



# You can't get there on your own

Children's Parliament consultation on access and barriers to Higher + Further Education as part of the Independent Review of Student Support





Images Above + Opposite:  
Children produced messages  
to reflect their ideas as part  
of the consultation

## Acknowledgements

Thank you to children and staff from:

- Ross High School, Tranent
- St. Mary's (Leith) RC Primary School, Edinburgh

Commissioned by Scottish Government



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# Introduction

## About this consultation

The Scottish Government launched an independent review into the effectiveness and equity of the Scottish student support system on 25 October 2016. The review addresses the most effective ways to support students in both Higher and Further Education with a focus on providing fair and fit-for-purpose support for the most vulnerable students in Scotland.

The review's remit will include exploring:

- The most effective support for the poorest and most vulnerable students
- The balance of support available to those in further and higher education
- The current repayment threshold and period for student loan debt

Representatives from the office of the Independent Chair of the Review (Jayne-Anne Gadhia, CEO Virgin Money) commissioned Children's Parliament (CP) to explore children's views on access to Higher and Further Education and the potential barriers that may prevent children from participating in education beyond secondary school. A short preliminary consultation took place in April 2017 with 10 girls aged 11-16 from Craigie High School in Dundee. Following this consultation, representatives from the office of the Independent Chair have asked Children's Parliament to consult further with children and bring their views to the wider consultation process.

Children's Parliament worked with children in both primary and secondary settings, facilitating creative workshops to address key questions about education. As with all CP work, we began with an input about children's human rights and human dignity, and the connection between these ideas and learning/education. Following this initial input, we looked more specifically at the following themes:

- Individual aspirations for the future
- Individual worries for the future
- The importance of education
- The barriers children may face in accessing university or college
- The support children need from adults (parents/carers, teachers, university and college staff, government officials, etc.) in order to participate fully in educational opportunities

The workshops culminated with each child creating a small 'billboard' that reflects the key messages about barriers to and support for accessing Higher and Further Education that they want to share with Scottish Government and other important stakeholders.

## About the children

The consultation workshops involved a total of 24 Members of Children's Parliament\*<sup>1</sup> between the ages of 9 and 13 years old. 11 boys and 13 girls took part in this consultation. We worked in two settings – St. Mary's (Leith) RC Primary School in Edinburgh and Ross High School in Tranent. We sought to work with children from diverse backgrounds, including children from areas of multiple deprivation, children with different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, and children with disabilities and learning difficulties.

The quotes in this report come directly from the children.

## About Children's Parliament

Children's Parliament is Scotland's Centre of Excellence for children's participation and engagement.

Children's Parliament works for a future where all children in Scotland are actively engaged in shaping our world so that everyone is healthy, happy and safe. We believe all children should live and grow with dignity and be valued for what they can offer the world.

We work creatively through projects, consultations and training programmes to improve communication between children and adults and to build relationships based on mutual respect and understanding. This enables us to explore our world together. We provide children with opportunities to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings so that they can influence life at home, in school and in the community through change at a local and national level.

Every space we create is a Children's Parliament.

Image: Children share their work and ideas with their peers.



## Key Messages

- Children recognise that education is a human right and want to have a say and be part of making choices about their futures.
- Children identify a tension between enjoying their childhoods now and planning for a future that still seems quite far in the future.
- Children feel pressure to make decisions about their future when they are still learning who they are and developing their interests and skills.
- Children stress the importance of adults recognising that things happening outside of school (e.g. family breakdown, trauma, moving house, etc.) can impact on their ability to focus and learn.
- Children want more information about adult life earlier, including university and college, so they know what to expect and can begin developing the skills and knowledge that will benefit them later in life.
- Children are very aware of the stigma of coming from certain places or backgrounds and the limitations this can place on their opportunities to access Higher and Further Education.
- Children feel very strongly that individuals with learning difficulties and disabilities should have the support they need in order to access the same opportunities.
- Children feel that cost should not be a barrier to their education and want clear information about how to afford college and university courses.

