

FIRST STEPS STUDY NEWSLETTER

September 2025 — For Parents & Teens



THANK YOU!!



As always we would like to say a massive THANK YOU to you for continuing to take part in the study – we couldn't do it without you! It's been six or seven years since we last saw most of you in person and we are so incredibly grateful you've continued to help us out by filling in questionnaires from home. Very few studies in the world have families like yours who first took part before their children were born and who have continued to give us really valuable information. The First Steps Study has done incredibly well, compared to other similar studies in the UK, at continuing to collect data from nearly all the families involved since the start. Every one of you makes a big difference.



As time passes the information you provide becomes more and more important and allows us to make discoveries that will help other families and young people in the future – so THANK YOU!

What's ongoing on the study?

We are just finishing up "phase 18" where we've asked caregivers and young people to fill in a questionnaire at around 15-17 years old. We started this phase in 2024 and most of you have already completed it, but we are still hoping to get the last few! So please do get in touch if you need your questionnaire link (or a postal pack) sending out. If you prefer we would be happy to arrange for a researcher to come out to your home and do it with you. Parents receive a £10 voucher and young people receive a £20 voucher as a thank you for your time. Every questionnaire we receive is hugely appreciated!

WE NEED YOUR HELP AGAIN!

We have put together a survey for caregivers and a survey for young people with questions created both from your responses to the last prize draw survey and the ideas we have for the next application for funding. Your responses will help shape the future of the study!



**SURVEY FOR
YOUNG PEOPLE**



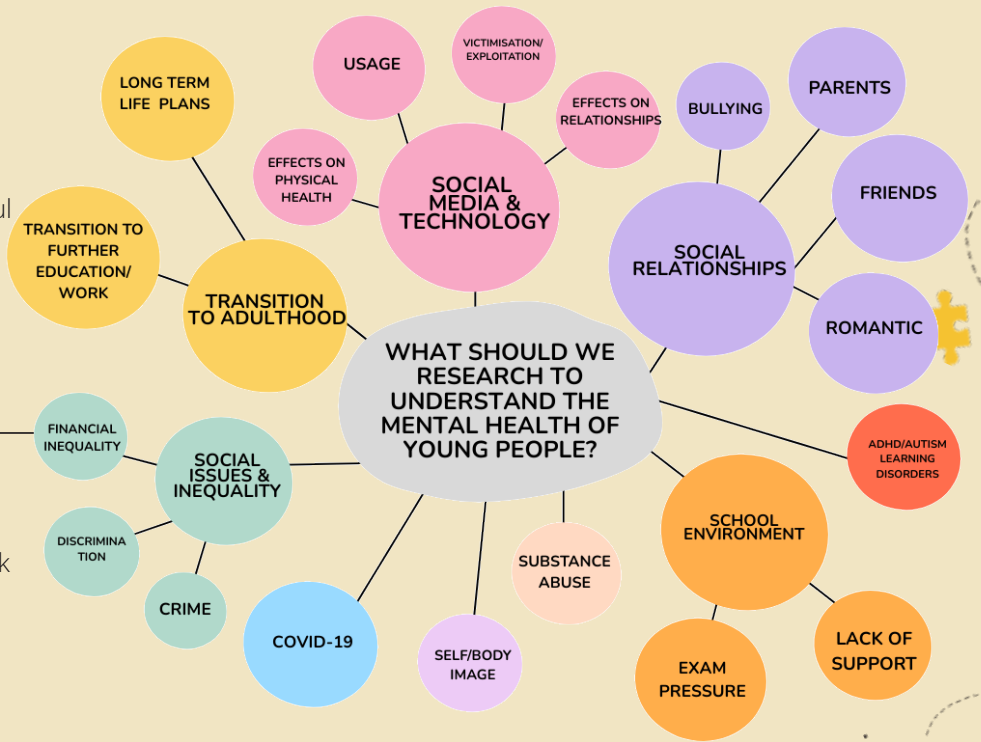
**SURVEY FOR
PRIMARY
CAREGIVERS**



**RESPONSES WILL BE
ENTERED INTO A
PRIZE DRAW TO WIN
£30 VOUCHERS (6
PRIZES AVAILABLE)**

What do YOU think is important for the mental health of young people?

