



Family findings from The Big Ask

November 2021

Family – Findings from The Big Ask

Introduction

In April 2021, the Children’s Commissioner for England, Dame Rachel de Souza, launched The Big Ask: a national consultation exercise with children in England to ask them about their lives and their priorities, aspirations and worries for the future. The purpose was not only to provide a large-scale ‘state of the nation’ assessment of the views of children on these issues, but also to help inform the Commissioner’s priorities and longer-term strategy for her term in office, and to help ensure that children’s needs and interests could be placed at the forefront of policy measures to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.

The Big Ask ran for approximately 6 weeks and gathered more than 550,000 responses, making it the largest ever survey of children anywhere in the world, to our knowledge.

The 6-8 and 9+ ‘Big Ask’ surveys included one free-text question each. To ensure the survey was age-appropriate, the questions asked to the 6-8 age group and children aged 9+ were slightly different, though designed to capture the same theme and underlying issues.

The 9-12 and 13-17 surveys asked:

- ‘What do you think stops children/young people in England achieving the things they want to achieve when they grow up?’

The 6-8 survey asked:

- ‘If you could change anything to make your life better when you grow up, what would it be?’

Family was mentioned by 15% of children who gave a response to the free-text question. Responses were identified as mentioning family if they referred to words such as ‘parent’, ‘family’, ‘social class’, ‘dad’, ‘mum’, ‘home life’, ‘sister’, ‘brother’, ‘upbringing’, ‘mom’, ‘baby’, ‘divorce’, ‘husband’ or ‘sibling’.

This analysis explores the main themes raised by children whose response referred to family alongside the quantitative findings from the survey. The methodology for how the qualitative data were analysed is available [here](#) and the quantitative methodology is available [here](#).

Quantitative findings

Happiness in life

Children aged 9-17 were asked ‘how happy are you with these things in your life now?’ and were given a list of aspects of their life to consider which included: ‘my family life’, ‘my family’s health’ and ‘my family’s ability to buy things we need’.

The vast majority of children, (94%) were happy or ok with their family life and 80% of children were happy or very happy with their family life. The same percentage of children (94%) were happy or ok with their family’s health and 97% were happy or ok with their family’s ability to buy the things they need. However, although only 6% of children reported being unhappy with their family life, these children were 9 times more

likely to be unhappy with their life overall.

Older children, those aged 16-17 were slightly less likely to be happy or ok with aspects related to family than their younger peers. 90% of children aged 16-17 were happy or ok with their family life, compared to 94% of those aged 12-15 and 96% of those aged 9-11. In other words, children aged 16-17 were three times more likely to be unhappy with their family life than 9-11-year-olds. Similarly, 89% of children aged 16-17 were happy or ok with their family's health, compared to 94% of those aged 12-15 and 96% of those aged 9-11.

For family life and family health there was little difference between boys and girls, however, children who chose to self-identify their gender were less likely to be happy or ok than other children. Of those children, 77% were happy or ok with their family life and 82% were happy with their family's health, compared to 94% of children overall.

Children supported by children's social care were more likely than other children to be unhappy with their life overall. They were twice as likely to be unhappy with their family life and their family's ability to buy the things they need compared to other children. Children in residential care were slightly less likely to be happy or ok with their family life than children in foster care (82% compared 87%)ⁱ. Similarly, children in kinship care were around twice as likely to be unhappy with their family life, their family's health, and their family's ability to buy the things they need compared to other children.

Children who were receiving support from a young carer's project (hereafter young carer's) were considerably less likely to be happy or ok with their family's health than other children (85% compared to 94%).

Children receiving mental health support were three times more likely to be unhappy with their family life and their family's health and more than twice as likely to be unhappy with their family's ability to buy the things they need than other children.

Priorities for a good future

Children aged 9-17 were asked 'when you grow up, which things, if any, do you think will be the most important for you to have a good life? Choose up to 5 things from the list below'. The list included 'getting on well with my current family' and 'starting my own family' alongside other things such as 'having a good education' and 'good mental health'.

Twenty-nine per cent of all respondents chose getting on well with my current family and 26% chose starting my own family as one of their top priorities for the future.

