National Literacy Trust

Change your story

Reading for mental wellbeing

Children and young people's voices in 2023

Introduction

In this research brief, we look at what children and young people tell us about the relationship between reading and mental wellbeing.

In 2018, our research found that children and young people who were the most engaged with literacy were three times more likely to have higher levels of mental wellbeing than children who were the least engaged (39.4% vs 11.8%, Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018).

We also ask children and young people about their motivations for reading in all our Annual Literacy Surveys. In this short report, we focus on what our most recent survey[1] tells us about reading and mental wellbeing through reference to large-scale data and the voices of children and young people themselves.

Children and young people who are the most engaged with literacy are three times more likely to have higher levels of mental wellbeing than children who are the least engaged.

(Clark & Teravainen-Goff, 2018)

[1] Clark et al., (2023) *Children and young people's reading in 2023*, London: National Literacy Trust
https://nlt.cdn.ngo/media/documents/Reading_trends_2023.pdf

In our most recent Annual Literacy Survey, we asked children and young people aged 8 to 18 to reflect on the reasons why they read. We grouped the 11 different motivations to form three categories: the curious[2], mindful[3] and social reader[4]. Focusing on those who read in their free time at least once a month[5], the statement "Reading helps me to relax" was selected by the highest percentage of children and young people, with 3 in 5 saying they read for this reason (see Figure 1).

Figure 11: Children and young people's (aged 8 to 18) motivations for reading in 2023

Category	Statement	Percentage
Curious	Reading helps me learn new words	55.6%
Curious	Reading helps me learn about new things	55.3%
Curious	Reading helps me understand the views of others	39.2%
Curious	Reading helps me learn about other people and cultures	38.5%
Mindful	Reading helps me relax	59.4%
Mindful	Reading makes me feel happy	46.0%
Mindful	Reading helps me feel more confident	29.8%
Mindful	Reading helps me deal with problems	27.3%
Social	Reading helps me to learn about the issues and causes I care about	29.7%
Social	Reading helps me feel connected to the world	25.7%
Social	Reading helps me spend time with others	12.6%

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[2] 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%).

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

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

[5] n = 43,103

In addition, nearly 1 in 2 children and young people read because it made them feel happy, 3 in 10 because it made them feel more confident, and 3 in 10 because it helped them deal with problems. This illustrates some of the ways in which reading can support children and young people's mental wellbeing.
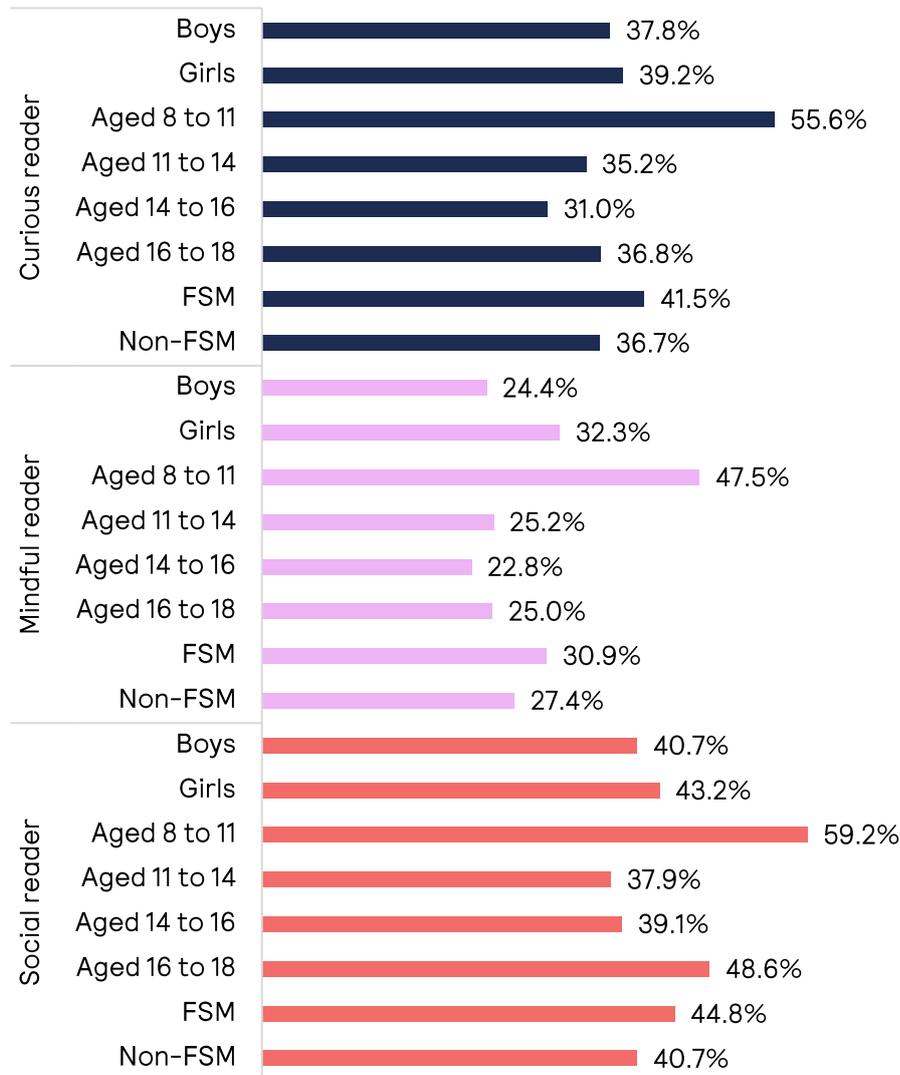
3 in 5 children and young people say that reading helps them to relax

