

The Good Childhood Report



2026

**The
Children's
Society**



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Forewords

Young Advisor Foreword

During the year, I have had the role of a Young Advisor for The Good Childhood Report 2026. To make this project possible, for the last 15 years, many young people from various backgrounds, religions, ages, genders, and sexual orientations have shared their experiences, challenges and viewpoints on the importance of their wellbeing and connections with others. This report is not just one person's work but a whole community of hardworking individuals who have put their valuable time into making a positive difference. However, young people need a support system, we need a support system that will ensure we reach our entire potential. Unfortunately, this sense of support, connection and belonging is not something that every young person has access to.

As there is a lack of attention to the wellbeing of young people, statistics show a significant decline through many years. Additionally, the United Kingdom has had some of the lowest levels of wellbeing among Europe. Throughout the country it is not seen as important or valued that the future generations are not receiving support and care that they need. A person's childhood dictates their adult lives. The Good Childhood Report is a research project that pushes forward the importance of young people receiving the opportunities and connections they deserve.

As a teenage girl growing up without a mother, and having various mental health struggles, this had opened me up to understanding the experiences of various classmates and friends and knowing how to be one of their supporters, but what had always broken my heart was the fact of seeing so many other classmates and friends not being able to understand what a person is feeling and how to support them. This is what has inspired me to become a Young Advisor. I wanted to have a part in pushing for an equal chance for all young people and make sure that they are being heard. To make a real impact on the wellbeing of the young population, we must hear their voices through community and a trustworthy connection to make meaningful and fulfilling changes.



Sara
Young Advisor to
The Good Childhood
Report 2026

Chief Executive Foreword

This is our 15th Good Childhood Report and, as I sit down to write this foreword, I find myself thinking about something we hear time and time again from young people – the importance of feeling like you belong.

Last year, our report explored the idea that it takes a village to raise a child.¹ Young people told us about the importance of the communities and relationships that help them navigate the challenges of growing up. Their insights stayed with us long after the report was published and prompted an important question. If it takes a village to raise a child, what helps children and young people feel that they truly belong within that village? This year we aim to answer that question.

The Good Childhood Report is the UK's leading research series into children's wellbeing. Throughout its existence, it has shown that far too many children and young people report declining happiness and lower life satisfaction. While these trends remain a serious concern, this year's report also points to a solution: a strong sense of belonging can play a vital role in protecting and supporting young people's wellbeing.

The encouraging thing is that young people have been remarkably clear about what helps them feel like they belong. They talk about trusted adults who listen to and support them, places where they feel welcome and safe, opportunities to pursue their interests, spend time with friends, contribute to their communities and feel like their voice matters. In other words, they talk about feeling connected.

Our research shows that these connections matter. Young people who feel connected to their local communities and have trusted adults in their lives are less likely to experience low wellbeing, they are more likely to have supportive relationships around them, and more likely to seek help when they need it. When those connections are missing, young people can become isolated and excluded, heightening the risk of poor wellbeing, exploitation and other harms.

Many of these things already exist. Across the country, I see extraordinary people working every day to support children and young people. I meet youth workers, teachers, volunteers, community leaders and practitioners who are creating opportunities to help young people thrive. Their commitment gives me enormous hope.

¹ See: The Good Childhood Report 2025.



Yet too often whether a young person can access these opportunities depends on where they live or whether a local youth service has survived. A good childhood should never depend on luck, and caring support should never be a postcode lottery.

The challenge facing us is not that we do not know what works, it is that too many young people cannot access the things that we know help them feel connected, supported and valued.

The recommendations in this report set out how we can begin to change that. They are practical and ambitious, rooted firmly in the experiences of young people themselves. Most importantly, they recognise that belonging is not an optional extra, it is a foundation of wellbeing and a vital part of a good childhood.

I am absolutely convinced that improving children's wellbeing must be a national mission and a defining priority of our age. This report gives us reason to hope because it shows us a path forward. If we are serious about improving wellbeing, then we must be serious about young people feeling deep down that their lives matter and that they belong.

This is my 8th foreword to our annual Good Childhood Report, and more than ever I believe in young people. I believe in their talents, their heart for justice, and their commitment to make a difference. More than ever in this complex world, young people need people they trust, places they belong, the power to influence decisions, and pathways to opportunities and support.

Together, we must build a future where every young person can thrive.

Mark Russell OBE
Chief Executive
The Children's
Society

Executive summary

Now in its 15th year, The Children's Society's Good Childhood Report provides an annual assessment of the wellbeing of children and young people in the UK. The Good Childhood Report 2026 presents trends and patterns in their 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.

Headline findings

Children and young people's overall wellbeing

- Children and young people's wellbeing remains in decline, with their average life satisfaction and happiness with specific aspects of life significantly lower than in 2009/10.
- A sizeable proportion (10%) of children and young people continue to have low wellbeing.
- There continues to be differences in subjective wellbeing between genders, with females significantly less happy than males both with their life as a whole and with several aspects of their lives.

- School and appearance were the aspects 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.

Belonging and wellbeing

- Young people defined belonging as feeling accepted, welcomed, included and valued for who they truly are.
- 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 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.
- Young people and professionals associated a positive sense of community belonging with young people's ability to have a say about how their communities are shaped.

Low wellbeing and belonging

- 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.

Places that foster belonging and enable access to trusted adults

- While most young people felt comfortable in their local area and their community, one in five felt uncomfortable and out of place in their local area and almost one in six felt uncomfortable and out of place in their community.
- Young people having access to safe spaces and activities in their local areas was fundamental to developing a sense of belonging; however, such opportunities were too often inadequate or lacking altogether.
- The availability of places where young people could feel like they belonged was also crucial for their ability to access support via trusted adults when it was needed.
- Having access to a trusted adult outside of the family was not only important to enable young people to access support, it was also found to be significantly associated with wellbeing.
- Young people with low wellbeing were more likely not to have a trusted adult to turn to (over one in five compared to just 6.1% of those without low wellbeing).
- Young people and professionals identified a range of barriers that prevented young people from receiving support. These centred around challenges hindering young people from building trusting relationships, together with systemic issues affecting trusted adults' ability to provide the support needed.

Policy recommendations

The Children's Society's recommendations² 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**.

Every young person should be able to feel like they belong and matter. For this, young people need:

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

² Policy recommendations are detailed in The Children's Society's separate publication [Building Wellbeing Through Belonging: The Good Childhood Report 2026 Policy Briefing](#). See The Children's Society 2026.

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. This marks a significant milestone towards The Children's Society's organisational goal to overturn the decline in children's wellbeing. Survey data continues to highlight worrying trends in children's wellbeing, including the decline in their happiness and the urgency with which this needs to be addressed. Working in close collaboration with a group of Young Advisors for a second year has allowed The Children's Society to centre the research on their experiences. Peer research conducted by the Young Advisors, alongside research with professionals who work directly with children and young people, facilitated the in-depth exploration of two interlinked fundamental themes in children and young people's wellbeing: **their sense of belonging, and the trusted adults who are crucial for support.**

The focus for the 15th Good Childhood Report was grounded in the research conducted for The Good Childhood Report 2025, particularly the central finding that "it takes a village to raise a child".³ 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.

Previous research has focused on school belonging,⁴ but much less attention has been paid to **children and young people's sense of belonging in their local areas and communities**, which both young people and professionals highlighted as important in The Good Childhood Report 2025.⁵ They also described how these 'third spaces' provide access to **trusted adults**, who young people can turn to when they need support.

Drawing on both survey data and qualitative research for this year's report enabled in-depth exploration of these themes. Findings are also set against the wider context for children's

3 See The Good Childhood Report 2025.

4 See, for recent examples: [ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/Final BM Report.pdf](https://ncb.org.uk/sites/default/files/uploads/files/Final%20BM%20Report.pdf) and [Understanding and enhancing school belonging: Launching our literature review; #BeeWell Evidence briefing: School Belonging \[Jan 2025\]; Understanding Attendance - Report 1: Belonging Schools | Teach First.](#)

5 See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapters 3 and 4.

wellbeing, which this year additionally includes a presentation of children's subjective wellbeing by region of England, thanks to Sport England's Active Lives survey.⁶

In addition to sharing their own insights and conducting peer research focus groups, the Young Advisors supported the interpretation of the data they gathered by identifying overarching themes and subsequently reviewing and commenting on the results of further thematic analysis. To centre the results of the research around young people's voices, Chapters 2 to 4 of The Good Childhood Report 2026 are shaped by their insights, supported by evidence from professionals and targeted questions from the household survey. The latest survey data in children's wellbeing are presented in Chapter 1 to provide context for this narrative.

Importance of measuring children's wellbeing and early support

The Children's Society's publication in February 2026, **How Has Children's Wellbeing Changed?**, offered a review of the evidence gathered by the Good Childhood research programme to date.⁷ It made a strong case for "the breadth and depth of what can be learnt when children and young people's subjective wellbeing is measured and the results investigated via robust analyses as well as qualitative insights".⁸ When this report was published, The Children's Society and a group of Young Influencers went to Number 10 Downing Street to hand in a petition **calling on the Government to introduce an annual**

National Wellbeing Measurement, published nationally and locally to inform policymaking and support for young people.



Photos on this page: Yvonne Catterson

⁶ Sport England. Active Lives Children and Young People Survey - Academic Year 2024-25 Report [Internet]. 2025 [accessed 2026 April 7]. Available from: sportengland.org/research-and-data/data/active-lives. See Appendix E for our presentation of Active Lives' data.

⁷ See Chollet, 2026.

⁸ Ibid, page 36.

Along with our previous Good Childhood research, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) have reported young people's life satisfaction to be "in free fall", having experienced a "steady decline since 2010".⁹ They also heard that those wide-ranging sources of pressure were "compounded by a deeper feeling that they no longer belong in the spaces they inhabit every day".¹⁰

The Children's Society recently commissioned PBE (formerly Pro Bono Economics) to investigate the economic costs and benefits of providing young people with early support for their wellbeing and mental health.¹¹ Their report found that while most young people are doing okay overall:

- 1.1 million are **starting to struggle**, at risk or experiencing early signs of difficulty
- 0.9 million are **struggling**, a high level of needs that warrant clinical attention
- 200,000 are **in crisis**, experiencing acute mental health needs that require urgent support.

This highlights that a staggering 2.2 million young people need targeted support, clinical treatment or crisis support for their mental health; however, PBE found that two thirds of these young people did not receive appropriate support for their mental health needs. This underlines the **importance of supporting children and young people before their needs escalate**. PBE's report makes a clear case for investment in early support, detailing how for every £1 spent on expanding early mental health support to meet children and young

people's needs, society and the public purse could gain £14 in economic benefits.

The focus of The Good Childhood Report 2026 on places of belonging and trusted adults strongly aligns with The Children's Society's overall emphasis on early support. Feelings of belonging in a community, including having people and places to go to seek support, are at the essence of early support.

The Government set out "places to go and things to do" as a core promise of the National Youth Strategy.¹² Their ambitions focus on safe spaces where safety is framed not only as physical, but is also linked to relational safety and belonging. The National Youth Strategy also underlines how crucial having access to safe spaces is for young people being able to connect with trusted adults, who are described as "a safe, respectful adult that is chosen by a young person as a trusted figure that listens to them and supports them".¹³ In addition, restoring safe local spaces is set out as a central policy intention in the Strategy.

The research presented in this 15th Good Childhood Report helps make the case for the importance of this work, highlights crucial findings in relation to these themes, and presents challenges and opportunities which can shape the future implementation of this national strategy.

9 [Young people's life satisfaction in free fall, IPPR finds | IPPR](#). To note, while The Good Childhood Reports draw on Understanding Society data related to 10- to 15-year-olds, IPPR used Understanding Society data from 16- to 24-year-olds.

10 ["I feel quite unsettled and unsafe": Young people, belonging, and the broken promise of childhood. | IPPR](#)

11 [PBE | Prevention that pays: The economic case for early support for young people's mental health and wellbeing | PBE](#). PBE's report focused on children and young people aged 10 to 17, and was primarily examined mental health needs rather than subjective wellbeing.

12 [Youth Matters: Your National Youth Strategy - GOV.UK](#)

13 [Ibid.](#)

What do we mean by wellbeing?

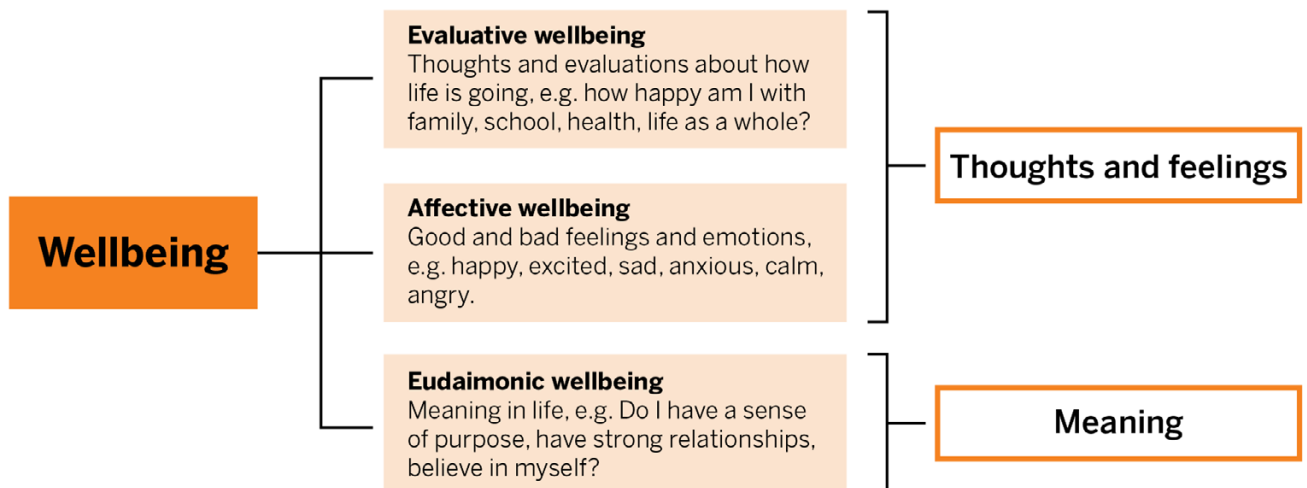
As defined by the What Works Centre for Wellbeing:¹⁴

“Wellbeing is how we’re doing as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future.”¹⁵

The Good Childhood Report focuses on **children and young people’s subjective wellbeing**, which is **their own views of how their lives are going**. Subjective wellbeing is made up of three different components, shown in Figure 1:

- **Evaluative wellbeing** (also referred to as **life satisfaction** or **cognitive wellbeing**): children’s thoughts, evaluations and assessments about how their life as a whole is going, and how happy they are with specific aspects of their lives (like their health, or their home).
- **Affective wellbeing** (also called **emotional wellbeing** or **emotional health**): how children may be feeling in the moment, their emotions. Affective wellbeing can also relate to how children identify, react to and process those internal feelings and emotions.
- **Eudaimonic wellbeing** (sense of **meaning**): this is distinguished from the other aspects of wellbeing, in that it reflects introspective (self-acceptance) and existential (sense of meaning, purpose, and control) aspects of wellbeing.

Figure 1. Components of subjective wellbeing.



14 The What Works Centre for Wellbeing was the UK’s independent body for wellbeing evidence, policy and practice, and closed on 30 April 2024.

15 What Works Centre for Wellbeing, n.d.

Data sources and methods used in this report

While full details can be found in Appendix A, the table below provides an overview of the different data sources and methods used for the research and analysis presented in The Good Childhood Report 2026.¹⁶

All sources and presentational notes for individual Figures can be found in Appendix B.

Table 1. Overview of data sources and methods used in The Good Childhood Report 2026.

Data source	Coverage	Respondents	Link to full methods
The Children’s Society’s household survey 2026 (wave 25) ¹⁷	April to June 2026, UK	2,031 children and young people aged 10 to 17 , and a parent or carer for each child or young person	See Appendix A, The Children’s Society’s household survey section
Understanding Society survey, wave 15	2023/24, UK	1,435 children aged 10 to 15	See Appendix A, Understanding Society section
Young Advisors	March to September 2026, England	12 Young Advisors aged 13 to 17	See Appendix A, Young Advisors and peer research section
Peer research led by the Young Advisors	May to July 2026, England	98 children and young people	See Appendix A, Young Advisors and peer research section
Survey of professionals	March to April 2026, primarily England ¹⁸	31 professionals working directly with children and young people took part in a mixed methods survey	See Appendix A, research with professionals section
Semi-structured interviews with professionals	May to June 2026, England	Nine professionals working directly with children and young people (seven respondents to the professional surveys and two youth workers from The Children’s Society)	See Appendix A, research with professionals section
Sport England’s Active Lives survey	2024/25, England	93,040 children and young people aged 10 to 16 years ¹⁹	See Appendix E for our presentation of Active Lives’ data

16 Throughout this report the term ‘young people’ is used to refers to all children and young people included in the research. Depending on the research strand (as detailed in Table 1), this encompasses children and young people aged 10 to age 17.

17 The term ‘wave’ is used to refer to data collected in specific time periods covered by a survey.

18 While most survey respondents were based in England, some represented organisations that worked in wider locations, such as across England and Wales, or the whole of the UK.

19 While Active Lives surveys children and young people aged 5 to 16, in line with the scope of The Good Childhood Research Programme, respondents aged under 10 were excluded from our analysis.



Statistical testing

Statistical tests were conducted to support the research findings presented in this report.²⁰ All tests used a 99% confidence level to test statistical significance.

The Children's Society is committed to The Good Childhood Report being accessible to a wide range of audiences; therefore, the main body of the report presents findings in a non-technical way. Where relevant, notes or footnotes include some basic explanatory information on the statistical analysis.²¹

Weighted datasets have been used for analysis.²² This means that even if there are differing proportions of any groups in a survey sample, the survey weight will account for, or 'correct', any over or under-representation of these groups and therefore produce data that accurately reflects the make-up of the wider population.

20 The analysis was conducted using SPSS; the Complex Samples command was used where relevant.

21 Further technical details of the research can be requested from The Children's Society's research team, whose contact details are provided at the end of the report.

22 The Children's Society's household survey data are weighted in line with the most recent available mid-year population estimates (Office for National Statistics, 2025).



Chapter 1:

Latest figures on children's subjective wellbeing



Chapter 1: key findings

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.

Sources used in this chapter

This chapter provides context about children and young people's subjective wellbeing, using two sources of data:

- 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.
- 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.

While these are different types of surveys which cover different age ranges and data collection dates, looking at these datasets together allows for the identification of patterns and changes in children and young people's wellbeing, including aspects of life that are particularly challenging for children and young people, and gender differences.

The Children's Society's latest annual household survey collected responses from 2,031 young people aged 10 to 17 and their parents or carers between April and June 2026. It asks a range of questions about children and young people's subjective wellbeing, including The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index (GCI) which measures their overall life satisfaction and happiness with 10 specific aspects of their lives, presented in Figure 4 below.²³

The Understanding Society survey asks children aged 10 to 15 years old how they feel about their life as a whole and five different aspects of their lives: their schoolwork, appearance, family, friends, and school.²⁴ This longitudinal data allows us to track changes in their overall happiness and identify areas of children's lives that need attention or further support. In 2023/24, the youth questionnaire for wave 15 was completed by 1,435 children aged 10 to 15.²⁵ The response rate for the Understanding Society youth questionnaire has continued to decrease, with this latest sample size being the smallest to date.

All sources and presentational notes for individual Figures can be found in Appendix B.

²³ See Appendix A for more detail about The Children's Society's GCI.

²⁴ 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>. A dotted line between waves 6 and 7 is shown in the charts presented in this report due to a different weight being used for the youth questionnaire for wave 7 onwards; see The Good Childhood Report 2023 for more detail.

²⁵ A small number of 9 and 16-year-olds were also included in some waves and are also captured in the analysis presented in this report.

Children and young people's overall life satisfaction

Both Understanding Society and The Children's Society's household survey measure children's overall life satisfaction:

- The latest Understanding Society data, from 2023/24, shows that children's average happiness with their life as a whole was **significantly lower** than when the survey started (in 2009/10).
- **10%** of children and young people who took part in the household survey this year had **low wellbeing**.

The distribution of scores for the GCI's measure of overall life satisfaction, that is used to identify the proportion of children and young people with low overall wellbeing, is presented in Figure 2.²⁶

The Children's Society's household surveys also include three Office for National Statistics (ONS) questions on children's personal wellbeing; 2026 results are presented in Figure 3.

Sport England's Active Lives surveys also include the ONS personal wellbeing questions, as well as a question capturing how often children feel lonely.²⁷ Their surveys have larger sample sizes and, therefore, the data can be broken down by region. The 2024/25 data are presented for England and each region in Appendix E.²⁸

10% of children and young people who took part in the household survey this year had low wellbeing.