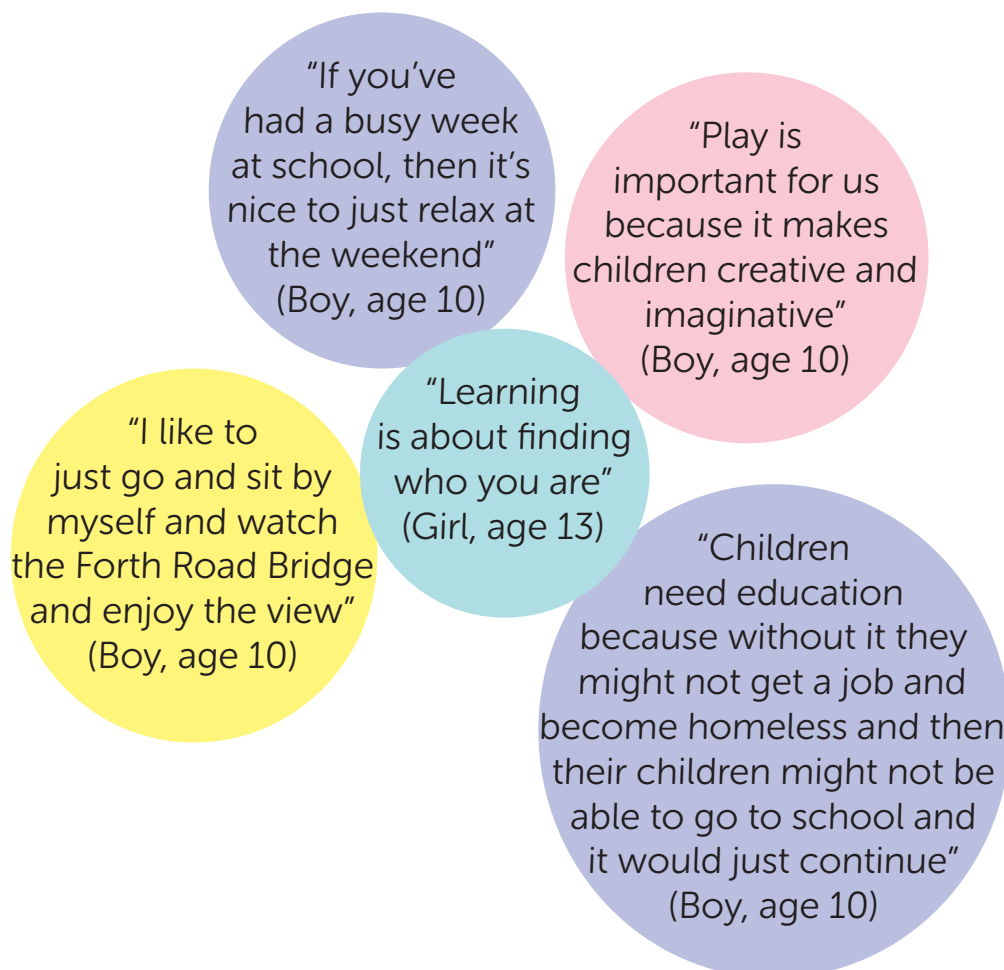
“I want to travel the world. I want to make a difference, help people and discover things that will impact the world”  
(Girl, age 13)

## The right to education

Children value their education and are insistent that all children have the right to learn, from the early years through adulthood. They speak about their education as serving two main functions: to provide them with a foundation so that they can achieve their aspirations for the future and to help them explore who they are. Children stress the importance of education in shaping their identity, particularly through exploring new ideas and developing their interests and skills.

Children speak about wanting positive relationships with both peers and adults at school. When they feel respected and supported, these relationships impact positively on their learning. However, when the quality of relationships is poor or if they experience bullying, then this has a negative impact on their learning and self-confidence.

Children also speak about the importance of their rights to play and relax and how these rights sit alongside their right to an education. For children, having space and time to play, being able to spend time with their friends and using their imaginations are an essential part of childhood.



Children are particularly concerned about children who may experience disadvantage, particularly through disability, learning difficulties, mental health challenges, stigma or financial disadvantages. They worry that there isn't enough support available for children with these experiences and believe more support should be offered to help everyone achieve their goals.

"Maybe someone's body or brain doesn't work the same way but they should get the same opportunities - it's all about fairness"  
(Girl, age 13)

"You might want to go to uni but could be in a wheelchair and there's no ramps or could be deaf and need help with sign language"  
(Girl, age 13)

"If someone was shy and not confident they might be too shy to apply- people who come from underprivileged areas should get extra support and help, like extra time with guidance counsellors"  
(Boy, age 13)

"You could have learning difficulties or be disabled- it might be harder to concentrate and you could have mental health issues"  
(Girl, age 13)

"It really annoys me that for some places it doesn't matter how smart you are but how much money you have. I hate it when there's someone who's really talented and good, like at engineering, but they are poor and can't go, and someone who is mediocre and has lots of money can go"  
(Boy, age 13)

"People might have preconceptions about you based on where you live or your sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity or religion"  
(Boy, age 13)

"If you're a carer, say for your sibling, you might not be able to go to uni"  
(Girl, age 13)

Your Future  
Your Choice



## Childhood and thinking about the future

Children have big ideas about their futures. The possibilities seem endless and they enjoy imagining what their future lives will be like. Some have very specific ideas of what they want to do when they are older and for others it's less clear. They all want to have the tools and knowledge necessary to go out into the world and make their dreams come true.

Children are aware that there are many choices to make about the future and say that while this can be exciting, it can also be stressful and worrying. Children feel a tension between wanting to know more about the future and just wanting to enjoy being a child. Children feel pressure from their schools, families and society to know what they want their future to be like at a young age and describe feeling overwhelmed by all the choices they will have to make that will impact on their lives.

