Revealing Reality

BBC Children in Need

SPOTlight Research

November 2024

About Revealing Reality

Revealing Reality is an independent social research and insight agency. We enjoy working on challenging projects with social purposes to inform policy, design, and behaviour change. This includes working with regulators, government, and charities to provide rigorous insight into the lives of children and young people, examining their behaviours and experiences, as well as the challenges that many of them face.

We frequently conduct detailed qualitative and quantitative research to build an in-depth understanding of the world in which children and young people are in.

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Contents page

This report presents the key themes raised by young people, in the survey and interviews. We recognise that these topics often overlap, with many concerns and experiences being interconnected across themes.

Executive summary

The SPOTlight research involved a survey of over 1,500 children supported by BBC Children in Need-funded projects and qualitative interviews with some of these children and young people. It also included a BBC Children in Need led UK-wide poll of 2,500 children and young people.

The research aimed to explore what life was like for children supported by BBC Children in Need, their hopes and fears for the future, and the impact of the BBC Children in Need funded projects they attend.

Mental health emerged as the top concern, particularly for the SPOTlight sample, where 76% of SPOTlight children identified it as a concern, compared to 66% in the UK-wide poll. Rising prices (69%) and bullying (60%) were also significant worries, with a higher proportion of children in the SPOTlight sample expressing these concerns compared to their peers.

Children in the SPOTlight sample reported worrying more about issues that appeared to be more local or likely to directly affect them, and were more likely to worry about mental health, rising prices, and discrimination. Meanwhile, those in the UK-wide poll were more likely to worry about issues that could be considered as more global, such as war and climate change.

School presented significant challenges for the SPOTlight sample. 41% of SPOTlight children reported being unhappy at school, compared to just 23% in the UK-wide poll. Themes of anxiety, loneliness, and bullying were consistent across both the survey and qualitative interviews.

Children with special educational needs or disabilities face heightened challenges fitting in; those with special education needs reported greater challenges, particularly with forming friendships, feeling excluded, and managing school life. They were also more likely to experience loneliness and mental health challenges.

BBC Children in Need-funded projects play a vital role in addressing these challenges. Children reported that the projects provide a crucial source of support, offering safe spaces where they can be themselves, form friendships, take part in activities that build independence and confidence, and build trusted relationships with adults.

Children who had trusted relationships reported feeling more satisfied across other areas of their lives. Those participating in BBC Children in Need projects who had a dependable adult in their lives reported feeling happier across various aspects of life, indicating the profound impact of supportive and positive connections.

Children remain resilient, ambitious, and hopeful for the future despite the challenges they face. Children supported by BBC Children in Need-funded projects demonstrate remarkable resilience and optimism. Many expressed ambitions for the future and a desire to see positive change in the world, often inspired by their own lived experiences.
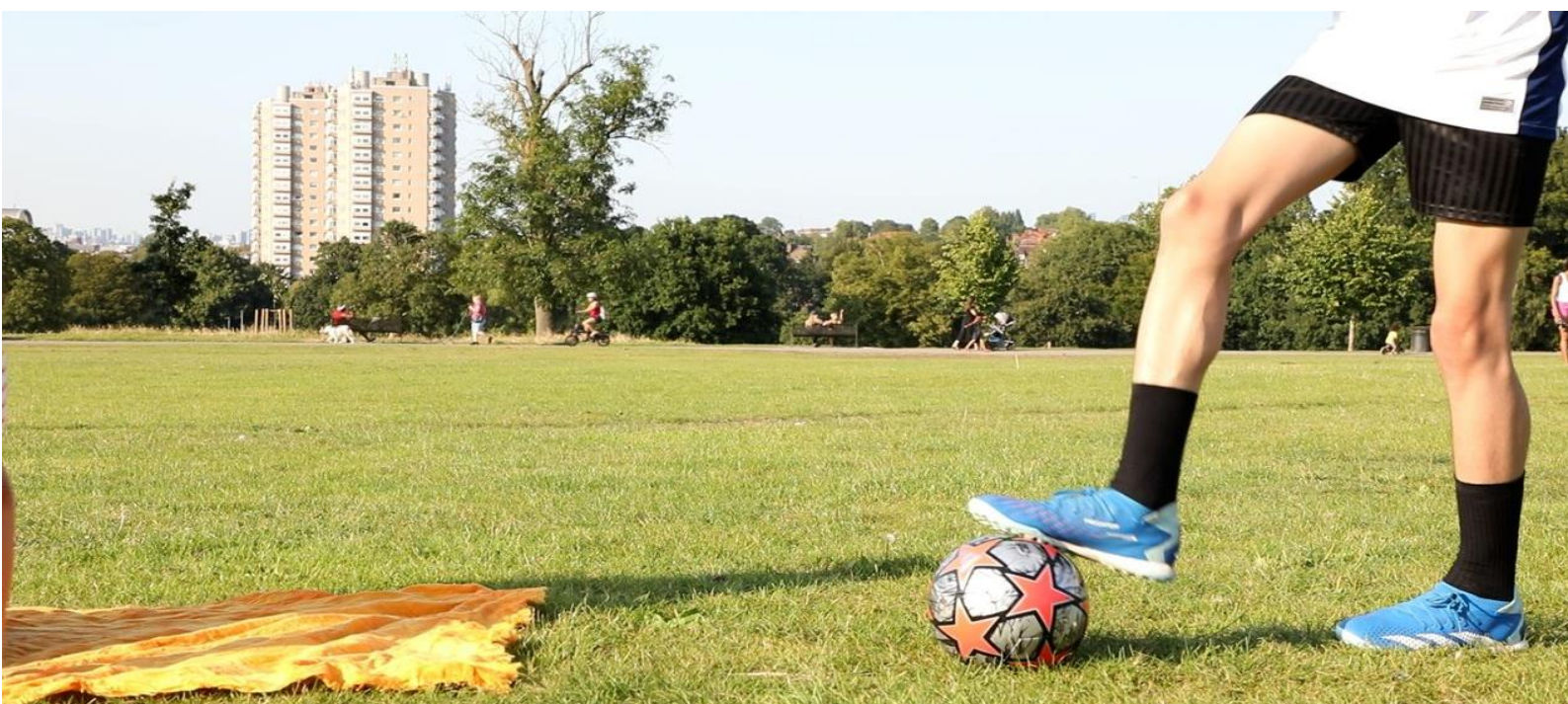
Introduction and method

Introducing the SPOTlight research 2024

BBC Children in Need supports almost 350,000 children and young people a year, funding projects right across the UK that aim to improve the lives of those experiencing challenges that affect their quality of life and wellbeing. Those challenges include growing up in poverty, having mental health issues, being disabled, experiencing challenges within their families and facing social inequality

These projects address a broad range of needs, from mental health support to opportunities for personal development.

Recognising the importance of amplifying the voices of those it serves, BBC Children in Need set up the SPOTlight research to hear directly from the children and young people supported by its funded projects, most of whom are likely to be experiencing issues and challenges.

The SPOTlight research set out to:

- **Provide a snapshot of what life is like** for the children and young people supported by BBC Children in Need projects
- **Understand the hopes and fears** of young people and what they feel would make their lives better
- Explore the **impact of the support that the children and young people receive** through the projects they attend

Method

The research involved four stages:

| Co-design with 4 Children in Need projects | SPOTlight Survey with over 1500 children | 50+ multimedia responses from Children in Need projects | 15 x in-home interviews and 5x filmed revisits |
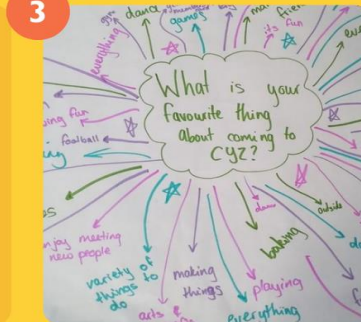
1. **Co-design with four BBC Children in Need projects**

Co-design sessions were conducted to identify what children and young people wanted to be asked about, and how they preferred to be asked. Children and young people from four projects shared thoughts and fed back on early outlines of the survey. This informed the questions and format of the survey and remote activities.

2. **SPOTlight Survey with over 1,500 children**

An online survey was shared with BBC Children in Need grantees to disseminate with the children and young people who attended their projects. The survey was anonymous and did not ask for children's names, and multiple versions were created to ensure the survey was age appropriate. The survey asked children about a range of topics including what made them feel happy and sad, their hopes for the future, what they thought about the support they received, and what they would like to change in the world.

Spotlight survey sample: 1,565 children

51% Girls

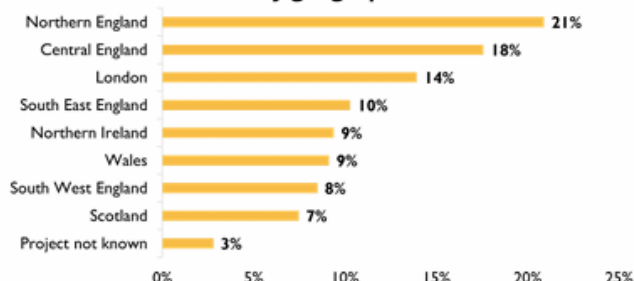43% Boys

2% Non-binary and Gender Diverse Identities

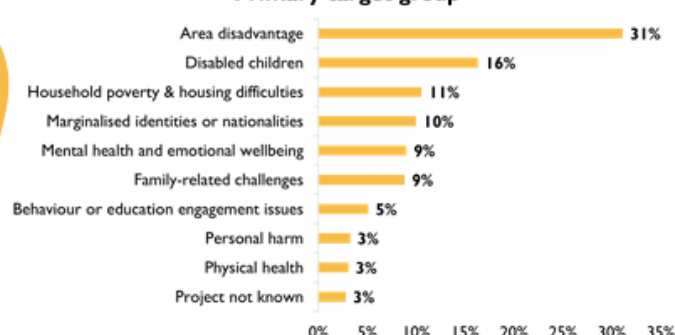35% 8-11 years old

60% 12-18 years old

28% Minority ethnic

38% Have special educational needs

Primary geographical area

Area	%
Northern England	21%
Central England	18%
London	14%
South East England	10%
Northern Ireland	9%
Wales	9%
South West England	8%
Scotland	7%
Project not known	3%

Primary target group

Group	%
Area disadvantage	31%
Disabled children	16%
Household poverty & housing difficulties	11%
Marginalised identities or nationalities	10%
Mental health and emotional wellbeing	9%
Family-related challenges	9%
Behaviour or education engagement issues	5%
Personal harm	3%
Physical health	3%
Project not known	3%

Q: 'How old are you?', Base n=1,565 .

Q: 'Are you…' – 'A girl', 'A boy', 'I don't want to say', 'I would like to write my own answer', Base n=1,563 .

Q: 'Your ethnic background is…' Base n=1,562 .

Q: 'Do you have any Special Education Needs or Disabilities (SEND)? This includes any disability, medical needs, learning difficulty or special needs that mean, for example, that you need extra help at school or college to do the same lessons or activities as the rest of your age group.' Base n=1,558

UK- wide poll with 2,500 children conducted by BBC Children in Need

A UK-wide poll was conducted with 2,500 children aged 12–18, commissioned and led by BBC Children in Need. The children were asked a range of questions from the SPOTlight survey. While this poll is not nationally representative, we have included charts to illustrate differences between the children being supported by BBC Children in Need, and a UK-wide sample of children.

