

Factors impacting opportunities for children and young people to thrive at school

An Academy of Medical Sciences and British Academy
roundtable summary report

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Executive summary

The Department for Education (DfE) is leading on the delivery of the Government's mission to '[Break Down Barriers to Opportunity](https://www.gov.uk/missions/opportunity)'.¹ This mission represents the Government's strategy for children and includes specific aims to set every child up for the best start in life and help every child to thrive and achieve at school.

To support this work, the Academy of Medical Sciences and the British Academy convened a roundtable to understand the factors that impact the opportunity for children to thrive at school. The roundtable built on previous work by both Academies, including the [Academy of Medical Sciences' work on child health](https://www.acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/child-health),² and the [British Academy programme on childhood](https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/childhood-policy-programme/).³ The scope of the roundtable considered all school-aged children and young people (4-16 years old), children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, and children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

The roundtable brought together experts across disciplines, and was co-chaired by Professor Rosalind Smyth CBE FMedSci, Professor of Child Health at UCL and Vice President (Clinical) of the Academy of Medical Sciences, and Professor Sarah-Jayne Blakemore FRS FBA FMedSci, Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Cambridge. A full list of participants can be found in Annexe 1.

The roundtable was set within the wider context of several recent announcements, including the Government's strategy "[Giving every child the best start in life](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/giving-every-child-the-best-start-in-life)",⁴ published in March 2025, the [announcement of the expansion of free school meals](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/announcement-of-the-expansion-of-free-school-meals)⁵ from September 2026, and the [Curriculum and Assessment review](https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/curriculum-and-assessment-review),⁶ published in November 2025.

Pre-reading material for the roundtable was provided (Annexe 2), which outlined evidence indicating that there is currently a decline in metrics of thriving and related factors. However, data is lacking around why this trend has occurred. Key metrics were around perceptions of school, including an individual's sense of belonging as well as factors which may be driving thriving.

These metrics of thriving and related factors are reflected in the working definition of thriving, which was provided to participants in advance, and used as a common basis for discussions at the roundtable. The definition encompasses both 'feeling good' and 'doing well'. This includes five core components: subjective wellbeing; sense of belonging; sense of accomplishment; sense of autonomy; sense of good health.

¹ Prime Minister's Officer (n.d.). *Break Down Barriers to Opportunity*. <https://www.gov.uk/missions/opportunity>

² Academy of Medical Sciences (n.d.). *Policy projects: Child health*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/policy/policy-projects/child-health>

³ The British Academy (n.d.). *The Childhood Policy Programme*. <https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/childhood-policy-programme/>

⁴ Department for Education (2025). *Giving every child the best start in life*.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/689b39d55555fb89cf3f5e7d/Giving_every_child_the_best_start_in_life_web_version.pdf

⁵ UK Parliament (2025). *Written statement: School Food*. <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-06-05/hcws682>

⁶ Department for Education (2025). *Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf

Roundtable aims

The roundtable aimed to discuss and identify the most important in-school and out-of-school factors that impact whether children and young people are thriving at school. In addition, it aimed to outline how these factors are contributing to the long-term declines seen in thriving, and to identify areas where schools have the most potential to improve these trends.

Key areas discussed

Discussions at the roundtable covered the following issues:

- The impact of attendance including challenges around transitions between educational stages.
- The importance of applying inclusive practices for all children, the role of children's sense of agency in cultivating a sense of belonging, and the experiences of SEND children in relation to school inclusion.
- Inequalities as a driver of school experience and variation across regions.
- The relationship between factors such as school assessment pressures and bullying and mental health.
- The influence of social media in children and young people's lives, including its impact on peer relationships and exposure to misinformation.
- Teacher-pupil relationships.
- The strong importance of the home learning environment.
- Challenges faced by the workforce, both directly in an education setting, and in the wider services that support the school system such as school nursing and health visiting.

Discussions also touched on the crucial importance of systems thinking and a joined-up approach across Government, the need to ensure that interventions are evidence-based and evaluated for their effectiveness, and a call to hear the voices of children, young people and their parents and carers in understanding the challenges faced and in the co-design of interventions to address these.

Overview

The following write up summarises the main themes discussed at the roundtable. Under each theme, we outline the in-school and out-of-school factors identified by participants as influencing thriving at school, and how these factors contribute to the current decline in thriving observed among children and young people in the UK. We also include examples raised of areas where schools could positively influence levels of thriving among young people.

This report reflects the discussion which took place at the workshop. It includes additional references that participants highlighted on this topic, which were provided to the Academy of Medical Sciences prior to and after the meeting. Discussions at the roundtable also covered the following overarching themes, which we include here as context to the subsequent sections.

The importance of systems thinking

Participants emphasised that there is no single driver of thriving, highlighting the critical importance of systems thinking and a joined-up approach across Government, both within and between departments, when tackling this issue. In-school and out-of-school factors should be considered together, as it is important to incorporate not only what schools can do, but also the wider services around the child, as well as the broader systemic factors that impact more indirectly.

Participants acknowledged challenges around siloed working in government; mechanisms of government funding based on direct impact by a single department, make cross-department collaboration difficult. Nonetheless, participants strongly emphasised the need for collaboration between education and health in policymaking and delivery. Attendees suggested a role for the Academy of Medical Sciences and the British Academy in supporting more joint working, building on the roundtable's discussions.

Integration of services was also raised as a key factor for enabling earlier intervention, with benefits extending beyond the current generation. An example of this was highlighted in the LifeLab program, which engages with young people, teachers and researchers to empower young people to make healthier choices which will also benefit the next generation.⁷ While it can be challenging to make the case for early intervention and prevention in the context of short-term pressures on stretched budgets, the long-term benefits must be given appropriate weight, including to the wider economy. Such approaches must not be lost between parliamentary terms before their impacts can be felt.

Participants stressed the importance of looking further than the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in recent years. Although an exacerbating factor, which exposed challenges in the system, metrics of thriving and related factors were already declining pre-pandemic (see Annexe 2). Participants also welcomed the focus on wellbeing alongside attainment, and the importance placed on both subjective and objective factors.

Research and evidence

There was significant discussion around the need to ensure that interventions are evidence-based, and participants recognised three areas where there is a lack of good evidence about their impact on thriving: ethnicity, neurodivergence and changing landscapes. Participants called for more randomised controlled trials (RCTs) to be conducted in education settings, highlighting that these

⁷ University of Southampton (n.d.). *LifeLab: Engaging young people with science*. https://www.southampton.ac.uk/lifelab/teaching_program/index.page

would be of particular importance when understanding tailored interventions for subgroups. In addition, more and better evaluation of interventions is needed to assess their impact. Improved data capture and linkage could reveal wider impacts, such as effects on parental workforce participation. Key barriers to evidence generation and use include underfunding of educational research, and the lack of translation of research from researchers to policymakers. Additional funding could be considered through a funder-led research theme, to fulfil the need for more research that leverages from healthcare into schools.

Engaging with children, young people, parent and teacher perspectives

There was discussion at the workshop of the need to co-design and implement interventions in partnership with schools, rather than in isolation. Participants noted that the implementation of programmes places demands on schools' resources and capacity, which should be considered in their design and roll out. The recent school census report from the Children's Commissioner was also highlighted, which captures the responses of schools and colleges to survey questions launched in 2024. A particular point flagged was around schools' concerns for wider support services within the system, especially Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.⁸

The voices of children, young people and their parents and carers must also be heard in this context. Understanding children's own perspectives on what thriving is, and what helps them to thrive, is key. Engagement should also be undertaken as part of the development of interventions, as well as in the policy discourse when setting agendas and priorities.

