



GENERATION ISOLATION 2025:

SOCIAL LIVES, TRUST AND
CONNECTION IN AN AI AGE

November 2025



onsideyouthzones.org

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FOREWORD

This is the fourth Generation Isolation report – OnSide’s annual study exploring how young people spend their free time.

First launched in 2022, in the wake of the pandemic, it set out to understand how young people were spending their free time outside school, who they were spending it with, and what this meant for the support they need.

Since then, Generation Isolation has painted a consistent picture of young people’s social lives as increasingly digital, often solitary, and too often disconnected from the in-person experiences that create real belonging.

So, it’s perhaps no surprise that this year’s findings continue that pattern. Generation Isolation 2025 tells us that 76% of young people spend most of their free time on screens; the smartphone remains young people’s most time-consuming free time activity; almost half (48%) spend most of their free time in their bedrooms; and almost one in five (18%) spend most of their free time alone.

It’s clear that the interlinked issues of loneliness, digital dependence and isolation have become entrenched in young people’s lives, raising deeper questions about what it’s like to grow up this way.

That’s why, having built a picture of how young people spend their time, we wanted to drill deeper and better understand what digitally-dominated

free time means for young people’s connection, support and friendships.

As digital interaction has become the default, how is AI technology impacting how young people seek connection, companionship and guidance?

And what does it feel like when friendships are formed, maintained and sometimes fractured through screens?

Our findings highlight a generation navigating friendships and social lives that differ radically from any before them.

39% of young people have turned to AI chatbots for advice, company or guidance, from schoolwork to help with feelings, emotions and mental health – often because it feels quicker and easier than talking to someone in person. Yet just 6% of young people trust AI more than a real person.

And although 53% of young people say social media and the internet make friendships easier, almost half (49%) say spending time together in real life is what really drives connection. Furthermore, 49% of young people have had a negative interaction with friends online – from being excluded from group chats to being blocked or ghosted, leaving many feeling anxious, less confident, and less trusting.

Together, these findings reveal a growing tension in young people’s lives – between what feels easy and what truly supports their wellbeing. Online friendships are effortless, but many feel most connected when they meet in person. AI support is instant, but no substitute for the trust, empathy and understanding of a human conversation.

And young people themselves recognise this tension. Despite the dominance of online interaction, when asked what would most improve

their lives outside school, young people’s top priorities were affordable leisure activities, safe social spaces, and more opportunities to connect in person. Their message is clear: they want more ways to come together offline and share experiences and connections that screens can’t replace.

That’s exactly what youth centres provide every day. They offer safe, inclusive spaces where young people can find guidance, make friends and build confidence. Although attendance continues to fall – just 12% now attend a youth club – 92% of youth club attendees say it has made a positive difference, with over half (55%) crediting attending with making new friends.

Generation Isolation 2025 shows that the digital habits shaping young people’s lives are deeply entrenched. But it also shows that digital life alone isn’t enough, and young people want more than life through a screen.

While young people’s lives are increasingly digital, their wellbeing depends on connection offline. If we are serious about helping them thrive, we must invest in the spaces, positive activities, and trusted adult role models that make real-life connections, friendship, guidance, and opportunity a reality for all young people.



Jamie Masraff
Chief Executive, OnSide

METHODOLOGY

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 5,035 11 to 18 year olds. Fieldwork was undertaken between 26th August – 12th September 2025.

The survey was carried out online.

The figures have been weighted and are representative of 11 to 18 year olds in England.

All analysis has been carried out by OnSide.



GENERATION ISOLATION 2025: KEY FINDINGS

To empower and support young people at scale, and to advocate for investment in the spaces and support they need, we must deeply understand the reality of their lives – how they spend their time, what matters to them, and why. This year, we asked 5,035 young people aged 11–18 about growing up in an increasingly digital world, from phones and online friendships to AI and youth centres.

These are the key findings:

76% of young people spend most of their free time on screens*.



24% of young people spend most of their free time on their smartphone, making it the most time consuming activity outside of school.



16% of young people spend most of their free time alone.



48% of young people spend most of their free time in their bedroom.



39% of young people have turned to AI chatbots for support, advice or company.



49% of young people say spending time together in real life helps them feel the most connected to their friends.



34% of young people reported high or very high feelings of loneliness**.



37% of young people do not have opportunities to meet new people and make friends.



49% of young people have had a negative friendship experience online.



88% of young people do not attend a youth centre.



92% of young people that attend a youth centre say it has made a positive difference to their lives.



24% of young people say more affordable leisure activities would make the most difference to improve their life outside of school.



*76% of young people surveyed spending most of their free time on screens (watching streamed content like Netflix/YouTube, gaming, spending time on their phone or watching TV).

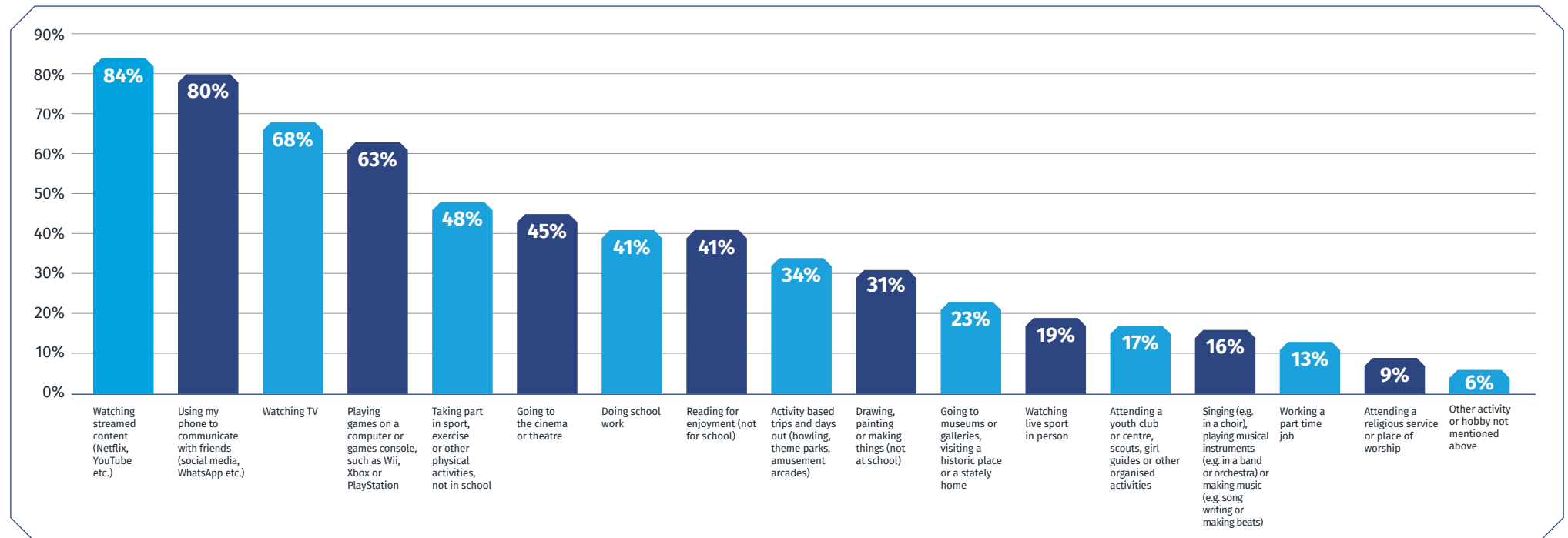
**Loneliness measure informed by a similar existing well-being scale developed and reported by the ONS.

PART 1 **YOUNG** **PEOPLE'S** **LIVES**



HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR FREE TIME?

We asked 'Which of these activities do you do in your free time now (i.e. the time when you are not in school?)'



Top 4 free time activities

84% of young people spend time watching streamed content in their free time outside of school.

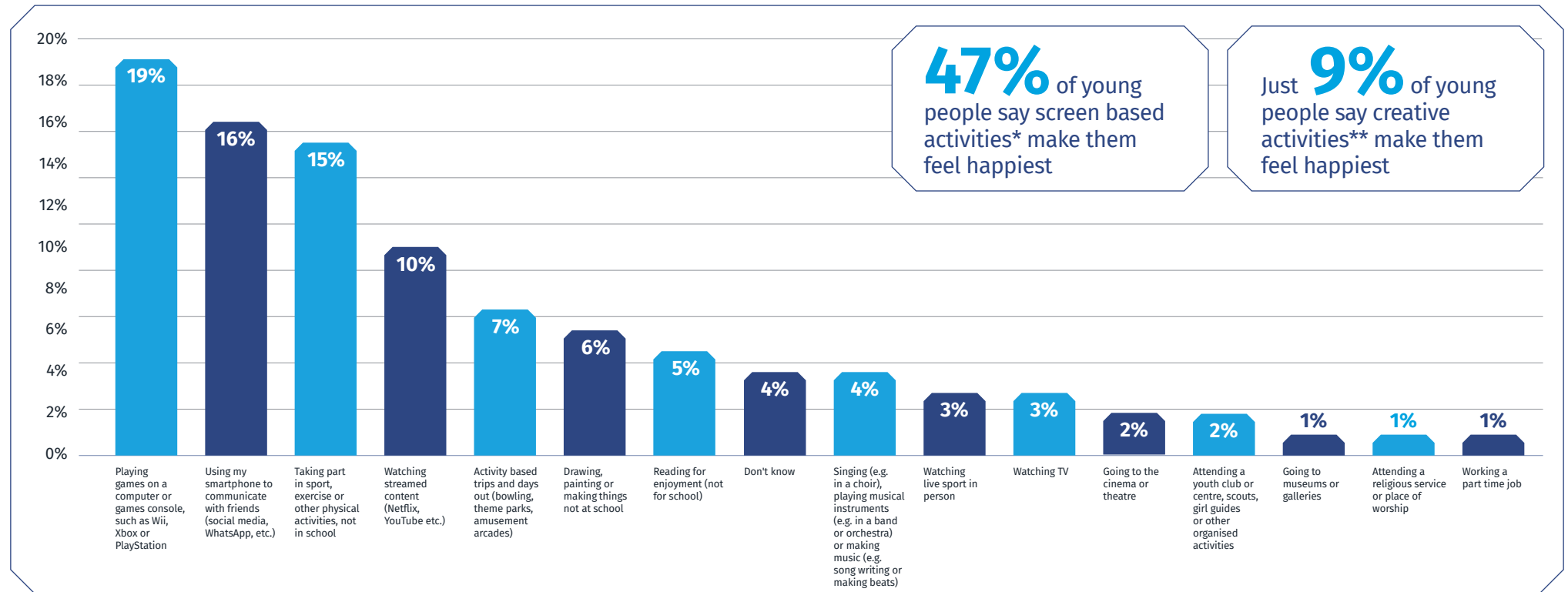
80% of young people use their phone to communicate with friends in their free time outside of school.

