



# Reading for Pleasure and Purpose



## Executive summary

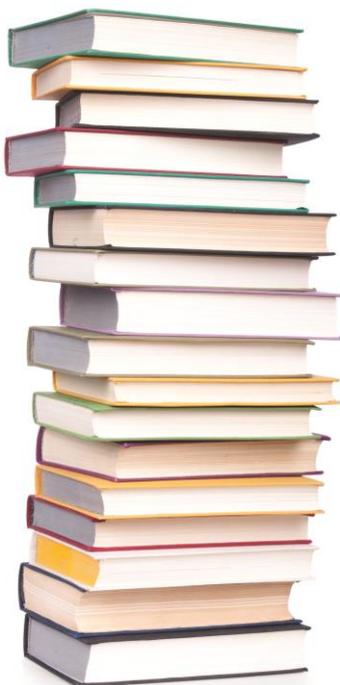
1. **Good news for the children's market: 2021 saw an increase in purchases by 'light' and 'medium' book buyers, broadening our consumer base.**
2. **This translated into a 17% increase in value sales (as determined by Nielsen BookScan's Total Consumer Market i) and a 15% increase in TCM volume sales vs 2019.**
3. **However, reading for pleasure amongst children remained low, with only 25% of children saying they read daily or nearly every day for pleasure, rather than schoolwork.**
4. **Reading for pleasure is a simple solution to help with academic attainment, social mobility and mental health issues post-pandemic.**
5. **For many parents, 'reading for purpose' may resonate more strongly than 'reading for pleasure'. Therefore, messaging that recognises both may be a more inclusive way to encourage reading to children.**



At Farshore, we are committed to our purpose: *to make every child a proud reader*. To achieve this bold ambition, we invest in research to understand the barriers and enablers to children's reading. We share what we know and strive to dismantle the barriers so that all children can enjoy the many benefits that reading for pleasure brings. In our new research, we have been exploring pleasure and purpose in children's reading and how these different ideas might affect motivation to buy books and to read independently. We have found that the many benefits of children reading for pleasure are not widely understood by parents. Moreover, reading purely for enjoyment is not a familiar concept for some. Instead, they see their children's reading as purposeful, an integral part of education, and pleasure in reading is not considered to be as important. We now have ten years of trend data, which shows that children who read independently correlates with their being read to, and children spending less time reading independently correlates with increased time spent on digital entertainment. In 2021, we invested in research to better understand the motivations of parents around reading to their children. We also invested further in quantitative and qualitative research among families from ethnic minority backgrounds, collaborating with Nielsen BookData, and also with Ethnic Dimension, who led focus groups from Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, Black African, Eastern European, Indian, Pakistani and White British communities. This gives us a far richer understanding of attitudes, reading across society and how we can reach all families more effectively.

Over the last two years we've seen children's lives disrupted with the closure of schools. This has impacted their friendships and their physical and mental health. There has been an uplift in use of technology to maintain friendships. Education has been affected (literacy has suffered in particular!), and it is expected it will take more than a year for children to catch up overall. It is estimated that pupils across the UK have lost out on a third of their learning time, even when home lessons are considered.<sup>ii</sup> However, some parents have been more involved in their children's education and a small number of children made learning gains.

Publishing has experienced strong sales in the children's book market – an increase of 17% in value terms on 2019. In addition, there has been mixed news with reading for pleasure: there have been some increases and some decreases, according to the ages of children.



## A buoyant book market



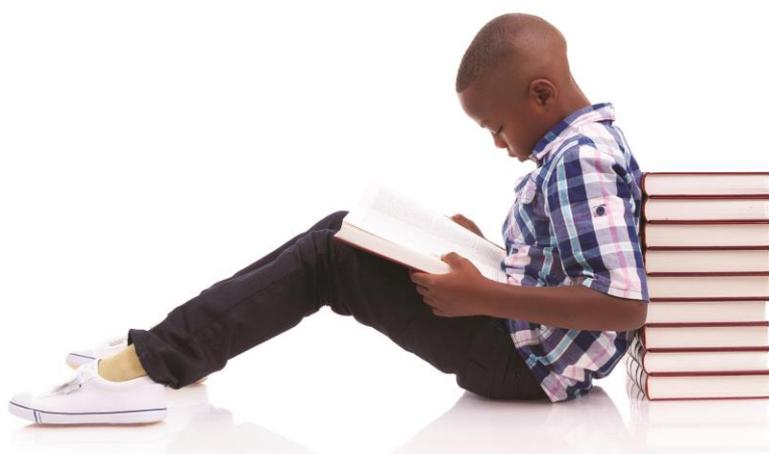
Children's book sales have shown strong growth in volume and value over the last two years. Due to the lockdowns it's not possible to get a good comparison of 2021 with 2020, as there are only 26 weeks of comparable data. However, with 42 weeks of data available in 2021, we can compare with the same 42 weeks in 2019:

- In 2019, 51.71 million books were bought. In 2021, 60.43 million books were bought – almost 9 million more and an increase of 15%.
- In 2019, the market was worth £323.8m. In 2021, it was worth £372.4m – up £48.6m, an increase of 17%.<sup>iii</sup>

The *Bookseller* estimates that if we did have full year data available, the children's market would be over £400m for the first time.

There were strong sales in all categories over those 42 weeks and, for the first time in 20 years, pre-school and picture books outsold fiction. Non-fiction and home learning were market winners, too:

- **Pre-school and picture books:**
  - 2019: £112m
  - 2021: £141m
- **Children's Fiction, Young Adult Fiction and Comic Strip Fiction & Graphic Novels:**
  - 2019: £121m
  - 2021: £135m
- **Non-fiction and home learning:**
  - 2019: £43m
  - 2021: £52m



## Who is buying children's books?



The market is characterised by a small number of 'heavy' book buyers (16+ books per year), who buy a disproportionately large share of the books. Data from Nielsen's *Books and Consumers*<sup>iv</sup> shows that in 2021, 5.8% of the adult buyers of children's books were 'heavy' book buyers and they bought 24.7% of all the books. (If we look at children who received books as gifts, we see the same leaning to heavy consumption by a minority: one fifth of children received half of all the books.) There is a relatively small group of adult

purchasers and child readers who are really invested in books and reading. Conversely, 72.4% of all buyers were 'light' buyers (buying one to five children's books per year).

At Farshore, we have talked for some time about the huge opportunities to expand the market for books if 'light' book buyers could be encouraged to buy just one more per year. It seems that this is what happened during the pandemic, with a slight decline in the proportion of buyers in the 'heavy' buyer category and with more of the buyers now in the 'light' and 'medium' category. For several years, the proportion of buyers falling into the three categories has been broadly consistent, so this is a real change. 'Light' book buyers bought more of the books; this category was up 1.4 percentage points year on year to 36.7%. 'Medium' buyers also bought more of the books; this category was up 1.6 percentage points year on year to 38.6%. 'Heavy' buyers 'Heavy' buyers bought fewer books, down to 24.7% from 27.6% in 2020.

So, more books have reached children (book sales up by 9 million units), and the growth appears to have come from adult buyers who are 'medium' and 'light' buyers: there were more buyers in these categories (0.8% overall), and they also bought more books (2.9% more). It is difficult to be more precise: although it is very clear that book sales have increased and the profile of the buyers has changed, we don't know whether the absolute number of buyers has increased i.e. whether there were new buyers to the category or simply that those already invested in children's books, to whatever degree, bought more. For instance, someone could be a light buyer if they bought one book in 2019 and five books in 2021 – this would be an increase but would not move them into the medium category.

