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Research and analysis

# Children's social care questionnaires 2021

Published 18 June 2021

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## Summary of findings

- This year, we received over 7,400 more responses to the survey from all audience types than we did last year. The number of responses from children was more or less the same as last year.
- While a lot of children said that they would like COVID-19 (coronavirus) to 'go away', they commented that they felt they had been helped to adjust to the restrictions by the people who cared for them.
- A lower proportion of children in boarding schools and in residential accommodation in further education felt they were well cared for compared with the children who lived or stayed elsewhere.
- Ninety-nine per cent of children in foster care who responded to the survey felt safe where they lived.
- There was an increase in the number of children in boarding school and in residential accommodation in further education who felt they were not helped to do well with their school or college work.
- A theme within the responses this year was children saying that they wished they could stay where they were for longer and that they did not have to move on when they were 18.

## Background

We use online surveys to gather views about children's homes, secure children's homes, adoption services, fostering services,<sup>[footnote 1]</sup> residential family centres, boarding schools, residential special schools and further education colleges.<sup>[footnote 2]</sup>

The surveys are for:

- children
- learners
- parents
- foster carers<sup>[footnote 3]</sup>
- staff
- social workers
- other professionals, such as independent reviewing officers

We ask providers to share the online questionnaire with these groups of people on our behalf.

In 2021, the surveys were open between 1 February and 28 March. We received 49,113 individual responses, 7,011 of which were from children. This was a very small increase of responses from children compared with last year. But overall, there was an increase of 7,476 responses from children and adults compared with 2020.

We use the responses, along with other information we have, such as previous inspection findings or any concerns we receive, to decide when to inspect and what to focus on when we do. If any responses raise serious concerns, we take the appropriate action immediately.<sup>[footnote 4]</sup>

The survey was carried out at the same time as last year. This was so we could ensure that all survey responses were available for each individual setting and ready for when we returned to graded inspection on 12 April 2021. Each day, throughout the survey, we read the responses submitted to check for any potential safeguarding concerns. These are referred to the inspectors to decide on the appropriate action to ensure that children remain safe at the places they live or stay.

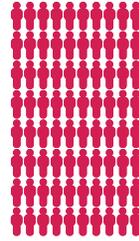
The survey questions we sent out this year were similar to 2020. We reviewed the wording of some other questions that we've previously asked and, as a result, made some changes to ensure that those questions relate more specifically to the place that children live or stay. We focused on the most important things we wanted to know about children's experiences and asked a question about how children were helped through the pandemic

This is the seventh year that we have published data and a report about the survey responses. Like last year, we are publishing separately the accompanying data for all adult responses.<sup>[footnote 5]</sup>

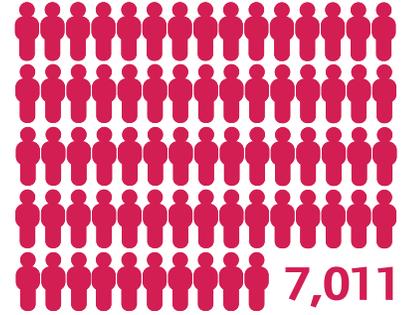
# Who are the children we are talking about?



There are **12 million** children aged 0–17 years in England.



**80,080** are children looked after.



**7,011**



**72%** of children looked after live with foster carers.

This year, children told us about the place they live or stay, such as their children's homes, their residential special schools or with their foster carers. Not all children are looked after.

There are 12 million children aged between 0–17 years in England.

80,080 are children looked after.[\[footnote 6\]](#)

72% of children looked after live with foster carers.[\[footnote 7\]](#)

This year, 7,011 children told us about the place they live or stay,[\[footnote 8\]](#) such as their children's homes, their residential special schools or with their foster carers. Not all children are looked after.

## What we found in 2021

We asked children questions about the place where they live or stay. The questions we asked, regardless of their setting, were similar in nature. This means we are able to compare what they have told us about their living experiences across different settings.

We asked all children the following questions:

- Do you feel well cared for?
- Do staff/carers listen to you if you are feeling upset or worried?
- Do staff/carers help you to do well at school or with your schoolwork?
- What do you like best about being here?
- What would you change to make things better?

We asked children staying in children's homes, residential special schools, foster care, boarding schools and residential further education colleges the following additional question:

- Do you feel safe where you live or stay?

