

# Growing up and independence

## Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 survey



### Introduction

At age 11, and in their final year of primary school, the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) children were at an important cusp in their lives. They were about to begin secondary education, which not only involves a change of school, but means new friends and increasing independence.

To reflect the children's growing maturity, the Age 11 survey included a substantial self-completion questionnaire for cohort members. This enabled their voices to be heard (in previous MCS surveys, most questions have been directed at parents). There were questions on such topics as their school life, friendships, and how they see themselves and their future.

In this briefing paper we summarise responses from the 13,160 children who completed the questionnaire and focus on gender and ethnic differences. We consider what the children say about their friendships, the time they spend with friends and the risk-taking (smoking and drinking, for example) and antisocial behaviours they have participated in. We combine this with parent reports on their child's use of transport (independent or otherwise), their access to and use of the internet, computers and mobile phones, and whether they spend unsupervised time with friends.

### MCS Age 11 survey

The Millennium Cohort Study's (MCS) survey of 11-year-olds took place between January 2012 and February 2013. Trained fieldworkers conducted 13,287 interviews with the children and their parents/guardians. Data from this survey and previous MCS surveys are available to download from the UK Data Service.

### Key findings

- Almost half of the 11-year-olds 'hung out' with friends without adult supervision most weekends.
- Most children had a mixture of friends, in terms of gender and ethnicity.
- Nearly a quarter of 11-year-olds communicated with friends via the internet or visited social networking sites on most days.
- Nearly three quarters had their own mobile phone, a huge increase from the 15 per cent who had one at age 7.
- 13 per cent had tried an alcoholic drink, and 3 per cent had smoked a cigarette.
- Very few children had used public transport on their own (4%), while almost half (48%) had never even travelled on public transport with an adult.

# Findings

## Friends

Childhood friendships are important for the acquisition of social skills and healthy development generally. As the UK population becomes increasingly diverse, the friendships children make, particularly inter-ethnic friendships, may become especially salient for their social development.

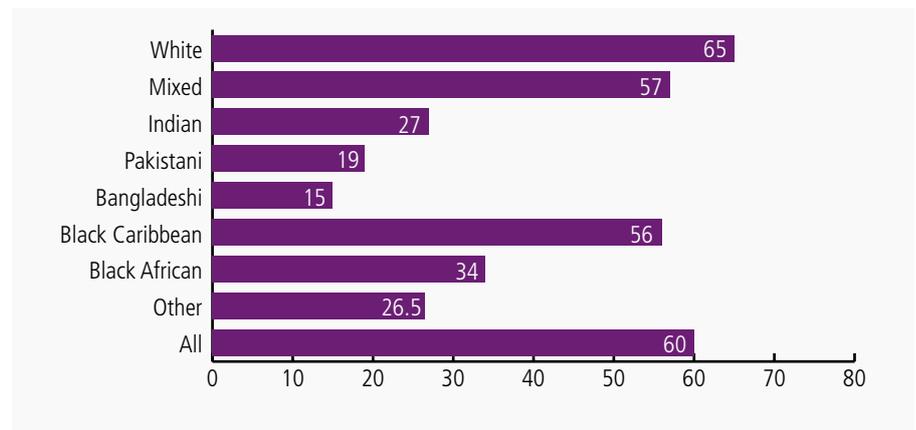
**Variety of friends:** Over half of the children (54%) said they had both boys and girls as friends and over 70 per cent had friends from other ethnic groups<sup>1</sup>. Pakistani (78%) and Bangladeshi (74%) cohort members were most likely to say that most of their friends were of the same sex, and Black Caribbean children were most likely to have a mixture of boys and girls as friends (65%). Nearly a quarter (24%) of White 11-year-olds, and a substantial minority of Pakistani (17%) and Bangladeshi (18%) children only had friends from the same ethnic group compared to no more than 6 per cent of children in other groups.

**Hanging out:** Nearly three in four children (72%) saw friends out of school at least once a week. Almost half (47%) spent time with their friends without adult supervision most weekends, and around one in three did this most afternoons after school. However, answers from children and parents suggest that boys are allowed more freedom than girls. Half the boys (51%) hung out with their friends unsupervised most weekends compared to 43 per cent of girls. Only 22 per cent of White children were never allowed unsupervised time at the weekends compared to 35 per cent of Black Caribbean, 41 per cent of Black African and 62 per cent of Indian children.

