

Children and young people's writing in 2021 and their reflections on writing during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020

Christina Clark, Emily Best and Irene Picton
June 2021

Listening to children's experiences of writing during the first lockdown in spring 2020¹, it became clear that for many it had been a time of increased creativity, with children writing everything from songs and stories to scripts, and some even beginning their own novels. Another prominent theme in our research last summer was that having more time to write freely had increased children's enjoyment of writing.

This report builds on those findings by highlighting how children and young people felt about writing in early 2021, a period that coincided with the third national lockdown in the UK. We also share children and young people's perceptions of their writing during the first lockdown and subsequent return to school (for many) in autumn 2020.

Method

We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and mid-March 2021. Despite the ongoing pandemic and disruptions to schools, 42,502 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from 117 UK schools participated in this online survey. We also had data from 3,959 children aged 5 to 8 who answered our survey designed for younger children. This survey was conducted at the same time as the survey for the older children and young people.

This report first presents findings about children and young people's writing in 2021. It then outlines their writing engagement during the first lockdown in spring 2020 and on their return to school in autumn 2020.

To capture the experiences and opinions of children and young people during lockdown, the online survey also contained numerous open-text questions, which have been themed and analysed to help contextualise findings in this report.

¹ https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Writing_during_the_COVID-19_lockdown_report.pdf

Key findings include:

In 2021,

- **1 in 3** (34.5%) children and young people said that they enjoy writing. This is the lowest level of writing enjoyment we have recorded since we first asked this question in 2010.
 - Writing enjoyment declined over the past year in all children and young people regardless of background, but boys on free school meals (FSMs) showed a particularly pronounced decrease.
- Only **1 in 7** (15.2%) children and young people said in 2021 that they write something daily in their free time, which is the lowest daily writing rate we have recorded since we began asking the question in 2010.
 - Daily writing levels decreased amongst all children and young people regardless of background.
- By far the most popular writing that children and young people do in their free time is text/direct messages (92.4%) followed by in-game communications (84.2%). Overall, more children and young people write five formats (song lyrics, diary, reviews, stories and poems) on screen now compared with last year. At the same time, the percentage who write these formats on paper decreased.
 - Comments suggest that children and young people thrive on feedback, while **3 in 5** (61.9%) children and young people said they write social media content at least once per month, suggesting platforms for sharing writing could be a key motivator.
- **1 in 2** children and young people say that they write to be creative (53.0%) or to express their ideas and imagination (48.0%).
- Writing continues to support children and young people's mental wellbeing, with **2 in 5** (38.3%) children and young people agreeing that writing makes them feel better.
 - Indeed, writing provided a lifeline for many during the pandemic, with children and young people telling us that they started writing in the pandemic to cope with anxiety but also to stay connected with people.

Writing in 2021

Writing enjoyment

In early 2021, 1 in 3 children and young people said that they enjoy writing in their spare time either very much (10.6%) or quite a lot (23.9%), which is a decrease compared with the year before (see Figure 1). Indeed, this percentage is the lowest we have recorded since we began asking the question in 2010.

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing either very much or quite a lot from 2010 to 2021²



Writing enjoyment by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake

Who enjoyed writing in 2021? As shown in Figure 2, more girls than boys said that they enjoy writing in their free time³, with 2 in 5 girls saying this compared with 1 in 4 boys. Writing enjoyment also declines with age, with nearly twice as many 5-8-year-olds saying that they enjoy writing compared with those aged 16 and over. More children and young people who receive free school meals (FSMs), our proxy of socioeconomic background, say that they enjoy writing in their spare time compared with their peers who don't receive FSMs.

Finally, we also looked at whether school attendance during the winter lockdown in early 2021 was associated with writing enjoyment. While marginally more children and young people who attended school during the lockdown said that they enjoy writing in their spare time compared with their peers who stayed at home⁴, this difference was not statistically significant.

