

Children, young people and audiobooks before and during lockdown

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Audiobooks have become increasingly popular in the digital age: streaming and subscription services, such as Audible and Spotify, have made audio stories available to a wide commercial audience, while apps like Libby and BorrowBox facilitate ‘borrowing’ of audiobooks from library services. With access easier and more widespread than ever, it is important to consider the potential benefits that audiobooks can offer to children and young people. In February 2020 we published a literature review on current research around literacy and audiobooks. Findings included evidence that audiobooks can:

- Improve children and young people’s reading skills and enjoyment of reading
- Support children and young people’s emotional intelligence and wellbeing
- Improve children and young people’s reading comprehension
- Widen children and young people’s access to books¹

Alongside this, we were commissioned by the Publishers Association to explore the use of audiobooks and their link to wider literacy engagement from the point of view of children and young people. To do this, we have used data from our latest Annual Literacy Survey of 58,346 children and young people, aged 9 to 18, conducted between January and March 2020.

The UK went into lockdown as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March, which meant that schools closed for all but children of key workers and those deemed most vulnerable. However, given the suddenly changed environment we found ourselves in, we were also keen to capture any possible changes to children and young people’s literacy practices as a result of lockdown. We therefore re-approached the schools that had previously taken part in our

¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/audiobooks-and-literacy-rapid-review-literature/>

research to see whether they would be interested to survey their pupils while they were largely staying home. 4,141 pupils aged 8 to 18 from 51 schools took part in an online survey between May and early June 2020.

This report shows:

Wider engagement with audiobooks during lockdown

- At the beginning of 2020, 1 in 6 (16.3%) children and young people aged 9 to 18 said that they listen to audiobooks.
- During lockdown, nearly 1 in 4 (23.4%) children and young people said that they have listened to audiobooks more than before lockdown.
- Children and young people cite various reasons for their greater engagement with audiobooks, including having more time, being able to access audiobooks more easily than other book formats and being able to access wider content.

Impact on reading and writing behaviours

- Listening to audiobooks has also changed the wider literacy engagement of a sizeable percentage of children and young people: 1 in 2 (52.9%) children and young people say that listening to audiobooks has increased their interest in reading, and 2 in 5 (42.6%) say that it has made them more interested in writing.
- Those who listen to audiobooks are also more likely to say that they enjoy reading and writing than those who don't listen to audiobooks. Similarly, more of those who listen to audiobooks say that they read daily in their free time compared with their peers who don't listen to audiobooks (40.2% vs. 27.0%).
- Audiobooks stimulate the imagination: 7 out of 10 (70.8%) of the children and young people who listen to audiobooks said that they use their imagination more than when they watch videos.

Listening to audiobooks supports children and young people's mental wellbeing

- 1 in 3 (31.8%) of children and young people said that listening to audiobooks made them feel better during lockdown.
- This is also highlighted in their comments, which indicate that hearing stories provides a welcome distraction from current events that may otherwise cause anxiety.

Audiobooks, boys and teenagers

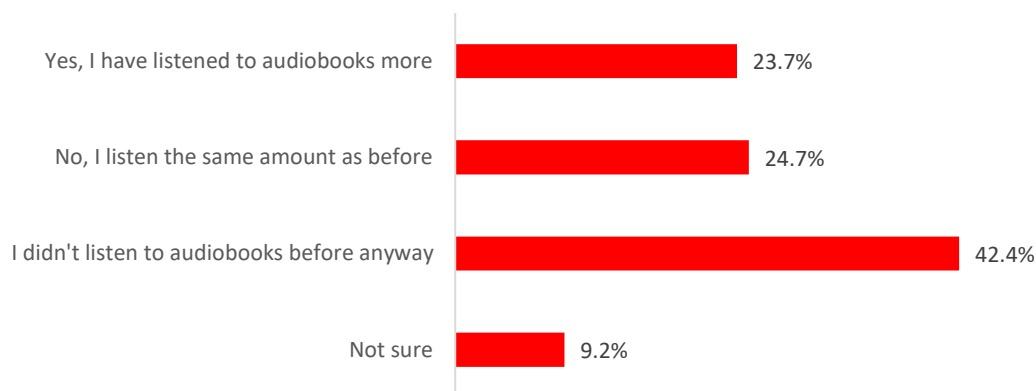
- While fewer boys than girls reported listening to audiobooks in January, more boys than girls said that they had listened to audiobooks more during lockdown (25.0% vs. 22.4%).
- As our research reports on reading and writing will show, listening is the only format in which boys report higher levels of engagement and enjoyment during lockdown compared with girls.
- At the beginning of 2020 there was a sharp decline in audiobook listening as children got older. However, nearly 1 in 4 (around 24%) children and young people in each age group said that they listened to audiobooks more when asked during lockdown.

Listening behaviours before and during lockdown

We first asked about audiobooks in our Annual Literacy Survey conducted in early 2020. We simply asked children and young people whether they listen to audiobooks in their free time², with 1 in 6 (16.3%) children and young people telling us that they do so.

With children and young people largely staying at home during lockdown, we wanted to know whether they listened to audiobooks more than they had done before. As can be seen in Figure 1, nearly 1 in 4 children and young people said that they listened to audiobooks more during lockdown than before. Around 1 in 4 listened to audiobooks as much as they had done before, and 2 in 5 said that they hadn't listened to audiobooks before and were still not doing so.

Figure 1: Engagement with audiobooks during lockdown compared with before



Source: 4,141 children and young people aged 8 to 18

However, for many children and young people lockdown has been a time to (re)discover audiobooks:

“I used to not listen to audiobooks but now I have finished listening to the first Harry Potter book and now I am trying to get Audible so I can listen to the other books.”

