

Children's Reading for Pleasure: trends and challenges

Why does reading for pleasure matter?

Children's reading for pleasure matters commercially and it matters socially. For the publishing industry it is business-critical (without a desire to read there is no sustainable driver for consumers to buy books and magazines). Beyond the commercial imperative there is something far more significant: reading is important to children's life chances, as well as their well-being, happiness and much more.

Reading for pleasure is not properly understood and is often confused or conflated with literacy. Reading for pleasure is *reading for enjoyment, done of free choice*, whereas literacy is *the ability to read and write*. Reading for pleasure feeds literacy because it is challenging to learn something if you don't enjoy it!

"...pleasure is fundamental to learning to read...reading for pleasure rehearses the mechanics of reading in meaningful contexts so that the reader learns to respond to text as part of the reading process"

(S Bodman, G Franklin- Which Book and Why 2014)

The impact on attainment

Reading for pleasure is more important to a child's academic success than the parents' socio-economic status. This is often quoted and comes from an OECD report. Many other studies provide evidence too, for example:

- The impact of reading for pleasure on progress in vocabulary, maths and spelling with 10-16 year olds is 4 times greater than if their parent has a degree¹
- Children who read for pleasure daily or nearly every day are a year ahead in reading performance versus those who never do²
- If all Key Stage 2 children read for pleasure daily, 75% of them would reach the level at the end of primary school that predicts 5 or more passes at GCSE – an increase of 8%³ or 112,000 children in 2017.

Reaching their potential is within every child's reach, no matter what their background is. But school league tables show there persists a huge attainment gap between rich and poor and, at the current rate, poor pupils won't catch up for decades. New school data was released in December 2018 and in January 2019 and BBC analysis suggests, at the current rate of progress, it will take 50 years to close the achievement gap in primary school, and 70 years for secondary school pupils at GCSE.

¹ Sullivan, A. and Brown, M. (2013) Social inequalities in cognitive scores at age 16: the role of reading, CLS working Paper 2013/10

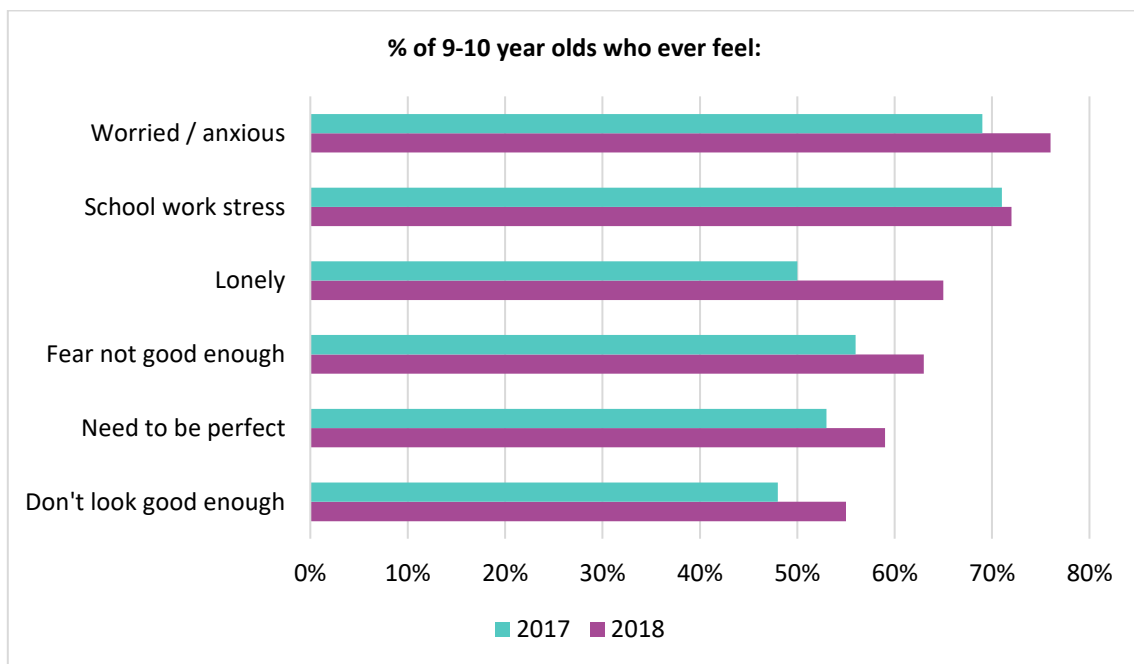
² OECD (2010), PISA 2009 Results: Learning to Learn: Student Engagement, Strategies and Practices (Volume III)

³ Department for Education analysis 2015, in relation to Mullis, I.V.S., Martin, M.O., Foy, P., & Drucker, K.T. (2012). PIRLS 2011 international results in reading.

Impact on wellbeing

Independent reading for pleasure has a positive impact on children's wellbeing. Benefits include better resilience, happiness, empathy, communication skills and relaxation. This is so important when we consider children's mental health, because currently 1 in 10 children age 5-16 suffer from diagnosable mental health disorder.⁴ Typically that might be three children in every class.

The chart below, from Childwise, illustrates the prevalence of anxieties among 9-10 year olds, and that worries have increased since 2017.



Source: Childwise Monitor Report 2019

However, a National Literacy Trust report⁵ shows that reading is positively correlated with mental wellbeing. 76% of children who have high mental wellbeing think positively about reading, whereas 48% of those who have low mental wellbeing think positively about reading. It's clear we need to encourage more children to read.

What encourages children to read for pleasure?