Note on terminology:

We have used the term "ethnic minority" in this report, acknowledging that our sample size does not allow for detailed analysis of each ethnicity subgroup individually. However, we recognise the diversity within this categorisation which we included as options in the survey.

In the survey, children were asked "Do you have any Special Education Needs or Disabilities (SEND)? This includes any disability, medical needs, learning difficulty or special needs that mean, for example, that you need extra help at school or college to do the same lessons or activities as the rest of your age group."

The term used was SEND, so this is the term used throughout the report, though it has been noted that this term is not universally used, and some children may not have been familiar with it.

Note on statistical significance:

Throughout the report, an asterisk (*) is used to denote statistically significant findings in graphs. Additionally, when we refer to something as '*significantly* higher/lower', this denotes that this finding is statistically significant.

3. 50+ multimedia responses from BBC Children in Need projects

Children and young people were invited to upload responses to questions about what they are proud of, what their favourite thing about coming to the project was, and one thing they would change if they could for other children like them, what it would be. They could share their response in whatever format they preferred, such as through photos, videos, voice notes or drawings.

4. 15 x in-home interviews and 5 x filmed revisits

Children who took part in the SPOTlight survey were asked if they would be interested in taking part in an in-home interview to share their experiences in more detail.

In-home interviews were carried out with 15 participants, to learn more about the hopes, fears and challenges of young people.

A spread of children and young people were engaged including a mixture across:

- Gender
- Age, from 8-18
- Those from different socio-economic backgrounds
- Those with Special Educational Needs or disabilities
- Those attending different types of projects
- Those living in different areas across the UK, including across Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland

Children we spoke to...

Area disadvantage

Zara, 14, B, Dudley

Jake, 15, D, Devon

Katherine, 15, B, Leeds
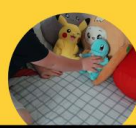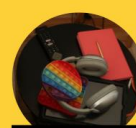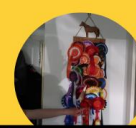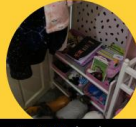
Alisha, 11, D, Essex

Disabled children

Cieran, 7, B, Dumfries

Luke, 17, B, Belfast

Robbie, 17, C1, Dumfries

Eliza, 9, C1, Wolverhampton

Felix, 12, C1, London
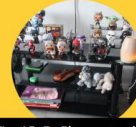
Fin, 15, B, Gloucestershire

Family related challenges

Tom, 16, C1, Surrey

Harrie, 17, C1, Kent

Marginalised identities

Luis, 12, C1, London

Adir, 17, D, Swansea

Physical health

Sophie, 17, B, Birmingham

Note: the grouping of the children is based off the target group of the project that they attend, which was known through the survey responses.

Five of these children then volunteered to take part in a filmed revisit to capture their lives visually:

Tom, 16, C1, Surrey

Luis, 12, C1, London

Eliza, 9, C1, Wolverhampton
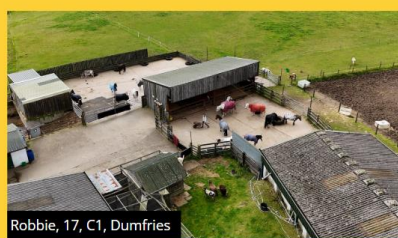
Robbie, 17, C1, Dumfries

Alisha, 11, D, Essex

This report

We asked children and young people to share a snapshot of what life is like for them, to tell us about their hopes and fears for the future, and to reflect on how the support they received from their projects has impacted them.

This report summarises what children told us in their survey responses and during interviews.

To note: All of the children that took part in the qualitative interviews have been given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity. None of the names mentioned in this report are the children's real names.

Section 1: Mental health

"I worry about staying here at home, having no freedom can affect your mental health"

Children worry most about their mental health

Although only 9% of the children surveyed were attending projects that focus primarily on providing children with mental health support, it was the thing that children reported worrying about the most, with 76% saying that they worry about it affecting them. It is important to note that many projects funded by BBC Children in Need provide significant mental health support, even if this is not their central focus.

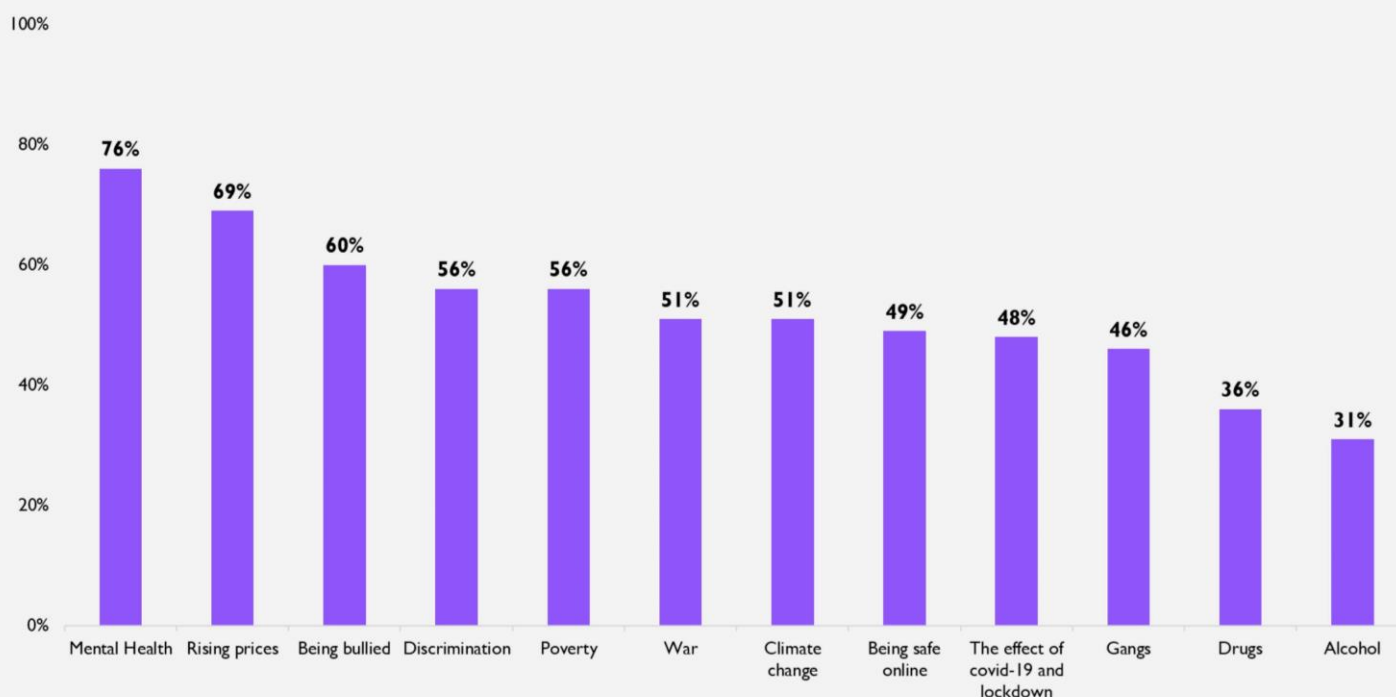**Children's top worries (proportion that selected 'a lot' or 'a little')**

Q: *'How much, if at all, do you worry about these things affecting you?'. Proportion that selected 'A lot' or 'a little'. Base n=856-864*

Open responses and qualitative interviews suggest that children may be concerned about their own mental health, mental health challenges affecting people they know, and in some instances, the ability to get a mental health diagnosis and the impact this may have.

Of those who worry a lot or a little about discrimination, children attending groups whose primary goal was to support those from 'marginalised identities' were more likely to express concern than other groups. All those who identified as non-binary and gender-diverse reported worrying about discrimination affecting them a lot or a little (base n= 31). 64% of children from ethnic minority backgrounds reported worrying about discrimination, compared to 54% of white respondents.

Children who completed the SPOTlight survey were more likely to worry about their mental health and rising prices compared to a UK-wide poll of children and young people

Children who completed the SPOTlight survey were significantly more likely to express concerns about issues such as their mental health, rising prices, discrimination, and the effects of COVID-19 and lockdown. In contrast, children in the UK-wide poll more likely to highlight broader concerns, including war, climate change, online safety, gangs, and drugs. The types of concerns that those in the SPOTlight survey worried more about could be considered to be more local or directly affecting them, while some of those concerns that their peers in the UK-wide poll worried more about were more global issues, such as war and climate change. However, it is not possible to know the extent to which individuals completing either survey had been personally affected by each issue.

Children's top worries in the SPOTlight vs. the UK-wide poll

Q: *'How much, if at all, do you worry about these things affecting you?'. Proportion that selected 'a lot' or 'a little'. SPOTlight base n=856-864, Uk-wide poll base n=2,500 (only asked to those aged 12 or over)*
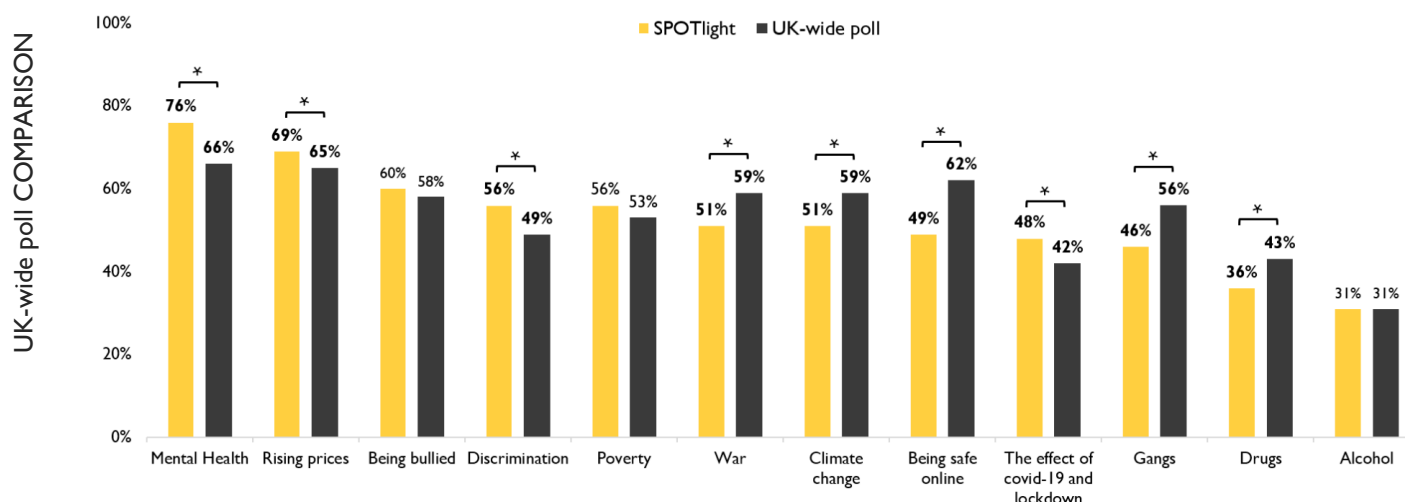
Girls and children with SEND were more likely to worry about their mental health

Girls were more likely to report worrying about mental health affecting them, compared to boys. This difference is statistically significant.

