



Parenting doesn't stop

Supporting adolescents and the adults around them

Insights from Parent Talk 2025/26

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About Action for Children

Driven by love, we take action so children don't miss out on a safe and happy childhood.

In 2025/26 we helped 544,297 children, young people and their families across the UK through 342 services in local communities, in schools and online. This includes children's centres and family hubs, family support services, homes for disabled children, children's homes, fostering services, services for children at risk of criminal exploitation, and employment and youth justice programmes.

We campaign and work closely with policy makers to make sure the voices of children and families are heard, influence policy decisions and bring lasting improvements to their lives.

Our Parent Talk service

Parent Talk is Action for Children's free online service for parents and carers of children aged 0 to 19 (up to 25 for children with additional needs). It combines nearly 200 trusted information, advice and guidance articles and guides with confidential one-to-one support from experienced parenting coaches trained in evidence-based practice.

Parent Talk supports parents and carers with everyday parenting questions and more complex situations. This includes practical advice in the early years around weaning, potty training, speech development and sleep, and support for parents of children of all ages around domestic abuse, child-parent bonding, barriers to education (including emotionally based school avoidance), special educational needs and disability (SEND), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), children's mental and emotional wellbeing, challenging or violent behaviour, online safety, co-parenting after separation, financial pressure, debt and safeguarding concerns.

Parent Talk also plays a role in local family support. Through local authority partnerships, the service can provide tailored signposting and coaching support as part of local family help and Family Hub offers.

Parent Talk receives very strong feedback from parents and carers who use the service. In 2025/26, 99% of users who rated their experience of one-to-one support described it as

either 'good' or 'amazing'. For the website, 84% of users said they found the support they needed, and 89% found the advice content helpful.

Parent Talk is accredited by the Helplines Standard. It won the Family Support Award at the 2021 Children and Young People Now Awards and was nominated for a second time in 2026. A 2024 evaluation by the University of Birmingham found that Parent Talk increases parents' self-efficacy, knowledge, skills and confidence; provides a trustworthy, impartial and non-judgemental source of advice; shows strong potential to reach underserved communities; and may help reduce escalation to points of crisis.¹

For further information on any of the topics covered in this report, visit <https://parents.actionforchildren.org.uk/>

Executive summary

“Those first years are really intense, but so are the teenage years. It can almost feel like your child is changing overnight and disappearing and you’ve got a new child in front of you.”

Parent Talk coach

Since launching in 2020, Parent Talk has grown into a substantial source of digital family support, providing 40,000 one-to-one conversations with parenting coaches, alongside nearly 200 information, advice and guidance articles and guides on the Parent Talk website. Between April 2025 and March 2026, 337,022 parents and carers accessed online advice through Parent Talk, with a further 3,984 receiving one-to-one support.

Early adolescence, from ages 10 to 15, is a period of significant cognitive, social and neurodevelopmental change.² Children are seeking greater independence, developing new peer relationships, moving into more complex school environments, spending more time online and beginning to think about identity, belonging and the future. At the same time, their families are having to adapt how they parent, often without the community or professional support that may have been more visible when children were younger.

Timely support and early intervention can help children and families to understand and navigate the huge changes that are happening in their brains, bodies and relationships, and to identify any emerging needs. This report uses insights from Parent Talk to understand the challenges parents face during the adolescent years, the barriers and enablers to seeking help, and how families could be better supported by national policy and local practice.

Setting a new ambition for adolescents: an opportunity for reform

We recommend that the UK government makes early adolescence a priority for the next phase of its prevention and opportunity agenda, comprising the following:

- **A clear national ambition for adolescence**, recognising ages 10 to 15 as a key stage for prevention, family support and improving children’s outcomes. This should include a target for secondary school readiness at age 11, supported by a national outcome framework covering family wellbeing, parental confidence,

emotional wellbeing, school attendance and belonging, and successful transitions.

- **Making support for parents of children aged 10 to 15 part of every local family support offer.** Local areas should set out how parents and carers of older children can access help before difficulties reach crisis point, including through Family Hubs, schools, youth services, digital support, voluntary and community partners and Family Help services.
- **Ensuring support is designed around the realities of adolescence and key transition points.** This should include secondary school transition, school absence, assessments for special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) or child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), family separation, online risk and early safeguarding concerns.
- **Providing support while children and families are waiting for specialist help.** The current system of ‘refer and wait’ is not good enough. Parents need practical and emotional support and trusted guidance while waiting for assessment or specialist services.
- **Recognising the value of digital parenting support as part of early help infrastructure.** Flexible, accessible and trusted digital support should be available to families with children of all ages, not just in the early years.

The early years are a crucial stage of child development and family life. Through its opportunity mission, the government has made improving children’s life chances a central priority, stating that ‘Every child should have the opportunity to grow, play, learn and thrive’.³ Its early years strategy, [‘Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life’](#), and expansion of the Best Start Family Hubs and Healthy Babies programme have brought welcome investment in prevention and family support during early childhood. Alongside this, proposed reforms to schools and SEND aim to improve children’s inclusion and outcomes, and ensure that children and families receive support at the earliest opportunity.⁴ This direction of travel is welcome.

For this ambition to translate into real support that reaches all families before difficulties become entrenched, it must extend more clearly into early adolescence. We cannot support adolescents to thrive without supporting the trusted adults around them.

Key findings

1. Parents of adolescents are an overlooked part of the early help system

Parents do not stop needing support when their children enter adolescence. Parent Talk receives requests for one-to-one support throughout childhood and early adolescence, with substantial demand involving children across ages 10 to 15. Yet families can fall between two stools. Their children may be too old for the family-based support provided in the early years, but too young for more child-focused youth services. Families may fall below the threshold for statutory intervention or be left waiting for SEND or mental health support while difficulties worsen. Too often, support is triggered only when a situation reaches crisis point.

2. Parental burnout is an increasing unmet support need for families with older children

Parents are not only asking what to do for their child; they are often asking for help to keep going themselves. Coaching support to parents frequently focuses on exhaustion, strained relationships and how to parent when on the edge of burnout.

Between August 2025 and July 2026, 40% of parents of children aged 10 to 15 described problems or concerns with their own wellbeing or mental health. This is up from 24% three years earlier.

3. Families' support needs remain complex and interdependent

Parents may initially request help for a specific issue but often go on to describe a wide range of interconnected issues, including school avoidance, secondary school transition, SEND and neurodivergence, mental health and wellbeing, online risks, domestic abuse, family separation and co-parenting, financial pressure and waiting lists for CAMHS or SEND support.

