

The State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Focus on... Family reading

Introduction

New research from The Reading Agency reveals that 1 in 5 adults (20%) did not read with their family as children. Critically, research shows that reading with a parent or caregiver has a positive impact on early development, school achievement, and later life success¹, yet our research shows that about 10.8 million people² may have missed out on these significant benefits.

Sadly, lack of engagement with reading limits life chances and choices. The Reading Agency's work with adults aims to create a world of opportunity where everyone can access the benefits of reading.³

For 22 years, The Reading Agency has built a robust evidence base relating to the reading habits of people of all ages across the UK, supported by extensive research and evaluation. Through this work, we've identified a gap in the evidence base on adult reading in the UK. Using our expertise in this field, we're now releasing the fifth set of insights from our nationwide survey tracking adult reading engagement in the UK, currently the only report of its kind. The following research focuses on reading with a parent or caregiver in childhood and the associated positive outcomes in later life.

Key findings: Family reading

Prevalence

The Reading Agency's findings indicate that nearly 3 in 5 adults (58%) read with their parents or caregivers as children, whilst one in five adults (20%) did not. Importantly, differences between women and men emerged in our dataset, offering key insights into wider research on the differences in boys' and girls' reading.

The impact of reading with family in early life on adult reading

Overall, family reading in childhood positively impacts adult reading habits and wellbeing, where adults with childhood family reading experiences are more likely to enjoy reading (79% vs 61%), read regularly for pleasure (73% vs 60%) and cite that reading makes them feel better (70% vs 51%).

¹ Niklas, Cohrssen and Tayler (2016) [The Sooner, the Better: Early Reading to Children](#), *SAGE Open*, 6(4); Xie, et al. (2018) [Psychosocial Effects of Parent-Child Book Reading Interventions: A Meta-Analysis](#), *Pediatrics*, 141(4); OECD (2010) [PISA 2009 Results: Learning to Learn: Student Engagement, Strategies and Practices](#), p. 32-4

² The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#)

³ The Reading Agency (2024) [Reading Facts](#)

Wider benefits of family reading

Our data also shows the wider benefits of childhood family reading on other aspects of daily life. Adults who read with family as children are five times more likely to cite improved sleep quality from reading (70% vs 14%) than those who didn't. In fact, frequent family reading correlates with greater perceived benefits.

Value of family-reading initiatives

Our research shows the longer-term impacts of family reading in childhood, with important implications for investing in family reading initiatives. For instance, we found that those who read with family as children are more likely to be a library member (39% vs 26%), start new careers or courses due to reading (15% vs 9% for careers, 18% vs 6% for courses) and critically, are also more likely to read with their own families (28% vs 11%).

Methodology

This survey and the reading engagement measures used to understand adult reading habits in the UK were designed by The Reading Agency using our Peter Sowerby Foundation-funded Reading Outcomes Framework. This Framework identifies the outcomes of reading for pleasure and provides a set of tools to help us measure these.⁴ For the purposes of this survey, 'reading for pleasure' was defined as reading that takes place by choice rather than for work or education, and could include reading material such as books, e-books, magazines, audiobooks, graphic novels, poetry, blogs and more.

The research was conducted by Censuswide with 2,003 UK nationally representative consumers aged 16 years and over, between 2 and 4 April 2024. Censuswide abide by and employ members of the Market Research Society which is based on the ESOMAR principles and are members of The British Polling Council. The results have been statistically weighted according to current data on age, gender, region and socioeconomic status from the most recent Census data to ensure the sample is representative of the entire adult population of the UK.

Focus on... Family Reading

National context: family reading practices

To understand how many people were read to as children, we asked UK adults to report to what extent they agreed that as a child, they used to read with a member of their family. Nearly 3 in 5 UK adults (58%) reported that they read with a family member as children, and 1 in 5

