

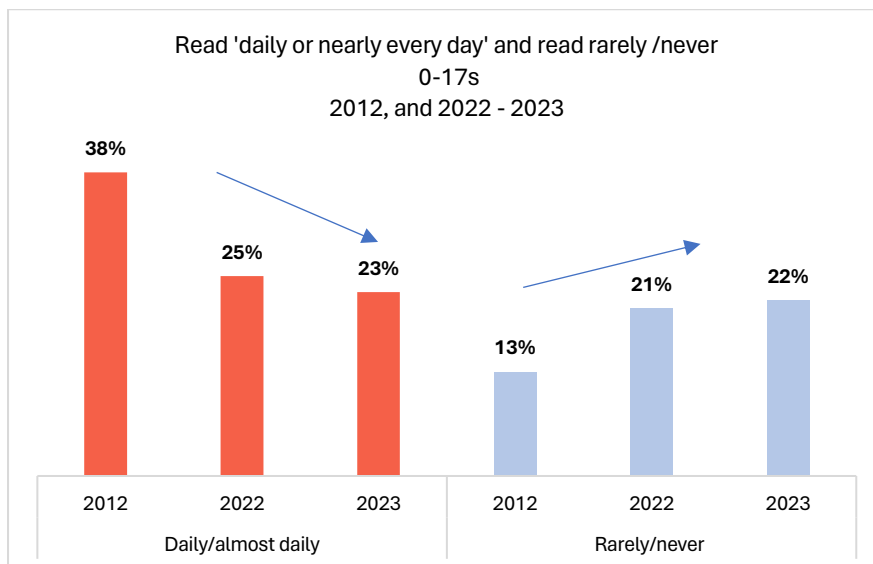
The Farshore and HarperCollins Children’s Books annual review of Children’s Reading for Pleasure, 2024

Reading for Pleasure trends and insights on the link between reading and wellbeing

At Farshore and HarperCollins Children’s Books, our purpose is to make every child a proud reader. We are determined to encourage more children to read for pleasure and have been researching the barriers and enablers since 2012. Our proprietary research has been mainly with families (nine projects) and two projects have been in the school setting. From this body of work and tracking trends we know there key factors that consistently affect reading: children are motivated and enthused when they are frequently read to, when they have wide choice and free choice of reading materials. But they are disengaged from reading due to the amount of time they spend with screen-based entertainment, not being read to, and thinking of reading as little more than a subject to learn.

Our latest research includes a focus on the link with reading and wellbeing, and a deep dive into the YA audience.

The overview



23% of 0-17s read for pleasure ‘daily or nearly every day’. This is defined as on 4 or more days per week. It’s a considerable decline from 38% in 2012. Concurrently, those who rarely or never read has risen from 13% to 22%.

Source: Nielsen BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2012, 2022, 2023

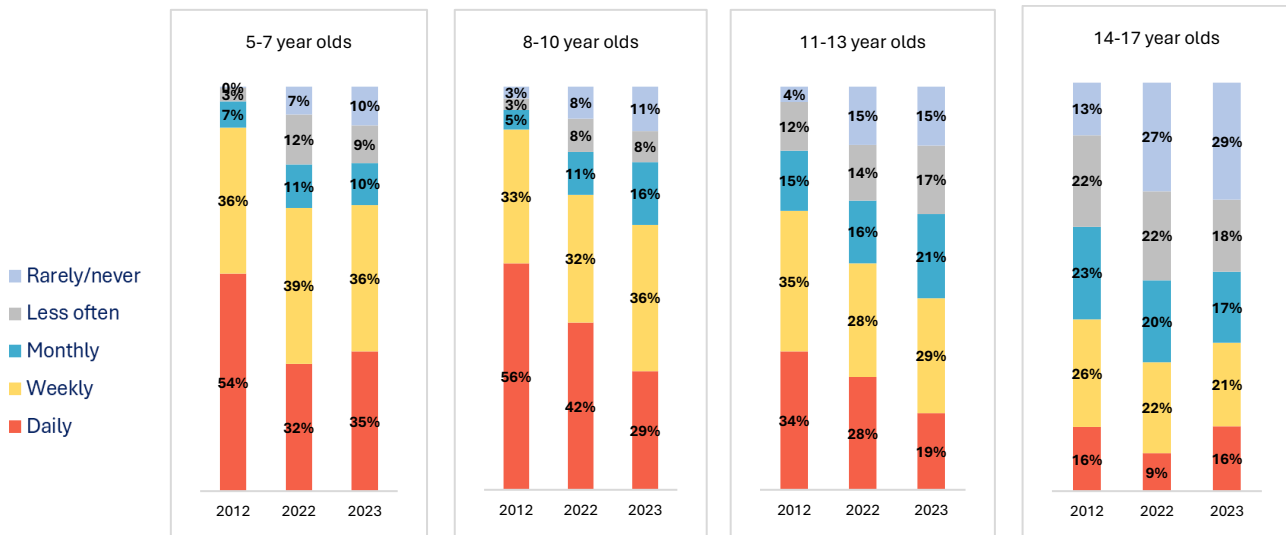
Frequency of reading for pleasure varies by age and gender. The following chart shows:

- **5-7s:** 35% read for pleasure daily, a 3-percentage point increase year on year. This increase was driven by boys, up from 29% in 2022.
- **8-10s:** only 29% read daily, down year on year and almost halved since 2012.
 - Among this age group, although the proportion who read daily remains stubbornly low, some children are giving reading for enjoyment a bit more of their time when they do read: more boys are reading for 30-60 minutes at a sitting – up from 45% in 2022 to 60% in 2023. And more girls are spending ‘from 45 mins up to an hour, or longer’, which is up from 41% in 2022 to 47% in 2023. One reason may be because of a focus on reading for pleasure in the school environment; another may be that it’s linked to the popularity of graphic novels.
- **11-13s:** 1 in 5 reading daily. Those who ‘rarely or never read’, in combination with those who read ‘less than monthly’ totals almost one third.