## Pause for thought



Whilst the market news is positive, children's reading for pleasure is in long-term decline. In 2012, 38% of 0-17s read 'every day or nearly every day' <sup>v</sup> for pleasure; in 2021, this had reduced to 25%. Over the same time period, 'never read' has grown from 13% to 20%: one in five children 0-17 did not read pleasure at all in 2021. Although book sales are up, it may be that these books are being given to children who are already engaged with reading. Moreover, a bought book is not necessarily a book read.

That only 25% of children read daily or nearly every day is a concern. Reading for pleasure is linked to higher attainment – it's more influential on a child's academic success than their family's background, including where the child was born, their parents' education, their parents' income. This was found by the OECD back in 2002. Further, the impact of reading for pleasure on progress in vocabulary, maths and spelling is four times greater than whether parents have a degree.<sup>vi</sup>

Reading for pleasure also has enormous emotional, social and cultural impact. The National Literacy Trust finds reading is positively correlated with mental wellbeing. Reading reduces depression, increases self-confidence and resilience and helps relaxation. Farshore's work with families has found reading to children is a powerful a way to express love and care and it has an astonishingly positive impact on family relationships.





Reading is vital for developing children’s understanding of the world and their place in it. It helps them understand others and develop empathy and tolerance. Reading nurtures children’s growing humanity, and children who read for pleasure will likely become adults who read for pleasure. Being able to interpret information through reading is perhaps more important now that it has ever been – if children can’t interpret they can be manipulated by fake news and false information spreading online. Dr Alice Sullivan comments, ‘Strong reading ability will enable children to absorb and understand new information and affect their attainment in all subjects.’

At Farshore we believe reading for pleasure is critical for social inclusion. It’s a key to social mobility, fairer distribution of wealth, and opportunity, it’s a great leveller, and a way to improve children’s life chances.

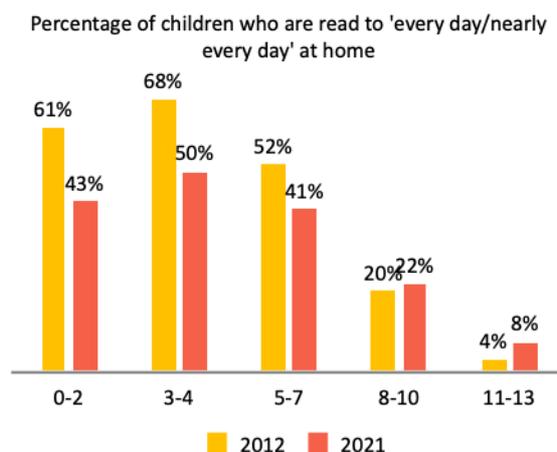
## Barriers to reading



If reading is this important, why is it in decline? Farshore’s extensive research has found three main barriers to children’s reading for pleasure:

### Children are not read to often enough.

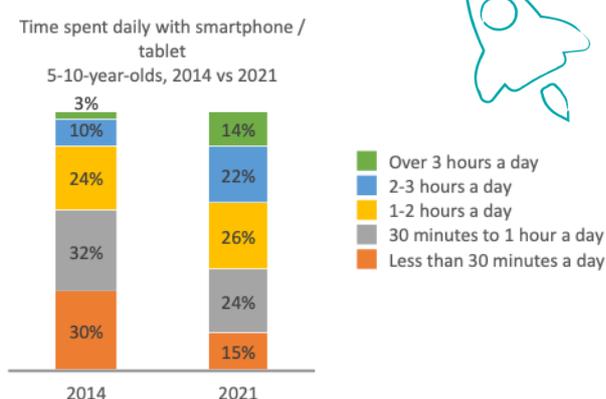
- Children are most likely to be read to at the age of 3-4, but even then only half are read to daily. By the age of 8, only around one in five are read to every day.
- A key reason reading to children declines as children get older is because parents typically think of reading as a skill, which once acquired negates the need to continue reading aloud to them.
- Reading to children shows them and shares with them the pleasure it brings; if children are not read to, they are not aware of the joy of it.



Source: Nielsen BookData’s *Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer Survey* 2012 and 2021

### Most children prefer to spend time on screen with digital entertainment.

- 64% of 0-17s would rather watch TV, play video games or go online than read books.
- In 2021, 14-17s spent circa 6 hours a day during weekends and school holidays using a screen of any type, compared to 4-4½ hours for 5-13s and 3-3½ hours for under 5s.
- Since 2014, the percentage of 5-10s who spend 2+ hours daily with a smartphone / tablet has grown from 13% to 36% (see chart, right)



Source: Nielsen BookData’s *Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer Survey* 2014 and 2021



## Many children think of reading as schoolwork and a task, not something they could enjoy.

- Children commonly associate reading with school lessons – a skill to acquire. Focusing on the skill of reading means they often lose the desire to read for pleasure. With parents not reading to them for enjoyment, the home environment can make reading seem like work, too.
- In addition, parents commonly think of reading as a skill: with schools focusing on literacy above reading for pleasure (although this is beginning to change), the importance of reading as homework is a message that reaches parents as well as children. Farshore’s 2021 focus groups with parents from a wide range of communities found a common theme of reading as a skill and a task associated with school:



*My son (12) has to read, I know at school they have between 30 and 40 minutes. He has to, he has no choice. It was when he got his x box when reading stopped. 2-3 years ago. Right now he sees reading as something he has to do.*

*I think reading is a task because they have to read because of school. If I asked my boy to pick up a book and read it's like – shock horror – it's just not cool to do it. They find pleasure in other things like the gadgets.*

*My son (11) reads by himself about 20 minutes a day, they have this thing at school where they have a reading record and you just have to sign and say they've read and etc, if not they miss their break time.*

*At school they do a reading quiz. They have to read a book 3 times before they can take the quiz. I test them on it.*

*I think he probably thinks it's punishment, she's taken my phone off me and told me to get a book*

*My daughter has to read. From school she brings a book home and then we have to write in it how many pages she has read. They have competitions each week to see who can read the most at home and get a sticker.*

*I read to him (5), I am forced to, because it is his homework*

*I read to my youngest (7) every other day and I tell him some stories, then I do some quiz questions, times tables. I bring times tables in as part of his reading*

*The schools do a lot you know so the parents think the school doing it, and a lot of us they think it's responsibility of the school.*

*With my kids it's something they don't want to do, it's a burden when they get their books from school. My kids never say I want to read a book. I'd be shocked if that happened.*

*I think once you give a book to them and they are able to read it comfortably that's the age when you take a step back. 7 /8 /9 sort of age, when they start reading on their own. There is no point reading to them if they can read a book themselves. Help them to figure it out then move on.*

*They have to meet so many targets in school so you know they are doing it, so reading at home fades out*

*I think when the teachers stop making you sign trackers, that's when the parents stop. You do it when you have to.*

Source: Farshore Focus Groups 2021

## Enablers of reading

We have found three strong counterpoints to these barriers: reading aloud to children with no other purpose than enjoyment, allowing children to choose what they read and what they have read to them, and ensuring they have a wide choice of reading material.

