

The home learning environment in 2021

Emerging insight into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents' literacy practices at home

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What happens in the early years of a child's life has a profound impact on the rest of their life¹. This significant and influential phase in visual, language and emotional development lays the foundation for lifelong health, learning and earning potential².

Children learn to investigate the world through everyday life and activities. Although early years practitioners provide essential support with a child's development during this period, it is parents who have the biggest influence on a child's outcomes³. The home learning environment influences language development, which can predict children's performance on entry to primary school⁴. Previous research has shown that seven key activities – reading, teaching songs, painting and drawing, visiting the library, teaching the alphabet, chatting and

¹ <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/foundations-for-life-what-works-to-support-parent-child-interaction-in-the-early-years>

² <https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/an-equal-start-improving-outcomes-in-childrens-centres-an-evidence-review.pdf>

³ *ibid*

⁴ https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/181549/DFE-RR134.pdf

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taking children on visits during the pre-school period – are all associated with better outcomes at age 6 and 7⁵. The more stimulating the early environment, the more positive connections are formed in the brain, and the better the child thrives in all aspects of his or her life⁶.

The survey

In August 2021 we commissioned Savanta ComRes to conduct a survey of 1,500 parents of children from birth to age five across the UK to explore the extent to which parents were carrying out these seven key learning activities at home: reading (including books, e-books, and picture books), chatting, playing, singing, painting/drawing, looking at the alphabet and playing outside the home (e.g. at a library or play group).

We compared the results to surveys we commissioned One Poll to conduct in 2020 and 2019, which asked parents of children from birth to five across the UK the same questions about how frequently they were doing these learning activities in the home. By comparing results across different time periods, we are able to identify and monitor changes in behaviour, get a snapshot of activity during a particular time, and place the survey findings into a wider context.

Key findings

Our survey showed that:

- **Fewer parents engaged in all seven home learning activities in 2021 compared with 2019. For example:**
 - 76% of parents said in 2021 that they had chatted to their child at least once a day in the last week, compared with 83% in 2020 and 90% in 2019
 - 53% of parents said in 2021 that they had read to their child at least once a day in the last week compared with 62% in 2020 and 66% in 2019
 - 30% of parents said in 2021 that they had played outside with their child at least once a day in the last week compared with 28% in 2020 and 41% in 2019
- **This year, slightly fewer disadvantaged parents engaged in some home learning activities on a daily basis compared with advantaged parents. For example:**
 - 50% of parents from the C2DE group (lower socioeconomic status) said they had read to their child at least once a day in the last week, compared with 56% of parents from the ABC1 group (middle and higher socioeconomic status)
 - 75% of parents from the C2DE group said they had chatted to their child at least once a day in the last week, compared with 78% of parents from the ABC1 group

⁵ <http://193.61.4.225/web-files/our-staff/academic/edward-melhuish/documents/EPPEprimary.pdf>

⁶ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/69729/a91213.pdf;jsessionid=CCA03E383F459A59C36C98A25B4F54BB?sequence=1>

