

Childhood in Essex

Overview of research findings
Online event

Research & Citizen Insight team
15th October 2025



Meet the researchers: Research & Citizen Insight



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Agenda

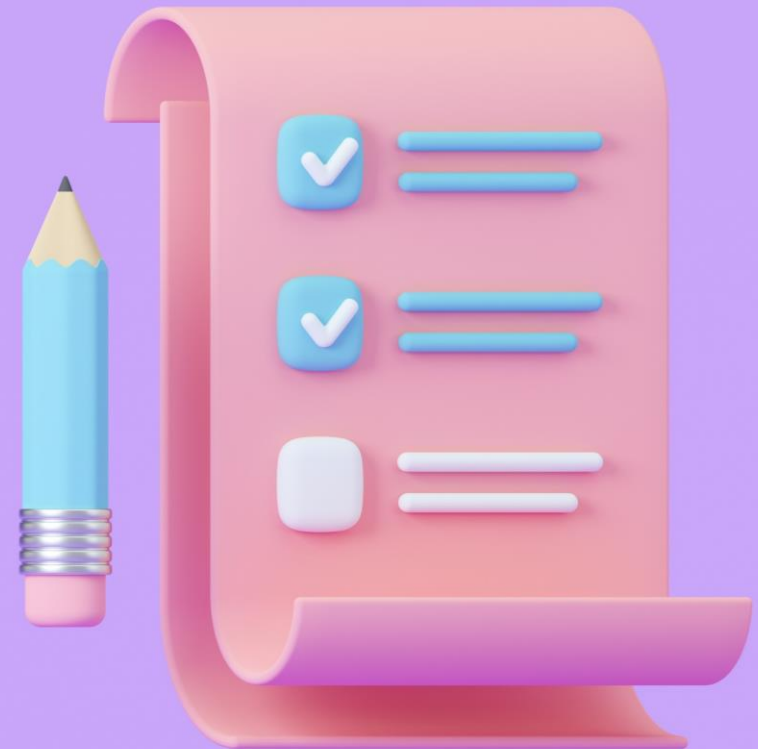
Item	Timing
Arrival, housekeeping	10:00-10:05
Welcome from Cllr Spence	10:05-10:15
Key research findings	10:15-11:00
Comfort break	11:00-11:10
Film	11:10-11:20
Research participant's reflection	11:20-11:30
Closing remarks	11:30-11:35
Q&A and discussion	11:35-12:00

Welcome from

Cllr John Spence

What we will talk about today

- A bit of context
- **Part 1:** The changing landscape of childhood
- **Part 2:** Day-to-day experiences of children and young people
- **Looking ahead:** Participants' suggestions around supporting childhood in Essex



Why are we here today?

- We have undertaken an in-depth exercise to explore the everyday realities of children and young people in Essex today, and how childhood has changed.
- This is within a context of increased governmental focus on children and young people in the UK, with new initiatives such as:
 - Children's Wellbeing and School's Bill
 - National Youth Strategy
 - Child Poverty Taskforce
- Children make up a fifth (21%) of total Essex population.
 - As of 2024, almost 330,000 children and young people (aged 0 to 17 years) are living in Essex.



(16, male)

Focus of this research

1. Examine **how childhood has changed compared to their parents.**
 2. Explore and bring to life **everyday realities of children and young people** living in Essex today.
- Intended 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.
 - Sponsored by the Children and Young People's Strategic Partnership Board





Let's hear from you

What generation are you representing?
(poll)

- Baby Boomer (born 1946 – 1964)
- Generation X (born 1965 – 1980)
- Generation Y/Millennial (born 1981 – 1996)
- Gen Z (born 1997 – 2012)
- Gen Alpha (born 2013 – 2025)



Who we engaged with and how

We have established an exceptionally rich and robust qualitative evidence base, with insights gathered from children and young people (aged 9-18), their parents and professionals.