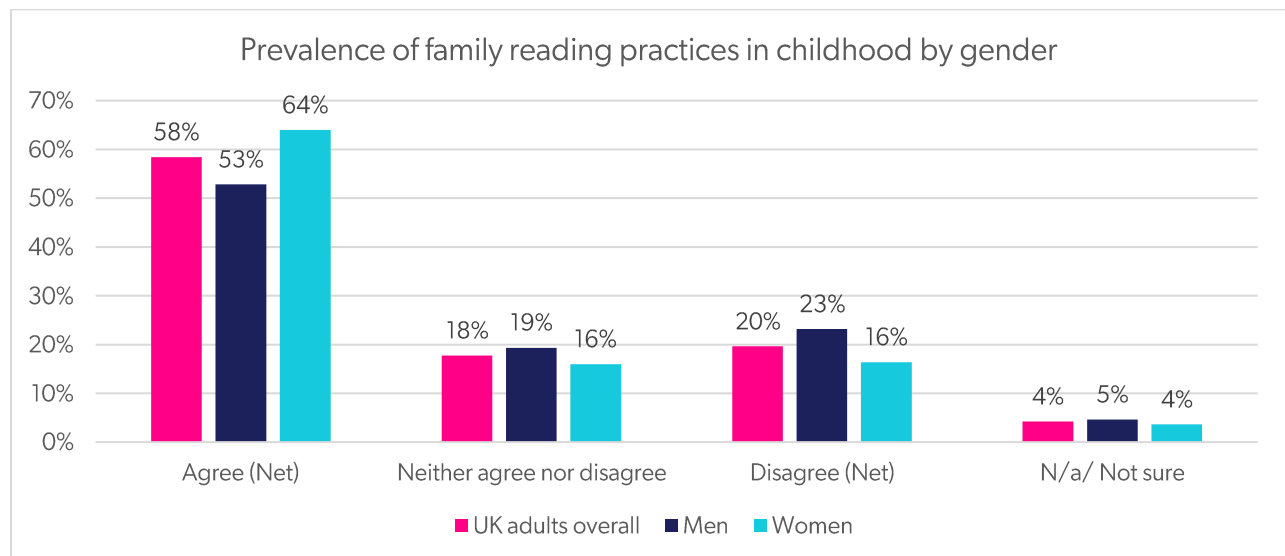
⁴ The Reading Outcomes Framework was developed in collaboration with stakeholder organisations including Arts Council England, Association of Senior Children's and Education Librarians (ASCEL), BookTrust, Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), National Literacy Trust, Publishers Association, Scottish Library and Information Council (SLIC) and the Society of Chief Librarians (SCL).

(20%) did not. This equates to about 10.8 million people who were not read to by a member of their family as children.⁵

Differences between family reading between men and women

The data also showed that UK women were more likely to have read with family members as children compared to men (64% vs 53%). In fact, this equates to over 18.19 million women⁶ and over 14.13 million men,⁷ meaning that 4.05 million more UK women were read to as children than men. A comparative breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Breakdown by gender of responses to the question ‘To what extent do you agree with the statement: As a child, I used to read with a member of my family?’



Our data supports wider research showing that in early childhood, girls are much more likely to be read to than boys.⁸ This difference has important implications for boys’ independent reading habits, as research shows a strong link between reading with one’s family and the amount of time children engage with books by themselves.⁹ Critically, this is a trend that may follow children into later adult life, as borne out in our dataset showing that 53% of UK women

⁵ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of ‘As a child, I used to read with a member of my family’ answers multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (aged 16+): $0.1962 \times 55,190,347 = 10,828,660$

⁶ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of ‘As a child, I used to read with a member of my family’ answers for women and men multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (women aged 16+): $0.6397 \times 28,436,983 = 18,190,686.07$

⁷ Extrapolation calculated using the percentage of ‘As a child, I used to read with a member of my family’ answers for women and men multiplied the ONS 2022 mid-year UK population figures (women aged 16+): $0.5282 \times 26,753,364 = 14,132,268.64$

⁸ Farshore (2022) [Reading for Pleasure and Purpose](#)

⁹ Farshore (2022) [Reading for Pleasure and Purpose](#); Farshore (2024) [Reading for Pleasure trends and insights on the link between reading and wellbeing](#)

report reading regularly for pleasure compared to 47% of UK men, a 6-percentage point difference.

