

Children and young people's letter writing in 2021

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October 2021

Our 2018 report¹ on letter writing highlighted the enduring appeal of writing letters to connect people. Many children and young people also told us that they write letters to make the person they are writing to happy. This has never been truer now. This research shows that children and young people's letter writing has been impacted by events in 2020, with the key themes of connections, wellbeing, and advocacy/campaigning emerging from children and young people's comments.

Nearly 1 in 4 (23.4%; n = 9,930) children and young people aged 8 to 18 said in early 2021 that they had written a letter in the past month². Indeed, the pandemic seemed to have impacted positively on this, as in the words of one young person:

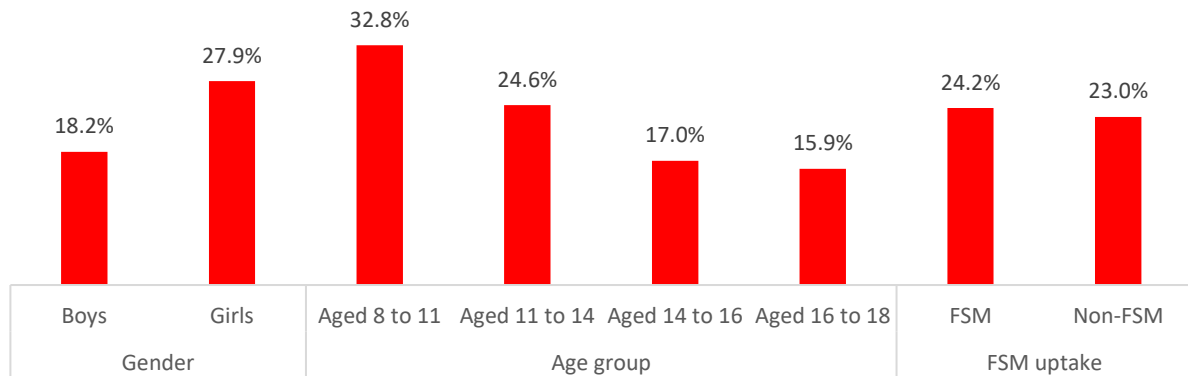
"I wrote letters and things to family which I did not do before as I had no time and in lockdown I had more time."

More girls than boys said that they had written a letter, as had younger children compared with their older peers (see Figure 1). Indeed, twice as many children aged 8 to 11 said that they had written a letter compared with their peers aged 14 to 16 and 16 to 18. There was no difference by free school meal (FSM) uptake, our proxy of socioeconomic background, with 24.2% of children and young people who received FSMs saying that they had written a letter in the past month, compared with 23.0% of those not receiving FSMs.

¹ <https://literacytrust.org.uk/research-services/research-reports/children-and-young-peoples-letter-writing-in-2017-18/>

² Based on data from our latest Annual Literacy Survey between January and mid-March 2021. Despite the ongoing pandemic and disruptions to schools, 42,502 children and young people aged 8 to 18 from 117 UK schools participated in this online survey.

Figure 1: Percentage of children and young people who had written letters in the past month by gender, age group and free-school-meal uptake.



In 2021, we also asked children and young people their reasons for writing. Of those who had been writing letters, 1 in 5 (21%) said that writing made them feel connected to the world. Indeed, the popularity of writing letters to stay in touch with family, particularly during the pandemic, is obvious from the many open-ended responses we received. These included:

“I write my Grandad a letter every so often to keep in touch.”

“I write a lot more letters now because due to COVID we can't see our family members, so I write letters to my grandparents who live far away.”

“I wrote messages for my grandparents as they were stuck inside due to being vulnerable. I wish I had wrote a poem or a story that they could put on their wall.”

“I wrote letters to people I couldn't see.”

“I wrote more letters to stay connected to friends and family.”

“During lockdown since I couldn't go outside I have been writing lots of letters to my family because they live far away and I can't go and see them.”