Proportion of children that worried 'a lot' or 'a little' about their mental health, by gender


83%* of girls
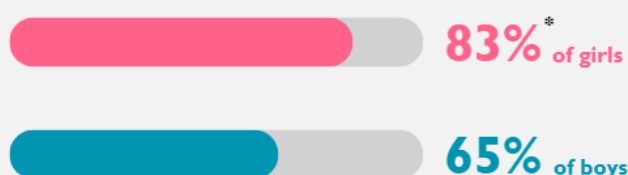
65% of boys

Q: '*How much, if at all, do you worry about these things affecting you? – Mental Health'.*

83%* of girls worried 'a lot' or 'a little' about their mental health, compared to 65% of boys.

Girls base n = 422; boys base n = 382 *(only asked to those aged 12 or over).*

While some girls in the qualitative interviews spoke about first-hand experience of poor mental health, others spoke about having friends who had been affected by having poor mental health. Some mentioned seeing people talk about mental health online; for example, TikTok videos of people talking about their own mental health or seeing online 'quizzes' that said they could determine whether you had the symptoms of different mental health conditions.

Case study: Alisha spoke about getting support for her own mental health and wanting a diagnosis of ADHD
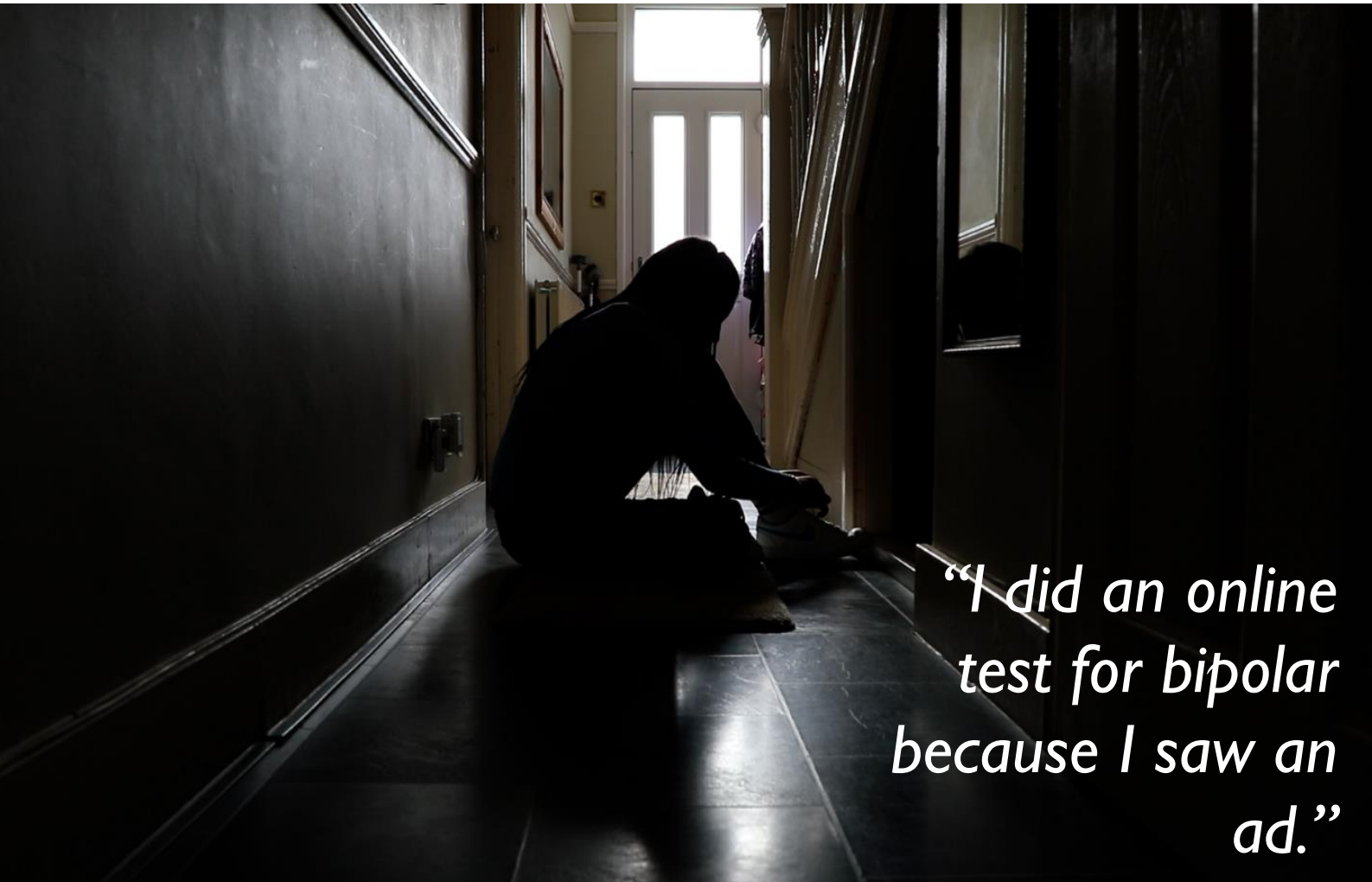
"I did an online test for bipolar because I saw an ad."

Alisha is 11 years old and lives in Essex with her half-sister, mum, grandma, and two lodgers. She's energetic, loves football and gymnastics, and is always smiling. "I think I'm really energetic, a bit weird, and very passionate about things," she says, describing herself with a grin.

Recently, she's been going to therapy, something that began a while ago.

"I got therapy because my mum was being abused. We're both okay now, but my mum still hurts."

After seeing an advert, Alisha decided to take an online test for bipolar disorder and ADHD.

"I did an online test for bipolar because I saw an ad, and I have three symptoms of bipolar and 13 or 14 for ADHD. So, I thought, yeah, I'll just stick to ADHD."

She's now hoping to get an official diagnosis as she feels that if she were diagnosed with ADHD, she might be treated differently at school by being given more allowances by her teachers and told off less. Alisha said that her teachers treat those who she knows have diagnoses of conditions differently.

Alisha has found ways to manage her feelings. Football is one of her favourite ways to escape from stress. "When I'm playing football, I forget everything else," she explains. Gymnastics is another passion of hers, where she enjoys learning new tricks and building her confidence.

Felix, 12, and Luke, 17, both described feeling unhappy at home. Felix, who is autistic, felt that spending too much time at home could negatively impact his mental health. He hoped his father and older sister would accompany him on more 'training days' so that he could learn how to be more independent. Meanwhile, Luke said that he often struggles with the boredom of being stuck at home and feels anxious about missing out on what his friends and family are doing. Luke's mother described the situation as a 'double-edged sword': although he wants to participate in activities, his condition makes it difficult to cope with certain environments.

Proportion of children that worried 'a lot' about their mental health, by SEND

44%* with SEND
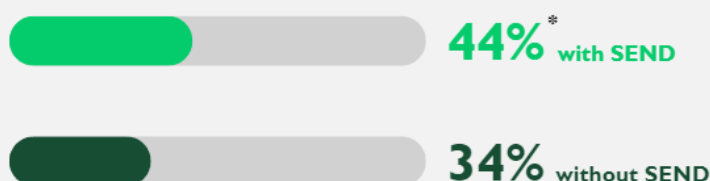
34% without SEND

Q: '_How much, if at all, do you worry about these things? – Mental health._

44% of children with SEND worried **'a lot'** about mental health, compared to 34% of children without SEND.

Children with SEND base n = 349; Children without SEND base n = 369 (only asked to those aged 12 or over).

A higher proportion of children in the SPOTlight sample reported having SEND, compared to a UK-wide poll

Proportion of children that reported having SEND, by SPOTlight/UK-wide poll
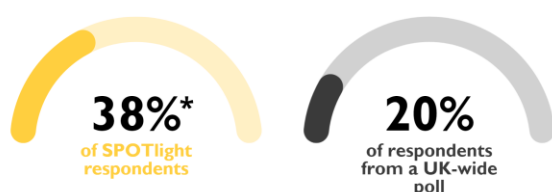
UK-wide poll COMPARISON

38%* of SPOTlight respondents

20% of respondents from a UK-wide poll

Q: '_Do you have any Special Education Needs or Disabilities (SEND)? This includes any disability, medical needs, learning difficulty or special needs that means for example that you need extra help at school or college to do the same lessons or activities as the rest of your age group.'_

SPOTlight base n =1,005, UK-wide poll base n = 2,500

Please note: To ensure more accurate comparisons, we have excluded responses from children aged 8-11 from the SPOTlight dataset, as the UK-wide poll only included those aged 12-18. This approach has been applied consistently throughout this report when comparing the SPOTlight sample with the UK-wide poll.

Section 2: School

"I find school overwhelming, there are too many people around"

Children say they feel unhappiest when they are at school compared to other settings

Children were asked how they felt in different settings: at school, at home, at their BBC CiN funded project, online, and in their local area.

A higher number of children reported feeling unhappy when at school compared to other settings. Statistically significantly higher rates of unhappiness were reported among certain groups: **older children** (42% of those aged 12+ compared with 22% of those aged 8-11), **children with SEND** (41% compared with 26% of those without SEND), **girls** (36% compared with 30% of boys), and **children with one parent** (42% compared with 32% of those with two parents).

How children feel in various settings

Q: *'How do you normally feel when you are…' Base n=1,483-1,551*
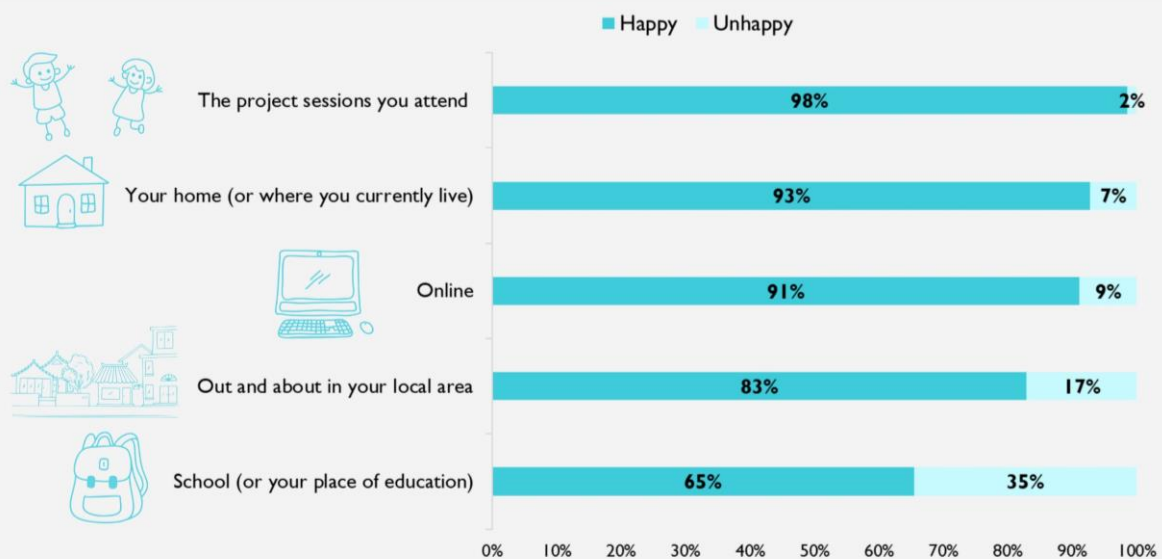
A higher proportion of children in the SPOTlight sample felt unhappy at school compared to a UK-wide poll of children and young people

A significantly higher proportion of the children in the SPOTlight sample reported feeling unhappy at school, in their local area, and at home, compared to the UK-wide poll. The difference in reported happiness between the two groups was largest at school.