² For comparison purposes, this graph only contains data for children and young people aged 8 to 18

³ Boys: 44.5% (n = 18,903), Girls: 51.0% (n = 21,696). 2.3% (n = 963) didn't want to specify their gender and 1.7% (n = 728) describe themselves another way. 0.5% (n = 212) didn't answer the question. FSM: 11.6% (n = 4,932); Non-FSM: 78.2% (n = 33,247); Didn't want to say: 1.2% (n = 515); Didn't know: 8.5% (n = 3,616) and didn't answer the question: 0.5% (n = 192). Aged 8 to 11: 8.7% (n = 3,699); Aged 11 to 14: 65.3% (n = 27,761); Aged 14 to 16: 21.8% (n = 9,247); Aged 16 to 18: 4.1% (n = 1,728); didn't answer the question: 0.2% (n = 67). The demographic make-up of our 2021 sample is comparable to that of our 2020 sample.

⁴ Stayed at home during lockdown in early 2021: 67.7% (n = 28,790); Attended school: 8.1% (n = 3,451); didn't answer the question: 24.1% (n = 10,261).

Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who enjoyed writing in 2021 by gender, age group, free-school-meal uptake and school attendance during lockdown

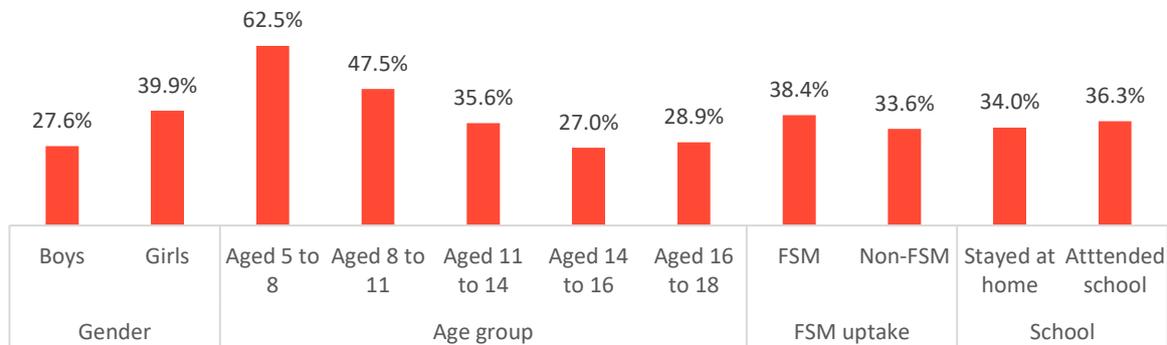
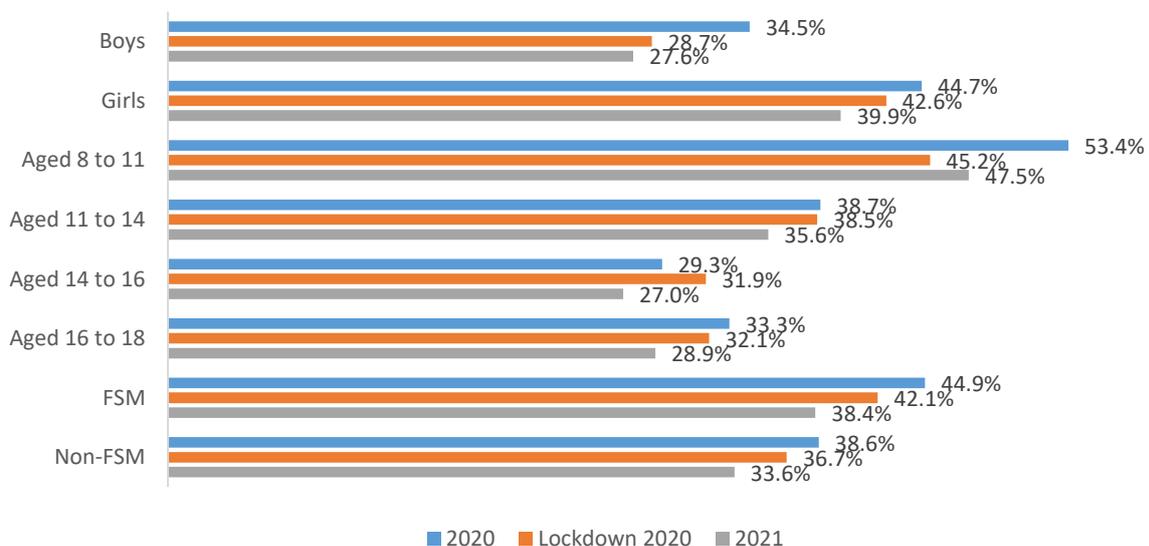


Figure 3 shows that 2020 has had an impact on writing enjoyment across children and young people regardless of their background. Compared with early 2020, and even compared with findings during lockdown 2020, fewer boys and girls said that they enjoyed writing in early 2021. The same is true for different age groups.

