



There's a  
**Star** in every  
**Child**  
Help them shine

Brighter  
**future**  
ahead?

Comparing three generations of childhood



## 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.

Brighter Future Ahead?

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## Contents

# Foreword

Children today are growing up in a very different world to that of their parents and grandparents. This report compares childhoods across these three generations. We shine a light on the progress that we, as a society, are making for our children.

Action for Children believes there's a star in every child. When a child has a safe and happy childhood, you see their star shining. It's wonderful. It's their infectious enthusiasm for everything. It's their curiosity, personality and imagination bursting to life.

We asked the three generations to share their views on childhood today, the barriers that children and young people face, how children are supported and what they think about local services.

Several of the questions we asked were repeated from our 2019 Choose Childhood report. This gave us an opportunity to explore how views have changed in the years since.

We hope the government will take forward the three recommendations in this report to improve the lives of children right now.



**Melanie Armstrong**  
Chief Executive



# Executive summary

The last two years have been hard for everyone across the UK, but they have been especially tough for children. The pandemic has caused immense disruption to children's lives and its impact will be felt long into their futures. Families must now also confront a painful squeeze on their incomes, as rising prices and soaring bills threaten to derail the country's recovery. All children deserve a safe and happy childhood, the foundations they need to thrive and the opportunity to shine.

In this report, we explore what it's like to grow up in the UK today and how it compares to previous generations. To better understand childhoods today, we surveyed three generations of families across the UK – children, parents and grandparents. In doing so, we revisit research we did before the pandemic in 2019.

Our findings suggests there is a strong and widespread perception that childhoods have got worse. Surprisingly few people think that children today have brighter futures than previous generations.

It is our collective responsibility to ensure that every generation of children can fulfil its potential. There's a long way to go until this ambition matches the reality of children's lives. Children and young people need the right support to overcome the barriers that stop their star shining now, and hold them back from a brighter future.

## Key findings:

There is a widespread perception that childhoods are getting worse.

**More than half of parents (57%) think that childhoods today are worse** than when they were their child's age, and **almost two-thirds of grandparents (64%) agree.**

**Children have a more positive outlook than older generations – but over a third (34%) still think that childhoods are worse** than when their parent or carer was their age.

**Just over one in five children (21%) feel that they do not have a brighter future than their parents did.** Parents and grandparents are **more than twice as likely than children to say that their child or grandchild does not have a brighter future** (44% and 46% respectively).

## Children and young people face barriers that make it harder for them to shine

We asked three generations what makes it harder for children to fulfil their potential and to have a brighter future than their parents did. We also asked what they worry about. Several themes came through strongly and are explored later in the report. This includes pressure from school, their mental health and wellbeing, the impact of the pandemic, and wider financial concerns.



# Our findings

## What children worry about

Children said:

**49%**

Pressure from school



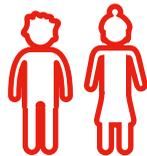
**42%**

Their mental health



**38%**

Physical appearance



**30%**

Family finances



## One significant finding found that mental health is a bigger worry for children now than in 2019.

42% said they were worried about their own mental health in our latest survey – compared to 29% in 2019.<sup>1</sup>

Parents and grandparents are also far more aware of their child or grandchild's mental health worries. Only 17% of parents and 9% of grandparents identified mental health as something they thought their child or grandchild worried about in 2019. In our latest survey, the figures jumped to 45% of parents and 30% of grandparents who thought their child or grandchild ever worried about their mental health.

## Almost a third of children (30%) worry about their family having enough money to live comfortably.

Among the children we surveyed from low income backgrounds, nearly half (47%) said they worry, about their family's finances, while only 14% of children from high income families said so.



## Barriers to having a brighter future

Children said:

**44%**

More pressure from school



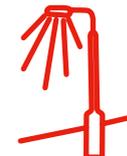
**34%**

Fewer opportunities to get a good job



**34%**

Less safe streets/ higher risk of crime



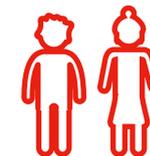
**34%**

More use of social media and devices



**34%**

More pressure around physical appearance

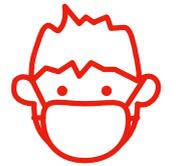


## Barriers to fulfilling their potential

Children said:

**48%**

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic



**46%**

Too much pressure from school



**41%**

Poor mental health



## Local support services play a vital role – but need to be strengthened

Over two-thirds of parents (68%) and a similar proportion of grandparents (63%) believe that the government is investing 'too little' in services that support childhoods.

Nearly half of parents (48%) and 42% of grandparents felt that services that support childhoods in their areas have got worse since 2011.

A third of children (33%) said they do not get enough support from services or adults that work with young people. A fifth of children (19%) say they get no support at all from these services.

## The government must build the foundations children need for their stars to shine

### Family hubs and children's centres are vital for the delivery of support in the crucial early years of a child's life.

Early help services support children and families before they meet the statutory threshold for intervention from children's social care. They allow professionals to identify problems early and prevent them from escalating. This is known to improve outcomes and often save money in the long run.<sup>ii</sup>

Investment in both of these areas would enable more children and families to benefit from these vital services.

Growing up in poverty represents one of the single most consequential barriers a child can face. There is strong evidence of the negative impact of poverty on childhood and children's life chances.<sup>iii</sup> Poverty stops a child's star from shining today, and it stops them having a brighter future tomorrow. We can reduce child poverty with the right policies.

### What we did

We commissioned YouGov to undertake three large-scale online surveys. They polled over 2,000 children and young people aged 11-18, more than 2,000 parents or carers, and almost 1,400 grandparents across the UK. We asked them to share their views on childhood today, the barriers that children and young people face, how children are supported and what they think about local services.

We repeated several questions from our 2019 Choose Childhood report. This allowed us to explore how views have changed in the years since.<sup>iv</sup>

For more information on polling methods, see Appendix A.



## Our recommendations

### The government should:

1. Roll out family hubs in every area of England to give every child the best start in life. Extend the core service offer to include baby and toddler groups and parenting programmes.
2. Introduce a legal duty on local authorities in England to provide early help. Scale up funding for a broad range of early intervention services.
3. Develop and implement a cross-government strategy for reducing and ultimately eradicating child poverty in the UK. Take immediate action to support those on the lowest incomes by ensuring that benefits keep pace with the cost of living.

## What we do to help

Action for Children provides a range of services to support families across the UK. In 2020/21, we reached 604,885 children, young people and parents or carers through our services, at schools or online.

We are there for families from conception, providing antenatal support through children's centres and family hubs. We work with children through their early years, supporting their development and helping to prepare them for school. Our parenting programmes help parents with skills such as managing children's behaviour. Our Blues Programme helps schoolchildren with their mental health.

