

What it's like to be young today

Fed up of hearing what adults think about the lives of young people in the 21st century Britain, a team of four young reporters from Headliners set out to interview their peers to find out what it is really like to grow up in this country.

Some people, especially those in developing countries, see young people in the UK as spoilt and lucky because we get education and health care for free. At the same time, adults and the media here often brand young people in this country as thugs who are into binge-drinking, drug-dealing and gang culture. But we wanted to find out what young people themselves think it's like growing up in this country.

Abi, 16, Birmingham

Abi's life has been changed by the birth of her son last year: "I was happy because I was going to have a baby, but I was sad because it was going to have loads of consequences. I can't go back to education [and] I lost most of my family - they stopped talking to me and my mum because my mum was supporting me."



She believes in God but she isn't religious. Her son, who is a year old, is going to get christened soon though. "His dad's a Christian and goes to church every Sunday. If my son wants to go, I'm not going to stop him. I think it will help him."

Abi doesn't want her son to be involved with gangs like she has been. "In my area there were two crews – one was all Asian and one was mixed black and white, and it was strictly those colours in each crew, and you weren't allowed to talk to people out of the other crew."

Abi is no longer involved with gangs since she has become a mum, but as a 16 year old she still has the temptation to act like a teenager: "I love alcohol. I drink about twice a week, it's bad for my age. I had my first drink when I was about 12 or 13."

She told us the best day of her life was when she gave birth to her son. "I knew I was bringing something of my own into the world that I would look after."

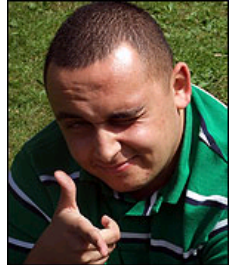
However, her friend Hayley, who's also 16, says "I think schools should do more on teenage pregnancies. More like 'don't do it!' Coz there's too many girls getting pregnant these days, it's not good."

Curtis, 19, Liverpool

According to Curtis being a young person in the UK today is "difficult with all the influences you have around you, but as long as you stick to yourself you'll get on with it."

Curtis demonstrates this strength of mind through his focus on university and his studies. "Hopefully by the year 2009 I'll be qualified and breaking into a job [in marketing]."

But one of the things that he finds distracting is relationships; although he is in one himself he says, "If you're 19, I wouldn't advise it, especially if you're studying. It can hold you back on doing so many things...I've always wanted to go travelling but I haven't really got round to it because of the fact I'm in a relationship."



In the free time he has left Curtis goes to the gym and plays football. But he doesn't think young people in the UK eat as healthily as they should, "I train a lot, but I do eat a lot of junk. I think that young kids in the UK could do with stricter diets coz I was a chubby kid myself and it's not nice being chubby when you're young."

Curtis is happy where he is at right now though: "Yeah, I feel overall, good life, 19 in the UK, and I'm laughing."

Lizzie, 9, Hackney, London

Lizzie reckons young people in the UK "are quite lucky; we've got a free education and the hospitals are free and we are quite a rich country so we have a lot of things going on." Lizzie enjoys school and her favourite subjects are History and Maths, but the thing that she dislikes about school is that "we have to spend most of our time there. I would prefer it if we spent two days of the week there and five days off." If that were to happen Lizzie would be at home playing with her toys.

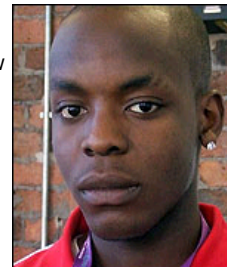


Everyone knows bullying is a main issue in schools and Lizzie has experienced it. "I did tell a teacher when it had gone on for a long time and eventually the teacher stopped it." Lizzie thoroughly enjoys school but she thinks "that they should make literacy and numeracy a bit more interesting, but I like all the other subjects." Lizzie agrees with the idea of making young children do SATs tests because "they get a feel of what exams are".

Generally Lizzie is happy in school because "I've got lots of friends and even if I do have to play on my own they've got a great playground." Lizzie thinks she's "quite lucky because I have got lots of toys and plenty of nice food." The only thing she worries about is that "there are lots of cars so I'm a tiny bit scared of getting run over."

Mico, 18, Liverpool

Mico lives in the Kensington area of Liverpool but hails from Zambia, Africa. To Mico being a young person in the UK today is "interesting" because "everybody's got their own agendas depending on what type of youth you are." Mico thinks that young people in the UK lack direction but he says he's different: "I know where I'm going and what I want. In the past I was just a typical person but now I'm reaching for my inspirations and goals."