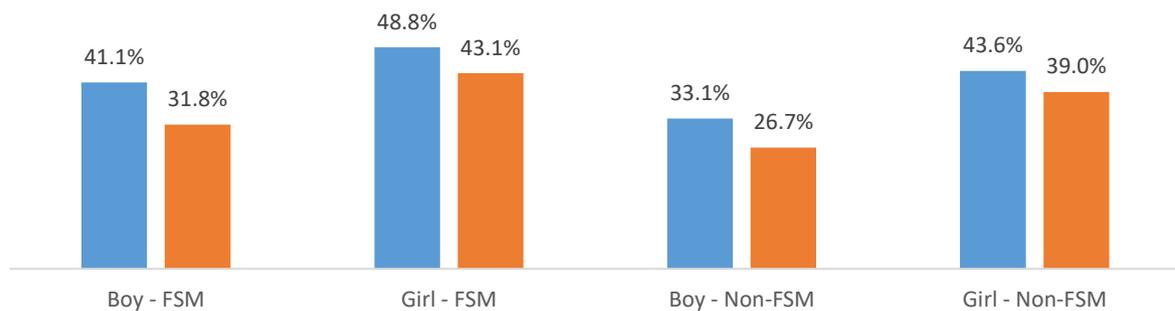
However, it might be worth noting some changes in differences in enjoyment between the groups over time. For example, during 2020 the gender gap in writing enjoyment increased from a 10.2 percentage-point difference early in the year to a 12.3 percentage-point gap by early 2021. This is because the drop in writing enjoyment was more pronounced for boys than girls. Similarly, while more children and young people on FSM still say that they enjoy writing in 2021, the gap between FSM and non-FSM children and young people has narrowed slightly from a 6.3 percentage-point gap in early 2020 to a 4.8 percentage-point gap in early 2021.

Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in early 2020, during the spring lockdown in 2020 and in early 2021 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake



Overlaying gender and FSM uptake (see Figure 4), we can see that the year between early 2020 and early 2021 had a particularly detrimental impact on the writing enjoyment of boys who receive FSMs, where we saw a drop of 9.3 percentage points in the number of boys who enjoy writing. While boys not on FSMs also saw a drop over the same period, this was much lower at 6.4 percentage points. The drop in writing enjoyment for girls was more muted, with those on FSMs decreasing by 5.7 percentage points and those not on FSMs declining by 4.6 percentage points.

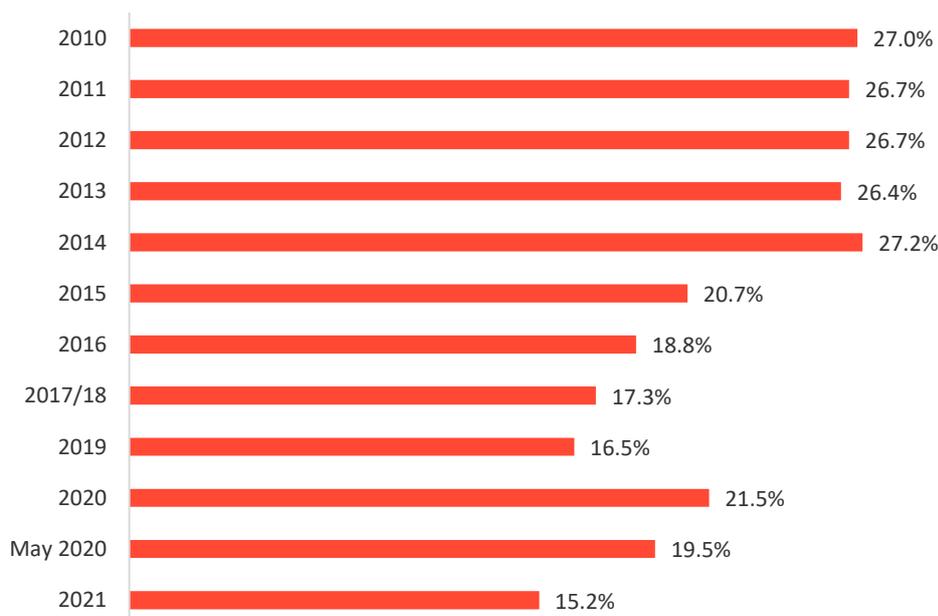
Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed writing in early 2020 and early 2021 by gender and free-school-meal uptake



