

**National  
Literacy  
Trust**

Change your story

# **Children and young people's reading in Scotland in 2023**

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**and**

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**Scottish  
Book Trust**  
inspiring readers and writers

# Introduction

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This is the first of our Annual Literacy Survey reports to focus on Scotland, and it has been produced in collaboration with Scottish Book Trust. All of our Annual Literacy Survey reports include data from schools across the Home Nations. However, we last focused on children's reading enjoyment in Scotland in 2014 as part of our work on the Read On, Get On campaign<sup>1</sup>.

In this report, we look at the reading engagement of children aged 8 to 18 in Scotland, based on data gathered from 1,141 pupils across eight schools in 2023. We hope to grow the number of pupils taking part in the survey in Scotland in the coming years to give us greater insight into children and young people's reading across the nation.

In 2023, children and young people's reading enjoyment across the UK is at a crisis point, with the survey showing the lowest level of reading enjoyment we have recorded since 2005. In Scotland, just 41.5% of the children and young people taking part told us that they enjoyed reading.

Reading for pleasure can have a wealth of positive effects: it supports equity and wellbeing, impacts children and young people's attainment, and encourages critical thinking, creativity, empathy and resilience. With this in mind, it is imperative that we continue our work in Scotland so that more than just 2 in 5 children and young people develop the love of reading that will support them to access these vital benefits.

## Method

We conducted our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and the middle of March 2023. Slightly more girls (58.8%; n = 635) than boys (41.2%; n = 445) participated from Scotland. We also had data from 33 children and young people who would rather not share their gender and 28 who would describe themselves in another way. In line with the national sample, more children and young people aged 11 to 14 (78.5%, n = 896) took part, followed by those aged 14 to 16 (11.8%, n =

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<sup>1</sup>[https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/2014\\_11\\_14\\_free\\_research\\_-\\_reading\\_in\\_scotland\\_2013\\_NCekFTR.pdf](https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/2014_11_14_free_research_-_reading_in_scotland_2013_NCekFTR.pdf)

135) and then those aged 8 to 11 (6.1%, n = 70). 40 (3.5%) young people aged 16 to 18 also took part.

## Key findings for 2023 include:

### Reading enjoyment in free time in 2023 in Scotland

- Just over 2 in 5 (41.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland said that they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023. This means that nearly 3 in 5 (58.5%) did not enjoy reading.

### Enjoying reading in free time versus at school in 2023 in Scotland

- In 2023, a very slightly higher percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time (41.4%) than said they enjoyed reading at school (39.7%).
- Both types of reading enjoyment were positively related ( $r = .614$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time. Indeed, 7 in 10 (70.6%) children and young people who enjoyed reading in their free time also enjoyed reading at school, while 3 in 4 (73.7%) children and young people who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time. This suggests 1 in 4 children and young people didn't enjoy reading in either location.

### Daily reading in free time in 2023 in Scotland

- More than 1 in 4 (27.1%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland said that they read daily or almost daily in their free time in 2023.

### What children and young people were reading in their free time in 2023 in Scotland

- More than 2 in 5 (44.3%) children and young people said they read fiction on paper, while 1 in 4 (26.6%) read fiction on screen.
- Slightly less than 2 in 5 (37.1%) read non-fiction on paper, while 1 in 7 (14.5%) read non-fiction on screen.
- More than three times as many children and young people said they read news on screen than read news on paper (34.4% vs. 9.6%).

- 7 in 10 (72.1%) read song lyrics on screen, while only 1 in 15 (6.7%) read them on paper.
- Regarding screen-only reading formats, more than 9 in 10 children and young people said they read personal/direct messages (93.7%) and messages while playing video games (90.1%). Slightly less than 9 in 10 (87.8%) read social media content and 4 in 5 (80.5%) read websites, while 3 in 5 (57.5%) read emails, and 1 in 4 (23.8%) read blogs or forums.

### **What motivated children and young people to read in 2023 in Scotland?**

We grouped children and young people's motivations to read into three categories: curious reader, mindful reader and social reader.