⁸ Children's Commissioner (2025). *The Children's Plan, The Children's Commissioner's School Census*.
<https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2025/09/cc-the-childrens-plan-the-childrens-commissioners-school-census.pdf>

Factors affecting children and young people thriving at school

Further resources on the subsequent topics can be found in Annex 3.

Attendance

Attendance is crucial to the impact schools can have in a child or young person's life, since non-attendance reduces the number of opportunities that schools have to support and intervene with a pupil. The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on attendance, with sharp increases in absence that have not yet returned to pre-pandemic levels.⁹

The reasons for lack of attendance vary significantly, and capture a broad range of challenges, including those highlighted at the roundtable: neurodivergence, poor parental health, poor parental engagement with the education system, bullying, not feeling safe at school, poor school discipline, language issues and mental health issues. Many of these issues are covered further in the subsequent sections of this report.

The transitions between education stages (early years education settings, primary school and secondary school) were identified as key places where improvements could be made to avoid challenges, that can result in non-attendance. The commitment of the Best Start in Life Strategy to help children transition smoothly into primary school is welcome in this context.¹⁰ It was outlined during the roundtable that early years settings provide a child-centred and play-led approach, which contrasts with aspects of the primary school setting where children are required to sit in classes for lessons. Transferring more of these approaches to a primary school context may help improve the transition between these settings. In the same way, extending some primary school practices into early years settings would be an opportunity to help children get used to the upcoming changes in environment. Children's first experiences of school can be very influential in whether they settle into and enjoy school as a positive experience.¹¹ Attendance, quality and duration of pre-school were noted to have long-term effects on students' academic outcomes.¹² High quality pre-school has also been linked to better self-regulation and pro-social behaviour, as well as lower levels of hyperactivity, though the effects are small.¹³

A particular pinch point around the transition from primary to secondary school was also highlighted, where persistent absences linked to emotionally based school avoidance (EBSA) can increase.¹⁴ Current research aims to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of targeting interventions to

⁹ HM Government (2025). *Explore education statistics*. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/>

¹⁰ Department for Education (2025). *Giving every child the best start in life*.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/689b39d55555fb89cf3f5e7d/Giving_every_child_the_best_start_in_life_web_version.pdf

¹¹ O'Farrelly C, et al. (2020). *Reconstructing readiness: Young children's priorities for their early school adjustment*. *Early Child. Res. Q.* **50** (2), 3-16.

¹² Department for Education (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project. Research Brief*.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d653fe5274a02dcdf4416/RB354_-_Students_educational_and_developmental_outcomes_at_age_16_Brief.pdf

¹³ Department for Education (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project. Research Brief*.

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d653fe5274a02dcdf4416/RB354_-_Students_educational_and_developmental_outcomes_at_age_16_Brief.pdf

¹⁴ Lester KJ & Michelson D (2024). *Perfect storm: emotionally based school avoidance in the post-COVID-19 pandemic context*. *BMJ Ment. Health* **27**, 1-4.

students who are absent due to EBSA, to address emerging mental ill health and prevent long-term absence.¹⁵

Inclusion

Another key factor discussed at the roundtable to enable children to thrive at school was inclusion. Participants considered that the current approach to inclusion is to apply standard practices to all, and only to make accommodations for pupils once a need is identified. This has the potential to inadvertently exclude children as it results in delays to providing the required support while awaiting a diagnosis of need, after which, children may decline the accommodations, due to stigma around this. It was instead suggested that applying more inclusive practices would be beneficial for everyone, and would also cover those children for whom it is necessary. Participants highlighted further resources to support schools in developing inclusive policies, which are outlined in the box below. Discussions at the roundtable also raised the question of whether schools have sufficient time and capacity to implement the guidance available in such resources.

Several discussions at the roundtable also considered the experience of SEND children with respect to inclusion at school. Schools may have a unique role to play in supporting children who do not meet the threshold for diagnosis, but benefit substantially from greater support. It is important that schools are able to identify such children to put support in place. Evidence also indicates that there are inequalities in the type and timing of SEND provision, that are associated with school governance.¹⁶ Participants also discussed the ways inequalities in SEND provision can be exacerbated, as some parents are more able than others to advocate for their children to receive a diagnosis and consequently gain access to support. With a stretched system, this leads to unequal distribution of already limited resources, with families most able to advocate often securing better support. A detailed NIHR-funded programme of work was undertaken to evaluate the impact of SEND provision on health and education (the Health Outcomes of Young People throughout Education – HOPE study), which provides much greater evaluation on these topics.¹⁷ The programme explored whether a lack of SEND support negatively influences children’s development, potentially increasing absence and reducing attainment at school.

The extent to which teaching is inclusive was also raised as a factor that makes a significant difference to whether children feel they belong, especially for those who are socially excluded. Participants discussed the current lack of space in teacher training for thinking about equity and inclusion, making this an undervalued aspect of teaching, overlooked amid other pressures.

Participants discussed the positive impact that having a sense of agency and connection can have on children’s feeling of belonging. One example of this was providing children with the opportunity to modify their learning environment, through initiatives such as those tested in the INCLUSIVE trial, outlined in more detail below. Participants also considered whether there could be the potential to combine initiatives for increasing children and young people’s sense of agency and connection, with approaches to increasing social media literacy and safety (outlined in further detail in the subsequent section on the social, communication and information environment), for example through developing a pupil-led charter for online conduct.

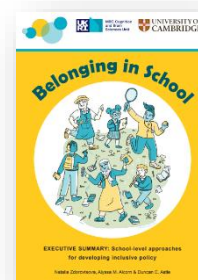
¹⁵ Lester KJ et al. (2024). *Intervention for School Anxiety and Absenteeism in Children (ISAAC): Mixed-Method Feasibility Study of a Coach-Assisted, Parent-Focused Online Programme*. Child Psychiatry Hum Dev. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-024-01755-6>

¹⁶ De Stavola BL et al. (2025). *Is there evidence of inequality in the provision, level, and timing of SEND provision in English primary schools?* <https://doi.org/10.1101/2025.08.27.25334554>

¹⁷ Echild (2025). *The HOPE Study*. <https://www.echild.ac.uk/research/project-one-f5w4d-gka4g>

Belonging in School – a school-level resource for developing inclusive policies

The Belonging in School resource contains tools to support schools and educators to revise or develop policies for educational inclusion, particularly relating to learners with neurodevelopmental differences.^{18,19,20} The tools are described as being applicable across any level of education, however they are flagged as being most relevant to mainstream primary schools in the UK's education systems. The resource contains two guidance documents, covering characteristics of inclusive school policies, suggested changes that schools could make for more inclusive practice, and how to collect information and measure the impact of any policy changes made.



INCLUSIVE trial in secondary schools

The INCLUSIVE trial tested the Learning Together intervention, which involved students in efforts to modify their school environment.²¹ The intervention consisted of staff training in restorative practice; convening and facilitating a school action group; and a student social and emotional skill curriculum. The Learning Together intervention was found to have small but significant effects on reducing reports of bullying victimisation in schools participating in the intervention, though no impact on aggression. The trial also found that students in schools receiving the intervention had lower odds of ever having smoked regularly, drunk alcohol, and been offered or having tried illicit drugs. Students in intervention schools also had lower odds than those in control schools of having been in contact with police in the past 12 months. No evidence was found of differences in age of sexual debut or use of contraception at first sex, bullying perpetration or use of NHS services.