*My daughter (age 10) is responding very enthusiastically to the project and begs for extra reading time. I told her we'd read a chapter a day but we ended up reading three today as she loves it so much - my voice was cracking by the end! I have noticed she will go and read instead of automatically asking to go on a screen because of the daily reading activity.*

**Mum's diary entry,  
Farshore's Lockdown Reading Club 2020**

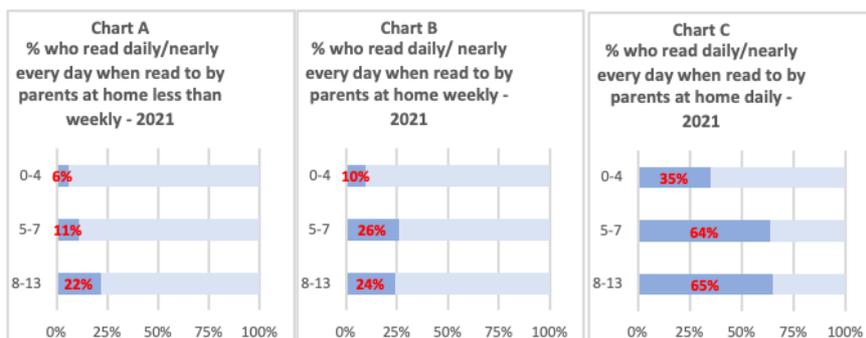
*D (age 10) completes a journal most days listing his 3 favourite things from the day. Before I'd even read to him he put 'story with mum' as top of the list so it's fair to say he's enjoying this shared time together.*

**Mum's diary entry,  
Farshore's Lockdown Reading Club 2020**

## Reading aloud to children

Being read to is an enormous treat. Children relish and cherish the time with parents – to have their focused attention and to share the story. Our reading projects (examples include Print Matters More, The Reading Magic Project and The Lockdown Reading Club) have proved that regularly reading aloud to children works – even for older children. Reading becomes normalised, 'what we do' as a family. And it motivates children to read independently. They look forward to it and happily spend time away from a screen. Just as increased screen time correlates with less independent reading, so reading aloud to children correlates with more independent reading.

The effectiveness of reading aloud to children is demonstrated in the charts below. Each chart shows the percentage of children who choose to read independently, daily or nearly every day, by age (for the 0-6s, reading independently includes looking at and playing with books). Chart A shows what happens when they are read to infrequently (less than weekly); Chart B when they are read to weekly; and Chart C when they are read to often (daily or nearly every day). Few children in Chart A read daily themselves, whereas Chart C shows that children who are read to daily or nearly every day are much more likely to read themselves on a daily basis – around two thirds of 5-13s.



Source: Nielsen BookData's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer* Survey 2021



## Free choice

Children are motivated by feeling in control and they cherish opportunities to assert their autonomy and agency. We have found that when children are allowed to make their own reading choices it forms a commitment – they are invested in the decision and genuinely have intent to read. However, more often than not, they have little agency: in school they have to follow reading schemes and at home many parents try to control what they read.

*When they were younger they just used to pick books with glitter and stickers on but we used to stop them so now they understand books are for reading and not for playing.*

**Dad to 11- and 8-year-old girls  
Farshore Focus Groups 2021**

*My son enjoys reading together and enjoys choosing the books we read. We share pages so we both read to each other. I get a lot more hugs whilst reading so makes us both happy.*

**Mum to 8-year-old boy  
Farshore Lockdown Reading Club 2020**

*I see how excited he gets when he chooses his books himself. And he finishes them*

**Mum to 9-year-old boy  
Farshore's 'Print Matters More'**

*If I've chosen it I KNOW it's going to be a good book*

**Boy, age 7  
Farshore's 'Print Matters More'**

## Wide choice, wide variety

Wide variety needs to be made available to children, in terms of both content and format. Children need to see themselves – and others – in books. Inclusion and representation are broad concepts: different family types (two parents, single parents), experiences, sexuality, ethnicity, ability; magazines as well as books; popular culture as well as classics. At Farshore, we aim to offer books for all kinds of interests and passions:





## Preferences for fiction and non-fiction vary

Fiction is favoured by the largest number of children: 48% prefer it. Funny stories are the most popular, peaking in popularity with 8–10-year-olds, when 53% of boys and 60% of girls enjoy them. 33% of children claim to like fiction and non-fiction equally. 19% prefer non-fiction, with more boys expressing a preference than girls (20% vs 17%).<sup>vii</sup> In our 2020 research, we identified that children from ethnic minority backgrounds were less strongly in favour of fiction than children from White British backgrounds.<sup>viii</sup> We explored this in focus groups in 2021 and found that their parents tended to prefer non-fiction for themselves and for their children.

*I like them to have factual learning books, that's my preference. We don't read a lot of fiction. When you see yourself you do attach to it. It's like that Bridgerton programme, I never watched period drama before but because you can see yourself in there you kind of attach to it. With fiction, I don't read it much, I don't see myself in there.*

**Dad, D, Black Caribbean background**

*I think it's more about education, we would rather dish the academics on them rather than the Famous Five!*

**Mum, N, works in HR, Nigerian background**

*We prefer stories that have some kind of fact or learning in it.*

**Mum, R, foster carer, Black Caribbean background**

*We watch a lot of documentaries in my house so I encourage them to read those kind of books instead of fantasy books and fiction. I like books on geography, history so I push them to read those kind of subjects.*

**Dad, A, self-employed Events Organiser, Bangladeshi background**

Parents told us they believe their children might be more motivated to read if they could see themselves in books...

*The kind of stuff I read, I'm becoming enlightened more about colour, about race, and the intersection of all of that and history. They don't really have such stuff for young children.*

*I would love a character that has loads of stories around it. Something like Dork Diaries based on brown, black. That variety, somebody that looks like them.*

**Mum, T, project manager in financial services, Nigerian background**

*From Jacqueline Wilson books there was only one that had a black character on the cover. I'm trying to notify myself more about my heritage. I wish there were more books out there about us. I'd like for my children to learn about their heritage and where they come from, just something that is more representative of us.*

**Mum, F, credit underwriting manager, Comoros Islands and Mali background**

*If there was higher representation I think more kids would take up reading. They'd be able to relate to them more, been through the same experiences. That's how you find inspiration, if someone's been through a similar experience to you – I've been through this, I've felt this.*

**Dad, S, Pakistani background**

Our 2021 survey enables comparison year-on-year, and we have found that there has been a change: there has been growth in the proportion of children from ethnic minority backgrounds who prefer fiction (30% in 2021, up from 24% in 2020) and a decrease in those liking fiction and non-fiction equally (32% in 2021, down from 37% in 2020).

Perhaps as a result of the pandemic, fiction is more appealing, offering escapism and release from the lockdowns and the stresses of life. Or it may be as a result of more representative and inclusive books being available. Farshore has been working hard to publish more representative books and some recent publishing includes:



## Reading for pleasure and the school environment



The challenge for educators is having to balance the need to teach the skill of literacy whilst inspiring and motivating children to read for pleasure. We know reading aloud to children works and at Farshore we believe that daily storytime throughout the primary school years would have a transformative effect on children's reading for pleasure. If this were mandated, every child would enjoy the benefits, whether they were read to at home or not. Our 'Stories and Choices'<sup>ix</sup> research project at a primary school in Stoke-on-Trent explored the impact of this and found that regular storytime over one term resulted in children having greater motivation to read for pleasure, better wellbeing and an increase in reading comprehension, at twice the expected rate.

