

# On the Right Track

What matters to young people in the UK?



# “We’re ready to vote,” say teens

According to our survey, 17 to 18-year-olds in the UK feel ready to vote. The proportion of this age group that said they intended to vote (71%) was greater than the proportion of electors who actually voted at the last election (59%); they were aware of key social issues, and they displayed growing sense of their responsibilities and their place in the world.

The *On the Right Track* respondents were capable of expressing strong political opinions. When we asked why they did or did not intend to vote, we found the 61 per cent who said they would relayed three insistent messages:

- I want to have my say.
- I want make the world a better place.
- I want to ensure the right Prime Minister is chosen.

The 13 per cent who did not intend to vote and the 26 per cent who weren’t sure whether they would or not said:

- I don’t care about politics.
- My vote won’t make a difference.
- I’m not ready/don’t know enough to vote.

Do you intend to vote when you are able to?	
	%
Yes	61
No	13
Not sure	26

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 4047

Would you consider writing to your MP if you felt strongly about an issue?	
	%
Yes	61
No	13
Not sure	26

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 4010

By education	%	
	Intend to vote	Would consider writing to an MP
State school	60	38
Sixth form/college	62	46
Private school	73	48
Other (employed/work based training/unemployed/other)	54	40.5

Base = All respondents

There was also considerable variation in voting intention between different sectors of the population. Young people in private education, for example, were more likely to say they would vote (73%, compared to 60%) and write to their MPs than their peers in the state sector. They also manifested a stronger belief that local actions can have an impact in wider society.

By contrast, young people not in mainstream education seemed to have comparatively little faith in their ability to make an impact on the world. Approximately two-thirds of this group were 16 to 18-year-olds who had left school and were either working, in work-based training or unemployed. Those in work-based training were more likely to say they would vote than the average (64%). But those in a non-training workplace were less likely (54%) – and just 41 per cent of unemployed respondents stated an intention to vote.

Although the relatively high proportion of young people who said they would vote bodes well for future elections, a gap between intention and action may be evident here. Just 39 per cent of 18 to 24-year-olds actually voted at the 2001 General Election (Source: Electoral Commission [www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/elections/publicparticipation.cfm](http://www.electoralcommission.gov.uk/elections/publicparticipation.cfm)).

Young people in the UK are growing up in a world where the assertion of rights is becoming more widespread. According to our survey, 11 to 18-year-olds know they have rights, but they have little detailed information about what those rights actually are.

Although an overwhelming 86 per cent of respondents agreed that young people have rights, a third could not name any. Of those that did, most stuck to broad ‘headline’ categories, such as the right to life or the right to free speech. There was little awareness of the less ‘obvious’ rights enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) such as the right to assembly or the right to protection from unhealthy work.

To what extent is rights understanding linked to knowledge of the UNCRC? Just a third of respondents had heard of the Convention. This figure did increase by age group, but even at 17 and 18 only 41 per cent replied positively.

Yet the UNCRC places a burden on signatories to ensure that young people in their countries are given information about their rights. The gradual increase in knowledge as teenagers grow older implies that rights education – perhaps via the introduction of compulsory Citizenship classes – is having some effect, but the proportion who know the UNCRC is still relatively low. In Scotland, however, 46 per cent of our sample group said they had heard of the UNCRC – considerably more than elsewhere. These young people were also far more likely to cite school as a source of information about the world (48%, compared to an average of 38%) and to say that school has a responsibility to tell them about rights (*see page 17*). Children in Northern Ireland, where awareness of the UNCRC is low (24%), were least likely to cite school as a source of information about the world.

Do you think as a young person you have rights?	
	%
Yes	86
No	8
Not sure	6

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 4012

Have you heard of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child?	
	%
Yes	31
No	54
Not sure	15

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 4004

Ten best-known children’s rights	
1	Education
2	Freedom of expression
3	Home
4	Food
5	Healthcare
6	Life
7	Freedom
8	An opinion
9	Respect
10	Be listened to

Base = All respondents values, n=4004

Do you feel your rights are generally respected?	
	%
Always	5
Quite often	22
Sometimes	40
Not often	25
Never	8

Base = respondents less missing values, n = 3979

When we asked respondents to name three rights that every young person has, we received a wide range of responses, from ‘the right to life’ to ‘the right to remain silent’. Where possible, these were amalgamated into broad categories which gave us our list of the ten entitlements that young people aged 11 to 18 are most commonly aware of.

