

## Children and young people's listening in 2022

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During the pandemic-related school closures and lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, listening to stories, whether through audiobooks or podcasts, was a lifeline for many children and adults (see Best & Clark, 2020 and Best, Clark, Perry & Riad, 2022). Around this time, the National Literacy Trust also began asking children and young people about their listening habits and attitudes to listening to audio in the [Annual Literacy Survey](#). 2022 was the third year that such questions were asked, and this report explores how listening habits have developed post-lockdown.

There is evidence that listening to audio has diminished since the end of lockdown or, at least, that growth has slowed. The findings below will show this among children and young people but it is also borne out by evidence from industry data and surveys, which show that audiobook sales have slowed to a predicted sales value of £182 million in 2022 compared with £184 million in 2021 (Brown, 2022). Meanwhile, listening to podcasts in the first part of 2022 was down slightly from 2021, although among younger adult listeners aged 15 to 34 it was in fact slightly higher than 2021 (Ofcom, 2022). Indeed, Ofcom found that of all adults aged 15+, 16% listened weekly to podcasts. However, this number increased to 27% for those aged 15 to 34, suggesting that podcast listening continues to grow in popularity with younger audiences.

In this report, we explore how these trends are reflected in the views and behaviours of children and young people. This year we also found that [reading](#) (Cole, Brown, Clark & Picton, 2022) and [writing](#) (Clark, Lant & Riad, 2022) enjoyment were down from 2021, so we were keen to see how the provision of audio might help promote engagement with stories in other areas.

We asked three key questions: whether they enjoy listening, how frequently they listen, and what formats they listen to – referring specifically to audiobooks and podcasts. It is important to note that this is the first time we have not issued separate reports about audiobooks and podcasts, but rather looked at attitudes to hearing stories across different formats. We focus

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primarily on those who enjoy listening, rather than those who say they listen to a specific format.

## Key findings

- In 2022, nearly 2 in 5 (37.5%) children and young people said they enjoyed listening to audio either very much or quite a lot
  - This is lower than 2021, when 43% said that they enjoyed listening
- 2 in 5 (39.7%) children and young people listened to audio, such as audiobooks or podcasts, at least once a week, and a further 1 in 5 (21.4%) listened less than once a week
- 1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people listened to audiobooks and/or podcasts, with 1 in 6 (16.6%) listening to audiobooks and 1 in 4 (23.6%) listening to podcasts
- Children and young people enjoyed listening to audio regardless of their age, with 37.2% of those aged 8 to 11, 36.4% of those aged 11 to 14 and 39.6% of those aged 14 to 16 enjoying listening to audio. Slightly more of those aged 16 to 18 told us that they enjoyed listening to audio (49.1%)

## Links with reading and listening

- While more girls than boys enjoyed reading (51.6% vs 42.4%) and writing (40.8% vs 29.9%), slightly more boys than girls enjoyed listening (38.3% vs 36.2%). However, the gap for listening is smaller than for reading or writing.
- 3 in 10 children and young people who didn't enjoy reading (31.5%) and/or writing (33.8%) enjoyed listening
- Open-ended comments suggested a growing association between reading and listening as different forms of storytelling, where children and young people talked about reading and/or listening in the same comments, while others talked about writing podcasts

## Motivations

- Open-ended comments suggested that the main motivation for listening was as an alternative where reading was not possible or appealing, as a way of multi-tasking, and as a form of relaxation

## Impact on other behaviours

- Half (49.1%) of those children and young people who said they enjoyed listening to audio said that when they listened to stories rather than watched videos they used their imagination more
- 3 in 5 (58.5%) of those children who enjoyed listening to audio said that when they listened to an audiobook or podcast it made it easier for them to understand a story or subject