26 This multi-item measure, for which results are combined into overall scores (ranging from 0 to 20), is based on Huebner, 1991 (see Appendix A for further detail). Low wellbeing is identified when a respondent scored below the midpoint of the scale.

27 See Sport England, 2025.

28 To note, the average scores for these questions are lower in the Active Lives survey, and the proportions of children who scored below the midpoint are higher, compared to the results of the household surveys. This is likely to be due to a range of methodological considerations, outlined in Appendix E.

Figure 2. Latest figures for overall life satisfaction for children and young people aged 10 to 17.

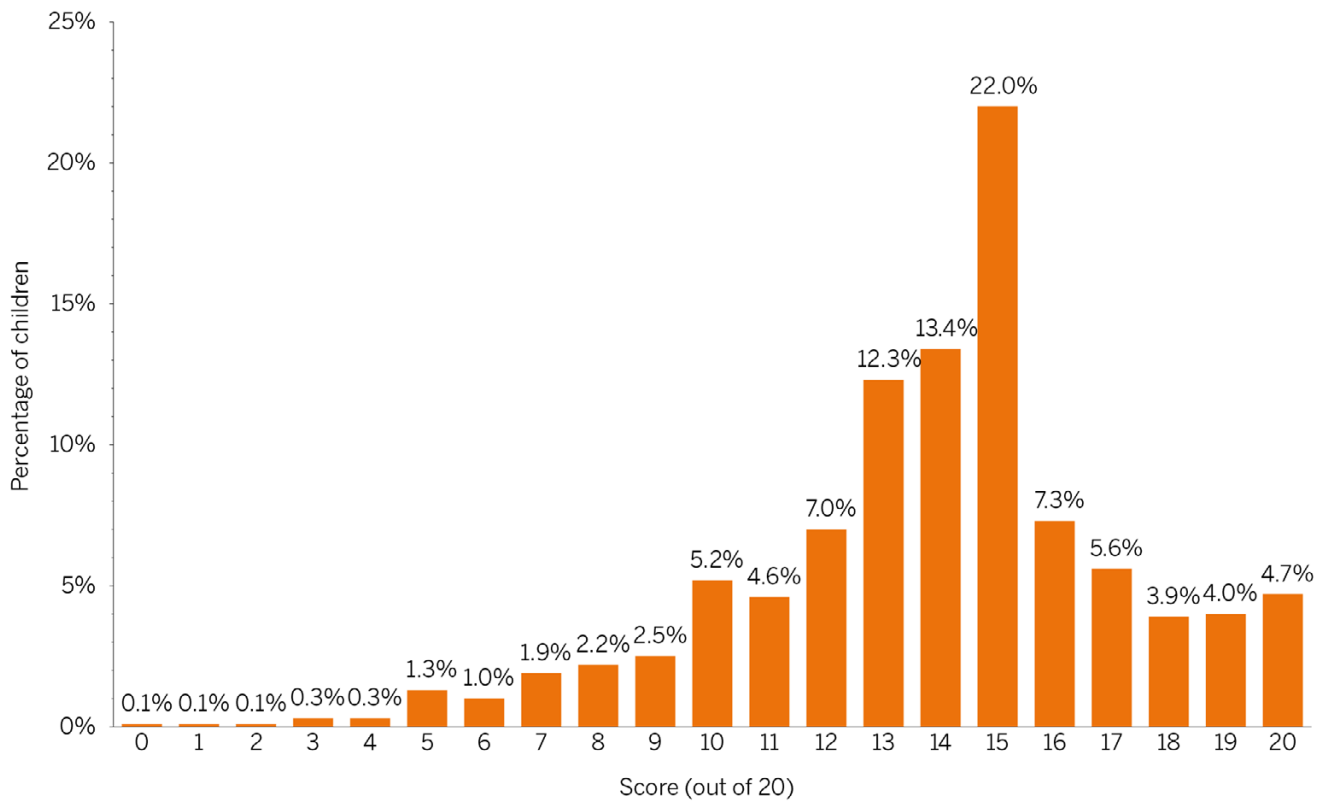
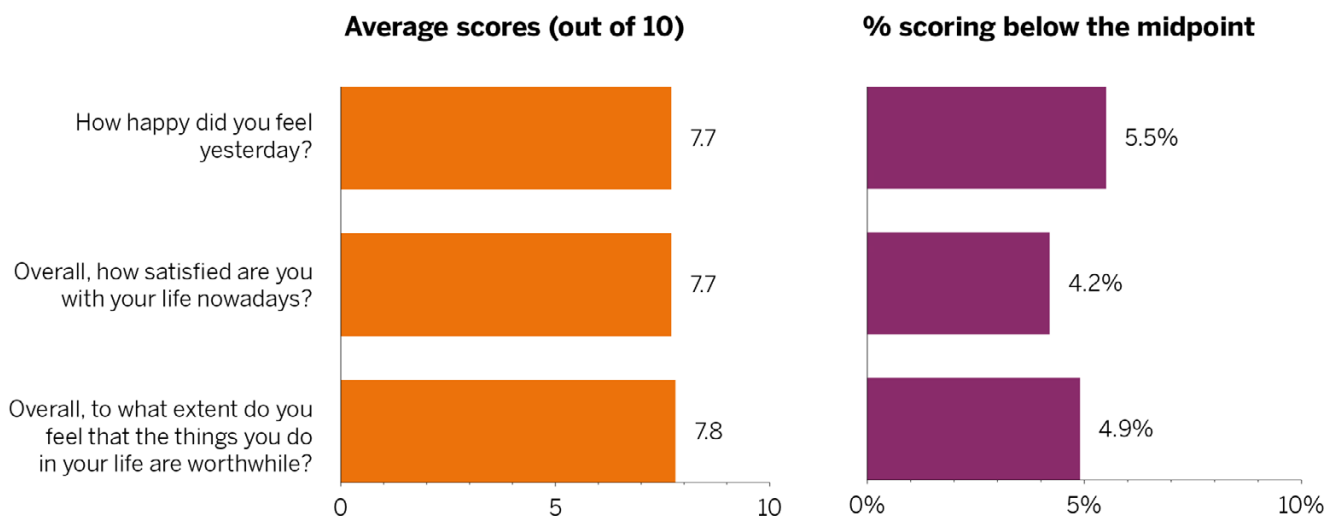


Figure 3. Latest ONS measures of overall wellbeing for children and young people aged 10 to 17.





Happiness with specific aspects of life

Both Understanding Society and The Children's Society's household survey also capture children's happiness with different aspects of their lives, as presented in Figures 4 and 5. While The Children's Society's GCI includes a wider range of measures than Understanding Society, both datasets indicate similar patterns:

- children were **most happy** with their **family**
- **school-related measures** and their **appearance** were the most problematic areas for children and young people:
 - In the household survey 2026, school was once again the aspect of life that children and young people were most commonly unhappy with (11.9%), followed by appearance (7.7%).²⁹
 - In Understanding Society 2023/24, children were most commonly unhappy with their appearance (15.9%), followed very closely by school (15.8%) and schoolwork (14.8%).

²⁹ Children and young people are identified as unhappy with a particular measure when they scored below the midpoint of the scale for this measure.

Figure 4. Latest figures from the Good Childhood Index for children and young people aged 10 to 17.

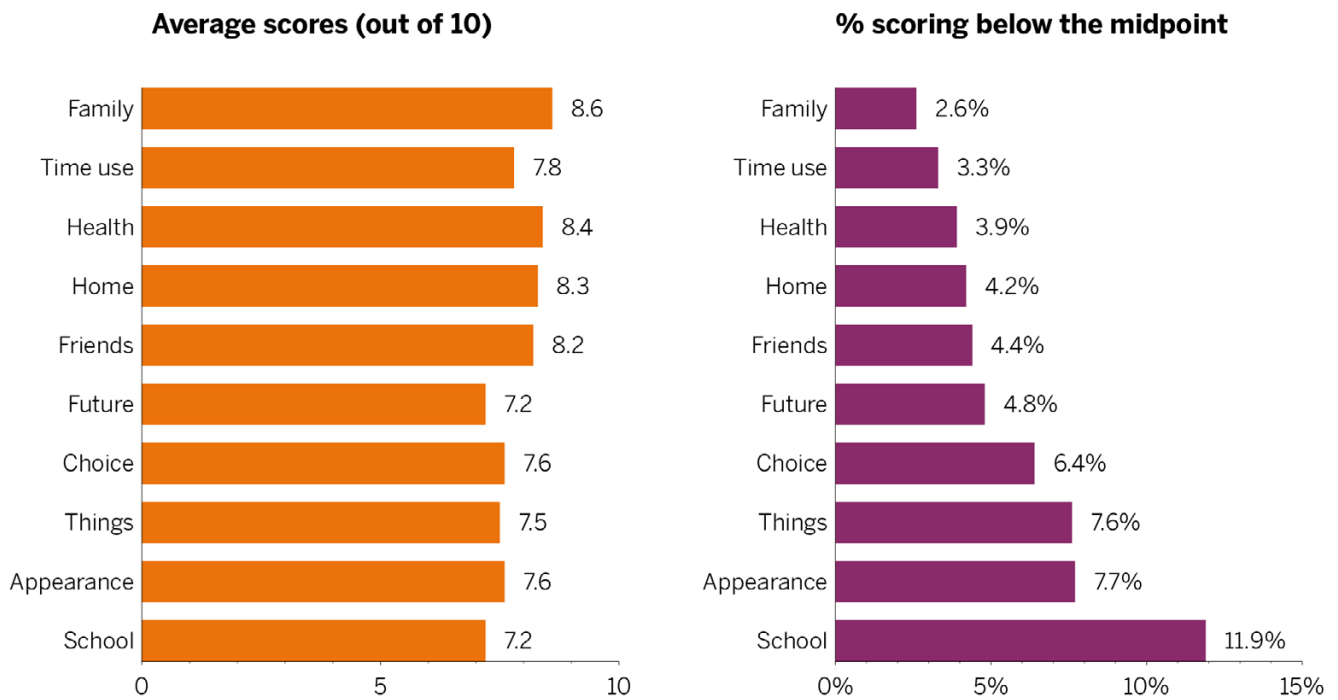
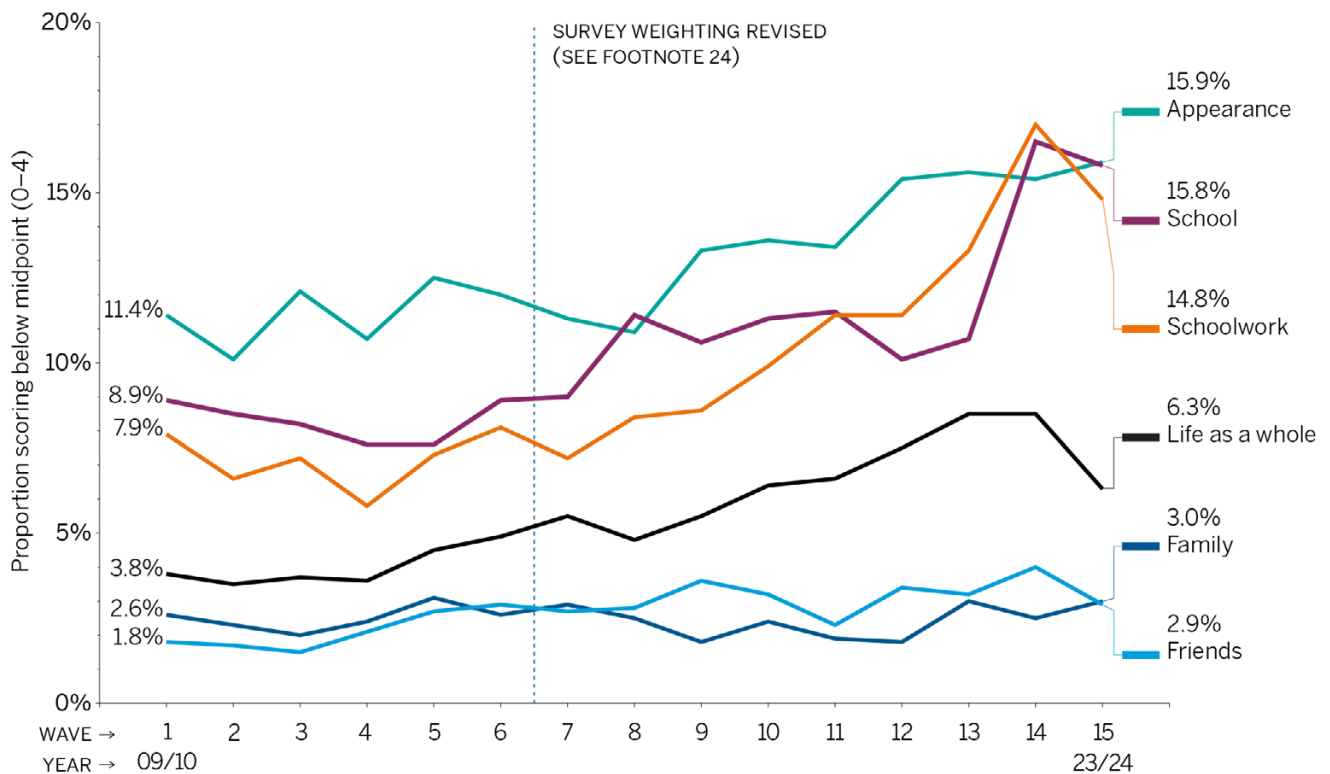


Figure 5. Proportion of children (aged 10 to 15) with happiness scores below midpoint (0 to 4 out of 10) for life as a whole and five different aspects of life, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.





Trends over time

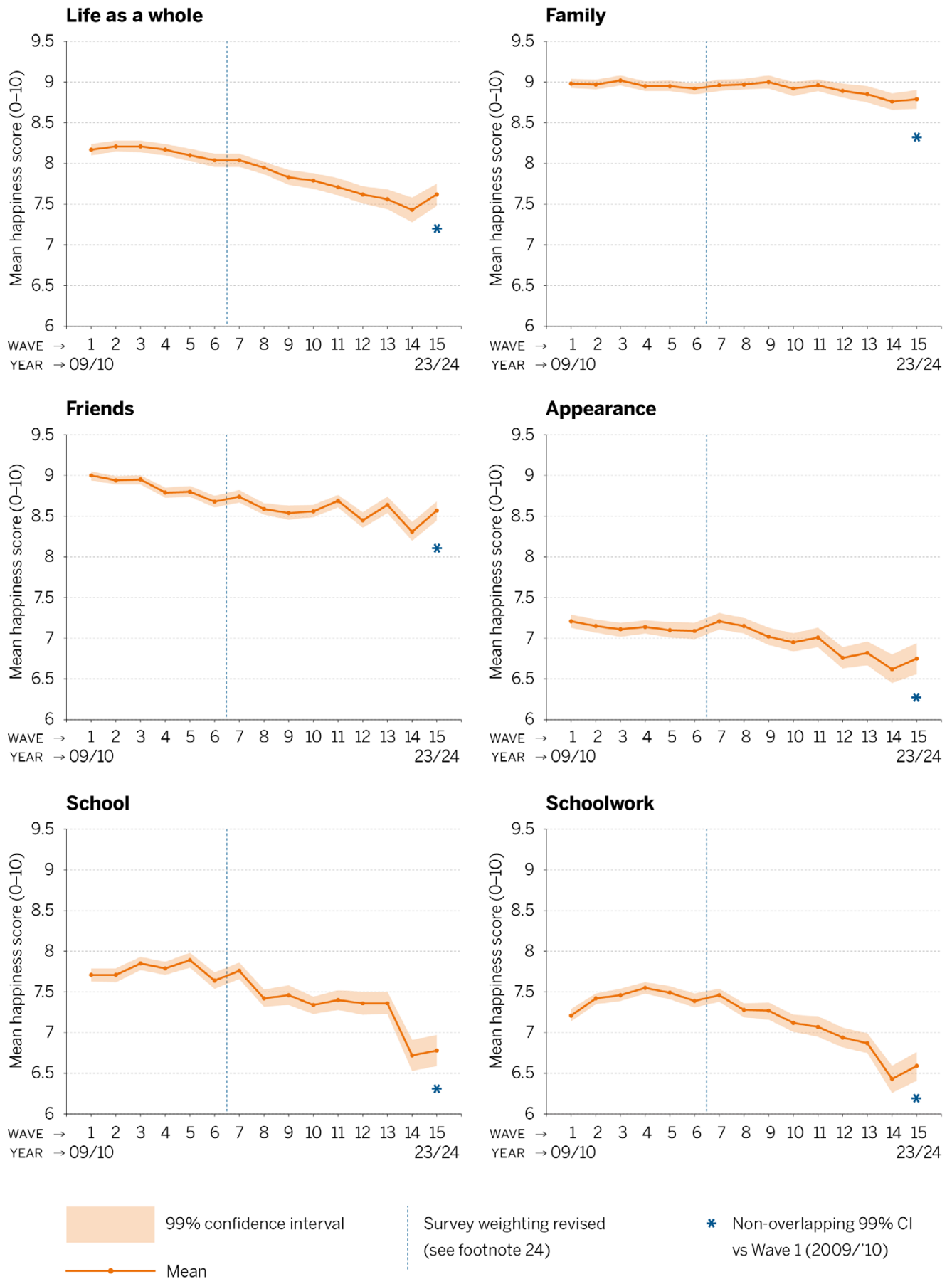
As shown in Figure 5 above, Understanding Society data allows us to track changes in children's wellbeing over time. Figure 6 presents the latest mean happiness scores for the six measures it includes across all survey waves to date. The solid orange lines show the mean score trends, and the shaded areas represent the 99% confidence bands.³⁰

- In the latest data, **children's mean happiness scores were significantly lower than when the survey started (in 2009/10) for all six aspects of life.** This was observed for the first time in The Good Childhood Report 2025 (reporting on wave 14); in all previous waves before that, the mean scores for children's happiness with their family had been broadly stable compared to the first survey wave.
- Within the broader context of a decline in children's happiness compared to 2009/10, an upturn in mean scores can be observed for all measures between the previous wave (2022/23) and the latest data. However, **this increase between wave 14 and wave 15 is only statistically significant for children's happiness with their friends.**³¹

³⁰ For the detailed underlying data for all six measures across all survey waves, see Table A in Appendix D.

³¹ Such changes between individual survey waves should be interpreted with caution, particularly in the context of a reduced sample size compared to wave 1.

Figure 6. Trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.





Gender differences

Analysis from Understanding Society data shows differences between males' and females' subjective wellbeing.³² Trends over time by gender are presented in Figure 7; statistically significant differences between male and female scores are indicated by asterisks.³³

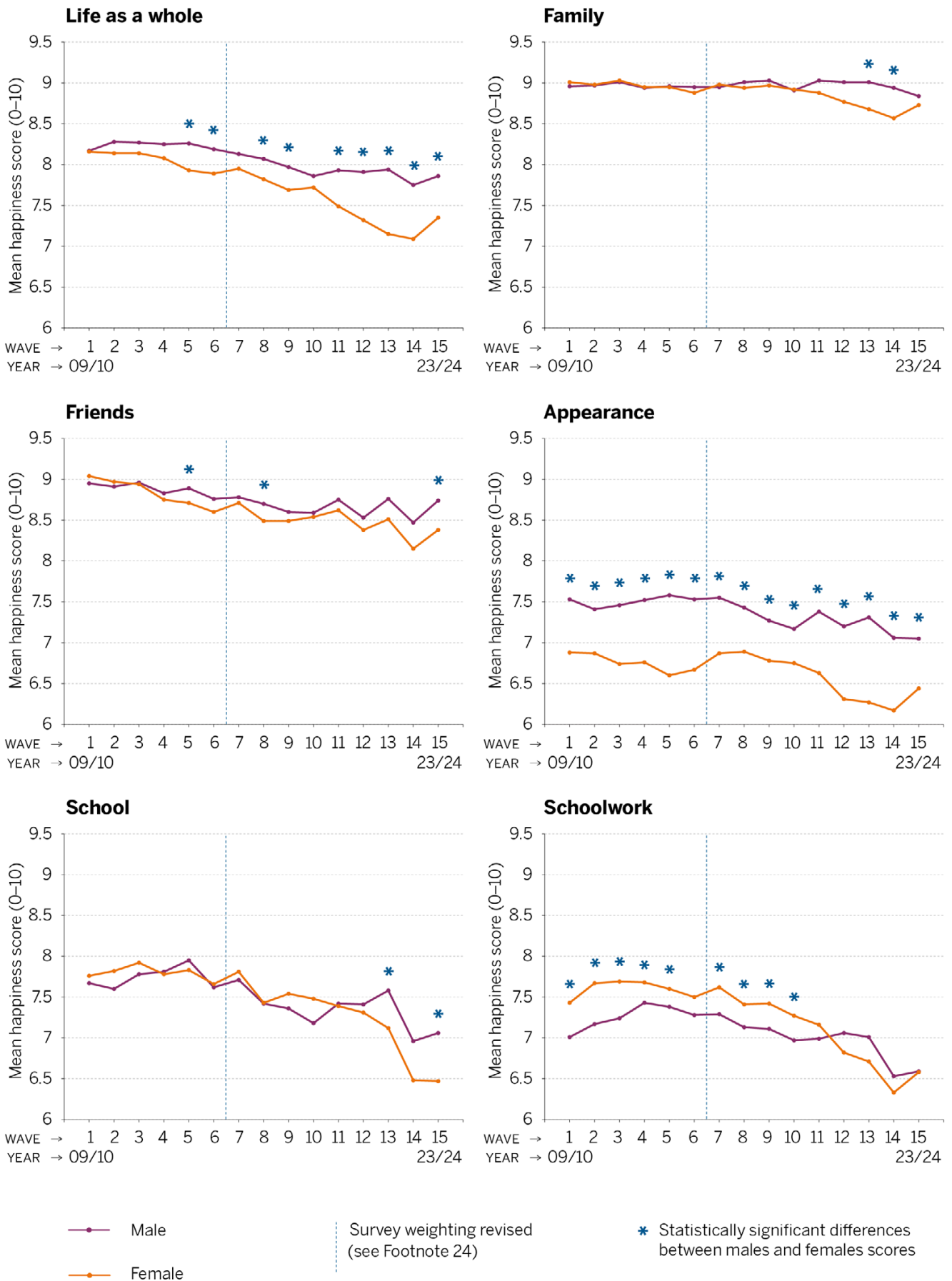
- For **children's happiness with their life as a whole**, **females continue to be significantly less happy than males** in the latest data. Since 2013/14, females have been significantly less happy than males in all but two survey waves.
- In 2023/24, **females were** also, on average, **significantly less happy than males** with their **appearance**, their **school** and, for the first time since 2016/17, their **friends**.³⁴

32 Understanding Society asks respondents whether they are male or female, with no other option available. Therefore, in this section, 'gender' refers to binary gender (female or male). While we do not know how individual children and young people who identify differently might answer the question on gender currently included in the Understanding Society survey, the sample sizes would be too small to allow for statistical analysis even if additional response options could capture their own gender identity.