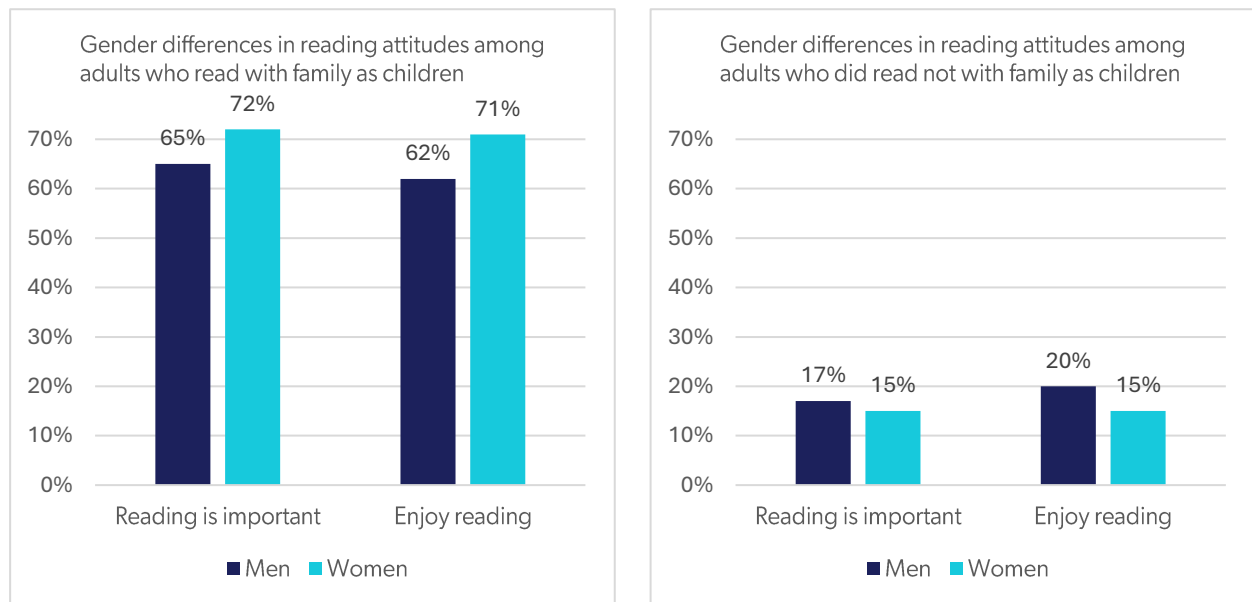
Differences in attitudes to reading between men and women

Exploring the data in greater detail, we found differences between men and women's attitudes toward reading if they had been read to as children, where early reading experiences may have a stronger influence on women's long-term reading attitudes compared to men's:

UK women who reported that reading is an important part of their lives¹⁰ were more likely to have been read to as children compared to men¹¹ (72% women vs 65% men). The reverse was true for those who were not read to as children (15% women vs 17% men). Similarly, UK women¹² who reported that they enjoy reading were more likely to have been read to as children compared to men¹³ (71% women vs 62% men). The reverse was true for those who were not read to as children (15% women vs 20% men). This shows that the gender gap in considering reading important as well as in enjoying reading is larger among those who were read to as children.

A comparative breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Breakdown by family reading in childhood of responses to the reading behaviour-related questions



¹⁰ N=646, Number of women who cite that reading is an important part of their lives

¹¹ N=533, Number of men who cite that reading is an important part of their lives

