

Childhood in Essex

Gen Z and Gen Alpha
'spilling the tea' on the
everyday realities and the
changing landscape of
childhood in Essex





Do you remember what it was like being a kid?

Like, really being a kid — before phones, before tracking apps, before the world felt so... loud?

Because for us, childhood's a bit different.

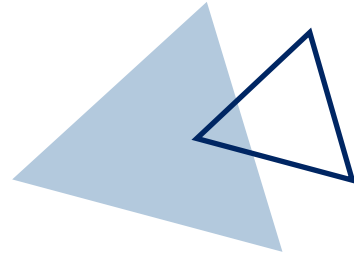
After all, there's over 300,000 of us growing up in Essex right now, and it's time you heard **our side of the story.**

Thank you:

This work would not be possible without all the children, young people, parents, carers and professionals who shared their views and experiences with us.

Our heartfelt thanks go to all of you, and we hope you feel we have done justice to what you told us.

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Introduction

Welcome to Childhood in Essex, where we ‘spill the tea’ on what it is like being a child or young person (CYP) in Essex today, and how childhood has changed compared to previous generations.

This piece of work came about from discussions among Essex partner agencies within the Children and Young People’s Strategic Partnership Board, who wanted a deeper understanding of the realities of childhood for different groups and communities across the county, regardless of whether they have a relationship with statutory services. Statutory services tend to have a good understanding of the specific cohorts they work with; however, what is it like for children and young people who may not use such services? Therefore, rather than focusing on specific groups, this research engaged with a more general population of children and young people living in Essex.

The world children and young people are growing up in today has substantially changed from the childhood of previous generations. As such, it’s important for decision makers to put themselves in the shoes of current children and young people, to understand the new opportunities and challenges that they face - as the decisions made now will shape their futures.

The intention of this work is to aid system partners in decision making and inform the development of policies, strategies and interventions aimed at improving the overall wellbeing of children and young people in Essex. We want the insights from this research to influence decisions so that they are better aligned to the needs and wants of our young people.

The two main areas of focus for the research were:

- 1. To explore and bring to life the everyday realities of children and young people living in Essex today.**
- 2. To examine how childhood has changed compared to their parents.**

Throughout the research, we have considered the broader picture of the current state of children and young people’s wellbeing. Research shows that there has been a continued decline in young people’s wellbeing over the past decade^{1,2}. The current generation of young people aged 18 and under spans both Gen Z (born between 1997 and 2012) and Gen Alpha (born between 2013 and 2025). They are growing up at a time of unprecedented turbulence and uncertainty, including the continued recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic to the deepening cost-of-living crisis, family poverty and international conflict.

The nature of children and young people's lives is complex, and multiple factors contribute to their overall happiness and wellbeing. These include family dynamics, educational experiences, socio-economic conditions, personal health and many others (Fig. 1). Many of these will be explored across this report. They are all interconnected, each playing a critical role in shaping the day-to-day experiences and prospects of young people.



Fig. 1: Factors contributing to children and young people's (CYP) personal wellbeing³.

This report is focused on reflecting the opinions, views and experiences that the children and young people, parents and carers and professionals have shared with us throughout the research. The report is structured into two parts:

Part 1: The changing landscape of childhood

Exploring the four key changes that make today's childhood different from that of previous generations.

Part 2: Day-to-day experiences of children and young people

Exploring the everyday realities of children and young people today, including how they spend their time, who matters to them, who inspires and influences them, how they experience their education and what their hopes and dreams are for the future.

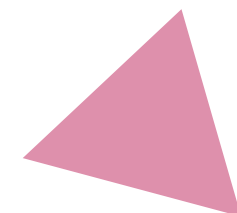
There are inevitable overlaps between the topics, which are highlighted throughout the report.

The project was endorsed by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Board and carried out by the Research & Citizen Insight team at Essex County Council, yet its remit goes beyond any organisational boundary. It is relevant to any individual or organisation that works directly with or supports children, young people and families, in Essex and beyond.

We hope you find this document enjoyable, insightful and thought-provoking and that it serves as a resource for years to come.

Research & Citizen Insight team
Essex County Council

**Dr Katerina Glover, Chloe Aldridge,
Emily Brodie and Maura O'Malley**



Why is this work important?

The political landscape surrounding children and young people in the UK is undergoing significant transformation, driven by a renewed governmental focus on equity, wellbeing and opportunity.

Following the 2024 general election, the new Education Secretary announced a new era of child-centred government, where children come first, and services are designed around the support they need. A series of legislative and strategic initiatives introduced over the past year signal a shift toward more integrated, preventative and youth-led approaches to policy.

Central to this agenda is the **Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill**⁴, which proposes wide-ranging reforms across education and children's social care. The Bill aims to strengthen safeguarding, improve support for care-experienced children and enhance educational access through measures such as free breakfast clubs and reduced uniform costs. It also introduces new oversight mechanisms for care providers, the creation of registers of children not in school and reforms to academy governance, reflecting a broader commitment to tackling systemic inequalities.

Complementing this is the announcement of the **National Youth Strategy**⁵, the first comprehensive youth policy in over a decade. Co-produced with young people, the strategy should prioritise local empowerment, inclusive opportunity and long-term investment in youth services. It includes a new Youth Guarantee for 18 to 21-year-olds and marks a move away from centralised programmes like the National Citizen Service.

In parallel, the **Child Poverty Taskforce**⁶ is developing a cross-government strategy to address rising levels of child poverty. With a focus on both immediate relief and structural reform, the strategy is expected to shape future fiscal and social policy, particularly in the context of growing concerns around cost-of-living and welfare adequacy.

These developments are set against a backdrop of increasing youth political engagement and widespread concern among young people about mental health, safety and economic insecurity. Together, they represent a critical moment for reimagining how public services and policy can better support children and young people to thrive.

Our research contributes to this debate by providing a qualitative source of insights and evidence drawn directly from Essex children and young people, their parents and carers, and professionals.

The broader Essex context

Socio-economic background plays a role in how the everyday is experienced. Here we present some population and other statistics, giving a broader context about the children and young people living in Essex.

This data covers the geographical area of Essex (Essex County Council local authority area), but the wider findings can be applied across Greater Essex.

Population context



As of 2024, the Essex population is **1,563,365 inhabitants**¹⁴ living within 602,697 households¹⁵.

As of 2024, there are estimated to be

329,197 children

aged 0 to 17 living in Essex. Of these, nearly 100,000 are teenagers aged 13 to 17¹⁰.

Children make up a **fifth (21%)** of the total Essex population¹¹.

Almost a **third (31%)** of Essex households have children in them¹².



Socio-economic context

41%



of households with children have a disposable income of less than £249 per month¹⁵.

14.3%

of children aged 0 to 15 in Essex are living in low-income households⁷. 3.5% of children in Essex are living in households that struggle to afford their heating and energy costs⁸.

20%



of school pupils are eligible for free school meals⁹.

Wellbeing context



In 2025, **5.3%** of all school pupils in Essex had social, emotional and mental health needs – an increase from **3.1%** in 2022¹⁶.

This follows a similar trend to the rest of the country, where the proportion of school pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs has been increasing since 2015/16 up to 2022/23 (latest data)¹⁸, demonstrating the continual decline in CYP wellbeing.



As of January 2025,

14,240 children and young people

(aged 0 to 25) in Essex had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP). This represents a significant increase from **9,361** children in January 2020¹⁷.



In 2024, **11%** of CYP aged 10 to 17 had low wellbeing (Children's Society, 2024)¹⁹.

Employment context



In 2025, **4.2%** of 16 to 17-year-olds in Essex were not in education, employment or training (NEET)²¹.



This proportion has been **increasing** in recent years - in 2022 only 2.6% of 16 to 17 years-olds in Essex were NEET²⁰.



19% of claimants of universal credit and job seekers allowance in Essex are aged between 16 and 24²².



Who have we engaged with, and how?

We have undertaken a qualitative in-depth exercise to explore the everyday realities of children and young people (CYP) in Essex today and how childhood has changed.

We wanted to explore the topics from a range of perspectives. Therefore, we adopted a multi-perspective, mixed-method approach. This generated an exceptionally rich and robust evidence base of qualitative data.



Who we engaged

We explored the topic from the perspectives of CYP, parents and professionals which gave us the ability to triangulate the findings.



Children and young people

Aged 9 to 18 years
Generation Alpha
Generation Z

Gave us a glimpse into their everyday lives

138 CYP engaged in total

36 through two online communities

102 through youth group discussions



Parents

Parents and carers of children aged 9 to 18 years

Millennials / Generation Y

Generation X

Provided more context on CYP's everyday lives and shared reflections on changing childhoods

29 parents engaged in total, through two online communities



Professionals

Represented a range of disciplines, all having worked directly with CYP for at least 15 years, coming from varied socio-economic backgrounds

Provided a broad and more strategic overview into the changes of childhood today and societal changes through observation throughout varied careers

12 professionals engaged through interviews

Most of our participants came from seemingly economically stable households, not experiencing socio-economic hardships. Most parents were in employment, and in two-parent families at least one parent appeared to be working full-time. Yet, these families still shared a lot of challenges in their lives, giving an indication of what those less fortunate may be dealing with. Combined with professionals' perspectives, **we feel confident that the insights we are about to share with you are an accurate description of what children and young people and their families experience now.**

We wanted to engage with the general population. While not focusing on any specific groups, we still aimed to engage individuals from different age groups, ethnicities and locations. The majority of participants came from the Essex County Council local authority area, however the insights can be applied across Greater Essex.

We also captured the experiences of families whose children have a special educational need or disability (SEND), and/or poor mental health. Several of our participants stated having additional needs including autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, learning difficulties/disabilities, dyslexia, dyspraxia, visual impairment and social anxiety. These CYP and their families told us about their day-to-day experiences of life with additional needs, however the research itself was not focused on uncovering specific experiences of CYP with SEND.

The majority of parents we engaged with were 35 aged years or older. Since our youngest participants were at least 9 years old, born in 2015 or earlier (representing Generation Z and Generation Alpha), almost half of our parent participants were Millennials, also referred to as Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1996), and the rest were Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980). This means they represent generations that experienced early life with limited technology and internet, or none at all - a comparison they often made in their reflections.



Throughout the document, we will mostly use the term 'children and young people' (abbreviated to 'CYP') to refer to all those aged 9 to 18 years who participated in this research. We may sometimes use the term 'young people' where we are referring to those aged 13 to 18 years old.

How we engaged

Between July 2024 and January 2025, we engaged with our participants through the following methods:

Online communities:

- Two online communities (one during school holidays, one in term-time), each lasting one week.
- Online platform, accessible anytime via phone, computer or tablet.
- Participants completed up to 12 separate activities, each tailored specifically to CYP or parents.
- Activities included written responses, photographs, videos and collages.
- Children aged 9 to 12 had some parental help.
- Young people aged 13 to 18 participated independently.

Youth group discussions:

- Four different youth organisations.
- Eight separate sessions.
- Carried out on our behalf by youth workers with established relationships with CYP.
- Reached 102 CYP from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, some of whom may be less inclined to take part in formal research.

Professional interviews:

- 1-hour in-depth video interviews.

Summary of sample breakdown and method used

Interviews with 12 professionals who have worked directly with children and young people for more than 15 years

- 4 x youth workers
- 3 x teachers
- 2 x community connectors
- 2 x health professionals
- 1 x wraparound childcare provider

102 youth group discussion participants

- 8 x youth sessions
- Aged 11-16
- Basildon, Colchester, Tendring and Southend

65 online community participants

- 36 x children and young people
- 29 x parents aged between 25-64
- 26 x families (20 duos; 6 trios)
- 14 x aged 9-12
- 12 x aged 13-15
- 10 x aged 16-18
- 18 female & 18 male
- 12 x aged 35-44
- 15 x aged 45-54
- 25 female & 4 male parents
- 6 single parents
- Around 70% were White British

Findings at a glance

Childhood in Essex is experienced in many different ways for children and young people (CYP), shaped by factors such as stability of family relationships and friendships, socio-economic background, educational experiences, and where they live. Despite these factors, this research has uncovered many areas of common ground in what childhood looks like today.

CYP often share common core values: relationships with family and friends are vitally important, they enjoy music, being active, and spending time with their friends. They have aspirations for their future careers and lifestyles - even while they are still 'figuring things out'.



However, the context in which CYP are growing up today is very different from that of their parents and grandparents. These societal changes affect all aspects of their lives. This research identified four key shifts in childhood that CYP, parents and professionals are having to navigate in the modern world:



1. The rapid rise in the use of technology and social media



2. Greater access to information and news, including awareness of more 'adult' topics



3. A reduction of independence and an increase in safety concerns



4. A rise in mental health and emotional wellbeing challenges

This section summarises the core changes and experiences of childhood that emerged from the research. The chapters that follow explore each topic in greater depth.

A snapshot view of different perspectives on changing childhood



1. Technological advancements and social media



Children and young people

- Have grown up with technology and social media use. They know no different.
- Communicate using a wide range of different platforms and apps.
- Often don't distinguish between their lives 'online' and 'offline'.



Parents

- Majority grew up when internet was in its infancy, with no constant access.
- Wary of their child's technology use, believing they spend too much time online.
- Cautious about the online risks.
- Many monitor children's tech use and impose restrictions.



Professionals

- See both positives and negatives of technology.
- Accept it facilitates the emergence of a 'tech-savvy generation', raises awareness of various topics, and opens opportunities.
- Concerns around online safety, cyberbullying, peer pressure, CYP concerns around their image.



2. Awareness of adult concerns and desensitisation



Children and young people

- Have instant access to information.
- Aware of news stories, world events and 'adult' topics, accessed through various online sources.
- As an informed cohort, they want to be involved and listened to in discussions that concern them, and decision making.



Parents

- Believe that instant access to information can be overwhelming and anxiety inducing for CYP.
- Contrast this with their own childhoods, with very limited opportunities to find out about world events and news stories.



Professionals

- Describe CYP as having a more 'adult view' of the world - becoming desensitised to topics previously considered as 'adult topics'.
- Highlighted that CYP today possess more 'adult worries', such as paying bills.
- See CYP as well informed.



3. Independence and safety



Children and young people

- Value their independence, with many feeling that they do not have as much as they would like.
- Keen to develop their independence as they grow older.
- Largely participate in organised activities, with limited independent play without adult supervision.
- Limited opportunities to make their own mistakes and learn from them, concern over mistakes being documented.



Parents

- Concern around children's safety.
- Granting less freedom than they had themselves as children.
- Often tracking their children's whereabouts, for example via mobile apps.
- Fondly reflected on their own childhoods, with ample opportunities to play outdoors with their friends, learning from own mistakes, acquiring life skills and developing their independence.



Professionals

- Recognised that increased parental safety concerns result in CYP having less freedom to develop their independence.
- Believe CYP are generally less independent and less prepared for adulthood than previous generations.
- Conscious of the level of scrutiny CYP are under.



4. Mental health and emotional wellbeing



Children and young people

- CYP commonly worry about school and exams, friendships and fitting in, their appearance and concerns over making mistakes.
- For many, family and friends are the main support system to confide in and to help them manage emotions.
- General awareness of the importance of mental health and wellbeing.
- Not always able to access timely mental health support.



Parents

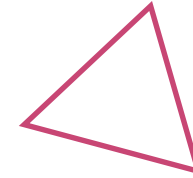
- Concerns over pressures CYP face today, including education, peer pressure, image concerns, cyberbullying and online exploitation.
- Encourage CYP to speak about their feelings and any mental health struggles. This is a shift from their own childhoods.
- Some have struggled accessing appropriate mental health support for their children.



Professionals

- Concern about the increase in the number of CYP who are struggling with their mental health.
- Some reflect whether this rise reflects a genuine increase or improved identification.
- Feel CYP need support to develop resilience and coping techniques to deal with everyday challenges as well as more difficult situations.

A snapshot view of the day-to-day experiences of children and young people (CYP)



Activities and use of free time

- CYP value spending time with family and friends and engaging in activities that interest them – such as playing sports, using their phones and devices for social media and gaming, and going on days out.
- Parents and CYP are consistently trying to strike a balance between technology-focused activities such as gaming, TV, films, music or social media and engaging in ‘real world’ activities.
- CYP spend a lot of time in organised activities and clubs under adult supervision, with limited opportunities for independent play.
- These organised activities can bring added cost and time pressures, particularly for lower income families. This is further exacerbated by expectations of day trips and eating out, which are now common pastimes.

Relationships and influences

- Friends and family are among the most important influencers in CYP’s lives, providing love, support and inspiration. CYP value spending their free time with family and friends, many having close and trusting relationships.
- ‘Family time’ is prioritised by many but can be challenging due to parents’ work commitments. It has become more common now for both parents to work, making it difficult to balance childcare responsibilities and work commitments.
- While parenting styles have always varied, many now adopt a child-centric approach - placing their children’s thoughts and feelings at the forefront, whilst also wanting to be ‘friends’ with their children.
- As CYP grow older, they are increasingly influenced by wider friendship groups and personalities seen online, such as sports personalities and social media influencers. These figures can inspire CYP towards certain skills or careers, but may also raise concerns around promoting negative views or showcasing unrealistic lifestyles and beauty standards.
- Image and appearance are key aspects of CYP’s identity, often influenced by online content.



female, 13

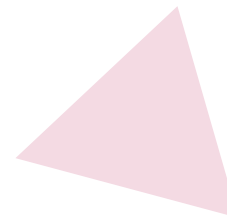
Education and the school environment

- CYP have varying experiences at school. Some enjoy school, others are neutral about it, while some find it overwhelming. Many report struggling with exam pressure and homework.
- Relationships with teachers play an important role in shaping school experiences. The most valued qualities of teachers are kindness, truly listening to CYP and caring for their wellbeing.
- Schools are facing increased pressures with limited resources. The national curriculum places high expectations on pupils and teachers alike. With rising identification of poor mental health and special education needs and disabilities (SEND), schools can struggle to meet the individual needs of every young person, especially with reduced external support compared to the past.



Aspirations and expectations

- CYP generally have high aspirations, with interests in a wide range of future careers, from traditional jobs to more creative pursuits. However, many are focused on the 'here and now', giving their future paths little consideration.
- Many young people aspire to glamorous lifestyles and hold high financial expectations.
- There is now a greater variety of career options that did not exist for previous generations, with alternative routes into them. University is no longer seen as the only path, with BTECs, apprenticeships and other training opportunities now available.
- While some CYP have a grounded view of the future, others have less realistic expectations, often shaped by what they see on social media. Adults have a key role to play in providing guidance on what different careers may involve in practice.
- Part-time jobs and work experience are harder to come by compared to previous generations, making them highly competitive. Yet, CYP need the financial means to be able to participate in activities, hobbies or simply to get out and about.



Looking ahead: Supporting childhood in Essex

Throughout the research, CYP, parents and professionals shared suggestions for what could improve the lives of CYP in a changing world. These fall into three key areas:

- 1. Engage with and listen to children and young people** - CYP are generally well informed, and they want their opinions sought, listened to and genuinely considered. Opportunities to have a say should be available to all, not just those already involved in formal routes such as youth councils.
- 2. Create more activities and safe spaces for children and young people** - CYP called for more affordable, or ideally free, activities and places to go outside of school. These spaces would allow CYP to follow their own interests, 'hang out' with their friends and gain some independence in a safe environment.
- 3. Improve access to timely and preventative mental health support** - while awareness of mental health has grown, and more support is available for CYP, tailoring support more closely to CYP's needs - particularly focusing on tools and techniques to prevent mental health challenges - would be beneficial.



male, 16

Part 1: The changing landscape of childhood

This section explores the key changes that make today's childhood distinctly different from that of the previous generations.

These fall into four areas:

- ▶ 1. Technological advancements and the rise of social media
- ▶ 2. Awareness of adult concerns and desensitisation
- ▶ 3. Independence and safety
- ▶ 4. Mental health and emotional wellbeing

While these changes are presented separately, the boundaries between them are blurred in reality. They are all interconnected and influence each other.



▶ 1

Technological advancements and the rise of social media

Technology is one of the most significant differences shaping childhood today compared to previous generations.

Children and young people (CYP) have not chosen to grow up surrounded by technology, yet they were born into a world where it is intertwined in nearly every aspect of daily life. While exposure to technology can be enriching, there are concerns that the long-term impacts are still not yet fully understood.

This section covers:

- ▶ [A tech-savvy generation](#)
- ▶ [The rapid rise of social media](#)
- ▶ [Excessive technology and social media use may replace 'real life' activities](#)
- ▶ [Managing the use of technology and social media](#)



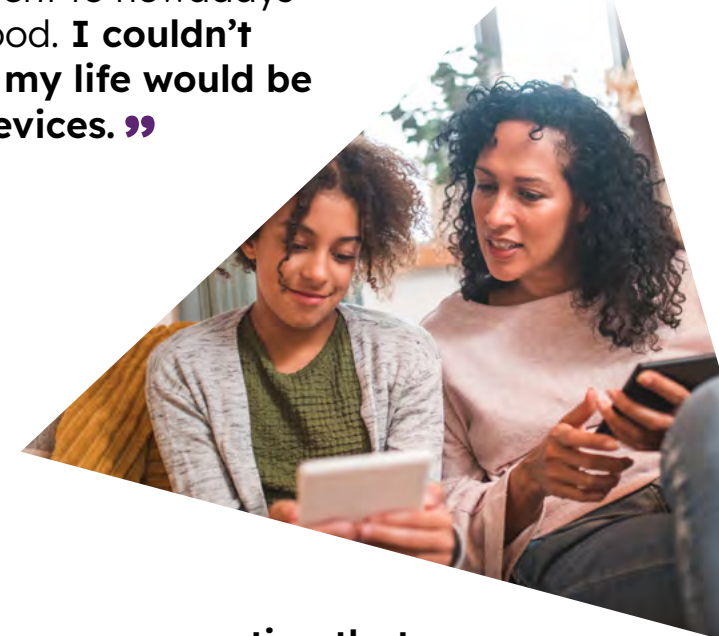
My mum was 16 to 17 when phones and electronics came out. I was surprised about how old she was when she had electronics as that is so different to nowadays and my childhood. **I couldn't imagine what my life would be like without devices.**”

15, female



They are a generation that has always had a screen present and we don't know what that is going to have done to them down the line.”

35-44, mum



A tech-savvy generation

Rapid developments in technology have led to the emergence of an intuitively ‘tech-savvy’ generation for whom technology has become a part of everyday life.

Children and young people (CYP) are using technology at earlier ages and often begin secondary school already equipped with a smartphone. Many are now skilled at multi-tasking with technology, where they can hold a conversation and use their phone simultaneously. In many instances, young people’s technology skills now surpass their parents’.

This was partly viewed as a positive change as these skills will be essential in later life, when they can be applied in educational and workplace settings.

Technological advancements have also opened doors to **various new learning and educational opportunities:**

- A high volume of educational resources accessible at home to support learning.
- Easy access to tutorials that help develop hobbies and skills.
- Enhanced learning experiences within schools, such as accessing resources electronically or using interactive whiteboards, rather than heavy textbooks.
- Assistive technology to support those with disabilities or visual impairments.

“Half the time my children know things better than I do now! It’s the same with all their friends, too. I realise technology has come a long way since I was young but they are so much more natural than I ever was at their age.” **45-54, mum**

“Their use of technology is excellent and is crucial as they grow up. At secondary school they have to use apps on a phone and a laptop.” **35-44, mum**

“In terms of positives, we’ve now got a whole cohort of young people that are actually incredibly tech-savvy, that understand the benefits of technology and how to use it.” **teacher, secondary school**

“Apps that my kids use to do their online learning are Mathletics, Alphablocks, Nessi, Top Marks, BBC Bitesize. These have maths, English, science, French, humanities, geography activities, games, examples for children to watch/listen and attempt to do, then check their answers. Children can learn through games and visual examples.” **35-44, mum**

“Technology has meant my daughter’s experience at a mainstream school having visual impairment has not been such a problem. Electronic whiteboards which can be put on a screen on the desk in front of somebody, textbooks can be found in an electronic format and read on a tablet device where you can use screen magnification to read it better and their devices which let you take pictures which you can then zoom on etc.” **45-54, dad**

The rapid rise of social media

The use of social media has become a bedrock of day-to-day activity for young people.