“I have...never listened to [audiobooks] before but I'm really liking them now.”

“I usually don't listen to audiobooks but now I have got so much time I have [listened] to 4 this month!”

When asked why they are listening more than before, many children attributed access as a key factor, particularly where they don't have access to physical books either at home or via a public or school library. Some have used commercial services such as Audible for this, while others are using the services available through their local library service:

² The other response options were: “Yes, I listen to podcasts”, “Yes, I listen to both audiobooks and podcasts”, “Neither”

“I found a lot of audiobooks on a library app that I downloaded at the end of March. I really enjoy audiobooks because I can listen to stories whilst doing other things, often painting or walking.”

“I never used to listen to audiobooks but I had finished all of my library books ... so I signed up at the library online for a library card and started borrowing audiobooks.”

“This is because I just downloaded the app called Audible and in my free time I just close my eyes and listen to them.”

Other pupils, meanwhile, have accessed them via teacher recommendations:

“I did not even know that you could listen to free audiobooks and podcasts before my teacher recommended it for the whole class.”

“In school we never really listened to audiobooks but sometimes in my English lessons online sometimes our teacher put one on there for us to listen to because she can't read it herself to us all because we have to stay at home.”

Why do children and young people listen to audiobooks more?

For those children and young people who said that they listened to audiobooks more during lockdown, the reason for this was most often having extra time to listen to them, and to help them relax (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: If you enjoy reading, writing and listening more or less than you did before the end of March, can you tell us why?



Comments suggest that they have more time, or want to pass the time. It is encouraging to see that they are choosing actively to spend this extra free time listening to stories.

“I have more time to do so, therefore i can listen to more.”

“More time to listen (we used to just listen to them on journeys in the car).”

“Because our teacher used to read books to us, but now – seeing as she doesn't – I would still like stories read to me because I rather enjoyed it.”

“I have more time on my hands and I am enjoying them, so I listen more often.”

“Because before the outbreak I didn't have the time but now I have lots of time so I just [listen] to audiobooks.”

Indeed, with this free time taking place outside school, children also reported more freedom to choose their own content and format:

“I think its [sic] probably because, now during my free time I can use technology, as during my breaks from school work I have the opportunity to listen to it.”

“I can listen to things I want to listen to and in my own time unlike at school if I had something that we listened to as a class I can't choose what it is or how fast to listen. I enjoy listening to things a lot more now and I can also listen while I do my work which helps me concentrate.”

Benefits of listening to audiobooks

Children and young people who listen to audiobooks shared many benefits of doing so. These benefits range from the act of listening itself alongside reading, or as an alternative for young people who either struggle with reading or lack access to physical books, to the enjoyment and learning that can be gained from listening to both fiction and non-fiction audiobooks.

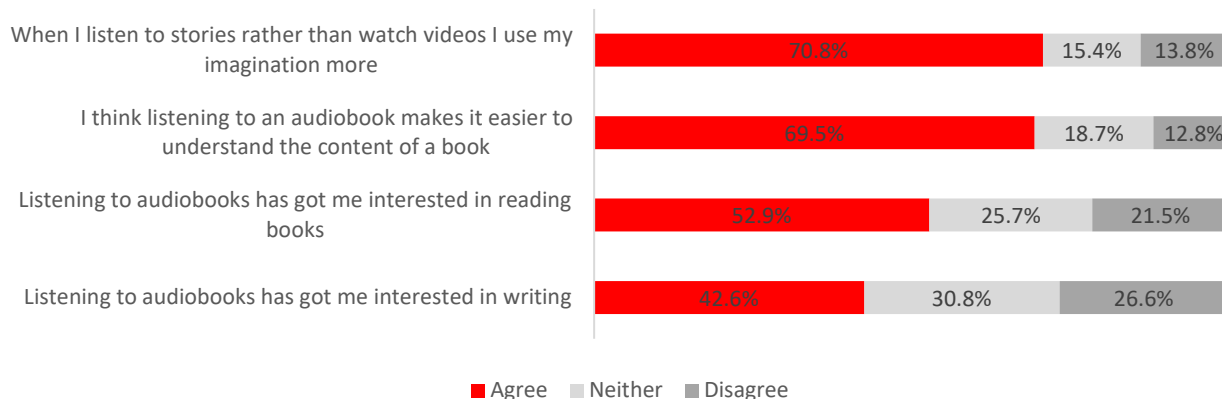
Impact on reading and writing behaviours

The perceived literacy benefits that children report are particularly interesting. As can be seen in Figure 3, listening to audiobooks has got 1 in 2 children and young people interested in reading, and 2 in 5 interested in writing. In detail, of those who said they listened to audiobooks, 7 in 10 said that listening to audiobooks makes it easier to understand the content of a book, suggesting that there is potential to use audiobooks to help engage more children and young people in stories, as has been suggested in our 2020 review.