- **14-17s:** over half say they have too much schoolwork to read books for fun. Daily reading is low at 16%. However, it is up year on year.

Additionally, those who ‘rarely or never read’ has increased across all age groups since 2012. The highest proportion of children who never read is found among 14- to 17-year-old boys: 38% (14- to 17-year-old girls: 19%)

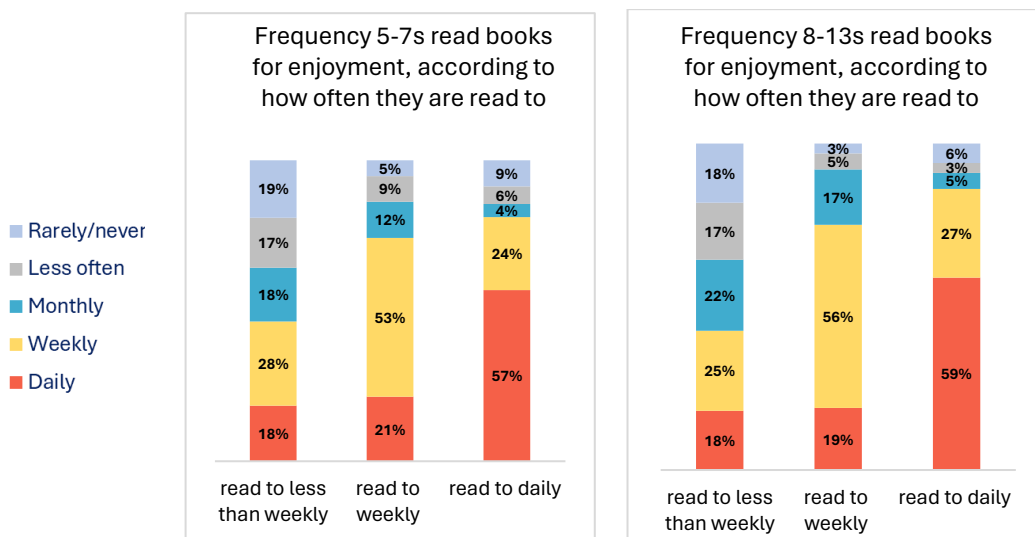
Frequency of reading for pleasure among 5-17s, 2012, 2022 and 2023



Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2012, 2022, 2023

Reading aloud to children results in children choosing to read.

There is a very strong link with reading aloud to children and how often they read for fun. When we correlate the proportion of children who choose to read with the frequency they are read to at home, shown in the charts below, we can see a clear pattern. Taking 5-7s as an example, the left column shows how often they read when they are read to infrequently – less than weekly – by Mum or Dad. The orange block shows only 18% also read daily themselves. In the middle column, when they are read to weekly, we see a jump in children themselves reading weekly – shown in the yellow block. The column on the right shows that when they are read to daily at home, 57% also read daily themselves. The same pattern is true of 8-13s.

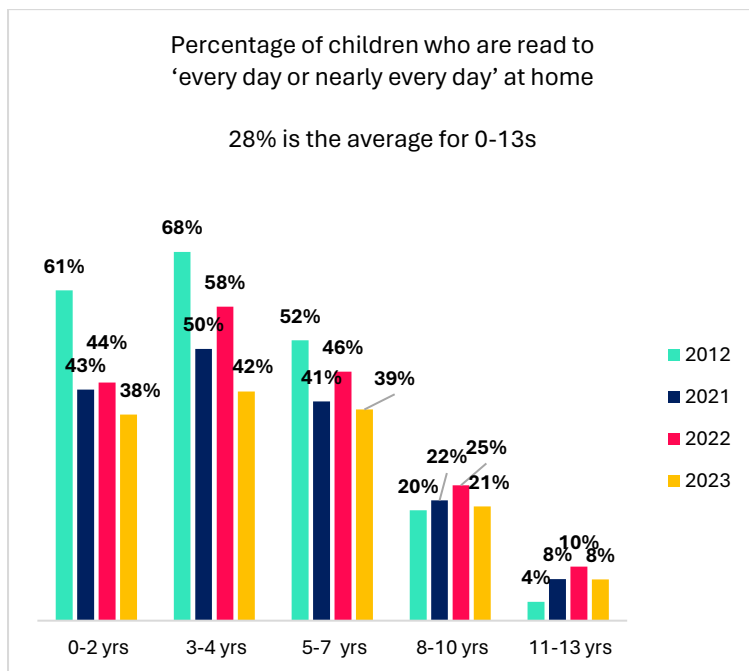


Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2023

Why does this happen? It's because when children are read to, they experience the deep joy that reading can bring, they delight in their parent's or carer's focused attention, they feel valued and wrapped up in love and it makes for very happy children. Reading is modelled for them, and they become inspired to read themselves. When they are read to frequently, the habit begins to take root.

In our Lockdown Reading Club project in 2020, where parents signed up to read aloud to their children daily for six weeks, one mum said she'd been encouraging her 8-year-old son to practise gratitude and at bedtime to write down what had been good about the day. Like many children when faced with tasks, he wanted to get it out of the way. One day she noticed he'd 'got ahead' and written his list early in the day. Top of the list was 'Mum reading to me'. He knew already that whatever the day brought, the absolute best part was going to be later when his mum read to him. She said she had not realised how much he loved it and it made a huge impression on her.

