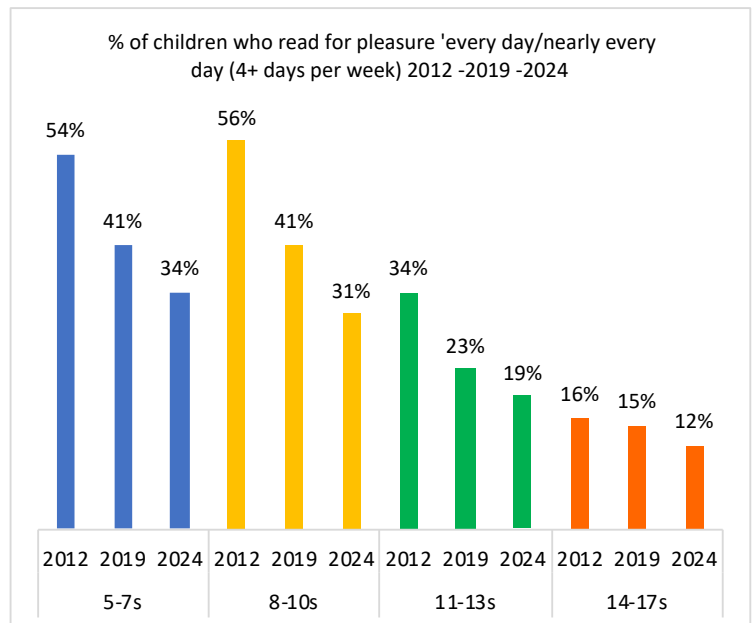


Children’s Reading: how do we move from Endurance to Enjoyment?

Our 2025 ‘state of the nation’ on children’s reading habits finds both perennial challenges and causes for optimism. A smaller proportion of children read for pleasure than ever before, few parents frequently read aloud to their children, and there has been a significant decline in reading to pre-schoolers. On the other hand, we have further evidence of the positive impact of reading aloud to children, and have had success with engaging disinterested 12–13-year-old children in our recent trial, ‘Social Reading Spaces’. We believe this offers a model that can be replicated in secondary schools.

Reading trends

Trends since 2012 show a decrease in children’s reading for pleasure – that is, choosing to read for personal satisfaction such as enjoyment, interest, relaxation, fun. It is also worth noting that this data is cross-gender. When looking just at boys, the picture is even more stark: for example, among 14–17-year-olds, only **9%** of boys read for pleasure 4+ days a week, vs **15%** of girls, and 14-17- year-old boys remain the most disengaged with **36%** ‘rarely or never’ reading (vs **16%** of girls).



Source: NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2012/ 2019 /2024

Given the low – and decreasing – levels of reading, it is no surprise at all that the National Literacy Trust survey in 2024 found the lowest *enjoyment* in reading among 8–18-year-olds (**34.6%**) since the survey began in 2005. And **72%** of children age 5-17 ‘would rather watch TV, play video games or go online than read books’.

What's behind the decline?

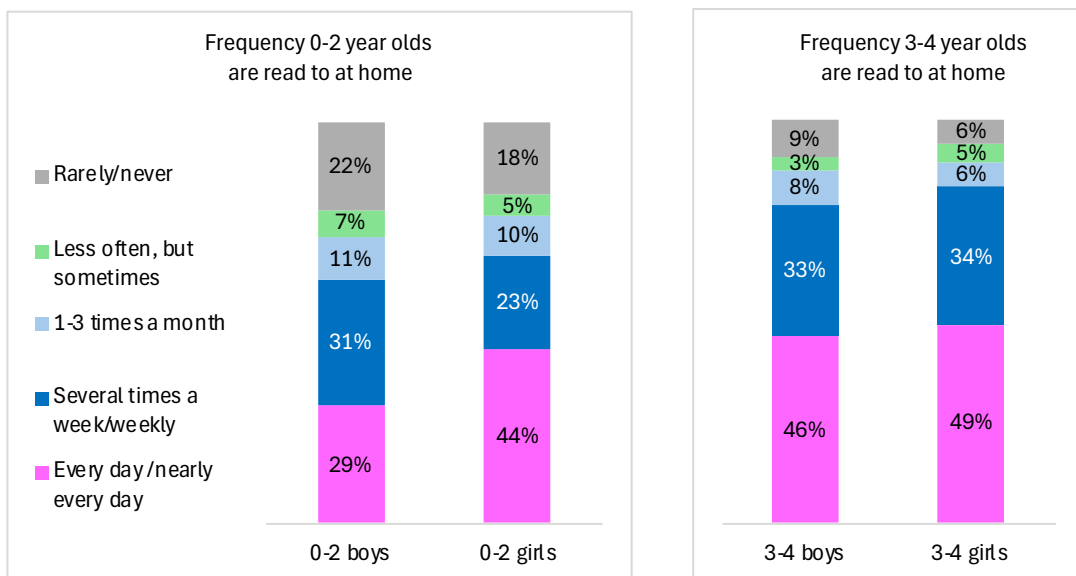
Our extensive research since 2012 has found the reasons children read infrequently are broadly threefold: they don't think of reading as something enjoyable to do (rather, it's a pressure and a task to be endured), screen-based entertainment dominates their free time, and they are not read to often enough. We know that solutions are simple, although perhaps not straightforward: having wide choice of reading materials (access to a broad range of books, well-stocked school libraries), free choice of reading materials (having autonomy) and being read to (taking the pressure off) all change children's attitudes and encourage reading.