While it can bring benefits in terms of developing social connections and the ability to explore interests in a different way, parents and professionals observe risks that young people as well as adults may need support to navigate safely, such as increased peer pressure and comparisons, exposure to inappropriate content, and cyberbullying.

i. Encouraging social connection

Social media is one of the main communication tools used by young people today, with popular platforms including WhatsApp, Snapchat, Instagram, TikTok and gaming sites such as Roblox and Fortnite²⁵. These social media platforms make it easier for CYP to maintain relationships and friendships over long distances or in circumstances where face-to-face interaction is not possible, such as during the Covid-19 lockdowns. Parents reflected how social media helps CYP form new friendships. It can act as an easy route for connection with like-minded people with similar interests and is often used as an outlet to express themselves on what they believe is important. However, some parents were concerned that social media encourages CYP to prioritise the quantity of connections or friendships over quality. (Read more in [Relationships and influences](#).)



Being a young person today is really good as we can all communicate easily and it's easy to maintain long distance friendships. I find it really helpful to have the internet, however I do feel like the internet is an ever-growing threat. ” 11, male



Often social media helps support the idea of being 'you' and who you want to be, which is a real positive. Children can 'find' people like them and relate to them. ” 35-44, mum



ii. Broadening awareness of new opportunities

Professionals reflected how social media allows CYP to be aware of what is available to them, such as new job opportunities and career paths. It also allows for services supporting CYP to connect with them and signpost them to safe spaces and resources, although this may not be used as much as it could be.

iii. Heightened peer pressure online

Social media opens the door to a world of constant comparison with others and gives rise to new forms of peer pressure. Young people often utilise social media platforms to share a 'highlight reel' of their lives. They may post about meals out, social events and holidays and normalise a lifestyle which is unrealistic or unaffordable for many families. As a result, CYP may feel pressure to keep up with the lives of their friends. In addition, being contactable 24/7 means many CYP feel pressured to respond immediately to messages and to interact constantly with their friendship groups, a pressure that did not exist for previous generations.

Parents and professionals acknowledge an undeniable pressure for CYP to look and dress a certain way. Social media intensifies this as CYP compare themselves to images of influencers and celebrities posted online. CYP also post images of themselves for their peers to comment on. Such focus on appearance raises concern among professionals in terms of how this impacts self-esteem and confidence. (Read more in [Relationships and influences.](#))



I'm still discovering that certain jobs exist. Whereas young people do know because they're able to see it, they can see what opportunities are available. ” **social prescriber**



I think there are positives to social media because we can talk to young people and show them videos and send them instant links to things and services they might want to get involved with. ” **youth worker**



They're seeing what everybody else has done and making those comparisons and not being grateful for what they have, because there's always someone that's going to have more. Whereas before they were a little bit blissfully unaware. ” **youth worker**



Peer pressure - kids compare their lives to those of their friends by seeing all the photos they post. They can feel left out if they aren't included in certain social events, if they don't have the latest fashion trends seen on photos etc. ” **45-54, mum**



They're so concerned about what they look like, what their friendship groups are, and it's getting worse. It's become more and more of a problem. And I think social media and stuff like that has a lot to do with that. ” **social prescriber**

iv. Encountering online risks

Parents and professionals were particularly concerned about online safety, in terms of cyberbullying and exposure to age-inappropriate content, violence and pornography. Social media creates an environment where cyberbullying can thrive, and many highlighted a dramatic increase, as social media and private messaging platforms make this much easier and 'sneakier'. Identities can be easily hidden and posting online often avoids immediate, or any, consequences. Bullying has always persisted as an issue that CYP face but now it can be more difficult to escape from it. Parents commented that issues at school can follow CYP home as they are subject to comments from peers at all times of the day.

While bullying is not a new phenomenon, and any attempt to be different or just standing out from the crowd can be a trigger for bullying, teachers shared that the education sector is constantly 'battling' cyberbullying with CYP not necessary understanding how they can hurt others online.



I'm so glad social media wasn't around when I was growing up. For the most part, I was able to leave school and any friendship issues at school, there's no escape now. ” **45-54, mum**



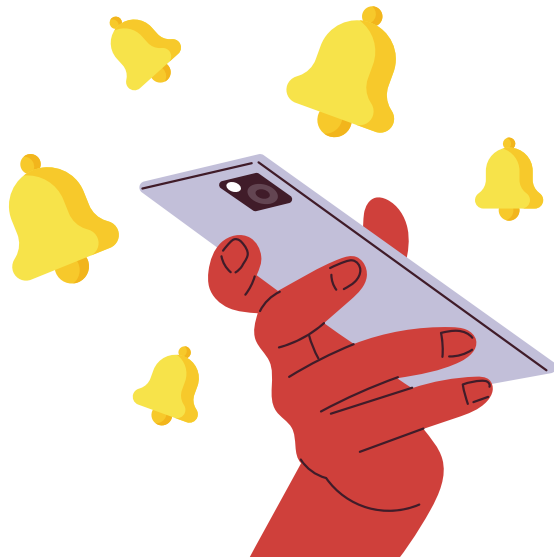
Lots of unkind comments, lots of memes, gifs, images shared. Lots of our safeguarding stuff now is based around internet use and social media. ”
teacher, secondary school



Cyberbullying has increased dramatically. They don't actually understand what can constitute bullying or hurt somebody else. ” **teacher, secondary school**

In addition to bullying, parents and CYP expressed concern over the potential for CYP to be targeted by online predators and exploited online. Social media, private chats and online gaming increase the chances of being exposed to this. As an example, CYP can feel pressure to share inappropriate images or videos of themselves, which increases the risk of exploitation. While image sharing has become somewhat normalised, there is a general lack of understanding from CYP, parents and teachers of where this stands in the law. Considering the speed at which the phenomenon of image sharing has developed, more education is needed for all.

CYP are aware of these online risks, too. Some admitted to dealing with this themselves by blocking people but not reporting this anywhere. While parents are aware of the potential risks surrounding social media usage, many are new to using some online platforms and find it difficult to help their children connect with others online safely.



“ I do worry about her being exposed to violence or porn, but also being targeted by paedophiles online. We have software on her devices with strong parental controls, and we talk often about how people can try and make other people do things they don't want to do. **” 35-44, mum**

“ I worry about their phones and social media. I've attended an online safety workshop, and they talked about how children take lots of photos of themselves and each other, and the danger of how these can be used. **” 35-44, mum**

“ People's parents often say things along the lines of 'if someone in a white van offers you sweets, run away and scream' but for people trying to take advantage of young people it's a lot easier for them and more effective to groom them over the internet. When young people recognise that someone isn't who they say they are, they just get blocked and 99.9% of the time it goes unmentioned. **” 11, male**

“ I feel social media means that children have to navigate around this world and the lack of parent confidence means they can often do this without much guidance. I feel adults are trying to learn how to make sense of the virtual world and how to trust people you connect with online whilst at the same time teaching their children. Parents can get very anxious about the virtual world and their reactions mean that children sometimes don't feel able to reach out for help and guidance when needed. **” 45-54, mum**

Excessive technology and social media use may replace 'real life' activities

CYP now have an endless number of entertainment options readily available and parents are concerned about CYP using technology and social media excessively.

Social media can be especially addictive, with parents noting how their children can spend hours passively scrolling and consuming 'useless' and shallow content online.



“ Even as a young person myself I think I can say that people spend way too much time on their phones, taking advice from influences they find on the internet and copying what other people do to make it trendy. This has led to the next generation of young people after us being brought up on technology, with iPad or phones at a very young age, and this causes them to only know what they see on the internet and lose all connections with the real world. Some may call this brain rot. ” **14, female**

“ Kids now can plug themselves in 24hrs a day. As parents if we don't monitor the amount of time they are on their devices, I doubt that they will stop if we don't take them away from them. There is no self-regulation. ” **45-54, mum**

“ At weekends or the holidays, they would spend all day on their iPads or Xbox if they could. I find I have to limit their time and make them go out in the garden for a bit or take them out somewhere, just so I know they have had some fresh air. ” **45-54, mum**

There are **several key concerns** surrounding this excessive technology use:

- **Replacing ‘real life activities’** - parents are concerned technology use may severely reduce or replace participation in offline ‘real life’ activities, as well as reduce the time CYP spend outdoors or engaging with family.
- **Less imaginative** – parents and professionals feel that the abundance of options CYP now have for entertainment means they are less reliant on using their imagination to create their own games and entertainment.
- **Reduced attention span** – parents and professionals felt that frequent exposure to short social media reels appears to lead to reduced attention spans in many CYP.



When I was a child, we seemed to use our imagination more as we didn't access computers/social media. Instead, we had to make up games to entertain ourselves. I do not think children of today are able to entertain themselves and use devices to minimise boredom. ” 45-54, mum



They have greater access to entertainment at home - gaming, social media, TV options. I'd have loved these options as a kid, but as a parent, I think it's a negative. The restricted access we had as kids (such as shared telephone, limited TV entertainment and music options) created healthy boundaries which were just there. Parents didn't have to police it all which creates more stress, it was just the way it was. It also left more room for family interaction/activities. ” 35-44, mum



Even when we sat down to watch a family film together, my wife and I will be watching it, there'll be the kids and they'll be watching the film, but then pick up their mobiles. It's become almost a security blanket, something that they have to have with them all the time, something they have to be checking in with all the time. They don't want to miss out something. ” 45-54, dad

Managing the use of technology and social media

Some parents proactively try to put limitations and restrictions on their children's use of technology and social media. For example, many parents utilise time limits and cutoff times for devices or ban use at the dining table or in the bedroom.

Not only is time spent on devices monitored but parents also proactively monitor the apps and content CYP are accessing with parental controls, checking search history and having regular check-ins with their children.

Despite taking these measures, professionals highlighted that parents' awareness and understanding of CYP's online activities is very low and that CYP often know how to overcome parental controls and safety settings. Some CYP can be very secretive with their tech use, purposefully hiding apps on their phones. Some parents admitted that they don't fully understand the online world and thus find it hard to manage their children's device use and subsequent online safety.



With her iPad and phone I do have parental controls on them. This allows me to set limits on how long she can use her phone or how long she uses particular apps and will also lock her phone at a set time each night until the following morning. It also tells me what apps she has installed and if I need to, I can block apps, which I have done in the past. ” **45-54, dad**



As parents we try to manage this by limiting time on different apps, talking to them about what they are looking at, checking searches, but you also have to trust them. ” **35-44, mum**



The online world is full of risks not easily seen or understood so it can be hard as a parent to guide children and teach them about these risks. ” **45-54, mum**



Parents don't know what to look for when they're looking through their phones. You can disguise apps now so you can hide apps within apps. So, unless you're fully educated on what's going on, children can be a lot more secretive, and they can hide things away from people. ” **health professional**



male, 11

Parents now face the dilemma of letting their children spend time outdoors versus keeping them physically safe at home where they may potentially encounter even greater risks online. Therefore, adults need to educate themselves much more extensively on online risks so they can appropriately monitor and connect with their children and have informed conversations about their tech use on an ongoing basis. As one professional said:

“The awareness isn’t growing as fast as the pace of what’s happening. Having worked with schools, I realised that teachers and parents don’t know the law around nude images themselves, it’s moving so fast. They need to be educated on things like grooming, upskirting, dark web and other topics.” **youth worker**



Parents are buying Xboxes because their friends have them and their kids want them, but they lack understanding of what they are getting their children. Luckily some have asked us about how to set their Xboxes up so that the children can’t do certain things. Through appropriate settings, all kinds of online dangers are averted because the parents are fully aware of who they can talk to and who they can’t. It’s the online bit that’s scary because no one else hears and sees it because they are always wearing a headset, so you can’t hear the person. And lots of children have their own room.” **childcare provider**



▶ 2

Awareness of adult concerns and desensitisation

Technological advancements have made it significantly easier for children and young people (CYP) to access information and news through a wide range of media platforms and apps.

As a result, CYP are more informed and can form opinions on global and local events that previous generations may have been shielded from. Parents and professionals are concerned that CYP are exposed to an overwhelming volume of content, some of which may be age-inappropriate or emotionally and cognitively challenging to process, which could lead to heightened anxiety, confusion or desensitisation to adult topics.

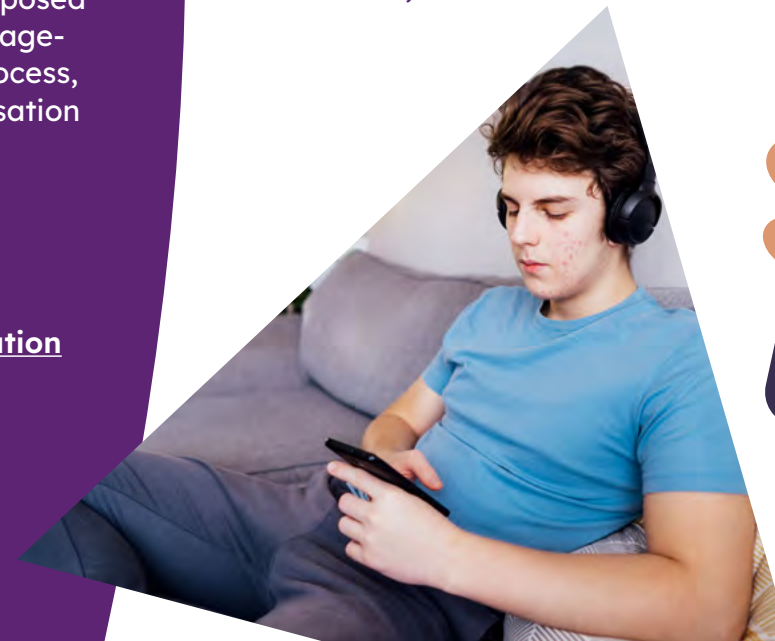
This section covers:

- ▶ [A knowledgeable and informed generation](#)
- ▶ [Information overload, increased anxiety and desensitisation](#)
- ▶ [A more accepting younger generation](#)



When I was a child, you relied on what adults told you, watched the news once a day, read a newspaper, went to the library for a book or watched a limited amount of television. Blue Peter was a highlight. Now children have so much more access to information and quickly. If they want to know something, they ask 'echo' or Google it immediately. There is no waiting to finding something out. ”

35-44, mum



A knowledgeable and informed generation

If CYP want to learn more about a certain event or topic, they can get answers instantly. Both parents and professionals pointed out that children are using technology from an early age and can find anything they want, using voice recognition if they cannot write yet. CYP who use social media platforms are served information automatically by algorithms.

Ease of access to information leads to an increased awareness of world events, including politics, war, crime, the cost-of-living crisis and environmental events. CYP from previous generations had limited exposure to these topics.

On the positive side, this means that today's generation of CYP are very well informed and knowledgeable about world events. They want to be engaged in conversations about these topics, have an influence and make a positive difference to issues such as the environment.

“ Sadly, some adults that don't care about the environment and are polluting our one and only home and us kids have to now try and stop it. It concerns me about the impact on the world because there is no 'planet B'. ” **10, female**

“ The kids and their friends are more concerned with the environmental and sometimes, political issues. They will say 'Mum, have you heard about this or that' and show me things about climate change or Donald Trump. Also issues around racism and sexuality/body issues. ” **35-44, mum**

“ Children today are more aware of environmental issues. This is a positive change as it seems that the long-term damage to the environment is already done and the next generation should be made more aware than what we were. ” **35-44, mum**

Information overload, increased anxiety and desensitisation

While children and young people (CYP) today may be better informed and eager to engage on the issues that concern or interest them, there are numerous risks surrounding the ease of access to this level of information:

i. Information overload

Parents expressed worry about the amount of information their children can access online. Apart from running the risk of them being exposed to information that is not age-appropriate, the sheer volume can be overwhelming and difficult to process adequately.



It does seem that young people have an awful lot of information thrown at them, leading to information overload. I think the poor brains of these young people are still growing, still in development and they never really get a chance to switch off. ” 35-44, mum



Children have an overload of information from the internet, and this is very difficult for young minds to process. ” 45-54, mum



ii. Increased anxiety

There is concern surrounding being exposed to too much information too young. CYP can be burdened with awareness of world events which can cause anxiety and upset. CYP today no longer retain the same carefree outlook on life as many of the participating parents recalled they themselves had. One professional reflected how CYP today have much more 'adult worries'. For example, some CYP may worry about money, bills and being able to afford food. They may worry about safety and gangs, particularly following media coverage of a recent crime or being exposed to violent content online. Some CYP even expressed concern over much wider societal issues such as international conflict.



“ Young people’s lives could be made better by keeping children less knowing about things that don’t involve them, like any war that is not in the UK. ” **13, male**

“ They are exposed to so much more information without the emotional or developmental skills to cope with it. I can imagine it’s got to be pretty scary to hear about world/political/even local conflict as a child/teen who hasn’t yet developed their own sense of self and has never been an independent adult member of society. I think for sure it could create a fearful view of life. ” **35-44, mum**

“ If something ‘bad’ happens in the world you have to explain it to them as they will find out from the internet, social media, school friends. Whereas I think when I was a child my parents would have ‘protected’ me from ‘bad’ in the world as they wouldn’t have thought it was relevant or wanted me to have to know about it. ” **35-44, mum**

“ We’ve got 8-year-olds walking around worrying about the electricity bill and stuff like that, and I think people need to know that young children, they’re worried about adult problems. ” **social prescriber**

iii. Desensitisation to adult topics

Parents and professionals are aware that CYP may be unintentionally exposed to violence or pornography, such as through social media algorithms. CYP are now more exposed to adult themes, which previous generations were shielded from and had limited access to.

For example, teachers reflected that when topics from literary works are raised in class, such as sexual violence in J.B. Priestley's 'An Inspector Calls' or prostitution in John Steinbeck's 'Of Mice and Men', young people are no longer shocked by them.

iv. Risk of misinformation

Information online can also be misleading for CYP, as it can be rife with fake news, manipulated images, AI generated content and opinions which may be presented as facts. Both parents and professionals highlighted the risk of CYP assuming everything they see online being true. CYP don't necessarily question the content and don't always know how to deduce what reliable sources of information are.



It's almost like the age of innocence has changed. ”
youth worker



They have a much more adult view of the world and have been subjected to much more adult themes. ”
teacher, secondary school



He is influenced a lot by the people he watches on YouTube. This is probably because he spends so much time watching it and also because he hasn't developed a full understanding of the need to fact check and question what he sees. ” 35-44, dad



It can also be hard, given the proliferation of AI, to help them know what is real and what isn't, and to understand what good quality sources of information on the internet are. ” 35-44, mum



I definitely think children face more challenges as they have the presence of social media, airbrushing, fake videos etc. Which as adults we can see as untrue, whereas children may believe everything they are seeing. ” 45-54, mum

A more accepting younger generation

A notable positive of improved access to information is increased awareness and acceptance of differences among CYP.

By being exposed to alternative viewpoints, today's younger generations are more understanding and accepting of each other's differences, and aware of potential inequalities.

Moreover, there is increased openness and acceptance around social issues and topics such as gender identity, sexuality and cultural differences, with CYP today cited as being more inclusive and being open to change. More CYP feel they can be honest about these topics and seek support if needed.



“ One of the biggest differences between school life now and what school life was like when I was growing up, is the freedom to talk about identity and sexuality, the wonderful openness in the current generation to discuss these topics and to be curious. That was not the case when I was at school, teachers could not really talk about sexuality with the children even if they brought it up. I think this is really reflective of how young people are very curious about themselves. They want to know themselves and to figure themselves out, which is what I believe most people are trying to do. I admire these young people for being so open to change and difference. ”

35-44, mum

“ Children seem so much kinder than children when I was young, and much wiser. They are more reflective and thoughtful about other people. ”

45-54, mum

“ The positive thing about all the information is that children are a lot more aware of social kind of issues. They are a lot more inclusive of other children and have a lot more understanding around things such as neurodiversity and the importance of wellness. They are more inclusive as they are brought up around a lot more diverse kind of community. ”

community connector

Some reported that CYP are also more aware of other CYP's additional needs. Some parents and professionals highlighted that compared to their own youth, or observations from earlier phases of their careers, CYP with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) no longer face the same judgement from peers (and also adults).

However, some professionals highlighted that this acceptance is not universal. It appears greater at micro level, such as when thinking about specific friends, compared to macro level, when thinking about the wider society. Some CYP may adopt stereotypical views without necessarily having a deeper understanding of the topic. Professionals noted that CYP may pick up on 'controversial' topics very early on, find them overwhelming or confusing, yet they can also be difficult for adults to explain.



“ Another change is the attitude to how people who have additional needs are treated. Sadly, my time at school felt like I was the problem as I could not see as well as everybody else. I wasn't the only person like this I'm sure, but I think there is a better understanding of additional needs and how to help children. ” **45-54, dad**

“ Additional needs are more understood and catered for. Despite having to wait years for any diagnosis, at least it is more known about now. When I was young, there were people who were different, but they really got sectioned out and bullied. ” **45-54, mum**

“ Kids don't see differences in terms of skin colour, background, culture or sexuality of other young people they know. 'John's all right, he's my mate'. But they see it in the bigger picture. We've had to challenge some of The Sun or Daily Mail thinking and mentality around topics such as immigration. But I find that very fascinating, that they almost don't differentiate in their heads between that person's background or culture. It actually gives me a lot of hope. Kids just see people, which is absolutely wonderful, and if more people did that, we'd have a much nicer society. ” **teacher, secondary school**

▶ 3

Independence and safety

Children and young people (CYP) value opportunities to be independent and want more of them.

However, parents are often reluctant to give them more freedom due to concerns over their safety, both in real life and online. Parents are aware that holding back opportunities to be more independent can impact CYP's ability to recognise and manage risks, but feel CYP now need more protection than they once did.

This section covers:

- ▶ Children and young people highly value their independence
- ▶ Enablers and barriers of independence
- ▶ Parents take conscious steps to increase their children's independence
- ▶ Wider society doesn't always support CYP independence
- ▶ Children and young people feel relatively safe when 'out and about'
- ▶ Parents' safety concerns can limit opportunities to be independent
- ▶ Reluctance to let CYP spend time outside without supervision
- ▶ Parents' 'overprotection' limits CYP's ability to build independence, life skills and resilience
- ▶ Wider safety concerns can make CYP more vulnerable
- ▶ CYP have fewer opportunities to grow independence and resilience



Children and young people highly value their independence

CYP value their freedom and are keen to gain more independence as they get older. Levels of independence vary based on age and individual circumstances:

Younger children (age 10 and under) Gradually gaining independence

- By going to the local shop, playing in the local park or walking to school part-way on their own.
- These activities were accompanied by feelings of uneasiness, as well as excitement and anticipation.

Younger teens (below 15 years) Regular opportunities to be independent

- Driven by the start of secondary school, travelling to and from school on their own, and being exposed to more people and opportunities.
- Going to the shops and pursuing activities with their friends either in local parks or town centres, such as shopping, cinema or eating out, and sometimes having oversight over their younger siblings.

Older teens (16 years and above) Independence is the ultimate goal for CYP

- Being independent is important and described as the best thing about being a young person today.
- CYP want fewer restrictions and more opportunities to make their own decisions and mistakes to learn from.

“ Today I had a play date with my friend from school, and we went to the SPAR shop to get some ice cream as it was very hot! It was the first time walking somewhere without my parents, I felt a bit scared honestly, but it was fine and was pleased I was with my friend, I wouldn't have done it by myself. ” 10, female

“ I part walk my son (10) to school as he likes some independence! ”
35-44, mum

“ Just recently my parents have started to let me go to the shops on my own, I can also take my brother to the park so that he can play. I think that it's nice that they trust me to do these things. ” 13, female

“ The best thing about being a young person today is the amount of freedom I get and how I have so many options on what to do if I go out. ” 16, female

The gradual increase in CYP's level of independence is directed by parents, guardians and educational settings. Yet, older teens exposed a conflict between expectations to 'grow up' and become a young adult and the level of independence they are given still being heavily influenced by what suits the adult or the institution. For example, while some felt they were treated as young adults at college or sixth form, where they had more responsibilities with some leniency, others felt they were still treated like children because they had to follow school rules.

It was acknowledged that adults may expect CYP to 'grow up fast' and be able to deal with whatever life throws at them, however this is not always realistic. Young people still need support to manage key changes in their lives, such as leaving secondary school or changing care placements, but also the more day-to-day challenges.

“ At school and at home, people will refer to me as 'an adult' when it suits them, depending on if my independence would benefit them. ” 16, female

“ I personally feel way more independent, I am not forced to do anything or treated like a child and I really like it. I feel like I am treated like a real person and trusted with more responsibility, which for me is a massive change from school and so much better. ” 16, trans male

“ I do feel more independent than being in Year 11 but I don't feel that I am treated as a grown up just yet as it feels like we are constantly baby sat in school. ” 16, male

“ I do feel more independent being at college but I feel that it has come quickly and it has been expected that I 'grow up' fast. I had lots of help and support at school but at college I didn't have much which is why I struggled with my Level 3 course at the start as it is a big jump. Independence does worry me as I still need help and support as much as when I was at school. I have a workbook from my social worker that is meant to help with independence. ” 17, female

Enablers and barriers of independence

Independence is key to developing life skills for the future and parents, guardians, schools and colleges try to increase CYP's independence in many ways.