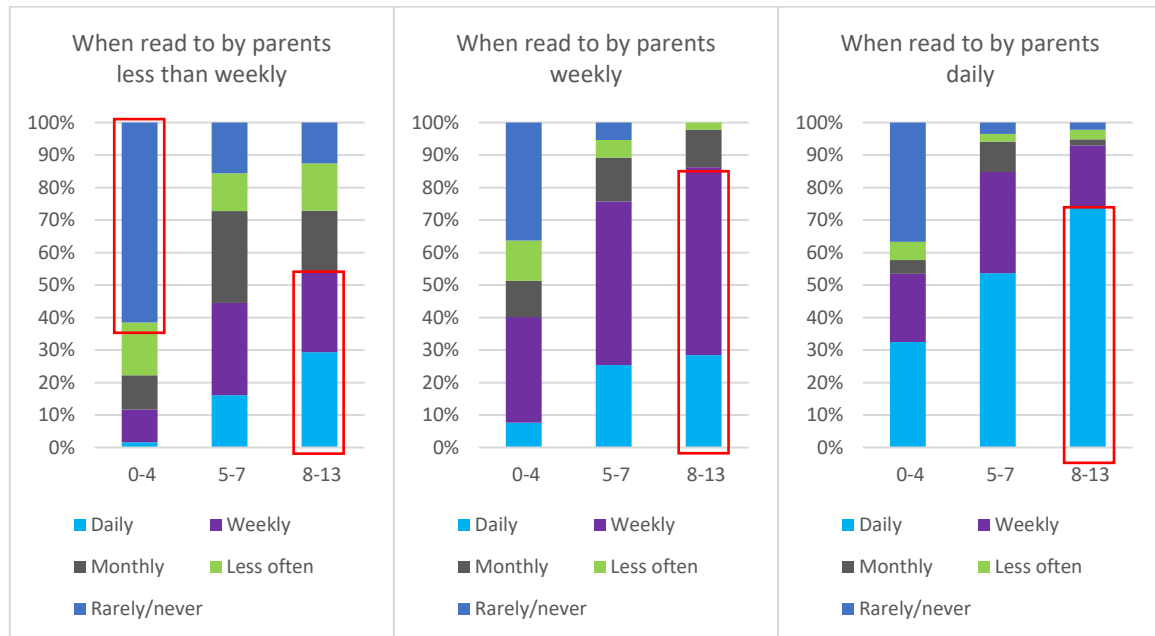
Egmont's extensive research into what helps children's reading for pleasure (www.egmont.co.uk/research) has found that a reading routine and having free choice of reading material is very important. And above all being read to, and the emotional connection between parent and child that this facilitates, is pivotal for encouraging children to read independently.

⁴ Young Minds

⁵ Mental wellbeing, reading and writing. NLT 2018

The three charts below show how often children read themselves, if they are read to by their parents:

Children read independently when they are read to by their parents



Source: Nielsen's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*, 2018

The chart on the left shows how often children read (or simply look at books, at the very young ages) when they are read to by their parents **less than weekly**. 62% of 0-4s rarely/never read (pick up a book) if they are read to this infrequently. This is because they can't properly access books and stories unless through others at this age. When 8-13s are read to less than weekly, just over half of them read to themselves at least weekly.

The middle chart shows children who are read to by their parents **weekly**. This makes a big impact on children's independent reading: now 86% of 8-13s read to themselves on at least a weekly basis.

The chart on the right shows children who are read to by their parents **daily**. The much larger proportions of children who are themselves daily independent readers is very clear. In the 8-13s example, 74% read to themselves daily, showing clearly that children are much more likely to read to themselves on a daily basis, when they are read to on a daily basis.

Far-reaching benefits

When children are read to they enjoy the same benefits as reading independently and much more besides. When reading to a child the implicit message is 'You matter enough for me to give you my time'. Children feel loved, secure and a deep sense of well-being when they are read to. This brings happiness, comfort and reassurance. There are great benefits of a reading routine like 'bath book bed', which creates quality time together in hectic family schedules. Having this time reinforces family ties, creating moments of intimacy, of parent-child bonding, and is

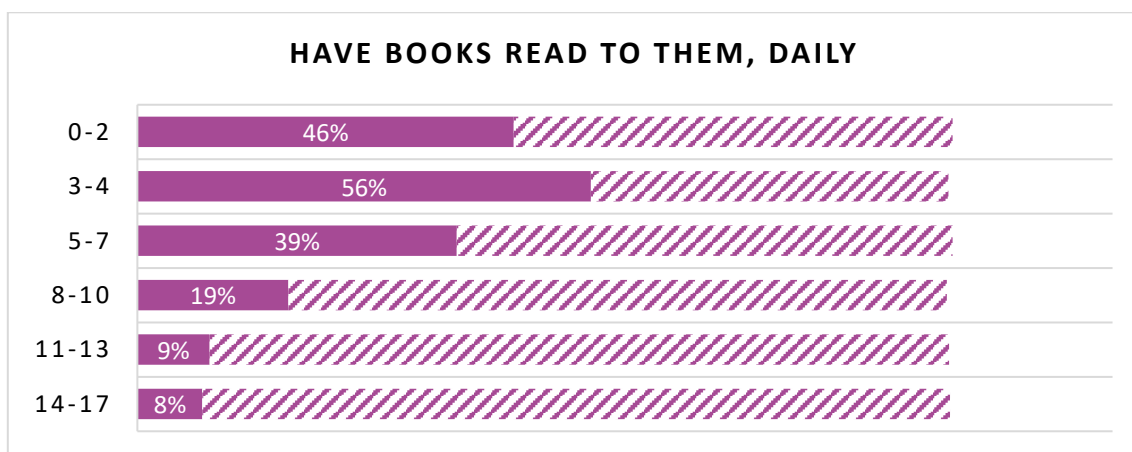
an expression of maternal / paternal love. Reading to children has a positive impact on their well-being and mental health. It builds their imagination and empathy, expands their vocabulary and communication skills. Beyond these many benefits, it also brings great joy to parents. Parents feel positive about their parenting and the shared experience becomes part of family life.

