

# 10. Childhood

## Growing up in Britain

International reports suggest the UK has not been as successful as other developed nations in promoting children's well-being. The media and some politicians appear to endorse a gloomy view of modern childhood; does the public share their pessimism?

**While a majority think Britain is a good country to grow up in, only a minority think children are happier now than they were a decade ago. Contrary to popular belief, the views of older people are not always the most negative.**

# 70%

Seven out of ten (70%) agree that **Britain is a good country to grow up in**, compared with one in ten (10%) who disagree. But only 12% think that children are happier than ten years ago; 54% disagree.



18-34 44%

65 and over 60%

People aged 65 and over are more likely than 18-34 year olds to think Britain is a good place to grow up in (81% and 60% respectively agree). But older people are also more likely than younger adults to think that children are less happy now than a decade ago (60% and 44%).

**A majority of adults think most young people are well-behaved. A majority, nevertheless, think that standards of behaviour were better in the past.**

# 61%

**think most young people are well behaved**

Six out of ten (61%) think most **young people are responsible and well-behaved**; only one in five (21%) disagree. Older people are more likely to agree (69%) than young adults (45%).

Agree 28%

Disagree 63%

However, six out of ten (63%) disagree with the idea that **young people's behaviour is "no worse than in the past"**, compared with 28% who agree.

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There are many reasons why the lives of children growing up in Britain today might be judged better than those of their parents and grandparents. They can expect to avoid disability or limiting illness and live longer than previous generations (Office for National Statistics, 2010a & 2010b). They live in households where disposable income per head is, on average, much higher and they are more likely to live in a warm ‘decent’ home. They can choose between more age-appropriate books than ever before, and they have access to sources of information, communication and entertainment that were unimaginable for previous generations (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010).

Schoolchildren when questioned about their lives mostly say they are happy, have good friends and are positive about their schools (Chamberlain *et al.*, 2010). Yet this is far from the whole story, as witnessed by an enduring political and media debate about children and the quality of modern childhood. Arguably the most damning contribution came in 2007, when the UK was placed bottom of a league table for child well-being across ‘rich’ countries, published by the United Nations Children’s Fund, UNICEF. This compared countries on indicators of relative poverty, education, family and peer relationships, risk-taking behaviour and health (UNICEF, 2007). Since much of the data used had been collected around five years earlier, there was mild relief in Britain when an updated report, using data from the middle of the decade, placed the UK 19th out of 24 countries on children’s material well-being, 13th on education and 11th on health – though only 21st using an overall indicator of equality in child well-being (UNICEF, 2010).

Following the 2010 General Election, the incoming coalition government showed interest in trying to improve the UK’s performance. It established a Childhood and Families Taskforce, to be attended by the Prime Minister, Deputy Prime Minister and senior ministers, with a remit to co-ordinate policies for improving children’s quality of life. This was expected to consider issues as varied as flexible parental leave, support for disabled children, helping children through family breakdown, helping communities to access play facilities and tackling the unwelcome sexualisation of children in marketing. However, little has been heard of the taskforce since the announcement and the government has appeared coy about its work or how often it has met (Mahadevan, 2011).

Against this background, we examine what the adult public thinks it is like growing up in Britain today. The questions we asked were first included in 2007 and 2008 with funding from the former Department for Children, Schools and Families (now the Department for Education) and we repeated a number of them in the 2010 survey. In this chapter we find out whether people think Britain<sup>1</sup> is a good country for children to grow up in and whether children fare better or worse here now than ten years ago. We also discover how far they agree that young people today are responsible and well-behaved and if they think behaviour is any worse than in the past. We begin with the overall balance of views, but go on to investigate the opinions held by different groups – notably, young adults, older people, parents and people living without dependent children.

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Exploring these attitudes will tell us whether people tend to be more optimistic about childhood than its generally gloomy portrayal by government and in the media,<sup>2</sup> or whether they, too, share a mood of pessimism and unease.

