OnSide
Here for young people

GENERATION ISOLATION 2026:

We expect young people to thrive in adulthood, but they tell us we don't give them the tools to succeed

November 2026



onsideyouthzones.org

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FOREWORD

This is the fifth Generation Isolation report – OnSide's annual study exploring how young people spend their free time and what this means for their state of mind and for the support, spaces and opportunities they need.

Five years ago, Generation Isolation was launched in the aftermath of the pandemic. Since then, the research has tracked a generation growing up through rapid social and technological change. The research provides a significant body of evidence about young people's lives, with each year adding another layer to the picture: digital habits, friendship, loneliness, AI, safe spaces and the changing ways young people connect. This year, we found that these pressures are having a greater impact on young people's aspirations than ever before.

It isn't a lack of belief in themselves; it's a lack of belief that they have the tools and support to succeed in life.

In 2026, the picture is more complicated. Young people are not simply telling us that they are lonely, unhappy or spending too much time online. They are also telling us something more fundamental: they know that adulthood will bring significant pressures, but many are not sure they are being given the opportunities to prepare for it.

47% say they are unprepared and, when asked what would help, they point to practical experiences: 19% say life skills are not normally taught in schools, 16% say they lack realworld experience, and 11% say they lack careers and jobs advice. Others want further opportunities to build confidence, take responsibility and make decisions.

That matters because agency - the ability to make decisions, take responsibility and shape your own future - is built through real-life experience. The confidence and independence young people need to thrive as adults develop when they have opportunities to try new things, meet people, solve problems and take safe, supported risks. Young people need — and deserve — those opportunities.

Developing a sense of agency starts with having influence: being able to make decisions, take responsibility, build practical skills and work towards the future you want, rather than feeling that life is simply happening to you. Community voice matters too, but it is one part of that wider picture. While 76% feel listened to, only 41% say they have opportunities to take action or make a difference on issues that matter to them. Being heard is not necessarily the same as having the power or opportunity to act.

Young people spend 85% of their waking hours outside of school and we once again asked them what they do with that time. More of them than ever are spending most of that time on screen (77%).

One in five young people say they don't have a safe physical space outside home and school where they feel they belong. The findings on parental tracking tell a similar story about the limited space young people have to practise independence.

This report is not an argument that young people should simply be given more freedom and treated as adults in an ever-more complex world. It is an argument for giving them opportunities and safe places in which to act, explore, learn and develop an understanding of themselves, and ultimately a sense of agency that they can shape the world around them.

Five years of Generation Isolation has brought us back to a simple question: are we expecting young people to be ready for adulthood without giving them enough opportunities to prepare for it?

And, importantly, what happens when young people do get those opportunities? The evidence from youth provision is striking. 91% of young people who attend a youth club say it has made a positive difference to their lives, and attendees are more likely to feel prepared for adult life than non-attendees. This is an association rather than proof of causation, but it is consistent with the experiences, skills and confidence young people say they need.

It is also a timely reminder that our young people need and deserve more.



Jamie Masraff
Chief Executive, OnSide

METHODOLOGY

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. The total sample size was **3,944 young people aged 11 to 18**. Fieldwork was undertaken between **5 and 24 August 2026**.

The survey was carried out online using the YouGov panel. The figures have been weighted and are representative of **11- to 18-year-olds across the UK**.

All analysis has been carried out by OnSide.



GENERATION ISOLATION 2026: KEY FINDINGS

Five years since we launched Generation Isolation, our growing body of research points to a central tension: young people understand the many pressures they face, but many do not feel they have enough opportunities, experience or confidence to face those pressures or navigate what comes next. There is an agency gap.

47% say they do not feel prepared for adult life.



Only **50%** of young people feel positive about their future.



76% feel listened to, but only **41%** say they have opportunities to take action or make a difference on issues that matter to them.



16% spend most of their free time alone.



20% do not feel they have a safe physical space outside home and school where they belong.



22% feel they have too little freedom and independence outside school.



77% spend most of their free time on a screen.



91% of youth club attendees say attending has made a positive difference to their lives.



EMILY'S* STORY

Meet Emily, 13, a member at Unitas, Barnet Youth Zone

I've been coming to Unitas since June 2024, when I first joined as a junior. I didn't know then that walking through those doors would change my life.

My very first memory is stepping into the performing arts room and meeting a youth worker called Keran. We connected instantly through our shared love for singing, dancing, and acting. From then on, we had singing lessons every Saturday morning. She didn't just teach me how to sing better — she taught me how to believe in myself. She listened when things were hard, encouraged me when I doubted myself, and helped me find my voice in more ways than one.

What keeps me coming back isn't just the activities — it's the people. The staff are so supportive, and everyone makes you feel welcome. It truly feels like a family. Before Unitas, I never really felt part of anything. But here, I found a community where I finally felt like I belonged.

Unitas has helped me discover who I want to be. Before I joined, I had no direction — I didn't know what my future could look like. I thought I'd just drift and see where life took me. But Unitas showed me that my passion for performing isn't just a hobby. It's something real. It's something I can build a future around.

Because of Unitas, I'm now attending Sylvia Young Theatre School. I'm starting my LAMDA training. I've begun auditioning. I'm putting myself out there in ways I never thought I could. Before coming here, I was shy. I barely spoke unless someone spoke to me first. I didn't think I was good enough. I didn't think people would want to hear my voice. But Unitas helped me grow into someone I'm proud of. Someone who feels seen. Someone who feels capable. Someone who feels hopeful.

Unitas gave me a safe space to dream — and the support to start making those dreams real.

*Name has been changed

Because of Unitas, I'm now attending Sylvia Young Theatre School. I'm starting my LAMDA training. I've begun auditioning. I'm putting myself out there in ways I never thought I could."