We support young people with getting into employment, and we're there for disabled children and their families. Our Serious Organised Crime Intervention Service provides intensive support and peer mentoring to divert young people away from criminal exploitation through serious organised crime.

Our online parenting advice and support service, Parent Talk, offers information on a range of subjects relating to parenting, as well as a one-to-one live chat function with our experienced Parenting Coaches. In 2020/21, we held over 10,000 live chats.



## Section 1

# What do families think about childhood today?

A fundamental responsibility of any government is to make sure that every generation of children has a better childhood and a brighter future than the last. In our survey of children, parents and grandparents, we found that many families do not see this reflected in their own lives.

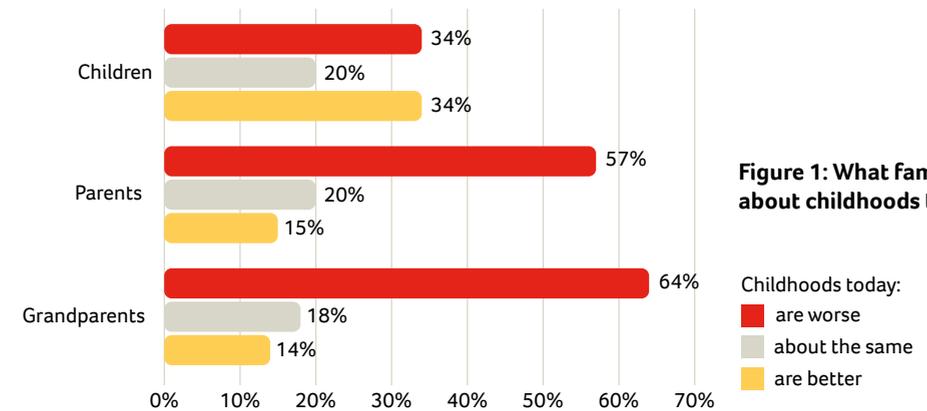
A number of findings stood out:

- **More than half of parents (57%) think that childhoods today are worse than when they were their child's age.** Grandparents take an even more negative view. Almost two-thirds (64%) feel that childhoods today are worse than when their own child was growing up.
- **Children have a more positive outlook than older generations – but over a third (34%) still think that childhoods are worse than when their parent or carer was their age.**
- **The number of children who think that childhoods are better has improved since we asked this question in 2019** (34% in 2022; 23% in 2019). Although this progress is encouraging, nearly two out of three children still don't share that sense of optimism.

**Older children, children from low income families, and girls were more likely to say childhoods are worse today.**

Exploring these findings in more detail shows that some groups of children were more likely to say that childhoods are worse today. Three groups stood out.

- **Older young people were more likely to see childhoods today as worse.** Only 24% of 11- to 12-year-olds that we polled said this, compared to 41% of 17- to 18-year-olds. There was a similar pattern in 2019. 26% of 11- to 12-year-olds said childhoods were worse compared to 45% of 17- to 18-year-olds.
- **Children from low income families were more likely to say childhoods are worse.** 38% of children in low income families that we surveyed said childhoods today are worse, compared to 26% of children from high income families.
- **More girls (37%) than boys (30%) said that childhoods today are worse.** This gender divide was also found among parents. 52% of dads said that childhoods are worse, compared to 62% of mums. For grandparents the split was 59% male, 68% female.



**Figure 1: What families think about childhoods today**

Childhoods today:  
■ are worse  
■ about the same  
■ are better

**Do children have a brighter future?**

We also asked children whether they think they have a brighter future compared to when their parent or carer was their age. Over a third of children (38%) believe they have a brighter future. This is a notable improvement from 2019 (29%).

Despite this progress, **just over one in five children feel that they do not have a brighter future than their parents did.** And when we put this question to parents and grandparents, they were more than twice as likely than children to say that their child or grandchild does not have a brighter future (44% and 46% respectively) – a small increase on 2019.

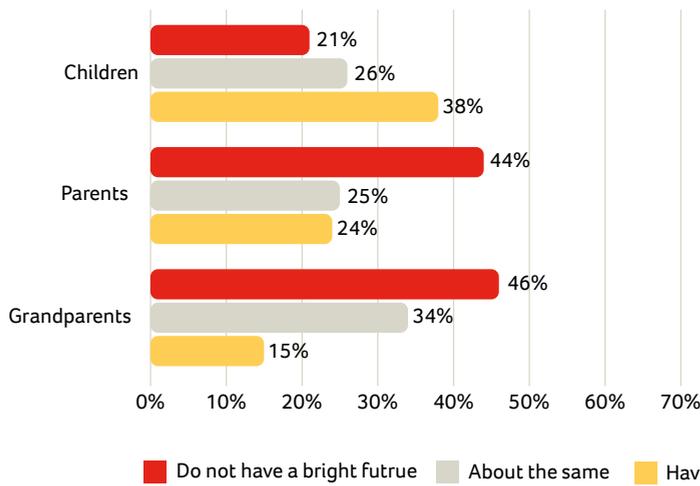


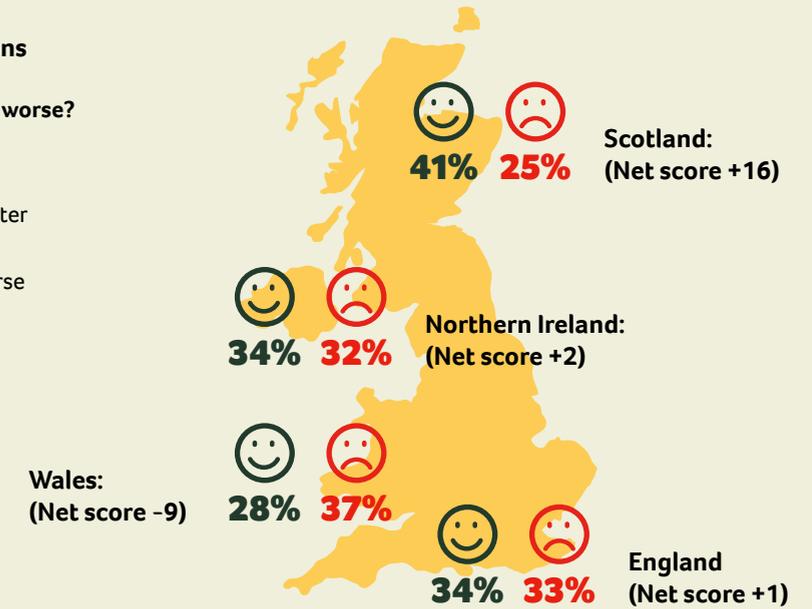
Figure 2: What families think about children's futures

**The breakdown of the nations**

**Are childhoods today better or worse?**

Children said:

