

**Choose Childhood:**  
building a brighter  
future for our children



## **Acknowledgements**

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# Foreword

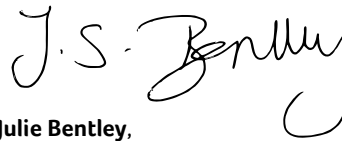
In 1869, Methodist minister Thomas Bowman Stephenson set up our first children's home in London. He was determined to help children living on the streets, to protect them from harm and give them a brighter future. Action for Children, formerly the National Children's Home, has stood hand in hand with children and young people ever since, working to ensure every child gets the childhood they deserve. For 150 years, we've provided support to meet immediate needs, to heal psychological wounds, to tackle isolation, and to help children seize opportunities to change their lives for the better, for good.

In this time, huge progress has been made to improve the lives of children, thanks to the work of governments and charities, including Action for Children. Physical health and mortality rates have improved enormously, and every child has rights, including the right to a secondary education and to protection from cruelty and abuse.

However, in the last decade slow wage growth, rising prices and significant cuts to benefits and public services have combined to damage vulnerable children's life chances. This is leaving some children without support to face abuse and neglect, domestic violence, poverty and hunger. New and intense pressures are also making life for children and young people even more complicated. Concern around children and young people's mental health is growing and many are struggling to get the help they need. As a result, demand for services that support children and families has increased. Given this growing crisis, we have chosen – in our 150th year – to explore the changing nature of childhood.

To understand what it's like to grow up in the UK today, we have listened to children – including those experiencing challenges – as well as parents and grandparents. This report presents their views, which have been collected through a large survey and a number of focus groups. We also examine the importance of parent-child relationships in the early years through the Millennium Cohort Study, to find out how these relationships form the foundation for good mental health in adolescence. And finally, we consider what must change to address the crisis in childhood today and call for a new vision from the government which puts children first.

We find that 150 years on, children today are facing different challenges to previously. However, many are telling us that childhoods today still hurt. This is why our work with children and families remains as important as ever, and why we are determined to do whatever it takes to give every child the childhood they deserve.



**Julie Bentley,**  
Chief Executive



**Sarika Patel,**  
Chair of the Board of Trustees

# Executive summary

In this report, published on Action for Children's 150<sup>th</sup> birthday, we explore how childhoods have changed since the charity was set up in 1869. While much has improved in this time, many children and families believe that childhoods have got worse in recent decades.

Our research with children, young people, parents and grandparents explores what it is like to grow up in the UK today. It highlights the urgent need for investment in support that helps children and young people face challenges, and the need to provide support early, before problems reach crisis point. The research also gives a sense that – despite these issues – children and young people have dropped off the agenda. This needs to change. We are calling on the government to put children first and develop a cross-government National Childhood Strategy for the UK.

**“I feel like you get put under quite a lot of pressure today as society has changed a lot since our parents or grandparents were children.”**

**Young person<sup>1</sup>**

**“Our current government has made it harder for children to achieve what we took for granted i.e. job for life, fair pay and a home of their own.”**

**Parent<sup>2</sup>**



## Key findings

### 1. Over the last 150 years, things have got a lot better for children, however children and families think that in recent years childhoods have got worse

In our survey of young people, parents and grandparents we found:

- **Young people, parents and grandparents most commonly said that childhoods are worse now than for previous generations.** Parents and grandparents feel this most strongly, with more than two-thirds suggesting that childhoods today are worse. This compares to around a third of young people.
- **More young people from low income families said childhoods are worse than young people from high income families.** 39 per cent of young people from low income families think this, compared to 25 per cent of young people from high income families.
- **Parents and grandparents most commonly said children today do not have a brighter future than previous generations had.** Two in five parents and grandparents think this. Young people most commonly believe they do have a brighter future today (one in three said this); however, one-quarter feel that they do not.

Since Action for Children was set up in 1869, significant progress has been made for children in the UK. Childhoods are no longer overshadowed by high mortality rates, child labour and the workhouse, and every child now has rights, including the right to a secondary education and to protection from cruelty and abuse.

Despite these improvements, there is a growing risk that, in some areas, progress has started to reverse. Child poverty in the UK has risen since 2011/12, there are more children with child protection concerns and more children in care.<sup>3 4 5</sup> With greater understanding and awareness, issues that weren't considered previously have come to light. We have seen a growth in mental health problems, with many young people unable to access support.<sup>6</sup> Some of the issues children faced in Victorian times, such as criminal exploitation, are still a blight on childhoods today, albeit in a more sophisticated form due to the development of technology.<sup>7</sup>

Our research found that young people, parents and grandparents share our concerns that childhoods are getting worse, and think that the government needs to do more.

**39%**  
of young people from low income families think childhoods are worse today



**25%**  
of young people from high income families think childhoods are worse today



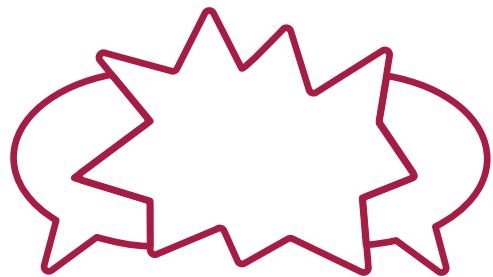
## 2. Strong parent-child relationships in the early years are critical to a good childhood, and yet vital services that strengthen these are being cut

In our analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study we found:

- **Conflict between the main parent and child at age three increases the risk of poor mental health at age 14.** These children are more likely to have higher depressive symptoms, be less happy, and be at an increased risk of self-harm, antisocial behaviour, emotional and conduct problems.
- **Parents and children being close at age three is an important protective factor, predicting better mental health and wellbeing at age 14.** A close parent-child relationship is associated with lower than average levels of conduct problems at age 14.
- **A good relationship between parents has a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing at age 14.** Children growing up in families where parents get on well have higher levels of wellbeing and self-esteem, and lower levels of emotional issues and conduct problems at age 14.

A child's early years are critical to their development, laying the foundations for language and communication, relationships, and health and wellbeing in later life. Our research illustrates the importance of parent-child relationships and their impact on good mental health in adolescence. At the same time, there is a significant gap in early years outcomes between five-year-olds from higher and lower income families. In England, 57 per cent of children eligible for free school meals in 2017/18 were considered to have reached a good level of development on starting primary school, compared to 74 per cent of their peers. In England, the national inequality gap increased for the first time since 2012/13 between 2016/17 and 2017/18, now standing at 17 percentage points.<sup>8</sup>

While administrations across the UK have taken some positive steps to address these challenges, measures have mostly centred on expanding access to early education and childcare. In England, cuts to a range of early years services – from children's centres to health visiting – are in danger of undermining attempts to improve early years outcomes.<sup>9</sup> In all four nations of the UK, a more joined-up, strategic approach is needed to give every child the best start in life.



**Children who experience higher levels of parent-child conflict at age three, have conduct problems 20% higher than average at age 14**

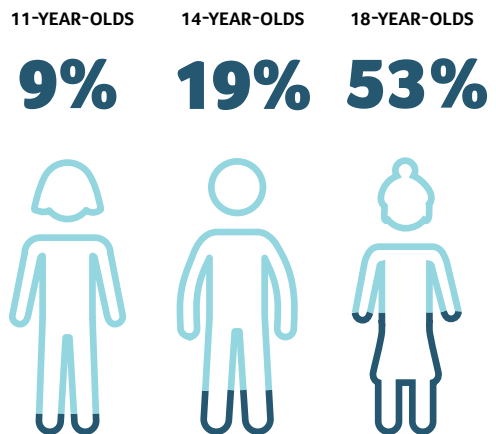
### 3. For many young people childhood is overshadowed by anxiety, which is exacerbated by social pressure

In our survey of young people, parents and grandparents we found:

- **Over a quarter (29 per cent) of young people are worried about their own mental health.** This increases with age, with almost one in ten 11-year-olds (9 per cent) saying they are worried about their mental health, compared to one in five 14-year-olds (19 per cent) and more than half of 18-year-olds (53 per cent).
- **For over three-quarters of young people (85 per cent), worries have an impact on their day-to-day lives.** Young people say that worries affect their ability to focus on what they're doing (40 per cent), their ability to shake negative feelings (37 per cent) and whether they get a good night's sleep (35 per cent).
- **The top issue that young people worry about is schoolwork and exams.** Over half of young people (53 per cent) worry about this.
- **The second most common worry is falling out with friends (39 per cent), followed by their own physical appearance (37 per cent).** Being bullied (online or at school) is seen as the top barrier to having a good childhood.

Children and young people across the UK are facing growing mental health challenges.<sup>10</sup> This is reflected in our survey of children, parents and grandparents, who described the impact of worries on their day-to-day lives. Yet, at the same time, we know that too many children and young people are left to suffer alone, and do not get the support they need, when they need it.<sup>11</sup> This means mental health problems can escalate to crisis point and have a long-term effect on a child's wellbeing.

Across the UK, current plans lack the pace and ambition to address the scale and urgency of the problem. We are calling on administrations in all four nations to accelerate timelines and provide sufficient funding for targeted early help. Doing so will ensure all young people who are suffering from – or at risk of developing – mental health difficulties, get the support they need as soon as possible.



**The proportion of young people worried about their own mental health increases with age**



#### 4. Increasing numbers of children are at risk of abuse and neglect without getting the support they need to prevent harm and recover from past trauma

In our survey of young people, parents and grandparents we found:

- **Young people, parents and grandparents feel more services are needed to support children and families when relationships become strained and break down.** More than a third of young people (35 per cent), and more than two in five parents (42 per cent) and grandparents (49 per cent), agree that more support is needed.
- **Parents and grandparents think that the UK government is investing ‘too little’ in services that support better childhoods.** More than two-thirds of parents (67 per cent) and more than half of grandparents (58 per cent) think this.
- **‘Feeling loved and cared for by my family’ was the top factor selected by all three generations for children to be happy.** Well over three-quarters of all respondents selected this option (young people: 79 per cent; parents: 85 per cent; and grandparents: 92 per cent).

Our research found that feeling safe and having a loving, caring family is an essential part of a happy childhood. However, increasing numbers of children are being taken into care because their childhoods are blighted by issues such as abuse and neglect.<sup>12</sup> At the same time, in England, funding for early help services to support these children and families is being cut.<sup>13</sup> Our previous research found that, too often, children are left without support until problems reach crisis point.<sup>14</sup>

Across the UK, administrations must do more to rebalance services protecting children by investing in prevention and early intervention approaches. Alongside sufficient funding, there must also be a greater responsibility placed on local authorities and the relevant agencies to provide early help according to the needs of every child and family. In situations where children do need to be removed from their families, the care system needs to support children to come to terms with their experiences.



## 67%

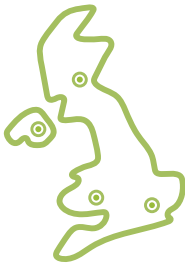
of parents think the government is investing too little in childhoods

## 58%

of grandparents think the government is investing too little in childhoods

## What needs to change?

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### 1. The UK government must put children first and develop a cross-government National Childhood Strategy for the UK

A new UK-wide strategy, led by the Prime Minister, must be developed to address the scale and cross departmental nature of the challenges our children face. The Prime Minister's leadership would make a clear statement about the importance of such a strategy to the country's future prosperity, and would galvanise action across the government. The strategy must be developed in partnership with children and young people, and put their needs at its heart. Administrations in each of the nations must urgently develop their own strategies for devolved issues and set out how they will meet the needs of their children.



### 2. Spending decisions must start to prioritise children and childhoods

An ambitious National Childhood Strategy must be underpinned by adequate investment in services that support children and families. Administrations in all four nations must transform how they help children by investing in high quality, evidence-based prevention and early help for families. Investing in these services now will result in considerable savings further down the line.<sup>15</sup>



### 3. Public policy must be rebalanced to promote early help

Supporting children and parents early and intervening before a problem spirals into a crisis is the most effective way to improve children's lives and reduce demand for costly late intervention services.<sup>16</sup> In the past decade, early help spending has been cut significantly in England. Policymakers must better incentivise local agencies to provide help early and end the cycle of increasing spend on crisis services.<sup>17</sup> They must continue to invest in growing the evidence base and to sharing good practice around early help.

## Together, we can Choose Childhood

**As Thomas Bowman Stephenson did 150 years ago, we continue to support children, young people and their families, listen to their voices and campaign to improve their lives. We will continue to do this for as long as it takes, to make sure all childhoods are free from crisis. Today, too many children continue to tell us that childhood hurts. That's why we're urging political leaders across the UK nations to Choose Childhood and put children at the heart of their vision for the future.**



# What we did

We wanted to explore how childhoods have changed since Action for Children was established in 1869, and to ask children what childhood is like in the UK today. To do this, we asked the following questions:

- How have childhoods changed since 1869?
- What do young people, parents and grandparents think about childhood today compared to in the past?
- Are all children getting the best start in life?
- How important are relationships in the early years for a good childhood?
- What stops children and young people today from having a safe and stable home?
- Are children and young people being supported to develop good mental health and emotional wellbeing?
- What needs to change to improve childhoods for children and young people today?

## Research methods

We chose a mixed methods approach to answer these questions. We started by looking at existing literature and nationally available datasets to paint a picture of how childhoods have changed over the last 150 years. This also provided an understanding of the main challenges facing children today.

The quality of relationships that a child has with their family is a key component of a good childhood. To explore just how important these relationships are, we worked with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at University College London (UCL), using data from the Millennium Cohort Study, to examine the relationship between the quality of parent-child relationships at age three and young people's mental health and wellbeing at age 14.

We also worked with YouGov to conduct quantitative and qualitative research. This included a large-scale online survey of over 2,000 young

people aged 11-18, over 1,500 parents/carers and over 1,300 grandparents.<sup>18</sup> We asked them what childhood is like today, how it compares to childhoods for previous generations, and what they want to change for children and young people.

To gain a deeper insight into the issues raised, we worked with YouGov to conduct a number of online focus groups with young people, parents and grandparents. We also conducted our own focus groups with young people who use Action for Children's services. This was vital to gain a better understanding of how the childhoods of young people who have experienced challenges differ from those experienced by their peers.

For a more detailed description of the research methods used please see Appendix B.

# Section one:

## How has childhood changed over the decades?

In the last 150 years, significant progress has been made to improve the lives of children and young people. While it is clear that huge improvements have been made, some of the same – or similar – challenges still exist. In this section, we explore how life has changed for children in the last 150 years. We also share the views of young people, parents and grandparents, who suggest that the progress made is at risk of being reversed.

### Childhood then and now

#### LATE 19TH TO EARLY 20TH CENTURY

When Action for Children opened its first children's home in 1869, life for many children was incredibly difficult. Many faced issues such as child labour, a lack of education, the workhouse, and what was then termed 'child prostitution'. In 1870, infant mortality rates in England and Wales stood at 160 per 1,000 live births.<sup>19</sup> This is in stark contrast to figures from 2017, when rates were 4 per 1,000.<sup>20</sup> The Rowntree report in 1901 found that 'one-fourth' of the population was living in absolute poverty<sup>21</sup> or acute deprivation.<sup>22</sup>

Throughout the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, campaigners such as Thomas Bowman Stephenson advocated for children's rights, provided care and support, and influenced policy to improve the lives of children. During this period, children gradually came to be seen as individuals in need of the care and protection of the state, rather than as cheap labour to be exploited or the property of their parents or employers.

Societal progress included improvements in sanitation, healthcare, housing and the opening of children's homes for those most in need. In 1908, for the first time, cruelty and neglect were defined in law and penalties for the maltreatment or death of children were introduced.

In Ireland, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many children faced sectarian division and violence, which was fuelled by rising discontent with poor living and working conditions.