How much reading is happening?

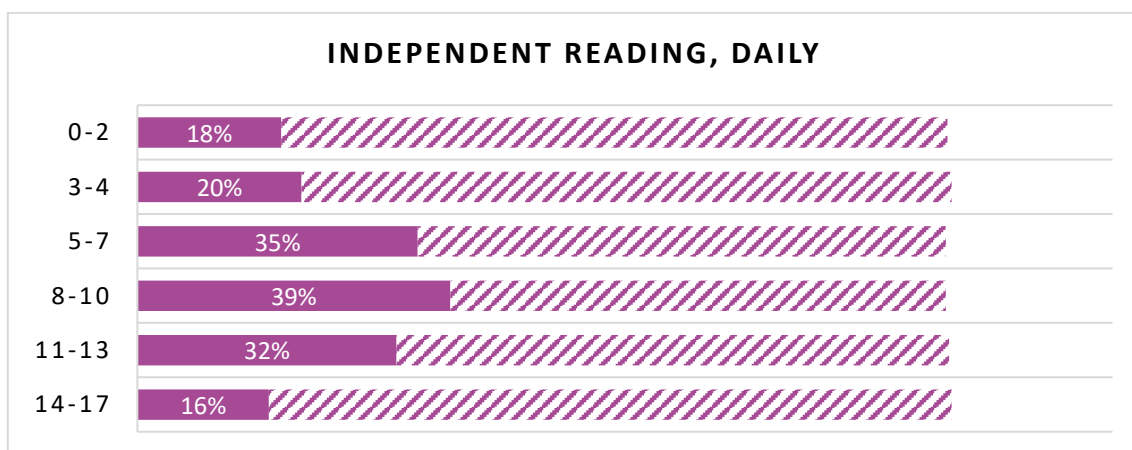
Given the vital importance of reading to children, it comes as something of a shock to realise how few children are read to daily.

- 32% of 0-13s are read to daily (36% in 2017). When this age span is extended to include the 14-17 year olds, the average comes down to 27%
- 29% of 0-13s read for pleasure daily (30% in 2017). When this age span is extended to include the 14-17 year olds, the average comes down to 27%.

Being read to (daily/nearly every day) and reading independently (daily/nearly every day) by age group is shown in the 2 charts below. There is a steep drop off in being read to at 8-10 with just 19% read to daily:



Of great concern is the independent reading (looking at books, engaging with them) of children 0-4 as these are the readers of the future:



Source: Nielsen's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer, 2018

Why do few children read for pleasure?

There are many reasons why few children read for pleasure. Having researched this for several years, at Egmont we believe there are three key factors:, but having researched this and followed trends for several years we can, with great confidence, boil it down to 3 key things that create an environment that discourages reading for pleasure:

- School: the curriculum makes reading a subject to learn, not something to do for fun
- Screens: increasing time on screen means less time for reading and other activities
- Parents: lack of awareness that they need to read to their children beyond the point at which the child can read independently

These affect all children, but the data reveals some clear differences between girls and boys. Boys are read to less than girls and spend more time on screens than girls, especially at younger ages.

Schools

The curriculum is focused on the teaching of reading. Naturally so, and of course this is critical.

However, because teaching reading is largely procedural, confined the explicit teaching of reading skills and comprehension, there is little time given to fostering a love of reading for pleasure. This is counterproductive to conveying to children that reading is fun. It makes it seem like a subject to learn. There is little choice as children have to learn through phonics and work through the book bands. Class reading materials are often not very varied. It's interesting, for instance, that 52% of boys age 8-10⁶ prefer magazines to books and only 21% of schools provide magazines for children to read for fun.⁷ Many parents perceive the goal to be their child being able to read fluently.⁸ Often parent involvement at home is simply making sure school reading is completed. Interestingly children often have a very practical and pragmatic view of reading – they certainly recognise it is important - to do well at school and get a good job – but not something they would choose to do for fun.

Screens

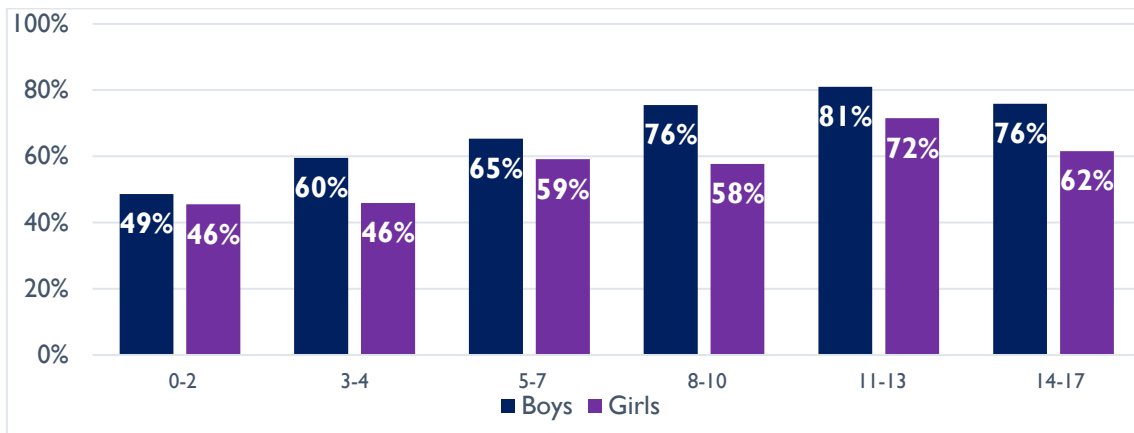
Spending time on screen is what children tend to choose to do for fun. For many children, using or watching screens is preferred to reading books, and more so for boys than girls.