Behaviour, risk and safety become more complex as children get older. Parents may be trying to protect a teenager who does not want protection, set boundaries with someone who is pushing hard against them, or stay connected to a child whose behaviour feels frightening.

4. Digital support can provide containment, clarity and a practical next step

Parent Talk shows the value of fast, flexible and non-judgemental digital support that parents can access when they feel overwhelmed, ashamed or unsure where to turn. This support is both practical and emotional. Parenting coaches help parents make sense of complex situations, recognise what they are already doing, navigate services and identify the next step – all while staying calm and connected to their child.

Why early adolescence is a critical opportunity for prevention

Early adolescence is a key window for prevention and early intervention. It is a major period of cognitive, emotional and social development, when continuing changes in children's bodies and brains can affect sleep, thinking, emotional responses, impulsivity and risk taking. At the same time, young people are navigating changes in school, becoming more independent, spending more time with peers and online, and developing their own identities separate to that of their parents.

This stage of childhood sits at the intersection of many of the government's priorities for children and families. It is often when difficulties that shape children's longer-term outcomes become visible or begin to escalate, including school absence, poor mental health, unmet special educational needs or disabilities (SEND), safeguarding concerns, family conflict and disengagement from education.

Supporting children and the trusted adults around them during this stage offers an opportunity to respond before needs become entrenched or reach crisis point. Effective early help can strengthen family relationships, help parents manage changing behaviour and risk and support children to have happy, healthy and safe childhoods.

Parenting doesn't stop: insights from Parent Talk

“*Their child still needs them just as much. It might look different – it might be going for a car ride, going for a walk, playing a game, texting them or sending a voice note. Whatever works to remind them you're there. They still need you.*”

Parent Talk coach

Since Parent Talk launched in 2020, Action for Children has produced annual thematic reports using data and insights from Parent Talk to explore issues that feel particularly significant to families that year. Previous reports have looked at [children's mental and emotional wellbeing](#), [special educational needs or disabilities \(SEND\)](#), [school avoidance](#), [parenting after separation](#), and [parents experiencing abusive or violent behaviour from their children](#). This year, we take a longer view of the needs of parents since the service launched and focus on what we can learn about the experience of parenting adolescents.

The early years are a crucial stage of child development and family life. Investment in support for babies, young children and their parents is vital. But children and families also need support after the early years: through school, into the teenage years and beyond.

Early adolescence, from ages 10 to 15, is a stage of significant cognitive and social development, during which parents remain central to children's wellbeing, safety, relationships and sense of belonging.⁵ Children are seeking greater independence, developing new peer relationships, spending more time online, moving into more complex school environments and beginning to think about the future. At the same time, their families are having to adapt how they parent, often without the community or professional support that may have been more visible when children were younger. Parents are often expected to step back just as their child's world becomes more complex.

This report uses insights from Parent Talk to understand the challenges parents are facing during this high-intensity stage of family life, the barriers and enablers to seeking help, and how they could be better supported by national policy and local practice.

A note on language

Throughout this report, we use the term 'parent' for simplicity and readability. Parent Talk supports a wide range of adults caring for or caring about children and young people, including grandparents, kinship carers, foster carers, special guardians, siblings and other family members. Unless otherwise stated, references to parents should be understood to include all adults who use Parent Talk.

Different terms are used around the UK to describe children's additional needs that may affect their educational access or development. In this report we have primarily used Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEN or SEND), which is the term used in England and Northern Ireland. In Scotland and Wales, these types of needs are referred to as Additional Support Needs (ASN) and Additional Learning Needs (ALN) respectively.

Definitions of adolescence vary, typically ranging between 10 to 19. In this report we use 'early adolescence' to describe the period of significant development and transition points for children aged between 10 and 15.

1. Five years on: parenting since the pandemic

Parent Talk launched in January 2020 and expanded rapidly during the Covid-19 pandemic in response to the needs of parents who, overnight, found themselves expected to balance work, home schooling and parenting during a period of unprecedented uncertainty and trauma. Five years since restrictions lifted, the pandemic remains an important backdrop for the current cohort of adolescents and their families.

The children in our dataset, who were between the ages of 10 and 15 in 2025/26, were aged between four and 11 at the start of the pandemic. For the majority of these children, the start of primary school, the later primary years and/or the transition into secondary school were affected by lockdowns, school closures, isolation and uncertainty. This meant disruption to learning, friendships, routines, transitions, early identification of additional needs and access to support. For many children, particularly those who were already anxious, neurodivergent or struggling with change, the lack of preparation and the loss of routine, alongside worries about the pandemic itself, has had lasting effects.

“Everyone struggles with change, but you learn to adapt to it. But if you’re not given a chance to prepare, then that can bring anxiety.”

Parent Talk coach

Since its launch, Parent Talk has grown into a substantial source of digital family support, now combining nearly 200 information, advice and guidance articles and guides with one-to-one support from parenting coaches. Parent Talk articles have been viewed more than 2.5 million times, and the service has provided more than 40,000 one-to-one chats with parents and carers, demonstrating the scale of demand and the breadth of issues that parents bring.

Previous thematic reports have focused on specific issues, including children’s mental and emotional wellbeing, SEND, school avoidance, parenting after separation, and child-to-adult violence and abuse. These are issues that do not disappear as children get older. Instead, they can resurface or become more visible at transition points, when school becomes larger and less personal, expectations increase, or parents find that the strategies they used in the younger years no longer work.

The data for 2025/26 show a continuing pattern of rising need. School avoidance remains

one of the most-viewed advice articles, with neurodiversity and SEND prominent in both article views and one-to-one support. Parents continue to ask for help with challenging or violent behaviour, family separation, contact arrangements and concerns that children are not safe with another parent. In this report we look at how these issues come together in families' lives, and how parents' own wellbeing is connected to their children's needs.