Daily writing

Not only did we record the lowest level of writing enjoyment in 2021, we also recorded the lowest daily writing rate over the past decade (see Figure 5). Only 1 in 7 children and young people said in 2021 that they write something in their spare time every day, a 6.3 percentage-point drop on the year before and continuing a decrease we saw in the spring lockdown 2020.

Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who wrote something daily in their spare time from 2010 to 2021



There was a moderate positive relationship between enjoying writing and writing frequency ($r = .553$), indicating that those who enjoy writing also do it more frequently in their free time. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, those who enjoy writing are nearly four times more likely to do so daily compared with their peers who don't enjoy writing.

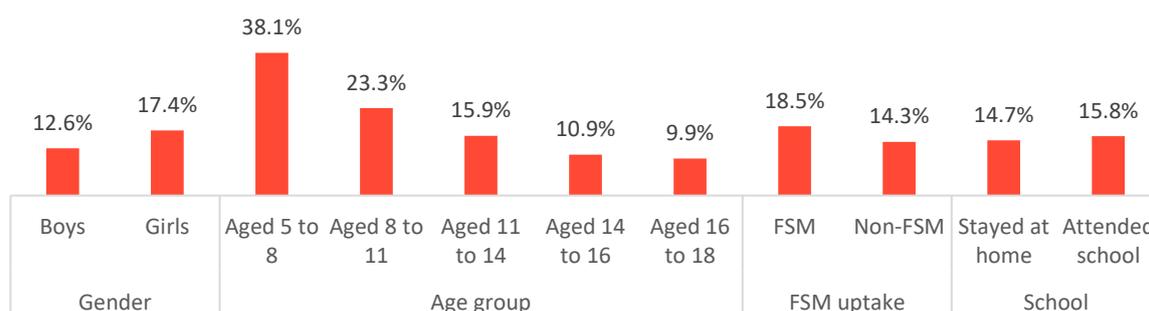
Table 1: Writing enjoyment x writing frequency in 2021

	Daily	A couple of times a week	Once a week	Couple of times a month	Once a month	Rarely or never
Enjoy writing	29.5%	33.8%	18.0%	10.0%	4.0%	4.8%
Don't enjoy writing	7.7%	14.8%	16.2%	15.8%	12.3%	33.2%

Daily writing by gender, age group and free school meal uptake

Slightly more girls than boys said in 2021 that they write something daily in their free time (see Figure 6). As with writing enjoyment, levels of daily writing decrease with age, with nearly four times as many children aged 5 to 8 saying that they write something in their spare time daily compared with those aged over 14. Not only do more children and young people who receive FSMs say that they enjoy writing, more also say that they write something daily in their free time compared with their peers who don't receive FSMs. Finally, while marginally more children and young people who attended school during the lockdown in early 2021 said that they write something daily in their spare time compared with their peers who stayed at home, this difference was not statistically significant.