33 For the detailed underlying data for all six measures across all survey waves, see Tables B1 (for males) and B2 (for females) in Appendix D.

34 While a slight upturn in scores can be observed for most measures for females between wave 14 and wave 15, none of these increases are statistically significant. For males' scores, none of the score increases or decreases between wave 14 and wave 15 were statistically significant either.

Figure 7. Trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life by gender, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.



These data also allow for an exploration of differences in patterns of change in each gender's happiness over time:

- In the latest dataset, females continued to be statistically significantly less happy across all six measures compared to their scores in 2009/10, however their happiness across several measures showed slight increases in 2023/24 in comparison to 2022/23.³⁵
- Males' mean happiness scores were significantly lower than when Understanding Society started for four of the six measures: males were significantly less happy in 2023/24 than in 2009/10 with their life as a whole, appearance, school and schoolwork.

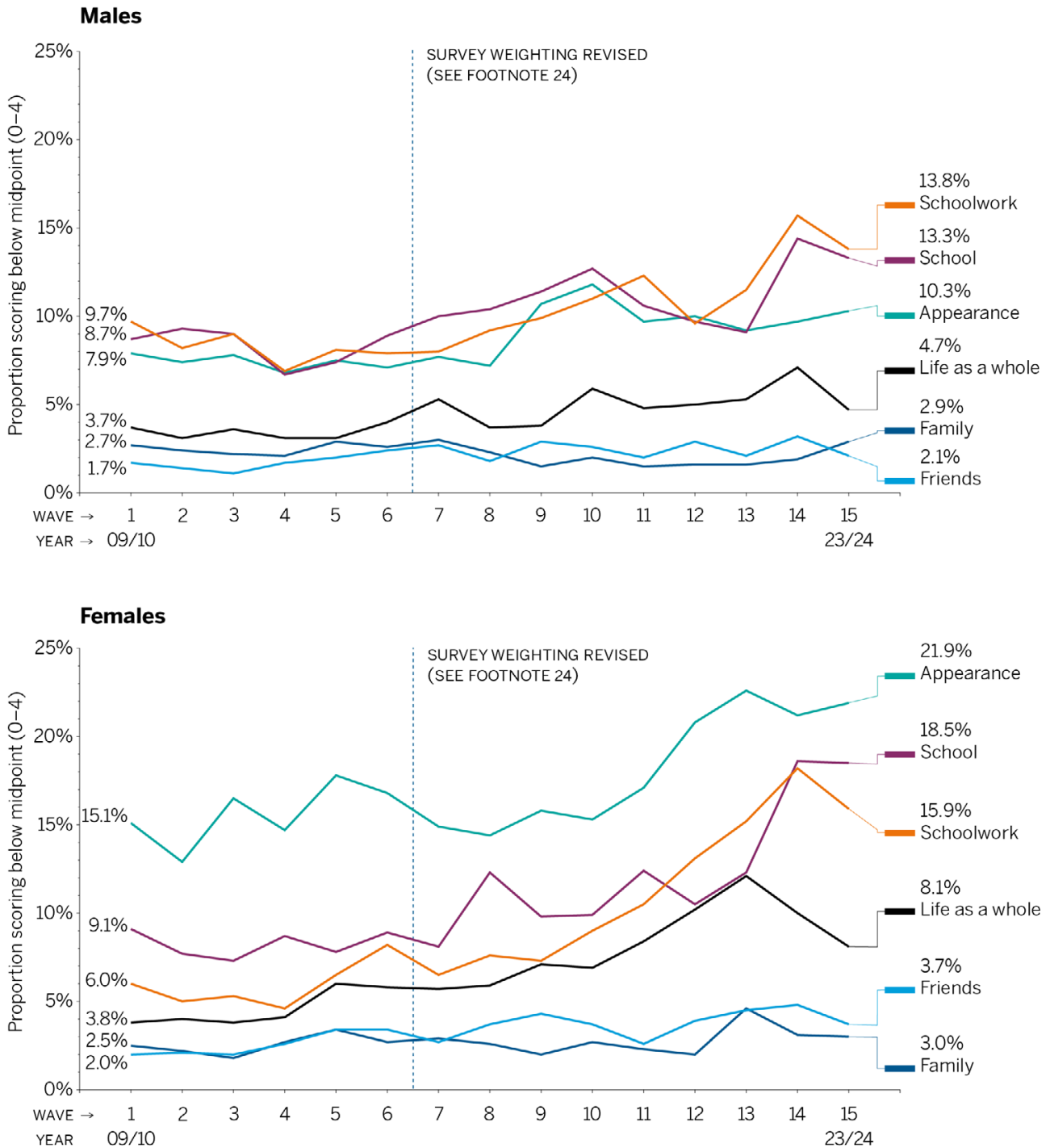
In terms of the proportions of males and females with low happiness, as shown in Figure 8, the aspects of life that children were **most commonly unhappy with differed for males and females**.

- In 2023/24, the aspect of life that more **females were unhappy with** was their **appearance**, which continues to be the measure that females are most commonly unhappy with across Understanding Society survey waves. In the latest dataset, **over one in five (21.9%) females scored below the midpoint for happiness with their appearance**; this is over double the proportion of males (10.3%, or 1 in 10) unhappy with this measure.
- For **males, the aspects of life that larger proportions were unhappy with were the school-related measures**. Just under one in seven (13.8%) males scored below the midpoint for happiness with their **schoolwork**, closely followed by **school** (13.3%). As previously observed,³⁶ a larger proportion of females than males were unhappy with these two school-related measures, with 18.5% of females scoring below the midpoint for the school they attend, and 15.9% for their schoolwork.

³⁵ These changes will require careful tracking in future waves to assess whether there is a significant improvement over time in females' wellbeing in these areas of life.

³⁶ See, most recently, The Good Childhood Report 2025.

Figure 8. Proportion of males and females (aged 10 to 15) with happiness scores below midpoint (0 to 4 out of 10) for life as whole and different aspects of life, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.





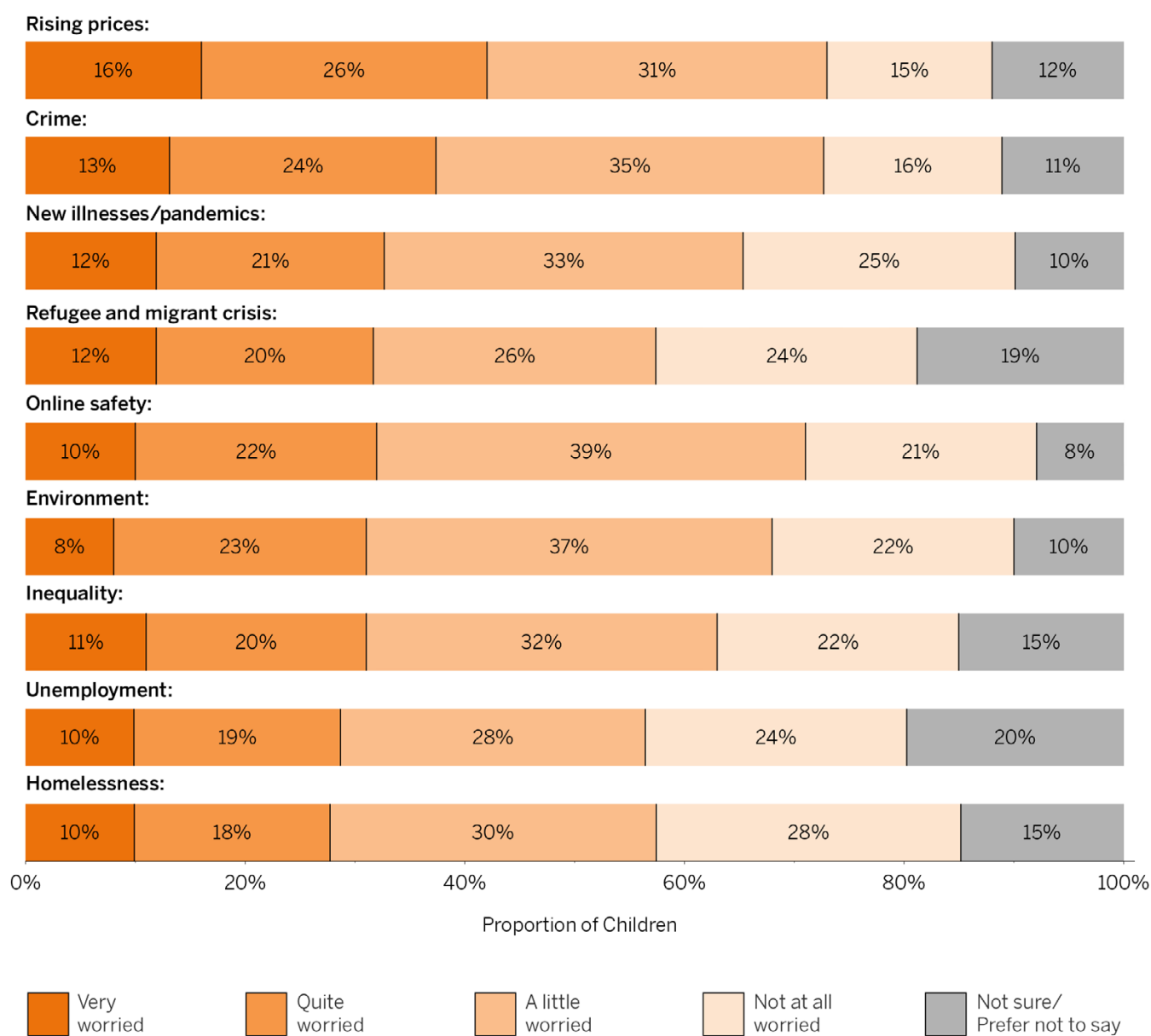
Broader societal issues

In addition to questions about their happiness with different aspects of their life, The Children's Society's household survey 2026 included a question asking children and young people how worried they were about a range of societal issues. As presented in Figure 9:

- **Rising prices was once again the issue that worried children and young people the most**, with 42% 'very' or 'quite' worried about this. Rising prices have been children and young people's top worry in every annual survey since this item was first added to this question in 2023.
- Their second most common worry was **crime** (37% 'very' or 'quite' worried).
- This was followed by **new illnesses/pandemics** (33%) – an issue which had not been in the top three worries for children and young people since 2022.³⁷

³⁷ See The Good Childhood Report 2022. The proportion of children and young people 'very' or 'quite' worried about new illnesses/pandemics in the household survey 2026 may be due to the timing of the survey fieldwork, which started soon after an outbreak of meningitis in England; however, there are no further data to clarify the nature of this result.

Figure 9. Extent of children and young people's (aged 10 to 17) worry about broader issues.



Cost of living

In light of substantial increases to the cost of living in the UK, The Children's Society's annual household surveys currently include a question for parents and carers assessing how concerned, if at all, they are about the impact that this situation may have on their family or household over the next 12 months.

- In 2026, 78% of parents and carers were **'very' or 'quite' concerned** about this.³⁸

This proportion is slightly larger than it was in 2025 (75%); it is also the first year-on-year increase since the question was first asked in 2022.³⁹

Since 2023, The Children's Society's household surveys have also included a measure identifying whether households had been **in financial strain**. This is measured by asking parents and carers how well their household had managed financially between January and March of the year they were surveyed, with those households where parents and carers responded that they had found it 'quite' or 'very' difficult to manage financially identified as being in financial strain.

- In 2026, 24% of households who took part in the household survey were in financial strain.⁴⁰

This represents the largest proportion of households in financial strain out of the previous four household surveys (20% in 2025, and 23% in both 2024 and 2023).

38 In detail, 30% were 'very concerned', 48% were 'quite concerned', 16% were 'not very concerned', 3% were 'not at all concerned', and 3% responded 'not sure' or 'prefer not to say' (those percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number).

39 Previously, this proportion had been slightly reducing each year. In 2024, 77% were 'very' or 'quite concerned'; in 2023, this was 82%, and in 2022, 85%. See The Good Childhood Reports 2022, 2023, 2024 and 2025.

40 12% of parents and carers responded that they found it 'very difficult' to manage financially between January and March 2025; 13% found it 'quite difficult', 32% were 'just about getting by', 36% were 'doing alright', and 8% were 'living comfortably' (percentages are rounded to the nearest whole number). Less than 1% responded 'not sure' or 'prefer not to say'.



Chapter 2:

Understanding what belonging means to young people



“Sense of belonging is like essential to how we operate as human beings.” — Young person

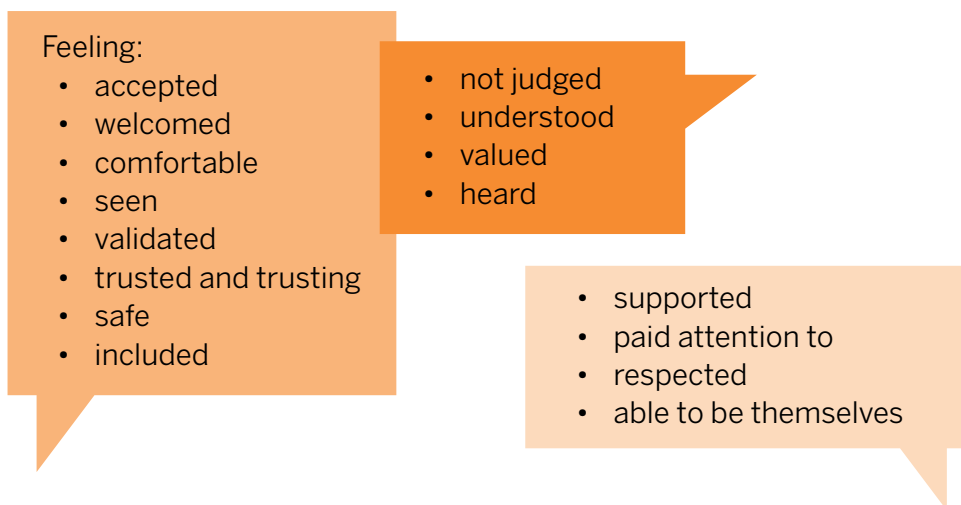
Chapter 2: key findings

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. The research highlighted how a sense of belonging – or a lack thereof – was linked with wellbeing.

- Belonging was defined by young people as feeling unconditionally accepted for who they are.
- Young people and professionals saw belonging as intrinsically linked to young people's wellbeing.
- Both survey data and qualitative insights suggested that young people who did not have a positive sense of belonging to their community and their local area were more likely to have low wellbeing.
- While most young people felt comfortable in their local area and their community, one in five felt uncomfortable and out of place in their local area and almost one in six felt uncomfortable and out of place in their community.

“Like they’re okay to be themselves”: how young people defined belonging

Throughout the peer research conducted by the Young Advisors, young people associated belonging with feeling like they were **accepted**, **valued**, **able to be their true selves** and **safe**. Words that they used to define belonging were:



Feeling accepted and comfortable

Young people said that feeling **accepted**, **understood**, **validated** and **respected** for **who they are** was crucial to their sense of belonging and sense of identity. They defined being accepted as being part of a community where they could “be comfortable in [their] own skin”, and be **free from judgement** of those around them. They described belonging in the following way:

“Feeling securely accepted, heard, valued, and welcomed for your authentic and own true self.” — Young person

Feeling included and valued

Young people also felt that being **welcomed** and feeling actively **included**, “being treated as one of the group” was an integral part of feeling a sense of belonging, together with feeling “truly **seen** and **valued**” and “feel[ing] like your opinion **matters**”:

“[that] you would be missed if you weren’t there, that you have a place and that you’re wanted in that community.” — Young person



Feeling able to develop their own identity

Young people expressed that being able to develop their identity was an intrinsic part of being able to build and sustain a sense of positive belonging, especially during the formative years of adolescence, when teenagers seek to discover and express who they really are. They felt that “true belonging” was only achievable together with **a secure sense of their own identity**:

“Because you can’t really feel like you belong if you don’t really know who you are.” — Young person

Feeling safe and supported

Underpinning all of the above, the following were identified by young people and professionals as essential conditions for young people developing and maintaining a positive sense of belonging:

- being able to **trust**, and be trusted by, those who surround them
- feeling **supported** by those who surround them
- feeling **safe** and secure.

Links between belonging and wellbeing

Throughout the research, young people and professionals saw a **clear connection between young people's sense of belonging and their wellbeing**.

"I think feeling like they belong is really an integral part of having wellbeing." — Young person

Young people explained that a positive sense of belonging was "uplifting", helped young people feel good about themselves, and had positive impacts on their **self-esteem** and **confidence**:

"If they can find a community where they feel comfortable and they feel heard and they feel safe, then overall they will be happier..."

— Young person

"A strong sense of belonging is so crucial for young people's wellbeing. It directly links with higher self-esteem, increased confidence, and better overall mental health." — Young person

Several focus groups highlighted the importance of belonging being **on young people's terms**. This involved respecting the fact that a sense of belonging (or the lack of it) will **feel different to different young people**, and that not everyone has the same needs in terms of belonging. They explained that some young people might be comfortable being on their own and it was important that belonging did not become an additional source of pressure.

Young people also felt that feeling a sense of belonging also offered them a **basis for accessing support**, by providing them with "somewhere to go if they ever need it".

The link between young people's sense of belonging and wellbeing was summarised in the following way during a peer research focus group:

"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

A lack of belonging impacts wellbeing

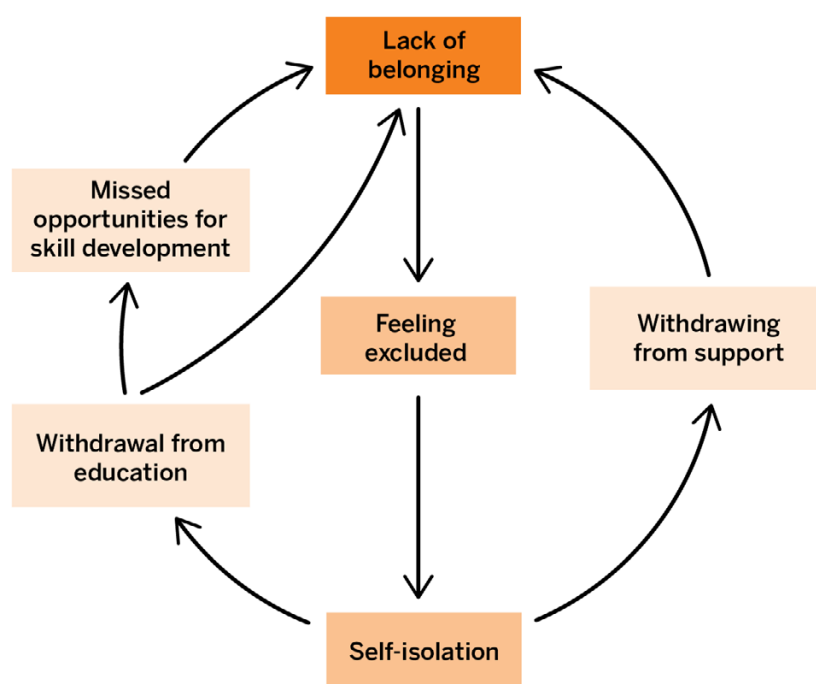
Young people and professionals both felt strongly that not feeling a sense of belonging had a detrimental effect on young people's wellbeing. This included:

- **Loneliness, isolation and otherness:** young people who did not feel like they belonged would feel "isolated", "really, really alone", "like an outsider", "othered", and "invisible".

