The Good Childhood Report 2026

Summary

The Children's Society

Introduction

The Good Childhood Report 2026 is The Children's Society's 15th annual report on the wellbeing of children and young people in the UK. It presents trends and patterns in children and young people's wellbeing and explores the theme of people and places of belonging. It brings together quantitative and qualitative insights from children and young people, including from a group of Young Advisors who conducted research with their peers, and from professionals who work directly with children and young people.

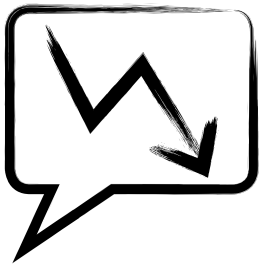
"Wellbeing is how we're doing as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future."[1]
— What Works Centre for Wellbeing

The research was grounded in the findings from The Good Childhood Report 2025 that "it takes a village to raise a child".[2] We wanted to find out, **if it takes a village to raise a child, how can children's sense of belonging within that 'village' be strengthened to improve their wellbeing?** This led to a focus on **places and people of belonging**, exploring:

- the link between children and young people's wellbeing and their sense of belonging in their local areas and wider communities
- the role of trusted adults in fostering a sense of belonging to the local community, as well as supporting children and young people when they need it.

Young people and professionals also shared their insights to support the development of The Children's Society's policy recommendations. The recommendations set out a practical agenda for strengthening belonging and improving children's wellbeing through the four Ps of belonging: **People, Places, Power** and **Pathways**. Full details of these recommendations can be found in Building Wellbeing Through Belonging: The Good Childhood Report 2026 Policy Briefing.[3]

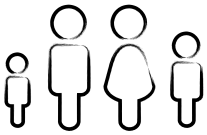
Trends in children's subjective wellbeing over time



The Good Childhood Report 2026 provides context about children and young people's subjective wellbeing, using two sources of data:

1. The Children's Society's annual household survey, whose 2026 results offer a very recent snapshot of how children and young people aged 10 to 17 are feeling about their lives. In 2026, 2,031 children and their parents or carers completed the survey. The survey measures overall life satisfaction, happiness with ten specific areas of young people's lives, and broader societal issues. Happiness with the different areas of young people's lives are measured through the Good Childhood Index (GCI), which asks about happiness with their family, time use, health, home, friends, future, choice, things, appearance, and school.

2. Results from wave 15 (2023/24) of the Understanding Society survey, a longitudinal study which is an important source for tracking national data on the wellbeing of children aged 10 to 15 over time. The survey measures overall life satisfaction and happiness with five specific areas of young people's lives: their schoolwork, appearance, family, friends, and school. The latest survey in 2023/24 was completed by 1,435 children.[4]



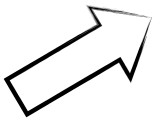
Family

Health

Friends

Choice

Home



Future

School

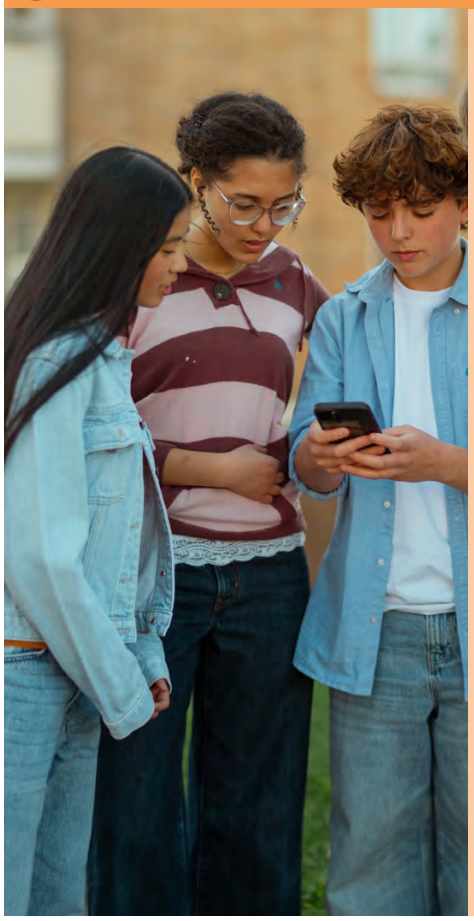
Time use

Appearance

Things

The Children's Society's household survey (2026 – age 10 to 17)