Although the curriculum still does not have a statutory requirement for daily storytime, the Department for Education in England brought out an amendment in 2021 – The Reading Framework – which goes some way to address this. It gives new advice and guidance for teachers, explicitly recognising reading for pleasure, and schools are giving much more attention to a reading-rich curriculum. Reading aloud to children now has a high profile. The CLPE Reading for Pleasure teacher survey 2021–2022, on reading practices in school since the pandemic, says reading aloud was *the most mentioned reading practice for making the most impact on children's reading and also the most mentioned practice being given extra priority since the pandemic amongst respondents.*<sup>x</sup>

Wonderful work is being done by the Open University and the UK Literacy Association and Farshore is proud to work with these organisations. Our collaboration with the annual Reading for Pleasure Teacher Awards recognises teachers who put reading for pleasure at the heart of their practice.



**Farshore champions the Open University/UKLA Reading for Pleasure pedagogy, a well-researched, proven effective, exciting, and engaging approach to Reading for Pleasure in the school environment.**

Reading for pleasure is encouraged and nurtured by

- reading aloud
- informal booktalk and recommendations
- independent reading time
- a highly social reading environment
- teachers' knowledge of children's literature and of their readers.

To find out more about this inspirational work: <https://ourfp.org/>  
[https://ukla.org/ukla\\_resources/promoting-reading-for-pleasure/](https://ukla.org/ukla_resources/promoting-reading-for-pleasure/)

### Choice in the classroom

Teachers need to be able to offer children books that feel relevant to them, that inspire and that meet their interests, emotional needs, crazes and passions. The work Teresa Cremin of the Open University does with her 'Teachers as Readers' groups is very effective at navigating the plethora of choices, as is Cheltenham Festival's 'Reading Teachers = Reading Pupils' network.



At Farshore, we are committed to supporting teachers and our Reading for Pleasure Book Club<sup>xi</sup> offers a way to find out what is new through newsletters and live events, and free and discounted books for Key Stage 1 and 2.

## Reading to children at home – understanding how parents think

If reading to children is so effective but many parents are not doing it, or doing it less often, then messages about how important it is are not landing on a wide scale. At Farshore we are trying to better understand parents' motivations, from all communities, so that we can better communicate the benefits of parents reading to their children.

### How it begins: reading to infants

In 2021, 43% of 0-2s were read to 'every day or nearly every day' (a steep decline from 61% in 2012), and 50% of 3-4s (also a steep decline, from 68% in 2012). At 3-4, girls are much more likely to be read to than boys (58% vs 43%).

The pre-school years are an important time for establishing early an association of enjoyment with books and reading. These years are also vital for laying the foundations for lifelong learning. Reading aloud to children builds vocabulary. Language skills at age three predict language skills at age nine or ten. In turn, strong language and reading skills at age nine set children up to perform better in secondary school and in adult life.

Our recent research asked parents whether they read at any frequency to their 0–2-year-old, and why. Overall, we found a majority (67%) with an innate awareness that they should read to their young children (*no one told me to read to my child, I just knew I should*). However, this varied a lot according to the parent's background, values, own childhood experience of reading, whether a mum or dad, and by generation of parent. We have found that mothers are a lot more likely to have this awareness than fathers (74% vs 56% respectively). One fifth of fathers said only after they were advised to did they read to their 0-2-year-old.

We have also found a significant difference between Generation X parents (78%) and Millennial parents (64%) who say they just knew they should read to their infant. Furthermore, 14% of Millennial parents didn't read to infants, in comparison with 9% of older, Generation X, parents who didn't read to infants. This is a cause for concern since younger parents may be an indicator of future trends.

**WE THINK** the data suggests that reading to infants is largely reliant on a parent's personal experience and instinct. The innate knowledge of the importance of reading to babies may be waning among Millennials and may not be present at all for some parents.



**WE THINK** that some parents are less likely to introduce books or maintain a reading routine with boys. Our focus groups found some parents believe boys to be naturally more active and so they expect them to be less interested books.



## Reasons for never reading to children

Some parents never read to their children. Our recent research shows the top reason is that the child prefers reading books by themselves (41% of 5-10s; 56% of 11-13s). 44% of parents of 11-13s say their child is not the right age to be read to, and 15% of parents of 5-10s say the same. Parents also say their child is not interested in books and reading (12% of 5-10s; 19% of 11-13s). Around one fifth of parents say their child prefers to do other things before bed instead of reading. <sup>xii</sup>

Typically, parents wish their child would spend more time reading books and this wish has increased considerably over the last ten years. Concurrently, time spent with screen-based entertainment has soared and the percentage of children being read to every day or nearly every day has decreased. These trends are related.

Percentage of parents who agree <i>I wish my child would spend more time reading books</i>		
	2012	2021
0-4-year-olds	38%	58%
5-10-year-olds	50%	67%

Source: Nielsen BookData's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer* Survey 2012 and 2021

Over the past ten years, we have consistently found that parents are unaware of the impact of regularly reading to their children. In our intervention projects with families, which trial parents' reading to children, we have found that in six weeks, often sooner, parents are engaged, as are children who were previously reluctant and disinterested. They both enjoy the experience and children are motivated to read independently. After the trial period is finished, typically, parents carry on reading to their child. Here are some comments from mums who participated in our Lockdown Reading Club project in 2020:

Day 2. Today my daughter (age 12) asked me to read in the morning! Was quite surprised to be honest but went with it. I actually was amazed at this, so very encouraging that she wants to do this. It is a lovely bonding experience I have to say. She seems to be responding so well. She is enjoying time with me, the book, chatting about it and I get a sense of happiness from her for this time.

I like how this has just become what we do, there isn't any question. N (age 8) just brings me a book and we read together. Some days we read more than others. I have noticed that more and more he is choosing to read a book over playing computer games or watching TV.

L (age 8) has enjoyed me reading to him again. The time with just the two of us has been positive. He has read part of the book out loud but still lacks confidence. He seems happy and it's making me feel sad that I don't normally do this, that I thought that reading was a school chore.

I can't believe this will be my last diary entry. I say diary entry but it won't be the last time we will read together. This has become so important to our routine in lock down. It's helped open up talking & bonding with us even though my child is no longer a baby. Thank you. (Son is 10)

Source: Mums' diary entries, Farshore's Lockdown Reading Club 2020

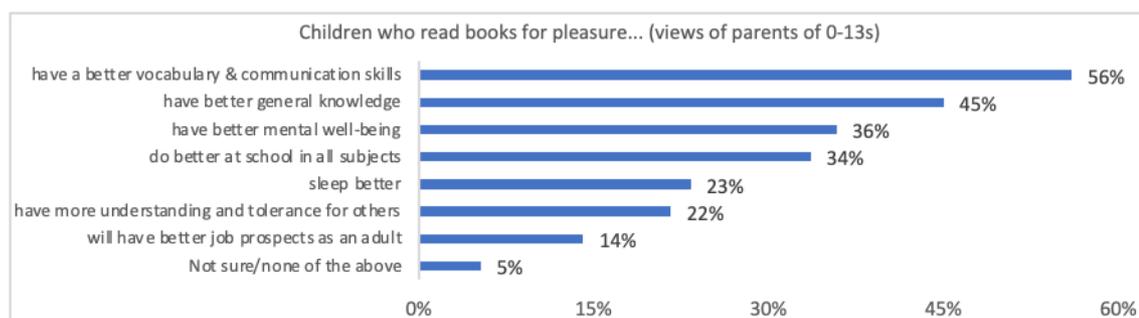
**WE THINK** parents don't realise that they have a powerful and positive influence on their child when they read aloud to them, and that it can transform their child's attitudes to reading.