- **Sadness and impact on mental health:** young people expected those who did not feel like they belonged to feel “sad” and “desolate”; they also identified risks of impacts on young people’s mental health, for example, young people feeling “depressed”.
- **Confidence and self-worth:** young people’s confidence and their sense of self-worth was also considered as being impacted by a lack of belonging, with young people feeling “inadequate” or undeserving.

“If you feel like you don’t belong anywhere, it can make you feel like really unimportant in a way. [...] And it can make you feel really unnoticed and it can take like a toll on your wellbeing.” — Young person

Young people also articulated a **negative cycle**, where feeling left out and excluded could lead young people to isolate themselves and withdraw from opportunities, activities and groups – including education, which would further impact their ability to meet others, make new connections and feel a sense of belonging.



“[If young people] don’t have that sense of belonging and they’re not in those communities, they miss out on opportunities, [...] which makes them feel less included and then leads to more self-isolation. So I think it is just like a big loop of kind of like feeling bad, self-excluding and then feeling worse.” — Young person

A lack of belonging was identified as **making it more difficult for young people to access support when they need it**. They felt that young people would be more likely to “bottle it up and then their wellbeing can even crash down even more”.

Risks linked to lack of belonging

Young people shared their perception of the **risks associated with a lack of belonging**. They felt that a lack of belonging could lead to some young people doing “the wrong stuff” to fulfil that gap in belonging. This could include:

- becoming associated with a “negative” community “because they want any sort of community”
- “falling into like a lot of unhealthy lifestyles and habits”, including the use of drugs and alcohol
- taking part in behaviour that is deemed antisocial and/or crime when attempting to develop a sense of belonging with a group, “to prove themselves”
- becoming vulnerable to “dangerous attitudes”, with young people explaining that a lack of belonging might make young people targets for being groomed or radicalised, and exposure to extremist content.

While these risks and harms are not an inevitable result of a lack of belonging, this highlights the need for preventative work with young people to be rooted in fostering a sense of belonging.

“It’s like waking up and feeling excited, knowing you have people to talk to, things to discuss, people who want to speak to you...”

— Young person

The risks outlined by young people were also raised by professionals. Some professionals further focused on the fact that a lack of belonging to any positive communities **could** make young people “more susceptible to being exploited by adults” due to “really crav[ing] community”. If a young person did go on to experience harm in this way, they explained, this would have **further negative impacts** on their sense of belonging.

To sum up, a peer research participant described how a sense of community belonging – or a lack thereof – could affect young people:

“It’s like waking up and feeling excited, knowing you have people to talk to, things to discuss, people who want to speak to you, or even just people who will be happy to see you - versus waking up and feeling a little bit of dread or anxiety about what are you going to do today? How are people going to perceive you? Are you going to talk to anyone or are you just going to be by yourself? And I feel like when having that community, it really benefits like your mindset and it gets you more into a productive of mood and just more of a growth mindset.” — Young person

Belonging to a community

Young people described a **sense of community** as a crucial component of **belonging and identity development**. They explained how having a community around them that they could trust, that understands them, and that would be available for support, “love and guidance” had a vital impact “across their whole life”.

To further understand what belonging to a community meant to young people, this year The Children’s Society’s household survey explored young people’s feelings of belonging, both to their local area and their wider community.

Young people aged 10 to 17 were asked what ‘my community’ meant to them. As presented in Figure 10:

- Over three quarters (77%) of young people selected ‘**my family, relatives and family friends**’.
- ‘**My school or classmates**’ was selected by two thirds (66%) of young people.
- ‘**People who live near me**’ was selected by nearly two thirds (62%) of young people.
- Over a third (36%) of young people selected ‘**a group I do activities with, like sports, hobbies or a local club**’, and a quarter (26%) selected ‘**people who like the same things I do**’.
- A very small proportion of young people (1.4%) felt that they did not feel part of any community.

Young people were then presented with the same list and asked to select **the main thing** that came to mind when thinking about what ‘my community’ meant to them. As shown in Figure 11:

- The option which was most commonly selected was ‘**my family, relatives and family friends**’, which over half (53%) of children and young people felt was the main thing that their community meant to them.
- One in five (21%) selected **people who live near them** as their primary community, and just under 1 in 10 (9%) selected **their school or classmates**.
- All other options were selected by very small proportions of children and young people (fewer than 6%).

“...having that community, it really benefits like your mindset and it gets you more into a productive...mood and just more of a growth mindset.”

— Young person

Figure 10. Overview of what 'my community' meant to children and young people (aged 10 to 17).

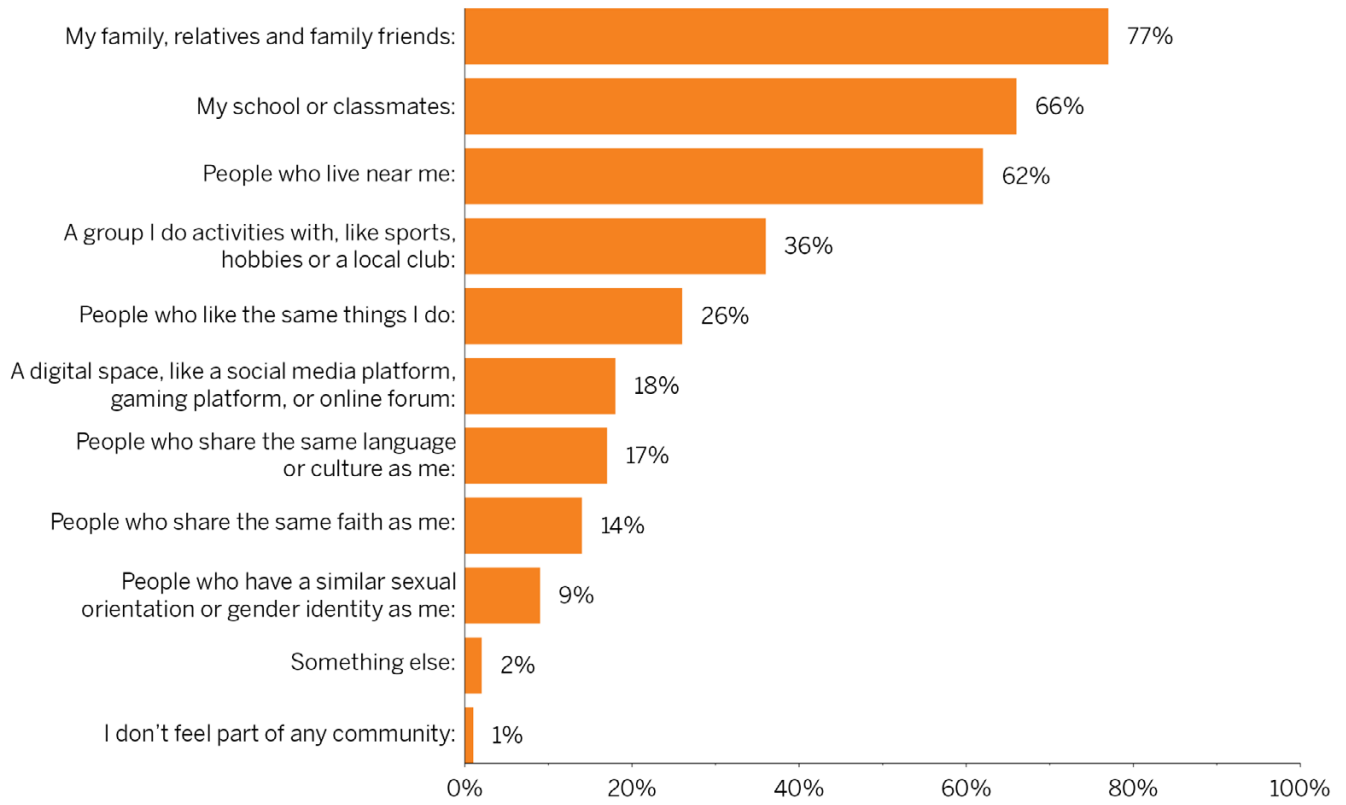
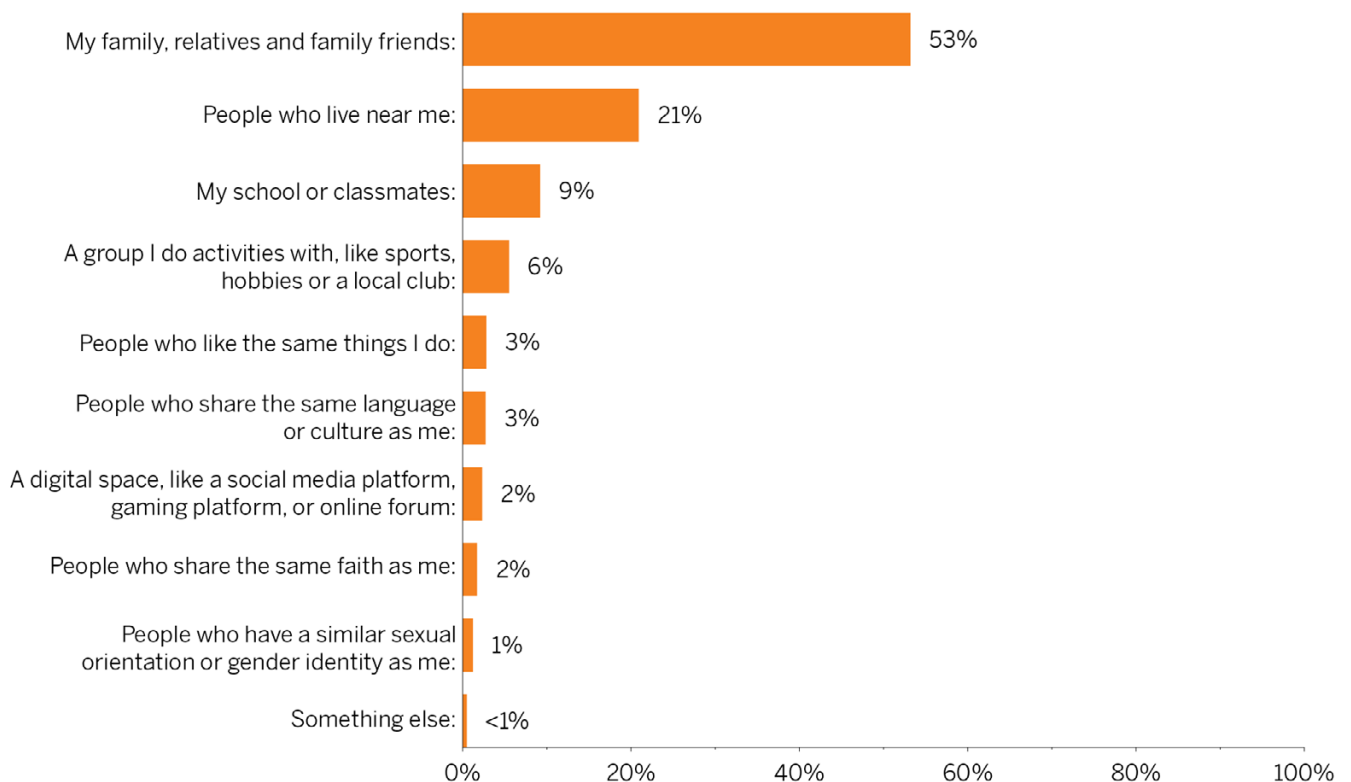


Figure 11. 'Main thing' that children and young people (aged 10 to 17) considered 'their community'.



Young people were then asked to indicate how much they agreed with a range of statements, thinking about what they had selected as their main community.

As shown in Figure 12, a majority demonstrated a positive sense of overall belonging to their community:

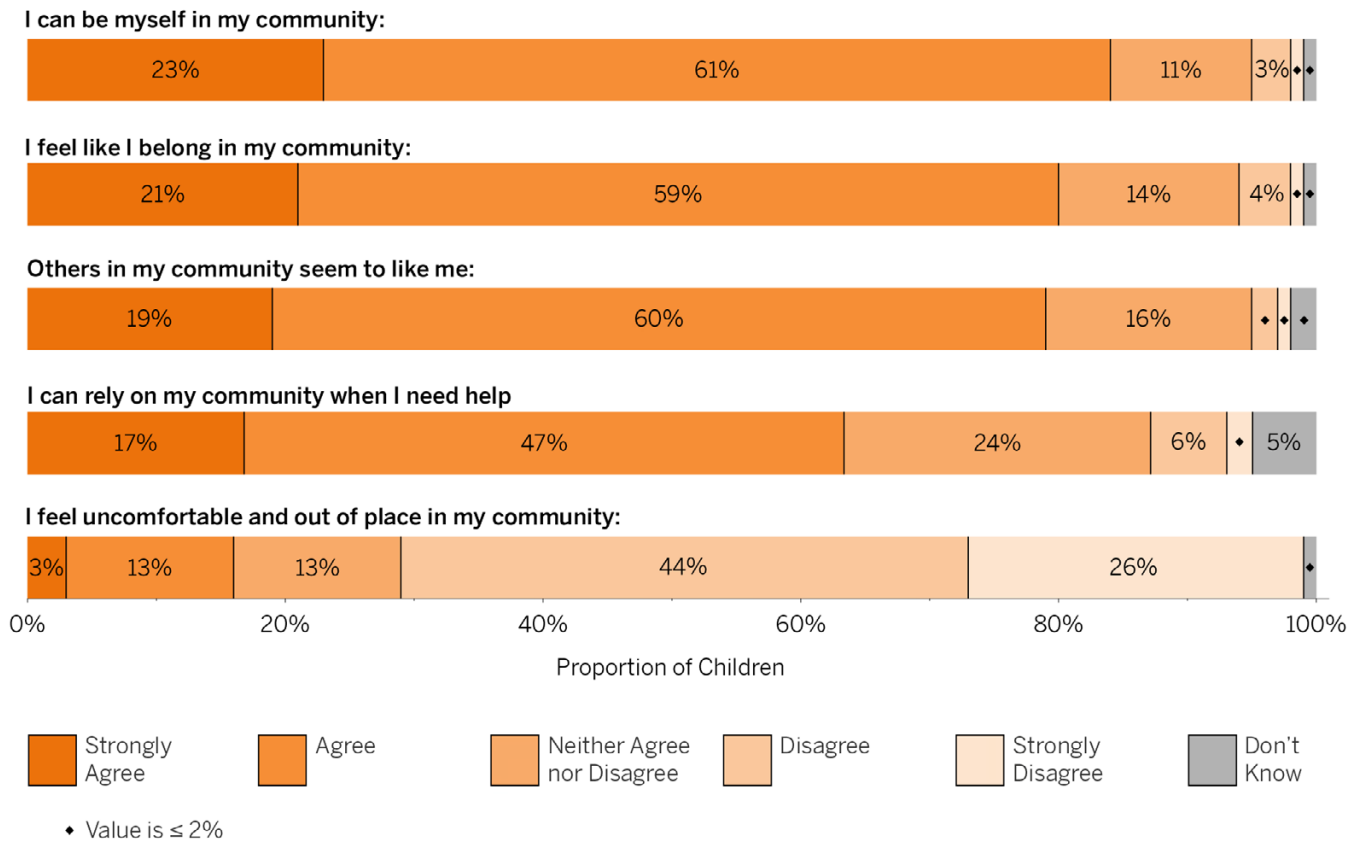
- The statement that young people most commonly agreed or strongly agreed with was that **they could be themselves in their community**, with over four in five young people (84%) showing agreement overall.
- Four in five young people also agreed or strongly agreed that they felt like they belonged in their community (80%), and that others in their community seemed to like them (79%).
- Just under two thirds of young people agreed or strongly agreed that **they could rely on their community when they needed help** (64%).

Results showed that there were also young people whose responses indicated a poor sense of overall belonging to their community:

- Almost one in six young people (16%) indicated that they **felt uncomfortable and out of place** in their community.⁴¹
- For the other statements, the proportions of young people whose responses indicated a poor sense of community belonging were small. Fewer than 1 in 10 young people disagreed or strongly disagreed that they could rely on their community when they needed help (7%), that they felt like they belonged in their community (5%), that they could be themselves in their community (4%), and that others in their community seemed to like them (3%).

⁴¹ This refers to young people who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I feel uncomfortable and out of place in my community'.

Figure 12. Extent of children and young people (aged 10 to 17) agreeing with statements about community belonging.



Analyses were conducted to explore the relationships between the feelings of overall community belonging captured by these five statements and young people’s overall life satisfaction. Results indicated that **low wellbeing was significantly associated with a lower sense of belonging in the community.**⁴²

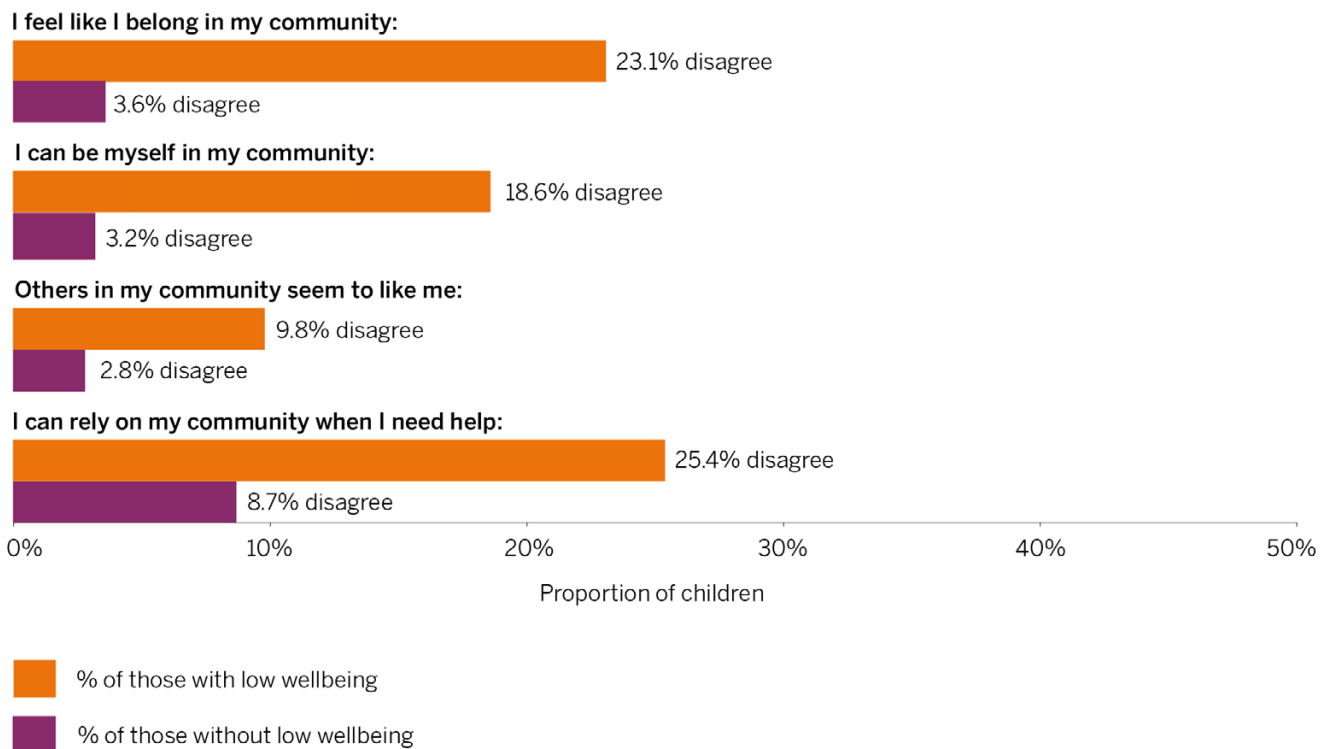
- Nearly a quarter (23.1%) of young people with low wellbeing **did not feel like they belonged in their community**, compared with just 3.6% of those who did not have low wellbeing.
- Nearly one in five (18.6%) young people with low wellbeing **did not feel like they could be themselves in their community**, compared with just 3.2% of the young people who did not have low wellbeing.
- Almost 1 in 10 (9.8%) young people with low wellbeing **did not think others in their community liked them**, compared with just 2.8% of young people who did not have low wellbeing.