Further, a similar percentage agree that they use their imagination more when they listen to stories rather than watch videos. This supports evidence from UCL research that audiobooks

can engage listeners in a story more than a film version of the same book.³ This reinforces the potential of audiobooks to build reading engagement, but also there is evidence to suggest that imagination itself can have wider benefits including heightened empathy and a positive impact on aspirations.⁴

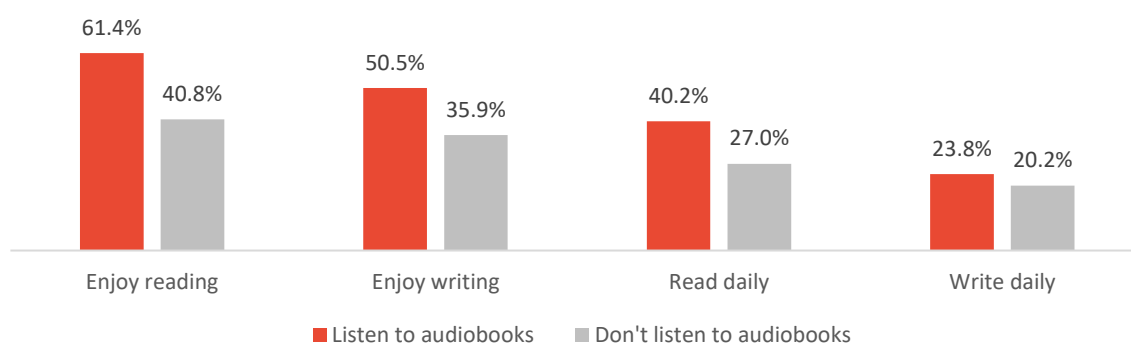
Figure 3: Perceived benefits of audiobooks



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

Indeed, when we look at those who say that they listen to audiobooks and compare them to those who don't, we can see in Figure 4 that those who listen to audiobooks are also more likely to say that they enjoy reading and writing than those who don't listen to audiobooks. Similarly, more of those who listen to audiobooks say that they read daily in their free time compared with their peers who don't listen to audiobooks, but there is no difference in whether they write daily in their free time.

Figure 4: Reading and writing enjoyment, daily reading and writing by whether or not children and young people listen to audiobooks



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

Other benefits of listening to audiobooks

In addition, some children and young people have reported that they find audiobooks easier to concentrate on and/or understand, meaning that those with poor decoding skills or low inclination towards physical reading are not excluded from the experience of sharing stories:

³ 28 Daniel C. Richardson et al., *Measuring Narrative Engagement: The Heart Tells the Story*, preprint (Neuroscience, June 20, 2018)

⁴ https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/benefits-of-imagination_n_5508760

“I like reading more because I feel like I have the time. I like listening more because I take in the story easier.”

“I prefer listening because I can concentrate more on what it is saying but when it is reading I get distracted sometimes.”

“The change of the situation has messed with my emotions. Reading now can be overwhelming to me. I resort to journaling to manage and track my mood and creating my own universe through writing helps me cope. You could call it escapism in a way. Listening to podcasts has helped with my feeling anxious and gives me a focus point.”

A few children and young people also commented on the ability to listen to an audiobook and being able to read alongside it, such as this one:

“[I listen to] a wide variety of books but I follow on the book with my own copy.”

Listening to audiobooks helped some children and young people concentrate on doing their work:

“I have more time to do so and it helps me concentrate better on my work.”

“I can listen to something I choose and in my own time. I can listen while I do my work and this helps me concentrate.”

It’s particularly striking to see an awareness among some children and young people of listening as an activity to do alongside other activities, not just school work, which resonates with what many adults seem to think about audiobooks as a corollary with other things.⁵

“I listen to audiobooks and music when I’m doing chores mostly because it makes it less boring.”

“[I u]sually listen during other static tasks, instead of before only when free to do so eg. exercise”

Conversely, some children and young people reported that they cannot concentrate on listening, or become easily distracted:

“I enjoy reading, writing and listening less [than before] because I am finding it difficult to focus on it at home.”

“I like reading more rather than listening to it because when I read something I can easily remember it but when I listen to it I usually forget.”

⁵ See, for example, <https://bookriot.com/2018/05/02/things-to-do-while-listening-to-audiobooks/>

Audiobooks beyond stories

In addition to the act of listening/hearing stories there are also reports that audiobooks can help children build their skills and knowledge, which might be a useful way of encouraging reading around a subject:

“Some of them are really amusing and there are different topics”

“I listen to more scientific research because I love science and I have more time now.”

Also, we know from our research that skills traditionally associated with physical reading can also be built from listening.⁶ Some comments support this:

“[I] think it is a good way to chill and see what others are up to during this crisis, I also learn some new words.”

“I do more listening and by listening I learn a few more words.”

‘I’m trying to listen and read more non-fiction so I can learn because we’re not going to school.’

“[Listening to audio] feels productive, as well as being educational and interesting.”

Audiobooks support mental wellbeing

Studies on the impact of lockdown are showing an increased risk of loneliness amongst children and young people, which in turn impacts on mental wellbeing.⁷ Wellbeing and companionship are often associated with storytelling⁸, and nearly 1 in 3 (31.8%) of children and young people said that listening to audiobooks made them feel better during lockdown.

Indeed, children and young people highlighted the benefits of audiobooks as a form of relaxation in their comments. Some describe this in a general sense:

“Music/ podcast/ audiobooks are interesting to listen to and they make you relaxed.”

“[J]ust because I find it relaxing to listen to after having to do all this work”

Where others, perhaps returning to the notion of being told a ‘bedtime story’ discussed earlier, value this form of relaxation to help them sleep:

“I found out more about [audiobooks] in March and I listen to them every night to help with sleep.”

⁶ Best, 2020

⁷ <https://www.theweek.in/news/health/2020/06/01/childrens-loneliness-in-lockdown-could-lead-to-mental-health-pandemic.html>

⁸ See, for example, <https://medium.com/swlh/the-science-of-storytelling-why-we-love-stories-fceb3464d4c3> and <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/worry-and-panic/201804/how-can-audio-books-boost-mental-health-were-all-ears>

“I [...] enjoy listening to audiobooks to help get me to sleep in the evening.”