When decisions are being made that will impact them, they want to be included in the conversation and for adults to listen to their views.

"There's this unspoken thing that you're just supposed to know what you want to do"  
(Boy, age 13)

"I have no idea what I want to do. I feel like there are options available, but I don't think I should have to think about it now"  
(Girl, age 13)

"I'm worried because whatever you do at uni will impact your whole life"  
(Girl, age 13)

"Sometimes it's just too much pressure! We shouldn't have to decide now- we don't even know what's really out there or what we might be good at"  
(Girl, age 13)

"It's ridiculous that you should have to choose what to do at 14. Part of learning is about finding out who you are."  
(Boy, age 13)

"There are so many possibilities that you can change your mind so many times"  
(Girl, age 13)

"It's going to affect your future you need to be heard!"  
(Boy, age 13)

"My mum and dad want me to go to uni and if I don't then they'll be really, really mad"  
(Girl, age 9)



## A changing world

When children think about the future, they are considering more than their future job or career path. They want adults to recognise that they are trying to make sense of the world around them and all the things that are changing. They speak about their future lives in the context of significant environmental, social and political change; natural disasters, terrorism, nuclear war and the unpredictability of the future are the sources of concern and worry for children.

Children are aware that the world is changing fast and that traditional ways of working and career paths may not be available for them when they enter the world of work. They note that jobs they had thought would be there when they were younger are being replaced by other ways of working and this makes children feel unsure of what the future holds.

"You just don't know what's going to come at you"  
(Girl, age 13)

"You might want a job but you never know if they will still be available when you're older"  
(Girl, age 10)

"You always have more worries than dreams"  
(Girl, age 13)



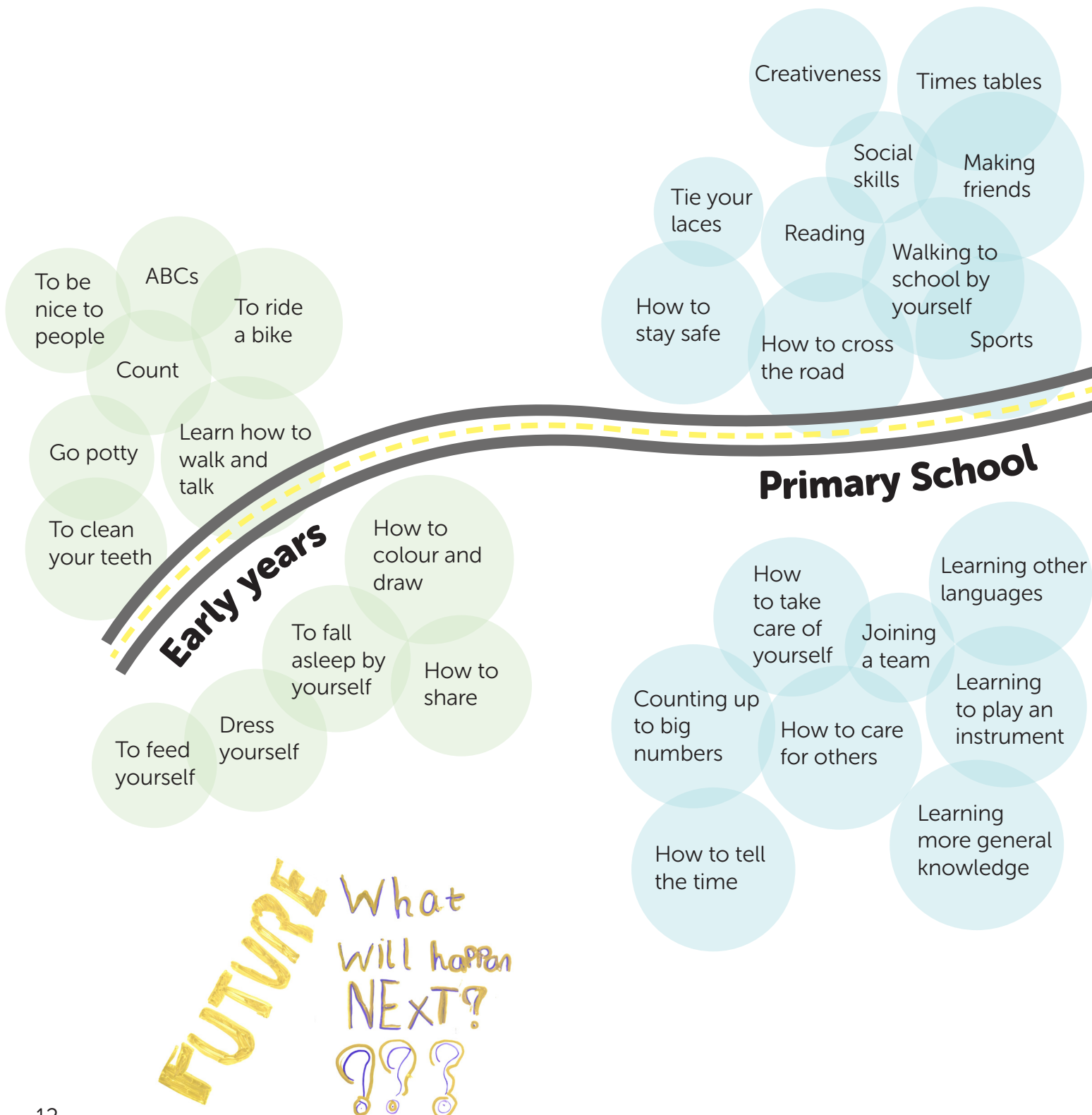
Children also know that there are many opportunities out in the world for work that they have not considered or jobs that may not even exist yet – this is exciting, but it can also be frustrating for children who recognise that they may be limited by the opportunities and skills being offered to them in their schools. There is a concern that they are unprepared for the future and that traditional skills and ways of teaching are not preparing children for the reality of life in Scotland today.