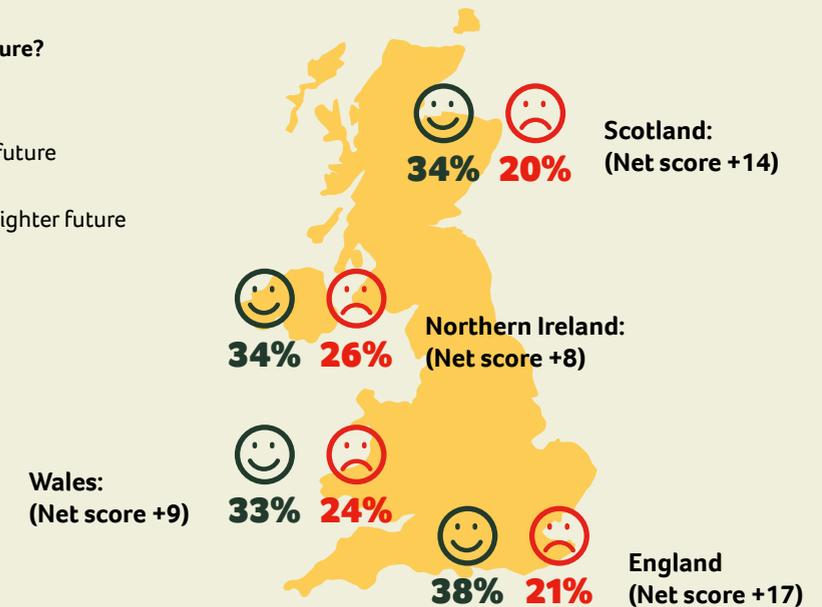
- ☺ Childhoods today are better
- ☹ Childhoods today are worse



**Do children have a brighter future?**

Children said:

- ☺ Children have a brighter future
- ☹ Children do not have a brighter future



**What is getting in the way of children having a brighter future?**

There are a number of ways to look at the challenges that children face when thinking about the quality of their childhoods, whether they can fulfil their potential and achieve a brighter future than their own parents. In the graphics below, several themes stand out. This includes poor mental health, pressures around school and physical appearance, and the impact of the pandemic.

**What barriers do children face in their future?**

To understand more about the barriers children and young people face, we asked them what they think makes it more difficult to have a brighter future than their parents did.

**The biggest barriers to having a brighter future were:**

**44%** More pressure from school

**34%** Fewer opportunities to get a good job

**34%** Less safe streets /higher risk of crime

**34%** More use of social media and devices

**34%** More pressure around physical appearance

**What are children worried about?**

We asked children and young people what they worry about, and if they hide these worries from their parents.

**The top three worries among children were:**

**49%** Pressure from school

**46%** Their mental health

**38%** Physical appearance

57% of children admit to covering up at least one of their worries from their parents. While 60% of parents believe their child covers them up – this is up significantly from 42% in 2019 .

**What stops children from fulfilling their potential?**

We also asked children what they think makes it harder for them to fulfil their potential and achieve everything in life that they are capable of.

**The top three responses among children were:**

**49%** The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

**46%** Too much pressure from school

**38%** Poor mental health

Children across the UK are more positive about their childhoods and more hopeful about their futures than parents and grandparents. But there are large numbers of children that aren't as optimistic. In the next section, we look in greater detail at the underlying barriers that children, parents, and grandparents feel are stopping children and young people from having the brighter futures they deserve.

**Real-life story**



**Three generations of the same family share different views about childhood today.**

We spoke to Marissa, 13, her mum, Suzanna, 53, and her grandmother, Daphne, 76, about growing up today. Marissa used an Action for Children Young Carers service as she cares for her mum, who suffers with back problems following a car accident.

**Marissa** believes some aspects of childhood are better today than they were for her mum and grandmother. Things like access to technology are of course 'way better' than when Suzanna and Daphne were children. However, she also believes some are worse: "Being a girl, it's terrifying going out later in the day, especially with what I hear from my friends and the news about girls my age being followed... social media has brought a lot of things to light that makes it scary to go out."

Marissa is also really worried about climate change and the environment, and often leaves the house with a bin bag just to collect rubbish she finds. On the environment, she said: "With social media you can see what is happening, it's really distressing, you feel alone, you feel like you are the only person who cares." Marissa is unsure about how her aspirations for the future will be affected by Covid, but she does think it will be harder to get a job now.

*“social media companies don't do enough to protect people”*

**Marissa's mum, Suzanna**, says that she is "100% sure childhood is worse now today than it was for me or my mum." She thinks that money is more of an issue now than it was back then, particularly with high house prices, the rising cost of living and low wages. Suzanna is really worried about safety on social media and what her daughter might see: "social media companies don't do enough to protect people."

**Marissa's grandmother, Daphne**, thinks that children spend too much time inside nowadays, and that childhood today "is more difficult, and more stressful, it's not as easy going as it was when I was a child". She agrees with Suzanna that the prices of things will make it harder for children to have a higher standard of living today, and thinks it is easier to get into debt: "Things are going up... there are more worries now about being able to afford things like housing... You have to leave the area you grew up in to get a job, there are no jobs for them down here in the south-west".

Daphne thinks some things, like technological advantages, have made it better for children who are well off, but she also thinks that access to technology has increased worries. Daphne thinks that even though children have a lot more nowadays, they don't necessarily appreciate it: "I wouldn't say they are better off nowadays, but they are better off with what they have."



## Section 2

# Themes

### 2.1 School and education

It's clear from our survey that school pressures are a major concern for children today. **It's the top issue that children worry about.** Half of children worry about it (49%) – and it was also their biggest worry in 2019 (53%).

Similarly, pressure from school was the most important issue for children when they were asked what will make it more difficult for them to have a brighter future compared to their parents' generation (44%).

The proportion of children who identified school pressure as a barrier to having a brighter future differed across the UK. It was most prevalent among the children we surveyed in England (46%) and least prevalent in Wales (34%).

There are lots of reasons why children might find school a difficult or pressured environment. Many will see this as a normal part of the education experience. But one important aspect to consider is how much support children feel they get at school.

According to our survey, nearly **a third of children (32%) say that school does not provide enough emotional support for them.** 28% of parents agree.

**Just over a quarter of children (26%) also say that they do not get enough practical support from school or teachers.** For example through after-school homework clubs, careers advisors or extra help with their learning.

Children surveyed in Northern Ireland were the most satisfied with the support they received in school. 45% said they receive a great or good amount of practical support. 37% said the same for emotional support.

Children we polled in Wales were the least satisfied – 28% said they receive a great or good amount of practical support. And only a quarter (25%) reported getting the same level of emotional support.

