

## Children, family and young people

In Britain there are almost 15 million children and young people up to the age of 19. This represents almost a quarter of the UK population. Young people are considered to be a group with their own identity, interests, and fashions that in some ways distinguish them from older people. Generally speaking, once they reach adulthood, children tend to move away from the family home, but this varies from one family and one community to another. Most children in Britain receive weekly pocket money from their parents, and many get more for doing jobs around the house.

Children today in the UK do not play outside the home as much as they did in the past. Home entertainment, such as television, videos, and computers, are seen as part of the reason for this, but so also is an increased concern for children's safety. Incidents of child molestation by strangers are often reported in great detail, but there is no evidence that dangers of this kind are increasing.

As a result of changing attitudes towards divorce and separation, family patterns in Britain have also changed considerably in the last 20 years. Today while 65 per cent of children live with both birth parents, almost 25 per cent live in lone parent families, and 10 per cent live within a stepfamily.

### Education

The Government places great importance on the need to assess and test pupils in order to know what they have achieved. Compulsory testing takes place at the age of seven, eleven and fourteen in England and Scotland (but not in Wales where more informal methods of assessment are favoured). These tests help to give parents a good indication of their children's progress and children know the subjects they are doing well and those that need extra attention.

Most young people take GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education) examinations at sixteen, and many take vocational qualifica-

tions, A/S and A levels (Advanced levels), at seventeen and eighteen.

One in three young people now move onto higher education after school. The Government aim is to reach one in two. Of those that do, some defer their university entrance by taking a year out. This often includes periods doing voluntary work, travelling overseas, or earning money to pay for fees and living expenses at university.

### Work

It is now common for young people to have a part-time job whilst they are still at school. Recent estimates suggest that there are two million children at work at any one time. The most common jobs are newspaper delivery and work in supermarkets and newsagents. Many parents believe that part-time work of this kind helps children to become more independent, as well as providing them (and sometimes their family) with extra income.

It is important to note, however, that the employment of children is strictly controlled by law, and that there are concerns for the safety of children who work illegally or are not properly supervised.

### Health Hazards

Many parents in Britain worry that their children may misuse addictive substances and drugs in some way.

Cigarette consumption in Britain has fallen significantly and now only a minority of the population smoke. Restrictions are planned against smoking in public places. Smoking has declined amongst young people as well as adults, although statistics show that girls smoke more than boys. Tobacco, by law, should not be sold to anyone under the age of 16.

Alcohol abuse is a problem. Although young people below the age of 18 are not allowed by law to buy alcohol, there is concern in Britain over the age at which some young people start drinking, and the amount of alcohol that they consume in one session or "binge".

Increasing penalties including on-the-spot fines are being introduced to help control this.

Controlled drugs are illegal drugs. It is an offence in Britain to possess, or supply substances such as heroin, cocaine, ecstasy, amphetamines, and cannabis. However, current statistics indicate that half of young adults, and about a third of the population as a whole, have used illegal drugs at one time or another – if sometimes only as an experiment.

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### Young people's attitudes and action

Young people in Britain are able to vote in elections from the age of 18. However, in the 2001 general election, only one in five potential first-time voters actually cast their vote, and there has been a great debate over the reasons for this. Researchers have concluded that one reason is young people's distrust of politicians and the political process.

Although many young people show little interest in party politics, there is strong evidence that they are interested in some specific political issues. Those who commonly say they are not interested in politics at all often express strong concern about environmental issues and cruelty to animals.

A survey of the attitudes of young people in England and Wales in 2003 revealed that crime, drugs, war/terrorism, racism, and health were the five most important issues that they felt Britain faced today. The same survey asked young people about their participation in political and community events. It was reported that 86 per cent of young people had taken part in some form of community activity over the past year. 50 per cent had taken part in fund-raising or collecting money for charity.

Crick, Bernard (ed.), *Life in the United Kingdom: A Journey to Citizenship*, Norwich, The Stationary Office Books, 2004.

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