**1869**

Thomas Bowman Stephenson sets up Action for Children's first children's home



**1908**

Children Act

defines cruelty and neglect in law and introduces penalties for the maltreatment or death of children



## MID TO LATE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

It wasn't until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century that social policy in the UK focused on the universal welfare of children. The 1940s saw the introduction of family allowances, the NHS and the expansion of council housing. The introduction of a secondary education for all children in 1944 marked a significant turning point for children, emphasising the importance of learning, rather than work.<sup>23</sup>

Following the death of 13-year-old Dennis O'Neill in 1945 at the hands of his violent foster carers, Action for Children played an active role in the Curtis Committee investigation into the welfare of children.<sup>24</sup> The committee's findings led to the 1948 Children Act, which introduced a children's committee and a children's officer in each local authority.<sup>25</sup>

In 1968, following the publication of the Seebohm report, councils' social work services and social care provisions were amalgamated into social services departments.<sup>26</sup>

1977 saw the introduction of Child Benefit, arguably one of the most significant social policy decisions since the formation of the welfare state. It was designed to help all families with the costs of raising a child, to tackle child poverty and to improve wellbeing.

From the 1960s until the signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998, children and young people in Northern Ireland grew up with the threat of conflict and the trauma of bereavement, displacement and violence. Around a quarter of the 3,601 people killed during this period were aged 21 or younger.<sup>27</sup>

### 1944

#### Education Act

introduces a secondary education for all children



### 1948

Following Action for Children's input into the Curtis review, the 1948 Children Act establishes a comprehensive childcare service in every local authority



### 1977

introduction of Child Benefit

## LATE 20<sup>TH</sup> TO EARLY 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY

The late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an increase in rights and participation for children.

The 1989 Children Act was fundamental to this. The Act allocated duties to local authorities, courts, parents and other agencies to ensure children were safeguarded and their welfare promoted. It centred on the idea that children were best cared for within their own families. However, it also made provisions for when parents and families refused to co-operate with statutory bodies. It ensured the child's wishes and feelings were considered, as well as the risk of harm.

Another critical milestone was reached in 1991, when the UK ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Convention covers 54 articles, including the right to safety, protection, education, and the right to express opinions and be listened to.

Decision and policymakers also began to recognise the importance of intervening early to prevent children and families reaching crisis point. The 1989 Children Act had introduced a new category of 'children in need',<sup>28</sup> which sought to make local authorities more proactive about providing early help.<sup>29</sup> Other new measures were introduced across the UK, including Children's Commissioners and children's centres. The government also took significant steps to end child poverty, which led to 800,000 children being lifted out of poverty between 1998/99 and 2011/12.<sup>30</sup>

Following a referendum in 1997, the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999, with power to legislate in a wide number of areas, including some tax raising powers. In 2006, the Scottish Parliament introduced Getting it Right for Every Child, with the aim of supporting children and their families through universal and integrated early intervention services.

The devolved government of Wales was established in 1998, and gained independent executive powers in 2006, allowing the government to pass bills on topics important to children and young people. Policies such as Flying Start, introduced in 2007, which provides early years support for families living in disadvantaged areas, have been part of a focus on early intervention.

**1989**

**Children Act**



strengthens duties to ensure children are safeguarded and welfare promoted

**1991**

the UK ratifies the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child



**1998**

Good Friday Agreement signed and Northern Ireland Assembly established

Welsh Assembly established with power over issues affecting children

**1999**

**Scottish Parliament established**



**2006**

the Scottish Parliament introduces Getting it Right for Every Child

**2007**

Welsh Assembly introduces Flying Start



## THE 2010s

In the last decade, demand for services that support children and families has increased significantly. The number of children subject to a child protection plan or on child protection registers<sup>31</sup> has risen in all nations since 2010,<sup>32 33 34</sup> apart from Northern Ireland where it has increased since 2014.<sup>35</sup> In England, Wales and Northern Ireland there has been an overall increase in the number of children in care<sup>36</sup> since 2010.<sup>37 38 39</sup> High profile child deaths like Victoria Climbié and Peter Connelly in England may have partly contributed by creating a more risk-averse culture and a greater awareness of child protection among professionals and the public.<sup>40</sup>

As in Victorian times, children today still face trafficking and criminal exploitation activities, though on a lesser scale. The use of technology has increased the scope and sophistication of those seeking to exploit vulnerable children, with many targeted online and groomed for gangs. This includes recruiting children to sell drugs through an expanded network of 'county lines'.<sup>41</sup>

Despite this rising need, available funding for local authority children's services<sup>42</sup> in England decreased by £3 billion (29 per cent) between 2010/11 and 2017/18.<sup>43</sup> Financial pressures have inevitably forced local authorities to prioritise statutory services, with early help support bearing the brunt of these cuts. A reduction in early support means that some children and families are not getting the help they need, when they need it.

In Scotland, there have been a number of initiatives announced that have seen new funding allocations for early intervention services.<sup>44</sup> This pattern is similar to Wales, where investment in Flying Start has underpinned a focus on early intervention over the last decade.<sup>45</sup> However, there is still more to be done. In 2017/18, spending by councils in Wales on looked after children was almost three times higher than spending on Flying Start.<sup>46</sup>



## 2010

second serious case review into the tragic death of Peter Connelly is published

## 2016

UK government introduces a freeze on working age benefits

## 2017

new prevalence data shows one in nine 5-15 year olds have a mental health condition in England



In Northern Ireland, the 2019/20 budget, passed by emergency procedures in Westminster, is 'flat', representing an ongoing budget deficit. Progress for children in Northern Ireland has been frustrated by the suspension of the Northern Ireland Assembly on several occasions, including most recently in January 2017, which is still to be resolved.

Changes to the tax credit and benefit systems, combined with slow wage growth and rising prices for everyday goods, have led to an increase in the number of families living in poverty across the UK. Between 2011/12 and 2017/18, child poverty<sup>47</sup> increased from 27 per cent to 30 per cent, with 4.1 million children now living in poverty in the UK.<sup>48</sup>

Poverty disproportionately affects children living in large families and lone parent households. In-work poverty has also risen, and more than two-thirds (70 per cent) of children in poverty are living in a family where at least one person works.<sup>49</sup> Poverty has a negative impact on people's lives, including poorer mental and physical health, lower educational attainment and reduced employment prospects across the life course.

The UK government scrapped its commitment to end child poverty in 2016. However, the Scottish government took a different approach, passing The Child Poverty (Scotland) Act 2017, setting four headline targets. In Wales, 2015 Child Poverty Strategy aims to eradicate child poverty in Wales by 2020. The Child Poverty Strategy (2016-2019) in Northern Ireland sets out a similar vision to eradicate child poverty.

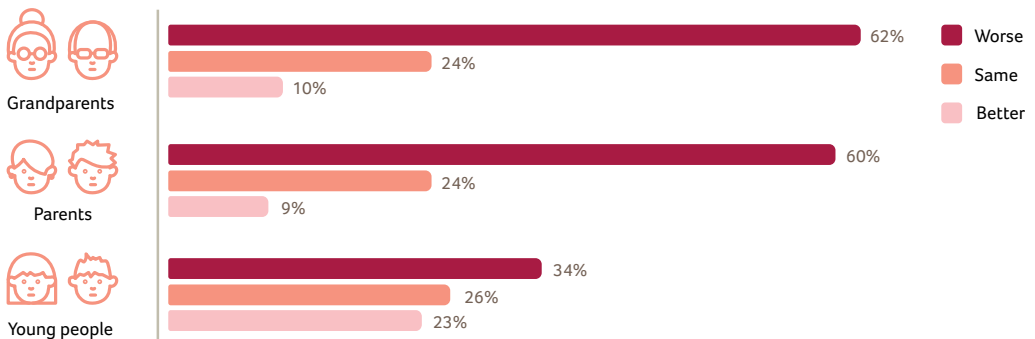
A growing political focus on children and young people's mental health is one of the more positive developments of the past decade. While historically many children and young people have experienced poor mental health, only recently has there been a growing understanding and awareness of this issue. This has led to rising numbers of children being diagnosed.

Across the UK, additional funding has been allocated for children and young people's mental health services. However, the number of children and young people experiencing poor mental health has continued to grow and outstrip provision. Between 1994 and 2017, the percentage of five to 15-year-olds experiencing mental health issues in England increased from one in ten (9.7 per cent) to one in nine (11.2 per cent).<sup>50</sup> However, in 2017/18, more than two-thirds (69 per cent) of children and young people with a mental health condition in England didn't access support.<sup>51</sup> This is mirrored elsewhere in the UK, for example in Scotland there has been a 24 per cent increase in the number of referrals rejected by specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) between 2013/14 and 2017/18.<sup>52</sup>

## What do children and families think about childhood past and present?

Childhoods have changed significantly over the past 150 years. Yet, despite vast improvements, progress on a number of measures has begun to slow – or even reverse – in recent years. This is casting a shadow over childhoods across the UK. We wanted to explore whether children, parents and grandparents living in the UK agree. We worked with YouGov to ask young people, parents and grandparents for their views on childhood today.

### Three generations say childhoods are worse today



When asked about growing up in the UK today, the most common response across all three generations was that childhoods today are worse than when the young people's parents were growing up. Parents and grandparents felt this most strongly, with nearly two-thirds saying that childhoods today are worse (parents: 60 per cent; grandparents 62 per cent). This compares to over a third of young people (34 per cent). More girls (38 per cent) than boys (30 per cent) said that childhoods today are worse. We also saw a difference in answers according to household

income, with 39 per cent of young people from low income families stating that childhoods are worse today, compared to 25 per cent from high income families.<sup>53</sup> This difference is mirrored among parents, with 61 per cent of those living in low income households saying that childhoods are worse today, compared to 54 per cent of those living in high income households.

39%

of young people from low income families think childhoods are worse today

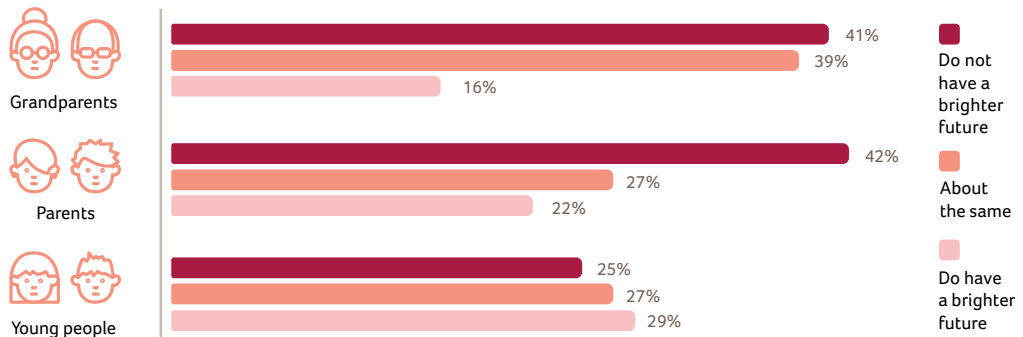


25%

of young people from high income families think childhoods are worse today



Parents and grandparents think children do not have a brighter future today



A similar pattern emerged when we asked whether children today have a brighter future than when their parents were young.<sup>54</sup> Parents and grandparents felt the most negative. Over two in five parents (42 per cent) and grandparents (41 per cent) said that children today do not have a brighter future than the previous generation. In contrast, young people gave a more mixed response. Over a quarter (29 per cent) said that they do have a brighter future today; however, one-quarter (25 per cent) felt that young people do not have a brighter future today.

Focus groups with parents and grandparents echoed the view that childhoods are worse today. Broadly, they blamed an unstable political and economic environment and limited career opportunities. While some believed that the education system has improved, they suggested that a good education no longer guarantees success in adulthood. Many also said that there is too much pressure to look a certain way and to fit in, blaming this on exposure to the media – particularly social media.

***“Children today are subject to more peer pressure than my childhood and they are more inclined to play on electronic games rather than playing outdoors.”<sup>55</sup>***

It was also suggested that children today worry a lot more about current events. One parent of a 15-year-old daughter said: “She is upset by the harsh realities of the world. Poverty, violence, abuse etc.” The parent added, “I think media brings things to our attention more these days so kids are just more aware of the world than I ever was.”<sup>56</sup> In our survey we found that around half of young people worried about poverty (50 per cent), terrorism (49 per cent) and the environment (48 per cent), and around two in five were concerned about equality (41 per cent) and Brexit (38 per cent).


Young people agreed that childhoods have changed since their parents were younger, but had mixed views about whether this was a change for the better or the worse. One young person said: “I haven’t had anything to compare it to but I supposed it’s better than being a kid without electricity, or being a kid with the threat of nuclear war.”<sup>57</sup> Some said that technology had made everyday life easier, for example by allowing them to stay in contact with friends and reduce loneliness. One young person said: “if you don’t have social media you don’t really have contact with anyone... then you have no social life.”<sup>58</sup>

However, a number of young people said that childhood is harder today due to a lack of opportunity and greater pressures and expectations. Many also said that the world is not as safe today, and that their parents had more freedom and a more carefree childhood.

***“They put the weight of stress of exams on children way too early... and I don’t think that’s very good for this generation or the next.”<sup>59</sup>***

These findings portray a growing sense of negativity about childhood today, and a feeling that economic and societal pressures are to blame. Section two explores young people’s experiences of childhood today and examines the evidence to support these growing concerns.

## Case study



Three generations of the same family share different views about childhood today<sup>60</sup>

**We spoke to Ella\*, 15, her mum, Joanna\*, and her grandmother, Sue\*, about being a young person today.**

Ella believes that, in many ways, childhood was worse for her parents' generation, who were restricted by strict male/female stereotypes. She welcomes technology, which has made communication easier.

She has a good relationship with her family, especially her mum, but says that schoolwork and money can get in the way of spending quality time together. She worries about "the insane amount of pressure with exams" and "disappointing my friends and family," as well as worrying about her parents and her family's finances.

When she is "feeling really down" she keeps things to herself to save her parents "more stress." Ella said if she was in charge of the country:

***"I would 100% put more money into education and support for mental health."***

**Ella's mum Joanna** says that, when she was younger, she had more free time outdoors and better opportunities than her children do now. Childhoods today are "much worse thanks to drugs, crime, overcrowding, peer pressure, social media, constant testing, endless homework and targets." Joanna thinks that children today need more time "just to be, to take time to breathe and laugh."

In the past, Joanna's children have struggled with their mental health and the support has not been adequate. She said: "I don't remember even knowing what a mental health condition was as a child! Three of my children have had mental health problems and the support was inadequate." She added:

***"I feel very sorry for youngsters with issues, there is a lot of noise made about mental health but very little practical help."***

Joanna thinks that mental health services need to be "properly funded" and that "there should be support within schools. There should be youth clubs and centres. There should be a large online presence of counselling and chat services for kids."

**Ella's grandmother, Sue**, agrees with Joanna. She thinks childhood is worse for her grandchildren because they have more pressure and less time to spend having fun. She worries about her granddaughter because of "the stress she places on herself with exams, studying." She says:

***"It makes me very sad as they were very happy when they were little but not now that they are older."***

Sue says society needs to be safer and more accepting, and that more support is needed for children with mental health issues.

\* Please note names used here are pseudonyms

## Section two:

### What is childhood really like today?

While life for children and young people has improved dramatically in the last 150 years, too many children in the UK today still don't experience the childhood they deserve. In this section, we take an in-depth look at what childhood is really like today, particularly for the most disadvantaged children.