Yet, there are influences that can prevent CYP from gaining more freedom, and the enablers and barriers are often interlinked:

Enablers

- Parents implementing household responsibilities
- Parents allowing freedom 'out and about'
- Access to public transport
- Technology, for example phone tracking
- Secondary school and colleges supporting transition to 'young adult'
- Ability to drive for older teens

Barriers

- Parents not implementing household responsibilities
- Parental fear for safety
- Unreliable public transport or reliance on parental transport
- Lack of money / difficulty finding a job
- Secondary school and colleges not supporting transition to 'young adult'
- Fear of making mistakes



male, 16

Parents take conscious steps to increase their children's independence

Parents reflect on the importance of increasing their children's independence in order to prepare them for the future.

Many parents implement steps and freedoms to build independence and sense of responsibility before secondary school. These include:

i. Gradually increasing freedom out of home

Accompanying younger children to school part-way, encouraging them to run small errands to a local shop or using public transport.

ii. Giving CYP responsibilities to help in the home

Including household chores such as emptying the dishwasher, washing up, food preparation and simple cooking, general cleaning and caring for pets. The extent of help varies, but girls appeared more able and reliable in the home. Unsurprisingly, parents say that they would like their children to do more, but some admit expectations can fluctuate and they often resort to getting housework done themselves. As such, CYP are often heavily reliant on their parents.



“ I like to cook because it's fun. I wish I always had time to cook. ” 14, female

“ I tidy my bed and bedroom. ” 9, female

“ At home I have to do the dishwasher with my older brother (13) and sometimes take the bins in. ” 11, male

“ My daughter (13) definitely doesn't do enough to help around the house compared to when I was her age. I suppose this is my fault, I might ask now and again for help with household chores but often just get on with it myself. ” 35-44, mum

iii. Utilising technology

When CYP are out, most parents track their children's location via mobile phones, giving parents some peace of mind. Some professionals believe that tracking real-time location can reduce young people's desire to take risks, but CYP appeared accepting of their location being tracked.

iv. Providing transportation

Whether this is public or 'parental' transport, to support independence, CYP need to get around easily. However, ability to access public transport depends on location, so CYP tend to be highly dependent on their parents to get them to places. This includes lifts to and from school, the train station, extra-curricular activities or entertainment with friends. This dependence on parental transport is both out of choice and necessity. Public transport can be unreliable or scarce - especially in rural areas - and parents can have safety concerns or are balancing multiple family commitments where time is of the essence. While parents realise this is not always conducive to building their children's independence, the alternative is too inconvenient and unreliable. Some parents try to make a conscious effort to let their children make their own way, yet many feel uneasy doing so. Public transport can prove even more difficult for CYP with special education needs or disabilities (SEND), for whom it can be unsuitable due to overstimulation or lack of accessibility. For older teens, the ability to drive improves their independence.



My eldest (13) is on his way back from the park. I was tempted to collect him as I often do but also know it's good for them to be independent and walk home. I hadn't set a time with him but did contact him via WhatsApp to check he was ok and used the phone tracker to check his location whilst he was out. ” 35-44, mum



This [more independence] is purely due to the invention of mobile phones. Both my children can go off to do things that I couldn't do as I had no way of contacting my parents to be collected. Also the problem of peer pressure means that I allow my kids to do things independently because their friends do. ” 45-54, mum



There needs to be better public transport for everyone - trains are only hourly and buses half the time don't turn up! We need these for college and in the future getting to work. ” 17, female



The poor transport options throughout Essex mean that options for fun and education are severely limited. Four out of five days during this week my bus has been late getting to and from school, meaning that I have to walk over 45 mins most days and this is worse when it rains. Currently fighting for a better service but apparently, it's not required due to a lack of use even though buses are packed every day! ” 16, male



The thought of the teenager using public transport to get to other parts of Essex is not even crossing my mind, but I know I used to go to other areas shopping with my friends by using the bus on our own. ” 35-44, mum



There is no one thinking about disability - invisible disability - not being able to cope with loud noises and crowds. I understand the tube is inaccessible for many with physical disabilities, too, and it's so unfair. ” 45-54, mum

Wider society doesn't always support CYP independence

While both CYP and adults reflect that independence is a good thing, there are some external influences, that may not have been as prevalent in previous generations, that can make this transition harder.

i. CYP face a higher level of scrutiny than previous generations

Technology is ever present and CYP have much less privacy than previous generations. Professionals spoke about young people's reluctance to make mistakes, as there is always a possibility of this being recorded, shared and not easily forgotten. Additionally, parents are conscious of how their children's actions and behaviour may be perceived by others and what may get shared and discussed on social media.

“ The one bad thing about being a kid is the fact I'm always watched (CCTV, phones, body cams etc.). ” **11, male**

“ CYP are not taking those safe risks to build their resilience so when you get a little bit older, you can make better choices. They just don't have the experiences that we maybe had when we were younger, because no one followed us around with a phone recording and taking pictures of us. Nothing's secret anymore. ” **youth worker**



female, 14

ii. Limited ability to earn money to participate in activities

Many CYP were given pocket money which was often linked to completing chores at home. Older teens were keen to earn their own money but finding a part-time job is very difficult (read more in [Aspirations and expectations](#)), likely influenced by changes to the National Minimum Wage and National Insurance contributions. Only a couple of young people worked, usually in a local café or pub. Parents were often key in identifying these jobs in the first place, through word of mouth or Facebook, a social media channel rarely used by young people. Overall, parents and professionals felt it is getting more difficult for young people to get a 'Saturday job' now, making it harder for them to develop their independence.

iii. Parents' concern over their children's safety

Professionals reflected that parents now seem to be more protective over their children. Parents are seeing the world as less safe than it once was and can be unsure about the right time to let go of their children, not necessarily realising that keeping children 'home' for longer is more to their detriment than benefit.



They probably feel they no longer have privacy and their life is open to scrutiny from others. Mistakes can be exposing and not easily forgotten. ” 45-54, mum



It's difficult to go out when no one is hiring for jobs or whoever is hiring doesn't want 16-year-olds, which makes it hard to get money. ” 16, female



It seems much harder these days for teenagers to get jobs. All the part-time jobs that would have been done when I was a teenager seem to be done by adults now. All our local paper rounds are adults which is a big difference in maybe 5/6 years? My older boys are 21 and 24 and easily got paper rounds at 13. My daughter is almost 15 and hasn't found anything - when I was her age, I had keys to a local shop and was in charge of opening up and running things for an hour before the owners arrived! ” 45-54, mum

Children and young people feel relatively safe when ‘out and about’

Despite safety concerns being a key barrier to independence, children and young people (CYP) in this research rarely spontaneously mentioned feeling safe or unsafe in ‘the real world’.

In fact, most 11 to 16-year-olds suggested they do spend some time independently, without the supervision of adults, and feel safe doing so. This included activities such as going to the park, engaging in sports, going shopping, seeing friends, going to the cinema, or pursuing hobbies specific to their interests.

In Essex, **65% of young people felt safe in their communities** when with friends in 2024. This is a decrease from 76% the year before.²⁴

CYP generally spend their time with family members or friends and are rarely alone. This contributes to them feeling relatively safe when out and about, particularly if they stick to well-lit areas with people they trust.

“ I much prefer the countryside to the city where I used to live. It is cleaner here and safer. The city was dirty and unsafe, with stabbings occurring weekly near my schools in my old area. ” **16, female**

“ I think that young people do not feel safe. They see a lot in the news and on social media and hear a lot at school - talks on knife crime, cyber bullying, drugs, gangs and such like. Even our local football club ran a talk on knife crime for 10 to 11-year-olds which whilst the intention is good, it must also make the children think there is a problem with knife crime. ” **45-54, mum**

The exception is for CYP with SEND, who feel less safe when out and about. They also tend to spend less time independently, when compared to their peers who have no additional needs.

Feelings of safety depend on location, activity and time of day

A few young people referred to criminal activity in their area or shared that they were being more vigilant in certain places following any well-reported incidents. Concerns were location specific and more common in urban than rural areas. CYP’s feelings of safety generally depended on the time of day and who they were with. Specific concerns were raised regarding ‘gangs hanging around’.

This was reflected in professional observations that children’s general awareness of dangers ‘in the real world’ resulted in fear for their own safety. For example, pupils were cited to be worried around knife crime, being hurt, stabbed or drawn into a gang, or commuting on the London tube or to specific locations following a spate of criminal incidents.

Parents' safety concerns can limit opportunities to be independent

Parents generally trust their own children when out and about.

Despite a perceived decline in community cohesion over the last few decades from parents, professionals felt that while communities are not as strong as they perhaps once were, they are coming back together again.

However, most parents still genuinely fear for their children's safety and feel pressure to protect them from a world that feels more dangerous than it did during their own childhoods. There are multiple drivers for these concerns:

Unprovoked escalation of situations

Some parents feel that disputes escalate too easily, fearing their child being 'in the wrong place at the wrong time' and worrying about negative reactions from other people or what may be shared on social media later. It is felt that the public can view groups of young people with suspicion rather than looking out for them.

Influence from external forces

Concerns stem from the increase in traffic and subsequent fears of CYP crossing roads or riding bikes. There are also concerns about criminal activity, including theft, violence, knife crime and gangs. Many believe levels of crime have increased, though some wonder how much it is inflated by the media.



I often see on the Facebook groups for my local area posts along the lines of 'just wanted to warn everybody there's a group of teenagers in the park'. No other background, context or any details to suggest the teenagers are causing a disturbance or being problematic in any way, just an automatic assumption that because there's a group of teenagers that this must be a bad thing. ” 45-54, mum



I find it more worrying letting my teenager into the town because of the changing nature of teenager and young adult arguments becoming more dangerous now. In my teenage times, if people had a falling out, then there might be a bit of a punch up... it's really scary that so many disturbances now end up with knives involved and so much greater and more dangerous consequences, even sometimes just for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. ” 45-54, mum



The challenge is keeping your young person safe. The world feels much scarier now. When kids get more independent - we worry about what we see on the news - danger of stabbings on the bus or near the station. Worry about crossing the road and cars and strangers who can be dangerous. Terrorists attacks at concerts and riots. ” 45-54, mum

Reluctance to let CYP spend time outside without supervision

For their own peace of mind and for the perceived safety of their children, parents often opt to enrol their children in organised activities and clubs rather than letting them spend time with friends independently.

These out-of-school activities are often highly structured and paid-for and parents typically provide transport to and from them. (Read more in [Activities and use of time](#).)

These activities provide CYP with somewhere safe to be and opportunities to develop skills. It was felt that these activities - especially those that are low cost or free - are particularly important for vulnerable children. While several of our adult participants had been 'latchkey kids' in their own childhoods, some parents were reluctant to leave their children at home alone, worrying about what their children may do in their absence.



I am more aware of risks to children today, so my children have more structured activities rather than free time unsupervised outside. I feel that my 9-year-old son has a lot of structured activities after school and at weekends... it requires a lot of commitment from myself and my husband to take him to these clubs. ” **45-54, mum**



They [CYP] are safer at the club than they would be doing a lot of things they do. Making mistakes is part of growing up, and that's how you learn, but we know a lot of the troubles some of our kids would get into if they were just out and about. And I think their parents do, too, which is why they send them here. ” **childcare provider**



Parents' 'overprotection' limits CYP's ability to build independence, life skills and resilience.

A reliance on organised activities means CYP have fewer opportunities to explore independently or with friends.

Most parents are aware of the negative impact of this, which include CYP having fewer opportunities to:

- Engage in independent play
- Get to know their community
- Develop social skills
- Identify and manage physical risks and safety
- Make mistakes and learn from them

They realise that CYP may not be taking semi-safe risks and trying out things which they would have tried when they were teenagers themselves. Adults were very conscious that this could result in naivety, or an inability to recognise, avoid or get out of dangerous situations, which might make CYP vulnerable to being taken advantage of. In some cases, this heightened parents' worry, creating a vicious cycle.

CYP themselves understand that, without a certain degree of freedom, they are missing out on vital experiences and learning opportunities.



You can't expect a young person to grow and be independent if all their life up until they are 18 you make all their decisions for them and keep rules surrounding their life. I have friends whose parents don't let them leave the house by themselves and if they are allowed out, they have only 1-3 hours. Although you worry about young people doing bad things when they go out, that is the best reason to let them. Let them make those mistakes and learn to be responsible. ” 16, male

Parents generally realise that ‘overprotection’ is not conducive to building independence, life skills and resilience. They also admit their approach is often in direct contrast to their own childhood experiences, where they were able to independently explore their areas with little or no adult supervision and their parents having limited knowledge of their whereabouts. However, with increased visibility and awareness of incidents through mainstream media, they find it difficult to let go and grant their children more autonomy, despite their fears being disproportionately higher than those of their children. Professionals also observed an increase in parental concerns over children’s safety.



“ I feel as a child I had more opportunities to play and spend time in my local community... I would spend summer evenings playing outside on my estate with friends unsupervised. We made up our own games and had so much fun. I learned so many social skills, plus how to manage physical risk and safety, plus all the benefits of playing out in the fresh air. ” **45-54, mum**

“ I had grown up playing responsibly but freely, with my friends around the neighbourhood, a bit unstructured, only guided by our parents’ advice, but it helped us to be resourceful and develop our own games, hobbies and pastimes! We used to trap insects, tiny fish, build dens, climb trees, fly kites, all on our own in the road while we knew our parents were always vigilant behind the windows. It taught us risk assessment, teamwork, and responsibility. We had that freedom to learn to judge right from wrong, danger from safety. We knew we had to be good kids or lose the privilege of playing outside. A challenge today! Probably the fact that the social pressure on teenagers is exacerbated by social media. ” **45-54, mum**

Wider safety concerns can make CYP more vulnerable

Most professionals have raised some concerns around the safety of young people today, some stating “young people are now more vulnerable than they have ever been”.

It was acknowledged that there are “so many families out there who are struggling and need help”. They highlighted the need for children to have stability, structure and clear boundaries in their lives to “feel safe” and “not get confused”. In the absence of stability at home, this needs to be provided at school and vice versa.

Professionals, that we engaged with during this research, commented on a variety of additional safety concerns that they observed through their professional capacity, that CYP, parents and schools may need more help navigating today:

- Decline in CYP mental health, increases in safeguarding concerns, rise in domestic abuse and self-harm.
- CYP are becoming more short-tempered and from an earlier age (including at primary school), which can result in emotional and physical outbursts.
- Some current music trends can be seen to glorify violence with their depictions of items such as knives, performed by artists with criminal histories, which CYP may not necessarily realise, or decide to overlook.

- Increase in child exploitation and ‘county lines’ posing a real risk to CYP from all backgrounds and from an earlier age, starting at primary school. Adults and schools would benefit from increased awareness of the signs and symptoms of exploitation to identify children who are being groomed.
- Rise in children not attending school due to exclusion or refusal to attend. These children are seen as particularly vulnerable and most at risk of being victims of criminal exploitation, as criminals tend to target alternative educational provisions.

It was felt that adults’ awareness of topics such as criminal exploitation, laws around nude images, online safety and supporting general mental wellbeing is lagging behind the pace at which these are developing. Professionals called for more adult education in this area, suggesting training could be delivered by young people themselves to achieve greater impact.



When you listen to the content or some of the music, to these artists it is and was everyday life when growing up because majority of them do have criminal records. But I think when younger people see this, they sort of overlook the fact that these people have been arrested. They see it as all being quite a cool thing to do and sort of a status thing. ” **health professional**

CYP have fewer opportunities to grow independence and resilience

Professionals spoke about independence in combination with the overall resilience of young people today.

They described CYP appearing less mature now. Covid-19 lockdowns were seen as contributing to this. According to professionals, young people's expectations are less rooted in the real world and are heavily influenced by online content. Consideration of the consequences of their actions has apparently decreased, too. As such, adults have a responsibility to prepare CYP for situations where their plans do not quite work out. While this is part of life, it can take young people by surprise and some struggle with coping and moving on.

This highlights the importance of CYP having more freedom to take semi-safe risks, to be able to make more informed choices as they get older. CYP with stability, security and positive friendships in their lives were described as much more resilient, adjusting and coping with situations that arise. Routines and healthy boundaries were also highlighted as important.

Overall, parents navigate a fine line between trusting their children and protecting them in a physical as well as online world, which they have not grown up in themselves.



We really have to drill the kids on having a plan A, plan B and plan C. That way if plan A and B go wrong, they've still got a safety net. Sometimes they just assume that something is going to happen, and then it's a shock when it doesn't. It's an important life lesson, as it's going to happen for the rest of their lives, such as going for interviews and not getting the job, but I don't think they are necessarily ready for it. ”

teacher, secondary school



Up until a few years ago, they were 'ready to move into adulthood', but Covid has had a massive negative impact on this. They lost two years of their lives and education, in terms of qualifications as well as social skills. They were having all that time at home and you can't guarantee that they were doing their school work or whether they were safe. A lot only had the internet and social media to go on to. Expectations of children and where they want to see themselves have probably been really impacted by that and we are seeing less children ready to move onto the adult stage of life. ”

health professional



I think that as a society we never quite get it in the middle. We always get it from one extreme to the other. We have gone from 'Man up' to 'It's OK to share how we feel', but we have forgotten to give children and young people the skills when things go wrong, because actually life goes wrong sometimes and no matter what you do, you can't change that people get sick, people die... It's life, so it's about not ignoring it, but giving children the tools to manage it themselves, rather than thinking that somebody has to do it for them. It's not that they expect people to do it for them, but they don't know how to do it, they lack awareness. ” **social prescriber**

▶ 4

Mental health and emotional wellbeing

Children and young people (CYP) are happiest when spending time with family or friends, engaging in hobbies and enjoying days out.

However, growing up today also brings a range of new pressures that CYP struggle with. Societal awareness and acceptance of mental health has increased and CYP are more open to discussing these issues than previous generations. Some struggle to manage their own emotional wellbeing but adequate support is not always readily available. If young people's mental health concerns are not addressed, more CYP are at risk of mental health issues persisting into adulthood and having long-term implications for their lives.

This section covers:

- ▶ Managing emotional wellbeing
- ▶ Increased prevalence of worries and pressures
- ▶ Rise in mental health awareness and acceptance
- ▶ Greater awareness and acceptance bring their own challenges
- ▶ The role of schools in supporting CYP's mental health



Managing emotional wellbeing

Unsurprisingly, children and young people (CYP) expressed that they are at their happiest when spending time with their family and friends, pursuing hobbies and interests such as sport, arts and crafts, gaming, and going on days out.

CYP are generally open to addressing and managing their feelings through a range of approaches including confiding in family, friends and teachers, playing sport, or utilising the escapism of online life. Some CYP find listening to music helps them regulate their emotions.

Yet, some CYP struggle to open up about their emotions and bottle them up instead. It was cited that the younger generations may find it increasingly difficult to have open conversations about their feelings due to being used to communicating predominantly from behind a screen.

It was also noted that CYP with additional needs, including SEND, can struggle to regulate their emotions. Certain environments or situations may act as a trigger. As a result, they may need additional support to help manage emotions effectively. Having a disability or additional needs may also impact CYP's self-esteem and they may feel different and isolated from their peers. This can be heightened if they also experience ongoing wellbeing issues such as anxiety or depression.

“ Maybe it's a Gen Z thing but people my age really struggle with opening up about feelings and having serious conversations. I'm not sure why, but if I had to put a reason on it, it would probably be because we are so used to communicating on our phones that some topics (I would argue the most important ones) are very difficult to talk about. It gets difficult because once you get used to saying how you feel behind a screen, it gets harder saying it in person because it's not as easy when you see others' reactions and hear their opinions. ” 17, female

“ I think children are very good at hiding their emotions especially when it's school related, we never get a whole story on their day. ” 45-54, dad

“ The things that would make my children upset or annoyed would be anything. It's really dependent on how regulated they are. They both have PDA [Pathological Demand Avoidance] part of autism, so asking them to do something that they don't want to do will trigger them. ” 45-54, mum

“ He (16) struggles every day with his special needs/disabilities and is aware that he is different to others. This has a massive impact on his self-esteem and self-worth. ” 45-54, mum

Increased prevalence of worries and pressures

While young people generally focus on the things that make them happy, consistent patterns of worry and pressures emerged through the research:

- **Preserving friendships, being liked and fitting in with peers** - This may not be a new concern for CYP, but social media has changed interactions for this generation, meaning there is now no break. (Read more in [Technological advancements and the rise of social media](#).)
- **Image and appearance** - Social media creates a window for constant comparison with peers, celebrities and influencers, who with their edited and filtered images contribute to creating unrealistic beauty standards and expectations for CYP to live up to. (Read more in [Relationships and influences](#).)
- **Increased educational pressure** - Many CYP worry about their school performance, tests and homework, feeling that they are constantly being evaluated. Professionals spoke of extensive focus on academic subjects and achieving good grades, with less attention paid to supporting children to thrive and flourish more generally. (Read more in [Education and the school environment](#).)



I think they worry about friendships. That hasn't changed since I was a child. However, with phones it can follow them home. When I was a child, once you were home, that was it but now the messaging can carry on. ” **35-44, mum**



They're worried about what they look like. I know everybody says 'Oh, that's always been the case' but not like it is now. Now it's worse than it's ever been. ” **social prescriber**



I think school feels a lot more competitive and stressful. School staff are under more pressure and the outcome is stress being passed on to the child. ” **45-54, mum**

- **Making mistakes or getting things wrong** - Parents and professionals reflected how social media fuels this. There is now less freedom to make mistakes without scrutiny. Mistakes can be recorded and shared online, staying with the young person, rather than being forgotten. (Read more in [Independence and safety](#).)
- **Increased awareness and exposure to world events** - Technological advancements mean that, compared to previous generations, CYP can more easily access information through various online platforms, apps and television. As a result of greater exposure, CYP express concern over environmental issues, crime and safety, the cost-of-living crisis, Covid-19 and political events and worry more about their future implications. (Read more in [Awareness of adult concerns and desensitisation](#).)



I get upset or annoyed when I can't do something right the first try, I know it's silly and I have spoken to people about it and I'm getting better at it but it still makes me feel sad sometimes. ” 14, female



If you muck up it is documented in a way that you can never forget, which is pretty harsh because I think teenage years are for experimenting and mucking up... I still think they're doing that, but their outcomes will be harsher. ” youth worker



Rise in mental health awareness and acceptance

Some CYP reported struggling to cope with increasing pressures and felt that their mental health was suffering.

To a certain extent this is being exacerbated by the use of social media. CYP may struggle with issues such as anxiety, depression, eating disorders or self-harming. Based on their observations, parents and professionals felt that mental health challenges have become more prevalent among this generation of young people, compared to the previous. This observation is supported by national evidence which shows an increase in school pupils with social, emotional and mental health needs between 2015/2016 to 2022/2023 across Greater Essex, to 3.3% in Essex, 3.1% in Thurrock and 2.9% in Southend-on-Sea²⁵.

Alongside the rise in reported mental health challenges there has also been a reported shift in attitudes towards mental health, with increased awareness and acceptance. Whether the observed increase in mental health issues is due to increased awareness and thus greater identification, or an increase in genuine cases, continues to be debated.



I've seen a huge, huge increase in ill mental health in young people, lack of confidence, lack of self-esteem, anxiety, depression. Especially since COVID, but even prior to that, a huge shift and a huge amount of young people that seem to be having those struggles. ” **youth worker**



There's lots of children that do seem to suffer with their mental health a lot more than they used to. That may be partly because there's more awareness around it. Which is obviously a good thing, that it's being picked up more. ” **childcare provider**



Looking back, I definitely think that people didn't recognise it like they recognise it now. Or there's much more of it now, I don't know. ” **youth worker**

Parents today encourage their children to speak up and talk about their feelings and mental health, whereas in previous generations CYP may have been expected to be 'seen and not heard'. CYP today appear to be more aware of mental health challenges, open to addressing them, and asking for help.