Mother Tongue Other Tongue

Mother Tongue Other Tongue is a multi-lingual poetry project, created to celebrate cultural diversity and the many languages spoken in schools in the UK. It began as a pilot in the North West, and continues to run there currently as an annual poetry competition for 8-18 year olds, where poems are written in the pupil's mother tongue or language used within family, or in a language that the pupil is learning and does not have experience of using within family.²² The project was evaluated in 2019, and was found to increase the self-confidence of bilingual and multilingual pupils, enhancing inclusivity and cultural exchange in the classroom and fostering dialogue and co-creation between children and their families.²³



¹⁸ Zdorovtsova N, Alcorn AM & Astle DE (2023). *Belonging in School Executive Summary: School-level approaches for developing inclusive policy*. Medical Research Council Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge. <https://www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/inclusion/sites/8/2023/09/Belonging-in-School-Executive-Summary-v1.0.pdf>

¹⁹ Alcorn AM, Zdorovtsova N & Astle DE (2023). *Belonging in School Part 1: An Introduction to School-level Approaches for Developing Inclusive Policy*. Medical Research Council Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge. <https://www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/inclusion/sites/8/2023/09/Belonging-in-School-Executive-Summary-v1.0b.pdf>

²⁰ Alcorn AM, Zdorovtsova N & Astle DE (2023). *Belonging in School Part 2: A Practical Guide to Inclusive Policy Planning*. Medical Research Council Cognition and Brain Sciences Unit, University of Cambridge. <https://www.mrc-cbu.cam.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/inclusion/sites/8/2023/09/Belonging-in-School-Part-2-v1.0.pdf>

²¹ Bonell C et al. (2018). *Effects of the Learning Together intervention on bullying and aggression in English secondary schools (INCLUSIVE): a cluster randomised controlled trial*. *Lancet* **392**, 2452-2464.

²² Manchester Metropolitan University (n.d.). *Mother Tongue Other Tongue*. <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/mothertongueothertongue>

²³ Edwards J et al. (2020). *Mother tongue other tongue: nine years of creative multilingualism in practice*. *Engl. Educ.* **56**, 18-30.

Inequalities and regional disparities

Inequalities were a strong theme in discussions at the roundtable. Participants acknowledged that, although schools may not directly address wider social and structural inequalities, they face the consequences, which significantly affect thriving. Participants discussed the importance of social cohesion and community building around schools, particularly as something that can be easily undervalued. Some participants felt there needed to be a stronger focus on addressing underlying inequalities experienced in other settings as these may impact the effectiveness of any interventions and undermine the efforts of schools to address the challenges surrounding thriving. For example, the opportunity for enrichment through extra-curricular activities in many cases depends on parents being able to facilitate their children attending these, including time commitments and the cost of equipment needed to participate.

Participants also highlighted the rise in regional disparities, driven by structural inequalities such as access to quality healthcare and adequate housing, poverty, and austerity. Unequal allocation of funding was also highlighted, reflected in lower annual spending in schools from the most deprived 20% of local authorities.²⁴ Between 2017 and 2022, children in the most affluent schools in the country had larger real term increases in funding from the National Funding Formula than those in the most deprived ones; 8-9% compared with 5%.²⁵ Participants highlighted the impact that this could have on teachers' ability to support pupils, and also pointed to differences in attainment outcomes. In 2023, the average grade in English and maths GCSE was 4.66 in the North East (the region with the highest proportion of pupils experiencing persistent disadvantage), compared with 5.27 in London.²⁶ The impact of spending cuts on GCSE performance was found to be greater in schools located in the most deprived local authorities.²⁷

The strong association between poverty and inequalities, and poverty and poor mental health were discussed, along with the need to implement policies based on the already available evidence on what can be done to address these. Participants also highlighted evidence that children experiencing combined poverty and poor parental mental health have a 72% lower odds of achieving a positive social mobility profile, defined as successful completion of age 16 exams, low risk of self-assessed ill health, low risk of obesity, low risk of socioemotional behavioural problems and low risk of criminality.²⁸ Similarly, there is a difference of a full GCSE grade lower in English and Maths for students receiving free school meals (FSM) compared with non-FSM students.²⁹ Furthermore, living in a disadvantaged neighbourhood predicted lower GCSE scores and poorer development in self-regulation and pro-social behaviour.³⁰ Participants also discussed the disinvestment in initiatives such as Sure Start, which reduced the support offered to children and their families alongside the education system. However, participants also acknowledged the recent announcement of the Best

²⁴ Akanni L et al. (2025). *Inequalities in school spending across local authorities in England: A time-trend analysis*. Br. Educ. Res. J., **0** 1-16.

²⁵ Mon-Williams M (2023). *Addressing Education and Health Inequality: Perspectives from the North of England. A report prepared for the Child of the North APPG*. <https://www.healthequitynorth.co.uk/app/uploads/APPG-REPORT-SEPT-23.pdf>

²⁶ Leckie G (2024). *Trends in GCSE attainment pre- and post- pandemic by ethnicity, disadvantage, region, and their intersections*. <https://www.northernpowerhousepartnership.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/LTD-report-2024.pdf>

²⁷ Akanni L et al. (2025). P54 School funding and GCSE performance in England: a longitudinal ecological study at the local authority level from 2015 – 2023. J. Epidemiol. Community Health **79**.

²⁸ Lee P et al. (2025). P82 The impact of childhood adversities on achieving positive social mobility by age 17: analysis of the millennium cohort study. J. Epidemiol. Community Health **79**.

²⁹ Department for Education (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project. Research Brief*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d653fe5274a02dcdf4416/RB354_-_Students_educational_and_developmental_outcomes_at_age_16_Brief.pdf

³⁰ Department for Education (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project. Research Brief*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d653fe5274a02dcdf4416/RB354_-_Students_educational_and_developmental_outcomes_at_age_16_Brief.pdf

Start Family Hubs and restated the importance of these being well funded and providing support that families need.

In addition to the objective inequalities noted above, the impact of subjective inequalities was also covered. For example, children and young people who perceive themselves as coming from a poorer background than their peer group, are more likely to have lower self-esteem and be victims of bullying than those who feel financially equal to the rest of their peer group (independent of objective family wealth).³¹

Mental health

Several aspects were covered in relation to children and young people's mental health, and links to measures of thriving. Compared to other countries, children in England start school at a relatively young age,³² and within-school ability grouping occurs at higher rates than in other developed countries.³³ The negative impact on children placed in bottom sets was raised, which conveys to the child that they are unable to achieve. Children internalise this expectation, which is difficult to overcome later.

Participants also felt that a significant focus is placed on testing in England, with other aspects of thriving overlooked in favour of a focus on attainment. The link between school pressures and mental health crises in some countries was raised, with participants cautioning against getting the balance wrong between driving up school attainment and damaging pupils' mental health. Participants also noted that there may be a need to focus on boys' mental health issues, in addition to mental health issues in girls, as the latter has received a greater focus to date, driven by the fact that girls report many more mental health problems than boys.

