

What and How Kids are Reading

Introduction and background

This report is based on data from Renaissance Learning's Accelerated Reader (AR) programme and research from the National Literacy Trust (NLT). It explores pupils' attitudes to reading and reading patterns and looks at whether these changed during the first pandemic lockdown. The report was mainly authored by Professor Keith Topping with insights from the NLT's National Literacy Survey from Dr Christine Clark and Irene Picton.

Key findings

Accelerated Reader: Implementation quality and effectiveness

- This section of the report summarises the efforts of 1,146,353 pupils taking part in the AR programme who read 19,662,147 books and took quizzes based on the books between August 1, 2019 and July 31, 2020.
- During the year as a whole, AR was used in 5,603 schools in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. During the lockdown period in 2020, AR was used in 4,902 schools in the UK and the Republic of Ireland, showing that some schools suspended AR during this period. Only 290,936 pupils (25% compared to the whole year) continued using AR and read 2,190,739 books (suggesting 8 books per student as compared to 17 books for the whole year).
- However, for the whole year the average ATOS (readability level) was 3.6 and the average points score (APC) on quizzes was 0.75, whereas during lockdown ATOS was 4.1 and APC 0.81. This shows that, during lockdown, those pupils continuing to use AR were reading books which were more difficult, and that they were being read with better comprehension.
- In almost all years there is a consistent pattern whereby the lowest APC scores are associated with the lowest reading scores, the highest with the highest reading scores, and the middle APC scores associated with the middle reading scores.
- The lowest Engaged Reading Time scores were associated with the lowest reading scores, the highest with the highest reading scores, and the middle ERT scores associated with the middle reading scores. More reading time in school led to higher reading attainment. The more time was allocated to reading, the greater was the number of words read.

- The Zone of Proximal Development is the zone in which the difficulty of a task is beyond what a pupil can do independently, but within range of what they can do with help. There was an increasing tendency for pupils to read books which were below the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as they progressed into and through secondary school, coupled with a decline in the tendency to read books above the ZPD.

Children and young people's reading enjoyment during the first lockdown

- This section of the summary presents findings from the NLT's annual literacy survey. Data collected from over 58,000 pupils aged 9 to 18 at the beginning of 2020 showed that just over 47 per cent of participating children enjoy reading although the 2020 figure revealed the lowest percentage of self-reported reading enjoyment since 2005.
- However, the subsequent survey showed increased reading engagement during the first Spring lockdown. Of over 4,000 children and young people surveyed in May and June 2020, 55.9 per cent said that they enjoyed reading either very much (24.2%) or quite a lot (31.7%) at that time. This reveals an increase in reading enjoyment.
- This increase in reading enjoyment was not consistent across all groups. Although a similar percentage of boys and girls said at the beginning of the year that they enjoy reading, more girls than boys reported enjoying reading during lockdown. This suggests that lockdown has widened the reading enjoyment gap between boys and girls, from a 2.3 percentage point difference at the beginning of 2020 to an 11.5 percentage point difference during lockdown.



- Lockdown also widened the gap between younger and older pupils. The gap between those aged 8 to 11 and those aged 11 to 14 grew from 13.2 percentage points to 15 percentage points.
- Children were asked whether they enjoyed reading more or less than before school closures, and why they felt this was the case. Responses revealed that the lockdown helped many children to discover, or re-discover, themselves as readers, and provided insights into the conditions that best create, or support, reading enjoyment. Time was a key factor, with children and young people suggesting that additional time enabled them to feel more immersed in a story and enjoy reading more as a result.
- For many children and young people, the ability to choose what they read and the opportunity to read for its own sake was given as a key reason for increased reading enjoyment. However, others missed the scaffolding offered at by their teachers and through social learning with peers at school.
- Another reason why children and young people might have turned to reading during lockdown relates to their mental wellbeing. Just over 59 per cent of children and young people reported that reading during lockdown made them feel better, and over 36 per cent said that reading helped them when they felt sad because of not being able to see family and friends. It is evident from the comments made that reading has been a source of calm, escapism, and relaxation during a difficult period.
- Overall, book ownership was high, with 90.9 per cent of children and young people reporting that they had their own books at home. However, other children and young people described a lack of access to books due to school and public library closures, and the impact this had on their opportunities to read and their reading enjoyment:
- Two in 5 children reported reading more fiction books, and a quarter said that they read more fiction on screen. Nearly 3 in 10 said that they read more non-fiction books in print with 1 in 5 saying that they read more non-fiction on screen. Nearly 7 in 10 children and young people said that they had read more fiction either on paper or on-screen during lockdown. Adventure stories were by far the most popular fiction genre being read by children and young people during lockdown, followed by funny books.
- From Year 3 right through to Years 9-11, the new books from David Walliams and Jeff Kinney were top, in one order or another. Books by Walliams and Kinney are read by very young children, when their difficulty presents a real challenge. Unfortunately, they continue to be read up until very advanced ages, when their difficulty is no longer at all appropriate.
- Below Kinney and Walliams there was more variation, with Dave Pilkey, Liz Pichon, Sue Hendra, Robin Stevens, and Matt Oldfield being names that teachers should be looking out for when seeking to stock school libraries.
- Jeff Kinney easily tops the books read by high achieving readers list with 55 mentions, slightly fewer than last year. J. K. Rowling remains in second place, now with 25 mentions, two more than last year. David Walliams is in third place with 21 mentions, an increase from last year.
- In Years 5-7 those defined as 'struggling readers' (at or below the 25th percentile on the Star Reading test) were reading well above the difficulty level expected – either almost at their chronological age or at worst one year behind it. However, APC was very low, with many books not read to the 85 per cent criterion, particularly in the higher ages. Beyond this into Years 8 and 9, the books read were much less difficult in relation to chronological age, but the APC was still low (0.83, 0.85). Accuracy of reading did not therefore seem to be directly related to book difficulty. Some quite hard books are read with comprehension by struggling readers, raising interesting questions about motivation.
- During the whole year, there was little change in favourite authors, except that Julia Donaldson became much more popular. Kinney, Walliams, and Dahl remained popular. J. K. Rowling re-appeared in the 2021 overall list, Jill Murphy was a new entrant, and Roderick Hunt declined in popularity.
- During lockdown, primary pupils' top 3 books were all by J.K. Rowling (Harry Potter books). The most popular book at secondary level was One of Us is Lying by Karen McManus, followed by Catching Fire by Suzanne Collins and then Mockingjay, also by Suzanne Collins.
- Both generally and in lockdown, Rick Riordan has enjoyed a surge in popularity.
- In non-fiction book reading there was even stronger evidence than in previous years of a football theme, which may have been male-oriented, but almost no other books for other interests. Secondary non-fiction books were not read or understood as carefully as the fiction books.

Most commonly read books

- Pupils read more books each year in the first 3 years, reaching a peak in Year 3 at 30 books. After this the number of books read per year steadily declined. As older pupils read longer and harder books, this is unsurprising.
- As in many previous years, book difficulty rose steeply throughout primary school, then plateaued and eventually decreased. Book difficulty does not rise at all in the first years of secondary school (Years 7-8). It declines in Years 10-13, when children read somewhat more books, but at an easy level. Throughout secondary school pupils are therefore still reading books at the same level of difficulty as upper primary pupils.
- Pupils in primary schools consistently showed a much higher APC on quizzes taken (77% to 82% – average 79%) than pupils in secondary schools (70% to 74% – average 72%), indicating that they were reading books with greater comprehension.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.renlearn.co.uk/what-kids-are-reading-2021/>