“ The things that I am trying to do differently when parenting my children as opposed to how I was parented is to show empathy and emotion. To demonstrate that it's ok to have emotions and to talk about how you are feeling and also to look after your mental health and wellbeing. ” **45-54, mum**

“ I know my parents very much loved me - but I don't think they focused on my 'wellbeing' as much as I do with my kids. They were from the generation of 'stiff upper lip' and to get on with things. ” **45-54, mum**

“ People are just more comfortable when talking about mental health... what their feelings are and how their thoughts are. And they're more open to saying 'I'm struggling with my mental health now'. ” **youth worker**

“ The positive thing about all the information is that children are a lot more aware of social issues, they are a lot more inclusive of other children, have a lot more understanding around neurodiversity and the importance of wellness. The children we work with are more open to speaking out about how they're feeling, and they know who and how to ask for help. ” **community connector**

Greater awareness and acceptance bring their own challenges

Greater awareness and acceptance around mental health can seem like a positive change, yet bring their own challenges, not just in terms of the mismatch between demand and supply of mental health support.

i. Risk of 'self-diagnosis' among CYP

Increased openness surrounding mental health difficulties can lead to risk of self-diagnosis. Professionals spoke about how mental health conditions are often miscommunicated or misinterpreted when they are being discussed by CYP. This can result in incorrect self-diagnosis due to a lack of understanding, when in reality CYP might just be experiencing low mood or mood swings, which are part of everyday life. They may also misuse acronyms and thus misunderstand specific conditions, for example referring to BPD as bipolar disorder, whereas it refers to borderline personality disorder.

Some parents and professionals reflected on whether increased openness around mental health could be driving a trend among CYP to seek out a mental health diagnosis as if it's something desirable and part of their sense of identity.

“All her friends seem to have anxiety in some form. It's now 'cool' to have a label or to be anxious. But maybe it's just that people are more self-aware and talk about it more.”
35-44, mum

“They're using words like 'depressed'. They're not... Depression can only be clinically diagnosed. You can feel low, but their language is very different as well.” **social prescriber**

“On TikTok there's a lot of people self-diagnosing and people are really interested in having certain diagnoses. Bipolar disorder seems to be the golden diagnosis at the moment. 'I flip from one mood to another' - which obviously isn't bipolar.” **health professional**

“Obviously, there's always been mental health difficulties, but the prevalence is nothing like it is now. There were much less children identifying, or almost even wanting to have mental health problems. I see that as part of a sense of identity really. When people start seeking out things like that, it's identity based.” **health professional**

ii. Missing the ‘middle ground’

Despite the increase in mental health awareness and acceptance, professionals reflected that a ‘middle ground’ is missing. They suggested that we need to focus more on teaching CYP coping techniques to build resilience and supporting them to manage everyday difficulties as well as more challenging situations. Several professionals reflected that some CYP today do not cope well when things don’t go to plan, and struggle to take an alternative path.

“ There is a lot of young people saying ‘I have mental health issues’ and you wouldn’t have got that 40 years ago. They would have just picked themselves up and dusted themselves down and go ‘Oh well, I’ll try again.’ ” **youth worker**

“ We have gone from telling people to ‘put their big girl knickers on’ or ‘man up’, which was wrong, to saying ‘it’s okay to cry’, ‘it’s okay to feel down’, ‘it’s okay not to be okay’. It seems we have missed the gap in between, which is teaching resilience of not being ok, character building. Life goes wrong sometimes, and no matter what you do, you can’t change that... So, it’s about not ignoring it. It’s about giving the children the tools to manage it themselves. ” **social prescriber**

“ Those that have that real high expectation of what they should do, when things don’t go their way, they just can’t manage it and that’s when things spiral for them in terms of their mental health. They have that ‘This is what I want to do, and this is how I’m going to do it’. If that doesn’t go to plan, they don’t have the ability to take the next route. ” **youth worker**

“ CYP have instant access to support when required and to find out things that will help them emotionally. ” **45-54, mum**



iii. Insufficient mental health support to meet increased demand

Parents and professionals both recognised that there is more mental health support and resources available compared to previous generations. There are also many free support resources online, for example chatlines and crisis lines which CYP can access instantaneously.

Whilst this is a positive shift, it was acknowledged that the support available does not match the increased demand. It was recognised that support organisations are overwhelmed with the number of cases and may have long waiting lists. Some families are frustrated and feel let down by services after experiencing long wait times, repeatedly seeking help, or deeming the support unhelpful. Some families may instead seek help privately, which can be expensive. Many felt there is a greater need for professionals who have existing trusting relationships with CYP to have better knowledge around how to support CYP in the moment when an issue arises. This includes knowledge around what to say, what not to say and how to recognise potential warning signs of larger problems, or even exploitation.



There is a lot more support regarding mental health nowadays, where it wasn't really spoken about when I was growing up. I think we live in a much more open world now which is beneficial for our children. ” **35-44, mum**



When your mental health is bad there is no one you can go to without having to wait for weeks or even years. And then they might say it's your problem, so you waited all that time for nothing. ” **13, female**



I do think so many children have anxiety and mental health problems nowadays and that the help isn't available. ” **45-54, mum**



It's still not easy to get mental health treatment unless you pay private and is very expensive. ” **45-54, mum**



It just seems like a very difficult kind of situation at the minute, we've noticed a massive growth in the amount of people being diagnosed with things. The awareness around it is good, some people are getting the right help but there is so much awareness that not everyone can get the help because all the organisations are overrun with the demand and are now seen as failing as well. ” **childcare provider**

The role of schools in supporting CYP's mental health

There is more mental health support available in schools now, compared to previous generations, though schools may take different approaches to mental health support.

There are schools that have an allocated counsellor or therapist, meaning some CYP can access support in their educational setting. In some schools, CYP can be trained as mental health advocates or mentors who help their peers to access support.

However, professionals, parents and CYP all reflected on how support in schools does not always work in practice. Some issues included a lack of understanding of mental health and SEND needs among school staff, CYP not being able to ask for help discreetly and in private, and having limited time dedicated towards mental health sessions. For some CYP, school may actually be a source of pressure and stress, rather than being seen as a potential source of help. As such, not all schools were seen to sufficiently meet CYP's needs. (Read more in [Education and the school environment](#).)

“ The best thing about being a young person today is that we are well supported when it comes to our health and wellbeing. My school is great and we have a student support centre which is open for all students. ” **13, female**

“ Some schools are giving older children the opportunity to take on more responsibility and act as mentors to younger children. That's been absolutely amazing because while you may have an adult saying 'come on, let's get you some support, we know you are going through this', now you've actually got someone who is around the same age group that you can identify with. ” **health professional**

“ We have lots on why mental health is important that it feels bad to ask for help, but not much about ways you can ask for help without seeing a teacher in a public place to ask. Which leads to extremely poor mental health among children especially my age as you near adulthoods. ” **16, male**

“ Our daughter has emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) and school trauma, so our biggest challenge has been in supporting this and accessing the right help prior to diagnosis. The lack of support from school and professionals has created the most stress, illness and crisis in our home. ” **45-54, mum**

Some reported that mental health struggles among CYP had resulted in some having reduced timetables or homeschooling to help them cope better. Some parents believe that homeschooling is their only option as they feel that the school system is not always conducive to supporting their child's mental health or specific needs. Many claimed that there was a lack of wellbeing support in schools. The new government-enforced attendance rules were also mentioned as a factor in several families' decision to begin homeschooling, since the school was no longer able to authorise time off for poor mental health.



“ Kids of today are having to grow up a lot quicker, in a harder world with a lot more external influences... it makes it difficult to support children through this jungle. ”
teacher, secondary school

“ My daughter (13) doesn't currently do a whole day at school due to being overwhelmed and very anxious. I also feel there is way too much homework on children now and should be limited. ” **45-54, dad**

“ Due to new government attendance rules that came into effect 19 August 2024, her school said they couldn't authorise my daughter (12) having time off of school due to anxiety and any time off would be marked as unauthorised and we were likely to get fined. ” **35-44, mum**

“ We're seeing a lot of increase in children that are not in education or are on a part-time timetable. ” **youth worker**

Part 2: Day-to-day experiences of children and young people



This section explores the everyday realities of children and young people (CYP) - what they get up to in their free time, the people that are most important to them, their school life and their hopes for the future.

This section covers the following broad themes:

- ▶ 1. Activities and use of free time
- ▶ 2. Relationships and influences
 - ▶ Family
 - ▶ Friends
 - ▶ Wider influence on young people
 - ▶ Image and appearance
- ▶ 3. Education and the school environment
- ▶ 4. Aspirations and expectations

▶ 1

Activities and use of free time

Children and young people (CYP) value the free time they spend with family and friends and pursuing personal interests.

Parents and CYP are consistently trying to strike a balance between activities such as gaming and social media, and engaging in 'real world' activities through organised clubs or sports, other physical activities or eating out and spending time with friends and family.

This section covers:

- ▶ CYP are happiest when free to do 'what they want to do'
- ▶ Activities centred around technology
- ▶ Activities centred around sport and physical activity
- ▶ Participation in a wide variety of organised activities
- ▶ Wraparound care at school is important especially for working families
- ▶ Eating out has become the norm for some families



male, 16

CYP are happiest when free to do ‘what they want to do’

Unsurprisingly, CYP expressed that they were happiest when spending time ‘doing what they want to do’.

This includes:

- Spending time with family and friends.
- Pursuing hobbies and interests such as sports, arts and crafts, gaming, listening to music, watching TV and films, cooking and engineering.
- Going on days out, such as shopping, going to the theatre, theme parks, museums, parks and the beach.

Conversely, CYP disliked doing chores and ‘boring’ tasks, having their devices taken away or screentime being limited, or losing a game or sporting match.

While these kinds of activities, particularly day trips during holiday periods, were common with the families participating in this research, this may not be typical for all families across Essex, particularly those from lower income households.



Things are expensive. Things need to be affordable for all children. If we took the kids to an escape room, it would cost us £100, which I think is too expensive. ” 35-44, dad

female, 17



female, 13



male, 11



Activities centred around technology

CYP today often rely on technology for many of their leisure activities and spend a lot of time using digital devices or being online.

Popular activities include:

- **Online gaming (particularly for boys)** - Some frequently played games include Fortnite, Roblox and FIFA. CYP particularly enjoy playing online games with their friends, which offer a new and alternative way to communicate.
- **Watching films and TV programmes** - Watching on streaming platforms such as Netflix, as well as watching YouTube videos, listening to music and using various social media platforms. Some CYP created their own TikTok videos.
- **Accessing information to expand on their interests** - For many CYP, technology provides new learning opportunities to enhance skills and personal hobbies. For example, accessing online drawing tutorials, or following successful sports personalities or entrepreneurs, whose skills they admire and want to learn from.

While CYP enjoy device-based activities, parents express concern over excessive screen time and spending too much time indoors compared to their own childhoods. As a result, parents often try to impose time limits and restrictions on the use of technology (Read more in [Technological advancements and the rise of social media.](#))

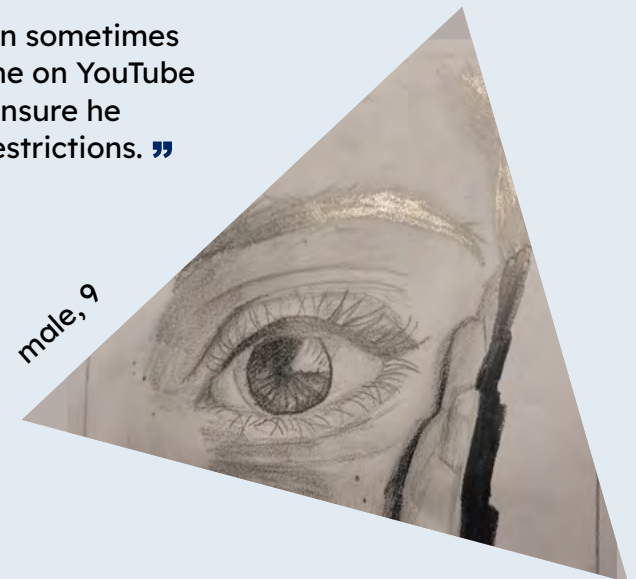
“ I like playing Fortnite on my PS4 with my brother and cousin. ” **10, female**

“ I like to watch a variety of different films and different genres. My favourite are comedy and action. ” **13, male**

“ Music makes me feel happy because it’s like you’re in your own little world. ” **14, female**

“ She uses her tech to support her love of art and drawing, which isn’t something I have any talent in, so I am happy for her to watch tutorials and complete sessions. ” **45-54, mum**

“ I feel my son (9) can sometimes spend too much time on YouTube or Switch unless I ensure he sticks to our time restrictions. ” **45-54, mum**



Activities centred around sport and physical activity

Sport plays a large part in the lives of CYP within the research, with most taking part in a variety of different sporting activities.

This is consistent with other research which shows sport being among the main ways CYP in Essex spend their free time^{26,27} and team sports being the most common among secondary aged pupils.

Although there was some overlap among sporting activities for both boys and girls, boys most frequently mentioned football, followed by cricket, basketball, golf, mountain biking and karate. Girls tended to mention sports such as swimming, dancing or majorettes.

“ I am very sporty, I like playing football, go swimming, karate. I also go to a drama club as I like talking and play the guitar. **” 9, male**

Alongside sporting activities, CYP also spoke about spending time outdoors with family and friends, as an alternative and free way to being physically active. For example, going to the park or walking their dogs. CYP living in rural areas of Essex enjoyed their proximity to the natural environment. Physical education (PE) was typically mentioned as one of children's favourite subjects at school.

Barriers to physical activity

Although many CYP in the research expressed a strong interest in sport and physical activity, there are still barriers that prevent them from taking part more frequently, or at all:

1. The cost of organised activities

Many young people took part in sports via clubs or organised activities, which have cost implications and can be out of reach for CYP from lower income families.

2. Competing with sedentary activities

There is a contrast between CYP discussing their engagement in physical or sporting activities, and the observed increase in time of CYP participating in sedentary activities such as gaming or watching YouTube. Many parents commented that their children spend too much time on digital devices, taking time away from offline activities – an option that didn't exist for previous generations.

3. Lack of alternatives to organised sports

Some cited that there was lack of alternative exercise opportunities available for CYP who are not interested in or do not enjoy playing sport.

4. Lack of motivation

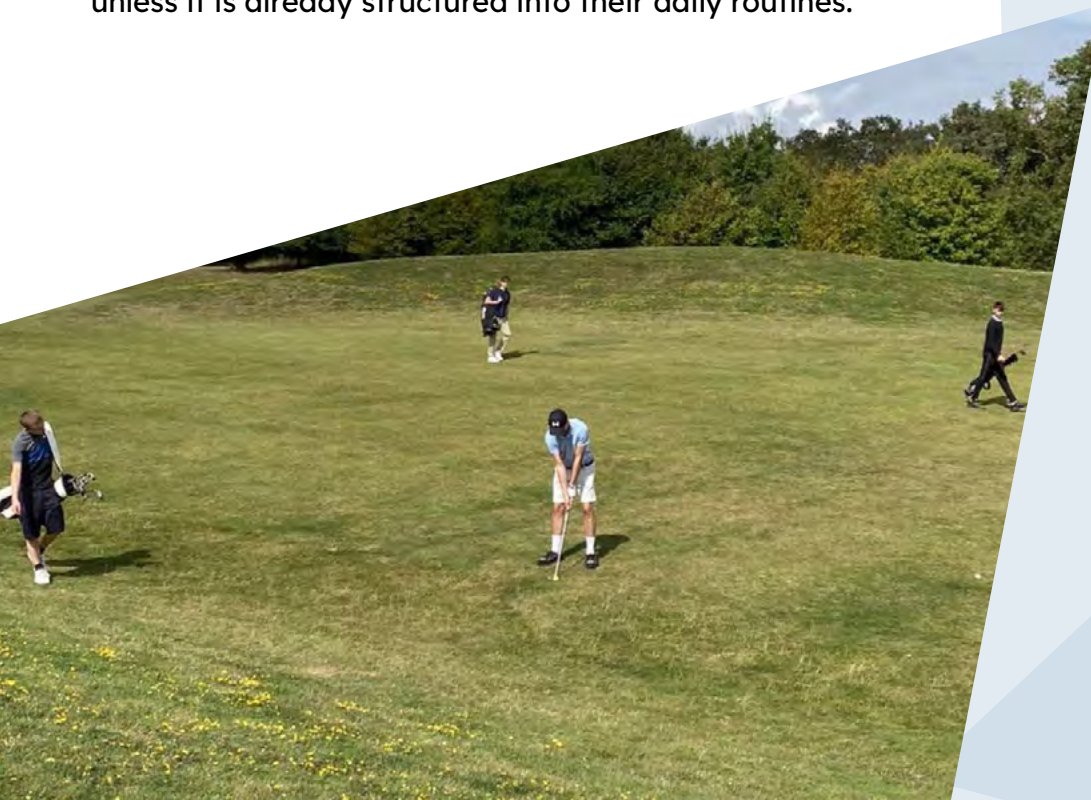
Some parents reflected that they would like their children to take more responsibility for their physical health and often need to encourage them to be more physically active. This is especially true during the school holidays when organised sports clubs aren't running, highlighting how for some CYP physical activity is not a priority unless it is already structured into their daily routines.



She doesn't enjoy sport and finds it hard to prioritise exercise. There aren't many options for her age. To attend all the classes at sport club she needs to be 16. I think if there was Pilates or similar locally, she could do that. ” **45-54, mum**



I feel that they don't do enough physical activity, particularly in the school holidays. In term time they will have PE during the day and then they both play for football teams, so they have training during the week and matches at the weekend. In the holidays these activities aren't running so they don't do as much activity. ” **35-44, mum**



Participation in a wide variety of organised activities

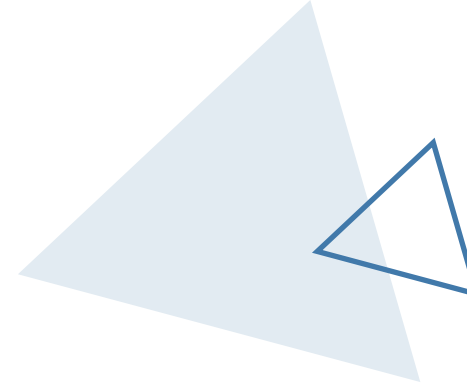
Many CYP engage in a range of different organised activities including sporting activities, drama, performing arts, Scouts or even horse riding.

These provide CYP with considerable stimulus – CYP appear busy and even oversubscribed, rather than bored.

Parents reflected that the large variety of different activities available for CYP provides opportunities to explore a wide range of interests. These activities also go beyond the typical gender stereotypes that may have existed in previous generations.

However, there are challenges to having lots of organised activities available:

- With so many ‘paid for’ options, there now seems to be fewer free activities available. Many parents commented on the lack of youth clubs compared to their own childhoods. Additionally, CYP commented there was little to do in their local area without spending money. CYP from financially disadvantaged households miss out on a lot of these opportunities, resulting in a growing gap between the ‘haves’ and ‘have-nots’.
- Many of these activities and clubs are generally aimed at younger children and there isn’t the same variety of activities for older teenagers to get involved in, with some reflecting on the lack of activities in their local area (Read more in [Looking ahead: Supporting childhood in Essex](#)).



- CYP today are spending more time in organised, structured activities than independently ‘hanging out’ or playing with friends. This limits their ability for free play and to develop independence and manage risky situations. (Read more in [Independence and safety](#)).
- Some reported that CYP with special education needs and physical disabilities (SEND) may be restricted by the types of organised activities they are able to take part in. Suitable alternatives were seen to be lacking.
- Parents feel under pressure to ‘keep up’, which can be difficult given the time, cost and need to transport children to and from activities. Parents can feel as if their lives revolve around their children’s busy schedules.

Youth workers reflected on the range of sessions that were run in the past, such as youth clubs, drop-in centres and summer programmes, which used to be fully funded. While these continue to exist, mostly delivered by community and voluntary groups, the provision was described as much reduced compared to before, a view shared by many parents. However, awareness of what is available is limited, often reliant on parents finding out about the opportunities, and then encouraging their children to attend. Many CYP don’t seem to access these provisions at all.

“ There are so many opportunities for children now, so many sports and new activities to try. If you have an interest, there is a way of exploring that and taking it further outside of school. I am sure this is a pressure on some parents depending on their time and resources. I feel fortunate to be able to give my children as many opportunities as possible to try new things and go new places. I think this is different to my childhood where it was a bit more standard - boys did football and girls did dancing or gymnastics. There was cubs/brownies but I don't think a lot else. ” **35-44, mum**

“ I feel there are more opportunities, such as self-defence and cooking classes. However, most are chargeable and I think it is a pity there are few youth clubs available anymore. ”
45-54, mum

“ There was definitely more money in youth services before, but I don't necessarily think there is less for young people. Certain young people will go to certain groups, encouraged by their parents. And there's a whole lot of young people out there that don't access youth services at all. Sometimes we've got free projects in the summer, we're putting it out there and you still can't drag them along to it. If parents hear about it, they're more likely to get the young people. If you tell the young people, they might forget they have signed up. ” **youth worker**

“ A lot more activities are 'organised' for children. You arrange to meet another family at the park or go somewhere rather than children all playing out in the street/park together making their own fun and own rules. When I was their age, you played out with children from your street and had to find the natural hierarchy between different children, without parents being called upon to help resolve issues. ” **35-44, mum**

“ I believe that there is not enough out there for teenagers. Where is somewhere that they can go and meet up with friends that's not walking around the streets or in each other's houses? Youth clubs, under 18 discos, more music venues, trampoline places for 13yrs+ or at least a session for them, swimming sessions for 13yrs+ etc. Maybe introduce a basic car maintenance course for 16yrs+ as lots would be looking to drive and valuable to know how to look after your vehicle. ”
45-54, mum

“ Disabled children are still not able to freely access many activities because a lot of people do not consider them in the planning and this is a challenge. ” **45-54, mum**

“ From the point of view of community groups and services, I can't see there's ever been as many different opportunities available. But a lot of opportunities come with being able to finance them. If you've got the money to take part in everything, there is every single thing that you could think of available for a young person to do. ”
community connector

Wraparound care at school is important, especially for working families

Wraparound care offered at schools, while not needed by all, was highly valued, especially by working parents.

Provision varied school to school, but most schools attended by participants offered a breakfast club and some form of after school provision, including sports, art, music and revision sessions. This offered some balance between different activities for CYP and provided childcare around parents' working schedules. Most participants had taken up some of these options at some point in their child's school life, especially at primary school. Awareness of what is available, as well as provision itself, is limited at some schools.



I don't know what the secondary school offers. My son's primary has a breakfast club, but I have heard there is a long waiting list for it. Thankfully I don't need to utilise it as my work hours are flexible. I did use the breakfast and after-school club at the primary school my son previously attended and that was a lifesaver at the time, otherwise I would not have been able to do the job I was in. ” **35-44, mum**



Eating out has become the norm for some families

Many families we engaged with seemed to frequently eat takeaways or go out for meals, with some opting for this multiple times a week.

CYP mentioned enjoying fast food options or restaurants such as McDonald's, Greggs, Nando's, Prezzo and Bill's. Eating out was seen as a form of entertainment, especially during the school holidays. This contrasts with parents' reflections on their own childhoods, when eating out was more of a novel experience or a treat. This has now become the norm for those who can afford to do so.

female, 16



If I was doing something with a new friend, I would take them to McDonald's because everyone likes McDonald's.”

11, male



The only young people you will now find 'hanging out' outside, in parks or fields, are often those that don't have enough money to be out on Friday night having a Nando's and taking a picture of it for Instagram.”

youth worker

female, 15



In addition to eating out, parents and professionals both reflected on a greater reliance on convenience food options, such as ultra processed foods and frozen foods, due to:

i. Ease and convenience

Parents considered how these food options are convenient for busy working families who are pressed for time to prepare home cooked meals.

ii. Lower cost

Professionals reflected on how convenience foods are an appealing option for low-income families on a restricted food budget who may not be able to afford healthier options. Several professionals expressed concerns for children living in poverty, who don't always have access to nutritious food. Low-income families may struggle not only to provide breakfast, but also to offer a balanced diet overall, which can have wider knock-on effects on health and wellbeing. Some would benefit from having more opportunities to learn about food preparation in a way that feels accessible and relevant to them.

A health professional commented on the increased levels of childhood obesity, to which unhealthy eating and convenience foods contribute, with subsequent negative impacts on overall physical health. This is reflected in national indicators which demonstrate an increase in the proportion of 10 to 11-year-olds classified as overweight and obese over the last 15 years across Essex²⁸.



