

Tackling the children's reading crisis

Challenges and Solutions

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Literacy and Reading for Pleasure

Literacy

- Ability (to read, write, use language proficiently)
- *Skill* to read: decode, comprehend
- Aptitude measured
- Can be taught

Reading for Pleasure

- Choosing to read in leisure time
- Intrinsic rewards (enjoyment, relaxations, fun etc)
- *Will* to read
- Can't be taught

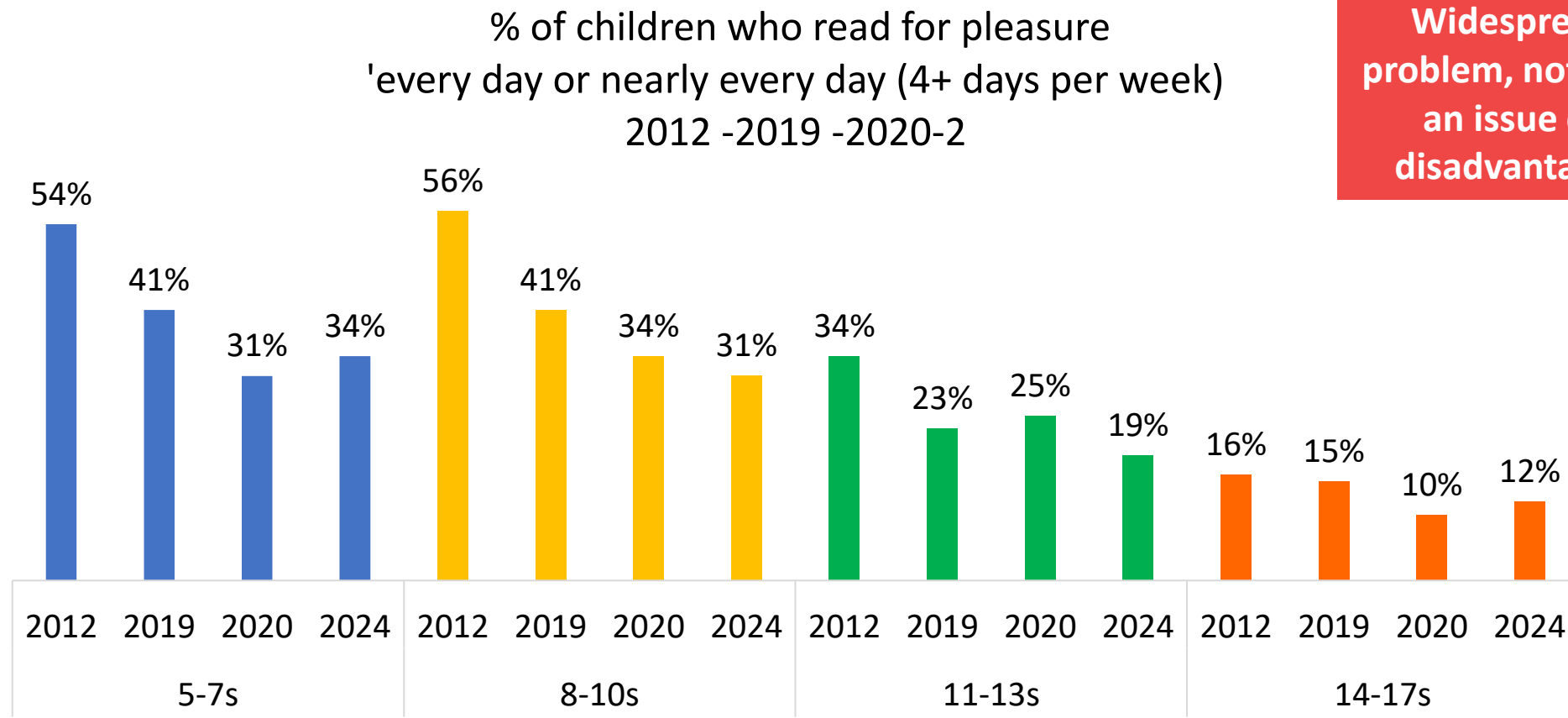
Finding ways to engage students in reading may be one of the most effective ways to leverage social change
OECD



- **32.7%** of 8-18-year-olds enjoy reading in their free time
- (51.4% in 2005)

Source: National Literacy Trust

Reading for pleasure decline



**Widespread
problem, not only
an issue of
disadvantage!**

Implications

Social

- Children' life chances: attainment, knowledge, cultural capital, empathy, wellbeing – and more!