Through our many research projects with families since 2012, we have found the reasons parents don't read to their children are bound up with their own perception of reading. Although there are two aspects to reading – literacy, the skill to read, which children need to learn, and reading for enjoyment, having the will /desire to do it, which children need to develop – we have found many parents focus on literacy, the skill to read, rather than helping their child develop a love for reading. Some parents stop reading aloud once a child can read for themselves, assuming they will choose to continue reading. Some parents even feel rueful that they do not do it anymore. They think of reading aloud as something nostalgic: *we did that then, not now, because they are no longer young*. Yet other parents believe if they read to their child who can read, it will make them lazy and less likely to read independently.

None of these beliefs are true. What is true is that children need a lot of help to get a reading habit – and regularly and frequently reading aloud is the best help there is.

It starts young

From infancy, many children do not benefit from a solid foundation in reading. **Fewer than half (41%) of 0–4-year-olds are read to frequently. This has declined from 50% in 2019 and 64% in 2012.** Deeper analysis shows that 0-2s are read to the least, and that boys and girls are treated differently. More than one in five boys 0-2 are 'rarely/never' read to. Only **29%** of 0–2-year-old boys are read to 'every day/nearly every day', a much lower proportion than girls of the same age (**44%**):



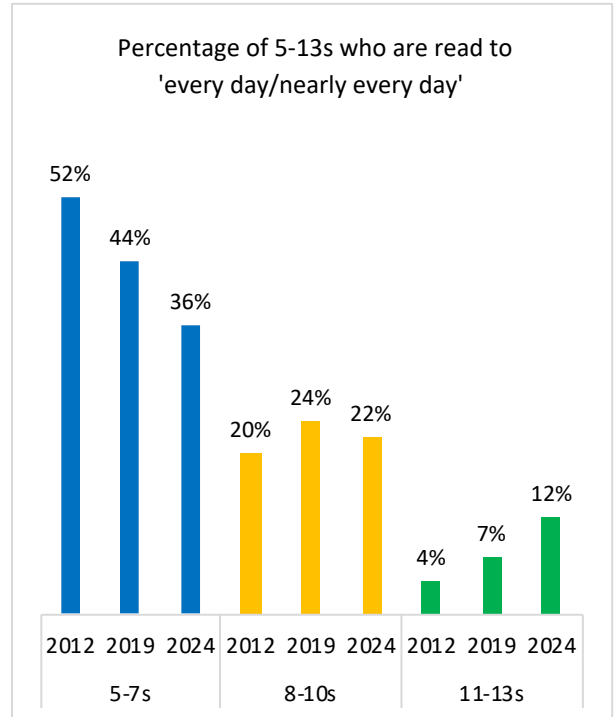
As a result, many young children don't know the pleasure of being read to, have not been exposed to enjoyment in books, and don't have positive reading role models. For most pre-schoolers, reading and books do not play a significant part in their life until they start school and are taught to read. For those who have not been read to at all, their first introduction to reading is as a subject, a skill they must learn, rather than something to be enjoyed.