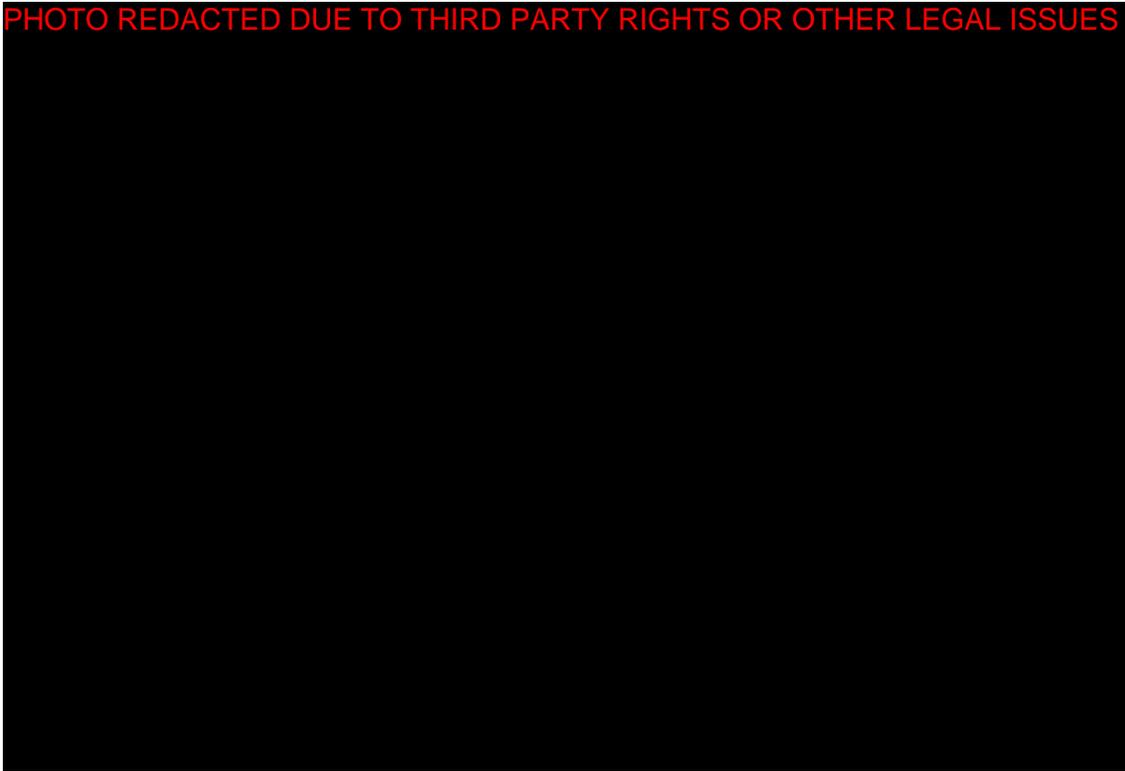
We asked children staying in children's homes, residential special schools and foster care the following additional question:

- Do you feel involved in decisions and plans about your life?

We asked children in secure children's homes the following additional questions:

- Are you helped to understand what is expected of you while you are at the home?
- Are you involved in making plans for when you leave the home?

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## **What children and parents have told us about their experiences through the pandemic**

This year's survey ran from February to March 2021. It coincided with a third national lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although we continued with our vital regulatory work, graded inspections of children's social care settings had been paused since March 2020. This meant that inspectors were not able to routinely listen and talk to children to hear their views.

So, we added a question to the survey that asked children to tell us how they had been helped by the people who cared for them during the lockdown restrictions.

In addition, we asked parents if the restrictions had affected how they had kept in touch with their children.

Of the 7,011 children who responded to the survey, 6,503 answered the COVID-19 question with a written response. Of the 3,390 parents asked how COVID-19 had affected the contact with their children, 3,207 parents made a comment about how it had impacted on contact with their children. This section summarises some common themes from the written responses we received. We have also published a [blog post that discusses what children told us about their experiences during lockdown](#).

## **COVID-19 precautions**

A common theme in the responses was that children told us that those looking after them had tried to keep them safe through the pandemic. Children told us that they were encouraged to frequently wash their hands, to follow social distancing guidance, to use hand sanitiser and to wear face coverings when appropriate. The responses suggested that children understood the potential dangers from COVID-19.

## **Contact**

A small number of children expressed unhappiness at not being able to see their families. Many others told us they had been able to keep in contact with their families whether in person or through phone or video calls. They appear to have been encouraged to keep in touch with family and friends during the pandemic. Some said they were given a mobile phone, or given more use of a mobile phone than usual, to enable them to stay in contact with others.

However, some parents who responded to the survey said that they had no or little face-to-face contact with their child, because of the restrictions. The reasons they gave for this varied, from the distance of the home from where the parents lived, and the restrictions on travel to the place children were staying having restrictions on visitors. Some did appreciate the video contact.

## **School work**

Children generally commented positively on the support that those looking after them gave with their schoolwork. Some children specifically commented that they had been given use of laptops by the people who cared for them, so they were able to join in with virtual lessons at home.

## **Fun and exercise**

Many children commented that those caring for them tried to ensure that they had fun during the lockdown periods. Children talked about a wide range of activities they had taken part in, both indoors and outdoors, and they appreciated this. A lot of children commented that their carers made sure that they had regular exercise. They said that they have enjoyed being taken out on walks locally. Some children said they have been given new equipment such as bikes, basketball nets and trampolines to help them to be active at home.

## **Worried**

Some children reported that if they felt scared or worried about the current situation, they were able to go to the staff/carers to talk about their worries. Other children said that if they were worried about COVID-19, staff/carers would think of things to distract them such as games, movie nights and having a longer time on their devices.

