



# The Reading Paradox: How Our Focus on Literacy is Undermining Reading for Pleasure

## READING TRENDS 2026

### Introduction

Reading for pleasure feeds children's interests and passions, it supports their understanding of the world, including, importantly, worlds beyond their experience, and enables children to achieve more academically. Children who read for pleasure develop richer vocabulary, build empathy and have better wellbeing – benefits that apply across all social backgrounds. The OECD identifies reading for pleasure as one of the most powerful tools for social mobility available to educators and policymakers.

Yet reading for pleasure among UK children is in freefall. This paper draws on HarperCollins' extensive research,<sup>1</sup> now in its 15<sup>th</sup> year, updated reading trend data from 2025, our new research from NielsenIQ, plus our 2026 research '*Reading Connections: Learning to Read vs. Choosing to Read*', in collaboration with The Reading Agency, to examine why – and what we can do about it.

We find a critical paradox: parents and schools both recognise that reading for pleasure matters, but their understandable focus on literacy skills is actively undermining it. However, there is encouraging news. Reading engagement among older children is rising, and parents are hungry for guidance. We have a window of opportunity.

HarperCollins is a proud supporter of the UK National Year of Reading's 'Go All In' campaign, which brings necessary and timely focus to the crisis in children's reading. We are proud to have influenced the thinking behind this campaign and we are steadfast in our mission to make every child a proud reader.



## The Reading Paradox: Literacy And Enjoyment In Tension

Here lies the central problem: parents do not understand that advancing their child's **literacy** requires a different approach from nurturing their child's **reading for pleasure**.

These two aspects of reading are interconnected but distinct:

- **Literacy is the essential skill of learning to decode and comprehend text**
- **Reading for Pleasure is voluntary reading that brings personal enjoyment and satisfaction**

Both matter profoundly. But literacy can be taught and assessed, unlike reading for pleasure, which must be encouraged, modelled and protected from pressure.

We can imagine literacy and reading for pleasure as two sides of the same coin, each with equal importance. But it's as if this metaphorical coin is weighted and always lands literacy side up; parents, teachers, journalists and policymakers emphasise reading *progress* – understandably so. But this focus risks undermining the very goal of creating lifelong readers.

**The unintended consequence:** when families and schools emphasise literacy instruction, assessment and homework, reading becomes synonymous with work. Children experience it as pressure. And pressure kills pleasure.

Learning to read is of the utmost importance. But so is ensuring children experience excitement in reading and feel it is relevant and 'for them'. The better children's literacy skills, the more likely they are to enjoy reading: these skills can be taught and practised. Reading for pleasure can't be taught; it requires a different approach. It needs to be encouraged and coaxed; budding interest needs to be nurtured through sustained support. This is separate from reading instruction and reading homework.

