

**Securing a better childhood and
a brighter future for every child
in Northern Ireland**

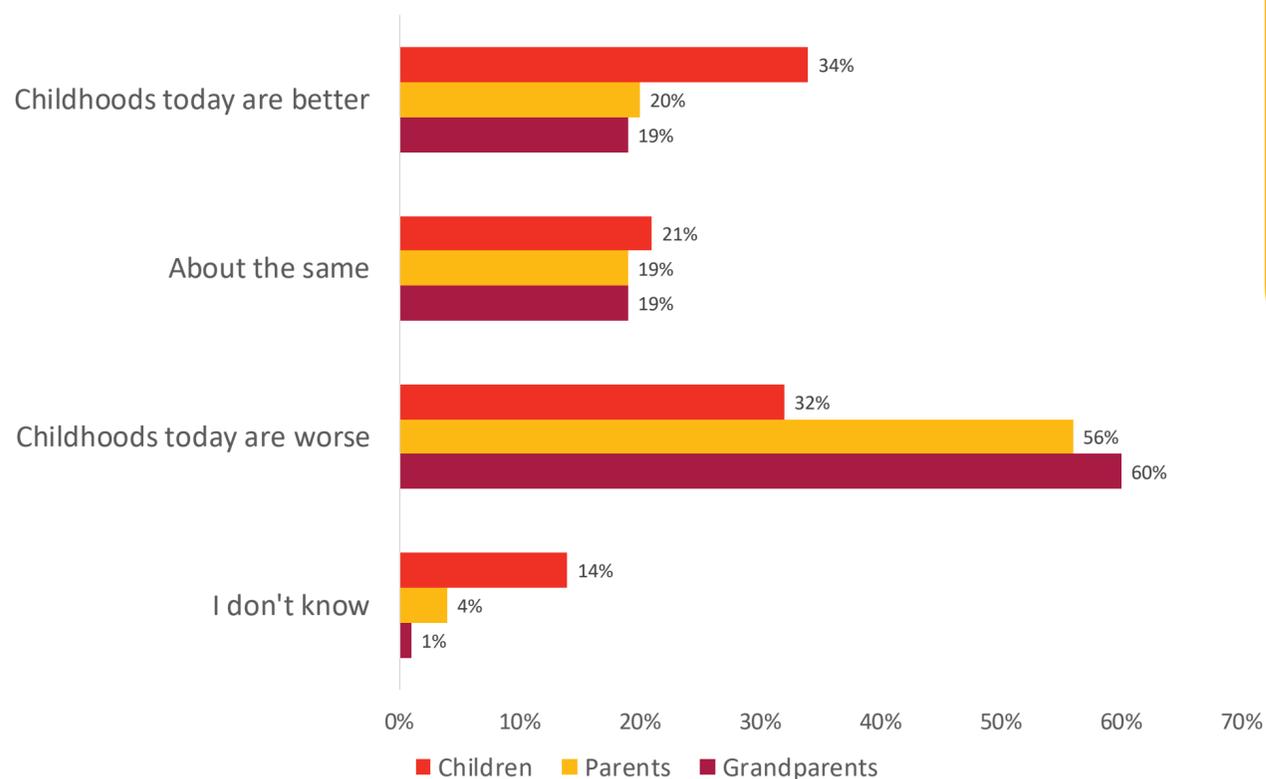


Are childhoods getting better?

One of the first and most fundamental responsibilities of any government is to make sure that every generation of children has a better childhood and a brighter future than the last.

However - our survey of children, parents, and grandparents, found that many families do not see this reflected in their own lives.

What families surveyed in Northern Ireland think about childhoods today



Cathal's family across three generations told us how they think childhood has changed:

Cathal, 18 - "I really do think there's not enough being done by governments for young people and the support they need. There's very little support for rural areas especially – there are no youth clubs around my hometown now or when I was growing up."

Cathal's mum, Mandy, 50 said "I think childhoods today are so much worse than when I was younger... I really worry about their mental health."

Cathal's grandfather, Dessie, 73 thinks "Pressures from the media, all that's available – social media bullying is a big problem and the curse of drugs especially – I had never any of those dangers. It's tougher for kids now in that they have to find their own feet from a very early age."

Over half of parents (56%) and grandparents (60%) we surveyed in Northern Ireland said that childhoods today are worse – and a third of children (32%) agreed.

What we did and our recommendations

To understand people's perceptions of the quality of children's lives, we conducted a unique survey of grandparents, parents, and children across the UK.

Across the UK we surveyed 2,073 children, 2,115 parents, and 1,353 grandparents. Additional survey boosts were also undertaken to increase sample size at the nation level. In Northern Ireland, we surveyed 107 children, 191 parents and 137 grandparents.