- The curious readers included the 2 in 5 children and young people who read to learn new words (45.7%) or new things (44.1%). 3 in 10 of this group also said that reading helped them understand the views of others (30.3%) and helped them learn about other cultures (29.8%).
- The mindful readers included those who read because it helped them relax (51.4%) or those where reading made them feel happy (38.6%). 1 in 5 also said that reading made them feel confident (21.5%) and 1 in 4 said it helped them with problems (24.9%).
- The social readers included those who read because it helped them learn more about the issues and causes they cared about (22.8%) and those where reading helped them feel connected to the world (17.9%). 1 in 13 also read because it helped them spend time with others (7.8%).

### **What would make children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland in 2023 want to read?**

- When asked what would make them want to read, most (40.7%, or 2 in 5) said that having books recommended to them would do this. 1 in 3 said that having books that represent them (33.8%) or being given books (33.1%) would make them want to read. 1 in 5 (22.1%) said that they would read more if their friends or family talked about books, while 1 in 6 (16.3%) said that seeing someone they look up to read or talk about reading would do this.

### **Children and young people's perceptions of their reading environment in Scotland in 2023**

More than 4 in 5 (86.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they had a quiet space at home where they could work, read or take time out. This, however, means that 1 in 7 (13.6%) didn't. Similarly, more than 4 in 5 (84.2%) told us that they had their own desk or table where they could write, draw or do homework, meaning that nearly 1 in 6 (15.8%) didn't.

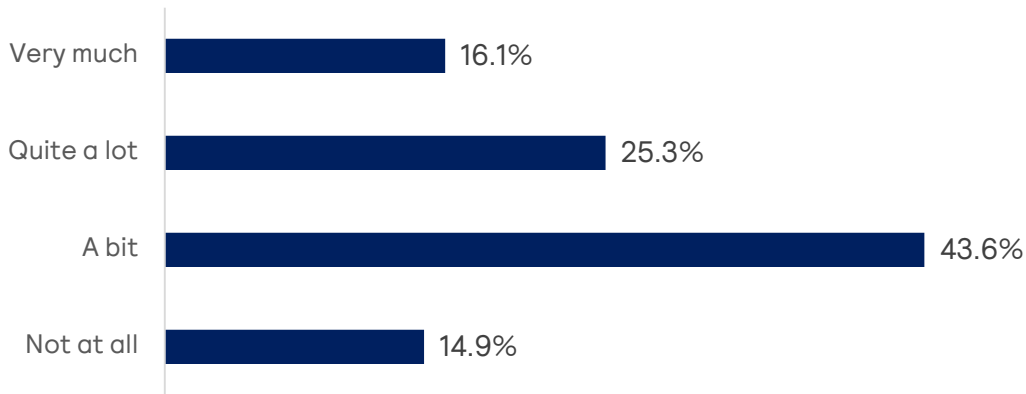
We also asked children and young people about the ways they might have been supported in their reading in the past four weeks:

- Encouragingly, 3 in 5 (61.8%) said they had seen their parents/carers read, while 1 in 2 (47.9%) told us they had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers. 2 in 5 (41.8%) talked about what they were reading with their family, while more than 3 in 10 (33.8%) talked about what they were reading with their friends. 2 in 5 (39.8%) got reading recommendations from their family, while 1 in 4 (25.1%) said that their friends had helped them find things to read. Finally, 1 in 7 (14.9%) said they had read with their family.
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## Reading enjoyment in 2023

1 in 6 children and young people in Scotland told us that they enjoyed reading in their free time in 2023, with 1 in 4 saying that they enjoyed it quite a lot (see Figure 1). This means that, overall, 2 in 5 (41.5%) Scottish children and young people enjoyed reading either very much or quite a lot in 2023. However, this also means that nearly 3 in 5 (58.5%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 only enjoyed reading a bit or not at all.

