

**YOUTH
TALK**
We're listening



THE GROWING UP SURVEY 2026

What young people
are telling us



www.youthtalk.org.uk



FOREWORD

At Youth Talk we spend every day listening to young people. In our counselling rooms we hear about the pressures they face, the worries they carry and the challenges they are trying to navigate. But we also see resilience, hope and a genuine desire to talk and be understood.

This report brings together the voices of more than 1,200 young people who responded to the Youth Talk **Growing Up Survey**, offering a snapshot of what growing up today feels like from their perspective.

The findings show that growing up can feel complicated, intense and at times overwhelming. One in six young people reported that life is difficult right now. School pressures, mental health worries, future opportunities and the constant presence of social media are all shaping young people's experiences.

Despite these real, everyday challenges it was reassuring to hear that over half of respondents were feeling more positive about their lives.

One of the clearest messages is the importance of human connection. Friends and family remain the people young people are most likely to turn to when struggling. When professional help is needed, many say they would prefer face-to-face support with a counsellor rather than relying on digital services.

Young people also offer an important message to adults: listen carefully, show empathy, take their experiences seriously and resist the urge to immediately try to "fix" things for them.

For parents, teachers, policymakers and mental health services, this report provides an important opportunity to hear directly from young people about what they need.

With demand for support continuing to rise and waiting lists growing, what young people are telling us should act as a clear call to action for all of us as a community.

We hope this report helps bring young people's voices to the centre of the conversation.

David Barker
Chief Executive



About the Survey

The Youth Talk **Growing Up Survey** 2026 was created to better understand how young people themselves experience the challenges of growing up today.

In total, 1,280 young people responded to the online survey, with responses gathered through local schools, Youth Talk communications channels and social media.

Responses were drawn predominantly from those aged under 18, with a particularly good spread across secondary school age groups. A smaller number of responses were received from young adults aged 19–25.

The survey provides a robust picture of the experiences of adolescents. The views of those aged 18–25 are less represented than we would ideally like in this year's data. Strengthening engagement with this older age group is a key priority for future surveys, helping us build a more complete understanding of how experiences and challenges evolve into early adulthood.

In terms of gender, the 2026 survey achieved a more balanced sample than a previous survey, allowing for more meaningful insight into differences in how young people experience the pressures of growing up.

The survey explored several key themes including:

- The biggest challenges facing young people today
- How young people feel about life overall
- What helps them cope with the pressures of growing up
- Who they would turn to when struggling with their mental health
- What types of support they would prefer if professional help was needed
- Advice young people would give to adults about how best to support them

Alongside the quantitative data, the survey also invited young people to share their thoughts in their own words. These responses provide powerful insight into how young people see the world and what they want adults to understand.



Key Findings

Several clear themes have emerged.

Growing up today can feel overwhelming

Over half of young people say mental health is one of the biggest challenges facing young people, while one in six say life feels difficult right now.

Words like “stressful”, “anxious”, “pressure”, “overwhelming” and “lonely” feature heavily when asked which three words describe being a young person right now.

These words appeared repeatedly across hundreds of responses, highlighting the emotional pressures many young people feel.

“Life is hard because there is so much pressure put onto you in a lot of situations and you are just expected to deal with it”