There was a discussion about the impact of bullying on pupils' mental health, along with the question of whether the high incidence of bullying has led to its normalisation as a routine part of school life. The incidence of bullying impacts on the feeling of safety in school, as well as mental health and attendance. Participants reflected several times during the roundtable on the data from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study (shared with participants as a pre-read – see Annexe 2), which showed the decline between 2014 and 2022 in the number of children who say they feel safe at school.³⁴ Many thought that this metric was particularly alarming, with safety at school being a basic and fundamental requirement, warranting greater focus in addressing this issue. It was suggested that anti-bullying programmes could be seen as part of what is delivered through mental health teams, and include wider aspects such as how to manage conflict.

³¹ Piera Pi-Sunyer B et al. (2022). *The relationship between perceived income inequality, adverse mental health and interpersonal difficulties in UK adolescents*. J. Child Psychol. Psychiatry **64**, 417-425.

³² UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2025). *Primary school starting age (years)*. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.PRM.AGES>

³³ Jerrim J (2019). *PISA: England's schools segregate by ability more than almost every other country in the world*. <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/2019/09/24/pisa-englands-schools-segregate-by-ability-more-than-almost-every-other-country-in-the-world/>

³⁴ Hulbert S et al. (2023). *HBSC England National Report: Findings from the 2001-2022 HBSC study for England*. https://hbscengland.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/2022_FULL_REPORT_final_02.01.24_non-interactive.pdf

KiVa school-based bullying prevention programme



The KiVa programme (from the Finnish *Kiusaamista Vastaan* ("Against Bullying")), also meaning something that is nice, good, or friendly) is a research and evidence-based antibullying programme for 6-16 year olds, developed with funding from the Finnish Ministry of Education culture.³⁵ It includes student lessons and online games designed to support students in preventing bullying, alongside tools for use with those who have been involved in bullying incidents. Monitoring tools are also provided to support schools in improving their antibullying work.

Data from 78 Finnish schools showed that the programme resulted in reductions in all forms of bullying being assessed³⁶, and led to positive effects on school well-being, academic motivation and academic achievement,³⁷ anxiety and students' perception of their peer climate.³⁸ For bullied students whose case was tackled by their school's KiVa team, 98% felt that their situation improved.³⁹ A year long trial of the programme in over 100 primary schools in England and Wales found that it reduced incidents of bullying in intervention schools, with equal efficacy across all socio-economic settings.⁴⁰ In the first year of use, the programme costs £28.78 more per pupil than usual practice, and £1.65 more per pupil in subsequent years.

Roots of Empathy programme

The Roots of Empathy program was initially designed in Canada to be delivered to elementary school children aged 5-13 who are coached via a specialist curriculum, delivered by a trained Roots of Empathy instructor. The aim is to recognise and connect with the vulnerability and humanity of a baby who visits throughout the school year with their parent(s).⁴¹ A number of research studies have shown that the programme is associated with reduced incidence of bullying, and other forms of aggression.⁴² There have also been increases in pro-social behaviour, resilience, emotional regulation and well-being.⁴³ The programme has also been run in localised areas of England.⁴⁴



³⁵ KiVa Antibullying Program (n.d.). *What is KiVa?* <https://www.kivaprogram.net/what-is-kiva/>

³⁶ KiVa Antibullying Program (n.d.). *KiVa is effective.* <https://www.kivaprogram.net/kiva-is-effective/>

³⁷ KiVa Antibullying Program (n.d.). *KiVa is effective.* <https://www.kivaprogram.net/kiva-is-effective/>

³⁸ KiVa Antibullying Program (n.d.). *KiVa is effective.* <https://www.kivaprogram.net/kiva-is-effective/>

³⁹ KiVa Antibullying Program (n.d.). *KiVa is effective.* <https://www.kivaprogram.net/kiva-is-effective/>

⁴⁰ Bowes L et al. (2024). *The effects and costs of an antibullying program (KiVa) in UK primary schools: a multicenter cluster randomized controlled trial.* *Psychol. Med.* **54**.

⁴¹ Roots of Empathy (n.d.). *Roots of Empathy.* <https://rootsofempathy.org/programs/roots-of-empathy/>

⁴² Roots of Empathy (2019). *Summary of Roots of Empathy Research 2001-2018.* <https://rootsofempathy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Roots-of-Empathy-Full-Research-Summary-2021.pdf>

⁴³ Roots of Empathy (2019). *Summary of Roots of Empathy Research 2001-2018.* <https://rootsofempathy.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/Roots-of-Empathy-Full-Research-Summary-2021.pdf>

⁴⁴ Roots of Empathy (n.d.). *Roots of Empathy in England.* <https://uk.rootsofempathy.org/england/>

Peer relationships and social media

Over the past 10 years, there has been a substantial increase in the presence of social media in the lives of children. This was the focus of a session during the Academy of Medical Sciences' international workshop on child health held in 2025.⁴⁵ Participants discussed how social media use may crowd out important aspects of childhood that otherwise act as protective factors against its harmful impacts. One aspect raised was around how social media is impacting the way in which children communicate and form relationships. Evidence indicates that peer relationships are protective, with poor peer relationships predicting the persistence of ADHD and anxiety.⁴⁶

Peer relationships were highlighted as an opportunity where schools could consider supporting children more, and aspects of the KiVa programme were suggested as a potential intervention approach for this (see [page 12 for more details on the KiVa programme](#)). This was noted to be particularly important during adolescence, when the proportion of time young people spend with peers typically increases substantially, although participants flagged the important impacts of adolescent-parent attachment during this period too.⁴⁷

Participants also discussed how a greater exposure to the realities of adulthood through social media can lead to young people becoming very aware of their upcoming environment when they finish school, and may not feel ready to enter this. The question was raised of whether the impression of life that is given in schools matches the reality, and whether the current school curriculum provides children with the skills they will require in the adult world, in order to feel prepared. The curriculum review's recommendations around updating or strengthening provision in the following areas are welcome progress in addressing this: financial education; digital literacy; media literacy; climate education and sustainability; oracy.⁴⁸

Social media increases exposure to social exclusion and bullying, with these experiences amplified to far greater audiences than without social media. Social media can also enable a greater awareness of an individual's socioeconomic status. In addition, social media exposes both children and parents to misinformation, potentially polarising beliefs about school and education.

Exposure of parents to negative narratives around the education system may also play into how they communicate with their children about school. Participants thought that there may be a need to support parents and children to learn how to critically evaluate the information that they are exposed to, and the recent announcement from the Department of Health and Social Care on combating misinformation is a welcome initiative in this space.⁴⁹

In addition, although social media platforms have some safety measures in place, participants emphasised that they are not easily accessible to users. Understanding and implementing these tools is a challenge for both parents and teachers. Participants suggested teachers would benefit from being offered greater support and training on how to guide parents and children to remain safe when using social media.

⁴⁵ Academy of Medical Sciences (2025). *Child health, wellbeing and inequities: influencing policy in changing social and political environments*. <https://acmedsci.ac.uk/file-download/academy-child-health-report-2025>

⁴⁶ Ford T et al. (2016). *The predictors of persistent DSM-IV disorders in 3-year follow-ups of the British Child and Adolescent Mental Health Surveys 1999 and 2004*. *Psychol. Med.* **47**.

⁴⁷ Moretti MM & Peled M (2004). *Adolescent-parent attachment: Bonds that support healthy development*. *Paediatr. Child Health* **9**, 551-555.