#### What's the impact of worries about school?

A long-term study of children's subjective wellbeing found that happiness with school is associated with feeling safe at school, being happy with relationships with teachers, and feeling listened to.<sup>v</sup> Research from the Department for Education shows that children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social, and school wellbeing, on average, have higher levels of academic achievement and are more engaged in school.<sup>vi</sup> Conversely, a non-supportive school environment and school-related stress can be risk factors for developing unhealthy behaviours and poor academic performance.<sup>vii</sup>

We are conscious that the worries of children will to some extent reflect where they spend most of their time. We know that many schools and education settings go to great lengths to provide their students with the right support despite increasingly overstretched budgets.

One reason why some children may feel they don't get the support they need from schools is because schools have increasingly been expected to pick up the role of other essential children's services. Many teachers now play the role of youth workers or family support workers.

It's important that all schools are equipped with the right resources, knowledge, training and confidence to deliver appropriate levels of support to the children in their care during the school day. At the same time, schools can't do all of the heavy lifting of helping children's stars to shine.

## Real-life story



*“the attendance team were absolutely fantastic”*

**Catherine\*** has an 11-year-old son, **Jack\***, who has cerebral palsy and started at secondary school in September. Since Christmas, Jack has experienced anxiety about returning to school. He has developed a phobia around needing the toilet and not being allowed to go. Catherine thinks the pandemic and Jack's awareness of his disability have heightened his feelings of anxiety during his transition to secondary school.

“Since he started high school he is very aware of his disability and how it comes across. You can't tell through looking at him that he's got cerebral palsy because it is mild, but he's very aware of it and will kind of hold himself differently when he's out and puff himself out, and make himself look strong and big in his eyes. **So I definitely think there is a link to his anxiety, which was heightened by the pandemic and where he is leaving the house now.**”

Catherine is really positive about the support Jack has received from the school, who she says have been fantastic throughout. Her son has been provided with a pass so he can go to the toilet during his lessons at any time. He also has an intervention once a week to support him in his core lessons. Catherine has seen a noticeable improvement in his academic performance: **“We've received his provisional report card last week, and it's better than any of the reports he got from primary school, so we were really buoyed by that.”**

After taking a week off for his anxiety recently, Catherine says: “There was no pressure for him to go back, only gentle encouragement...**the attendance team were absolutely fantastic... they were really kind to him and reassured him that he wouldn't be in trouble when he goes back to school. When my husband and I had Covid, we had a crossover where we were both still positive and couldn't get him to school, and they offered to arrange and pay for a taxi for him.**”

*\*While their names have been changed to protect their identity, their story is real.*

## 2.2 Mental health and emotional wellbeing

**Mental health is a bigger worry for children now than in 2019.** 42% said they were worried about their mental health, significantly higher than in 2019 (29%). While a third of boys (34%) worry about their mental health, more than half (51%) of girls say they worry.

**Parents and grandparents are far more aware of their child or grandchild's mental health worries in our latest survey.** In 2019, only 17% of parents and 9% of grandparents identified mental health as something they thought their child or grandchild worried about. This leapt to 45% of parents and 30% of grandparents in 2022. <sup>viii</sup>

Pressure around physical appearance was another prominent theme in our survey. 38% of children said that they worry about their appearance. **It's a noticeably bigger worry for girls (48%) compared to boys (29%).**

A third of children (34%) also identified more pressure around physical appearance as a potential barrier to them having a brighter future than their parents.

Similarly, **physical appearance was among the top worries identified by parents (44%) and grandparents (36%).** This shows that, alongside school pressures and mental health, it's an issue that is strongly recognised across all three generations.

There are a number of reasons as to why children's feelings about their own mental health – as well as the perceptions of parents and grandparents – may have deteriorated. Two causes were particularly apparent from our research.

### The impact of the pandemic

Since the onset of the pandemic, there has been a precipitous decline in the mental health of children. NHS figures for England show that one in six children had a probable mental health disorder in 2021, up from one in nine in 2017.

Mental health deteriorated for 39% of children aged 6-16 in England between 2017 and 2021. Among 17-23-year-olds, over half (53%) experienced a deterioration.

The prevalence of probable mental health disorders in children aged 11-16 was higher for girls (20%) than boys (16%). For young women aged 17-23, rates of probable mental disorder were more than double (24%) than that of young men (11%). This reinforces our own survey findings that show girls are significantly more worried about their own mental health. <sup>ix</sup>

The growing number of people who think that mental health problems have got worse for children may be driven in part by financial concerns. Children in families that fell behind with their bills during the pandemic were twice as likely to have a possible mental health disorder than other children. Children whose parents are in psychological distress are more than three times more likely to have a possible mental health disorder than other children. <sup>x</sup>

### Social media

Greater social media use has been linked to online harassment, poor sleep, low self-esteem and poor body image, with an associated increased risk of depressive symptoms. <sup>xi</sup>

Interestingly, social media was a top concern for parents and grandparents, while children generally saw it as less important than other factors. A third of children (34%) identified more use of social media and devices as a potential barrier to them having a brighter future than their parents did. But 53% of parents and 56% of grandparents thought this.

Worryingly, 29% of children with mental health worries admitted to covering them up from their parent or carer. One in five (21%) said they cover up their worries about their appearance.

## What we do to help

### The Blues Programme

Action for Children delivers The Blues Programme to young people aged 13-19 through schools.

The Blues Programme aims to reduce low mood and negative thoughts and promote prevention. It provides young people with cognitive restructuring techniques and practical coping strategies to use in daily life. The programme supports young people to recognise their triggers of negative thoughts and feelings and how to use positive counter-thoughts.

It is delivered in small groups of young people, for an hour a week over six weeks, with some home practice. So far, we've delivered The Blues Programme in over 150 schools to more than 5,500 young people.

- 76% of students say it improved their wellbeing.
- 80% feel comfortable talking about their mental health.
- 98% would recommend Blues to one of their friends.

**“My head was like chaos and now I have it organised”**

- Young person who took part in the Blues Programme.



The programme has recently been awarded a Level 4+ with the Early Intervention Foundation. This means there is evidence of a long-term positive impact on child outcomes through multiple rigorous evaluations.

**“Every student should do this as it helps you deal with life by thinking differently”**

- Young person who has taken part in the Blues Programme.

**“The Blues Programme has been invaluable to the school; we have become a school which now actively discusses mental health”**

- Teacher at a school where we deliver Blues

## 2.3 Poverty and hardship

### Household finances

For many children and families, a lack of money is an ever-present challenge in their lives.

30% of children said they worry about their family having enough money to live comfortably. Almost a third of parents (32%) told us that not having enough money will make it harder for their child to fulfil their potential.