68% of young people watch TV in their free time outside of school.

63% of young people play computer games in their free time outside of school.

WHAT ACTIVITIES MAKE YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL HAPPIEST?

We asked 'Which ONE of the activities you do in your free time makes you happiest?'



The top 4 activities driving young people's happiness are

Gaming
– almost **1 in 5** young people (19%) say gaming makes them feel happiest.

16% of young people said using their smartphone makes them feel happiest.

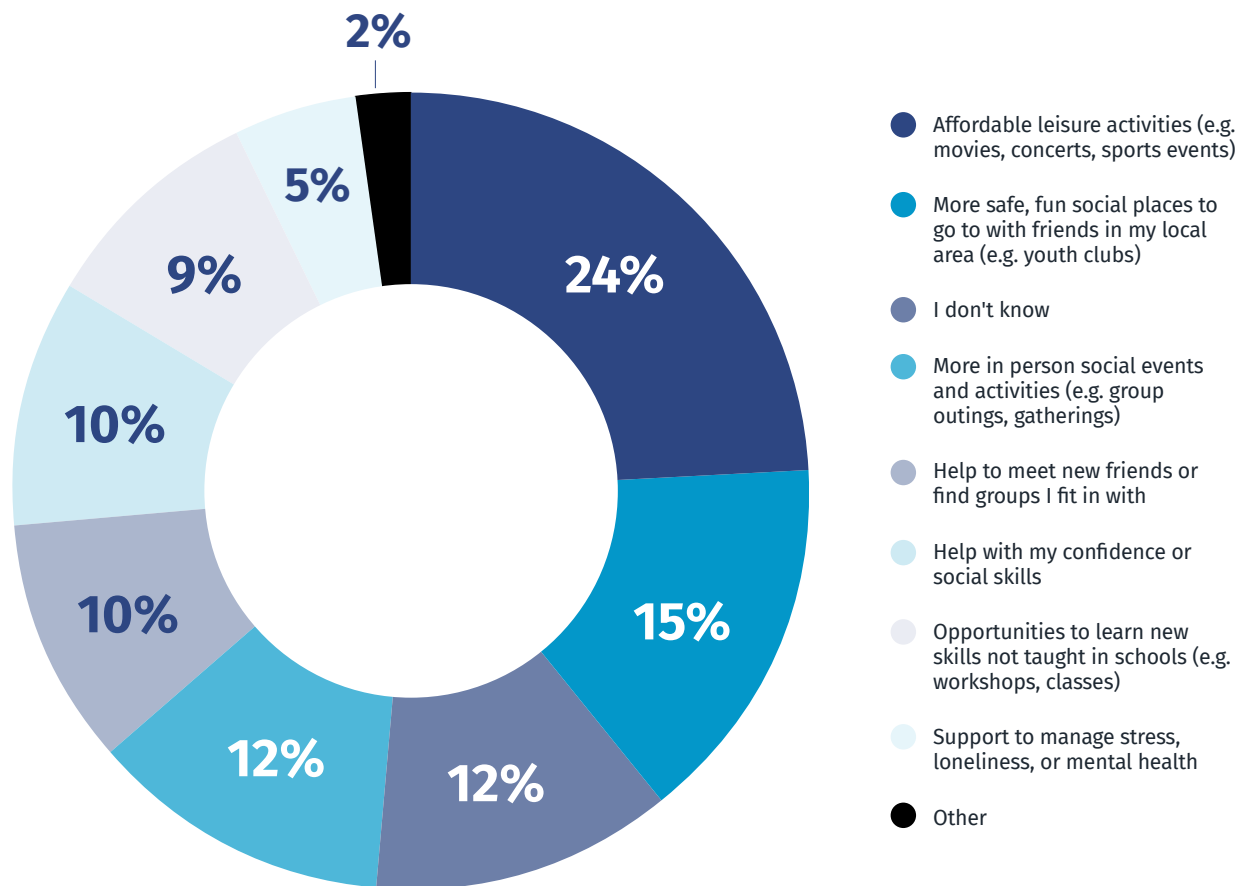
15% of young people said taking part in sport and exercise outside of school makes them feel happiest.

10% of young people said watching streamed content makes them feel happiest.

*47% of young people say screen based activities make them feel happiest (watching streamed content like Netflix/YouTube, gaming, spending time on their phone or watching TV).
Just 9% of young people say creative activities** make them feel happiest (Singing (e.g. in a choir), playing musical instruments (e.g. in a band or orchestra) or making music (e.g. song writing or making beats), Drawing, painting, or making things not at school).

IMPROVING LIFE OUTSIDE SCHOOL

We asked 'What is the MOST important thing that could be done to help you enjoy the time you spend outside of school?'



Almost a quarter of young people (**24%**) said that more affordable leisure activities would improve their life outside of school.



15% said more fun, safe, social places to go to with friends in their local area (like youth clubs).

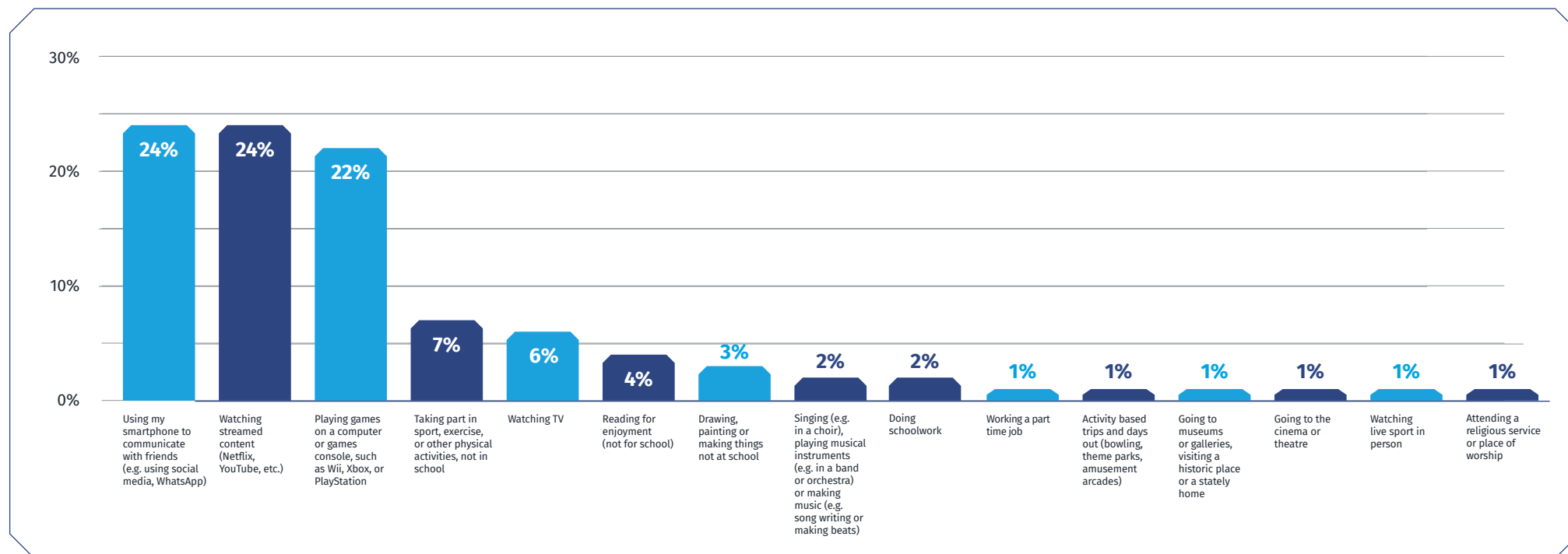


12% cited more in person social events and activities.



WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE'S MOST TIME CONSUMING FREE TIME ACTIVITIES?

We asked 'Which one of these activities do you spend most of your free time (i.e. the time when you are not in school) doing?'



Top 3 most time consuming activities

24% of young people say they spend most of their leisure time using their smart phone to communicate with friends (no change from 2024).



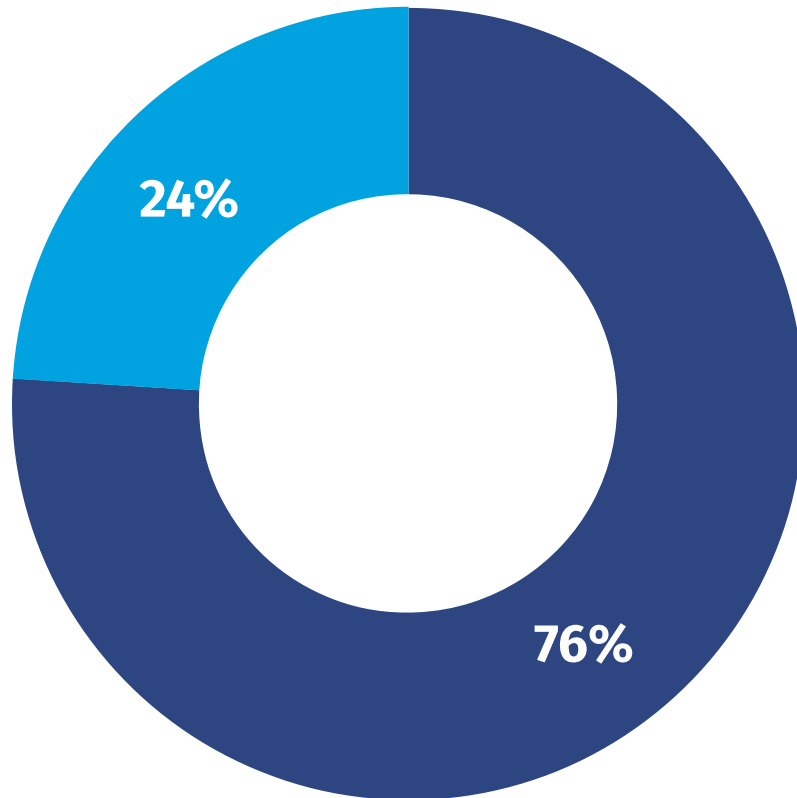
24% of young people say they spend most of their leisure time gaming (no change from 2024).



22% of young people spend most of their leisure time watching streamed content (compared to 21% in 2024).



YOUNG PEOPLE'S SCREENTIME



- Spend most of their free time on screen
- Spend most of their free time on non-screen based activities

76% of young people spend most of their free time on screens.



Almost half (47%) of young people say screen based activities* make them feel happiest.



3 out of the top 5 activities that make young people feel happiest are screen-based.



Gender differences

77% of boys spend most of their freetime on screens.



