

# Children's insights



What they do and think

# A message from the Children's Commissioner for England, Anne Longfield

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**It's my job to be the 'eyes and ears' of children in England, so I want to know what is actually happening in their everyday lives. What do children care about? What's on their minds? What are they talking about? Our new Children's Insights series will start to answer these questions. We want to know about the latest trends in games, social media, foods, what children want for their birthdays and what they like to do in their free time.**

Using the latest research, we will shine a light on the thoughts, worries and experiences of all children. In line with our other work on vulnerable children, this report is also for them – putting a spotlight on what those everyday issues look like for the most vulnerable kids.

In this issue, we hear from children saying they feel they are not heard by politicians, about their concerns for the environment and their worries for the future.

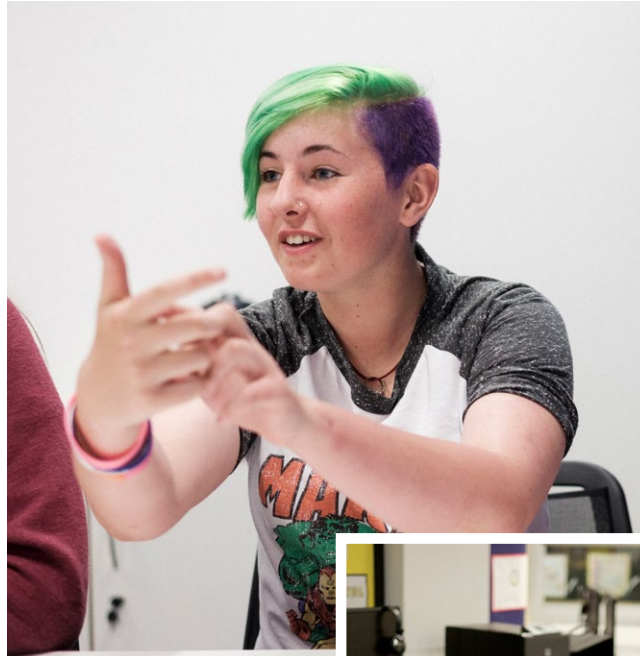
We would like to share Children's Insights with you so that we can all understand the world of children more. If we find out what matters to them and are more connected with what children are saying, we can do more to help them fulfil their potential.



Anne Longfield, OBE  
Children's Commissioner for England



# Brexit dominates for children, too



Children's word of the year 2019 is 'Brexit'. From the 112,986 entries that BBC Radio 2's '500 Words' story competition received this year, the word Brexit emerged on top as the team at Oxford Children's Dictionaries have looked at children's evolving use of political language.

Children mentioned Brexit 418 times in their 2019 stories, a **464% rise since 2018**.

**↑464%**

Children also used other Brexit-related terms – such as “trade deal”, “backstop” and “European Union” – **32% more than in 2018**.

Trade deal

Backstop

European Union

**Brexit might have inspired children to become problem solvers.** They wrote stories entitled “The cat who solved Brexit”, “The three little politicians and the big bad Brexit Monster” and “Henry VIII negotiates Brexit”.



When talking to the Children's Society about politics, **400 11 – 17 year olds, most commonly expressed that they felt side-lined by adults** making decisions without listening to them.

*'Politics don't listen to young people's views. They think because we are 'children' we don't know what we are talking about.'* Female, 14

*'Politicians should acknowledge children and teenagers more. We are the next generation so we should be the ones choosing how we want our lives to be.'* Male, 14

# How do children with special educational needs and disabilities see themselves?

Research shows children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) don't define themselves by their disability – they tend to talk about their own personalities instead. Children without SEND talk about themselves in the same way.



*"A bit weird, not very clever."*

Child with SEND

*"I'm strange, I'm weird, I'm the complainer of the group, the Drama Queen and complainer."*

Child without SEND

Children with SEND also talk about their hobbies and interests.

*"I'm quite creative and have a bit of imagination with it all."* Child with SEND

*"I'm a good goalkeeper and I'm good at English."* Child with SEND

*"I'm quite musical, and I like acting."* Child with SEND

## Special educational needs and disabilities

In this research, children with SEND describe being bullied and socially excluded at school and say that they do not have a friendship group or only a small one.