Commercial/strategic

- Book buyers
- Future consumers

Economic

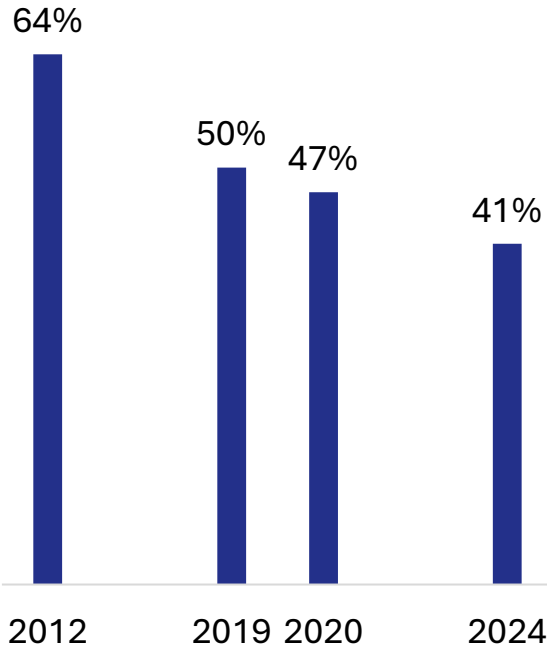
- UK = top global exporter of physical books
- Soft power and cultural influence

Reasons for decline

1. Children are read to infrequently, and much less than in the past
2. School experience: reading not fun. Associated with pressure, learning, schoolwork, homework
3. Children spend most of their leisure time on screens

Collapse in parents reading frequently to pre-schoolers

Percentage of children (0-4 years old) read to by their parents 'every day or nearly every day' (4+ days per week)



- No time
- A chore/ no fun
- Lack confidence
- Not read to themselves as children
- For the school years
- Parents reading less themselves
- Lack information

*I think reading is just the standard thing that parents do. (Why do you think that is though?)
I don't actually know, in all honesty*