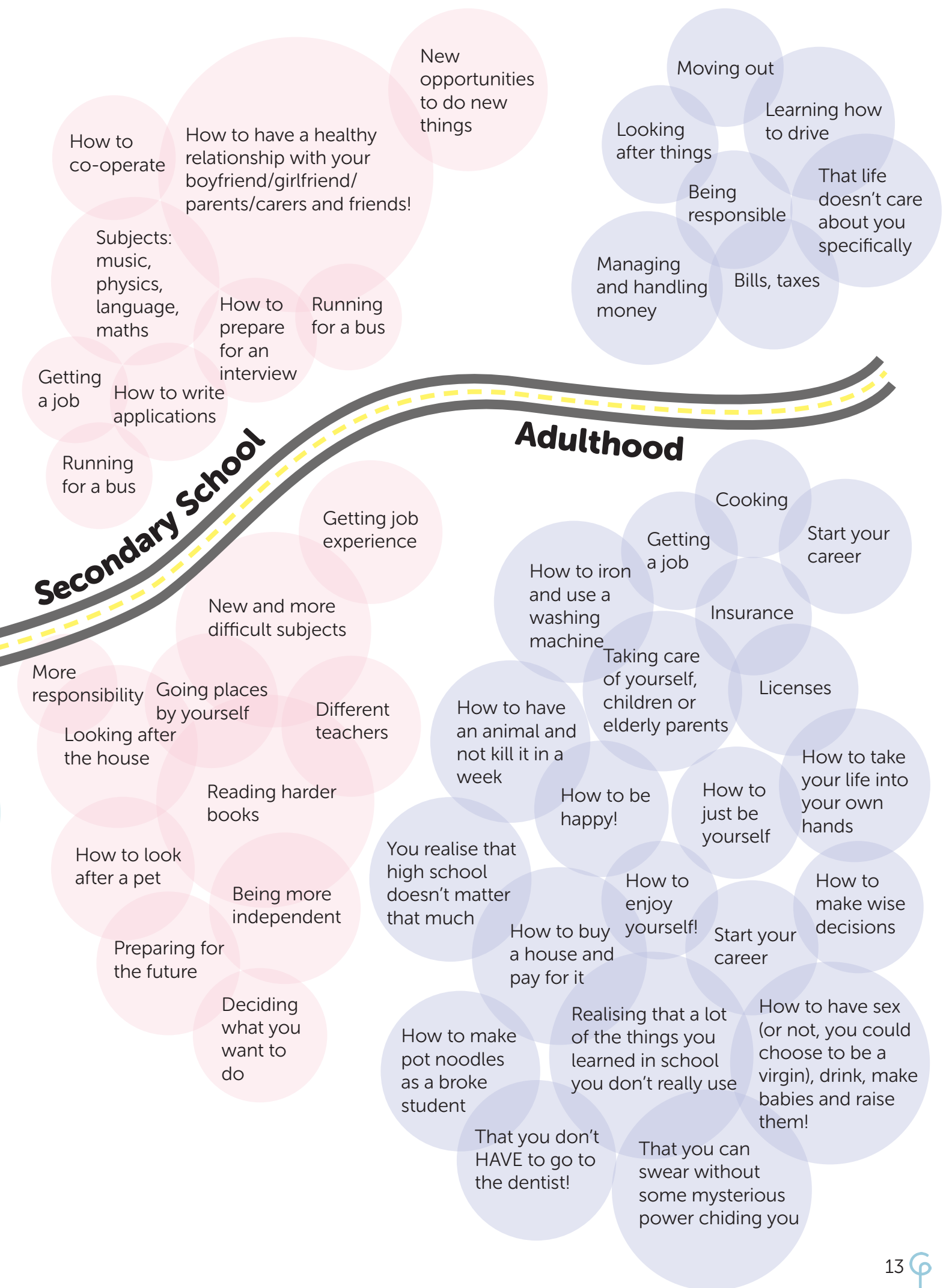
“There are jobs that we haven’t even heard about, so how are we supposed to know what we can do and what subjects to choose, things that fit what we’re interested in and good at?”  
(Girl, age 13)