Proportion of children that feel 'happy' or 'very happy' in various settings, by SPOTlight vs. UK-wide poll
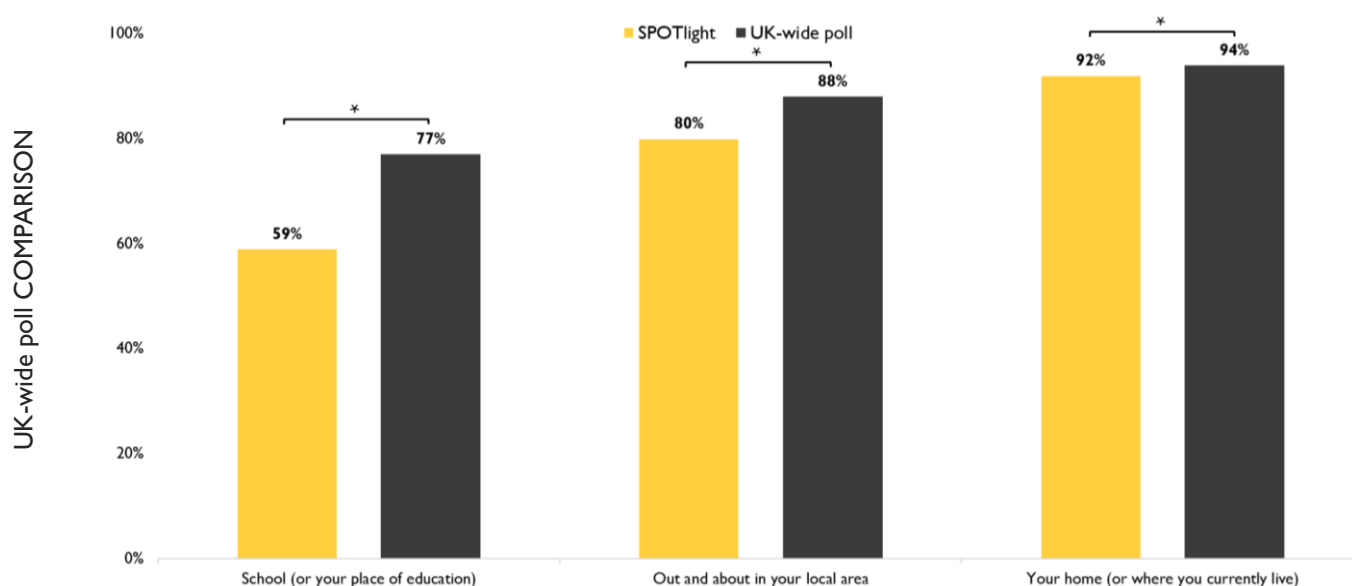
Q: *'How do you normally feel when you are…' SPOTlight base n = 994-1,003, UK-wide poll base n = 2,269-2,500 (we have excluded responses from ages 8-11 in the SPOTlight sample in this comparison to ensure a fair comparison).*

At school, this difference between those in the SPOTlight sample and those in the UK- wide poll was greater when comparing children *with SEND* within the SPOTlight sample than the children *without SEND*, although both groups were significantly less likely to report being happy at school compared to a UK-wide poll.
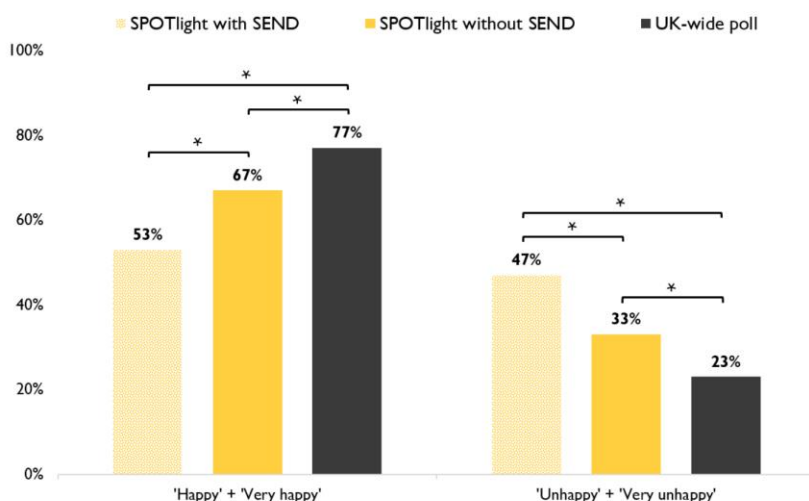
Q: *'How do you normally feel when you are at school (or your place of education)?'*

SPOTlight with SEND base n = 401, SPOTlight without SEND base n = 429, UK-wide poll base n = 2269. (we have excluded responses from ages 8-11 in the SPOTlight sample to ensure a more accurate comparison).

Over half of those who felt unhappy at school said it was because they feel anxious there

Children who said they felt unhappy at school were asked why this was. The two most common reasons were children reporting that they felt anxious, or that they felt bored, at school.

Some children spoke about finding school overwhelming and anxiety-inducing in the open responses to the survey, and during qualitative interviews.

"I find school overwhelming, too many people around"

"I struggle with depression here [at school]"

"I have ADHD and am not often given support and staff pick me out a lot"

Survey open responses

Why children are unhappy at school

Q: *'You said that you feel **unhappy** when you are **at school,** why is that? Please select all that apply.'* Base n=387

Reason	%
I feel anxious here	51%
I feel bored here	51%
I find the work boring	42%
I don't get along with the other people here	35%
I find the work too difficult	30%
I don't get to do what I like here	30%
I feel lonely and left out here	30%
I am bullied or people are not nice to me…	25%
I feel unsafe here	18%
Another reason	17%
I feel scared here	14%
I find the work too easy	8%
Don't know	8%
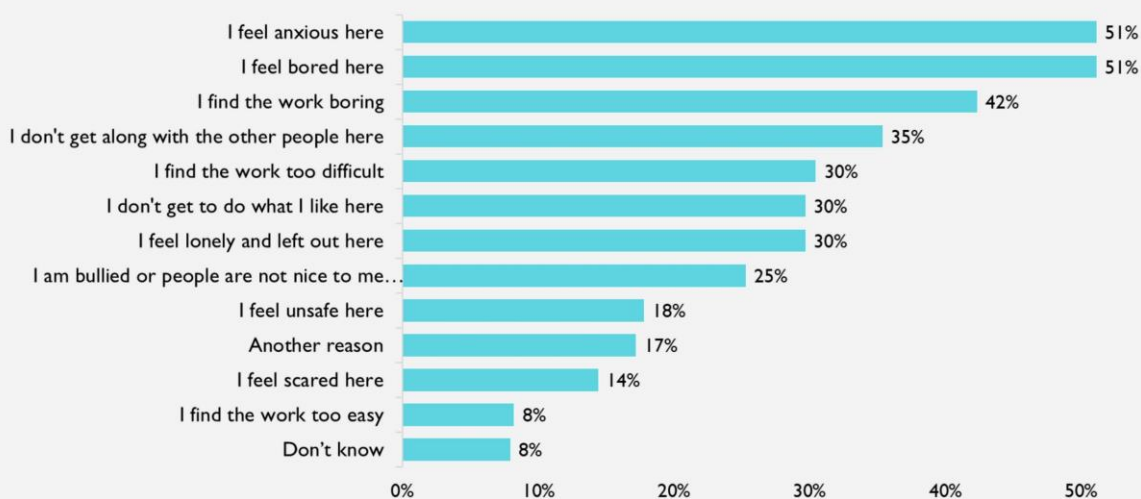
Anxiety was more frequently chosen as the cause of unhappiness at school and in their local area, compared to the sessions they attend at their BBC Children in Need project, and their home.

Proportion of children reporting feeling anxious as the cause of unhappiness, by location
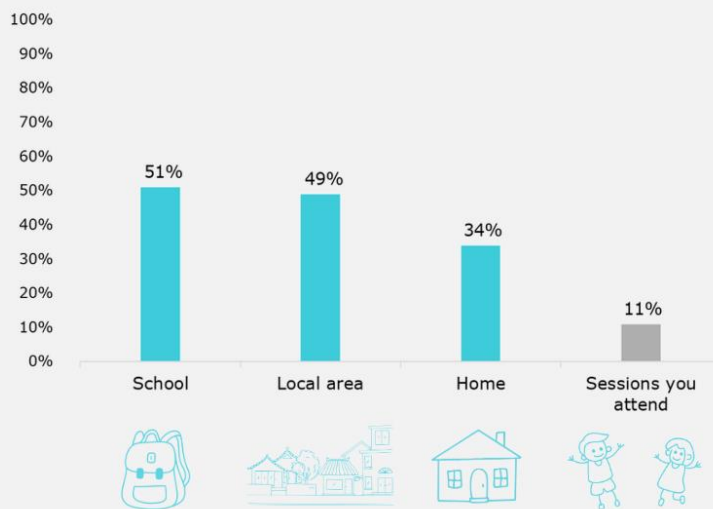
Q: '*You said that you feel <u>unhappy when you are at</u> [location], <u>why</u> is that?' (asked only to those aged 12 and over, proportion that selected 'I feel anxious here'*

Base of: Children that feel unhappy at school n=387; Children that feel unhappy in their local area n=168,Children unhappy at home n=76;

Of the children from the BBC Children in Need projects who said that they were unhappy at school, girls were more likely to say this was because they felt anxious, and lonely and left out.

Gender differences in reported feelings of anxiety and loneliness at <u>school</u>

Feeling anxious

56% * of girls

40% of boys

Q: '*You said that you feel <u>unhappy</u> when you are <u>at school,</u> why is that? – 'I feel **anxious** here'.*

56% of girls who felt unhappy at school reported they felt anxious at school, compared to 40% of boys.

Girls base n = 210; boys base n = 139 *(only asked to those who felt unhappy at school and aged 12 or over).*

Feeling lonely and left out

35% * of girls

21% of boys

Q: '*You said that you feel <u>unhappy</u> when you are <u>at school</u>, why is that? – 'I feel **lonely and left out** here'.*

35% of girls who felt unhappy at school reported they felt lonely and left out, compared to 21% of boys.

Girls base n = 210; boys base n = 139 *(only asked to those who felt unhappy at school and aged 12 or over).*

1 in 10 children reported regularly missing school

Across the sample, 10% of children reported missing school 'most of the time' or 'often'.

A significantly higher proportion of children in the SPOTlight sample missed school frequently, compared to those in the UK-wide poll

A significantly higher proportion of children in the SPOTlight sample missed school 'most of the time or often' (11% of those aged 12-18 in the SPOTlight sample, compared to 3% of those in the UK-wide poll).