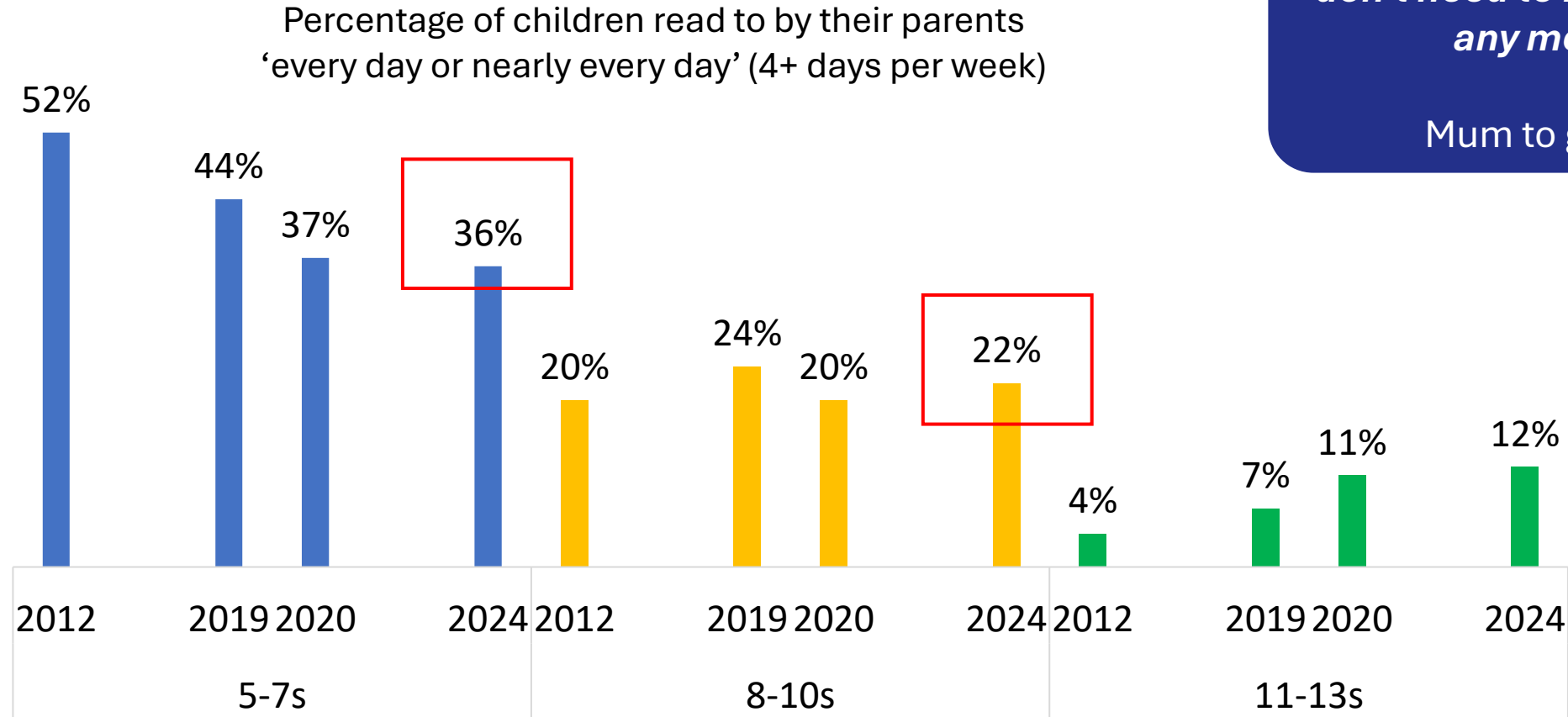
Mum to boy, 4

Reason 1

Low levels of reading to older children every day/nearly every day and decline in reading to 5-7s

She can read now, so I don't need to read to her any more

Mum to girl, 7



Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer'