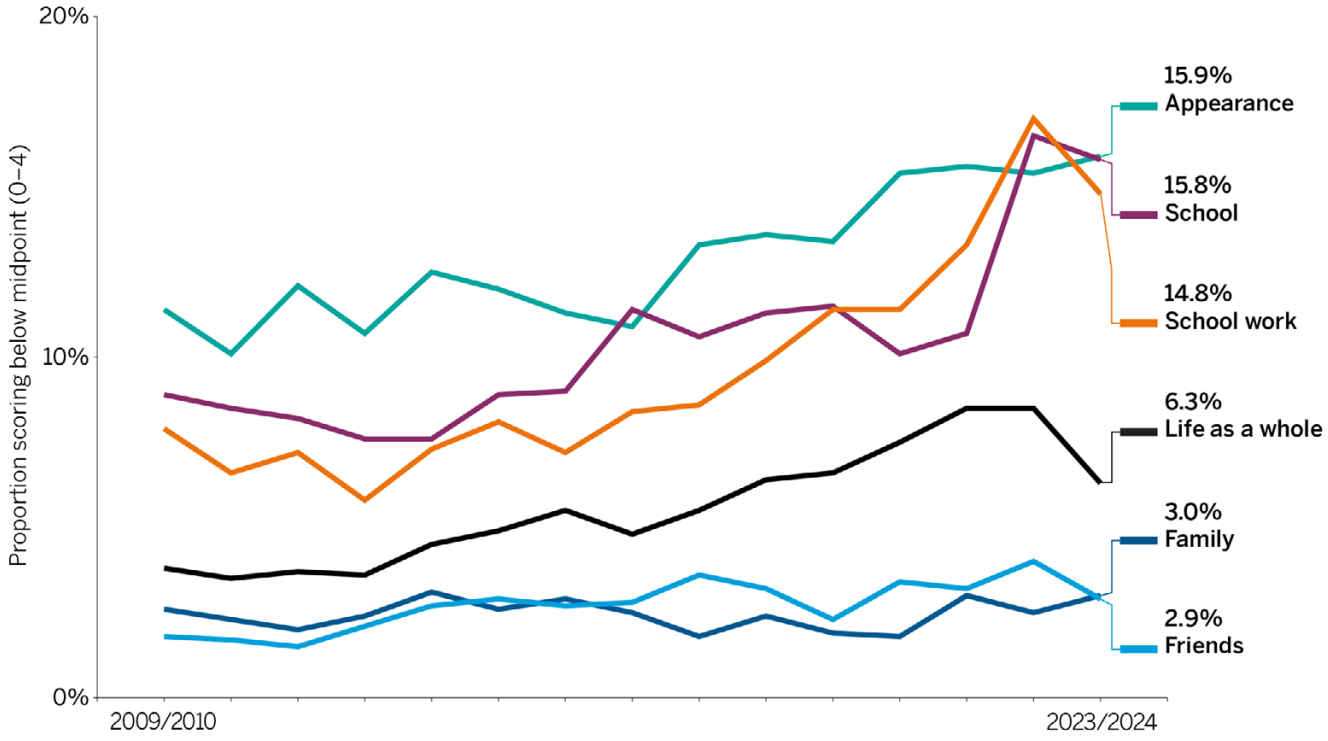
- In 2026, **10%** of the children and young people who took part in the household survey had **low wellbeing**.
- **School** was the aspect of life that children and young people were **most commonly unhappy** with.
- **Rising prices** was children and young people's main worry about society, while almost four in five parents and carers were concerned about increases to the cost of living.



Understanding Society (2023/24 – age 10 to 15)

- **Children's average happiness** with all six aspects of life continues to be **significantly lower** than when the survey started (in 2009/10).
- In 2023/24, **females were on average significantly less happy than males** with their life as a whole, their appearance, school, and, for the first time since 2016/17, with their friends.
- Males and females differed in the aspects of life they were most commonly unhappy with. Males were most commonly unhappy with their schoolwork and school, while females were most commonly unhappy with their appearance.