⁴⁸ Department for Education (2025). *Curriculum and Assessment Review Final Report: Building a world-class curriculum for all*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/690b96bbc22e4ed8b051854d/Curriculum_and_Assessment_Review_final_report_-_Building_a_world-class_curriculum_for_all.pdf

⁴⁹ UK Government (2025). *Press release: Parents supported to navigate early years misinformation online*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/parents-supported-to-navigate-early-years-misinformation-online>

Teacher-pupil relationships

In comparing the primary school and secondary school settings, discussions highlighted that the single teacher setup in primary schools allows for a more collaborative and focused environment, with more time available to support and build relationships. In the case of positive teacher-pupil relationships here, the primary school environment can be protective, and may support children with challenging circumstances elsewhere in life. These support systems are less available in secondary schools, and the transition from primary to secondary school can be a point where non-attendance starts as a result. Attending a secondary school where teachers were reported to have a strong focus on learning, where there was trust between teachers and students, and where teachers provided more feedback on work were all significant predictors of GCSE outcomes.⁵⁰ Positive relationships also predicted better social development.⁵¹ Participants caveated the discussion with the need to ensure adequate funding is available for schools to be able to create the best possible environment to support pupils to thrive.

The home learning environment

The role of parents in shaping a supportive and stimulating home learning environment (HLE) was highlighted as a key factor affecting children's school achievement. Evidence was highlighted showing that positive parenting experiences, especially a more stimulating home learning environment when children are young, supports better long-term outcomes, with the early years HLE a strong predictor of GCSE results.⁵² Participants discussed that parents facing difficult circumstances may struggle to provide the same enabling environment as others. However, caution was also raised through comparisons to other countries where there is a strong push from parents academically. Although academic metrics in these countries are strong, children perform poorly on wellbeing measures.

Equally, participants thought that it was unhelpful to put the onus on parents alone to create the environment necessary for children to thrive in school, given barriers faced around time, money and support in how to provide an enabling home learning environment. Schools should also be seen as partners rather than adversaries, an issue often linked to trust between parents and staff, as well as limited time for staff to engage with parents, given the many demands on their time.

⁵⁰ Department for Education (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project. Research Brief.*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d653fe5274a02dcdf4416/RB354_-_Students_educational_and_developmental_outcomes_at_age_16_Brief.pdf

⁵¹ Department for Education (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project. Research Brief.*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d653fe5274a02dcdf4416/RB354_-_Students_educational_and_developmental_outcomes_at_age_16_Brief.pdf

⁵² Department for Education (2014). *Students' educational and developmental outcomes at age 16. Effective Pre-school, Primary and Secondary Education (EPPSE 3-16) Project. Research Brief.*

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a7d653fe5274a02dcdf4416/RB354_-_Students_educational_and_developmental_outcomes_at_age_16_Brief.pdf



Parent-led intervention programmes

The Incredible Years programme is an evidence-based early intervention parenting programme, with different approaches to match ages from 0-12 years. It strengthens parenting competencies, and fosters parental involvement in children's school experiences to promote academic, social and emotional skills, and reduce conduct problems.⁵³ A trial of this programme in a disadvantaged London Borough and a South West city found that the intervention reduced disruptive behaviour, and additionally found an improvement in word-reading compared with the control group.⁵⁴

The ENGAGE (Enhancing Neurobehavioral Gains with the Aid of Games and Exercise) programme is used in both home and education settings to foster self-regulation skills in young children through play.⁵⁵ Children who struggle with self-regulation struggle to engage in school, with numerous studies linking self-regulation and academic achievement. Research in New Zealand has shown that ENGAGE has led to improvements in children's self-regulation abilities, when implemented in both a home or early childhood education setting.^{56,57}

Workforce

There was a discussion about the challenges faced in retaining staff and the attrition was felt to be particularly high among early years educators. There are also fewer male teachers,⁵⁸ leaving boys with fewer role models in this sector. Participants referenced challenges around masculinity and identity for young men. Retention challenges across the board were put down to several factors, including a lack of professional development and poor work conditions, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Discussions also reflected on teachers feeling disenfranchised in the face of systemic issues around the expansion of performance metrics and thresholds at the expense of holistic support for children. The lack of professional development also represents missed opportunities for broader training, such as helping teachers to understand the complexities of inequalities.

Participants discussed how valued teaching is as a profession, and drew comparisons with how staff in other sectors are supported. However, others felt the issue was less around remuneration and more about work conditions and pressures. Participants particularly outlined the importance of staff

⁵³ The Incredible Years (n.d.). *The Incredible Years Series Evidence-based Parenting Programs*. <https://www.incredibleyears.com/early-intervention-programs/parents>

⁵⁴ Scott S et al. (2014). *Which type of parenting programme best improves child behaviour and reading?* https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/HCA_follow_up_report_13_05_14.pdf

⁵⁵ Healey D, Milne B & Healey M (2022). *Adaption and implementation of the engage programme within the early childhood curriculum*. Sci. Rep. **12**, 21580.

⁵⁶ Healey D, Milne B & Healey M (2022). *Adaption and implementation of the engage programme within the early childhood curriculum*. Sci. Rep. **12**, 21580.

⁵⁷ Healey D, Milne B & Healey M (2022). *Adaption and implementation of the engage programme within the early childhood curriculum*. Sci. Rep. **12**, 21580.

⁵⁸ House of Commons Library (2022). *Research briefing: Increasing the number of male primary school teachers*. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2022-0197/>

wellbeing – teachers and school leaders must thrive themselves before they can support children effectively. The length of break times has decreased over time,⁵⁹ impacting both teachers and pupils.

Beyond the teacher component of the workforce, other professions including health visiting and school nursing play an important part in the workforce that surrounds children and their families in an education context. The decline in the health visitor workforce⁶⁰ in particular was raised, resulting in reduced support and training for parents of babies and young children. It was thought that structural challenges need to be addressed to reverse this decline. Low numbers of school nurses were also noted,⁶¹ though participants felt they could be a valuable resource if expanded. Recent data show that only 44% of primary schools and 68% of secondary schools have school nurse provision.⁶² Whilst these points remain, participants also cautioned around over-medicalising normal childhood experiences by directing children to services such as school counsellors, rather than allowing teachers to perform a supportive role in this situation, and using the more specialist expertise of a counsellor in situations which necessitate this.

Experience Corps volunteer reading programme

The Experience Corps programme is a US-based volunteer programme, that trains people over 50 to tutor students who are not yet reading at grade level, to become better readers by the end of third grade. Trials have indeed shown improved reading through the third grade is achieved with the programme, while additional outcomes include improvements in school climate, teacher morale and retention.⁶³

Conclusion

The roundtable brought together a cross-disciplinary group of experts, who identified a number of key factors that contribute to the decline in thriving observed among children and young people in the UK. Discussions covered a range of areas, including attendance, school inclusion practices, inequalities and regional disparities, mental health, assessment pressures, bullying, peer relationships, teacher-pupil connections, social media, the home learning environment and the workforce. Systems thinking, the need for an evidence-based approach and co-design with children and young people were underlying themes. Several examples where schools could positively influence thriving were also highlighted. These areas are of particular importance to the Government's mission to 'Break Down Barriers to Opportunity', including setting every child up for the best start in life, and helping every child to thrive and achieve at school

⁵⁹ Baines E & Blatchford P (2019). *School break and lunch times and young people's social lives: A follow-up national study*. [https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%202402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20\(May19\)-Final\(1\).pdf](https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/sites/default/files/files/Baines%202402%20BreaktimeSurvey%20-%20Main%20public%20report%20(May19)-Final(1).pdf)

⁶⁰ Institute of Health Visiting (2022). *Health visitor workforce numbers in England reach an all-time low*. <https://ihv.org.uk/news-and-views/news/health-visitor-workforce-numbers-in-england-reach-an-all-time-low/>

⁶¹ NHS Digital (2025). *NHS Workforce Statistics – November 2024 (Including selected provisional statistics for December 2024)*. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/nhs-workforce-statistics/november-2024>

⁶² Children's Commissioner (2025). *The Children's Plan, The Children's Commissioner's School Census*.