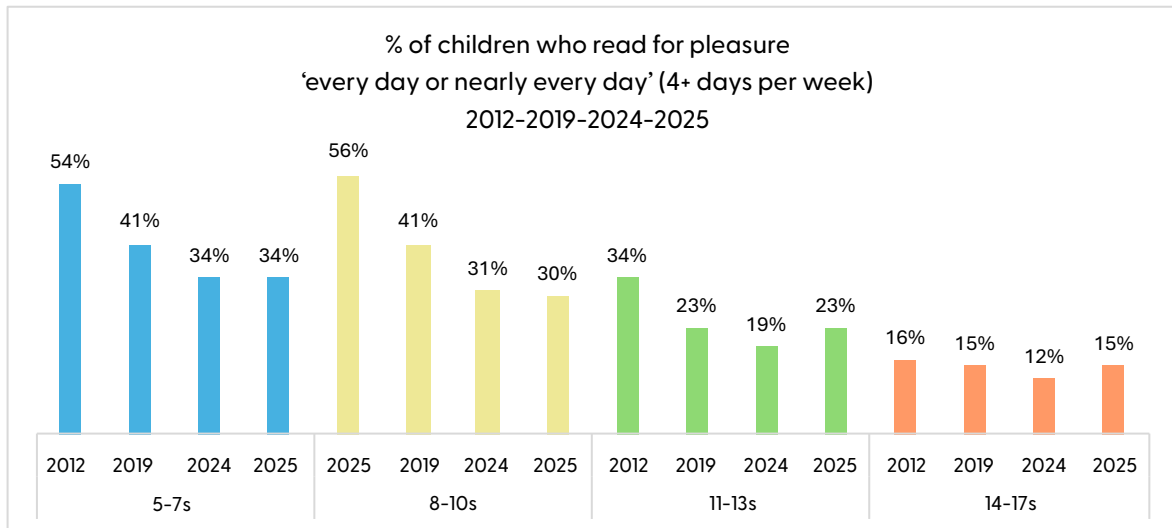
### Shifting the emphasis

Children's reading must go beyond tasks. When families and schools consistently provide enjoyable, pressure-free reading experiences, children find pleasure in reading. In school, daily storytime creates a joyful atmosphere. Our [Storytime in School](#) research shows children become excited and motivated to read when they experience pressure-free storytime as a consistent class routine.

In the home, reading aloud to children daily throughout childhood (or as near to daily as is feasible) is the cornerstone of developing a reading-for-pleasure habit, establishing a family tradition and providing a springboard for children's independent reading. If parents stop reading to children once they can read independently, they are setting them loose from their reading moorings – cutting the anchor that keeps them connected to books. Children are very easily distracted by technology and often negatively affected by the instructional approach to reading in school. Reading can easily tail off and gradually disappear. They need the reading routine to help them embed a positive attitude to reading and maintain a personal reading-for-pleasure habit.

## The Current State: Reading For Pleasure In Decline

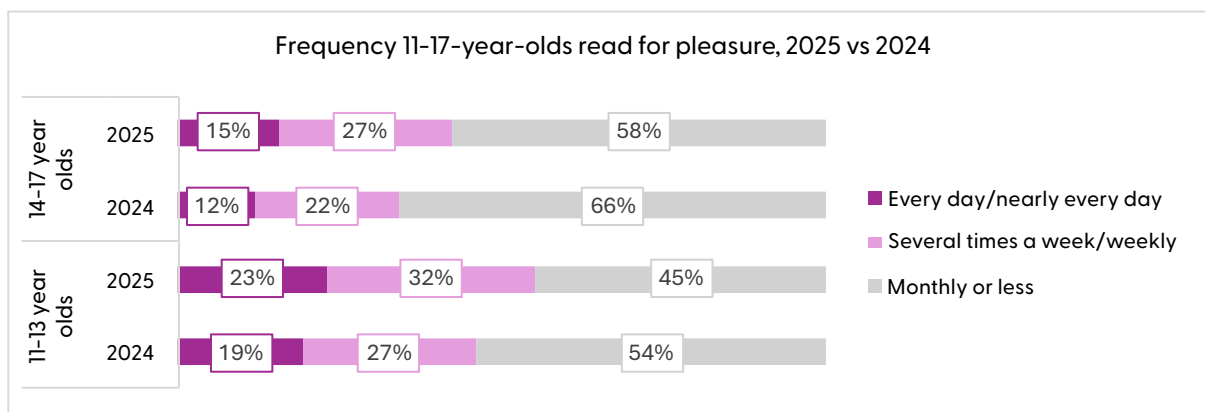
The headline figures are stark: daily reading for pleasure has collapsed from **39%** in 2012 to just **25%** in 2025 among 5-17-year-olds, while the proportion who rarely or never read has tripled from **5%** to **15%**. But these averages conceal important variations by age:



Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2012/ 2019/ 2024/ 2025

## A Turnaround Among Teenagers?

There are some signs of recovery.<sup>ii</sup> In 2025, both daily and weekly reading increased year-on-year among boys and girls aged 11-17. Among the hardest-to-reach group – 14-17-year-old boys – those who never read fell from **36%** to **30%**.