**WE THINK** the 5-A-Day campaign is analogous: it was recognised that there was a real need to explain to parents the importance of 5-A-Day, and as a result, parents do know that their involvement in their child developing healthy eating habits starts young and, importantly, does not stop. Parallels can be drawn.

## The benefits of children reading for pleasure are not widely appreciated



In our recent research, we explored parents' perception of the benefits of children reading for pleasure. The findings in the chart below, with generally low percentage scores, suggest the benefits are little understood.



Source: Farshore/Nielsen BookData's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2021*



### Attainment

Given that the positive impact of reading for pleasure on a child's attainment is so widely known in the publishing industry, education, and charity sectors, and that many parents are focused on reading as an integral part of education, it's striking that only around one third of parents of 0-13s recognise that children who read for pleasure do better at school in all subjects, and only 14% recognise the positive impact on job prospects as an adult.

**WE THINK** parents need to be told at all stages that children's reading for pleasure – done of their own free will, not because they have to do it for schoolwork or homework or because their parents say they must – is linked to their child doing well at school and beyond.

### Wellbeing

Only 36% of parents of 0-13s understand that children who read books for pleasure have better mental wellbeing.

**WE THINK** there is a huge opportunity to convey the positive impact of reading for pleasure on children's mental wellbeing, given the increase in mental health problems.

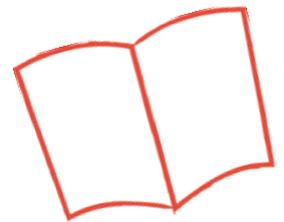


## Vocabulary and communication skills

The top benefit of children reading for pleasure, for over half of parents of 0-13s, was *better vocabulary and communication skills*. This chimes with the notion of reading for purpose – it’s perhaps a more immediate and tangible outcome of reading for pleasure and is one that parents will be very aware of via school communication.

It is illuminating to compare the responses of those parents who do read to children often with those who don’t. Obviously, frames of reference are totally different – those that do read often will answer on the basis of what they observe – and we know vocabulary and communication skills grow very fast when children are read to frequently. Those that don’t read to their child often will not see the benefits to such a degree so will answer based on what they observe, or perhaps imagine to be true. Thus, there is a marked difference in the percentages of those who agree ‘*Children who read books for pleasure have better vocabulary and communication skills*’ :

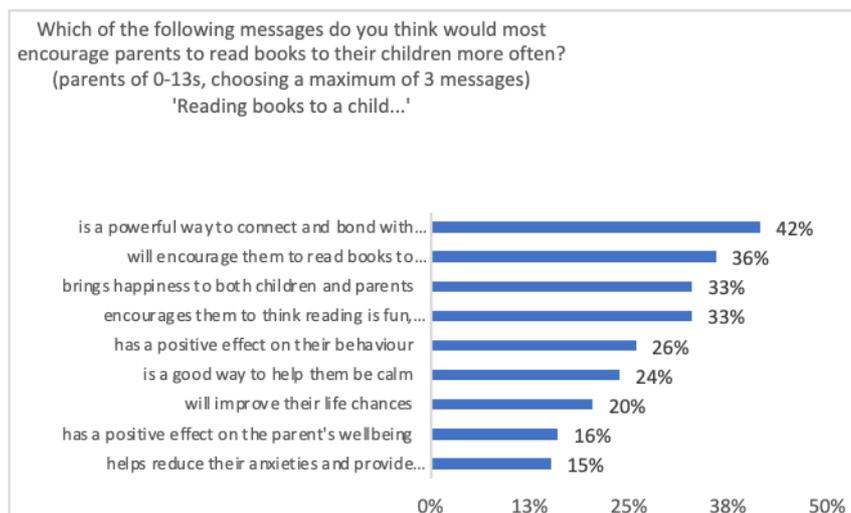
- 69% of parents of 0-4s who read to their child every day or nearly every day
- 35% of parents of 0-4s who read to their child less than weekly or never
- 64% of parents of 5-7s who read to their child every day or nearly every day
- 39% of parents of 5-7s who read to their child less than weekly or never



## How can parents be motivated to start to read, read more often or resume reading to their child?

We have found 64% of parents who do read to their child say they do so because the child enjoys it and 57% because they know it is important. The notions of both ‘pleasure’ and ‘purpose’ are apparent.

We have explored what kind of messages might encourage parents to read books to their child. We want to understand what might be encompassed in the sense of reading’s importance. We asked parents what they thought (by asking them to select only three, we can get a sense of the key drivers). The chart below shows average responses for parents of 0-13s:



Source: Farshore/Nielsen BookData's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2021*



The responses vary significantly according to age of child and according to the frequency that parents read to them.

- **0-4s:** 43% of parents who read to their child daily say it *brings happiness to both parent and child*, whereas only 20% of those who rarely or never read to their child say this.

Similarly, 52% of parents who read to 0-4s daily say it is a *powerful way to connect and bond*, whereas 32% of those who rarely or never read to their child say this.

- **5-7s:** 54% of parents who read to their child daily put '*a powerful way to connect and bond*' at the top of their list of compelling messages, whereas 34% of parents who read rarely or never to their child put '*encourages them to think reading is fun, rather than a chore*' at the top of their list. Both put '*will encourage them to read books to themselves*' in second place, but with very different proportions selecting this, at 43% of parents who do read often to their 5-7s and 32% who don't read often to their 5-7s.
- **8-13s:** Those that do read to their child daily place '*encourages them to think reading is fun, rather than a chore*' as the topmost compelling message (38%) and those that read rarely or never to their 8-13s place '*a powerful way to connect and bond*' at the top of their list (45%).
- On average, one fifth of parents of 0-13s think messages around improving life chances would encourage other parents to read to their children. The highest score for this comes from parents of 8-13s who do read to their children (34%). Perhaps, by this age, the many long-term benefits of reading to their child have become clear.



**WE THINK** stakeholders in children's reading for pleasure need to be much more vocal about the range of benefits and raise awareness with parents. Multiple benefits require multi-dimensional messages.

**WE THINK** while some parents will be engaged by the softer 'connect and bond' messaging, some will be more engaged with outcomes around attainment. A lot will depend on the age of the child as well as the motivations of parents.

**WE THINK** a strong inclusive message is reading aloud to your child will encourage them to read books themselves; this speaks to parents' widespread desires for their child to read more, whether it be for pleasure or purpose.

**WE THINK** parents' true understanding of all the benefits – the astonishing impact on vocabulary and communication skills, connecting and bonding and the happiness of reading to their child – only comes with experiencing them. At Farshore we already know this – parents need to try it to know it. Our intervention approaches have proved this. So, stakeholders in children's reading for pleasure need to act and make interventions where parents can have the experience, rather than simply telling them what they should do.

## Conclusion



Reading for pleasure is in long-term decline and yet it provides the solution to pressing current issues around attainment, social mobility and mental wellbeing. It's clear that parents need much more information about children's reading for pleasure: how it differs from literacy and schoolwork, how to encourage it and nurture it, when they should start reading to their child, and indeed why they should read to their child at all.