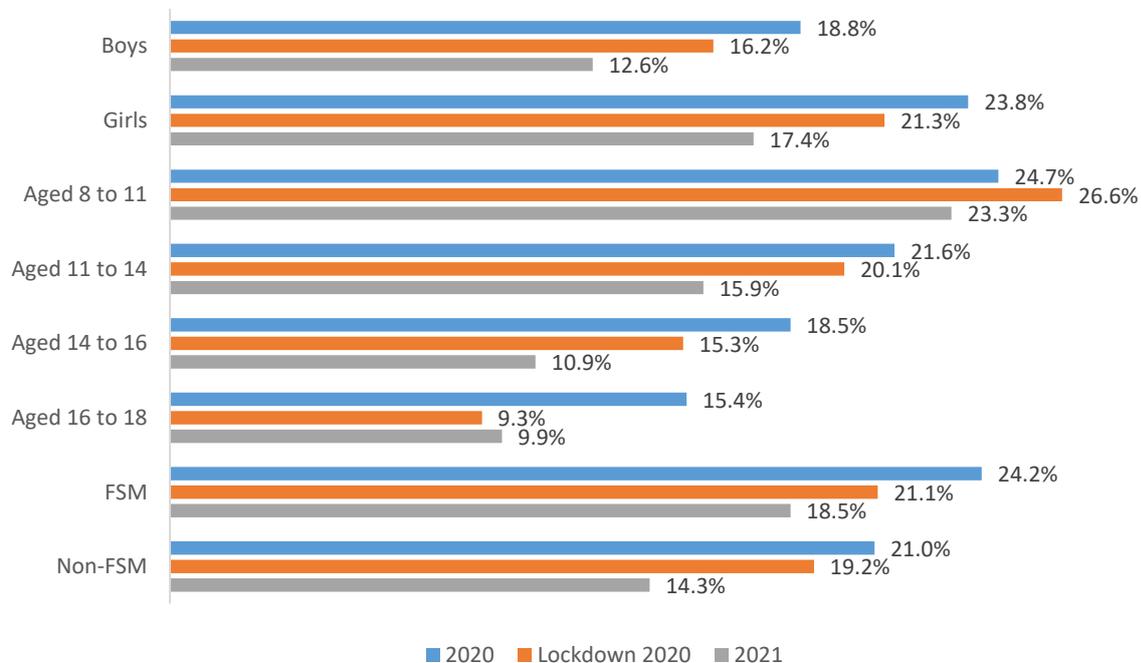
Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people aged 5 to 18 who said that they wrote something daily in their free time in 2021 by gender, age group, free-school-meal uptake and school attendance during lockdown



As shown in Figure 7, daily writing declined in all children and young people in the past year regardless of background. For some groups, the drop in daily writing was more marked than in others, which means that some of the gaps between groups changed. In particular, the gap in daily writing increased between children in primary school (aged 8 to 11) and those in secondary school (aged 11+). For example, the gap in the transition years between the ages of 8 and 11 and ages 11 to 14 doubled in the past year, increasing from a 3.1 percentage-point gap in 2020 to a 7.4 percentage-point gap in 2021. Similarly, the gap between those

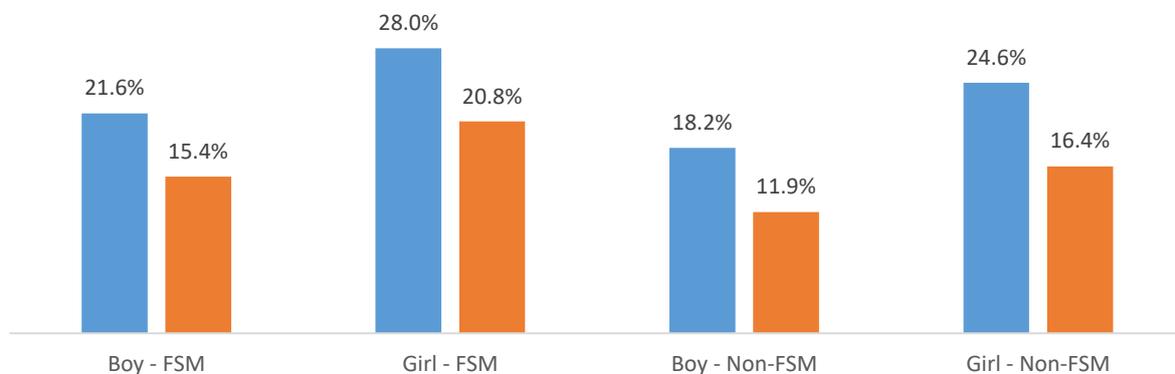
who receive FSMs and those who don't increased slightly from a 3.2 percentage-point gap to a 4.2 percentage-point gap in 2021.

Figure 7: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who wrote something daily in their free time in early 2020, during the spring lockdown in 2020 and in early 2021 by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake



Looking at the interplay between gender and FSM uptake, we can see in Figure 8 that the past year had a detrimental impact regardless of their gender and whether or not they receive FSMs. Girls across both groups (FSMs: 7.8 percentage-point drop; non-FSM: 8.2 percentage-point drop) show a drop in their daily writing rates, as do boys across both groups, albeit to a lesser extent (FSM: 6.2 percentage-point drop; non-FSM: 6.3 percentage-point drop).