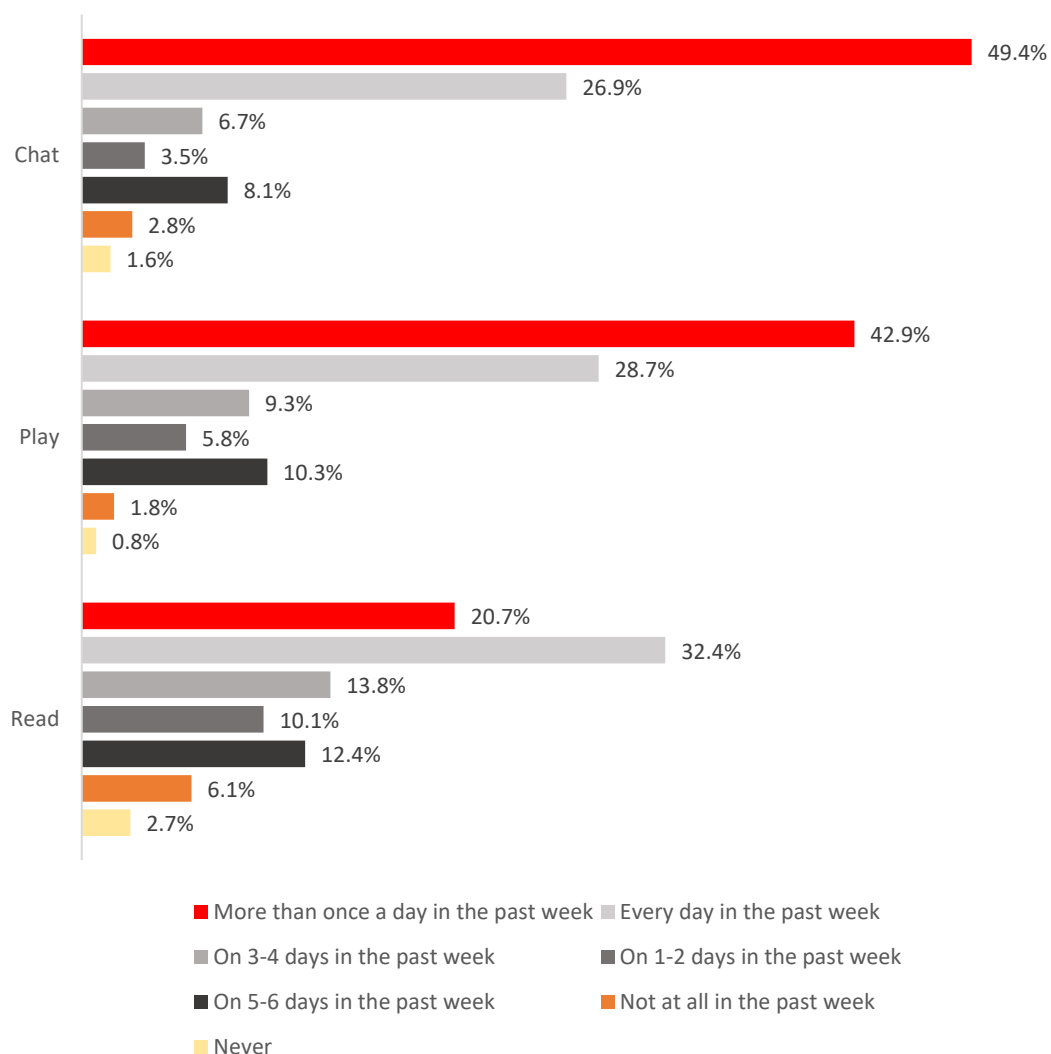
- **There were also differences in the frequency of engagement by other parental characteristics:**
 - **More mothers than fathers** engaged in home learning activities, with the exception of reading (where there was no difference by gender) and playing outside (which fathers had done more frequently). For example, 79% of mothers said they had chatted to their child at least once a day in the last week, compared with 63% of fathers
 - **More parents** aged 34 and under said that they played, sung, looked at the alphabet, painted, and played outside at least once a day in the last week compared with parents aged 35 and over. For example, 65% of younger parents said they had sung to their child at least once a day in the last week, compared with 53% of older parents
 - **More parents with higher levels of education** said that they read to their children at least once a day in the last week compared with parents with lower levels of education. For example, 58% of parents with a doctorate said they had read to their child at least once a day in the last week compared with 50% of parents with a secondary level qualification.

- **Many parents intend to engage in activities more frequently over the coming months. For example:**
 - 47% of parents said they intend to play outside more than before
 - 35% of parents said they intend to look at the alphabet more than before
 - 35% of parents said they intend to paint and draw more than before