Outcome of not reading to children

No reading foundation

Little experience of fun in reading

No home reading culture, reading routine

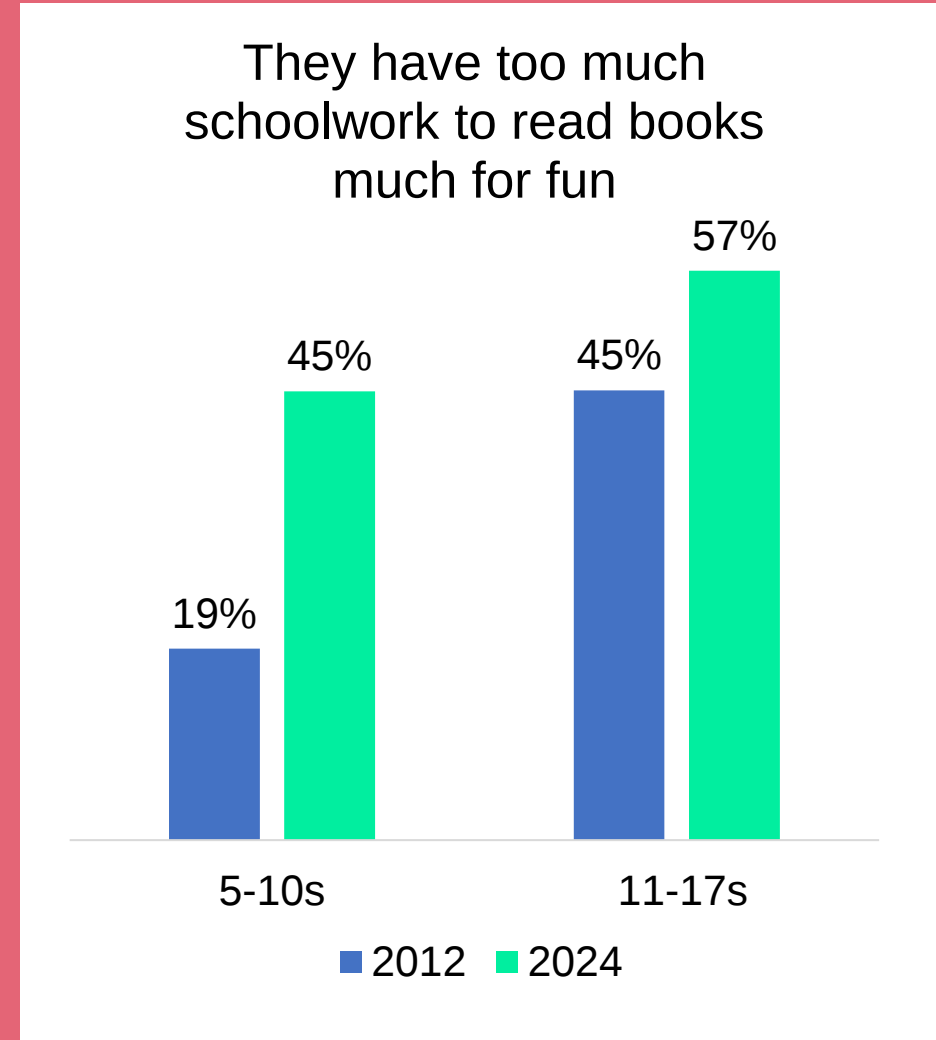
No reading role models

Little interest in reading



Reading is experienced as learning, not fun

- Negativity from school experience
- Focus on 'skill' more than 'will'
- Lack of free and wide choice
- Don't find reading easy
 - 5-7s: 41%
 - 8-17s: 36%
- No time?