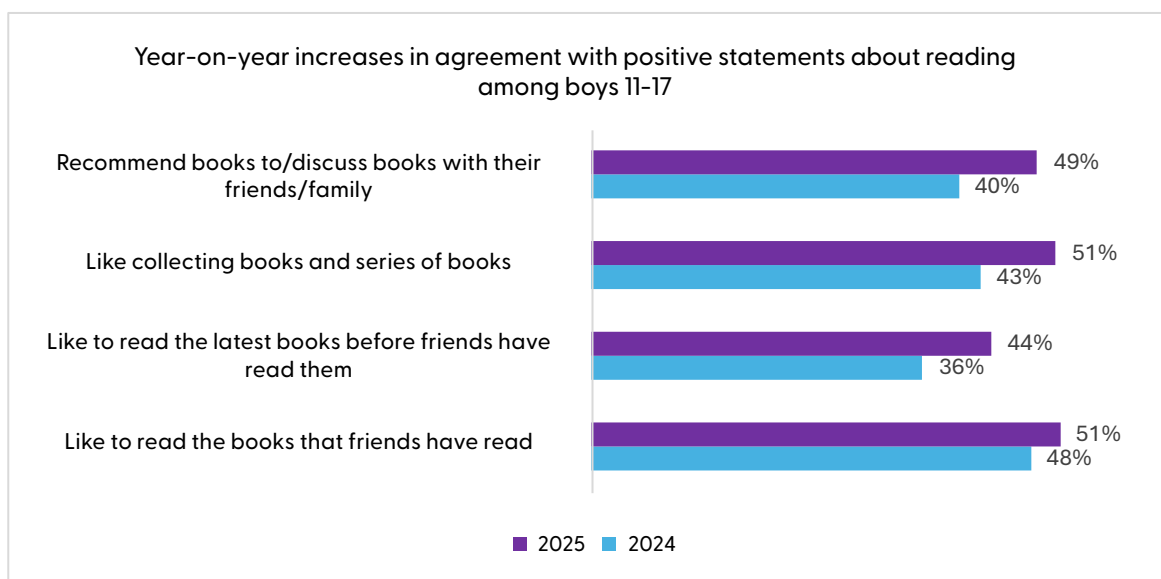
Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer' 2024/ 2025

More striking still, attitudes are shifting. Fewer teens think “books aren’t cool” (down from **45%** to **38%**), and fewer say they’d “rather watch TV, play video games or go online than read” (down from **76%** to **69%**).<sup>iii</sup>

What’s driving this? The rise of BookTok and YouTube as methods of book discovery suggests reading is becoming social again – something to find and share with peers, not just a solitary activity or school task. Among 14-17s, discovery through BookTok rose from **23%** in 2024 to **27%** in 2025; among 11-17s, discovery via YouTube rose from **25%** to **30%**.

There has also been an increase in engagement with positive statements about reading among boys aged 11-17 in 2025 (among girls, scores remain broadly the same as 2024).

Kai Cenat, celebrity Twitch streamer with over 20 million followers, launched a new YouTube channel in January 2026 called Kai’s Mind, focusing on reading books aloud and engaging with viewers through book streaming



Source: NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2024/ 2025

This aligns with HarperCollins’ [‘Social Reading Spaces’](#) research with the School Library Association: when pressure is removed and reading becomes social, even reluctant teens engage.

### The problem starts young

However, progress among younger children has stalled. Only **32%** of 5-10-year-olds read daily for pleasure in 2025 – unchanged for three years and down sharply from **55%** in 2012. Worryingly, the proportion of 5-7-year-olds who rarely or never read rose from **8%** to **11%** in a single year.<sup>iv</sup>

This age group should be the most engaged, yet we’re seeing a troubling shift towards less frequent reading at precisely the stage when habits form.

## Why Children Don't Read For Pleasure

Since 2012, our research has identified four persistent barriers:

- **Reading feels like work.** Children associate reading with pressure, assessment and learning – not pleasure – so they avoid it in free time.
- **They're not read to enough.** Many are read to infrequently; some not at all, often because parents see it as a task, not a pleasurable shared activity.
- **Book discovery is hard.** They struggle to find books, genres and authors they enjoy.
- **Screens win.** Technology successfully monopolises children's attention and free time.

These barriers are interconnected. When reading is framed primarily as a skill to master rather than a source of joy, the other barriers become harder to overcome.

