

## Children's and young people's understandings and experiences of respect and disrespect

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### Introduction

Respect is a key ingredient in positive human relationships, but there is no consensus on how it manifests. The Northern Ireland Life and Times survey (NILT) has included questions on understandings and perceptions of respect for some time. The most recent data suggested that young adults were less likely to feel respected than older people (Fargas-Malet et al., 2025), suggesting that age is a key factor in experiences of respect.

Children and young people have rarely been asked about their understandings of respect and whether they feel respected or not. Therefore, in 2025, 4,191 10/11-year-olds in Northern Ireland who took part in the Kids' Life and Times (KLT) survey, and 1,087 16-year-olds who took part in the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey answered questions on respect and disrespect. These questions were asked as part of the RADICAL (Respect And Disrespect In Children's and Adolescents' Lives) research project and were co-designed with children and young people. RADICAL aimed to understand and theorise respect and disrespect from the perspectives of children and young people. It involved working with two Children and Young

People's Advisory Groups (CYPAGs), of which the co-authors of this Research Update are members. The groups, formed by members of the Belfast City Youth Council, and the 40th and 90th Belfast Scout groups, were involved in all stages of the research, including designing the research instruments, conducting some of the fieldwork, analysing data, presenting findings and co-designing outputs (see some images

from the project below). Members of both advisory groups reviewed and discussed the KLT and YLT survey results and these discussions, alongside additional analysis by the authors, have informed this Research Update.

In this Update, we explore 10/11-year-olds' and 16-year-olds' understandings, experiences and feelings of respect and disrespect.



Understandings and Perceptions of Respect

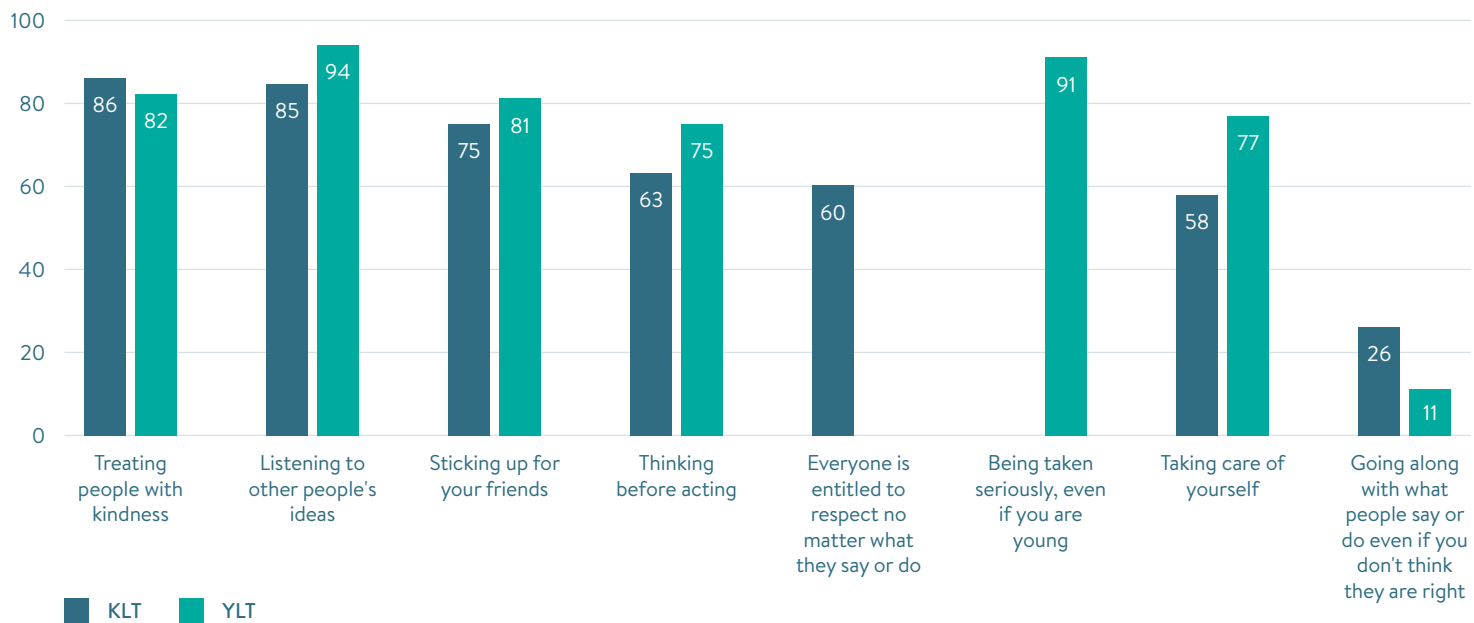
KLT and YLT respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements on what respect means. Most of the statements were the same in both surveys; however, ‘being taken seriously, even if you are young’ was only an option in the YLT survey, whilst ‘everyone is entitled to respect no matter what they say or do’ was incorporated in the KLT survey (Figure 1).