**Figure 1: Children and young people’s reading enjoyment in Scotland in 2023**

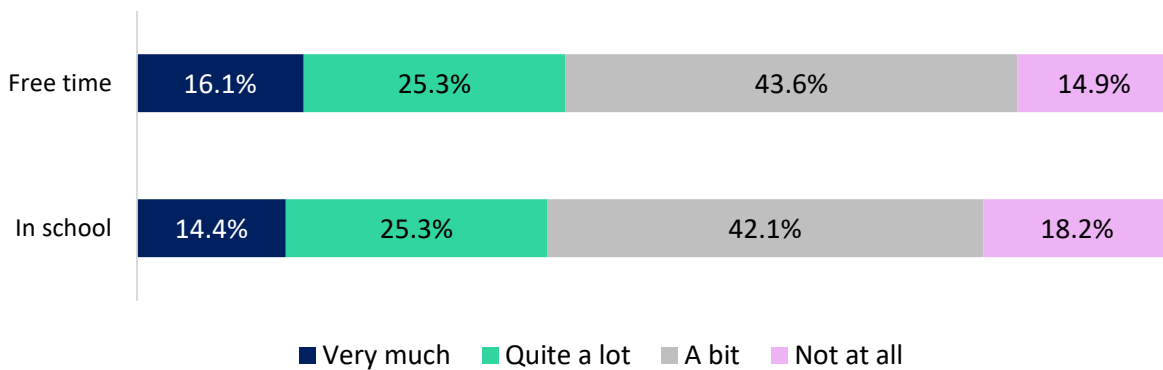


**Reading enjoyment in free time versus enjoyment of reading in school time**

Traditionally, our survey has focused on how much children and young people enjoy reading in their free time. In 2023, we also included a question to see how this compared with the reading they did at school.

Figure 2 shows that a very slightly higher percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 said that they enjoyed reading in their free time (41.4%) than said that they enjoyed reading during school time (39.7%). Therefore, a slightly larger percentage of children and young people said that they didn’t enjoy reading in school compared with reading at home (60.3% vs 58.5%).

**Figure 2: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland who enjoyed reading in 2023 in their free time versus reading at school**



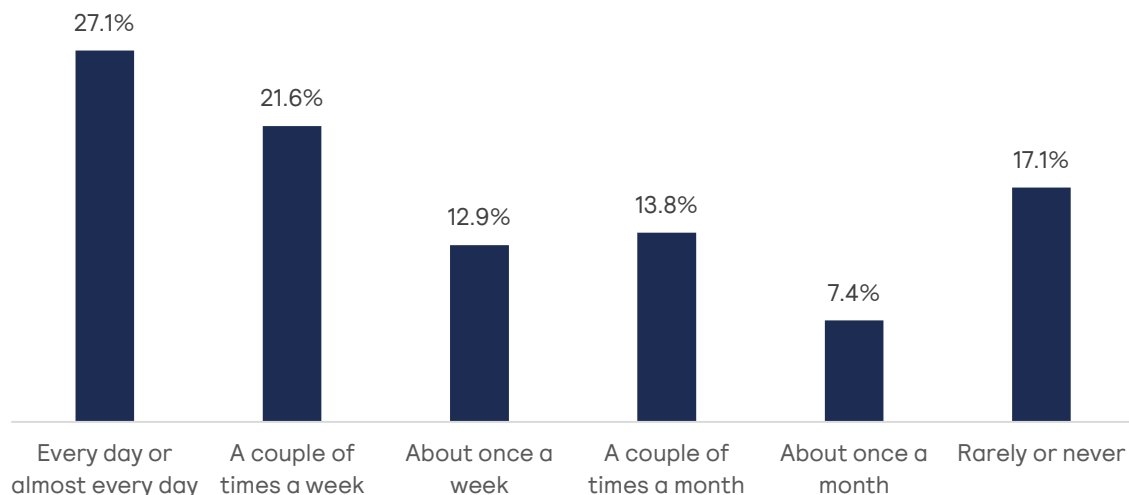
Both types of reading enjoyment were strongly positively related ( $r = .614$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time. Indeed, 7 in 10 (70.6%) children and young people in Scotland who enjoyed reading in their free time also enjoyed reading at school, while nearly 3 in 4 (73.7%) children and young people in Scotland who enjoyed reading at school also enjoyed reading in their free time. However, this also suggests that 1 in 4 children and young people in Scotland didn't enjoy reading at school or in their free time.

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## Daily reading in free time

Figure 3 shows the frequency with which children and young people in Scotland read in their spare time in 2023. It shows that over 1 in 4 (27.1%) told us that they read daily in their free time, while 1 in 5 (21.6%) read a couple of times a week. Overall, 3 in 5 (61.6%) told us that they read at least once a week in their free time. However, 1 in 6 (17.1%) said they rarely or never read.