- **Kindred Squared's 2024 school readiness survey found 44% of parents think children do not need to know how to use books before they start school.**

Change in home reading patterns

During the school years, home reading patterns change, even for those who were read to when pre-schoolers. Reading to children reduces significantly.

- **There has been a dramatic decline in 5–7-year-old children being read to frequently, and only around one fifth of 8–10-year-olds are read to often.**
- **By the time children reach 11-13, over a third (35%) are 'rarely or never' read to at home.**



Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024

Parents' own disengagement from reading impacts their children

Adults are reading less themselves, and this may be linked to the decline in parents reading to children.

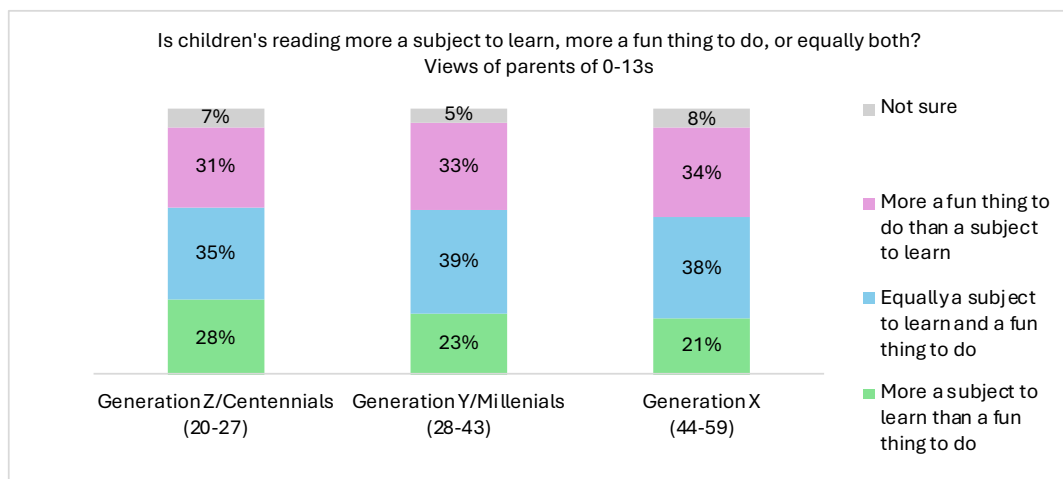
- **The Reading Agency's 2024 research finds 50% of adults are regular readers, down from 58% in 2015. Over the same time, those who never read has increased from 8% to 15%.**
- **YouGov's January 2025 survey finds 40% of adults have not read a book in the last year.**

Many parents think of reading to their children as an onerous task, yet another pressure and expectation. Of course, some do consider it to be a pleasure, and this is highest among those with a degree, but nevertheless, even among those parents, fewer than half are positive about it:

40% of parents say reading aloud to their child is 'fun for me'.

We have found Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012), the youngest of parents, are the most likely to consider reading as 'more a subject to learn than a fun thing to do'.

They may be more likely to think reading is the school's job, and this may be a reason for the decline in reading to pre-schoolers. These parents grew up with technology themselves and they may think fun comes more from digital entertainment than from books.



Source: HarperCollins collaboration with NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024

The school experience means reading pressure, not pleasure, for many children

Reading for pleasure is a high priority in education, but is the instructional approach found in many classrooms effective at encouraging children to choose to read? Daily teaching practise is overwhelmingly focused on English/literacy lessons, where children are evaluated, their competence is tested, and as a result they know they can get reading right or wrong. They are told what to read, via reading schemes and class reads, and have reading set as homework. There is little free choice and a lot of obligation, and many experience reading predominantly as a subject to learn, a task to endure, and something they can do badly in.

Despite the focus on reading for pleasure in the Department for Education's 2023 'Reading Framework', **there has been an increase in the proportion of children aged 5-13 who think reading is more a subject to learn than a fun thing to do since 2022**. In 2012 this stood at **25%** and in 2024 was **29%**. The increase has been greatest among 5-7-year-olds, up from **18%** in 2022 to **24%** in 2024.

Does being given the freedom to read a book of your choice in lessons help?

We know that children need to have a feeling of control, of choice and agency. Schools aim to tap into this by encouraging children to read books of their own choice – and will set time aside for this (for instance *Everyone Reading in Class* (ERIC), *Drop Everything and Read* (DEAR)). Commonly, children are expected to always have a reading book in their bag, so that if there is a spare 10 minutes they can take them out and read.