Downward trend in reading aloud to children



The chart on the left shows most children are not read to frequently at home. On average, 28% of children up to 13 years old are read to every day or nearly every day (4+ days a week).

The problem is acute for pre-schoolers. In 2012, the majority were read to daily. In 2023, the majority were not.

By the time children reach 8-10 years old, only 21% enjoy a daily story from Mum or Dad.

Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2023

We have found there are many reasons parents don't read to children, including lack of time and thinking it a chore. When children are pre-school age, many parents simply don't know they should be reading aloud to them frequently. Some parents lack confidence in their own ability to read aloud. Some think reading will be dealt with when their child starts school – no need to worry about it yet. When children start school it's common for parents who did read to children to stop, instead prioritising the reading homework, to the exclusion of having a bedtime story. There's a common belief that it's babyish to read to child who can read. And there's a widespread assumption that if a child can read they will automatically choose to read.

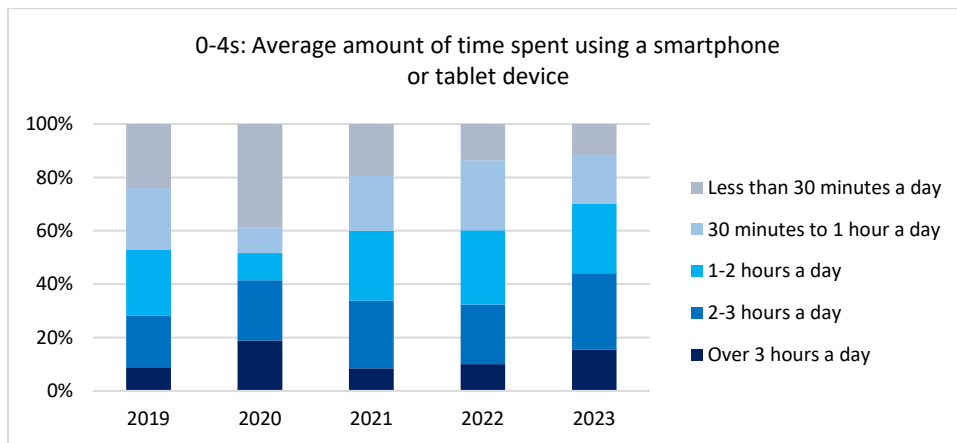
Also in our Lockdown Reading Club project in 2020, we met a mum who was unhappy that her daughters, aged 7 and 4 years old, did not show much interest in books and reading. She had not been reading aloud to them before the project, and during it she experienced an epiphany, saying, *'I feel rather silly because I have an English Literature degree and a house full of books – I didn't consider that just having books in the house wasn't enough, I had to actually read them to the children.'*

Screen-based entertainment

12 years of trend data shows there is a negative correlation with increased screen time and children's reading for pleasure. With devices literally at fingertips, screens dominate children's leisure time and there is little spare for reading, and little inclination, too, because screens attract eyes – the business model trades on getting and keeping children's attention. Children need to be read to, to show them reading is enjoyable, too.

On a typical school day, a third of 8-10s spend 2+ hours a day using their smartphone/tablet, while at weekends and on holidays, 38% of boys and 25% of girls spend 5+ hours daily.

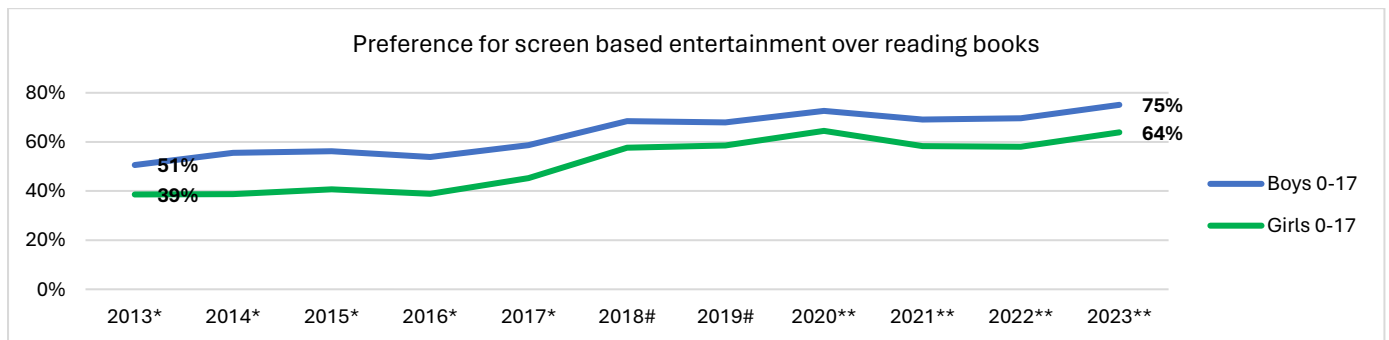
0-4s are increasingly using screens and are spending 20-25 minutes more per day on smartphones and tablets than in 2019. There was a peak during the pandemic in 2020, and afterwards, time spent fell back to nearer pre-pandemic levels. But in 2023 the amount of time has risen.



45% of 0-4s spent 2+ hours a day using a smartphone or tablet.

Source: Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2023

In 2023, on average 76% of children preferred screen-based entertainment to reading books. This has risen steadily since 2013 and boys are more likely to prefer screens than girls.