**Figure 3: Frequency of reading in their spare time for children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland in 2023**



## The link between reading enjoyment in free time and reading frequency in free time

There was a strong positive relationship between enjoying reading in free time and reading frequency in free time ( $r = .621$ ), indicating that those who enjoyed reading read more frequently in their free time. Indeed, as shown in Table 1, four times as many children and young people in Scotland aged 8 to 18 who enjoyed reading in their free time also said that they read daily in their free time compared with those who didn't enjoy reading. Instead, over 1 in 4 of those who said that they didn't enjoy reading also rarely or never read.

**Table 1: Reading enjoyment in free time by reading frequency in free time in 2023 for children and young people in Scotland aged 8 to 18**

	Daily	A couple of times a week	Once a week	A couple of times a month	Once a month	Rarely or never
Enjoyed reading	48.8%	31.1%	11.8%	6.8%	1.5%	0.8%
Didn't enjoy reading	12.3%	15.0%	13.6%	18.9%	11.7%	28.6%

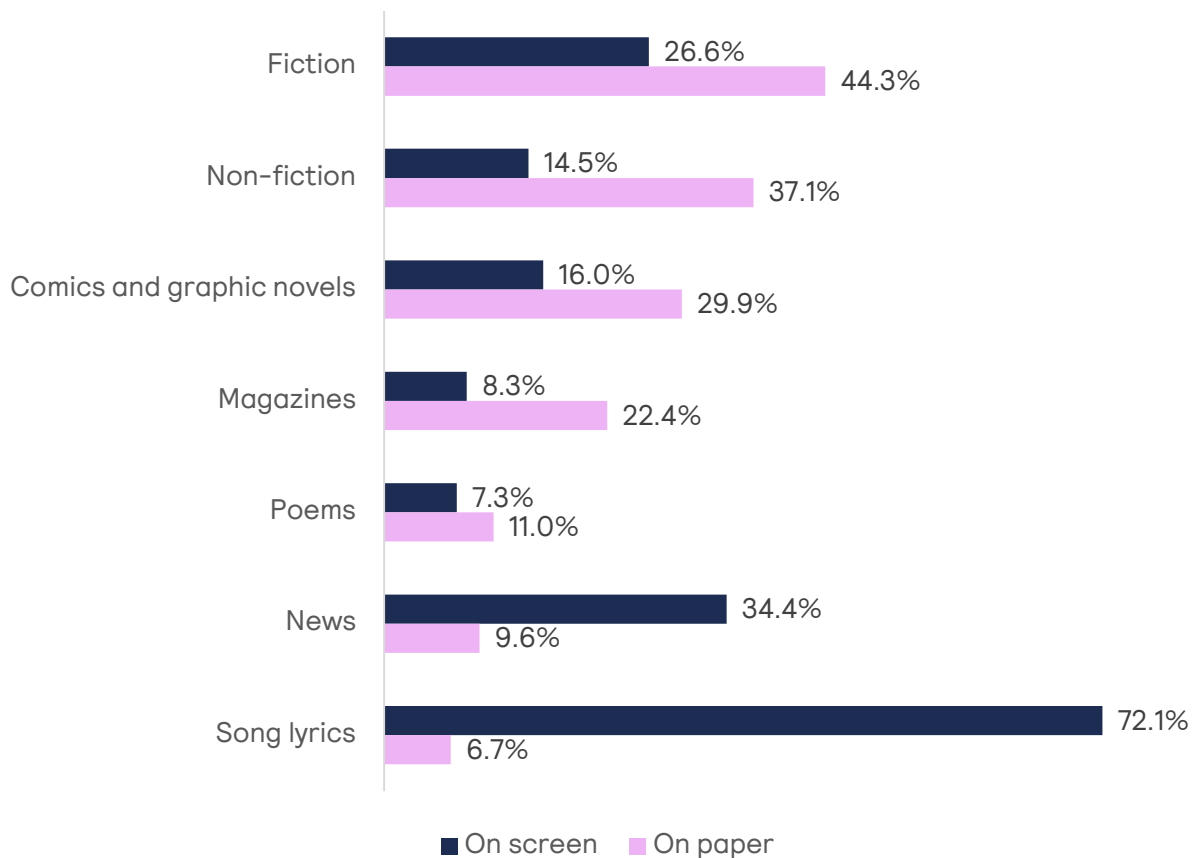
## What do children and young people read?