### Childhood in Britain

We begin by considering whether the view that the UK performs relatively poorly on child well-being is reflected in public attitudes towards childhood in Britain. In 2010, we asked respondents for the first time to indicate whether they agree or disagree with the following statement:

*Overall Britain is a good country for children to grow up in*

The fact that we do not specify a comparison means that people may have stated their views with different reference groups in mind – including poorer countries than the industrialised nations assessed in the latest UNICEF report on inequalities in well-being (UNICEF, 2010). Nevertheless, the answers – presented in Table 10.1 – suggest that the public generally take a positive view. Seven in ten respondents agree Britain is a good country for children to grow up in, while around two in ten neither agree nor disagree. Just one in ten respondents disagree with this view.

**Table 10.1 Attitudes to Britain as a country to grow up in**

Overall Britain is a good country for children to grow up in	%
Agree	70
Neither agree nor disagree	17
Disagree	10
Base	2791

Even without knowing what comparisons people are making when agreeing to the statement, their broad assessment is clearly at odds with widely-publicised assessments that the UK is not performing well. However, to discover how far views are uniformly positive or vary, we next examine what the public thinks about a number of specific childhood issues and how these have changed over time.

# 7 in 10

respondents agree Britain  
is a good country for children  
to grow up in

### **Attitudes to childhood**

Respondents' knowledge of childhood in other countries is bound, in most cases, to be limited. But no such qualification applies to questions about childhood in Britain itself, where they can draw on their own upbringing and their experiences as parents, or as members of the community, aware of other people's children.

To ensure comparison with a common point in time, we asked respondents in 2010 to think back 10 years and say whether they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements:

*Children today are happier than children were 10 years ago*

*Children today are under more pressure from adverts than children were 10 years ago*

*Children today have better educational opportunities than children had 10 years ago*

*It is less safe for children today to play outside than it was 10 years ago*

Their responses are compared in Table 10.2 with those obtained in 2008 when the same questions were asked. The results demonstrate that the public's perceptions of childhood and how this is changing are more nuanced than might be supposed from the large majority who agree that Britain is a good country to grow up in.

We can also see how perceptions differ markedly depending on the aspect of childhood being discussed; so it is not simply the case that a fixed proportion of the public regard childhood as having improved in the past decade, while the remainder think it has worsened. Overall, as in 2008, people think three of the four aspects of childhood we asked about have grown worse in the last decade. While just over half disagree that children are happier now than they were 10 years ago, the proportion saying this has declined by five percentage points since the previous survey. Nevertheless, the proportion of adults who positively agree that children are happier than 10 years ago remains low at 12 per cent. When it comes to children playing outside, the proportion agreeing they are less safe than 10 years ago rises above six out of ten, although this, too, is rather lower than in the previous survey. The percentage in active disagreement is, conversely, five percentage points higher than in 2008, at 23 per cent. This contrasts with an altogether stronger and less changing consensus that children are under more pressure from adverts now than 10 years ago, where 85 per cent agree and just seven per cent disagree.

The question where most people acknowledge there has been a positive improvement over the last 10 years concerns education. Around three-fifths agree that children have better educational opportunities today than a decade ago, while less than a fifth

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 **The public's perceptions of childhood and how this is changing are more nuanced than might be supposed** 

disagree. Similar proportions were identified in 2008. This finding accords with other *British Social Attitudes* data showing that public attitudes to school-based education have become more positive in the past 10 years. For example, in *The 27th Report* we found that the proportion of the public who felt secondary schools were doing well preparing young people for work, teaching the ‘three Rs’ and bringing out pupils’ natural abilities had increased significantly since the mid-1990s (Clery and Low, 2010).

**Table 10.2 Attitudes to childhood, 2008 and 2010**

	2008	2010
<b>Children today are happier than children were 10 years ago</b>	%	%
Agree	10	12
Neither agree nor disagree	29	31
Disagree	59	54
<b>Children today are under more pressure from adverts than children were 10 years ago</b>	%	%
Agree	83	85
Neither agree nor disagree	9	7
Disagree	6	7
<b>Children today have better educational opportunities than children had 10 years ago</b>	%	%
Agree	61	59
Neither agree nor disagree	20	20
Disagree	17	18
<b>It is less safe for children today to play outside than it was 10 years ago</b>	%	%
Agree	69	64
Neither agree nor disagree	12	12
Disagree	18	23
<i>Base</i>	3393	3297