#### To do this, we explore three key aspects of modern childhood:

1. Whether children are getting the best start in life
2. Whether children are being supported to develop good mental health and emotional wellbeing
3. Whether children have a safe and stable home

*“I think in some ways it was easier when my parents were children because they didn't have to look a certain way and feel bad if they didn't look like someone else.”<sup>61</sup>*

Young person

*“There needs to be more youth centres and activities, geared up to what children like to do. I don't think that mental health would be so much of an issue if the right support was in place in the home and school.”<sup>62</sup>*

Grandparent

**Getting the best  
start in life**



## What is the problem?

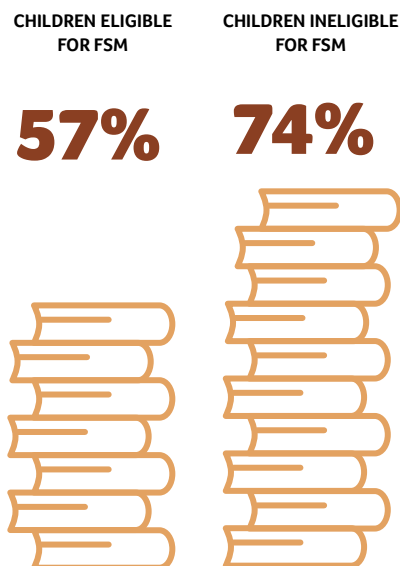
A child's early years are critical to their development, as they undergo rapid growth that is unmatched at any other time in their lives. These experiences lay the foundations for language and communication, relationships, and health and wellbeing. A range of factors influence a child's early development, including parenting, education, family income and parental employment.

Research shows a six-month developmental gap between toddlers from higher and lower income families by 24 months.<sup>63</sup> In 2017/18, 22 per cent of children living in the most deprived areas of Scotland had a concern recorded about their development at 27-30 months. This is compared to 9 per cent in the least deprived areas.<sup>64</sup>

In England, 57 per cent of children eligible for free school meals (FSM) in 2017/18 were considered to have reached a good level of development<sup>65</sup> on starting primary school, compared to 74 per cent of their peers.<sup>66</sup> While there have been improvements in the overall number of children considered school ready, the gap between children in low income families and their peers has only closed by two percentage points since 2012/13.<sup>67</sup> Between 2016/17 and 2017/18 the national inequality gap increased slightly for the first time since the revised Early Years Foundation Stage was introduced in 2012/13.<sup>68</sup>

In Wales, children aged seven who are eligible for FSM are less likely to achieve the overall Foundation Phase indicator compared to those who are ineligible.<sup>69</sup> In 2018, 68 per cent of seven-year-olds eligible for FSM met this standard, compared to 86 per cent of those who were ineligible. The gap of 18 percentage points is the widest it has been in five years.<sup>70</sup> Research analysing the Millennium Cohort Study for Northern Ireland also found gaps in early years attainment between children growing up in poverty and their peers.<sup>71</sup>

Reaching key developmental milestones has a long-term impact on educational attainment. Almost all (94 per cent) children in England who achieve an expected level of development at age five go on to achieve expected standards for reading at Key Stage 1.<sup>72</sup> Conversely, those children who perform poorly at Key Stage 1 are likely to remain at the bottom when they sit their GCSEs.<sup>73</sup>



**Disadvantaged children are less likely to be considered 'school ready' at age five than their peers**



Access to high quality, affordable early education protects against poorer outcomes and narrows the development gap.<sup>74</sup> In England, there is a positive link between the take-up of free early education for disadvantaged two-year-olds and improvements in outcomes for disadvantaged children at a local authority level.<sup>75</sup> However, research shows that this additional funding is poorly targeted, with three in ten disadvantaged children missing out on free early education places.<sup>76</sup>

Parenting style is a critical factor in preventing poor childhood outcomes. Parents who are nurturing and sensitive help children to develop a strong attachment. Many parents do, however, need guidance to get their child off to the best possible start.<sup>77</sup> Parenting and family support is critical to this. For example, stimulating play and positive interaction help children to develop communication and language skills. However, nearly one in three two-year-olds (28 per cent) using our services in 2018/19 had not experienced stimulating play before coming to us.<sup>78</sup>

As children get older, problems with behaviour can emerge. In 2018/19, almost a third of children (32 per cent) aged five that used our services needed support to improve their behaviour.<sup>79</sup> Emotional difficulties can also emerge. Nationally, 28 per cent of pre-school children face difficulties that impact on their mental health.<sup>80</sup> Parenting support gives parents the tools and confidence to meet these needs.

Parents also face external pressures and stresses, such as budgeting and financial management. Of those parents we supported across the UK in 2018/19, one in ten (11 per cent) with children aged five and under, needed support in this area.<sup>81</sup>

**Of families with young children that we supported in 2018/19:**



**28%**  
of two-year-olds had not experienced stimulating play before



**32%**  
of five-year-olds needed support to improve their behaviour



**11%**  
of parents needed support with budgeting

## Case study

**Rachel\* was referred to her local children's centre by her health visitor after becoming worried about her three-year-old son Jamie's\* eating. Having recently split with her husband, she was adjusting to life as a single parent and the challenges it can bring.**



Rachel and her husband separated when Jamie was two years old and they moved to a new area. Rachel said:

***“When Jamie and I moved to our own place it was tough. At times, it was really emotionally and mentally draining and it could be lonely.”***

After visiting her health visitor with concerns about Jamie's eating, she was referred to a children's centre for support. A Support Worker Louise went to visit the family and found that as well as eating support, Jamie's behaviour was becoming increasingly challenging. Rachel explained:

***“Before Louise came to the house things were so very tough. I was plodding my way through each day, each hour. I never knew what type of mood Jamie would be in and he would often be angry and take it out on me.”***

Louise visited the family regularly, as well as the family coming to the centre. Rachel said: “We had 1:1 sessions where we'd do activities with Jamie... it was all interactive so that he was learning and

developing. We would also have chats about how the week had been, it gave me moral support.”

Alongside the parenting support, Rachel also needed help with practicalities. Finances were stretched and she was battling to keep her job. Rachel explained:

***“Financially we had some help through the children's centre – I couldn't have done it on my own. Childcare was a big issue. Louise helped me and organised funding for childcare for the summer holidays. Without that I have no idea what I could have done.”***

With Jamie recently starting school, Rachel said: “I personally feel stronger and was very grateful for Louise coming in to help. Jamie is amazing - I can't even explain how different he is. He hasn't had a physical outburst in months. In some ways we've both changed; we've grown. I'm a lot calmer now. At the time it was so overwhelming, now I'm much more chilled out. It's unbelievable really how far we've come.”

\* Please note names used here are pseudonyms

## Our findings

Given the importance of parenting in the early years, we analysed how early relationships impact on mental health and wellbeing in adolescence.

We worked with the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at UCL to analyse data from the Millennium Cohort Study, a UK-wide cohort study of more than 19,000 individuals born at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We looked at how family and social relationships and the home environment at age three (measured by factors such as parent-child closeness and conflict) predict subjective wellbeing and mental ill-health at age 14 (measured by outcomes such as depressive symptoms and self-harm).<sup>82</sup>

### Parent-child conflict in early childhood increases the risk of poor mental health



At age 14 parents report:

↑ **11.9%**

higher than average emotional problems

↑ **20.0%**

higher than average conduct problems

At age 14 children report:

↑ **3.5%**

higher than average depressive symptoms

↓ **1.0%**

lower than average wellbeing

↑ **6.6%**

increase in self harm

↑ **7.2%**

higher than average antisocial behaviour

We found that both parent-child conflict and parent-child closeness at age three had an impact on mental health and wellbeing at age 14. By conflict we mean that the parent is struggling with the child and the relationship between the parent and child is difficult.<sup>83</sup> While all parents experience some difficulty in parenting, we found that where the main parent<sup>84</sup> experienced greater difficulty, the child was more likely to have higher depressive symptoms, to be less happy and to be at an increased risk of self-harm, antisocial behaviour, emotional and conduct problems aged 14.

Children who in early childhood experience a high conflict relationship with their mother reported a 3.5 per cent higher than average level of depressive symptoms, a 6.6 per cent increase in self-harm, and 1 per cent lower wellbeing in adolescence. Their parents reported adolescent emotional problems at 11.9 per cent above the average. These adolescents self-reported 7.2 per cent higher levels of antisocial behaviour, and their parents reported conduct problems 20 per cent higher than average.

A high level of conflict with the second parent in early childhood was found to be less significant than conflict with the main parent. Where high levels of conflict were described, adolescents reported 9.5 per cent lower levels of wellbeing, and their parents reported 6.1 per cent higher levels of conduct problems at age 14. Conflict with the second parent was not associated with any other adolescent outcomes considered in this study, such as higher depressive symptoms, self-harm and emotional problems.<sup>85</sup>

The closeness of children and their parents at age three was also an important predictor of mental health and wellbeing outcomes at age 14, although the link was less clear than that for parent-child conflict. A close relationship between child and caregiver was associated with a 4.3 per cent lower than average level of conduct problems at age 14. However, this wasn't associated with other positive outcomes.

A good relationship between parents was found to have a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing at age 14. Children growing up in families where parents get on well reported a 1.4 per cent higher level of wellbeing and a 0.8 per cent higher level of self-esteem at age 14. Their parents reported 3.8 per cent lower levels of emotional issues and 3.6 per cent lower levels of conduct problems.

## What needs to change?

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While administrations across the UK have taken positive steps to improve early years support in recent years, for example by investing in early education, cuts to local authority budgets in England are leading to a reduction in the parenting support critical to building healthy relationships. In all four nations of the UK a more joined up, strategic approach is needed to address the range of needs in the early years, underpinned by sustained political leadership to end child poverty.

### 1. Early years and childcare

In recent years, a key focus of early years policy across the UK has been increasing access to early education. In England, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government expanded free early education for two-year-olds from disadvantaged families. However, take up of the entitlement is low and more must be done to increase participation. In 2017, the government introduced 30 hours of free childcare per week for working parents of three and four-year-olds. Despite good intentions, there have been well-documented challenges, with insufficient funding to cover delivery costs.<sup>86</sup> The scheme has also been criticised for failing to target families most in need. Analysis by Lucy Powell MP, published by the Social Market Foundation, shows that only 2.7 per cent of new funding for childcare and early education in this parliament is earmarked for disadvantaged children.<sup>87</sup>

Similar concerns have been raised in Wales, where the government has also rolled out 30 hours a week of free childcare for three and four-year-olds. As in England, this is available for working families with a combined income of up to £199,000 a year. The Children's Commissioner for Wales has expressed concerns that offering this support to working families only could see disadvantaged children falling even further behind.<sup>88</sup>

The Scottish government has committed to increasing free childcare for all three and four-year-olds, and eligible two-year-olds, from 600 to 1,140 hours per year by 2020. They have published an Action Plan to improve Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland. This 'Blueprint' outlines a number of key principles for the early learning and childcare sector. Although a welcome step, a number of implementation barriers remain. The number of childcare providers and the level of infrastructure need to be expanded to cope with higher demand.

#### 1.1

**Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should rethink their childcare offer so that high quality, affordable early education is available to all children from the earliest years.**

#### 1.2

**In Scotland, the Scottish government should work collaboratively across sectors to overcome barriers and implement the Early Learning and Childcare Blueprint.**

While the focus on early education across the UK is welcome, we believe a more holistic approach to early years support is needed. Wider cuts to a range of services in England, from health visiting to parenting support, are in danger of undermining attempts to give all children the best possible start in life.

Between 2010/11 and 2019/20, the Early Intervention Grant, which pays for a number of early years services in England, is estimated to fall by 71 per cent, from £3.3 billion to £960 million.<sup>89</sup> As budgets are squeezed, local authorities have been forced to protect late intervention services, leading to a decline in spending on early intervention.

Sure Start children's centres in England and Northern Ireland, integrated children's centres in Wales, and children and family centres in Scotland, help young children in a number of ways, including through childcare and parenting support. However, spend on children's centres in England has decreased from £1.5 billion in 2010/11 to £579 million in 2017/18. Children's centres have closed at a rate of one a week since 2010, and more than 1,000 centres are estimated to have shut their doors since 2009.<sup>90</sup> The role of many children's centres has also changed significantly

to cut costs. There has been a reduction in open access services and an increased focus on more targeted support, meaning fewer families are getting support. Our recent report, 'Closed Doors', estimates that between 2014/15 and 2017/18, the number of children using children's centres fell by almost a fifth (18 per cent) – from 2.2 million to 1.8 million.<sup>91</sup> Currently, there is a lack of oversight and accountability, with Ofsted inspections of children's centres on hold since 2015. This has impacted on the quality and consistency of provision.<sup>92</sup>

## 1.3

**In England, the government should set a clear direction for the future of children's centres, creating long-term security for services used by millions of children each year.**

## How we're helping

### *Supporting families through parenting programmes in children centres*

There are different types and styles of parenting programme offered through Action for Children's children centres to address different needs. These programmes are designed to improve parental effectiveness by providing a clear parenting philosophy and a set of positive parenting skills and strategies.

For younger children, Incredible Years is a popular intervention. The programme is for parents with concerns about the behaviour of a child between the ages of three and six. Parents attend 18 to 20 weekly group sessions where they learn strategies for interacting positively with their child and discouraging unwanted behaviour. There is also a component that seeks to improve children's outcomes by improving the quality of interparental relationships.

Incredible Years has a strong evidence base with multiple rigorous evaluations showing a long-term positive impact on child outcomes.<sup>93</sup>

In Northern Ireland, the draft Programme for Government (2016–2021) includes a welcome cross-cutting approach to improving wellbeing outcomes including giving children and young people the best start in life. The Northern Ireland Executive began the process of developing an Early Years and Childcare Strategy back in 2012. However, after seven years and two public consultations, nothing has been agreed to date, thus stagnating progress in this area.

## 1.4

**In Northern Ireland, a newly re-formed Northern Ireland Assembly should urgently speed up the development of the cross-cutting Early Years (0-6) Strategy and the Childcare Strategy.**

More positively, in Wales, the Families First programme emphasises the importance of early intervention and the government has continued to invest in the programme. The Flying Start programme provides targeted early interventions to children and families in the most disadvantaged areas. This includes an enhanced health visiting service, fully funded part-time childcare for two to three-year-olds and parenting support. However, although the Welsh government has significantly increased the number of children accessing the programme, criticisms remain because accessibility is determined by where the child lives, creating a postcode lottery of support. Recent research by Save the Children found that 44 per cent of children from disadvantaged backgrounds live outside of Flying Start areas.<sup>94</sup>

In Scotland, positive steps to improve early years support include introducing the Best Start antenatal programme and a new health visitor pathway, which sits alongside the National Parenting Strategy. However, there is still no comprehensive approach to early family support and more needs to be done to develop a system that addresses the spectrum of needs along with proper investment.

Health visitors play a critical role in supporting positive early development by assessing children's progress, identifying potential problems, and referring families for targeted support. In England, funding reductions have resulted in the health visitor workforce shrinking from 10,309 in 2015 to 7,724 in 2018.<sup>95</sup> A recent survey of health visitors found some to be working with caseloads of more than 500 children.<sup>96</sup> This has led to variations in whether families receive mandated health assessments, and whether this is done by a trained health visitor or a less qualified member of staff.<sup>97</sup>

This is deeply concerning in light of reductions to universal services in children's centres, as health visitors are often the only engagement some families have with professionals in the earliest years of their child's life.

## 1.5

**In England, the government should properly resource the health visitor workforce to increase support for families in the first years of a child's life.**



## 2. Poverty and hardship

Undermining real progress towards giving all children the best start in life is the increasing number of children growing up in poverty across the UK. The Welsh, Northern Ireland and Scottish administrations have taken positive steps in this regard with clear commitments and action plans to address poverty, although the impact of these are yet to be seen. In England there are currently no plans in place. The Scottish government has also pledged to deliver a new 'income supplement' for low income families by 2022, to help parents of young children. However, limited details have been provided.

