

HEADLINERS

Children's professionals: what I really think of my...

what do you people think about the professionals who are there to help them?

What do young people actually think about the children's professionals with whom they come into regular contact? Young reporters from Children's Express find out. My perfect social worker would be happy, easy to talk to, and really helpful.

Have you ever wanted to know what the young people you work with really think about you? Well here at Children's Express, a programme of learning through journalism for young people aged eight to 18, we decided to interview 12 young people from a range of projects and agencies to find out what they have to say about the adults who work with them.

We wanted to get the views of a variety of young people from different backgrounds so we found our interviewees in youth centres, mentoring schemes and outreach projects.

Most of the comments the young people made were positive. They generally found workers made a significant impact on their lives. This ranged from helping them gain confidence, to keeping them in school and giving them practical and emotional support.

Given the current debate about confidentiality for young people under 16, it's significant that most of the interviewees felt it was important for workers to keep things confidential. The young people who trust their workers seemed to be the ones who had the best relationships.

Some of the negative feedback about these professionals included young people feeling they didn't have enough time with their worker, since the meetings are often slotted into weekly sessions.

A couple of other areas where workers could improve included their listening skills and attitude towards young people.

In general, though, we found young people thought workers should be easy to get along with, friendly, encouraging, fun, kind and caring. But above all they should be trustworthy, and they should be there for the young person when they need them.

Hopefully, after reading the interviews below, you'll have a better idea of what to think about when engaging with the children and young people you come into contact with as part of your working life.

JENNY, 14 PERSONAL TUTOR

"Sometimes my personal tutor can be set in her ways so that she's rude, and she doesn't listen as much as she could.

"But she is also open and, in general, I feel like I can talk to her about anything. She's organised, quite friendly and down-to-earth.

The sort of things my tutor helps me with are career advice and further educational work for future university applications."

JAMIE, 10 SOCIAL WORKER

"The good thing about my social worker is she helps me when I'm upset and she gives me advice. I do lots of things with her, like playing games.

The only thing that's not good about my social worker is sometimes she's grumpy and she could be a bit more interesting.

"My perfect social worker would be happy, easy to talk to, and really helpful.

"My worker's made a difference to my life by helping me be good. I trust her because she's good at keeping a secret and I believe she would keep confidential any information on me."

EAWEN, 16 COUNSELLOR

"When I started secondary school I found it difficult to maintain friendships because I was too serious and took things straight to heart. I used to get angry and upset. So from year 8 to the end of year 9, I took part in something called circle time. This is when a group of students in the same year get together to talk about their issues. Then, in year 10, my school arranged for me to meet once a week with a counsellor to talk about my problems.

"The counsellor was very calm and positive and she had a brilliant understanding of what I was going through. I trusted her and I think that's important in these kinds of relationships. But I would have liked to spend more time with my counsellor than just once a week. I think the extra time would have given me a chance to extend my discussions and find other ways of sorting out what I was going through."

SOPHIE, 13 PARTICIPATION AND DEVELOPMENT WORKER

"I met my participation and development worker at a youth club and she thought I'd be a good young evaluator. So we go out together and evaluate projects, which is quite a fun thing to do.

"I can't really think of anything bad to say about my worker. She's made a real difference in my life by giving me more confidence. And I trust my worker because she's got children of her own, and she keeps things I tell her confidential. My advice for other workers is to be child-friendly and help young people with their confidence."

PAULA, 13 GP

"I think I have the perfect GP. I can go to him about any concerns I have to do with my health and he's really friendly. He's never rude to me. I feel like we get along really well, but I wouldn't say we've got a personal relationship; it's more like a friendship that we've built up over time. I trust my doctor because I know I can tell him things and he'll keep it confidential, which is really important.

"He's given me the wrong medication in the past. But when I've told him I wasn't feeling any better, he's done his best to find out what's wrong with me, so that he can give me the right medication. That's why I have confidence in him. There's nothing I'd change about my GP."

NATHAN, 13 LEARNING MENTOR

"My mentor's helped me at school by keeping me in my classes and helping me realise when, how and why I'm messing up.

"If I was to design my perfect mentor they'd be someone who's there for me and someone I can trust and talk to. I wouldn't mind if the mentor was male or female.

"When I tell my mentor stuff, he keeps it discreet and he tells me stuff as well. He's sent me on a course with Arsenal and a course for the National College for Young People.

"My mentor is doing all he can and I trust him because whatever I tell him, I know he'll keep it private."

MICA, 12 SOCIAL WORKER

"I don't trust my social worker because she tells other people my business. For example, if I have a fight she might tell my school or the police. My perfect worker would keep my problems to herself and help me out more.

"But, sometimes she does talk to me and helps me sort things out. Once when I had a fight she helped me with the situation. If she hadn't stepped in, things would have gotten worse."

KELSEY, 17 CLASSROOM ASSISTANT

"I'm registered blind, but I was educated in mainstream schools. So I had a classroom assistant from year 4 to year 11. She supported me by copying things down from the board and enlarging maps and charts, which were sometimes hard for me to see. She also assisted me during PE classes, because I couldn't play contact sports.

"But when I moved to secondary school, the classroom assistant started causing problems for me and my peers. She used to tell them off when they were messing around and they resented this. So sometimes they'd get annoyed at me. As I grew older, I wanted more independence and I didn't really want or need my classroom assistant anymore."

FAYE, 17 PERSONAL TUTOR

"My personal tutor is good because she does one-to-one tuition and helps me when I'm stuck on something like my applications. If I want help outside school she can help me with that too. Like if I want to discuss something then she's there for me.

"Generally, there's nothing bad about her and I trust my tutor because she's professional and friendly. She has made a difference in my life by helping me discuss issues and she's encouraged me and brought out my confidence. My perfect tutor would be fun and friendly, someone who is more like a friend than authority figure."

MONIQUE, 14 DANCE COACH

"My dance coach and I get along really well. I think it's because she's young and different from your usual dance teacher as she experiments with different styles like break dancing and MCing. I trust her because, a year ago, she said: 'If you've got any problems, come and talk to me.' So I know she'll keep things confidential.

"She's made a difference in my life by encouraging me to join in the end-of-year acting and singing performances at our youth club. And she's helped me get higher grades in dance at school. The one thing I wish she could do better is have longer sessions because we only get one per week."

CLAUDY, 10 VOLUNTEER MENTOR

"I wanted a mentor because I wasn't very confident. One of the learning mentors at school recognised this so she called Chance UK and got me one.

I was really excited and happy when we met. She's very kind and caring.

We go to the cinema, play in the park and we're going to be going on bike rides and roller-skating.

"My behaviour and attitude towards other people have changed since we met. Even my mum's noticed.

Nowadays, when someone's talking to me and I don't like what they're saying, I don't go up to them and start screaming and saying rude stuff. And when I'm angry I don't go up to people and start punching them. Now I just say 'can you leave me alone?' and walk away."

ALEM, 17 SOCIAL WORKER

"I came to London as an unaccompanied asylum seeker from Eritrea when I was 15 and that's how I got a social worker. Before we met, I used to stay home after college because I didn't know how to use the bus and communicate with young people. I used to stay home and cry, but now I go everywhere.

I know how to catch the bus and I don't feel alone. I'm more confident now.

"My social worker is like my mum and my sister. She's so nice and lovely and treats everyone equally. When you're cold she'll take her top off and give it to you. She looks after me and gives me advice, like telling me to go to the doctor or sorting out a solicitor. My social worker means everything to me."

About the team

This story was produced by Lathaniel Dyer, 15 and contributed to by Chisom Edomobi, 12. It was published by Children Now.

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