75% of girls spend most of their freetime on screens.

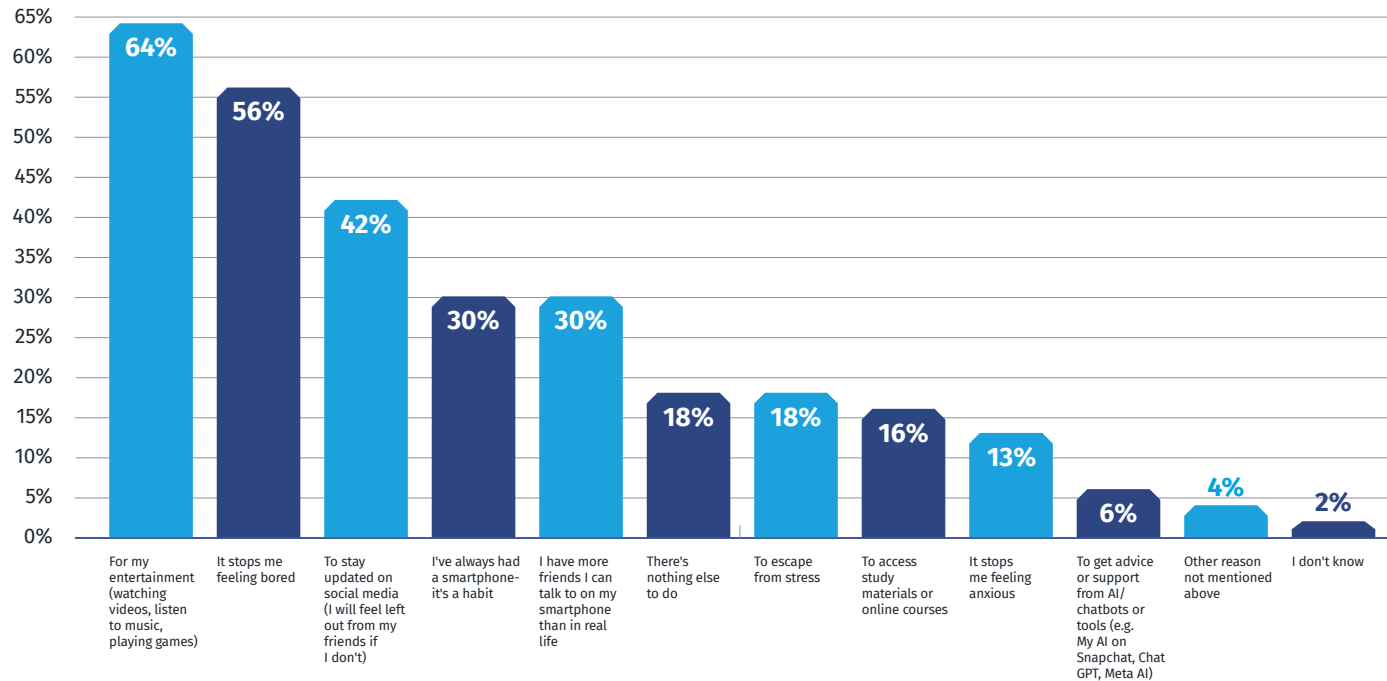


51% of boys say that screen based activities make them feel happiest.



SPOTLIGHT ON SMARTPHONES

We asked young people that spend most of their free time on their phone their reasons for this.



56%

of young people spend most of their free time on their smartphone because they are bored.



42%

of young people spend most of their free time on their smartphone because they will feel left out from their friends if they don't.



48%

of the young people that spend most of their free time on their smartphone – wish they could spend less time on their phone.



16%

of young people said using their smartphone made them feel happier than any other freetime activity.

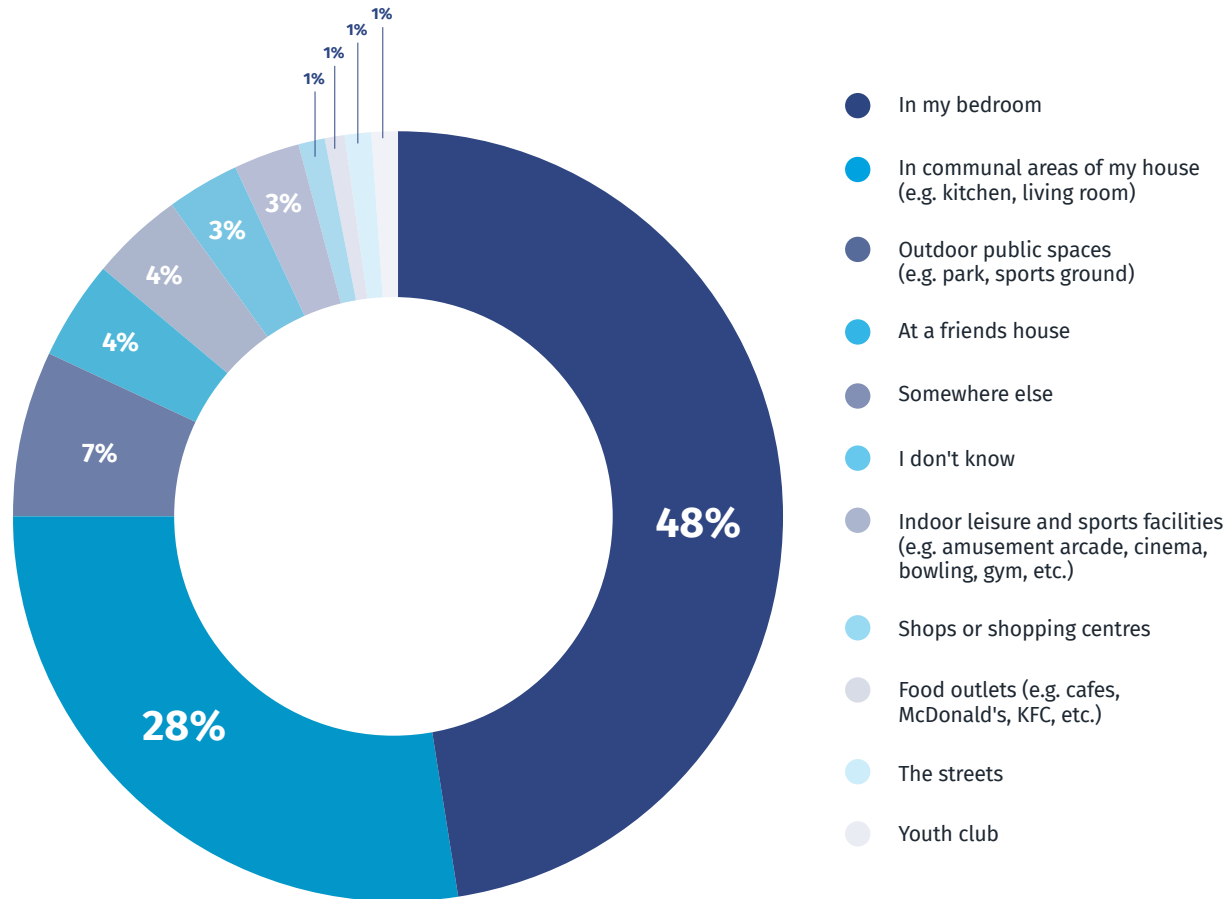


30%

(almost a third) of young people say they have more friends they can talk to on their phone than they do in real life.



WHERE DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR FREE TIME?



48% of young people spend most of their free time in their bedrooms.



76% of young people spend most of their free time at home.



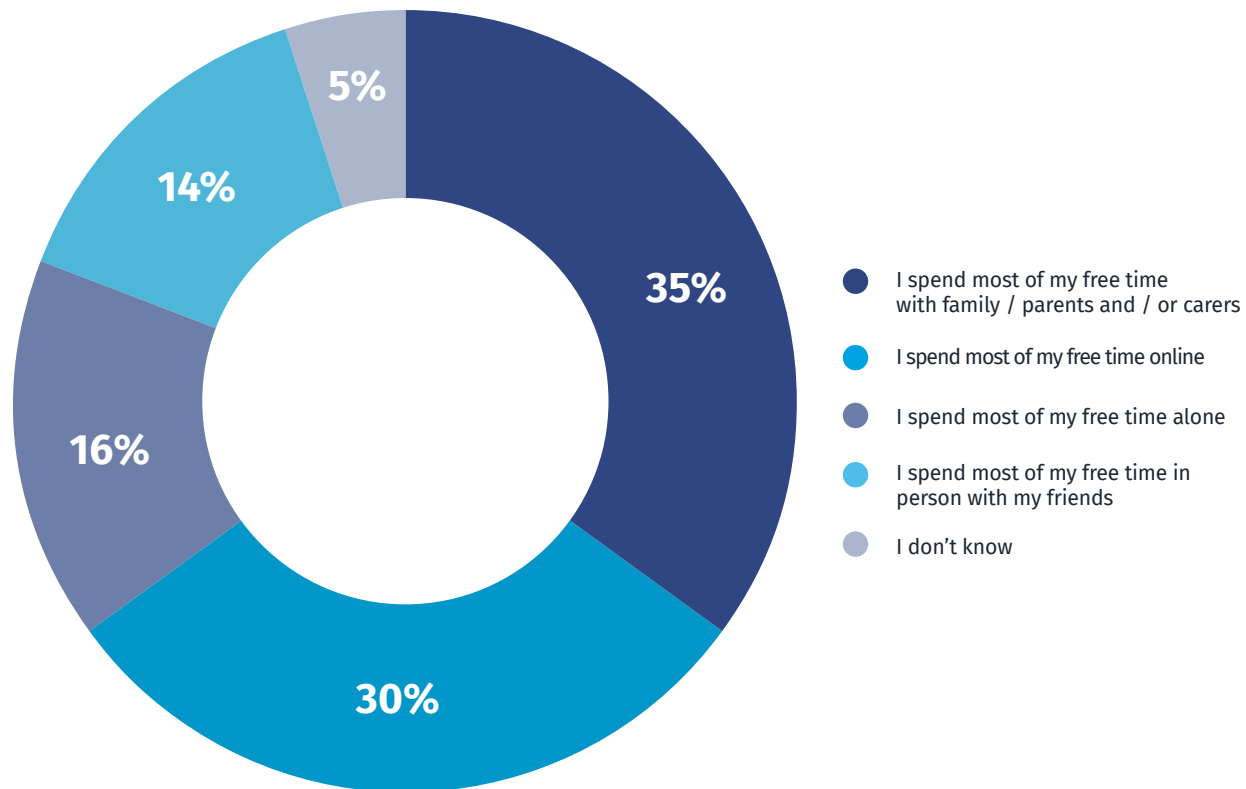
4% of young people spend most of their free time at friends' homes.