People’s positive views about improving educational opportunities over the past decade contrast with their prevailing pessimism about the direction of change in the pressures on children from advertising, children’s safety playing outside and their overall happiness. But attitudes on these specific questions are not necessarily inconsistent with a general impression that Britain is a good country for children to grow up in. People could hold this positive view yet still feel that British childhood is not as good as it used to be in various key respects. The data reported above also give no indication of the extent to which people feel these aspects of childhood in Britain have deteriorated in a decade. Looking at the modest movement in attitudes that has taken place since 2008 towards a more optimistic stance,

we can, at least, be sure that negative opinion on the four chosen issues has not hardened. In other words, the 2010 findings cannot be interpreted as evidence of a downward trend in public confidence concerning the quality of childhood.

In 2010, respondents were also asked whether they agreed or disagreed that:

***Young people in this area do not have enough constructive things to do in their spare time***

Sixty per cent of respondents agreed with this statement – a decline of six percentage points from the proportion who stated the same in 2007, when the question was first asked. This short-term change adds weight to a hypothesis that public attitudes to childhood, even when they show continuing concern, have not been getting any more pessimistic. But does this distinction still apply when it comes to people's view of today's children and young people – and more specifically the way that they behave?

### **Attitudes to children and young people**

We asked respondents whether they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements about children and young people. In designing these questions, we recognised that respondents would be likely to hold different views about children of different ages and developmental stages, from infancy through to late adolescence. We chose to focus our questions on 10–19 year olds and advised respondents that:

***For the next few questions, I'd like you to think in particular about people aged between 10 and 19. So when I use the term young people, 10 to 19 is the broad age group I'm referring to.***

People were then asked to indicate how far they agreed or disagreed with each of the following statements:

***The behaviour of young people today is no worse than it was in the past***

***Girls are more badly behaved than boys nowadays***

***Most young people are responsible and well-behaved***

Their responses are presented in Table 10.3 alongside views obtained in the 2008 survey when the same questions were asked. The first important point to note is that a majority of the public (61 per cent) agree that most young people are responsible and well-behaved – and that this is slightly higher than the proportion recorded three years earlier. The percentage that disagrees has, meanwhile, declined somewhat from 25 per cent to 21 per cent.

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**61%**

**think most young people  
are well behaved**

Nevertheless, the data indicate a widely-held perception that standards of behaviour are not as high as “in the past”. Slightly less than three in ten agree that young people’s behaviour is no worse today, but more than six out of ten disagree. Again, we can see evidence of a modest shift in recent years towards a more positive view of the way that young people’s behaviour has changed over time. This provides further evidence that, while the majority of the public still think many aspects of childhood have deteriorated, rather more adults express optimism about children and young people than a few years ago.

**Table 10.3 Attitudes to children, 2008 and 2010**

	2008	2010
<b>The behaviour of young people today is no worse than it was in the past</b>	%	%
Agree	24	28
Neither agree nor disagree	7	8
Disagree	69	63
<b>Girls are more badly behaved than boys nowadays</b>	%	%
Agree	41	40
Neither agree nor disagree	33	32
Disagree	25	27
<b>Most young people are responsible and well-behaved</b>	%	%
Agree	57	61
Neither agree nor disagree	17	17
Disagree	25	21
<i>Base</i>	3393	3297

However, it is instructive to observe how opinions about the behaviour of girls compared with boys are not only very mixed, but also little changed in three years. Four in ten agree with the proposition that girls are more badly behaved than boys nowadays, while three in ten neither agree nor disagree and slightly fewer than three in ten disagree. These views appear to fly in the face of the evidence that young women are less likely to commit crime than young men, commit less serious offences and also tend to stop offending at an earlier age (Smith, 2010). Even so, evidence from the middle of the last decade that teenage girls in Britain are more likely to drink alcohol regularly than in other European countries (Currie *et al.*, 2008) attracted considerable media attention, fuelling concerns that young women are increasingly involved in a hard-drinking, anti-social ‘ladette’ culture. This may help to explain why such a large minority of the public think girls are more badly behaved than boys.