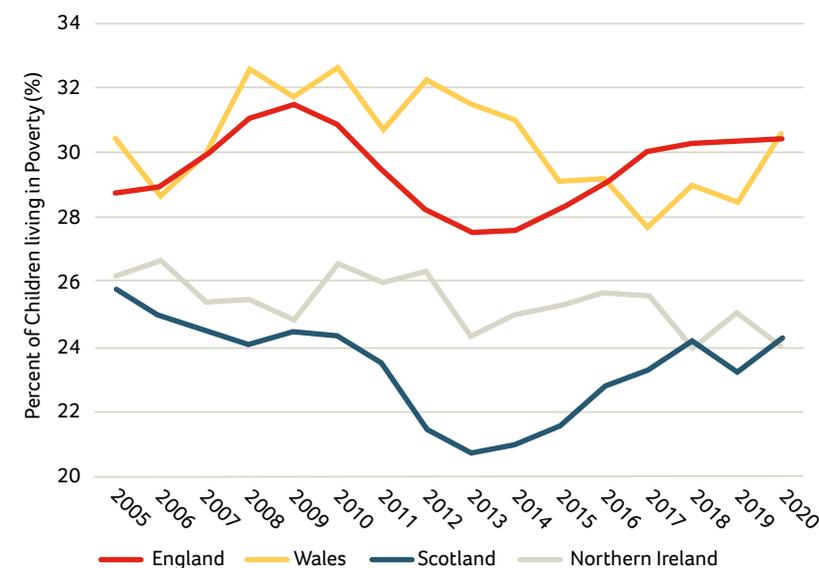
**Among the children we surveyed who come from low income backgrounds, nearly half (47%) said they worry about their family's finances.** It was only 14% for children from high income families.

One in four children (25%) say they are worried about the impact of the pandemic on their family's finances. This was consistent across the nations – except in Scotland, where only 15% of children surveyed said they worried about this.

These financial worries reflect the reality that rising numbers of children are growing up in poverty. From 2010 to 2020, the percentage of children in poverty rose from 27% to 31%. By the end of the decade, there were 700,000 more children in poverty than there were at the start. <sup>xii</sup>

At a nations level, child poverty is on the rise everywhere except Northern Ireland, where poverty rates have steadily fallen over the last fifteen years. In England, child poverty is highest in the London borough of Tower Hamlets. 56% of children there live in poverty, the highest of any local authority in the UK.

In Scotland, the child poverty rate is highest in Glasgow (32%). In Wales, the highest child poverty rate is in Cardiff (33%). And in Northern Ireland, it's Newry, Mourne and Down (26%) followed closely by the cities of Belfast and Derry. <sup>xiii</sup>



**Figure 3: Child Poverty in the nations, 2005-2020**  
Child poverty is high and rising throughout most of the UK

**Real-life story**



*“I feel like I can’t fulfil my full potential as an adult, but also as a parent.”*

**Gemma\* has a five-year-old daughter, Lily\*, and works in a hospital. As a single parent, she finds things a struggle financially and has experienced a lot of stigma. Up until last year, she was working in a school, but found it really difficult to balance work and childcare for her daughter.**

There’s not much childcare provision in Gemma’s area, particularly early in the morning or later in the evening. Since starting her new job in a hospital, she has had to rely heavily on friends. Gemma can claim back 85% of her childcare costs through her Universal Credit, but this only applies to registered providers.

“If I needed someone out of hours, they have to be Ofsted registered. There’s a lot of babysitters around, but I wouldn’t get my money back for that, so I am having to rely heavily on friends who will do it for free.”

Gemma is concerned about what the future holds for Lily because of the financial barriers they face. Her housing allowance from Universal Credit is £55 less than her rent, and she is frustrated that her benefits are not going up at the same rate as inflation.

“The prices of everything are going up, and we’re just being left with this really minimal amount... you just end up having to scrape by and live a really meagre life, and it’s really sad.”

Gemma received the Warm Homes Discount over winter which has really helped with her energy bills. But she has heard that prices are going up and says she is scared to check her bills.

“I am worried about this year with them saying everyone could be paying so much more... and I’m just thinking, we scraped by anyway. I don’t know who’s gonna help us.”

If she was to give one message to the government, it would be that single parents are not given enough consideration, particularly by the benefits system.

“Universal Credit is a token gesture. They say it helps us get back into work, but you know, the structure is not there. There’s not as many provisions as I would need to be able to have a full career. I feel like single-parent families who are on a low income – we’ve just been shoved aside. I feel like I can’t fulfil my full potential as an adult, but also as a parent.”

*\*While their names have been changed to protect their identity, their story is real*

**Poverty makes it harder for children to fulfil their potential**

To an extent, those who worry about the impact of financial troubles on their children’s futures are right to be concerned. The impact of poverty is clear in a number of areas.

**School outcomes**

Since 2015 in England, the GCSE attainment gap between children eligible for Free School Meals and all other pupils in state-funded education has grown. The pandemic exacerbated this, where GCSE grades were awarded by teacher assessment rather than the usual system of examinations. Figure 4 shows the average ‘Attainment 8’ scores for Free School Meal pupils, and all other pupils for all assessment years since 2015. <sup>xiv</sup> The gap of 14.5 points in 2020/21 between children eligible for Free School Meals and those who are not is the highest since 2015. It reflects a disadvantage gap of more than one full grade per GCSE subject.

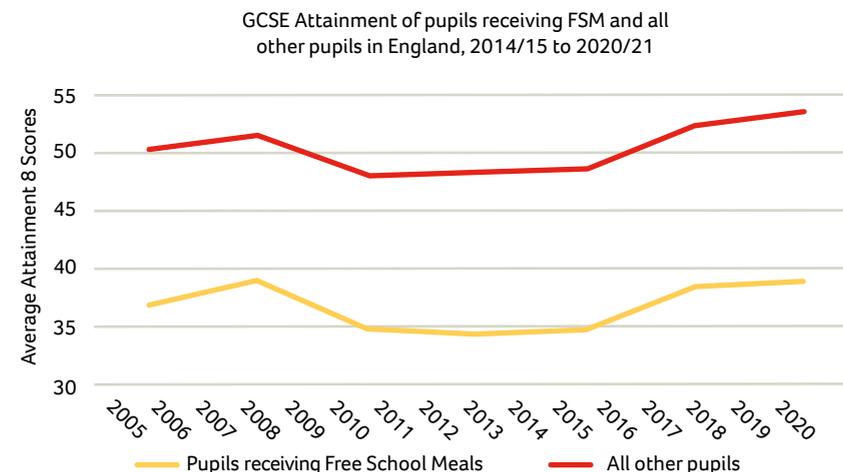
**Labour market outcomes**

Lower educational attainment also affects employment prospects for children who grow up in low income families. By 25, only 23% of people who received Free School Meals have an income higher than the national living wage. For non-Free School Meals pupils, it’s 44%. <sup>xv</sup>

**Health outcomes**

The 2020 Marmot Review of health inequalities in England highlighted a significant overlap between child poverty and health outcomes. Children in more deprived areas are more likely to face a serious illness during childhood or have a long-term disability. They are much less likely to reach a good level of development by the age of five. <sup>xvi</sup> A 2021 study from Loughborough University estimated that child poverty costs the NHS £3.35 billion a year. <sup>xvii</sup>

**Figure 4: The disadvantage gap at GCSE level 2014/15 to 2020/21**



## How we help in a crisis

### Action for Children Emergency Fund

In March 2020, we launched the Coronavirus Emergency Fund in response to the pandemic and signs of urgent financial needs among the children, young people and families that we support through our services.