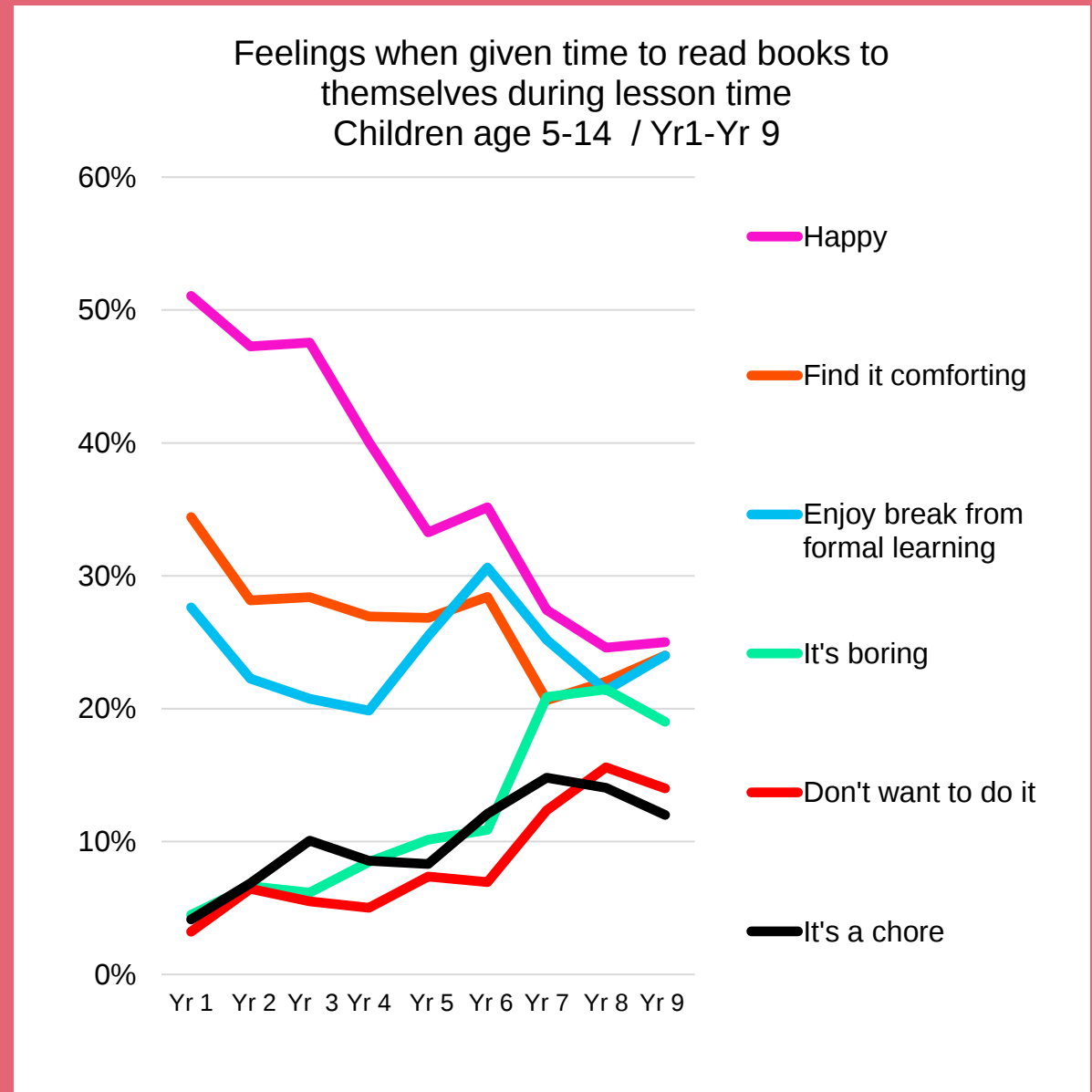


Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer'

Reason 2

Reading is learning, not fun

- RfP high priority in education
- Only 36% of 5-17s feel happy reading own book in lesson time
- Lack of agency/free choice demotivates