Source: Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2013 – 2023

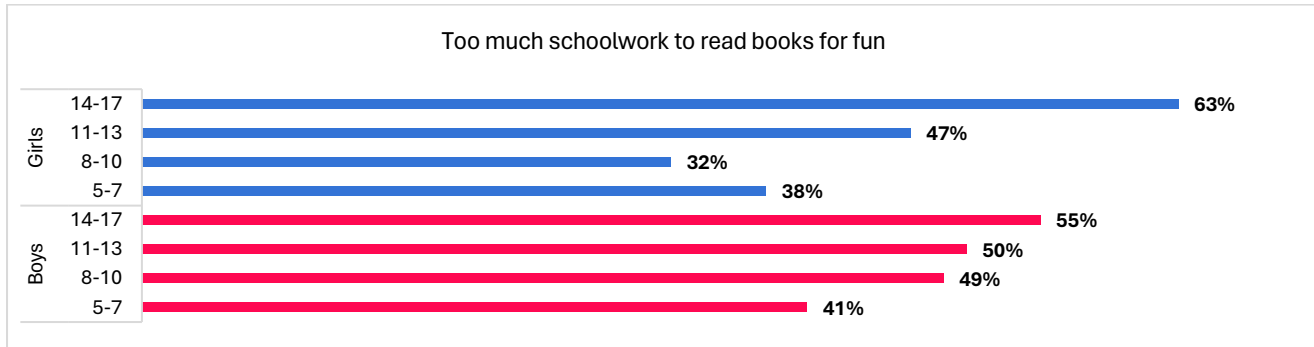
*They would rather be using the internet than reading books 2013 – 2017

#They would rather be using/watching a screen than reading books 2018 – 2019

**They would rather watch TV, play video games or go online than read books 2020 – 2023

Reading: a subject to learn?

School years can also be a challenge to reading for pleasure. For some children, learning to read can be difficult (for example, 51% of boys and 45% of girls 5-7 don't find reading easy). Significant numbers say they have too much schoolwork to read books for fun.



Source: Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2023

If a child's only experience of reading is lessons, being tested, measured, doing schoolwork and homework, enthusiasm for reading wanes. In addition, if children have not been regularly read to at home, they may have little sense of the potential for enjoyment in reading.

Our [Storytime in School trial](#) found when children are read to in the classroom, just for fun, it is transformative for their attitudes to reading. But only 29% of 5-10s are read to daily at school.ⁱ Since our trial, in the summer of 2023, the Department for Education in England introduced their 'Reading Framework' which also suggests reading aloud to children, stating: *'Teachers should consider providing story time for every Key Stage 2 class, at least four times a week for 20 minutes.'* More schools are focusing on reading for pleasure. The Open University and UK Literacy Association are making a huge impact in this space and we collaborate with them through our [Reading for Pleasure awards](#), to recognise teachers and educators who really make a difference.

The link between reading for pleasure and wellbeing

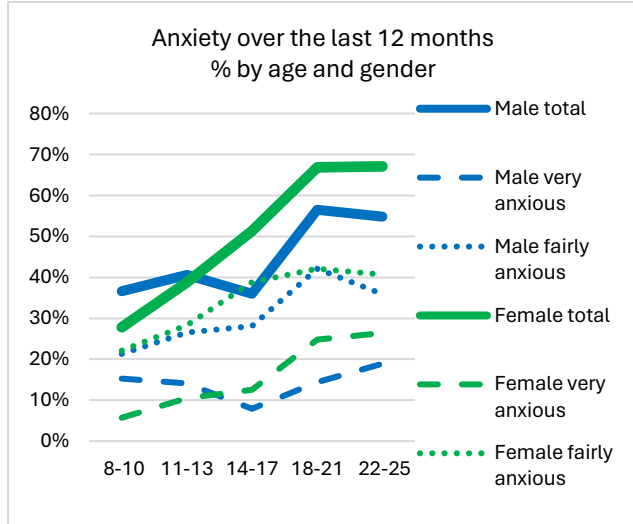
There is an increasing recognition of the impact of a screen-based childhood/adolescence on mental health and very many children and young adults are suffering. National Health Englandⁱⁱ finds 1 in 5 children and young people aged 8 to 25 years have a probable mental health disorder (20.3% of 8- to 16-year-olds, 23.3% of 17- to 19-year-olds and 21.7% of 20- to 25-year-olds). Children are more likely to have mental health issues if their parents can't afford to pay for out-of-school activitiesⁱⁱⁱ – perhaps because this leads to a sense of social exclusion: more than 1 in 4 (26.8%) of 8- to 16-year-olds with a probable mental health disorder had a parent who could not afford for their child to take part in activities outside school, compared with 10.3% of these unlikely to have a mental disorder. Another survey found one in five 18- to 24-year-olds were classified as experiencing "severe distress".^{iv}

Causes are very wide-ranging including friendship problems, bullying, loneliness, body image anxiety, discrimination, seeing harmful content online – and much more.

Smartphones have been identified as a problem and in March 2023 the charity Parentkind found 77% of parents of primary-school-age children favour a ban on smartphones for under 16s, believing them to be harmful to children. A large proportion of parents (62%) worry about the amount of time their children (0-13)

spend on a screen – peaking with 5- to 7-year-old boys at 78%. Teens and young adults also worry about their screen use, and 18-21s are the most concerned (67%).

In our 2023 research we explored reading for pleasure and the link with wellbeing.