1% of young people spend most of their free time hanging out on the streets.



WHO DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR FREE TIME WITH?



16% of young people spend most of their free time alone



14% of young people spend most of their free time in person with their friends.



Almost a third of young people (30%) spend most of their free time online.

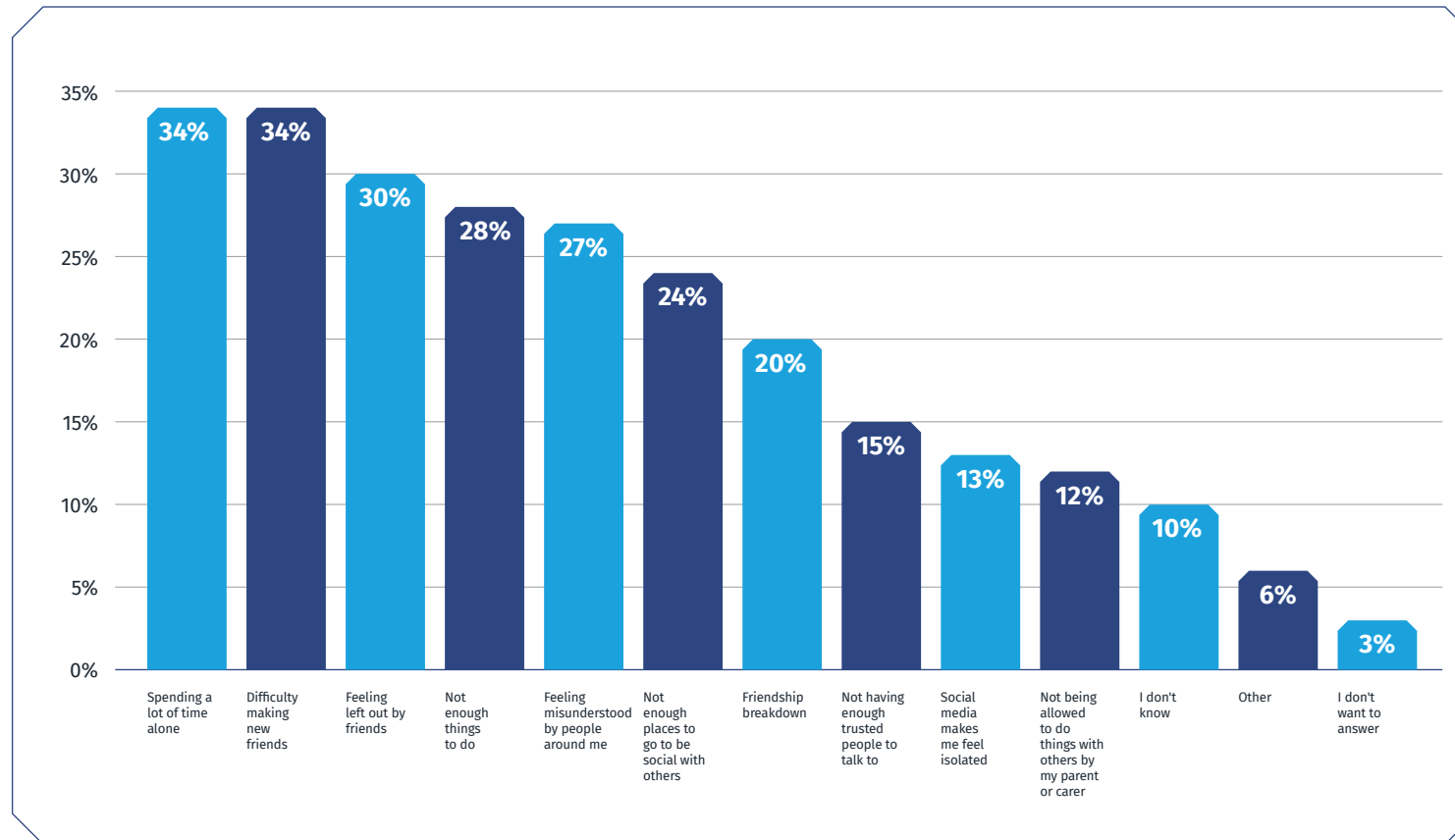


Young people that attend youth centres are almost twice as likely to say they spend most of their time with their friends in real life (22%) than those that don't (13%).



SPOTLIGHT ON LONELINESS

We asked the young people who reported high or very high feelings of loneliness the issues causing this.



34%

of young people reported high or very high feelings of loneliness.

17%

of those young people who spend most of their free time alone cited not having friends as the reason for this.

55%

Over half of young people that are lonely say it is because of issues with friendships*.

The top 5 reasons young people gave for loneliness were:

Spending time alone **34%.**

Difficulty making new friends **34%.**

Feeling left out by friends **30%.**

Not enough things to do **28%.**

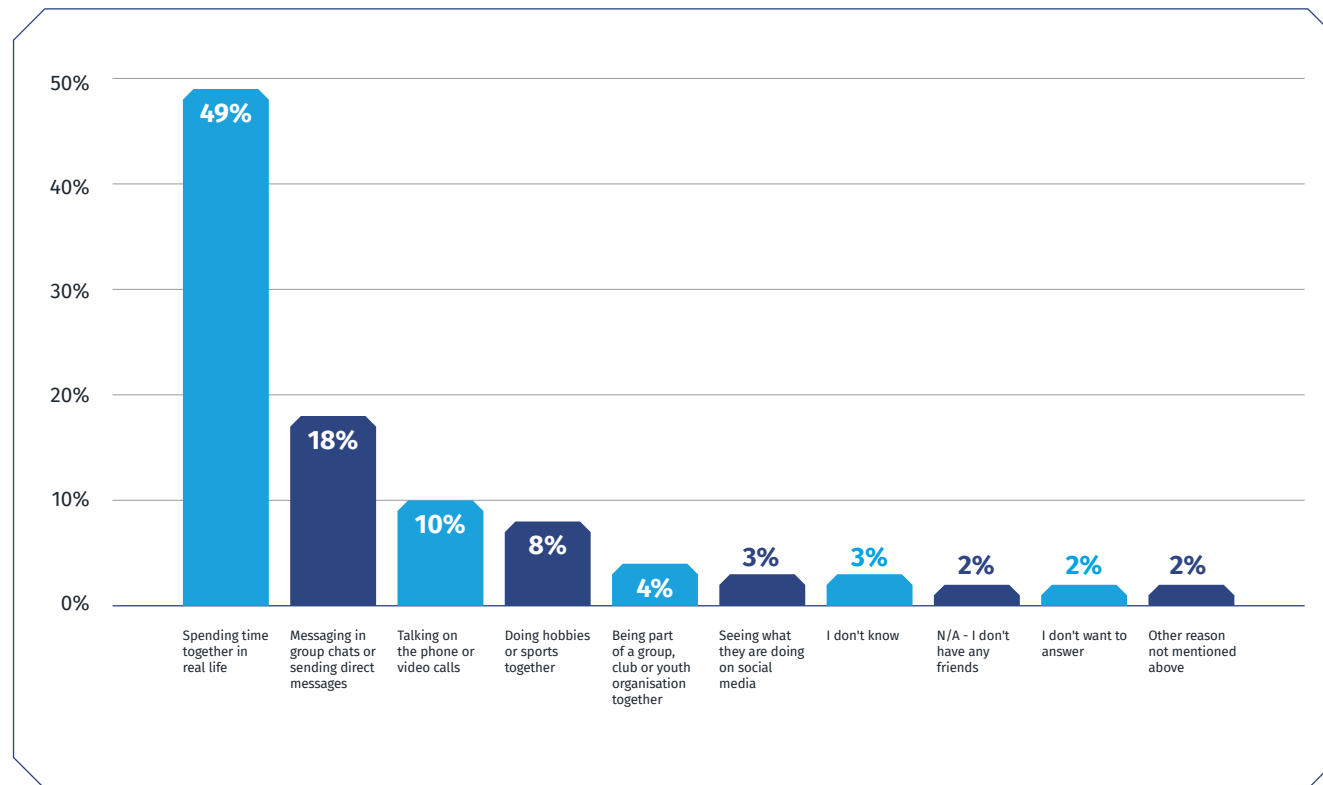
Feeling misunderstood by the people around them **27%.**

*55% of young people that are lonely cite friendship breakdown, feeling left out by friends or difficulty making new friends as the issues causing loneliness

SPOTLIGHT ON FRIENDSHIP IN A DIGITAL AGE

With just 13% of young people reporting spending most of their freetime in person with their friends, we wanted to understand more about the nature of their friendships today.

We asked young people what helps them feel most connected with their friends?



Almost half (49%) of young people say spending time together in real life is what helps them feel most connected with their friends.



Almost a fifth (18%) of young people said connecting through messaging and group chats makes them feel more connected with their friends.



61%* of young people cited in person interaction as making them feel most connected with their friends vs **30%** who cited online/digital interaction.



38% of young people think you can be friends with someone you have never met in real life.