I think ultra processed foods are incredibly dangerous in terms of health. 'Children's food' didn't exist, but has been invented to once again make money from children and families. There is a huge proliferation of packaged snacks and foods, often with healthy messages which aren't so true when you dig below the surface. Families are busy, and it feels like people have less time to cook and less knowledge of how to cook. When I was a child, we ate what was then normal food - home cooking, seasonal, simple. There wasn't the explosion of fast food chains and restaurants there are now. **” 35-44, mum**



As the years have gone on, childhood obesity has definitely shot through the roof. There's a lot more support being put in place for the children who might have a high BMI or whose family can't afford to do healthier meals. **” health professional**



Those experiencing poverty are having a lot more problems with health, diet, wellbeing, sleep, general nutrition and things. All of that has a knock-on effect. **” community connector**

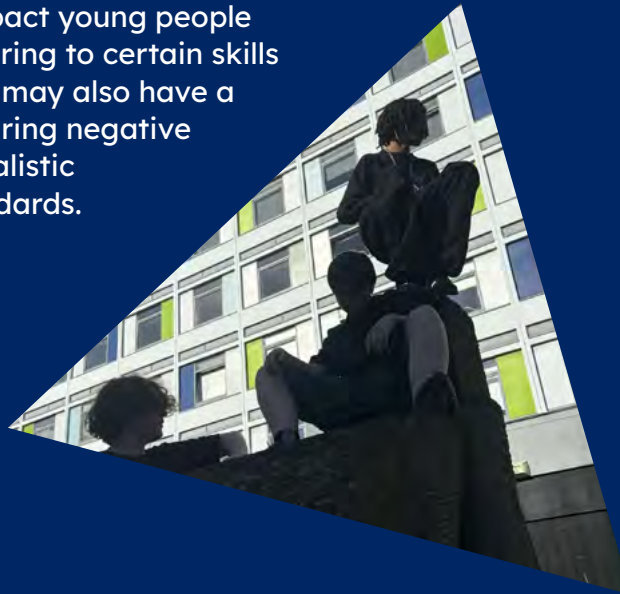
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Relationships and influences



The importance of family and friends in providing love, support and inspiration is a recurring theme among children and young people (CYP).

Spending time together is important, but family time can be limited due to parents' working commitments. As young people grow older, they are increasingly being influenced by wider friendship groups and personalities seen online, such as sports personalities and social media influencers. These can impact young people positively, in terms of aspiring to certain skills or careers, however some may also have a negative influence, by sharing negative views or showcasing unrealistic lifestyles and beauty standards.



This section covers:

Family

- ▶ Family remains central to CYP's lives as a source of love, trust, support and inspiration
- ▶ Working families sometimes have less 'family time'
- ▶ Family support networks are changing
- ▶ Developments in parenting approaches and styles

Friends

- ▶ Friends are central to children and young people's lives
- ▶ Parents worry about the quality of friendships versus the quantity

Wider influences on children and young people

- ▶ CYP look up to their family and people in their immediate circles
- ▶ External influences on CYP come from sport and social media

Image and appearance

- ▶ Image and appearance are key aspects of CYP identity, especially for girls
- ▶ Social media fuels unrealistic beauty standards

Family

Family remains central to CYP's lives as a source of love, trust, support and inspiration

The importance of family remains central to CYP's lives.

Family is the key source of love, care, support, trust, understanding, encouragement, appreciation and numerous other qualities. The CYP in the research expressed deep affection and admiration for various family members. It is with their family that many CYP feel they can be themselves and feel understood. Parents and grandparents are often seen as role models, but so are siblings. Siblings tend to be the main companions for having fun, whether just having a laugh, playing sports or gaming together.

The majority of our CYP participants came from loving and supportive homes, whether birth families or foster families, with high levels of trust. They clearly enjoyed spending time together. Parents made an effort to jointly do activities that they all enjoyed, such as playing sports, or going on days out.

However, it needs to be acknowledged that not all children grow up in ideal households and not all view their family as the main source of support. Professionals highlighted that there are lots of children who have strained relationships with their parents whose time at home is difficult, as well as many families who need support more generally.

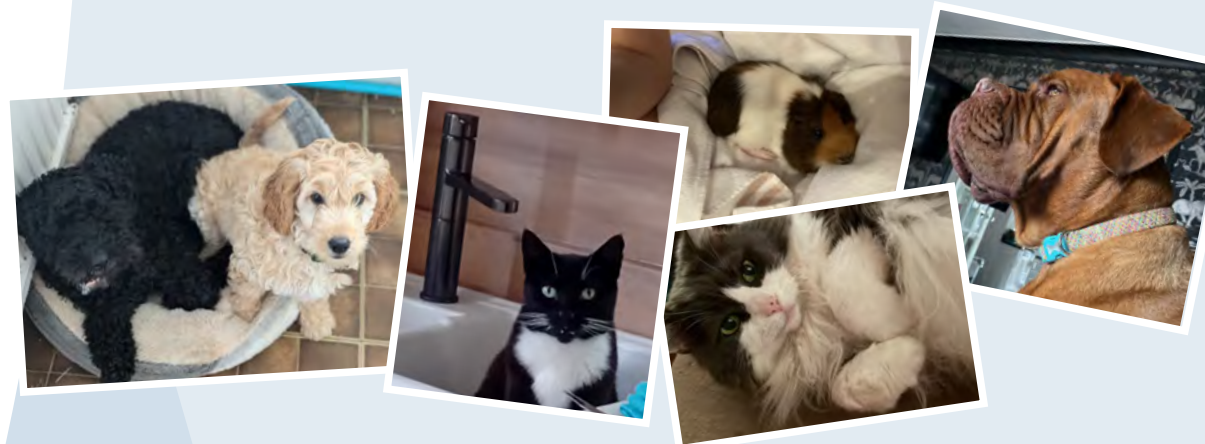
Additionally, many CYP had a family pet – their dogs, cats as well as guinea pigs were an important source of comfort, happiness and fun, and were loved very much.

“ My dad inspires me to do better with everything I do and not do half a job. He makes me feel stressed, happy and sometimes bored. He helps me to be more independent and learn the value of money. ” **13, male**

“ I'm inspired by mum as she is very hard working. I would like to be like my mum and dad and sister as they are all wonderful, I love everyone for the way they are. ” **12, female**

“ CYP still have parental relationship issues, struggle at home, find it really hard. But at school they are fine because they have that routine. School is something where they can just get on with it. ” **health professional**

“ There are so many children and parents out there who are struggling an awful lot with coping with everything, who need help and support that doesn't come with a price tag. There are endless queues for things. There are lots of things that can be done to help parents feel that they're not on their own. ” **teacher, primary school**



Working families sometimes have less ‘family time’

Family time can be limited for some, especially since it is now common for both parents to be working, usually for financial reasons.

Professionals viewed it as a key development in how families live and acknowledged the pressure this puts on the family. This was not the case at the start of most of the professionals’ careers, and parents also reflected they often had their mothers stay at home while they were children.

Families need to juggle their work commitments with childcare and other tasks. This is even more challenging for single parents and if family or friend support is limited. The direct consequence of this is CYP having less time at home with their parents. They spend it in organised activities or other wraparound care arrangements instead (read more in [Activities and use of free time](#)). Limited family time can also limit the opportunities for the family to develop and maintain wider networks in their local communities.



“ Then we chilled while daddy did work. Dad has to work so much and almost never can play with us at home because he has work work work. ” **10, female**

“ The main difference in upbringing is that both myself and husband work full-time in quite demanding jobs and therefore my daughter was in some sort of childcare for nearly 10 hours each day from the age of 6 months old until 6, whereas my mum didn’t work until I was in secondary school and then only part-time until I was much older. ” **45-54, mum**

“ I feel bad as I work all day, then come the evening I don’t have the energy to do ‘activities with him’. When I grew up my mum was a stay at home mum and always had time for me. ” **45-54, mum**

“ There is an increase in working families, who then don’t have that time to get to know their neighbours, to make friends and things like that. Maternity leave for lots of people is lovely, but a short time to make a little network of people, and then they’re back at work, they are not sharing care of the children. Whereas when there wasn’t a cost-of-living crisis and going back many years, a lot of a lot more families could afford for maybe one person to stay at home or to work part-time. So then people had that opportunity to build a support network of friends and wider family. ” **community connector**

Many of our CYP participants had either one or both parents working full-time, with some having part-time or term-time only arrangements. Thus, there was usually one parent in the position to step in if the other was working longer hours or was away from home.

Most of our parent participants appeared to have relatively flexible jobs and were making the most of these flexible arrangements. Many were able to work from home, take children to and from school, take them to their extra-curricular activities, fulfil general household tasks and have a family mealtime at the end of the day. This was not without a considerable amount of juggling and stress and feelings of guilt on the parents' part. Families appeared to make an extra effort to spend time together at the weekends or during holidays or put more emphasis on the quality of the time they spent together. However, it needs to be noted that there are many families who do not have this flexibility or the finances and thus need to compromise the time they can spend with their children, as well as how they spend it.



Technology and the impact of Covid has meant parents work from home more and this has given us a lot more flexibility to be present at home. ” **35-44, mum**



Juggling full-time working and childcare is hard, the holiday time myself and husband get from work does not cover school holidays so we rarely have time off altogether as a family. We also have to work shift patterns to ensure they are collected from school so also get less time together as a family during the week. ” **45-54, mum**



Just before leaving for work at 8am, my youngest child awoke and got very upset that I was leaving and wanted me to stay at home. My husband comforted her as a left. I got home at 7.45pm when both my children were ready for bed. I didn't have much time with my children which is hard. ” **45-54, mum**

Family support networks are changing

Participating families generally had good support networks, with family members such as grandparents, aunts and uncles and cousins playing an active role in their families, be it for socialising, providing emotional support, assisting with childcare, or generally helping.

Families highly valued this support. However, professionals reflected on wider societal changes such as reduced community cohesion - although believed to be improving - and a decrease in family support networks. They observed a growing trend of family units becoming more insular over time, with Covid-19 lockdowns having a further impact on this. There are now many families who are managing on their own and with limited connections to their extended families or their local communities. This puts considerable pressures on them, be it social, emotional or economic. Both professionals and parents provided comparisons to the times when children used to play independently within their local areas, overseen by a range of adults. For many parents in this research, this was still the case during their own childhoods, and they shared their fond memories of these times.



Today was a very standard day, being busy with work and challenges of being a single parent, for example having to ask a friend to bring back my older son from Scouts so I don't have to take my four-year-old out when he's already asleep, to take the 20-minute walk there and back. ”

35-44, mum



I grew up playing with my neighbour in the green areas of the estate. We used to trap insects, tiny fish, build dens, climb trees, fly kites, all on our own in the road while we knew our parents were always vigilant behind the windows. We had that freedom to learn to judge right from wrong, danger from safety. ” **45-54, mum**



Thinking back to my childhood, I had 'freedom' - my parents would let me out to hang out with friends until it was dark. They wouldn't know where I was but they felt I was safe. I am not sure what has changed now - but I just wouldn't let my kids do that without me knowing where they are. ” **45-54, mum**



There are now fewer opportunities in some areas for growing up within a community network with friends and family, where you know everyone on the street and your friends and your neighbours and everyone you know looks after each other. ” **community connector**



There is less external input into family lives. Less people seeing their nans, their aunties... it's lots of singular units. Your household is your unit, rather than it being like it was before, where everybody in your street was your aunt. Mum and dad both have to work to survive, the need to work is a priority. So children are left at clubs or stay at school longer so they're not interacting as much with their families. It has been gradual, but it does seem like Covid-19 lockdown sealed those units up. ” **social prescriber**

Developments in parenting approaches and styles

Parenting experiences are multifaceted, with parents expressing both the joys and challenges of raising children in a rapidly changing world.

The joy of watching children grow and develop is a common sentiment among parents, who shared their appreciation for seeing their children's personalities emerge, their interests evolve, and their development into unique individuals. This joy was often contrasted with the challenges of modern parenting, linked to:

- Navigating technology and social media
- Balancing independence and safety
- Managing their children's social relationships and supporting general wellbeing
- The difficulty of balancing work and childcare
- Cost and time implications of providing children with a variety of experiences and opportunities
- Setting boundaries and knowing when to allow children to make their own mistakes
- The difficulty of balancing guidance with independence
- Having a supportive community of other parents to share experiences and advice

(Read more in [Technological advancements and the rise of social media](#); [Independence and safety](#); [Mental health and emotional wellbeing](#)).

Greater openness in family communication, children are the priority

Many parents noted the differences between their own childhoods and their children's experiences, highlighting greater openness in family communication and the shift towards more child-centred parenting approaches.

Parents generally wanted to approach parenting their children in a different way than they were parented themselves. Many reflected on their own childhood experiences, where they felt they were not listened to, paid attention to or understood, and in some cases boys being encouraged in school and their career aspirations more than girls. Current parents try to treat their children in a different way, possibly how they would have wanted to be treated in their own youth.

Parent participants want to be, and are, more involved with their children, as are dads, who appear to be more present thanks to more flexible working arrangements. Parents appear to view their role more as a facilitator or mentor, helping children to navigate through life. At the same time, they realise they grant their children less freedom than they themselves had (Read more in [Independence and safety](#)). For many families, children were clearly their priority in everything they did. Their children appeared to realise this, being positive and appreciative about their parents.

Parents try to provide the best support for their children. However, in some cases this results in their lives revolving primarily around their children's needs, potentially leading to burnout or feelings of isolation. This was particularly true for families with CYP with SEND, where the whole family needs to make extensive adjustments.



“ I have always tried to promote my children's views and ensure they are listened to and their thoughts and feelings respected. This is different to my own experiences when I was young, when children should be 'seen and not heard'. ” **45-54, mum**

“ I am engaging with my children more than my parents had done when I was little. I take them everywhere with me. I always talk and play with them, which is something my parents didn't do. I do this because I enjoy it, and my children want to. ” **35-44, mum**

“ I didn't like being around my parents, they were boring and never took us anywhere. There wasn't a lot of love in the house, I think that was just how they were brought up though. They didn't really understand anything about me, and I never felt comfortable talking to them about anything other than asking to go out. ” **45-54, mum**

“ She can find the environment (certain noise, crowds) etc. very stressful and sometimes we have to adjust our behaviour at home to make sure the environment is right at home. This helps her be regulated but can add stress for us having to walk on eggshells. ” **45-54, mum**

“ My children struggle to manage their emotions. I have to give support for most things for them. This can be from getting them organised to get ready for the day, reminders to brush teeth, wash etc. Support with food, medication, crafts, friendships - there isn't really anything that they don't need assistance with. ” **45-54, mum**

More parents wanting to be ‘friends’ with their children can blur boundaries

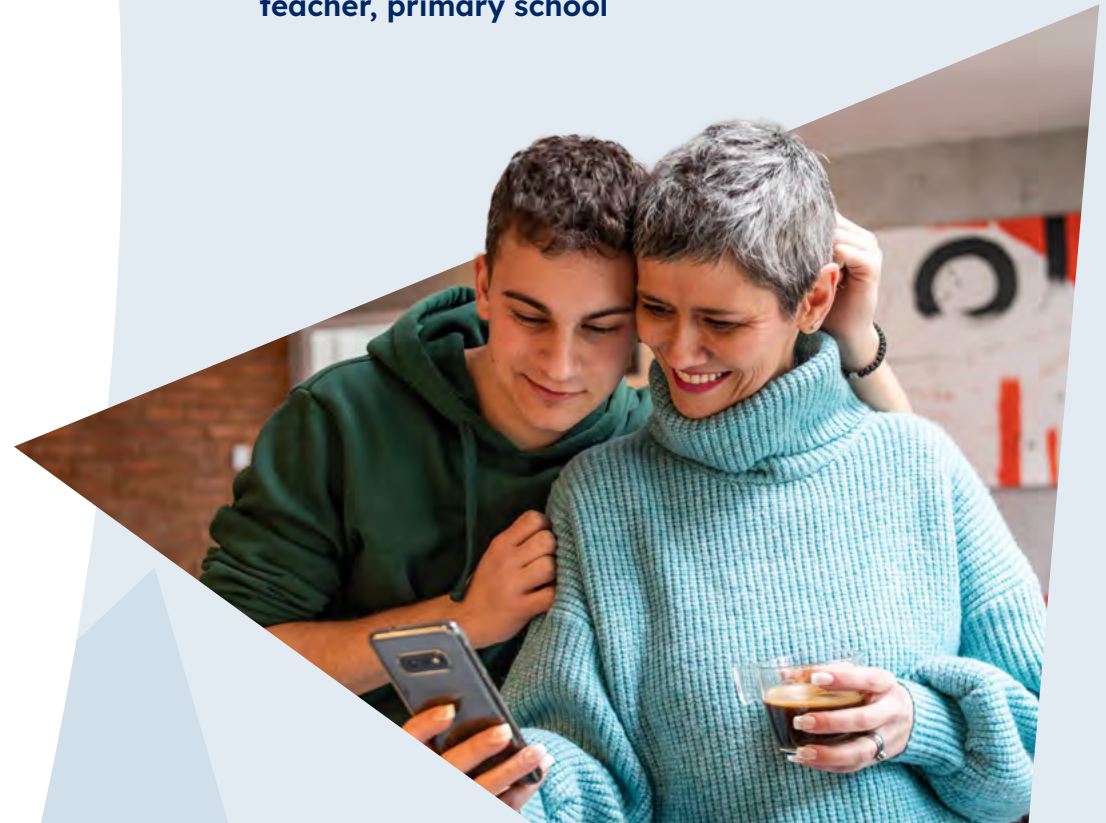
Professionals generally felt that parenting as such has not changed much. Throughout their careers, they had encountered a wide spectrum of families and thus parenting styles. Therefore, they were less inclined to comment on overall patterns, as they felt there has always been a wide range, depending on individual family circumstances: families where parents are very involved, and those where they are more at an arm’s length; families that spend time together, and others that are much more reliant on technology; families which are financially very well off, and those where putting food on the table is the main priority; ‘pushy’ parents, and those who are led more by the children themselves. Still, professionals felt that most parents want the best for their children and try their hardest, whatever their socio-economic circumstances.

However, they observed a trend towards both parents working which tends to result in less time with children. This impacts the level of support parents provide, for example with homework.



There are a lot of children who have both parents working hard and don’t get the benefit of having parental time with them, but then there are also lots who manage it. Then you’ve got parents who are both at home all day, and I’ve seen this in many schools, and they still haven’t spent time with the children reading and what have you. Cash-rich time-poor is a terrible affliction these days that parents have. They just think by throwing money at something, it’s going to happen. After school care, before school care, nannies. That’s not actually parenting. You either invest in your children on a personal level, or you don’t. And no matter how much money you have or don’t have has any influence on that whatsoever.”

teacher, primary school



Professionals recognised that many parents want to be more like ‘friends’ with their children. This can be both a positive and negative. While it is beneficial in terms of connection, building empathy and taking CYP’s views on board, this can also result in blurred boundaries and potential complacency towards some issues where more direction may be necessary. Some felt that parents are ‘softer’ and overprotective and while trying to apply ‘gentle parenting’ and similar styles to their family, the practical application is not always ideal. Professionals repeatedly highlighted the need for clear structure and boundaries for young people, suggesting that these are necessary for CYP to flourish and grow into independent adults.

According to some professionals, some parents these days can feel unsure about their role themselves, needing and seeking advice and support. Some are facing significant challenges in their own lives. Professionals acknowledged that many parents try their best, yet if they hadn’t had the best role models themselves, it is difficult to try a different way and step out of established behavioural patterns. Therefore, support for parents is necessary, too. This can be provided by professionals that parents encounter in their day-to-day lives, such as at childcare provisions, clubs, and education settings, but can also include facilitating opportunities for parental peer support or more formal courses for individuals to find tips for little changes that could help them with their daily struggles.



From the start of our parenting journey, we have followed gentle parenting, which focuses on natural consequences rather than punishments, and behaviour as communication. All feelings are allowed, so we wouldn’t say ‘don’t cry’. Instead, ‘it is ok to cry when you are sad/hurt/frightened etc’. We make the distinction between the feeling and behaviour, for example it is ok to feel angry with your sister, it is not ok to hit her. We have never done naughty steps or anything like that. Interestingly, a few weeks ago, my daughter (10) asked why we couldn’t just punish her like normal parents. ” **35-44, mum**



Parents were stricter. I’m not saying in the best possible ways, but they were. Now they tend to be more friendly with their children rather than be parents with their children. I think parents are a little bit lost and don’t know where the boundaries are. It’s almost the children are in more control than the parents. But there still has to be boundaries because children feel safe with boundaries. But trying to work out where the boundary is has become an issue. So I think everybody’s a little bit lost. Parents are asking for more advice. ” **social prescriber**

Friends

Friends are central to children and young people's lives

Children and young people (CYP) see their friends as very important people in their lives, that they trust and feel supported by.

This highlights the importance of friends who are non-judgemental and always there for them. Many CYP spend a lot of their free time with their friends, doing things like playing football, gaming, going to the cinema, shopping or just hanging out together.

Professionals also reflected on how friends remain a key influence on CYP and their behaviour, hobbies and appearance.



I like spending time with my best friend who I go to school with. We like gaming together, playing football and other outdoor games. He is one of the people I trust and we never argue, which makes me feel that we are good friends. ” **12, male**



Her close friends are always excited and happy when they get the chance to be together, especially when they are doing fun things. ” **55-64, mum**



Friends influence your feelings, what you're wearing, what hobbies you do. Peers always have an influence, and I think that will be until there is no human beings left on the planets. ” **social prescriber**

Parents worry about the quality of friendships versus the quantity

Whilst many CYP spend time in person with friends, some are overly reliant on communicating with friends online, via social media or gaming.

Parents feel concerned about this shift online as it was felt to place an emphasis on the quantity of friends rather than the quality of their relationships. Parents are wary that time online may replace more meaningful face-to-face interactions. Also, it makes potential conflict more obscure, making it more challenging for parents to establish what is happening and how they can support, if needed.



If anything, I find it can be challenging to get my teenagers to do things with friends. Although they spend lots of 'social' time online in various forms, which is much easier to do than when I was a teenager, I feel like they almost have quantity over quality, and that time spent doesn't actually translate into quality interpersonal relationships with each other, or with people in general really. **” 35-44, mum**



I have provided support to the children when they are having social issues with their friends or their classmates. It can be difficult to deal with as they chat through apps like Snapchat and WhatsApp, so you can't always establish what is going on. **” 35-44, mum**



mum, 45-54



Wider influences

CYP look up to their family and people in their immediate circles

Children and young people (CYP) told us they tend to look up to people who are closest to them in their lives, such as parents, siblings, grandparents and specific friends.

Girls specifically mentioned looking up to their mums and other female family members, showing great admiration for them, valuing the love and care they give to the family, as well as their confidence, attitude and encouragement.



“ My mum and dad are inspiring because they work hard to provide for me and my brother but we still have lots of fun. ” **13, female**

“ My mum has always told me to be myself since I was little and started doing performing arts and drama, and for that, I can't thank her enough because her encouragement has made me so comfortable in myself (as much as a teen can be I guess!) and her believing in me has made me believe in myself more times than not. If I become a mum one day, I'd want to be like my mum for sure. ” **17, female**

“ I would like to say that their dad and I have the biggest influence on them and in real terms I think that is the case. They have lots of cousins older and younger, and I think that subliminally they all influence each other, too. ” **35-44, mum**

“ My wife is probably the target influence for my daughters, they just have more things in common which means she influences them more. ” **45-54, dad**

Other people physically present in CYP's lives, such as professionals working directly with them – teachers, youth workers, sports coaches and others – play an important role, too, although secondary to family and friends. CYP appreciate them for their care, kindness, honesty and trustworthiness, and believe they are good at their job or admire their attitude or particular skills. However, teachers themselves admitted they feel their influence has decreased over time (read more in [Education and the school environment](#)).

Professionals' general observation was that CYP copy who they surround themselves with, be it adults or their peers. Depending on the group they are part of, this influence can be positive or negative. However, CYP face a dilemma between trying to 'fit in' and 'be themselves' at the same time. Many feel they need to act in a certain way or portray a certain behaviour to retain their 'social standing' in a particular group, sometimes overriding their better judgement.

“ His teachers do seem to have big influence on him. My son (15) is very much a consumer of knowledge so when a teacher engages him in a topic, he will take endlessly. ”
35-44, mum

“ I look up to a former international cricket player who came to coach at my town cricket club for a few seasons. He is kind and just really nice in general. ” **11, male**

“ As children get older, the balance of influence starts to lean from the family home a lot more towards friends and social media. ” **community connector**

“ CYP feeling the need to act a certain way is getting worse. If you don't do something, you are kind of different and no one wants to be different anymore. They do, but they don't. ”
childcare provider

“ My daughter's (13) biggest influence are her close peer group. Luckily she has a sensible peer group who are nice and these have really improved her own confidence and wellbeing over the past few years. My son's (10) behaviours can be influenced by his friends but he does know when to not get involved in situations he shouldn't. ” **35-44, dad**

“ He's more influenced by friends and will do or not do something to fit in. ” **35-44, mum**

Professionals pointed out that family traits are generally followed through generations. Stability of the family unit, family values, dynamics and how children are parented remains key. Parental influence is the strongest on younger children, who start to lean more towards friends and social media as they grow older. Professionals highlighted how important parental encouragement is for CYP education and their participation in other activities such as Scouts or Duke of Edinburgh Award, and how they influence career aspirations and prospects, too (read more in [Aspirations and expectations](#)).