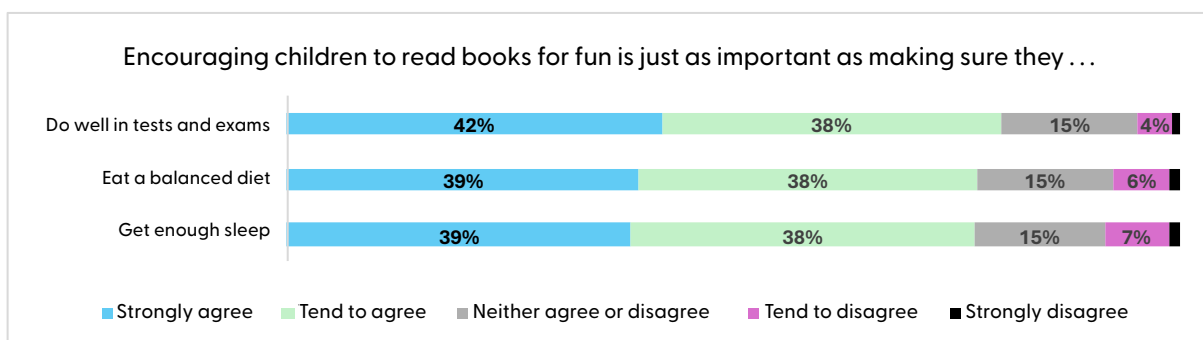
## What Encourages Children To Read For Pleasure

- **Remove pressure! Make reading fun. Make reading social.**
- **Read to children, frequently and throughout childhood.** This makes time for reading and helps establish a reading habit. It is a happy experience; children associate reading with enjoyment and are much more likely to read themselves.
- **Provide wide choice:** reading materials should feel exciting and relevant.
- **Allow free choice of what and when to read, giving them a feeling of autonomy and agency.** Children need to feel the decision is their own.

## What Parents Think vs. What They Do

Parents overwhelmingly agree reading for pleasure matters: **41%** say it's *more* important than ever, and **44%** say it's *just as* important.<sup>v</sup> Most (**71%**) wish their children (0-13) would spend more time reading books – an increase from **65%** in 2019. Interestingly, 14-17-year-olds (who answer the NielsenIQ survey for themselves) also wish they spent more time reading books (**60%** in 2025, vs **50%** in 2019).<sup>vi</sup>

Indeed, parents see reading for pleasure as a fundamental part of childhood, with around two in five strongly agreeing and a further two in five tending to agree that *encouraging children to read books for fun is just as important as making sure they have a balanced diet, enough sleep and do well in tests and exams.*



Source: HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025.

Yet this belief doesn't translate into action – because parents don't understand how reading for pleasure works or what they should do differently from supporting literacy homework.

*I've never been a big reader. I don't read a lot but I think it's important for kids to read and like reading. So, yeah, I get them to read a book and I also like them to relay what they have learned because a lot of time they just read it and they are not taking anything in.*

C, Dad to girl (11) and boy (8)

HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group, January 2026

Most parents (**56%**) recognise that encouraging reading for pleasure is a joint responsibility between home and school and one third think it's more the parents' responsibility; only **9%** think it's solely the school's job.<sup>vii</sup> But when we asked *why* parents read to their 5-10-year-olds, the top two reasons were literacy-focused:

- **To help develop reading skills (47%)**
- **To improve vocabulary (46%)**
- **To encourage reading for enjoyment (42%)**

In other words, **58% of parents did not select enjoyment as a reason** for reading to their child.

Even more telling: **38%** of parents of 5-10s agree that *ensuring my child does their reading homework is a higher priority than me reading books to them for fun* – rising to **41%** among parents of 8-10-year-olds.<sup>viii</sup>

*It's hard to not make reading a chore for them.*

M, Dad to girls (7 and 4)

HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group

## The Message Isn't Getting Through

Reading aloud to children throughout childhood is the single most powerful way to build a reading-for-pleasure habit. Yet:

- **Only 40% of 5-7-year-olds are read to daily (up slightly from 36% in 2024)**
- **Only 23% of 8-10-year-olds are read to daily**
- **Only 40% of 3-4-year-olds are read to daily (down from 68% in 2012)**

**Three-fifths of 3-7-year-olds are not read to daily.**<sup>ix</sup> This has grave implications both for children starting school and for reading for pleasure as they grow older. Children are made readers on the laps of their parents<sup>x</sup> – yet many children are not having a positive association with reading before they start school.

## Why the disconnect?

Parents' personal experience as children can affect their thinking about their own children's reading and what they do. For example, those who were not read to themselves don't automatically include reading to their children in their parenting repertoire.