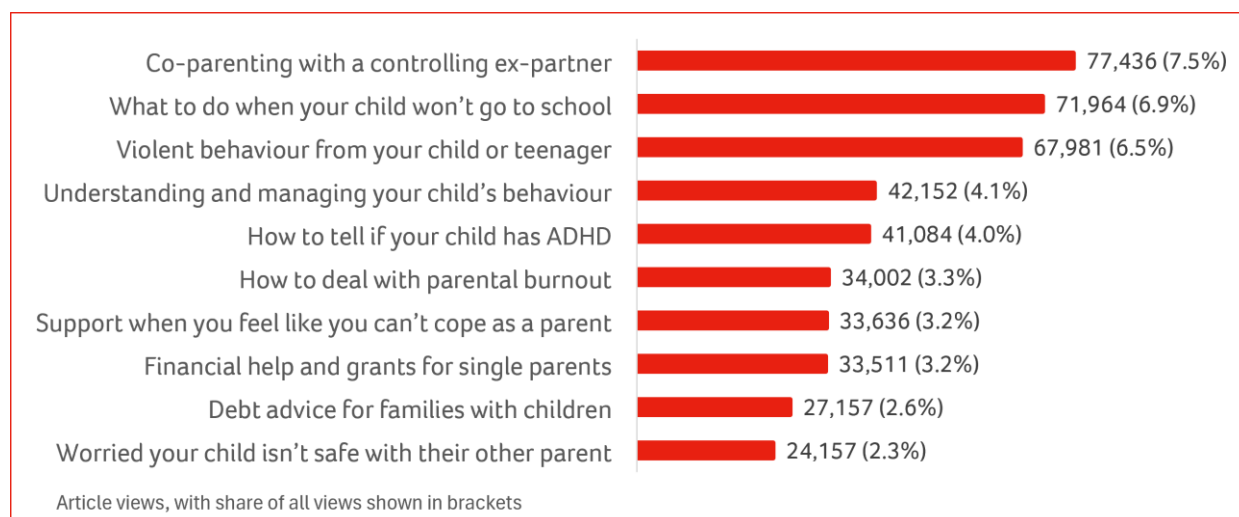
2. What parents sought support for in 2025/26

Parent Talk's data on information, advice and guidance articles covers all parents and carers using the website. It gives a picture of the issues parents are searching for and returning to each year. Between April 2025 and March 2026 our information, advice and guidance pages were accessed by 337,022 parents and carers, with over a million total page views. Approximately 87% of Parent Talk users were in England, 6% in Scotland, 5% in Wales and 3% in Northern Ireland, broadly in line with national populations.

The most viewed article category was home and family life, with over a third (37%) of views. This was followed by support for managing children's feelings and behaviour (27%), neurodiversity (14%), school life (12%) and early parenting (10%).

The most-viewed individual advice articles show the breadth of parental need, with parents looking for practical support as well as help with the emotional, relational and financial realities that shape whether family life feels manageable.

Figure 1: Most viewed Parent Talk articles, April 2025 - March 2026



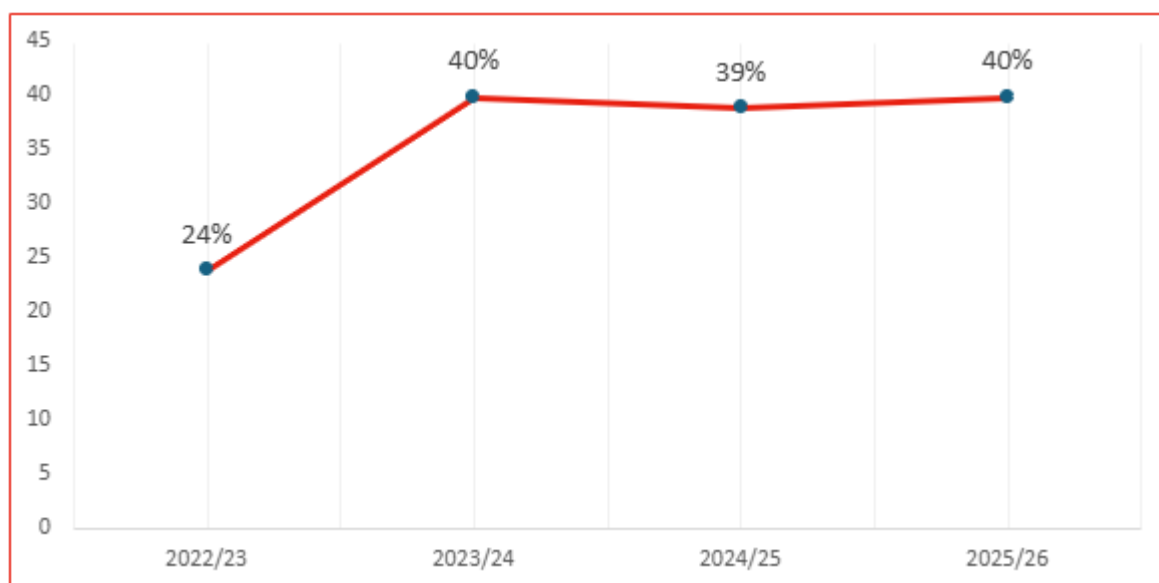
A further 3,984 parents received one-to-one support from Parent Talk coaches in 2025/26, an increase of 9% on the previous year.⁶ Just over a fifth of one-to-one conversations involved issues related to children and parents' mental health and wellbeing (22%), followed by parenting and relationships (19%), practical support including finances and housing (16%), children's behaviour (13%) and SEND (11%).

Parents' own wellbeing has become an increasingly visible part of the support that families need, and this has risen particularly sharply for parents of adolescents. For this report we analysed four years of one-to-one support data from August 2022 up to the latest figures available in July 2026.

Figure 2 shows this increase in concerns around parental wellbeing recorded over this time frame. This covers all case files that include one or more of 20 tags related to parental wellbeing, including mental health, anxiety, stress, panic attacks, self-harm, depression, burnout and stress. **Between August 2022 and July 2023, 24% of cases with parents of children aged 10 to 15 included topics around parental wellbeing, anxiety, burnout or stress. In the most recent year this had risen to 40%.**

Between August 2025 and July 2026, 82% of parents worried about their own wellbeing or mental health also raised concerns about their child's, highlighting a link between the two.

Figure 2: Share of one-to-one cases with parents of children aged 10 to 15 that include concerns about parental wellbeing. Years run from 1 August to 31 July.