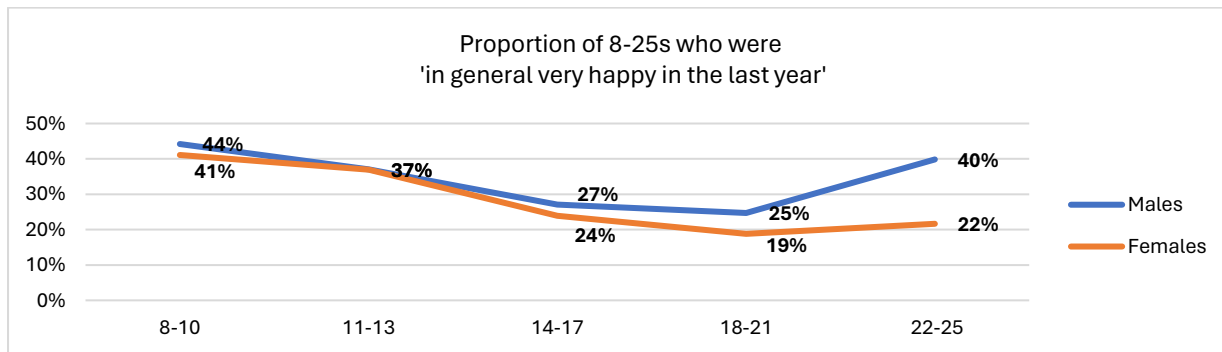


36% of 8-13s have been, in general, either very or fairly anxious in the last year. Boys have been more anxious than girls and boys are more likely to be very anxious.

Among 14-24s anxiety rises to, on average, 55%. In this age band, more females are anxious than males (62% female, 49% male). And 1 in 5 females say they have been **very** anxious.

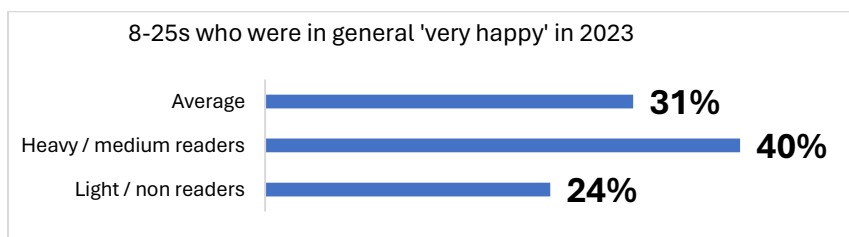
Source: HarperCollins collaboration with Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2023

Anxiety is, to some degree, part of growing up. It is perfectly possible for two things to be true at the same time, and so children and young people can be anxious sometimes, and happy sometimes, too. We have found that, on average, 31% of 8-25s have been 'in general very happy in the last year'.



Source: HarperCollins collaboration with Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2023

There is a positive correlation between reading for pleasure and happiness, in both reading behaviour and in the psychology or consciousness of being a reader. In terms of reading *behaviour*, among heavy or medium readers the proportion who were 'very happy' increased to **40%**, and among light or non-readers decreased to **24%**.^v



Heavy = read books/read to weekly, 45+ mins/day
 Medium = read books/read to weekly, 15-45 mins/day
 Light = read books/read to weekly, <15 mins/day
 Occasional = read books/read to < weekly
 Non = rarely/never read books/read to

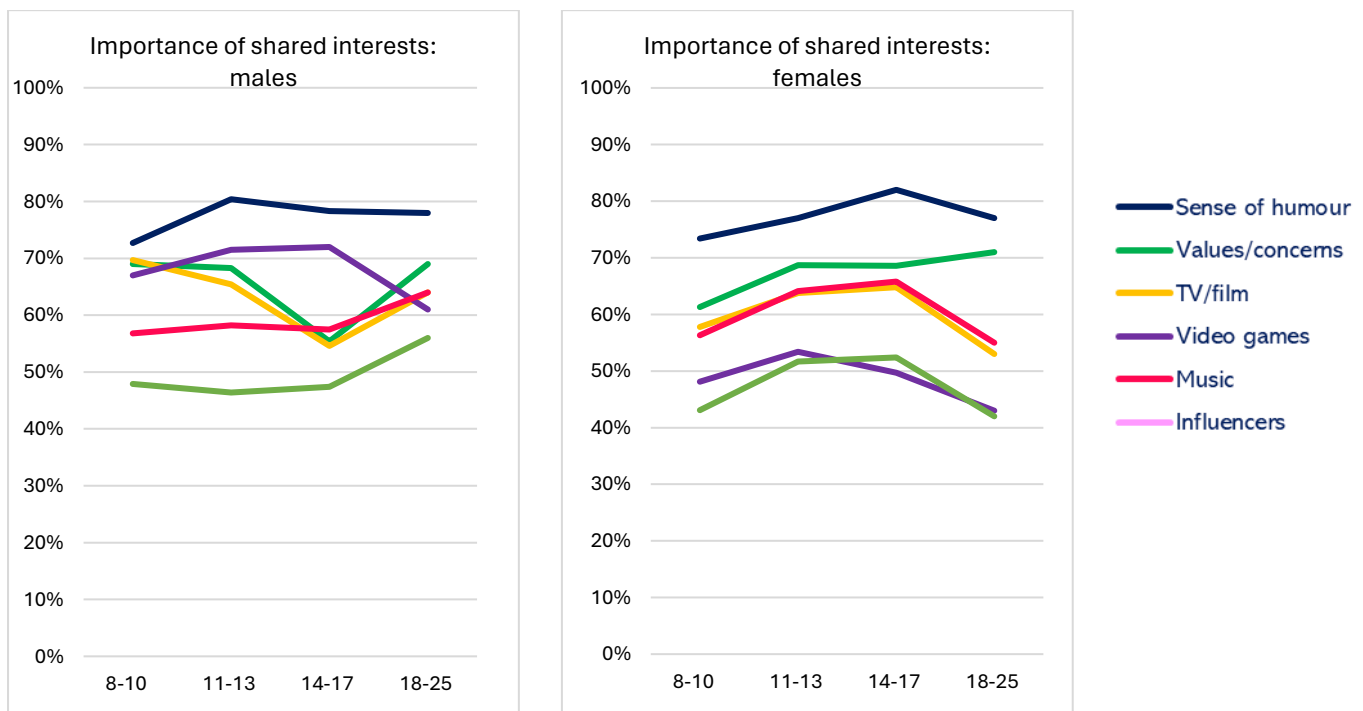
It's known that that having a positive self-identity is closely linked to good mental health. We have explored identity positioning and finding out if having a sense of self that is bound up with reading affects wellbeing. We found those who strongly identify as 'a reader' are much the happiest at **46%**. Linking one's identity to reading – the *consciousness* of being a reader – has a huge impact on wellbeing.