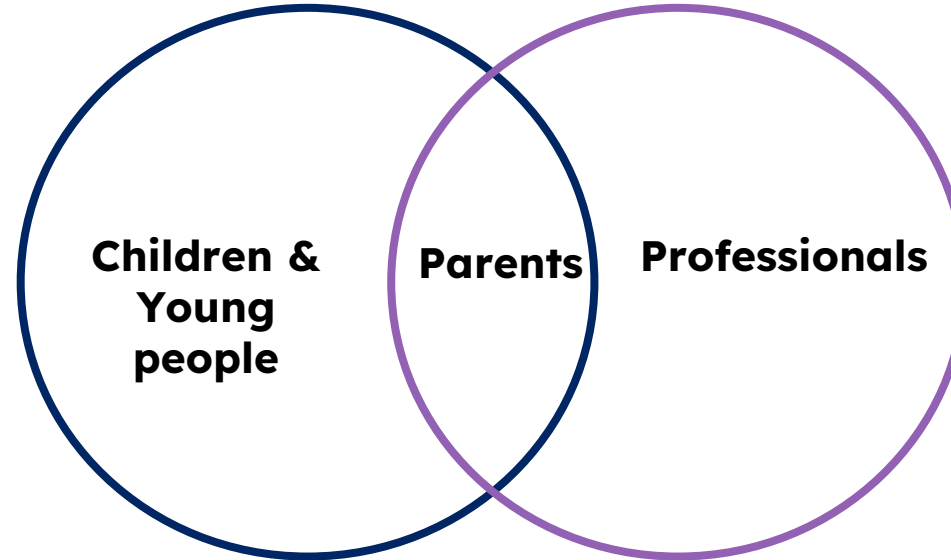
Children's everyday realities

2 online communities

- CYP and parents - 65 participants completing a range of tasks over a week
- Using an innovative online platform 'Incling'

Youth group discussions

- Over 100 CYP



Changes in childhood

Online interviews with professionals

- 12 professionals



Essex County Council
Welcome to us!
VIEW

HELLO
Child - Day 1.1 - Getting to know you

Welcome!
Parent - Day 1.1 - Getting to know you

Child - Day 4.1 - How you spend your time

Parent - Day 4.1 - How children spend their time – parent's perspective

the future
Child - Day 5.1 - When I grow up... looking into the future

Child - Day 2.1 - Important people in your life

Parent - Day 2.1 - It takes a village to raise a child

Child - Day 3.1 - What makes you happy and what makes you sad

Child - Day 5 BONUS TASK - Chat about your parent's childhood

Parent - Day 5.1 - Your child's future

Child - Day 6.1 - What adults don't understand about young people today

Child - Daily Diary

Parent - Day 3.1 - Children's feelings

Parent - Daily Diary

Child - Day 6 OPTIONAL TASK - Moving from primary to secondary school

Parent - Day 6.1 - Misconceptions about children and young people today

Parent - Day 6 OPTIONAL TASK - Thoughts about moving from primary to secondary school

Part 1: The changing landscape of childhood



Part 1: The changing landscape of childhood



**Technological
advancements
and rise of social
media**



**Awareness of adult
concerns and
desensitisation**



**Independence
and safety**



**Mental health and
emotional
wellbeing**

Let's hear from you

At what age did you get your first mobile phone?

(poll)

- 10 years or younger
- 10 - 15 years
- 15 - 20 years
- 20 - 25 years
- 25 - 30 years
- 30 - 35 years
- 35 years and older



1. Technological advancements and rise of social media

- **A tech-savvy generation**
- **The rapid rise of social media**
 - Encouraging social connection
 - Heightened peer pressure online
 - Encountering online risks
- **Excessive technology and social media use may replace 'real life activities'**

*“I was surprised that my **mummy was so old when she got her first phone** and that it didn't have the internet. I don't have a phone yet but will get one when I am in Year 6.” (9, male)*

*“**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)*

*“I do worry about her **being exposed to violence or porn**, but also being targeted by paedophiles.” (35-44, mum)*

*“There is a potential for a lot of what my children call '**brain rot**' i.e. absolutely useless stuff that they scroll through and watch for seconds/minutes. 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)*

Let's hear from you

**Where did you get your news when
you were growing up?**

(chat)



2. Awareness of adult concerns and desensitisation

- **A knowledgeable and informed generation**
- **Challenges with increased access to information**
 - Information overload
 - Increased anxiety
 - Desensitisation
 - Risk of misinformation
- **A more accepting younger generation**

*“The kids and their friends are **more concerned with the environmental and sometimes, political issues.** Also issues around racism and sexuality/body issues.” (35-44, mum)*

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

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

*“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)*

3. Independence and safety

- Children and young people highly value their independence, and feel relatively safe when 'out and about'

“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)



3. Independence and safety (cont)

- **Parents' safety concerns can limit CYP's ability to build independence, life skills and resilience**
 - Reluctance to let CYP spend time without supervision
 - Reduced opportunities to take semi-safe risks
 - CYP's fear of making mistakes
- **Wider society doesn't always support CYP independence**

*“My mum won't let me travel on my own on public transport which is understandable, but I wouldn't feel comfortable anyway. **I rely on my dad to drive me places or I walk if local.**”
(13, female)*

*“Now time spent with friends is much more limited and dictated by parents with children having to check in on their phones so **parents always know who they are with and where;** my parents didn't have a clue.” (35-44, mum)*

*“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.” (youth worker)*

4. Mental health and emotional wellbeing

- **Increased prevalence of worries and pressures**
- **Rise in mental health awareness and acceptance**
- **Greater awareness and acceptance bring their own challenges**
 - Risk of 'self diagnosis' among CYP
 - Missing the 'middle ground'
 - Insufficient mental health support to meet increased demand

“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 round it. Which is obviously a good thing, that it’s being picked up more.”
(childcare provider)

*“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)

*“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 lots on **why mental health is important** and 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.”* (16, male)