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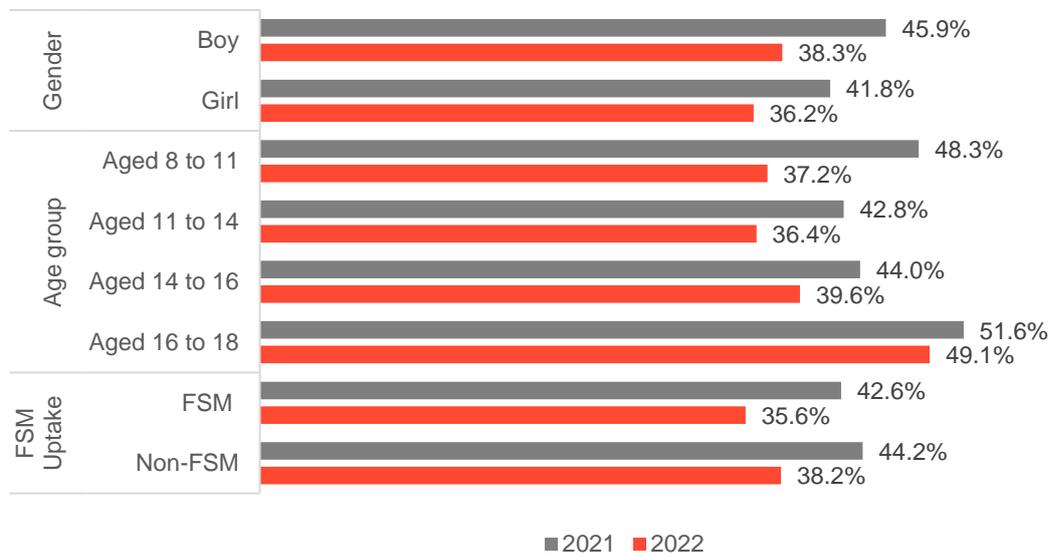
- 2 in 5 (41.9%) children and young people who enjoyed listening to audio said that listening to an audiobook made them want to talk more about a subject with family and friends
- 1 in 4 (24.6%) children and young people said that listening to an audiobook or podcast got them interested in reading books on paper and on screen. This increased to nearly 2 in 5 (37.4%) for those who enjoyed listening and to 1 in 6 (15.2%) for those who did not enjoy listening

## Listening to audio in 2022

### Listening enjoyment

Nearly 2 in 5 (37.5%) children and young people said they enjoyed listening to audio either very much or quite a lot. This is lower than the previous year, when 43% said that they enjoyed listening. As shown in Figure 1, there is some similarity across gender, age and whether children and young people are in receipt of free school meals (FSMs). Perhaps the most notable difference is for young people aged 16 to 18, for whom the percentage jumps almost 10 percentage points from the previous age group. Figure 1 also shows that the changes in enjoyment levels from 2021 are consistent across these groups.

**Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people in 2021 and 2022 who enjoyed listening to audio by gender, age and free-school-meal (FSM) uptake**



### Listening frequency

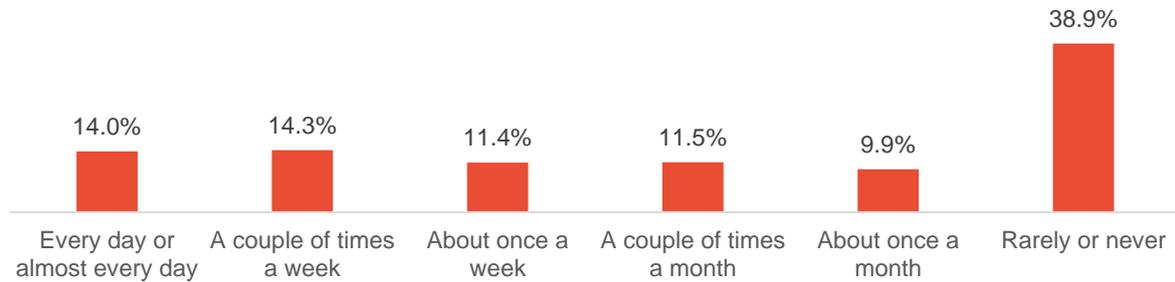
We asked children and young people how often they listened to audio, such as audiobooks or podcasts, ranging from every day to never. As shown in Figure 2, 2 in 5 (39.7) children and young people listened to audio at least once a week, and a further 1 in 5 (21.4%) listened less than once a week.

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**Figure 2: How often children and young people listened to audio, such as audiobooks or podcasts, in 2022**