¹² N=752, Number of women who enjoy reading

¹³ N=624, Number of men who enjoy reading

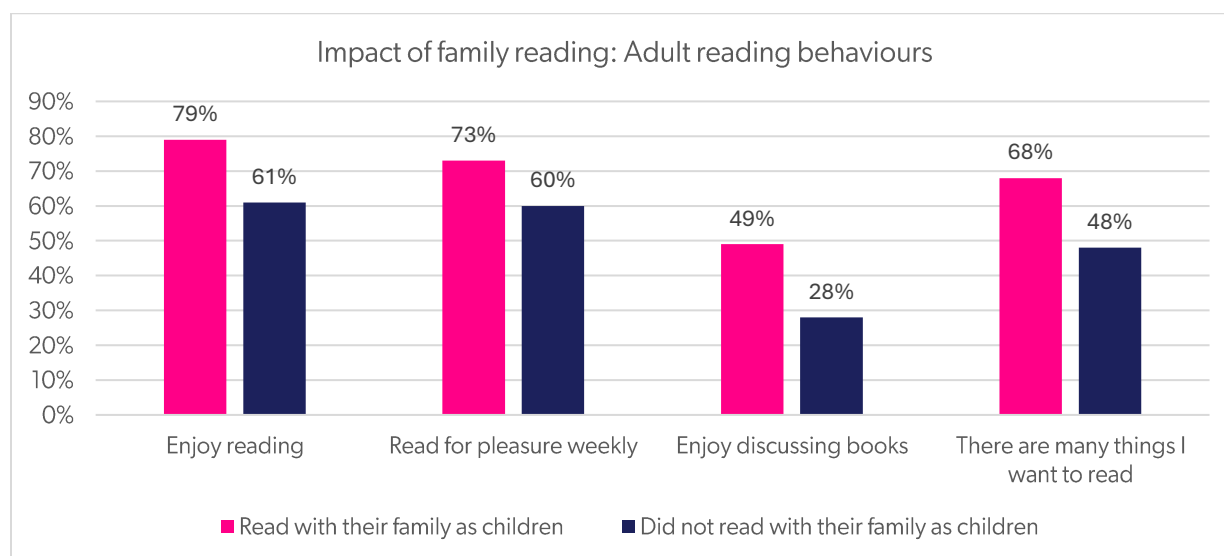
Being read to as a child has a positive impact on reading attitudes for both women and men; however, our dataset and wider research shows that other social and cultural factors may also be at play in shaping differences in women’s and men’s attitudes toward reading in later life.

Relationship between family reading and engagement with reading in later life

Research shows that reading with a parent or caregiver during childhood can have long-lasting effects on reading habits, behaviours and attitudes.¹⁴ Our recent study of UK adults corroborates these findings, revealing key differences between those who experienced family reading in childhood and those who did not.

UK adults who were read to by a parent or caregiver as children were more likely to report positive reading behaviours than those who were not¹⁵. These adults were more likely to enjoy reading (79% vs 61%), read for pleasure at least once a week (73% vs 60%)¹⁶ and enjoy talking to other people about