3. What does the data tell us about parenting adolescents?

National evidence shows that today's adolescents are growing up amid overlapping pressures on their wellbeing, education, family life and access to support. Children and young people describe school as a major source of stress, with schoolwork the area of life they are most likely to be unhappy with.⁷ Recent national analysis also points to rising or sustained pressures around child poverty, housing insecurity, school absence, SEND, safeguarding and children's mental health.⁸ Demand for children's mental health services has now reached more than one million referrals, with many children still waiting for help.⁹

Action for Children's own evidence points in the same direction. Our recent analysis of child in need assessments found that many families are only offered support once difficulties have already escalated.¹⁰ Previous Parent Talk reports have highlighted families' experiences of struggling to access help for school refusal, SEND, children's mental and emotional wellbeing, and children with violent or abusive behaviour towards their parents.

This year's report adds the perspective and experience of parents on the impact of these combined pressures. As children move into adolescence, the concerns that parents bring to Parent Talk become more layered. Parents are still handling everyday issues around behaviour, school and family life, but the context changes. Children are becoming more independent, their relationships with peers and online spaces are more important, school systems can be harder to navigate, and risks can feel far more outside parents' control.

3.1 Parents of adolescents are an overlooked part of the early help system

Parents do not stop needing support when their children enter adolescence. Requests for one-to-one support from Parent Talk are spread evenly across each year of childhood from birth to 16, with some small peaks around starting primary and secondary school. Parents of children aged 10 to 15 make up a substantial part of everyday demand for the service.



I'm stuck not knowing what I can do or what support there is. I'm exhausted, extremely concerned for my child's wellbeing and future."

Parent of a child aged 15

However, the local support available to families can become less visible as children get older, shifting too quickly from family-based help to provision focused principally on

young people. Families with older children report finding themselves falling between two stools: their children may be too old for early-years-focused family support, but too young for youth services provision which more typically works directly with the young person.

“When they’re young, you’ve got family hubs, primary school, there’s quite a lot of support for parents. But I think as they get older [parents] are finding less and less [support].”

Parent Talk coach

This experience sits in the context of many years of reductions in preventative provision. In 2024/25, 82% of local authority children’s services spending in England was directed towards late intervention, with spending on early intervention 40% lower than in 2010/11. Spending on services for young people has fallen by around 73% in the last 15 years.¹¹

In addition, families who come to Parent Talk often fall below the threshold for statutory intervention or are waiting for SEND or mental health support while difficulties worsen. Too often, support is triggered only when a situation reaches crisis point.

Early adolescence is a developmental stage when the role and expectations of parenting change significantly. Parents may feel they should know what to do because they have been parenting for years, but the relationship, the risks and the strategies needed can change quickly. This can create feelings of failure, guilt and shame that make parents less likely to seek help – from services as well as communities, friends and family – until the situation has become much harder to manage.

“Parents may think, ‘I’ve been a parent for 10, 12, 14, however many years, I should know what to do’. And they just don’t.”

Parent Talk coach

For some parents, adolescence also brings a sense of loss or uncertainty as their relationship with their child changes. A child may become more private, more oppositional, more anxious, more influenced by peers, or harder to reach. Parents may need help to understand what is changing developmentally, rather than feeling that they have failed or that their child has simply become difficult.

“There’s lots of guilt, there’s lots of blame, there’s lots of grief.”

Parent Talk coach

“*I just want to help him and I don't want to lose him.*”

Parent of a child aged 10

Many older children and teenagers will need and access support in their own right, but parents remain the key trusted adults in children's lives: holding boundaries, managing risk, maintaining routines, advocating to services and maintaining positive relationships. If parents of adolescents fall out of view, the support around the child becomes weaker too.

3.2 Parental burnout is an increasing and unmet support need for families with older children

“*Parents can't parent if they're at rock bottom. They just can't.*”

Parent Talk coach

Parents contact Parent Talk because they care about their children and want to find a way forward. But a large and increasing number are also reaching for support for themselves. In one-to-one chats, parents routinely describe being exhausted, frightened, ashamed, guilty, overwhelmed, anxious, angry, isolated and burnt out. In many cases, parents describe the cumulative pressure of caring responsibilities, work, financial stress and family demands. For some, burnout is explicit: they know they are exhausted and say so. Others are so overwhelmed that they need help to understand the pressure they are under.

“*I just feel burnt out and withdrawn constantly... like I'm a complete failure and I don't know what to do about it.*”

Parent of a child aged 12

“*I was thinking is it doable to work full time with all this going on? Work said I can't keep having more than one day off... I'm struggling as I'm trying to support him but also work.*”

Parent of a child aged 10

“*I'm a single parent and have been unable to work for the past two years due to his care needs. I feel in need of help.*”

Parent of a child aged 13



I want the best for her, but because of my own health I'm worried if I'll be able to do it."

Parent of a child aged 12

The risk is not only that parents need help for themselves to stay safe and well. It is that this is crucial to continue supporting their children: to stay calm, maintain relationships, advocate for their child with professionals, manage risk, hold boundaries and keep family life going.

Recognising that parental wellbeing is crucial to child wellbeing requires building support around parents so they can continue to be a source of safety, advocacy and connection for their child. A parent who is exhausted, frightened, isolated or ashamed cannot provide the emotional and relational support their child needs.

3.3 Families' support needs remain complex and interdependent

Parents typically come to Parent Talk with a single presenting issue: my child will not go to school; I am worried about online grooming; my teenager is violent at home; I am separated and we cannot agree contact arrangements. But the conversation often reveals a cluster of concerns around a much wider range of issues. For parents of children aged 10 to 15, the issues raised include school avoidance, SEND and neurodivergence, contact arrangements, unsafe behaviour, peer pressure, online risks, family separation, domestic abuse, financial and work pressures, and long waits for support.

Parents tell us that school attendance, SEND and mental and emotional wellbeing are closely interwoven, with secondary school transition a crucial pressure point. Children may be absent from school because of anxiety, bullying, unmet SEND, family stress or trauma. Yet parents often experience the response of schools and other services as narrowly focused on attendance or behaviour, rather than understanding the wider picture.

Between August 2025 and July 2026, concerns around children's mental health and wellbeing appeared in 41% of one-to-one cases with parents of children aged 10 to 15, compared with 30% for those aged five to nine. The peak is seen at age 14, with over 50% of parents of 14 year olds reporting concerns.

Parents are often trying to respond to several pressures at once, and describe trying to hold together their child's distress, school expectations and other responsibilities. They

know their child may need education, routine and social connection. At the same time, they may feel that sending them into school is causing harm or is simply impossible. This creates a painful gap between what systems require and what families can manage.



School just concentrates on one thing, which is attendance.”