Their peers without SEND who know people with disabilities, have positive views of them. They talk about disabilities as limiting but do not make moral judgements. They recognise that children with SEND were bullied, but do not describe stepping in.

Children without SEND talk about having friendly relationships with their disabled peers at school, but often they do not see them as friends. They describe their peers with SEND as someone they know in their classes rather than someone that they would hang out with.

*"Like, we don't really hang out outside of class but we're, like, good friends inside of class."* **Child without SEND**



**Disability Rights UK** asked 42 children aged 12 to 14 across England about their views on and perceptions of disability. They held focus groups with 13 pupils with SEND in mainstream schools, 15 pupils with SEND in special schools and 14 pupils without SEND in mainstream schools.



*'I worry that climate change will mean we won't have a safe or enjoyable world to live in.'*

**Female, 14** (Children's Society, Good Childhood report)

# What do children worry about?

Researchers asked children aged 10 to 17 from 2,400 households what they are most worried about. Along with crime, the most common concern was the environment: two in five children – including 45% of girls and 36% of boys – said they were worried about it. This could be a result of both increasing visibility of activists such as Greta Thunberg and changes to some schools' curricula to engage children with the environment.

# 88%

**Nine out of ten (88%)** of the 2,000 girls aged 7 to 21 who took part in the Girlguiding perceptions survey feel it is urgent that we all do more to protect the environment.

Their most common environmental concerns were :



**Water Pollution (46%)**



**Climate Change (46%)**



**Plastic Pollution (44%)**



**Loss of nature and habitats (43%)**

# 49%

**Half of them (49%) think the main responsibility for tackling environmental issues lies with the Government.** A further one in five think it lies with private individuals while one in five think it lies with companies and businesses.

## Environment

Children also mentioned the environment, and the government's responsibilities for it, during our 2019/20 business plan consultation [↗](#)

*"The one [message] for the government is that we need to help the environment. If we're not going to do something soon it's going to die and there's going to be nothing left."*

(Primary school child, male)



Many girls who took part in the Girlguiding report spoke about environmentally friendly actions that they do. **They turn off the lights, they recycle and reuse more, turn off TVs, put on an extra jumper instead of heating, walk or cycle instead of using the car, buy ethical clothing and eat less meat.**



Children also wrote about 'climate change', 'global warming', 'deforestation', 'pollution', 'recycling' and 'veganism' in their BBC2 entries. **The use of the word "plastic" increased by 64% from 2018 to 2019.** Children raised similar issues during our 2019/20 business plan consultation [↗](#)

*"A safer environment by banning plastic and stop, doing less deforestation and less pollution."*

(Primary schoolboy)

**Children used the phrase 'save the...'  
4,450 times in their stories (Oxford  
Children's Dictionaries)**

**Save the...  
Amazon / Day /  
Planet / Universe /  
Earth / Rainforest**



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# Children from disadvantaged backgrounds get out less

Research shows children mostly enjoy the natural environment in parks and playgrounds, as opposed to beaches, forests, nature reserves or country parks. Three quarters of the 4,266 under 16s who participated in the Natural England survey spent time outside at least once a week in an average month in 2018/19. But children who live in richer areas get to do this more often:

## 81%

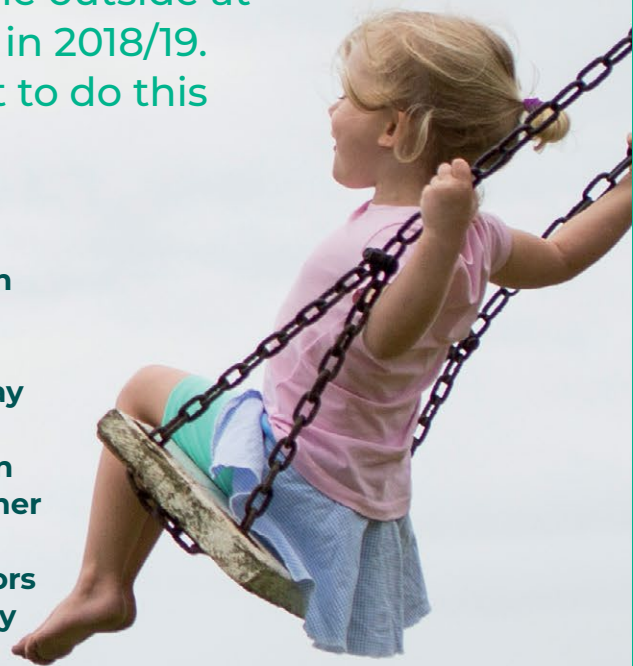
of children in the most affluent areas spend time outside at least once a week, compared to

## 61%

of children in the most deprived areas in England.