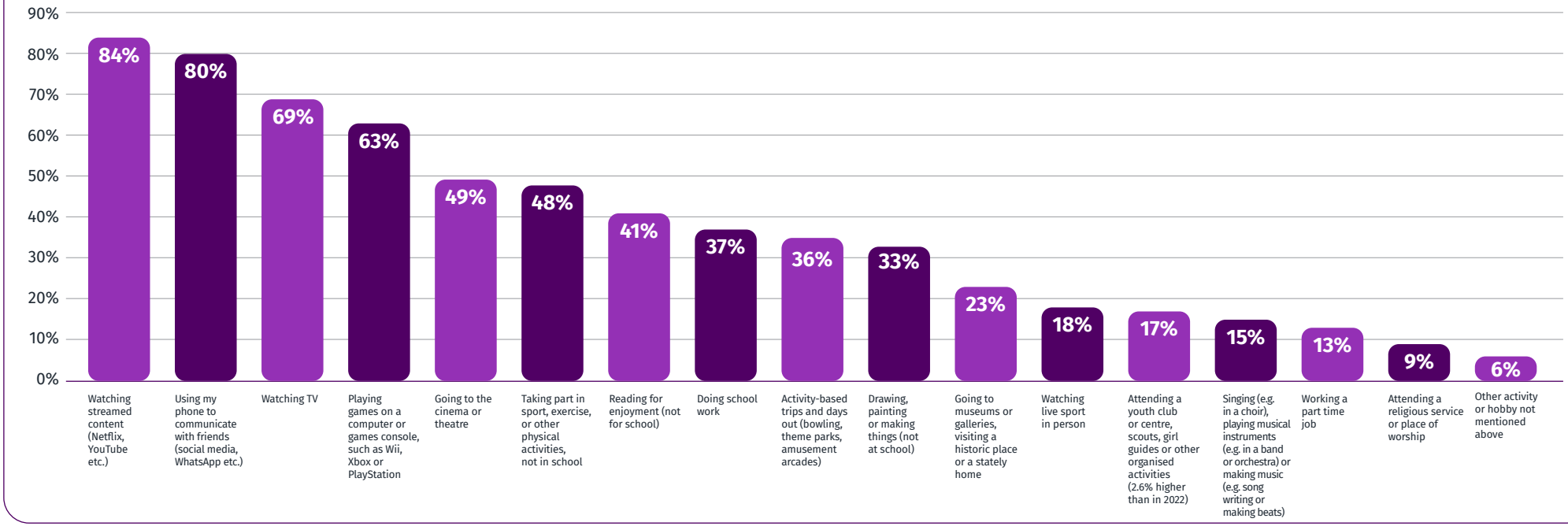
PART ONE
YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES



HOW DO YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR FREE TIME?

Young people's free time is dominated by screens.

We asked 'Which of these activities do you do in your free time now (i.e. the time when you are not in school)?'



Top 3 free time activities

84% of young people spend time watching streamed content in their free time outside of school.

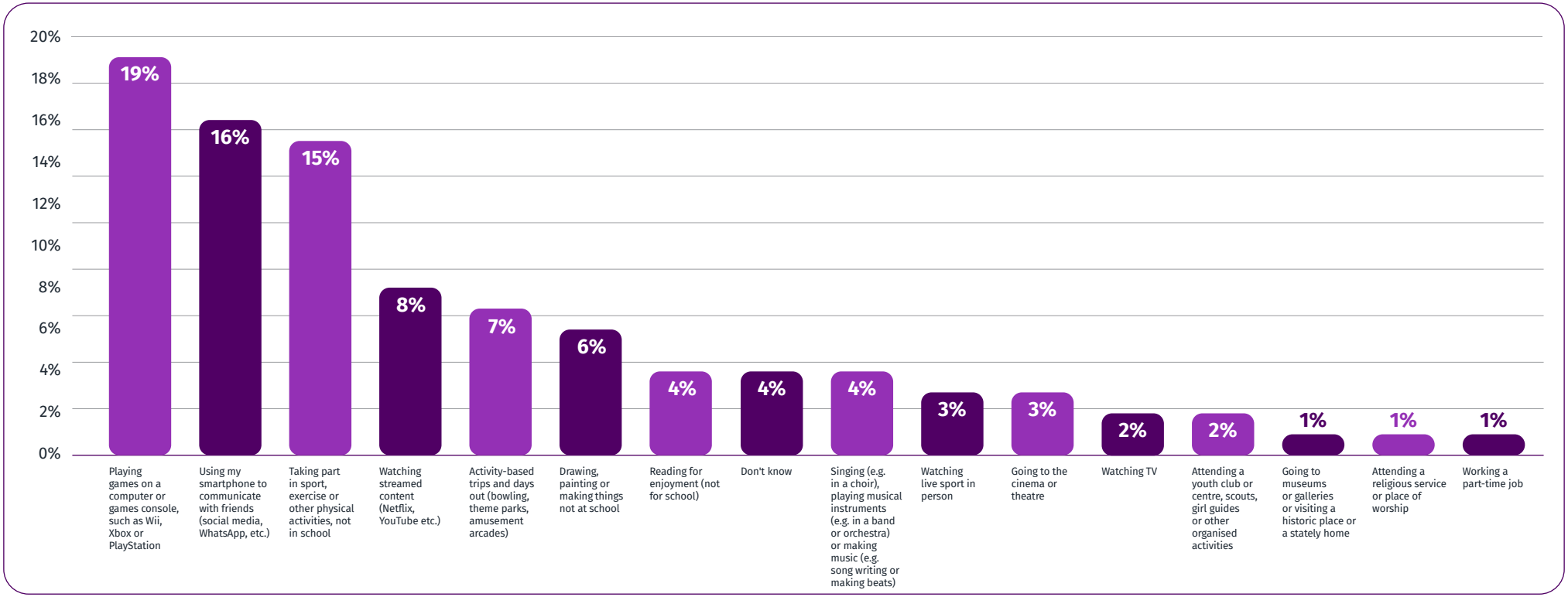
80% of young people use their phone to communicate with friends in their free time outside of school.

69% of young people watch TV in their free time outside of school.

13% of young people work a part-time job.

WHAT MAKES YOUNG PEOPLE HAPPIEST?

The activities young people value most combine enjoyment with connection, movement, creativity and a sense of doing something for themselves.



Top 4 activities driving young people's happiness

Gaming – almost **1 in 5 young** people (19%) say gaming makes them feel happiest.

16% of young people said using their smartphone makes them feel happiest.

15% of young people said taking part in sport and exercise outside of school makes them feel happiest.

8% of young people said watching streamed content makes them feel happiest.

HOW POSITIVE DO YOUNG PEOPLE FEEL ABOUT THE FUTURE — and what would help them feel ready for it?

Only half feel positive about their future. When asked what one thing would help, young people prioritise practical skills, real-life experience, responsibility and confidence.



19% Opportunities to learn life skills not usually taught in school (e.g. managing money, cooking, renting a home)

17% I don't know

16% Opportunities to try new things and gain real-life experience

11% Advice and guidance about future careers and jobs

9% Opportunities to take on responsibility and make decisions for yourself

8% Opportunities to build confidence and social skills

8% Safe places to spend time with friends and other young people

6% Support to help you feel confident about your future

5% Support with mental health and wellbeing

2% Other reason not mentioned above

ARE YOUNG PEOPLE READY FOR ADULT LIFE?