However, influence is not always positive. Professionals noted that experiences of domestic abuse or violence can negatively influence CYP's understanding of healthy relationships. Struggling families may focus on prioritising the basic needs over needs of individuals within the family. Families also heavily influence CYP's opinions and political views. Some professionals highlighted this became more noticeable following the Covid-19 lockdowns, when some CYP adopted polarised opinions on topics such as immigration which were not challenged due to not mixing with other people.

“ I look up to my dad a lot as he runs his own business which makes me feel inspired to do the same one day. I enjoy helping him with jobs at home and watching TV together. I love my Grandad and like walking our dogs with him. He inspires me because he works very hard and always helps us with jobs at home. ” **12, male**

“ We want them to be influenced by our own values and morals but they are influenced by their friends massively and also by what they see online. ” **35-44, mum**

“ Generally, if children are coming from a family background where there is a cohesive family unit, they are supporting, caring and loving, they've got good methods in place for supporting the child's development, and they don't have any existential issues such as poverty, then that's still generally the biggest influence on how a child is developing and doing. ” **community connector**

“ Parents have a big influence because you just hear the language that's used by younger people. Children do tend to follow family traits, it is very unusual for them to step out of that unless they go to university and they are completely enthralled by someone else. Parenting influences political views and even careers and aspirations, it's almost like they open the doors for them. ” **youth worker**

“ Parents have a large influence, but it depends on how you parent your child. There are children growing up in unsettled homes with domestic abuse and violence, so they will be heavily influenced by that, turning it from being a scary experience into seeing it as a norm. ” **health professional**

External influences on CYP come from sport and social media

External influences are very varied and link to individuals' personal reasons and interests.

CYP look up to:

- Sports personalities – for instance footballers such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Lionel Messi, Lamine Yamal and other sportsmen such as the MMA fighter Conor McGregor or swimmer Adam Peaty
- Entrepreneurs – for example Steven Bartlett and Daniel Ashville
- Public speakers – such as David Goggins
- YouTubers – for example Markiplier, Sidemen, Mr Beast and Molly Mae
- Musicians – such as Taylor Swift, Ariana Grande and Chappell Roan
- Scientists – for example Albert Einstein, Hack Smith and specific astronauts

“ Lamine Yamal, he is a 17-year-old footballer who plays for Spain. He scored when he was 16 for Spain in the Euros and also plays for Barcelona. He has amazing skills and is really fast and scores good goals. I like him as a player as he is young and that makes me want to be like him. He makes me want to work hard and train hard to play for my country. I have a football shirt with his name on and I wear this for training. ” **10, male**

“ I look up to Lionel Messi, he is autistic like me and struggles like me but he keeps practicing football and is now a famous, brilliant footballer. I also look up to Conor McGregor as he is a very good MMA fighter. These people make me feel like I can do anything if I work hard enough. ” **16, male**

“ The person I look up to the most would probably be Mark Edward Fischbach better known by his YouTube name Markiplier, an influencer who I look up to greatly. His kindness, his creativity and humour and confidence are all things I try to emulate in my day-to-day life. They make me smile while also inspiring me to have fun and be kind to others. ” **15, male**

“ I look up to an Aussie YouTube family because their videos are funny and I like their lifestyle (they are all home ed). I feel happy when I watch their videos. ” **12, female**

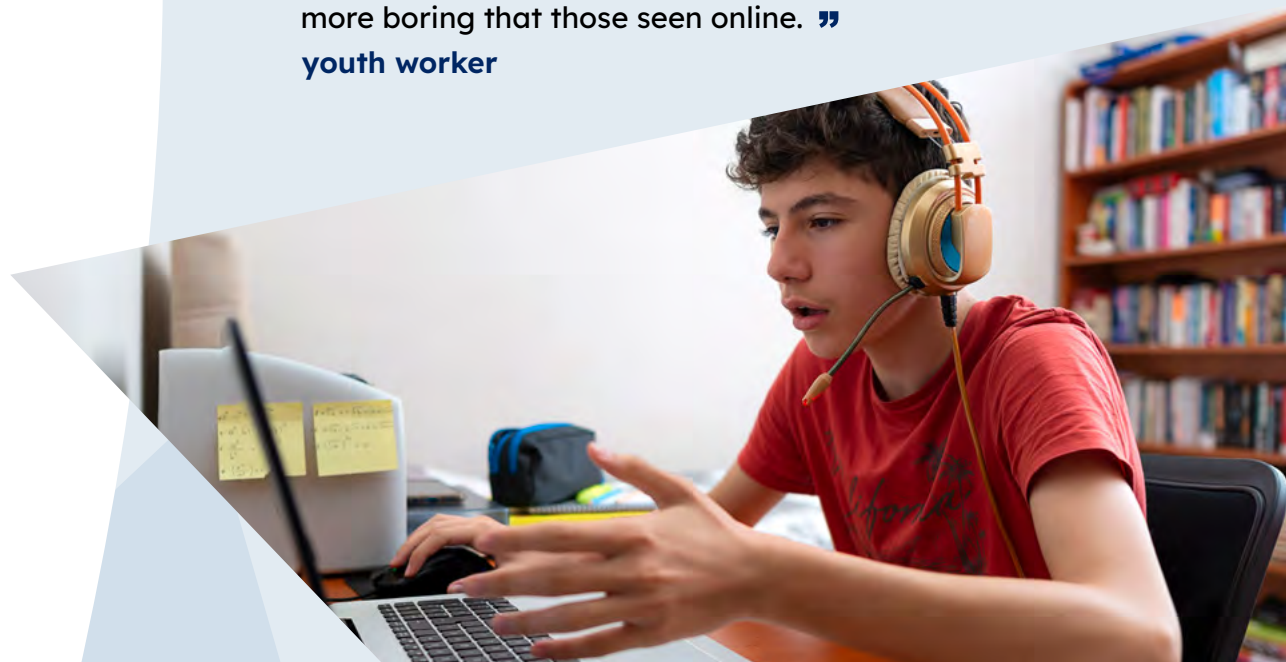
CYP tended to be impressed by specific skills these individuals had, as well as their determination to achieve their goals in the face of adversity, for example coming from poor backgrounds, overcoming academic challenges or experiencing racism. They also often contributed something to society, such as sharing their knowledge, or supporting or running charities. CYP claim these people instil hope and confidence as well as motivation to succeed, and make some of them feel like they could “achieve anything”.

Many CYP also follow specific social media channels related to their interests. CYP can improve their skills, such as sporting techniques, drawing and others, but other times they just want to be entertained and have fun. This is catered for by channels showing various challenges, providing commentaries and reviews, and many others. These channels offer opportunities for both positive and negative influence, depending on context and actual content.

Most professionals confirmed the large impact that social media (YouTube, TikTok, Instagram), online influencers as well as reality TV (for example Love Island) have on CYP, and claimed that their influence should not be underestimated.

“My main two inspirations in my life are Steven Bartlett (entrepreneur and TV personality on Dragon’s Den) and Daniel Ashville (TV personality and business owner). They both came from nothing. Steven Bartlett was a school drop out and Daniel Ashville came from St Lucia as a child and struggled in school. They also both struggled with racism when entering into their industries. They have taken every opportunity that was thrown at them and this has made them who they are today which is massively inspiring for me as it gave me hope when I was feeling down or worried that my GCSEs wouldn’t work out. Thankfully they did. It gave me the confidence to try new things.” **16, male**

“Real life people can sometimes have a lesser influence as they are comparatively more boring than those seen online.” **youth worker**



Professionals and parents couldn't really name any specific influencers, but the general impression was that boys tend to be most interested in footballers, and girls in beauty and lifestyle influencers and channels related to make-up and general appearance. Furthermore, the influence of channels promoting negative views of others, especially women, cannot be ignored.

Professionals shared their concerns around these influencers and celebrities with a large following portraying certain lifestyles or behaviours. While they may not necessarily promote them as such, the key factor is how CYP interpret and understand them. Some noted that CYP often think that what they see online is true, so their resultant view may be an inaccurate depiction of life which is not necessarily grounded in reality. CYP are interested in the general life of these people - what they do, how much they earn, the types of boots or clothes they wear, and want to be like them. This way, some influencers establish trends which many CYP feel they have to follow to fit in. Many young people aim for glamour, big lifestyles and fame. However, what happens 'behind the scenes' is largely obscured from view.



I think there's nothing wrong with looking at people and thinking 'Oh, I'd love to be like you', but it's whether it's in reality or not. ” **youth worker**



Young people now idolise these people [influencers] and believe that they can become rich by posting content online. I think this is quite a negative influence to grow up with as they don't understand the full consequences of this lifestyle and the potential pitfalls. I think it's sad now that there are less people known by young people for their achievements, such as sportspeople or scientists, and more people are known just for being famous or having lots of followers. ” **35-44, mum**



He (10) is influenced a lot by the people he watches on YouTube. This is probably because he spends so much time watching it and also because he hasn't developed a full understanding of the need to fact check and question what he sees. ” **35-44, dad**



These very famous people influencers have a big impact on children's lives. They portray a certain way of living, or acting or behaving. They may not be encouraging it, but it's more about children's understanding of it. They have big followings and it starts a trend which everyone follows. And if you are not following it, wearing a certain item of clothing that everyone seems to be wearing, or wearing your hair a certain way, then you are on the outside, or you may get bullied for whatever reason. And it just seems to be made OK, because adults are doing it. ” **childcare provider**


Image and appearance


Image and appearance are key aspects of CYP identity, especially for girls


Image and appearance were highlighted as one of the key worries for children and young people (CYP) these days.


Maintaining a particular image seems to be a primary concern, especially for girls, who feel they need to look a certain way, keep up with specific beauty routines and wear certain clothes. Professionals highlighted social media trends fuelling expectations around how young girls should present themselves in terms of make-up, false eye lashes, eyebrows, professionally done nails, hairstyles, wearing specific designer brands (such as Canada Goose, White Fox and Nike) and how they are worn, and having particular 'gadgets'. Failing to conform to these popular trends can be a reason to be left out and bullied. Keeping up with these trends often isn't affordable for young people, but it is still seen as a necessity, potentially putting parents under financial pressure.


Yet it is apparent that image is an issue that impacts both girls and boys. Parents reflected on their sons' increased focus on appearance, which is a noticeable difference from their own childhoods.


 There's a lot of children who don't want to go to school in pre-owned uniform and equipment because they get picked on by other people, which leads to bullying and more emotional trauma. **” health professional**

 People my brother's age really struggle with confidence which makes me really sad to see because at their age, I couldn't care less about what I looked like when someone took a selfie with me in the background at 13, but now they all cover their faces and get mad when someone manages to get one of them being themselves. **” 17, female**

 My youngest teen (13) worries about his appearance quite a bit and is asking for reassurance from me, such as if his muscles are looking bigger and if he has a fat tummy. I think this stems from social media. **” 45-54, mum**

 The girls are saying 'Well, I need to look like that. So, I need to lose weight. I need to get my hair done. I need to wear these clothes. I need to have half my body out all the time'. **” social prescriber**

 Social image - I know boys do stuff with it, but especially for girls - when they come out of school, if their uniform is to wear skirts, they want to try and get away with their skirt being as high as possible. And we're like 'why don't you wear the skirt normally?' And they will say 'well everyone will laugh at you'. **” childcare provider**

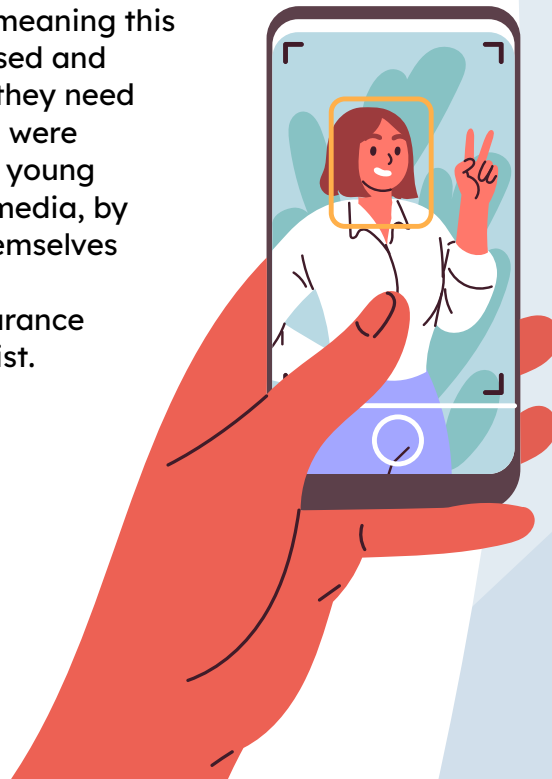
 Social media has ruined our children's 'growing up' experience... the pressure from peers is hideous. The main challenge I find is financial - they seem to cost more money as they get older as they have to have the same designer trainers as those they see on social media. **” 45-54, mum**

Social media fuels unrealistic beauty standards

Whilst caring about one's appearance is not a new phenomenon, today's pressure on a young person's image is further influenced by social media.

Unrealistic beauty standards are being enforced by celebrities, influencers and peers posting edited and filtered images of themselves in which they appear their best. This creates a pressure to look 'Instagram-able' at all times of the day.

Much of the imagery on social media was described as sexualised, particularly for girls, meaning this sort of content is becoming normalised and impacts the way young people feel they need to present themselves. Professionals were concerned over the types of images young people share themselves via social media, by which young people are opening themselves up to receiving likes and comments validating, or criticising, their appearance - an option that didn't previously exist.



“ One particularly difficult thing is the fact that just by looking at your profile, people make such wide judgements, and the beauty standards are so high due to this too. I think adults don't tend to understand that childhood is still really hard for young people even if we are more fortunate in many ways because we still have lots of downsides - they never had to worry about if their Instagram post looked good enough or if they had the newest phone. ” **14, female**

“ There's always a filter. Which is almost saying you have to have a filter because you're not good enough. ”
social prescriber

“ Nowadays, a girl wouldn't wear a swimming costume at 15. She would be laughed at. Girls want to, or feel they have to, wear thongs, Brazilian knickers or tiny bikinis. And what gets shared on social media - they're not sexual images in the legal sense, but they're very sexualised images and they're available to everybody to see. ” **health professional**

Professionals specifically highlighted the risks of young people sharing inappropriate or nude images of themselves, without necessarily understanding the legal implications of this (read more in [Technological advancements and the rise of social media](#)).

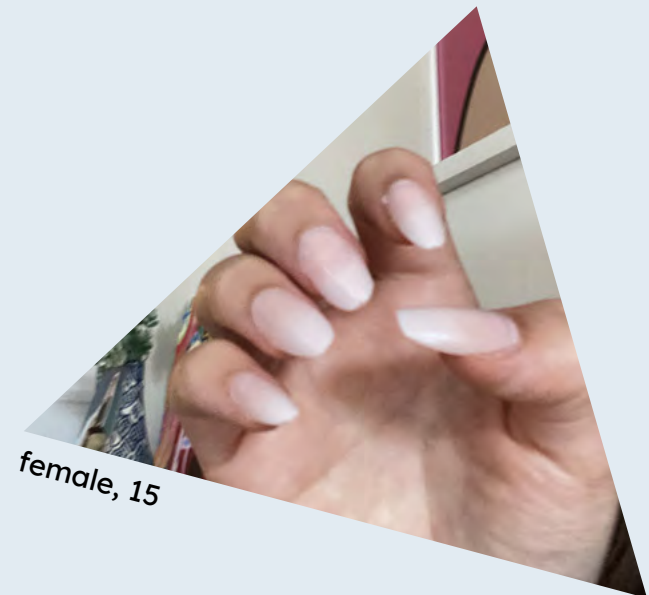
Professionals also warned that such an intense focus on image can translate into young people developing unhealthy relationships with their bodies, including concerns about their weight or muscle tone. Several professionals commented on an increasing number of young people with eating disorders, and some even developing body dysmorphia. A health professional reflected that such a deep focus and care about one's appearance and clothing points to wider issues with identity and self-esteem.



There is an increased ability to chat with friends outside of school, share images, share photos, which brings with it that higher level of exposure to other people's thoughts and comments about how you're looking. Which 20 years ago didn't exist, other than a face-to-face level of 'oh, the dress you're wearing is nice' or 'oh, you look awful' or whatever. But now obviously people are posting an image, which is putting it out there for people to comment on from behind the screen. ” **community connector**



A lot of worries around image around how they view themselves and their bodies. So, we've got an increasing number of children who are overweight and obese, but also a lot of children with eating disorders. I'd say there is a very big increase in the number of children who are worried about how they look and how other people judge them. ” **community connector**



female, 15

▶ 3

Education and the school environment

Children and young people (CYP) expressed having very different experiences of school.

Some enjoy it, others find it difficult, feel under pressure or struggle to attend regularly. For most, seeing their friends is the best thing about school. Many feel pressure to do well in their exams. Their relationships with teachers play a big role in their overall school experience. However, relationships between parents and schools have become strained, especially when parents feel that their child is not receiving the support they think their child needs. Many feel that the education system hasn't adjusted to meet the needs of CYP with special education needs and disabilities (SEND), and neurodiversity in particular, and that greater focus on pupil wellbeing is needed.



This section covers:

Children and young people's (CYP) experiences of school

- ▶ Being with friends is the best thing about school
- ▶ Relationships with teachers play a big role in the school experience
- ▶ School pressures come in many forms and are felt by everyone
- ▶ CYP look forward to the transition to secondary school

Schools are facing increased pressures from multiple angles

- ▶ Greater understanding of child development, behaviour, mental health and SEND
- ▶ Challenge for schools addressing spectrum of increasing needs
- ▶ The pressure of the national curriculum
- ▶ High expectations in schools with limited resources
- ▶ Relationships between parents and school are important but changing

Being with friends is the best thing about school

CYP's experiences at school are often highly personal and vary widely from one individual to another.

Some really enjoy school - this tended to come more from girls than boys - others are 'happy' or 'settled', while many seem to just be neutral about it, describing it as 'ok'. There are also many who are not keen, find it 'boring' or don't get along with others, whether peers or adults.

CYP generally prefer the social side of school, with 'playing with friends' listed as the best thing about school, followed by playing sports/PE. Those more academically capable enjoy school more than those who find learning difficult.

However, there are now growing numbers of CYP for whom school is a considerable source of anxiety and can be overwhelming. These pupils, together with CYP with a special educational needs or disability (SEND), can find the school experience very challenging. Some push through on a daily basis, with variable attendance. Others in the research resorted to part-time timetables or home schooling (read more in [Mental health and emotional wellbeing](#)).



I do want a good career so I try my best, I'm just not that clever so it's not easy. ” CYP, Youth group



It's just a process that you have to attend - there are good days and bad days. It's good to see your friends. I enjoy some lessons but hate homework. ” CYP, Youth group



My favourite subject is product design (aka art and design) because I'm always very prepped and I have a lot of freedom to make what I like in the lessons, and my product design teachers are my favourites. ” 15, female





Relationships with teachers play a big role in the school experience

Teachers inevitably continue to have an influence on CYP today and play a key role in how CYP feel about their school experience.

The most valued qualities of teachers were kindness, truly listening to CYP and caring for their wellbeing. A 'good' teacher is fun, cares about what they are teaching, brings it to life and creates an overall positive atmosphere.

CYP want to feel listened to, cared for and understood. They want to build a trusting relationship with an adult at school. Yet, many don't feel they can and would not feel comfortable reaching out to a teacher if they were worried about something.

“ My RE (religious education) teacher cares about what she is talking about and finds a way to make most lessons active and engaging and answers any questions along the way. Our science teacher is one of the youngest educators which makes him one of the more relatable members of staff at our school. The main reason he is one of my favourites is he is very good when it comes to making sure children are doing well emotionally. He is always there to just listen to any student that may be struggling and that has been very useful in my time at my school. ” **15, male**

“ The best teachers are the ones that listen and that are kind and caring and also give good advice. I'd like to be a teacher when I'm older to help younger people like they have done for me. ” **13, female**

“ I don't go to anyone if I need help or support because most people have their own problems and I don't trust teachers or most adults at school because they aren't very helpful. ” **13, female**

The importance of pupil wellbeing and pastoral care was highlighted. Some parents felt their schools provided excellent pastoral care. However, some secondary school-aged CYP felt this was not always the case, due to:

- Adults being seen as ‘too busy’ to adequately listen and thus understand.
- Some teachers rushing too much or jumping to conclusions.
- Inability for CYP to speak to a teacher privately, without being seen by others in the school.
- Teachers focusing on enforcing rules that don’t always make sense to young people, including strict uniform policies (which can be particularly uncomfortable for children with SEND), rules around comfort breaks, and giving ‘unjust’ detentions.
- School staff not always understanding the individual needs of children with SEND, who may use coping mechanisms such as masking to conceal their emotions.

CYP shared some ideas on what schools could do to better support their wellbeing:

- Teachers proactively and regularly checking-in with all pupils.
- Teachers taking the time to understand underlying issues and not taking certain behaviours at face value.
- Providing safe and supportive spaces, where those needing it can take a break.
- Providing a range of opportunities for CYP to raise their mental health concerns privately, or even anonymously, such as class worry boxes or an online platform.



I do something called masking in school where I mask my emotions so when I get home, I don’t want to go back to school because of all of the stress I have previously experienced at school, a lot of the time I don’t realise I am doing it which is not very good. ” 15, female



At school there is not anything you can do to get help without seeing a teacher or member of staff in a public area where you will feel judged to ask for help. I feel it would be nice to be able to have an online system which allows you to ask for help without stigma. ” 16, male



To feel more comfortable to speak to an adult at school, I would like teachers to look out more at children who are disruptive and to ask what’s really going on and not to declass them or to shout at them. ” CYP, Youth group



We have a room that is intended to be a drop-in location away from the stress of school life. However, it is also a place used to send unruly students when the other places are full, so it doesn’t really accomplish that. ” 15, male



Schools now have rooms where children can go ‘to talk to an adult if they are struggling’, but we hear that they mostly just sit there. They are given a place to go to where they are supposed to get help and the people in there are uninterested. ” childcare provider

School pressures come in many forms and are felt by everyone

CYP generally want to ‘do well’ at school. They feel pressure from school, yet don’t elaborate on the details extensively, mostly mentioning exam and homework pressure.

Some struggle in certain classes, due to subject content, or lack of interest, others worry about their relationships with specific peers or teachers.

Parents and professionals provided much more context on this area. They felt that compared to their own childhoods, pressures at school have increased considerably, to the detriment of CYP enjoyment and wellbeing.

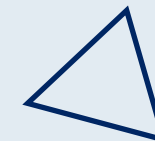


“Waiting for exam results worries me because I just want to know then and there, I don’t like waiting.” **14, female**

“I find homework difficult, even with help it piles up too much and stresses me out so I don’t want to do it because it overwhelms me way too much.” **13, female**

“Adults don’t understand the immense stress young people are under these days just to get into college or sixth form.” **15, female**

“I didn’t really have any pressure as a child, there was no social media and I think school puts more pressure on children today, more exams / tests and constantly being evaluated, it wasn’t like that for me as a child. Other parents have said, by the time their child got to A-level, they were just burnt out from years of exams / tests.” **35-44, dad**



CYP look forward to the transition to secondary school

Parents reported apprehension about the transition to secondary school, driven by school allocation, the unknown around the place, the people, expectations and a potentially less personal relationship with the school.

However, Year 6 participants felt quite excited about their final year at primary school, looking forward to residential trips and new responsibilities of helping younger pupils.

At the same time, CYP were sad about the prospect of leaving their teachers and friends, and felt nervous about meeting new students and teachers, getting lost or being late for classes. Opportunities to visit the new school, and knowledge that some of their existing friends will be going there, too, made them feel much more comfortable about the change.

Those looking back on their move to secondary school generally felt it went better than expected. They enjoyed making new friends, learning new subjects and having more freedom, such as travelling on their own and taking responsibility for getting to their lessons.

Some parents reported mixed feelings about the actual transition to secondary school. While their children seemed happy, they were disappointed that the support provided in primary was not going to be provided at secondary school, or felt the schoolwork was not at the appropriate level. Parents were prepared to continue to discuss these topics with their respective schools.



