensive and I don’t wanna get one from the school because I won’t have enough time to read it all and reading is sometimes boring.”

“I like to read comics but they cost a lot.”

Lack of volition

Negative sentiments often also stemmed from being forced to read:

“If I have to do it for like homework or something I will do it or otherwise at school so, the reason I don’t enjoy it is that it is forced to do so which sucks out the fun of reading.”

“When I get forced to read, I just don’t want to read anymore.”

“Reading is forced on me which makes it all the more unappealing and it is just something I do not enjoy.”

“My parents make me feel like I’m being forced to read.”

No quiet space

Finally, like many ambivalent readers, the lack of the right conditions and space hindered their relationship with reading:

“I don’t really have enough time or quiet space to read.”

“I don’t enjoy reading in my free time because I always lose the line I am on whenever I get distracted and I have no quiet place in the house.”

“I find it hard to understand a book when reading one because of all the noise around me.”

In sum, many averse readers told us they found reading boring, difficult, irrelevant and anti-

social. Cognitive and environmental barriers, such as issues with comprehension and unsuitable reading environments, featured strongly, and encouragement to read was often perceived negatively. Uncertainty about what books one might enjoy highlight the potentially transformative power of giving children and young people the time and support they need to discover and explore the variety of reading material available, and to consider whether they don't enjoy reading, or just don't enjoy reading yet.

The views of averse readers underline how quickly reading can shift from opportunity to obstacle when affect, confidence, and support align in negative ways. Where keen readers encounter joy and ambivalent readers waver between attraction and resistance, averse readers describe how every factor – emotional, cognitive, behavioural and contextual – has the potential to discourage reading. Their voices remind us that disengagement is not inevitable, but the product of conditions that can, in principle, be reshaped.

Reflections and implications

Taken together, these accounts point to reading as a fragile ecology that is shaped by the interaction of inner dispositions and outer contexts (see Table 1 for a summary). Small differences – having a quiet space, being able to choose both the topic and the format, receiving encouragement rather than pressure – can have disproportionate effects. Importantly, the same factor can act as either an enabler or a barrier depending on how it is experienced. For one child or young person, parental involvement may be motivating and affirming; for another, it may feel intrusive or controlling. A challenging text might inspire persistence and pride, or it might confirm a sense of inadequacy.

Table 1: Main themes emerging through comments by level of reading enjoyment

	Keen	Ambivalent	Averse
	High, positive	Mild, complex	High, negative
Affective	Sense of joy Sense of escape Sense of calm Choice	Sense of escape Wellbeing Emotional regulation Conflicted Choice Reading when bored Boring Chore Negative experiences	Boredom Lack of value/ relevance Chore Lack of interesting books Uncertainty
Cognitive	Intrinsically & extrinsically rewarding	Very prominent, both facilitator & barrier	Often a barrier
	Language Knowledge	Academic benefits Personal growth	Challenges with comprehension

	Empathy Identity Intellectual stimulation Focus	Challenges SEND	Visualisation Focus SEND Physical discomfort
Behavioural	Regular, habit	Infrequent/variable, selective	Avoidant
	Routine Not a screen Digital reading	De-prioritisation Competing with other activities Digital reading	Time constraints Too solitary/anti-social
Environmental	Supportive	Visible, complex	Often lacking
	Family support Teacher support Peer support Solitary	Family support (home experiences) Home environment Conditions at home What counts as reading Access to books (cost, borrowing)	Lack of books Cost Lack of volition No quiet space

In many ways, these findings affirm what we know already: enjoyment, cognitive stimulation, habit and support matter. Yet what is powerful here is that this picture comes directly from children and young people. Their words validate existing frameworks while also complicating and extending them. They show, for instance, that the same factor, such as digital technology, can act both as a distraction and as a gateway into reading. They reveal the conditional nature of engagement, where reading may soothe stress one day but feel boring or burdensome the next. And they highlight how perceptions of choice and control can tip encouragement into pressure, turning potential supports into barriers.

Similarly, some comments indicated the additive effect of enabling or detracting factors. In keen readers, enjoyment might be the result of two or three positive factors (e.g. *"I enjoy reading because it helps to open my mind to different perspectives and ways of life. It also can help me to accept who I am, and it's helped me regulate my emotions and become a better person."*). For ambivalent readers, variable feelings related to positive and negative experiences of reading (e.g. *"I enjoy reading because it can relax me but I find it hard sometimes to get into a book or just reading in general."*), and averse readers expressed the cumulative impact of several negative feelings (*"Takes time of the day and books are expensive and I don't wanna get one from the school because I won't have enough time to read it all and reading is sometimes boring."*). This highlights the need for multiple strategies to support reading, as focusing on just one factor may not help a child shift from a negative to a positive view of reading, or indeed themselves as a reader. It also requires

acknowledging that reading engagement can change over time, and that some children, rather than not enjoying reading, may not enjoy reading yet.

These accounts show that engagement with reading is unstable, situational and deeply personal. Ambivalence is not a middle point on a linear scale but a lived state of fluctuation and contradiction. They also remind us that structural barriers, such as cost, access or lack of representation, are not background conditions but central to how reading is experienced. By surfacing these complexities, children and young people's voices invite us to reconsider assumptions, attend to nuance, and design approaches that reflect the fragile, contingent and sometimes contradictory ways in which reading is woven into young lives.

Together, these findings highlight the need for tailored strategies that respond to the distinct experiences of each group if we are to rebuild a culture of reading for all. For keen readers, this might mean enrichment and depth; for ambivalent readers, stability, scaffolding and encouragement; and for averse readers, foundational support that restores confidence and access. Recognising the diversity of these experiences is essential. Only by addressing them on their own terms can we begin to foster a culture where every child and young person has the chance to see reading as meaningful, relevant and rewarding.

A huge thank you to all the schools that took part in our survey this year and the nearly 60,000 children and young people who took the time to tell us in their own words what they thought about reading – we couldn't do it without you!

About the National Literacy Trust

Our charity is dedicated to improving the reading, writing, speaking and listening skills of those who need it most, giving them the best possible chance of success in school, work and life. We run Literacy Hubs and campaigns in communities where low levels of literacy and social mobility are seriously impacting people's lives. We support schools and early years settings to deliver outstanding literacy provision, and we campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians, businesses and parents. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy and drive our interventions.

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Appendix

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 young people's use of AI to support their literacy have been included since 2023, and questions about speaking were added to the survey in 2024.

We made three surveys available in 2025: 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 16 (Year 4 to Year 11, or Primary 5 to Secondary 5 for Scotland), and one for those aged over 16. 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 16 had questions more relevant for that age group. The 2025 survey contained 19 questions for those aged 5 to 8, 39 questions for those aged 8 to 16, and 35 questions for those aged 16 and over.

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 like World Book Day and Renaissance. 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.