<https://assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2025/09/cc-the-childrens-plan-the-childrens-commissioners-school-census.pdf>
⁶³ Fried LP et al. (2014). *Experience Corps: A dual trial to promote the health of older adults and children's academic success*. *Contemp. Clin. Trials* **36**, 1-13.

Annexe 1: List of roundtable participants

- Professor Lynn Ang, Professor of Early Childhood Education, UCL
- Professor Louise Archer OBE FBA, Karl Mannheim Professor of Sociology of Education, UCL
- Professor Duncan Astle, Gnodde Goldman Sachs Professor of Neuroinformatics, University of Cambridge
- Ms Nancy Bailey, Foresight Projects Manager, Government Office for Science
- **Professor Sarah Jayne Blakemore FRS FBA FMedSci, Professor of Psychology and Cognitive Neuroscience at the University of Cambridge (Co-Chair)**
- Professor Kathleen Boyd, Professor of Health Economics, University of Glasgow
- Ms Jessamyn Briers, Senior European Policy Officer, Academy of Medical Sciences
- Dr Hannah Chance, Policy Officer, Academy of Medical Sciences
- Dr Matthew Clark, National speciality advisor for children and young people, NHSE
- Mr Mickey Conn, Senior Manager Research Policy, DHSC
- Ms Sarah Cowan, Head of Higher Education and Research Policy, British Academy
- Dr Giulia Cuccato, Head of UK Policy, Academy of Medical Sciences
- Mr Michael Dale, Principal Research Officer, DfE
- Professor Tamsin Ford CBE FMedSci, Professor of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, University of Cambridge
- Professor Ruth Gilbert FMedSci, Professor of Clinical Epidemiology, UCL
- Professor Keith Godfrey MBE FMedSci, Professor of Epidemiology & Human Development, University of Southampton
- Professor Pia Hardelid, Professor of Epidemiology, UCL
- Ms Helen Hoogewerf-McComb, Senior Policy Advisor, DfE
- Ms Eliza Kehoe, FORUM Policy Officer, Academy of Medical Sciences
- Dr Jacqueline Phillips Owen, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, South London and the Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust
- Professor Ann Phoenix FBA, Professor of Psychosocial Studies, UCL
- Dr Amrit Kaur Purba, Senior Research Associate, University of Cambridge
- Mr Sam Ramsay, Senior Research Officer, DfE
- Professor Stephen Scott CBE FMedSci, Professor of Child Health and Behaviour, King's College London
- **Professor Rosalind Smyth CBE FMedSci, Professor of Child Health at UCL and Vice President (Clinical) of the Academy of Medical Sciences (Co-Chair)**
- Professor Kathy Sylva OBE FBA, Professor Emeritus of Educational Psychology, University of Oxford
- Professor David-Taylor Robinson, Professor of Public Health and Policy, University of Liverpool
- Ms Liz Tenney, Policy Intern, Academy of Medical Sciences
- Professor Russell Viner CBE FMedSci, Chief Scientific Advisor, DfE
- Ms Angel Yiangou, Senior Policy Manager, Academy of Medical Sciences

Annexe 2: Pre-read data for roundtable on children and young people thriving

Brief evidence summary on factors affecting children thriving

The health behaviour in school-aged children (HBSC) study

The [HBSC study](#) examines the health and well-being, health behaviours and social context of young people using a survey methodology of self-completed questionnaires. The survey is completed by young people aged 11, 13 and 15 years old across England and collects key data on metrics such as belonging, overall health, loneliness and family support.

Between 2014 and 2018, declines were reported across four metrics relating to children and young people's perceptions of school, including feeling safe in school, belonging in school, liking school, and experience of pressure from school (Figure 1).

In 2022, children and young people from the least affluent families reported lower levels of feeling safe (Figure 2) and school belonging (Figure 3) than their peers from the most affluent families. Data on the association with family affluence was not available for metrics of liking school and experience of pressure from school.

On aspects of teacher social support, between 2014 and 2022, declines were reported in young people feeling that their teachers care about them as a person, and that there is one teacher that they can go to if they have a problem (Figure 4). Between 2018 and 2022, declines were reported in young people feeling that their teachers accept them as they are, and that they feel a lot of trust in their teachers (Figure 4).

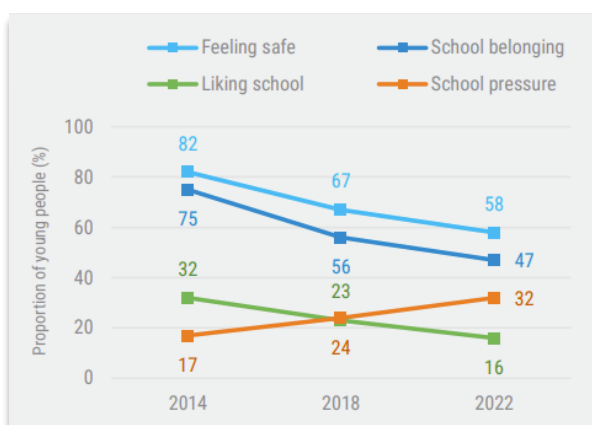


Figure 1. Young people reporting their perceptions of the school environment, 2014-2022. (Taken from figure 4.8 on page 84).

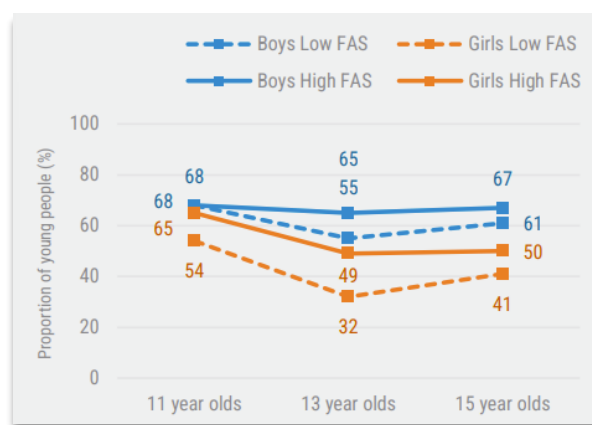


Figure 2. Young people who report feeling safe at school, by family affluence (FAS). (Taken from figure 4.12 on page 85).