⁴² Bivariate analyses (2x2) were conducted using chi-square tests between those who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the five statements, those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with those statements, those who had low wellbeing overall based on the GCI’s multi-measure item of overall life satisfaction, and those who did not have low wellbeing overall. Only associations that would be significant in a random sample (p<0.01) are reported. No such association was found for the reverse-worded statement ‘I feel uncomfortable and out of place in my community’. ‘Neither agree nor disagree’, ‘don’t know’ and ‘prefer not to say’ responses were excluded for the purpose of this analysis.

- A quarter (25.4%) of young people with low wellbeing **did not feel like they could rely on their community when they needed help**, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 (8.7%) of those who did not have low wellbeing.

This analysis shows that while a majority of young people seemed to have a positive sense of belonging to their community, those young people who did not feel an overall sense of belonging to their community were much more likely to have low overall life satisfaction, echoing the messages from the peer research about this relationship.

Figure 13. Percentage of children (aged 10 to 17) with and without low wellbeing who disagreed with statements about community belonging.





Belonging to a local area

The Children's Society's household survey also asked young people how much they agreed with statements exploring their sense of belonging to their local area.⁴³ The results, presented in Figure 14, show that **a majority of young people felt a positive sense of overall belonging to their local area.**

- For community belonging, the statement that young people most commonly agreed or strongly agreed with was that **they could be themselves in their local area**, with three quarters of young people (76%) showing agreement overall.
- Two thirds of young people agreed that they felt welcomed by adults in their local area (68%), that they would recommend their local area to others as a good place to live (68%), and that they felt like they belonged in their local area (67%).

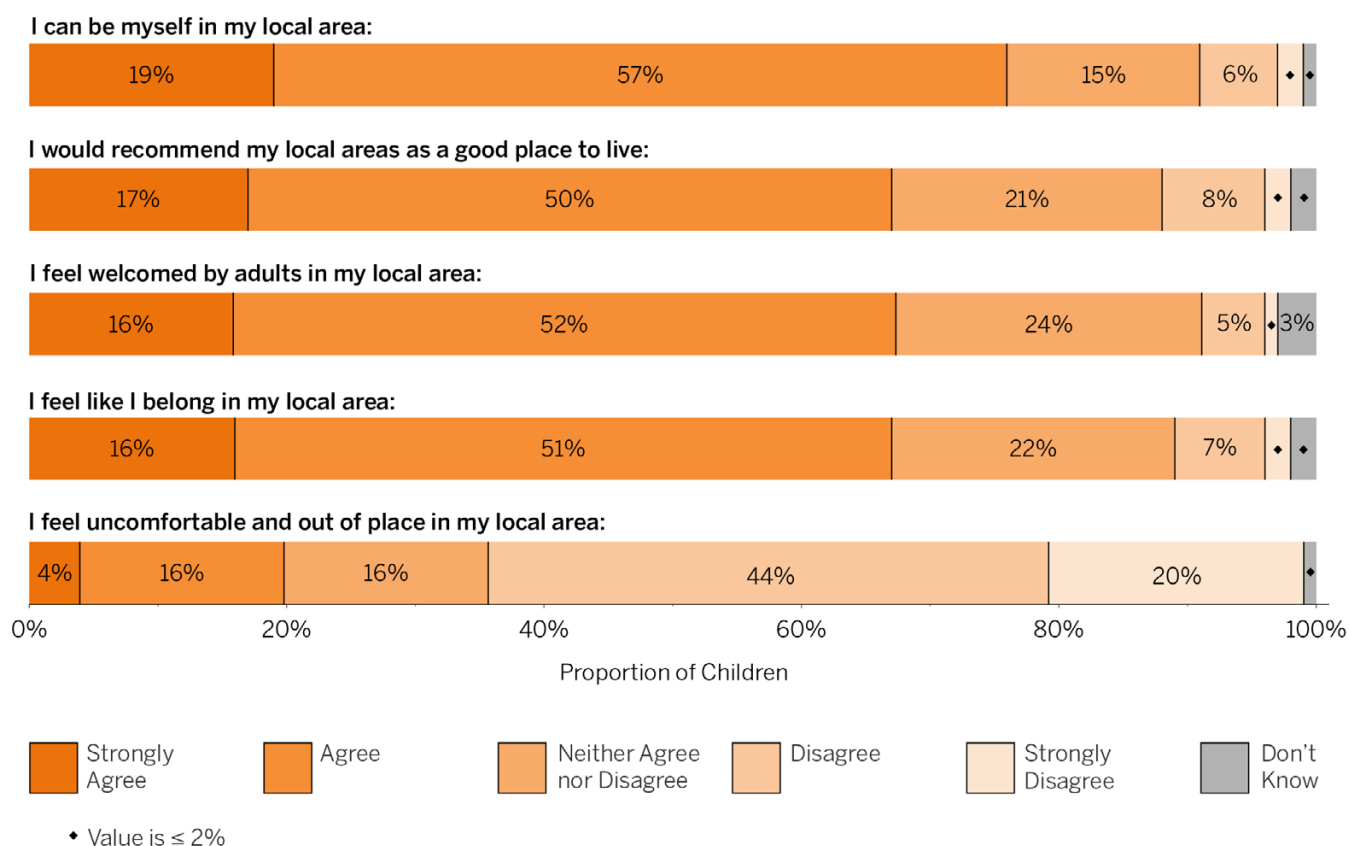
However, one in five (20%) young people either agreed or strongly agreed that **they felt uncomfortable and out of place** in their local area.

For the four other statements, the proportions of young people whose responses indicated a poor sense of overall belonging to their local area were small. Few young people, yet enough for significant consideration,

⁴³ Their local area was defined as their village for young people who lived rurally, or the area within 15 to 20 minutes' walking distance from their home if they lived in a town or city.

disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statements relating to their local area: 10% would not recommend their local area to others as a good place to live, 9% did not feel like they belonged in their local area, 7% did not feel they could be themselves in their local area, and 6% did not feel welcomed by adults in their local area.

Figure 14. Extent of children and young people (aged 10 to 17) agreeing with statements about local area belonging.



Analyses were conducted to assess the links between young people's sense of overall local area belonging and their life satisfaction. Results showed that **low wellbeing was significantly associated with a lower sense of belonging in the local area.**⁴⁴

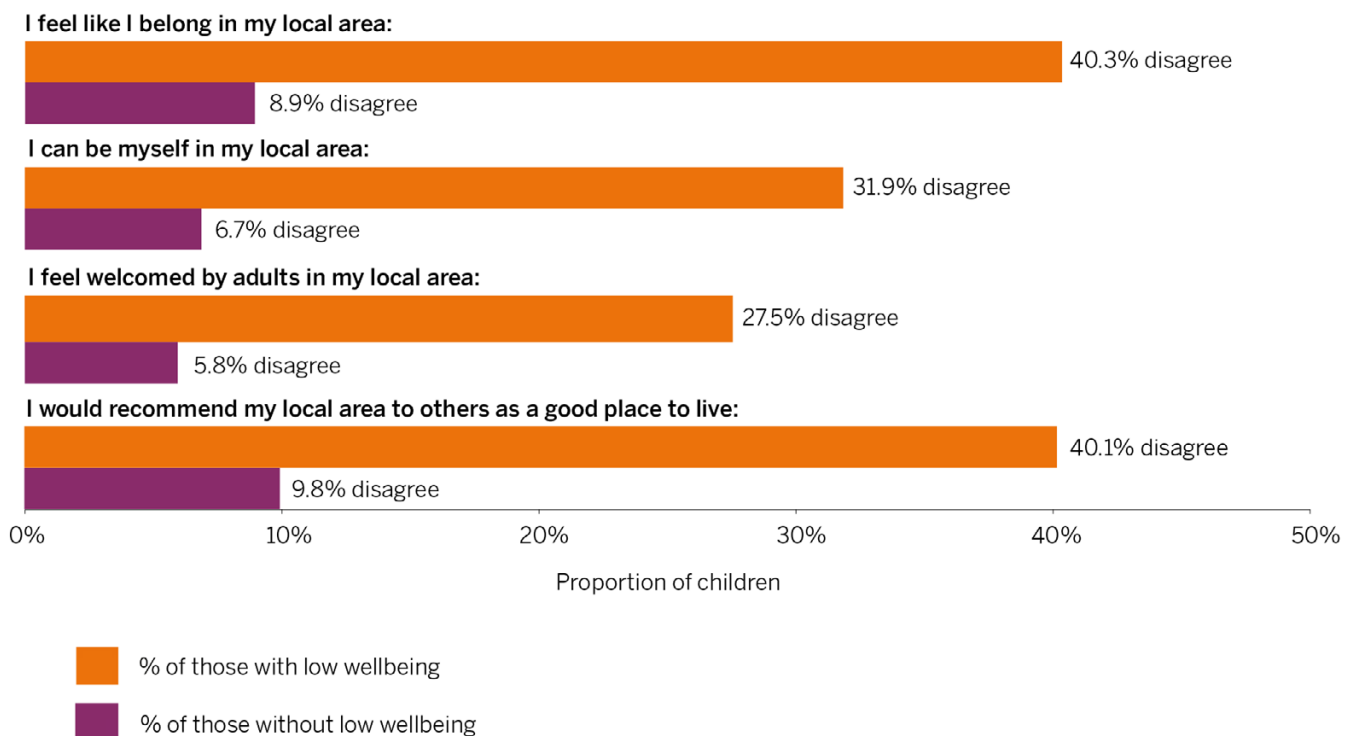
- Two in five (40.3%) young people with low wellbeing **felt that they did not belong in their local area**, compared with fewer than 1 in 10 (8.9%) respondents who did not have low wellbeing.

⁴⁴ Bivariate analyses (2x2) were conducted using chi-square tests between those who agreed or strongly agreed with each of the five statements, those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with those statements, those who had low wellbeing overall based on the GCI's multi-measure item of overall life satisfaction, and those who did not have low wellbeing overall. Only associations that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$) are reported. 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'don't know' and 'prefer not to say' responses were excluded for the purpose of this analysis.

- Almost a third (31.9%) of young people with low wellbeing **did not feel like they could be themselves in their local area**, compared with only 6.7% of those who did not have low wellbeing.
- Over two in five (42.4%) young people with low wellbeing **felt uncomfortable and out of place in their local area**, compared with over one in five (22.3%) of those young people who did not have low wellbeing.
- Over a quarter (27.5%) of young people with low wellbeing **did not feel welcomed by adults in their local area**, compared with only 5.8% of those who did not have low wellbeing.
- Two in five (40.1%) young people with low wellbeing **would not recommend their local area as a good place to live**, compared with 1 in 10 (9.8%) of those young people who did not have low wellbeing.

These results indicate that most young people seemed to have a positive sense of local area belonging but that **those young people who did not have a positive sense of belonging to their local area were much more likely to have low wellbeing**.

Figure 15. Percentage of children (aged 10 to 17) with and without low wellbeing who disagreed with statements about local area belonging.



Care-experienced young people

Professionals who work with care-experienced young people highlighted that developing and sustaining a sense of belonging in a local area may be harder for care-experienced young people. They explained that due to “physically actually having to move” home and school, at times repeatedly, those young people are sometimes not afforded the sense of permanence that could foster a stronger sense of belonging.

Barriers to belonging

Young people and professionals identified several barriers that could negatively impact young people’s sense of belonging. These included:

- the pressure young people can feel to **change who they are to fit in**
- experiences of **discrimination, exclusion or bullying**.

Pressure to fit in

Young people described that they often felt **pressure to change who they are in order to fit in**, so that they could feel like they belonged. When discussing the origins of these pressures, young people identified a range of sources:

- **societal expectations** of how young people should behave and what they should achieve

“There’s [...] pressure to conform to what is seen as like societally accepted or what the standard is and what is expected of young people” — Young person

- **pressures related to the school environment**, like peer pressure, bullying, pressure to achieve academically

“Let’s say in school there’s an assembly about something and everyone’s got the same opinion about it. But if you have something different, like if you think something different about it, then it’s like you’re the odd one out and people might make fun of you for it.” — Young person

- **pressures related to social media**, for example around unrealistic expectations and beauty standards, or cyberbullying.

“I think it’s really toxic the way that people watch stuff online and, like, they see the way other people are and they start to like think that they have to be like that in order to, like, be liked and fit in.” — Young person

Young people identified a problematic **comparison culture** and professionals stressed that “the pressure on young people” did not “necessarily allow people to have the time to explore, to be, to find themselves”.

“You just have to pretend, like, to be someone you’re not.” — Young person

Some young people highlighted that specific groups were more likely to feel pressure, in particular neurodivergent young people who might use masking⁴⁵ in order to feel accepted. They discussed how those who were, or felt “different” to those around them might also feel a **sense of otherness** that would negatively impact their sense of belonging.

Young people outlined the **wider impact and risks** of this pressure to change:

“That’s sort of like lying to yourself [...] And that can be really damaging even after you’ve like left [...] the place where you’re not accepted. It can be really, really hard to actually untangle all of the things that you told yourself.” — Young person

Discrimination, exclusion and bullying

“You just have to pretend, like, to be someone you’re not.”

— Young person

Young people and professionals outlined that any experiences of **discrimination, bullying, or feeling excluded** were highly likely to impact young people's sense of belonging. Young people also explained that those experiences might lead to them **losing confidence in trying to find a community**, and therefore **feeling more isolated** and withdrawing.

“I think that’s just more or less a fight or flight response just kicks in then. [...] If you keep it to yourself, there’s gonna be less criticism, less harm going towards you. [...] And like keeping up a lie is just mentally exhausting.” — Young person

Young people and professionals emphasised that while not limited to those groups, **marginalised groups of young people** were more likely to experience this sense of isolation linked to discrimination.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Masking is defined by the National Autistic Society as “a strategy used by some autistic people, consciously or unconsciously, to appear non-autistic in order to blend in and be more accepted in society”. See <https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/behaviour/masking>

⁴⁶ In the examples shared by young people and professionals, groups of young people were described as marginalised in terms of race, gender, sexuality, religion or socioeconomic background – at times this included intersectional experiences between different characteristics.



Safety, fear and perceptions of the outside world

Young people and professionals highlighted the negative impact that **fears around safety** and **negative perceptions of the world** had on young people's sense of belonging to their local areas and communities.

"If you don't feel safe in your community, you're sort of, by definition you're going to want to leave that community, and if you want to leave it, you can't really feel like a part of it."— Professional

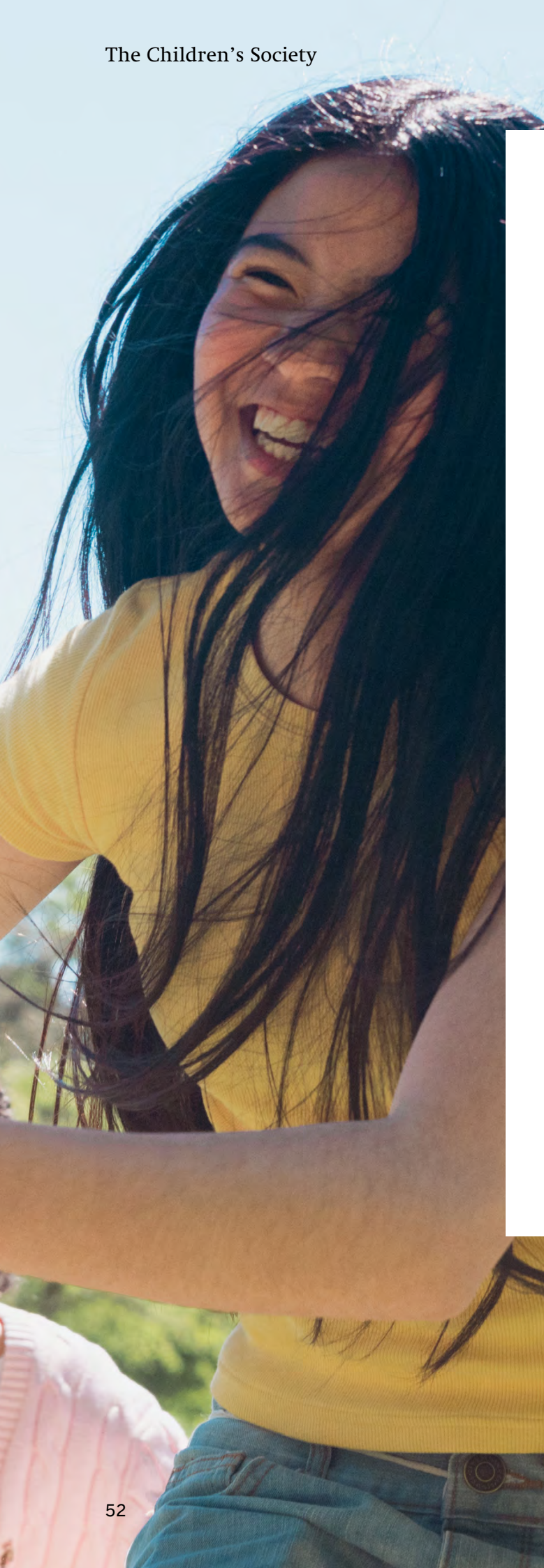
This, they felt, was particularly relevant to young people who were, or felt, "different". Some professionals highlighted that worries about issues like crime or violence could be amplified due to young people being confronted with "the impact of everything that goes on in the news".

Professionals and young people also shared that parents could hinder a young person's sense of belonging through their own "fear of the outside world", which meant that parents might restrict young people's access to community spaces and experiences and "might not let you go out that much".



Chapter 3:

Enabling belonging through places and power



Chapter 3: key findings

Insights from 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. Both young people and professionals outlined the dire need for more spaces that are suitable for young people.
- There need to be more opportunities for young people to have a say, with their views meaningfully listened to and acted on, so they can shape the spaces and activities available to them in their local areas.
- Spaces and activities needed to be accessible, affordable, suitable and inclusive of all young people – and young people needed to be aware of them.
- Additional barriers such as negative perceptions of young people negatively impacted young people's ability to access spaces and therefore their sense of belonging.

Connection and identity development

Young people emphasised the importance of being able to **connect with like-minded people to develop their identity** and sustain a sense of belonging. They said it was crucial that they had access to **spaces and activities** in their local areas which enabled them to do this:

“That mutual feeling and connection towards something that’s going to allow you to connect and come together as a community [...] and allow you to have that better wellbeing that you’re striving to have.” — Young person

However, young people and professionals emphasised that **opportunities for in-person connections were limited or lacking altogether**, and both groups called for more in-person opportunities:

“I think we need [...] more activities within the community, [...] it’s like there’s no activities in that people can’t, like, socialise with their community.” — Young person

Some young people felt that **community outreach initiatives and volunteering** offered positive opportunities for young people to foster their sense of belonging by developing a **sense of connection to their community**, providing exposure to new experiences that they otherwise might not have, and supporting their skills development.

Digital Connections

Young people and professionals outlined that **digital communities** could support young people’s belonging by **enabling connections** with those who had mutual interests, experiences or characteristics. They felt this might be particularly important for young people whose **interests, characteristics or experiences** were very specific, who didn’t feel safe to express their identity to those around them or who might feel less confident meeting others in person.

However, the Young Advisors commented that online spaces could become an additional burden with regards to belonging:

“...to live in a physical and online community can really push young people into striving for validation from two different environments.” — Young Advisor

Young people and professionals highlighted that digital lives could create pressure for young people to change by setting **perceived standards and expectations**. Young people described online hate as “prominent” and that some digital spaces “can get really nasty”.

Spaces and opportunities: what works and what gets in the way?

“In my experience those that have access to youth provision/groups are often happier than those with no provision near them.” — Professional

Having access to spaces and activities that suited young people's needs and interests was mentioned by both young people and professionals as **crucial**. Young people explained that **youth clubs**,⁴⁷ **groups and extracurricular activities** provided opportunities to engage in positive experiences, form friendships, and develop their confidence, skills and a sense of belonging:

“When you have like a genuine interest, when you have something you're able to engage in, be like volunteering, like going to the gym, like doing some kind of sport, that becomes a much more concrete sense of belonging that I think serves young people a lot better in the long term in terms of their wellbeing.” — Young person

Youth clubs and projects were also explicitly referenced by professionals as one of the types of spaces that were necessary for young people to feel a sense of belonging:

“In my experience those that have access to youth provision/groups are often happier than those with no provision near them.” — Professional

Welcoming spaces

Throughout the peer research, young people described spaces and experiences in their local areas that fostered a sense of belonging. Some examples they gave:

- **Parks** were cited as a good option for easy gatherings as young people could go and “just sit down or something”. Some young people particularly appreciated parks or outdoor areas with sports or outdoors gym equipment as they allowed them to exercise and have fun for free.
- More generally, young people felt that **outdoor activities** were a good way of fostering a sense of connection without being pressurising, for example: “just going for a walk somewhere with people is like, it takes your mind off really worrying about conversation a lot”.
- **Libraries** were mentioned by different groups of young people as examples of places where young people would feel like they belonged as they could study and relax.
- Some young people highlighted that having the opportunity to do **work experience** locally could foster a sense of belonging and equip them with connections and skills.