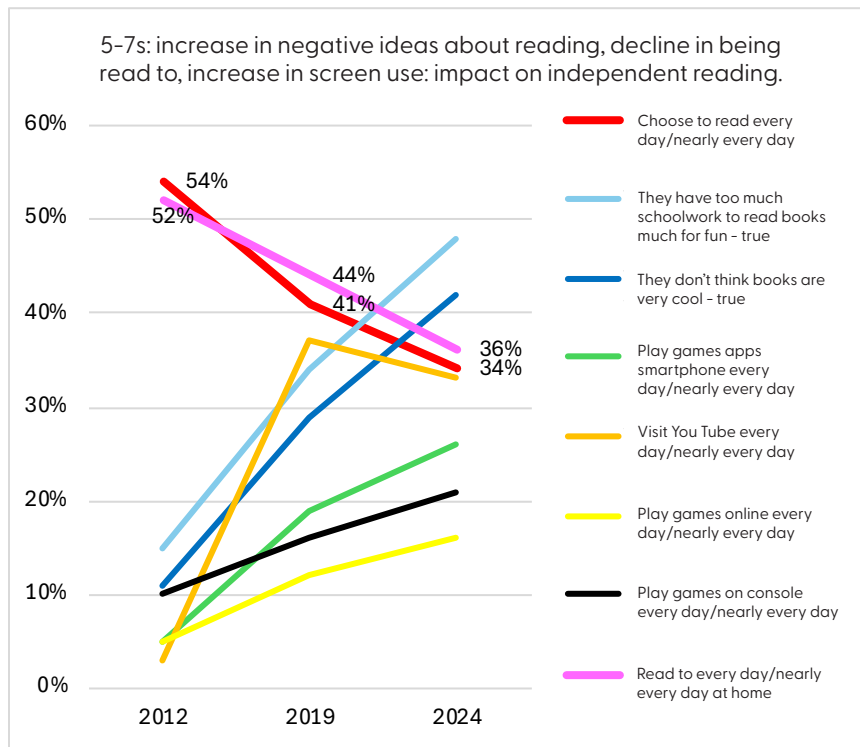
In 2024 we investigated how often children are given the opportunity to read their own books at school, and whether this creates positive feelings about reading. Among 5-17s, fewer than one in five have the opportunity to read their own choice of book during lesson time every day.

How children *feel* when they are given time to read a book of their own choice varies considerably, with positive feelings being more prevalent among girls, among children who already enjoy reading, and among children who are frequently read to at home (highlighting the impact of reading aloud to children). Negative feelings coalesce around boys, those who are disengaged from reading, and those who are rarely read to at home. Negative feelings increase as children get older. For instance, just 25% of 12-13-year-olds feel happy about the opportunity to read their own book. There are more positive responses in younger years, for example it's **51%** among 5-7-year-olds – but within that there are large differences among boys (**43%**) and girls (**57%**).

It is clear that for children who *do* enjoy reading, being given time to read is pleasing: this strategy 'preaches to the converted'. But if children are disengaged with reading it is likely to be perceived as instructional and not a positive experience.

A perfect storm

Having negative ideas about reading at school, being tested and being expected to read, in combination with not being read to very much at home means, not surprisingly, that for many children reading is not thought of as enjoyable and is not something they would choose to do in their free time. Children are *told* reading is great, is fun, is interesting, is good for them, but this means nothing if they do not *experience* any enjoyment. Meanwhile, time spent on screens fills free time and offers fun without pressure. The chart below illustrates this ‘perfect storm’ among 5–7-year-olds and shows a correlation between increased screen time and a decrease in being read to:



Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024

Solutions

Children need a lot of help, both at home and at school, to get a reading habit: as we can see from the preceding graph, there are many distractions from other forms of entertainment, while the perception that books are not cool has risen dramatically.

Reading aloud increases children's independent reading

Reading aloud very effectively encourages children to read independently through positive associations and *no pressure*. When children are read to, often, reading habits are created: repetition gathers a self-reinforcing momentum, and routines become established. This is borne out by the data. Among 5–11-year-olds, only 13% choose to read every day when they are read to ‘monthly/less/never’ by their parents. However, this number rises to 66% when they are read to daily by their parents.