We asked children and young people what they read in their spare time, both on paper and on screen. For those aged 8 to 18 in Scotland, more than 2 in 5 (44.3%) said that they read fiction on paper in their spare time, and slightly less than 2 in 5 (37.1%) read non-fiction on paper (see Figure 4). Nearly 3 in 10 (29.9%) said they read comics/graphic novels on paper, while more than 1 in 5 (22.4%) read magazines. Just 1 in 10 said that they read poems (11.0%) or news (9.6%) on paper, while 1 in 15 (6.7%) read song lyrics in this format.



At the same time, more than 1 in 4 (26.6%) children and young people said that they read fiction on screen, while 1 in 7 (14.5%) said that they read non-fiction and 1 in 6 (16.0%) comics/graphic novels in this format. More than three times as many children and young people told us that they read news on screen than read news on paper (34.4% vs 9.6%). The biggest difference was seen with respect to song lyrics, with 10 times as many children and young people saying that they read song lyrics on screen than on paper (72.1% vs 6.7%), making it the most popular material being read on screen.

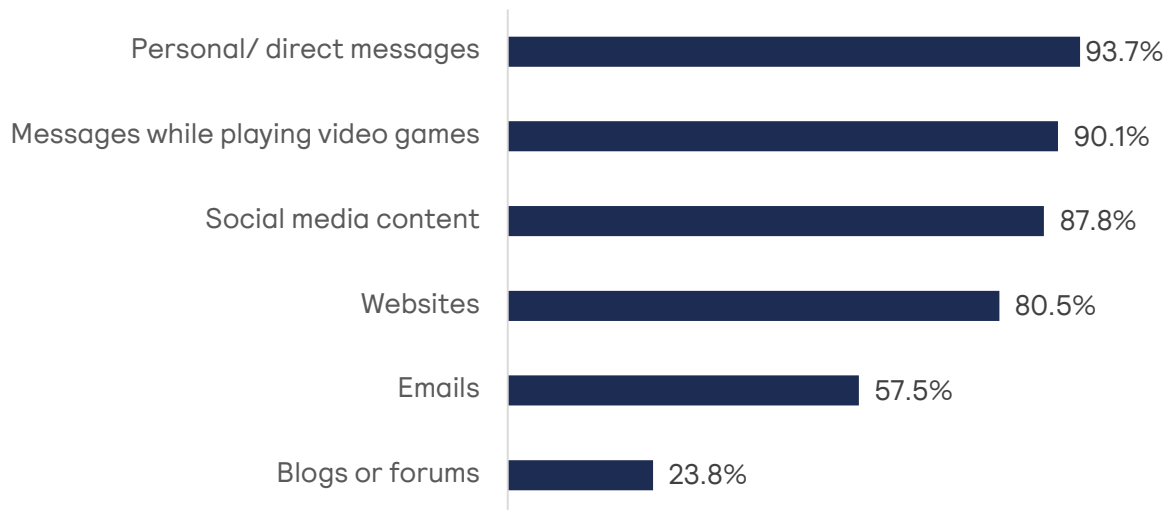
**Figure 4: Materials read either on screen or on paper in their spare time by children and young people aged 8 to 18 in Scotland in 2023**



Regarding screen-only reading formats, a high percentage said they read a variety of materials on screen, emphasising the importance of acknowledging their place in children and young people’s reading lives. More than 9 in 10 children and young people read personal/direct messages (93.7%) and messages while playing video games (90.1%), and slightly less than 9 in 10 read social media

content (87.8%, see Figure 5). 4 in 5 (80.5%) read websites, slightly less than 3 in 5 (57.5%) read emails, and 1 in 4 (23.8%) read blogs or forums.

**Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people aged 8 to 18 reading various exclusively on-screen formats in their free time in 2023**



## What motivates children and young people to read (aged 8 to 18 only)?

We also asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 to reflect on the reasons why they read. We presented children and young people with 11 different motivations to read, which we grouped to form three categories: the curious reader<sup>2</sup>, the mindful reader<sup>3</sup> and the social reader<sup>4</sup>.