At Christmas we sent out a prize draw survey asking you to enter and tell us what you think are the important factors affecting the mental health of young people today. We had an overwhelming response and we are really grateful to everyone who entered and shared their views. This is what you said – the larger the bubble the more of you mentioned the topic:



We thought you might like to hear what we have discovered already about some of the topics you think are most important. The information you are giving us now around age 16 will help us to see what changes and what stays the same as young people move through adolescence.

Social media/technology

	Age 13	Age 15.5
Phone for messaging/ social media more than 2 hours a day	57%	83%
Use tiktok	72%	83%
Use Instagram	61%	85%
Use Snapchat	66%	90%
Talking to friends on phone/facetime etc every day	87%	85%
Gaming for more than 2 hours a day	49%	42%
Read a book/audiobook at least one day a week	59%	41%
Exercising at least one day a week	85%	78%
Structured activities (e.g. scouts, cadets, drama/ music class) at least one day	39%	31%
Hang out with friends at least one day a week	83%	86%
Stay home all evening every day	11%	12%

The table shows the information the First Steps Young people provided on how you spend your time at age 12-13 years and recently at age 15-16 years. As you can see a lot more of you are using phones for social media/messaging, using tiktok, Instagram and snapchat than when you were 13. Is that a good thing? Or a bad thing? Soon we will be able to ask whether how much young people use social media and technology is linked to their mental health or their well-being.

Other studies have suggested that there is a link between increased social media use and poorer wellbeing and poorer attention ability. However, it may not be as straightforward as social media “causing” poor outcomes. It is also possible that young people who already have difficulties with attention or poorer wellbeing are more likely to start spending more time using social media/technology, which may in turn then make their attention or wellbeing even worse! By collecting information from you repeatedly over time, we can find out which comes first, and find out whether certain groups of young people are more at risk from negative effects of social media and technology. We will also be trying to learn if social media use helps some young people in a positive way.

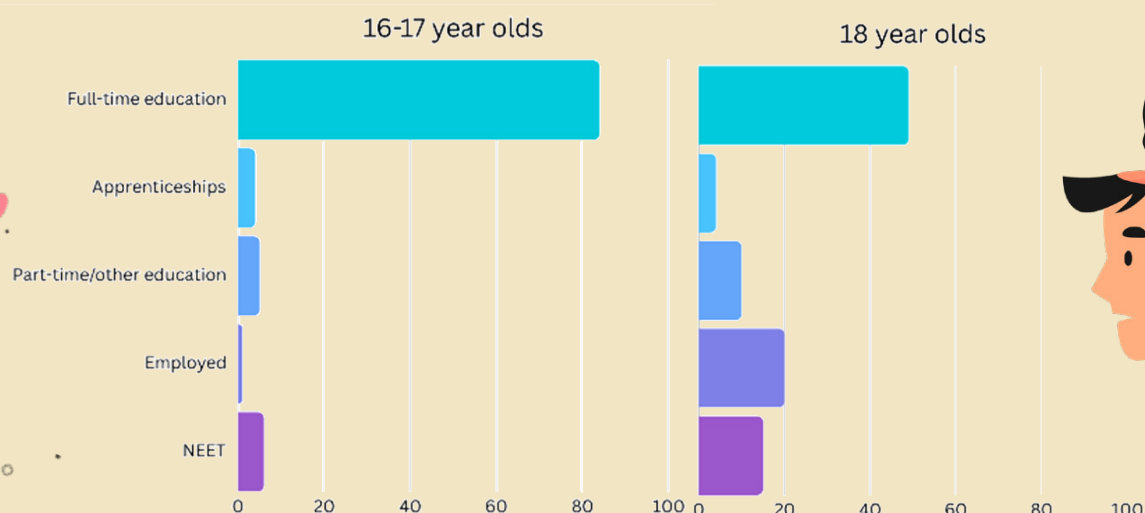
The transition towards adulthood

This is a time of big decisions, about relationships and about education, training and work. At age 18 most young people get into further training or university, or start employment, but some don't. You can see in the chart below from the Department of Education that from ages 16 to 18 an increasing number are not in education, employment or training (the government call this NEET!). Why is this? The information you are giving us now and hopefully in a couple of years time will help us understand what factors influence young people to get back into education, employment or training and what factors are barriers to this.