“I don’t know what I want to do, but I want to be hardworking”  
(Boy, age 10)

# Learning for adulthood: A learning journey

Children say that they need to learn about how to be an adult before they are out on their own and responsible for adult choices. They want to learn to cook and clean, to care for themselves as well as any children they might have or any other family they might be responsible for. Children say they need to know about adult responsibilities like taxes, mortgages, how to write a CV and how to find somewhere to live so that they feel more prepared and capable for when these things do happen.





# Secondary School

# Adulthood

How to co-operate

How to have a healthy relationship with your boyfriend/girlfriend/parents/carers and friends!

Subjects: music, physics, language, maths

How to prepare for an interview

Running for a bus

Getting a job

How to write applications

Running for a bus

New opportunities to do new things

Moving out

Looking after things

Learning how to drive

Being responsible

That life doesn't care about you specifically

Managing and handling money

Bills, taxes

More responsibility

Going places by yourself

Looking after the house

Different teachers

Reading harder books

How to look after a pet

Being more independent

Preparing for the future

Deciding what you want to do

New and more difficult subjects

Getting job experience

How to have an animal and not kill it in a week

You realise that high school doesn't matter that much

How to buy a house and pay for it

How to make pot noodles as a broke student

That you don't HAVE to go to the dentist!

How to iron and use a washing machine

How to be happy!

How to enjoy yourself!

Realising that a lot of the things you learned in school you don't really use

That you can swear without some mysterious power chiding you

Getting a job

Taking care of yourself, children or elderly parents

How to have an animal and not kill it in a week

Insurance

Licenses

How to just be yourself

Start your career

How to have sex (or not, you could choose to be a virgin), drink, make babies and raise them!