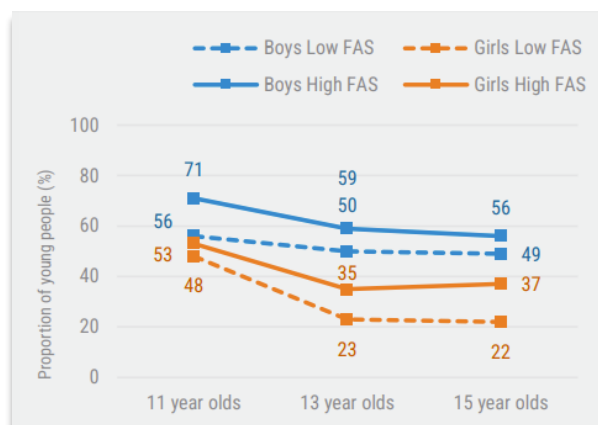
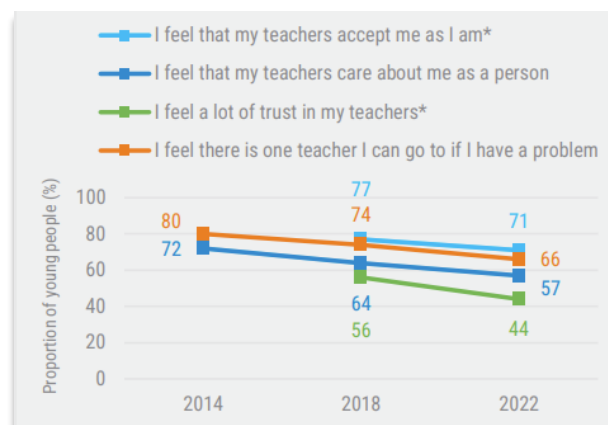


Figure 3. Young people who feel they belong in their school, by family affluence (FAS). (Taken from figure 4.14 on page 86).

On aspects of relationships among classmates, between 2014 and 2022, declines were reported in the proportion of young people reporting that students in their class enjoy being together, and reporting that most of the students in their class are kind and helpful. Between 2018 and 2022, a decline was reported in the number of young people reporting that other students accept them as they are.

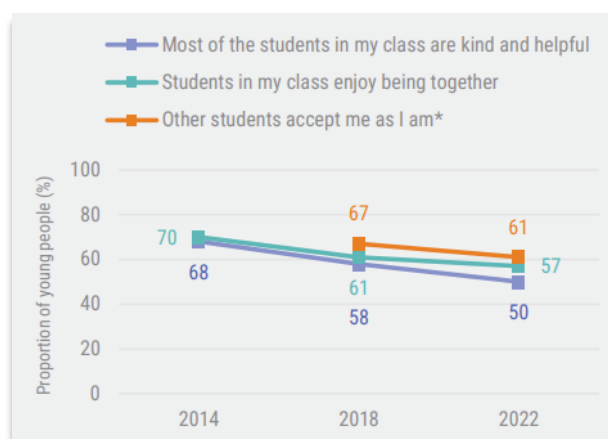
Declines were also seen in a range of other factors related to whether a child or young person is thriving, including overall health, physical activity, life satisfaction, loneliness, self-efficacy (problem solving), deliberate self-harm, family support, parent support for education, and social support from friends.

Across these factors, there was an almost universal association between lower family affluence and poorer outcomes. The exceptions were in measures of loneliness, where scores were higher in children and young people from more affluent families, and physical activity, where a higher proportion of girls in the oldest age group (15 years old) from less affluent families met the WHO-recommended physical activity level, compared with those from more affluence families. No data was available on associations between family affluence and deliberate self-harm.



*'teachers accept me as I am' and 'I feel a lot of trust in teachers' were not recorded in 2024

Figure 4. Young people reporting aspects of teacher social support, 2014-2022. (Taken from figure 4.17 on page 88).



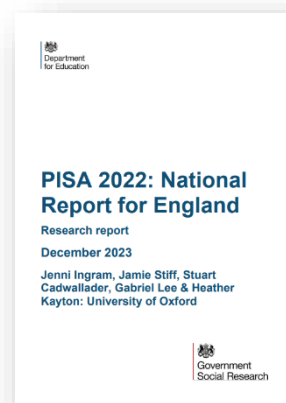
*'other students accept me as I am' was not recorded in 2014

Figure 5. Young people reporting positive relationships among classmates, 2014-2022.

The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)

The [PISA study](#) assesses knowledge and skills that are considered necessary for participation in social and economic life, specifically in mathematics, reading and science, through a survey of 15-year-old pupils. Data is available across OECD nations, providing an international comparison for data in England. It should be noted that England was not able to meet all sampling requirements for PISA 2022, which needs to be considered when using findings from this survey⁶⁴. The survey reports that:

- In 2022, pupils in England reported a significantly lower average level of life satisfaction when compared to the average across OECD countries. Similar results were observed in 2018. The metric has declined across both England and the OECD average between 2018 and 2022.
- In 2022, the proportion of pupils in England that agreed or strongly agreed that they felt like they 'belong' at school was 12% lower than the average across OECD countries. In 2018, the proportion of pupils in England that agreed or strongly agreed that they felt like they 'belong' at school was 19% lower than the average across OECD countries⁶⁵. Between 2018 and 2022 the pupils reporting feeling they belong at school has increased by 1% in England and dropped by 6% across the OECD average.
- Additional changes were seen in England across a further five measures, including whether pupils felt that they were liked by other pupils (declined by 1%), whether they make friends easily at school (improved by 2%), whether they felt awkward and out of place in their school (declined by 2%), whether they felt like an outsider at school (improved by 5%). No change was seen in whether they felt lonely at school. In 2018 England outperformed the OECD average by a small margin on two measures: whether pupils felt they make friends easily at school and whether they feel liked by other pupils (by 2% and 5% respectively)⁶⁶. In 2022, England outperformed the OECD average only in whether pupils felt they are liked by other pupils (by 2%). In both years, metrics were equal across whether pupils felt lonely at school.
- In comparison to the OECD average, pupils in England reported greater exposure to bullying across an average of six measures. Pupils reported regular instances of bullying had lower average levels of PISA mathematics performance than those reporting less frequent instances of bullying.
- The percentage of pupils reporting experiences of bullying has generally decreased between 2018 and 2022, both in England and across the OECD average. However, these reductions have been less substantial in England compared with the OECD average, and in 2022, the percentage of pupils in England reporting different experiences of bullying was higher in all categories than the OECD average.
- The survey also records headteacher reported data on several measures, including parental engagement and extra-curricular activities. For parental engagement, declines were seen across three of four metrics in England between 2018 and 2022. Whilst declines were also recorded across the OECD average for all four metrics over the same period, in 2022, metrics for England were worse than the OECD average in three out of four metrics.
- A substantially higher percentage of schools offered extracurricular activities to pupils in England compared with the OECD average.



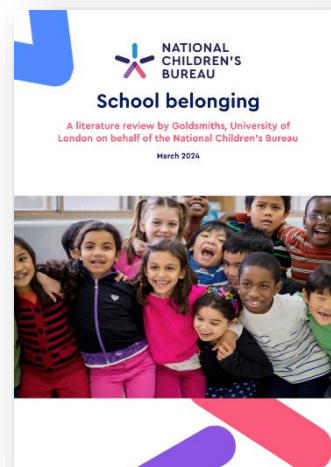
⁶⁴ https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/united-kingdom_9c15db47-en.html

⁶⁵ https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/12/pisa-2018-results-volume-iii_bdc12c30/acd78851-en.pdf

⁶⁶ https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/12/pisa-2018-results-volume-iii_bdc12c30/acd78851-en.pdf

The National Children's Bureau (NCB) literature review on school belonging

NCB commissioned a [literature review on school belonging](#), highlighting several factors that influence this metric of thriving. These include: teachers; peer relationships and peer support with developmental influence; personal and demographic characteristics; parental support; extra-curricular activities in school; geographical location; school climate and safety; pupil aspirations.