A global survey by Edelman Intelligence in 2016 showed that over half of all children play less than one hour a day outdoors, rising to 74% in the UK. As a result, in the UK and in some other countries, children can spend less time outdoors than maximum security prisoners do.

The research also found that only 56% of children from black, Asian and ethnic minority backgrounds spent time outdoors at least once a week, compared to 70% of white children.





# How do children feel about their future?










Most children in England grow up living happy and healthy lives. They are aware of the world around them and the challenges that will face their generation and others, but they are also resilient and optimistic about the future. In a survey of 2,400 households in England, Scotland and Wales (The Good Childhood Report), while most children are happy with their own future, **30% of children aged 10 to 17 said they are either “not happy” or “unhappy”**.

## Children's future priorities

-  **Having a place to live** (72%)
-  **Their physical health** (68%)
-  **Getting a job** (67%)
-  **Having enough money** (63%)
-  **Their mental health** (61%)
-  **Getting good marks** (52%)
-  **Going to University** (30%)

## Children's biggest worries

-  **Having enough money** (33%)
-  **Getting a job** (29%)
-  **Getting good marks** (29%)
-  **Having a place to live** (23%)
-  **Going to University** (18%)
-  **Their mental health** (17%)
-  **Their physical health** (17%)

## Children's futures

**Girls were more likely to be worried than boys** about these aspects of their future – especially their future mental health (where the gap between boys and girls was 6 percentage points).

**Older children aged 14 to 17 worry more than younger children aged 10 to 13** about getting a job, having enough money, having a home to live in and their mental health.

Children living in deprived households are more worried about all these aspects of their future they were asked about than children who do not live in poverty. **The largest gaps are having a home to live in (8% gap), their future mental health (7% gap) and having enough money (5% gap).**

In our 2019/20 business plan consultation children told us that they don't think all children get the same future opportunities.

*They'll probably grow up feeling like a bit rubbish about themselves because they don't know what they want to do because no opportunity has been offered to them."*

**(Older child in a secure children's home, female)**

*"You grow up when you're at a state school and you see it's not how good you are or what you've achieved, it's who you know."* **(Older child in college, female)**



The platform Popjam, a creative community platform for 7 – 12 year olds, asked its users in the UK and Ireland in September what makes them happy and what they think their future jobs will be. Here are some of the most common answers:

### **"This makes me really happy..."**

Family; Friends; PopJam; Animals; Dogs; Food; Cats; BFF; Gaming; Pets

Children also mentioned dance, BTS, sweets, reading, Minecraft, art, school, music, their mums, making others happy, loved ones, Fortnite and babies.

Other than family and friends, animals and pets, mostly dogs and cats, also made children happy.

### **"My future job is..."**

Teacher; Vet; Actor; Singer; Artist; YouTuber; Doctor; Hairdresser; Dancer; Zoo worker

They also thought about becoming an author, animal helper, footballer, writer, paramedic, nurse, gymnast, game developer and chef.



Our work on 'Growing up North' includes the voices of children who are ambitious and aspirational for their futures.

# Reducing knife crime: what do children think?

In July and August, 45 young people in London were asked by Coram how they think knife crime could be reduced. This is what they said:

1. Police should be more respectful when they stop and search
2. Young people should receive education on better relationships and managing emotions
3. Young people should have better access to careers services
4. Stop and search levels should stay the same and there should be a tougher criminal justice system
5. Young people should have access to long term mentors
6. There should be more healthy, safe opportunities for young people to spend their time

↑54%

The latest ONS numbers show that in the year to March 2018 103 young people under 25 were killed with a sharp instrument in England and Wales. **This is an increase of almost 54%.**



See the latest stats on  
knife crime in England



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