In addition, many seem to find – perhaps like reading – that hearing stories provides a welcome distraction from current events that may otherwise cause anxiety:

“I do not have many things to do and listening to audiobooks is a nice way to relax and escape from things that are going on around me.”

“I enjoy listening to Audible and reading more because it relaxes me and takes me out of [what’s] going on for at least half an hour. It also calms me down if I am [too] giddy or anything like that.”

In particular, some of the comments suggest that children and young people feel positively towards, and perhaps comforted by, the experience of being ‘told’ a story and hearing different voices:

“I like listening more as now it is just nice to hear someone else speak not just me.”

“Because our teacher used to read books to us, but now – seeing as she doesn’t – I would still like stories read to me because I rather enjoyed it.”

“Because it’s nice to listen to someone reading it rather than reading it [myself]. It’s like your father/mother reading you a story as a little kid.”

This sense of companionship also extends to shared listening. Indeed, 12% of children and young people said that they had listened to audiobooks with their family or friends during lockdown. Our previous report on audiobooks also highlighted that they can be a great way of sharing stories as a family,⁹ which is evidenced in some of these comments:

“I listen and write more now as I have more time and because me and my family are listening to the book *Animal Farm* together as a family, which means we can also spend time together in more creative ways whereas before we would just watch a movie because we were all too tired to do anything else.”

“I like listening to audiobooks sometimes because we have to do a lot of reading and sometimes whilst I’m doing other work I like to listen to stories. We have also been provided audiobook websites that me and my brother like to listen to together.”

Conversely, where isolation can lead to familial pressure, audiobooks can provide children and young people with a ‘break’:

⁹ Best, E. (2020). *Audiobooks and Literacy*. London: National Literacy Trust.

“I need to hear other people’s voices, but not members of my family, because I’m fed up with my family.”

“[I] need more time to get away from the family sometimes, it gets hard and you need a break to just block them out.”

Audiobooks as a way to engage boys?

So far we have explored the role of audiobooks more broadly but are there certain groups of children and young people who show greater or lesser engagement with audiobooks?

Slightly more girls than boys listened to audiobooks at the beginning of 2020 (see Figure 5), with 1 in 7 boys saying that they listened to audiobooks at the beginning of the year compared with nearly 1 in 5 girls.

Figure 5: Percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks in early 2020 by gender



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

However, slightly more boys than girls said that they have listened more to audiobooks during lockdown than they had done before (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks more during lockdown by gender

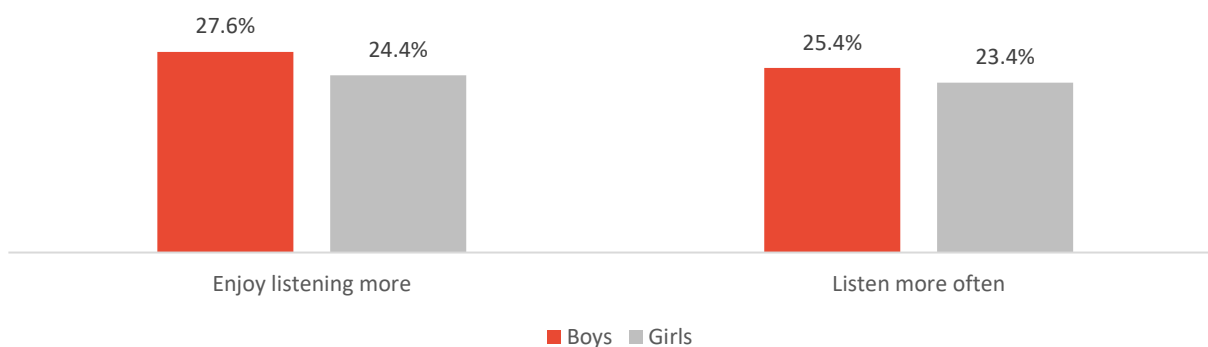


Source: 4,141 children and young people aged 8 to 18

We also asked boys and girls in a general question whether they enjoy listening more during lockdown and listen more often than they had done before. As shown in Figure 7, slightly more boys than girls say that they enjoy listening more and listen more often than before

lockdown. Interestingly, this is different to what we see for reading and writing, where more girls than boys say that they enjoy it more and do it more often than before¹⁰.