Frequency of missing school by SPOTlight vs. UK-wide poll

Q: *'How often do you miss school or college? Please choose the one that best applies to you.' SPOTlight base n = 903, UK-wide poll base n = 2,269 (Similarly, we have excluded responses from those aged 8-11 from the SPOTlight dataset, to ensure greater comparability).*
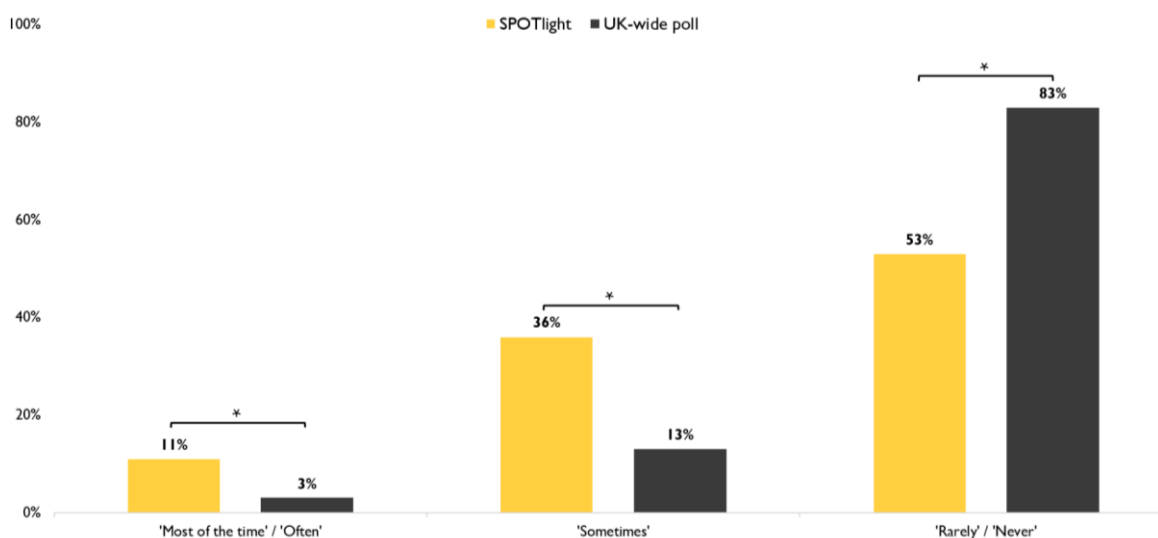
The UK-wide sample was more likely to report missing school 'rarely' or 'never' than both SPOTlight groups (83% compared to 49% for those in SPOTlight with SEND and 59% for those without).

Within the SPOTlight survey, those with SEND were more likely to miss school regularly compared to those without, and those living with one parent were more likely to miss school than those living with two parents.

Proportion of children that miss school 'often' or 'most of the time', by SEND and number of parents they live with at home

Q: *'How often do you <u>miss school or college?</u> Please choose the one that best applies to you'. Base n with SEND = 551, Base n without SEND = 660. Base n living with one parent = 430, Base n living with two parents = 931*

Children with SEND were more likely to report anxiety as a reason for unhappiness at school, compared to children without SEND.

Reported feelings of anxiety at school, by SEND
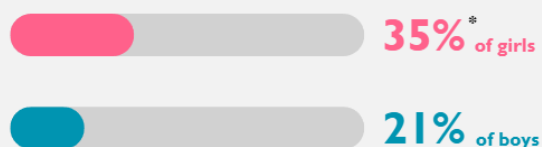
61%[*] with SEND

39% without SEND

Q: '_You said that you feel <u>unhappy</u> when you are <u>at school</u>, why is that? – 'I feel **anxious** here'._
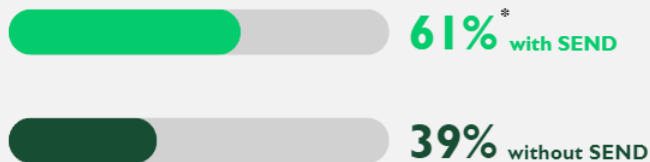
61% of children with SEND reported they felt anxious at school, compared to 39% of children without SEND.

Children with SEND base n = 171; children without SEND base n = 136 _(only asked to those who felt unhappy at school and aged 12 or over)._

Children in the qualitative research spoke about the reasons they missed school. Some, such as Cieran and Harrie, missed school as a result of bullying.

Harrie, 17, left school early this year, after years of severe bullying by classmates. Harrie says that ever since primary school she has been picked on relentlessly because she was seen as different due to her weight and (undiagnosed) autism. On one occasion, a rock was even thrown at her eye.

Harrie's mum said that she would use any excuse to skip school: **"She said she would have toothache, backache, any ache to get out of it."**

This affected her learning, and she said this was one of the reasons why she felt she struggled in her GCSEs.

Fortunately, Harrie has decided to enrol in a new college, where she will be studying mechanics, something she's been interested in since she was young. She says she is looking forward to a new start.

Other children we spoke to were missing school due to other responsibilities they had. In some cases, like Adir, this was to take family members to the hospital.

Adir, 17

Adir lives in Swansea and sometimes misses college to take his dad to the hospital. Originally from Libya, Adir translates for his father who has a long-term kidney and joint condition which affects his mobility. This causes him to either leave school early, or sometimes skip college all together, whenever his dad has an appointment. This is around once a month.

Adir told us he likes to see himself as a "protector of his friends and family." Due to his dad's illness, Adir is responsible for most of the cleaning and cooking in the house as well as looking after his 11-year-old younger brother. This can also mean that he has to leave college early.

"I have to take care of my brother sometimes. He's a bit of a troublemaker in school, so I have to go to school and then sort things out."

Adir says he doesn't mind missing school occasionally. He is studying an Electrical Engineering BTEC and is also resitting his GCSE maths exam. He says he feels happy about how school is going for him and is confident about passing his exams later this year. However, he did say that the extra time studying at home can pull him away from his other hobbies such as the gym:

"For a year and six months, I could not go to the gym because of my dad, and the travel that I would have to make between gym and home and then school, and then all my exams."

Some felt that COVID lockdowns had impacted their confidence and happiness at school

Some said that COVID lockdown had made school feel harder, as they were used to spending more time inside with their immediate family. For example, Kathryn explained that she feels she is quieter and less confident in school, and mentioned seeing a similar shift across children in her school.

Katherine, 14, is about to enter her GCSE year at school. She says the Covid-19 lockdown affected her confidence.

"I feel like before Covid, everyone was quite loud and confident, and after Covid, I got a bit quiet."

Spending so much time inside with just her family has made her feel less confident at school, and she has noticed a similar change in other children as well.

This was reflected in the SPOTlight survey, where 48% of children said they worried about the effect of Covid-19 and lockdowns on them.

Worries about Covid-19 and lockdown

48% of children worry 'a lot' or 'a little' about Covid-19 and lockdown

Children who worried about Covid-19 and lockdown 'a lot' were **more likely to miss school** 'most of the time' or 'often'.

20%* of those that worry about Covid-19 and lockdown 'a lot' miss school frequently.

11% of children that don't worry about Covid-19 and lockdown at all miss school frequently

Q: 'How much, if at all, do you worry about these things affecting you?' – Covid-19 and lockdown. Base n=858. Base of those that worry about Covid-19 'a lot' = 137; base n of those that don't worry 'at all' = 345

Section 3: Friendships and fitting in

"It's really hard to make friends, whenever I come up to someone, they just don't notice me."

47% of children reported finding it hard to make new friends

Nearly half of the children in the sample reported that they found it 'very hard' or 'hard' making new friends.

"I'm not sure how to interact with the other people, and find it difficult to read their body language, and find a pattern in how to move around. It's very stressful."

"I have a social and communication disorder. I would rather talk to people online than in person."

"People are judging and social interaction hurts."

Survey open responses

A higher proportion of children in the SPOTlight sample reported finding it hard to make friends compared to children and young people in the UK-wide poll

A significantly higher proportion of children in the SPOTlight sample reported that they found it 'very hard' or 'hard' to make friends, in comparison with the UK-wide poll.

Proportion of sample that find it 'hard' or 'very hard' to make new friends

Q: *'How easy or hard do you find making new friends?'* SPOTlight base n = 995, UK-wide poll base n = 2,500 (We have excluded responses from those aged 8-11 from the SPOTlight sample)

UK-wide poll COMPARISON
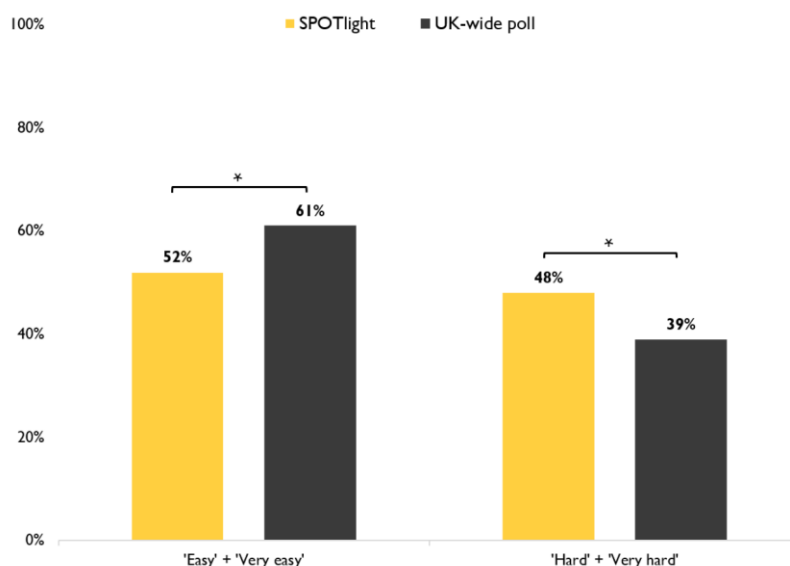
However, children who reported *not having* SEND in the SPOTlight sample were no more likely to report finding it 'hard' or 'very hard' to make new friends than the UK-wide poll. Only the children with SEND were more likely to report finding it 'hard' or 'very hard' (59% compared with 39% in the UK-wide poll and 34% in the SPOTlight group without SEND; both of these differences are statistically significant).

Proportion of sample that find it 'hard' or 'very hard' to make new friends

Q: *'How easy or hard do you find making new friends?' SPOTlight with SEND base n=400, SPOTlight without SEND base n=425, UK-wide poll base n=2,500. (We have excluded responses from those aged 8-11 from the SPOTlight sample)*

UK-wide poll COMPARISON
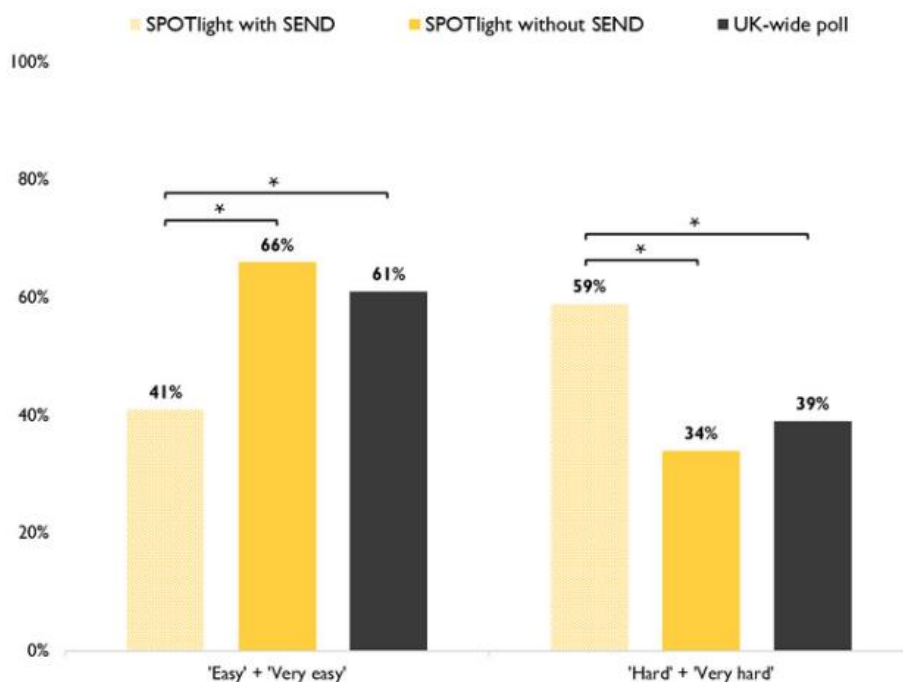
Children with SEND reported having fewer friends