At Farshore our purpose *to make every child a proud reader* frames everything we do. Our initiatives include:

1. **Encouraging those medium and light buyers to buy more through our broad and diverse portfolio.**
2. **Investing in research to identify the enablers and dismantle the barriers to children's reading for pleasure.**
3. **Working with the HarperCollins Literacy Project and external partners to promote the messages around reading for pleasure as a solution to attainment, social mobility, and mental health issues.**
  - **Farshore's intervention approach has been adopted by HarperCollins and The National Literacy Trust in their Little Big Book Club.**
4. **Investing in initiatives to encourage reading for pleasure.**
  - **The Farshore Reading for Pleasure Book Club**
    - i. **To support schools and teachers we provide free online author events every term and free and discounted books, plus information and support.**  
<https://www.farshore.co.uk/reading-for-pleasure-book-club/>
  - **Annual Reading for Pleasure Teacher Awards**
    - ii. **We work with The Open University and The UKLA to recognise those teachers who put reading for pleasure at the heart of their practice.** <https://www.farshore.co.uk/the-reading-for-pleasure-teacher-awards-2022/>
  - **Ootiboo**
    - iii. **Farshore is the exclusive children's publishing partner of new start-up ootiboo, who bring to life immersive creative experiences and reading for pleasure directly in UK primary schools. The initiative is underpinned with cutting edge neuroscience research to study impact.** <https://www.ootiboo.com>

We know that currently just 25% of 0-17s read for pleasure 'every day or nearly every day'<sup>xiii</sup>, and based on a simple extrapolation of UK 2021 population estimates that there are around 14 million 0-17s<sup>xiv</sup>, this is circa 3.5 million children. Therefore, approximately 7.7 million children read less often than this, and 2.8 million children read 'rarely or never'. We must ensure the 10.5 million children that don't read regularly for pleasure don't continue to be disadvantaged and miss out on the enhanced attainment, wellbeing, communication skills and sheer joy that comes from reading for pleasure.

## ADDENDUM



### Reading for Pleasure by age group: winners and losers in 2021

In 2012, 38% of 0-17s read 'every day or nearly every day'<sup>xv</sup> for pleasure. Last year, in 2021 it was 25%. This was two percentage points higher than 2020. The overall increase year-on-year was driven by two age groups in particular: 5-7s and 14-17s. At the same time, two age groups did not fare well: 3-4-year-olds, and 8-10s.



### 3–4-year-olds, boys in particular

In 2021, 50% of parents read aloud to 3–4-year-old children ‘every day or nearly every day’. This has dropped steeply since 2012 when it was 68%. It also dropped year-on-year from 54% in 2020.

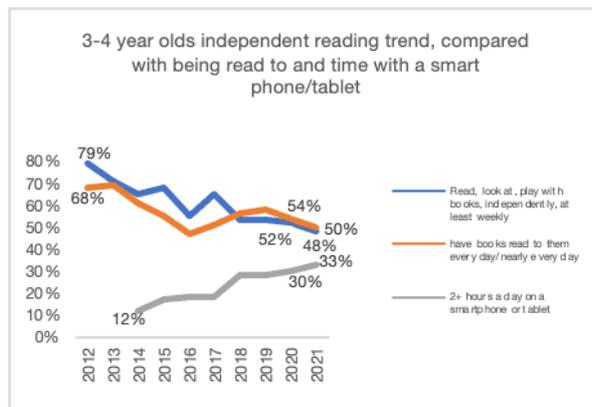
This trend is of great concern. The importance of reading to children in the early years cannot be over-estimated; early language skills can affect life outcomes:

- *The quality and quantity of children’s vocabulary at age five is a strong predictor of how well they are doing aged 34.*  
The Institute of Education, 2006
- *There is a strong correlation between the number of words a child comes in contact with on a daily basis and the breadth of their vocabulary.*  
OUP 2006
- *A child in the lowest 20% in vocabulary knowledge at age five would have to learn 20 new words a day, every day, to move to an average level within three years.*  
(Biemiller, A. (2011) Vocabulary: what words should we teach? Better: Evidence Based Education, Winter: 10-11)

There was a big difference by gender in 2021: 58% of girls 3-4 were read to ‘every day or nearly every day’, unchanged since 2020. However, 43% of boys 3-4 were read to daily in 2021, down from 50% in 2020. Back in 2012, girls were also more likely to be read to than boys, but the gap was narrower then (71% girls, 66% boys).

In 2021, parents reported that 57% boys vs 48% girls spent 3+ hours per day total screentime, and that it was ‘true’ that boys were more likely to prefer to spend time online than read a book (54% boys, 51% girls). There was a greater difference between boys and girls when parents reported it was ‘very true’ their child would rather spend time online than read – 19% boys and 14% girls.

Reading to children correlates with their own independent reading, as can be seen from the graph on the right. While children this age have not yet learned the skill, they can choose to interact with books, for instance by playing with them or turning the pages. As a direct result of being read to less, there has been a decrease in children independently engaging with books, at least weekly, down from 52% in 2020 to 48% in 2021.



Source: Nielsen BookData’s Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer Survey 2012-2021

Farshore’s publishing successes for this age group include:



### 5–7-year-old children

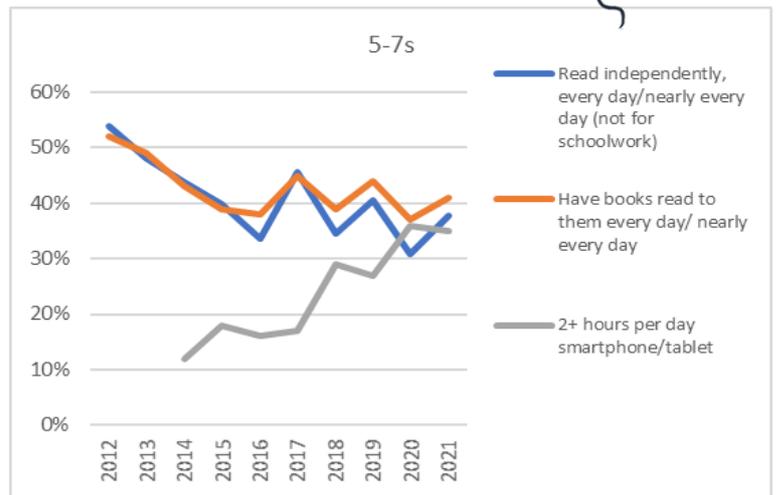
Reading to 5-7s ‘every day or nearly every day’ grew year-on-year from 37% in 2020 to 41% in 2021. There was also an increase in 5-7s who read independently for pleasure, not schoolwork, from 31% in 2020 to 38% in 2021.





Reading aloud to children motivates them to read independently. The graph, right, shows how inter-linked these behaviours are; there is a clear correlation. When children are read to more often, their independent reading increases. When reading to children drops, their own reading drops.