Young people are looking ahead to work, an apprenticeship, university or another next step without a clear sense that they are equipped for the practical demands and decisions ahead. The findings below show how prepared young people feel for what comes next.

42% feel prepared for adult life.

47% unprepared for adult life.

11% say they don't know.



WHAT ARE YOUNG PEOPLE WORRIED ABOUT?

Young people understand the pressures ahead. Their concerns span school and relationships as well as choosing a future, becoming an adult and making ends meet.

40% worry about school, exams or coursework.

38% worry about deciding what they want to do in the future.

32% worry about growing up and becoming an adult.

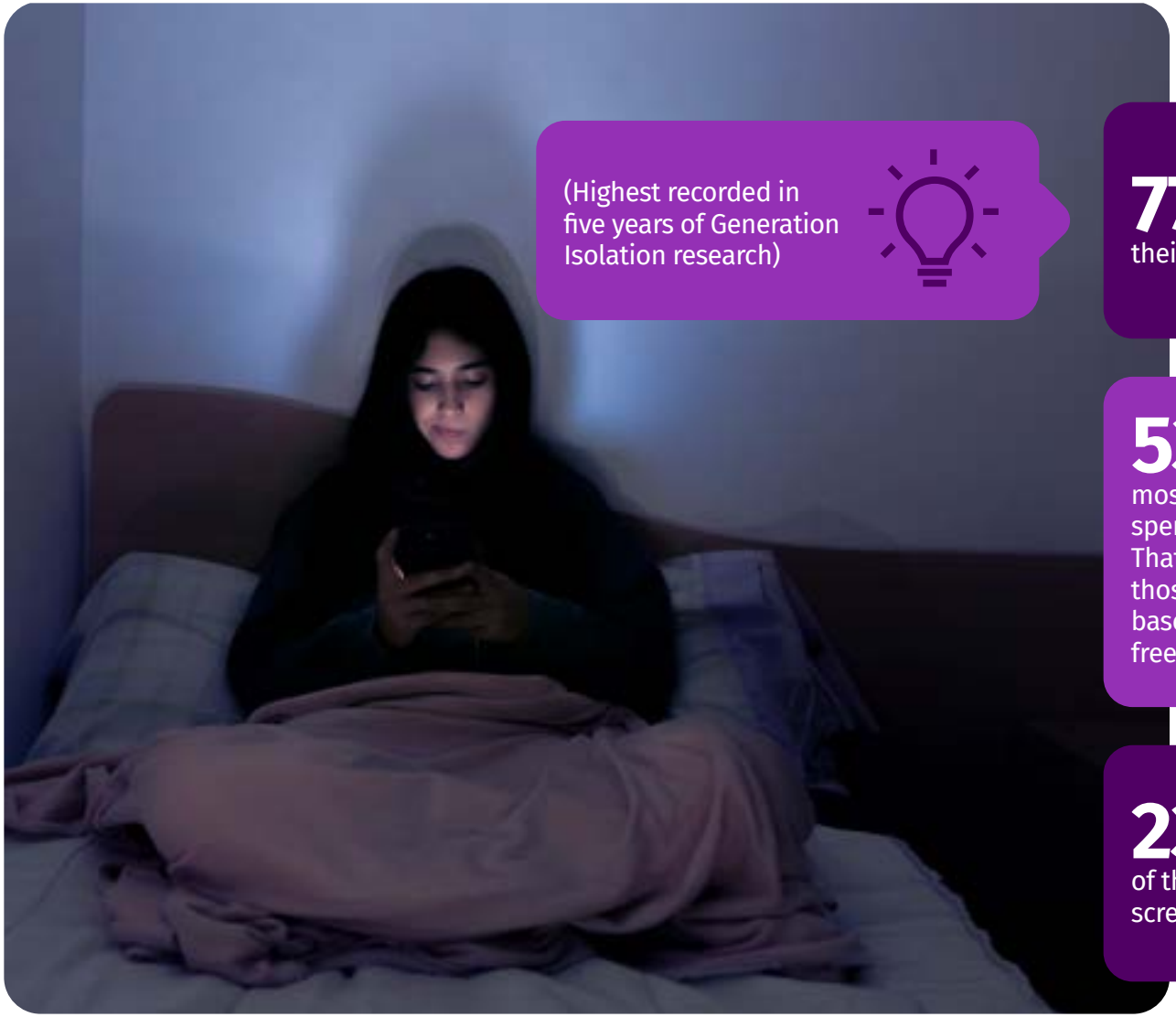
30% worry about money and the cost of living, and **22%** about whether they will be able to afford a home.

24% worry about the pressure to succeed.



HOW MUCH FREE TIME IS SPENT ON SCREENS?

Screens account for most free time for many young people. This is a broad measure covering screen-based activities and is different from the later question about spending most free time online.



(Highest recorded in five years of Generation Isolation research)