Figure 8: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 who wrote something daily in their free time in early 2020 and early 2021 by gender and free-school-meal uptake

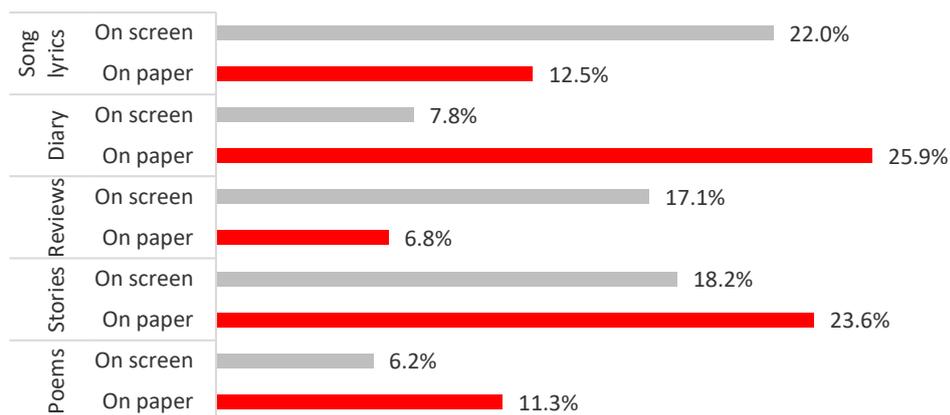


Other writing findings

Writing formats

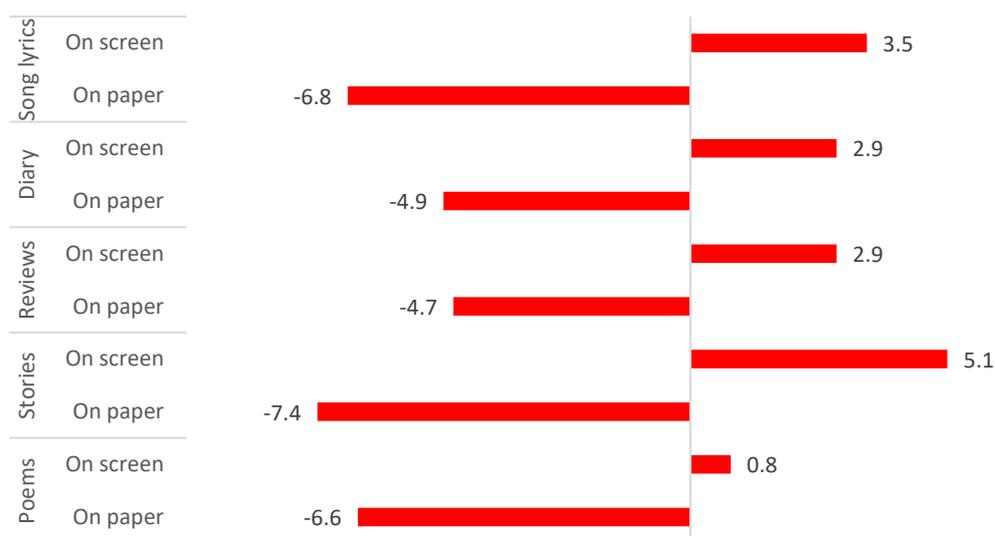
When asked about the writing they do in their spare time at least once a month, 1 in 5 children and young people say that they write song lyrics or stories on screen (see Figure 9). Fewer children and young people say that they write song lyrics on paper. However, 1 in 4 children and young people say that they write in a paper diary or write stories on paper.

Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people writing various formats in their free time either on screen or on paper in 2021



Indeed, Figure 10 shows that in 2021, more children and young people wrote various formats on screen compared with the year before. At the same time, fewer children and young people wrote those same formats on paper between 2020 and 2021.