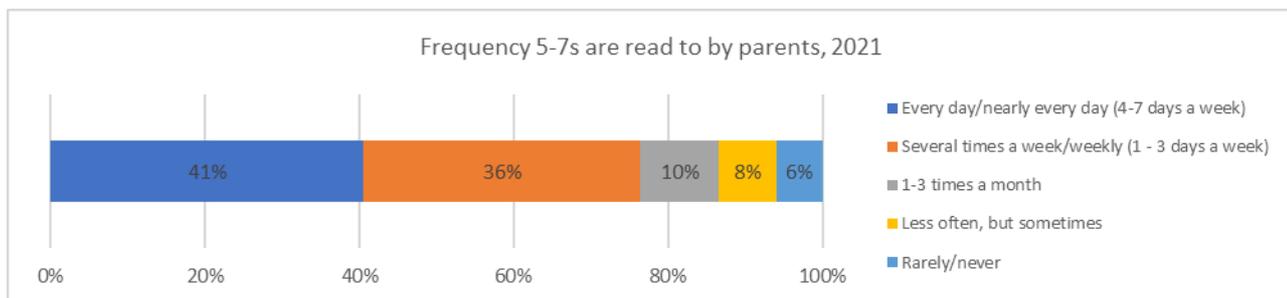
Since 2014, there has been a rapid growth in children 5-7 spending 2+ hours a day with a smartphone or tablet.



Source: Nielsen BookData's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2021*

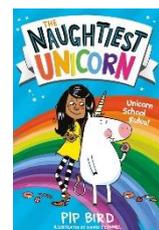
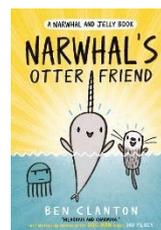
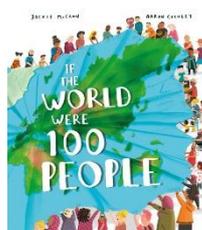
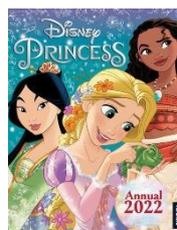
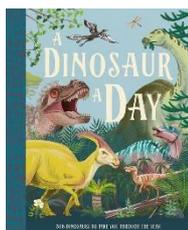
Making time to turn off screens and read aloud to children ensures they have the opportunity to be engaged by books and reading, and that a reading habit can be established.

Reading to 5-7s dipped in 2020, the first year of the pandemic. This is when children were being home-schooled and so parents' focus was on learning at home. In 2021, children were back at school more often. In the news, we heard that teachers found many children had fallen behind with their reading. It may be that schools then communicated effectively with parents about the importance of stepping up reading to their children at home, accounting for the increase in reading aloud to children in 2021. An increase in parents reading to children is very good news. However, it's alarming that nearly a quarter of 5-7s (24%) are not read to even as frequently as weekly; given the power of being read to daily or nearly every day, it is hugely disappointing that the majority (59%) do not experience that (see chart below).



Source: Nielsen BookData's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2021*

Farshore's publishing successes for this age group include:



## 8–10-year-old children

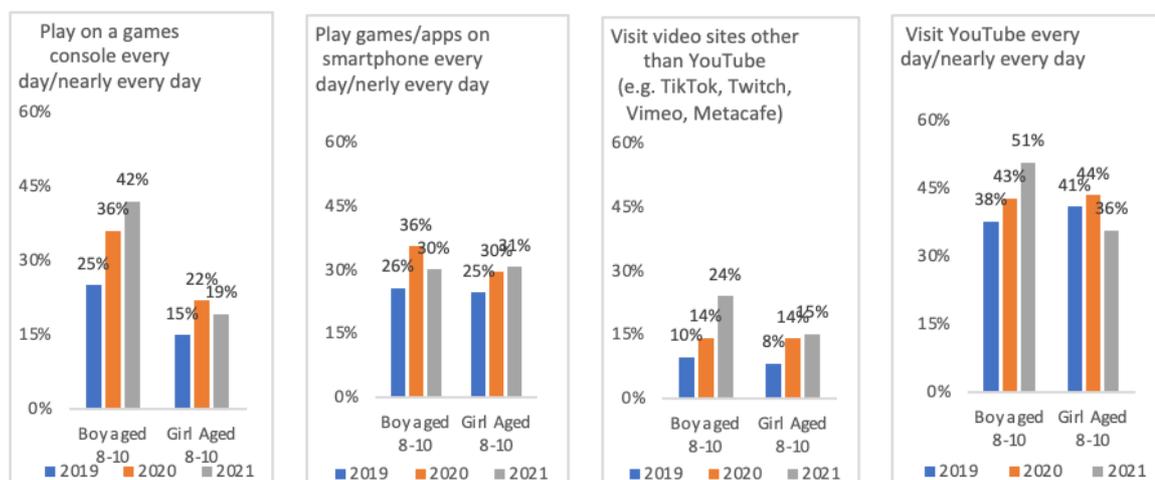
This age group’s experience of reading is polarised:

- In 2021 there was an increase in parents reading ‘every day or nearly every day’ to girls, but not as much to boys (girls; 16% in 2020; 20% in 2021. Boys: 23% in 2020; 24% in 2021).
- For both girls and boys, there was an increase in the proportion who are read to ‘rarely or never’: 21% of girls and 24% of boys in 2021, up from 18% and 16% respectively in 2020.
- 35% of both girls and boys were read to ‘less than monthly’ or ‘rarely or never’.

Trends show that parents typically step back from reading to children from around the age of eight, children read independently less often and also spend more time online. These behaviours are linked.

- In 2021, 34% of 8-10-year-olds read ‘every day or nearly every day’ for pleasure, not schoolwork, and this was unchanged year-on-year, although much changed since pre-pandemic: 2019 (41%) and 2012 (56%).
- On a typical weekend or school holiday, 68% of 8-10-year-olds spend 3+ hours a day online, and 40% of boys and 32% of girls spend 5+ hours a day.
- 64% of parents worry about the amount of time their child (0-13) spends in front of a screen, and they are equally concerned for boys and girls up to the age of seven, but from eight onwards they are more concerned about boys.

It seems the pandemic has accelerated the growth in time spent with screen-based entertainment, particularly for boys, as can be seen from the charts below:



Source: Nielsen BookData’s *Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer Survey 2019/2020/2021*

To help understand why, it’s interesting to consider that during the tween years, children experience huge changes in physical, cognitive, emotional and social development. It’s a time of growing independence, with more reliance on – and more importance attached to – friends. At this time, an important part of development is having autonomy: children are more motivated to do something if they can make choices about it and shape their own experience.

With the lockdowns causing restrictions to their burgeoning independence, it’s clear this age group may have been especially affected by the pandemic. Children have spent a lot less time with friends and have had to try to maintain their friendships online. The online world has been a lifeline for many and, among



8–10s, 43% video-chat at least weekly for fun with friends and family. At this age, social networking sites are not used heavily on a daily basis, but 22% of 8–10-year-olds do so at least weekly.

It is not surprising that gaming and online entertainment have all grown a lot for this age group – these activities are valued for providing connection with friends and for a feeling of control and that highly desired sense of autonomy – video games put children in charge.

## Reading for pleasure needs to find a way to co-exist with screen-based entertainment

A high proportion of 8-10-year-olds have negative attitudes to books and reading:

- **78% of boys and 63% of girls 'would rather watch TV, play video games, or go online than read books'**
- **40% of boys and 25% of girls 'don't think books are cool'**
- **41% of boys and 32% of girls 'don't enjoy reading books'**

However, we know that negative ideas can be overturned by reading to children. The good news is that, 75% of parents of boys and 62% of parents of girls 8-10 wish their child would spend more time reading books.