Who reads for mental wellbeing?

While boys and girls were almost equally likely to say they were curious or social readers, more girls than boys said they were mindful readers (see Figure 2). More of those aged 8 to 11 were found in each of the three categories compared with the other age groups, with the exception of those aged 16 to 18, where more said that they were curious or social readers compared with their peers aged 11 to 14 and those aged 14 to 16.

Marginally more children and young people who received free school meals (FSMs) were found in the three categories compared with their non-FSM peers, but the differences between the two groups were small.

Figure 22: Being a curious, mindful or social reader in 2023 by gender, age group and FSM uptake

Curious reader

Boys	37.8%
Girls	39.2%
Aged 8 to 11	55.6%
Aged 11 to 14	35.2%
Aged 14 to 16	31.0%
Aged 16 to 18	36.8%
FSM	41.5%
Non-FSM	36.7%

Mindful reader

Boys	24.4%
Girls	32.3%
Aged 8 to 11	47.5%
Aged 11 to 14	25.2%
Aged 14 to 16	22.8%
Aged 16 to 18	25.0%
FSM	30.9%
Non-FSM	27.4%

Social reader

Boys	40.7%
Girls	43.2%
Aged 8 to 11	59.2%
Aged 11 to 14	37.9%
Aged 14 to 16	39.1%
Aged 16 to 18	48.6%
FSM	44.8%
Non-FSM	40.7%

Children and young people's comments also shed more light on how reading supports their mental wellbeing. Indeed, many of their comments related to the themes categorised within the 'mindful' reader group: reading to relax, reading as it makes them feel happy, reading to feel more confident, and reading to deal with problems.

"Reading helps me relax."

Children and young people told us how reading could help them relax, feel calm, imagine other worlds and lives, and prepare for sleep:

"Overall, reading can calm me down and also is a great way to fall asleep." (Boy, Y9)

"I love reading because it helps me relax and I always want to know what will happen next." (Girl, Y7)

"I enjoy reading throughout school and when I get home. I find it really relaxing to go off into another world and feel the emotions that certain characters feel, know what certain characters don't know." (Girl, Y6)

"I love to read because it makes me relaxed, and it gives me happiness." (Boy, Y7)

"I like to read because it just relaxes me, and I like to listen to audiobooks because I can imagine what's happening in the story." (Girl, Y6)

"Reading makes me feel happy."

Many told us in their own words that reading made them happy, with some expanding to describe how it could give them a sense of belonging or sharing how different formats and choices could support them in feeling happy through reading:

"I enjoy reading because it makes me feel free and happy." (Boy, Y4)

"I read lots of books at home, I read every single day and it is something that makes me feel happy and understood." (Girl, Y7)

"I personally like to read because of how it makes me feel, happy isn't the right word to describe it but in a way, it makes me feel like I belong." (Girl, Y10)

"Reading is fun and makes me happy." (Boy, Y8)

"I read comics a lot of time – almost all my free time is spent reading comics and occasionally books. Reading comics is my main and my favourite hobby, it makes me so happy. The thing I look forward to the most is reading comics. I love them." (Y11)

"I enjoy [Drop Everything and Read] time, reading books that I enjoy always makes me happy, and having a good variety of books in our school library is always helpful." (Girl, Y7)

"Reading makes me feel more confident."