We went to the open evening and he was able to look round with his friends who will also be going to the school. It was very overwhelming and very busy so he was unable to process what was going on until a few days later. We then went back one morning in a quieter group so he could see what the school is like on a day-to-day with students learning which I think has really helped him! He doesn't like change so I wanted to show him as much as I could before he makes the final transition. ” 35-44, mum



I am nervous about bullies and the overwhelming number of kids in the schools but that is my anxiety that I am trying not to share with my daughter. All I can do is support her, build that relationship to have open conversations and fingers crossed all will be ok! ” 35-44, mum



The first few weeks of year seven have been great! I'm really enjoying my time at my new school and like most of the subjects. I've made a few new friends who I share stuff in common with. I think it's easier than I expected, my teachers made it sound like a really big place full of really hard work. But, to be honest, it's really not; the work isn't that much different to what we did in primary school and it's not actually that big. ” 11, male



The biggest change has been the independence, him (11) just getting himself ready, me not really knowing what he's got on each day and him just sorting everything himself. It's taken so much pressure off me and I feel like I have gained about 10 hours a week of time. There was so much to organise and be involved in at primary! ” 35-44, mum

Greater understanding of child development, behaviour, mental health and SEND

Professionals felt that understanding of child development, behaviour and mental health has improved over time, with greater awareness of why children behave in certain ways and what support they need.

Challenging behaviour may be the result of family situation, caring responsibilities, mental health as well as SEND. Some professionals also highlighted the need to accept that CYP tend to be non-conformist by default, as part of learning and a natural way to test boundaries.

Specific behavioural challenges appear to have emerged in recent years, with many professionals citing the impact of Covid-19 lockdowns (read more in [Mental health and emotional wellbeing](#)).

These include:

- Decrease in pupils' understanding of how to behave in certain situations, including the classroom, leading to more disruptive behaviour.
- Decrease in ability and/or willingness to take direction from authority.
- Increase in CYP struggling to regulate their emotions, with more extreme reactions towards others, including aggression.
- Decrease in willingness to try before asking for help, with CYP needing more encouragement.
- Fear of making mistakes.
- Decrease in confidence and self-esteem.
- Increase in anxiety and depression.



Since Covid, there is now a much more of a bell curve of those students that do know and those that don't know, but not as many sat in the middle anymore. A lot of children may be feeling they are struggling, because they have missed out on the basics and because we've moved on in the topic and they are struggling to keep up and understand, it leads to disruptive behaviour! ” **teacher, secondary school**

Greater awareness of additional needs has resulted in far more proactive parents, exploring appropriate routes through the NHS, schools and charities to gain the right support. Some professionals reflected on the potential for some parents to be overly reliant on getting a SEND diagnosis as a means of ensuring their child receives the support they believe their child needs. However, professionals believed that greater focus should be placed on adults making conscious changes in how they work with the children, to help them manage the everyday regardless of whether these CYP have a formal diagnosis or not.



The autism diagnosis helped as we have learnt so much about autism. NHS does not provide further help if your kid is not medicated. Luckily, there are charities such as Maze and Pact, both have been extremely helpful for us to understand it and learn how to manage triggers. Also the diagnosis was helpful at her new school, mainstream school of course, but they are very supportive. And finally it helps financially as you get some support. For all the support we are grateful. ” **45-54, mum**



Parents’ attitudes have changed if their child has a diagnosis of some kind and they just expect there to be extra things put in place. And sometimes that’s just not possible. The money just isn’t there in state education, unfortunately. ” **teacher, primary school**



There is a lot more awareness around additional needs, which can lead to a lot more parental anxiety of wanting to, rightly so in a lot of cases, get the children diagnosed with different conditions, making sure that their needs are being met. ” **community connector**

The challenge for schools to respond to increasingly diverse needs

Most professionals referred to a noticeable increase in mental health challenges and identification of SEND among CYP.

Schools were recognised for being more inclusive now and multiple professionals acknowledged that understanding of CYP's additional needs is improving in schools, youth settings and beyond. Professionals felt that while this is not 'perfect', it is probably better than it has ever been. They also acknowledged that there have always been CYP who struggled, however teachers used to have more flexibility in the classroom in the past, which allowed better accommodation of needs. Still, it was suggested that greater understanding and awareness of SEND needs and diagnosis have led to CYP no longer facing the same judgement from peers and adults that they once may have done (read more in [Mental health and emotional wellbeing](#)).



As time's gone on, the SEND element has come in so strongly, I'd say in the last 10 to 15 years. When I started teaching 30 years ago, you just had children in your class who were a little bit different, it wasn't picked up quite so much. We've always been able to spot these children. There was no special provision in place for them. We could kind of diversify and go off on our own tangent if we felt that was necessary, so these children used to just kind of get along in the class. We didn't have the national curriculum then. But the demands on the children are so extreme now compared to when I started teaching, it's made a very much a straitjacket for certain children that have to fit a mould, and these children don't fit a mould. You know, very regimented kind of schedule, which is a shame. It doesn't leave any room for those children who just don't quite fit into that. ”
teacher, primary school



There are lots of children being diagnosed with additional needs, who are mostly placed in mainstream schools. It's inevitable there's always going to be children with additional needs in any classroom now. ” **childcare provider**

It is challenging to support children with different needs, especially with limited resources, skills, knowledge, and variable pastoral, mental health or learning support available. Some more specific challenges highlighted by participants include:

- Secondary schools have a high volume of pupils as well as numerous teachers being involved in their education, so the call for greater focus on wellbeing in schools is more challenging compared to primary school.
- CYP can carry hidden trauma that others are not aware of. In these situations, supportive rather than punitive environments are important.
- CYP, especially those with SEND, can find it difficult to fit into the expectations of the established education system, particularly when expected to conform and achieve specific educational milestones.
- Some schools have very stringent behavioural policies with low tolerance thresholds. They can have limited understanding of children's personal situations. There is a subsequent concern over the increase in CYP who are suspended or excluded from school, as well as those on part-time timetables or not in education at all.
- CYP with SEND struggle to access appropriate support, particularly one to one support, without a formal diagnosis. This can be challenging to obtain due to the volume of requests in the system and long waiting times.




Accessing specialist support for your child if they have differences can be hard, we had to seek this privately due to waiting lists and lack of specialist knowledge. Ensuring my child's special needs are recognised and supported via education requires regular reminders. **” 45-54, mum**





I think one of the struggles for schools is that if they say 'fine, we will provide the support and the money', because they want to help the child and the family, they run the risk that if they do that, they are going to be expected to do it for everybody. They've got to draw the line, saying 'we can't offer this support until we get given what we need.' If parents hear about a child getting 1:1 support, they will want it for their child, too. Each parent gets upset if their child is not getting what they need. **” childcare provider**


For some CYP, home education was cited as offering an alternative for learning in a way more attuned to their needs. This can come in many forms and heavily depends on the arrangements that parents put in place, such as independently buying into online education programmes, tutoring, participating in home education groups and others, as well as paying privately for exams. Homeschooling also presents its own challenges such as potentially reduced social opportunities or lack of a teacher physically present to help with challenging work.


Overall, many felt that the education system has been static for a long time and has not yet adequately adjusted to the changing needs of children today, especially neurodiverse children and those with more complex needs. There was a general feeling that greater reforms in the education system are needed in order to meet the changing needs of current CYP and those who teach them.


 It's just the education system is one of the only things in our country that hasn't changed in 100 years. So it just doesn't cater for the needs of all young people, unfortunately. **” youth worker**

 It's just 'one size fits all' in a lot of schools unfortunately. If you don't conform and you don't want to do what's expected of you in that way of learning, then you're going to get sanctioned, there's gonna be repercussions. **” youth worker**

 I've never really had a good thing about school, not primary, my first high school or second. I don't think going back full time will be an option as there are other ways around school like alternative groups or types of schooling, like farm school, schooling groups, tutoring, going to college to study when I'm 14. **” 13, female**

 My son (16) is accessing online tutoring whilst the local authority finds a suitable SEN post-16 provision. The tutoring isn't going well, he finds it very difficult and needs a physical person sitting next to him to break the learning down for him. It is also very socially isolating for him, and he doesn't access other peers his age to form friendships with. **” 45-54, mum**

 My daughter always worries about school (never enjoyed it since nursery) and it is a pressure that hangs over us all. We have given the option to home school, but she wants to 'see it through' and she fears she would have no friends if she wasn't in school. **” 45-54, mum**

 There's lots of choice around when it comes to home education. It's a community that's growing but unfortunately, I feel this is a reflection of how the school system is failing children, as I suspect lots of families, like us, have come to home education due to school not working for their child, for whatever reason. I've joined lots of home ed groups and found lots of online resources etc. and am confident we can make this work for my daughter (12). **” 35-44, mum**

The pressure of the national curriculum

Teachers have acknowledged that pupils are trying very hard at school and that their curiosity and thirst for knowledge remains the same as it has always been.

They are extremely passionate about topics that interest them and which they have genuine opportunities to influence or be involved in.

However, pressures of the national curriculum (introduced in the 1990s and updated in 2014) are acutely felt by schools, teachers, students and families. While recognising that the national curriculum has helped broaden out the quality of teaching overall, professionals felt that schools have become too academically focused, at the expense of non-academic subjects and enrichment activities.

“ Being a young person is great but we have a lot more to worry about nowadays. We have schoolwork that is basically the equivalent to what A-levels used to be and there is so much stress placed onto GCSEs and that if you don't pass them then you won't have a good job and your whole life is basically over. ” **15, female**

“ Adults also don't seem to understand exam pressure as many young people have much bigger aspirations as they are able to find out about much more unique jobs, meaning they have to do a lot of work and stay up incredibly late, studying to get into these jobs. ” **15, female**

“ Schools focus on exam percentages and doing well. I am sure it was there to a certain extent in previous years, but now more and more children are becoming aware that their exam results are not just a reflection on them, but the whole school. Their school is expecting them to do well, pushing them. There's a lot more data available for people to compare who got how many whatever levels etc. Now children from Year 5 are being prepped for months for the exams, they fully know what a SAT is. ” **35-44, mum**

They reflected that:

- **The curriculum is too rigid** - with prescribed schedules and little room to explore topics more creatively or flexibly to accommodate different learning styles.
- **There is too much focus on meeting targets** - teachers feel they need to push CYP to meet certain attainment levels, in some cases beyond what is realistically achievable for their ability level. This is particularly challenging for children with additional needs.
- **They are under scrutiny as educators** - particularly if CYP are not 'where they need to be'.
- **Pressure is exerted on CYP from a very young age** - potentially decreasing enjoyment of school and instilling a feeling of failure, which comes with ongoing scrutiny of academic performance.
- **Parental pressure plays a role** - while some parents openly show their high expectations, others may exert more subtle pressure by how they react on a daily basis.
- **Resources may not be distributed to benefit all** - with limited resources, schools may put additional resources into 'boosting' those pupils that need additional help, but at the expense of those whose attainment is at the expected level.
- **Learning has been 'accelerated'** - with content being introduced at younger ages and GCSEs being described as much harder than in previous generations.



It is all shifting – Year 7 are now doing what used to be GCSE work and Year 6 do what used to be done at secondary school. It might look like they are not doing as much, but it may only seem like it because they are being channelled down these very strict paths at school, not having such a broad spread of things that they used to. And maybe because they are also not enjoying it as much. The children are working incredibly hard. Teachers are working incredibly hard. It's just there's an awful lot. ” **teacher, primary school**



We almost put so much pressure on them at such a young age about examinations, attainment, expectations - it's constantly in the back of their mind and the feeling of being a failure. We don't give them credit for that. ” **teacher, secondary school**

High expectations in schools with limited resources

Professionals reflected on a mismatch between the levels of funding, what is expected of the education system, and the increase in additional behavioural, mental health and SEND needs that schools need to support.

Teachers commented that a lot of services that supported them in the past, and were delivered by outside providers, are no longer available. Having the necessary number of adequately trained support assistants is a challenge, yet they are key in supporting children with SEND. Access is limited to services such as school nurses, speech and language therapists, and specialised play assistants; careers advice formerly delivered by Connexions is no longer available, and work experience programmes have decreased.

Teachers say they try to fill the gaps but succeed only partially due to the demands. Some said they feel like they are substituting the roles of others. While they acknowledge their role in safeguarding and looking out for signs of abuse and similar, they feel that there are also some parents who expect schools to take on responsibilities that should be the parents'. The importance of schools providing the stability that some CYP lack in their home lives was highlighted, however schools' ability to do this is increasingly under threat due to more teachers leaving the profession.



An awful lot of services have been withdrawn from schools. Teachers are expected to cover a lot of things, filling in the role of what used to be done by outside providers. Juggling things socially, educationally, sometimes as social workers - asked to spot for signs of abuse. It's really hard. Sometimes I think I can't as a teacher do any more of this... ”

teacher, primary school



Fourteen years of austerity have ripped the living heart out of education. A lot of support structures that we had when I started have gone. Schools try to fill the gap, but only partially - we can't do it all. ” **teacher, secondary school**





Relationships between parents and school are important but changing

Participant parents generally described the relationship with their respective schools as good.

This was mostly based on the communication received from the school, via newsletters, emails or classroom apps, or direct contact with the teachers. Parents valued opportunities to meet the teachers and were generally appreciative of their work, especially when teachers took extra care to understand their children. Many praised teachers' dedication and acknowledged the pressures they are under. However, there were cases where parents felt frustrated, mostly due to the support provided to their child not meeting their expectations. This was often due to mental health or SEND needs.



I feel that my boy (10) is really supported at school, he has been there two years now and is in Year 6. I feel they have taken the time to get to know him and understand him and what he needs and what it's important to him. This is the headmaster, his teacher, even down to the reception staff! ”

35-44, mum



My relationship with my girls' primary school teachers is great! On top of Class Dojo being an extra mode of communication, all teachers including deputies and the head teachers make themselves available to speak to before and after school at the gates which I feel has created a safe security blanket, unlike schools we'd previously attended in London! ” **25-34, mum**

However, professionals reflected on the changes in parental attitudes towards school, which have been described as becoming more strained, especially since the Covid-19 lockdowns and subsequent teacher strikes. Parents were seen to have lost faith in the education system, resulting in a decrease in trust as well as respect for the school and hierarchy more generally.

Professionals felt that attitudes then permeate into CYP attitudes, describing some CYP as less likely to take direction from authority. Teachers described being trusted to deal with issues without parental input in the past, while now parents want to be involved, often by default siding with the child, and sometimes contributing towards an atmosphere of conflict, rather than resolution. They felt this was modelling an unhelpful attitude to the pupils. Yet, professionals recognised that many families genuinely struggle but still want the best for their children, and with schools being their main point of call, it sometimes becomes the target of their frustration. Professionals highlighted that parental involvement in their children's education is key, be it in terms of the relationship with the school, or helping with homework, such as reading.



I think parents these days are a lot happier to talk about the teachers in a way that might not have been done 20 years ago. The child might come home and complain about something that's happened at school and whereas before the parent would sort of go 'Oh well, I'm sure there was a reason why that happened', now they'll immediately take the stance of 'that was unfair, I'm going to talk to your teacher about that'. So there's less of an understanding that something's been dealt with properly. Parents just used to let the school get on with it. There is less trust. ” **teacher, primary school**



Families struggle and because the school is their main point of call, and the school struggles to support them, they see the school as the enemy, which it isn't. Unfortunately, the training, experience or money isn't there to provide the right support. ” **childcare provider**

▶ 4

Aspirations and expectations

Children and young people (CYP) generally have high expectations for themselves in their future education, careers and lifestyles.

They expressed a variety of aspirations, reflective of their ages, background and other circumstances. Some have a more grounded and achievable outlook while others have a less realistic view of their futures. CYP's aspirations for their future can mirror their parents' paths, but they are also driven by influencers or famous people they look up to. Yet, many are living in the 'here and now', giving little thought to planning their futures. Part-time jobs and work experience have become more difficult to come by compared to previous generations, but schools play an important role in making CYP aware of the opportunities available to them.

This section covers:

Aspirations and expectations

- ▶ Wide variety of aspirations for future careers and lifestyles
- ▶ Breadth of career opportunities with less traditional paths to achieving them
- ▶ Not all aspirations and expectations are grounded in reality
- ▶ Challenges when planning for the future

Work experience

- ▶ Uptake of part-time jobs and work experience
- ▶ Fewer work opportunities for young people compared to previous generations
- ▶ Schools play an active role in supporting young people's futures



Wide variety of aspirations for future careers and lifestyles

Children and young people (CYP) were asked to create a collage of their future aspirations.

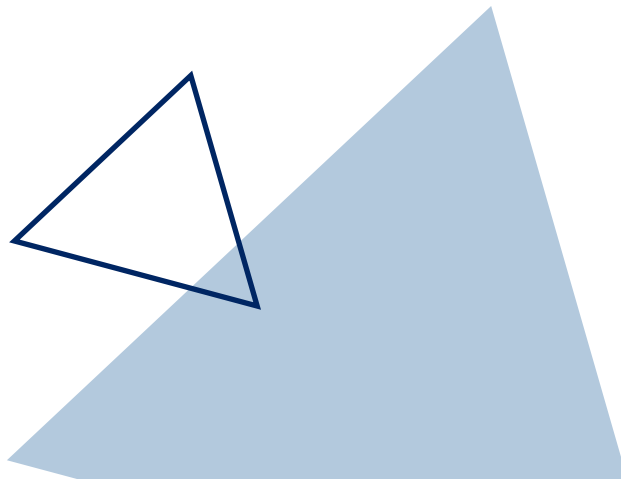
The results were varied, demonstrating there is not one path that fits all, but showed that CYP generally have high expectations for their future:

Education

- Some older CYP are planning for A-levels, university and future career pathways while others are less certain on where their next steps will take them.
- Some CYP are taking relevant steps to help achieve their goals, for example completing work experience or attending relevant clubs and activities.

Careers

- The majority of CYP want to take a professional career pathway. Some mentioned wanting to pursue a career in the public sector such as teaching or the police.
- Others wanted to be surgeons, vets, lawyers, engineers, architects, animal keepers, astronomers or builders.
- Some CYP want to contribute to society by volunteering or advocating for those with poor mental health, neurodiversity or SEND.
- CYP are aware that the types of careers available to them are changing. Some are looking for less traditional and more creative careers, for example performing arts and music, photography, sports and gaming.
- Some career aspirations may be driven by looking up to influencers or famous people, who they wish to model.



Lifestyles


- Alongside having good careers, many CYP aspire to relatively extravagant lifestyles. Having money, cars, holidays and nice homes is important to most.
- Some want to travel and see the world, potentially moving to and working in other countries.
- Family remains important, with some CYP wanting to live near or with parents when they get older.
- Having good friendships and relationships are very important. Some CYP specifically mention wanting families and children in the future.




- “ I like the idea of working within the sport industry. My dream is to be a professional football player. ” **13, male**
- “ I want to be a professional gamer and earn lots of money! ” **9, male**
- “ I would love to be working with animals in a zoo, farm or aquarium, but my second choice would be a social worker, a therapist or a school teacher as I would love to help animals but also I’d love to help people. ” **13, female**
- “ After college, I’m going to America for a summer camp volunteering place and that will really help me get myself prepared for future travelling that I hope to do independently. ” **17, female**
- “ I like the idea of working with younger children as you are setting them up for life. ” **13, female**

Collages of CYP future aspirations



PRO GAMER



Things I want to do: I want to drive a green car and I want to go on holiday lots.



Live: I want to live in a big house and I think I will live with my Mum and Dad and brother forever.






Job: I want to be a professional gamer and earn lots of money!

male, 9






I see myself as an explorer or a genetic engineer or maybe a teacher

A photographer of nature
In my spare time I would like to be a photographer

For example this is what I would take photos of


female, 10: "I would like to have no kids and have 3 jobs (be a genetic engineer and teach it across the country for example). I would like to explore nature."






male, 12






I'd like to be an architect or structural engineer when I grow up. I like building houses on Minecraft now.

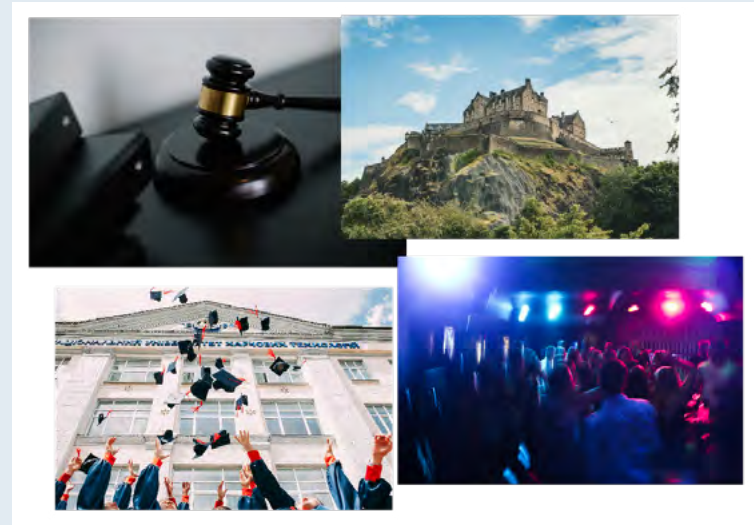
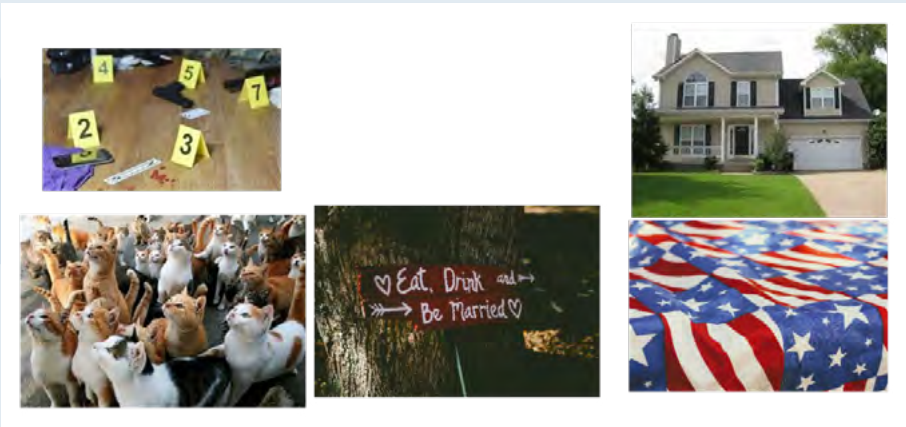




I'd like to live in a big house in a rural area near a village. I hope to have a family with 2 children and a dog. I'd like to drive a porsche.

male, 11: "The mountain bike is what I like to do in my free time. Florida is where I would like to live. I'd like to have a German Shepard when I'm older. Since I was 5, I've always wanted to be a policeman."

female, 12: “I want to have lots of cats and maybe live in America (we’ve never been but I really want to). I am interested in criminology so maybe a job doing something related to that. I will probably get married.”



male, 15: “When I am older, I would like to study law and after graduating from university, I would like to move to Edinburgh, having fun and making friends.”

female, 14: “In the future I’d like to go into musical theatre. I don’t really mind where as long as I’m living with someone I love, could be a friend or a partner or even family.

But I know I want to go into performance.”



female, 16

When parents reflected on their own aspirations for their children, they recognised that life is very different now from when they were young themselves. However, there were some important high-level values most want for their children in their future:

- **Children’s happiness and wellbeing is the most important factor** - parents want their children to be happy and fulfilled in whatever path they choose to follow. Some parents mentioned their children having families, partners and support circles when they grow up. Some also spoke about wanting their children to have active lifestyles to help maintain their health and wellbeing.
- **Parents do not want to push their expectations onto CYP** - unlike how their own parents may have done in the past, they want to recognise the variety of options available today. To some parents, raising a confident individual who does ‘their own thing’ is important. Some want their children to follow what they are passionate about, while others want their children to have a career that is lucrative and allows them to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle.
- **Parents want CYP to try their hardest and do their best at school** – parents want their children to make the most of their education and consider what future options are best, including decisions around going to university. Some want their CYP to go on to university, but others recognise this might not be right for their child, with the long-term implications and variety of other options needing to be considered.
- **Parents want their children to have the appropriate opportunities** – parents want their children to have the opportunities to thrive and do well. This may be particularly important to parents whose children have SEND and those who have encountered additional challenges in their educational journeys thus far.



