

**WELCOME TO
READING STREETTM
CHAPTER THREE 
READING AND THE
DIGITAL WORLD**

WELCOME TO READING STREET

Welcome to Chapter Three of *Reading Street*, our UK study to help us understand the changing nature of children's reading for pleasure in family life.

We're looking behind the headlines and the statistics that tell us reading for pleasure is in decline. We want to understand why this is happening and also why, in some families, reading still flourishes.

Since the summer of 2012 we have been studying the reading habits of twelve families across four regions of the UK: Bristol, Edinburgh, London and Manchester.

A recurring theme in the first two chapters of our study (Reading and Home and Reading and School) has been the influence of the digital world. Both the parents and the teachers we've spoken to have said that the rise in children's time spent on screens is a challenge to the time dedicated to reading for pleasure.

It's tempting to make digital or screen-based activity the bogeyman when it comes to reading for pleasure. And it's easy to see why, when headlines about children's short attention spans and lack of ability to concentrate fill our news and

when we read that the average screen time for children aged 5–16 is now 6.5 hours a day, compared to less than 5 hours a day in 2005. And at the same time we hear from the National Literacy Trust that only 28% of 8–16 year olds read every day, compared to 30% in 2011 and 40% in 2005.

But it's simply not as straightforward as that. Reading for pleasure is being squeezed, but there's a lot more to the story ...



Chapter Three: Reading and the Digital World

What's happening in family life that has made screen time so all pervasive?

It's true that many families have a large number of devices for children to use. For example, one of the families we visited had five smart phones, a tablet, three Nintendo DSs, a Wii and two laptops – all of which were for use by their 10 year old daughter.

However, talking with parents it's clear there are some complex reasons behind buying devices. They feel compelled to provide the latest things for their children to make sure they are not left out, that they are not the only ones amongst their friends without a Nintendo DS or a smartphone; and they want their children to keep up with technology.

'I let him play on his DS if I think he might get bored waiting somewhere.'

- MUM TO BOY, AGE 7

There's never any question of not buying it, whatever the family circumstances.

Often devices connect children with their friends, be it by texting or on a social gaming or networking site, and parents don't want to obstruct their child being part of a social group of their peers.

There's also a strong feeling among parents that their child should never be bored, and screen time (beyond TV) is the go-to for filling in time.

'It is important to me that they have the latest things, we really only bought the 3D TV for them to watch films on.'

- MUM TO A 4 YEAR OLD BOY

'I let him play on his DS if I think he might get bored waiting somewhere.'
– Mum to boy, age 7

'It is important to me that they have the latest things, we really only bought the 3D TV for them to watch films on.'
– Mum to 4 year old boy

'Technology is a have now, not a 'must have' any more. People have it just because they can.'
– Mum to three children

Parents also have a very pragmatic reason for their child's habitual screen time.

In most UK families both parents now work, so time is at a premium. The digital world meets so many needs for parents. It can occupy children while parents are busy, and enables 'parallel parenting' with parent and child side by side but not engaging. Having your child playing on an app beside you whilst you are on your laptop sending work emails or placing supermarket food orders is a pragmatic solution for busy, harassed parents.

Children are used to having a digital device with them almost 24 hours a day and are becoming unfamiliar with being offline. The most recent Childwise Monitor report found that an average of 60% of children have access to the internet in their own bedroom (47% of 7–8 year olds and 83% of 13–14 year olds); 59% of children have a TV in their bedroom (a further 12% watch TV via a computer, making a total of 71% watching TV in their bedrooms); 70% of 5–16 year olds own a mobile phone and 62% of 7–16s own a smartphone.

The unquiet mind and the lost art of being still

What does this mean for reading for pleasure? The sheer volume of screen-based activity is having an effect on reading for pleasure in behaviour, expectations and buying habits.

'If I can't get to sleep, I'll wind down by playing Mario Bros on my DS in bed.'

– Girl, age 13

In a recent study we commissioned with Bowker, we found that 31% of parents described their family life as hectic with never or rarely a moment to relax. (That equates to almost 2.5 million UK households with children.) And a further 37% (almost 3 million UK households with children) describe their family as busy with only some quieter moments.

'If I can't get to sleep, I'll wind down by playing Mario Bros on my DS in bed.'

- GIRL, AGE 13

In many families the digital world has taken over their lives to such a degree that children's minds are over-stimulated by screens. And having a quiet mind, being still, is of course when reading for pleasure can happen. We have lost the art of being still, the habit of a quiet mind.

In addition to this we live in a very busy, achievement-oriented world with families trying to fit so much into every day. Many parents feel compelled to fill up their children's time, booking up activities in advance – and quiet time is often seen as wasted time.