⁶ Nielsen's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer 2018

⁷ Egmont/ Nielsen Understanding the Children's Book Consumer 2018

⁸ Egmont's Reading Street, Print Matters, Print Matters More and The Reading Magic Project

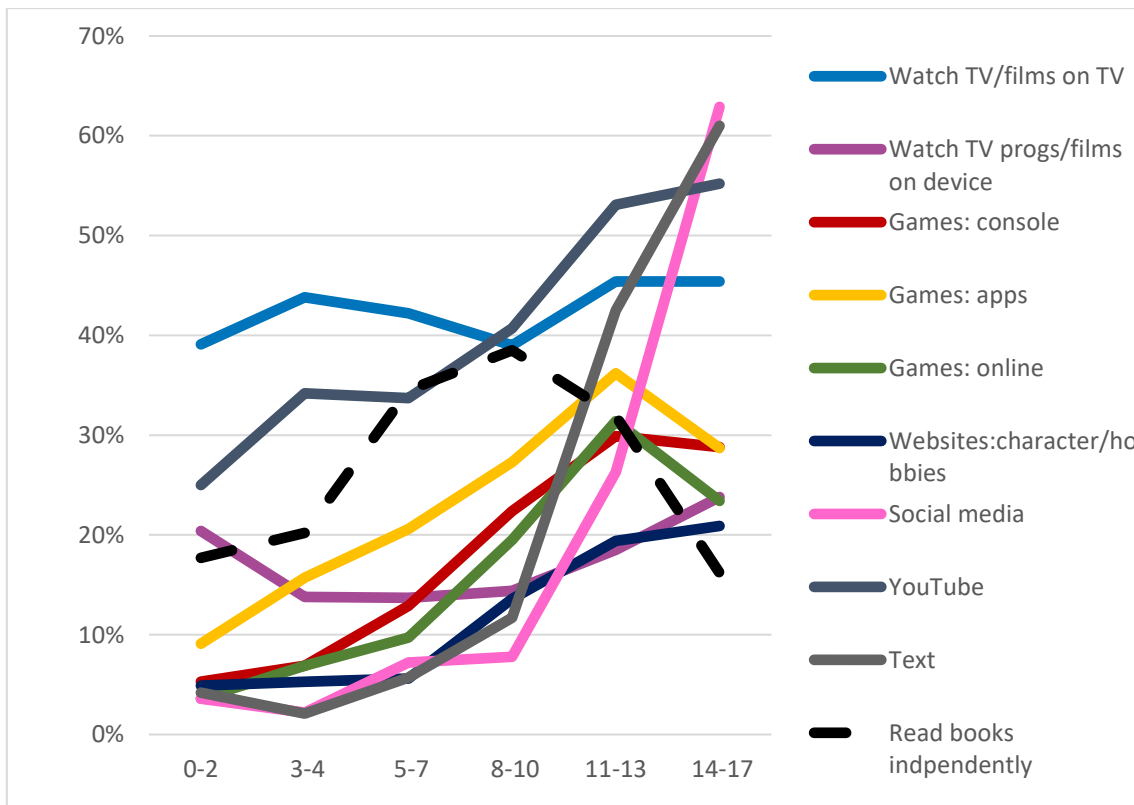
Prefer using/watching screens to reading books



Source: Nielsen's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer, 2018

Children's days are filled with screen-based activities and there is a clear sense that days are crowded with digital entertainment. At 0-2 boys and girls are similar but from 3-4 years old, gender differences emerge. For example at 3-4 years old, 36% of boys visit YouTube daily vs 32% of girls. 19% boys play on Apps daily and 13% of girls do. 10% of boys play on games on consoles daily and 4% of girls do. As they grow up, boys are generally more likely to be gaming in all its guises and girls are generally more likely to be on social media and texting, and from younger ages than boys.

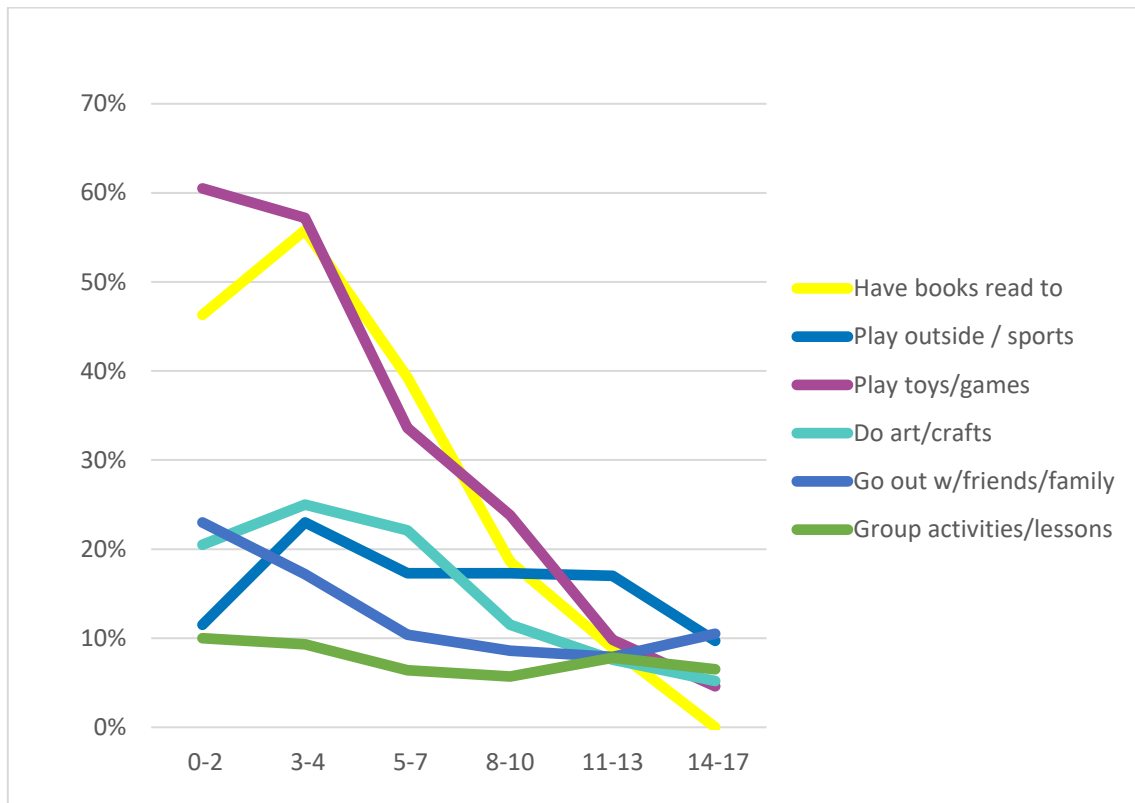
Children's Activities: daily/nearly every day – focus on screens vs independent reading