### **The influence of age and parenthood**

Childhood is a topic where – exceptionally in social policy – everyone has personal experience on which to base their opinions. But to what extent do views change when

people are no longer young themselves, or do not have children living at home with them? Previous *British Social Attitudes* surveys have produced compelling evidence that people with direct or recent experience of an area tend to view it more positively. For example, in 2009, those who had recently used NHS services expressed greater levels of satisfaction with them (Appleby and Robertson, 2010) and parents of school-age children rated the performance of schools more positively than non-parents (Clery and Low, 2010). Is this also true of adults with the most recent experiences of childhood and children?

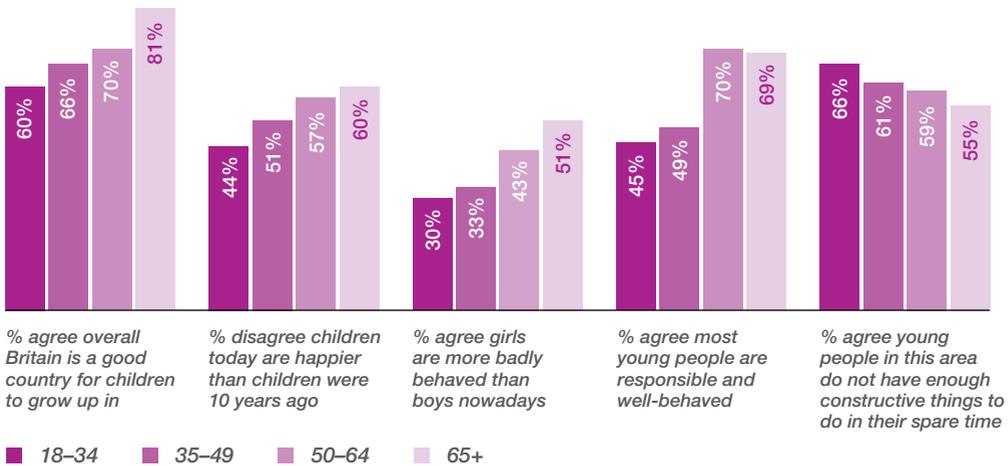
Perhaps surprisingly, the picture that emerges from the 2010 survey is unclear. There are almost no significant differences between the attitudes of parents caring for dependent children and other members of the public – suggesting that current experience of childhood from the standpoint of a parent does not result in attitudes that differ much from those of adult society as a whole. The only exception concerns behaviour, where parents of dependent children are less likely to accept that girls' behaviour is worse than boys. Not only do 30 per cent disagree, but another 37 per cent say they neither agree nor disagree. It may be that parents' experience of their children's friends as well as their own families reduce their capacity or willingness to generalise about children's behaviour. Even so, 32 per cent of current parents concur that girls' behaviour is worse than boys, aligning themselves with 40 per cent of non-parents who take this view.

Distinctions between the views expressed by younger and older adults are much more marked, but not always in predictable ways. As shown in Figure 10.1, the views that older people hold about childhood are not universally more positive or negative than those of younger people. Older age groups are much more likely to agree that Britain is a good country to grow up in. Eight in ten (81 per cent) people aged 65 years and above express this view, compared to six in ten (60 per cent) of those aged 18–34. Yet despite being positive about Britain as a place for children to grow up, older people are more negative than others about children's happiness over time. Sixty per cent of people aged 65 and over – and almost as high a proportion of 50–64 year olds – disagree that children are happier today than they were ten years ago, compared to 44 per cent in the youngest age group.

When we examine attitudes to young people's spare time, older age groups revert to adopting a more positive position. While 66 per cent of those aged 18–34 agree that young people do not have enough constructive things to do in their spare time, the proportion among those aged 65 years or over falls to 55 per cent. It is, perhaps, not difficult to imagine that the oldest age group, observing the rapid expansion in availability of computers, books and other leisure opportunities might be less inclined than younger adults to think that children lack constructive things to do.