The ongoing reduction to the value of child-related benefits across the UK has significantly contributed to more families experiencing poverty. A freeze on working-age benefits means that they are the same cash amount as in 2015/16, despite inflation increasing. Analysis by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation shows that by 2020 the benefits freeze will have made life harder for 27 million people – 11 million of whom are children.<sup>98</sup>

In Northern Ireland, changes to the benefits system are being rolled out more slowly than in the rest of the UK, and there are fears that, when mitigation measures to help maintain family incomes come to an end in 2020, finances will be put under even greater pressure.<sup>99</sup>

### 2.1

**The UK government should immediately end the freeze on working age benefits, given the impact this has had on the living standards of low income families. All future benefits should be regularly reviewed and upgraded in line with the cost of living and living standards.**

### 2.2

**The UK government should end the two-child limit, which targets families already facing higher poverty risks. Sufficient resources should be put in place to mitigate the impact of welfare changes, particularly in Northern Ireland, where the roll out is happening more slowly.**

### 2.3

**In England, the government must put in place a comprehensive action plan to tackle child poverty and the barriers to escaping it, following the examples of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.**

## 2.4

**In Wales, the Welsh Assembly should ensure that tackling child poverty remains a priority within new arrangements under the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and that clear accountability measures are in place.**

## 2.5

**In Scotland, the Scottish government should outline what their 'income supplement' will look like and fast track its delivery. More must also be done to maximise families' incomes. An information strategy should be established to ensure people are fully aware of their entitlements and rights when it comes to financial help.**

If administrations across the UK take steps to address the root causes of poverty, alongside sustained investment in a range of early years services, from parenting support, to childcare and health visiting, they can close the gap in outcomes between less affluent children and their peers. They can support children and their parents to build the healthy relationships that we know lay the foundations for good emotional health and wellbeing in later life. In the next section we consider what else is impacting on the mental health and emotional wellbeing of young people in the UK and what is needed to support positive outcomes.

**Building sound minds**



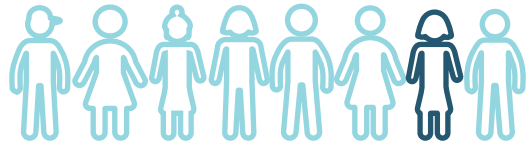
## What is the problem?

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Supporting parent-child relationships from the early years builds the foundations for good mental health and emotional wellbeing in adolescence. This is all the more important in the context of a growing mental health crisis among children and young people in the UK.

In the last 25 years, the percentage of teenagers experiencing depression and anxiety has increased by 70 per cent.<sup>100</sup> One in eight (12.8 per cent) five to 19-year-olds in England had at least one mental health disorder when assessed in 2017.<sup>101</sup> However, services have not increased to meet this demand, and many children and young people are being left without support.<sup>102</sup>

Mental health problems affect children of all ages, with half of adult mental health difficulties starting before the age of 14, rising to three-quarters by the age of 18.<sup>103</sup> The latest NHS prevalence figures for England show that, in 2017, one in eighteen (5.5 per cent) two to four-year-olds experienced mental health issues. These rates increase with age. For example, 17 to 19-year-olds were three times more likely to experience mental health issues (16.9 per cent) than two to four-year-olds (5.5 per cent).<sup>104</sup>



**ONE IN EIGHT** five to 19-year-olds in England had a mental health disorder in 2017


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In Northern Ireland, more than 20 per cent of young people experience significant mental health problems by the time they reach 18.<sup>105</sup> The Bamford Review (2016) estimated that rates of mental ill-health in Northern Ireland were 25 per cent higher than in other parts of the UK.<sup>106</sup> There are particular needs to address in Northern Ireland, as the legacy of the conflict continues to have an impact on young people's mental health.<sup>107</sup>

In Scotland, referrals to specialist services increased by 22 per cent, from 27,271 to 33,270, between 2013/14 and 2017/18.<sup>108</sup> Rejected referrals also increased.<sup>109</sup> In Wales, a survey of school aged children found that over 18 per cent had used school or college-based counselling services.<sup>110</sup>

There is much speculation about why mental health problems have increased. Many commentators suggest that the ‘high stakes testing system’ in schools is increasing anxiety.<sup>111</sup> Behavioural difficulties in boys may be more apparent because of teachers’ awareness of disruptive behaviour,<sup>112</sup> but for girls, who are more likely to be affected by emotional difficulties, causes may be associated with increased internet use, increased sexualisation, and school performance pressure.<sup>113</sup> For those children who are intensive users of social media this may also be a contributing factor.<sup>114</sup> In Scotland, research has found that 60 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds felt overwhelmed and unable to cope because of pressure to succeed.<sup>115</sup>

Children who experience early childhood trauma are more likely to suffer from poor mental health. Children in care are between three and four times more likely than their peers to experience mental health difficulties. Almost half (45 per cent) of children entering care in England have a diagnosable mental health condition<sup>116</sup> and 60 per cent of children in care are reported to experience emotional or mental health problems.<sup>117</sup> These findings are echoed in Scotland.<sup>118</sup>



*In Scotland, referrals to specialist services increased by **22 per cent**, between 2013/14 and 2017/18*

The mental health support currently available for children and young people across the UK is insufficient, meaning many have to wait for support, during which time problems can escalate. In 2017/18, as many as one in four children (24.2 per cent) referred to specialist mental health services in England were rejected.<sup>119</sup> One in five children who experienced a mental health issue reported waiting more than six months for contact with a mental health specialist (20.7 per cent).<sup>120</sup> In Scotland, children and young people are waiting longer than previously for treatment, with over a quarter (26 per cent) of those who started treatment in 2017/18 waiting more than 18 weeks.<sup>121</sup> In Northern Ireland, the percentage of referrals not accepted by Step 3 CAMHS increased from 33 per cent in 2013/14 to 42 per cent in 2015/16.<sup>122</sup>

In Wales, CAMHS waiting times from referral to assessment have fluctuated, although in March 2019 the target of 80 per cent of patients waiting no longer than 4 weeks was met.<sup>123</sup> The usefulness of this target has been criticised however because it only measures the waiting time until assessment, not treatment.<sup>124</sup>

## Case study

**Cathal, 15, took part in a Blues Programme in Northern Ireland after feeling negatively about himself. The Blues Programme is a six week course run by Action for Children in school to help with low level depression and anxiety. Throughout the programme he learnt how to accept himself, coming out as gay to his friends and family.**



In the past Cathal struggled with his mental health, bottling up his feelings and isolating himself from his friends and family. He said:

***“I was very snappy. I would isolate myself because I felt like a volcano. I was in denial, living in fear and confused.”***

Cathal was offered support in his school through the Blues Programme. At the start he would avoid eye contact with the rest of the group and was nervous to speak out. He said: “I just wanted to figure out a way to accept myself.”

After a few weeks he began to feel comfortable and would join in the conversations. He said: “I talk more and figure out ways to deal with my problems. The biggest impact now is that it gave me the confidence to come out to my family that I’m gay. After that I started to take part more. It also helped me accept that myself. Before I would’ve just bottled it up and stuck it down saying no it’s stupid, it’s daft, it’s wrong. But now I feel like I can be myself. I’m happier, more confident.”

While Cathal has been through the programme and has worked out a way to accept himself,

he admits he has hard days. “There is still some really dark times, but I’m able to cope and work through it to get to the light at the end of the tunnel. I’ve learnt in the Blues Programme a way to deal with negativity with the positive counter thoughts which works in creating a healthy way to deal with your problems.”

Since completing the course, Cathal has become an advocate for people getting mental health support. He said:

***“There is a stigma around talk about mental health and I beat myself up a lot of times worrying about what people thought. But people are not alone and there are others going through the same thing. You don’t need to be in denial or fear because there is help.”***

He said: “There isn’t enough support out there for young people. There’s been I don’t know how many suicides in the local area, it’s a clear sign that something definitely does need to be done.”

## Our findings

The growing level of anxiety among children and young people is reflected in the research we conducted with YouGov surveying young people, parents and grandparents.<sup>125</sup> Although the majority of young people said they were happy in life, nearly one in seven (15 per cent) said they were unhappy. This amounts to 880,000 young people across the UK.<sup>126</sup>

### Mental health

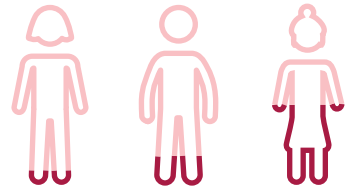
More than two in five young people (42 per cent) and parents (41 per cent) think poor mental health stops children from having a good childhood nowadays. Over a quarter (29 per cent) of young people said they were worried about their own mental health, but only 17 per cent of parents and 9 per cent of grandparents thought their children/grandchildren worried about this issue. This increased with age, with almost one in ten (9 per cent) 11-year-olds worried about their mental health. This is in comparison to around one in five 14-year-olds (19 per cent) and more than half of 18-year-olds (53 per cent). Young people from low income families were more likely to be worried about their own mental health compared to young people from high income families (31 per cent versus 20 per cent). Girls were more likely to be worried about their own mental health than boys (35 per cent versus 24 per cent).

Over three-quarters of young people (85 per cent) said their worries impact on their day-to-day lives in some way, and even more parents (90 per cent) thought this was the case. Young people said that worries impact their ability to focus their mind on what they're doing (40 per cent), their ability to shake negative feelings (37 per cent) and whether they get a good night's sleep (35 per cent). Over a quarter (26 per cent) of young people said worries impact whether they decided to go to social events.

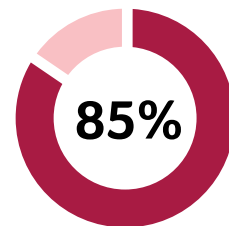
Alarming, 57 per cent of young people hide at least one type of worry from their parents. Over one in five (21 per cent) young people said that they cover up worries about mental health in particular, with girls more likely to do so than boys (one in four girls (25 per cent) versus one in five boys (18 per cent)).

11-YEAR-OLDS 14-YEAR-OLDS 18-YEAR-OLDS

**9% 19% 53%**



**The proportion of young people worried about their own mental health increases with age**



**of young people said worries impact on their day-to-day lives**



**of young people hide at least one type of worry from their parents**

## School pressure

The primary issue that young people consistently said causes worries is pressure from school, for example through homework or exams. Over half of young people (53 per cent) said they worry about this. In the focus groups, young people said that homework, a pressure to achieve academically, and the build up to exams, were stressful. One young person said there is an “insane amount of pressure with exams.”<sup>127</sup> Girls were more likely to worry about pressure at school than boys (57 per cent versus 48 per cent).

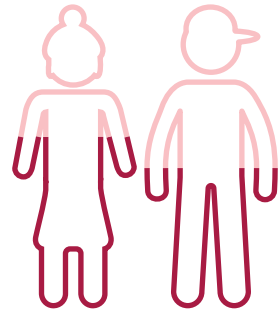
The majority of young people (60 per cent) said that too much pressure at school is stopping children from having a good childhood nowadays. More than half of young people (55 per cent) want there to be less pressure from school. Two-thirds of young people (66 per cent) said that having free time to themselves was important for them to feel happy. Young people were likely to hide their worries from parents, with one in five (20 per cent) saying they would cover up pressures about schoolwork. This may be because young people feel there is a lack of understanding among adults, and that “people don’t take [stress] seriously.”<sup>128</sup>

## Friendships and bullying

Another cause of anxiety is peer relationships, with almost two in five (39 per cent) young people worrying about disagreements/falling out with friends. This was higher among girls, with 45 per cent worried about this problem, compared to 33 per cent of boys. Being bullied was selected as the primary reason for not having a good childhood today, with 61 per cent of young people, 63 per cent of parents and 69 per cent of grandparents selecting this option. This was a particular issue in Northern Ireland, where 70 per cent of young people listed bullying as a problem. Young people from low income households were more worried about bullying than those from high income families (28 per cent versus 21 per cent).

Bullying was also consistently mentioned in our focus groups. Young people said this was an issue both in person and online. One young person said: “people say things on the internet

**57% 48%**

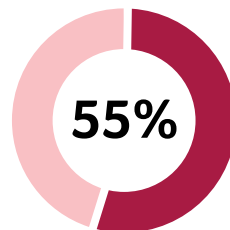


**More girls are worried about school pressure than boys**

**60%**



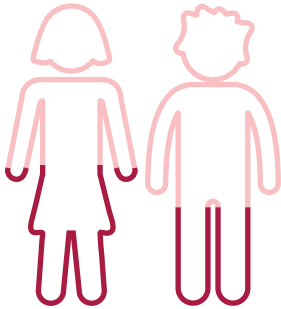
**of young people said pressure at school is stopping children having a good childhood**



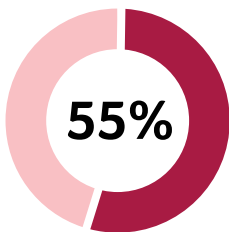
**of young people want there to be less pressure from school**



**45% 30%**



**More girls are worried about physical appearance than boys**



**of young people think pressure to fit in and to look a certain way stops children having a good childhood**

‘cos they’re scared to say it to the person’s face.’<sup>129</sup> Bullying may also be linked to concerns about prejudice and a lack of equality. Two in five young people (41 per cent) were worried about people not being treated equally because of issues such as sexuality, race and gender. This rose to one in two among girls. The issue was also expressed consistently in focus groups, with one young person saying:

**“...the world is terrible... racism, people being mean about people’s sexuality when it’s nothing to do with them.”<sup>130</sup>**

## Physical appearance

The third most common issue that young people worried about was their physical appearance. Over a third (37 per cent) of young people said they worried about how they look, with more girls concerned about this (45 per cent) than boys (30 per cent). Over half of young people (55 per cent), parents (59 per cent) and grandparents (57 per cent) said that pressure to fit in and to look a certain way stops children from having a good childhood today. The majority of girls (59 per cent) thought there should be ‘less pressure around physical appearance’ for today’s children. This is in comparison to two in five boys (41 per cent).

Almost one in five young people (19 per cent) said they hide worries about their physical appearance from their parents. This was higher among girls, with one in four (25 per cent) admitting they cover up their concerns compared to 14 per cent of boys. This was also a theme in our focus groups, where some young people blamed social media for putting pressure on their appearance. One young person cited “a lot of toxic things like body [image] expectation”<sup>131</sup> on social media. Talking about people with a lot of followers on social media, they said:

**“...they call themselves influencers but they’re really influencing us to feel bad about ourselves.”<sup>132</sup>**

## Parents worrying

The pressure young people feel may be exacerbated by their parents' anxiety and concerns. Half of young people (50 per cent) said their parents worry about whether they or their siblings are doing well at school or college, and about their future prospects. More than two-thirds (71 per cent) of young people said that seeing their parents worrying made them feel worried (sometimes, often or always). For young people from low income families, 59 per cent reported seeing their parents worry about having enough money to live comfortably (compared to 33 per cent from high income families). Parents also recognised this anxiety, with over half (59 per cent) saying they worry more about their children than their parents worried about them when they were young. Low income parents were more likely to say that they worry much more about their children than their parents worried about them when they were young, with 39 per cent selecting this, compared to 28 per cent of those with a high income.