⁴⁷ While not all young people used the words ‘youth clubs’, their descriptions often corresponded to these types of spaces.

- When relevant to them, young people felt a sense of belonging in their local **places of worship**.

Young people were clear, however, that how welcomed young people would feel in a space would be **different from person to person** and that different groups of young people might experience the same spaces differently.

Professionals identified **youth-friendly spaces as one of the main influences on young people's sense of belonging to their local area**.

They cited the importance of young people “having safe, accessible places to come together and hang out”, and “a sense that they have safe spaces to go and that they are welcome”. Several professionals emphasised that it was crucial that this included access to **outdoors spaces**, with opportunities for young people to **play**. They also spoke about the role of **local and grassroots initiatives** in supporting young people's sense of belonging to their local area by providing them with a safe space to go to and “be”. They provided the following examples of local initiatives set up to improve young people's sense of belonging in their local areas:

- a “youth cafe for teenagers” set up by a church
- a “bus stop sports club”, where young people could “get off the bus and then they're just there with a, you know, a smile and a lack of judgement and a basketball”
- “pop-up sports on consenting volunteers' driveways”, to make up for the lack of spaces for young people to play sports.

“It was the only available space where we could put like a basketball hoop or something, and just give the kids a chance to play about.”

— Professional

**“You can either feel
really included or
you can feel really
excluded.”**

— Young person

Schools

Schools were identified by young people as **either potential places of belonging, or potential places of pressure and isolation**:

“You can either feel really included or you can feel really excluded.” — Young person

Young people shared that schools could be “a great place, especially when it comes to extracurricular activities, different clubs”, which would help young people **find a community based on mutual connection**. However, they also outlined that schools were **environments where young people could feel under a lot of pressure to fit in**.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Pressure to fit in is discussed more comprehensively in Chapter 2.

Some professionals identified additional challenges for young people attending **secondary schools**, which were often **larger and more distant from young people's homes** in contrast to small, local primary schools which they felt fostered a stronger sense of belonging. Young people and professionals also mentioned an **overfocus on academic achievement**⁴⁹ as a common factor in young people feeling like they did not belong within their school community:

"I think exam results and the pressure that are put on such young people is making it harder for younger people to find a place where they belong"
— Young person

Many professionals felt that **schools and teachers played an important role in a young person's overall sense of belonging**, but some worried that schools were not always able to meet young people's needs.

"Far too many young people aren't doing well at school because what they experience and receive simply doesn't meet their needs [they] and feel they don't belong at school." — Professional

The topic of representation was also touched on by some young people, who highlighted the importance of a **diverse and representative curriculum** for fostering a sense of belonging for all pupils:

"I think it's really important to have like a diverse, like, required curriculum. So like in school, every day you're learning about new people in history and learning that, like, who you are, or being different, is completely normal. And that no one, no two people are the same and it's okay to be whoever you are." — Young person

Colleges

Older young people shared that young people were often **more likely to feel a sense of belonging in college** as colleges were more conducive to young people being able to **develop their own identity** and express their individual style. This, they explained, meant that in college young people could be their "actual selves".

Colleges were also highlighted as offering good opportunities to "find your people", because young people could select the topics they wanted to study and had access to more clubs and societies and were therefore likely to **find others with similar interests**.

49 For a more comprehensive discussion on this topic, see The Good Childhood Report 2025.



What young people and professionals felt could improve young people's sense of belonging at school

Both young people and professionals suggested that there needed to be **more flexibility in approaches to learning**, to allow for young people's sense of identity and belonging to develop positively:

"Relax the education curriculum, reduce the pressure and amount of testing and exams, to enable people to really learn and explore who they are." — Professional

Both groups also felt that **mixing age groups could foster a stronger sense of belonging in schools** by breaking down the barriers between younger and older pupils. Young people suggested that this could be during activities, in shared spaces and or through opportunities for students to work and learn together across age groups. Professionals provided examples of where this had worked well, like peer mentoring programmes. Some young people felt that **mixing different schools in a local area** would also allow for more diversity and more opportunities to meet new people.

Lack of spaces

Both groups outlined the **dire need for more spaces for young people**, and professionals highlighted that **the availability of spaces was unequal and dependent on what happened to be available** in each local area.

- Results from the mixed-method survey conducted with professionals highlighted the 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.⁵⁰

Young people highlighted that often, the only spaces they have access to are not particularly suitable:

"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

Both young people and professionals highlighted the link between the **lack of options available to young people for in-person connections**, and young people turning to "socialis[ing] online". They felt that **more in-person opportunities would help reduce the use of social media and online options**. One professional summarised a negative loop between a lack of in-person opportunities and a perceived over-reliance on digital alternatives in the following way:

"And, at the same time, being forced online, but then being told off for being online. So they're in a no-win situation." — Professional

The Young Advisors felt that this point was particularly "topical" given the recently announced social media ban for under-16s.⁵¹ They 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

The majority of professionals who took part in the survey did not feel that there were enough appropriate places for young people.

⁵⁰ This refers to respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that there were enough appropriate places for children and young people to go or spend time.

⁵¹ [Fact sheet: New rules to protect children online - GOV.UK](#)

Inclusion

Young people and professionals emphasised the importance of there being a broad range of spaces and activities to recognise the diversity of young people's interests, needs, characteristics and experiences. They also highlighted that clubs and activities needed to be **inclusive** and to be **developed with the diversity of young people and their varied and, at times, intersecting needs** in mind.

Inclusivity and **representation** were cited by young people as crucial components of developing their identity and feeling a sense of belonging. They outlined that this was particularly relevant for specific groups, for example neurodivergent young people, those from the LGBTQ+ community and those with specific cultures or traditions.

"They might feel least included in places where they feel judged, excluded, or don't see people like themselves represented." — Young person

Professionals felt that representation was particularly important for groups with specific identities or interests:

"If young people aren't seeing themselves in their communities and in spaces [...], then that's a barrier for them being able to access it."
— Professional

Professionals commented that this was especially important when young people straddled more than one minority or marginalised group and therefore had **intersecting identities** that might make it harder for them to feel like they belonged in more generic spaces or groups.

A diverse range of spaces and activities

Young people provided examples of numerous potential opportunities that would be beneficial for a wide range of young people to develop a sense of community belonging. Some were based on young people's **interests** or **hobbies**, and others on their **identities** or **characteristics**. They cited, for example: sports clubs, art clubs, concerts, drama performances, events, lectures, cultural or religious gatherings, and specialised groups like LGBTQ+ societies, a deaf group or a politics club.



Accessibility and suitability

Young people highlighted the importance of **them being aware of the opportunities that do exist in their area**. They explained that too often, young people “don’t actually know of, you know, the opportunities in the area” and they wanted to see “more promotion”.

“It’s very difficult to know where to go unless you’ve been told.” — Young person

Location and cost were said to create additional **barriers to access** for some young people. Professionals discussed that geographical barriers were particularly relevant for young people living rurally, for whom it might be “very difficult to access any sort of provision outside of the immediate neighbourhood”. While young people showed an overall awareness that not all opportunities can be free, they felt that there should be more free options for them, and that paid-for options should at least be affordable.

“If we want to do anything, like there’s not, there’s not many recreational places where we can do things that don’t require a certain amount of money or like a lot of effort or a certain amount of travel. I think that needs to be a bit more accessible to all groups of children.” — Young person

Professionals echoed this concern, highlighting that many activities were “only for families with capital to fund them”.

“The things that are available are usually too expensive for families to afford.” — Professional

Young people and professionals also outlined that at times, spaces and activities were **not suitable for young people, in particular teenagers**. Both groups described spaces or activities that were targeted at younger children, or simply not open to teenagers, which left teenagers feeling excluded or being perceived as disruptive if they did use the spaces:

“Like, the little park at the end of the street might have a roundabout and some swings. Like, that’s fine for younger kids, but, like - in a space like that, as soon as teenagers arrive in it, they’ll then proceed to be disruptive and stopping other people using the park. But okay, where else can they go?” — Professional

Young people also outlined that when opportunities were designed with too wide or generic an approach, no specific age group actually felt catered for:

“They also need to be very like age specific, if that makes sense, because what younger young people will need will be very different to what sort of older young people need. [...] To create community with everyone is obviously the main goal, but you also need to consider that the people that are coming may be different and may have different needs.” — Young person

Young people and professionals highlighted that **spaces and activities are often designed by adults without young people’s involvement**. This meant that the opportunities were not always “appealing”, “inviting” or “actually enjoyable”. Professionals highlighted that **young people have to ‘make do’ with the public spaces that happen to be available in the local area**, and that spaces for young people were sometimes quite “traditional” and were **often not codesigned with them**. As a result, professionals worried that young people felt “very little connection because nothing locally matches their lived experience”. Young people were aware of this limitation too:

“I think also the opportunities that are given to young people need to actually be appealing [...]. Most of the time that I see them, they’re kind of created by older people or... not older people, but people who aren’t, like, teenagers.” — Young person

Young people were keen for adults to **work with them to develop spaces and activities that would suit their needs**.

“The things that are available are usually too expensive for families to afford.”
— Professional

Power to change: codesigning with young people

Professionals saw **codesign and coproduction** with young people as vital solutions to **local opportunities being meaningfully targeted towards young people** and genuinely welcoming for them, enabling young people to feel a sense of belonging in their local communities:

"Their sense of community is impacted directly by their capacity to shape the offer locally. This could be by sharing their ideas for events, or by being involved in campaigns and projects in the community."

— Professional

Professionals explained having the opportunity to help shape what their spaces would look like gave young people a **sense of ownership**, which supported their **self-esteem** and sense of **belonging**:

"That sense of ownership that they get through co-production is one thing that really benefits them when it comes to having that sense of belonging and sense of kind of agency over the provision in their city."— Professional

For this, professionals explained that it was crucial for young people to "see the full chain" of having "said something and therefore this has happened" – so that they knew their views had "taken on board" and **acted on**.

Young people also felt that there should be **more opportunities for them to be able to take part in groups or events where they could share their views on their community**, which they felt would give them an opportunity to have "an impact on the future generations". They felt that "roles where youth actively shape their environment" would "help young people find a true sense of belonging" to their communities. Professionals also mentioned the benefits that could come from **fully involving young people in decision-making in their communities**, citing "the confidence boost and connections they make when they are positioned as experts of their own experiences".

Professionals also mentioned the importance of youth engagement initiatives being **representative of all different groups of young people in the community**, recognising that **their needs are diverse**.



Negative perceptions of young people

Both young people and professionals felt that **negative labelling of young people, particularly teenagers**, was widespread. This, they felt, affected young people's sense of belonging in their communities, as they felt "prejudged" and not accepted. This impacted young people's experiences of some public spaces which were described as "really unwelcoming". As this was a finding that emerged from The Good Childhood Report 2025,⁵² this was an aspect that the research with professionals further focused on this year.

In The Children's Society's survey of professionals working directly with young people, respondents were asked to indicate, based on their professional experiences, whether they felt that public spaces tended to be welcoming of young people in the local areas in which they worked.

- Over half of respondents (18 out of 31) did not feel that public spaces were welcoming for young people.⁵³
- Over half of respondents (16 out of 31) felt that public spaces had become less welcoming of young people.⁵⁴

⁵² See The Good Childhood Report 2025, pages 53, 57 and 62.

⁵³ This refers to respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that public spaces were welcoming for young people.

⁵⁴ This refers to respondents reporting that public spaces had become 'a bit less' or 'a lot less' welcoming of children and young people than they used to be.

“The media show teenagers in a negative light, therefore communities are wary of having areas where young people can gather.”

— Professional

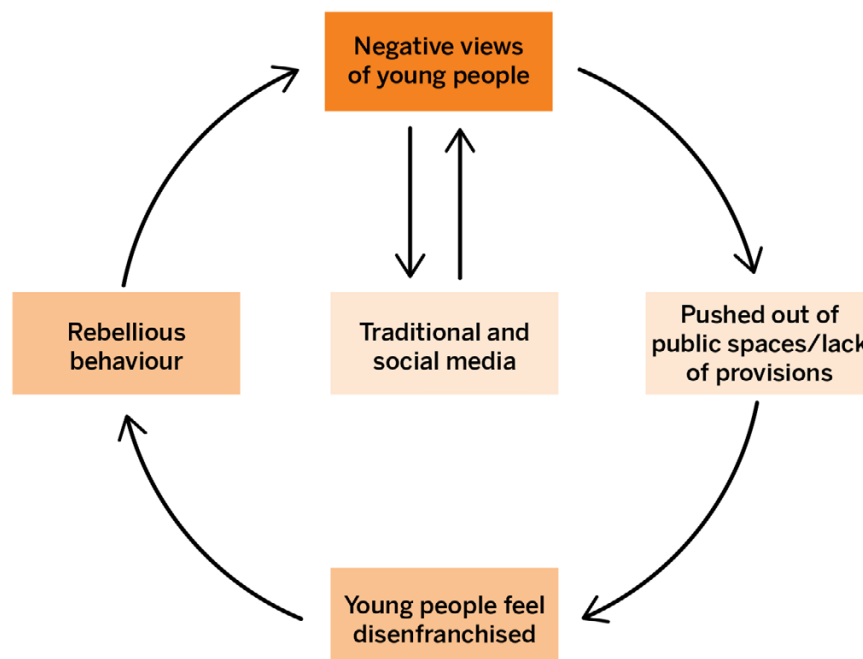
“There’s a lack of... I suppose, a positive youth perception, which means that when they’re in kind of the general population in the wider community [...], they’re often kind of shunned or moved along or sneered at and they don’t feel very welcome.” — Professional

Professionals described **the role of both traditional media and social media** in this negative perception of young people, with news stories about young people being “very often negative stories”. Professionals and young people both described that these negative assumptions could lead to young people being **pushed out of public spaces** and feeling “disenfranchised” and like the place where they live is “not for [them]”.

Negative perceptions of young people was also said by a number of professionals to **impact the ways in which young people, in particular teenagers, were provided for** in their local areas and communities. One professional said, “the media show teenagers in a negative light, therefore communities are wary of having areas where young people can gather”.

“There’s kind of a preconceived notion especially among older generations that whenever groups of young people are out together, it’s immediately going to be something negative. [...] People assuming you’re up to no good.”— Young person

Both young people and professionals 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.



Professionals also highlighted that there was a **widespread lack of understanding of young people**. They stressed that cognitive development, including the honing of reflective and critical thinking skills, and hormonal changes linked to puberty, affect teenagers' emotions and reactions, but that this was often **misunderstood, minimised or simply forgotten** by adults.

As before, professionals highlighted that these negative perceptions of young people by adults could impact some groups of young people more than others, perhaps due to adults not understanding their behaviours or holding negative or clichéd views of them.

Building bridges between generations to foster belonging

Overall, young people felt that “there needs to be bridges rebuilt between generations”. Young people and professionals both felt that **more opportunities for intergenerational mixing within communities** would help foster more understanding and connection. Young people explained that at the moment, different age groups do not often mix, and “young people stick together”. A peer research participant outlined how this could be different:

“I think if there was more wider community things, those links and those bridges and those connections could be rebuilt, the kind of faith between generations could be restored in a way.” — Young person

Professionals also outlined the benefits that could be had by building “that mutual understanding, finding areas of commonality, finding shared interests”. Young people felt that to “change the culture around between different generations” would be a gradual process that would “sort of need to have it integrated over a long period of time”.

Some young people emphasised that **more opportunities for young people to take part in volunteering activities in their communities** would help show them “in a positive light doing good things” out in the community. Professionals outlined how **a shift in mindset was needed in the wider community**:

“The attitude at the moment is that, well, young people are not community minded - and it's down to them, that's their fault. Whereas I think as a community we should be opening up and making it [...] much more rewarding for a young person to be involved in their community.” — Professional

“...there needs to be bridges rebuilt between generations.”

— Young person



Chapter 4:

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



Chapter 4: key findings

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

- While the majority of young people reported that they had an adult that would be there for them outside of their family, young people with low wellbeing were more likely to feel like they did not have a trusted adult to turn to.
- Over one in five (21.7%) respondents with low wellbeing felt they did not have an adult to turn to, compared with just 6.1% of those who did not report low wellbeing.
- Young people shared that they were most likely to turn to a teacher. Both young people and professionals stressed that any trusted adult needed to listen, be non-judgemental and have young people's best interests at heart.
- 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.
- In order to be able to support young people, trusted adults in professional roles⁵⁵ needed 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.

⁵⁵ In this chapter, 'trusted adult' refers to those working or volunteering formally; 'professionals' also includes formal volunteer roles.



Relationships and support: what works and what gets in the way?

Young people and professionals both outlined that young people having **access to support** when they did not feel like they belonged was **fundamental**. This included young people having **spaces** where they could access support and **people that they could turn to**.

"I think young people need spaces where they can go if they're not feeling great and they want to get out of the house [...] if you want to speak to somebody, speak to somebody, but you can just be yourself and, you know, be in a different environment." — Young person

"If you are feeling well taken care of, if you're feeling supported, you know, you are able to access community things, you are able to put yourself out there [...] So all of this is intrinsically linked to the theme of belonging." — Professional

Several professionals highlighted the importance of support **catering to specific groups of young people**, including those experiencing physical, cultural or societal barriers.

Having someone to turn to

Young people and professionals both highlighted how vital it was that each individual young person felt they had someone they trusted that they could turn to when they needed support.

Low wellbeing was significantly associated with young people reporting that they did not have a trusted adult they could turn to if they needed.

- In the surveys and interviews with professionals, this mostly centred on **trusted adults**, and primarily on adults in professional roles, outside of young people's family environments.
- During the peer research sessions, young people focused on a wider definition of **having someone to turn to**, which included their peers as well as people within their family environment and external to it.

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.** Only a very small proportion (6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.⁵⁶

Analyses were conducted to explore the relationship between having access to a trusted adult when needed and young people's overall life satisfaction. Results 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.**⁵⁷

As shown in Figure 16 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. Over one in five (21.7%) respondents with low wellbeing felt they **did not have an adult to turn to**, compared with just 6.1% of those who did not report low wellbeing.

These findings echo the insights from the qualitative research, where young people and professionals emphasised the impact of **not feeling able to reach out or having a trusted adult to turn to**:

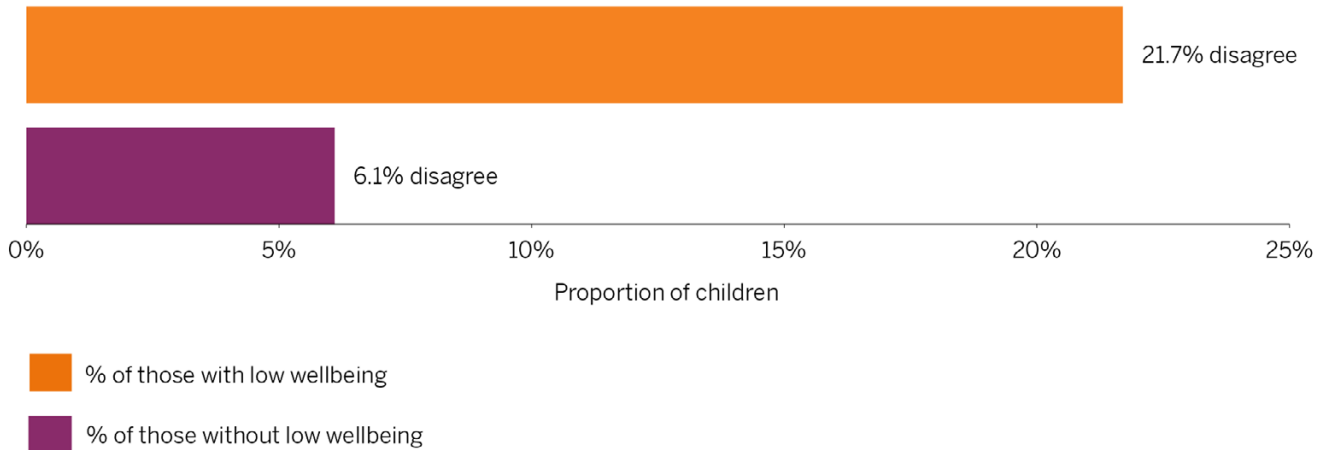
"It can be really damaging if you don't have people that you can talk to or fall back on when something like life is hard." —Young person

⁵⁶ In detail, 26% strongly agreed, 49% agreed, 12% neither agreed nor disagreed, 5% disagreed, 1% strongly disagreed, and 6% responded 'not sure' ('prefer not to say' responses were excluded from this analysis).