School and College pressures remain the biggest challenges

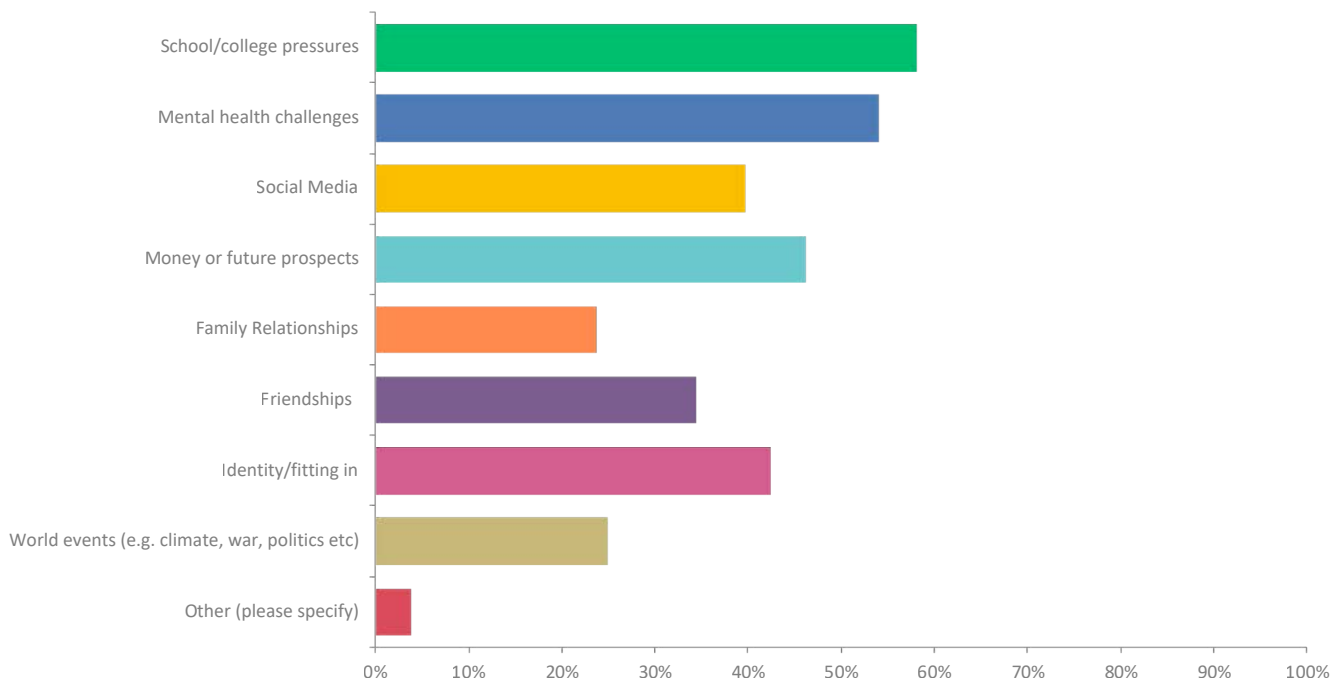
School and college pressures were the most frequently mentioned challenge facing young people today. Academic expectations, exams and the pressure to succeed are weighing heavily on many young people.

Mental health challenges were also widely mentioned, reflecting the increasing awareness among young people of issues such as anxiety, low mood and emotional stress.

Other significant pressures highlighted were money worries, future prospects, fitting in and the impact of social media.



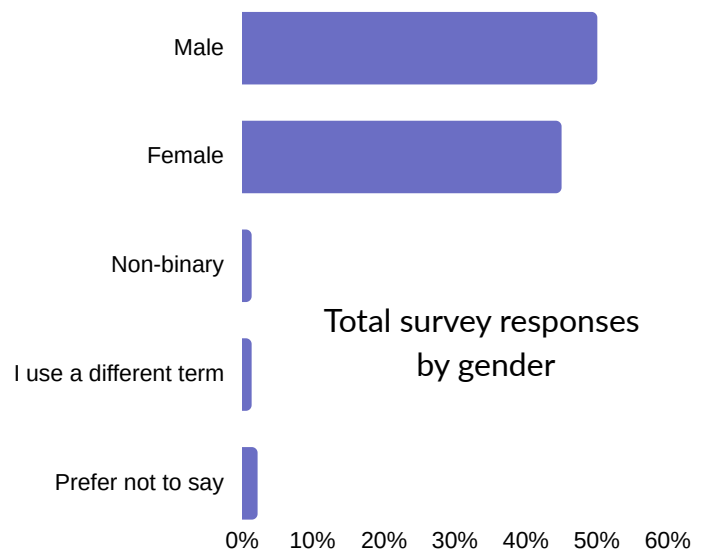
Which of these feel like the biggest challenges for young people today? (tick all applicable)



A Gender Divide

Across almost every category - including mental health, friendships, social media and family relationships - girls were more likely than boys to mention challenges and more likely to say life feels difficult overall.