There were only small differences between the percentages of children choosing these options by age. Thirty per cent of children aged 9-11 chose getting on well with my current family as a priority, very slightly more than the 27% of children aged 16-17 who chose this. By gender, both girls and boys were much more likely to choose getting on well with my current family as a future priority than children who chose to self-identify their gender (29% of girls and 30% of boys chose this compared to 18% of children who self-identified their gender).

For vulnerable groups of children; such as those in the SEND proxy group, young carers and children receiving support from children's services; there was little difference in choosing the family related future priorities.

Future worries

Children aged 9-17 were then given the same list of options and asked 'when you grow up which of these, if any, are you most worried that you won't have? Choose up to 5 things'.

Overall, 18% of children selected starting my own family and 14% selected getting on with their current family as one of their top five future worries. Children who chose good mental health as one of their future worries were more likely to also be worried about getting on well with their current family. Additionally, children who were currently unhappy with their family life were more likely to select getting on well with their current family as a future worry.

There were no significant differences by age in the likelihood of choosing one of these options as a future worry. By gender, 25% of children who chose to self-identify their gender selected getting on well with my current family as a future worry compared to only 15% of girls and 13% of boys. Interestingly, boys were the most likely to select starting my own family as a future worry (20%) compared to 17% of girls and 15% of children who chose to self-identify their gender.

Compared to other children, children supported by children's social care were slightly more likely to choose getting on well with my current family as a future worry (22% compared to 14%). The responses from children in kinship care and young carers followed a similar distribution.

Qualitative findings

Statistical overview of children who mentioned education in their response

Table 1 - Percentage of children whose response referenced 'family', by demographic characteristics

Characteristic	Percentage of children whose response referenced family
Age	
6-8	29%
9-11	19%
12-15	15%
16-17	14%
Gender	
Male	15%
Female	20%
Self-identified gender	19%
Ethnicity	
Asian	21%
Black	19%
Mixed	19%
Other	17%
White	17%
Ethnicity not given	20%
Happiness with family life (9-17)	
Happy with family life	72%
Neither happy nor unhappy with family life	16%
Unhappy with family life	9%
Happiness with family health (9-17)	
Happy with family health	70%
Neither happy nor unhappy with family health	17%
Unhappy with family health	7%
Future priorities and worries (9-17)	
Chose getting on well with my current family as a future priority	29%
Chose getting on well with my current family as a future worry	18%

Table 1 shows the distribution of responses which mention family by demographic characteristics and responses to other questions. Children aged 6-8 were more likely to mention this topic than any other age group, and girls were slightly more likely than boys to mention it. There was little variation by ethnicity although Asian children were slightly more likely than other ethnic groups to mention this topic. Children aged 9-17 who mentioned family in their response were slightly less likely to be happy or ok with their family life than other children (88% compared to 94%). Similarly, children aged 9-17 who mentioned family were also less likely to be happy or ok with their family health (87% compared to 94%).

Supportive families

Where children did have a supportive family and positive role models, it had an extremely positive impact. For example, children talked about how their parents had helped them with school and their mental health and felt 'lucky' to have this.

'I know that not all kids are as lucky as me. I have very supportive parents who are always there for me. I can't imagine going through school without them.' - *Boy, 11*

'I have been very lucky to have grown up with a very supportive and stable family environment with fantastic role models in my parents. As a result, they have shown me ambition and the importance of hard work and perseverance. My mum grew up in quite a deprived area as a child with very little opportunity and poor education but her parents encouraged her to work hard and build a better life for herself.' - *Boy, 17*

'Growing up I was very lucky and have always had parents who have taught me all I know about life and have supported me in subjects that I felt uncomfortable in. However I know not all are as privileged as me and may need the school for such things.' - *Boy, 15*

'Getting mental health support is extremely difficult [...] However I was very lucky and unlike a lot of people who struggle I managed to overcome the majority of my anxiety myself due to my parents being supportive and becoming less close with people who would worsen it.' - *Girl, 16*

Other children spoke about how unsupportive or controlling parents can limit a child's life and future success:

'If the environment they grow up in isn't ideal for learning for example unsupportive parents [...] or siblings, then they will have a disadvantage in achieving their goals in life when compared to kids who have all these things.' - *Girl, 17*

'Parents expecting their children to live their lives in the same orthodox manner they did, or restricting their children on what they can and can't do based on stereotypes and snapshots of their own culture or heritage. Also parents who take little or no part in supporting their children's education, health (especially mental health) and/or wellbeing.' - *Boy, 16*