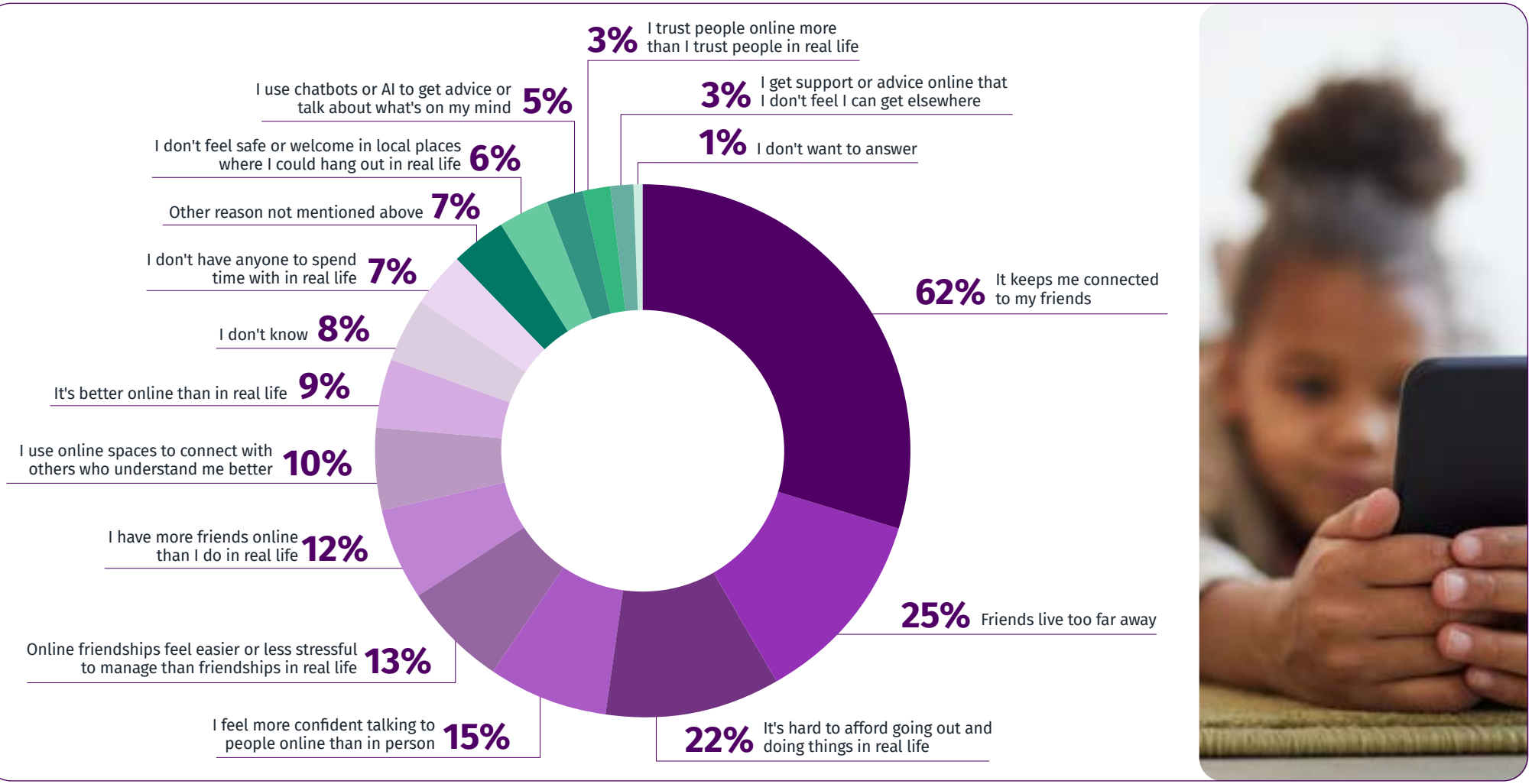
77% spend most of their free time on screen.

53% of young people who spend most of their free time on screens also spend most of their time in their bedrooms. That is almost double the proportion of those who mainly engage in non-screen-based activities that spend most of their free time in their bedrooms (28%).

23% spend most of their free time on non-screen-based activities.

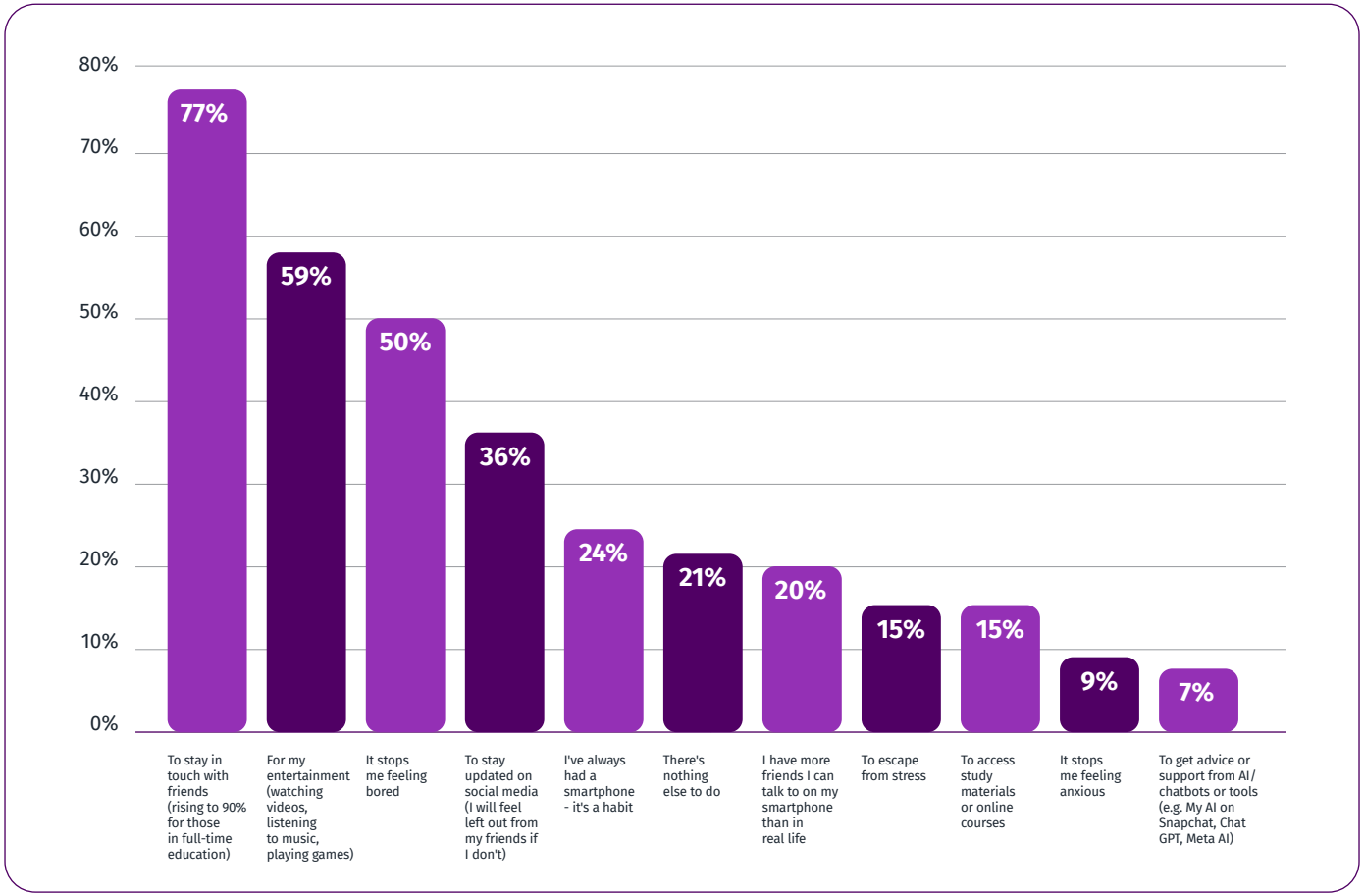
WHY DO SOME YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND MOST OF THEIR FREE TIME ONLINE?