Overall, boys were less likely to identify or describe these issues, which may reflect a greater difficulty in recognising, expressing or talking openly about their struggles and emotions.



These differences are something Youth Talk sees regularly in its day-to-day work with young people.

As a result, the charity has recently partnered with the University of Greenwich and Verulam School on an important new research project called '**Breaking the Silence**', aiming to better understand the barriers boys and young men face in seeking counselling support and opening up about how they are feeling.

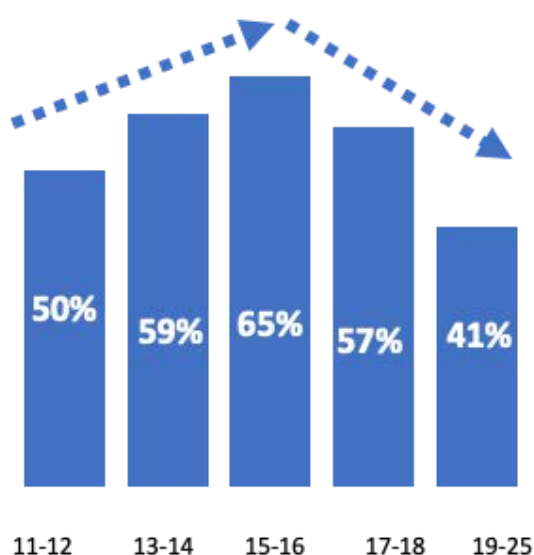
Pressures intensify with age

As young people get older there are some understandable areas where worries about life beyond school begin to grow significantly.

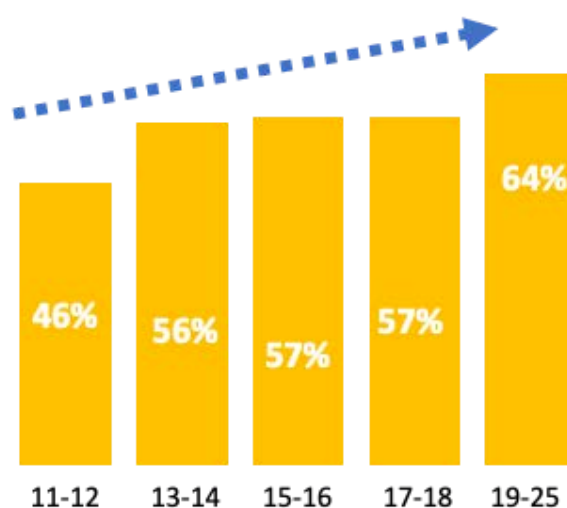
Concerns about mental health increased steadily with age, as did worries about money which rise sharply. This suggests that uncertainty about the future becomes far more significant as young people approach adulthood.

Concerns about the wider world also increased with age. Older respondents were more likely to mention issues such as war, climate change and politics, rising from 20% of younger respondents to 34% among those aged 19–25. This suggests many young people are carrying not only personal pressures, but anxieties about the world around them as well.