*My mum didn't sit down with us and read. It was like, well, that's what you do in school, so when I've got you I want you to do more activities and creative stuff. Bonding with my son is movies or Mario Kart. He likes me reading to him. If he's not good, his punishment is me not reading a book to him.*

K, Mum to boy (6)

HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group

*My parents were never there to read me a book because they didn't read, they couldn't read. So that's the barrier, but obviously I want to change things for my son.*

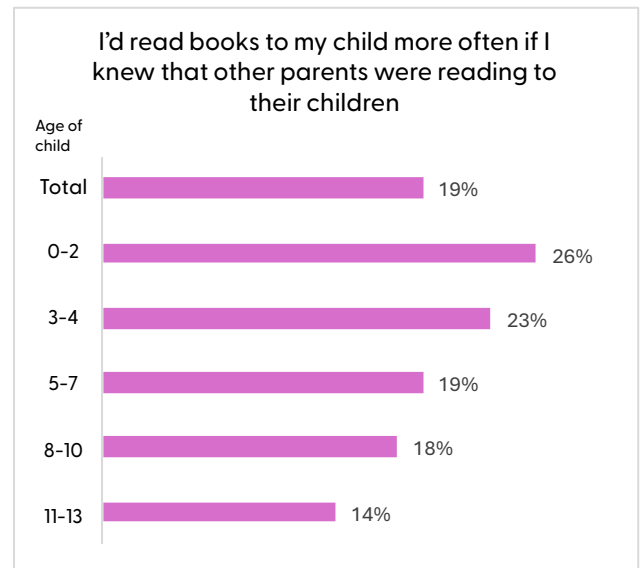
K, Mum to boy (6)

HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group

Peer groups, broader culture and parenting movements also affect behaviours. The power of shared values, beliefs and behavioural norms is evident: **19%** of parents of 0-13s (and **24%** of Gen Z parents) say they would read books to their child more often if they thought other parents were reading to their children (peaking at **26%** of parents of 0-2s).<sup>xi</sup> This data is positive for Go All In – a collective cultural movement raising awareness of reading for pleasure among adults.

The Reading Agency finds over half of 16-44s say they struggle to focus on reading themselves, due to distractions around them,<sup>xii</sup> and one in five UK adults say their ability to focus on reading has worsened over the last three years. Children are seeing reading for pleasure modelled less often.

We also need to consider how parents of pre-schoolers are getting information about reading to their children. Among school-age children, obviously the school is a key source of information, but only **32%** of parents of 5-10s say their child's teacher talks to them about the importance of reading books to their child.<sup>xiii</sup> However, in great contrast, **83%** of primary school teachers say that this academic year they have communicated with parents or carers about the importance of reading books to their child.<sup>xiv</sup> How do we explain this mismatch? It's clear that *what* is communicated about reading matters enormously. Part of the challenge is lack of clarity: reading for pleasure is not the same as literacy instruction, but this distinction isn't always made clear to parents. Without understanding *why* reading for pleasure is important and what to do to make it happen, without the personal experience of being read to as a child, parents focus their energy on supporting their child's literacy progression.



Source: HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

When I went to the last parents' evening, the teacher was trying to say, like, Ah, you should do more reading at home. You should do this at home. But she wasn't being clear with what I need to do.

R, Mum to girl (4)

HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group

We asked parents to what degree they feel the school environment or approach encourages or discourages their child from reading for pleasure:<sup>xv</sup>

- Only 28% of parents of 5-13s think school strongly encourages reading for pleasure (25% for boys, 31% for girls)

14-17-year-olds, who answer the survey themselves, are less positive: only 20% say the school environment or approach strongly encourages them to read for enjoyment.