Source: HarperCollins/NielsenIQ BookData 2024

Reason 3

Screens offer fast fun

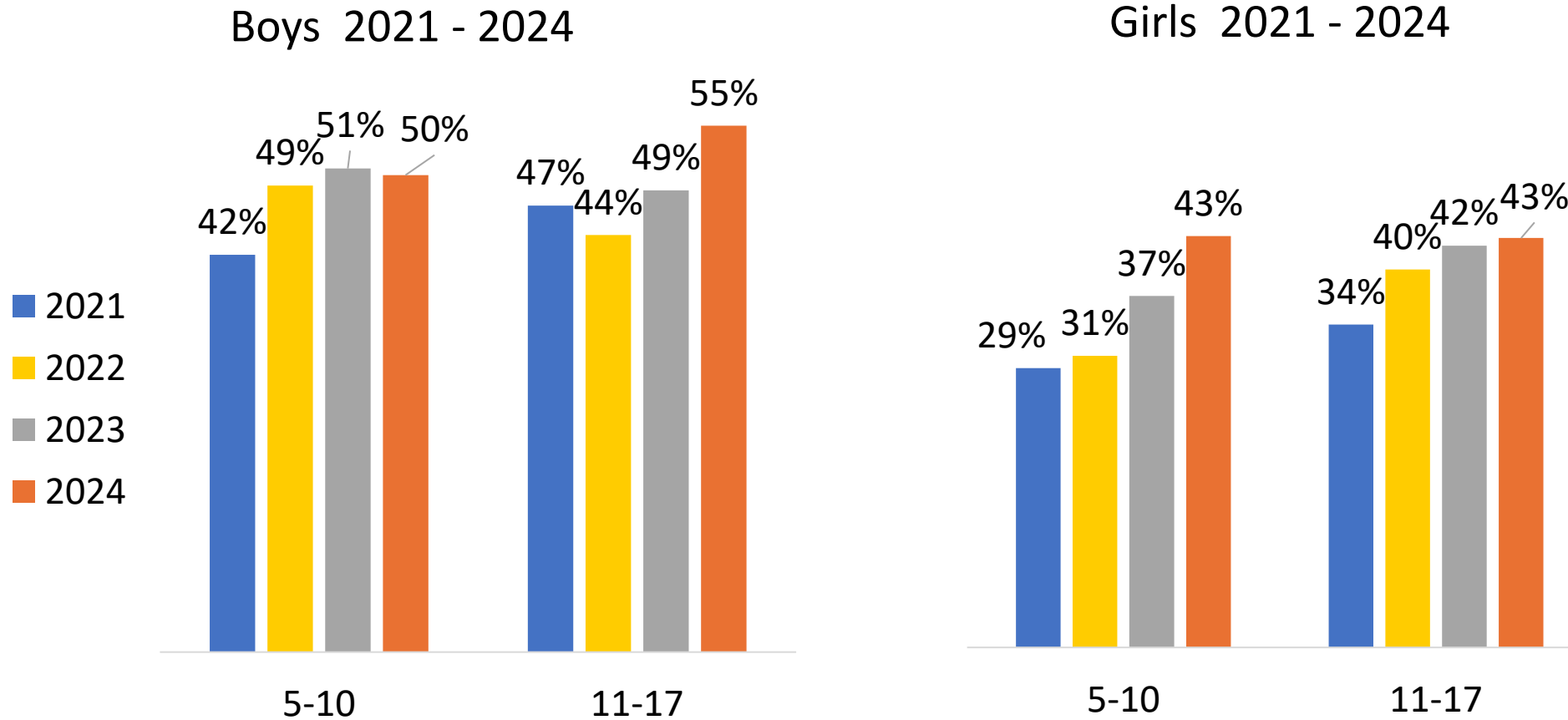


69% of 0-17s would rather watch TV, go online, or play games than read books

- 11-13 boys: 83%
- Pre-schoolers: 55%

Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer'

Don't have the attention span for reading books



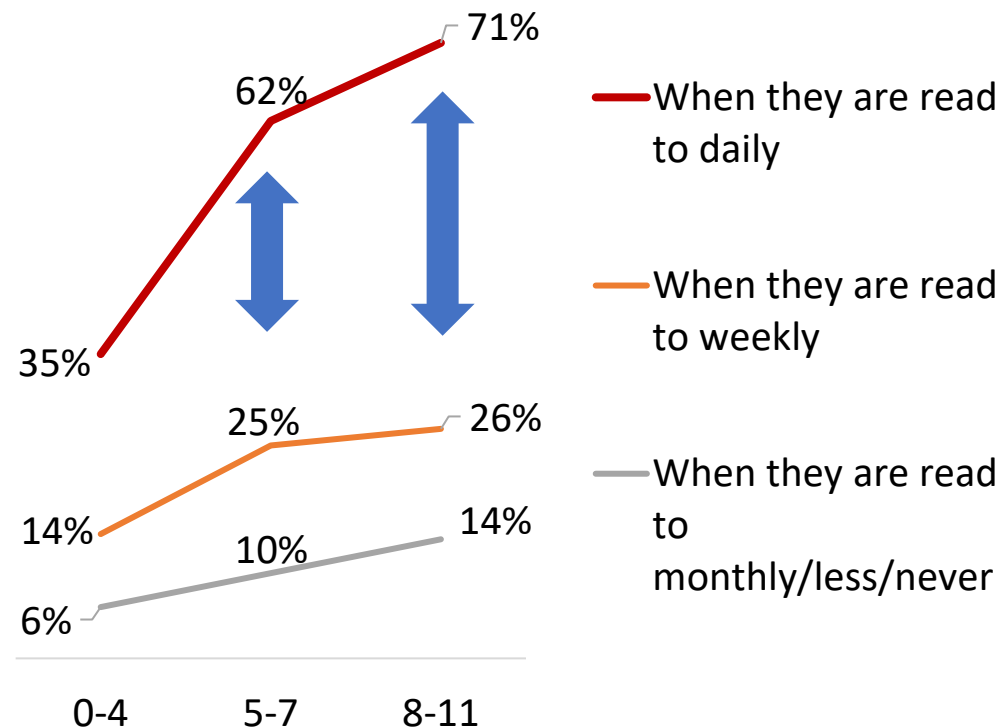
Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer'

Solutions

- Being read to: makes reading fun and removes the pressure.
A treat, not a task
- Wide choice: reading feels interesting, exciting and relevant
- Free choice: having autonomy and agency is motivating

Impact of reading to children daily on their independent reading for pleasure

Percentage of children who read for pleasure daily, according to how often they are read to



Source: NielsenIQ BookData's 'Understanding the Children's Book Consumer'

Why does reading aloud work so well?



- Enjoyable, a treat, no pressure.
- Focused attention, supercharged bonding
- Positive associations with reading
- A reading aloud routine helps children get a reading habit
- Becomes family culture / normalises reading for enjoyment
- Reading co-exists with screens

How to engage parents with reading aloud?