The Emergency Fund is open to all children, young people and families across the UK currently using our services who need

emergency financial aid. It's there to help them meet the cost of daily essentials. Such as food, utility bills, baby items, clothing, cleaning products, and home learning resources. Applicants receive a grant of up to £250 per claim but can get more in exceptional circumstances. Almost £1.5 million has been generated through the Emergency Fund to date, supporting over 11,000 families and 26,000 children.

## 2.4 Crime and safety

A third of children (34%) think that less safe streets and an increased risk of crime will make it more difficult for them to have a brighter future. This rises to 42% among parents and well over half of grandparents (55%).

However, children's views on this differed significantly depending on where they live. 41% of children in London and 40% in the east Midlands identified this as a concern for their futures. Whereas only 26% in the south-west did. It was also the top concern of over half of parents in London (54%) – more than in any other region.

Lower income families were also more likely to identify crime and safety as a barrier. 38% of children surveyed from low income families identified this, compared to 26% from high income families. This was also observed among the parents we polled – 45% of parents from low income backgrounds, versus 34% of high income parents.

### Fears about crime are widespread

The prominence of fears about crime and safety is well supported by other survey data. The Children's Society's 2017 Good Childhood Report found that fear of crime was the most prevalent of various types of disadvantage for children aged 10-17.<sup>xviii</sup>

An estimated 2.6% of children aged 10-15 were a victim of violent crime between March 2019 and March 2020.<sup>xix</sup> While violent crime against children is thankfully rare and has been trending downwards since 2010, children's fears of being victimised seem to be relatively widespread.

## What we do to help

### Serious Organised Crime Intervention Service programme

Our Serious Organised Crime Intervention Service supports children and young people aged 11-18 who might be at risk of involvement with serious offending and criminal activity. The service aims to identify these young people as early as possible, and divert them away from exploitation or criminal pathways. It supports young people to address issues of vulnerability that could lead to exploitation and offers support to their families to strengthen family relationships.

The Serious Organised Crime Intervention Service builds young people's capacity and resilience, and uses peer mentors with lived experience to act as positive role models.

We currently deliver the service in Scotland, Wales, and England. Evaluations of the project in Scotland found that:

- 83% of teenagers demonstrated a reduction in offending behaviour (Research Scotland, 2021).
- Glasgow City Council saved half a million pounds in six months by diverting high risk young people from entering secure care.<sup>xx</sup>





## Section 3

# Support from services

We know that many children and young people face challenges in their lives that can have a negative impact on both their experience of childhood and their later life chances.

Services can help families with a wide range of support. This might be advice and support provided during the early years of a child's development through a children's centre or family hub. Or more intensive parenting and family support to help families overcome difficulties.

Some families will need extra support because their child has additional needs or a disability. Or because they are struggling with something, such as poor mental health or abuse and exploitation. Many parents also face external pressures, such as financial insecurity and poverty, or an unexpected crisis or change in circumstances.

### What do families think about government investment in services?

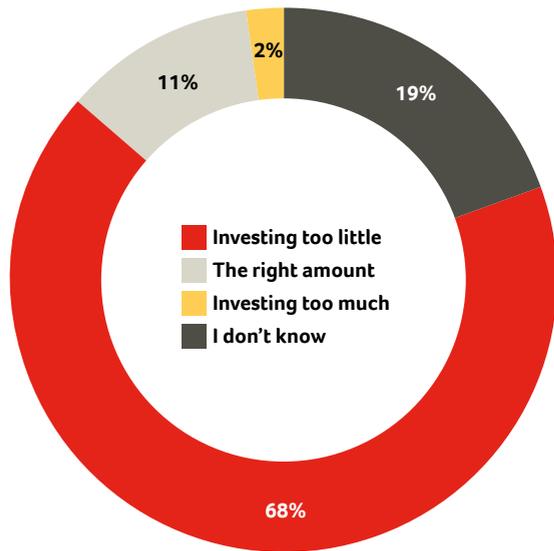
Despite their vital role, many of the services that support families have been closed or faced funding cuts over the last decade.<sup>xxi</sup> Overall, over two-thirds of parents (68%) and a similar proportion of grandparents (63%) believe that the government is investing 'too little' in services that support childhoods. Just 2% think that they are investing too much. This is broadly unchanged from 2019.

Many felt that the services available for children and families had deteriorated in the last decade. We found:

- **Almost half of parents (48%) and 42% of grandparents felt that services supporting childhoods in their areas have got worse since 2011.** Only 7% of parents and 6% of grandparents thought they have improved.
- **Parents and grandparents surveyed in Wales had the least favourable view of services.** Over half said that services in their area have got worse since 2011.
- **The parents we polled in Northern Ireland had the most favourable view of services.** 38% said they have got worse. One in nine (11%) said they have got better.
- **A third of children (33%) said they do not get enough support from services or adults that work with young people.** A fifth of children (19%) say they get no support at all from these services.
- **The older children are the more dissatisfied they are with support from these services.** A quarter of 11- to 13-year-olds that we polled say they do not get enough support, compared to 34% of 14- to 16-year-olds, and rising to 43% of 17- to 18-year-olds.
- 40% of parents and 34% of grandparents told us that 'fewer services that support children and families who need help' will make it more difficult for their child or grandchild to have a brighter future.

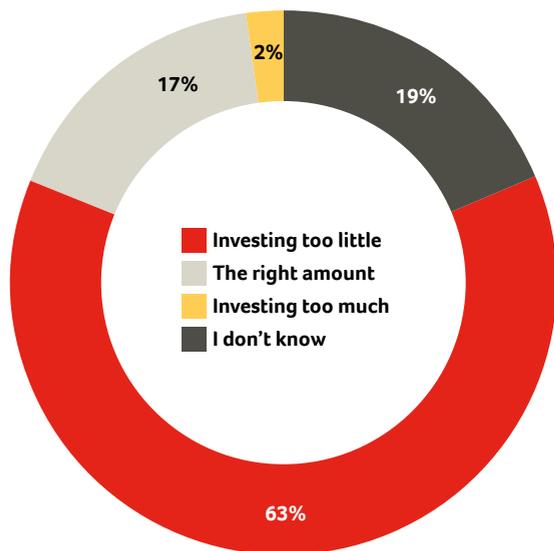
These findings suggest there is widespread dissatisfaction with the availability and provision of services and support for young people, which is supported by wider research. This could reflect significant recent funding cuts to children's services, including visible community services like children's centres.