Parent of a child aged 15

For some families, the main issue is that the child’s needs have not been understood or met. Parents may spend months or years trying reduced timetables, exposure work, SEND processes, GP appointments, CAMHS referrals and school meetings. The concern is not only the immediate absence from school, but what it means for the child’s independence, friendships and future.



He has no grasp of time, he thinks he’s a kid and has a long way off before college, work, apprenticeship, which actually will be next year.”

Parent of a child aged 15

Key issues raised in one-to-one chats by parents of children aged 10 to 15

- school anxiety and emotionally based school avoidance;
- anxiety, low mood and self-harm concerns;
- SEND and neurodivergence;
- secondary school transition;
- behaviour that feels aggressive, controlling or unsafe;
- peer pressure, alcohol or substance use;
- online risk, grooming or exploitation concerns;
- disordered eating;
- family separation and co-parenting;
- domestic abuse and coercive control;
- financial and work pressure; and
- long waits or unclear thresholds for support.

3.3.1 Secondary school transition is a crucial pressure point

Secondary school transition is one of the clearest points at which support can become harder to access, just when some children and families need it most. Parents describe moving from a primary school where they knew their child's teacher and understood how to ask for help, into an environment that can feel dauntingly large, less nurturing and more driven by policies and rules. Even when individual staff are highly committed to supporting their child, it can be more difficult for parents and schools to establish close relationships.

Where a child begins to struggle with attendance, mental and emotional wellbeing, SEND or relationships, some parents tell us that communication can become dominated by attendance procedures, letters and the possibility of fines. They can feel that the immediate focus is on getting their child into school, while underlying issues which may include anxiety, neurodivergence or family crisis remain unresolved. The pressure can be particularly acute when a parent is also working, caring for other family members, facing financial pressure or worrying about court action and fines.



I am at an absolute loss. I suffer badly with anxiety and depression and they are constantly threatening us with being fined. I really don't know what I'm supposed to do anymore or where to turn to."

Parent of a child aged 13

Parents often describe individual teachers, SENCOs and pastoral staff in their child's secondary school who go above and beyond to support them. But the size and structure of secondary education can make the relationship between home and school feel more distant at exactly the point when parents may need the most help. The move into secondary school coincides with the start of adolescence, when children are seeking greater independence and may be less willing to talk openly with adults. Parents can therefore feel suddenly distanced from their child's world at home and at school.

Parents describe how this can be particularly difficult for children whose needs were supported by the familiarity, routines and consistent adult relationships in primary school, but who are not immediately identified as needing additional support in secondary school. Some children may mask distress during the school day, or present differently at home and at school. Parents tell us this can leave them feeling disbelieved.

“*They’re not the disruptive child. They’re the child that’s managed in primary school due to that nurturing element, now getting lost in secondary school because their behaviour raising concerns.*”

Parent Talk coach

Extracts from one-to-one chat with Lisa, parent of a child aged 15

Lisa: My child is 15, diagnosed autistic, and seemed fine at primary school but has massively struggled at secondary school. My child has not attended school since October 2024. I’m stuck at what I can do or what support is there as I’m exhausted, extremely concerned for my child’s wellbeing and future.

The Parent Talk coach asked Lisa about the professionals and services already involved, the support she had sought and what had been tried at home and at school.

Lisa: We’ve had gradual exposure, reduced timetables and neurodivergent navigators. I’ve done a lot of courses on autism and the teenage years. I’m at a loss.

The coach acknowledged the extensive work Lisa had already undertaken and explored the different sources of support around the family, including education, SEND, health and early help. The conversation continued over several exchanges, allowing Lisa to provide updates and work through possible next steps.

Later, Lisa told her Parent Talk coach that a professional involved in the case and a colleague who had previously worked as a school SENCO had reviewed the school notes. They concluded that her son’s needs were not being met at school, and the professional planned to write to the school about the support he needed.

Lisa: She said this is NOT a lack of parenting; it’s an unmet need at school. She was lovely and actually felt sorry for all the fighting I have done, and continue to do, for my child.

3.3.2 Behaviour, risk and safety become more complex as children get older

Behaviour, risk and safety also become more complex as children get older. Older children are physically bigger, more mobile, more independent and more connected to peers and online spaces. Parents can no longer rely on the strategies that may have worked when children were younger. They may be trying to protect a teenager who does not want protection, set boundaries with someone who is pushing hard against them, or stay

connected to a child whose behaviour feels frightening.

The 2024/25 Parent Talk report, 'Behind the behaviour', focused specifically on parents experiencing violent or abusive behaviour from their children. This year's data shows that there continues to be substantial demand from parents seeking help about behaviour from their child that feels aggressive, controlling, risky or unsafe. 'Dealing with violent behaviour from your child or teenager' was the third most viewed article across the Parent Talk site in 2025/26, up from fourth the previous year.

Chats with parents on this topic included child-to-adult violence or aggression, alcohol use, disordered eating, peer pressure, criminal or antisocial behaviour, online grooming or exploitation concerns, and wider safety risks inside and outside the home. These conversations with parents also show clearly that adolescent behaviour and safety concerns rarely occur in isolation but overlap significantly with SEND, mental and emotional wellbeing, school transition, peer relationships, online risk, family stress and parental burnout.

“ I am starting to feel intimidated and sometimes fearful of him, due to his unpredictable outbursts and behaviour.”

Parent of a child aged 11

Adolescent safety can be framed as a problem located only in the young person: the teenager is risky, disengaged, difficult, harmful or making poor choices. Parent Talk conversations show a more complex picture of parental experience, in which the adults around the child are trying to set boundaries, keep communication open, protect siblings, decide when to escalate, support their child to navigate peer pressure and risk, and find specialist help without disrupting already fraught relationships.

“ I’m just trying to do my best for her and I know she’s struggling but nothing I am doing is working in terms of helping her make the right choices.”

Parent of a child aged 15

“ Recently she went to a boy’s house and turned off her phone. Her mum had to call the police to find her... We got her back home, but none of us slept. I worry that she doesn’t realise she is putting herself in danger.”

Grandmother of a child aged 15

Extracts from one-to-one chat with Carlie, parent of a child aged 15

Carlie: I need help in guiding my child to make the right choices. We have had issues with stealing, which has now developed into stealing alcohol to drink. I've tried grounding, removing technology and separating her from the friends who are influencing her choices, but the moment she is ungrounded she's going straight back and making the same choices.