books and reading (49% vs 28%) compared to those who didn't read with family as children. These adults were also much more likely to report that there are a lot things they want to read (68% vs 48%). A comparative breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. Breakdown by family reading in childhood of responses to the reading behaviour-related questions



¹⁴ T Kleemans et al. (2011) [Child and Home Predictors of Early Numeracy Skills in Kindergarten](#), *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 27(3): 471-7; F Niklas and W Schneider (2013) [Home literacy environment and the beginning of reading and writing](#), *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 38: 40-50; J Law et al. (2020) [Parent-child reading to improve language development and school readiness: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#), Nuffield Foundation; OECD (2011) [PISA in Focus](#)

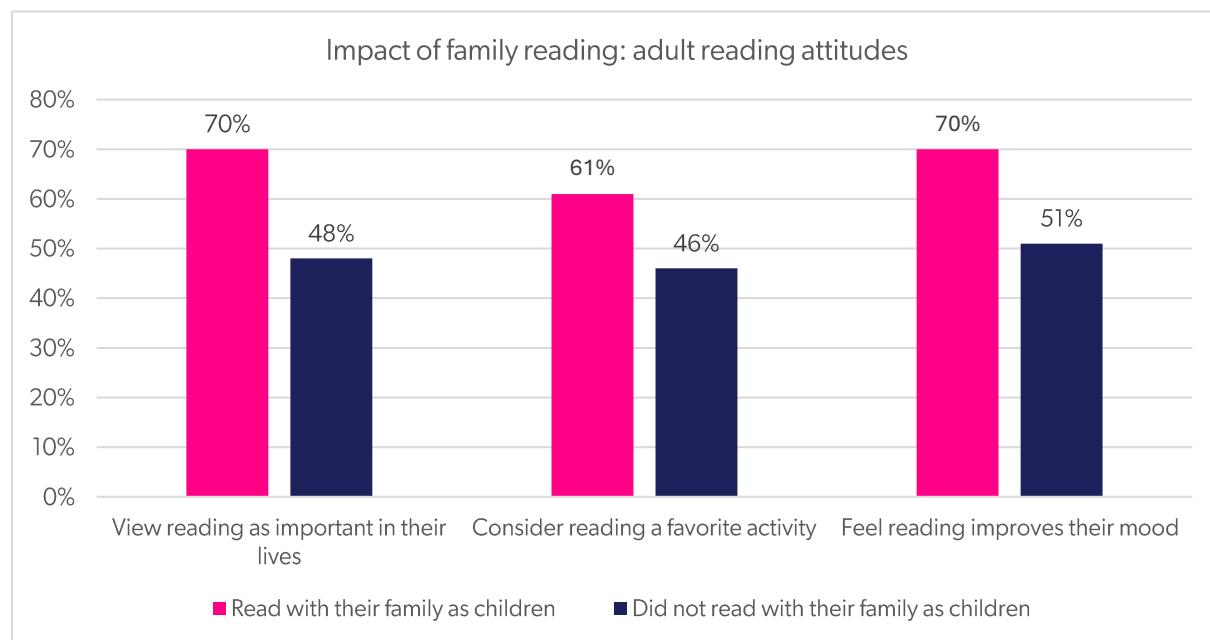
¹⁵ N= 1170, Number of people who read with their family as children; N= 393, Number of people who did not read with their family as children.