⁵⁷ Bivariate analyses (2x2) were conducted using chi-square tests between those who agreed or strongly agreed that if they needed advice or someone to talk to, there were adults who would be there for them (outside of their family), those who disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, those who had low wellbeing overall based on the GCI's multi-measure item of overall life satisfaction, and those who did not have low wellbeing overall. Only associations that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$) are reported. 'Neither agree nor disagree', 'not sure' and 'prefer not to say' responses were excluded for the purpose of this analysis.

Figure 16. 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.

If I needed advice or someone to talk to, there are adults who would be there for me (outside of my family):



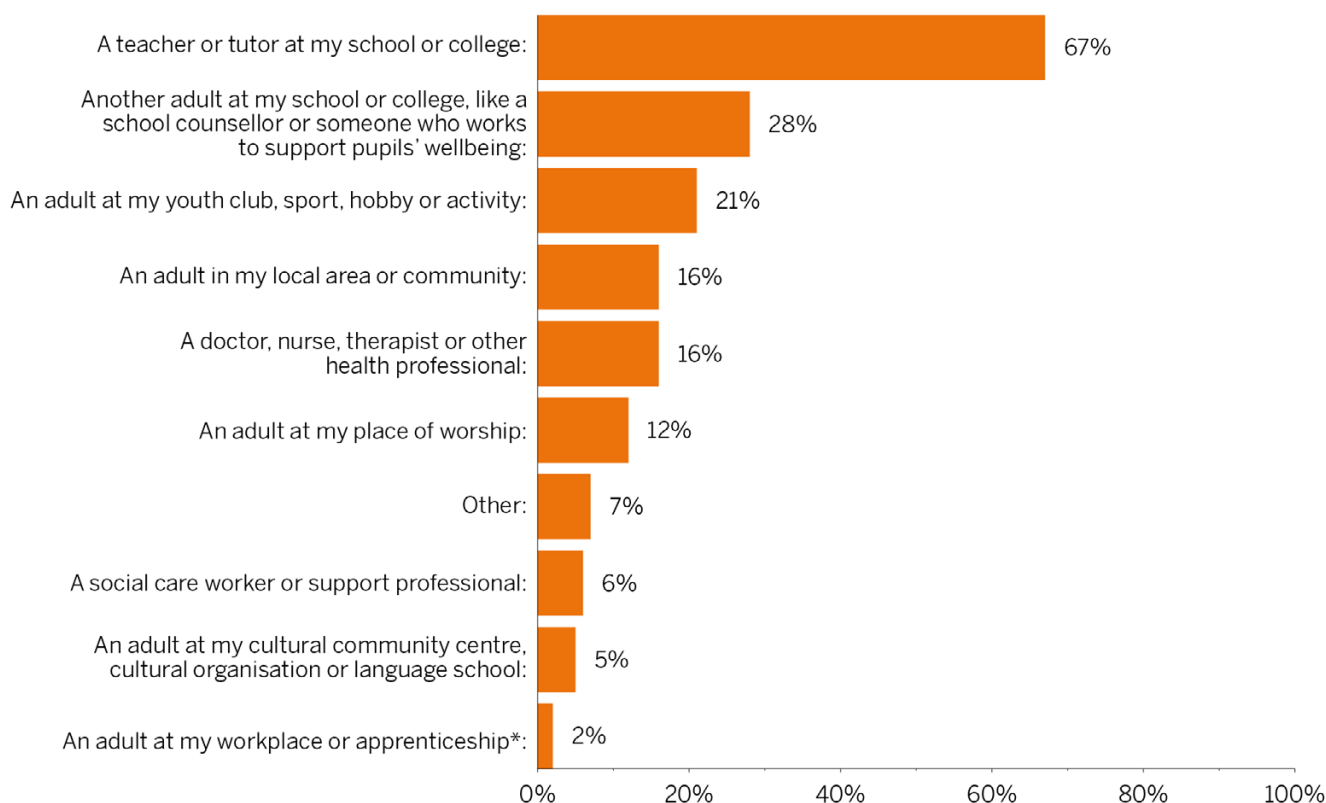
The household survey also asked young people who, from the list presented in Figure 17, were the adults they knew that they would feel comfortable talking to outside of their family. Young people could select all the options that applied to them.

- Two thirds (67%) of young people said they would feel comfortable talking to **a teacher or tutor** at their school or college.
- The second most commonly selected option was to talk to **another adult at school or college** who works to support pupils' wellbeing, selected by over a quarter (28%) of young people.
- One in five (21%) young people said they would talk to **an adult at their youth club, sport, hobby or activity**.
- All the other options were selected by fewer than one in six young people.

“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

Figure 17. Adults outside of the family that children and young people (aged 10 to 17) would feel comfortable talking to.



* was only available to respondents aged 14+

In the peer research sessions, the Young Advisors also asked participants who, if anyone, young people might feel they could talk to if they did not feel a sense of belonging. The resultant discussions went beyond the scope of trusted adults outside of the family. When considering the breadth of people that young people could turn to, peer research participants mentioned the following:

- 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".

Adults at school

As the household survey results suggest, **teachers** featured prominently in peer research discussions. Many professionals also felt that schools and teachers should be well placed to provide support to young people around belonging.

“You might go into like a trusted teacher, like a teacher that you’re really close to or that you know will listen” — Young person

Some young people also mentioned **other adults at school**, like counsellors, wellbeing tutors, school mentors, specific teams including “safeguarding”, and heads of years.

Family members

Young people mentioned both family members **within their home environment** and **extended family members** as people they could turn to when they needed support.

Many young people cited **siblings**, in particular **older siblings**, as a good option as they tended to be more **relatable** than parents and were more likely to understand their experiences and perspectives. Some young people also mentioned **wider family members**, like grandparents, parents’ siblings or cousins. Grandparents were mentioned by some professionals as trusted adults, who were often the ones “picking up the kids from school” therefore were well placed to provide support or reach out and signpost for support when this was required. However, professionals also mentioned that **family members were not always aware of the external support** that existed and therefore did not always know where to turn to when their children needed help.

Friends

Young people generally felt that they could talk to their **friends**, in particular **close friends** or **best friends**, and that, like siblings, peers would be able to **relate to** and **understand** young people:

“Their friends are [...] really important because they can help you like feel like you belong or like they can support you through times that like maybe some parents can’t.” — Young person

Friends were also described by young people as being positive when they wanted to get things off their chest, but did not need specific advice; in such cases friends could offer a good **listening ear** to whom they could “tell anything”. While this was seen by some as a positive, other young people highlighted this same aspect as a potential issue: that friends might not be able to help, or “do anything” about what they shared with them.

Young people also shared that **not all young people would have a positive experience opening up to friends**. They highlighted that, at times, friends might not take a young person’s issues seriously, or that, in friendship groups with problematic dynamics, young people may be laughed at for trying to open up.

Dedicated support services and professionals

Young people emphasised the importance of **specialist support** being available when needed. They often mentioned **dedicated support services and professionals** when asked to consider who young people might talk to. They spoke about:

- counsellors, therapists, emotional wellbeing and mental health organisations and services including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)
- dedicated helplines
- “child services”
- youth workers and related professionals and volunteers, “like a sports teacher from out of school or like a club leader”.
- online resources such as emotional wellbeing and mental health support services.

Trusted adults: what works and what gets in the way?

Regardless of who young people felt they could turn to, they shared common qualities that made them a trusted source of support. While peer research participants spoke about any adults that they trusted as having the potential to offer support, for professionals the term ‘trusted adults’ referred primarily to adults in formal professions or volunteering roles.

What does ‘trusted’ mean to young people?

Young people and professionals emphasised that it was vital for young people to feel a **sense of trust** and **connection** with a particular adult in order to feel able to open up to them and reach out for support.

They explained that trust depended on who young people were **comfortable with** and stressed that **trust was not inherent but needed to be built and maintained**.

Young people outlined that adults needed to be “available”; this was also echoed by professionals, who talked about being present and having an “open door”. Both groups outlined that it was crucial that young people felt **listened to** – and for this listening to be **non-judgemental**.

“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



The role and qualities of a trusted adult

Professionals described further attributes, behaviours and practices that they saw as fundamental to the role of a trusted adult. They emphasised the importance of young people feeling **safe** to talk to them and of taking “appropriate steps as needed” by **acting on concerns** and, **acting on young people’s views, keeping their word** and delivering changes.

An important part of acting as a trusted adult, professionals said, was also the capacity to show **integrity** and remain “honest even [when] situations become challenging”. They highlighted that it was important for the adult to be **reliable** and, where the trusted adult is working or volunteering formally, hold professional **boundaries**.

“To develop a genuinely safe and responsible trust, the adult must be fair, hold boundaries, make expectations and consequences clear, be consistent with their support.” — Professional

Stable and consistent support was an aspect that was repeatedly mentioned by professionals as crucial to helping young people build trust in the adults around them and receive the support they needed. They felt that this often needed to be “proved over a period of time”. This sense of **consistency and commitment** was echoed when a professional described a trusted adult as “a safe adult who you can tell anything to, and you know that they’re still going to be there afterwards”.

Some professionals also highlighted that trusted adults could offer young people a **safe space to explore their developing opinions** and discuss different viewpoints. Where young people might be expressing “negative things”, trusted adults could help them “unpack” where those views might have come from, being a “safe pair of ears” to explore and challenge the views together with the young person.

To underpin this relationship of trust, both young people and professionals felt that it was helpful for trusted adults to be **relatable** and show that they would **understand**.

Professionals felt that it was important that trusted adults:



Professionals also explained that it was crucial that all trusted adults felt a responsibility for the wellbeing of the young people that they worked with. They spoke about the **importance of advocating for young people, believing in them and their potential** and of **amplifying young people's voices**. One professional said it was not only about being “an ear [...]”, but also then being maybe a voice when the young person can't or isn't being taken seriously themselves”.

Trusted adults as role models

Professionals and young people discussed how trusted adults could be **role models fostering young people's sense of belonging**:

“Just having, you know, a good role model, a good figure that allows them [...] to give them that knowledge and guidance is really, really powerful.”
— Young person

“You can be a bit of a guide and a bit of assurance and a bit of wisdom for them [...] And a young person's trajectory in life can be, I think, hugely affected by somebody in that position in a positive way.” — Professional

As part of this, professionals felt that it was important for trusted adults to be **transparent** and **honest**, including when they had got something wrong. This, they explained, was an important part of role modelling, “to show that it’s okay, that we all make mistakes, we can all learn from them”, as many young people were “very anxious about getting things wrong”.

Professionals felt that access to trusted adults outside of the family could improve young people’s sense of belonging by providing role models that helped **develop their confidence** and “role models and mentors” were cited as a recommended change to improve young people’s sense of belonging in their local area. Access to a trusted adult could help young people “see modelled by an adult that they have something valuable to contribute to their community” and learn how to “navigate” and **participate actively** in their communities. Trusted adults acting as role models therefore had a crucial role in “being able to encourage young people to find that sense of belonging in the wider community”.

“I feel like it’s really important that we have some kind of person that will give us safe advice but also isn’t there to judge or to punish.”

— Young person

“An adult who is well connected to the community can introduce you to so many different pockets of the community [...] you know, to be able to strengthen connections between generations as well, to demonstrate what healthy relationships look and feel like, so that we have a cycle of young people who grow into adults who are trusted.” — Professional

Stigma and judgement

Young people felt that there was still a **stigma attached to needing support with their wellbeing** and that at times **worrying about being judged** might prevent them from seeking support as “they might feel like scared or like ashamed”. This, they said, was particularly likely if young people needed support after having done something that they should not have. To ensure that young people could still access support in those situations, young people said that **non-judgemental support** from a trusted adult was crucial:

“Some of the stuff we go through isn’t exactly ideal. It’s something that maybe we shouldn’t have been doing. [...] I feel like it’s really important that we have some kind of person that will give us safe advice but also isn’t there to judge or to punish.” — Young person

While many young people said they would turn to their **parents or carers**, a number of young people felt that parents or carers “may not understand where they’re coming from”.⁵⁸ Young people felt that this was particularly the case “if your parents grew up in a different environment”, which could lead to “a culture barrier” where parents

⁵⁸ Similar findings were outlined in The Good Childhood Report 2025, pages 44 to 45, related to parents and carers not always understanding their children’s experiences.

“I regularly have young people who feel lost and hopeless who have felt betrayed and let down by their ‘trusted’ adults in the past.”

— Professional

“may not understand”. Some young people also pointed out that not all parents were willing or able to talk about emotions.

Previous negative experiences

For those young people who had already sought support in the past, some described how **previous negative experiences might hinder them from seeking support again**. They described, for example, young people being “passed on” from person to person when requiring support. Young people also explained that when previous support had ended **without being connected to further opportunities**, this might stop them reaching out for support again in future.

Additionally, professionals explained that **a family’s experiences of services and/or support** might affect the young person. They shared that the family’s negative experience might “follow” with the young person and “determine whether a [young person] feels able to trust” the potential sources of support.

Other negative experiences included feeling **dismissed or misunderstood** by adults. For example, adults might misinterpret the behaviours of young people who are struggling or provide simplistic self-care solutions like “maybe to drink more or get better sleep” rather than “actively listening and actively trying to give solutions” that are specific to what the young person is sharing. Conversely, at times young people just wanted the chance to “say something to get it off [their] chest” and they felt that adults being **overly intervention-focused** could lead to young people not opening up again in future.

This highlighted the **importance of trusted adults being able to gauge how to respond to young people’s needs appropriately**, including when to take action. One professional shared the consequences of young people having sought support **but not been heard or taken seriously**:

“I regularly have young people who feel lost and hopeless who have felt betrayed and let down by their ‘trusted’ adults in the past.”

— Professional

Skills, training and support

Professionals referenced the importance of trusted adults in professional roles having **appropriate training** and the **skills and knowledge** to support young people. They explained that this training needed to cover safeguarding first and foremost, but they stressed that it needed to comprehensively encompass all core issues that affect young people’s wellbeing, including mental health and trauma-informed practices. Some felt that training should also cover “their communication skills, their listening skills”, as well as any specialised training relevant to particular work.

Some professionals also mentioned the importance of trusted adults being **supported by appropriate structures and infrastructure**, including supervision and guidance from their own management. They highlighted that this needed to include appropriate support when they were received a disclosure or were supporting young people dealing with particularly challenging situations. **Recognition of the emotional impact on the professional** was necessary so that they could be supported to continue in their role as trusted adults.

“[You need] breathing space as well [...] [Being able to] take a moment of stillness and reflection for myself and really look after myself so that I can show up and be that trusted adult.” — Professional

Some professionals touched on the role of volunteers. They felt it was crucial that volunteers too are equipped with the relevant training, skills and support, in order for them to be able to act as trusted adults and support young people.

Systemic barriers to trust: availability, time and consistency

Young people felt that there was a **need for more trusted adults based in the community** that young people could turn to:

“Although I have [people I could turn to] like at home and at school, outside on the streets or like in the local community centre, there’s nobody there.” — Young person

Many professionals spoke about the **importance of financial investment** to enable the provision of **spaces that provided access to safe trusted adults**. Inadequate investment in youth provision and youth work was referenced regularly, and **three quarters (24 out of 31) of the professionals** who took part in The Children’s Society’s survey **felt that there were fewer places for young people to go and spend time now than there used to be**. They commented on the **closures of youth clubs, community centres and other community-based clubs**.

“Enough funding for clubs and activities [is needed] so that relationships can be fostered overtime in a safe environment.” — Professional

Professionals detailed how a **lack of financial investment in the existing youth workforce** also contributed to **systemic challenges** that hindered their ability to provide support to the young people that they work with. These included difficulties attracting people to the youth workforce and high staff turnover. They stressed that these factors **impacted trusted adults’ ability to build trusting relationships with young people**.

“Enough funding for clubs and activities [is needed] so that relationships can be fostered over time in a safe environment.”

— Professional

"It becomes much more difficult for the young people to trust [...] When staff have been coming and going, that can be quite problematical I think." — Professional

Professionals **feeling overwhelmed and having a lack of time and capacity** was also cited as a barrier to building trust with young people.

"We need professionals to have time to build these relationships that allow us to be trusted. You can't build a relationship in five minutes. You need time and for it to be regular." — Professional

For teachers in particular, some professionals felt that while these professionals *could* be trusted adults, they might not be able to fully embody the role due to "teachers being overworked". This issue was also noted by young people:

"But when she was there, she felt like she couldn't really say anything because the teacher she was with was thinking about three things at once and was quite insensitive about the whole thing. So then for someone who's meant to be a trusted adult, she then couldn't actually trust them with anything." — Young person

Some professionals stated that the **pressures that many families were under that limited their time together**, including financial pressures where adults had to work very long hours or young people had to work to contribute financially, limited the time and availability of trusted adults in those spaces.

Professionals saw further barriers to trust-building in the limitations of the wider system, including difficulties signposting young people for further, targeted support due to **support not being available, long waiting lists or particular thresholds** and a **lack of action taken when young people shared views** about how their communities should be shaped. Several professionals emphasised **the importance of "closing that feedback loop"**, so that young people knew that they had been heard.

Professionals felt that it was crucial for **trusted adult roles to be supported and enabled** by their management and funders to be able to act in the best interests of young people.

Youth work

While young people mentioned youth workers in a small number of peer research groups, youth work featured prominently in research conducted with professionals.

Dedicated youth work was generally viewed as an **important vehicle for supporting young people's sense of belonging**, and many professionals referenced a **lack or disappearance of youth work** as a prevailing issue negatively impacting young people's sense of belonging. While overall professionals felt like youth work had been "decimated" over time, some commented that youth work was showing signs of recovery in more recent times. They felt that it was important for there to be more recognition of what was being done at grassroots level in individual communities to support young people's involvement and sense of belonging. They also emphasised that grassroot initiatives needed to be better supported to collaborate at a local level.

Professionals spoke of the importance of fully **valuing youth work as a profession** to "ensur[e] trusted adult roles are well paid and respected, else no one will want to do these jobs and we won't be able to retain people".

Professionals commented that disappearance of youth work over time had led to a **loss of understanding of what youth work can offer**.

"Because young people aren't used to having youth workers, [...] it's not a concept they understand [...] It's not within their frame of reference." — Professional



Reflections on findings and recommendations

This 15th Good Childhood Report focuses on places and people that support children and young people to feel like they belong – an essential part of their wellbeing. Subjective wellbeing questions from surveys continue to provide important context into UK children and young people's wellbeing. They show that young people's wellbeing remains in decline, that a sizeable minority of them have low wellbeing, and that females fare worse than males overall. They also indicate that too many children and young people continue to be unhappy with school and their appearance, and to be worried about rising prices. Qualitative insights gathered from young people and professionals complemented quantitative data to allow for the identification of the fundamental 'ingredients' that support young people's sense of belonging to their local areas and communities, improving their overall wellbeing, and the barriers that jeopardise this.

Young people's vision for belonging

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

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

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

feel **supported** by their community

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



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
- **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 to enhance belonging

Young people and professionals shared what they know helps counter these challenges and enable young people to develop a true sense of belonging. Their insights supported the development of our policy recommendations.

The recommendations that follow 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.⁵⁹

Young people need:

- **People** they trust,
- **Places** they belong,
- **Power** to influence decisions,
- **Pathways** to opportunities and support.

We are calling on Government to:

People

1. **Embed trusted adults within local youth systems** rather than creating new standalone structures, ensuring they are part of a coherent local support offer.
2. **Deliver a National Trusted Adults Framework** that sets out what high-quality trusted adult support looks like across different settings, while allowing for local flexibility.

Places

3. **Publish guidance on Teen-Friendly Communities** to create places where young people feel welcome and set out a local entitlement to the spaces, support and opportunities that foster belonging.
4. **Strengthen open-access community hubs** as welcoming spaces that promote belonging, wellbeing and early support.
5. **Review the youth services statutory duty**, including developing a clearer definition of what constitutes "sufficient" youth provision.
6. **Deliver long-term funding certainty for youth services**, including assessing the impact of multi-year funding settlements and publishing a recovery trajectory for youth services investment.

⁵⁹ 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.

Power

7. **Make youth participation a core expectation of publicly funded youth services**, with proportionate approaches to ensuring young people help shape the services and opportunities available to them.
8. **Introduce an annual National Wellbeing Measurement** to improve understanding of children's wellbeing and inform national and local decision-making.

Pathways

9. **Create a national Waiting Well offer** to ensure young people can access the support, activities, trusted adults and clear information they need while waiting for mental health support.
10. **Support delivery of the Enrichment Framework for Schools and Colleges** ensuring that all education settings offer high-quality and inclusive enrichment opportunities.
11. **Build connected local support systems** by publishing a long-term plan setting out how new youth initiatives are integrated with existing local services through clear referral pathways and a “no wrong door” approach.