The Children's Society's Good Childhood report 2024

Data on wider factors relating to variations and trends in children's subjective wellbeing were reported in [The Children's Society's Good Childhood report 2024](#). This includes data from the UK Longitudinal Household Survey (known as Understanding Society), a youth questionnaire with routine questions on children's subjective wellbeing, and data from The Children's Society household survey 2024, a survey about children and young people's and their parent or carer's wellbeing, the household, and other characteristics.

The latest took place in April to June 2024, with responses from a sample of 2,056 UK children and young people aged 10 to 17 and their parents or carers. Children and young people from across the UK were selected to closely match the make-up of the wider population on four criteria: age, gender, socio-economic background, and UK nations and regions. The report outlined that:



- Children's happiness with their life as a whole was significantly lower in the latest survey wave (2021/22) than when the survey began, in 2009/10. In 2021/22, children's mean happiness score for life as a whole was 7.56 (compared to 8.17 in 2009/10).
- Children's mean scores for their happiness with their friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork were also significantly lower in 2021/22 than when the survey started. Out of the six domains, family remains the only aspect of life for which there is no significant change in children's mean happiness scores when comparing 2021/22 to when the survey began.
- Average happiness scores forming the Good Childhood Index showed that a larger proportion of children were unhappy with school (scoring below the midpoint on this metric) than with the other nine measures.

The mental health of children and young people in England survey 2023

[The Mental Health of Children and Young People \(MHCYP\) survey series](#) provides England's Official Statistics on trends in child mental health. The most recent face to face survey in the series took place in 2017 and involved interviews with a random probability sample of children and young people (aged 2 to 19 years) and their parents or carers. Those that agreed to future research were invited to take part in the wave 1 MHCYP online follow up survey in 2020, and again in spring 2021, spring 2022 and spring 2023 to complete the wave 2, wave 3 and wave 4 online follow up surveys.

The survey reports that:

- The percentage of children and young people between the ages of 8-16 with a probable mental disorder has grown between 2017 and 2023.
- Children aged 8 to 16 years with a probable mental disorder were more than twice as likely to live in a household that had fallen behind with rent, bills or mortgage (18.7%) than those unlikely to have a mental disorder (6.8%). They were also more than twice as likely to not be able to afford to keep the home warm enough (19.9% compared with 7.6%).
- With respect to data on feelings about school, for children aged 11 to 16 years, 9 in 10 (88.8%) said they had at least one friend they could turn to for support, and over 7 in 10 agreed that 'I feel safe at school' (76.2%) and 'I can be myself at school' (74.7%). 6 in 10 agreed that 'I enjoy learning at school' (60.5%).
- Children with a probable mental disorder were less likely to have positive views of school than those unlikely to have a mental disorder as follows:
 - 75.3% agreed that 'I have at least one friend I can turn to for support' compared with 92.4% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder
 - 56.3% agreed that 'I feel safe when I am at school', compared with 85.1% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder
 - 49.1% agreed that 'I can be myself at school', compared with 84.6% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder
 - 35.2% agreed that 'I enjoy learning at school', compared with 70.9% of those unlikely to have a mental disorder
- Most children aged 11 to 16 years had positive feelings about access to mental health support at school: 81.3% knew how to get support and 75.1% agreed they were able to access support if they needed to. Children were less likely to agree that 'I feel comfortable talking to adults about my mental health' (59.3% agreed) or 'The support at my school is helpful' (64.5% agreed).

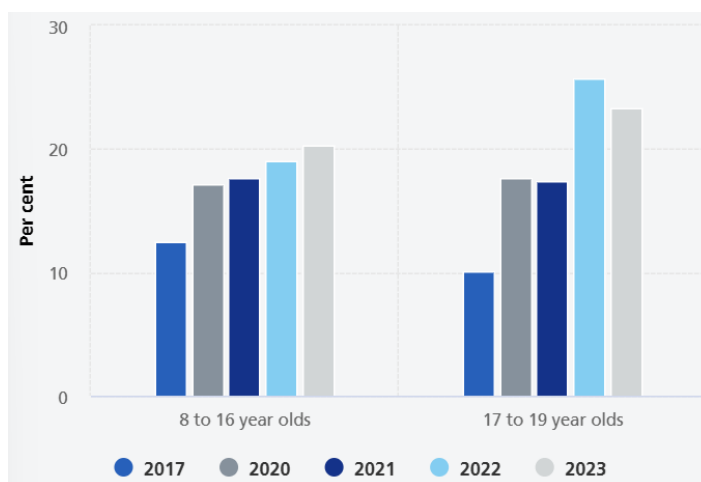


Figure 6. The percentage of children and young people with a probable mental disorder by age, 2017, 2020, 2021, 2022 and 2023

Annexe 3: further resources on factors affecting children and young people thriving at school

- Archer L & Francis B (2007). *Understanding Minority Ethnic Achievement: the role of race, class, gender and 'success'*. London, Routledge
- Archer L (2008). *The Impossibility of Minority Ethnic Educational 'Success'? An Examination of the Discourses of Teachers and Pupils in British Secondary Schools*. European Educational Research Journal, **7**. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/eeerj.2008.7.1.89>
- Archer L et al. (2016). *Stratifying science: a Bourdieusian analysis of student views and experiences of school selective practices in relation to 'Triple Science' at KS4 in England*. Research Papers in Education **32**, 296-315.
- Archer L et al. (2018). *The symbolic violence of setting: A Bourdieusian analysis of mixed methods data on secondary students' views about setting*. British Educational Research Journal **44**, 119-140.
- Archer L et al. (2020). *Changing the field: A Bourdieusian analysis of educational practices that support equitable outcomes among minoritized youth on two informal science learning programmes*. Science Education **105**, 166-203.
- Archer L et al. (2022). "It really has made me think": Exploring how informal STEM learning practitioners developed critical reflective practice for social justice using the Equity Compass tool. Pedagogy Culture and Society **32**, 1243-1265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2159504>
- Archer L et al. (2024). *Applying the principles of culturally sustaining pedagogy to a model for justice-oriented school science pedagogy in England: the science capital teaching approach*. London Review of Education **22**, 7.
- Archer L, Hollingworth S & Mendick H (2010). *Urban youth and schooling: the experiences and identities of educationally 'at risk' young people*. Maidenhead, Open University Press.
- Cattán S et al. (2023). *The impact of area level mental health interventions on outcomes for secondary school pupils: Evidence from the HeadStart programme in England*. Econ. Educ. Rev. **96**. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2023.102425>
- Chowdhuri MN & Archer L (2023). *Getting comfortable with discomfort: supporting primary science teacher educators' capacity for socially just pedagogy*. Journal of Education for Teaching **50**, 479-493.
- Chowdhuri MN et al. (2023). *Towards justice-oriented science teaching: examining the impact of the science capital teaching approach on teachers*. London Review of Education, **21**. <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.21.1.37>
- Education Endowment Foundation (2019). *Improving behaviour in schools guidance report*. https://d2tic4wvo1iusb.cloudfront.net/production/eeef-guidance-reports/behaviour/EEF_Improving_behaviour_in_schools_Report.pdf
- Feifer M, Butler ML & Davis-McElligatt J (2025). *bell hooks's Radical Pedagogy*. Bloomsbury Publishing.

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