The results show **that too many children face big barriers to fulfilling their potential.**

To help ensure that this generation of children does have a brighter future than those before, we think the Executive should take 3 steps:

1. Invest in early mental health and wellbeing services for children.
2. Deliver an Anti-Poverty Strategy & introduce a Child Payment in Northern Ireland.
3. Ensure that all families have a right & access to family support that is adequately funded.

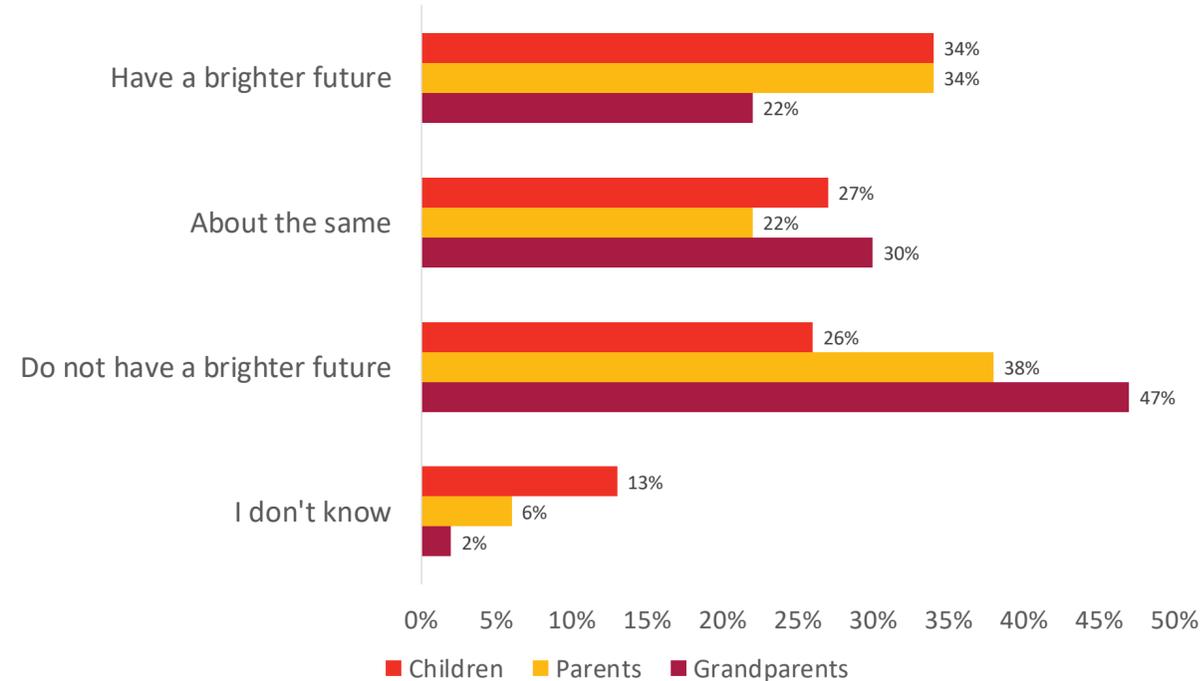
Do children have brighter futures?

At Action for Children, we aim to give children the foundations they need to thrive and fulfil their potential. For lots of families in Northern Ireland, our research suggests that goal feels like an uphill struggle.

When asked if children had brighter futures than their parent's generation:

- Only a third (34%) of children surveyed in Northern Ireland said yes.
- A third of parents (34%) and 22% of grandparents surveyed said their child/grandchild has a brighter future.
- Over a quarter (26%) of children surveyed in Northern Ireland said they that they didn't think they had a brighter future than their parents did at their age – and this pessimism increased across the generations.

What families surveyed in Northern Ireland think about children's futures



Barriers to having a brighter 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.

Children surveyed in Northern Ireland said:

48%

More use of social media and devices



35%

More pressure around physical appearance



38%

More pressure from school



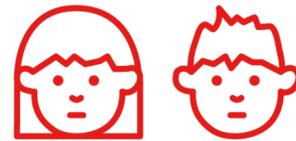
Parents pointed to their child's **use of social media/devices** (59%), **pressure around their physical appearance** (50%) and **less safe streets/higher risk of crime** (39%) as all making it harder for them to have a brighter future than they did.

Grandparents surveyed in Northern Ireland said that their grandchild's **use of social media/devices** (67%), **the pressure on their physical appearance** (45%) and **less safe streets/higher risk of crime** (39%) are all factors in making their future less bright than their parents' generation.

What is getting in the way of children's potential?

Children

- The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic (45%)
- Too much pressure from school (39%)
- Poor mental health (39%)



Parents

- Too much time spent on social media (56%)
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (51%)
- Poor mental health (39%)



Grandparents

- Too much time spent on social media (59%)
- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (46%)
- Threats to safety through technology & social media (32%)
- Being overwhelmed by negative news (32%)



What are children worried about?