All are key basic entitlements enshrined in the UNCRC and they show us what really matters to young people. Education is clearly of primary importance, and some of the rights are absolute necessities, such as life, food and shelter. Yet others relate to individual liberty and three of these are linked directly with freedom of speech and thought – implying that this is a particularly key issue for young people.

When we asked our respondents whether they felt their rights were generally respected, we found a significant proportion felt they were not: one in three said their rights were ‘Not often’ or ‘Never’ respected.

This figure was consistent for young people aged 11 to 16, but dropped to a quarter for 17 to 18-year-olds. This sixth-form age group was generally more confident that their rights would be observed, suggesting a post-GCSE watershed beyond which they are given noticeably greater respect by their peers and by adults. What this implies is a noticeable difference in the extent to which adults are prepared to extend rights to people they perceive to be children and people they perceive to be other adults. Natalie Armstrong’s extra research (*see page 16*) suggests that adults know even less about children’s rights than young people themselves.

But rights are of great value to young people. Asked if they would be prepared to defend someone else’s rights, more than one in ten said they would always do so, and one third of respondents said they would be likely to do so. Just two per cent said they would never defend someone else’s rights.

Our young people are passionate about rights, but our survey suggests there are gaps in their knowledge and in the general willingness of adults to observe the rights of young people.

# The ADULT view

## How can you teach us if you don't know?

Survey group member Natalie Armstrong, 17, interviewed adults about their knowledge of children's rights. This is what she found out.

From experience I believed that adults probably have no more knowledge about the UNCRC than young people. If this is the case, then how is it possible for them to have the responsibility to inform us about our rights?

My respondents were evenly spread across the age ranges of 18 to 65+. Almost all of them (94%) thought that young people had rights and the remainder said they were not sure. But less than a quarter (23.5%) had heard of the UNCRC. I know for a fact that some of them had either looked it up when answering or heard about it from me.

When I asked them what the UNCRC stood for, only 18 per cent could tell me. More than 40 per cent of my respondents did not answer. I then asked them whether they could name any rights. The table to the right lists their ten most common responses.

More than a third of adults surveyed felt that the Government has responsibility for informing young people about their rights. Nearly 30 per cent said they felt it was the responsibility of their families, and fewer than a quarter said school should take responsibility. Almost half (47%), however, felt that rights education should be shared between the Government, families, school, the media and other state and voluntary agencies. But how is this possible if adults don't know about children's rights?

Ten children's rights best known by adults
1 Education
2 Health
3= Love
3= Freedom
3= Opinion
3= Protection
7 Be heard
8= Accomodation
8= Respect
8= Justice

Who do you think has responsibility to inform you of your rights?	%
Your family	71
Your school	60
The government	51
You	44
The media	25
Other	3

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 3953

Who/which do you feel you have a responsibility towards?	%
Yourself	89
Your family	85
Your friends	77
Environment	52
Your local community	25
Your country	36
Global community	40
Other	3

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 3953

# Who's responsible?

According to our survey and Natalie's research, young people are more likely than adults to feel that families are primarily responsible for teaching children about rights.

This belief was strongest in the English Midlands (73.5%) and Wales (73%), and weakest in Northern Ireland (68%). The next most important conduits for rights education are school and the Government, according to the results. Scottish young people were more likely to say that school had responsibility (64%), along with young people from Southern England (63.8%). More young people in both of these regions said they had heard of the UNCRC.

The survey implied that as they get older, teenagers become less dependent on their families for information about their rights and more likely to believe this is the province of institutions. Alongside this, they steadily develop a greater sense of responsibility towards themselves, their friends and families and their communities. In fact, 17 to 18-year-olds are almost twice as likely as their 11 to 13-year-old counterparts to believe they have a responsibility towards the global community. Nevertheless, this figure (36%) is still relatively low: it is towards their immediate circle of friends and family that young people feel the greatest sense of responsibility.