## Guidance and support

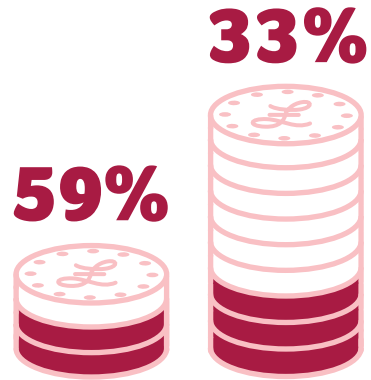
In focus groups with young people using Action for Children services, participants highlighted a lack of guidance and support for mental health issues. Young people didn't know "what options we have to deal with stress."<sup>133</sup> They felt this was dangerous given that:

**“Stress can lead to so many things... such as self-harm, depression and stuff like that; if it's not dealt with it can build up until something dramatic happens.”<sup>134</sup>**

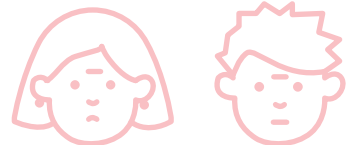
They felt there should be "more support groups... so if you're feeling the pressure you can go and get help."<sup>135</sup> Another suggestion was that "people should know about the side effects of mental health and how it starts." There was also a discussion about changing their behaviour and helping their peers "if you see someone that seems at risk people don't feel like they have the moral obligation to help [but] before you just walk away I'd say it's worth a chance to see if they're alright or offer help at least."<sup>136</sup>

LOW INCOME

HIGH INCOME



**Children from low income families see their parents worry about money more than those from high income families**



**39%**  
of low income parents worry much more about their children than their parents worried about them

**28%**  
of high income parents worry much more about their children than their parents worried about them

## What needs to change?

Amidst growing concerns about the mental and emotional wellbeing of children and young people, administrations across the UK have started taking steps to improve services. However, despite these good intentions, plans currently lack the ambition and long-term investment needed to tackle the scale of the problem.

### 3. Mental health and emotional wellbeing

In England in 2015, the government set out its vision for children and young people's mental health. The strategy, 'Future in Mind', was accompanied by £1.4 billion of transformation funding for local areas.<sup>137</sup> In 2017, a green paper was published, committing a further £300 million to prevention and early intervention services, and emphasising the role of schools and colleges.<sup>138</sup> Most recently, in the NHS long term plan, the government has stated that funding for children and young people's mental health services in England will grow faster than both overall NHS funding and total mental health spending over the next 10 years.

However, current plans in England are already experiencing serious challenges. The original aim set out in 'Future in Mind' was to increase the proportion of children and young people accessing support from 25 per cent to 35 per cent by 2020/21. Serious concerns have been raised about growing the workforce to meet this target, with the Public Accounts Committee describing this as a 'roadblock'.<sup>139</sup> Despite this, a new goal has been set to ensure that 100 per cent of children and young people can access specialist care and support in the next decade.<sup>140</sup> Whilst this ambitious target is welcome, the government has not set out how this will be achieved and more detailed plans are required urgently.

The government plans to roll out its new approach to prevention and early intervention in England, as laid out in the 2017 green paper, to between a fifth and a quarter of the country by 2022/23.

These plans lack pace and ambition, leaving many young people who are currently struggling with their mental and emotional wellbeing without the support they need. Furthermore, these plans will only provide more support for school aged children and more low level mental health support is needed for pre-school aged children.

#### 3.1

**In England, the government should speed up the implementation of promised reforms and secure long-term funding to ensure children and young people suffering from – or at risk of developing – mental health difficulties get the support they need, when they need it.**

#### 3.2

**In England, the government should prioritise improvements in prevention and early intervention support, which go beyond current plans. While recent government announcements are a step in the right direction, we need broader ambitions, with a focus beyond school aged children to include the early years.**

In Wales, the health service has allocated £7.6 million to mental health improvement services for children through its 2015 strategy, 'Together for Children and Young People.'<sup>141</sup> The strategy seeks to develop resilience, intervene early and increase access to CAMHS. Whilst the 'Mind Over Matter' report, published by the Children, Young People and Education Committee in Wales, welcomed the strategy, it emphasised the need for more early intervention services. This report was initially dismissed and so it is positive that its recommendations are now being considered by policy makers. However, urgent action is now needed to ensure proposals are implemented.

### 3.3

**In Wales, the Welsh Assembly should fully consider and properly resource the recommendations of 'Mind Over Matter', the children and young people's committee report, as a matter of urgency.**

The Scottish government has taken some positive steps to invest in low level mental health services. In 2018, they announced £250 million of additional funding to support a shift in mental health services towards early intervention. A commitment has also been made to invest in school counselling services to enhance the support children and young people receive.

Whilst we welcome these measures, more needs to be done at a faster pace to rebalance services which are still largely focused on specialist care and crisis responses, rather than early intervention. The system itself can be complex and fragmented, and access to services varies across the country. Against this backdrop, the Scottish government has established a Children and Young People's Mental Health Task Force. The Task Force has already observed that waiting times are unacceptable, there are gaps in community services for young people with milder mental health problems, and out of hours or crisis support is lacking.

### 3.4

**In Scotland, the Scottish government should invest in preventative mental health provision to ensure all of Scotland's children have access to good mental health support.**

### 3.5

**In Scotland, the Scottish government should fully consider and properly resource the final recommendations made by the Mental Health Task Force.**

In Northern Ireland, there has been a growing recognition of the role played by schools in promoting positive mental health. Education policy has also moved away from a focus solely on attainment, to a wider consideration of the individual and their personal development.

There has, however, been a significant lack of investment in children and young people's mental health services, particularly in terms of early intervention and preventative services. The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People found the system struggling to respond to the scale of need, and the complexity of issues children and young people are presenting with.<sup>142</sup>

Tackling mental health issues among children and young people requires significant cross-departmental co-operation. In England, while 'Future in Mind' set out a cross-departmental vision, no single cross-departmental plan or accountability measures have been put in place to deliver this. The NHS long term plan committed the government to the creation of a new children and young people's transformation programme. As the detail around this is developed, the government should ensure it is led by senior representatives from across departments and includes a long-term implementation plan.

In this respect, Northern Ireland is perhaps further ahead than its UK counterparts. The Department of Education is engaging with the Department of Health, Public Health Agency and the Education Authority to develop a joined-up framework to support the wellbeing of children and young people, although this work is still at an early stage.

## 3.6

**In Northern Ireland, a newly re-formed Northern Ireland Assembly should ensure that the Education and Health Well-Being Framework being developed considers the emotional support needs of children and young people of all ages, and takes a cross-sectoral approach. It must include targeted, early and effective support for children and young people in and outside schools and educational settings, along with significant investment in early intervention.**

Positive steps have been taken by administrations across the UK to improve mental health support for children and young people, including a greater focus on early intervention through schools. We are now calling on policymakers to build on this and invest in early support beyond school settings, including for pre-school children. We also want to see more support for children who may have experienced past trauma to help recover in the long-term, and this is something we consider in the next section.

## How we're helping

### *Tackling the early signs of depression in school through 'The Blues Programme'*

The Blues Programme aims to support young people who are suffering from, or who are at risk of developing depression and other mental health problems. By acting early to spot and reduce the signs of anxiety and depression, this pioneering preventative programme is supporting the long-term mental health and wellbeing of thousands of teenagers across the UK.

Currently targeting 13-19 year olds, the Blues Programme has been delivered in over 108 schools and sixth form colleges across all four nations and is run by dedicated Action for Children 'Blues' trained specialists. We screen students to identify those with signs of anxiety and depression, provide specialist support to treat the early signs of depression and encourage teenagers to apply the skills to their daily life.

We know that early action can prevent problems escalating and have lasting benefits not only for the individuals, but society as a whole. This programme means the young people are more likely to:

- Have increased confidence and improved feelings of self-esteem
- Develop positive thinking patterns and see a major reduction in depression and depressive symptoms
- Be more socially independent and develop positive and supportive relationships with their family, friends, and in school
- Keep themselves safe by making positive choices and be less likely to misuse alcohol or other substances
- Be more engaged in all aspects of school, leading to increased attendance and achievement, and helping them to achieve their potential

# Ensuring children have a safe and stable home



## What is the problem?

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Feeling safe and having a loving, caring family is fundamental to a happy childhood. In our research, three-quarters of children, parents and grandparents identified this as a key factor. However, too many children in the UK today are at risk of harm, with some vulnerable children being exploited for criminal purposes. Overstretched services are often unable to support them. When children do need to be removed from their families, there is a lack of consistent, high quality care to help them overcome past experiences.

### **Youth violence and employability**

Today, children and young people face a number of threats to their safety, many of which directly affect the most vulnerable. Grooming by gangs, exploitation and trafficking through county lines to sell drugs, are growing problems. The children and young people most at risk are those in poverty, those experiencing abuse, and those missing school through school exclusions.<sup>143</sup> Against a background of falling youth crime, knife crime in England and Wales is rising steadily. There have been year-on-year increases in these offences since 2013/14, with a 7 per cent increase between 2016/17 and 2017/18.<sup>144</sup> In Scotland, the opposite is true, with the number of under 21s convicted for handling an offensive weapon showing an overall decrease over the last decade.<sup>145</sup>

Young people who are not in employment, education or training are particularly susceptible to exploitation. Living in a deprived area increases the likelihood that a young person will not be participating in employment, education or training. In 2017/18 less than 26 per cent of school leavers from the most deprived areas in Scotland entered higher education, compared to almost 62 per cent from the wealthiest communities.<sup>146</sup>

Once young people have a criminal conviction they suffer disproportionately high levels of victimisation and social adversity, including poverty, family crises and school exclusion or drop-out. Our previous research in Scotland, 'Kilbrandon Again: How well does Scotland support children in trouble?', confirms that the most serious and persistent child offenders are among the most vulnerable. These children and young people need support to escape trouble and adversity, however they are often the least likely to receive effective help.<sup>147</sup>



## How we're helping

*Supporting young people on the fringes of criminal activity through the Serious Organised Crime Early Intervention Service*



Since 2012, Action for Children has been running a unique intervention service to target and divert young people away from serious organised crime in two areas of Glasgow. The service engages young people aged between 12 and 18, working in partnership with a range of stakeholders, including relevant statutory and non-statutory agencies, and the young person's family and networks.

The service aims to re-engage young people and build trust so they can acquire the necessary skills and tools to help fulfil their potential. A key part of the project is the creation of diversion plans. These plans focus on when and where the young person was targeted, what level of diversion and engagement is required, who could be approached

as a positive role model, the support available in their network, and who could be a barrier to progress. We take a flexible approach, developing personalised diversion plans supported by specialist peer mentors who can gain the trust of the young people and, just as crucially, their families.

A recent review found that 71 per cent of young people who used the service were kept out of secure care for at least six months during their involvement. The project has worked with over 50 young people. These young people are considered to be the 'hardest to reach' and who are currently involved in or on the periphery of serious and organised crime.

## Abuse and neglect

There are increasing numbers of children across the UK for whom there are child protection concerns.

Between 2009/10 and 2017/18, there was a 38 per cent increase in children on a child protection plan in England.<sup>148</sup> This trend is unlikely to change in the near future. The Association of Directors of Children's Services predicts that by 2022/23 there will have been a 56 per cent increase in the number of children subject to a child protection plan in England, based on 2007/08 levels.<sup>149</sup>

In Scotland, there was a 6 per cent increase in the number of children on a child protection register between 2009/10 and 2017/18.<sup>150</sup> In Northern Ireland, although there has been an overall decrease in the number of children on the child protection register since 2009/10, there has been an increase of 9 per cent since 2013/14.<sup>151</sup> In Wales, a new method of data collection was introduced in 2016/17 making previous data incomparable. However, between 2016/17 and 2017/18 there was a 6 per cent increase in the number of children on the child protection register in Wales.<sup>152</sup>

The number of children in need due to abuse and neglect in England increased by 45 per cent between 2009/10 and 2017/18.<sup>153</sup> In Wales, the data available shows that the number of children in need due to abuse and neglect increased by 15 per cent between 2009/10 and 2015/16.<sup>154</sup> Latest figures for the new category of children receiving care and support in Wales show levels have stayed fairly stable since being introduced in 2016/17.<sup>155</sup> In Northern Ireland, data available for the overall number of children in need has stayed fairly stable since data became available in 2011/12.<sup>156</sup>

*Between 2009/10 and 2017/18, there was a **38 per cent** increase in children on a child protection plan in England*

## Access to support

Action for Children's first 'Revolving Door' report found that children at risk of abuse and neglect are not getting the support they need. In 2015/16, 184,500 children who had been referred to social services in England had their cases closed as 'no further action' following assessment.<sup>157</sup> Only one in four children who did not meet statutory thresholds for support were referred to early help, leaving 140,000 children without support.<sup>158</sup>

Our follow up report, 'Revolving Door part 2', found that as many as 36,000 children who were referred for statutory help in England, but did not receive it in 2013/14, were referred again the following year. 23,000 were then found to be in need, suggesting early opportunities to provide help were missed.<sup>159</sup> Without early help, problems go unresolved, and vulnerable children are left to suffer until they reach crisis point.

Evidence from other research indicates that many vulnerable children in England do not receive the support they need as thresholds to access statutory services have risen. An inquiry into social care thresholds by the All-Party Parliamentary Group for Children and the National Children's Bureau found there are rising thresholds for both early help and services for children in need.<sup>160</sup>

## Domestic abuse

Domestic abuse is one of the most common reasons for contact with children’s social care services. The percentage of assessments in England that identified domestic violence as a factor increased from 40.6 per cent in 2013/14 to 51.1 per cent in 2017/18.<sup>161</sup> In Scotland, domestic abuse was noted as a major cause for concern 993 times during child protection case conferences in 2018.<sup>162</sup> And in Wales in 2017/18, domestic abuse was recorded as a parental factor for 26 per cent of children receiving care and support.<sup>163</sup> More widely, as many as one in five children and young people under the age of 18 have been exposed to domestic abuse in the UK.<sup>164</sup>



As many as **ONE IN FIVE** children and young people under the age of 18 have been exposed to domestic abuse in the UK

We know that domestic abuse has a devastating impact on children and young people that can last into adulthood. Babies exposed to violence can experience so much stress that it negatively affects brain development, and children are more likely to develop emotional and behavioural problems.<sup>165</sup>

If a child is unable to process what has happened in their families, they may not be able to develop an understanding of healthy relationships. SafeLives found that a quarter of both boys and girls exposed to domestic abuse exhibit abusive behaviours themselves.<sup>166</sup> Recent analysis of the Crime Survey for England and Wales showed that those who had witnessed domestic violence or abuse as a child

(before the age of 16) were more likely to experience domestic abuse by a partner as an adult.<sup>167</sup>

## Children in care and care leavers

Since 2009/10, there has been a significant increase in the number of children in care in Wales (24 per cent increase), Northern Ireland (19 per cent increase) and England (17 per cent increase).<sup>168 169 170</sup> In Northern Ireland, successive Annual Family Support Report Cards have highlighted a year-on-year growth in the number of children and families referred with increasingly complex needs, who require intensive and ongoing family support (tier 2-3).<sup>171</sup>

In Scotland, this trend has gone in the other direction and there has been an overall 7 per cent decrease in the number children in care since 2009/10.<sup>172</sup>

Issues such as abuse and neglect can lead to children being removed from their families. When this happens, it is vital that children receive high quality care that helps them overcome past experiences. More than 60 per cent of children who come into care in England have been seriously neglected or abused.<sup>173</sup> The impact of these experiences can be profound. Nine out of ten children who have been abused go on to develop a mental health issue by the time they are 18.<sup>174</sup>



**NINE OUT OF TEN** children who have been abused develop a mental health issue by the time they are 18

The care system itself can sometimes work against a child's recovery, and many experience placement instability. Research from the Children's Commissioner for England identified that most children living in care experience a change of placement, school or social worker in the space of a year.<sup>175</sup>

Current care systems across the UK do not adequately support the mental health and emotional wellbeing of children in care. In 2016, the Education Select Committee identified that provision for children in care who experience mental health difficulties in England needed to be much more effective.<sup>176</sup> Local authorities can often fail to identify mental health difficulties when children enter care, and young people have been turned away from support for not meeting diagnostic thresholds, or not having a stable placement.