The Parent Talk coach first asked about Carlie's relationship with her daughter, what her daughter was able to share with her and what support Carlie had herself. As the conversation developed, the coach explored when the drinking had begun, how much her daughter might be drinking, how she was accessing alcohol, the influence of her peer group and whether the family had received support from school or early help services.

Carlie: I have always felt that we have a great relationship, she talks to me about her relationships and issues she's facing with boyfriends or friendships in general, and we have an open-door policy on topics relating to her friends so she often freely starts conversation around that. But the moment she is being punished for something she always brings up that she hates me, hates living in this house and cannot wait to move out and get away from me. I worry that maybe what I'm perceiving as a great relationship isn't.

The coach helped Carlie recognise the trust and connection already present in the relationship. They discussed looking beneath the behaviour, maintaining communication and balancing consequences with opportunities to rebuild trust safely. The coach also gave Carlie details of specialist alcohol support, early help and an anonymous digital support service that her daughter could use if she did not feel ready for counselling.

Carlie: That's great, that's exactly what I need: some outside support to help her. It's nice to hear an outside perspective, as it's easy to get clouded when you're in the middle of it.

3.3.2 Family relationships and co-parenting can become harder to manage

Parents' capacity to support adolescents is shaped by the wider family context. Parents talk to Parent Talk about difficult separations, domestic abuse, contact arrangements, parental conflict, concerns that a child is unsafe with another parent, and how to stay connected to children when family relationships are strained.

Our 2023/24 report, 'Parenting after separation', found a sharp increase in parents seeking support with parenting and relationships. In that year, 'co-parenting with a controlling ex-partner' became the most visited Parent Talk article, and the report found that many separated parents were looking for help with co-parenting, contact arrangements and

ongoing conflict or abuse after separation. Our new data suggests that these pressures continue to sit alongside wider concerns about adolescent wellbeing, behaviour and family stress.

For parents of older children, contact arrangements can become more complicated as children develop stronger views of their own, spend more time outside the home, communicate directly with adults through phones and social media, and may be exposed to different rules, routines or expectations in each household. Parents may be trying to respect a teenager's growing independence while also managing legal arrangements, concerns about safety, communication with the other parent and the emotional impact on their child.

For some parents, co-parenting is also affected by fear, stress or the effects of domestic abuse. Where a parent has experienced coercive control, contact arrangements can become another route through which conflict, control or anxiety continues. Parents describe the ways in which this can affect both their own wellbeing and their child's experience of family life.

“ I still feel on eggshells after 3 years of me leaving him... My own phone doesn't feel safe and my son then has a stressed mum after such a good day.”

Parent of a child aged 10

Co-parenting in these circumstances can affect the emotional environment around a child. Parents can sometimes see the other parent's behaviour reflected in their child, especially as children get older. This can make it harder to respond to the young person as a child who still needs support.

“ The children are becoming adults... so [parents] can almost see them as adults as opposed to still children and still teenagers.”

Parent Talk coach

Fathers and male caregivers also seek help with contact, connection and co-parenting. Practitioner interviews suggested that fathers may be more likely to come to Parent Talk with a specific issue they want help to resolve in the co-parenting relationship, such as

wanting more time with their child, navigating contact arrangements or mediation, or worries that conflict between parents is affecting their relationship with the child.

“ I have three kids and my oldest current lives with me, but unfortunately I haven't seen my other two kids for a few months. I am waiting for my ex to have her MIAM mediation meeting. Could you please offer me some advice?”

Parent of children aged 11, 13 and 15

Co-parenting support needs to be accessible to all parents and carers, including those who may not see themselves as the main or default user of family support. Parents may need support to communicate safely with another parent, understand what their child may be experiencing, maintain connection, and protect children from the impact of adult conflict.

For some families this will also mean clear routes into legal advice, mediation, domestic abuse support, children's social care or other local services. But many parents also need something more immediate: a safe place to explain what is happening, check whether their concerns are reasonable, and work out one manageable next step.

4. Containment, clarity and a practical next step: the value of digital support

Across Parent Talk's data, case files and insights from practitioners, parents describe needing a combination of practical and emotional support. They need information, navigation and signposting, but also reassurance, validation, space to tell the whole story, and help to identify a manageable next step. The conversations between parents and coaches this year show that parents of adolescents do not always want services to take on the role of supporting their child. Instead, they are asking for the support needed to keep doing this themselves: to stay connected to their child, understand what may be happening, manage risk, work with schools and services, and protect their own wellbeing. The evidence from Parent Talk shows that, while digital support cannot replace local family support or specialist services, it can provide a crucial first point of help and support parents to understand their own and their child's needs.

4.1 Parents need accessible support throughout childhood and adolescence

Parents with older children need a clear and visible route to help before difficulties reach crisis point. Support should be easy to find, clearly relevant to families with older children and explicit that parents of adolescents are still entitled to ask for – and receive – timely and tailored early help. Parents want help to stay connected to their child, understand what is happening, manage risk and work alongside schools and other services.

Digital support can provide a visible entry point to support that parents can approach without needing a referral, assessment or to meet a threshold of need.

A 2024 evaluation of Parent Talk by the University of Birmingham found that the service strengthened parents' self-efficacy, knowledge, skills and confidence, and helped them to resolve concerns or problems.¹² The evaluation also identified its potential to reach underserved communities and help prevent families' difficulties from escalating towards crisis.

“If we can move parents on from those powerful feelings, they are able to see the wood for the trees. They're more able to stay calm and diffuse the situations that they find themselves in.”

Parent Talk coach

4.2 Parents need support for their own wellbeing, not just for their child

Parents often come to Parent Talk because they are worried about their child. But many are also asking for help to keep going themselves. They describe exhaustion, guilt, shame, anxiety, strained relationships, fear and burnout while managing school refusal, unmet SEND, mental health concerns, behaviour that feels unsafe, financial pressure or long waits for help. Parental wellbeing is not separate from children's needs. It is part of the support picture around the child.

Parents need support that recognises the pressure they are under without blaming them or shifting responsibility away from services. They need permission to say that parenting feels unmanageable, help to understand what is happening, and reassurance that needing support does not mean they have failed. The anonymity and flexibility of digital support can make it easier for parents to ask for help without feelings of shame, fear or failure.



Listening, being heard, having that reflected back to you can be really therapeutic."

Parent Talk coach



Just being told that I'm not failing is huge."