**Figure 5: What parents and grandparents think about investment in services that support childhoods**

**Parents' views on government investment**



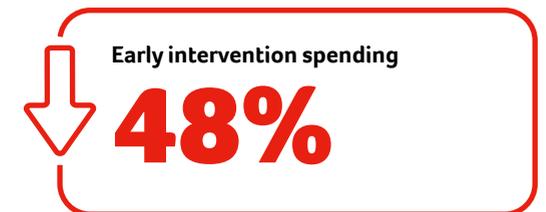
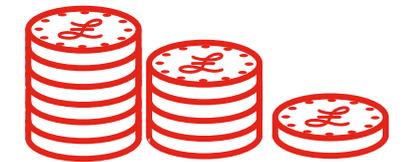
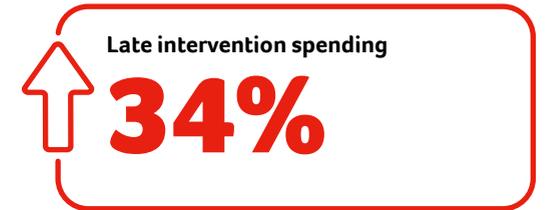
**Grandparents' views on government investment**

**The funding challenges facing children's services**

Local authority budgets are under immense pressure. Rising demand has forced children's services departments to prioritise spending on crisis services. This means focusing on things like supporting children in care, rather than preventative services, that intervene early to stop problems escalating in the first place.

Between 2010/11 and 2019/20, spending on late intervention services in England – such as safeguarding, youth justice and children in care – **increased by 34%**. Over the same period, spending on early intervention – like children's centres, youth services and family support – **fell by 48%**. Spending on children's centres alone fell by a staggering 68%.<sup>xxi</sup> This has contributed to falling numbers of families using these services.

Between 2014/15 and 2017/18, usage of children's centres in England fell by 18%.<sup>xxii</sup> Estimates suggest that more than 1,000 children's centres have closed since 2009.<sup>xxiii</sup>



## Real-life story



*“Having all these parenting courses were really helpful. It helped you understand how the child looks at things.”*

**“I think people assume that when you become a mother you know exactly what you’re doing. People don’t realise how isolating it can be as a mum.”**

**Jasmin**, 24, is a single parent to **Imogen**, seven, and **Evelyn**, two. She became pregnant at 16, and was overwhelmed by the responsibility when the father left. Being a young parent, Jasmin felt she had been dropped into the deep end.

Following the birth of her first child, Jasmin experienced postnatal depression and rarely left the house. “People don’t realise how isolating it can be as a mum. Sometimes you do lose your sense of identity as a mother.”

“Immy started school when I was 19 and all the mums were in their thirties. So, I was really intimidated by all these ‘proper mums’. It was terrifying. It was really isolating, and I had no friends. Everyone my age was busy being a teenager and going to college.”

Jasmin was referred to Action for Children. “I first found out about the charity when Immy was two-and-a-half. She got out on the street when I was in a bad domestic abuse relationship with her dad. I was doing nights, and he was

supposed to be looking after her, but it turns out he was just neglecting her.”

“So, we had social services involved and they asked if I wanted any more support and I agreed. So, they spoke to me about Action for Children and we had a support worker, Tilly, who came to my flat. She helped me get Immy into nursery and manage her behaviour.”

Imogen had always struggled with controlling her emotions and behaviour, but Tilly helped Jasmin better understand how to manage it. “Immy can’t regulate her emotions – she goes from zero to 100 really quick. Tilly was there to help me with managing it and help me keep on top of things. I really struggled to keep my house tidy and organised.”

“So having all these parenting courses were really helpful. It helped you understand how the child looks at things. It helped me get in their mindset and why they get upset. It taught you how to be a bit more mindful.”

The isolation that Jasmin experienced lessened as she surrounded herself with a strong support network. “I didn’t make any mum friends until I got involved with the charity. Now I’ve got a core group which is amazing.”

## How do services support families?

### Early years services

The earliest years of a child’s life are crucial for their development. Parents need support during these early years to help them give their children the best start in life. Action for Children has a strong history of providing support for new parents.

However, an Action for Children survey of 2,000 parents in summer 2021 found that too many are struggling to access vital early years services like parent and baby groups, parenting programmes and health services.

Eight in 10 parents of 0- to 5-year-olds (82%) said they struggled or were unable to access these services. Of those, 78% said they were worried about the impact on them or their child. The most common worries were around children’s development and parental mental health and wellbeing.<sup>xxiv</sup>

### Early help and parenting support

Early help refers to the services that support children and families before they meet the statutory threshold for intervention from children’s social care. They allow professionals to identify problems early and take preventative action that can stop a minor problem from escalating into a crisis.

Early help services might include things like parenting support, play and activity groups, or more intensive services like counselling and disability support. Evidence shows that spending on early help is effective at reducing the number of children going into care.

It can save local authorities money by reducing the need for more costly late intervention.<sup>ii</sup> Recent research by Action for Children found that for every two children receiving targeted early help services, there are three that require more costly and intensive social care.<sup>xxv</sup>

Polling published in October 2021 found that 61% of parents needed support with parenting in the preceding 12 months. Worryingly, one in seven of those parents said they didn’t get the help they needed.<sup>xxvi</sup> The pandemic has exacerbated the challenges facing parents. More than four in five parents have struggled with a symptom of parental burnout since the onset of the pandemic.<sup>xxvii</sup>

### Mental health support

There is an urgent need to provide more support for children struggling with their mental health. In England, only 40% of the children referred to Child and Young People’s Mental Health Services (CAMHS) entered treatment within the year. Of those that did enter treatment, 26% had to wait for more than six weeks.<sup>xxviii</sup>

In Scotland, 27% of children had to wait more than 18 weeks to start treatment. This is far short of the Scottish government’s target of 90% of children and young people starting treatment within 18 weeks of a referral to CAMHS.<sup>xxix</sup>

Government plans to roll out mental health support teams to provide early-stage support for mental health in schools are welcome. But the current rollout plans would see services made available to less than 40% of state-educated pupils in England by the end of 2023.<sup>xxx</sup>

## Section 4

# Conclusion and recommendations

Our research paints a picture of a country where we are failing to deliver one the most fundamental obligations we owe to children – that every generation of children has a better childhood and brighter future than the last.

Across the UK, people believe that childhoods are getting worse and that children do not have a brighter future than previous generations. This perception appears to get worse as you move from one generation to the next. Older children are more likely to have a pessimistic outlook than younger children. Parents and grandparents are much more negative about childhoods today and children's futures than children themselves.