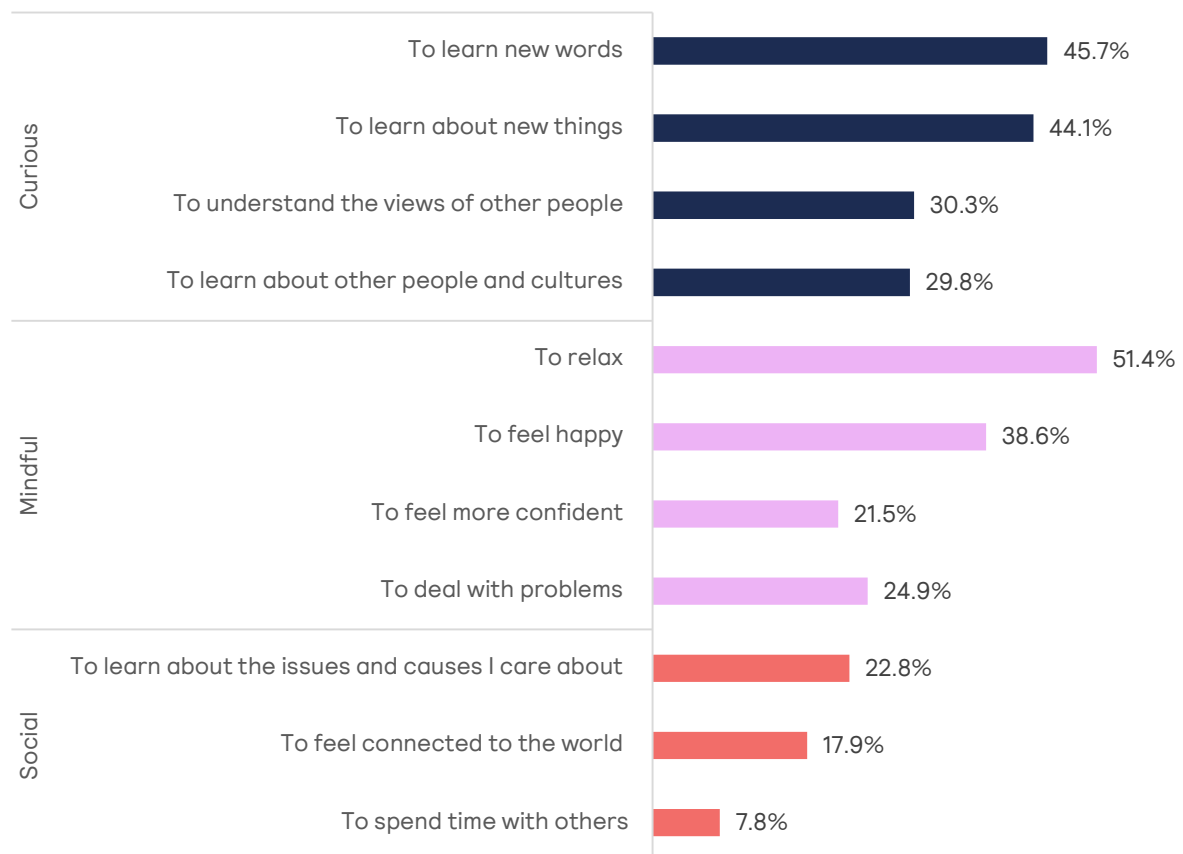
<sup>2</sup> Combining four items: Reading helps me learn about new things, Reading helps me learn about other people and cultures, Reading helps me learn new words, and Reading helps me understand the views of other people. Cronbach's alpha = .810. Top quartile of responses being described here as the curious reader (38.5%).

<sup>3</sup> Combining four items: relax, happy, confident, problems. Cronbach's alpha = .795. Top quartile of responses being described here as the mindful reader (29.0%).

<sup>4</sup> Combining three items: connected, time, causes. Cronbach's alpha = .786. Top quartile of responses being described here as the social reader (42.3%).

Of those who read in their free time at least once a month<sup>5</sup>, more than 2 in 5 read because it helped them learn new words or new things (see Figure 6). Around 3 in 10 told us they read to help them understand the views of others or to learn more about other people or cultures. Looking at the mindful reader, 1 in 2 said that they read because it relaxed them, and nearly 2 in 5 read because it made them feel happy. 1 in 5 read because it made them feel more confident and 1 in 4 because it helped them deal with problems. Finally, as social readers, slightly less than 1 in 4 said that they read to learn more about the issues and causes they cared about, and 1 in 5 read because it helped them feel connected with the world. Fewest (1 in 13) said they read because it helped them spend time with others.