## **Mental health**

Many children referred to their mental health unprompted. The fact they did this demonstrates how this is an important area to children and perhaps also for the people who care for them. Many children were positive about how the people who looked after them had tried to help their mental health during the pandemic and through lockdowns. It appears that mental health was a topic of interest and conversation during the pandemic at the places these children lived or stayed.

## **Routines**

Some children said that the people looking after them made sure they had good routines. For example, they set times for schoolwork and time to be active and ensured that they had good sleep routines. The children said that this helped them to feel well supported.

## **Birthdays**

Some children mentioned that their birthdays had been during lockdown and, in some cases, this meant they could not spend the time with their families. They did say that those who look after them made a great effort to make their day special.

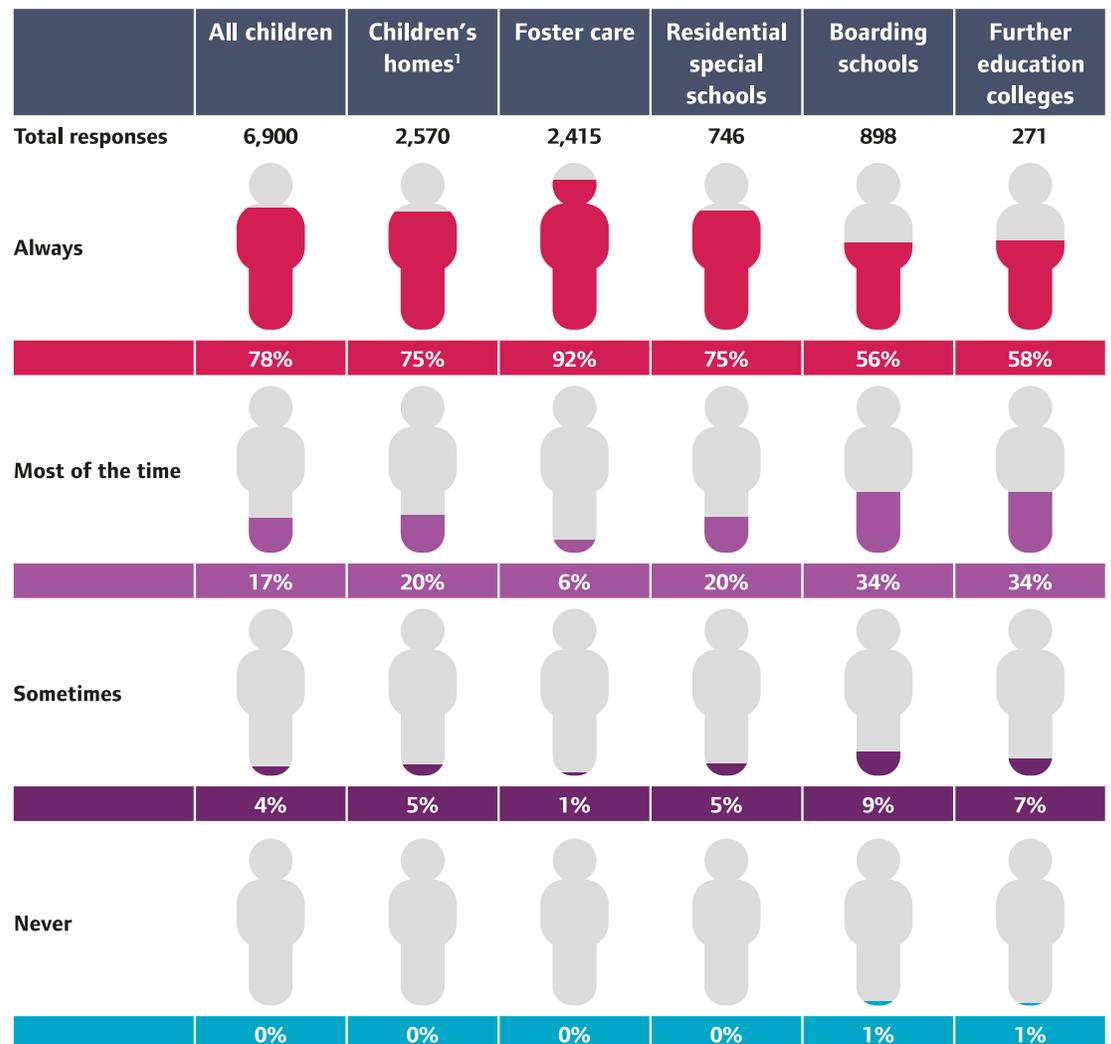
Overall, the responses from children seem to suggest that they have accepted the current situation. They appeared mostly positive about how they were being cared for and, with the help of the people who look after them, had adjusted to the restrictions.

## Do you feel well cared for?

For the last 5 years, we have asked children if they considered that they were well cared for by staff/foster carers. The combined percentage of children answering 'always' or 'most of the time' in 2021 was very similar to the responses we received in previous years.

Ninety-five per cent of children in children's homes answered either 'always' or 'most of the time'. For those staying with foster carers, it was 98%.

For boarding schools, this was 90% of children, and for residential further education accommodation it was 92%. This was a very small increase from last year of children who felt well cared for.