Their reasons show that the search for connection, entertainment and belonging can draw young people towards digital life, alongside practical barriers to meeting in person.



WHAT DO YOUNG PEOPLE USE THEIR SMARTPHONES FOR?

Connection is the strongest reported reason for using a smartphone. Digital relationships can meet a longstanding human need, while in-person activities may also create opportunities to practise social, practical and decision-making skills.



Top 3 reasons for using a smartphone

77% are using smartphones to stay in touch with friends.

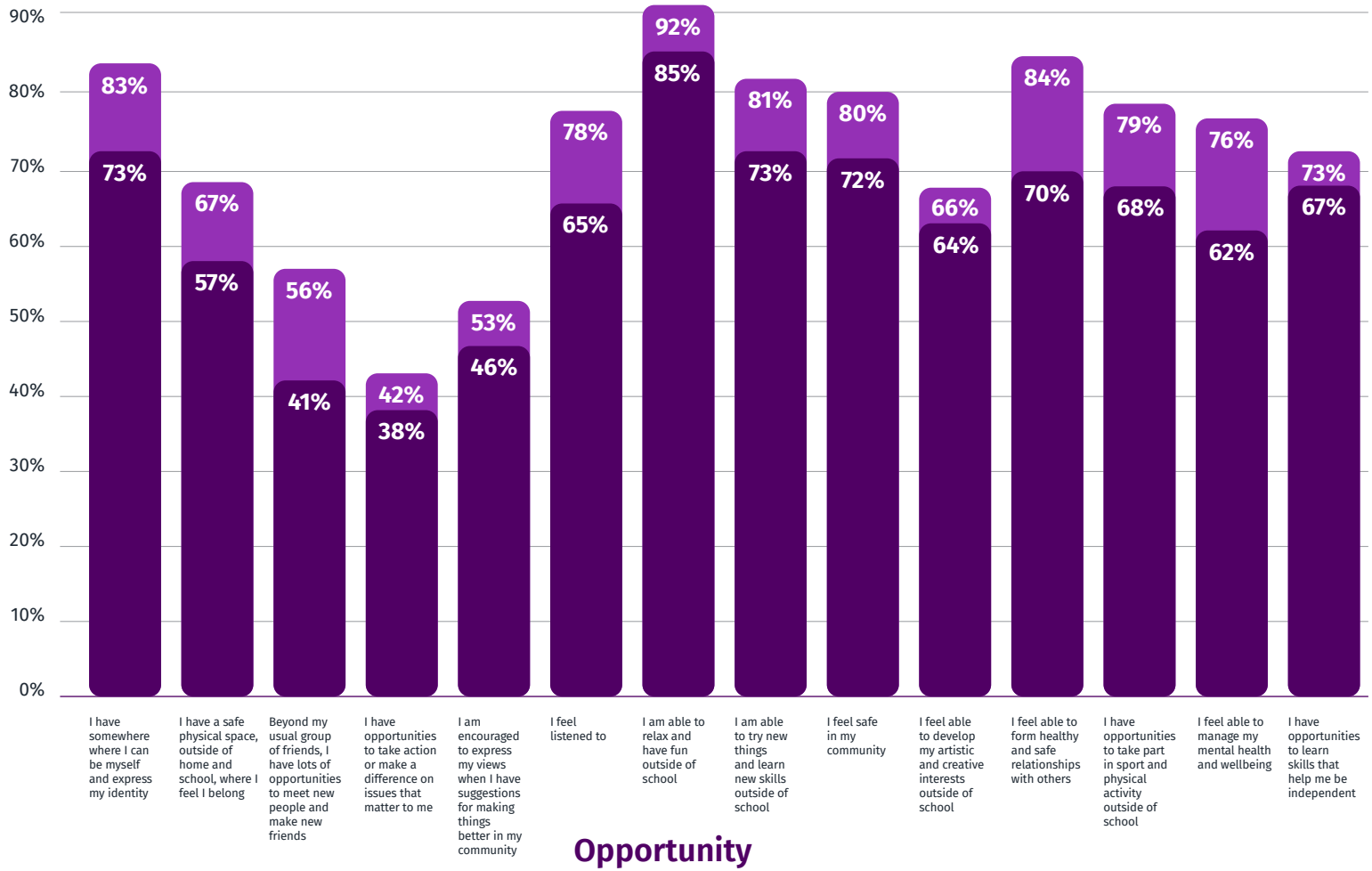
59% are using smartphones for entertainment purposes.

50% are using smartphones to prevent feelings of boredom.

BEING ALONE: CHOICE OR CONSTRAINT?

Spending time alone can be enjoyable and restorative, but for some young people it is linked to limited opportunities, inaccessible places or not having friends available. The survey shows associations, not causes.