**Figure 6: Children and young people’s (aged 8 to 18) motivations for reading in Scotland in 2023**

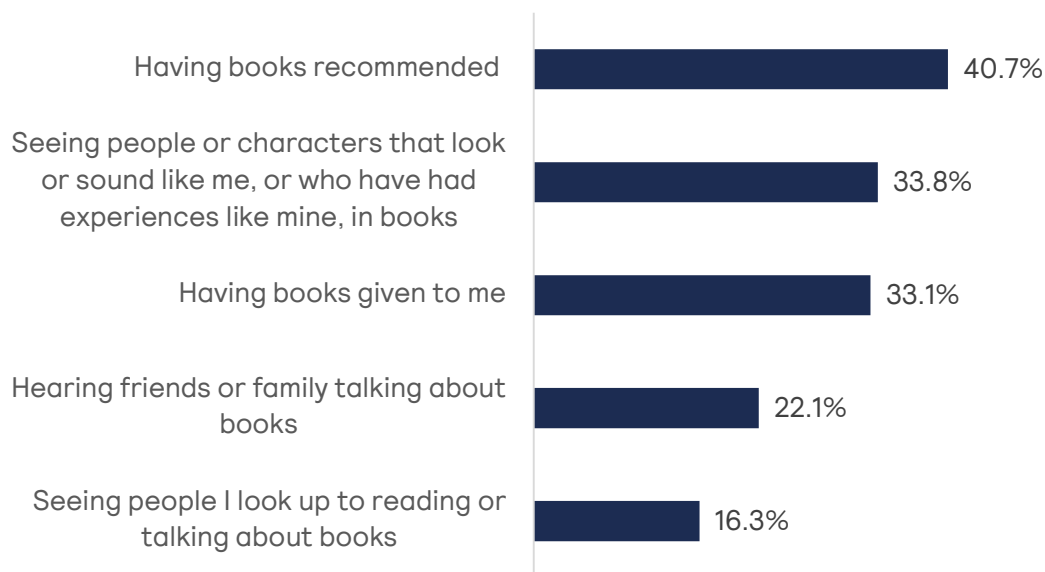


<sup>5</sup> n = 946

## What makes children and young people read more?

When asked what would make them want to read, 2 in 5 (40.7%) children and young people told us that having books recommended to them would make them read more (see Figure 7). 1 in 3 (33.8%) said that having books that represent them and being given books would be reading motivators. 1 in 5 (22.1%) said that they would read more if their family and friends talked about books, while 1 in 6 (16.3%) mentioned that seeing someone they look up to reading or talking about books would make them want to read.