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**The views that older people hold about childhood are not universally more positive or negative than those of younger people**

**Figure 10.1 Attitudes to childhood and children, by age**

The data on which Figure 10.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

In relation to children and young people's behaviour, very similar proportions of younger and older respondents agree that young people's behaviour today is no worse than it has been in the past. But, rather surprisingly, we find that respondents aged 50 and over are much more likely than 18-34 year olds to endorse the view that most young people are responsible and well-behaved. Seven in ten of those in the oldest age groups support this view, compared to less than half of those aged 18-34 years. It might be argued that those who were most recently children themselves have more experience of the way that today's children and young people behave, leading to less positive assessments. On the other hand, young adults might also be thought to have a stronger incentive than older people to put a positive gloss on their own childhood behaviour when comparing it with their even more youthful successors.

The waters are further muddied by the evidence that older people are much more likely than younger age groups to believe that girls' behaviour is nowadays worse than boys. In particular, where only 30 per cent of 18-34 year olds think this is the case, as many as 51 per cent of those aged 65 and over agree. This may be because expectations of girls' behaviour were very different in the period when the oldest age groups were growing up – and that what is construed as acceptable today was then viewed negatively. It is also possible that older people have also been more strongly influenced by negative media portrayals of girls' behaviour. Overall, however, we can see that the differences and distinctions between the attitudes to childhood held by older and younger adults are complex and may merit closer investigation in future.

**The adult public's view of childhood and children is in many ways a less negative one than that presented by policy makers and the media**

Clearly, however, it is quite wrong to suppose that older age groups, just by dint of being furthest removed from childhood, view children and growing up in Britain more negatively than younger age groups.

## Conclusions

As The Children's Society's *Good Childhood Inquiry* (Layard and Dunn, 2009) observed in its assessment of children's lives in modern Britain, "There are causes to celebrate *and* causes to worry". Others, too, have contrasted the concerns that adults often express about childhood, with evidence that the vast majority of children and young people say their lives are happy and tend to take an optimistic view of the future (Cambridge Primary Review, 2010: pp. 53–62). Yet we can now see that the adult public's view of childhood and children is in many ways a less negative one than that presented by policy makers and the media, and certainly more nuanced. While a number of aspects of childhood and children are widely viewed as having deteriorated in the past decade, the data we have collected in recent years does not suggest we are witnessing a long-term slide into pessimism in these areas. Whatever their specific concerns, most people view Britain as a good country for children to grow up in.

Attitudes to childhood turn out to be less influenced by whether people are currently caring for dependent children – a somewhat unexpected finding that may merit further investigation across a wider range of topics. But it is also interesting to discover that while older people tend to hold distinctive views about children's lives, these do not run in any single direction – positive or negative.

The well-being of children and families was identified as a priority by the coalition government at an early stage in its administration, but it remains to be seen what substantive outcomes may emerge from this – and how these may influence the public's attitudes to childhood in the future.

## Notes

1. While the UNICEF studies and the government's Children and Families Taskforce focus on children in the UK, our findings are for Britain and exclude Northern Ireland.
2. A recent statistical review provides evidence that young people themselves feel the media present an unduly negative view of their age group. Almost eight out of ten 16 and 17 year olds agree that the media usually make young people out to be worse than they really are. A similar proportion feel that most attention is given to a minority of troublemakers, rather than young people who are making positive contributions to society. (Department for Education, 2011).

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**Appendix**

The data for Figure 10.1 are shown below.

	<b>Age</b>			
	<b>18-34</b>	<b>35-49</b>	<b>50-64</b>	<b>65+</b>
% agree overall Britain is a good country for children to grow up in	60	66	70	81
<i>Base</i>	<i>569</i>	<i>802</i>	<i>718</i>	<i>697</i>
% disagree children today are happier than children were 10 years ago	44	51	57	60
% agree girls are more badly behaved than boys nowadays	30	33	43	51
% agree most young people are responsible and well-behaved	45	49	70	69
% agree young people in this area do not have enough constructive things to do in their spare time	66	61	59	55
<i>Base</i>	<i>676</i>	<i>943</i>	<i>814</i>	<i>857</i>