<sup>1</sup> Children's homes data throughout the report includes the views of children staying in children's homes, secure children's homes and residential special schools registered as children's homes.  
View data in the spreadsheet ['Social care questionnaires: data on children's responses'](#).

## What children told us about being cared for

"There are loads of activities to do, they love and care for me and support me in the best way they can."  
(child in children's home)

"Being surrounded by amazing people and friends, it feels like a community and not like you are being left alone in these difficult times. I am very grateful to be able to live here and be part of [name of school]."  
(child in boarding school)

"They're all nice, they care for you and if you need them they always help you."  
(child in children's home)

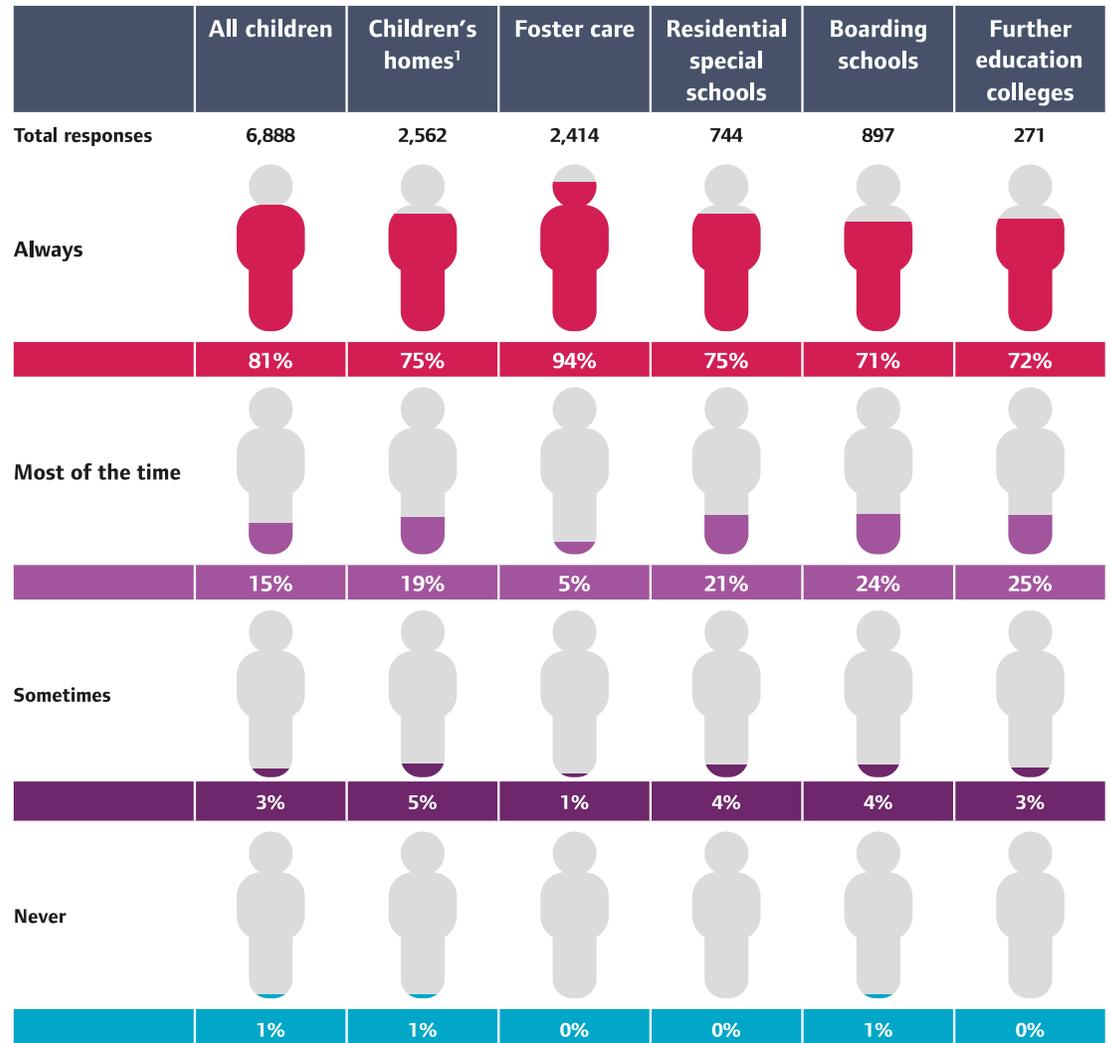
"Everything, it is amazing here and I never want to move, we have a great relationship with our carers and our foster brothers and they are a family so I don't think of them [them] as my foster carers they're our parents."  
(child in foster care)

"They love me always and they are my family. They look after me with nice food and I get lots of treats when I am good. They help me when I feel sad. They take me on lovely holidays abroad and we go away at half terms camping. We do lots of fun activities."  
(child in foster care)

“I enjoy this family. I didn’t settle at my 2 previous placements but settled quickly with this carer, and am thinking to stay long term here.”  
(child in foster care)

## Do you feel safe where you live or stay?

This year, for the second time, we asked children if they felt safe where they live or stay. Ninety-six per cent of children said that ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’ they did feel safe. This means that nearly 1 in 20 children regularly feel unsafe where they live or stay.