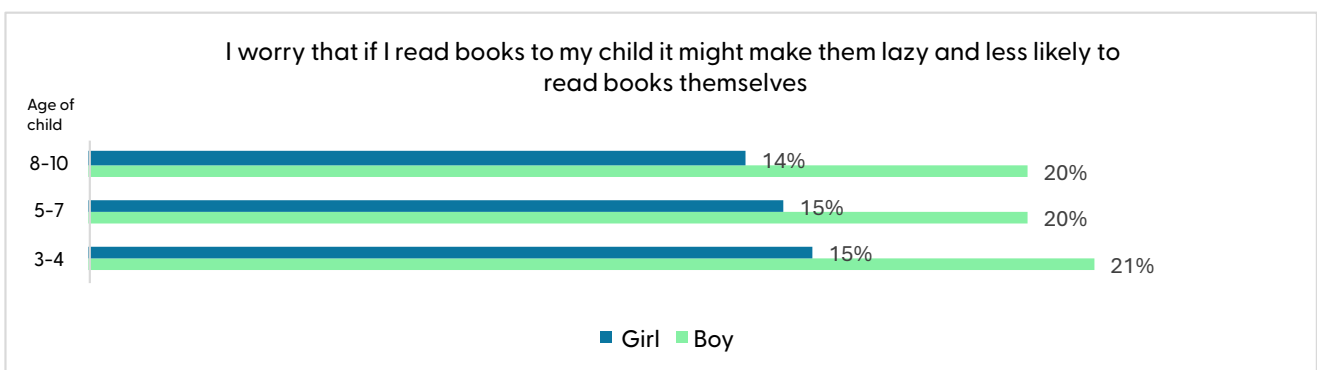
Many schools do outstanding work with reading for pleasure, with clear strategies and positive outcomes – the HarperCollins annual [Reading for Pleasure awards](#), in association with The Open University and The UK Literacy Association, celebrate excellence and best practice. But with nationally representative statistics showing such limited impact, it's evident that something is amiss.

### Parents don't understand the impact

Our focus groups, in collaboration with The Reading Agency, in London and Birmingham (January 2026) revealed a fatalistic attitude: parents assume some children will love books and others will “grow out of reading” – it's the “luck of the draw.”

**They don't know it's not chance.** Children who are read to frequently are far more likely to read for pleasure themselves. Parents believe reading for pleasure is important, but many don't know this solution exists.

Moreover, a significant minority of parents, especially of boys, worry that reading to their child will make them lazy and less likely to read independently – exactly backwards.



Source: HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025.

## Reading As Drudgery

Many parents experience supporting their children's reading – both literacy and pleasure – as a chore to fit into overstretched family life. Lack of time affects both obligatory reading homework and, as parents see it, optional reading for enjoyment.

*It's the chaos of life . . . you turn around, it's eight, half eight, and you haven't got reading done.*  
T, Dad to girl (4)

HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group

Parents told us they know they are expected to read with their child every day. They interpret this as supporting literacy homework: sitting with and listening to their younger children reading aloud, correcting mistakes, checking vocabulary and asking comprehension questions. Some parents feel they have to do more teaching at home than the school provides. Some said they feel overwhelmed by expectations. Homework plus spellings plus reading together was described as “too much” at times.

When the focus is on reading as a skill to learn, it is imbued with a sense of task for children. When parents think of it this way, it's a task for them, too. 22% of parents of 5-7s say *filling in my child's reading homework diary feels like homework for me.*<sup>xvi</sup>

*It's tedious when they have the same book for a week, there is only so much you can add to the notes every day. You don't get much direction – I write 'she read well' but is that what they are looking for?*

R, Mum to girl (4)

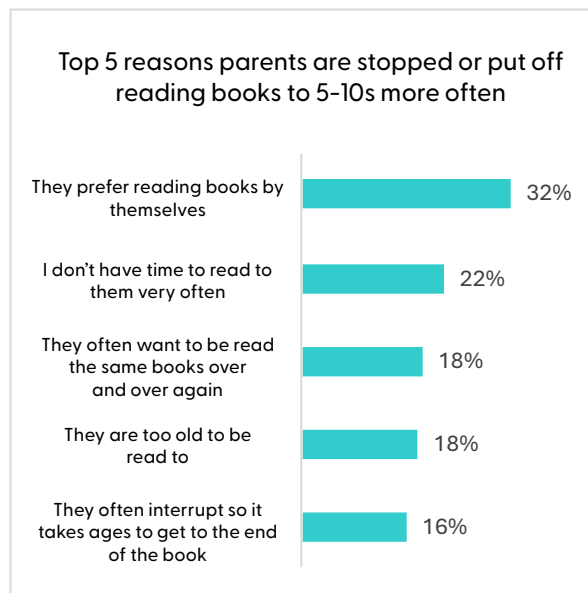
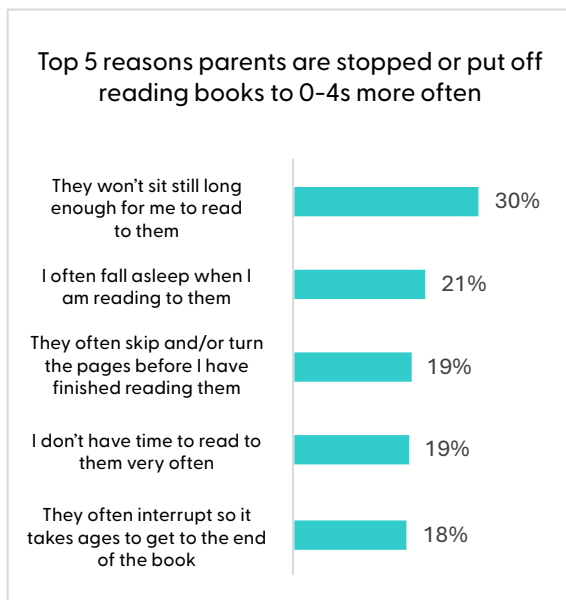
HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group

