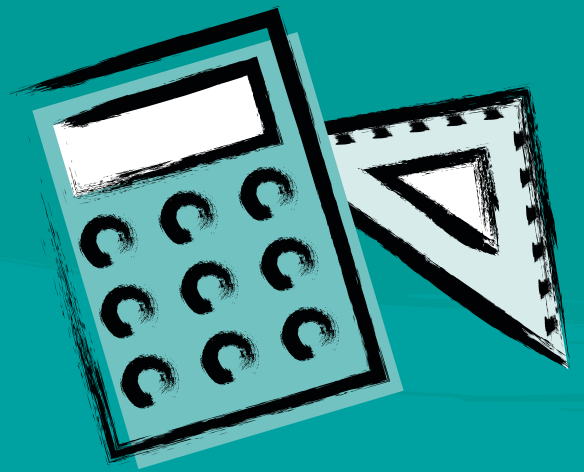


# My school: improving young people's experience of education



From evidence to impact:  
The Good Childhood Report 2025 policy  
recommendations for **local government**

**The  
Children's  
Society**

# My school

## **School and wellbeing are deeply connected. But young people often describe school as a source of stress, rather than support.**

The **Good Childhood Report 2025** shows a steep decline in happiness with school and schoolwork, with 'getting good grades' now young people's top worry. Narrow definitions of success leave some pupils feeling they do not belong, while punitive behaviour policies risk pushing vulnerable children further out.

The transition from primary to secondary is a key moment for anxiety and disengagement, yet support is often inconsistent. At the same time, Personal, Social, Health and Economic (PSHE) education is often under-prioritised, leaving gaps in life skills and resilience.

### **What the Good Childhood Report shows**

- There has been a steep decline in happiness with school since 2009/10, with it now being the aspect of life children are least happy with.
- 43% of young people say getting good grades is their top future worry.
- Young people feel excluded by narrow definitions of success.
- Transition to secondary school is a key risk moment for anxiety and disengagement.
- Behaviour policies can punish children for challenges rooted in trauma, poverty or unmet needs.

### **What young people say**

Young people describe school as a major source of pressure, with the drive to achieve academically having a clear impact on their wellbeing. Many felt that success was defined too narrowly, leaving them excluded if they did not fit the academic mould.

**"In my school they had sets from one to nine and the people in the lowest sets didn't feel included in school life." Young person**

They spoke about how this pressure builds both inside the school system and from external expectations, intensifying during exam periods. Some young people said this left them feeling overwhelmed and anxious.

**Supportive staff relationships, however, made all the difference. When children had consistent, trusted adults in school who genuinely cared, they were able to re-engage with learning.**

**"Now I've got a great staff member, and they have made all the difference and made it possible for me to engage in education. Basically, it shows how much the relationship with the staff member is so key. I believe she genuinely cares."**

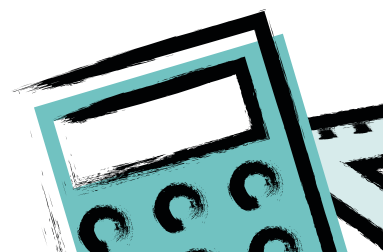
**Young person**

Young people also raised concerns about how behaviour is managed. They felt that punitive approaches made things worse and ignored the real issues behind behaviour. What they wanted instead were compassionate responses and recognition of the deeper challenges they were facing. They were clear that wellbeing support must be prioritised, not treated as an optional extra. PSHE education was identified as under-valued and under-resourced, often delivered by staff without time or training.

**"Even the presentations they were giving, it's the first time they are seeing it too, reading off the script – when we leave the classroom, we forget it all!"**

**Young person**

Finally, young people highlighted how difficult transitions can be, especially the move from primary to secondary school. They told us this period needs far more attention and support if children are to feel confident and thrive.



## What professionals say

Professionals described school as a key part of the ‘pressure environment’ young people are navigating, noting that academic pressure leaves many feeling overwhelmed and, in some cases, disengaged. This was linked to a wider gap between young people’s expectations and lived reality, alongside pressures such as poverty, poor housing, and reduced access to early support.

They also raised concerns about some young people becoming more isolated from trusted adults and safe spaces, which makes it even more important that schools get pastoral care and wellbeing right – not just academic outcomes.

## Recommendations

### Fund transition support programmes

Vulnerable pupils are most at risk of disengagement when moving into secondary school.

- **How:** work with schools and local partners to put consistent transition support in place with clear referral routes for pupils who need more help.
- **What can councillors do?** Press for targeted support for children who are in at-risk groups, including pupils with SEND, care-experienced children and young carers. Use briefings or scrutiny to ask what is in place in each area and where the gaps are.

### Promote inclusive behaviour policies

Punitive measures isolate pupils and escalate exclusion whereas inclusive approaches keep children engaged and learning.

- **How:** use local education partnerships to promote inclusive behaviour and whole-school wellbeing approaches. Focus additional support on schools with high exclusion rates or persistent unauthorised absence.
- **What can councillors do?** Ask schools what they are doing to reduce exclusions and improve belonging. Request regular data and narrative updates – including feedback from parents, carers and young people – so you can track whether change is being felt on the ground.

## Work with Public Health to strengthen PSHE education

PSHE education and wellbeing support in schools is often uneven, and schools do not always have a clear, shared way to assess need and hear from pupils.

- **How:** develop a consistent local offer for schools with Public Health and the School Health Service, using pupil feedback and a simple check-in on wellbeing priorities to target practical PSHE support, including emotional health, relationships, and digital safety, with clear opportunities for young people to input.
- **What can councillors do?** Use your influence to secure an offer that schools can access. Ask for clear updates on success and how schools are using the offer.

## Why this matters

School is where young people spend most of their time. When it becomes a source of pressure rather than support, the impact is huge. Stress and disengagement do not stay contained within school, they affect mental health, attendance, behaviour, relationships and belonging. **For some, the message they take away is not ‘I’m struggling with schoolwork’, but ‘school isn’t for someone like me’.**

**“The meritocracy of schools is very academic and not very holistic. If you’re not seen as achieving ... you’re not belonging.” Young person**

This matters for councils because the knock-on effects land locally: escalating crises, more demand for early help services, higher risks around exclusion and exploitation, and weaker routes into skills and employment. Getting school experience right, especially at transition points, is one of the most practical ways to protect wellbeing and improve life chances.

## **Teenagers' needs are being ignored, with those who face abuse, exploitation or neglect only receiving help at crisis point.**

We reach teenagers where they are to tackle the struggles they face today, providing complete support that's specific to them, and challenging the government to deliver policies that will continue to protect them. Because a future of hope and happiness belongs to every young person.

## **Together, we can set a path to a good childhood.**



**Scan here to download and  
view The Good Childhood  
Report 2025 publications.**

For further information or advice on how to implement these actions in your council, please contact **Regional Policy and Public Affairs Manager, Georgia Power**, at Email: **[georgia.power@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:georgia.power@childrenssociety.org.uk)**.

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