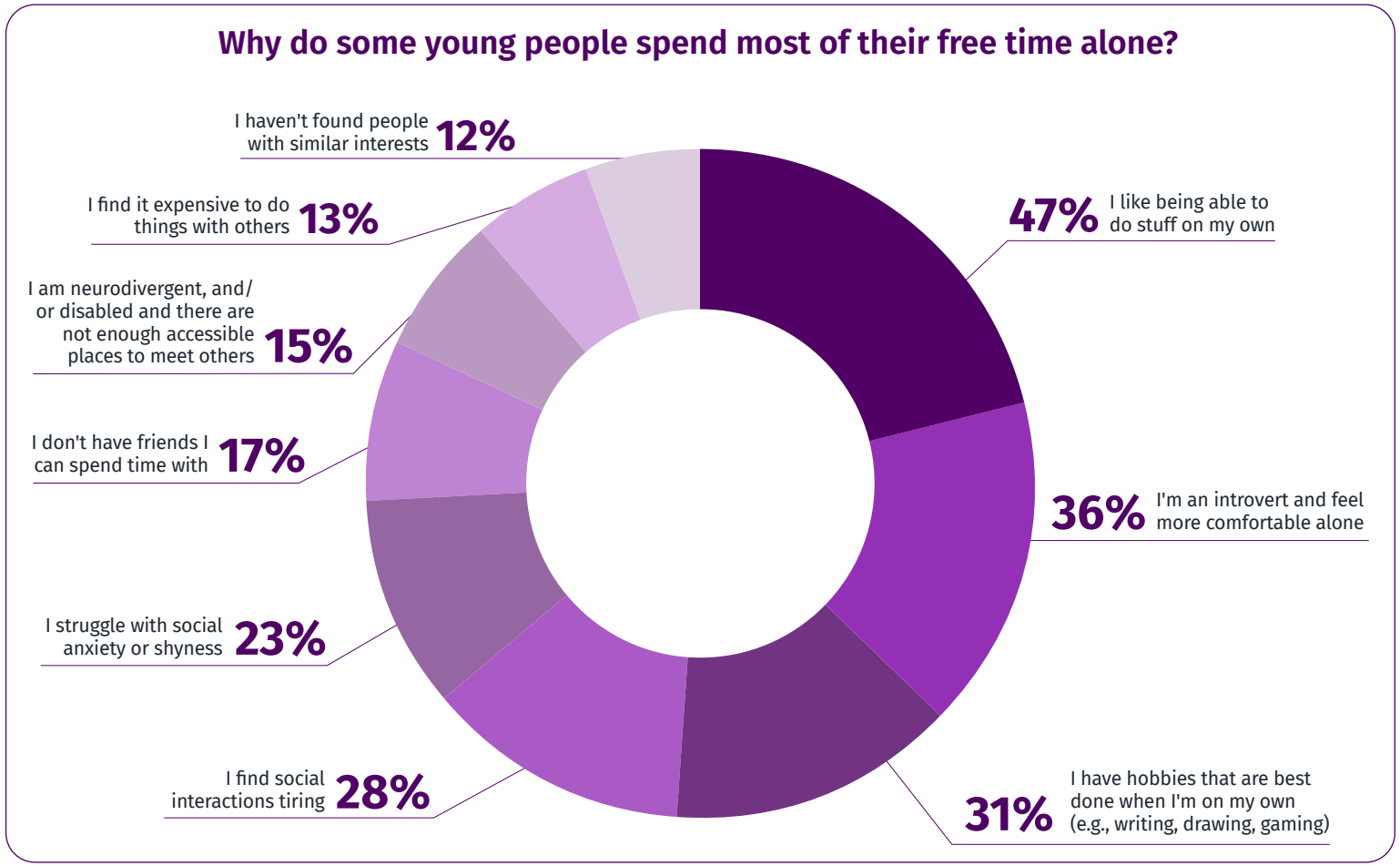
There is a stark opportunity gap between those who spend most of their free time alone and those who don't





WHY DO SOME YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND MOST OF THEIR FREE TIME ALONE?

More young people spend most of their free time alone (16%) than in person with friends (15%). Their reasons range from preference and solitary hobbies to anxiety, cost, accessibility and a lack of people with similar interests.



16% spend most free time alone.

36% of mainly-alone young people are introverted/ comfortable alone.

28% of mainly-alone young people find social interactions tiring.

17% of mainly-alone young people say they have no friends to spend time with.

DO YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE PLACES TO BELONG AND OPPORTUNITIES TO GROW?

Belonging is not only about feeling safe. It is also about having places to connect, be yourself and gain experiences outside school. The findings below come from separate statements about safe spaces, identity, meeting people and opportunities; neutral and “don’t know” responses mean agreement and disagreement do not necessarily total 100%.

20% disagree they have a safe physical space outside home and school where they feel they belong.



10% disagree they have somewhere they can be themselves and express their identity.



37% of young people disagree that they have opportunities to meet new people and make new friends beyond their usual group



14% disagree they can try new things and learn new skills outside school.



16% disagree they have opportunities to take part in sport and physical activity outside school.



16% disagree they can develop artistic and creative interests outside school.



17% disagree they have opportunities to learn skills for independence.



32% disagree that they have opportunities to take action on issues that matter



DO YOUNG PEOPLE HAVE ENOUGH FREEDOM TO PRACTISE INDEPENDENCE?

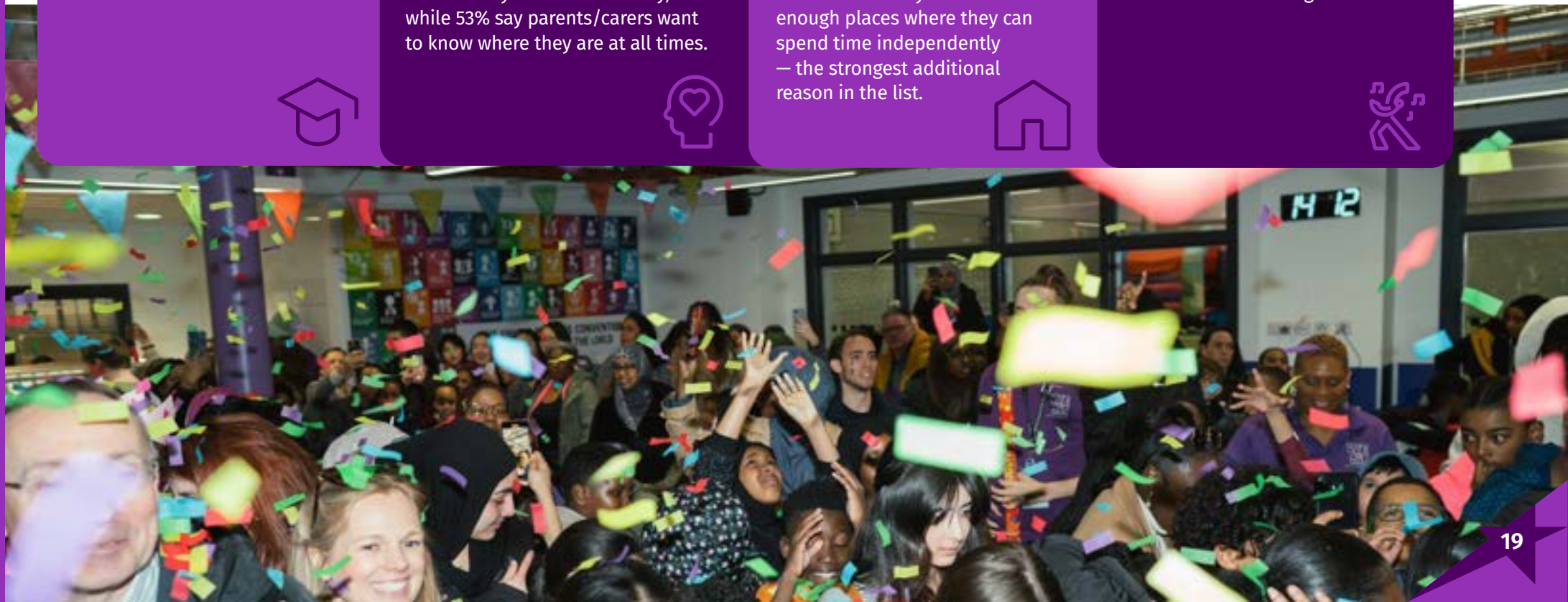
For some young people, the barrier is not simply freedom — it is having safe places and real opportunities to experience independence.