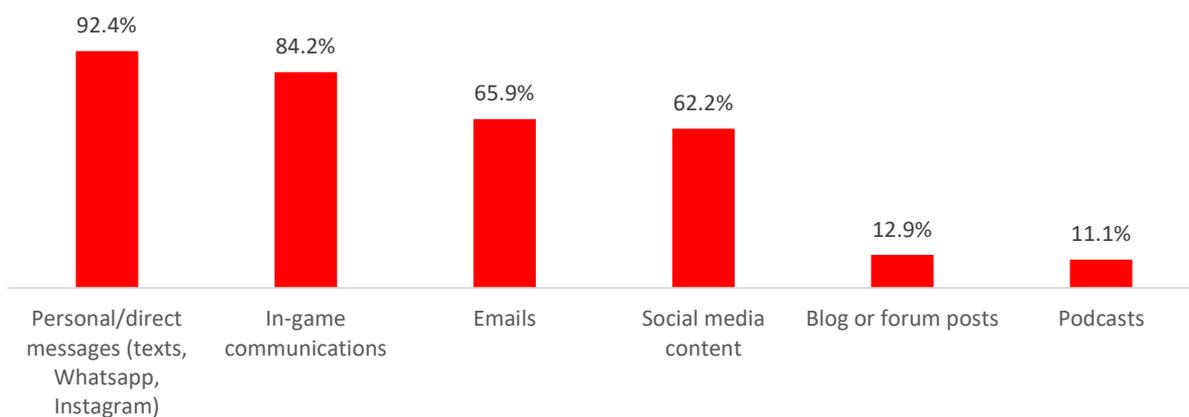
Figure 10: Percentage-point difference in various formats being written either on screen or on paper between 2020 and 2021⁵.



⁵ Please note that we cannot compare exclusive digital formats between 2020 and 2021 as our descriptors were updated for the 2021 survey.

We also asked whether children and young people write a variety of exclusively on-screen formats. As Figure 11 shows, most children and young people say that they write personal/direct messages in their free time, followed by over 4 in 5 who say that they also write texts or other messages with family and friends while playing video games. Around 2 in 3 also write emails and social media content in their free time, while only around 1 in 10 say that they write blog/forum posts or podcasts in their spare time.

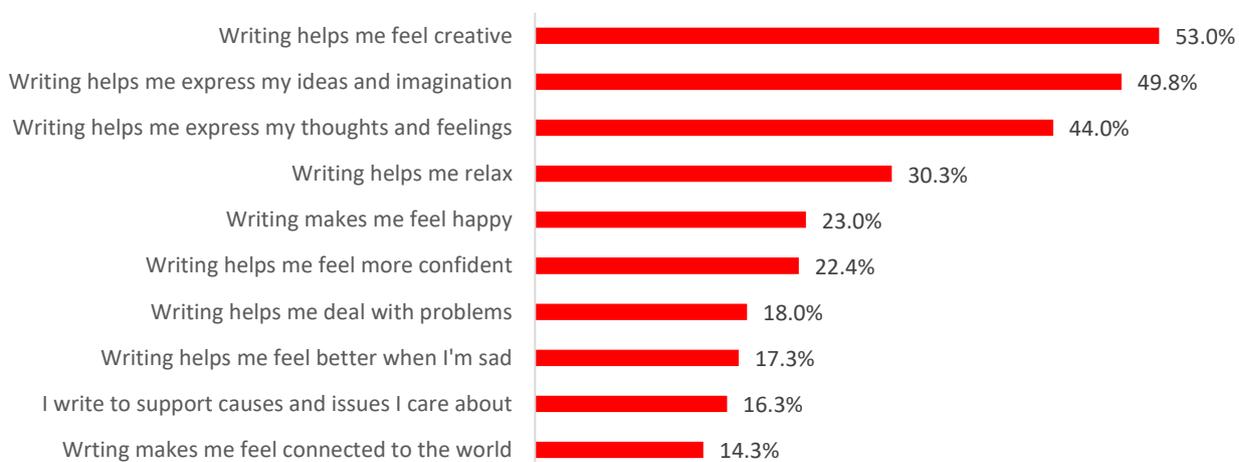
Figure 11: Percentage of children and young people writing various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2021



Reasons for writing

We also asked children and young people to reflect on the reasons why they write. Of those who write in their free time at least once a month⁶, 1 in 2 write because it helps them feel creative and express their ideas and imagination (see Figure 12). Writing to support mental wellbeing also emerged as an important theme, with 3 in 10 saying that they write because it helps them relax, and nearly 1 in 4 saying they write because it makes them feel happy or feel more confident. One in 6 write to support causes and issues they care about, and 1 in 7 write because it makes them feel connected to the world.