¹⁶ N= 1058, Number of people who read with their family as children and responded to the question; N= 311, Number of people who did not read with their family as children and responded to the question

We also explored the link between family reading, reading identities and positive attitudes toward reading, finding that adults who read with a family member as children were much more likely to view reading as an important part of their lives (70% vs 48%), to cite that reading is one of their favourite things to do (61% vs 46%) as well as to state that reading makes them feel better (70% vs 51%).

A comparative breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 4 below.

Figure 4. Breakdown by family reading in childhood of responses to the reading attitude-related questions



Wider benefits of family reading

To understand more about the wider outcomes and the long-term impact of family reading, we asked people with varied experiences of childhood reading to respond to the question: 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?' This data revealed some key differences, with many more of those who read with their families as children reporting positive outcomes compared to those who did not.

Key highlights show that:¹⁷

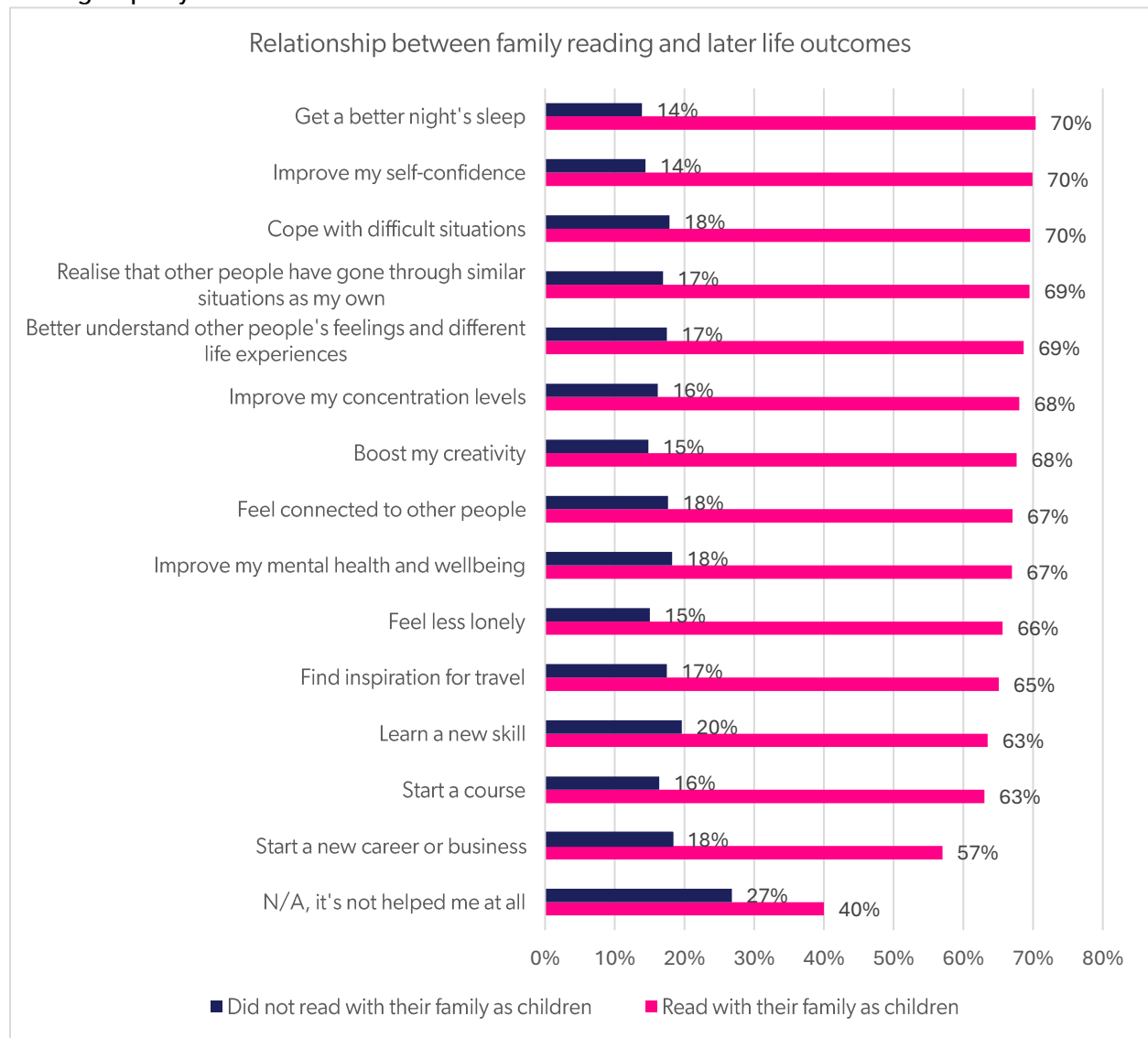
- People who read with their families as children were **more than five times as likely** than those who were not read to as children to report that reading helped them become more confident readers (70% vs 14%) and get a better night's sleep (70% vs 14%).