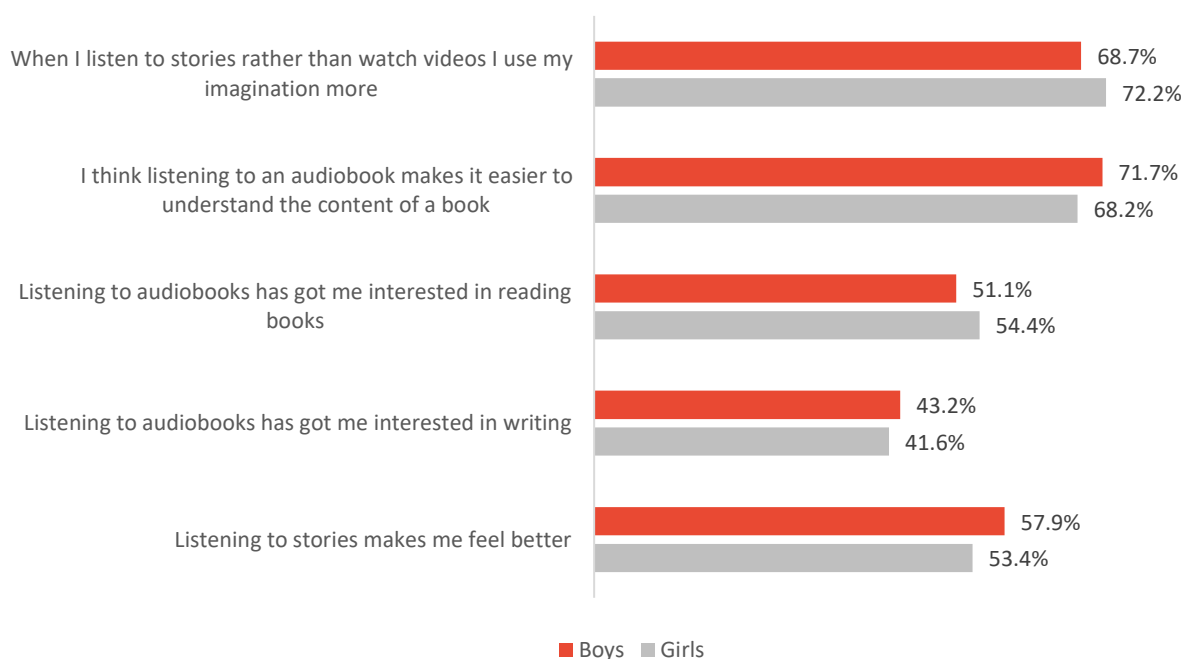
Figure 7: Greater listening enjoyment and greater listening frequency during lockdown by gender



Source: 4,141 children and young people aged 8 to 18

Broadly, boys and girls who listen to audiobooks have similar perceptions about their benefits (see Figure 8). A slightly larger number of girls than boys said that listening to audiobooks stimulates their imagination and has got them interested in reading, while slightly more boys than girls said that listening to audiobooks makes it easier for them to understand the content of a book. Slightly more boys than girls also said that listening to stories makes them feel better.

Figure 8: Benefits of listening to audiobooks by gender



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

¹⁰ The reading and writing reports will be published in early summer 2020

Our literature review on audiobooks and literacy¹¹ showed that audiobooks can be popular with boys because of their presentation on a digital or electronic device, giving them a ‘cool’ factor:

“In my Guys Read work, I’ve met all kinds of boys who are crazy for audiobooks. I think it’s partially because audiobooks appeal to a lot of guys’ love for messing around with any kind of technology. ... Guys also think they are getting away with something by listening instead of reading. We don’t have to tell them that they are learning vocabulary, story structure, sentence composition and a dozen other literacy skills.”¹²

We know that technology can increase engagement with reading in a variety of formats including ebooks, particularly amongst the most disengaged boys.¹³ We also know that smartphones are a common way for children and young people to access audiobooks: 63% of children and young people reported listening to audiobooks on smartphones at the beginning of 2020, compared to the next nearest method of smart speakers such as Alexa or Siri at just over 40%.

The availability of smartphones compared with other devices is important; a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research highlighted the concern that many families will not have access to a range of devices during lockdown, citing Ofcom’s figure that while exact statistics for under 16s are not available, 36% of 16 to 24-year-olds live in a mobile-only household.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Ofcom reported in 2019 that half of all 10-year-olds own a smartphone, rising to almost all 15-year-olds, as opposed to 27% of 5 to 15-year-olds having access to a smart speaker.¹⁵

Not only does this context help account for children and young people’s (and boys’ in particular) increased usage and enjoyment of audiobooks, it also suggests that there is a captive audience for audiobooks as a way of engaging boys in stories, particularly where they do not have access to books or other devices.

.... And teenagers?

Those aged 11 and older are typically the age groups that are more disengaged with reading and writing than their younger peers. For example, at the beginning of 2020 we found that more pupils aged 8 to 11 said that they enjoy reading and writing, with reading and writing enjoyment levels declining between ages 11 to 16, before rising again.

When we asked about audiobooks at the beginning of the year we found that listening to audiobooks also decreases with age, with five times as many children aged 9 to 11 listening to audiobooks than those aged 16 to 18 (see Figure 9).

¹¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/audiobooks-and-literacy-rapid-review-literature/>

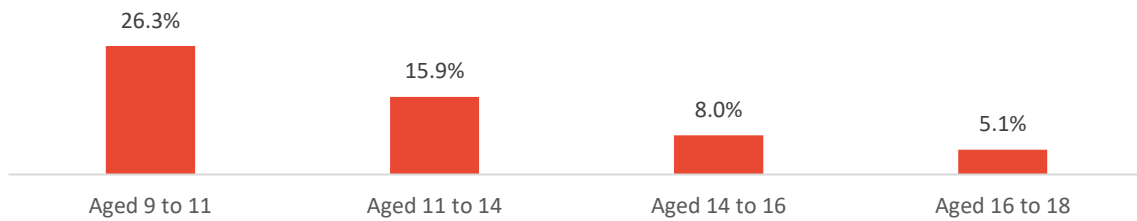
¹² Jon Scieska quoted in Sharon Grover and Lizette D. Hannegan, *Listening to Learn: Audiobooks Supporting Literacy* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2012), p. 12

¹³ Clark, C. and Picton, I. (2019). *Children, young people and digital reading*. London: National Literacy Trust

¹⁴ https://www.ippr.org/files/2020-03/1585586431_children-of-the-pandemic.pdf

¹⁵ https://www.ofcom.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0023/190616/children-media-use-attitudes-2019-report.pdf