Figure 12: Children and young people's reasons for writing



⁶ n = 31,830

When asked other reasons why they write, some children and young people mentioned writing linked to their aspirations, such as:

Writing lets me more fully prepare for the future

It helps me plan out ideas and figure out my future

I did try to write some acting scripts as I would like to practice my confidence and my acting. This is because I would like to be an actor when I am older

Others write because it brings joy to other people:

I write because some people actually seem to enjoy what I write, and it's always fun to see people enjoy your weird thoughts in a book

I write really long text messages for no reason and make my friends and family laugh about what I say in the text message

I like to write to make another person feel better or enjoy it

Similarly, some said that they use writing to help others, or indeed, helped others with their writing:

I helped my little brother with writing
I helped my mum with ideas to write her own book
I write to plan ideas for the future and help others

Another young person said how writing helps to focus their thoughts:

Writing helps me to get everything out my head, i have a lot of thoughts because i get distracted easily, so writing helps me concentrate

Others mentioned writing as escapism:

It helps me become someone else even though I am really not

I get invested in the characters I write about and find myself in their world. I also enjoy world building

Some also mentioned the importance of feedback from others in shaping their writing:

I started writing poems and songs and got feedback from my sister and my parents on what I wrote.

I wrote and read may books. Some by my best friend in South Carolina, and she had sent feedback on my own books, and we write books together.

I wrote a poem for my dad's birthday and read it to him.

Writing to support mental wellbeing

As shown earlier, mental wellbeing was an important reason for children and young people to write. Indeed, nearly 2 in 5 (38.3%) children and young people agree that writing makes them feel better, and writing as an outlet for mental wellbeing in 2021 also emerged in some of the qualitative comments we received:

When I write it makes me feel elated and happy

writing helps me grow and helps me during tough situations so if I feel anxious about something writing helps and I don't have to talk to no one but in the same way express myself

I started writing songs about how i was feeling , I still do this relatively often as it helps me get a hold of myself when I'm not ok. But none of us are ok right now right ? This is just one of my coping strategies:)

I wrote how I felt when I was sad and letting it all out helped me calm down after

If I'm sad then it helps me take things off my mind

It helps me vent sometimes, and helps me get my emotions out in a healthy way

Instead of all the stuff always in my head I write it down and then it's not as bad and calms my thoughts.

Figure 13 highlights the range of reasons why children and young people write. As this shows, the idea of 'help' figures highly here, whether that's a recognition of the benefits of writing to help with concentration, wellbeing and other skills, or a recognition of the power of writing to help others.

Given that emerging insight into the impact of the pandemic on children and young people's schooling has highlighted a specific detrimental impact on those from disadvantaged backgrounds (e.g. EEF, 2021⁷), our finding that boys on FSMs are less likely to enjoy writing is particularly concerning.

However, we also found that children and young people who write in their free time do so because it supports their creativity, allows them to express their thoughts and feelings, and supports their mental health. It is heartening that so many turn to writing as an outlet for self-expression, which for many also means writing song lyrics, stories and even journals. At the same time, there is a continued uptake of writing on, or related to, digital formats such as social media writing apps, podcasts and YouTube.

As we look ahead to a period of processing and recovery, these findings indicate that creative writing will play an important role. Our programmes, campaigns and policy work on enjoyment and positive behaviours around writing are more crucial than ever.

⁷ <https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/news/prof-becky-francis-in-tes-why-research-on-remote-learning-offers-hope/>

About the National Literacy Trust

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

Literacy is a vital element of action against poverty and our work changes life stories.

Visit www.literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

Copyright

© National Literacy Trust 2021. You may report on findings or statistics included in this report if you accredit them to the National Literacy Trust.

Suggested reference for this report is: Clark, C., Best, E. and Picton, I. (2021) Children and young people's writing in 2021 and their reflections on writing during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020. London: National Literacy Trust.

We will consider requests to use extracts or data from this publication provided that you:

- Acknowledge that the content is the work of the National Literacy Trust and provide appropriate references in any publications or accompanying publicity;
- State that any views expressed are yours and not necessarily those of the National Literacy Trust.