Another challenge facing children in care is the transition to adulthood. When young people turn 18, they often still depend on their parents for guidance, practical and financial support. Young people who have experience of living in care do not tend to have the same support system, and the transition to adulthood, always daunting, can be even more challenging. In England, 7 per cent of care leavers aged 19 to 21 are in accommodation that is considered unsuitable.<sup>177</sup>

## Case study

**Angharad, 22, has faced many hurdles in her life. She grew up in foster care and lived in many placements, until she turned 18 and rented independently.**

Angharad was two years old when she and her seven siblings were taken from their birth parents and put into foster care in Wales. She was placed with one of her brothers and the other children lived separately.

At age seven Angharad witnessed her sister die in a tragic accident. Soon after this, she was moved to England. But for Angharad, this was the wrong decision:

***“They moved me away from my family. You’re not helping me by putting me somewhere new. I was on my own not knowing anyone.”***

Angharad then moved to another set of foster parents in Wales, where she stayed until she was 16. She felt they understood her and she calls them Mum and Dad. She said: “I blamed myself for my sister’s death as I was the last person to see her. I never really spoke to anybody. They sat me down and said don’t blame yourself.”

At 18, Angharad found her independence and rented a house. She had suffered from anxiety since the age of five, but around the time she moved this got worse. She said:

***“I was quite an outgoing person, quite happy. I lived on my own and one day I locked myself in the house for three weeks and wouldn’t come out. Eventually I admitted that I didn’t feel right and went to the doctors - they were quite surprised how long it took me to become depressed after all I’d been through. After all that time, I just lost my strength.”***



After finally starting to find her independence, Angharad suffered another blow. She became homeless after her house became unsafe and she was fearful of her landlords. Her personal advisor helped her to secure a place in supported lodgings. She said: “now I’m somewhere where I can feel safe.”

Angharad received support from an Action for Children support worker and joined in group sessions. She said: “they gave me ideas so if I was in different situations how to deal with it and mindfulness things to do. They gave us ways of how to do things.”

Angharad has since become a young ambassador for Action for Children and is studying a Degree in Media and Creative Writing. Angharad’s message is clear:

***“I want to show people that people that have had my background, people that have had mental health issues and have been in care can achieve things too.”***

## Our findings

Through a survey and focus groups conducted by YouGov, and focus groups we held with young people using Action for Children services, we wanted to explore what people think prevents children from having a safe and stable home.<sup>178</sup> We also wanted to understand what needs to be done so that children and young people feel safe and cared for.

### Fear of crime

Across all our research, young people, parents and grandparents consistently said that the threat of crime, and in particular knife crime, is the biggest danger to children's safety today. In our survey over one in three young people (36 per cent) and around two in five parents and grandparents (40 per cent and 42 per cent respectively) said 'not feeling safe enough to play/spend time outside where they live' was a barrier to having a good childhood today. This was felt most strongly in London, where almost half (47 per cent) of parents said 'not feeling safe enough to play/spend time outside where they live' stopped children from having a good childhood nowadays. Having 'safer streets and a lower risk of crime' was the key issue that all three generations wanted to be different for children today, with over two-thirds of parents (69 per cent) and grandparents (77 per cent) selecting this option, and almost three in five young people (58 per cent).

In the focus groups with young people using Action for Children services, participants spoke about the threats posed by knife crime and substance abuse. Young people said that knife crime made them feel at risk, for example:

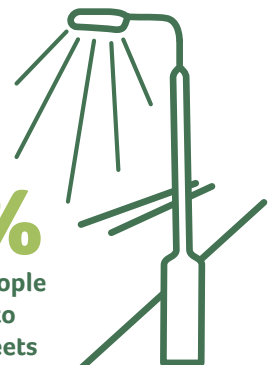
**“I don't feel safe, that's why I never... go into London anymore. I just don't feel safe.”**<sup>179</sup>

They said that children are taking drugs at an even younger age and that social media makes drugs more easily available. Taking drugs is “almost like a popularity contest; if you don't do it then you're gonna lose out.”<sup>180</sup> Young people felt that parents weren't necessarily as aware of these issues as they should be, and should have: “more support and more awareness of what their children are getting into.”<sup>181</sup>



**36%**

of young people think not feeling safe enough to play/spend time outside is a barrier to a good childhood



**58%**

of young people want there to be safer streets

**38%**



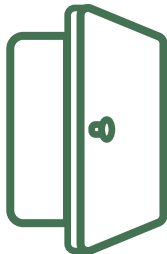
of young people said threats to safety posed by technology and social media are a barrier to a good childhood



**51%**

of parents think there should be a safer online environment

**48%**



of young people want there to be more opportunities to get a good job

## Safety online

Young people highlighted a number of threats to their safety online. Almost two in five (38 per cent) young people said that threats to safety posed by technology and social media are a barrier to children having a good childhood. Even more parents – almost half (49 per cent) – felt this. Young people said: “the wrong people using it [technology] for the wrong reasons is bad”<sup>182</sup> and “you don’t know who is looking at the things you are posting.”<sup>183</sup>

This was one of the top things that adults wanted to be different for children today, with more than half of parents (51 per cent) and grandparents (69 per cent) saying the online environment needed to be safer. Two in five young people (40 per cent) thought this – this was higher among girls, with 46 per cent saying there should be a safer online environment compared to 35 per cent of boys. Over half of parents (55 per cent) and grandparents (65 per cent) also said that social media/devices should be used less. However, a much lower proportion of young people thought this (30 per cent).

## Jobs and employability

All three generations chose having ‘more opportunities to get a good job’ as one of the top things they would like to be different for children today. Almost half of young people (48 per cent) and over half of parents (54 per cent) and grandparents (58 per cent) thought this. More parents in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK (66 per cent) said that more opportunities to get good jobs was something they wanted to be different.

In focus groups parents and grandparents said they wanted more career opportunities for their children, and more support for young people to take part in activities and gain new experiences. One said: “Put more money into good experiences and activities for young people, I don’t think they put enough money into sport and youth centres, etc.”<sup>184</sup> Young respondents mentioned the need for a more balanced school curriculum to gain crucial life skills, and the need for improved job opportunities. They felt that more employability

programmes where “they’d rather see you build your foundations up,”<sup>185</sup> as opposed to job centre programmes which could be stigmatizing, could help young people find work. Young people taking part in an Action for Children employability programme said:


**“...if you do the work yourself, you’ll find a job through this course. We need more stuff like this.”**<sup>186</sup>

## Family relationships

In terms of what is important for children to have a good relationships with their parents/carers, ‘feeling loved and cared for by my family’ was selected by all three generations as the most important factor (young people: 30 per cent; parents: 38 per cent; grandparents 37 per cent). However a different pattern emerged in Wales, where the most important factor chosen by young people was ‘being able to talk openly about worries without feeling judged.’ One in five young people (20 per cent) in Wales selected this option.

The importance of children having people who love and care for them was a consistent theme across the focus groups. Young people, parents and grandparents emphasised the importance of a stable family life, with one parent saying: “a solid and stable family life has to be the most important thing.”<sup>187</sup> Young people said feeling cared for, a sense of trust, and being able to open up and feel listened to, were important for a good relationship with their parents. To be happy, “you need at least one [parent] to help you through your life.”<sup>188</sup> They felt that being respected and not feeling judged were key to building good relationships. One said:

**“...you just want to make sure... if you go home, it’s a safe place ... you don’t have to be sitting constantly freaking out about what you’re saying to them... like have a totally open, safe relationship.”**<sup>189</sup>

**30%** 

**of young people said feeling loved and cared for is most important for a good childhood**

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**42%**

**of parents think there needs to be more support for children and families**

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## Barriers to good relationships

However, some young people said they lacked guidance and support from their parents. One young person said some parents “kind of expect us to just know [how to face challenges] ourselves which is impossible.”<sup>190</sup> Another said:

**“...parents just feed and home their children but then apart from that just let them get on with it, which is dangerous to life lessons because you just don’t learn them.”<sup>191</sup>**

Young people, parents and grandparents felt there should be more services that support children and families when relationships become strained and break down. More than two in five parents (42 per cent) and grandparents (49 per cent), and more than a third of young people (35 per cent), agreed that more support was needed.

## What needs to change?

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Our research shows that a safe and stable home is a vital component of a good childhood. However, we know that services that support children and families when their home life becomes difficult are being reduced. Rising poverty and a lack of opportunity for young people in deprived neighbourhoods may be contributing to criminal exploitation.

### 4. Early help and prevention

Despite there being a growing demand for services that support children and families, significant cuts have been made to central government funding for local authority children's services in England. This means that many councils have had to concentrate their limited resources on children with the highest level of need. Since 2010, there has been a 47 per cent decrease in local authority spending on early help services in England. In the same period, there has been a 12 per cent increase in late intervention spending.<sup>192</sup> This is extremely worrying, as we know that helping families early can stop problems spiralling out of control and can prevent the need for more costly statutory services later on in life.

In England, council budgets for children's social care are unsustainable. In 2017/18, the National Audit Office found that local authority overspend on children's social care was £872 million.<sup>193</sup> Local Government Association analysis indicates that by 2025 Local Authorities children's services face a further funding gap of £3.1 billion.<sup>194</sup> This figure does not take into account the increasing gap if demand continues to rise.

#### 4.1

**In England, the government should provide additional funding for children and young people's services in the Spending Review to address the estimated £3.1 billion funding gap facing local authorities by 2025.**

#### 4.2

**In England, the government should ensure all local authorities have the resources to sustain a consistent offer of early intervention.**

#### 4.3

**In England, the government should introduce a legal duty on local authorities and their statutory partners to provide early help to children, young people and families.**

More positively, in Northern Ireland there has been a welcome cross-cutting focus on improving wellbeing outcomes for children and young people through early intervention. The 2009 parenting and family support strategy is supporting families

to parent confidently and has been greatly enhanced by the development of a network of family support hubs to prevent children from coming into care.<sup>195</sup>

The draft 10 Year Children and Young People Strategy (2018-2028) for Northern Ireland aims to improve the wellbeing of children and young people. A number of public agencies have a statutory duty to put this plan in place.<sup>196</sup> However, despite this, the intermittent operation of the Northern Ireland Assembly has led to delays in publishing and implementing this strategy.

In addition, budget pressures may threaten the long-term sustainability of services for children and families in Northern Ireland. Finances are currently being propped up by short-term, non-recurrent monies. This includes £5 million announced in May 2018 to support preventative measures, develop a new approach to children's social care, and establish a different offer for children in care. While this investment is welcome, its short-term nature means services for children and families may become less sustainable in the long-term.

The Scottish government has taken positive steps to improve the child protection system, and this may have contributed to reducing numbers of children in care in Scotland. The Child Protection Improvement Programme 2016, made recommendations to establish a national child protection leadership group, a national child protection register, and a set of national standards for those undertaking significant case reviews. In Scotland, there has also been a slight real terms increase in social work spending on children and families of 1.3% between 2013/14 and 2017/18.<sup>197</sup>

Yet Scotland has yet to fully adopt an early intervention approach. Back in 2011, the Christie Commission highlighted the importance of early years, prevention and personalised service delivery, and argued that partnership working needs to be at the heart of the reform process in local communities. These principles are still to be fully adopted through a greater focus on preventative measures and targeted work with children and families.

## 4.4

**In Northern Ireland, a newly re-formed Northern Ireland Assembly should, in line with the Children's Services Cooperation Act 2016, introduce a clear legislative framework that encompasses an 'early help duty' for the financing, co-ordination and delivery of all education, health and social care services for children and young people.**

## 4.5

**In Scotland, the Scottish government should fully implement the Christie Commission principles of the importance of early years, prevention and personalised service delivery. That means funding should be directed into more family support provision and better evaluation of early family support.**

In Wales, the introduction of Flying Start in 2007 has underpinned ongoing investment in early intervention.<sup>198</sup> However, the increase in the number of children in care has meant councils are still spending large parts of their budgets on children who have already reached crisis point.<sup>199</sup> More needs to be done to continue to rebalance spend towards early intervention.

## 4.6

**In Wales, the Welsh Assembly should ensure that all local authorities have the resources to sustain a consistent offer of early intervention.**

## 5. Supporting young people who have experienced adversity or trauma

### Employability and youth justice

Across the UK, more needs to be done to support children and young people to fulfil their potential. In 2012, the Scottish government made an explicit commitment to offer every 16 to 19-year-old not in employment, education or training, a place in training or learning. However, in 2018 there was a 12.9 percentage point difference in the participation rates between the most deprived, and least deprived, young people. There is general recognition that businesses, organisations and people with experience, skills and passion must work together to create positive destinations for all young people. This includes through effective employability programmes. This is particularly important for disadvantaged young people,

including care leavers, young offenders and those in deprived neighbourhoods.

Although progress has been made across the UK to improve the youth justice system, more needs to be done to prevent young people falling into crime and to avoid custodial sentences. Administrations must prioritise and invest in services which divert young people who are at risk of falling into crime and support young people to move on from crime. Further to this, across the UK, disclosure provisions which mean that criminal records follow children and young people into adult life must be reviewed.

## 5.1

**Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should improve support for young people at risk of, or involved with, crime by:**

- **Prioritising and investing in services that support and divert both young people who need to move on from crime and those who are at risk of falling into crime.**
- **Putting in place further restrictions on the disclosure of offences committed by under 18s so that criminal records don't limit future opportunities.**

### Domestic abuse

The government has promised a Domestic Abuse Bill for England and Wales. Commitments in the draft bill include the introduction of a Domestic Abuse Commissioner who will have a role in encouraging good practice in the identification of children affected by domestic abuse. This is a

positive development, although there must be further assurances around the Commissioner's independence from the Home Office, to ensure they can fulfil their responsibilities as effectively as possible. The government has also recently proposed placing a legal duty on local authorities to deliver support to survivors and their children in accommodation-based services like refuges. However, there are concerns that support is needed beyond this, especially as most child victims will not go into a refuge and will have needs other than accommodation.

Given significant reductions in funding across both children's services and the domestic abuse and sexual violence sectors in England, there are particular challenges to the establishment of effective and consistent support for children. Local authorities do not receive a designated, sustained and guaranteed amount of funding for dedicated domestic abuse services. There is concern that there could be significant variation across England regarding the type of support that is offered specifically to children affected by domestic abuse. We also note that the percentage of domestic abuse services providing dedicated support to children and young people, as listed on Routes to Support,<sup>200</sup> fell from 62 per cent in 2010 to 52 per cent in 2017.<sup>201</sup> More should be done to ensure that effective and dedicated domestic abuse services for children are consistently provided across the country.

In Scotland, the Domestic Abuse (Scotland) Act 2018 recognises the impact of domestic abuse on children by creating an aggravator to the offence. This means that when a person makes a choice to abuse a partner/ex-partner, they are also making a choice to harm the child. While this is a step in the right direction there is still a lack of long-term support to help children recover from past trauma.

Similar steps must be taken in Wales and Northern Ireland to ensure that wherever children live they can access specialised support services.