'Parents that don't support their children could stop them from achieving their goals and stop dreaming or horrible family members that will make fun of you if you dream.' - *Girl, 10*

There was a gendered aspect, as some girls felt they are only encouraged to pursue stereotypical gender roles and future ambitions:

'The fact that parents might not approve of what their children wants to pursue in life as some girls might want to become a sports player but their parents won't allow them to.' - *Girl, 9*

'Sometimes parents because when they were growing up they could only do specific things like women do this and men do that so they might be like 'no no that's a woman's/men's job...' we are allowed to be who we want!' - *Girl, 12*

'Mummies and daddies hold my friends back because they are girls and other girls don't try as hard because they are scared if they are more clever than the boys.' - *Girl, 9*

Family, money, and disadvantage

Money intersected with many aspects of family life. Children most frequently mentioned it in relation to their family not having enough money to buy things, or the difficulty of affording somewhere to live. In some cases, children described challenging home situations where parents were struggling to pay for food and bills. Other children mentioned being unable to take part in activities like sport because their parents could not afford the kit or lessons.

'The people/parents don't get enough money or help for their children. [...] My mum is a single parent who hasn't got a job and has 4 kids. We barely have enough money to stay in the house and get food and stuff to live [...] I'm worried about my mum and her mental health and to be honest I'm worried about mine.' - *Girl, 10*

'Right now it would help if we had enough income or at least a place where we could get more help we really need flooring in our bedroom but mummy can't get it because of bills.' - *Boy, 11*

Children aged 12-17 also how parents' own experiences of disadvantage can limit children's aspirations and visions for the future:

'Some people think that just because their parents did not get a great life that they will have an equally bad life, this means that they won't try as hard. It also means that they do not think they have as many opportunities as they actually do.' - *Girl, 13*

'Lack of everyday role models who have overcome hardship and managed to get a good life or job.' - *Boy, 11*

What would 6–8-year-olds change about their family?

Just over 1 in 4 6–8-year-olds said that they would change something related to their family.

Six to 8-year-olds primarily expressed a desire for a 'positive' family environment. Children in this age group also spoke about wanting to spend more time with their family – an issue which has been exacerbated by the pandemic.

'To see my brother and sister more [...] also see my dad more as well.' - *Girl, 8*

'Mummy and daddy to be with us more so kids don't have to go to clubs all the time.' - *Boy, 6*

'I want my daddy to work less.' - *Girl, 6*

'To see my grandparents more due to the pandemic!' - *Boy, 6*

'I wish there were no more lockdowns and I could travel to Brazil to visit my family (grandparents and aunts, uncles, cousins).' - *Boy, 6*

Children in this age group also wanted more financial security for their family both now and in the future. Again, in some cases this issue had been exacerbated by the pandemic.

'Sort out are money so my mum can pay of her det [debt].' - *Boy, 8*

'I just want my family to be healthy and have enough money to buy my family some food and what we all want.' - *Girl, 8*

'It would be to get my dad's pain away and to have enough money to pay for things.' - *Girl, 7*

'[...] Getting a bit more money because my dad's work place got shut down before covid-19, my family shop had to shut because of covid so my family is a bit stressed.' - *Girl, 8*

Many children wanted better their relationships with family members, often saying that they wished their parents or siblings could be 'nicer' to them:

'Change my family so they can be nice to me.' - *Boy, 6*

'My brother to be nice to me and my dad to not be on his games and take care of me.' - *Girl, 8*

'My devil siblings to stop getting me into trouble because that's how I feel upset and scared and worried all the time [...]' - *Girl, 8*

'My mummy not screaming at me.' - *Girl, 6*

'The bullying in my family.' - *Girl, 8*

Finally, many children in this age group expressed a desire to have families of their own when they are older:

'[...] making a life or family of my own.' - *Girl, 7*

'Make a family of my own have a good job.' - *Girl, 7*

'To take care of people and my baby children and make them grow up helthey [healthy]' - *Girl, 7*

'Getting lots of money so I can make my own family with a wife and child.' - *Boy, 8*

ⁱ Children in care – findings from The Big Ask, Children's Commissioner 2021, link: [cco-children-in-care-findings-from-the-big-ask.pdf](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/cco-children-in-care-findings-from-the-big-ask.pdf) ([childrenscommissioner.gov.uk](https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk))

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