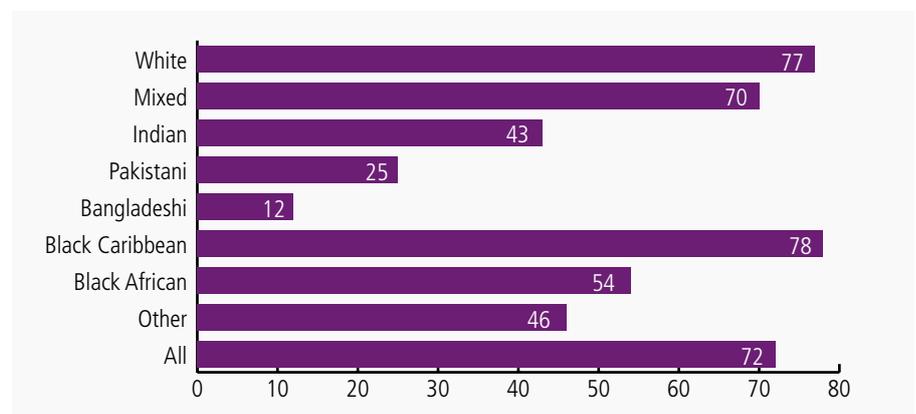
## Independent journeys and feeling safe

**Journeys:** Parents were asked how much freedom their child was allowed in making independent journeys around their local area. Boys were more likely than girls to travel on their own on a bike (36% to 23%) or on foot (54% to 44%). Independent journeys on foot were most likely to be made by Black Caribbean children (55%) and least likely by Indian children (23%). The survey underlines the ever-greater reliance on the family car. Very few children had travelled on public transport on their own (4%), while a surprisingly high proportion (48%) had never even used public transport with an adult.

► **Figure 1: Percentage of children with a TV in their room by ethnicity**



► **Figure 2: Percentage of children having their own mobile phone by ethnicity**



**Feeling safe:** Most 11-year-olds (89%) felt that the area they lived in was safe or very safe. Only 9 per cent said it was 'not very safe' and 1 per cent 'not at all safe'.

'Almost half the children had never even travelled on public transport with an adult.'

## Use of technology

A lack of a home internet connection or a computer can create a 'digital divide' that can exacerbate the educational disadvantage for some, usually poorer, children.

**Computers and the internet:** Almost all (96%) MCS children had access to a computer and 95 per cent were linked to the internet at home. This had increased from 82 per cent and 81 per cent respectively at age

7. Children of parents with no qualifications were least likely to have access to a computer (85%) or the internet (82%). About two in five children (46% of girls and 39% of boys) had their own computer. However, there were large ethnic disparities. Just over one in five Bangladeshi, Black African and Pakistani children had their own computer compared with two in five in all other ethnic groups.

**Recreational screen time:** Seventeen per cent of children said they spent three or more hours watching TV or a video on a computer on a weekday, while 3 per cent sat in front of a screen for seven hours or more. MCS children were also more likely to have a TV in their bedroom at age 11 (60% compared to 45% at age 7). More boys (63%) than girls (57%) had a bedroom TV at age 11, reversing the situation at age 7 (44% boys to 46% girls). Children with lower-qualified parents were most likely (76%) to have a TV in the bedroom. Again, there were large ethnic differences (Figure 1). Just 15 per cent of

<sup>1</sup> In this briefing paper we employ Census categories, e.g. Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean and Black African, used by the Office for National Statistics.

Bangladeshi and 19 per cent of Pakistani children had a TV in their bedroom compared to 65 per cent of White children. The overwhelming majority of parents had rules about the time their child could spend on the computer and the material they could watch on it, but the percentage increased with parent qualification level. For parents with no qualifications, 84 per cent had rules on time and 90 per cent on content, compared with 93 per cent and 97 per cent respectively among parents with post-graduate qualifications. Black African parents were most likely to have time and content rules.

**'Nearly three quarters of the children had their own mobile phone at age 11.'**

**Mobile phones:** Nearly three quarters (72%) of the children had their own mobile phone at age 11, a huge increase from the 15 per cent at age 7. More than a third (37%) of those with a mobile could use it to access the internet. More girls (77%) than boys (67%) had their own phone, as was the case at age 7. As Figure 2 shows, there were big ethnic differences in the proportion of children with a mobile phone (Black Caribbean 78%, Bangladeshi 12%).

**Social media, tweeting and messaging:** The social media world is a key part of many MCS children's lives. With the evolution of social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter, friends have become redefined as not only those they see but virtual friends. More than one in four girls (28%) and almost one

in five boys (19%) exchanged messages with friends via the internet on most days. However, nearly half of boys (46%) and a third of girls (31%) never messaged friends.