## 5.2

**In England and Wales, the UK government should ensure the needs of children are fully taken account of in the new Domestic Abuse Bill by:**

- **Recognising children who experience domestic abuse within the proposed statutory definition itself.**
- **Strengthening the independence of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and ensuring they have a clear remit to scrutinise the provision of support for children.**

## 5.3

**Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should introduce measures to ensure local support services for survivors of domestic abuse and their children are properly funded and provided. In England, this should be done through the Domestic Abuse Bill, building on and widening the proposed duty to support survivors and their children in accommodation-based services. This will ensure that all children can get support, no matter where they might be living.**

## Children in care and care leavers

There is currently an insufficient focus on helping children in care and care leavers to recover from the psychological impact of abuse and neglect. In England, the Department of Health and Social Care is still to respond to the full recommendations of the Social Care Institute for Excellence's Expert Working Group, on the mental health and emotional wellbeing needs of children in care and care leavers. The government has however committed to piloting dedicated mental health assessments for children coming into care. We want a strong commitment from the government that learning from the pilots will be acted on.

In England, the policy of 'Staying Put' was introduced in 2014 to enable young people in foster care to remain with their carers until the age of 21. This gives young people the opportunity to develop their independence more gradually. The evaluation of the pilots highlighted a number of benefits. Young people who stayed put were more than twice as likely to be in full-time education at 19 as those who did not.<sup>202</sup> The future of 'Staying Put' is uncertain, however, because funding is only secured until 2019/20. It has also been highlighted that, even with national government grants, funding levels for 'Staying Put' are still inadequate.<sup>203</sup>

In England, we welcome the pilot of a similar scheme for young people leaving residential care, 'Staying Close', which provides accommodation close to their former children's home alongside practical and emotional support.

In Northern Ireland, the draft Looked After Children strategy emphasises the importance of stability and consistent relationship-based support. We welcome its proposals for more comprehensive health and wellbeing assessments when children come into care and putting the 'Going the Extra Mile' scheme (equivalent to the 'Staying Put' scheme in England) on a statutory footing in line with the rest of the UK. This strategy must now be implemented as a matter of urgency.

In May 2017, the Scottish government announced the establishment of the full Independent Care Review Group. This group was set up to explore legislation, practices, culture and ethos of the care system across Scotland. As a priority, this review should identify how funding can be better invested to provide effective financial, or in-kind, support for care experienced young people to fulfil their potential. It must also listen to the voices of children and young people in care. The review's final recommendations are due in summer 2020. As in England, care leavers in Scotland have the right to stay with their foster carers until the age of 21 through 'Continuing Care'. However, concerns have been raised that funding has not been sufficient to meet the increasing take up.<sup>204</sup>

In Wales, as elsewhere in the UK, there is a lack of placement stability for children in care. A key cause is a lack of training and support for foster carers, who are supporting increasingly complex needs. The 'When I am Ready' scheme gives young people the statutory right to stay with their foster families beyond the age of 18, however a better understanding needs to be developed of whether current funding is sufficient.

## 5.4

Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should ensure the care system supports children and young people to build stable, long-lasting relationships by:

- Reviewing the provision of ongoing high quality training and therapeutic support for carers to help them understand and address the emotional needs of children at every stage of their development.
- Reviewing the implementation of the ‘Staying Put’, ‘Continuing Care’, ‘When I Am Ready’ and ‘Going the Extra Mile’ schemes to ensure that policies are adequately funded and any implementation issues are addressed.
- In Northern Ireland, following the examples of England, Wales and Scotland, the ‘Going the Extra Mile’ scheme should be made statutory so all young people have the option to stay with their foster carers until at least the age of 21.
- Ensuring that similar forms of support are available to young people transitioning into independence from residential care, and that learning from the ‘Staying Close’ pilots in England is acted on.

## 5.5

Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should ensure the care system promotes recovery from past harm by:

- In England, the government should commit to acting on learning from the current pilot of mental health assessments for children when they enter care. In Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, administrations should build on the learnings from these pilots, and explore the introduction of dedicated mental health assessments.
- In Scotland, the government should fully consider and properly resource the final recommendations made by the Independent Care review when published in summer 2020.

Most recent statistics show that for too many children in the UK today childhoods are blighted by issues such as abuse, neglect and domestic abuse. It is now time for administrations across the UK to rebalance support and invest in the early help needed to make sure all childhoods are free from crisis.

## How we're helping

*Helping to break the cycle of domestic abuse through our dedicated counselling service*

Action for Children runs a successful counselling service, Breaking the Cycle, for children and young people who have been affected by domestic violence and abuse.

Breaking the Cycle supports children and young people aged four to 16-years-old, who have been affected by domestic violence and abuse, and are no longer living with the perpetrator(s).

The programme was developed by Action for Children in response to an identified gap in services for children who have experienced domestic violence and abuse, and were displaying signs of trauma.

The programme gives children and young people a voice, supporting them to build emotional awareness, confidence, resilience and coping skills. It consists of a minimum of six weekly, one-hour therapeutic sessions, depending on the complexity of each case.

The counselling sessions give children and young people the opportunity to talk through their worries and explore their emotions and feelings through arts, crafts and play therapy. The children are then supported to understand what they can do to overcome their trauma. The exact content is personalised to each child and young person, but examples include: expelling anger and aggression through physical activity, such as throwing or kicking a ball; expressing feelings through art; and writing and practising how to share feelings with significant others.

As well as one-to-one counselling sessions, the programme also offers support and guidance to the non-abusing parent/primary carer, so they are able to provide the care and support their child needs whilst undertaking counselling.



# Conclusion

Since Thomas Bowman Stephenson set up the National Children's Home to rescue children from destitution on the streets there have been many much-needed improvements to the lives of children. Children today are viewed as participating citizens with rights and responsibilities, rather than, as in Victorian times, an economic resource owned by their parents or employers. Action for Children is proud of the part it has played in supporting children and families along this journey, listening to them and influencing change to improve their lives.

There are worrying signs, however, that some of the progress made is at risk of being reversed. In the last decade, there has been an increase in the number of children for whom there are child protection concerns and the number of children in care. The prevalence of mental health conditions has grown and there are few signs of this need being met. At the same time, significant reductions in local authority budgets in England have led to cuts to early support services that help children and families before they reach crisis point. Changes to the tax credit and benefit systems have left increasing numbers of families in poverty over the last decade, with 4.1 million children (30 per cent) now living in poverty in the UK. This is projected to rise to 37 per cent over the next five years, meaning an extra one million children living in poverty.<sup>205</sup>

The children, young people, parents and grandparents who took part in our research share these concerns. They believe that childhoods are getting worse, and that the government needs to do more. They paint a picture of childhoods overshadowed by anxiety, with children worrying about their mental health, school pressure, friendships and their physical appearance. These worries have a daily impact on the lives of young people. Having a loving, caring relationship with their family is critical to a good childhood, but a number of young people told us that this is not the experience of some children today, and that more support is needed. Parents and grandparents agree, with more than two-thirds saying the UK government is investing 'too little' in services that support better childhoods (parents: 67 per cent, grandparents: 58 per cent). To see real change, the UK government, alongside devolved administrations, must take a number of steps.



## 67%

of parents think the government is investing too little in childhoods

## 58%

of grandparents think the government is investing too little in childhoods



## 1. The UK government must put children first and develop a cross-government National Childhood Strategy for the UK

As this crisis in childhood has been developing, the UK government has failed to take comprehensive action. The significance given to children's issues has been demonstrated by the downgrading of the role of Minister for Children and Families to Parliamentary Under Secretary of State. We urgently need cross-government leadership on children's issues and a new National Childhood Strategy, led by the Prime Minister, to address the scale and cross departmental nature of the challenges children face. The strategy must be developed in partnership with children and young people, and put their needs at its heart. Administrations in each of the nations must urgently develop their own strategies for devolved issues and set out how they will meet the needs of their children.

## 2. Spending decisions must start to prioritise children and childhoods



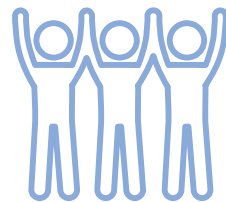
A National Childhood Strategy must be underpinned by proper funding for services that support children and families across the UK. In England, the Spending Review needs to address the estimated £3.1 billion funding gap facing local authorities' children's services by 2025. This requires sufficient investment to ensure local areas can fund high quality, evidence-based services that support families early, before they reach crisis point. Too often, services that help families have had to be cut by local authorities, as they struggle to balance their budgets and are forced to protect the support they must provide by law.

### 3. Public policy must be rebalanced to promote early help

A National Childhood Strategy must send a clear message that prevention and early intervention approaches are the best way to improve long-term outcomes. We are concerned that opportunities to support families from the earliest years and throughout childhoods are being missed. This can leave children without support to face issues such as abuse and neglect. Vital family support services can stop problems spiralling out of control and prevent the need for statutory services later on. It is important, therefore, that administrations across the UK invest in preventative services and place a clear responsibility on local authorities (or relevant agencies) to provide early help that meets children's needs and improves outcomes.

As part of any preventative approach, children must be supported to build emotional resilience. Investment must also be made in early mental health provision so that every child can access mental health support as soon as a problem emerges. A National Childhood Strategy needs to set out how administrations across the UK will support children to recover from past trauma.

**The pressures on children today – particularly the most vulnerable – are intense, growing and often different from the past. These pressures can have a profound long-term effect on children's lives. It is vital, therefore, that we don't let another decade pass without a step change in support for children. This is why we're urging the government to respond to the UK public, invest in our future and Choose Childhood by putting children at the heart of their vision for the future.**



# A National Childhood Strategy for the UK

## – ambitions and actions

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Amongst a broad range of areas, a National Childhood Strategy must take account of the following five ambitions:

### **1. Childhoods where every child has the best start in life**

The earliest years are the most important to a child's development, and yet many children, in particular those born into poverty, are already behind by the time they start primary school.

- 1.1** Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should rethink their childcare offer so that high quality, affordable early education is available to all children from the earliest years.
- 1.2** In Scotland, the Scottish government should work collaboratively across sectors to overcome barriers and implement the Early Learning and Childcare Blueprint.
- 1.3** In England, the government should set a clear direction for the future of children's centres, creating long-term security for services used by millions of children each year.
- 1.4** In Northern Ireland, a newly re-formed Northern Ireland Assembly should urgently speed up the development of the cross-cutting Early Years (0-6) Strategy and the Childcare Strategy.
- 1.5** In England, the government should properly resource the health visitor workforce to increase support for families in the first years of a child's life.

## 2. Childhoods free from financial hardship

No childhood should be blighted by poverty, and yet child poverty in the UK is rising and set to reach record levels in the next few years.

- 2.1** The UK government should immediately end the freeze on working age benefits, given the impact this has had on the living standards of low income families. All future benefits should be regularly reviewed and upgraded in line with the cost of living and living standards.
- 2.2** The UK government should end the two-child limit, which targets families already facing higher poverty risks. Sufficient resources should be put in place to mitigate the impact of welfare changes, particularly in Northern Ireland, where the roll out is happening more slowly.
- 2.3** In England, the government must put in place a comprehensive action plan to tackle child poverty and the barriers to escaping it, following the examples of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.
- 2.4** In Wales, the Welsh Assembly should ensure that tackling child poverty remains a priority within new arrangements under the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act, and that clear accountability measures are in place.
- 2.5** In Scotland, the Scottish government should outline what their 'income supplement' will look like and fast track its delivery. More must also be done to maximise families' incomes. An information strategy should be established to ensure people are fully aware of their entitlements and rights when it comes to financial help.

### 3. Childhoods that build good mental health and emotional wellbeing

Mental health problems are a growing issue among children and young people, and yet many are left without the help and support they need.

- 3.1** In England, the government should speed up the implementation of promised reforms and secure long-term funding to ensure children and young people suffering from – or at risk of developing – mental health difficulties get the support they need, when they need it.
- 3.2** In England, the government should prioritise improvements in prevention and early intervention support, which go beyond current plans. While recent government announcements are a step in the right direction, we need broader ambitions, with a focus beyond school aged children to include the early years.
- 3.3** In Wales, the Welsh Assembly should fully consider and properly resource the recommendations of ‘Mind Over Matter’, the children and young people’s committee report, as a matter of urgency.
- 3.4** In Scotland, the Scottish government should invest in preventative mental health provision to ensure all of Scotland’s children have access to good mental health support.
- 3.5** In Scotland, the Scottish government should fully consider and properly resource the final recommendations made by the Mental Health Task Force.
- 3.6** In Northern Ireland, a newly re-formed Northern Ireland Assembly should ensure that the Education and Health Well-Being Framework being developed considers the emotional support needs of children and young people of all ages, and takes a cross-sectoral approach. It must include targeted, early and effective support for children and young people in and outside schools and educational settings, along with significant investment in early intervention.

## 4. Childhoods free from abuse and neglect

All children should have a safe, stable and loving childhood, and yet the number of children, young people and families reaching crisis point is rising, with vital support services too often not there to provide the support they need.

- 4.1** In England, the government should provide additional funding for children and young people's services in the Spending Review to address the estimated £3.1 billion funding gap facing local authorities by 2025.
- 4.2** In England, the government should ensure all local authorities have the resources to sustain a consistent offer of early intervention.
- 4.3** In England, the government should introduce a legal duty on local authorities and their statutory partners to provide early help to children, young people and families.
- 4.4** In Northern Ireland, a newly re-formed Northern Ireland Assembly should, in line with the Children's Services Cooperation Act 2016, introduce a clear legislative framework that encompasses an 'early help duty' for the financing, co-ordination and delivery of all education, health and social care services for children and young people.
- 4.5** In Scotland, the Scottish government should fully implement the Christie Commission principles of the importance of early years, prevention and personalised service delivery. That means funding should be directed into more family support provision and better evaluation of early family support.
- 4.6** In Wales, the Welsh Assembly should ensure that all local authorities have the resources to sustain a consistent offer of early intervention.

## 5. Childhoods supported to overcome traumatic experiences and adversity

Many children and young people live through traumatic experiences, from domestic abuse to neglect. When this happens, every child and young person must get the support they need to recover.

**5.1** Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should improve support for young people at risk of, or involved with, crime by:

- Prioritising and investing in services that support and divert both young people who need to move on from crime and those who are at risk of falling into crime.
- Putting in place further restrictions on the disclosure of offences committed by under 18s so that criminal records don't limit future opportunities.

**5.2** In England and Wales, the UK government should ensure the needs of children are fully taken account of in the new Domestic Abuse Bill by:

- Recognising children who experience domestic abuse within the proposed statutory definition itself.
- Strengthening the independence of the Domestic Abuse Commissioner and ensuring they have a clear remit to scrutinise the provision of support for children.

**5.3** Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should introduce measures to ensure local support services for survivors of domestic abuse and their children are properly funded and provided. In England, this should be done through the Domestic Abuse Bill, building on and widening the proposed duty to support survivors and their children in accommodation-based services. This will ensure that all children can get support, no matter where they might be living.



- 5.4** Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should ensure the care system supports children and young people to build stable, long-lasting relationships by:
- Reviewing the provision of ongoing high quality training and therapeutic support for carers to help them understand and address the emotional needs of children at every stage of their development.
  - Reviewing the implementation of the ‘Staying Put’, ‘Continuing Care’, ‘When I Am Ready’ and ‘Going the Extra Mile’ schemes to ensure that policies are adequately funded and any implementation issues are addressed.
  - In Northern Ireland, following the examples of England, Wales and Scotland, the ‘Going the Extra Mile’ scheme should be made statutory so all young people have the option to stay with their foster carers until at least the age of 21.
  - Ensuring that similar forms of support are available to young people transitioning into independence from residential care, and that learning from the ‘Staying Close’ pilots in England is acted on.

- 5.5** Across all four nations of the UK, administrations should ensure the care system promotes recovery from past harm by:
- In England, the government should commit to acting on learning from the current pilot of mental health assessments for children when they enter care. In Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland, administrations should build on the learnings from these pilots, and explore the introduction of dedicated mental health assessments.
  - In Scotland, the government should fully consider and properly resource the final recommendations made by the Independent Care review when published in summer 2020.