'It's so hard to believe it's OK for them to do nothing. It seems like a waste of time, even though I know inside it isn't.'
– Mum to two girls, ages 8 and 12

The result is that many children today are not in the habit of concentrating on longer-form texts. Parents, however, do want their children to enjoy reading and 64% say they'd like their child to love reading as much as they do.

'He plays on his Xbox before breakfast, after breakfast and after school. We'd like him to focus his energies into other things, but it's like fighting a losing battle.'
– Parents to boy, 12 years old

E-reading not taken off ... yet

Recent research from Bowker tells us that even though half of all households have a tablet, only one in five children use them for reading. Nearly half use them for watching YouTube, and 88% use them for gaming.

However, when we talk to families we hear a lot of enthusiasm about the idea of e-reading. Children say they want to do it – over 40% of children who read but don't currently have an e-reader say they like the idea of reading on one.

But there's anxiety among parents about e-reading – that it's not right for very

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– MUM TO TWO GIRLS, AGES 8 AND 12

young children and that it's perhaps better for factual books than for fiction. 34% of parents say children already spend too long looking at screens and 74% of parents say they would prefer their children to read a physical book rather than an ebook. Knowing this, it's perhaps not surprising that sales of ebooks have been slower to take off: 3 million ebooks were sold in 2012 versus 73 million in print. With 50% of households now owning at least one tablet device, the opportunity for children to read electronically is there but the habit of e-reading is still in its infancy. Gaming, YouTube and social media dominate our devices

Worry, Watersheds and Family Harmony

Parents do worry. Across the entire age span of 0–17 year olds, parents worry that their children spend too long on screens.

Some try to establish house rules, with a watershed time being the most common

in our Reading Street families. The latest Ofcom report also identifies this, as well as rules around the age-appropriateness of content. Interestingly, few parents have a rule that limits the actual amount of time spent on the internet: only 21% of parents of 5–15 years olds do this.

'I now monitor how much they are in front of a screen. The house rule is that by 9.00pm it's settling down time and everything goes off.'
– Mum to boy, age 6

Conflict avoidance (which we discussed in Chapter One of Reading Street) also plays a part in exacerbating the lack of offline time. But children are pushing for screen time:

'The kids get bored if they are not on a screen. They are always pushing for it. It's a constant battle to keep them off it.'
– Dad to 3 children

Screen time is eroding or even replacing time for reading for pleasure. There are fewer and fewer reading opportunities yet despite the many other demands on family life, and in particular children's time, it's important to remember that reading is seen as a good thing by the parents in our Reading Street families. Many wish their children would read more, indeed 53% say they wish they had more time for reading with their children.

But the way we live now means spare

time is at a premium and finding time to encourage reading is challenging. If we look at parents' time dedicated to their children's reading, we can see a clear scenario of early involvement tailing off rapidly from school age.

Most parents are involved with reading to their children at preschool age, if not every day then weekly. This falls back when children start school due to a combination of factors: parents seeing reading as a skill to learn, so more the school's responsibility rather than theirs; anxiety about not getting it right (after all, they didn't learn phonics); story time is replaced with listening to their child practise their school reading book.