22% of young people feel they have too little freedom and independence outside school.

Among this group, parental concern is a major part of the picture:
61% say their parents/carers worry about their safety, while 53% say parents/carers want to know where they are at all times.

But the challenge goes beyond parental rules:
38% of those with too little freedom say there are not enough places where they can spend time independently — the strongest additional reason in the list.

Among this group
15% say they do not get enough chances to try new activities or new things.



DOES PARENTAL DIGITAL TRACKING SUPPORT INDEPENDENCE

Location tracking is a common part of young people's lives as it may help some young people spend time away from home, but it does not itself create the confidence, practical skills or opportunities to make decisions and take responsibility.

67% say their parent or carer tracks where they are at least sometimes, including **38%** who are tracked with app or device all the time.

Among young people who are tracked,

38% say it makes them feel safe and **34%** say it allows them to be more independent because their parent or carer knows where they are.

8% say it makes them feel less independent and less trusted.

23% of young people who are tracked by their parents or carers all the time say they have too little freedom, compared with **21%** of those who aren't tracked



THE AGENCY GAP: BEING HEARD ISN'T THE SAME AS HAVING THE POWER TO ACT

Taken together, the findings point to the central issue of whether young people have enough agency – i.e. the chances to make decisions, build competence and turn intentions into action.

Agency over young people's lives: making decisions and taking action

Agency means being able to make decisions, take responsibility, build practical skills and work towards the future you want. Having a voice in the community is one supporting dimension, but being heard is not necessarily the same as having the power or opportunity to act.



76% feel listened to. The difference suggests that voice does not always translate into a route to action.

Community influence is a secondary strand:

41% say they have opportunities to take action on issues that matter to them and **51%** feel encouraged to share ideas about improving their community.

Young people's priorities show where personal agency can be strengthened:

19% choose life skills, **16%** real-life experience and **9%** opportunities to take responsibility and make decisions for themselves as the one thing that would help them feel ready for their future, and activities outside of school specifically.

The wider explanation is therefore not that young people lack opinions or ambition. It is that many do not consistently have the opportunities, experience, confidence or support to turn choices into action and develop control over their own lives.

PART TWO
HOW YOUTH WORK CAN BUILD AGENCY



WHO HAS ACCESS TO A YOUTH CLUB?

The current survey measure finds less than 13% say they attend a youth club or centre.

The number of young people attending a youth club/centre since the report began:

2022	8%
2023	9%
2024	15%
2025	12%
2026	13%



Access is only part of the picture. The reasons why young people don't attend youth clubs vary - from a lack of local provision to a lack of interest, highlighting the need to understand what puts young people off.

19% of current youth club non-attenders say there is no club/centre nearby but they would attend if there were.

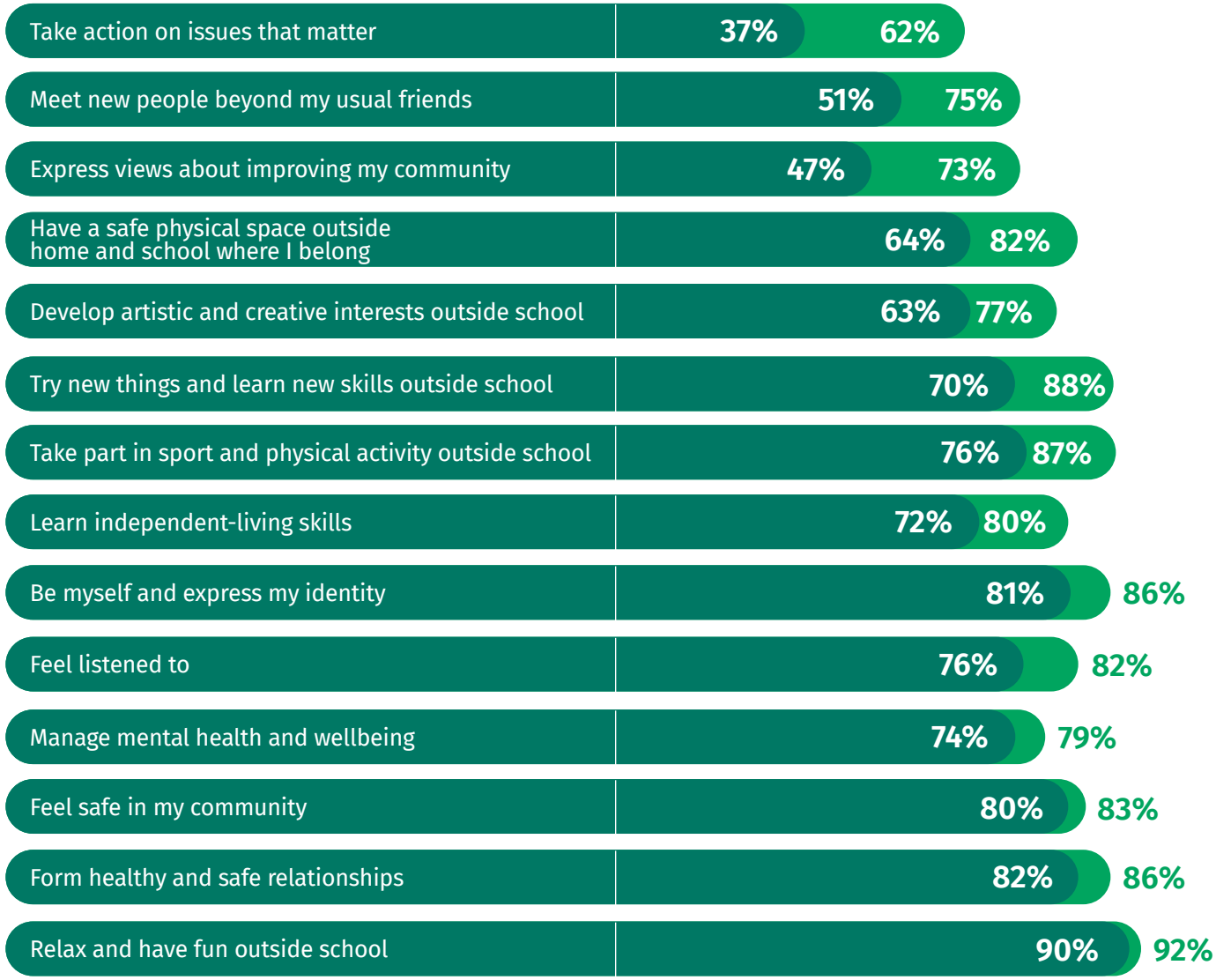
24% say there is provision nearby but they do not want to attend.