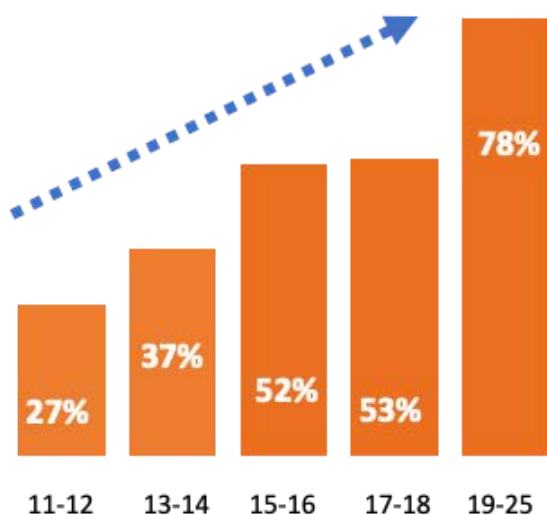
School and college pressures



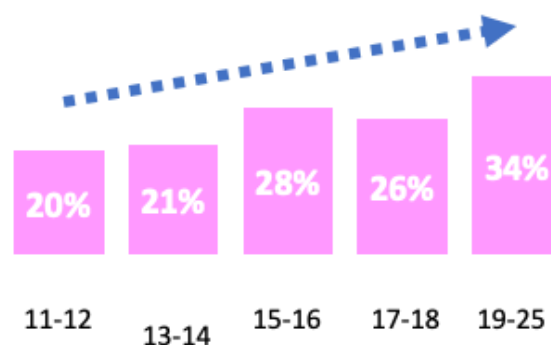
Mental health challenges



Money/ future prospects



World events



How Young People Feel About Life Today

To better understand how young people experience the world today, the survey asked respondents to describe growing up using three words.

The results paint a vivid picture of the emotional landscape many young people are navigating and how they currently feel about life.

The most frequently used words included:

- Stressful
- Confusing
- Hard
- Overwhelming
- Lonely
- Anxious
- Challenging
- Pressure
- Tiring
- Scary

These words appeared dozens or even hundreds of times across responses. Around one in six young people described life as feeling difficult right now, rising to one in five of those aged between 15 - 16 years.

However, the picture is not entirely negative. Despite these pressures, more than half of respondents said they feel positive about life overall.

Some young people described growing up today as exciting, creative and empowering, reflecting the complex mix of challenges and opportunities that young people experience.