<sup>1</sup> We do not ask this question of children in secure children’s homes.

View data in the spreadsheet [‘Social care questionnaires: data on children’s responses’](#).

## What children told us about feeling safe where they live or stay

“I feel safe and I’m happy there.”  
(child in foster care)

“I feel safe. I like it here. I get more support with things and I have more freedom to talk to my friends and I can go and meet my friends out of school when I’m allowed and I love my room.”  
(child in foster care)

“Good relationships with staff who genuinely care. Feels secure. I need one-to-one care always so [name of home] allows parents to give some attention to [my] other sibling. Close by so do walks... locally in places I know.”  
(child in children’s home)

“I like the freedom and the confidence that residential has given me. I am incredibly happy in residential. I have made a lot of friends and feel happy, safe and secure.”  
(child in further education college)

“To be able to do the things other teenagers [do]: meet friends, socialise, learn self-help skills, go places and possibly sleep over but in a safe and secure and familiar environment, which meets everyone’s different needs.”  
(child in residential special school)

“I love my course and all the skills I’m learning. My lecturers are absolutely amazing, I’m developing my own independence (I have autism) but I’m made to feel very safe. The college environment is very calming and supportive.”

(child in further education college)

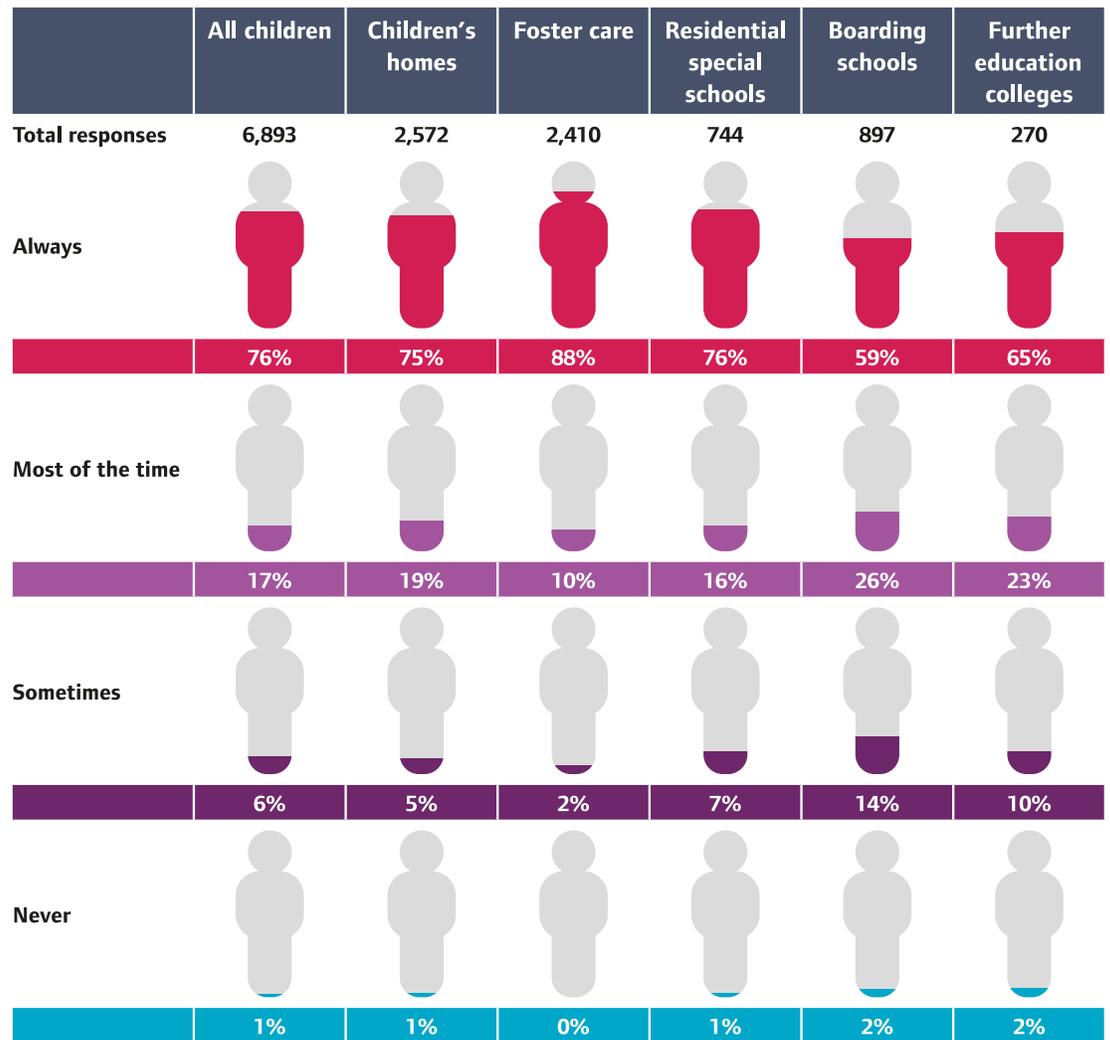
“I like the facilities we have in place to live in a safe and clean environment. We have more time to study and also have ample time to play. The teachers are also kind, funny and understanding.”

