

# Life at 15

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From a survey of 820 15-year-olds in Britain, a number of basic joys and concerns surfaced. Among these were the desire to "be oneself", rather than to emulate worthy models; the dislike of oppressive teachers; the fear of the family breaking up; the sheer joy of living; and the fear of one's own death.

This article reports on a survey in which an open-ended questionnaire was administered to 820 15-year-olds in six schools in the early summer of 1981.<sup>1</sup> The main aim of the survey was to portray what a large number of young people think, feel, and believe about important aspects of their lives, using as evidence their own uncorrected written statements.

The questionnaire comprised 10 unfinished sentences spread over five sheets of A4. In a rubric preceding the sentences, the subjects were assured that the exercise was unrelated to school work, that their teachers would not read what they had written, that there were no right or wrong answers, that they need not give their names, and that no one would criticise them for what they had written.

The schools which took part in the survey comprised 4 comprehensive schools, a grammar school, and a public school. All quotations in this article carry a code (e.g. CF or "comprehensive, female"), which indicates the sex of the pupil and the type of school he or she attended in 1981. The quotations preserve the original spelling and punctuation of the subjects.

## The Results

**Sentence 1** The sort of person I would most like to be like . . . .

The study of children's heroes and heroines by some form of ideal person

test has a long history in social psychology. However, the results of the present survey would have surprised early researchers. To start with, 19% of the young people did not wish to resemble anyone else at all. For example:

I don't think much about being someone else because I am more interested in making something of my own life. I feel happy with the way I live and don't wish I was someone else or someone better because this can only make a person feel inferior. CF

An additional 43% did not name any heroes or heroines. Of the 35% that did, most cited models from the world of sport and entertainment:

Clint Eastwood because he's got everything. Money, he's rock hard, is good looking, he is world famous and works in the movies. CM

It is clear that during the 20th century there has been a definite tendency for the young, in completing "ideal person" tests, to reject models or personifications

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of behaviour in favour of "being oneself". Where models are chosen they are likely to be from TV, films, and sport instead of, as in the early part of the century, from literature and history.

**Sentence 2** The sort of person I would least like to be like . . . .

The chief candidates for least-liked models seem to be politicians. In 1981 Mrs Thatcher's popularity was at a particularly low ebb and, not surprisingly, 50 young people found her job completely unenviable.

She is hated by most people for the things she does and says. Anything she does is bound not to suit everybody, so in a way she can't win whatever she does. CF

The least-liked characteristics cited were *snobbishness* and *bighheadedness* (14%). Perhaps this response is peculiarly British, since a recent study on the Continent revealed *selfishness* or *egotism* (24%) as the least-liked characteristic among young Europeans.

**Sentence 3** The people I am happiest with are . . . .

and

**Sentence 4** The people I am unhappiest with are . . . .

It was expected that responses to these two sentences would throw some light on what is commonly called "the generation gap". The generation-gap thesis, in its simplest form, suggests that the younger generation develops a solidarity or loyalty of its own, which leads to a rebellion against parental authority and a breakdown of communication and understanding between the two generations.

In the present survey 39% of young people nominated the *family*, which usually means parents, as the people with whom they were happiest. Nominations from girls (52%) exceeded those from boys (31%). Many youngsters spoke eloquently of the importance to them of family life:

my family, my mother sisters, Aunties, Uncles and my Grandad. They make

life seem worth living some days and give you the courage to go on and succeed. They give me a kind of drive and an aim. Most of all they make you happy when things are down. CF

However, a greater percentage (54%) nominated *friends* as their preferred companions. Again, the proportion of girls (62%) was greater than boys (46%). The following is a typical response:

I am happy with my friends they brighten up your life more and you always have someone to turn to when anything goes wrong. I like to have lots of friends the more the better. CF

It is interesting, however, that only 6% of young people nominated the family as their *least* preferred companions, and of this 6% one-third were least happy with their brothers and sisters rather than with their parents. Therefore the following quotation is most definitely *atypical*:

PARENTS, just to name one type of person, for a start they are *always* over-protective and never let you go out with friends past 9 o'clock at night. They are always giving you little bits of advise eg don't talk to strange men, don't hang around street corners, when you've heard them all a thousand times before. CF

In fact, unhappiness was associated more with teachers (7%) and snobs and bigheads (10%) than the family. For many young people at the age of 15, friends are increasingly providing opportunities for fun and happiness outside the home. Nevertheless, a large proportion of young people are also happy with their parents, and find their company enjoyable.

**Sentence 5** When I am by myself . . . .

The responses to Sentence 5 show that, when left to themselves, about one-quarter of the sample think (23%); about one-half engage in activity (54%); and around 11% are lonely and bored. In the quotations which follow, one example is given from each category.