I think it is easy to say I want them to work in a job that they love but I know deep down I want them to have a job where they can support themselves, buy a house if they wish and live comfortably - whatever that means to them. ”

35-44, mum



My main aspiration for my children is to be happy and fulfilled in their future. I don’t have particular expectations for what they do for work, although I would like them to be financially secure. Whilst I think university would be a fantastic opportunity and life experience for them to attend, I would advise my children to consider carefully whether it’s worthwhile in the long-term and the implication of the debts. ”

35-44, mum



I am quite happy for my daughter to choose her own career and further education within reason, obviously I will guide her along the way if I think my intervention is needed. When I was growing up my parents would often make clear what their expectations were, which careers they felt were suitable on repeat!! ”

55-64, mum



In terms of their wellbeing, I’d love them to have an element of exercise or an active hobby that they enjoy which would run alongside work and family. I’d like them to nurture their friendships so they have a trusted circle of support, and I’d like them to meet someone to share life with. Someone who shares their values and adds happiness to their lives. ”

35-44, mum

Breadth of career opportunities with less traditional paths to achieving them

The variety of future careers that young people aspire to demonstrates the breadth of opportunities available to them.

Professionals and parents both reflected on how there is now a greater variety of career options that did not exist for previous generations, with technological advancements further supporting the creation of new careers, and awareness of their existence.

In addition, there are now multiple alternative routes into potential careers. Going to university is no longer considered the only route to achieve a 'good job', and BTECs, apprenticeships, degree apprenticeships and other training opportunities now offer recognised options for CYP of various interests and learning styles. This is helped by open days at colleges, career fairs at schools, career interviews and other activities offered at schools to help young people to consider their options for the future. Several young people in this research had taken up these opportunities, taking college courses in aeronautical engineering, business, enterprise skills, photography or music performance. Others stayed on at sixth forms for A-Levels.

These career opportunities are now encouraged equally for both boys and girls. Parents and professionals reflected on girls in previous generations being encouraged to prioritise family life and motherhood, but now more and more girls are pursuing further education and careers.



When I hit the stage of searching for a career it seemed so much simpler than now. The 'professions' people went into were very much the bog standard 'accounting, law, marketing' etc. Now there seems to be a million different careers out there and half of them I haven't heard of. **” 45-54, mum**



His sister started at uni but didn't like it so left to start a degree apprenticeship. My son seems to be keen to do the same - but they are so hard to come by. **” 45-54, mum**



I think the opportunities for children are more open. The areas people might want to go in to in the future is more vast and I don't think children are pigeonholed into specific areas and allowed to find their own way a bit more. **” 45-54, dad**



Something I've noticed that is a positive change is that maybe 10 years ago, 15 years ago, a lot of 17 and 18-year-olds would have been just expected to go straight to university. That's not the expectation anymore and I do feel there are lots of different avenues now. **” teacher, primary school**



As a female and mother, I feel there is more opportunity to participate in further education and pursue a career, and this is as encouraged for girls equally to boys. **” 45-54, mum**


Not all aspirations and expectations are grounded in reality


Professionals suggested that some young people's goals and aspirations are not always grounded in reality.


CYP look up to YouTubers, social media influencers, TV personalities, entrepreneurs or famous footballers (read more in [Relationships and Influences](#)). However, professionals and parents felt that CYP often assume these careers will come easily, only seeing the end result and not realising how difficult it is to become successful in these fields and what the necessary steps to take towards them are.


In some cases, these aspirations are detrimental towards CYP's attitudes about education. Many young people follow entrepreneurs online who are presented as having achieved their success despite having struggled at school, giving the impression of anything being possible. However, it is necessary to be honest with CYP and accurately guide them through what making their dreams and aspirations a reality requires.

Professionals also reflected that in some cases CYP are actually aspiring towards a particular image rather than pursuing the career itself. CYP may look up to people just for having a large following on social media, rather than because they possess a particular skill. In some cases, they may be reaching for something that isn't even real that they've seen online, for example AI-generated content.

 I think that some online careers are misleading. Kids see the finished product, such as the influencer's video reviewing a toy/game/fashion or whatever, but they have no concept of how the influencer got to that point or how long it even took to make that 3-minute clip. So again, there's a gap between perceived reality of life online, and the real-life steps, skills and experience you need as a person to be able to do those things. **” 35-44, mum**

 There's much more about being an entrepreneur, and [the attitude] that it's going to be OK even though I left school with nothing and I've not achieved, but I can still be an entrepreneur, make it for myself and start my own business. **” youth worker**

 A lot of them are moving towards being streamers and influencers. They want to be famous, be out there and get paid for it. But in reality, they don't know the level of luck that goes with it. Only a small percentage make it big. They start giving up on their academic work because they think that doing something online will be the way for them. I think expectations have become obscure, distorted and blurred over the years. They want to make as much money as possible, as quickly as possible, and get all the fastest cars. And if it's not working out for them, it has a massive impact on their self-esteem and they start having self-doubt. **” health professional**

 At 15, if you're not in a football team, you're not going to be a professional footballer. But some of them are still trying to hold on to that dream without looking at reality. **” social prescriber**



Challenges when planning for the future

Some CYP expressed pressure to attain certain grades and are concerned about following a particular path after school to achieve their goals.

“ I’m worried I won’t be able to achieve my goals or my dreams or I won’t know how things work in future. ” **14, female**

Conversely some young people are unsure what they want to do when they are older. This feeling may persist even when progressing onto A-Levels or after finishing college courses. Instead, some may want to travel or pursue other avenues before deciding on a long-term career path.


“ Though in college, I might look a bit silly because they expect everyone to have everything pretty much figured out in terms of uni and long-term jobs and such, but I would much rather save up money now (which I have been) and use it to explore the world when I can. ” **17, female**

“ I am still at college. I am studying Skills for Enterprise which is about life skills and looking at customer service which I feel I will need when I get a job. I have another year of college but am struggling to decide what I want to do short term but also for a career. ” **17, female**


“ I don’t think as many children seem to care about careers and future in a way I used to see. I think a lot of kids feel quite lost. There are some that are still career driven and got ideas but there are many quite lost young people and they’re just trying to get through today and get through tomorrow. ”
health professional

Others may not necessarily grasp the importance of planning for their futures and applying themselves whilst in school, with these considerations seeming a far way off. CYP were inclined to state that they didn't think that what they were learning at school was useful. They did not feel it particularly helped them to think about what they would want to do when they grow up. Instead, they called for more practical 'life skills' lessons to help them cope and prepare for life generally. These could include financial awareness, mental health coping techniques, dealing with rejection, guidance to help with future careers, such as CV writing and job interviews, and also more practical lessons, for example self-defence or cooking skills.


Professionals and some parents acknowledged that because CYP often don't really know what they would like to do in their future, CYP may not always realise the importance of their time at school. College and other educational or vocational pathways can seem too far off, thus CYP don't necessarily make the connection between current actions and future consequences. For example, CYP tended to select subjects based on their personal interests, rather than focusing on what they needed for their future.

 Maths and algebra, what's the point? We all have calculators, and not everyone wants to be a mathematician. ”


CYP, Youth group

 The general consensus among the group was that they don't see the use in the majority of stuff in most lessons, but just assume that it must be useful, otherwise they would not be taught it. ”


CYP, Youth group

 There needs to be more support for all young people to talk about feelings, and have more life skills lessons such as how to write a CV and how to apply for a job. ”

17, female

 We need less time in lessons and more time outside and to learn about other things like life skills (I have done this at school but want more). ”

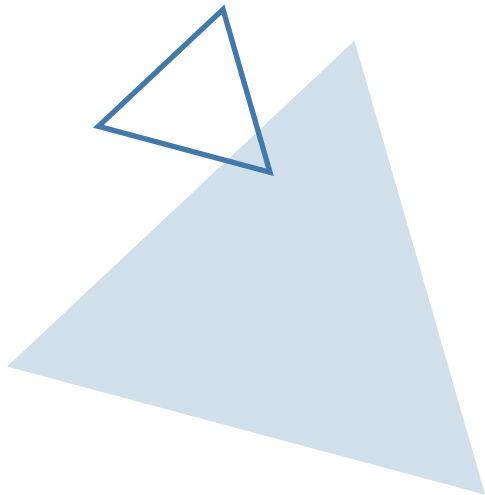
10, male

 We have about six lessons focused on financial awareness, directed at Year 7. We talk about tax, budgeting, savings, different types of accounts, credit and debit cards, debt, mortgages, loans. And they've got a thirst for it, they want to know. The majority of students actually really appreciate it when you talk about money. ”

teacher, secondary school

Therefore, teachers are having to really emphasise the importance of planning ahead and explaining how CYP's decisions today may impact their choices later in life. CYP also need greater encouragement to give things a go, as they are less inclined to put themselves forward, due to potential embarrassment or general fear of failure. However, they are very passionate about things they get involved in.

Other professionals considered alternative reasons why some young people aren't planning ahead. For example, some may be focused on getting through the here and now, and as a result not considering their future paths. This may be particularly true of CYP who come from challenging family backgrounds so do not want to add the pressure of considering the future when they are already dealing with enough in their day-to-day lives.



“ I sat my GCSEs in the same school and got mainly 6s and 7s with an 8. I personally don't feel my GCSEs were too important for my options as I wasn't too sure back on results day what I wanted to go on and study in sixth-form. ” **16, male**

“ I don't think kids necessarily understand the importance of what they're doing while they're in school. Parents do and there are a lot of parents that push their kids, 'You need to get a 5, you need to get an 8'. Or as school staff, we're saying 'your minimum grade is this, but you should be a grade above'. And the kids are sat in the middle of it going 'but why?'. ” **teacher, secondary school**

“ When I was young, my expectations were to leave school, go to college, get a job and pay my own bills. A lot of children today don't know what they're doing anymore. Their expectation is to live in the moment and the now is what I look like rather than who I am. It's almost like they haven't thought further down the line. ” **teacher, secondary school**

“ Children from broken families don't want to think of themselves having to slog like their parents, so they don't think that far ahead. Almost as if 'If I don't think about it, I don't have to worry about it'. Some look after their siblings or may already be parents themselves, they don't want to add the pressure of considering the future when already dealing with enough in the here and now, in some ways they are already living it. Those are the groups that have no expectations of themselves. It's almost like 'this is my life and that's that'. ” **social prescriber**

Uptake of part-time jobs and work experience

Some of the young people we engaged with had part-time jobs in hospitality, shops or leisure centres.

Others engaged in various work experience opportunities, for example at a solicitor's office or a farm. Some took part in other activities to help enhance their skills and confidence, including the Multi Schools Council, volunteering at their local library (Summer Reading Challenge), litter picking, Duke of Edinburgh Award or youth and sports clubs.




I have previously volunteered at youth clubs for bronze and silver DofE. Sometime next year I would like to volunteer at my local library to improve my uni application. ” **16, female**




Fewer work opportunities for young people compared to previous generations


Both parents and professionals identified that it is more challenging to get work opportunities today compared to previous generations.


They reflected on the numerous contributing factors towards this, such as certain casual job opportunities not existing anymore and there being greater restrictions on the age at which young people can begin work.


 I think earning money is a huge challenge for today's children and teens. When I was younger, you could get a paper round or help the local milkman to earn a little bit, but these 'jobs' don't seem to exist anymore and nobody takes on younger teens. So children rely heavily on their parents' finances. **” 35-44, mum**

Additionally, there is a lot of competition for the few job opportunities that do exist. Even for part-time positions, young people may have to jump through lots of hoops and interviews. Some CYP may rely on their parent or a known contact in the industry to 'open the door' for them.

 I'm part of catering staff at a cafe! It's very fun and I'm very lucky to have been able to get it in at all honesty... it was a group interview where we all were asked scenario questions so they could see how we worked together. Only a few people got picked so I'm very happy to have gotten it! **” 17, female**

 I currently don't have a part-time job due to the fact that people and companies want experience, however I can't get experience because no one is giving me the opportunity to gain that experience. **” 16, male**

 He (16) has been applying for jobs, but there are no vacancies. This seems to be the same for all the other mums in their year who I have talked to about their teenagers. **” 45-54, mum**

 I think getting the basic Saturday job is harder. When I was younger you could get a Saturday job or a paper round or something. The competition is so high now and I think that transition to independence and getting some money, doesn't happen as early as it did for the earlier generations. **” youth worker**

Schools play an active role in supporting young people's futures

Despite the difficulties young people are facing to access opportunities, schools are offering support to help young people into their desired careers.

For example, schools host careers fairs, making young people aware of the different courses available to them. Young people can also attend UCAS fairs or take part in careers interviews at school, which are all opportunities they value.



“ I had my interview and I learnt about some incredibly valuable information for my future educational and occupational endeavours, which I enjoyed. ” **15, male**

“ Today I went to the UCAS fair with my school. Lots of unis and higher education departments were advertising, along with handing out free stuff. I liked attending the seminars, but I found that the unis attending didn't really interest me. ” **16, female**

“ Schools are really good at guiding children in regards of what they want to do, such as open evenings at colleges, where you sit down with a tutor and they will go through the grades you need and what is expected in each year. And you are given a lot more opportunity to speak about career development in school. So, I think there's a lot more positives out there regarding moving on to secondary education and potential employment. ” **health professional**

However, despite schools providing young people with information and guidance on the different career paths they can take, it was mentioned that previously schools used to allow pupils time out of the classroom for work experience days. This no longer seems to happen, potentially due to increased emphasis on educational attainment, and was viewed as a great loss in terms of young people having less opportunities to gain practical experience of what the world of work is like (read more in [Education and the school environment](#)).

Instead, young people may seek to gain this practical experience through post-16 courses they can complete after leaving school such as BTECs or apprenticeships.



How would they know what the world of work is like when they've never experienced it? ” **teacher, secondary school**



They're as aspirational as they've always been, the bigger issue is that the support structures around young people that enable them to be aspirational have disappeared. ”
teacher, secondary school



He is now at sixth form college studying for a Level 3 BTEC in Business studies and it has been the making of him... Part of his course requires two days a week work placement - so he had the experience of applying for work. Brilliant for when he is older and looking for work. ” **45-54, mum**

Looking ahead: Supporting childhood in Essex

Throughout this report, children and young people (CYP), parents and professionals made suggestions about what could improve the lives of our younger generations, today and in the future.

Most of the suggestions from participants fall into three key areas, which may be used across the system to guide decisions that will impact our children and young people.

1. Engage with and listen to children and young people
2. Create more activities and safe spaces for children and young people
3. Improve access to timely and preventative mental health support

Questions to stimulate thinking and consider how collective action could help address local challenges are featured throughout this section. They also provide a starting point for leaders, decision makers, organisations and anyone working with CYP and families on how they may wish to take forward and embed the insight from this research.



1. Engage with and listen to children and young people

Children and young people (CYP), parents and professionals were unanimous in their calls for greater engagement of CYP on topics that concern them. CYP want to be listened to, heard, and have their opinions acted upon. CYP are generally well informed, yet they feel that when their opinions are sought, they are not genuinely considered and can be overlooked. Without taking their views on board, there is a risk of losing their trust and subsequent interest. Many CYP specifically highlighted that they can, and want to, make their own decisions but they need adult support in the process.

CYP need to be engaged on their own terms, in ways that are interesting and accessible to them. Applying the following could help:

- Actively inviting and encouraging CYP to get involved.
- Involving CYP throughout the whole decision making process to give a sense of ownership.
- Making engagement fun and purposeful, to retain their interest.
- Consider using different forms of incentives.

In addition, professionals acknowledged that a lot of people don't know how to communicate well with CYP, and that it takes time for CYP to open up and be honest with you, therefore building relationships and trust is important.

Parents and professionals reflected that although opportunities such as the Young Essex Assembly and youth councils are important, there is a lack of reach and awareness around other ways to engage. There is a need for more widespread opportunities to allow more CYP's voices to be heard - for example through youth clubs and schools - not just those who choose to volunteer. Some older teens suggested lowering the voting age to 16 so they could make their views count. This was subsequently passed by the current UK Government as part of Labour's 'Plan for Change', whereby 16 and 17-year-olds will be legally able to vote by the next general election (by 2029).

“ I think sometimes adults don't understand the complexity of the problems some kids may face today. Adults should understand that we do know what's going on around us, and we can be wiser than some give us credit for. ” **14, female**

“ I think adults often disregard young people's opinions on important matters and use their powers as older people to restrict what the young people can do. Many people are very patronising, even to mature 16-year-olds. Young people's lives could be made better if older people genuinely took their opinions into account and didn't just disregard them because they are young. ” **16, trans male**

“ I would love to see how much better our generation can make the society we live in, if the voting age was lowered to 16. I don't think we are too immature to vote at all. If anything, we have more sense than the ones that speak against us!! ” **17, female**

“ I think if you actually listen to young people, sit down with them, have them involved, not just in the beginning or the outset, but throughout the whole process, they will take ownership, and you'll also have that respect back for it as well. ” **teacher, secondary school**

“ If I were someone making decisions about public services, I'd be talking to kids themselves, very much like you are in this piece of work. I've seen a push on youth councils and focus groups too, but I'd also want to get into schools and talk to the kids who wouldn't volunteer to do this, or who wouldn't join a youth council. ” **35-44, mum**

“ We [adults] have to open our minds to absorb young people's voices and their thoughts on their expectations of the government and the country, rather than just make use of our thoughts and stereotypes to provide so-called good services for them. ” **35-44, dad**



Reflective questions

1. In what ways might CYP be more meaningfully engaged in discussions around the issues that affect them?
2. In what ways could the voices of CYP be more effectively incorporated into decision making processes?
3. How might children and young people be made more aware of opportunities to engage, particularly through channels beyond traditional routes such as youth councils and assemblies?



2. Create more activities and safe spaces for children and young people

Most participants – especially children and young people (CYP) and parents – called for more activities and places for CYP to go outside of school which are affordable, or ideally free. Parents commented on the lack of free activities for CYP to partake in, such as youth clubs, compared to their own childhoods. This not only creates a barrier for families that may not be able to afford the cost of alternative options, but also does not promote CYP developing their independence. CYP would like to be able to pursue their own activities and interests, within safe environments.

Ideas for these activities included:

- Informal spaces, such as social clubs or cafes, to just ‘hang out’ with friends, but also access support and guidance from trusted adults if needed.
- Provision for a range of different age groups, such as school holiday activities for over-10s and youth clubs for over-16s. Everyone wants to feel welcome.
- Available in local smaller towns and rural areas and better serviced in terms of transport.

- Clubs that are not reliant on volunteering from local people.
- Provision of activities and clubs in evenings and the winter months.
- Opportunities to acquire skills, such as woodworking, sewing, cooking, car maintenance.
- A range of physical activities, such as trampolining, swimming, Pilates.
- Events for CYP, such as music nights or under 18s discos.
- Allocated spaces where CYP can be creative, for example with their graffiti art.
- Volunteer safer neighbourhood teams who patrol areas to help CYP feel safe and enable them to spend more time outside with friends.
- Greater promotion of existing activities, including via social media channels used by CYP.



I feel that having more things to do and places to go outside of school would help. I find that there are not many places that are welcoming to my age group and also affordable! ” 16, female

“ I feel we do not invest in children enough; money is always saved by cutting services for children. Youth clubs and playschemes are virtually non-existent for children compared to when I was young. There are very few safe spaces for children to spend time together and where they can have access to safe adults who they can confide in. Children make many of their social connections online, including when seeking for support and help. Why can't they have this available more easily in person? ” **45-54, mum**

“ I believe that there is not enough out there for teenagers. Where is somewhere that they can go and meet up with friends that's not walking around the streets or in each other's houses? Youth clubs, under 18s discos, more music venues, trampoline places for 13yrs+ or at least a session for them, swimming sessions for 13yrs+ etc. Maybe introduce a basic car maintenance course for 16yrs+ as lots would be looking to drive and valuable to know how to look after your vehicle? ” **45-54, mum**

“ I think there needs to be more funded youth organisations that are accessible and local in smaller towns and rural areas. Kids need places, connections, guidance and advice to keep them healthy and active and out of reach of people who may want to deter them onto less helpful paths. ” **45-54, mum**

Reflective questions

1. How can the activities of existing (or new) free clubs be made more appealing, accessible and available to CYP?
2. How could new ideas for free activities be shaped by listening to what CYP want and need?
3. In what ways could young people's independence be fostered, and safe means provided for them to travel and explore their community?



3. Improve access to timely and preventative mental health support

The need to embed mechanisms to provide greater access to timely mental health support was the final key suggestion. While participants acknowledged that awareness around mental health is improving and that there is support available, the supply does not match the demand, and the delivery of support in practice is not always what is expected or aligned to the needs of CYP.

Participants call for mental health and wellbeing support that is:

- **Timely** – accessible at a time when it is needed.
- **Preventative** – avoiding the long-term implications of challenges that are not addressed early.
- **Easily accessible** - available in person and online.
- **Discreet** – CYP wish to be able to seek support privately, or even anonymously.
- **Better matched to the levels of demand**

Other suggestions included:

- Supporting CYP to learn tools and techniques to cope with the everyday, as well as more challenging, situations to build resilience.
- Training for professionals who work with CYP on a regular basis, focused on building their understanding of and recognition of mental health issues, and their ability to respond to these in the moment. This ‘low-level’, preventative support at the point of need may be able to avoid escalation and ease pressure on services that need to focus on more severe cases.
- Greater focus on pupil wellbeing in schools, with staff supporting pupils in ways more aligned to their personal circumstances and additional needs.
- General awareness raising around technology and social media risks for CYP, parents and the public.



Less on ‘why’ mental health is important and more on ‘how’ to access support, as that is what is missing. And more support should be available in many forms in person and online. ” 16, male

“ Children need much more support than we were ever given, and more mental health support must be made available... Counselling services are far too stretched and need to be invested in. When children need help, they need it instantly, not after a six month or longer wait. ” **45-54, mum**

“ We need to make sure there is more mental health support available as the wait times for these services are so over run and it's months before children and families are getting support. If we don't provide mental health support early enough for young people, this could have a knock-on effect for their mental health in adulthood - we need to remember our young people are the next generation! ” **35-44, mum**

“ More professionals need to be trained, not to the level of a counsellor or therapist, but they need a more basic understanding of what to do and what to say and what not to say, so they can deal with and help these children they already have a relationship with that want to open up to them. This could then potentially reduce the demand on the big professionals. ” **childcare provider**



Reflective questions

1. In what ways could awareness be raised about the different ways CYP can access mental health support?
2. What forms of low-level mental health support could be provided to CYP to meet their everyday wellbeing needs?
3. In what ways could CYP be supported to develop appropriate coping strategies to manage life's challenges?
4. How might CYP and parents be supported in navigating the use of technology, to develop healthy digital boundaries, manage online risks and promote digital safety?

Final reflections

We hope this report has offered a glimpse into what it's like to be a young person in Essex today, and has prompted reflection on the similarities and differences between your own experiences of childhood and those of children and young people (CYP) today.

Our participants shared a wealth of information about their observations and experiences. We heard that there are significant changes to how CYP experience the world compared to previous generations. CYP are navigating the demands of the modern world, such as the rise of technology, instant access to vast amounts of information, new pressures contributing to poor mental health and a shift towards reduced independence. Yet, these changes also bring new opportunities that were not available to previous generations. Despite these changes, there remains common ground and values that can be built upon, such as the importance of family and friends, and aspirations for the future.

Participants identified suggestions that could better support CYP's wellbeing and ensure their views are effectively incorporated into decision making. We need to encourage CYP to try new things, make their own mistakes and learn from them. As adults, we should help them build resilience, guide them in making informed decisions, and trust that their opinions are valuable and can help shape the future of the county and beyond.

Insights from this research can be used across the Greater Essex system. Our hope is that this work will spark discussions about how system partners can influence the development of policies, strategies and interventions to improve the wellbeing of CYP across Greater Essex, while challenging assumptions of what we think we know about childhood today.

This report also provides valuable insight for those working within services that directly support CYP, as well as for parents and guardians who wish to better understand the challenges and opportunities their children may face.

The insights in this report come directly from the voices of the children and young people, parents and professionals we engaged with. While it offers a rich view of what childhood is like for many, there are numerous other resources, research and evidence available - both nationally and locally - that provide insight into specific topic areas in greater depth. Visit Essex Open Data (<https://data.essex.gov.uk/>)²⁹ and search for 'Childhood in Essex' to access a directory of additional resources that can help support decision making across the system.



A 10-minute 'Childhood in Essex' film is also available. It brings to life the experiences of some of the young people we engaged with and can be found [here](#), or through the [Essex Open Data 'Childhood in Essex' directory](#)³⁰.

You've heard from some of us now — what we love, what we're proud of, and what we're struggling with.

We don't expect all the answers. But we do want to be part of the conversation.

So if you're someone who makes decisions, don't just listen to us because you have to. Listen because we've got something worth saying.

Because the world you're shaping is the one we're going to grow up in.

This is Childhood in Essex, and we want to be ready for it — together.



Endnotes

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