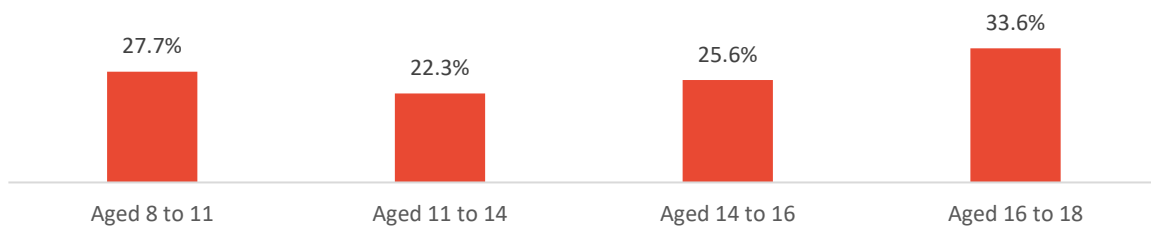
Figure 9: Percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks in early 2020 by age group



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

However, we can now see a possible change in these differences during lockdown (see Figure 10). While before lockdown children aged 8 to 11 were most likely to say that they listen to audiobooks, and young people aged 16 to 18 were least likely to listen to audiobooks, behaviour reversed somewhat during lockdown. A third of those aged 16 to 18 said that they had listened to audiobooks more during lockdown, compared with over 1 in 4 children aged 8 to 11. Around 1 in 4 of the remaining two age groups also said that they had listened to more audiobooks during lockdown than before.

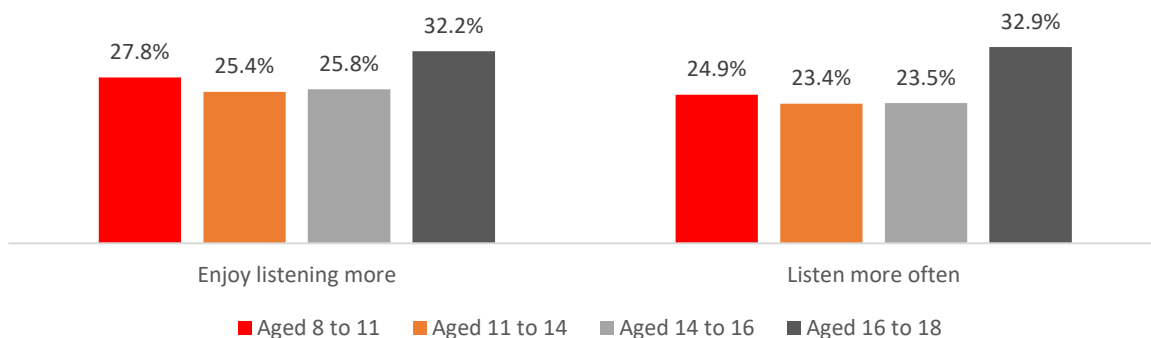
Figure 10: Percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks more during lockdown by age group



Source: 4,141 children and young people aged 8 to 18

Similarly, when we asked whether, as a result of lockdown, they generally enjoyed listening more and listened more often than before, we can see that more young people aged 16 to 18 said that they had compared with the other age groups (see Figure 11).

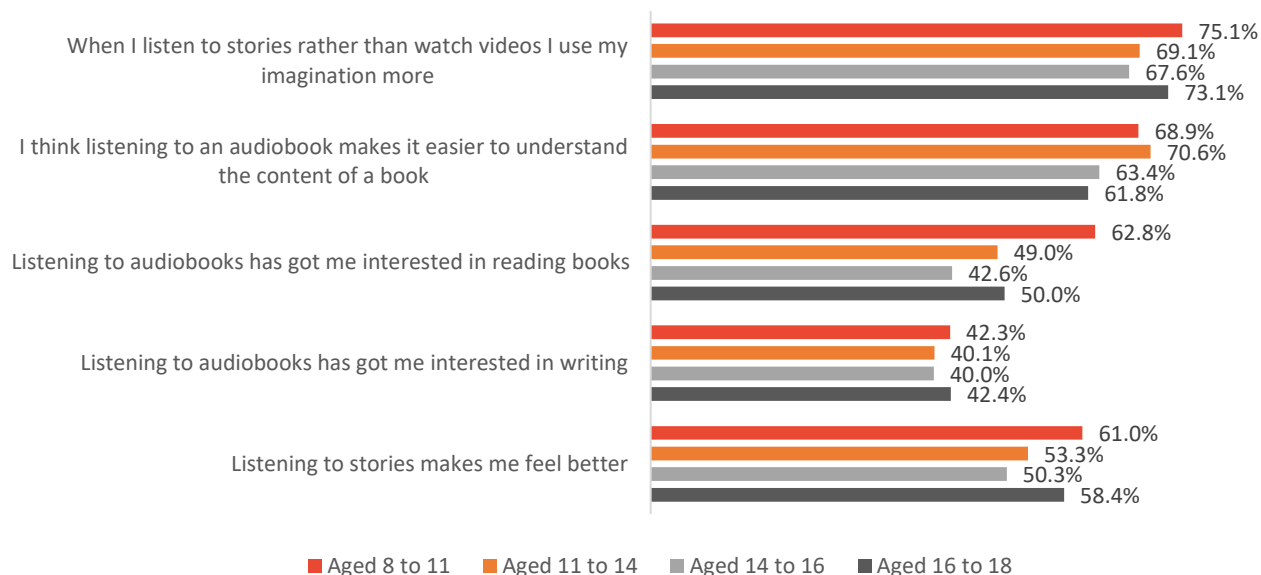
Figure 11: Greater listening enjoyment and frequency during lockdown compared with before by age group



Source: 4,141 children and young people aged 8 to 18

As can be seen in Figure 12, children aged 8 to 11 who read audiobooks are more likely than their older peers to agree that audiobooks have various benefits. It is also interesting to note that typically agreement with the statements dips between aged 11 to 16 and increases again at ages 16 to 18.