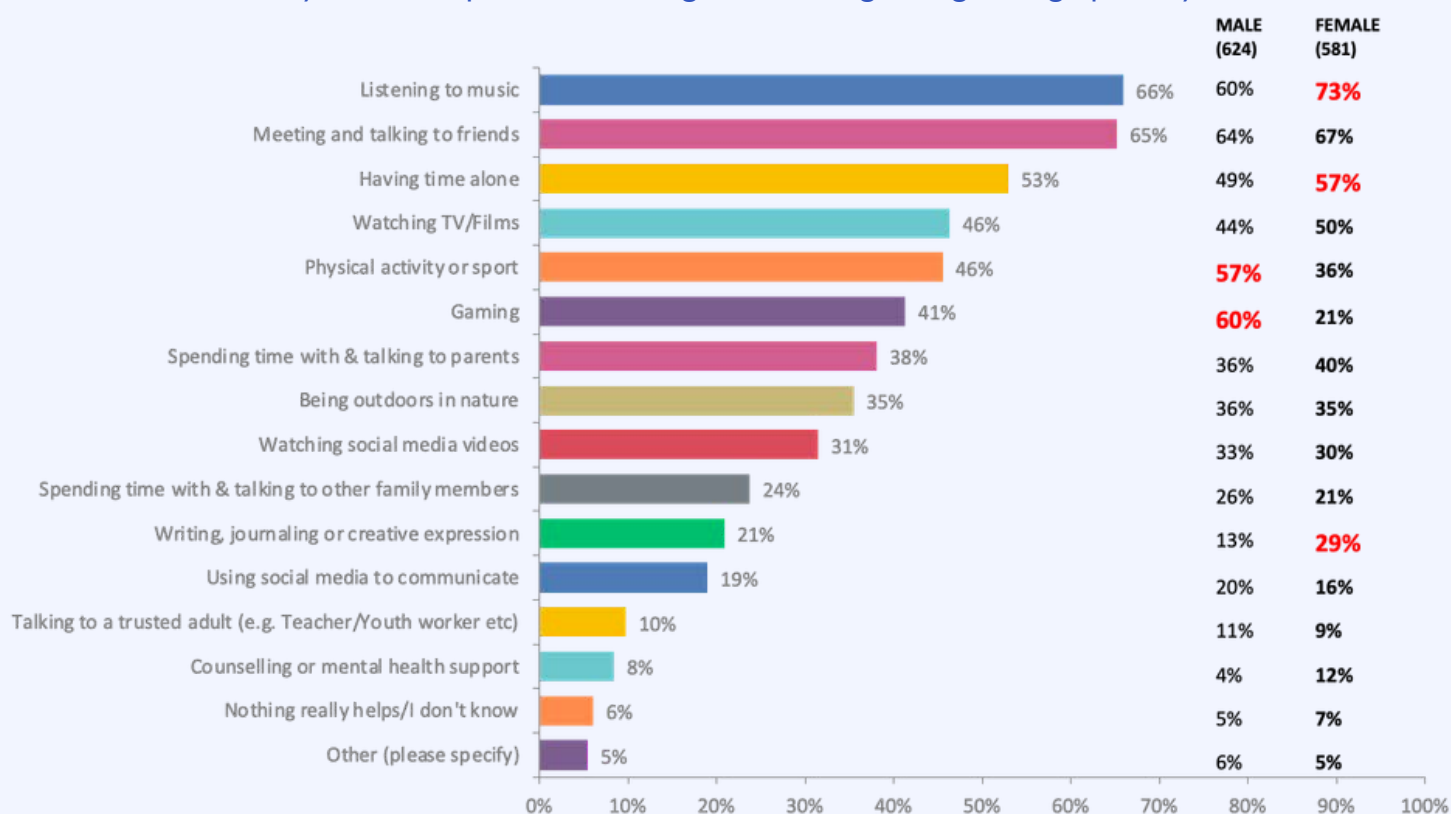
Where Young People Turn for Support

One of the clearest messages from the survey is that young people are far more likely to turn to trusted people and familiar coping strategies before seeking formal mental health support.

Friends and family remain the most important sources of support, highlighting the vital role trusted relationships continue to play during adolescence and early adulthood. For many young people, simply having someone they know and trust to talk to can make an important difference during difficult moments.

Listening to music also featured very strongly, reinforcing how many young people use personal and accessible ways to manage emotions, process difficult feelings and create space to think. Other commonly identified coping strategies included gaming, spending time online, physical activity and watching TV/Films.