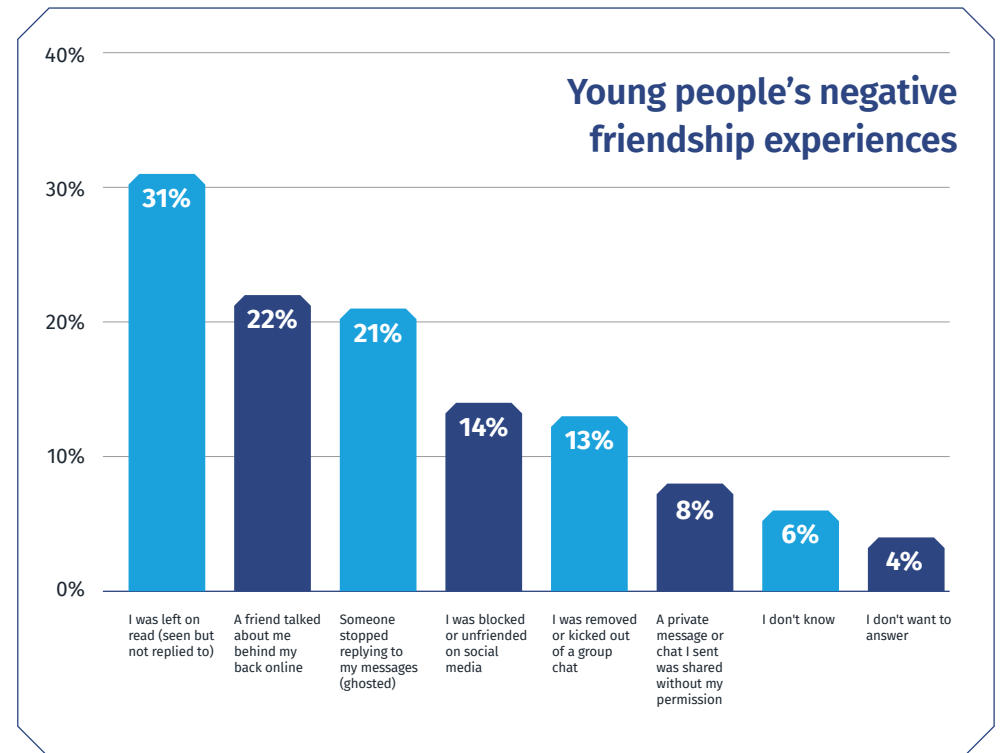
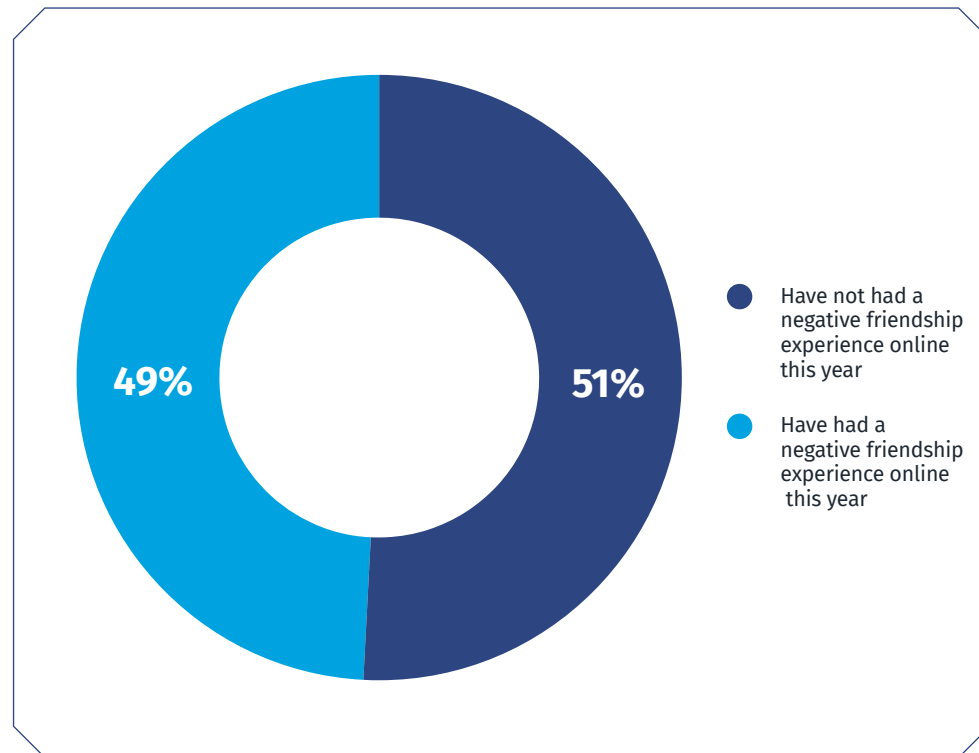
Gender differences

55% of girls say spending time together in real life helps them feel more connected with their friends vs 44% of boys.



*61% of young people combines those who cited spending time together in real life, doing hobbies or sports together or being part of a club or youth organisation. 30% combines those who cited messaging in group chats, talking on the phone and seeing what friends are doing on social media.

We asked young people about things that have happened in their friendships over the past year.



Almost half
49%
of young people have had a negative experience with a friend online over the past year, rising to 57% for girls.



A fifth
21%
of young people have experienced friends ghosting them (a friend stops replying to their messages).



Almost a third
31%
of young people have experienced being left on read (seen but not replied to) by a friend in the past year.



Over **1 in 10**
young people (13%) have experienced being kicked out of a group chat.



14%
of young people have been blocked or unfriended on social media.



The top 5 impacts of negative online friendship experiences were:

Feeling anxious or worried **38%.**

Feeling less trusting of people **32%.**

Feeling less confident **32%.**

Feeling like I didn't matter **26%.**

Feeling lonely **25%.**



Youth clubs and social connections

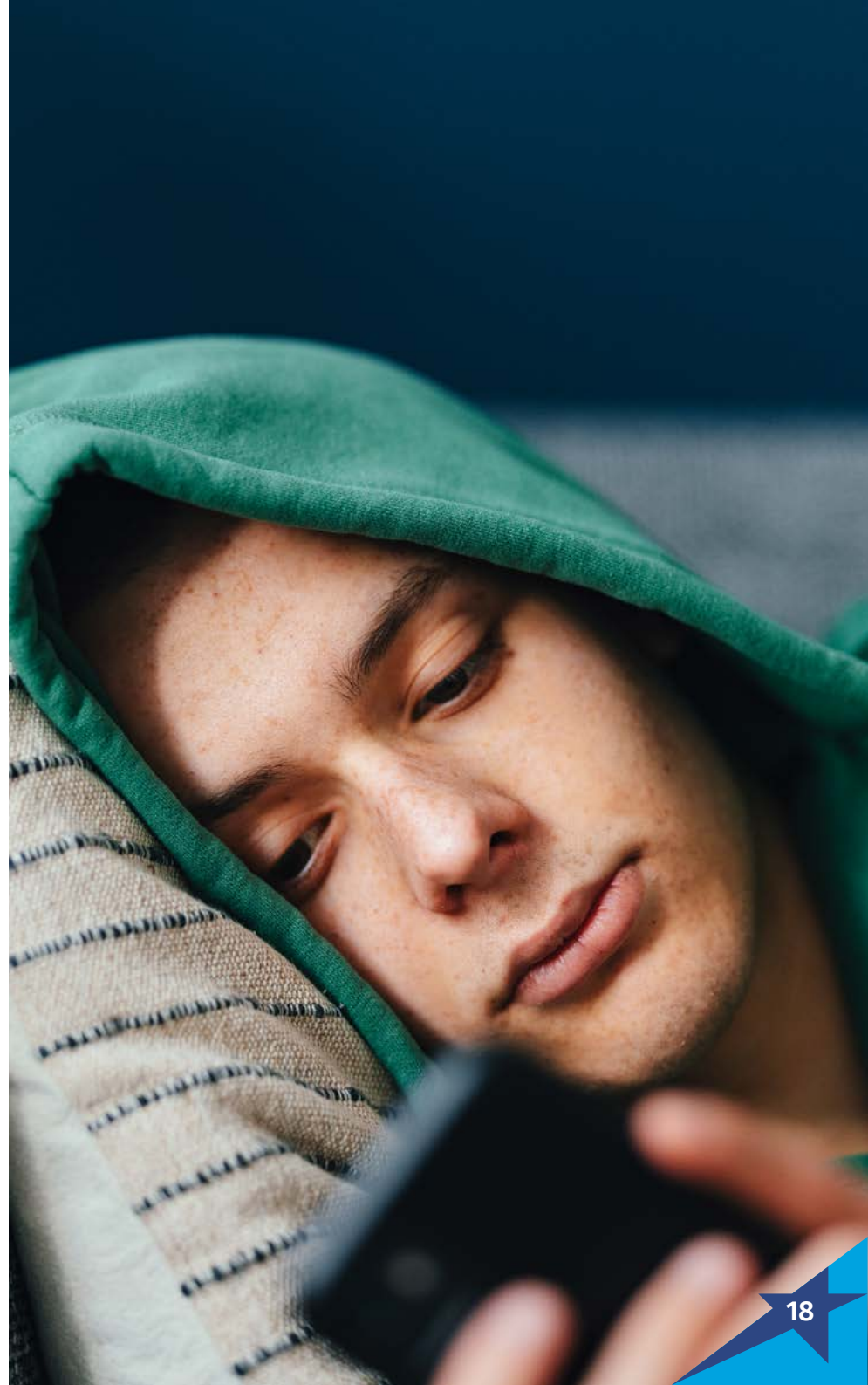
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Young people that attend youth centres have greater levels of social connection. **54%** of young people overall have lots of opportunity to meet new people and make new friends – by contrast **75%** of young people that attend youth centres say they have lots of opportunities to make new friends.



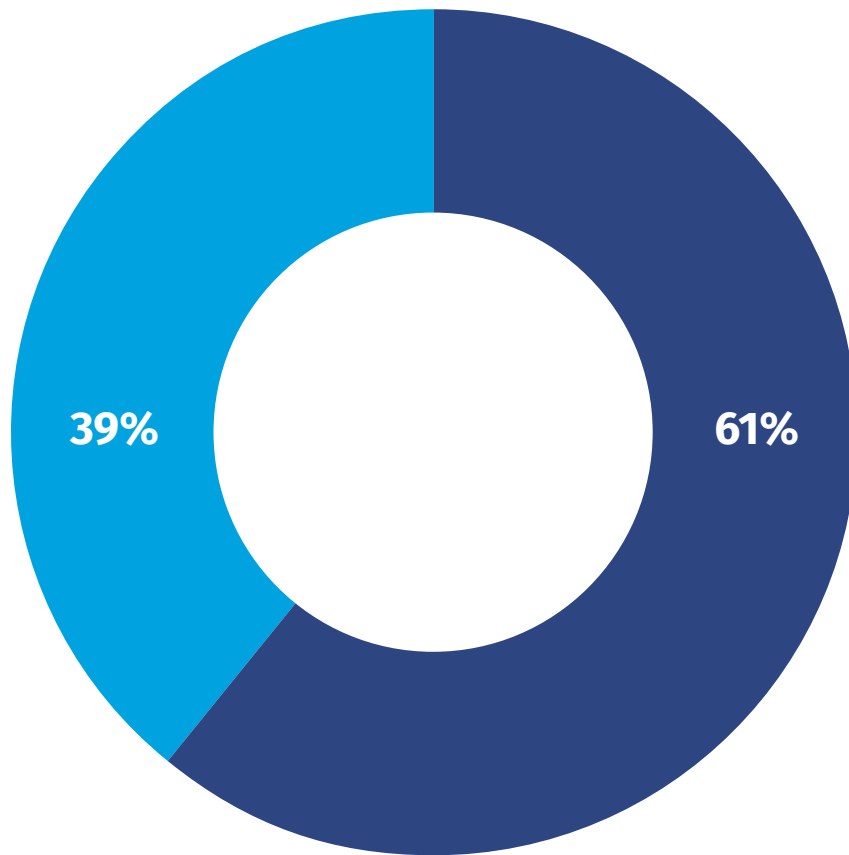
53% of young people say social media and the internet make friendships easier.

21% say it makes friendships harder.



SPOTLIGHT ON AI

We asked young people if they are turning to AI for advice, support or company.