Frequency of learning activities in the home in 2021

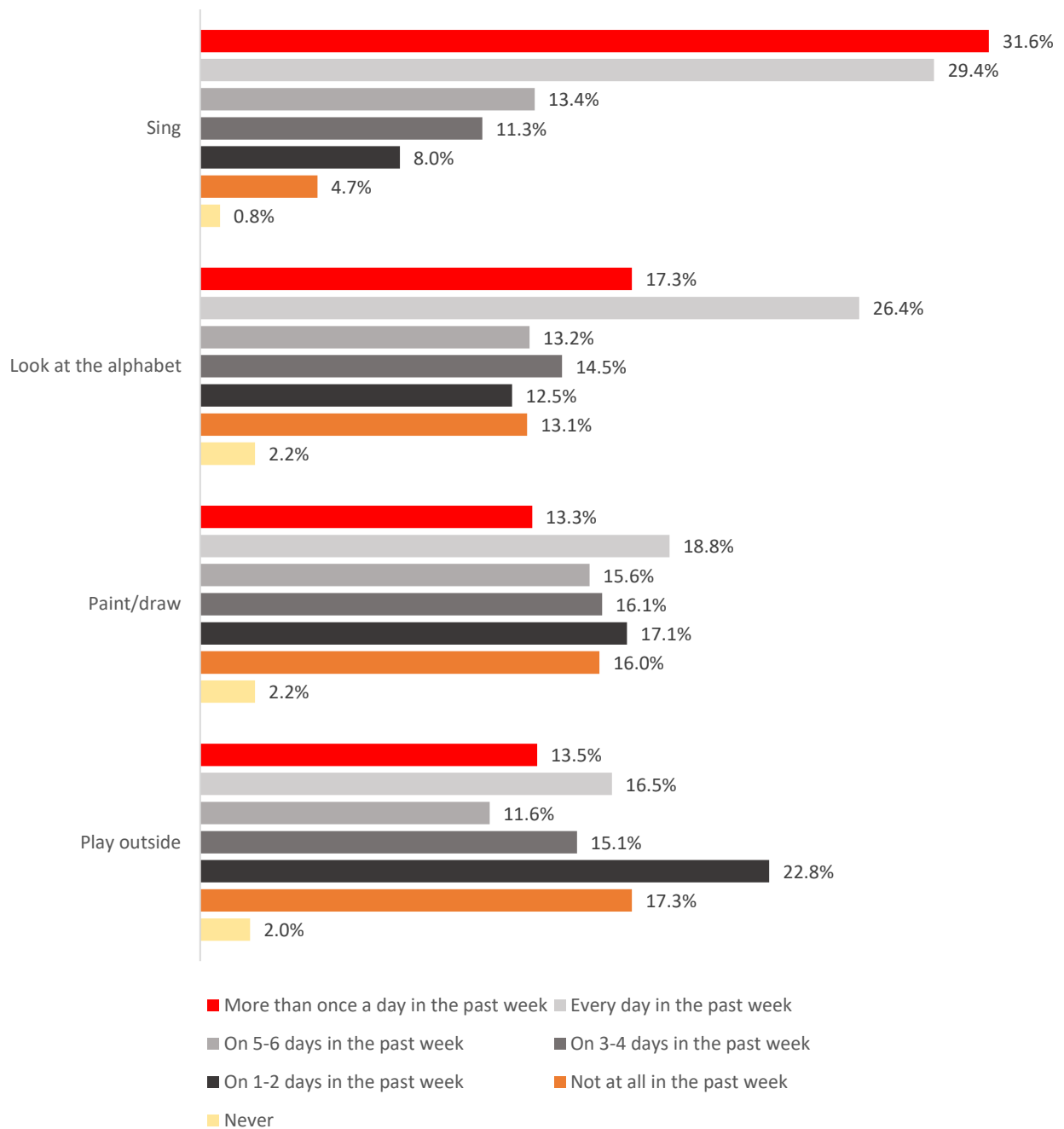
We asked parents how often they had participated in different learning activities in the home with their children over the last week. Most parents were doing the three key home learning activities (chat, play and read) at least once a day or more (Figure 1). For example, 76% of parents said they had chatted to their child at least once a day in the last week and 72% of parents said they had played with their child at least once a day in the last week.

Figure 1: Frequency of key home learning activities engaged in in the past week



Parents reported doing other activities, such as looking at the alphabet, painting/drawing and playing outside less often than chatting, playing, and reading (Figure 2). However, most parents reported doing these activities at least three days or more in the last week. For example, 71% of parents said they had looked at the alphabet with their child on three or more days in the last week and 64% of parents said they had painted, drawn or made something with their child on at least three days in the last week.

Figure 2: Frequency of other home learning activities in the last week



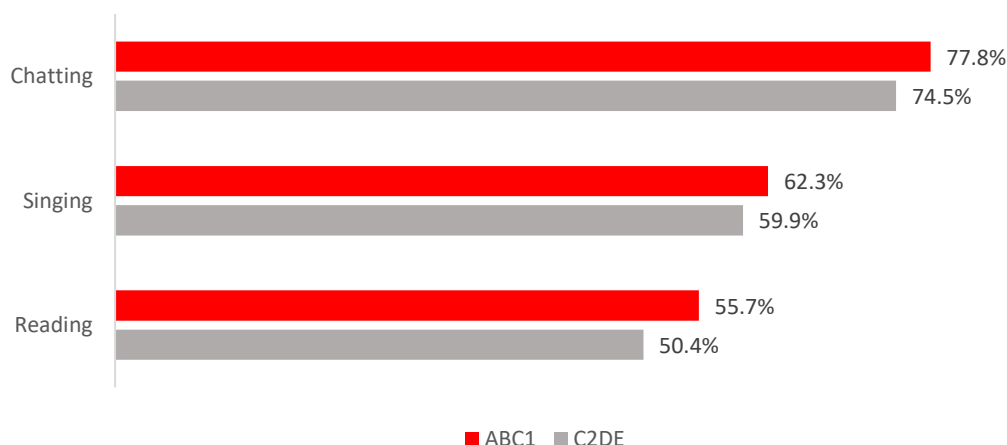
Differences in frequency of engaging in learning activity by parental characteristics