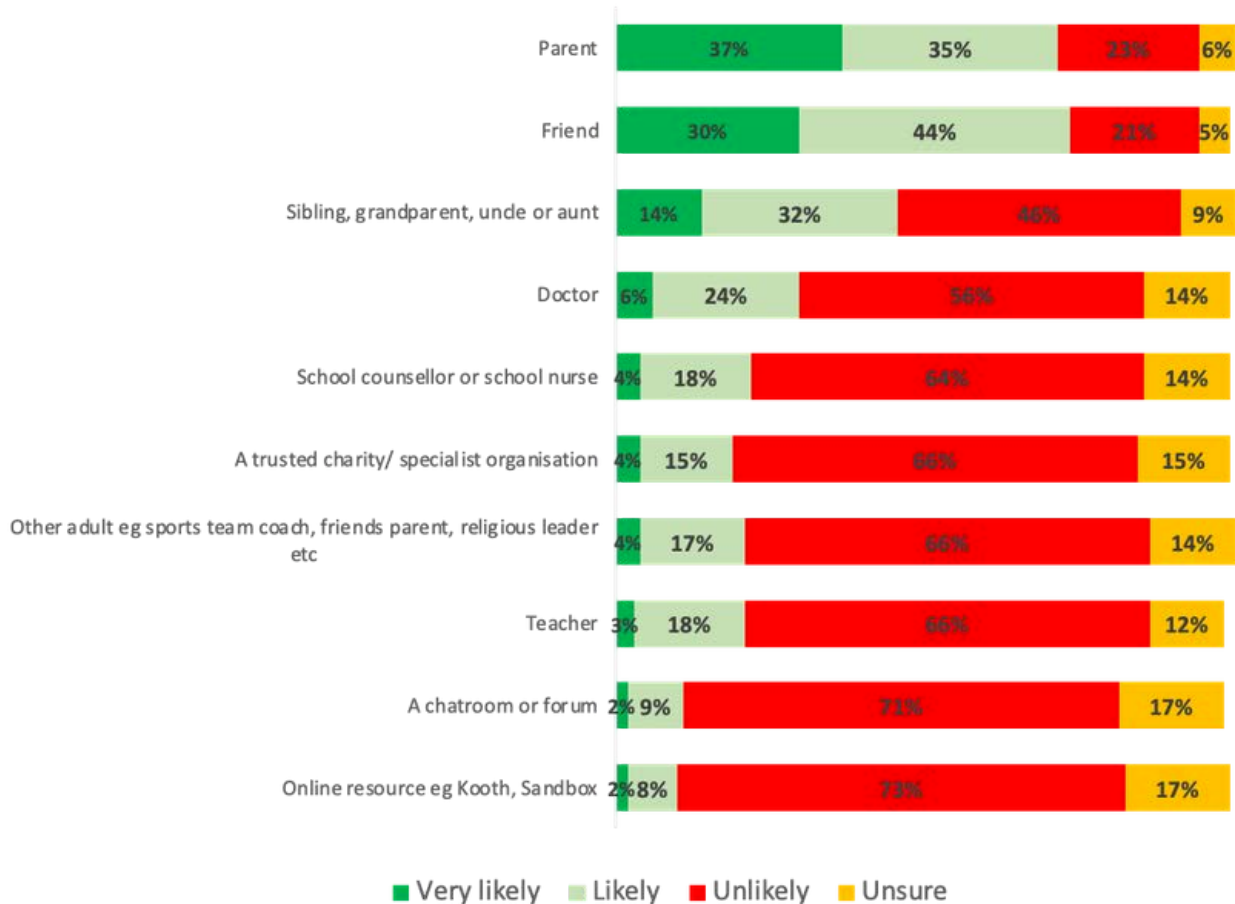
What do you find helpful when facing the challenges of growing up today?



The findings also suggest that support networks evolve with age. Younger respondents were more likely to turn to parents and family members, while older young people showed a greater tendency to consider professional support options as they move towards adulthood and greater independence.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of connection, trusted relationships and accessible coping strategies in helping young people navigate the pressures of growing up today.

**If you were sad and/or struggling with your emotions and mental health
how likely would you be to talk to the following people?**