Source: Nielsen's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer, 2018

When we look at other activities, non-screen based, we can see the incidence of doing these things reduces as children grow up. The following chart shows 2018 data, and there have been some interesting changes in recent years. For instance, boys 5-10 are now less likely to get outside or play than they were in 2015. This is especially true of the 5-7s, down from 27% (2015) to 16% (2018). Playing with toys for 5-7 year old boys was 39% in 2015, down to 31% in 2018. Arts and crafts has dropped across boys 3-13 in the last few years, especially 3-4 year old boys, 28% in 2015, 23% in 2018.

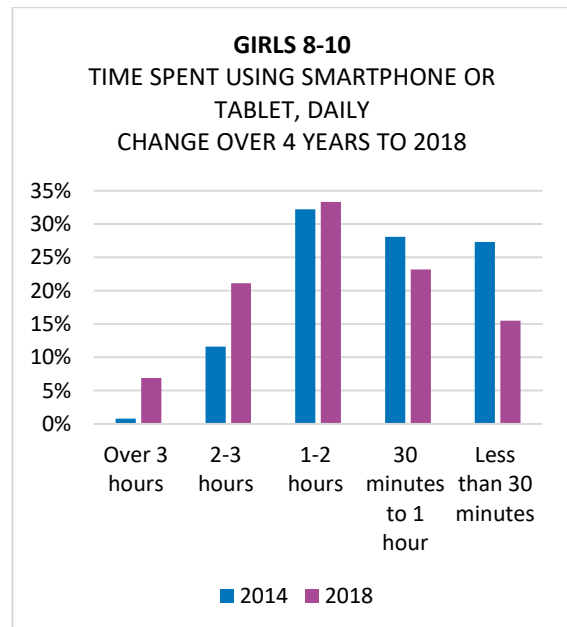
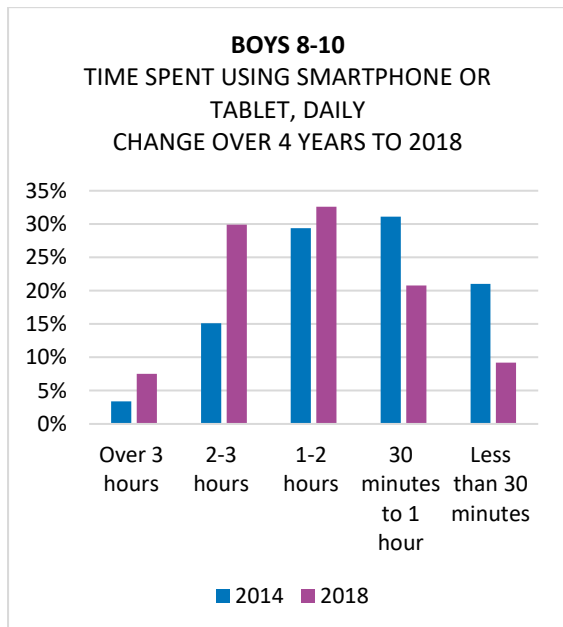
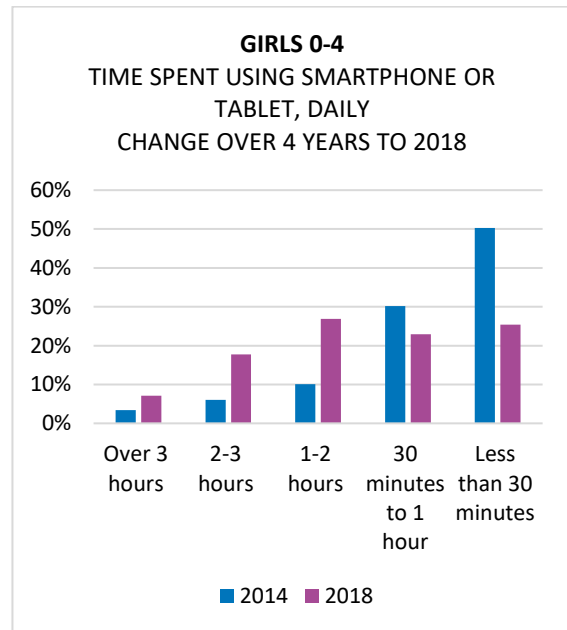
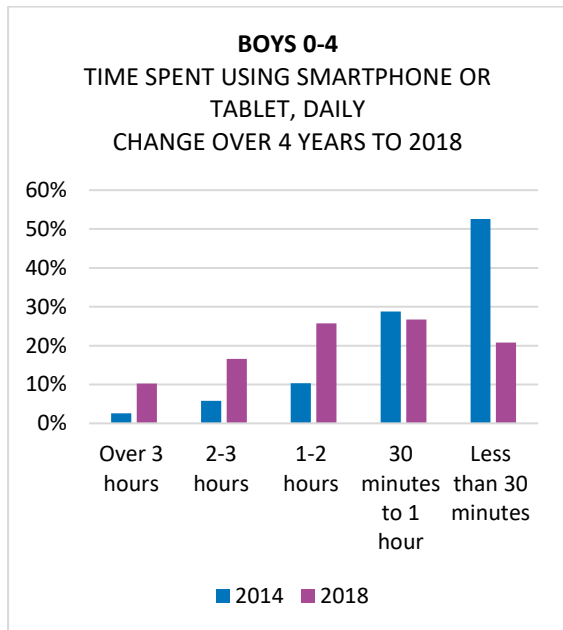
Children's Activities: daily/nearly every day: focus on non-screen vs being read to