The majority of all respondents said they felt a responsibility towards friends, family and themselves. But there was considerable difference between the attitudes of girls and boys. Girls felt school, family and government had greater responsibility for giving information about rights than boys, and they claimed a greater sense of responsibility in almost every category. In some cases, the difference was marked: 63 per cent of girls felt that school had responsibility to inform them of their rights, compared to 55 per cent of boys; 88 per cent of girls felt responsibility towards their families, compared to 80 per cent of boys; and 82 per cent felt responsibility towards their friends, compared to just 70 per cent of boys.

There was just one category which broke this pattern of response: 41.5 per cent of boys said they felt responsibility towards their country, compared to 33 per cent of girls. The implication is that girls feel closer to friends, family and their communities, and boys have a stronger identification with the idea of nationhood.

Overall, however, Natalie's argument seems to be justified by our figures. Young people look first to their families, and then to the institutions of school and government for guidance about rights. But the relatively low level of detailed rights knowledge indicates that these structures are inconsistent in their delivery of rights education. If Natalie's interviewees are representative of adults generally, then this is because adults themselves know little about rights legislation. There is hope, however: virtually all adults and children acknowledge that young people have rights and, when asked, can identify a number of key ones.

# Conclusion

What does the *On the Right Track* survey tell us about the extent to which young people feel engaged as citizens of the UK? Our 4,163 analysed responses yielded a huge amount of information from young UK citizens of diverse backgrounds and ages – much more than could be included in this report.

An awareness of the wider world was ever-present in the survey responses, and the survey showed that young people are strongly influenced by information about the world delivered by the media. They are greatly concerned by war and conflict, which dominated the headlines in 2003 and triggered widespread political activism among young people. They are equally concerned about crime, which is always heavily featured in the news and which young people in the UK have more reason to fear than adults.

Overall, the results challenge the idea, often recorded in the press, that the UK's young people are uninvolved, uncaring and uninterested in society. In fact, the survey respondents come across as reasonably well-informed people, aware of key social issues, eager to know about their rights and prepared to involve themselves in their communities.

They are positive about voting. By the age of 17 to 18, the respondents appeared to be aware of responsibilities and ready to take an active part in the democratic process. However, there was also some evidence that young people of this age who have moved away from full-time education face challenges that may dampen their enthusiasm for voting and taking part in their communities.

How interested would you be in receiving information?					
	%	%	%	%	%
I = not at all; 5 = very	1	2	3	4	5
Rights and responsibilities	8	13	29	26	23
Campaigns on global issues	28	32	24	9	6
Get involved locally	18	29	33	13	7
Global issues	22	28	31	11	8

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 3908

What is the best way of getting information to young people?	
	%
TV	84
Internet	67
Magazines	65
School/college	63
Radio	54
Text messages	52
Posters	48
Email	45
Youth club	42
Leaflets	36
Post	30

Base = All respondents less missing values, n = 3908

Other patterns of response stood out. Girls were consistently more positive with their answers than boys and appeared more likely to engage with their communities. Young people in the south of England seemed to be better informed and more confident about their political choices than their peers elsewhere in the UK. Black and ethnic minority respondents had lower levels of group membership and exhibited greater concern for education than white respondents – but otherwise their responses were strikingly similar.

All the age groups, however, exhibited a strong interest in rights and rights education. The *On the Right Track* survey suggested that young people are comfortable with the idea of rights, value them and can make intelligent assumptions about them. But relatively few have heard of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Significantly, where respondents professed a knowledge of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, they also showed greater enthusiasm for school as a source of information about the world.

How to build on this enthusiasm? The survey implies that a focus on global child rights might be a good foundation for Citizenship education that young people find consistently interesting and relevant to them. Save the Children already supports schools to deliver global child rights education, and all the organisations behind this survey are committed to delivering rights education in youth work settings. But there are no statutory requirements governing this form of education – even within Citizenship, it remains an option for teachers and not a requirement. What the *On the Right Track* survey shows is that we are heading in the right direction, but there is still some way to go before our young people are fully aware of their rights and feel fully engaged as citizens.

# The survey team



The *On the Right Track* survey was conceived and designed by 14 young people drawn from seven youth organisations: Girlguiding UK, Article 12, The Woodcraft Folk, The Scout Association, Millennium Volunteers, Global Youth Network and The Children's Society.

“It’s important to know what young people actually feel, need and want, not just what adult decision-makers think is best for them. I hope that the *On The Right Track* project will help change things for young people for the better.”

Katharine Grabham

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