Impact of Covid-19

Young people of the age of the young people in the study now suffered a lot during the COVID-19 pandemic because it came just as you were moving from primary to secondary education. The information you gave us has allowed us to publish papers with important findings. For example, it looked as though COVID restrictions led to more depression in girls BUT it is already well established that depression in girls increases during adolescence and we found out that COVID had not made that worse. With boys it was different. COVID-19 restrictions did make their mental health worse. What about possible long term effects? We don't know yet but the information you give us will help us to find out, and that will help work out whether some young people need extra support.

Education/employment destinations for 16-17 and for 18 years olds in 2024



Going to University

National figures from UCAS in 2024 tell us that 36% of young people go to University at age 18-years (30% of males, 41% of females). This increases to 49% by age 25, indicating many young people take time out to work or travel before starting University. Fewer 18 year olds from lower-income families go to University compared to higher income families (20% from low income versus 37%).

Covid-19 and educational outcomes

Another recent UK study looked at the impact of the pandemic on GCSE and other examination results. Young people in the UK experienced an average 6 month learning loss due to the pandemic (and this was closer to 8 months for families with lower income), and school attendance is now lower than before the pandemic. This study showed that the pandemic has negatively impacted both cognitive (e.g. reading, maths ability) and socio-emotional skills (e.g. the ability to engage in positive social interactions, co-operate, show empathy) and these two sets of skills were equally important in predicting GCSE grades. As a result, the pandemic has led to lower GCSE grades, particularly for lower income families.

RECENT PUBLICATIONS

One of the main themes in our findings from the First Steps Study is that the infants' experiences in the womb during pregnancy help prepare them for the outside world. The implication of this is that experiences that we may think of as harmful for the developing fetus, such as a mother experiencing stress during pregnancy, may actually help prepare the infant to deal with stress themselves. We have shown that the children of mothers who were stressed during pregnancy and who experienced stress during their child's early life are less likely to experience mental health problems themselves later on. We have published findings previously showing that this was the case for emotional and behavioural problems measured in childhood. We have recently published a paper showing that this is also true for depression measured at age 13 years.

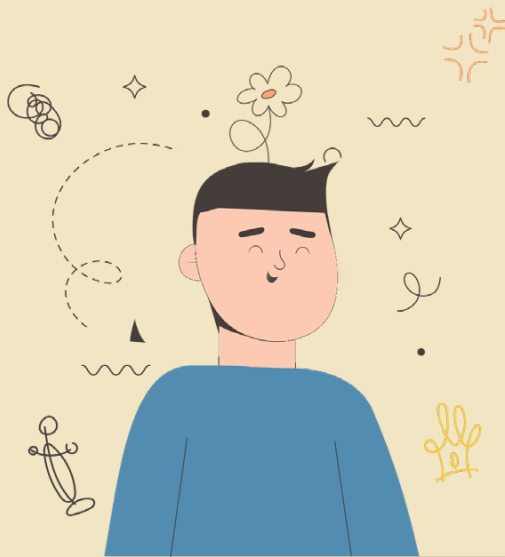


THANK YOU ONCE AGAIN!!

We could not be more grateful to each and every one of you. We know that many of you will have experienced a lot of changes to your lives, especially now all young people in the study are moving through adolescence towards adulthood, so we really appreciate your continued support!

And finally...Good Luck!

We know this is often a time of changes, with some First Steps young people starting college, sixth form or apprenticeships, and others making decisions about future employment or University. Whatever you do next, we want to wish all the First Steps Young people the best of luck!



Getting in touch

If you have any questions or comments, you can contact us 0151 795 1114, text us on 07956297412, email us at first.steps@liv.ac.uk or write to us at First Steps Study, The University of Liverpool, Eleanor Rathbone Building, Bedford Street South, Liverpool, L69 7ZA

Don't forget to look at our website: <https://www.liverpool.ac.uk/population-health/research/groups/first-steps/>