Source: Nielsen's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*, 2018

Of the activities in the chart above, you might not expect them all to be experienced on a daily basis. Clearly Brownies, Cubs, swimming are not going to be daily. However you might expect or hope that going outside or playing sport and being read to are things done daily. Equally you might not expect screens to be something used daily. There is a sense of increasingly atomised family life and solitary children on screens.

Across all ages the trend is for short spells of time on screens to be decreasing and for longer spells of time to increase, which means reading for pleasure has some serious competition. More 3-4s are spending a longer time – 21% now spend 2-3 hours a day on a screen. In 2014, 7% of 3-4s spent 2-3 hours a day on a screen. Increasing time with screens naturally means decreasing time with other activities: there are finite hours in a day. So reading is squeezed, as is sport, being outside, arts and crafts, playing with traditional toys, sleeping and many other things besides.

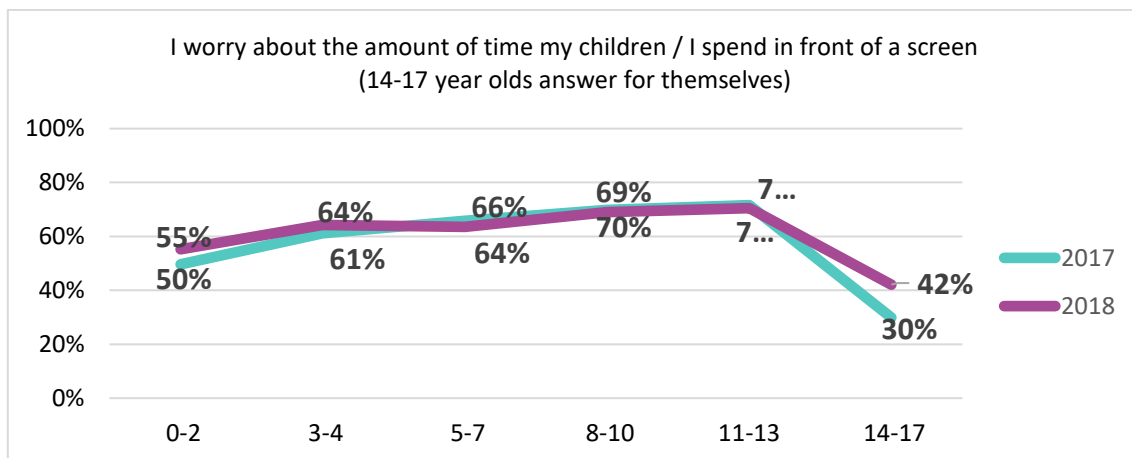


Source: Nielsen's Understanding the Children's Book Consumer, 2014 / 2018

Parents

Parents are keen for their child to read alone because it shows development: learning, growing up, becoming more independent. But they are under the misapprehension that if their child *can* read, they *will choose* to read for pleasure, and reading to an older child is regarded as babyish.

Egmont's studies show that parents are unaware of the positive impact on their child if they read to them – and also unaware of the great pleasure for themselves. Instead of seeing reading aloud as a positive thing, many see it as a chore; yet another thing to fit into their busy lives. Parents struggle with lack of time and screens and devices rule parents' worlds as much as their child's. Egmont's studies have shown that screens are very useful as babysitters when parents have lots to do.⁹ It's no surprise that screens have established a strong foothold in children's lives. And yet, 65% of parents of 0-13s worry about how much time their children spend in front of a screen.



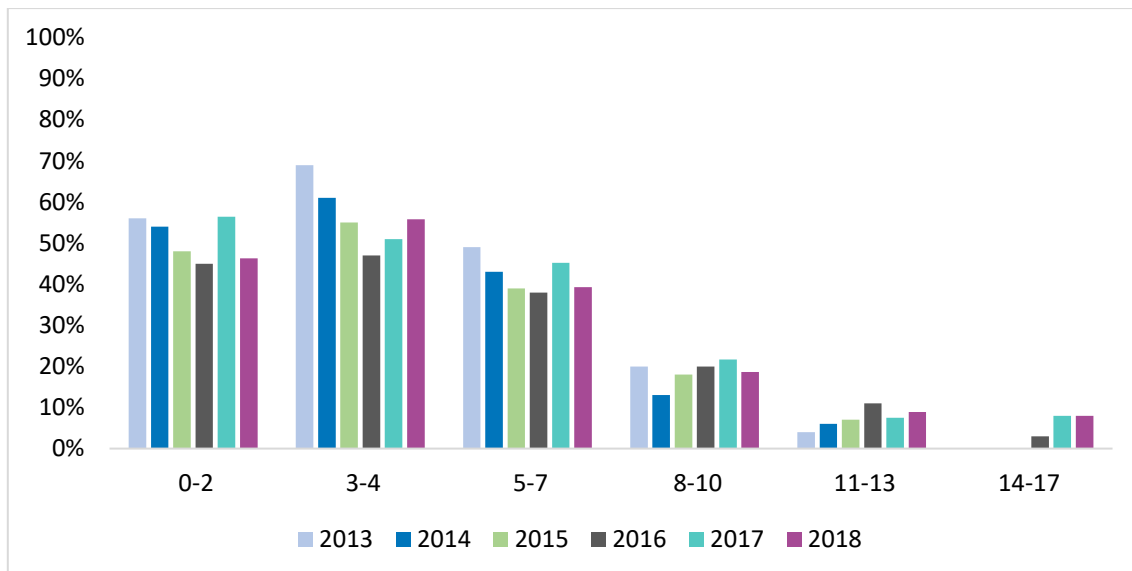
Source: Nielsen's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*, 2017 / 2018

⁹ Print Matters, Print Matters More, The Reading Magic Project

Parents are reading to children less often

Reading to children is in decline. 2018 data reveals a year-on-year decline in reading to 0-2s and 5-10s. There was a small uplift with 11-13s.