Figure 1. Proportion of children (aged 10 to 15) with happiness scores below midpoint (0 to 4 out of 10) for life as a whole and five different aspects of life, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.[5]



"It feels as though year on year there's always more to worry about...It ends up becoming very overwhelming."
— Young person

Understanding what belonging means to young people

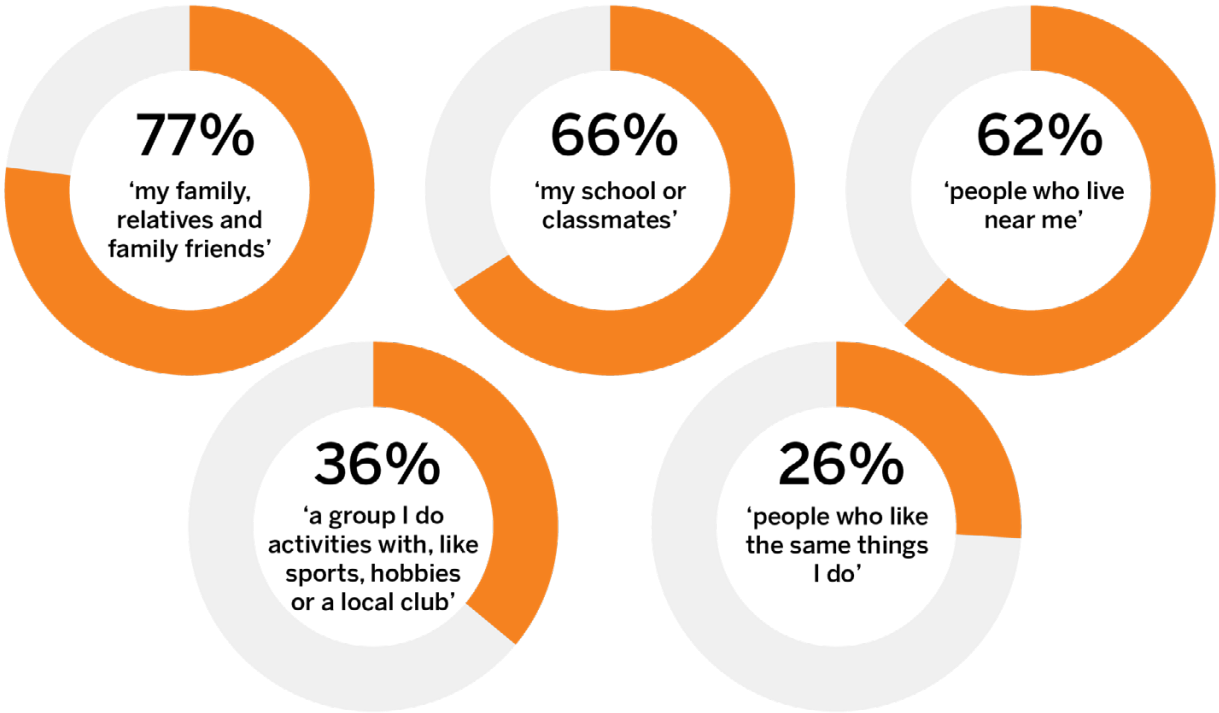
Insights gathered from young people and professionals provided a detailed understanding of what belonging meant and felt like to young people, while survey data allowed for an exploration of young people's feelings of belonging in their local area and wider communities.

Young people defined belonging as feeling:

- accepted
- comfortable
- included
- safe
- supported

What does 'my community' mean to young people?

In the 2026 household survey young people selected:[6]



Do young people feel they belong in their local area?

76% felt **they could be themselves in their local area.** However,

20%

either agreed or strongly agreed that they **felt uncomfortable and out of place**.

Belonging and wellbeing

- Belonging was considered by young people and professionals as integral to young people's wellbeing, with both qualitative insights and survey data highlighting an association between a lack of belonging and low wellbeing.
- A range of challenges such as pressure to fit in, discrimination, exclusion and bullying, and fears about the world around them affected young people's ability to develop a positive sense of belonging and often led to them feeling pressured to change who they are to fit in and conform to expectations.