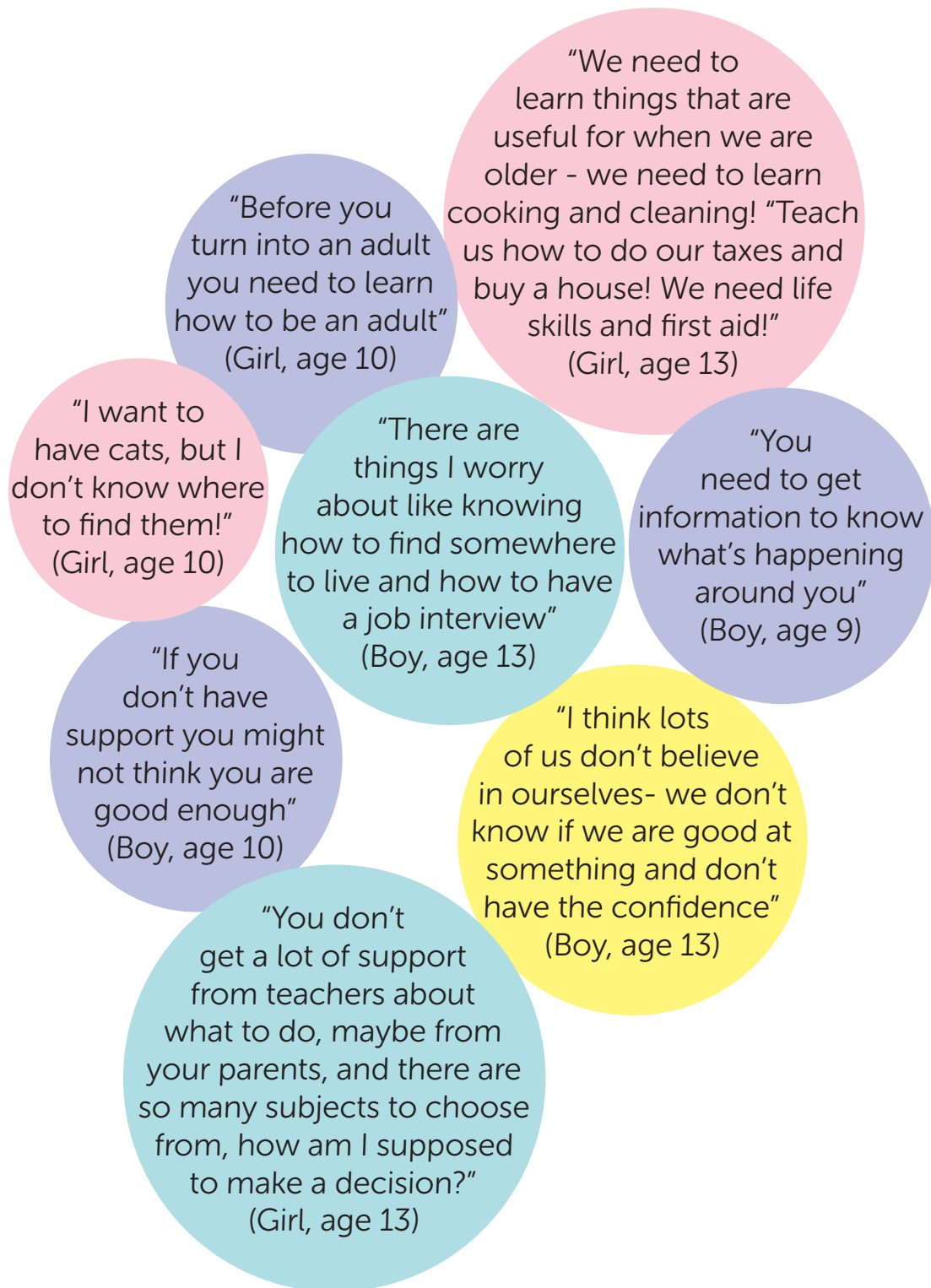
Cooking

Start your career

How to take your life into your own hands

How to make wise decisions

Children identify that feeling unprepared for the world has a significant impact on their ability to thrive and make their dreams come true. Children recognise that knowledge and information can give them confidence to explore and try new things. Children want to be trusted, to learn how to be independent and capable in the world, and to feel that they can rise to the challenges that may come in an unpredictable world. They rely on schools and family to provide opportunities to learn life skills along with traditional education.



## Perceptions of university and college

Children identify that attending university or college is an important step in achieving their goals for the future. They feel that everyone should be able to attend university or college if they want to and have the required qualifications.

However, for most children, the idea of attending university or college is still quite vague and distant. Some children know people who have gone to university or college, like older siblings, parents or other adults, while other children report not knowing if anyone they know has attended. A few children in secondary school have visited universities or colleges before, however the majority have not or are unsure if they've set foot on a campus before.

"Some jobs that you might want you need to go to uni so you don't really have a choice"  
(Girl, age 10)

"Someone in my family might have gone, but I don't know"  
(Girl, age 10)

"Most adults I know have been to either college or uni"  
(Boy, age 10)

"Me and my mum went to a St. Andrew's Open Day and she decided that's where she wanted me to go and she started putting money away"  
(Boy, age 13)

"I know someone who might go to uni - they've got a job but sometimes they're somewhere else"  
(Girl, age 11)

"I went to my sister's uni (Napier) where she's studying nursing to help her move in"  
(Boy, age 13)



## The cost of education

Although children agree it is important for everyone to have the opportunity to pursue Higher and Further Education, they recognise that financial inequality results in some children being unable to fulfil their dreams. They recognise that finances impact the ability of some children to be free to explore their potential and strongly state that this is unfair.

"I think it's good that we have free education and that people can go if they want to. If you want to be an astronaut and you're really good at physics then you should go. Other places you have to pay a lot, like America, so we should take advantage of the privilege of free uni"  
(Girl, age 13)

"Just because your family isn't wealthy doesn't mean you aren't intelligent. But sometimes it comes down to who has the most money which isn't fair"  
(Boy, age 13)

Children also discussed the tension between the positive aspects of going into Higher and Further Education – the potential, the excitement and the learning – and the concern about going into debt at an early age and being disadvantaged in their adulthood. Children worry about not knowing how to take out loans, are unsure about issues like interest and express some anxiety about borrowing money and going into debt. Children recognise that this particularly impacts children from families who are less financially secure and are concerned that this could prevent children from having the chance to continue learning after secondary school.

"You might not have the money to pay it back. That's the thing I would worry about and then it would get higher and you would get letters and letters"  
(Girl, age 10)

"It's okay to get a loan if you are going to be able to make the money to pay it back, but there are also other ways to pay for uni - you could get a scholarship"  
(Boy, age 11)

"It think it's okay to take out a loan - you can take enough to help you out with what you need"  
(Boy, age 10)

"I think life's too short to worry about financial strain in the future- there could be a nuclear war!"  
(Boy, age 13)

"I think it's preferable not to take a loan but I don't think you should pass up an opportunity"  
(Girl, age 13)



## Barriers to accessing university and college

Children overwhelmingly view their education as a vital pathway to success in their futures. Many children link going on to Higher and Further Education as a way to pursue specific careers and to provide for themselves and their families. While children highlight the importance of education, they also identify that there are many barriers to being able to access university and college.