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.

To leave the last word to a young person, one summed up the essence of belonging in the following way:

“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



Appendix A.

Data sources and approach for research presented in this report

The Children's Society's household survey 2026

Each year The Children's Society conducts an online household survey capturing the views of a minimum of 2,000 children and young people aged 10 to 17, as well as a parent and carer for each. The Children's Society started running these surveys in 2010 and they were quarterly at the time; see Appendix C for detail of the Good Childhood research programme. To date, 25 survey waves (now yearly) have now been conducted, collecting the views of over 52,000 children and young people.

These household surveys collect data about children and young people's subjective wellbeing, together with contextual information and a different module of ad hoc questions every year which focus on topical issues. The subjective wellbeing module of questions centres around The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index (GCI), first launched in 2010 following developmental work that included consultations with children and young people. The GCI is made up of a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction⁶⁰ and individual measures asking children and young people how happy they are with 10 different aspects of their lives (see Figures 2 and 4).⁶¹

The 2026 survey took place in April to June and collected responses from 2,031 children and young people from across the UK, as well as their parents or carers. Children and young people were sampled to closely match the make-up of the wider population on four criteria: age,

⁶⁰ This multi-item measure is based on Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale; see Huebner, 1991.

⁶¹ The Children's Society's research team can be contacted to find out more about the Good Childhood Index and/or to enquire about using the index. Contact details are provided at the end of this report.

gender, socio-economic background, and UK nations and regions.⁶²

The ad hoc module of questions focused on children and young people's understanding of what constitutes their community, their sense of belonging in their communities and local areas, and their understanding of, and access to, trusted adults.

UK Longitudinal Household Survey (known as Understanding Society)

Understanding Society is a longitudinal survey that covers a large, representative sample of households across the UK. Following its predecessor, The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) which had started in 1994, Understanding Society began in 2009 with around 40,000 households.⁶³ Data from Understanding Society are available through the UK data service, ukdataservice.ac.uk/.

Understanding Society is a continuous survey with interviews held annually with adults and, for the youth questionnaire, a cross-sectional sample of children aged 10 to 15. Interviews take place at roughly the same time each year, with fieldwork running over a period of 24 months. The youth questionnaire includes core questions on children's subjective wellbeing, together with modules on different aspects of children's lives. The subjective wellbeing questions ask children how they feel about their life as a whole and five different aspects of their lives, including their schoolwork, appearance, family, friends, and the school they go to.

Data from the latest survey, wave 15, were collected in 2023/24, when the youth questionnaire was completed by 1,435 children. This is the smallest youth sample size achieved by Understanding Society to date. As for all waves since wave 7 (2016/17), the youth sample included an Immigration and Ethnic Minority booster (IEMB) sub-sample, which aims to increase the representation of children from these groups in the overall sample through targeted recruitment. All data presented in this report include the full dataset for each wave, including the IEMB sample from wave 7.⁶⁴

62 This was based on the most recent, mid-2024, population estimates as a guide for quotas; see ONS, 2025. Social grade quotas were revised for the 2026 survey, based on PAMCo H2 2025; see PAMCo, n.d.

63 There was some overlap between the first wave of Understanding Society in 2009/10 and the final wave of the BHPS, which means that the coverage of the first wave of Understanding Society differs slightly from subsequent surveys (wave 2 onwards), which also include interviews with BHPS participants.

64 The latest data release from Understanding Society (April 2026) included revisions to wave 14 weights, which mean that the data for wave 14 presented in this report differs from that published in The Good Childhood Report 2025. The error with the weight for wave 6 that were published by Understanding Society mentioned in previous Good Childhood Reports has now been corrected in the latest Understanding Society data release in April 2026; the data in this report therefore shows the latest published data for wave 6.

Young Advisors and peer research

After a first successful collaboration for The Good Childhood Report 2025, The Children's Society once again worked in partnership with Leaders Unlocked,⁶⁵ a social enterprise that enables young people to have a stronger voice and influence over the issues that affect their lives, to establish a group of Young Advisors to The Good Childhood Report 2026.

Between March and September 2026, we worked with a group of 12 Young Advisors between the ages of 13 to 17 from across England, representing a diverse mix of characteristics and experiences.⁶⁶ The Young Advisors were introduced to initial scoping decisions made about the research project, and the results of a rapid evidence review on belonging. They worked with us through facilitated workshops to further explore this theme, refine the overarching research questions and prepare for the peer research. The peer research questions were co-developed with the Young Advisors, who were trained to conduct their own peer research focus groups, supported by Leaders Unlocked. This allowed them to gather insights from a broader range of young people, and to gain skills and experience in research methods.

The peer research took place from May to July 2026 either in education settings or with other networks of young people facilitated by Leaders Unlocked.⁶⁷ Overall, the Young Advisors consulted with 98 young people across England. Within the various settings, an appropriate adult was identified and briefed to support the peer research, be available to manage any issues that arose from the discussions and provide assurance of safeguarding. The sessions were recorded and transcribed for the purpose of data analysis. The Young Advisors supported the data analysis and contributed to drawing together findings from the identified themes.

The Young Advisors also shared their insights in order to support the development of our policy recommendations.

⁶⁵ leaders-unlocked.org

⁶⁶ While The Good Childhood Report focuses on children and young people between the ages of 10 to 17 across the United Kingdom, the decision was made to restrict the location and age range of the children and young people participating as Young Advisors as described, due to the number of young people involved, the logistics of bringing them together, the complexity of supporting them to conduct their peer research, and the devolution of power in terms of policy recommendations.

⁶⁷ The Children's Society would like to thank the settings and networks that kindly took the time to support the Young Advisors in conducting their peer research.

Research with professionals

Following the inclusion of a strand of work gathering the views of professionals for The Good Childhood Report 2025, this year's research included two-stage research with professionals working directly with children and young people:

- A mixed-methods survey was conducted in March to April 2026 with 31 professionals working in youth work/the third sector, education, health (including mental health), children's social care, policing, or other sectors working with children and young people. The survey contained quantitative and open-text questions centred on the themes of children and young people's sense of belonging to their local areas, and the role of trusted adults in supporting young people and their sense of belonging to their local area. The respondents' areas of work represented a mix of urban, rural and mixed areas.
- Semi-structured interviews took place in May to June 2026 with nine professionals, and focused on a further exploration of the themes covered in the mixed-method survey together with that of children and young people's sense of belonging to their wider communities. Survey respondents could express their interest in taking part in these follow-up research interviews; interviews were conducted with seven survey participants, as well as two youth workers from one of The Children's Society's youth hubs.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ While the data for other aspects of The Good Childhood Report represents the United Kingdom, in order to align with the scope of the Young Advisors' work and with the policy recommendations of the report much of our research with professionals centred on England, though some professionals represented organisations that cover England and Wales or the whole of the UK.



Appendix B.

Figure sources and notes

Figure Number	Source and/or notes
Figure 1.	Source: based on Soffia & Turner, 2021; see page 10.
Figure 2.	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. Note: Only includes responses from children who provided a score for each of the five items that make up the measure.
Figure 3.	Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 25, April to June 2026, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data. Excludes missing responses ('I don't understand this question' and 'I don't want to answer this question').
Figure 4.	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 (including 'prefer not to say').
Figure 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.
Figure 6.	Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data (confidence intervals take account of design effects). Presentational note: All graphs use the same size range of values (3.5) so that they can be visually compared.
Figure 7.	Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data (confidence intervals take account of design effect). Presentational notes: All graphs use the same size range of values (3.5) so that they can be visually compared. Asterisks indicate statistically significant differences between male and female scores based on non-overlapping confidence intervals (at 99% level).
Figure 8.	Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

Figure Number	Source and/or notes
Figure 9.	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. Note: Percentages for each item may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
Figure 10.	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 ('not sure' and 'prefer not to say'). Note: Percentages do not sum to 100% as children and young people could select all the options that they felt applied to them ('I don't feel part of any community' was an exclusive option).
Figure 11.	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 ('not sure' and 'prefer not to say'). Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
Figure 12.	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 ('prefer not to say').
Figure 13.	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'.
Figure 14.	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 ('prefer not to say').
Figure 15.	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'.
Figure 16.	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'.
Figure 17.	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 ('not sure' and 'prefer not to say'). Notes: The response option 'an adult at my workplace or apprenticeship' was only available to respondents aged 14+. Overall percentages do not sum to 100% as children and young people could select all the options that they felt applied to them.

Appendix C.

The Good Childhood Research Programme

2005

The Children's Society runs a national consultation of over 8,000 young people aged 14 and 15. They told us what they felt were the most important ingredients for them to have a good life and what things prevented this.

2007

The pilot of The Children's Society's first wellbeing survey using young people's responses to our 2005 survey, as well as a review of existing international work on children's wellbeing takes place.

2008

Our first wellbeing survey is carried out with a representative sample of over 7,000 children aged 10 to 15 in mainstream schools in England.

2009

The Children's Society runs further consultations with younger children aged eight and nine years old and tests additional questions.

2010

The second wellbeing survey begins. This includes a representative sample of just under 6,000 children aged 8 to 15 in mainstream schools in England. Our quarterly Good Childhood Index surveys begin, which sample 2,000 children aged 8 to 15.

2011

The second wellbeing survey ends. The Children's Society carries out supplementary surveys of children and Pupil Referral Units to represent the views of children who are not covered in mainstream schools' surveys.

2012

Participation in piloting of international Children's Worlds survey including, in England, qualitative work with children and a survey of over 1,100 children aged 12 to 13 takes place.

First annual The Good Childhood Report published.

**2013/
2014**

The third schools-based wellbeing survey is undertaken with over 4,000 children in Years 4, 6, 8 and 10. This includes participation in the Children's Worlds survey for the three younger age groups.

2015

The wave of our - now annual - online Good Childhood Index survey is undertaken. These surveys have by then included over 28,000 children and young people aged eight to 17.

**2016 to
2019**

Further waves of our annual online wellbeing survey take place, covering a sample of around 9,500 children.

2020

Our 19th Good Childhood Index survey is conducted during the first national lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first time, children (aged 10 to 17) in all four nations are included.

Results for England from the third wave of the International Children's Worlds survey are published. Data collection for the England survey was carried out jointly by The University of York and The Children's Society.

2025

The 24th wave of The Children's Society's annual online wellbeing survey is completed. These surveys have by then included just under 50,000 children.

For the first time, **The Children's Society worked with a group of Young Advisors** who shared their insights to support the research and conducted peer consultations. The Good Childhood Report 2025 also included insights gathered from professionals in consultations.

2026

The Children's Society publishes its 15th Good Childhood Report.

It presents data from the 25th wave of our annual online wellbeing survey. These surveys have now included over 52,000 children.

The Children's Society has continued to work with a group of Young Advisors who in addition to sharing their insights to shape the direction of the project, have conducted peer research. The Children's Society also conducted qualitative research with professionals.



Appendix D.

Mean scores in children's subjective wellbeing from Understanding Society

Table A. Mean scores presented in Figure 6, trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.

	Life as a whole	Family	Friends	Appearance	School	Schoolwork
Wave 1, 2009/10	8.17	8.98	9.00	7.21	7.71	7.21
Wave 2, 2010/11	8.21	8.97	8.94	7.15	7.71	7.42
Wave 3, 2011/12	8.21	9.02	8.95	7.11	7.85	7.46
Wave 4, 2012/13	8.17	8.95	8.79	7.14	7.79	7.55
Wave 5, 2013/14	8.10	8.95	8.80	7.10	7.89	7.49
Wave 6, 2014/15	8.04	8.92	8.68	7.09	7.64	7.39
Wave 7, 2015/16	8.04	8.96	8.74	7.21	7.76	7.46
Wave 8, 2016/17	7.95	8.97	8.59	7.15	7.42	7.28
Wave 9, 2017/18	7.83	9.00	8.54	7.02	7.46	7.27
Wave 10, 2018/19	7.79	8.92	8.56	6.95	7.34	7.12
Wave 11, 2019/20	7.71	8.96	8.69	7.01	7.40	7.07
Wave 12, 2020/21	7.62	8.89	8.45	6.76	7.36	6.94
Wave 13, 2021/22	7.56	8.85	8.64	6.82	7.36	6.87
Wave 14, 2022/23	7.43	8.76	8.31	6.62	6.72	6.43
Wave 15, 2023/24	7.62	8.79	8.57	6.75	6.78	6.59

Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data (confidence intervals take account of design effects).

Table B1. Males' mean scores presented in Figure 7, trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life by gender, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.

	Life as a whole	Family	Friends	Appearance	School	Schoolwork
Wave 1, 2009/10	8.17	8.96	8.95	7.53	7.67	7.01
Wave 2, 2010/11	8.28	8.97	8.91	7.41	7.60	7.17
Wave 3, 2011/12	8.27	9.01	8.96	7.46	7.78	7.24
Wave 4, 2012/13	8.25	8.94	8.83	7.52	7.81	7.43
Wave 5, 2013/14	8.26	8.96	8.89	7.58	7.95	7.38
Wave 6, 2014/15	8.19	8.95	8.76	7.53	7.62	7.28
Wave 7, 2015/16	8.13	8.95	8.78	7.55	7.71	7.29
Wave 8, 2016/17	8.07	9.01	8.70	7.43	7.42	7.13
Wave 9, 2017/18	7.97	9.03	8.60	7.27	7.36	7.11
Wave 10, 2018/19	7.86	8.91	8.59	7.17	7.18	6.97
Wave 11, 2019/20	7.93	9.03	8.75	7.38	7.42	6.99
Wave 12, 2020/21	7.91	9.01	8.53	7.20	7.41	7.06
Wave 13, 2021/22	7.94	9.01	8.76	7.31	7.58	7.01
Wave 14, 2022/23	7.75	8.94	8.47	7.06	6.96	6.53
Wave 15, 2023/24	7.86	8.84	8.74	7.05	7.06	6.59

Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data (confidence intervals take account of design effect).

Table B2. Females' mean scores presented in Figure 7, trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life by gender, UK, 2009/10 to 2023/24.

	Life as a whole	Family	Friends	Appearance	School	Schoolwork
Wave 1, 2009/10	8.16	9.01	9.04	6.88	7.76	7.43
Wave 2, 2010/11	8.14	8.98	8.97	6.87	7.82	7.67
Wave 3, 2011/12	8.14	9.03	8.94	6.74	7.92	7.69
Wave 4, 2012/13	8.08	8.95	8.75	6.76	7.78	7.68
Wave 5, 2013/14	7.93	8.95	8.71	6.60	7.83	7.60
Wave 6, 2014/15	7.89	8.88	8.60	6.67	7.66	7.50
Wave 7, 2015/16	7.95	8.98	8.71	6.87	7.81	7.62
Wave 8, 2016/17	7.82	8.94	8.49	6.89	7.43	7.41
Wave 9, 2017/18	7.69	8.97	8.49	6.78	7.54	7.42
Wave 10, 2018/19	7.72	8.92	8.54	6.75	7.48	7.27
Wave 11, 2019/20	7.49	8.88	8.62	6.63	7.39	7.16
Wave 12, 2020/21	7.32	8.77	8.38	6.31	7.31	6.82
Wave 13, 2021/22	7.15	8.68	8.51	6.27	7.12	6.71
Wave 14, 2022/23	7.09	8.57	8.15	6.17	6.48	6.33
Wave 15, 2023/24	7.35	8.73	8.38	6.44	6.47	6.58

Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data (confidence intervals take account of design effect).



Appendix E.

Wellbeing data from Sport England's Active Lives survey

Sport England's Active Lives survey collects data from both adults and children and young people.⁶⁹ The Active Lives Children and Young People Survey is an online survey delivered by Ipsos MORI. To date, eight survey waves have been published. The most recent wave covered the 2024/25 academic year and included a sample of 130,448 children and young people aged 5 to 16 across England.

The analysis presented in this Appendix focused on 93,040 respondents aged 10 to 16.⁷⁰ It presents overall mean scores and the proportion of respondents who had low wellbeing for the ONS wellbeing measures.⁷¹ Data is also presented on Active Lives' measure of loneliness, which captures how often children and young people reported feeling lonely. We further analysed these wellbeing and loneliness measures by regions across England.⁷²

⁶⁹ See Sport England, 2025.

⁷⁰ Some of Active Lives questions are asked from age five, and others are asked from age 11 (in line with school Year 7). Of the questions presented in this Appendix, only 'How happy did you feel yesterday?' includes the younger age group. In line with the scope of The Good Childhood Research Programme, respondents aged under 10 were excluded from the analysis for this question, through recoding of the age variable.

⁷¹ Scores of 0 to 4 were classified as indicating low wellbeing, while scores of 5 to 10 were classified as not indicating low wellbeing, in line with the analysis routinely presented in The Good Childhood Reports.

⁷² Further technical details of the research, such as confidence intervals, can be requested from The Children's Society's research team, whose contact details are provided at the end of the report.

Table C. ONS measures of overall wellbeing for children and young people aged 10 to 16, England, 2024/25.

	Average scores (out of 10)	% scoring below midpoint
How happy did you feel yesterday?	6.61	19.0%
Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?	6.66	18.1%
Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?	6.84	15.3%

Source: Sport England Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, academic year 2024/25, weighted data.
Note: Results for ‘How happy did you feel yesterday?’ include 10 to 16-year-olds; results for ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?’ and ‘Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?’ include 11 to 16-year-olds.

Table D. Proportion of children (aged 10 to 16) with happiness scores below midpoint (0 to 4 out of 10) for ONS measures of overall wellbeing, England regions, 2024/25.

	Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?	Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?	Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
East	19.0%	17.8%	15.0%
East Midlands	20.0%	18.8%	15.9%
London	16.4%	18.3%	15.3%
North East	20.3%	18.5%	15.5%
North West	18.5%	17.3%	14.4%
South East	17.5%	17.8%	15.2%
South West	19.4%	18.6%	16.4%
West Midlands	22.2%	17.4%	15.1%
Yorkshire and the Humber	22.2%	19.9%	16.3%

Source: Sport England Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, academic year 2024/25, weighted data.
Note: Results for ‘How happy did you feel yesterday?’ include 10 to 16-year-olds; results for ‘Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?’ and ‘Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?’ include 11 to 16-year-olds.

Table E. Children and young people (aged 11 to 16) on how often they felt lonely, England, 2024/25.

How often do you feel lonely?	Often / Always	Some of the time	Occasionally	Hardly ever	Never
	9.6%	23.6%	26.0%	29.4%	11.4%

Source: Sport England Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, academic year 2024/25, weighted data.

Table F. Proportion of children (aged 11 to 16) who reported being often or always lonely, England regions, 2024/25.

How often do you feel lonely?	% who selected 'Often / Always'
East	9.5%
East Midlands	10.1%
London	9.3%
North East	10.5%
North West	8.6%
South East	9.1%
South West	10.5%
West Midlands	9.1%
Yorkshire and the Humber	10.9%

Source: Sport England Active Lives Children and Young People Survey, academic year 2024/25, weighted data.

A note on results

The average scores for the ONS questions presented in Tables C and D are lower than the equivalent results from The Children's Society's annual household surveys for the same questions; similarly, the proportions of children who scored below the midpoint for those measures are higher in the Active Lives survey, compared to the results of the household surveys.⁷³ This is likely to be due to a range of methodological considerations:

- Sample sizes are substantially different, with the analysis of Active Lives data presented in this Appendix including over 90,000 children, while the household surveys collect data from a minimum of 2,000 children annually.
- The age ranges covered by both surveys are different. The household surveys collect data from 10 to 17-year-olds, while Active Lives collects data from 11 to 16-year-olds for the life satisfaction⁷⁴ and worthwhileness⁷⁵ question, and, for the happiness⁷⁶ question, the analysis presented here covers data from 10 to 16-year-olds.⁷⁷
- Active Lives collects data over the course of the academic year, whereas the annual household surveys are snapshot surveys undertaken in April to June.
- Active Lives is a school-based survey, while The Children's Society's is a household survey.
- Sampling approaches are different. Active Lives uses a probability sampling strategy and then weights the data by school year and gender, proportion of pupils getting free school meals, count of pupils in schools in rural areas, and NUTS2 geographical area; the household surveys are sampled to closely match the make-up of the wider population on child age, child gender, socio-economic background, and UK nations and regions.

73 See Figure 3 in Chapter 1 for the latest results; for results covering the same academic year as Active Lives 2024/25, see Figure 8 in The Good Childhood Report 2025.

74 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?'

75 'Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?'

76 'How happy did you feel yesterday?'

77 See footnote 70 above for further detail concerning the age range for this question and the wider Active Lives survey.



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⁷⁸ To note, the UK Data Service, the University of Essex, and Sport England bear no responsibility for the analysis and interpretation of the data presented in this report.

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