Make it real

Feel it, see it

Deep, emotional, visceral understanding



Virtuous circle: rewards become motivators

This is the end of the trial but it's not the last time we will read together. This has become so important to our routine. It's helped open up talking & bonding with us, even though my child is no longer a baby

Mum to boy, 10

I like how this has just become what we do, there isn't any question. N just brings me a book and we read together. Some days we read more than others. I have noticed that more and more he is choosing to read a book over playing computer games or watching TV

Mum to boy, 8

I am amazed at how the regular reading has affected us all. I feel rather silly because I have an English literature degree and a house full of books - I didn't consider that just having books in the house wasn't enough, I had to actually read them to the children!

Mum to girls, 4 and 7



20 primary schools
3000 children
86 teachers

No teaching, no testing, no learning activities

Just relaxation and fun, every day, for one term



Increased voluntary reading
(44% read more in free time)

Increased confidence and wellbeing

Increased enjoyment and concentration

77% of children
wanted storytime
to continue

*It has made me like books a lot more
and I feel like if we don't carry then I will
go back to hate reading. Also I feel like it
has made a lot of people in my class like
reading*

Girl, year 5

*Children would cheer when it
was storytime, and remind me if
I had forgotten to put it on the
timetable or if I had to move it to
a different time for some reason*

Teacher feedback

Increases in reading age & comprehension

Year 4 children



Reading age gain

12 months = average
More than 13 months: 36%
More than 2 months: 60%

Comprehension attainment

Average scores increased in all schools. Shift towards excellence:

- 49% excellent at start
- 60% excellent at end

Individual schools, comprehension examples:

School A.

31% Pupil Premium/69% EAL: 29% 'excellent' at start / **61%** 'excellent' at end

School B.

59% Pupil Premium: 4% 'excellent' at start / **52%** 'excellent' at end

Low cost, high impact solution



- 24% of 5-10s are read to daily at school (31% in 2022)
- Opportunity to transform children's reading
- Need to mandate?

*We would all love 20 mins a day.
But sometimes it is a choice
between foundation subjects
and storytime.*

Teacher feedback

Adolescents want / need a feeling of control and autonomy, to fit in and belong, to be accepted, to make friends and socialise

If we can give them what they want and need ***through*** reading, can we change their ideas ***about*** reading?



A weekly book club with a difference!



For disengaged readers

Social, cool, relaxing place to have fun, discover books

A sense of autonomy and agency

During the timetabled day

Expressly told *no requirement to read*

An inviting space in the library, comfortable, cozy.

Bean bags, cushions, blankets, fairy lights, biscuits



Great results in a short time (October 2024 – February 2025)



60% were more interested in books and reading

52% were reading more

82% wanted book club to continue

"Before book club I wouldn't read at all. Now I like to try to do at least 10 minutes of reading a day"

[boy]

"It's like a place where you can just, like, be yourself and express your views, cos nowadays people think that if you read books, you're considered a nerd and like it's ok to read books in here"

[boy]

Librarian feedback:

Student 1 has a reading age of two years above his chronological age.

His previous reading was mainly books from The Ultimate Football Hero series.

Through book club he read a lot of books. He really embraced the opportunity of book club and read a variety, including completing a trilogy series



Child audio file

Librarian feedback:

Student 2 had a reading age of almost 2 years below his actual age.

Prior to book club he was very much limited to Tom Gates books.

He really enjoyed hearing about and seeing different types of books and this widened his reading and improved his attitude towards books greatly.



Child audio file

Librarian feedback

Student 3 had a reading age of 2 years below his actual age.

He had never used the library during social time before doing book club.

A lightbulb moment for him was seeing all the dyslexia friendly books. He loved them and benefitted tremendously from exposure to these books.



Child audio file

Children are motivated by having free choice



When they were younger they just used to pick books with glitter and stickers on but we used to stop them, so now they understand books are for reading and not for playing

Dad to 11- and 8-year-old girls

If I've chosen it, I KNOW it's going to be a good book

Boy, age 7

I see how excited he gets when he chooses his books himself. And he finishes them

Mum to boy, 9

Children are enthused by wide choice / variety

Non-fiction preferred by 22% of children, peaking at 32% of 14-17-year-old boys

Graphic novels/comic books/manga preferred by 53% of all children

Another Pokemon book today and his excitement in this book has made me realise that he will enjoy books on his own terms and his own interest levels

Mum to boy, 8



Children engage when

- The pressure is off
- Reading feels fun, relevant
- They have a feeling of control, choice and agency

THANK YOU