(child in boarding school)

## **Do staff/carers listen to you if are feeling upset or worried?**

Ninety-three per cent of all children responded that ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’ they felt they were listened to by staff and/or carers if they were feeling upset or worried. This is an increase of 3% from last year. [\[footnote 9\]](#) For those in foster care, this was 98% of the children who responded.

This year, 16% of children in boarding schools and 12% of children in residential accommodation in further education felt that they only ‘sometimes’ or ‘never’ had someone to talk to. Although this number has gone down compared with last year, it is still concerningly high.



View data in the spreadsheet [‘Social care questionnaires: data on children’s responses’](#).

## What children told us about having someone who listened if they were feeling upset or worried

“Help and support throughout my crises. Understanding and patient. Sometimes don’t feel listened to. Sometimes there’s problems... things don’t get well.’  
(child in children’s home)

“The staff are great... they have welcomed me in from day 1. I am listened to and they support me with my education. Activities are brilliant. Most of all, I feel like they are my family.”  
(child in children’s home)

“I have a nice bedroom and we go to nice places when the virus isn’t here. I am listened to and I love being part of this family.”  
(child in foster care)

“The staff always listen and [are] easy to get on with and if I want alone time they let me have it. When I have my bad days they help me try to get out of my own head and do something I enjoy. Feels like a family setting but not so much better than foster care.”  
(child in foster care)

“The people because we’re in the same position and are able to communicate well with each other. Certain staff members have also been extremely helpful and caring, they listen to any problems we may have and gives us advice. I also like the fact that they help provide activities.”  
(child in boarding school)

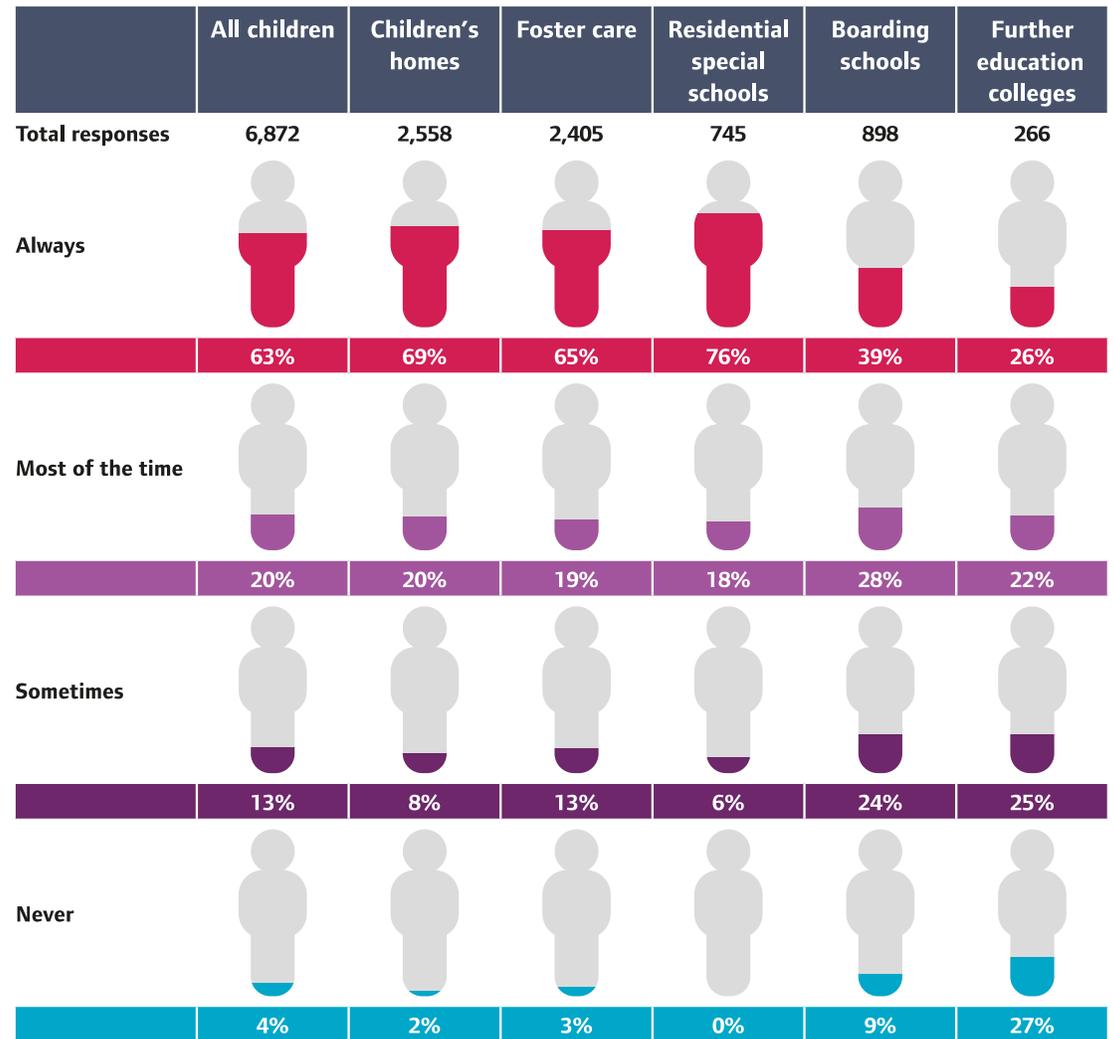
“Not really sure. More support when I am upset probably and not to make the situation worse probably.”  
(child in children’s home)