Parent feedback

4.3 Parents need support that responds to complexity, not issues in isolation

Parents may initially ask for help with one issue: school avoidance, anxiety, ADHD, contact arrangements, violent behaviour, online risk, debt or worries about safety. But the wider story often includes several pressures at once. School attendance, SEND and mental and emotional wellbeing are closely related, with secondary school transition a crucial pressure point.



I want to understand what's going on with him and to support him without keeping stressed about his attendance. I have tried everything I could and it's been having a major negative impact on me, adding to my worry of him losing education and not engaging in any social activities."

Parent of a child aged 13

As children get older, behaviour, risk and safety also become more complex. Parents may be trying to protect a teenager who does not want protection, set boundaries with a child who is pushing hard against them, or stay connected to a child whose behaviour feels frightening.

Parents need support that looks at the whole family picture: practical advice on the presenting issue, alongside help to understand how issues connect, what might be driving a child's behaviour, what support to ask for and how to keep family relationships as safe and stable as possible.

Digital practitioner support gives parents the space to explain this whole picture, in their own time, rather than having to identify the correct service or present each concern separately.

4.4 Parents need containment, clarity and a practical next step

Parent Talk shows the value of digital support that parents can access when they feel overwhelmed, ashamed or unsure where to turn. Parents can begin with information, advice or guidance on the website, or receive tailored support through webchat or WhatsApp when online advice alone is not enough. They can use the service anonymously, take time to organise their thoughts and reflect on the advice given, pause and return when they have more capacity to engage. Practitioners described this as giving parents the opportunity to 'offload' in a safe space, which can be the first step towards repair.

“We’re not just another cog of signposting. We give the parent the time and the space to get off the hamster wheel and take a breath.”

Parent Talk coach

One-to-one chats with parents often begin with urgent or fragmented messages: “I don’t know where to start”, “I’m at a complete loss”, “I don’t have any support”, “I need help urgently”, “What do I do?” Coaches acknowledge the parent’s feelings, check safety where needed, organise the issues, provide tailored advice and help identify a realistic next step.

“Seeing it written down... can be a really good starting point in thinking, okay, here’s a bit of a plan of what we can do next.”

Parent Talk coach

Extracts from one-to-one chat with Antonio, parent of a child aged 15

Antonio talked to Parent Talk coaches while trying to support his son, who was struggling to attend school. Antonio believed that something at school was making attendance difficult, but his son found it hard to explain what was happening.

Antonio: For sure something is going on at school. He does his homework, prepares his bag and talks about school, then in the morning he doesn't engage... I just want a rest. I'm exhausted. I took the week off this week but for what, more stress. I've worked all night and still haven't rested ahead of another night shift. Help me please.

Across several exchanges over a number of weeks, Parent Talk coaches acknowledged the pressure Antonio was under, explored what might be making school difficult for his child and asked what support had already been offered. Antonio explained that the school had offered adjustments, including an earlier lunch and permission to leave lessons early, but that these had not resolved the underlying problem.

Antonio: School just concentrates on one thing, which is attendance. We just don't know what causes it.

When the approaches already tried with the school had not worked, Antonio was connected with a Parent Talk coach specialising in emotionally based school avoidance and SEND. This helped to give Antonio additional confidence in talking to his son's school.

Antonio: Thank you for the time you gave me and for all the information you provided. Most importantly, thank you for listening to me. You and the whole team have always made me feel supported and helped me bring my anxiety back to a more manageable level.

What does Parent Talk provide?

Fast, flexible access to support. The online nature of the service is not only convenient; it also gives parents control. Parents can use trusted online information, advice and guidance or request support from a parenting coach through webchat or WhatsApp. They can write down their experiences at any time, pause and return when they have more capacity to engage.

Space to tell the whole story. Parents can explain how different issues fit together and how this affects the whole family. Coaches can help parents to organise concerns that may initially feel too overwhelming to tackle.

Validation without judgement. Many parents are carrying guilt, blame, shame or fear. They may worry that asking for help will make them look like a bad parent, or trigger a cascade of formal interventions that they are not in control of or feel ready for. Parent Talk offers a safe, anonymous space in which parents can feel heard and reassured.

Help to understand adolescence. Parent Talk helps parents to understand adolescent development, independence, boundaries, online life, peer influence and why strategies that worked when a child was younger might no longer be effective.

Help while families wait. Waiting for a diagnosis, assessment or specialist help can leave families feeling stuck. Parent Talk offers practical support to manage the daily reality of school avoidance, conflict, sleep disruption, risk or family stress in the meantime.

Support to maintain connection. Coaches help parents to find practical ways to keep communication open, spend time with their child, reconnect after conflict and remember the child behind the behaviour.

Support with family relationships and co-parenting. This can include managing contact arrangements, responding safely to conflict, understanding how adult relationships affect children, and protecting children from domestic abuse.

Navigation and a clear next step. Parent Talk helps families navigate complex systems including SEND provision, children's services, school and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). Coaches can help parents understand what support they need, build confidence to advocate and, where appropriate, make referrals on families' behalf.

Timely and responsive information. Parent Talk uses data from article views, one-to-one chats, article evaluation and a wider understanding of support needs to keep its advice relevant to predictable and emerging pressures. This includes the 'back to school' period after the summer holidays and known periods of increased financial strain such as Christmas.

5. What this means for policy and practice

The early adolescent years between 10 and 15 can be a period of intense pressure for families, shaped by school transition, emerging mental and emotional wellbeing needs, SEND, changing family relationships, online risk, behaviour, safeguarding concerns and parents' own wellbeing.

Supporting adolescents means supporting the trusted adults around them. Parents of older children and teenagers need accessible, non-judgemental support before family difficulties become entrenched or unsafe, so that they can help their children to grow up safe, happy and healthy.

These recommendations build on Action for Children's wider evidence that children's services spending has become increasingly weighted towards late intervention,¹³ and that families too often miss opportunities for support before needs escalate.¹⁴ The case for prevention and early help for families, which is well established in the early years, must be extended to the specific needs of families with older children.

Making adolescence a priority for the next phase of early help reforms

The UK government should make early adolescence, covering ages 10 to 15, the priority for the next phase of its prevention and opportunity agenda. Families do not stop needing support as children leave the early years. If the government's investment in babies, young children and family support is to have lasting impact, that support must continue as children move into adolescence and beyond.