¹⁷ Sixteen response options were provided. Response options available as 'tick all that apply; therefore, percentages may exceed 100%.

- People who read with their families as children were **more than four times as likely** than those who were not read to as children to report that reading helped them cope with difficult situations (70% vs 18%), realise that other people have gone through similar situations as their own (69% vs 17%), better understand other people's feelings and different life experiences (69% vs 17%), improve their concentration levels (68% vs 16%) and boost their creativity (68% vs 15%).
- Only 40% of people who read with their families as children reported no benefits, compared to 27% of non-family readers, implying that previous experience of family reading is more likely to result in at least one perceived positive outcome.

A comparative breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 5 below.

Figure 5. Breakdown by family reading in childhood of responses to the question 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?'



Current family reading habits

We also wanted to know about current family reading habits across the UK. We asked people to respond to the question 'How often do you read together with family, for example, reading aloud or reading different books at the same time?', finding that 23% of people typically read with their family at least once a week.

Importantly, people who read with their families as children tend to continue this practice with their own families. UK adults who were read to as children by a parent or caregiver were much more likely to read with family in later life (28 vs 11%) than those who were not read to as

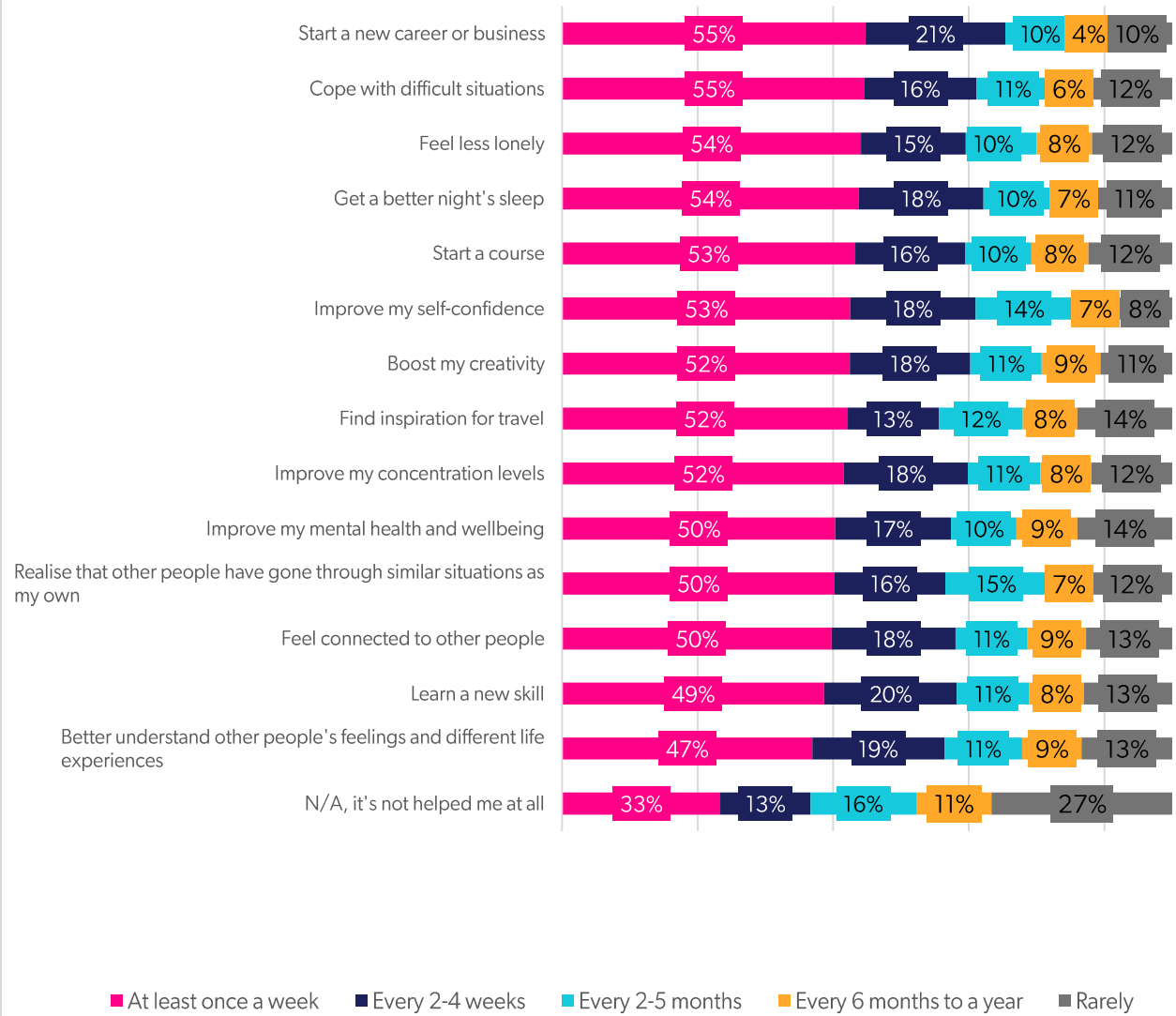
children. Only 49% of those who read with family as children reported never reading with their current family, compared to 66% of those who didn't.

On top of this, our research also shows that for those who do read with their family, more frequent family reading is associated with greater perceived benefits. Around half of all respondents (ranging from 47-55%) who read with their families at least once a week, consistently reported positive outcomes related to reading. Whilst those who read with their families less frequently were less likely to list the positive benefits associated with reading. In fact, the less people reported reading with families, the less likely they were to have experienced the benefits of reading.

A comparative breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 6 below.

Figure 6. Breakdown by family reading frequency of responses to the question 'What, if anything, has reading helped you with?'