Socioeconomic status

We used social grades as a proxy of socioeconomic background, which is based on occupation. There was a difference in the frequency with which parents from different socioeconomic

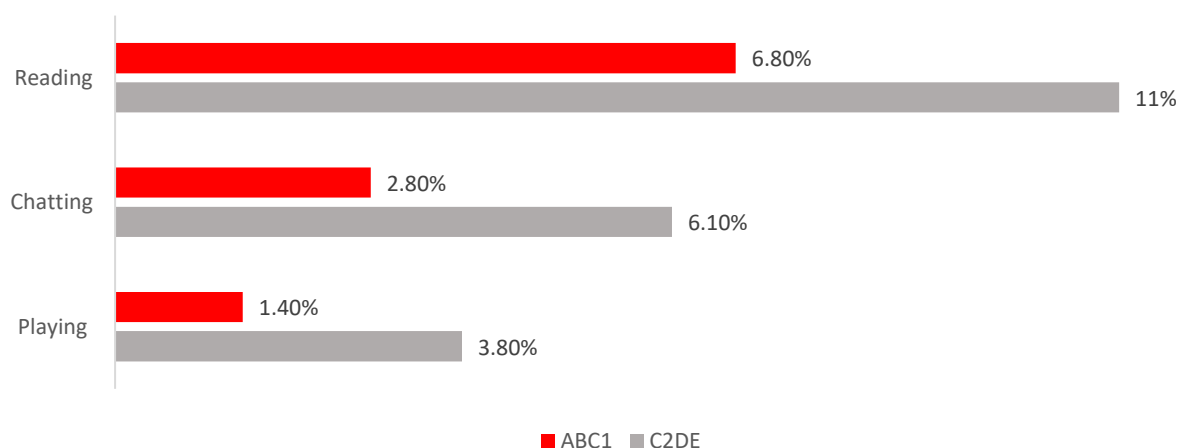
backgrounds engaged in three activities in 2021, with parents from C2DE social grades⁷ engaging in reading, chatting and singing at least once a day in the last week compared with parents from ABC1 social grades⁸ (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Percentage of parents chatting, singing and reading at least once a day in the past week by socioeconomic status



In 2021, more parents from a C2DE background said that they had hadn't read, chatted or played with their child in the past week compared with parents from ABC1 backgrounds (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of parents who didn't engage in activities in the past week by socioeconomic status



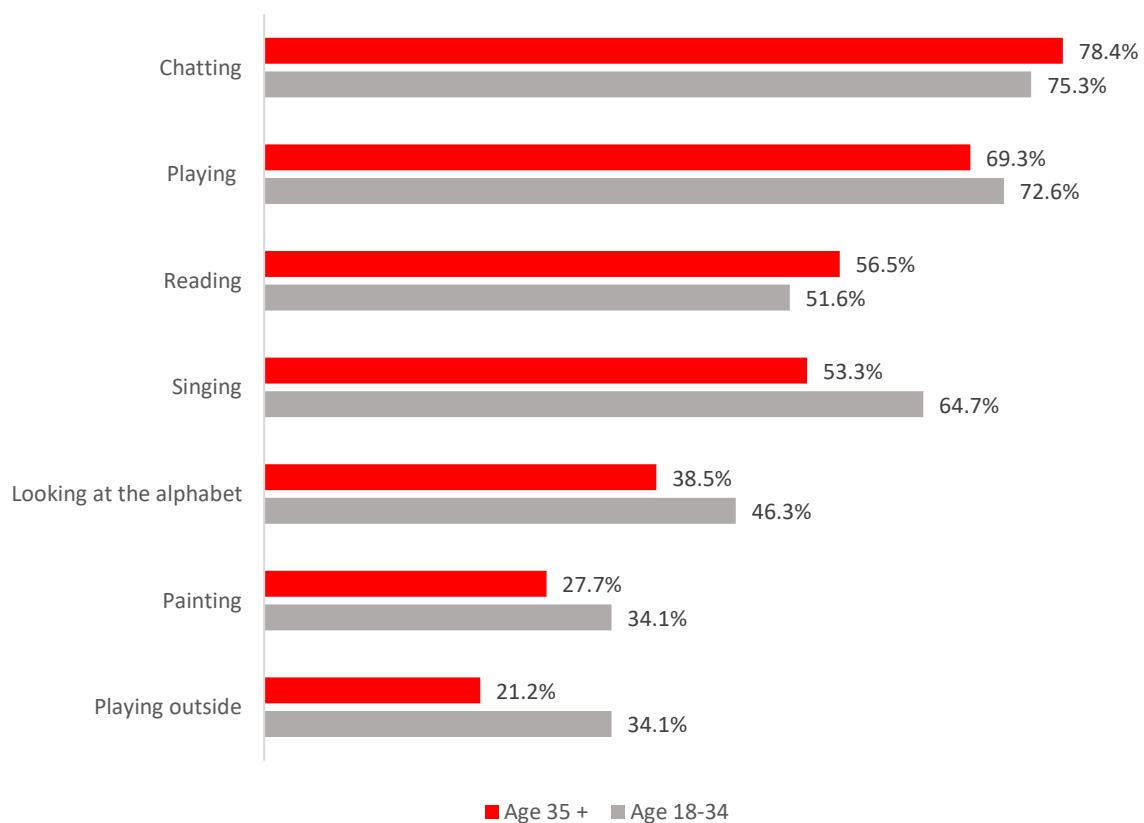
⁷ i.e. parents from skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled occupations or those not currently in employment, including students and pensioners