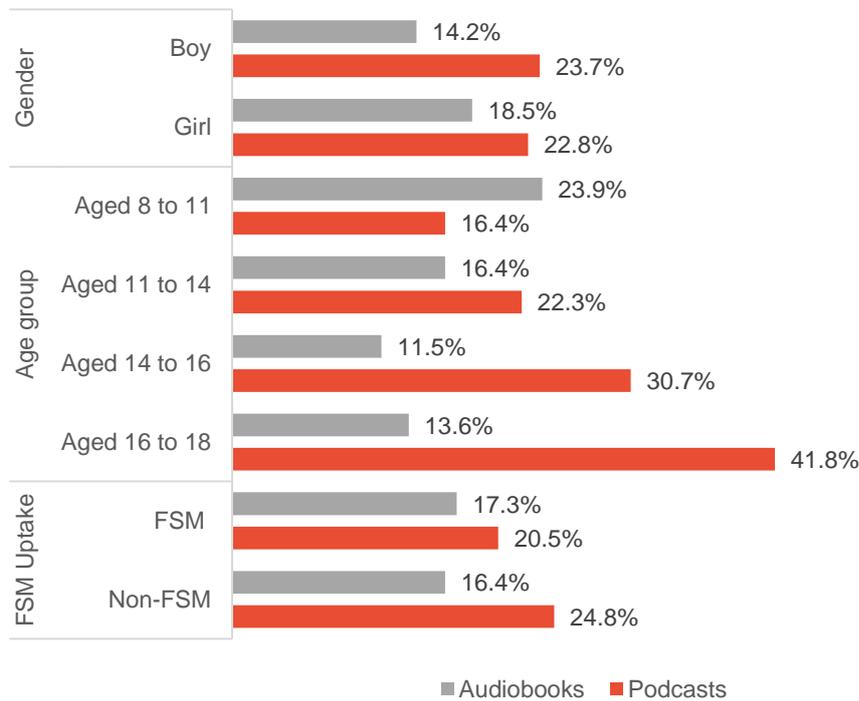


### Listening to audio in different formats

1 in 3 (34.6%) children and young people listened to audiobooks and/or podcasts, with 1 in 6 (16.6%) listening to audiobooks and 1 in 4 (23.6%) listening to podcasts. Fewer children and young people listened to audio in 2022 compared with 2021, when half of all children and young people (48.7%) listened to audiobooks and/or podcasts ).

As shown in Figure 3, slightly more children and young people listened to podcasts than audiobooks. The most notable difference was by age, with significantly more children and young people aged 11+ listening to podcasts than audiobooks. More younger children aged 8 to 11 were listening to audiobooks, but there was no real difference between boys and girls in both cases.

**Figure 3: Percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks and/or podcasts by gender, age, and FSM uptake**



While there was some differentiation between these formats, it was a less important distinction than between those who were listening to audio in any form (or enjoyed listening to audio) and those who were not. Indeed, as shown in Figure 4, roughly the same percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks enjoyed listening, as did those who listened to podcasts.

**Figure 4: Percentage of children and young people who listen to audiobooks and/or podcasts who say they enjoy listening**



### Motivations

Comments from children and young people about their attitudes to and motivations around reading and listening highlighted how feelings in these areas might also promote listening. For example, some children and young people noted how they preferred listening because they struggled with reading:

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“Because of my dyslexia I don’t like reading that much but I do like listening to comics on YouTube sometimes.”

“I only enjoy listening to books really as I find reading hard to concentrate on.”

“I can’t read, I struggle to focus on the sentences. I find that listening to podcasts or someone reading much better. I feel more confident listening than reading.”

Meanwhile, as in previous years, some children and young people noted how audio enabled them to engage with stories while carrying out other tasks or activities:

“I listen do audiobooks when I draw or do work or something like that & when I eat.”

“[I listen to] audio books while playing video games.”

Again, in keeping with previous years, relaxing and getting to sleep also seemed to be common motivators for listening to audio:

“When I can’t sleep I listen to podcasts.”

“If my stress levels are high I find it hard to start reading a book because my mind wanders back to deadlines or whatever else I should be doing for school and work. In the situation, I watch or listen to videos or audiobooks etc.”

## Listening, reading and writing

Enjoyment of listening to audio was less differentiated across different groups than enjoyment of reading or writing, suggesting that audio can be a way of engaging children and young people who are disengaged in other areas.

For example, listening enjoyment was more consistent across age and gender than reading or writing. As shown in Figure 5, while more boys enjoyed reading than listening overall, the gap between boys and girls was much smaller, with a difference of 2.1 percentage points for listening (and, in fact, more boys than girls enjoyed listening) compared with a gap of 9.2 percentage points for reading and 10.9 percentage points for writing.