We know that children and young people face many difficulties in their lives. They're worried about pressure from school, their appearance, their family's financial situation and, increasingly, their mental health. For many, the impact of the pandemic hangs heavy. One in five children are doubtful they will have a brighter future than their parents did.

Children and young people face these challenges in the context of a withering system of support services that are widely perceived to have deteriorated over the last decade.

**In order to support childhoods, the government should take three steps:**

### 1. Support families to thrive by investing in family hubs.

Children's centres and family hubs are vital for the delivery of support in the crucial early years of a child's life.

Baby and toddler groups can support children's development by promoting communication and bonding between parents and children. They improve parents' understanding of children's emotions and learning. Parenting programmes can help parents to better understand and manage children's behaviour and prevent problems from developing further. They support parents to build stronger relationships with their children.

At the Spending Review 2021, the government announced funding for a network of 75 new family hubs and a Start for Life offer for families. This is a great start, but it is vital that these commitments allow every family to access the support they need.

**The government should commit to rolling out family hubs in every local area. The core service offer within family hubs should also be extended to include baby and toddler groups and parenting programmes, as well as online parenting support.**



### 2. Provide children and young people with the right support at the right time by strengthening early help services.

Since 2010, local authorities have faced funding cuts alongside rising levels of demand for children's social care. As a result, they have significantly reduced their spending on prevention – which they have no statutory duty to deliver.

Early help services have the potential to reduce harm and save money in the longer term. However, the last decade has seen local authorities caught in a cycle of late intervention and crisis response. Without additional support, this costly and harmful cycle will continue.

**The government should introduce a legal duty on local authorities to provide early help and scale up funding for a broad range of early intervention services. An increase of £1.93 billion above 2019/20 spend levels is needed to restore per child spending to what it was in 2010/11.**



### 3. Give every child the chance to have a brighter future by taking action to reduce child poverty.

There is strong evidence that growing up in poverty has a negative impact on both childhood and children's later life chances. This includes poorer physical and mental health, lower education attainment and reduced employment prospects.

We know that it's possible to reduce child poverty with the right policies. 700,000 children were lifted out of poverty between 1999 and 2012. In that period, reducing child poverty was a government priority backed by a comprehensive strategy and investment.<sup>xxx</sup> The UK government has not had a child poverty strategy since 2016. This should be rectified.

**The government should develop and implement a cross-government strategy for reducing and ultimately eradicating child poverty across the UK.**

**In the near term, the government can take immediate action to support those on the lowest incomes by ensuring that benefits keep pace with the rising cost of living. With inflation at its highest level for 30 years, families in poverty will be hardest hit by soaring costs.**



## Appendix A

# Methodology and definitions

### Polling methodology

We commissioned three UK nationally representative online surveys, run by YouGov:

1. A survey of 2,073 children aged 11-18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 22 December 2021 and 5 January 2022.
2. A survey of 2,115 parents of children aged 11-18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 23 December 2021 and 6 January 2022.
3. A survey of 1,353 grandparents of children aged 11-18. Fieldwork was undertaken between 23 December 2021 and 6 January 2022.

The surveys were carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of UK regions and social grade groups (18+).

Additional survey boosts were also undertaken in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to increase sample size at the nation level. These took place between 7 and 23 January 2022.

### Defining low and high income

We have defined low income as gross household income of less than £20,000 annually, and high income as gross household income of more than £70,000 annually.

We have based this on the income amounts found in the Department for Work and Pensions Households Below Average Income (HBAI) dataset for 2019/20.

We have combined survey results for respondents who disclosed a gross household income of £20,000 or less to represent 'low income families'. This income bracket roughly corresponds to the DWP's definition of low-income – which is 60% of median net household income before housing costs. In 2019/20, this was £328pw.

For high income, we have combined results for respondents who disclosed a gross household income of £70,000 or more to represent 'high income families'. This income bracket roughly corresponds to median net household income for the highest quintile (the top 20% of earners). In 2019/20, this was £1,070pw.

### Defining poverty

We define child poverty as children living in households with relative low income. This means its equivalised household income is below 60% of median income for that year. We have used figures after housing costs have been included.

### What do we mean by 'having a brighter future' and 'fulfilling their potential'?

In the context of the survey, we defined having a 'brighter future' than your parents did as having better opportunities when you are older, such as the chance of having a good career, being able to do the things you enjoy, affording house, etc.

We defined 'fulfil your potential' as achieving all the things in life that you are capable of.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>i</sup> There was a slight variation in the questions asked. In 2019, we asked “Which of these do you worry about?”. In the most recent survey, we asked “Which, if any, of the following, do you ever worry about?”.
- <sup>ii</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (2019) *The health effects of Sure Start*, Available at: <https://ifs.org.uk/publications/14139>  
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- <sup>iii</sup> Stewart, K. & Cooker, K. (2020) Does household income affect children’s outcomes? A systematic review of the evidence. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12187-020-09782-0>  
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- <sup>v</sup> The Children’s Society (2021) *The Good Childhood Report 2021*. Available at: <https://www.childrensociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2021>
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- <sup>x</sup> NHS Digital (2021) ‘Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2021 wave 2 follow up to the 2017 survey’. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2021-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey>
- <sup>xi</sup> NHS Digital (2020) ‘Mental Health of Children and Young People in England: Wave 1 follow up to the 2017 survey’. Action for Children calculation. Available at: <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2020-wave-1-follow-up#data-sets>
- <sup>xii</sup> Kelly, Y., Zilanawala, A., Booker, C., & Sacker, A. (2018) ‘Social media use and adolescent mental health: Findings from the UK Millennium Cohort Study’. *EClinicalMedicine*, 6, 59–68.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Department for Work and Pensions (2021) ‘Households Below Average Income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2020’. Tables 4.1tr & 4.3tr. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2020>
- <sup>xiiii</sup> End Child Poverty Coalition (2021) ‘Local child poverty indicators 2019/20 data tables’. Available at: <http://www.endchildpoverty.org.uk/local-child-poverty-data-2014-15-2019-20/>
- <sup>xv</sup> A pupil’s ‘Attainment 8’ score is calculated by summing grades from the pupil’s top eight qualifications at Key Stage 4, which must include five English Baccalaureate qualifying subjects (Maths, English, Sciences, Languages, Humanities). A multiplier is then applied to Maths and English scores. Data from Department for Education *Key stage 4 performance 2019* (revised) national characteristics tables. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2019-revised> and *Key stage 4 performance 2021*. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/key-stage-4-performance-2021>
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- <sup>xxii</sup> Children’s Services Funding Alliance (2021) *Children and young people’s services: spending 2010/11 to 2019/20*. Available at: <https://www.probonoeconomics.com/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=fca940e7-7923-4eb3-90d3-be345f067017>
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