When we asked parents who read to their children *less than weekly* what stops them reading to them more frequently, the barriers revealed a telling mindset:

- *They want the same books over and over again (18% of parents of 5-10s)*
- *They interrupt so it takes ages to get to the end (18% of parents of 0-4s and 16% of parents of 5-10s)*
- *They won't sit still long enough for me to read to them (30% of parents of 0-4s)*
- *They often skip and/or turn the pages before I have finished reading them (19% of parents of 0-4s)*

These responses suggest a sense of tedium and expose the fundamental misunderstanding: parents see reading as skills practice, not pleasure.

One third of parents of 5-10s say their child *prefers reading by themselves* and **18%** say their child is *too old to be read to* (rising to **40%** for parents of 11-13-year-olds). Of course, a child who has learned to decode no longer *needs* to be read to for instruction. But they still need to be read to for the enjoyment it brings, for habit forming and for encouragement to read independently.



Source: HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025. Base: parents of 0-13s who read to their child less than weekly

## The Missed Connection

Parents are anxious. They worry about:

- **Academic pressure on their children**
- **Excessive screen time (64% are concerned)<sup>xvii</sup> – it is prominent in the news and the prevailing mood of the time**
- **Lack of quality family time**
- **Their children's happiness and wellbeing**

Reading for pleasure addresses all of these – yet parents don't know it.

*My son is at school from 7.30 to 5.30 and he is reading every day as part of the curriculum, so then to come home and then do that with him again is too much. He doesn't like reading, so he's just doing it because he has to. It's not like he enjoys it, if I'm being honest.*

K, Mum to boy (9)

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*My son already is obsessed with looking at things on a tablet or my wife's phone. Given the choice, he'd sit and look at screens and the TV all day. And we have to ration it. It's like junk food. We have to limit it.*

S, Dad to boy (4)

HarperCollins and The Reading Agency Focus Group

Family life is very busy, and parents feel their children are under significant pressure. They want their children to be happy and have time to relax. They want quality tech-free family bonding time, and they don't realise reading for pleasure can deliver this. They view reading as a task – like homework – not as fun, and favour creative or social activities, play or sport instead.

*Family time would be, like, bowling, or soft play, activities. Or a movie. Not sat down to read a book. It wouldn't even cross my mind, to be honest.*

F, Mum to boy (10)

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On average, only **29%** of parents of 0–13-year-olds are well aware that *children who read for pleasure are happier*; **39%** are aware to some extent, and **28%** are not aware. Among parents educated to GCSE level, **39%** are unaware of this link. Among those who rarely read to their 8–11-year-old, **38%** don't know.<sup>xviii</sup> Tellingly, parents are most likely to know this if they frequently read to their child – if you do it, you know it.

## Parents Want Clarity

Our focus groups found they want to understand:

- **Why reading for pleasure matters (beyond literacy skills)**
- **How it differs from reading homework**
- **What they should do – with specific, practical ideas**

Parents felt they'd been given little rationale for reading aloud "just for fun". They wanted to understand the benefits to motivate them to act. They wanted understandable explanation and guidance – plenty of ideas of what to do.