Some children and young people told us that they read to build their confidence, including in other areas such as speaking:

"Reading helped me be more confident in class when speaking." (Girl, Y4)

"I really like reading because it helps me feel happy and makes me more confident like the Marcus Rashford book." (Y7 boy)

"It's relaxing and makes me feel happy and confident." (Girl, Y4)

"Reading also makes me feel confident, brave and connected to the book." (Boy, Y7)

"Reading encourages me to do things I don't do very often: it helps me feel more confident and it teaches me things that will help me in life." (Girl, Y8)

"I love reading because it makes me confident." (Boy, Y6)

"Reading helps me deal with problems."

Other children and young people shared how reading could act as an 'escape' from their daily lives:

"I like to read a lot at home because it clears my mind on what is happening at school." (Demigirl, Y7)

"Reading helps me to calm my mind and escape from the real world." (Girl, Y8)

"I [like] reading books and writing as you can get into a different world and forget about the thing and problems happening in the real world." (Boy, Y8)

"It boosts my imagination and takes me away from all the things that happen in the world." (Girl, Y5)

"If something bad happens I might read to take my mind off it." (Boy, Y7)

"[Reading] helps me get lost and take away whatever might be happening in my life at the time." (Girl, Y10)

Many children and young people tell us that reading supports their mental wellbeing.

Finally, several children and young people told us that they read to improve their mental health and wellbeing:

"I love reading because it's good for your mental health, good for your brain, and it is fun for you." (Girl, Y4)

"Reading helps with my mental health." (Boy, Y7)

"I also read to help me with my self-esteem, wellbeing, and anxiety." (Girl, Y7)

"Reading helps my mental health." (Girl, Y11)

"It is extremely good for you and your mental health so that's why I read." (Boy, Y8)

"[Books are] just fun to read, and reading about people that are happy and have a simple life makes me feel less alone." (Girl Y11).

Children and young people's comments about engaging with their school and local libraries also related to this theme, illustrating how these spaces could be happy and relaxing places to be:

"I go to my local library because it makes me happy when I see a lot of books." (Girl, Y8)

"It's my happy place at school." (Y7)

"Because I am able to experience an adventure in a place you wouldn't expect an adventure to happen." (Girl, Y6)

"I like to go because it's warm and peaceful and makes me happy." (Boy, Y4)

"I like going to a reading space because it calms me down if I have had anything happen." (Girl, Y4)

"I love going to my local library because nobody is ever there and it's local. I catch the bus or get dropped off and my mother used to work there so the librarian knows me and she gives me a cup of tea/coffee while I read, the environment makes me smile and happy!" (Boy, Y7)

To sum up

In 2018, our research demonstrated a link between reading engagement and mental wellbeing. In addition, in every year that we have surveyed children and young people, we have found that both motivations to read and comments about reading illustrate how it can support mental wellbeing.

In 2023, the statement "Reading helps me relax" garnered the highest percentage of agreement of any motivational statements, with 3 in 5 children and young people saying this. While many told us that they read for practical reasons, such as to learn new words and things, nearly 1 in 2 children and young people also said that they read because it made them feel happy, and nearly 3 in 10 as it helped them to feel confident and deal with their problems.

Children and young people's comments provided greater insight into each of these areas, with many telling us in their own words that reading helped them with mental health and wellbeing. Some shared how reading calms them, clears their mind, and takes them into another world. Other children told us that reading helps them to feel happy and confident. These positive reflections on the benefits of reading extended into some children's perceptions of reading environments, with school and public libraries described as 'happy', 'warm' and 'peaceful' places.

At a time when the value of mental wellbeing is increasingly recognised, these findings indicate the powerful and ongoing role of reading – and nurturing reading environments – in supporting children and young people's mental wellbeing.

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I read lots of books at home, I read every single day and it is something that makes me feel happy and understood.

(Girl, Y7)

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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.

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