⁸ i.e. parents from higher, intermediate or junior managerial positions

Age

In 2021, there were differences in the frequency of engagement in certain activities by the age of the parent: as Figure 5 shows, more younger parents (aged 34 and under) had played, sung, looked at the alphabet, painted, and/or played outside at least once a day in the last week, while more older parents (aged 35 and above) had read and chatted at least once a day in the last week.

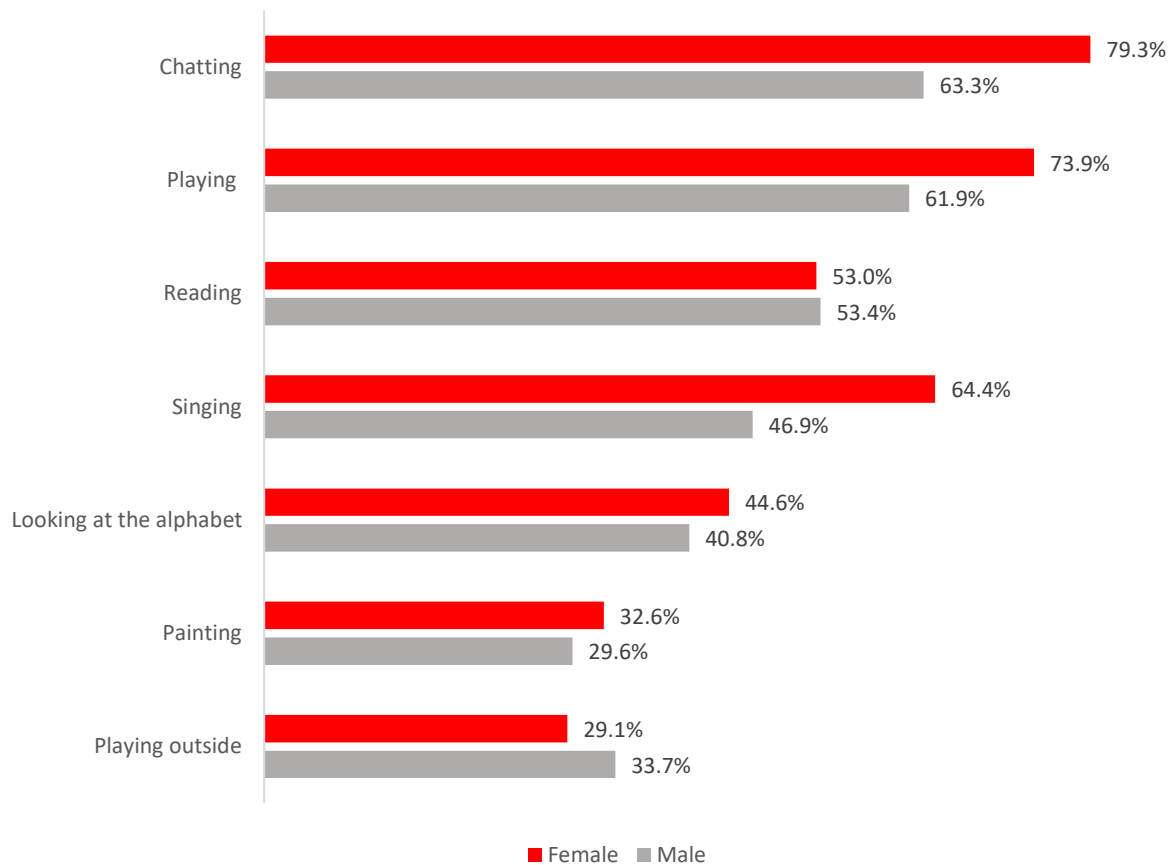
Figure 5: Percentage of parents participating in home learning activities at least once a day in the past week by parental age



Gender

In 2021, more women than men engaged in activities at least once a day in the last week, with the exception of reading where there was no difference by gender, and playing outside, which more men than women did at least once a day over the last week (see Figure 6). Of the men who said they had played outside at least once a day over the last week, 83% had done this with a male child, and 16% with a female child.