Listening enjoyment was relatively consistent across age groups, with a gap between the youngest and the oldest groups of just 0.2 percentage points. Meanwhile, enjoyment of reading increased with age, going from just under 2 in 5 of those aged 8 to 11 to nearly half of those aged 16 to 19. Enjoyment of writing decreased with age, with just over half of those aged 8 to 11 enjoying writing compared with 1 in 4 of those aged 14 to 16 and 3 in 10 of those aged 16 to 18. Lastly, enjoyment by FSM follows a similar pattern to reading, with slightly

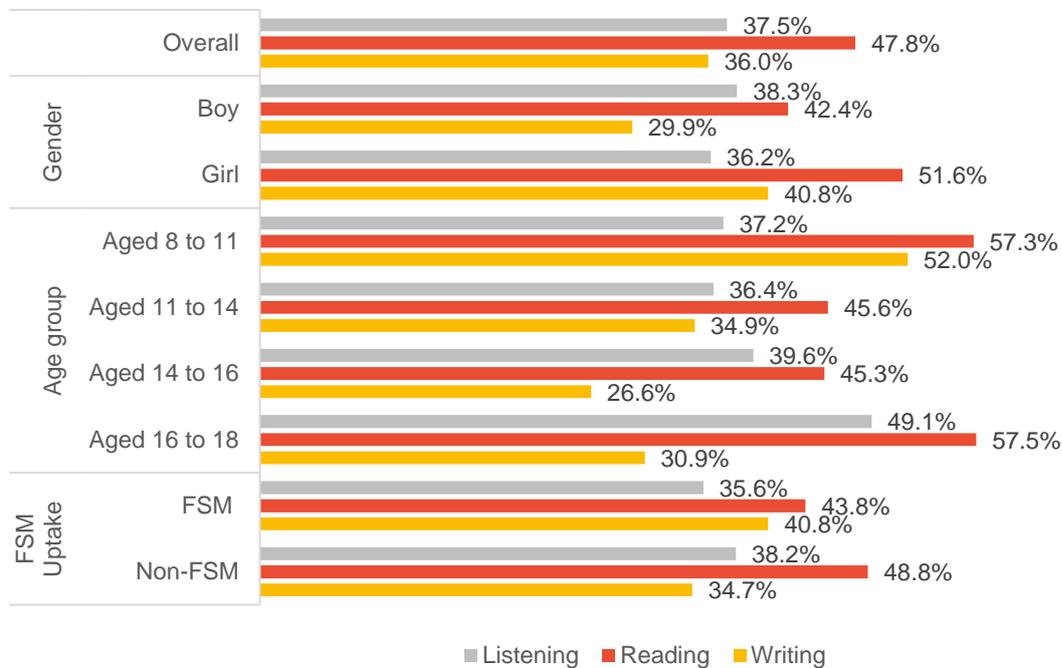
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more of those not in receipt of FSMs enjoying listening, while slightly more of those in receipt of FSMs enjoyed writing.

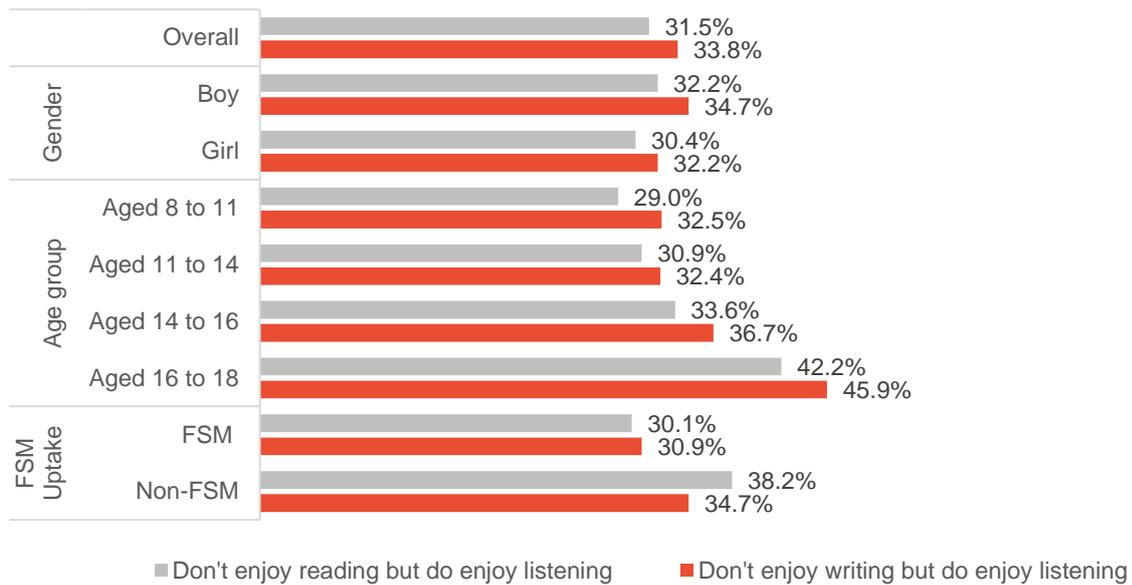
**Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people who enjoy listening, reading and writing by gender, age group and FSM uptake**