Children with SEND were significantly more likely to report having fewer friends, with a higher proportion reporting having "one or two" or "no" friends, compared to chi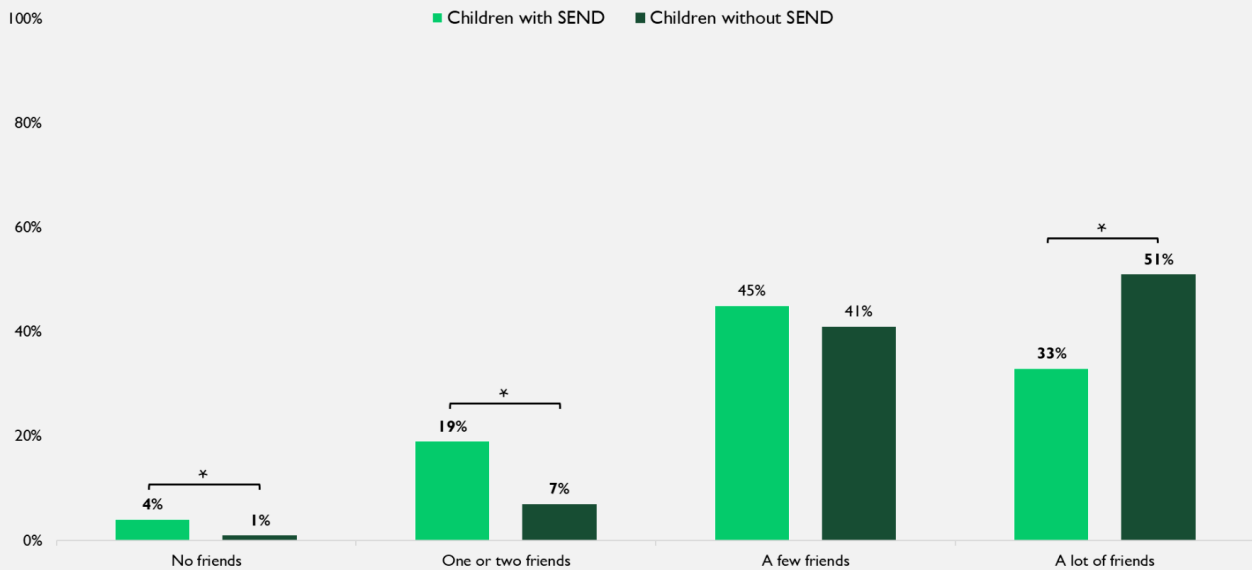ldren without SEND. While about half of children without SEND said they had "a lot" of friends, only a third of those with SEND reported the same. Additionally, children with SEND found it harder to make new friends and were more likely to feel lonely and left out at school.

Reported number of friends, by SEND

Q: '*How many friends do you have?'*** Children with SEND base n=592; children without SEND base n=702 (only asked to those who felt unhappy at school and aged 12 or over).*

Legend: ■ Children with SEND   ■ Children without SEND

	No friends	One or two friends	A few friends	A lot of friends
Children with SEND	4%	19%	45%	33%
Children without SEND	1%	7%	41%	51%

Proportion that find it hard making new friends, by SEND

58%* with SEND

35% without SEND

Q: '*How easy or hard do you find making new friends?'***

58% of children with SEND reported they find it 'very hard' or 'hard' to make new friends, compared to 35% of children without SEND.

Children with SEND base n = 591; children without SEND base n = 692.

Reported feelings of lonely and left out at school, by SEND
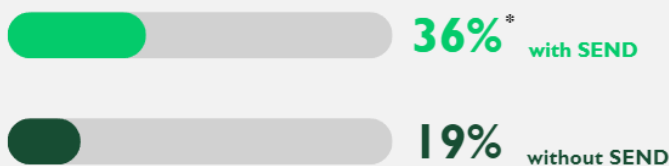
36%* with SEND

19% without SEND

Q: '*You said that you feel <u>unhappy</u> when you are <u>at school</u>, why is that? – 'I feel **lonely and left out** here'.*

36% of children with SEND reported they felt lonely and left out at school, compared to 19% of children without SEND.

Children with SEND base n = 171; children without SEND base n = 136 *(only asked to those who felt unhappy at school and aged 12 or over).*

Luis and Eliza told us about their experiences at school. They both have SEND diagnoses; Luis has dyslexia and Eliza is autistic.

Luis, 12, moved from Venezuela with his mum to the UK in 2023. His parents explained that they moved mainly for Luis's education and the lack of support available in Venezuela for children with dyslexia.

Initially, Luis struggled to adapt to life in the UK and found it difficult to keep up in lessons with his limited English. However, this past year he feels really supported by his teachers and his confidence has increased massively.

"I didn't have any friends, I just roamed around the school"

Eliza, 9, lives in Wolverhampton with her mum, sister, dog and four guinea pigs. She's currently in the process of getting a dyslexia diagnosis and is also autistic. These factors have made school more challenging for her, especially when it comes to making friends and fitting in.

At school, Eliza often feels left out and struggles to connect with the other children. She shared how lonely it's been for her: "When I was 8, I found a friend, but before that, I didn't have any friends. I just roamed around the school." After moving schools, Eliza found it hard to start over and make new friends.

"It's really hard to make friends because whenever I come up to someone, they just don't notice me. I don't want to be in the shadows—I want to be a popular kid."

Eliza says she longs to be part of a group. Her mum reflects on the challenges Eliza has faced, especially during the Covid pandemic.

"She was always going to struggle with being autistic, but Covid threw a spanner in the works."

"It made things harder than they would've been because she was in and out of school, and she just didn't make any friends." Academically, Eliza's mum noticed that she wasn't at the same level as other children her age. **"We didn't know it was autism back then, but I could tell something was different, especially with her English."**

Over half of children worried about being bullied

Being bullied was another big thing that children worried about. Girls and children with SEND were more likely to worry 'a lot' or 'a little' about being bullied (66% of girls worried, compared with 50% of boys). Similarly, 66% of children with SEND worried about being bullied, compared to 50% of those without SEND. Both differences were statistically significant.

There were no significant differences in the proportion of children who worried about bullying in the SPOTlight and UK-wide poll.

In the qualitative interviews, Jake and Cieran spoke about being bullied at school, and how this has led them to sometimes taking time off, and considering being taken out of school.

Jake, 14, has learning difficulties and ADHD. Up until last year, he was in mainstream school, where he really struggled, not just with keeping up in class, but with the other children too; he was often picked on and bullied. Jake talked about some of his experiences.

"He punched me and got suspended for two days."

There were times when things escalated further, and he had drinks thrown at him.

Since moving schools, Jake hasn't experienced any bullying and is feeling much happier and more settled.

Cieran, 7, lives in a small village about an hour from Dumfries, Scotland. He's an energetic and funny child, but he suffers from severe eczema, which can be triggered by things like weather, grass, carpet, and certain skin products.

Unfortunately, Cieran is often bullied at school, and sometimes it even turns physical. "One time he even hurt me, threw a brick at my head," he says. When things get bad, his mum sometimes pulls him out of school until the teachers took action.

"Most of them aren't very nice at school."

This is a presentation Cieran shared with his class to help them understand more about his condition.
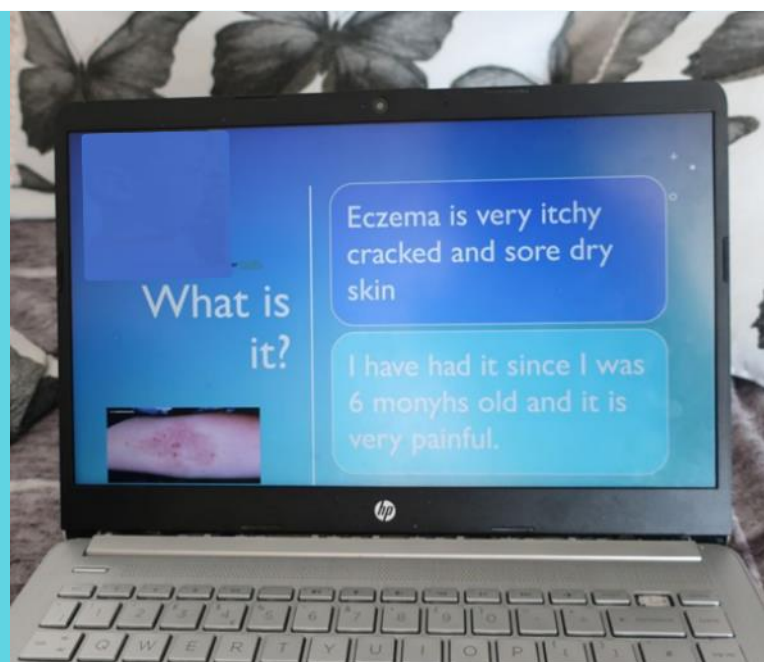
Section 4: Money

"I wish there were lower prices so people with less money can live a happy life"

Many children worried about being affected by rising prices and poverty

Children reported being concerned about rising prices and poverty, with children mentioning not having enough space in their household and not having enough food as specific concerns in the survey.

Proportion of those that worry 'a lot' or 'a little' about rising prices and poverty

69%

Worried about
rising prices

56%
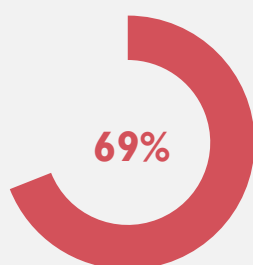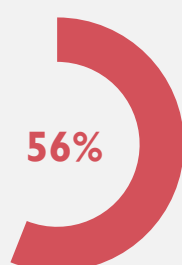
Worried about
poverty

Q: '*How much, if at all, do you worry about these things affecting you?' – Rising Prices, base n = 861*

69% of children worried about rising prices

Q: '*How much, if at all, do you worry about these things affecting you?' – Poverty, base n = 857*

56% of children worried about poverty

"We have not got much food and things"

"Our house is too small for my family. We are cramped"

Survey open responses

Certain children were statistically significantly more likely to worry about poverty 'a lot': those from minority ethnic groups and in single parent households, as well as those attending projects supporting those from 'marginalised identities'. In contrast, children attending projects whose primary target was to provide support for those living in 'areas of disadvantage' did not report heightened concerns about poverty.

Harrie is a young carer and described how she takes responsibility for her mum's finances. For some children, especially young carers, worrying about money is another part of their family responsibilities.

Harrie, 17, is a young carer for her disabled mum who suffers from severe anxiety and complex PTSD.

Because it is just her and her mum at home, Harrie takes care of a lot of the cooking and cleaning in the house, as well as doing the weekly shop. This means she has learnt to "watch" money.

Harrie says that she **"has to be careful not go to over a certain amount"** so she doesn't leave her and her mum short for the month. She said that she has noticed rising prices which have increased their overall costs. She feels like this has limited what she can do.