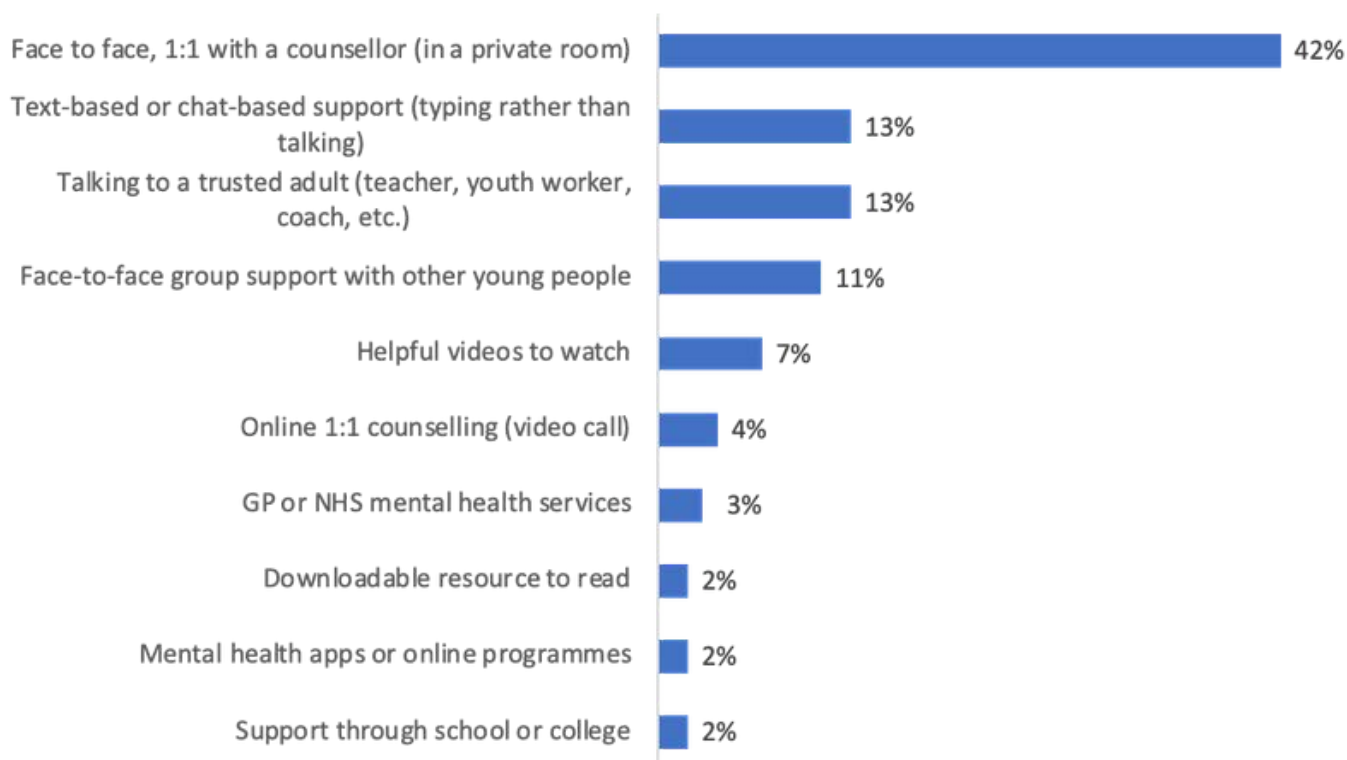
While some young people said they would speak to counsellors, doctors or teachers if they were struggling, the findings also reveal significant hesitation around formal and school-based support.

Many young people appear unsure about where to turn professionally, while others may worry about being judged, misunderstood or not having privacy and confidentiality respected.

The relatively low likelihood of turning to school-based support is particularly notable and may reflect concerns some young people have around confidentiality within education settings.

These findings reinforce the importance of ensuring support services feel approachable, safe, confidential and genuinely centred around the needs of young people.

**If you were struggling with your mental health and were looking for professional support which one of the following support services would you most prefer?
(% ranking each as first choice)**



A very clear message emerged when young people were asked what type of professional support they would most prefer if they were struggling with their mental health.

Across almost all age groups, face-to-face counselling with a counsellor was the strongest and most consistent first preference, ranking significantly higher than digital tools, videos to watch, downloadable resources, online forums.

These findings challenge a common assumption that young people automatically prefer digital support simply because technology plays such a large part in their daily lives. While many young people are highly digitally connected, the survey suggests that when it comes to emotional wellbeing and mental health, many still value something deeply human - the opportunity to talk openly with another person in a safe, trusted and confidential environment.

This does not mean digital support has no role to play. Online resources, apps and other digital tools may provide useful additional support, information and accessibility for some young people. However, the survey strongly suggests these are often viewed as complementary to - rather than replacements for - meaningful human connection and face-to-face therapeutic support.

At Youth Talk we see the importance of this every day. For many young people, counselling provides the first opportunity they have had to speak openly and honestly about what they are experiencing in a safe, confidential and non-judgemental space.



What Young People Want Adults to Understand

One of the most powerful parts of the survey invited young people to share pieces of advice to adults about how best to support young people who are struggling.

Across hundreds of open and honest responses, several strong themes emerged.

Really Listen

The most consistent message was simple but powerful: young people want adults to listen.

They spoke about the importance of being heard without judgement, interruption or pressure to provide immediate solutions.