## **Do staff/carers help you to do well at school or with your schoolwork?**

We asked children if staff or foster carers help and support them with their schoolwork. Eighty-nine per cent of children who live in children’s homes and 84% of children who live with foster carers answered either ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’.

The percentage of all children who responded ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’ was 83%, which was similar to last year’s responses before the pandemic. We thought this might have increased.

A third of children in boarding schools and more than half of children in residential further education accommodation felt that only 'sometimes' or 'never' were they helped to do well with their schoolwork or college work. This is an increase of 21% from last year.



View data in the spreadsheet ['Social care questionnaires: data on children's responses'](#).

## What children told us about being helped with their schoolwork

“The staff. The way everyone supports me, for example [when] moving from primary to high school. Love my bedroom. Being close to school and having friends close by. Everything.”  
(child in children's home)

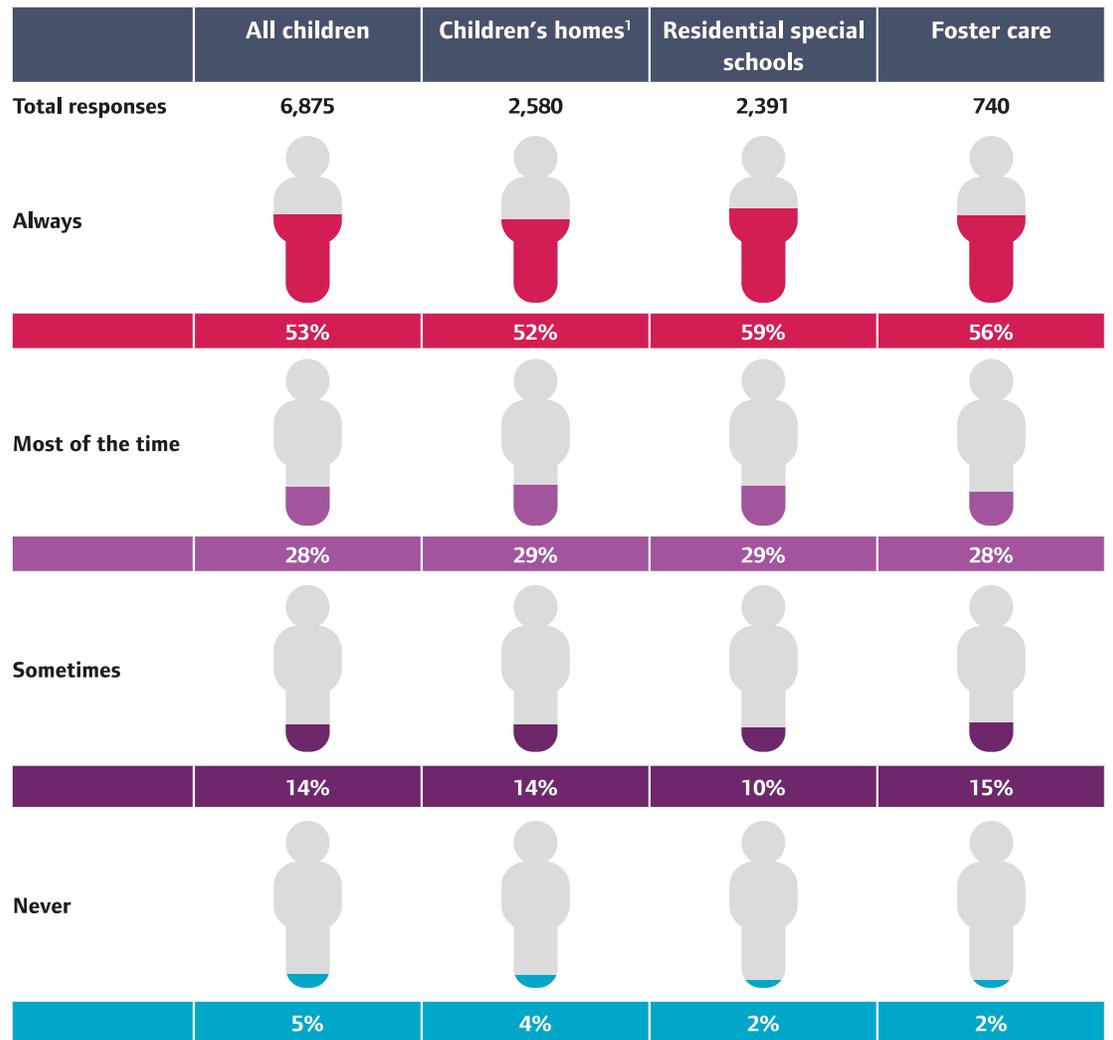
I like it here because she looks after me well and loves me and cares about me and she listens to me [and] helps me with schoolwork.”  
(child in foster care)