For example, around her birthday, Harrie said she wanted to go Go-Karting with friends. However, she was worried that this 'would leave her mum short'. As a result, she celebrated at home instead.

"Sometimes it hurts that I can't do everything that I want"

Harrie's mum thinks she worries too much, saying that "she is a worrier over money." However, Harrie feels like she has to worry. Part of her anxiety stems from her brother, who has borrowed money but hasn't returned it. "My mum got stressed about this, and her anxiety gets worse, meaning she didn't want to leave the house."

Section 5: Online life

"People put up things and it's the complete opposite of how they are, it ruins your self-esteem"

Children spent a lot of time online, with some feeling it was easier to 'fit in' online

For many children, online life was a big part of their lives.

91% of the sample say they feel happy when they are online. They enjoyed the entertainment, connectivity and ability to learn new things.

> *"I have 2 friends from Wales that I wouldn't get to talk to otherwise"*
>
> *"It's a very nice outlet for my comfort things"*
>
> **Survey open responses**

Many children spoke happily about the activities they do online and how it affected their behaviours in real-life.

For example, **Luke, 17** has his own cooking YouTube channel. His Dad helps him make the videos and edit them. He shares these with his friends on WhatsApp, most of whom now go to different schools. He also watches a lot of local travel vlogs on YouTube which his mum says helps him to relax and manage his autism.

Some children spoke about feeling like they could connect with people in similar situations online, when it was not always possible to do so in their day to day lives.

Sophie, 17, lives in Birmingham with her mum, dad, and younger brother. She has thalassemia and sickle cell disease, which can be challenging to manage. To learn more about her conditions and connect with others, Sophie uses online platforms.

"I feel like I fit in and am accepted."

Reflecting on the supportive communities she has found as a Muslim, Sophie says she also engages in online spaces to widen her community and deepen her sense of identity.
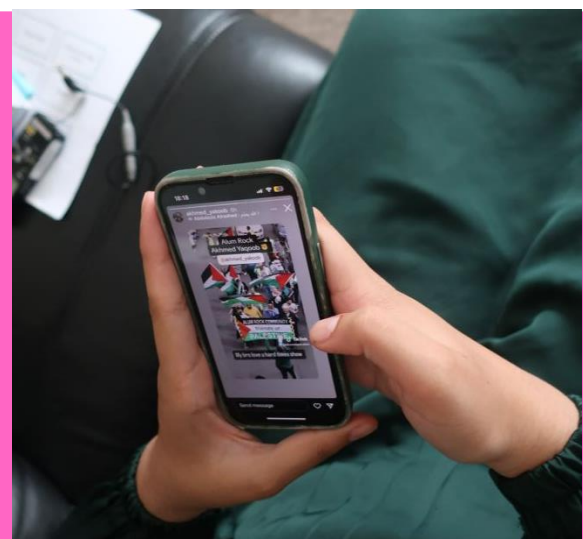
However, some encountered negative experiences online

Not all children were positive about being online.

Some children reported experiencing online bullying. For example, Jake, who was previously bullied at the school he attended, also often gets into scraps and arguments with people online too. **"It's just been really unkind name calling"** Jake's mum explained. After Jake got himself into a number of heated situations, his mum decided to bring the console downstairs, so that she could be present and hear the conversations he was having.

There were also worries about making comparisons to others and seeing distressing things online. For instance, as Sophie explains:

"People put up one thing and it's completely the opposite to how they are […]. It can really affect people because they believe if this person has this kind of body then why can't I have one. It's all about self-image and self-esteem. It ruins your self-esteem a lot."

This was reflected in the SPOTlight survey, where comparison to others on social media was the most common reason children said they felt unhappy online. There were no significant differences in overall net happiness between boys and girls, but boys were significantly more likely to be "very happy" online (33%* vs. 24%), suggesting boys skew toward higher happiness levels.

Why children feel unhappy online

Q: *'You said that you feel <u>unhappy</u> when you are <u>online</u>, why is that? Please select all that apply', Base n = 71*
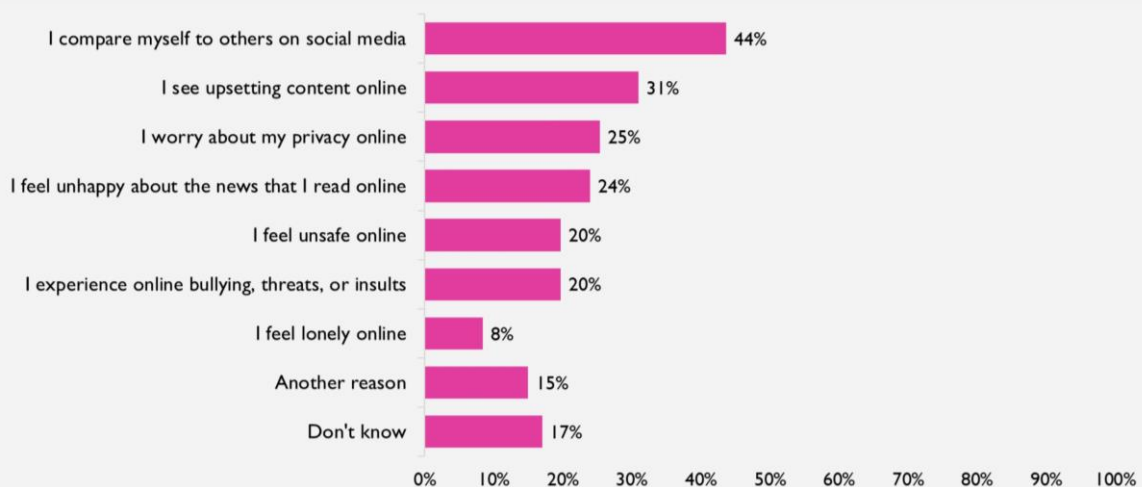
Section 6: Getting support from BBC Children in Need funded projects

"*[Since starting project] I've been calmer, a lot less stressed, and they've given me so many opportunities*"

Children reported feeling happiest when at their BBC Children in Need funded project

Children were the most likely to report feeling happiest when at their BBC Children in Need funded project, compared to other settings. Children spoke about many things they liked about their projects, including making friends and feeling like they fit in, meeting adults they can trust, doing fun and new activities, and feeling independent.

98% of children reported feeling happy at their BBC Children in Need funded project

It is fun here	73%
I have met adults that I can trust here	69%
It helps me feel included/ like I belong	64%
It makes me feel safe here	62%
I have made new friends here	61%
I learn new skills here	61%
It makes me feel better about myself	56%
It helps me with my mental health	55%
I feel healthier	35%
Another reason	5%
Don't know	3%
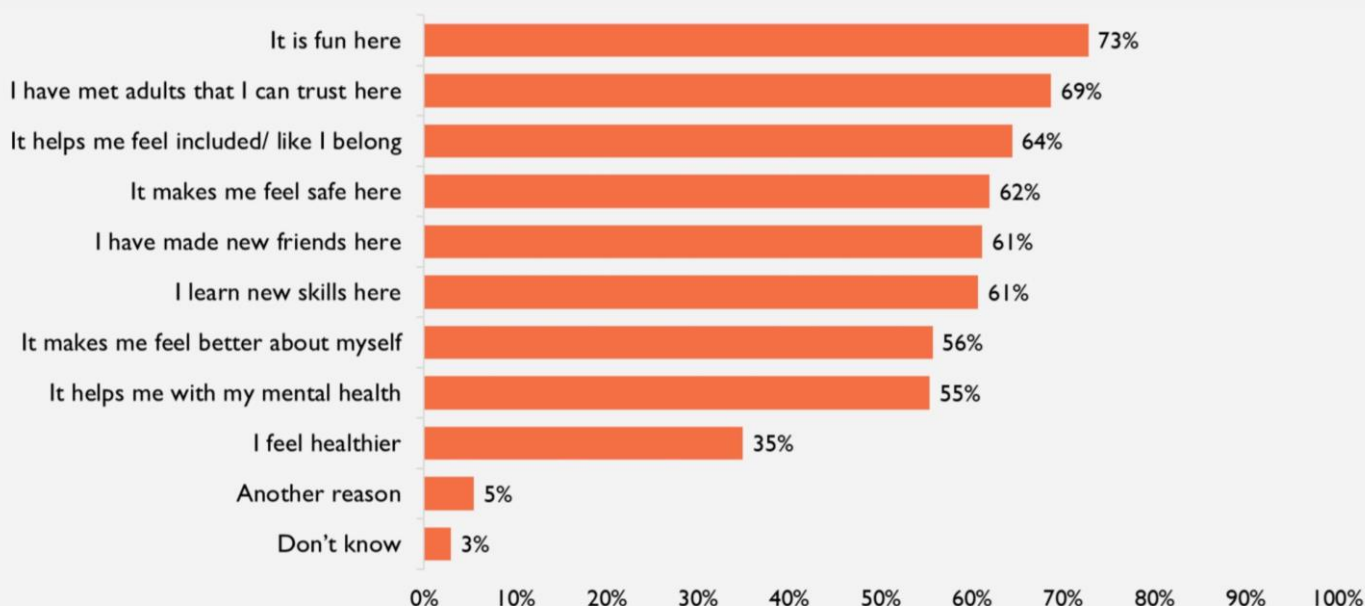
Q: *'You said that you feel <u>happy</u> at the session you attend at [BBC CiN funded project], why is that? Please select all that apply.'*

Base n=885

Children valued the friends they had made, and feeling like they fit in

Many children had found friends and felt a sense of belonging at the clubs they attended.

For example, Sophie, 17, has sickle cell and thalassemia and attends a BBC CiN project that is specifically for children with these conditions. For her it's been great to meet other children like her and be mentored and looked after by them. She is now looking to become a mentor so she can help others the same way that they have helped her.

Proportion that feel included/like they belong, and that have met new friends at their BBC CiN project

64%
'It helps me feel included/ like I belong'

61%
'I have made new friends here'

Q: '*You said that you feel happy at the sessions you attend at [BBC CiN funded project], why is that? Please select all that apply, n=880 Please select all that apply.' Base n =885 Please select all that apply, n=885' Please select all that apply.' Base n = 880*

64% feel included and like they belong

61% say they have made new friends

However, there were often barriers that made it difficult to maintain these friendships over time.

For example, Finn attends a powerchair football club, but the age gap between him and the other members, who are mostly in their 30s and 60s, makes it hard for him to find companionship. He's hopeful that this might change soon as he plans to start attending a children's group. "From this September, I'm hoping he'll find a friend. That's what I need for him," his mum reflects.

For Cieran, geography presents a major hurdle. Living in a remote part of Scotland, the eczema-related club he attends holds most of its in-person sessions far away, with the closest meet-up in Birmingham. Although he's participated in one remote session, attending in person is nearly impossible due to the distance.

Eliza, who goes to a youth club for children with SEND, faces another kind of challenge. While the club has helped her make new friends in the moment, her mum notes that the group of attendees often changes, making it hard for Eliza to build lasting connections.

Children appreciated the opportunity to try new things

There were lots of examples of children talking about learning new things and trying new activities that they did not usually get to do when at their projects.

For example, Jake's club run a radio show each week, which he likes to get involved in. The shows last an hour and Jake's often focuses on sports and matches that have been played that week. Jake likes being able to try something new and share his passion for sport with others.

Children also enjoyed the independence and confidence that the clubs gave them

Children spoke about having the opportunity to spend time away from home, making them feel more independent.