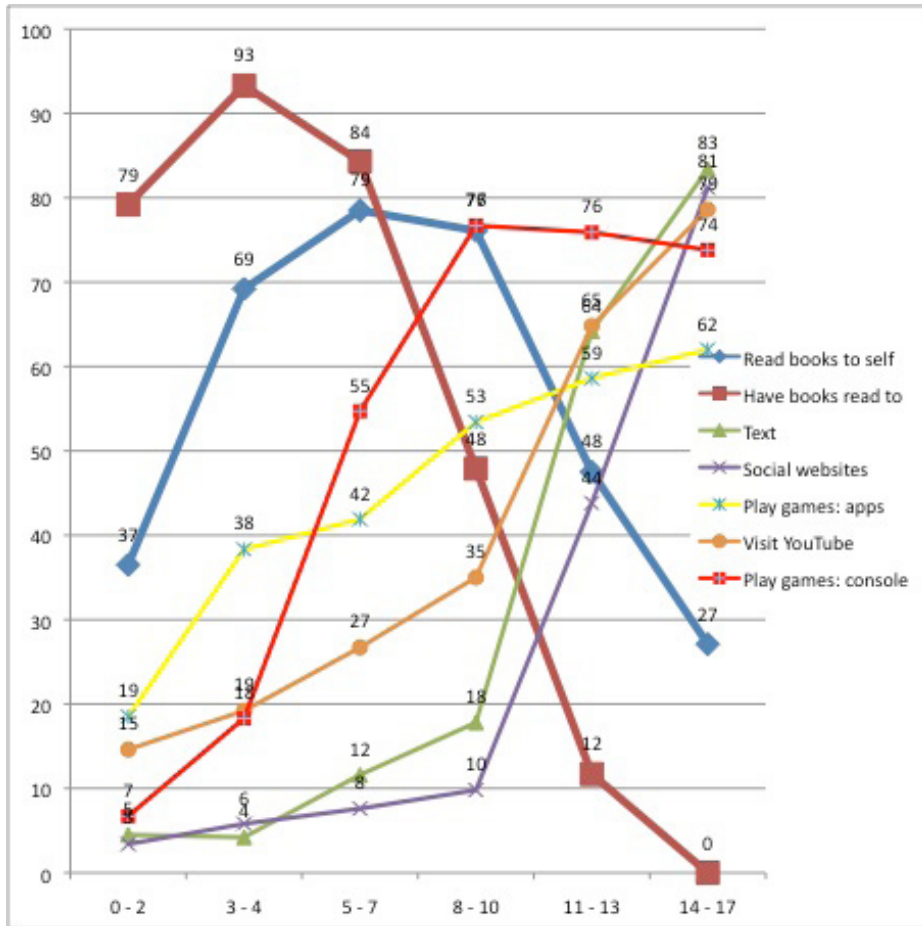
The Call of the Digital World

Parents take a bigger step back when their children can read relatively competently (usually age seven or eight), hoping and believing they will go on to become independent readers. But parents stepping back tends to happen at an age and a stage in a child's development when the digital world is calling very loudly: friends are becoming increasingly important; and having and doing the same things, such as social networking, gaming and texting, all become playground currency. And it is at this vulnerable age in reading progression that parents let go of their child's hand.

From these graphs we can see a clear pattern of parents slowing down on reading to their children. We also see that when their influence on reading is lower, screen-based activities gather

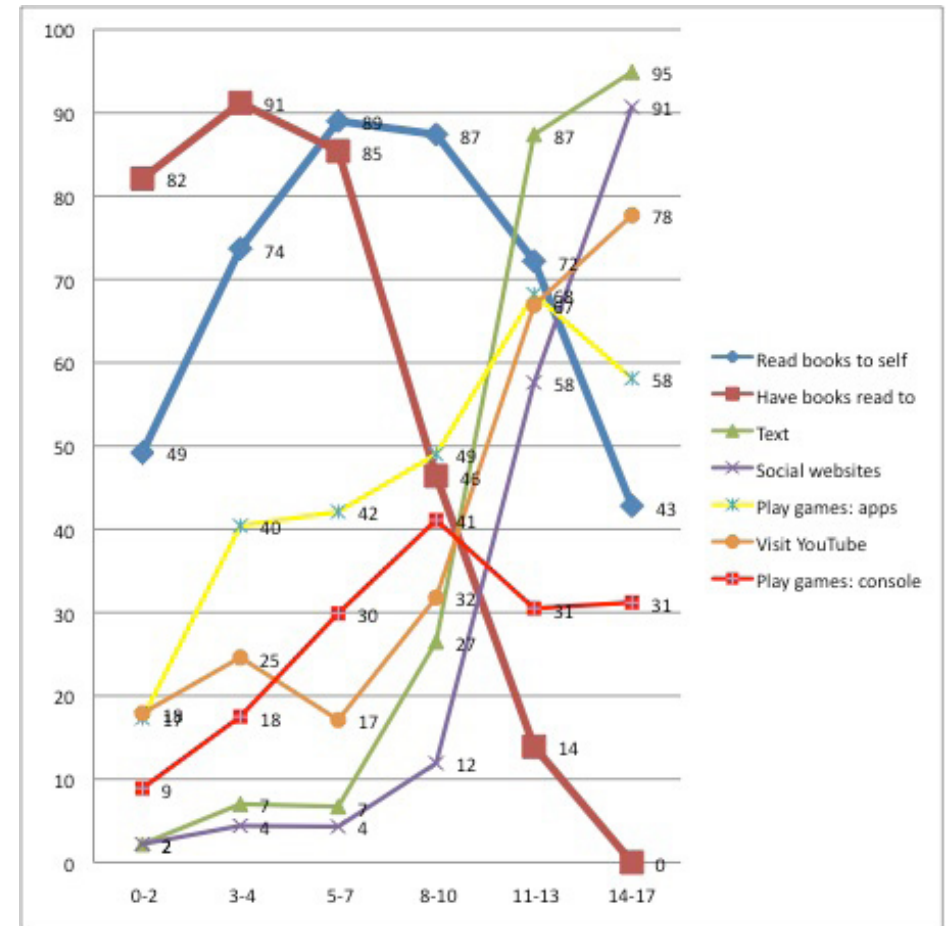
momentum and children's personal reading declines. This pattern is true for both boys and girls. The pull of gaming on consoles is, however, much stronger for boys than for girls.