Figure 12: Perceived benefits of audiobooks by age group



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

While there is a drop in both engagement and enjoyment between the lower two groups – as we know happens as children transition from primary to secondary school – it is nevertheless encouraging to see it rising as children and young people get older. As shown earlier in some comments, many children and young people are listening to non-fiction audiobooks. This could be a useful mechanism for supporting disciplinary literacy – that is, the literacy practices (reading, writing, speaking and listening) needed to navigate and understand subjects at secondary school. Our research has consistently shown that reading enjoyment is related to reading attainment,¹⁶ and we know that listening to audiobooks uses many of the same cognitive functions and holds many of the benefits as reading, such as building vocabulary and interest in a subject, so audiobooks may help build many of the same skills.¹⁷

However, for secondary students to develop the disciplinary literacy skills they need, they should be reading widely around a subject in order to develop the language, writing styles and vocabularies specific to those subjects.¹⁸ It is therefore encouraging to see references to non-fiction texts that may help students develop their skills and understanding of those related subjects, and certainly something that could be encouraged further.

¹⁶ Based on reading skills data for 712 pupils aged 11 to 14, young people who enjoy reading are three times more likely to read above the level expected for their age than children who don't enjoy reading (30.1% vs 8.1%) - Clark, C. and Teravainen-Goff, A. (2020). *Children and young people's reading in 2019: Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey*. London: National Literacy Trust.

¹⁷ Best, 2020

¹⁸ See, for example, Shanahan, C., Shanahan, T., & Misischia, C. (2011). *Analysis of Expert Readers in Three Disciplines: History, Mathematics, and Chemistry*. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 43(4), 393–429.

And what about those on free school meals?

The findings by socioeconomic background, using free school meals (FSMs) as a proxy, are much more muted and point throughout to little differentiation between those who receive FSMs and those who do not in their engagement with audiobooks.

At the beginning of the year, there was no difference in the percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks by socioeconomic background (using free school meal uptake as a proxy; see Figure 13).

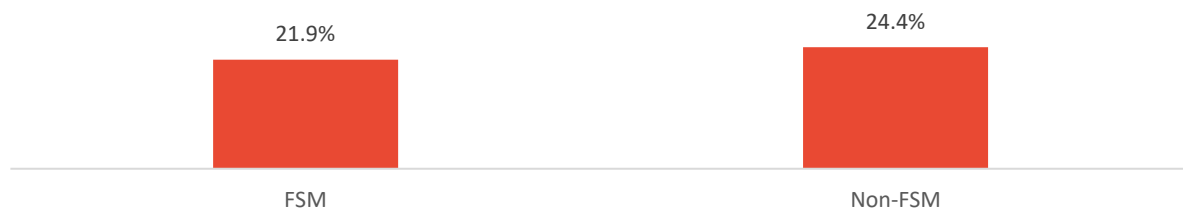
Figure 13: Percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks in early 2020 by free school meal uptake



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

When we asked whether they had listened to audiobooks more during lockdown than before, slightly more non-FSM than FSM pupils said this (see Figure 14).

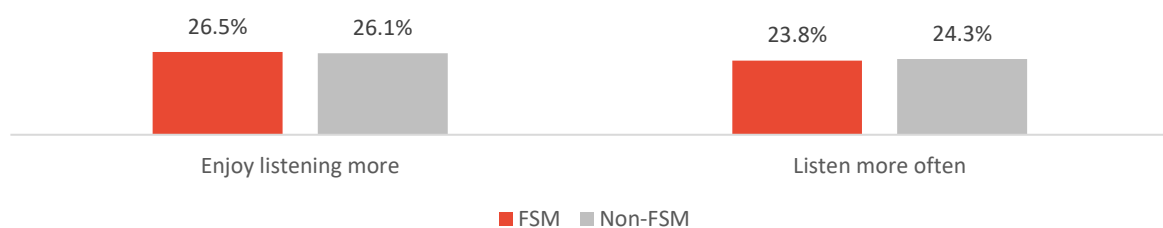
Figure 14: Percentage of children and young people who listened to audiobooks more during lockdown by free school meal uptake



Source: 4,141 children and young people aged 8 to 18

However, as can be seen in Figure 15, children and young people said that they generally enjoy listening more and listen more often during lockdown, regardless of whether or not they receive FSMs.