I like the staff who always listen and make lessons fun. I missed them in lockdown, but in the second lockdown they talked to me on Zoom. I like it that the school can help me use my special computer and help me to use a power chair. I like being with students with the same disability.”  
(child in residential special school)

“I would change that we are not allowed to have friends (post-COVID) upstairs in our rooms and I think we should be able to leave the house for as long as we want as long as we are back by dinner time. I also think that prep should only be if we have homework or work to do because sometimes you have finished all your work and you’re sitting there after 6 long hours in school we then have to sit for another 1 and a half hours even if we don’t have work to do.”  
(child in boarding school)

## **Do you feel involved in decisions and plans about your life?**

We asked children if they felt involved in decisions and plans about their life. Eighty-one per cent of all children responded that they felt included ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’. This has remained the same as last year.



<sup>1</sup> We do not ask this question of children in secure children's homes.

View data in the spreadsheet ['Social care questionnaires: data on children's responses'](#).

## What children told us about feeling involved in decisions and plans about their life

"I like having control over my life decisions and cooking meals for everyone."

(child in children's home)

"The staff are friendly and support my decisions. I am given the opportunity to do my best and as it is a very small school my needs are fully met."

(child in residential special school)

“I would like to move out and become more independent with my life and make my own decisions.”

(child in children’s home)

“To have a permanent plan for our lives. To be involved in making decisions about our futures. Neither of these things are the fault of the agency. The agency are fighting for our voices to be heard by the local authority. They are helping our carers to fight for the best outcomes for us.”

(child in foster care)

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## What do you like best about being here?

We asked children what they liked about the place where they live or stay.

A lot of children said that they liked being at the place they live or stay because they felt that the staff and/or carers loved them and cared for them. We heard this from those in children’s homes, foster care and residential special schools.

A common theme throughout the responses was that children said they loved having their own room, being able to decorate it how they wanted and that they loved their bed. We heard this from those in children's homes, foster care and residential special schools.

Many children mentioned the activities they most like to do. These included horse riding, swimming, trampolining and riding their bikes. However, many said that they missed doing these during the lockdown periods. We heard this from those in children's homes, foster care, further education colleges and boarding schools.

Children also said that they appreciated having free time to themselves and loved having pets at the places they live or stay. We heard this from those in children's homes, further education colleges and boarding schools.

Some children said the food they have is really good, while others were not so happy about it. A number of children said that they enjoy baking. We heard this from those in children's homes, further education colleges and boarding schools.

## **What would you change to make things better?**

We asked children what they would like to change about where they live.

A recurring theme within the responses this year was that children said they wished they could stay where they were for longer and did not have to move on when they were 18. We heard this from those in children's homes and foster care.

A number of children said they wished the wifi was better and that they wanted their phones, tablets or computers for longer or overnight. We heard this from those in children's homes, further education colleges and boarding schools.

A large number of children said that they would not change anything because they liked where they live or stay. We heard this from those in all types of provision.

There were many responses from children saying they would like to get rid of COVID-19 and/or the restrictions. We heard this from those in children's homes, foster homes, further education colleges and boarding schools.

**Thank you to everyone who has completed our surveys and shared their views with us.**

## **Notes**

1. 'Adoption services' includes voluntary adoption agencies and local authority adoption services. We sent the surveys to regional adoption agencies, which now carry out some local authorities' adoption functions. 'Fostering services' includes independent fostering agencies and local authority fostering services. [↵](#)
2. Under the Care Standards Act 2000, Ofsted has the powers to inspect these types of services. There is no law to say that children, staff and professionals have to share their views with us through this survey. It is optional, and we highly value the information we receive. [↵](#)
3. We do not inspect individual foster carers. We inspect the local authorities and agencies that recruit them. [↵](#)
4. For more on how we use information, see our [privacy notice](#). [↵](#)
5. The data throughout the report has been rounded to the nearest whole number. This means that some percentages may not add up to exactly 100%. [↵](#)
6. ['Children looked after in England including adoption: 2020'](#), Department for Education, December 2020. [↵](#)
7. ['Children looked after in England including adoption: 2020'](#), Department for Education, December 2020. [↵](#)
8. In relation to children's homes and fostering services, the responses from children do not solely relate to children looked after. A number of children who are not looked after receive services, for example, children who receive short breaks or are placed under other arrangements. Most users of short breaks are children who have special educational needs and/or disabilities but other children in need may also receive short breaks. The breaks usually have 2 aims: to enable the child to participate in fun, interesting and safe activities and to provide a break for parents. [↵](#)
9. We have amended this question this year to make it clearer. Last year, we asked 'do you have someone to talk to if you were upset or worried?'. [↵](#)

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