

Executive Summary

Choose Childhood:
building a brighter
future for our children



Acknowledgements

Action for Children would like to thank all the young people using our services who shared their views and gave up their time to take part in focus groups. We would also like to thank the members of staff in our services who have kindly dedicated time to ensure that these focus groups could take place.

Finally we would like to thank the other individuals and organisations we worked with in undertaking this research, in particular, independent consultant Dr. Jane Evans, Dr. Praveetha Patalay, Dr. Aase Villadsen and Prof. Emla Fitzsimons at the UCL Centre for Longitudinal Studies, and the team at YouGov.

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 150th 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 person¹

“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. ”

Parent²



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.^{3 4 5} 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.⁶ 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.⁷

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

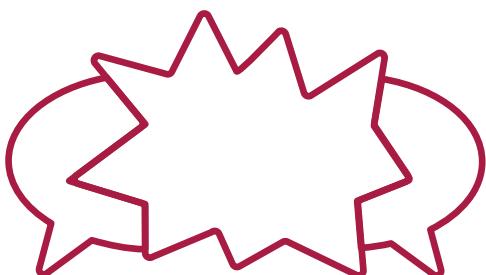
In our analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study we found:

- **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.⁸

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.⁹ 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:

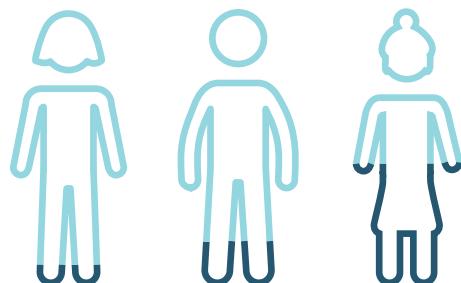
- **Over a quarter (29 per cent) of young people are worried about their own mental health.** This increases with age, with almost one in ten 11-year-olds (9 per cent) saying they are worried about their mental health, compared to one in five 14-year-olds (19 per cent) and more than half of 18-year-olds (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.¹⁰ 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.¹¹ 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.

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

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.¹² At the same time, in England, funding for early help services to support these children and families is being cut.¹³ Our previous research found that, too often, children are left without support until problems reach crisis point.¹⁴

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?



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.¹⁵



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.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.



Endnotes

- 1 Online focus groups conducted by YouGov with young people, parents and grandparents.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Department for Work and Pensions (2019). *National Statistics: Households below average income: 1994/95 to 2017/18*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-199495-to-201718>
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- 15 Action for Children & the New Economics Foundation (2009). *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*. Available at: https://b.3cdn.net/nefoundation/e15acdab95a4f18989_j8m6vrt0j.pdf
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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.



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