Reading aloud to children changes their perceptions of reading

Only a quarter of 5–11-year-old children who are read to ‘monthly/less/never’ think reading is more a fun thing to do than a subject to learn. But this rises to one third among children who are read to daily. Conversely, **30%** of 5–11s who are rarely read to think of reading as more a subject to learn, while this decreases to **23%** among those who are read to daily.

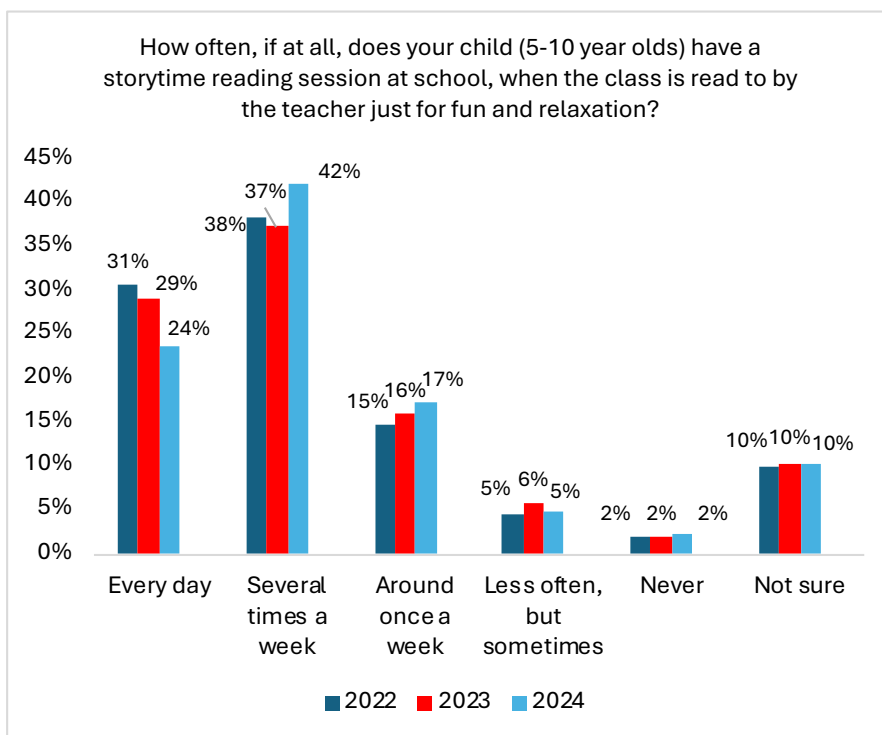
Reading aloud to children at home changes their engagement with reading

Children are more than twice as likely to recommend and discuss books with friends and family, to enjoy reading books before their friends do, and to enjoy collecting books and book series when they are read to daily vs read to ‘monthly/less never’.

Reading aloud to children at school changes attitudes and motivates reading

Our ‘Storytime in School’ trial over the spring term in 2023 ensured children experienced no pressure from reading: there was no obligation but to listen, they relaxed and were happy (*‘Children would cheer when it was storytime’* Teacher comment). As a result, they engaged with reading (children chose to read more, and more widely). Among Year 4 children, the average reading age gain was 12 months over the term, with **36%** gaining more than 13 months in their reading age.

Despite the evidence that it works, our research over the last 3 years suggests the proportion of 5–10-year-olds who experience a daily story at school is actually decreasing, shown in the chart below.



Only 36% of 5–7-year-olds and 22% of 8–10-year-olds are read to at home ‘every day/nearly every day’ (4+ days per week).

For some children, listening to a story at school might be the only time they are read to.

‘Our pupils don’t get storytime at home, they don’t read with their parents, so it was so important to give them this experience to learn to love to read.’

HarperCollins’ ‘Storytime in School’ trial,
teacher comment

Conclusion

We continue to see a decrease in children's engagement with reading, and a decrease in parents' engagement with reading aloud to children. In the school environment, daily storytime is a proven effective strategy to encourage children to read independently. It is a low cost, high impact solution which would have far-reaching impact if implemented in every primary school, every day. At HarperCollins we will continue to advocate for this because it would ensure no child misses out on the joy and life-enhancing benefits of being read to – changing reading from something to endure, to something to enjoy.

NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024

HarperCollins collaboration with NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer'

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