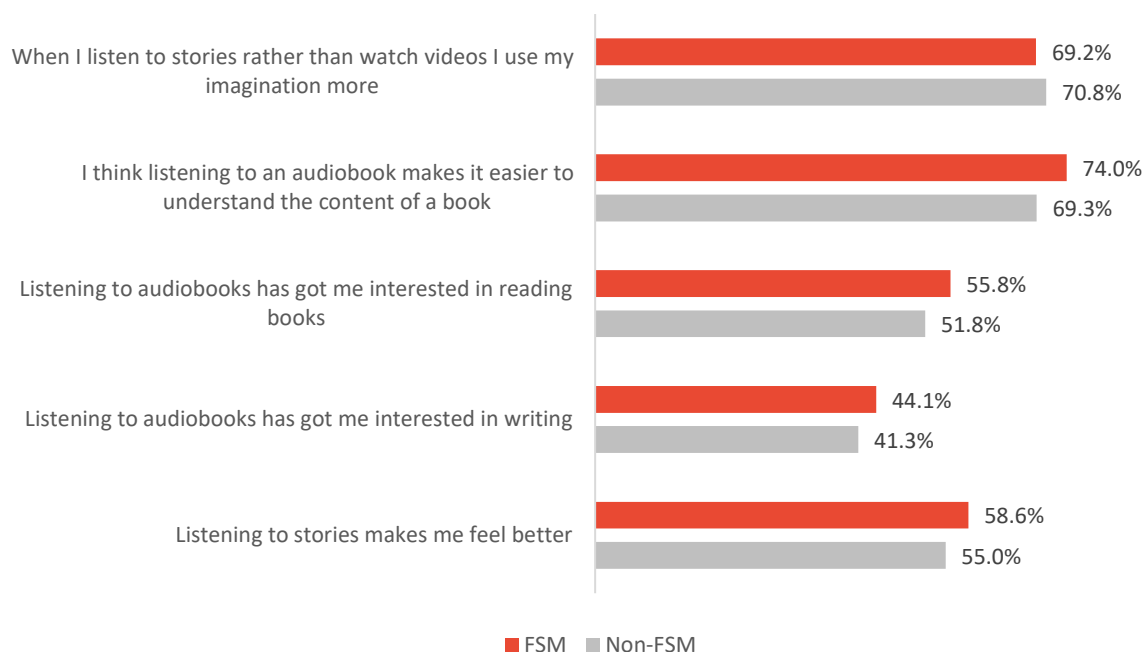
Figure 15: Greater listening enjoyment and frequency during lockdown compared with before by FSM uptake



Source: 4,141 children and young people aged 8 to 18

Marginally more children and young people who receive FSMs compared with those who don't receive perceive audiobooks to have various benefits (see Figure 16). For example, slightly more FSM than non-FSM children and young people said that listening to audiobooks makes it easier to understand the content of a book and slightly more also say that listening to stories makes them feel better.

Figure 16: Perceived benefits of audiobooks by free school meal uptake



Source: 58,346 children and young people aged 9 to 18

Our 2018 report on book ownership found that 1 pupil in 8 in receipt of free school meals does not own a book at home¹⁹; we can hope that those children who cannot access physical books can still access (and want to access) stories via audiobooks.

Summary and discussion

The initial findings from our January survey coupled with the responses to our more recent lockdown survey show a really encouraging level of enthusiasm for audiobooks. In particular, seeing a rise in interest from older children and young people, and increased interest from boys, who tend to be less engaged in reading and writing, is hugely positive and suggests that school closures and lockdown have not dampened children and young people's appetite for stories and learning, even if the formats have had to change somewhat. It is also interesting to see that there is a lack of differentiation between children in receipt of FSMs and those who are not, which suggests that economic disadvantage might be less of a barrier to accessing stories than we may have thought. Comments from children and young people themselves suggest that access to various library and commercial services help facilitate this.

¹⁹ Clark, C. and Picton, I. (2018). Book ownership, literacy engagement and mental wellbeing. London: National Literacy Trust

Throughout the report, children and young people’s comments illuminate the various lockdown-related factors that may have led to an increase in the engagement with audiobooks. Having more time will no doubt impact on many leisure activities, but the availability of audiobooks presents them as a perfect way to spend time in lockdown. This is particularly useful when considering what we know about book ownership, particularly among lower-income families, where traditional access channels such as libraries are not currently available. Free online library services such as BorrowBox and Libby, and commercial audiobook suppliers such as Audible and Spotify, can help improve access.

The companionship and comfort that audiobooks can provide is also apparent, whether through being told a story, as a way of relaxing or as a distraction from other events. They can also make the day-to-day activities happening in the home, or now confined to home, such as housework and exercise, more enjoyable, and listening is something that a family can enjoy together. We know that physical reading can have a significant impact on wellbeing so for children with low literacy, audiobooks can provide an alternative way into a story. This is particularly useful when considering audiobooks as an alternative to class-based story time or storytelling where parents and carers at home may not have the time or confidence to read stories themselves.

Lastly, we know that reading for enjoyment is related to reading attainment, but also attainment in other areas.²⁰ By increasing opportunities to access stories, children are able to increase their vocabularies and access a range of insights and experiences. This will be particularly important for those children at risk of a decline in their literacy levels during lockdown. We also know, however, that promoting disciplinary literacy (that is, literacy in subjects aside from English) is crucial to developing young people’s skills in different areas, and reading around a subject is a key part of that. Reports of children accessing non-fiction audiobooks and enjoying listening for information as well as enjoyment show that audio can support this.

The age of the smartphone is potentially the most exciting shift in the potential of audio storytelling – and audiobooks in particular – for generations. Lockdown has put a spotlight on the pressures of access and engagement for young people, particularly those who cannot or do not access physical books or stories in other ways. This report shows that the appetite for audiobooks is strong, and as a democratic medium that can overcome the barriers of cost, reading ability and physical access the audiobook holds huge potential.

²⁰ According to our 2019 children and young people’s reading survey, based on reading skills data for 712 pupils aged 11 to 14, young people who read daily in their free time are twice as likely to read above the level expected for their age than children who don’t read daily (37.6% vs 14.2%). Clark, C. and Teravainen-Goff, A. (2020). *Children and young people’s reading in 2019: Findings from our Annual Literacy Survey*. London: National Literacy Trust.

About the National Literacy Trust

We are a national charity dedicated to raising literacy levels in the UK. Our research and analysis make us the leading authority on literacy. We run projects in the poorest communities, campaign to make literacy a priority for politicians and parents, and support schools.

Visit literacytrust.org.uk to find out more, donate or sign up for a free email newsletter. You can also find us on Facebook and follow us on Twitter.

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