Daily reading to children: 6-year trend



Source: Nielsen's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*, 2013-2018

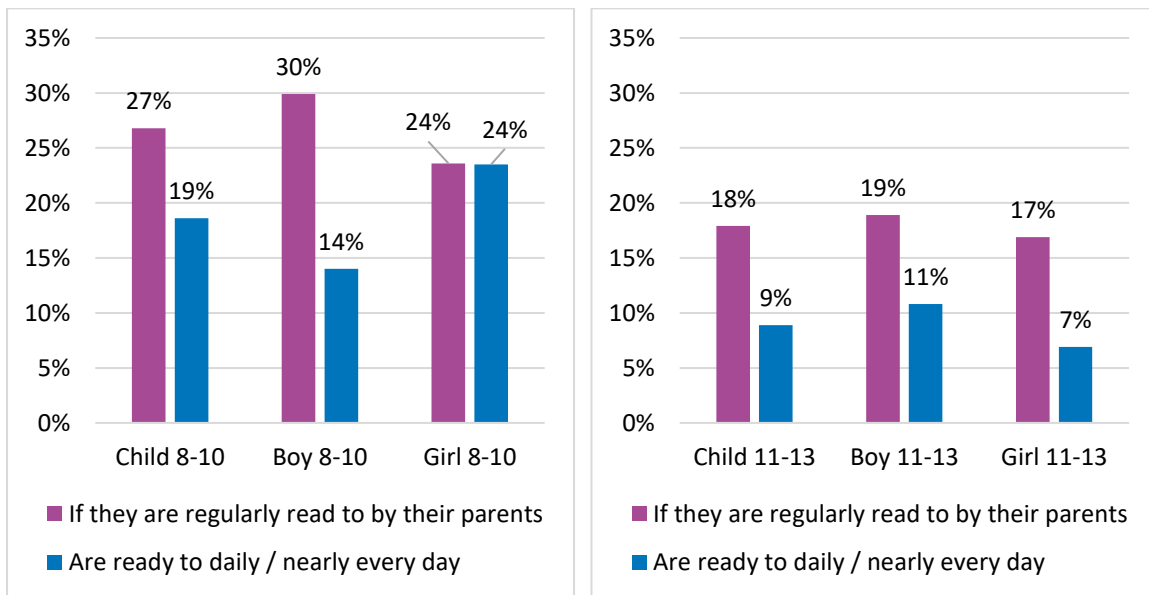
Children are not being regularly read to in any significant numbers and there continues to be very low levels of reading to children aged 8+. Not reading aloud to children daily is extremely prevalent, not just amongst disadvantaged families. In fact, the age of the child when parents stop reading to them reveals so much about parents' mistaken belief that once a child can read, the parent's role is complete.

Parents treat their sons and daughters differently. Of the 19% of 8-10s who are read to daily, it is girls who benefit the most. The 19% average comprises 14% of boys and 24% of girls. In 2018, there was an increase in reading to 3-4s in comparison with 2017. However, this was only for reading to girls. We believe the uplift is much to do with the popularity of unicorns and is proof that a trend or brand can push up reading. This is also the age group where 60% of boys prefer screens to reading books (vs 46% of girls), so it is pertinent to ask who is leading the choice of children's activities, child or parent? If boys love screens so much it stands to reason they want to be on them – but it may be at the expense of being read to.

What parents say and what they do are different

When asked in the Nielsen 2018 children's survey what most influences a child to read for fun, 27% of parents of children 8-10 say *'if they are regularly read to by their parents'*. 24% of parents of girls 8-10 believe regular reading to children will encourage them to read for fun, and 30% of parents of boys. We can compare this belief with action by looking at the proportion of parents of 8-10s who do regularly read to their child. The comparison below shows that, despite believing this *more* for boys than girls, parents read *less* to boys. There is also a mismatch with parents' belief and action with older children of both genders.