“Be calm and just listen. Sometimes people don't want advice straight away, they just need to unload their thoughts.”
(Male, 16)

Show empathy and understanding

Young people also asked adults to recognise that mental health challenges are real and that their feelings should be taken seriously. And most importantly try not to slip into ‘fix it’ mode where a parent just tries to fix things for them.

“Listen without judgement and try to understand what we are going through even if you don't at the start.”
(Female, 18)



Understand that things have changed

Many young people said that adults sometimes underestimate the pressures they face today and draw too quickly and heavily on their own experiences of growing up.

Social media, academic expectations and the pace of modern life can create a sense that pressures are constant.

“Stop comparing young people's struggles today to what you dealt with when you were that age - the world has changed.”
(Female 17)

Don't minimise our feelings

Another recurring theme was frustration when young people feel their emotions are dismissed or downplayed.

These comments highlight how powerful simple acts of empathy, patience and attention can be in supporting young people through difficult moments.

“Don't say it's just hormones. What we feel matters.”
(Male 16)

What This Means

The findings from the Growing Up Survey offer important insights for parents, schools, policymakers and organisations supporting young people.

For parents, carers and families

For parents, carers and families, the message is clear: listening and empathy matter deeply. Simple, non-judgemental conversations can make a powerful difference. And don't rush in to try to 'fix' things for them.

For schools

For schools, the results highlight the importance of supportive environments where students feel safe to talk in confidence about their wellbeing.

For policymakers and mental health services

For mental health services and policymakers, the findings reinforce the importance of accessible face-to-face support, close to home alongside appropriate digital tools.

Young people continue to value face-to-face human support when they are struggling. Ensuring that accessible counselling and therapeutic services are available remains critically important.

For communities

Supporting young people is not the responsibility of one organisation alone. Families, schools, services and communities all play a role in helping young people navigate the challenges of growing up.

Conclusion

The voices captured in this report highlight both the challenges and the resilience of young people today. While many pressures exist, young people consistently tell us that being heard, understood and taken seriously can make an enormous difference.

What they are asking for is not complicated - but it is powerful. They want time, attention and space to talk.

These survey findings are not the end of that conversation they are the beginning.

At Youth Talk, we are committed to continuing to listen. We will build on this work by developing the **Growing Up Survey** as an annual piece of research - creating a clearer, year-on-year picture of what young people are experiencing and what they need from the world around them.

As a local charity, rooted in our community, we see every day the difference that the right support at the right time can make. We recognise that mental health does not follow a deadline so being able to offer longer term support to those young people that need it is vital. We also see the growing demand, and the increasing number of young people who need somewhere to turn.

Supporting young people's mental health is not the responsibility of one organisation alone. It requires communities, schools, families and services working together.

If we listen carefully to what young people are telling us - and respond with care, empathy and action - we can create environments where more young people feel supported as they navigate the journey to adulthood.

And crucially, ensure that no young person has to struggle alone.



And Finally...

Youth Talk is a local charity providing free, confidential mental health support to young people aged 13–25 across St Albans, Harpenden and the surrounding areas.

Every week, we support growing numbers of young people struggling with anxiety, low mood, identity, self esteem, trauma, relationships and the many other pressures and struggles of growing up today.

At the heart of our work is something simple but powerful - giving young people a safe, confidential space to talk to someone who will listen without judgement.

This report highlights some of the very real, everyday challenges young people are facing today, but it also highlights the importance of connection, support and early intervention.

Behind every statistic is a young person trying to make sense of the world around them and their place within it.



As an independent local charity, Youth Talk relies entirely on the support of the local community to continue providing this life-changing and life-saving support. Local people helping local young people is what makes our work possible.

If you would like to help make a difference, we would love to hear from you. Whether that's becoming a regular supporter, making a donation, partnering with us through your business, fundraising, volunteering your time or simply helping us spread the word, every contribution helps ensure more local young people can access free, professional mental health support when they need it most.

Because every young person deserves someone who will listen.



Help us to be there for local young people

A regular gift to Youth Talk
ensures we are there when a
young person needs us most.

Donate at:
www.youthtalk.org.uk/donate



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