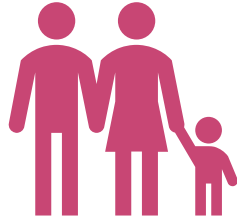
Part 2:
**Day-to-day
experiences of
children and
young people**



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



**Activities and use
of free time**



**Relationships and
influences**



**Education and the
school
environment**



**Aspirations and
expectations**

1. Activities and use of free time

- Activities centred around technology
- Participation in a wide variety of organised activities
- Many of CYP's activities today are costly for families

(13, female)



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

*“She **uses her tech to support her love of art and drawing**. I am happy for her to watch tutorials and complete sessions.” (45-54, mum)*

*“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)*

*“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.” (35-44, mum)*

2. Relationships and influences

- **Family dynamics are changing**
 - Family time can be under pressure, especially for working families
 - Developments in parenting approaches
- **External influences on CYP come from sport and social media, and can create unrealistic expectations**
- **Image and appearance is very important to young people**

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

*“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)*

*“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)*

*“They [influencers] 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.” (childcare provider)*

3. Education and the school environment

- **Relationships play a big role in the school experience**
 - Teachers and pupils
 - Parents and the school
- **Schools face growing challenges in meeting individual pupil needs**
 - Greater understanding of child development, behaviour, mental health and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
 - Calls for greater focus on wellbeing
- **School pressures come in many forms**

*“The **best teachers** are the ones that **listen** and that are kind and caring and also give good advice.” (13, female)*

*“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.” (teacher, primary school)*

*“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.” (35-44, mum)*

*“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)*

Let's hear from you

What did you want to be when you grew up?

(wordcloud)



4. Aspirations and expectations

- **Wide variety of aspirations for future careers and lifestyles**
- **Breadth of career opportunities with less traditional paths to achieving them**
- **Challenges when planning for the future**
 - Not all aspirations are grounded in reality
 - Living in the 'here and now'
 - Fewer work opportunities for young people compared to previous generations

*“I want to be a professional **gamer** and earn **lots of money.**” (9, male)*

*“The professions people went into [before] were very much the bog standard ‘accounting, law, marketing’. 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)*

*“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. They start **giving up on their academic work** because they think that doing something online will be the way for them.”
(health professional)*

Future aspirations collage – 12-year-old male



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.

Future aspirations collage – 16-year-old female



After I have hopefully succeeded in my A-Levels I want to attend medical school OR go into the army and be a Medic or Surgeon

I am hoping to study these A-Levels for 2 years - Chemistry, Biology, Maths and Performing Arts



I want to live in a farmhouse with large gardens that I can look out on. I want to live with my husband and 3 children.



Looking ahead: Supporting childhood in Essex



Participant suggestions: Areas for improvement



Engage with and listen to children and young people

“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)



Create more activities and safe spaces for children and young people

“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)



Improve access to timely and preventative mental health support

“Children need much more support than we were ever given... 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)

Childhood in Essex


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



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Summary

Changes in childhood

The context in which CYP are growing up in today has substantially changed:

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

CYP everyday realities

- CYP spend a lot of time on tech-based, but also organised, adult-led activities.
- External influences play a big role in CYP's aspirations for the future, which are not always grounded in reality.
- There are many pressures in the school environment, on CYP and adults alike. Supporting individual needs is challenging.

Looking ahead

Participant suggestions for improvement:

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

This will help decision makers to put themselves in the shoes of current CYP, to understand the new opportunities and challenges that CYP face.

**Insights are obvious only
after you point them out.**

Gary Klein
(Cognitive psychologist)



10 min comfort break



Childhood in Essex film



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0NIGtlyVc3E>

Research participant's reflection

So what next?

Emerging messages for policy and practice

- Public services in Essex are already dealing with acute pressures stemming from profound changes in the way children and young people live, interact, and their exposure to new influences.
- Repeated studies, and evidence collected locally in support of this project, point to a sustained decline in children's wellbeing (e.g. The Good Childhood Index – The Children's Society).
- In an era of child-centred government, the key drivers of change in childhood – referenced in this research – ought to be a key focus for our upstream preventative activity:
 - exposure to technology and social media;
 - awareness of adult concerns and desensitisation;
 - protection and reduced independence;
 - declining mental health and resilience.

How can this work be used?

This research brings to life CYP perspectives and provides a resource to be used on an ongoing basis to:

- Inform live planning work
- Shape policy and strategy development
- Shape a broader approach to prevention
- Inform new mechanisms for engaging the public, including children and young people

Insights can be used across the Greater Essex system



Make your pledge

- 1. Find a 30min slot in your diary – this week or next – to scan through our report and read the section that you feel is most relevant to you.**
- 2. Share the report with two other people that you think will most benefit from it.**

Search 'Childhood in Essex' on Essex Open Data:

<https://data.essex.gov.uk/>

<https://data.essex.gov.uk/dataset/childhood-in-essex-244yz>




Let's hear from you

What has surprised you today?

(chat)

What is your key takeaway from today?

(chat)



(16, male)

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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Q&A Discussion



This information is issued by:
Essex County Council

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