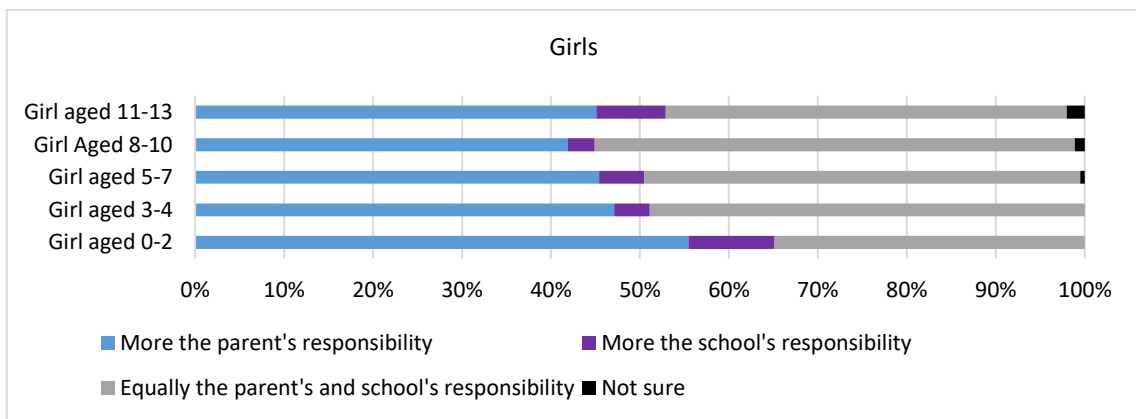
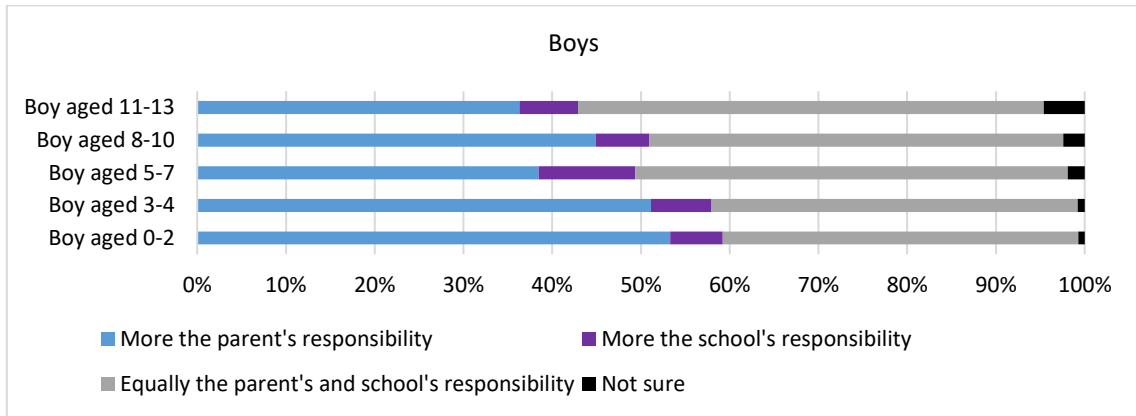
Reading for fun would be most influenced by being read to regularly, compared with regular reading to children



Source: Egmont / Nielsen's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*, 2018

Despite little participation in most families, just under half (46%) of parents consider it mainly the parents' responsibility to encourage their children to read to themselves for fun, while the same proportion think the responsibility is shared between parents and school. Few (just 7%) think it is more the schools' responsibility. The greatest likelihood of parents thinking it is the school's responsibility is boys 5-7 at 11%.

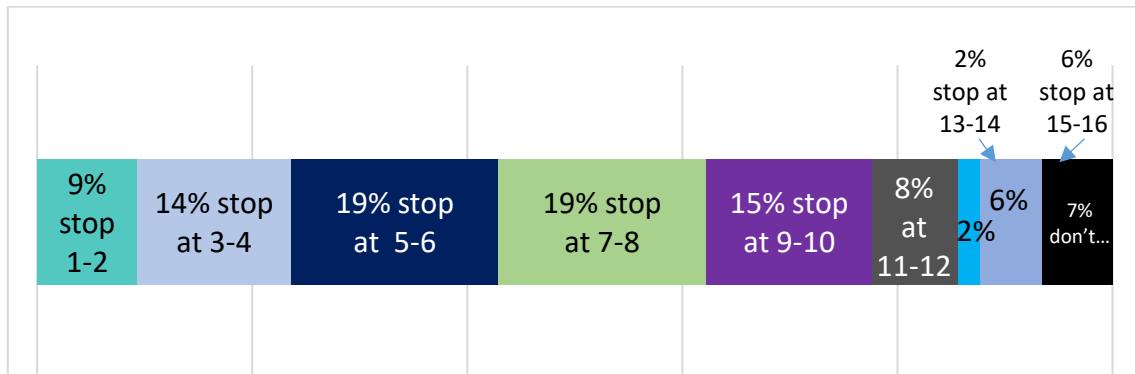
Do you think it is more a parent's responsibility to encourage their child to read for fun, or more a school's responsibility?



Source: Egmont / Nielsen's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*, 2018

At Egmont, we are keen to understand what parents think is a good age to stop reading to children. The findings from 2018, which are summarised in the chart below, are fascinating and sobering.

Up to what age do you think children should be read to, in order to encourage them to read to themselves for fun?



Source: Egmont / Nielsen's *Understanding the Children's Book Consumer*, 2018

Most commonly, parents think children should only be read to up to the age of 5-6 or 7-8 in order to encourage them to read to themselves for fun. Only 31% of parents believe that children should be read to beyond the age of 8, and only 16% beyond the age of 10. There are significant numbers who think it's enough to stop at very young ages: 24% feel they need only to read to their child until the age of four or under. The different attitudes to boys emerges again: 18% of parents of girls think reading to their child up to the age of 9 or 10 is enough; 13% of parents of boys.

Summary

It is clear that reading for pleasure is confused with literacy in school life, in the minds of parents and in the minds of children. It's more likely to be regarded as a subject to learn than a pleasure to delight in. What is seen as fun is screen time, and children spend more and more time on screens. It's squeezing reading and other activities, too. Parental anxiety about screens is high and growing.

It's clear that parents treat boys differently to girls. Fewer boys are read to than girls and boys spend more time on screen than girls, and especially at younger ages.

Children not being read to is not only an issue of disadvantage; it's a pervasive problem. Of course, there are big issues around disadvantaged families, but data shows us that it's the wider cohort of families, who don't read to their children frequently and who cease to do it in the primary school years.

Among parents, there is a prevalent and damaging lack of awareness. They don't know they need to read to their children throughout childhood to make reading for pleasure happen; that reading aloud to their child is pivotal for the child's enthusiasm, enjoyment and independent reading; that they, too, will enjoy it! Indeed, parents are done a great disservice. We need to ask ourselves a hard question – *why don't they know?* Why do only 16% think they need to read to their child beyond the age of 10 years old. Why don't they know about the joy of it?