- Has not turned to AI for advice, company or support
- Has turned to AI for advice, company or support

Two in five (**39%**) young people have turned to AI for advice, support or company.



AI and gender – for boys this rises to (**41%**) while for girls this drops to **36%**.



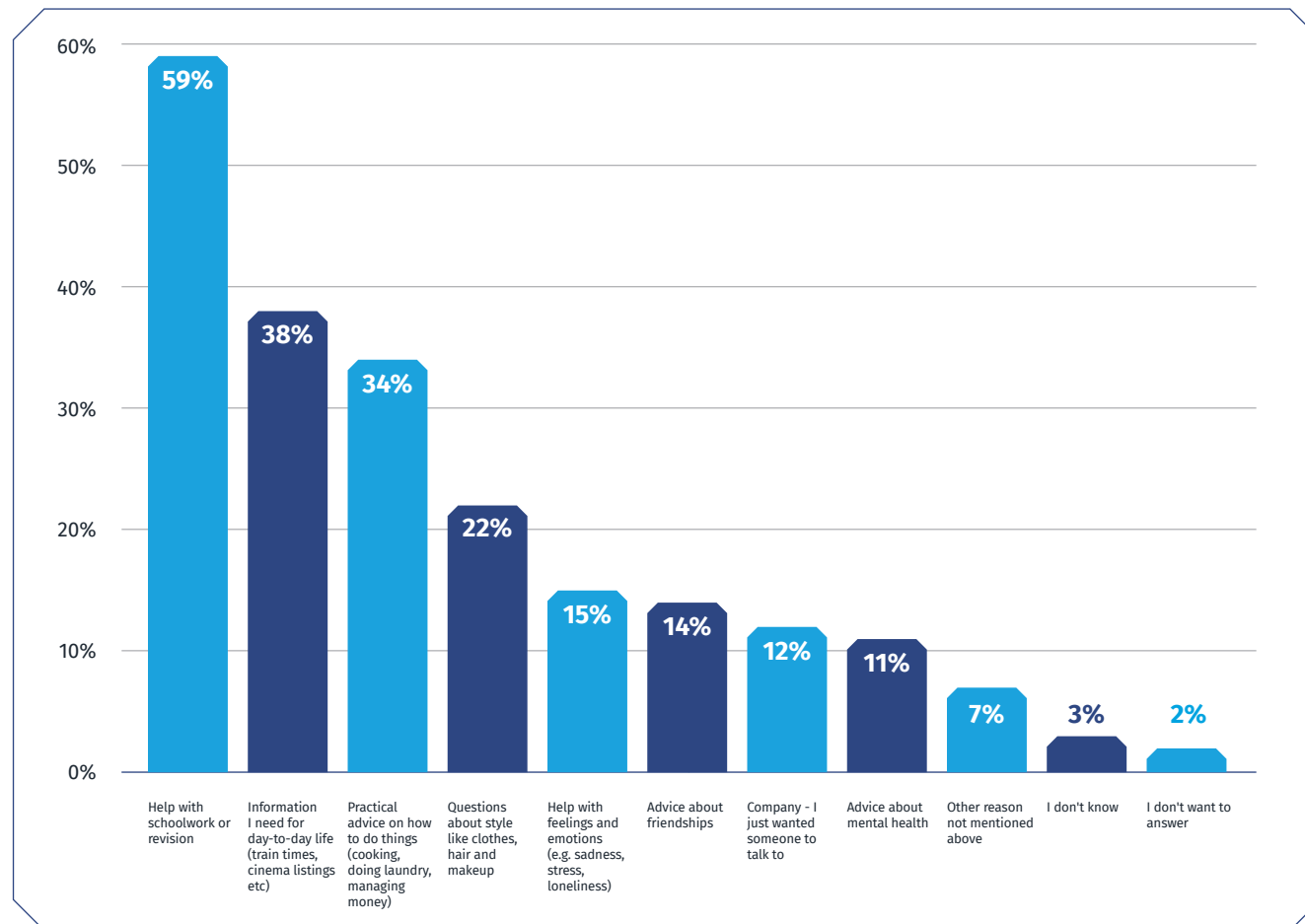
AI and age – turning to AI for advice, support or company is most common among 18 year olds where just over half (**54%**) say they do.



A significant proportion of 14 and 15 year olds are also turning to AI with **41%** of each age group saying they do.



We asked young people that use chatbots or AI tools their reason for this.



Over **1 in 10** young people turning to AI (**12%**) are doing so for company or someone to talk to.



Over **1 in 10** young people turning to AI (**11%**) are doing so for advice about mental health.



14% of young people tuning to AI do so for advice about friendships.



Over half (**55%**) of young people who turn to AI or Chatbots do so for advice*.



78%** of young people turning to AI are doing so for support.



Top 5 reasons for turning to AI instead of talking to someone were:

It's quicker 51%	Curiosity 35%	It's fun 35%	It's easier than talking to a real person 19%	Anonymity 13%
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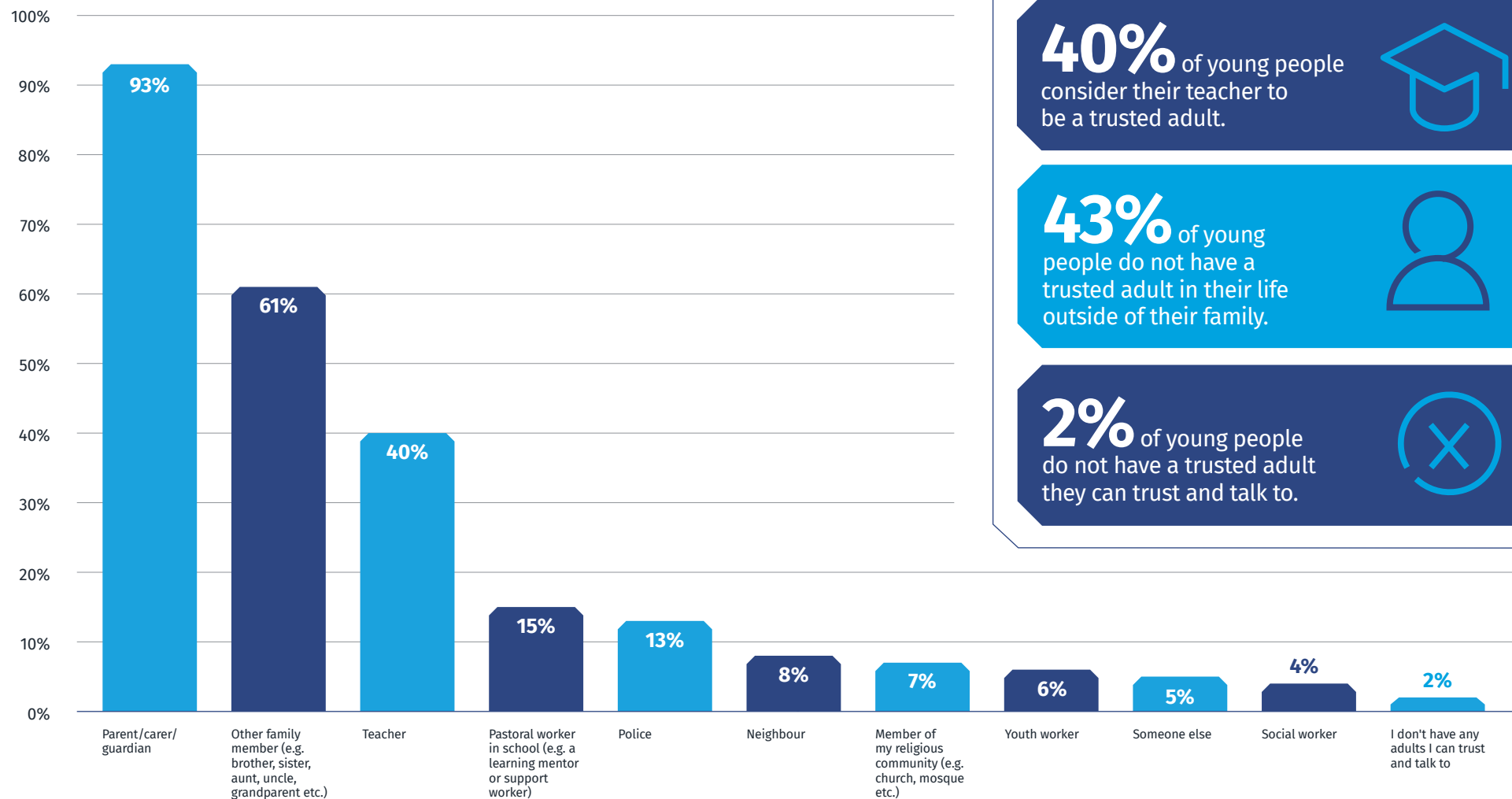
Other reasons include:

- Not wanting to burden others **10%**
- Feeling embarrassed or awkward talking to an adult **9%**
- Not having anyone else to talk to **6%**
- Trusting AI more than a real person **6%**

*55% is advice about mental health, friendships, how to do things and style advice.

**78% is support with schoolwork or revision, day to day information like train times, and help with feelings or emotion.

WHO ARE YOUNG PEOPLE'S TRUSTED ADULTS?



93% of young people name their parents as people they feel they can trust and talk to.



40% of young people consider their teacher to be a trusted adult.