**Figure 7: What would make children and young people want to read more?**



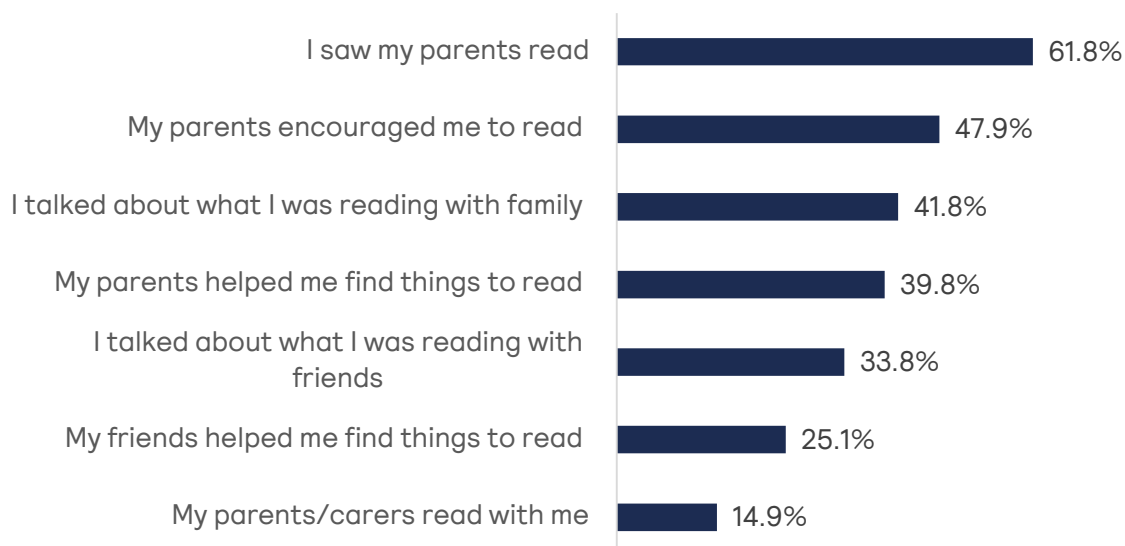
## The reading environment

So far, we have looked at how many children and young people enjoy reading in and out of school, how often they read in their free time, what motivates them to read, and, if and when they read, what formats they are most likely to read, either on screen or on paper. We have also explored how any of these are associated with some of their background characteristics.

We were also interested to explore if environmental factors had an association with children and young people’s reading. We know that having access to reading materials (see our report on book ownership<sup>6</sup>) is linked with reading engagement, but what about access to a quiet space or access to a desk or table to work on? More than 4 in 5 (86.4%) children and young people aged 8 to 18 told us in 2023 that they had a quiet space at home where they could work, read or take time out. This, however, means that 1 in 7 (13.6%) didn’t have a quiet space. Similarly, more than 4 in 5 (84.2%) told us that they had their own desk or table where they could write, draw or do homework, meaning that nearly 1 in 6 (15.8%) didn’t.

We also asked children aged 8 to 18 about the ways in which they had been supported to engage in reading in the past four weeks (see Figure 8). Encouragingly, 3 in 5 (61.8%) said they had seen their parents/carers read, while 1 in 2 (47.9%) told us that they had been encouraged to read by their parents/carers. 2 in 5 (41.8%) talked about what they were reading with their family, while more than 3 in 10 (33.8%) talked about what they were reading with their friends. 2 in 5 (39.8%) also said that they got reading recommendations from their family, while 1 in 4 (25.1%) said that their friends had helped them find things to read. Finally, 1 in 7 (14.9%) said they had read with their family.

**Figure 8: Children and young people’s perceived access to a supportive reading environment in 2023**



<sup>6</sup> [https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Book\\_ownership\\_in\\_2022\\_final.pdf](https://cdn.literacytrust.org.uk/media/documents/Book_ownership_in_2022_final.pdf)

## To sum up

It is of great concern that only 2 in 5 children and young people taking part in the survey in Scotland reported enjoying reading.

In Scotland, Scottish Book Trust run a number of fully funded programmes to support children and young people to develop a love of reading, both in school and at home. Reading Schools<sup>7</sup> provides a research-informed framework that supports schools to build and sustain a culture of reading. The framework includes guidance around all the factors pupils told us were motivating, such as being recommended books, having access to books that represent them, and role modelling. We also know that author visits can inspire children and young people and lead to increases in reading and writing engagement (Clark & Picton, 2023<sup>8</sup>). Schools can engage with authors through Authors Live<sup>9</sup> and Live Literature<sup>10</sup>.

The positive impact of the home learning environment is well-documented (Melhuish, 2010). Whilst it is encouraging that 3 in 5 (61.8%) pupils said they had seen their parents/carers read over the past month, we would like more than the half documented here to be encouraged to read by their families, and significantly more than 2 in 5 reading with their family. Scottish Book Trust's Bookbug<sup>11</sup> and Read Write Count with the First Minister<sup>12</sup> programmes support families in the Early Years and P1-3 to access books and read together, but more must be done to bolster the access and shared reading experiences we know to be so vital as children progress to upper primary and into secondary school.

As we heard from the children and young people themselves, alongside supporting their literacy skills, reading can help them to relax, feel confident and happy, as well as developing their knowledge of the world and empathy for others. In a time of deepening poverty, worsening mental health outcomes and increasing political division, these are vital benefits that we must help the nearly 60% of our children and young people who do not currently enjoy reading to access.

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.readingschools.scot/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/author-visits-in-schools-in-2023/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/learning-and-resources/authors-live>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/writing-and-authors/live-literature>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/topics/bookbug>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/reading-and-stories/read-write-count>

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Our sincere thanks to all of the schools that participated in our survey this year. We couldn't do it without you!

### 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](http://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.

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