“I wrote letters to my gran who didn't have access to technology lots.”

“I wrote letters to my nanna about how I was feeling and what I had done in that week.”

“Since my aunties and grandma and my grandpa live somewhere else in England we like to send letters to each other through the mail because we haven't seen each other for so long but we do FaceTime on our devices once in a while.”

Letters were also written to forge new connections:

“I wrote letters to older people in my road offering to do their shopping and help them out.”

“Writing letters to people in my local area to give them some encouraging literature on how to cope with the lockdown - I wrote letters to the old people's home.”

Children and young people not only wrote letters to stay connected to others but also to remind themselves what this time has been like. As such, many wrote letters to their future selves:

“I wrote a letter to my future self a year from now. I will be reading it in August 2021.”

“I wrote a letter to my future self about my school, friend and life when I was little.”

“I wrote letters to my future self about corona.”

“I started journaling and also writing letters for my future self to look back on.”

For many children and young people, letter writing was an outlet for their creativity (66.1%). It also presented a way to express their thoughts and feelings (57.3%), as well as their ideas and imagination (62.9%). Nearly 1 in 4 (23.8%) of those who wrote letters also said that they wrote to support causes and issues that they cared about. Indeed, one young person told us that:

“I write letters and make posters to protest on things like climate change, free school meals and other things too.”

“[I] wrote a letter regarding racism.”

“In lockdown I wrote a letter to Malorie Blackman because I thought she was a great writer and I wanted to write to her about her books.”

Many of those who wrote letters also said that writing helped them feel better when they were sad (24.6%) and, overall, nearly 1 in 2 (45.2%) of those who wrote letters agreed that writing made them feel better. This also emerged as a prominent theme in the open-ended responses, with children and young people saying that:

“I found writing letters to people who I couldn't see really relaxing as it gave me something to look forward to.”

“I wrote letters to my best friend which kept my mental health at a good level.”

“It helps me express how I feel when I write letters. It helps me get my emotions out.”

“I also write unsent letters to people who’ve hurt me to let go of those emotions and try to understand them.”

Children and young people also write letters to make a positive impact on the recipients:

“I write letters to my friends to make them happy. I write letters to my parents so they know how much I love them and then give it to them, even though they live with me so I make the letters so they know how much I appreciate them.”

“I wrote letters to make my parents laugh.”

“I wrote letters back and forth with one of my friends during the first lockdown talking about how we were coping and planning things to do when we saw each other again.”

There is also some evidence that writing letters has an impact on wider writing engagement. More children and young people who had written a letter in the past month also said that they enjoy writing compared with their peers who hadn't written a letter (48.3% vs 30.3%). Also, more had been writing more frequently in their free time, with 70.4% writing in their free time at least once a week compared with 47.8% of those who hadn't written a letter in the past month.

Indeed, writing letters wasn't just a way to keep in touch with family and friends – it also allowed children and young people to practise their skills:

“Handwriting letters to different members of family especially grandparents. This kept my formal writing in practice and at a good standard.”

In summary

It is encouraging to see that writing letters remains a popular activity for many children and young people, with almost a quarter saying they had written a letter within the last month. Children and young people's comments suggest that periods of lockdown provided not only an opportunity for many of them to write more, but many more reasons to write letters. For example, many young letter-writers reported writing to grandparents or older relatives, particularly those who were vulnerable, lived far away or had limited access to technology.

It is also heartening to see the connections between writing letters and playing an active and positive role in both the community and the wider world. While some children and young people wrote letters to offer a helping hand or inspiration to older people in their local area,

others did so to highlight issues of global importance, such as climate change and racism. This suggests that letter writing is connected to both kindness and empowerment. A further reflection is that, whether writing letters to support their own or others' wellbeing, almost half of those who write letters agree that the act of doing so helped them feel better.

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Suggested reference for this report is: Clark, C., Picton, I. and Lant, F. (2021). Children and young people's letter writing in 2021. London: National Literacy Trust.

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