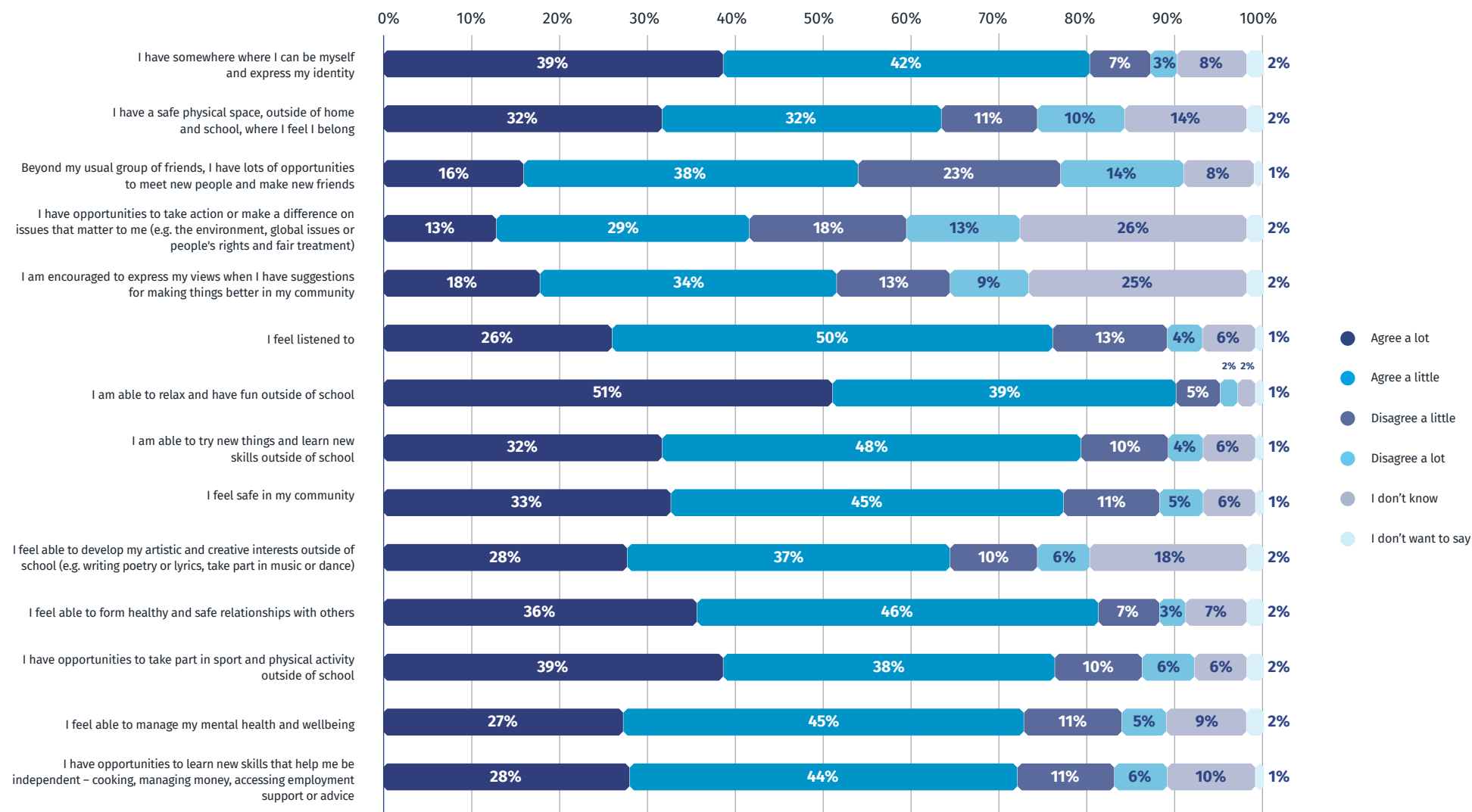
43% of young people do not have a trusted adult in their life outside of their family.



2% of young people do not have a trusted adult they can trust and talk to.

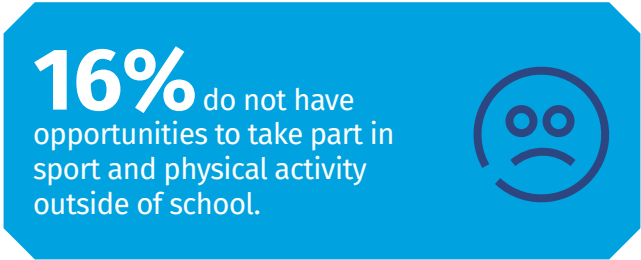
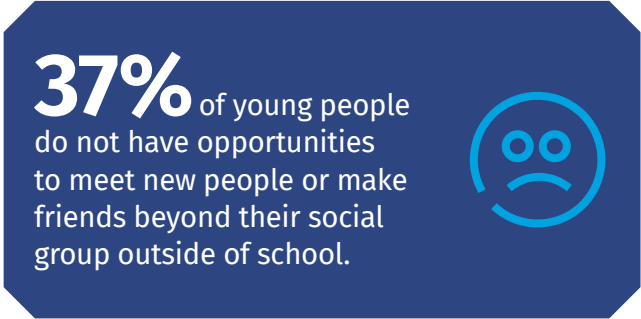
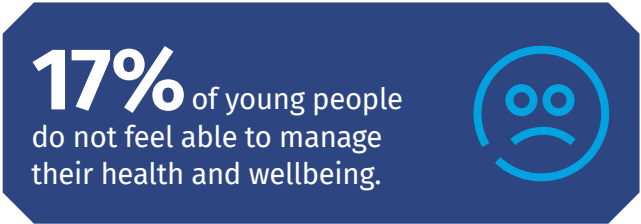
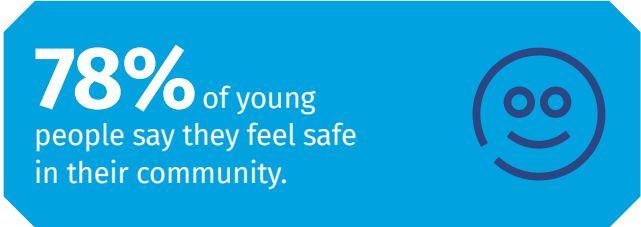
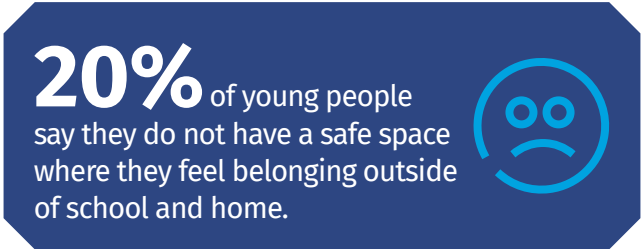
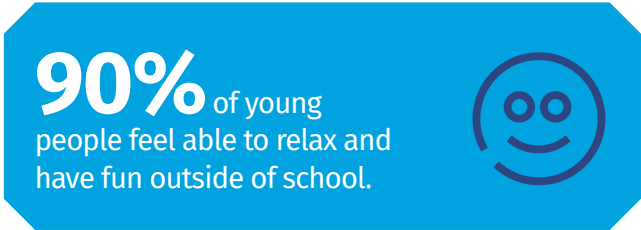


OPPORTUNITIES OUTSIDE SCHOOL



Base: All England 11 – 18 year olds

We asked young people if they agree or disagree with several statements (outlined on page 19) about their lives outside of school. Their answers show that:



Youth clubs and opportunities

.....

Young people that attend youth centres have greater levels of social connection.

.....

54% of young people overall have lots of opportunities to meet new people and make new friends.

.....

By contrast **75%** of young people that attend youth centres say they have lots of opportunities to make new friends.

WELLBEING

We asked young people to rate their feelings against four wellbeing* measures ranking their feelings on a scale of 0-10 where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'.

SATISFACTION

Overall how satisfied are you with your life right now?

69%

of young people reported high or very high levels of satisfaction with their life.

10%

reported low levels of satisfaction.

HAPPINESS

How happy did you feel yesterday?

68%

of young people reported high or very high levels of happiness.

10%

reported low levels of happiness.

LIFE IS WORTHWHILE

To what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?

65%

of young people reported high or very high feeling that the things they do in their life are worthwhile.

11%

reported low feelings that the things they do in their life are worthwhile.

ANXIETY

How anxious did you feel yesterday?

43%

reported high or very high feelings of anxiety (an increase from 2023).

30%

reported low feelings of anxiety.

AARON'S STORY

Aaron, 11, Unitas, Barnet Youth Zone.

“

I love Unitas - it's my favourite part of my week. I'm homeschooled and although I love being homeschooled, it does get lonely at times. But all that changed when I started at Unitas.

I was ten years old when I first attended Unitas. I told my mum and dad that I felt confident when on my first session, I was actually really nervous, but I didn't want anyone to know. I wanted to make friends, so I put on a brave face. I was curious, my older brother went to Unitas when he was my age and he always boasted to me about how cool it was, so I knew I had to be brave, and it would get easier after my first day. On my first day I didn't know anyone, and I wasn't used to being around so many people. The media room was nice. It was quiet and some of the children in there let me play Roblox with them, this made me feel less nervous. I was so worried no one would like me and wouldn't let me play with them. Later on in the sports hall we did roller-skating – this is when I knew I'd love it here.

I had never been to a youth centre before, but this one was beyond my imagination. Now I'm so excited coming to Unitas every week. It's a nice change of environment from being at home

and I wish I had come sooner! I wouldn't like being in school, I prefer the independence of homeschooling. But I've always felt like I was missing out when it came to making friends and socialising. Unitas is like school but for making friends and now I don't feel like I'm missing out. I've made friends who I get to see every week and they actually like the stuff I like.

Before I came to Unitas I felt lonely. I have two brothers, but they are way older than me. I mean I do have mum and dad, but they are my parents, they don't always have time to play with me. I wanted friends my age, other kids I can relate to.

My skating has improved so much, I feel safe and comfortable practicing my skating and now I'm even learning tricks. I was really struggling with my skating before, and I felt like I wasn't improving which was making me feel sad. The sports hall staff have really helped me feel more confident in my abilities. Now I even help other people with their skating. I've tried loads of new things as well that I never even knew about. Badminton and origami are my favourite activities apart from skating.

I'm going to be 12 soon and although I'm nervous about going to seniors when I'm 13, when I get there, I'll at least have friends. It's going to be a big change but at least this time I know I won't feel lonely.”