### Risky behaviours

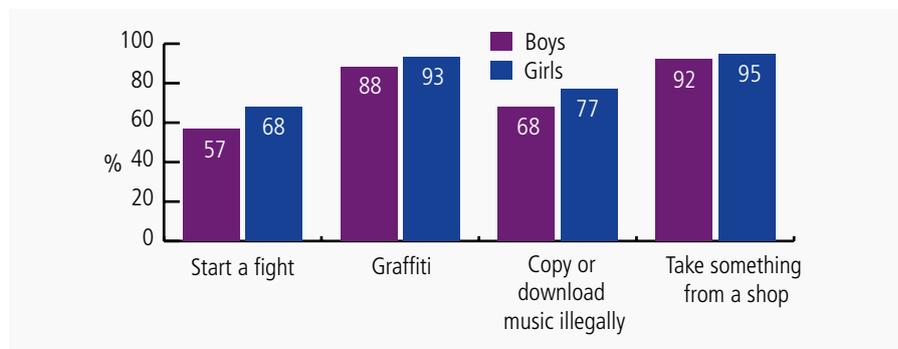
**Smoking and drinking:** Smoking bans and stricter penalties for selling cigarettes to minors have helped to reduce underage smoking. However, early onset and binge drinking are particular policy concerns, as both are associated with later health and social problems. As most MCS 11-year-olds (96%) were still at primary school, they might have had less exposure to the drinking and smoking habits of older children. Just 4 per cent of boys and 2 per cent of girls had tried a cigarette. Children of non-working parents were most likely to have smoked a cigarette by age 11 (6% compared to 1% of those with parents in professional/managerial jobs). More 11-year-olds had tried an alcoholic drink (13%) than had smoked. Boys were more likely than girls to have had alcohol (15% to 11%), but only 2 per cent of boys

and 1 per cent of girls reported ever having had enough to feel drunk.

**Antisocial behaviour:** Very few cohort members said they had been antisocial, or had ever graffitied or damaged public property. But 24 per cent of boys and 14 per cent of girls admitted they had been noisy or rude in public. Seven per cent of boys and 4 per cent of girls had taken something from a shop without paying for it. Children with out-of-work or lowly-qualified parents were most likely to say they had taken an item from a shop.

**Morality:** The children were also asked about their attitudes to various antisocial activities (Figure 3). Very few thought these activities were not wrong. However, girls were more likely than boys to consider antisocial behaviour 'very wrong'. Less than 1 per cent thought it was not wrong at all, meaning that even among the small proportion of 11-year-olds who admitted taking something from a shop (5%), most must have thought it was wrong to some extent.

► **Figure 3: Percentage of 11-year-olds thinking antisocial activities are 'very wrong'**



## Conclusions

Friends had become increasingly central to the lives of 11-year-olds as they grew more independent. Most had a mix of friends – in and out of school – in terms of gender and ethnicity. They were spending a lot of time with friends and were starting to see them without parental supervision. However, boys were seemingly allowed more freedom than girls, while Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi children were granted less independence than other children.

With three quarters of children having their own mobile phone, contact with friends was as likely to be via technology as it was face-to-face. Almost all of the children also had access to a computer and the internet at age 11 and the majority had a TV in their bedroom. However, most parents set rules about the content their children could access and the amount of time they could spend on their computer or other devices.

While there is increasing discussion about early onset of risky and antisocial behaviours, responses from the MCS 11-year-olds were reassuring. Relatively few children had drunk alcohol, smoked a cigarette or engaged in antisocial behaviour. The Millennium generation may not be perfect but at age 11 their behaviour was giving little cause for concern.



## Future research

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These data have highlighted several areas that would benefit from further research, for example the association between increased independence, risky behaviours and risk-taking. Given concerns over the impact of social media and the time young people spend in front of a screen, future research could also look at how mobile phone and computer use relates to different aspects of the MCS children's wellbeing – from healthy eating and exercise to behavioural and emotional problems.

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## About the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study is following around 19,000 children born in the UK between September 2000 and January 2002. The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and government departments, and is managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, London.

The five surveys of cohort members conducted so far – at ages 9 months and 3, 5, 7 and 11 years – have built up a uniquely detailed portrait of the children of the new century. The study has collected information on diverse aspects of their lives, including behaviour, cognitive development, health, schooling, housing and parents' employment and education.

The MCS has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as breastfeeding, immunisation and child poverty. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers addressing social challenges for many years to come.

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## Further information

The material in this briefing has been drawn from Smith, K. and Parsons, S. (2014) *Growing Up and Independence*. In Platt, L. (ed) *Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 Survey Initial Findings*. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

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