

Do our children feel safe?

Horrific crimes against children has led to them being portrayed chiefly as victims by the news media. Children's Express asks youngsters whether they feel like victims.

From the horrific killings at the Dunblane school to the rape and murder of Caroline Dickinson in Pleine-Fougeres last week, the portrayal of children as victims has dominated the news. But one set of voices have not yet been heard, Children's Express asked youngsters how secure they feel.

"I saw a friend at a bus stop on Lewisham High Street. As I went over to speak to her I noticed the man next to her was carrying a knife. It makes me feel bad – like I could be taken away."

Natasha Asare, 14 was on her way home to Peckham, south London, after a birthday visit to a fun fair two weeks ago." I got my friend away from there and told her about the knife. We started walking but he followed us. We were lucky because two policemen came by. They went to him and it turned out that he was drunk."

Teachers and parents have responded to incidents such as this by tightening security around their children: "My primary school has a high fence in the front, and in the classrooms we always lock the doors but some people still broke in and stole the video and the telly," said Andrea Dixon, 10, of Newcastle upon Tyne.

"Then a man in a white car nearly took away a girl from my school in March. The teachers told us not to talk to strangers. It makes me feel bad like I could be taken away."

The statistics are grim. The 1992 British Crime Survey asked 1,000 children aged from 12 to 15 about their experiences of crimes and harassment outside the home in a six month period. A third of the children reported some form of assault; one in five reported harassment by other young people and just under one in five were harassed by adults. One in 20 had been sexually harassed by men.

Andrea's friend Sammy Jo Hedley, 9, also of Newcastle, said: "I'm only allowed to go half way down the road where my mum can see me. They make rules in case I get taken away but sometimes I'd like to go places I'm not allowed to."

There is no escaping the details of sensational murders. For nine-year-old Bobby Ford from Great Shelford, Cambridgeshire, details from the recent trial of Howard Hughes, who murdered nine-year-old Sophie Hook in north Wales last August, haunted him while on a recent family holiday in Wales: "Me and my friend Jessica camped out and I was getting a bit spooked in case anyone came and hurt us. I'd heard about Sophie's murder and I was worried there might be other people like that out there. I felt scared, so we didn't stay out all night," he said.

"I don't think it's safe at night," said Thomas Smith, 13, from rural Oxfordshire. "Very few bad things happen in the day and people will help you if anything happens. Bad things happen at night because there are less people around."

Sammy Jo Hedley thought the media did frighten people. "I think the news makes it sound worse than it is. I don't think it's that bad, but I get a little bit scared."

A Gulbenkian Foundation survey on children and violence last December expressed concern at recent research suggesting that children's freedom of movement has been drastically limited over the last few decades. Parents' main reason for restricting their children's freedom is fear of violence.

"My mum can feel really protective over me and my brother," said Natasha Asare. "She says if it can happen in a small town like Dunblane, it can happen anywhere. I understand, but I think I'm sensible."

Andrea Dixon said: "I heard about Dunblane from my mum. It made me feel upset. They should put locks on the doors and have big fences and cameras like our school. It makes me feel safe."

"I don't see how you could have stopped the man who killed the children at Dunblane," said Thomas Smith. "I don't think schools trust having strangers around after Dunblane and Wolverhampton. It will be in everyone's minds for a long time."

About the team

Report and interviews by reporter Selina Gibson, 13. This article was published in [The Observer](#).

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