30% say there is no nearby provision and they would not attend anyway.

23% do not know.

DOES OPPORTUNITY CHANGE WITH ACCESS TO A YOUTH CLUB?

Opportunities to...





Does preparedness differ between youth club attendees and non-attendees?

Current youth club attendees are more likely to feel prepared for adult life than non-attendees: **53% compared with 40%,** a **13-percentage-point gap**. This is an association, not proof that attendance caused greater preparedness, but it is consistent with the practical experiences and opportunities attendees report.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES YOUTH WORK MAKE?

62%
say attending is fun/ they enjoy going.

53%
say it has helped them make new friends.

41%
say they have had the chance to try new activities.

40%
say they have gained confidence.

39%
say they have learned new skills.

35%
say it has helped them spend less time on their phone or online.

32%
say they feel like they belong there.



91% **of attendees say going to a youth club has made a positive difference to their life.** The supporting benefits move from enjoyment and belonging to new experiences, skills, confidence, independence and support for the future.

30%
say it helps their mental health or wellbeing.

30%
say it gives them somewhere safe to go.

23%
say they have become more independent.

21%
say they have had support from youth workers.

18%
say they feel more confident about their future.

18%
say they have had a chance to give back or get involved in their community.

11%
say they have had help with education, jobs or training.

YOUTH WORK AND THE AGENCY GAP

The report's central finding is that young people lack agency over their lives: many understand the pressures ahead but do not feel they have enough practical experience, confidence, responsibility or support to shape what happens next.

Youth work responds to those needs through safe places, supportive relationships and opportunities to try new things, learn skills, make decisions and take responsibility. Attendees report greater access to every opportunity, with the greatest positive differences in taking action on issues that matter, meeting new people and being encouraged to express views.

91% of attendees say youth club attendance has made a positive difference to their life. Reported benefits include making new friends (**53%**), trying new activities (**41%**), learning new skills (**39%**), gaining confidence (**40%**), feeling they belong (**32%**) and becoming more independent (**23%**).

Despite these positive associations with youth club attendance, access to youth clubs remains uneven. Among current non-attendees, **19%** say there is no youth club or centre nearby but that they would attend if there were.



If we expect young people to be ready for adulthood, are we giving them enough safe, real-life opportunities to make decisions, build skills, take responsibility and shape the future they want?

ABOUT ONSIDE

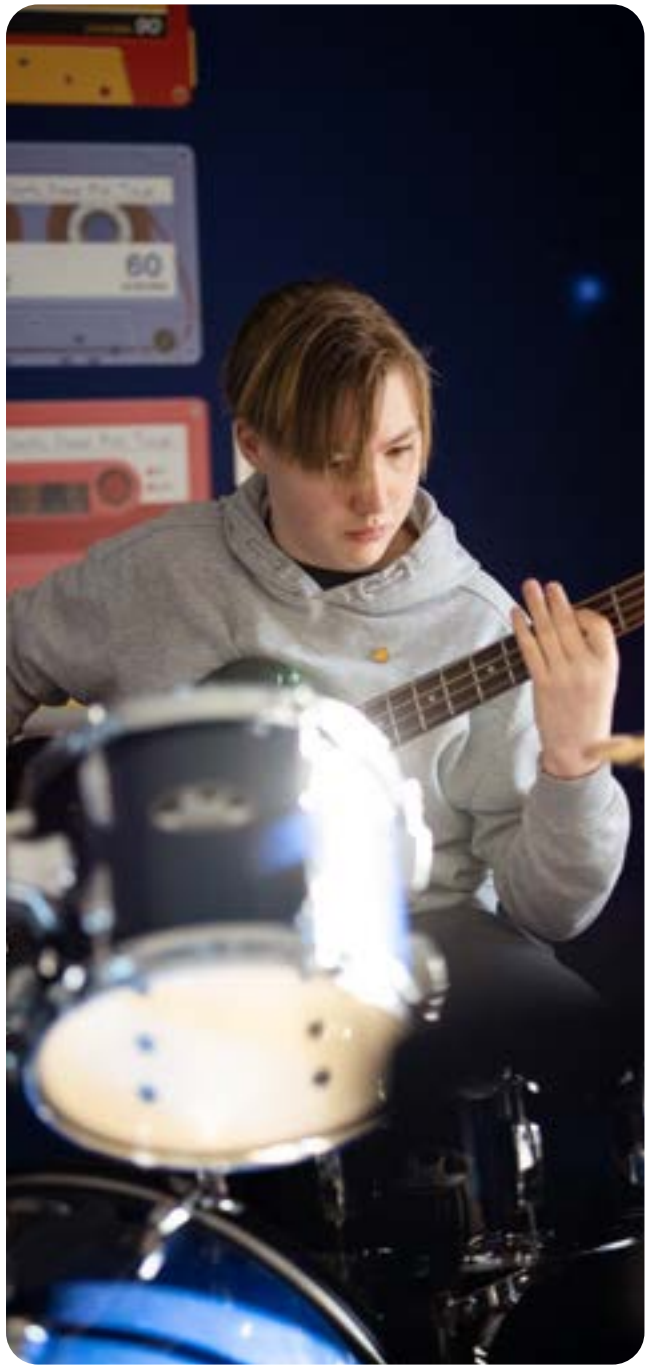
We're a national charity that believes every young person should have the opportunity to discover their passion and their purpose.

To achieve this, we fund, build, launch and support a growing network of state-of-the-art, multimillion-pound Youth Zones in some of the UK's most disadvantaged communities.

These vibrant, safe and affordable spaces give young people somewhere to belong, build friendships, explore new interests and discover what they're capable of. They are brought to life by skilled, dedicated youth workers who believe in young people, helping them build the confidence, skills and ambition to shape their own futures.

Our impact is growing. We currently support over 68,000 young people across a Network of 20 Youth Zones spanning the UK - from Carlisle to London.

Youth Zones offer something vital: real -world connection, trusted relationships and opportunities to feel part of something. We believe passionately in the power of youth work to help young people overcome challenges, build meaningful friendships and transition positively into adulthood.







www.onsideyouthzones.org

OnSide

Here for young people

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