As well as being concerned about their futures, children in Northern Ireland are worried about their day to day lives.

Our survey found children were most commonly worried about:

47% Me or my family catching Covid

42% Pressure from school

38% My mental health

37% My physical appearance

32% Having disagreements with friends



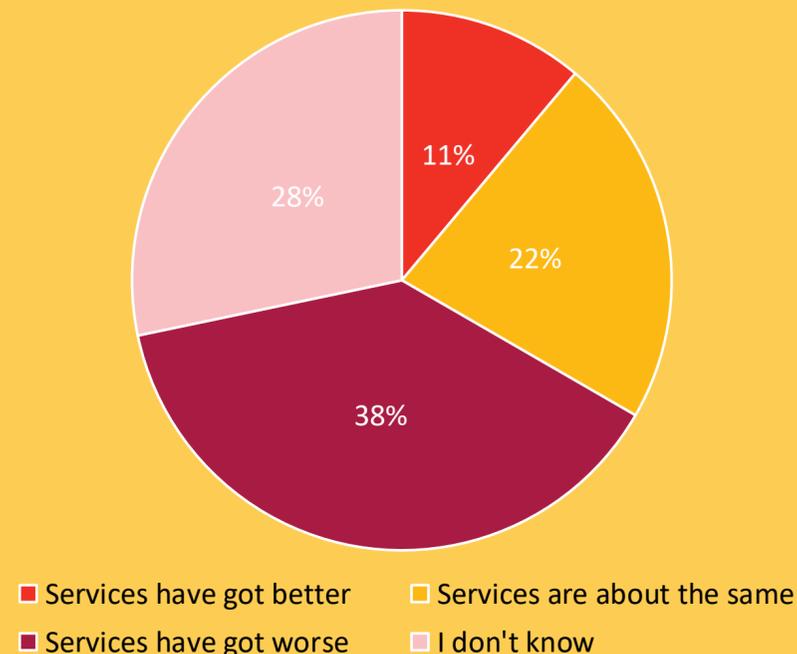
26% also **worried about their family having enough money** to live comfortably, and the **impact of the pandemic on their family's finances.**

Are we doing enough?

66% of Northern Irish parents that we surveyed, and **60% of grandparents**, think the Government is **investing too little in services that support childhoods**.

38% of parents surveyed in Northern Ireland and **40% of grandparents** felt that **services supporting childhoods in their areas have got worse since 2011**. Only 11% of parents and 8% of grandparents thought they have improved.

Parents' views on local services that support childhoods



What needs to happen: Mental health

38% of children we surveyed in Northern Ireland said they worried about their mental health in 2022, compared to 23% in 2019. 31% of children with mental health worries said they cover them up from their parent or carer.

Consistent investment in mental health and wellbeing services for children and their parents is essential.

We call on the Executive to:

- Ensure infants, children, young people and their parents have access to mental health support and the chance to thrive.
- Fully resource the Mental Health Strategy to ensure it provides a continuum of care across its lifespan.
- Ensure all primary and post-primary schools have access to high quality, evidenced based universal programmes to build resilience & emotional wellbeing.
- Prioritise prevention and early support through an inter-departmental approach, to enable a wider ambition that is not only carried by public health or health & social-care systems.
- Invest in the early years and parental support through an expansion of Sure Start services across the region to transform child and family outcomes.

What needs to happen: Family support

As a Family Support Hub coordinator in a number of areas, we know that the demand for holistic family support has been increasing throughout the pandemic and as the cost-of-living crisis places additional pressures on our communities.

Our early support services are relationship based and people-centred, enabling access for families with a wide array of needs within their local community.

However, not all families can easily access this support and further investment is needed to expand Early Intervention Support Services, Choices Family Support Services and Family Support Hubs, particularly in rural communities and areas of higher deprivation.

We call on the Executive to ensure that all families in all areas have a right & access to family support services that are fully resourced according to need.

What needs to happen: Poverty

We know that local policies have the potential to prevent poverty. We are calling for further policy frameworks that will meaningfully respond to the 1 in 4 children affected by poverty in Northern Ireland.

We believe all policymakers in Northern Ireland should view **anti-poverty measures as the primary step of early intervention in relation to health, mental health, educational and social outcomes**. A family that cannot feed or heat their home results in stress and trauma for the whole household.

We call on the Executive to:

- Deliver and implement the promised Anti-Poverty Strategy with specific and measurable child poverty reduction targets.
- Introduce a Northern Irish Child Payment of £20, which could lift up to 27,000 children out of poverty. This would reduce the child poverty rate in Northern Ireland from 24% to 17%.



There's a
Star in every
Child

Help them shine