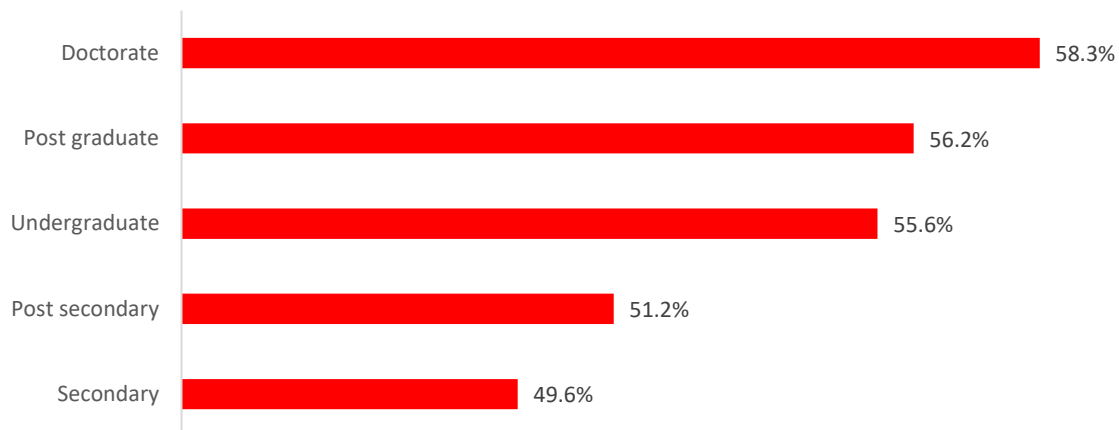
Figure 6: Percentage of parents participating in home learning activities at least once a day in the past week by parental gender



Education

In 2021, there were differences in the frequency of engagement of certain activities by the parents’ education level. For example, the higher the level of education the parent had, the more likely it was that they had read to their child at least once a day in the past week (see Figure 7). For example, 58% of parents with a doctorate said they had read to their child at least once a day in the last week compared with 50% of parents with a secondary level qualification.

Figure 7: Percentage of parents reading at least once a day in the past week by parental education level



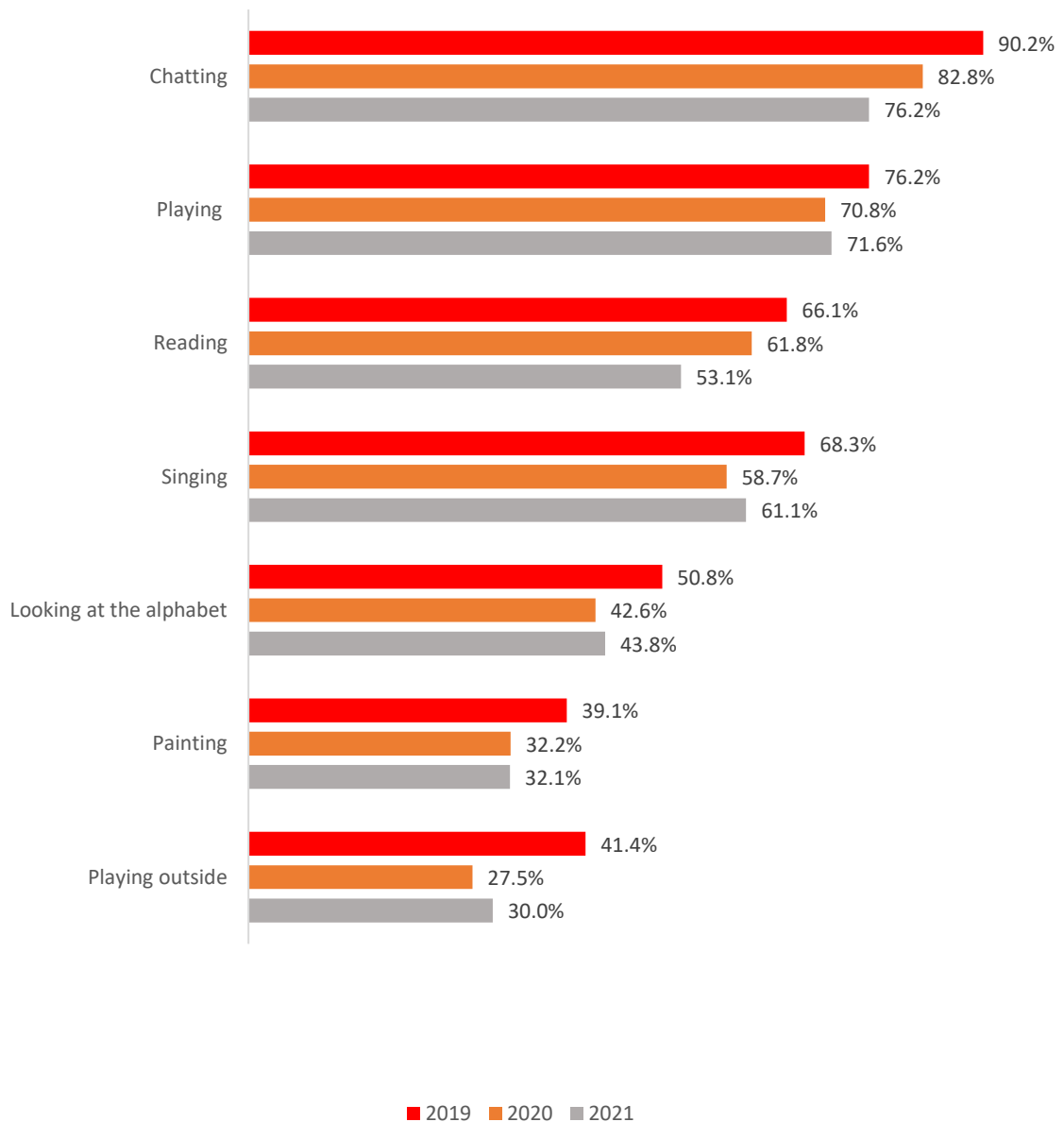
We also found that more parents who were educated to post-graduate or doctorate level looked at the alphabet, painted or drew, or played outside at least once a day over the past week compared with parents with other educational levels. For example, 52% of parents with a doctorate qualification had painted or drawn with their child in the last week, compared with 32% of parents with secondary level qualifications (e.g. GCSE/O Level). Similarly, 42% of parents with a post-graduate qualification (e.g. MA or MSc) had played outside at least once a day in the last week compared with 25% of parents with a post-secondary qualifications (e.g. A Levels or NVQ3).