### Listening enjoyment among those who do not enjoy reading and/or writing

Encouragingly, as shown in Figure 6, just under 1 in 3 children and young people who did not enjoy reading and/or writing did enjoy listening to audio. This figure was relatively consistent across different groups, but particularly high for those aged 16 to 18, with nearly half (45.9%) of those who didn't enjoy writing saying that they enjoyed listening.

**Figure 6: Children and young people who do not enjoy reading and/or writing but do enjoy listening to audio**



### Benefits of listening and associated behaviours

We asked children and young people whether they agreed with a range of statements about listening to audiobooks or podcasts. The below responses are based just on those children and young people who enjoyed listening. As shown in Figure 7, nearly 3 in 5 children and young people who enjoyed listening to audio agreed that it made it easier to understand a subject. Furthermore, just under half agreed that when they listened to stories rather than watching videos they used their imagination more, while around 2 in 5 agreed that listening to audio made them want to talk more about a subject with family or friends, and that listening to audio had got them interested in reading books.

**Figure 7: Agreement with statements about listening among children and young people who enjoy listening to audio**



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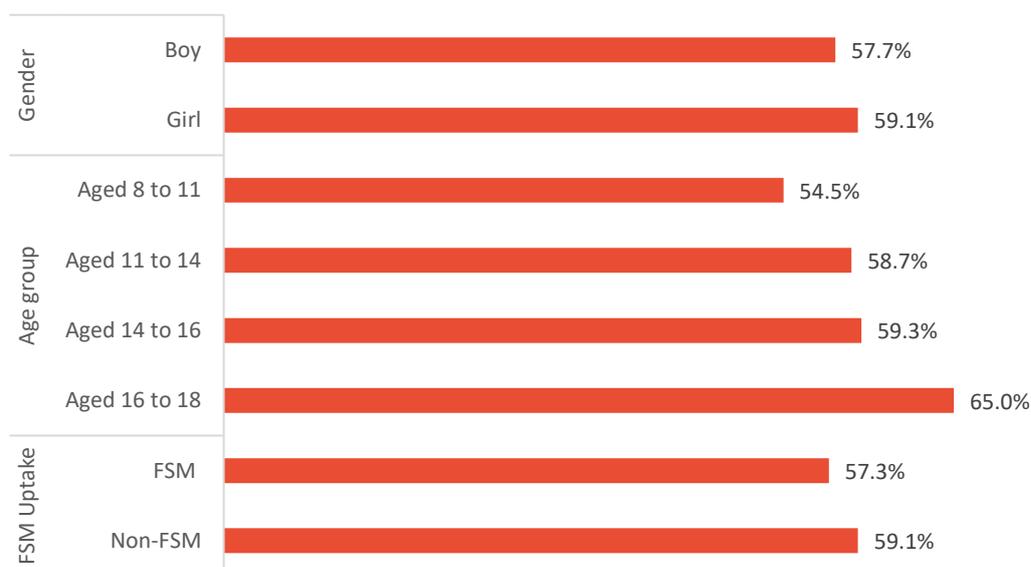
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### In detail: understanding a subject

Research has shown that audio can be instrumental in helping children and young people understand a subject (Daniel & Woody, 2010) and, in 2021, the National Literacy Trust’s survey of secondary pupils’ engagement with podcasts found that 3 in 4 (74.6%) children and young people agreed with this (Best & Cole, 2021). As shown in Figure 8, agreement with this statement was relatively consistent across demographics, except for age, where between the youngest and the oldest age group there was a difference of 10.5 percentage points.