There's even more evidence of the power of thinking of yourself as 'a reader'. 37% of 18-25s firmly feel that reading books for enjoyment is important for mental health and wellbeing.^{vi} However, this rises to 67% among those who strongly identify as a reader.

The importance of sharing humour for wellbeing

Children and young adults need to feel they fit in and belong; it's integral to self-worth, confidence, and good mental health. Thus, relationships and developing a sense of being part of a group is very important, and a feeling of not belonging can cause great distress and anxiety. In our recent research we discovered that 8- to 25-year-olds consider sharing the same sense of humour is *the* most important factor in developing friendships and fitting in.

How important do you think sharing the same interests in the following areas is in helping you develop friendships and/or feel like you fit in or belong to a group?



Source: HarperCollins collaboration with Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2023

It's no surprise that funny books have perennial appeal. Among 8-10s they are the top fiction genre and the top attribute that is looked for in fiction books is *being made to laugh*.

Reading is a social activity, and it can be highly effective at building relationships: talking about books, and swapping book recommendations builds a reading community. In the school setting, reading aloud to groups of children is a shared and highly social, bonding experience and an amazing way of creating the group cohesion that is needed for a happy childhood – no child is left out, all can connect and bond through the shared

experience. When we consider the increased incidence of mental health problems for children who feel socially excluded, the importance of storytime in school is very clear.

Teacher Jon Biddle puts it beautifully. He says: *‘A class of children enjoying the same text has a bigger impact on creating a class reading community than virtually anything else.’*

Of course, the books that are read to children don’t have to be funny, but when they are, laughing together is a powerful way to break down barriers and create an atmosphere of joy and ease, helping to build relationships and friendships. Humour connects and is of broad appeal, so funny stories are a key way to engage children with reading for pleasure, and to improve mental health and wellbeing.

Resonance of wellbeing messages

Our new insights showing the strong link between reading for pleasure, children’s happiness and good mental health may resonate with parents – and with millennial parents, especially. Research from Beano Brain^{vii} finds 81% of millennial parents think it’s more important for their child to be happy than economically successful and that the happiness and good mental health of their children are their topmost concerns. (In contrast, Gen X parents place happiness and a good education as their topmost concerns.) Might the prospect of happier children encourage more parents to read to them, more often, and reverse the declining trend? Currently, only 40% of pre-schoolers are read to ‘every day/nearly every day’ (4+ days per week). For 5-7s it stands at 39% and for 8-10s at 21%.

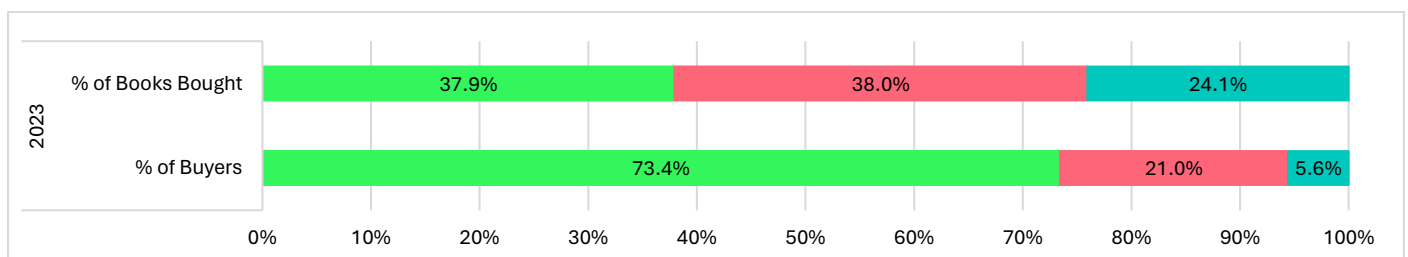
Just one more book

If more parents can be encouraged to read to their children, if more children and young adults can be engaged with reading for pleasure, and if, as a result, ‘light’ and ‘medium’ children’s book buyers each purchase only one more book per year, we will see significant market growth.

Nielsen’s ‘Books and Consumers’ finds there were 14.6 million children’s book buyers in 2023.

- 73.4% of those buyers were categorised as light buyers, meaning they bought between 1 and 5 children’s books in the year. They accounted for 37.9% of all purchases, so around three-quarters of buyers delivered 38% of the volume sales. They numbered 10.7 million people.
- 21% of buyers were categorised as medium buyers, meaning they bought between 6 and 15 children’s books in the year. They accounted for 38% of all purchases. They numbered 3.1 million people – a smaller number of buyers than in the light category – but accounted for the same volume of books bought. Their impact is far greater than the relative size of the category of buyers.
- 5.6% of buyers were categorised as heavy buyers, meaning they bought 16+ children’s books in the year. They accounted for 24.1% of all purchases. They numbered 800,000 people – a small group who over-index in their purchasing power.