Comparison of frequency of activities between 2019, 2020 and 2021

Comparing parental home learning activities over the past three years (see Figure 8), we can see that engagement in 2021 was lower for all seven activities when compared with 2019. This may suggest that for some families, COVID-19 has been a difficult experience, with issues around mental health and financial difficulties perhaps preventing parents from participating in these activities as often as before.

Our [literature review](#) found that during COVID-19, regulations around social distancing resulted in families spending more time at home, and many enjoyed this quality time together. Research suggests, however, that there was a marked difference between children who spent extra quality time at home with their parents, and those who were at home in more difficult circumstances. COVID-19 exacerbated factors that can influence the prevalence of parental depression, including economic hardship and job insecurity, and those in low paid or insecure work, who had fewer resources to begin with, were impacted more. Parenting is influenced by parents' current lives – it is easier to parent more effectively when social and economic circumstances are favourable and when stress and anxiety are lower. For many parents the stress of financial insecurity meant they were not able to support their children's learning as much as they would like.

Figure 8: Percentage of parents who reported doing activities at least once a day in the last week

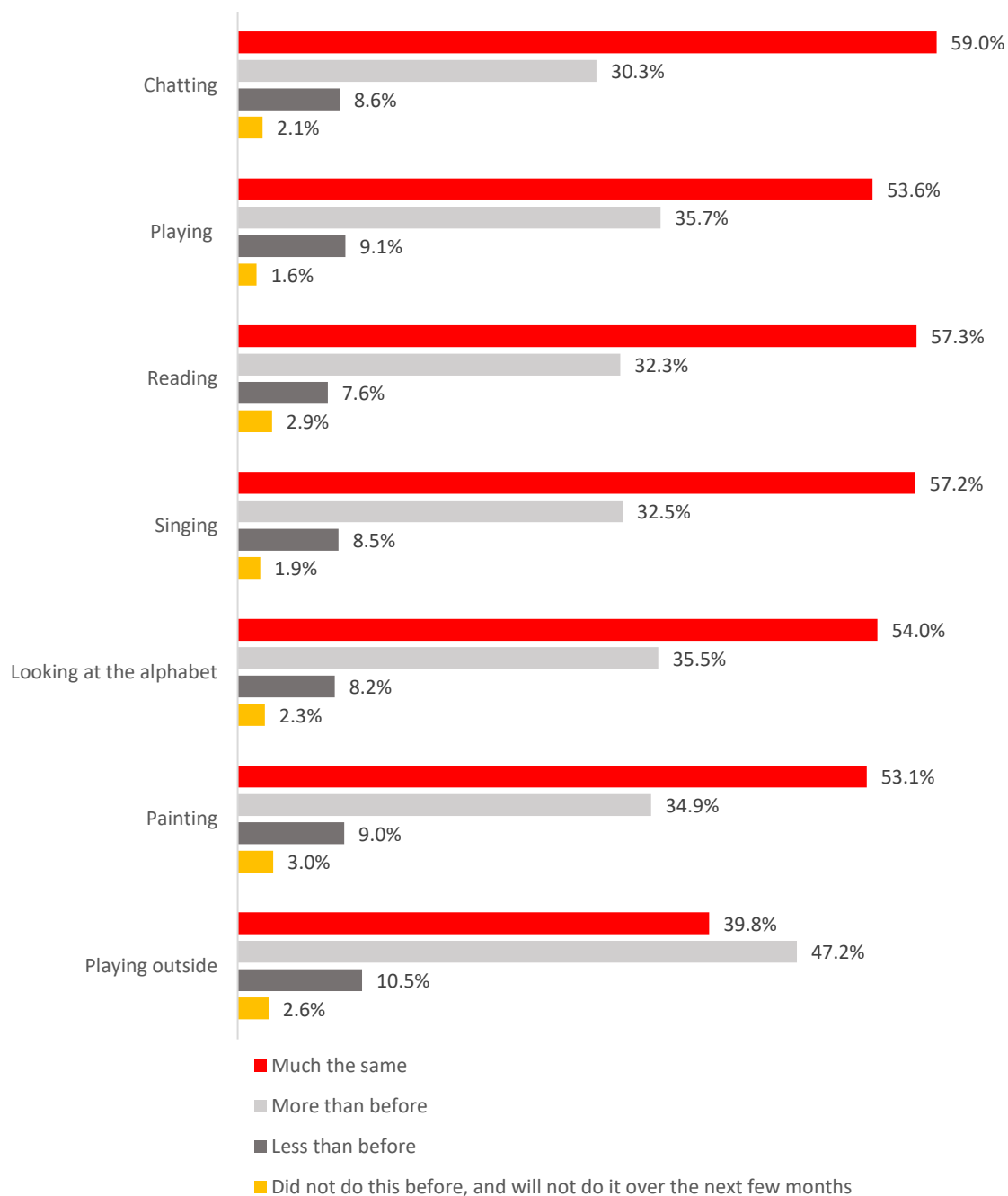


Future plans

Finally, we asked parents how frequently they intend to engage in home learning environment activities in the next few months, now that COVID-19 restrictions are easing (Figure 9). The majority of parents said that they intend to engage in activities as frequently as they do now, although a significant number also said they intend to engage in activities more frequently. For example, nearly a third of parents (32%) said they intend to read more frequently, and nearly half (47%) said they intend to play outside more frequently.

Slightly more parents from the C2DE group said that they intend to read more over the coming months than parents from the ABC1 group (34% vs 30%).