Weekly activities among boys



Source: Understanding the children's book consumer in the digital age – 2013

Weekly activities among girls



Source: Understanding the children's book consumer in the digital age – 2013

What Teachers Think

So far in this chapter we have been looking at the lost art of being still (the habit of a quiet mind) in family life, but our research with teachers shows that time where reading for pleasure can happen is also hard to find in the classroom. Here, too, quiet time can be seen as wasted time:

'There needs to be time in the school day to read children a story. I used to do this and would read my class a book per term, now there is no time for a whole story for the class.'

'When I started teaching we shared a book at the end of most days. Now there is so much pressure on the teacher that you almost feel that you are doing something wrong if you 'only' read a book.'

Teachers also observe the phenomenon of increasing screen time at home:

'Digital culture is an important factor and there is a general expectation that children will have 'entertainment' all the time (e.g. soft play, swimming, clubs) rather than family activities at home.'

'Screen time takes over as parents have less time or inclination to read or share books with their children.'

'Parents need to understand the value of sharing good books with their children and restrict their children's screen time.'

But, as we said in our last chapter, while digital media may be affecting children's reading time at home, only 19% of teachers believe this is an insurmountable problem. Most teachers think reading for pleasure can co-exist with the digital world and are adamant that children can still be encouraged to be enthusiastic readers:

'There's the right type of book for every child – it's just having the time to expose the children to all the different genres and letting them read in order to establish a liking for them.'

'There needs to be time in the school day to read children a story. I used to do this and would read my class a book per term, now there is no time for a whole story for the class.'

When screen time and reading co-exist

Despite the attractions and challenges of screen time, we've met families where

reading co-exists very happily with screen-based entertainment. These families have found some balance and prevented wholesale takeover by screen time

'My son would love to use the Kindle again. He likes how it saved the page for him. I am not sure I am going to get my Kindle back!'

- MUM TO BOY, AGE 7

Children, and many parents, are thrilled by the possibilities that technology brings for reading: personalising books, sharing recommendations online, interacting with stories in new ways and simply watching a book materialise on an e-reader at the touch of a button.

'I used to read books before bed, but now I use the iPad instead. I've downloaded ice hockey/sports books and books about zombies as well.'

- Boy, age 13

'My son would love to use the Kindle again. He likes how it saved the page for him. I am not sure I am going to get my Kindle back!'

- Mum to boy, age 7

Yet physical books still resonate with children. In fact, according to Nielsen,

73 million children's books were sold in 2012. And the digital worlds and games that children so love can be new ways into reading: books about Minecraft, Angry Birds, Moshi Monsters and Skylanders hold great appeal.

Screen time is one part of a child's entertainment repertoire. There is no reason why it can't co-exist with and motivate reading. Indeed, we have met families where it does.

The danger to reading is when the balance goes and screen time takes over, and we lose the art of being still, the habit of a quiet mind.

Sources

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Children and their Reading (YouGov, 2013)

The Children's Book Consumer in the Digital Age (Bowker, 2013)

Reading Street (Egmont, 2013)

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About Egmont UK

Egmont is the UK's leading specialist children's publisher for babies to teens, inspiring children to read through more than 30 million award-winning books, magazines, ebooks and apps each year. We're proud to be home to many of the world's favourite stories and best-loved authors, illustrators and characters such as Michael Morpurgo (War Horse), Andy Stanton (Mr Gum), Enid Blyton, Julia Donaldson, Lemony Snicket, Michael Grant (Gone series and BZRK), Winnie-the-Pooh, Tintin, Mr. Men, Thomas & Friends, Ben 10, Angry Birds and Minecraft.

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So why Reading Street? And why now?

Like many parents, teachers and authors, we hear every day that children's reading for pleasure is under threat. Is it? Or is it just changing to reflect a new media environment? As a children's publisher this question is incredibly important to us, so we're setting out to find out more.

Now more than ever, reading is hitting the headlines. Libraries are closing, one in three children aged 11-13 don't own a book (Source: NLT), and the UK is way down in the world literacy rankings. Yet children still love stories and everyone agrees that reading is important.

While the government is taking action in schools, and charities are encouraging people to volunteer as reading helpers, we feel it's also important to understand reading in the context of family life and what it takes to inspire children to read.

At Egmont we're already experimenting with new ways of telling stories on the digital devices children love most: games machines, smartphones and tablets. And we're working with schools to teach literacy through magazines.

We'll be sharing our findings and thoughts on our Reading Lives blog.

Please join in on our blog: <http://readinglives.egmont.co.uk/> and talk to us on Twitter: @EgmontUK #ReadingLives

We hope you'll enjoy this journey with us.

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