In his spare time he writes poems, raps and studies drama. He thinks it's more worthwhile spending time on these hobbies than on relationships, which he describes as "unnecessary". When he was in a relationship in the past it affected who he hung out with because "I was putting more time into my relationship rather than dividing my time equally". The other thing that takes up lots of his time is his religion, which plays a huge part in his life: "Everything I do I walk by religion. I don't make decisions - it's got to come from above." Religion is a strong part of his cultural tradition, which he feels very attached to. "My tradition has given me cultural morals which I'm never going to abandon no matter where I am."

Lateefah, 16, Liverpool

Lateefah lives in Kesington, a relatively affluent area of Liverpool. Lateefah sees her life as typical of a young person in the UK today "because I go to school and I get to go out with my friends. I get a reasonable amount of pocket money and I've done my GCSEs... The way I live is quite comfortable compared to people all over the world".

Lateefah's family life is "very close. We do family outings, we spend birthdays and Christmas together, and I can talk to them about anything." Lateefah goes out a lot with her friends, which she sees as one of the reasons for her less-than-perfect diet: "I probably don't eat as healthily as I could because I'm always out, so you get what you get when you're out, and it depends how much money you've got left".

Lateefah has "had a very religious upbringing...but as I've got older my dad's let me believe whatever I want to believe. I do believe in God but I don't think you need to go to church all the time, I think you can worship in your own way."

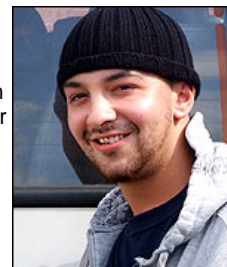
Lateefah thinks her experience of being mixed race has given her a unique perspective on life: "I've always had black people influencing my life and I've always had white people influencing my life, and I think that's brought me up better because I've been able to see different communities and the way people interact differently."

Lee, 22, Edgbaston, Birmingham

Looking back on his own childhood, Lee feels that it's hard living in the UK today because "it's easy to fall into the wrong crowds and get involved in gangs."

He was never in a gang but he's seen the consequences: "I know a lot of people who've tried to get out of it but everybody knows them as being in a gang, so that label's stuck there for life. Like a friend of mine who was shot dead, he'd been out of a gang for about a year and half. He's got two kids and then his life is taken."

He feels that young people in deprived areas around the UK have a similar experience to when he was growing up, in that "there's a lack of support, no role models and nothing to do." As a result Lee was into "stolen cars, binge drinking and just having a laugh with friends."



Lee had problems with drink and drugs, but his life turned around since he joined Fairbridge [a youth support programme] and started a career in journalism. After being sent to the G8 earlier this year to report for The Times he now has high hopes "to replace Jon Snow or Philip Webster as either a newspaper or broadcast journalist."

His experiences have taught him a lot: "Back then I was just young and dumb; now I've wised up and I know that it's not about your life day by day - you need to concentrate on the future. Now that I've got a sense of direction I know where I'm going and I'm not going to stop till I get there."

Maybe those who want to stereotype the lives of children and young people in the UK today should actually get out and speak to them, as we did. Although undoubtedly young people here are affected by negative influences, this isn't the whole picture. We discovered that it's unfair to label young people in the UK as anything in particular because it really depends on the individuals themselves.

Maryam, 8, London

Maryam turned eight in August and has lived in north London her whole life. She has just started Year 4 at school. "School life is OK. I like it because you learn a lot but I dislike it because six hours a day is too much. My favourite subject is Maths." Besides her mum and herself, education is important to her "so when you're older you get a job."

Maryam thinks "some people probably have a different life [to me] if their family's better or worse. A good family is one that always does stuff together." She lives at home with her mum, sister and brother. "It's normal not having a dad in the house. Most of my friends live with just their mum. I get on well with my mum but not with my siblings. They annoy me by being rude and dumb and taking my things without asking." Her brother and sister do help a lot with looking after her however.



Maryam's family is Moroccan. "We go to Morocco every year. I always go together with my cousin. I like the house we stay in there, it's big, but I prefer being here because the weather in Morocco is too hot." Her family are Muslim but she doesn't go to the mosque "except sometimes during Ramadan." But she does fast. "I normally do one day on and one day off. My whole family fasts. It's important because you can feel how people in other countries feel when they don't eat properly."

Maryam says 'Playing games makes me happy, like It and Hopscotch and Hide & Seek.' She has plenty of friends but "I confide in my mum. She's nice and she's helpful – and she's a good cook."

About this article

This story was produced by Jason McLeod, 16, Shannique Smith, 14, Odaka Olugu, 13, and Zainab Asad, 14. It was published by [Children and Young People Now](#).

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