Heavy, Medium & Light Buyers – % of purchases



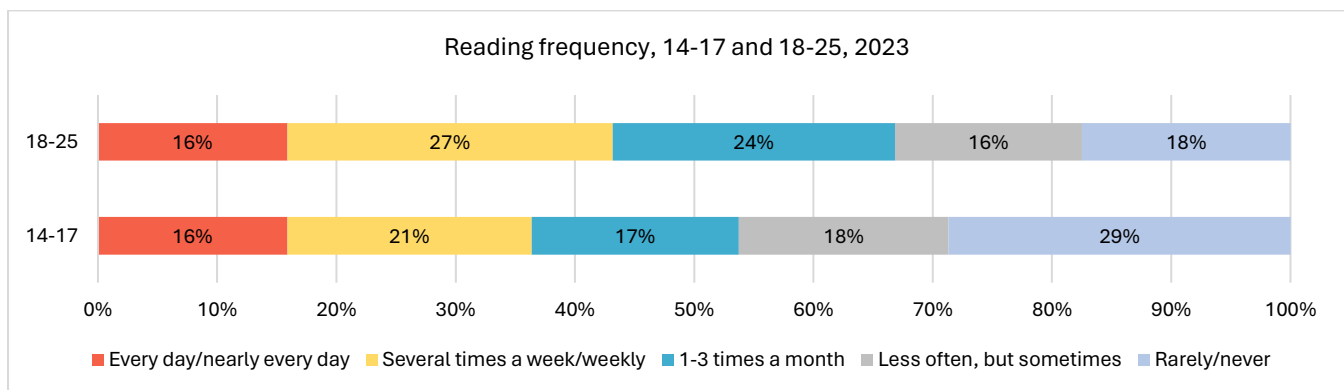
The shape of the market shows there is enormous potential to develop and grow. If light buyers and medium buyers each bought just one more book in a year, that would be 13.8 million more books sold (indeed if only half of them bought one more book, there would be 6.9 million more book sales). These are consumers who are already engaged with children's books and present an enormous opportunity for growth.

The Young Adult Fiction audience

HarperCollins leads the Young Adult fiction market with our Electric Monkey and Harper Fire imprints. We've invested in quantitative research^{viii} and a qualitative in-depth online community group^{ix} to build on our existing knowledge of this audience. The mix of numerical data and of thoughts, opinions and attitudes has given us an even deeper understanding of our readership.

Demographics

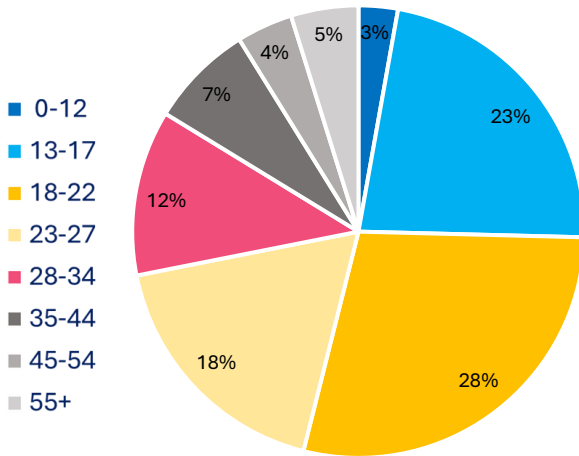
Only 16% of 14-25s read for enjoyment 'every day/nearly every day' (on 4+ days per week). But 25% read several times a week/weekly. Thus, in total, 41% read *at least* weekly. As can be seen in the chart below, reading 'several times a week/weekly' increases from 18 years, and 'rarely/never read' decreases. There is a big gender difference among 14- to 17-year-olds, with the average of 16% reading daily splitting as 13% of boys and 19% of girls. The 29% average of those who 'rarely/never read' splits as 38% of boys and 19% of girls.



Source: Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the YA Book Consumer' 2023

From 20 years and up, males come back to reading and from 20-25 both genders read at similar levels to females. There are further gender differences at the broadest level, with males significantly preferring non-fiction and females preferring fiction.

Age profile: YA fiction readers



The pie chart on the left shows the age profile of the YA fiction reader, and that there is not a clearly defined age band:

26% are 17 or under

46% are 18-27

Almost three quarters (72%) are 27 or under

Nielsen's 'Books and Consumers' 2023

Things to know about the YA fiction reader

Our research has generated extensive insights, and we are sharing 3 of them:

1) YA fiction fans love it for feeling relatable and relevant to their lives

YA fiction is valued for relatable experiences, or relatable characters and vicarious experiences. It's highly engaging and relevant to readers, and identifying with situations or characters is compelling, immersive and engrossing.

I can relate to the characters in the book and that's the difference between other books and YA novels because what the characters say and do are a lot what I would personally do as well

14-17, heavy reader

I feel empowered by the character, I am not alone, others have felt this way

14-17, heavy reader

I love reading young adult romance as it allows me to experience romance that I have never experienced before

18-21, medium reader

The characters go through changes, difficulties or situations that I can relate to . . . their thoughts, feelings and issues are understandable

22-25, heavy reader

Another reason YA fiction resonates across ages and experiences is the relatively new phenomenon of 'emerging adulthood', an extended 'life stage' between adolescence and young adulthood. Among 18-25s and beyond, it is linked to growing up more slowly, delaying adult life, identity explorations, instability and self-focus.^x The coming-of-age themes that are a core part of YA fiction are highly relevant.

We've also found readers are looking for slightly different things from YA fiction. Younger readers want to feel more mature – for example, aspiring to first love – and older readers want to feel comforted and nostalgic, for example remembering first love.