I brood of different matters — will I pass my O levels? Will I get a decent

job? Then after abit I think of current affaires, the problems the world faces how to solv them. Then I wonder if all the problems can be solved? — What will be left of the world when I grow up? Will there be any country side and fresh air? — will there be a nuclear war? Will there be any wild life? — Gloom. PM

When I am by myself I wank. I also go to my hens when I am by myself and let them out of their pen. I ride on my bike. CM

I am quiet and if I hav'ent got anything interesting to do I get rather bord and uncomfortable and lonely. I hate being by myself. CM

**Sentence 6** What matters to me more than anything else . . . .

In order to find out what mattered to today's 15-year-olds more than anything else, an incomplete sentence was constructed which asked just that. As a result, the young people wrote with absolute clarity about what was of supreme importance to them — the family (32%), friends (22%), and getting a job (14%).

I suppose my Mother does because I ain't got a proper dad but a step Dad but he's good to me. Probably most that matters to me is that my family keeps together and is happy. When me other Dad left everyone was to pieces then. I think that what get people in trouble if things happen like that. CM

Friends are very important as I don't want to go thru' life being a 'Loner' or an 'outcast', or an 'eccentric old fool'. GM

. . . is getting a job. Every night while in bed I think of the prospect of me getting a job and what job I would do. GM

The extent to which the sentence stem determines the structure and content of the response is now becoming clearer. Thus in Sentence 3 (*The people I am happiest with are . . . .*), friends (54%) were nominated more than the family (39%). In Sentence 6 (*What matters to*

*me more than anything else . . . .*) the family (32%) was cited more frequently than friends (22%), and both were cited more than getting a job (14%). However, in Sentence 7 (*The best thing that could happen to me . . . .*), 27% cited getting a job as the most desired outcome.

**Sentence 7** The best thing that could happen to me . . . .

During the year preceding the survey (1980), unemployment rose from 1,471,000 in January to 2,244,000 in December, and continued to rise afterwards. Against this background, it is not surprising that many 15-year-olds were of the opinion that the best possible outcome for them in the next few years would be to get a job.

Get a job (with the country in its present state that is very difficult). CF

is that I could get a good job and not go on the doll. This would worry me a great deal because I would get very bored and it would make me Idle. CM

It is not difficult to understand why getting a job appears to be so essential to 15-year-olds. It takes over from school as an organiser of time and a provider of goals and purposes; it provides new sets of relationships in the adult world; and indeed for many youngsters it is synonymous with actually becoming a fully-fledged adult human being. As David Hargreaves has put it, *to be denied paid employment is to be rendered not fully human.*<sup>2</sup>

**Sentence 8** The worst thing that could happen to me . . . .

Nearly one-quarter of the 15-year-olds (23%) specify the death of relatives as the worst possible outcome, confirming once more the deep attachment that many young people have to their parents. One girl wrote that the worst thing that could happen "is that my parents died", and continued:

I just curl up and die if they did, I love them. They bore me through all my

tantrums and sulks. What Patience! They've done so much for me. When I marry someone I love and they do die (touch wood) the blow will have been softened. CF

Almost as many (20%) fear personal disablement as a result of an accident. The word "accident" seems in most cases to refer to a road accident although this definition is rarely spelled out.

is to have a serious accident and to a serious injury or to have serious brain damage so I become a vegetable. CM

**Sentence 9** The best thing about life is . . . .

and

**Sentence 10** The worst thing about life is . . . .

The last two sentences in the questionnaire invited the 15-year-olds to contemplate what they regarded as the best and worst aspects of life. Necessarily this involved them in expressing a small part of their personal philosophy. Hedonism topped the list in Sentence 9 with 17% citing enjoyment as the best thing about life. Statements about enjoyment were often in the form of maxims and injunctions:

You must go out and enjoy yourself. It is no use sitting back hoping you will be happy. Hapiness is a thing which you can get from other people. GM

By contrast, the *worst* thing about life for 21% of the sample is death. At an age when youngsters discover new enjoyment, new friends and new freedoms, they are also aware that life is finite and death inevitable. As one girl writes:

You have to die. I think about it a lot and I know everyone has to die sometime but I get this feeling inside that I cant explain I just get worried and feel awfull. CF

Some way behind death as the worst thing about life comes school! Thirteen per cent of the young people in the present study expressed themselves vividly

about "the happiest days of their lives": school every bloody day day after day for eleven year or more. CF

Going to school and taking exams. All your teenage years are bleeding wasted on revising & everything. Exams shouldn't be the most terrifying, depressing things in some peoples lives. Instead there ought to be a system where your total coursework counted, in every subject, as your exam. People would work harder in lessons, would still learn a lot, and the pressure of many exams in a short time would be relieved. CF

## Conclusions

The open-ended research strategy employed in this survey allowed the individual voices of 820 15-year-olds to be heard. A number of basic joys and concerns surfaced. Chief amongst these were:

1. The desire to "be oneself" rather than emulate worthy models.
2. The dislike of snobs, bigheads and politicians.
3. The delight in the company of friends.
4. The dislike of oppressive teachers.
5. The importance of the family.
6. The importance of getting a job.
7. The fear of the family breaking up, chiefly through death but also through divorce.
8. The sheer joy of living.
9. The fear of one's own death.

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## References

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