Low wellbeing was significantly associated with a lower sense of belonging in the community and in a young person's local area.

- Nearly a quarter of young people with low wellbeing **did not feel like they belonged in their community** and two in five young people with low wellbeing did not feel like they belonged in **their local area.**
- Nearly one in five young people with low wellbeing **did not feel like they could be themselves** in their community and almost a third with low wellbeing did not feel like they could be themselves in their local area.
- Over two in five young people with low wellbeing felt **uncomfortable and out of place in their local area** and over a quarter with low wellbeing **did not feel welcomed by adults** in their local area.

This was supported by the qualitative data, with both young people and professionals feeling that **negative labelling of young people, particularly teenagers**, was widespread. They felt that this created a cycle where negative views of young people and subsequent lack of provision "sort of pushes sort of rebellious behaviour" from young people and led to older generations having negative experiences of sharing public spaces with young people, furthering negative views about them.

"If they can find a community where they feel comfortable and they feel heard and they feel safe, then overall they will be happier because they know that they have a group of people to go to and to feel welcome."
— Young person

Enabling belonging through places and power

Young people and professionals outlined the positive impact that having access to **suitable spaces and activities** had on young people's sense of belonging. They also highlighted the importance of **sharing power with young people** to increase their sense of belonging and ensure that spaces for young people were suitable.

Suitable spaces and activities provided young people with opportunities to develop their identity, connect with others and supported a sense of belonging and wellbeing. However, young people and professionals outlined the **dire need for more spaces** that are suitable for young people.

"Like the most that I have in my area is like a park, a big shopping place and that's kind of it and that's all I can really do" — Young person

Results from the mixed-method survey conducted with professionals highlighted this lack of spaces available to young people. The majority (26 out of 31) of **professionals** who took part in the survey **did not feel that there were enough appropriate places for young people** to go and spend time in the local areas they worked in.

While the benefits of connection with others online were highlighted, young people and professionals felt that if social media was banned or limited for young people, it was crucial that **more in-person opportunities were offered as alternative ways to engage young people,** as these would be **more effective than rules** in supporting young people's connections and belonging:

"One point that really came through for me was making sure that we have alternatives to social media, not just rules because people always bypass rules but if there is an alternative to turn to, that's how you're actually going to stop the problem and help." — Young Advisor

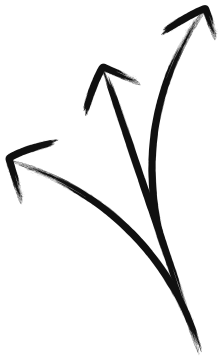
There need to be more opportunities for young people to have a say, with their views meaningfully listened to and acted on, so they could shape the spaces and activities available to them in their local areas and ensure that they were appealing to young people.

Power to change: codesigning with young people

Spaces and activities also needed to be accessible, affordable, suitable and inclusive of all young people – and young people needed to be aware of them. Professionals saw meaningful **codesign and coproduction** with young people as vital solutions to **local opportunities being genuinely welcoming and suitable** for them:

"Their sense of community is impacted directly by their capacity to shape the offer locally. — Professional

Enabling belonging through people and pathways: a trusted adult for every young person

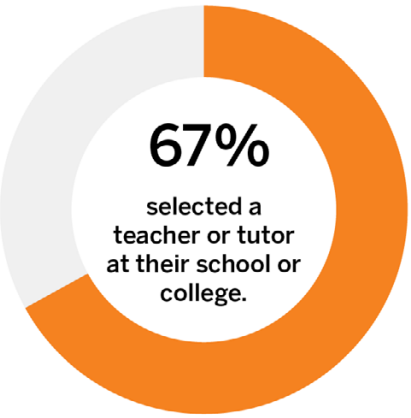


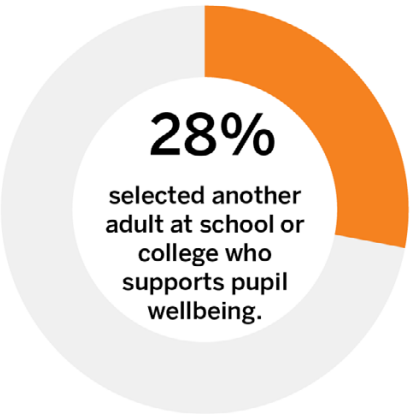
Access to trusted adults and support when it was needed was identified by young people and professionals as an essential protective factor for young people's sense of belonging and wellbeing overall.