These barriers include:

### Expense

### Distractions

### Family issues

### Student loans

### Homesickness

### Not being yourself

### Mental health issues

### Getting there on your own

### Being away from your family

### Learning difficulties or ADHD

### Not being able to concentrate

### Lack of money/'being too poor'

### Not feeling confident in yourself

### If you can't find/afford a place to live

**Emotions – being stressed or unhappy**

**Coming from a dodgy location or school**

**Being shy or vulnerable; lacking confidence**

**Being accused of a crime you didn't commit**

**Not being able to find/afford the right equipment**

**Responsibility of being a carer for a family member**

**Not finding accommodation; housing too expensive**

**If you are shy it might make it hard to communicate with others**

**Your grades aren't good enough to get in; might not get accepted**

**Transport – no transport from home to uni or transport too expensive**

**Ethnicity, race, gender, disability, illness, sexual orientation, religion & beliefs**

**The course you want to study isn't available at the university you want to go to**

**You might think the work is hard and that might make you stressed or pressured**

**Relationships - Not enough support (from family, teachers, etc.); negative people in your life**

**Being gullible – not knowing what's going on when living on your own and being taken advantage of**

“When I am older I want to have a job that I really enjoy and want to go to every morning. I am interested in STEM. I would like to get a really nice house and a happy and loving family”  
(Girl, age 13)

# Help and support

The idea of attending university or college still feels like a distant possibility for the majority of children. However, they identified that it could be a very overwhelming period for some people, especially those that are more vulnerable. After discussing the barriers that might prevent people from accessing university or college, the children identified some ways to help and support children leading up to and whilst attending university or college.

<b>Feeling loved</b>	<b>Help to supply school equipment</b>	<b>Learn more things about how to go up to college - inductions and stuff</b>
<b>Help with costs</b>	<b>Talk to someone that went to uni</b>	<b>Have more direct links between secondary school teachers and universities</b>
<b>Cheaper housing</b>	<b>Provide cheaper food in uni/colleges</b>	<b>If you are shy find something you like and you can be yourself when doing it</b>
<b>Discount on travel</b>	<b>Go to a preparation group for university</b>	<b>Reassurance and encouragement (that you can do it/everything will be okay)</b>
<b>More financial advice</b>	<b>Talk to a therapist to make you feel better</b>	<b>University 101 (advice for applying to, preparing for and what to expect at university)</b>
<b>Being taken seriously</b>	<b>Money (loans) - easier to manage and access</b>	<b>Support for people who have learning difficulties/disabilities to access uni/college</b>
<b>Help with applications</b>	<b>Finding out what jobs are available so you can plan ahead</b>	<b>Schools teaching life skills – first aid, paying taxes, finding housing, accessing loans, filling out applications, writing a CV, etc.</b>
<b>Money from government</b>	<b>Get professors to come speak to us so we get to know them</b>	
<b>Motivation and determination</b>	<b>Being able to choose what you learned about earlier on in life</b>	
<b>Love and help from your family</b>	<b>On a Saturday morning you could take groups in and show us around</b>	
<b>People not being so judgmental</b>		
<b>More scholarship and internships</b>		
<b>More advice on living by yourself</b>		
<b>Try your best and always practice</b>		

**Give**

**US**

**Opportunities**

We need freedom to experiment with the possibilities.

We need to know what jobs are available to us.

We need our interests taken into consideration when choosing what we want to do.