**The power of this approach became immediately clear.** One week after our first focus group session, parents reported they'd been inspired to read to their children more often and to read more themselves. They'd gained practical ideas from other parents, learning from the 'good practice' shared by others. They felt they had a bigger role to play than they'd realised. Some committed to modelling reading behaviour, accepting that their children learn by example and showing determination to make a concerted effort to read more themselves. There was a sense of empowerment about making a real difference to their children's development.

## A Window Of Opportunity

The relentless focus on measuring literacy progress in schools has had an unintended consequence: it has pushed reading for pleasure to the margins. Parents have received this message loud and clear, equating their children's reading with learning tasks rather than enjoyment. This creates a pressured approach both at school and at home –precisely what kills the pleasure in reading.

But we now have a unique opportunity. Parental anxiety about screen-dominated childhoods has never been higher, and the National Year of Reading is creating unprecedented public focus. We can reposition reading for pleasure as the answer parents are looking for.

**Reading aloud to children as an act of reclaiming childhood.** Family reading offers parents a way to take back control from technology, create meaningful connection, and make a lasting difference to their children's happiness and life chances.

Children cannot self-regulate around screens. Without active, informed parental support for reading for pleasure – distinct from schoolwork, focused on joy – children lose their connection to books easily. Technology has eliminated the idle moments when children might pick up a book; it attracts children's attention and time and has changed childhood fundamentally. Parents must now consciously create time and space for reading to become a joyful family tradition.

**Parents don't know what they don't know.** We must give them:

- A clear understanding of the difference between literacy and reading for pleasure
- Compelling evidence of why reading for pleasure matters – for happiness, wellbeing, and yes, academic success too
- Practical ways to nurture it at home
- They want this information. They're worried about their children.  
Reading for pleasure is something powerful they can do.

## What Is The Size Of The Prize?

We know that reading aloud to children frequently is a very powerful motivator for children to read independently. **59%** of the 5–7-year-olds who are read to every day also read every day themselves.<sup>xix</sup>

**38%** of 5–7-year-olds are read to 'several times a week/ weekly'. Based on population estimates that there are 2.33m 5–7-year-olds ([Statista 2024](#)), this means they number ~880,000. What could the impact be if we could shift parents to reading to them daily? We could reasonably anticipate **59%** of those children (i.e. ~519,000) would be motivated to read for pleasure every day themselves. This would move the total 5–7s who choose to read daily for enjoyment to ~ 1.4m, or over half the population of 5-7s. This is clearly a prize worth going for.

## A Movement Within Reach

The evidence is clear: we have a rare opportunity to transform children’s reading. By helping parents understand that encouraging reading for pleasure requires a different approach from supporting literacy – that both are essential, both are achievable – and by giving them practical tools and compelling reasons to act, we can make change happen. This is not wishful thinking: parents are seeking solutions to screen-dominated childhoods, teenagers are rediscovering reading, and the National Year of Reading is galvanizing attention like never before. Parents want to help their children and we must guide them with clarity. In doing so, we can reverse the decline and raise a generation for whom reading is a joy, not a chore. At HarperCollins we are committed to achieving this goal, just as we have been since 2012. The paradox that has undermined reading for pleasure can be resolved.

<sup>i</sup>The core previous studies that are drawn upon are Print Matters, Print Matters More, The Reading Magic Project, Stories and Choices, The Lockdown Reading Club, Dads Reading, Storytime in School and Social Reading Spaces.

<sup>ii</sup>NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2025

<sup>iii</sup>Children 11-17, NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2025

<sup>iv</sup>NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2025

<sup>v</sup>HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

<sup>vi</sup>NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2025

<sup>vii</sup>HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

<sup>viii</sup>HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

<sup>ix</sup>NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2025

<sup>x</sup>Emilie Buchwald. Early, intimate, and consistent reading with parents is crucial for fostering a lifelong love of literacy.

<sup>xi</sup>HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

<sup>xii</sup>The Reading Agency State of the Nation’s Adult Reading 2025 (16-24=55% 25-34= 52% / 45-54 = 55%)

<sup>xiii</sup>HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

<sup>xiv</sup>Teacher Tap survey March 2026

<sup>xv</sup>HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

<sup>xvi</sup>HarperCollins and NielsenIQ BookData 2025

<sup>xvii</sup>NielsenIQ BookData’s ‘Understanding the Children’s Book Consumer’ 2025

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