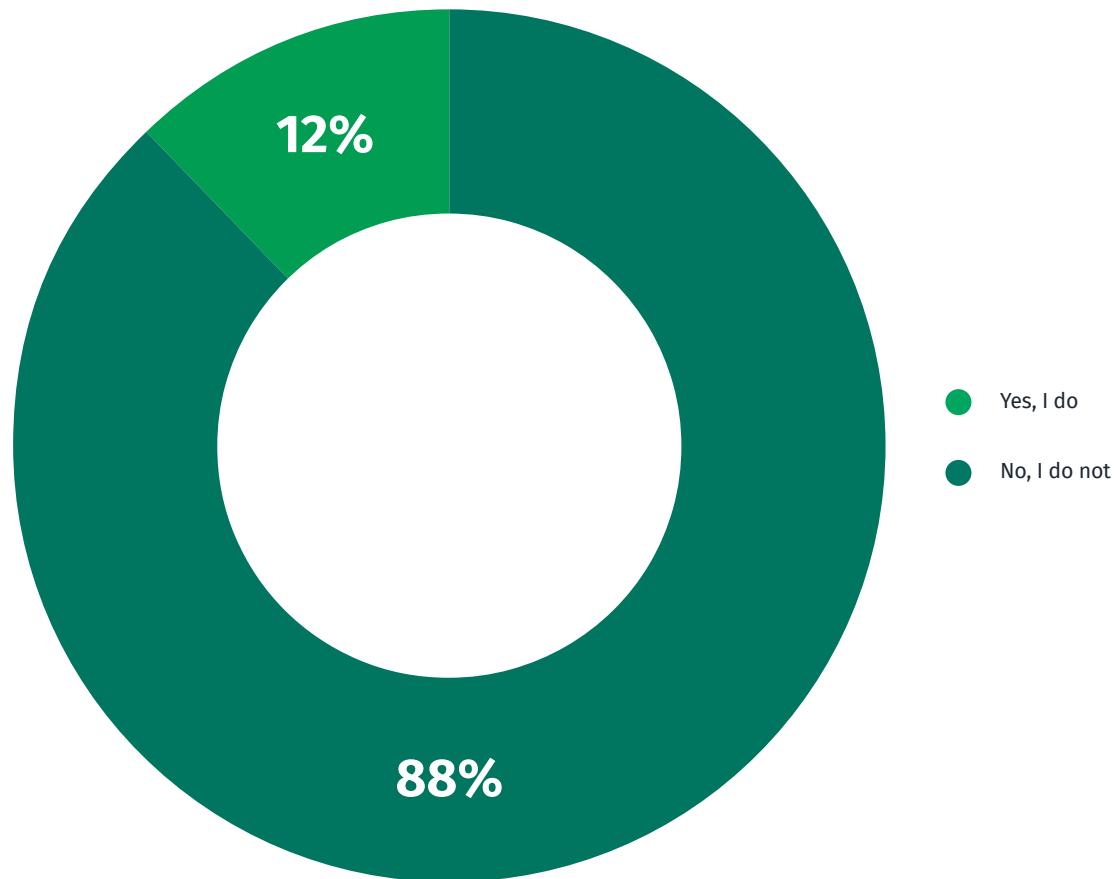


PART 2 **YOUNG** **PEOPLE** **AND** **YOUTH** **SERVICES**



YOUTH CLUB EXPOSURE

We asked young people if they attend a youth centre.



88% of young people do not attend a youth centre.



31% of young people said they didn't know when they were asked to define a youth worker.



“

I have learnt that no matter what I am going through, just sitting down and talking it through with one of the youth workers always makes my problems seem so much more manageable. ”

YOUTH CLUB IMPACTS

We asked young people that attend youth clubs about the difference it makes.

92% of young people that attend a youth centre say it has made a positive difference to their lives.



90% of young people that attend a youth centre say it has offered them new experiences and opportunities.



87% of young people that attend a youth centre say it has given them new skills.

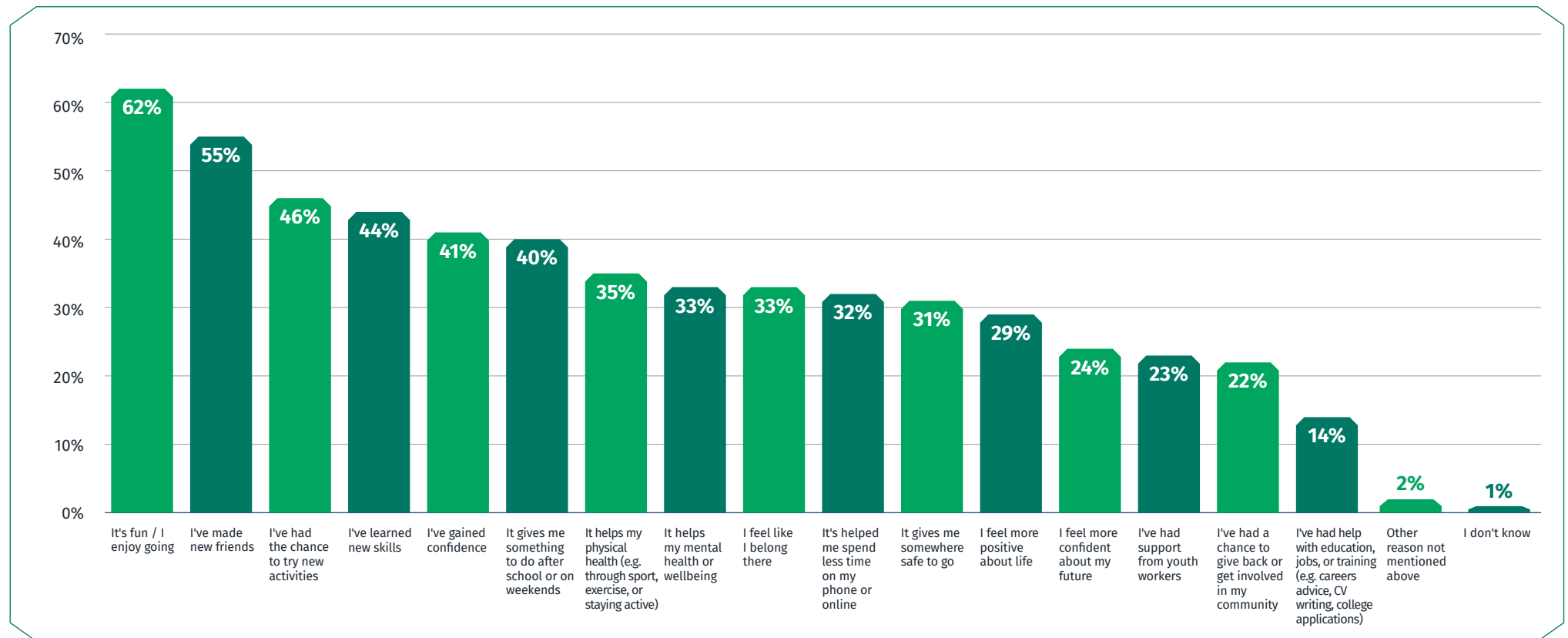


74% of young people that attend a youth centre say it has helped them overcome the difficulties they face.



YOUTH CLUBS – POSITIVE DIFFERENCE

We asked people who said that youth clubs have had a positive difference on their life their reasons for this:



Over half (**55%**) of the young people who said a youth centre made a positive difference cite making new friends as the reason for this.



Other reasons include

Gaining confidence **41%**

Improved physical health **35%**

Improved mental health **33%**

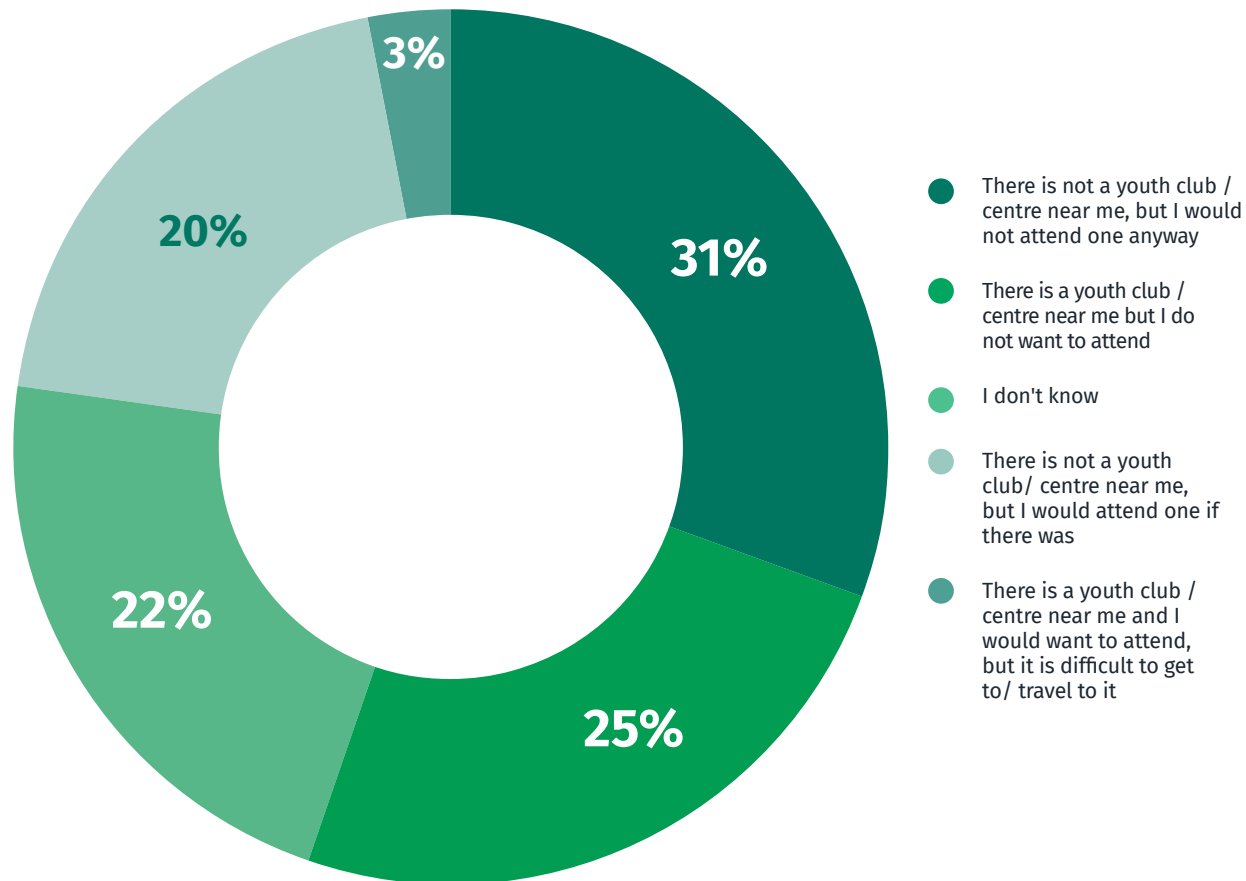
Helps reduce time spent on the phone or online **32%**

A sense of belonging **33%**

Support from youth workers **23%**

YOUTH CLUB PERCEPTIONS

We wanted to understand more about how young people that don't attend youth clubs perceive them.



Key findings

A fifth (**20%**) of young people who don't currently go to a youth club would attend a youth centre if there was one near them.

Half of young people that don't currently attend (**50%**) say there isn't a youth club near them.

A quarter of young people that don't currently attend (**25%**) do not want to attend their local youth club.

“Without Legacy Youth Zone my life would be dramatically different. My mental and physical health would have probably continued to deteriorate as I would not have found a way to release my stress and anxieties in a safe way.”

ABOUT ONSIDE

We are a national charity that believes every young person should have the opportunity to discover their passion and their purpose.

To achieve this, we fund, build, launch and support a national network of state-of-the-art, multimillion-pound youth centres called Youth Zones in the UK's most economically disadvantaged areas.

Youth Zones are staffed by skilled and dedicated youth workers who truly believe in young people helping them see what they could achieve, and giving them the skills, confidence and ambition to go for it.

We believe passionately in the power of Youth Work to transform lives and provide young people with a breadth of opportunities to help them thrive, overcome challenges and transition positively into adulthood.



www.onsideyouthzones.org



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