2) Reading is a wellbeing lifeline

i. Escapism

We've found that reading is a wellbeing lifeline for young adults. They experience many life challenges, including the pressure of growing up, exams, their worries about the world, navigating relationships; and YA fiction offers a way to deal with the pressures through escapism and relaxation. Three quarters of 18- to 25-year-olds say they read to escape the stresses of life and as an escape from studying.^{xi}

I definitely use YA as escapism especially as I am doing my GCSEs this year

14-17, heavy reader

I escape from the hardships of my life and submerge myself into the character's life

18-21, medium reader

I'm taken away from the worries of the world and life temporarily, which brings comfort and relief

22-25, heavy reader

Escapism is found through characters, too. Diversity is so important for YA fans, offering escapism through new ideas and perspectives and a window on the world of others, as well as a feeling of being seen. Even if the reader is not from a minority group, they want – and expect – inclusivity and representation from YA fiction.

It's an escape into new worlds and the minds of characters . . . seeing other realities through different perspectives and finding yourself in that world

22-25, heavy reader

2) Reading is a wellbeing lifeline

ii A break from phones

67% of 18-25s (61% of 14- to 25-year-olds) worry about their screen use and 79% of 18- to 25-year-olds say they like printed books, much higher than those who like ebooks (33%) and audiobooks (26%). In our online community we found YA fans said they wanted and needed time off screens and that they consciously used reading physical books as a break.

I always find myself reading a lot more than usual when I need a break from my phone or don't feel well

14-17, medium reader

Reading gives me an opportunity to have some time to myself without the likes of technology and my phone interrupting

18-21, medium reader

I use YA to get away from the screens, it's easy to get sucked into that social media hole, so it's good to take a break

22-25, heavy reader

I love a physical book as it allows me to completely forget about my phone

22-25, medium reader

2) Reading is a wellbeing lifeline

iii Belonging and feeling seen

Being a YA fiction fan brings a sense of belonging to a wider reading community, and participating in YA social media feels safe and welcoming. They said they feel happy to contribute online and that it's a place where they can be themselves. Reading YA fiction is a salve for feelings of isolation and being misunderstood. Feeling seen is linked with the importance of diversity and representation in both the characters and authors. A YA book that truly represents the reader can increase confidence and reduce perceptions of isolation.

<p><i>On social media it feels like I'm around people even if I'm alone</i></p> <p>22-25, heavy reader</p>	<p><i>A turning point was Tahereh Mafi's 'Shatter Me' series. The representation of an ethnic minority Muslim woman author was an important moment in my experience of reading YA</i></p> <p>22-25, heavy reader</p>	<p><i>I genuinely feel seen, it's like I'm not alone</i></p> <p>14-17, heavy reader</p>
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3) YA fiction has the power to shape identities

14-25s who are daily readers or who are heavy readers are much more likely to say reading gives them a strong sense of identity (52% of daily readers, 49% of heavy readers, and 20% of light readers).

Identity is formed through experiences, relationships, and a feeling of belonging; the essence of YA fiction and being part of the YA community come together to create a sense of self that is linked to reading. In our online group research we found YAs believe reading *helps shape who they are*: being a reader of YA fiction influences their world view and their attitudes.

They feel proud of being a reader and a YA fan and love their family and friends thinking of them as such. And they enjoy a sense of community online and a shared appreciation of reading with friends.

<p><i>A lot of my beliefs, values and even political views have their basis in YA fiction, like Hunger Games</i></p> <p>22-25, heavy reader</p>	<p><i>Reading is a part of my identity as I genuinely relate to a lot of the books I have read</i></p> <p>14-17, medium reader</p>	<p><i>YA fiction means a lot to my sense of identity as I have many friends that I have become friends with through our love of YA fiction</i></p> <p>22-25, heavy reader</p>
<p><i>I'm quite proud of how much I read. I like people thinking of me as a reader</i></p> <p>22-25, heavy reader</p>	<p><i>I love being a reader and knowing that friends and family know this is an integral part of my life</i></p> <p>22-25, heavy reader</p>	

ⁱ HarperCollins' collaboration with Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the YA Book Consumer' 2023

ⁱⁱ Mental Health of Children and Young People, 2023, NHS England

ⁱⁱⁱ more than 1 in 4 (26.8%) of 8- to 16-year-olds with a probable mental health disorder had a parent who could not afford for their child to take part in activities outside school, compared with 10.3% of these unlikely to have a mental disorder. Mental Health of Children and Young People, 2023, NHS England

^{iv} *Smoking and Alcohol Toolkit study*, University College London, King's College London and the SPECTRUM Consortium

^v Heavy = read books/read to weekly, 45+ mins/day / Medium = read books/read to weekly, 15-45 mins/day / Light = read books/read to weekly, <15 mins/day / Occasional = read books/read to < weekly / Non = rarely/never read books/read to

^{vi} 'Reading books for enjoyment is important for my mental health and wellbeing' *very true* responses. HarperCollins' collaboration with Nielsen BookData's '*Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*' 2023

^{vii} 'Raising Gen Alpha', Beano Brain

^{viii} HarperCollins' collaboration with Nielsen BookData's 'Understanding the YA Book Consumer' 2023

^{ix} HarperCollins' online community research among YAs involved talking to 25 female or non-binary participants, age 14-25, several times a day for one week. They were heavy or medium readers of YA fiction and from a geographical spread. They completed tasks, answered our questions, shared their thoughts, made videos.

^x <https://open.maricopa.edu/devpsych/chapter/chapter-8-emerging-adulthood>

^{xi} HarperCollins collaboration with Nielsen BookData's '*Understanding the YA Book Consumer*' 2023