If parents can be engaged with the idea of reading aloud to their tween, the situation will change. Reading to children creates a desirable and compelling alternative to screentime, enabling children to find pleasure in reading and to expand their entertainment repertoire. Here are some comments from mums in our Lockdown Reading Club – they have seen it happen:

*Since reading more her screen time has gone down, she is a lot calmer, seems more content and her moods and sleep have improved. She is really enjoying our reading time together.*

**Mum to 8-year-old girl**

*Another nice reading session today. He'd not long had a strop about having to stop gaming for the day, so it was a nice way to calm down and reconnect*

**Mum to 10-year-old boy**

*T is loving being read to and we are enjoying one-on-one time together. I have noticed she will go and read instead of automatically asking to go on a screen because of the daily reading activity.*

**Mum to 10-year-old girl**

*B is calmer when we read together and not bothered about going on the TV or Playstation which is nice as I'm trying to get him away from that. He has also taken to reading a bit more before bed by himself.*

**Mum to 8-year-old boy**

Despite the challenges in this age group, there have been huge successes in book sales for those who are engaged with reading.





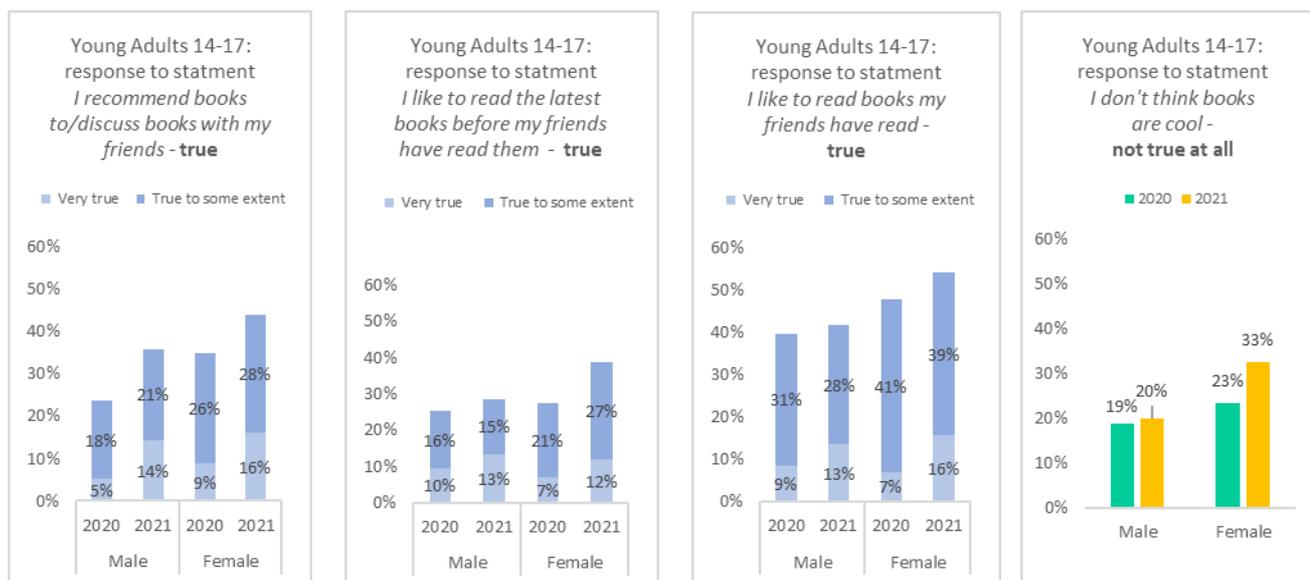
Farshore's publishing successes for this age group include:



### 14-17-year-olds

Increasingly for young adults, reading is cool again. It grew year-on-year among 14-17-year-olds, from 10% who read for pleasure 'every day or nearly every day' in 2020 to 15% in 2021. Reading 'at least weekly' grew from 34% to 40%.

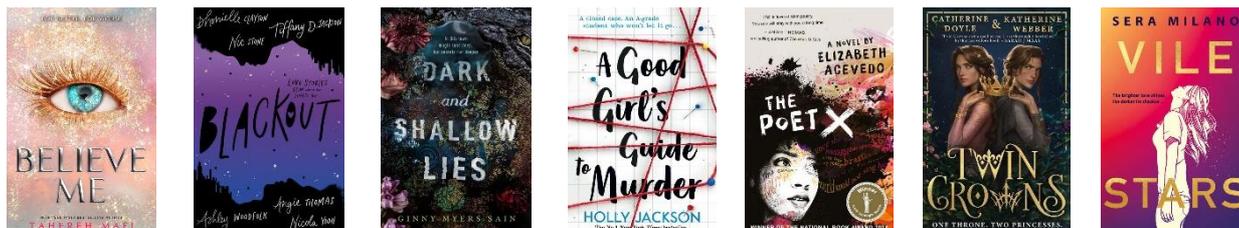
Positive attitudes towards books and reading have been growing. There has been an increase in recommendations by word of mouth, a sense of increased discussions and real excitement about books among young men and young women. The charts below show the year-on-year increases in favourable responses to questions about books and reading:



Source: Nielsen BookData's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer Survey 2020/2021

BookTok, a sub-community within TikTok that is focused on reading, was formed in 2020. It has rapidly grown in influence and has played a big part in the resurgence in popularity of reading among teens and young adults. Short videos are posted and recommendations and reviews are shared. There is a buzz around books that has propelled backlist, forgotten titles to the top of the bestseller charts in multiple markets. Starting in the US and the UK, the trend is also now emerging in translation markets.

Electric Monkey is Farshore's industry-leading Young Adult imprint. Home to award-winners and bestsellers, in 2021 revenues increased 63% year-on-year. We have successfully tapped into BookTok and our collaborations have reached 1.3m+, delivering 100k views. Supporting advertising reached 500k+, with 6k clicks to retailers. Electric Monkey's publishing successes for this age group include:



<sup>i</sup> Nielsen BookScan collects transactional data at the point of sale, directly from tills and dispatch systems of all major book retailers. The Nielsen BookScan Total Consumer Market (TCM) data covers approximately 90% of all retail print book purchases in the UK; remaining sites are specialised such as gift shops, specialist booksellers and tourist information centres. Nielsen BookScan TCM represents sales through 6,500 retailers in the UK each week.

<sup>ii</sup> London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and the University of Exeter

<sup>iii</sup> Nielsen BookScan

<sup>iv</sup> Nielsen's 'Books and Consumers': rolling 12 months to end of September 2021

<sup>v</sup> On between 4 and 7 days a week

<sup>vi</sup> Sullivan and Brown, 2013

<sup>vii</sup> Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' Survey 2021

<sup>viii</sup> Farshore / Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' Survey 2020 and 2021

<sup>ix</sup> Farshore's 'Stories and Choices' research 2018. In Key Stage 2, reading comprehension increased by an average of 10.25 months over a 5-month period

<sup>x</sup> <https://clpe.org.uk/research/clpe-reading-pleasure-2021-22>

<sup>xi</sup> <https://www.farshore.co.uk/reading-for-pleasure-book-club/>

<sup>xii</sup> Farshore / Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' Survey 2021

<sup>xiii</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281174/uk-population-by-age/>

<sup>xiv</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281174/uk-population-by-age/>

<sup>xv</sup> <https://www.statista.com/statistics/281174/uk-population-by-age/>