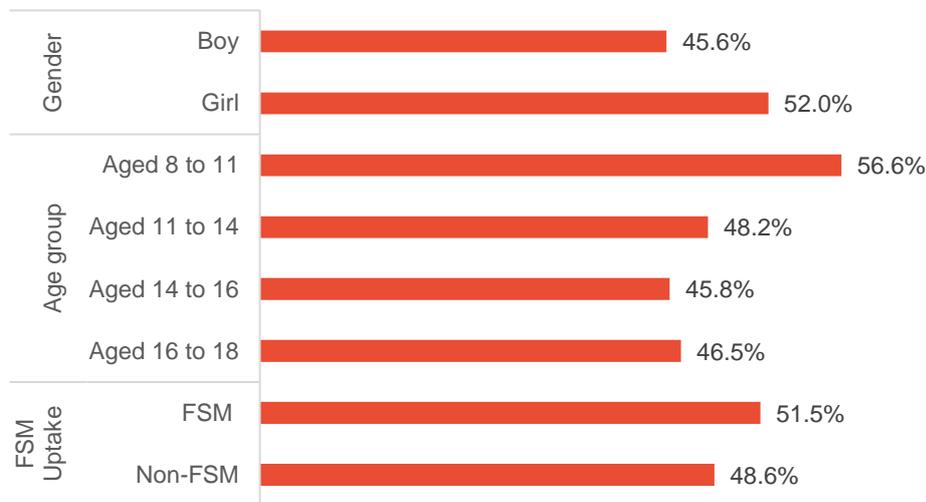
**Figure 8: Agreement among children and young people who listen to audio that listening to an audiobook or podcast makes it easier to understand a subject, divided by gender, age group and FSM uptake**



### In detail: using imagination

Research has also shown that people are, at a neurological level, more engaged with a story when listening to an audio version than when watching it on video (Richardson et al., 2018). Agreement with the statement “[w]hen I listen to stories rather than watch videos I use my imagination more” was fairly consistent for children and young people across all demographics (see Figure 10). It is notable that, contrary to the agreement around understanding a subject, more younger children (particularly those aged 8 to 11) agreed with this statement than their older peers.

**Figure 9: Agreement among children and young people who listen to audio that when they listen to stories rather than watch videos they use their imagination more, divided by gender, age group and FSM uptake**

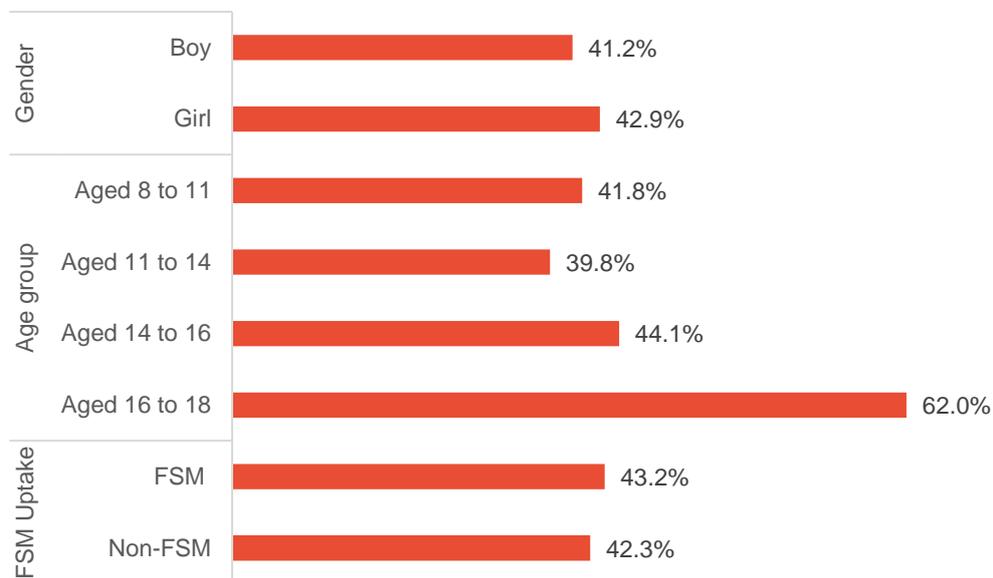


### In detail: encouraging talk

Talk, alongside listening as the key oracy skills that children and young people should be developing as part of their literacy journey (see, for example, [Why oracy matters | Oracy APPG \(inparliament.uk\)](https://www.inparliament.uk/why-oracy-matters)), is an important consideration in how audio can support literacy. It is therefore encouraging to see many children and young people who enjoyed listening to audio across different groups agreeing that listening made them want to talk more about a subject. In detail, Figure 10 shows that while agreement was broadly consistent across groups, it was notably higher among young people aged 16 to 18, where 3 in 5 (compared with an average of 2 in 5) agreed with this point. This suggests that encouraging talking and listening-based activities with these groups could be beneficial but, equally, that for younger groups

there is potential to expand on such ideas. It also shows that children and young people would be equally receptive to these approaches regardless of FSM status or gender.