This should build directly on the measures set out in the government's early years strategy, 'Giving Every Child the Best Start in Life'¹⁵ and in the schools white paper, 'Every Child Achieving and Thriving'.¹⁶ Together, these recognise the importance of family support and early intervention throughout the early years in preparing children for primary school, and set out reforms to build an inclusive education system that supports disadvantaged children and those with SEND to achieve and thrive at school.

Through its opportunity mission, the government has made improving children's life chances a central priority, stating that 'Every child should have the opportunity to grow, play, learn and thrive'. But these ambitions can't be delivered by schools alone. Parents need the right support to help children navigate the emotional, developmental and practical challenges.

Recommendations for policy and practice

1. Establish a national ambition for adolescence, including secondary school readiness

The government should recognise adolescence as a key stage for prevention, family support and improving children's life chances. Just as it has set a national ambition around school readiness and age five, it should establish a parallel ambition for secondary school readiness at age 11, supported by a national outcome framework covering family wellbeing, parental confidence, emotional wellbeing, school attendance and belonging, and successful transitions.

2. Make support for parents of children aged 10 to 15 part of the local family support offer

Local areas should set out how parents and carers of older children can access help before difficulties reach crisis point, including through Family Hubs, schools, youth services, digital support, voluntary and community partners and family help services. This support should be easy to find, clearly signposted and relevant to the complex issues parents of adolescents are facing. It should also dovetail with evidence-based practice in the early years, so that family support is understood as a continuous pathway through childhood. As the Families First Partnership Programme develops, Family Help should explicitly support families with adolescents.

3. Ensure support is designed around the realities of adolescence and key transition points

Early help and targeted support should be organised around the points at which needs commonly emerge and escalate, including transition to secondary school, school exclusion or absence, SEND assessment and support, referral to CAMHS, changes to family circumstance, online risks and safeguarding concerns.

4. Provide support while children and families are waiting for specialist help

The current system of 'refer and wait' is not good enough. Parents should be offered practical and emotional support and trusted guidance from local family support teams while waiting for assessment or specialist help.

5. Recognise the value of digital parenting support as part of early help infrastructure

Digital parenting support should be recognised as part of the early help system for families with children of all ages, not just in the early years. Services like Parent Talk complement local face-to-face services by providing fast, flexible, parent-led support that helps parents feel heard, navigate services and take the next step.

Conclusion: Supporting adolescents and the adults around them

The early years matter enormously. But families do not stop needing support when children start school, move to secondary school or become teenagers. Early adolescence is a crucial stage of developmental transition, when children are moving between childhood and adolescence, between primary and secondary school, between family and peer relationships, and towards independence.

For many families, this transition is positive, exciting and full of growth and new experiences. But it is also the point when unmet needs become harder to manage, relationships become more strained, school expectations increase and support can feel harder to access. Parents can find themselves trying to support emotional distress, school difficulties, unmet SEND, behaviour that feels difficult or unsafe, financial pressure, family conflict and systems that are hard to navigate.

Parent Talk insights show that parents of older children and adolescents are still seeking substantial help. They are not only looking for instructions on what to do about a single issue. They are trying to keep loving, calm and connected relationships with their children, while managing pressure, uncertainty and risk. Many are exhausted and have already tried to get help elsewhere. Many simply need someone to listen, help them make sense of what is happening and support them to take the next step.

The trusted adults around adolescents are often under intense pressure themselves. A parent who is exhausted, frightened, isolated or ashamed may still be the most important protective relationship in a child's life, but they cannot continue to be a source of safety, advocacy and connection for their child without the right support.

Digital services such as Parent Talk are not a replacement for local family support, schools, SEND services, mental health services, domestic abuse services or safeguarding responses. In some cases, Parent Talk is filling a gap because parents are unable to access the support they need elsewhere. But it also provides something uniquely valuable: fast, flexible, parent-led support that offers containment, validation, practical advice and a route through complexity.

The current cohort of children aged 10 to 15 has grown up through the disruption of the Covid-19 pandemic and its aftermath. Many were in primary school, or moving towards secondary school, during a period of interrupted learning, routines, friendships and access to support. Long-term investment and reform are vital, but it will not meet the immediate needs of children who are already in, or entering, adolescence. The government should recognise this cohort as needing support now, not only rely on early years investment to improve outcomes over time.

If we are serious about prevention and early help, support for parents must continue across childhood and into adolescence. Supporting adolescents means supporting the trusted adults around them, and making sure those adults are not left to parent alone.

Appendix: Methodology and evidence used

This report draws on the following evidence relating to our Parent Talk service:

- Annual data from the service's launch in 2020 to March 2026, including website reach, one-to-one users and chat tagging.
- Age-linked one-to-one case data from August 2022 to July 2026, used to understand broad patterns across childhood and adolescence.
- Advice article data for the 2025/26 financial year, including the most viewed content categories and advice articles.
- One-to-one chat data for the 2025/26 financial year across all categories of support, including parent wellbeing, child wellbeing, behaviour, financial concerns, family relationships, contact arrangements, SEND, education and safeguarding.
- A case-file sample of 63 anonymised one-to-one support cases from August 2025 to July 2026, focused on children aged 10 to 15.
- Interviews with Parent Talk coaches.

One-to-one support gives insight into more complex, emotional or relational need because parents use one-to-one support when online advice alone is not enough.

'Tagging' means the labels applied within the Parent Talk system to describe the issues discussed in a one-to-one case. More than one tag can be applied to a case, and tags are used to understand patterns of need across the service.

Tags included in the 'parental mental health and wellbeing' category are: anger, anxiety, anxious feelings, bereavement, depression, eating disorder, emotional wellbeing, hearing voices, loneliness, low mood, low self-esteem, mental health, OCD, PTSD, panic attacks, phobias, self-worth, self-harm, social anxiety, stress, suicidal thoughts, trauma.

Tags included in the 'child or young person mental health and wellbeing' category are: anger, anxiety, anxious feelings, bereavement, body image, body dysmorphia, depression, eating disorder, emotional wellbeing, hearing voices, loneliness, low mood, low self-esteem, mental health, mental health disorder, OCD, PTSD, panic attacks, phobias, self-worth, self-harm, social anxiety, stress, suicidal thoughts, trauma.

All names and identifying details, apart from children's ages, have been changed in the case-file extracts. Some quotes have been lightly edited or shortened for clarity.

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['School refusal: Insights from Parent Talk 2022/23'](#), October 2023.

['Parenting after separation: Insights from Parent Talk 2023/24'](#), August 2024.

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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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