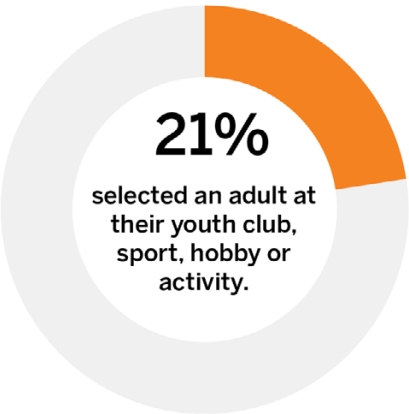
"It can be really damaging if you don't have people that you can talk to or fall back on when something like life is hard." — Young person

The Children's Society's household survey 2026 asked young people whether they had access to a trusted adult outside of their family. Overall, **three quarters (76%) of young people agreed or strongly agreed that, if they needed advice or someone to talk to, there were adults outside of their family who would be there for them.**

The household survey asked young people who were the adults they knew that they would feel comfortable talking to outside of their family. Young people could select all the options that applied to them.







This was supported by peer research conducted by the Young Advisors, who heard that their peers felt they could talk to:

- adults in the **school** environment
- **family** members
- friends
- dedicated support services and professionals
- **online** resources
- a range of **other people**, for example romantic partners, friends' family members, colleagues for those young people who work, or "sometimes even strangers".

Further analysis showed that **low wellbeing was significantly associated with young people reporting that they did not have a trusted adult they could turn to if they needed.**

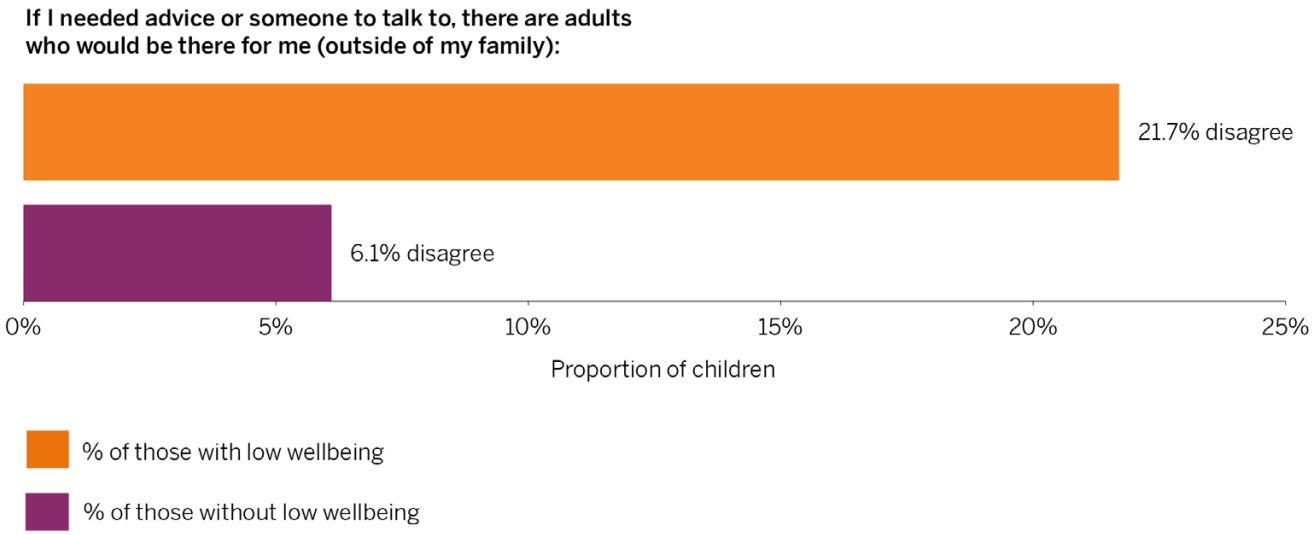
Young people with low wellbeing were more likely to disagree that there was an adult outside of their family that would be there for them.