Relationship between family reading frequency and positive life outcomes



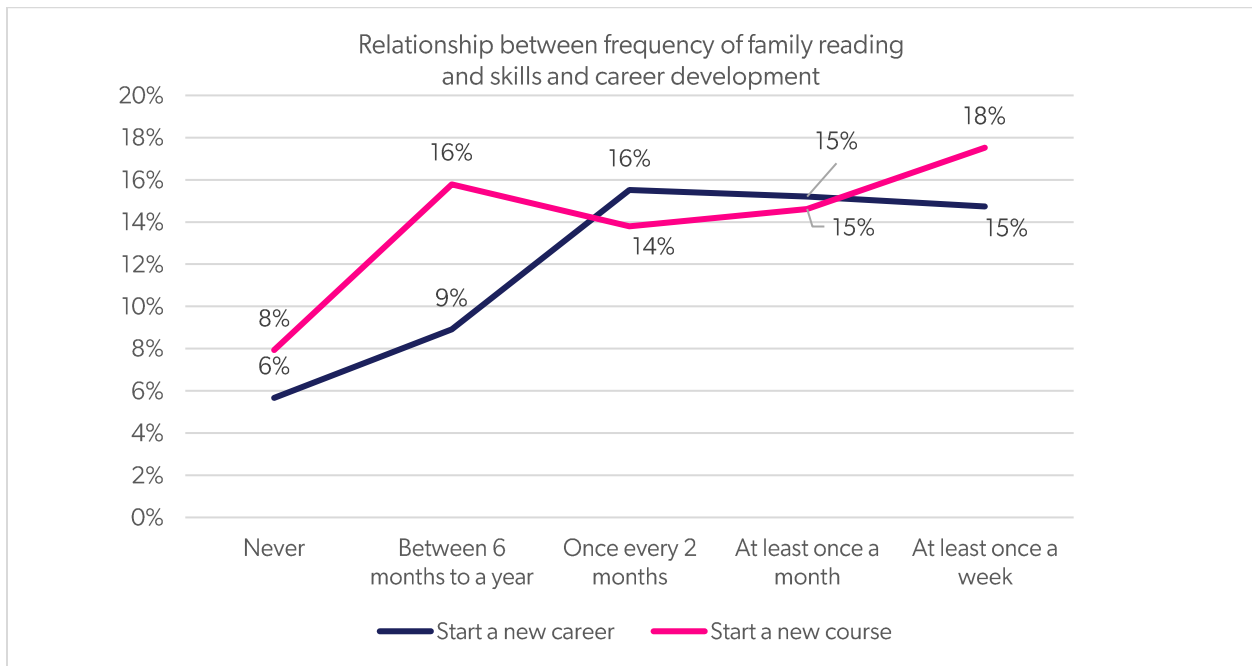
Value of family-reading initiatives

Our data also reveals the long-term benefits associated with family reading, indicating that early reading experiences shape future engagement with reading spaces and resources, with implications for further investment in family reading initiatives. In fact, those who had read with a family member as children were more likely to report that they currently enjoy visiting a bookshop or library than those who had not read with a member of their family as children (60% vs 44%, a 16 percentage-point difference) and were also more likely to be library members in later life (39% vs 26%, a 13 percentage-point difference).

These findings have important implications for the library and publishing sectors, highlighting the potential long-term benefits of investing in family reading initiatives in sustaining reading engagement. Further research could investigate possible links between family reading as a protective or mitigatory factor for sustained reading engagement throughout the life course, particularly where research shows a drop-off in reading engagement during secondary school years.¹⁸

The benefits of family reading extend beyond sustained reading engagement in adulthood, where family reading is also linked to education and career development. Our research shows that those who read with their families more frequently (at least once a week) were more likely to have experienced a positive benefit of reading in supporting them to start a new career or business (15% vs 9%) and to start a new course (18% vs 6%). In fact, we saw a positive correlation between family reading frequency and starting new courses or careers because of reading, with a slightly stronger relationship for starting new courses. A breakdown of these responses can be found in Figure 7 below.

Figure 7. Breakdown by frequency of family reading of responses to professional development-related questions



These findings highlight the importance of family reading initiatives, emphasising the longer-term impact of family reading on individuals, communities and society as a whole.

¹⁸ Ofsted (2022) [Research and analysis 'Now the whole school is reading': supporting struggling readers in secondary school](#)

What's next?

This fifth set of insights into the nation's reading habits demonstrates the positive difference reading can make to our lives, with family reading being associated with a range of benefits in later life including improved wellbeing, sustained reading engagement alongside education and career development, with important implications for the library and publishing sectors.

We have launched our [State of the Nation's Adult Reading: 2024 Overview Report](#) and will be releasing our 'Focus on...' series of reports over the coming weeks, including:

- Focus on... [Reading, health and wellbeing](#)
- Focus on... [Reading, skills development and career opportunities](#)
- Focus on... Reading and social connections
- Focus on... Regional insights