## Appendix A: Definitions

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When we speak about **children living in poverty today** we mean children living in households with a relative low income. A household is said to be in relative low income if its equivalised income is below 60 per cent of median income in that year. Income can be measured before or after housing costs are deducted. Here we have used figures after housing costs have been deducted.<sup>206</sup>

When we speak about **children living in poverty in Victorian times** we mean absolute poverty, which is a condition characterised by severe deprivation of basic human needs, including food, safe drinking water, sanitation facilities, health, shelter, education and information. It depends not only on income but also on access to services.<sup>207</sup>

**Early help** means providing support as soon as a problem emerges, at any point in a child's life, from the foundation years through to the teenage years. It includes a range of services and support for children and families. Statutory guidance states that early help should typically include family or parenting programmes, and help for families affected by substance misuse problems and domestic violence.<sup>208</sup>

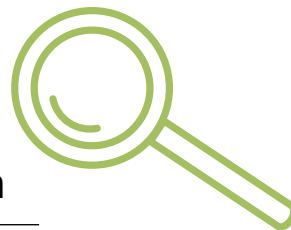
In England and Northern Ireland, **children in need** are those who need services to achieve or maintain a reasonable level of health or development or who are disabled. In Wales, the equivalent is **children receiving care and support**, where services are needed in addition to, or instead of, the care and support provided by their family. Local authorities in England and Wales, and the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland, are required to ensure that services are provided for these children. Scotland has a different approach through Getting it Right for Every Child.

**Child protection** refers to measures taken to protect children who are not safe. The threshold for child protection is when children are, or suspected to be, at risk of significant harm. If children in England meet this threshold they will become subject to a child protection plan, while for children in Wales, Scotland or Northern Ireland, they are added to a child protection register.

In England, Wales and Scotland, **local authority children's services** are responsible for supporting and protecting vulnerable children, working closely with other statutory partners. This includes providing children and their families with extra help to promote children's welfare and wellbeing. In Northern Ireland, the Department of Health is responsible for child protection. The Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland co-ordinates and ensures the effectiveness of work to protect and promote the welfare of children.

A child who has been in the care of their local authority for more than 24 hours is known as a **child in care**. Each UK nation has a slightly different definition, but in general children in care are: living with foster parents, living in a residential children's home, or living in residential settings like schools or secure units. Scotland's definition also includes children under a supervision requirement order. This means that more children in care in Scotland are still living at home, but with regular contact from social services, than in other nations.<sup>209</sup>





## Appendix B: Notes on the research

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### To summarise, our research involved the following:

1. Five focus groups with young people using Action for Children services across the UK.
2. Four online focus groups, run by YouGov, with children, young people, parents and grandparents, asking them about childhood today.
3. An online survey, conducted by YouGov, of over 2,000 11 to 18-year-olds, over 1,500 parents and more than 1,300 grandparents, asking them about childhoods today and previously.
4. A regression analysis using the Millenium Cohort Study to identify the associations between relationships in the early years with adolescent mental health and wellbeing outcomes.

### 1. Action for Children focus groups

We conducted five focus groups, two in England and one each in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The young people were aged between 11 and 24, and were using, or had used, Action for Children services. The sample represented a range of different types of services that Action for Children provides for this age group. This included: support for young people at risk of homelessness, employability support, mental health support, a young carers support group, and a support group for children of military families.

### 2. YouGov focus groups

We conducted four online focus groups split by life stage (children, young people, parents and grandparents) lasting 90 minutes each. There were 34 respondents in total, including a mix of key demographics (social grade, ethnicity, gender and region).

### 3. YouGov survey

We conducted three UK nationally representative online surveys:

- A. The first survey included 1,559 parents of children aged 11 to 18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 5 and 12 March 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).
- B. The second survey featured 1,379 grandparents with grandchildren aged 11 to 18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 6 and 12 March 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 50+).
- C. The third survey was conducted with 2,082 children aged 11 to 18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8 and 20 March 2019. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK children (aged 11 to 18).

#### 4. Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study conducted by UCL

The research sought to identify the extent to which the quality and nature of family and social relationships and the home environment at age three predict subjective wellbeing and mental ill-health in young people aged 14. Data was taken from the Millennium Cohort Study, a national birth cohort study of more than 19,000 individuals born at the start of this century.

##### *Factors investigated at age three*

Family and social relationships variables:

- **Parent-child relationships:** assessed using the Pianta Child-Parent Relationship Scale, a widely used 15-item short form that provides subscale scores corresponding to both parent-child closeness and parent-child conflict (the term conflict in this case mainly represents difficulty reported by the parent in relating and managing their child).
- **Parent-parent relationships:** assessed using the Glombok-Rust Inventory of Marital State (shortened 5-items version used here), with higher scores capturing better relationship quality.
- **Peer relationships:** are assessed using the parent-reported peer difficulties scale of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire, a widely used questionnaire in the UK to measure these difficulties.
- **Family structure:** family structure variables included in the analysis are lone parent and number of siblings.

Variables we controlled for:

- **Child demographic characteristics** (sex, ethnicity).
- **Cognitive ability:** assessed using the British Ability Scales, Naming Vocabulary, and the Bracken School Readiness Assessment.
- **Parent mental health:** maternal and paternal psychological distress is measured using the Kessler K6 scale, with higher scores indicative of greater psychological distress.
- **Age of parents at birth of child.**
- **Family socioeconomic status:** Household income (weekly in pounds); highest educational level (no qualifications, NVQ1-NVQ5); social class (NS-SEC 1-5); rented accommodation (yes/no).
- **Country** (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland).

##### *Outcomes investigated at age 14*

Child reported:

- **Depressive symptoms:** measured by the young person completing the Short Moods and Feelings Questionnaire (SMFQ), which assesses symptoms of depression. The measure consists of 13 items that assess feelings or behaviours in the previous fortnight (e.g. I felt miserable or unhappy) with responses on a three-point scale: true, sometimes true, not true. The items are aggregated to create a depressive symptoms score, with higher scores indicating greater symptoms.
- **Self-harm:** based on one question on whether the young person had self-harmed in the last 12 months.
- **Subjective wellbeing:** assessed using a six-item measure assessing satisfaction with different domains, including school, family,

friends, schoolwork, appearance, and life as a whole. The young person responded by indicating their level of happiness with each aspect of their lives on a seven-point scale ranging from not at all happy to extremely happy. The score is aggregated to represent overall wellbeing, with higher scores indicating greater wellbeing.

- **Self-esteem:** Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (shortened 5 items scale). The young person indicated their level of agreement on statements (e.g. ‘one the whole, I am satisfied with myself’, ‘I am a person of value’). A higher score indicates a higher level of adolescent self-esteem.
- **Antisocial behaviour:** antisocial behaviour was reported by the cohort member using 11 items on frequency and whether they had ever or in the last year participated in these behaviours.

Parent reported:

- **Emotional and conduct problems:** measured using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. A parent/carer (~95 per cent mothers) responded by indicating how true (not true, somewhat true, certainly true) statements about the child are.

### Analysis

Regression-based methods were used to investigate mental health outcomes (mental health difficulties and wellbeing), the continuous mental health scores at age 14, and binary scores (identifying those with high or clinical levels of scores on the different measures). Multivariate regression is used to account for the confounding variables and variance explained by the predictors of focus is estimated. In addition, we examine whether the associations of interest are significantly different between males and females using interaction terms in analysis. Also

differences in these associations between single parent and two-parent families were explored (with no differences in associations observed). Socioeconomic and demographic factors predicting to the family environment are also examined in regression models.

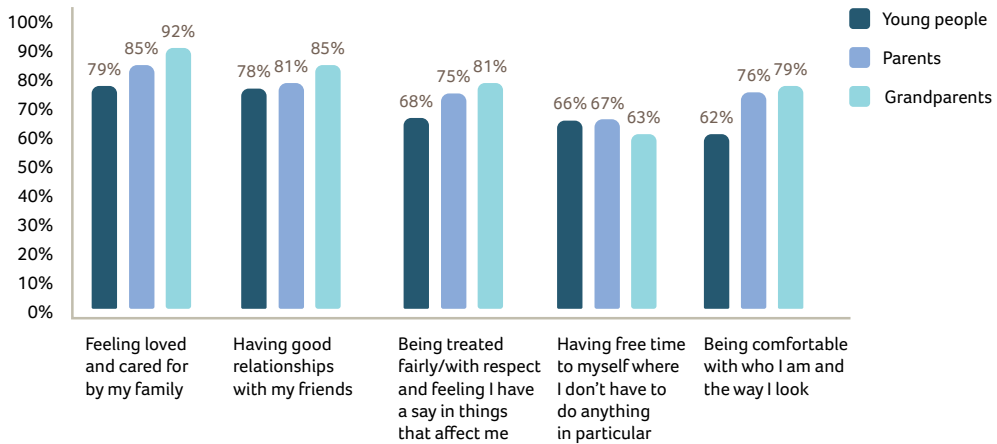
Measures (outcomes and predictors) that are continuous and not already on a natural scale are standardised, as per convention, to have a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, which helps the interpretation of results. A positive coefficient for a predictor, signifies that an increase in the predictor, is associated with an increase in the outcome. A negative coefficient means that an increase in the predictor, is associated with a decrease in the outcome. Statistically significant associations are indicated using p-values (\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ ). To aid the interpretation of results for policy relevance and audiences outside academia, regression coefficients are transformed into percentage change from the mean score of the outcome examined. Percentages are used in the reporting of results in this document.

Sample weights and imputation to deal with missing data are used in analysis to restore the national representativeness of findings. Missing data is mainly due to attrition from the survey between ages three and 14; multiple imputation restores the analytical sample to 15,382 families, which is the number that participated at age three. Further use of weighting in regression analyses means that results are nationally representative of adolescents born in the UK around the millennium. Imputation means that all missing data are imputed. The imputation and availability of a complete dataset allows all models to include the full sample without some families being dropped from the analyses because of missing data.

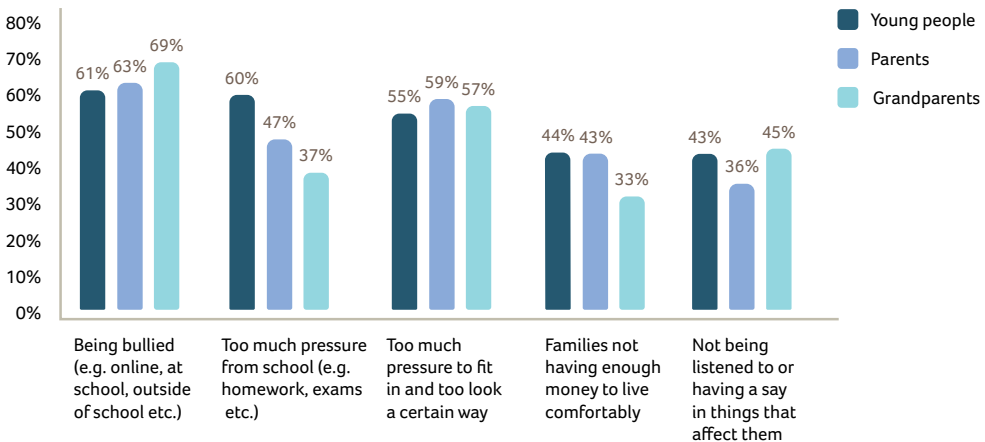
## Appendix C: Graphs showing our survey results

As outlined in Appendix A, we worked with YouGov to conduct a large scale online survey with young people, parents and grandparents, asking them about childhoods today and previously. Here we provide a more comprehensive breakdown of the answers for some of the key survey questions referred to throughout this report.

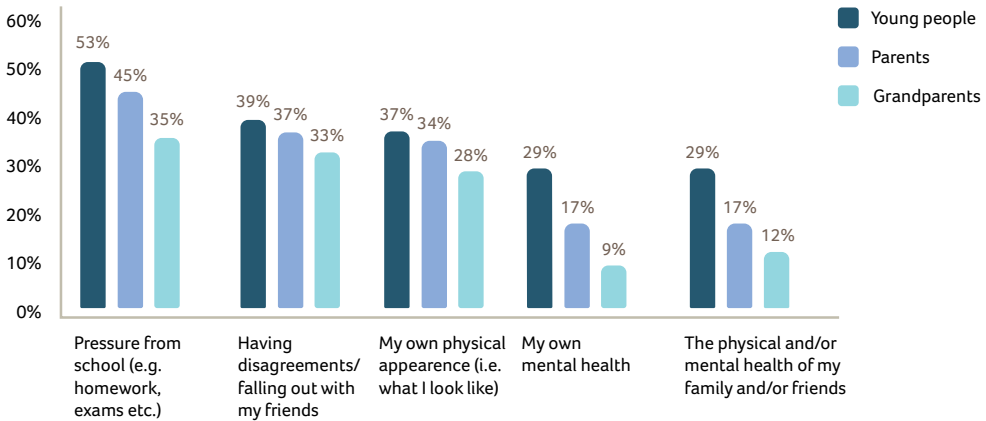
### 1 Which of these do you think are important for you/ your child/ your grandchild to feel happy?



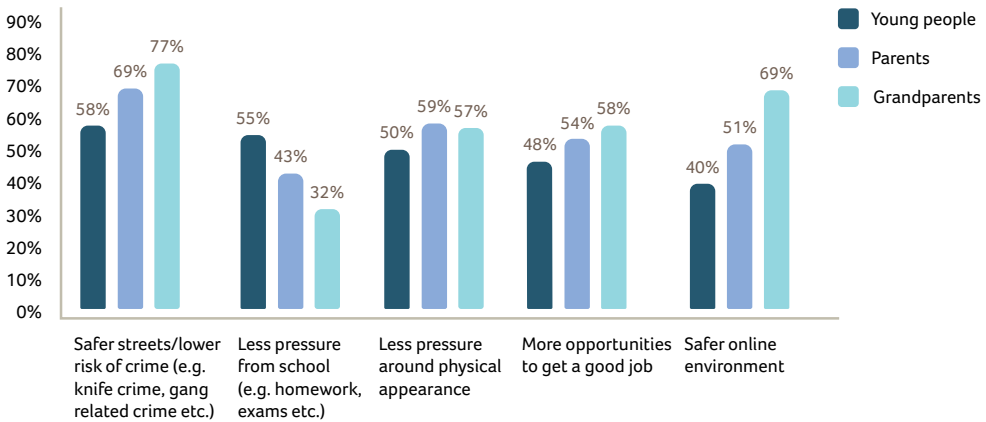
### 2 In general, which of these do you think stop children from having a good childhood nowadays?



### 3 Which of these do you/ your child/ your grandchild worry about?



### 4 Thinking generally about children today, which of these do you want to be different for children today?



\* Graphs 1-4 only show the 5 options selected the most by the young people

## Endnotes

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- 83 Measured using the parent-child conflict subscale of the Pianta Child-Parent Relationship Scale, a widely used 15-item short form. The scale which measures conflict includes the following items:
- Struggle with child
  - Child easily becomes angry with me
  - Child angry or resistant after disciplined
  - Dealing with child drains my energy
  - Child bad mood, in for a long day
  - Child's feeling can be unpredictable towards me
  - Child is sneaky/manipulative with me
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## **Safe and happy childhood**

Action for Children protects and supports children and young people, providing practical and emotional care and support, ensuring their voices are heard, and campaigning to bring lasting improvements to their lives.



## Action for Children

3 The Boulevard  
Ascot Road  
Watford  
WD18 8AG

[actionforchildren.org.uk](http://actionforchildren.org.uk)



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