While only 8% of young people who responded did not feel they had an adult to turn to, this was a greater issue for those with low wellbeing (21.7%) compared to those who didn't report low wellbeing (6.1%)(see Figure 2).

"It's very important to have people who you trust and like, you know, that are going to listen to you and what you're going to say."
— Young person

Specific circumstances and experiences hindered young people from accessing support, such as **stigma**, feeling like they are **not taken seriously**, feeling **misunderstood or judged**, and having had **negative previous experiences** of services or support. As such, it was highlighted that trusted adults in professional roles need **appropriate training and support, time** to build trusted relationships with young people, **financial investment** to support their work, and to be equipped and **supported to act on young people's views** and refer them to further help when necessary.

Figure 2. Percentage of children (aged 10 to 17) with and without low wellbeing who disagreed with a statement about having an adult outside of the family to turn to.[7]



Reflections

Young people's vision for belonging

The research has shown clearly what belonging looks like for young people. It requires young people to:

feel **accepted** and **valued** as their "true selves"

feel **supported** by their community

have access to **trusted adults** they can turn to for support

have an ability to **have a say**, be **listened to**, and be **heard**

be able to safely develop their **own identity**

have access to **spaces** to "just be", connect with others, and seek support when it is needed

Barriers to young people's sense of belonging

The research identified that when young people do not have a positive sense of belonging, their overall wellbeing is negatively affected. Challenges that hinder young people from feeling like they belong were when they:

- **do not feel able to be themselves** – feeling pressured to change who they are in order to fit in
- **lack access to spaces and activities** that would support their sense of belonging
- feel **excluded** from their community – experiencing discrimination, stigma, or negative perceptions from wider society
- **do not feel listened to** – feeling misunderstood, judged, or unable to influence decisions
- **do not have anyone to talk to** when they need help with their sense of belonging or wellbeing – leading them to being unable to find or navigate available support.

Policy recommendations

The Children's Society's recommendations[8] provide a roadmap for strengthening children's sense of belonging and improving their wellbeing via the four Ps of belonging: **People, Places, Power** and **Pathways.**

Young people need:

- **people** they trust
- **places** they belong
- **power** to influence decisions
- **pathways** to opportunities and support.

Every young person should have the opportunity to feel that they matter and that they have a place where they belong. These recommendations provide a roadmap for making that ambition a reality.

"Somewhere where they [young people] feel heard, like it doesn't really matter where, but as long as they like have a voice there, then they'll feel like they belong."
— Young person

Endnotes

1. What Works Centre for Wellbeing. What Is Wellbeing? [Internet]. What Works Centre for Wellbeing: London; n.d. [accessed 2026 August 3]. Available from: whatworkswellbeing.org/about-wellbeing/what-is-wellbeing/.

2. The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2025 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2025 [accessed 2026 July 10]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2025.

3. The Children's Society. Building Wellbeing Through Belonging: The Good Childhood Report 2026 Policy Briefing [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2026. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/building-wellbeing-through-belonging-good-childhood-report-2026

4. The dataset used to conduct this analysis was: University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2026). *Understanding Society: Waves 1-15, 2009-2024 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009.* [data collection]. *21st Edition*. UK Data Service. SN: 6614, DOI: http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-22.

5. Source: University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2026). Understanding Society: Waves 1-15, 2009-2024 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009. [data collection]. 21st Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6614, DOI: doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-22. Children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

6. Totals do not equal 100 as young people could select all options that applied to them.

7. Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 25, April to June 2026, children and young people aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data. Excludes missing responses, 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say'.

8. The Children's Society. Building Wellbeing Through Belonging: The Good Childhood Report 2026 Policy Briefing [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2026. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/building-wellbeing-through-belonging-good-childhood-report-2026

Across the country, young people's needs are being ignored.

Trapped in poverty, facing poor mental health and abuse both on and offline, too many only receive help once they reach crisis point. We're working to change that.

The Children's Society is by young people's side when they need us, providing lasting support and campaigning for the changes that will improve young lives.

Together, we can make sure that no young person faces life alone.

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