TO FIND OUT WHAT WE ENJOY AND WHAT WE ARE GOOD AT

## Final thoughts

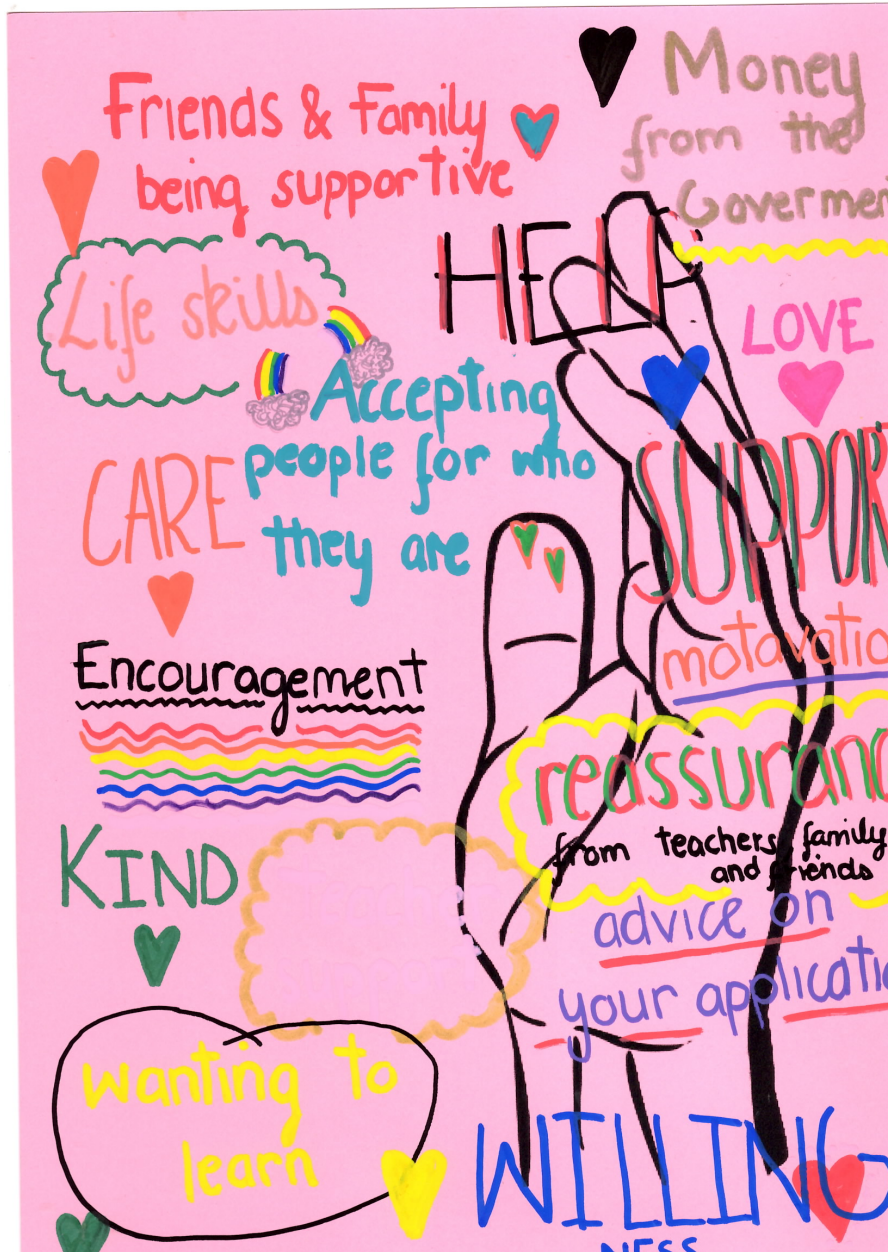
Children want to talk about their futures and explore all the different possibilities and ideas. For many children, the specifics of what they want to do in the future are unclear, but they know that they want to follow their interests and strengths and find their place in the world. They value their education and see learning as a way to find out about themselves, learn about the world around them and prepare themselves for the future.

Children overwhelmingly agree that all children in Scotland have the right to continue their education following secondary school if that is what the child wants. However, children also identify that there are external factors that impact whether children are actually able to pursue Higher and Further Education. These include finances, family circumstances, learning difficulties or disabilities as well as stigma and discrimination based on religion, ethnicity, gender and sexual orientation. Children recognise that success in learning is about more than natural abilities and effort and that sometimes factors beyond a child's control can negatively impact their capacity and ability to learn. They say this is unfair and want support from adults to make this better.

Children feel a tension between wanting to think about the future and prepare themselves by learning all they can and finding out about the practicalities of adult life and wanting to enjoy being young and exploring who they are before choosing a specific career path or identity. There is a sense that children feel overwhelmed and pressured by the idea that they have to choose a career and that this will impact the rest of their life. Children worry that this could mean choosing to do something you are good at but don't enjoy over something you love. When children consider their futures their potential career is only one part of this future; children talk about wanting to be someone who stands up for what they believe and wanting to make a difference in the world, to love what they do and to travel and be happy. Children want to feel equipped to make decisions about their future and feel that this should happen in their schools as well as at home. There is a hunger for learning both financial literacy and life skills and children express concern that they do not get the chance to explore and learn these important skills of adulthood before they leave home. They want to be given the tools and confidence to navigate the world of Higher and Further Education without feeling pressured or overwhelmed. They want the chance to practice these skills before the stakes feel too high and options become more limited.

Children want help from their schools to prepare them for an uncertain future. Children identify school as their main source of knowledge and information and expect support and guidance from their teachers. They suggest that increased links and connections between schools and HE/FE providers would provide a bridging between childhood and young adulthood. Increased exposure to life as an HE/FE student would help them prepare for this time in their life as well as help them make choices about which path to follow after school. Children want to be exposed to various career paths and possibilities at an early age when they are still eager to learn and excited about the future and before it becomes a stressful and overwhelming reality.

Children in Scotland have big dreams – not only for their own futures but for their ability to make the world better and to be creative and entrepreneurial in a new and changing world. They want support and thoughtful guidance from adults to help them turn their dreams into reality and want adults to understand that contemplating future careers and lives is difficult, uncertain and can provoke anxiety. When adults offer understanding, listen to children's views and ideas, and take action to help relieve financial and other forms of stress, children feel more capable, confident and ready to face their futures.



 **Children's Parliament**  
*giving ideas a voice*

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