Figure 9: Parents' future plans in relation to frequency of engagement



Conclusion

Given the impact of the home learning environment on improving outcomes for children, it is encouraging that in 2021 most parents reported doing activities such as chatting, playing, singing and reading with their children on a daily basis. However, it is concerning to see that fewer parents engaged in these activities in 2021 compared with 2019.

It is equally concerning to see that there was a difference in the number of activities parents were doing in the home by socioeconomic background. This reflects wider research, which

suggests that parents from low-income backgrounds spend less time reading and playing with their children. For example, research has found that children from low-income backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich home learning environment⁹: they are likely to hear fewer words, and have fewer books¹⁰. As a result, children from low-income backgrounds are more likely to fall behind in vocabulary skills at school entry¹¹, are less likely to be ready for school¹², and more than twice as likely to be diagnosed with a language problem¹³. Given that our survey found engagement in home learning environment activities has decreased overall since 2019, it is likely that the pandemic has exacerbated these existing inequalities.

⁹ <https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/poorer-children-education-full.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c86931b4d87114c07db1adb/t/5d11f4b220828c00012d82de/1561457851435/Evidence+Review+SCUK+DSDL+2018.pdf>

¹¹ <http://www.healthscotland.scot/media/2049/childrens-social-circumstances-and-educational-outcomes-briefing-paper.pdf>

¹² <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c86931b4d87114c07db1adb/t/5d11f4b220828c00012d82de/1561457851435/Evidence+Review+SCUK+DSDL+2018.pdf>

¹³ [file:///C:/Users/MelanieC/Downloads/language-child-wellbeing-indicator%20\(19\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/MelanieC/Downloads/language-child-wellbeing-indicator%20(19).pdf)

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