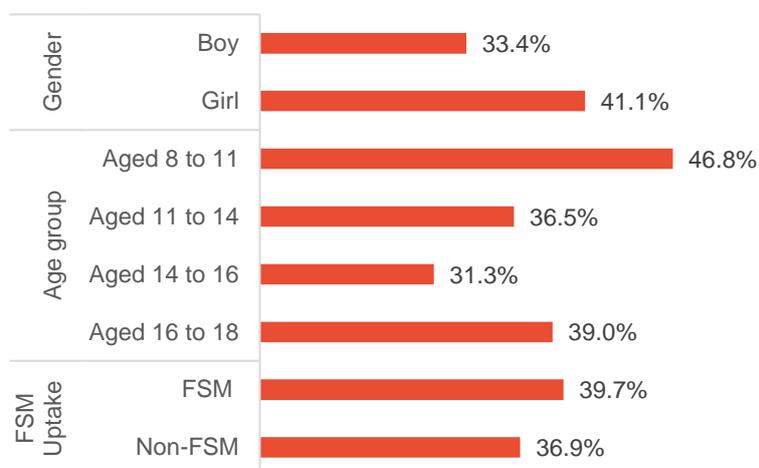
**Figure 10: Agreement among children and young people who enjoy listening to audio that listening to an audiobook or podcast makes them want to talk more about a subject with family or friends, divided by gender, age group and FSM uptake**



### In detail: encouraging reading

We also found that many children and young people who enjoyed listening to audio said that it also got them interested in reading books on paper and on screen. However, dividing this by group shows that this is commensurate with those groups who have higher levels of reading enjoyment in the first place (Figure 11). This suggests that perhaps for those who are predisposed to reading – girls rather than boys and the oldest and youngest age groups – audio can boost reading and encourage them in specific directions. It also suggests that there may be more to do in using audio to convert less-keen readers who enjoy listening to audio.

**Figure 11: Agreement among children and young people who enjoy listening to audio that listening to an audiobook or podcast has got them interested in reading books on paper or on screen, divided by gender, age group and FSM uptake**



We also asked children and young people an open-ended question about what made them want to read, and the opportunity to talk about books and having spoken about a particular book were both motivators, suggesting that there is a link.

“I love to read books so that I can talk about them with other people.”

“Hearing other people talk about books [makes me want to read].”

“What makes me want to read is other people and also hearing other stories.”

## Conclusion

This report shows that, despite a slight drop from 2021 when many children and young people were listening to audio during school closures, listening remains popular across different formats in 2022. While different groups might tend more towards audiobooks or podcasts, and while some may also enjoy reading and/or writing more than others, listening to audio is relatively consistent across all demographics. It is also worth noting that when asking this question, we simply give audiobooks and podcasts as *examples* and might also include listening to the radio, or listening to other people tell stories or read them aloud. Including these different modes of storytelling, particularly for younger children, might be an area for further exploration.

It is encouraging to see that, broadly speaking, listening enjoyment is consistent with reading and writing enjoyment, and that for reluctant readers and writers listening might also be a way to promote stories. These behaviours might be enjoyed by fewer children and young people in 2022 but they remain as important as ever. This is especially true when talking about levelling up post-COVID because it's critical that children and young people develop the

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literacy skills they need to succeed, and it's equally important to close the gap for the most disadvantaged. While reading and listening are established forms for consuming stories, there is further exploration to be done around writing and speaking as ways of telling stories.

Motivations for listening are consistent with previous years. Benefits such as multitasking and relaxation are cited, and many children and young people suggest that audio provides an accessible alternative when reading is not possible. Furthermore, the high levels of agreement that listening to audio can help with understanding a subject and can excite the imagination more than visual media suggest that there is still a receptive audience for audio to be used in this way. There is great potential for teachers and families to make use of audio in the classroom and the home, although this need not be limited to formats that require devices and access to data when these resources might be limited. Telling and hearing stories can be a face-to-face activity, and the evidence here that children and young people enjoy talking about subjects they listen to, and that these behaviours are linked, shows that verbal storytelling is powerful in all its forms and for all audiences.

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

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