Felix is 12 years old and lives in Ealing with his older sister and father. He has autism and goes to a weekly after-school club for children and young people with SEND.

It's a space for him to meet up with friends after school, but also try new activities.

"It's where I learnt to ride a bike... I like cycling - I barely get to do it [at home] since I don't have a bike."

Children reported having met adults they can trust at their BBC Children in Need funded project

Children mentioned specific adults that they had met at their projects whom they felt comfortable around and able to talk to about anything with. This support was reflected in the survey findings, with 69% of children reporting that they had adults they can trust at their project.

"They give me space and there are no expectations"

"I get to talk to adults who genuinely care about how my day/week has gone"

"The adults are so lovely and I feel so comfortable around everyone"

Survey open responses

Some children enjoyed talking to adults who had been through similar situations to them. For example, Tom attends a club for young carers and enjoys speaking to people who have also been young carers.

Tom, 16, lives in Surrey with his mum, stepdad, and four sisters. His family life is busy and complex, as two of his sisters have special needs that require full-time care. With three siblings on the autistic spectrum with different needs including anxiety, and one sister being affected by significant challenges after being born prematurely, Tom often finds himself helping his mum and stepdad and stepping into a caregiver role.

Tom is part of the Young Carers Project, a BBC Children in Need initiative that supports children with caring responsibilities. Through this programme, Tom attends both one-on-one sessions and group activities, which have had a significant impact on his well-being.

"Since Young Carers, I've been calmer, a lot less stressed, and they've given me so many opportunities."

At the Young Carers Project, Tom has met adults he can trust. He enjoys talking to mentors who understand what he's going through, as most of them have had similar experiences themselves.

The support he receives has made a difference, particularly during tough times. "Actual young carers come into school and talk to us. I find that really helpful, especially when things get stressful, like if one of my sisters is really unwell. When they talk to me, it calms me down."

In addition to emotional support, the Young Carers Project has opened doors for Tom that might not have been possible otherwise. "They funded the whole family to go to the pantomime. We couldn't afford that on our own, so it was great." He's also had access to fun outings and valuable work experience. "I missed out on work experience at school because of Covid, but through the project, I got to do a three-day 'get ready for work' course."

Workshops and outings have helped Tom shape his future aspirations too. **"They took us to HS2 and showed us around, gave us interview skills, and it was amazing. After that, I knew I wanted to do an apprenticeship in Aerospace Engineering."**

Reflecting on his journey, Tom credits the project with helping him find a sense of freedom. "It's probably one of the best things I've ever done. They took me on a trip, and I got to meet so many other young carers. It felt like freedom."

Children who reported having adults they could go to for support were happier across different settings

The SPOTlight survey showed that the presence of trusted adults is linked to children's wellbeing across different aspects of their lives. Children who reported having 'a lot' of trusted adults were significantly more likely to report feeling happy, particularly at school. In contrast, those who said they had 'no trusted adults' were significantly more likely to feel unhappy, not only at school but also at home and in their local area.

Sophie, 17, who attends a group for children with thalassemia and sickle cell, shared how important this support is: "My teachers are really supportive, not just when it comes to education. Even when you're feeling down, you always have someone to go to."

Feelings of happiness across environments by number of trusted adults

Q: *'How do you normally feel when you are at these places?' Base n=1547*

'Do you have adults that you trust that you can go to for support?' Base n=1548

■ Have 'a lot' of trusted adults   ■ Have no trusted adults

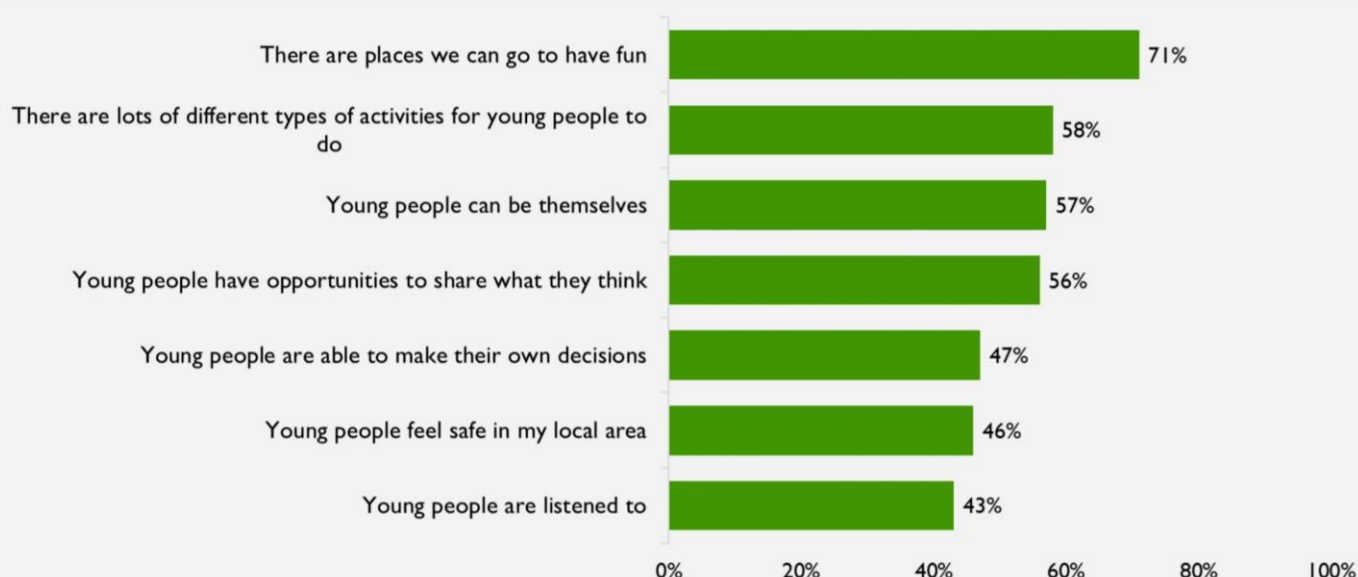| Place	Have 'a lot' of trusted adults	Have no trusted adults
The sessions you attend at your project	99%	100%
Your home (or where you currently live)	96%	73%
Online	94%	91%
Out and about in your local area	91%	74%
School (or your place of education)	77%	60%
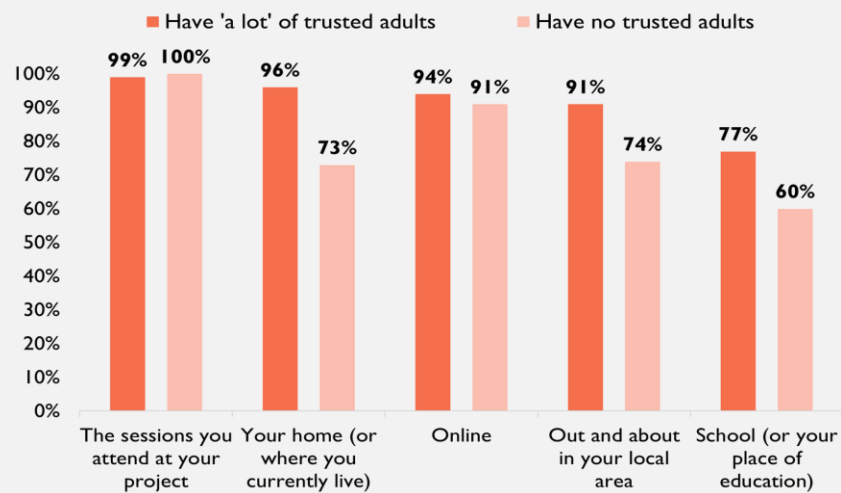
Section 7: Making a difference
"My aspiration is to help people as much as I can"

Not all children felt that they were listened to, or had opportunities to share what they think

Children reported not always feeling recognised, not feeling like they could be themselves, listened to, or safe.

Proportion of children who reported that they 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with these statements about their local area

Statement	%
There are places we can go to have fun	71%
There are lots of different types of activities for young people to do	58%
Young people can be themselves	57%
Young people have opportunities to share what they think	56%
Young people are able to make their own decisions	47%
Young people feel safe in my local area	46%
Young people are listened to	43%

Q: *'We want to know more about where you live and the community around you. What do you think it's like for young people like you?' Base n = 1,480-1,494*

Certain groups were more likely to feel unhappy in their local area: **children with SEND** (25% compared with 10% of those without SEND), and **older children** (19% of those aged 12+ compared with 13% of those aged 8-11).

Additionally, children with SEND were more likely to report feeling anxious in their local area as the reason for being unhappy.

Reported feelings of anxiety in their local area, by SEND
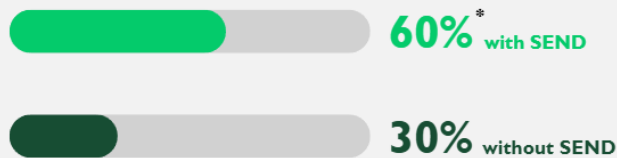
Q: '*You said that you feel <u>unhappy</u> when in your <u>local areal</u>, why is that? – 'I feel **anxious** here'.*

60% *with SEND

30% without SEND

60

60% of children with SEND reported they felt anxious in their local area, compared to 30% of children without SEND.

Children with SEND base n = 94; children without SEND base n = 44

Children wanted to change the world so there was no bullying and for there to be more kindness

When asked what they'd like to change in the world, the most common theme was for kindness and no bullying. The other most common themes were world peace and no war, and to end poverty and homelessness. Survey open response included:

Kindness and no bullying

"To make people nicer to each other so no one is bullied or hurt because of what they like and do"

"To all get along and everyone to be accepted"

"I just wish people would just be kinder to each other and themselves"

World Peace and No War

"No war, killing people - hurting people hurts the world"

"For the world to be a more peaceful place"

"That people would realise we are all human, we have one life we should value it"

End poverty and homelessness

"Everyone would have enough money"

"For everyone to have a home and food"

"I would make it so that everyone has the opportunity of a good life"

Children had big ambitions for the future, sometimes shaped by their experiences

Despite often being affected by challenges, children remained ambitious about their futures. Some children's future ambitions were shaped by their experiences. For example, Tom wants to be a bio-medical engineer to help other children like his sister, and Sophie wants to be a paediatric nurse and care for children, having received lots of support for her physical health as a child.

"I want to become a paediatric nurse. I've always been fond of like children and looking after them"

Sophie, 17, Birmingham

"It's a big decision for me. I want to be a journalist, like my dad, and a footballer"

Luis, 12, London

"I want to be famous. To go on tours and have lots of fans"

Katherine, 15, Leeds

Robbie, 17, lives in a small, rural village in Dumfries with his mother, older brother, and younger sister. His mother, a former social worker, adopted Robbie and his brother who both have significant learning disabilities.

Robbie's ambition is to move out and live independently with friends his age. Robbie's mother shares this vision, hoping he will find a place in a supported residential centre in Dumfries. Currently, Robbie's independence is limited — he has only just been allowed to take the bus by himself— but he is determined to increase his fitness and continue building his confidence.

Robbie has a busy week. He works in a café, volunteers on a farm, participates in a sports coaching programme, and attends a horse carriage driving centre funded by BBC Children in Need. Through the driving centre, Robbie also competes in events both at a national and international level.

"He has levels of responsibility. He is now part of their competitive team. He has to be organised. He has to turn up wearing the correct clothes. He has to have all his kit organised. He has to get his pony ready. He has to be in the right place at the right time."