In both surveys, respect was predominantly understood as ‘listening to other people’s ideas’ - 94 per cent of YLT respondents and 85 per cent of KLT respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement. In addition, over nine in ten 16-year-olds agreed or strongly agreed that respect was about ‘being taken seriously’. In addition to listening, 16-year-olds equated respect with being heard. Respondents in both surveys also associated respect with kindness, with

over 80 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing that respect means ‘treating people with kindness’.

A noticeable difference between the two age groups concerns the importance of self-respect or the association between respect and self-care: a higher proportion of 16-year-olds than 10/11-year-olds agreed or strongly agreed with the statement ‘respect is taking care of yourself’ (77% vs 58%).

Figure 1: How much do you agree with the following statements? Respect is... (Percentage who agreed or agreed strongly – KLT 2025; YLT 2025)



Respondents in both surveys could add their own comments about respect in an open-ended question. Around 250 16-year-olds and 2,300 10/11-year-olds chose to do so. A thematic analysis of the diverse YLT comments identified the following themes:

- Respect is mutual or reciprocal;
- Respect is universal;
- Respect has to be earned through actions and behaviours;
- Respect is situational/context- and scenario-dependent (time and place-bound); and
- Respect is important and necessary in relationships.

Other common responses related to beliefs that:

- Young people are disrespected because of their age;
- Respect and disrespect are experienced differently by people from a range of backgrounds (e.g. different ethnic groups, different religious groups and different sexual and gender identities);
- Certain places/institutions can be more disrespectful to young people (e.g. schools, online, workplaces);
- Disrespect is normalised online/in social media; and
- Self-respect is important.

Similarly, KLT respondents also defined respect as either universal (everyone should be equally respected despite any differences), reciprocal/mutual, or, conversely, as something that is earned. In many of the free text responses, respect was also seen as an ‘expectation.’ There were also many comments associating respect with kindness, care and understanding, inclusion, listening to others, and valuing opinions.

Like the 16-year-olds, children also referred to age, and some commented on how older people expect respect from children without giving it themselves, and how adults should respect children:

“Adults should listen to your ideas and not just other adults - children should be heard too.”

“I think children should be respected more in public places and not underestimated for their age.”

Age, Respect and Disrespect

Children and young people were asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with two statements about age and respect – one reflecting the norm of respecting older people because of their age, and the other reflecting the idea that children are less respected because of their age (Table 1). Survey results show that only just over one third (35%) of 16-year-olds agreed or strongly agreed that children and young people should respect older people because of their

age. The proportion of 10/11-year-olds agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement was considerably higher (57%).

Regarding the second statement, the difference in responses between the two surveys was even greater, with 16-year-olds much more likely (78%) than 10/11-year-olds (41%) to agree or strongly agree that ‘young people/ children are less respected because of their age’. Some of the older members of

the CYPAGs thought this might reflect how children and young people are viewed differently, with children being seen as more innocent and vulnerable and young people being viewed as more problematic. They also felt that as they got older, they became better able to identify disrespectful attitudes and behaviours directed towards them.

Table 1: Perceptions about age and respect – how much do you agree or disagree with the following statements (%) (KLT 2025; YLT 2025)

	Strongly agree / Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree / Strongly disagree		Don't know	
	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT	KLT	YLT
Children should respect older people because they are older than them	57	35	23	31	13	32	7	1
Children/young people are less respected because of their age	41	78	20	13	22	6	16	3

Places and Spaces of Respect and Disrespect

Respondents of both surveys were asked about the extent to which children and young people felt respected or disrespected in different places and spaces, including school, home, hospital, etc. Other children had themselves identified the places and spaces listed in the survey in an earlier part of the RADICAL project.

In all spaces, apart from youth and sport clubs, a higher proportion of 16-year-olds than 10/11-year-olds stated that they felt disrespected. The difference in responses in relation to school was one of the starkest – 43 per cent of 16-year-olds compared to 11 per cent of 10/11-year-olds indicated that children/young people felt disrespected at school. The CYPAGs suggested a range of reasons about why this is the

case, including: social expectations and assumptions that younger children should be treated well or with more care; teenagers having a better understanding of disrespect and being more able to identify it; post-primary schools being more stressful environments than primary schools; and the size of schools, as primary schools are smaller and teachers know the children better.

Table 2: Top three places where children/young people feel respected or disrespected (highest percentages of always or mostly respected/disrespected) (KLT 2025; YLT 2025)

Top 3 places for experiences of respect YLT			Top 3 places for experiences of respect KLT		
1.	Doctor/Hospital	(83%)	1.	Doctor/Hospital	(90%)
2.	Youth Centres	(79%)	2.	Youth Centres	(78%)
3.	Sport Clubs/ Playing fields	(76%)	3.	Sport Clubs/ Playing fields	(74%)

Top 3 places for experiences of disrespect YLT			Top 3 places for experiences of disrespect KLT		
1.	Online	(51%)	1.	Online	(41%)
2.	School	(43%)	2.	Public transport	(16%)
3.	Public transport	(36%)	3.	Public spaces	(12%)

Online platforms were identified by the highest proportion of respondents as spaces where children/young people feel mostly or always disrespected – 51 per cent of 16-year-olds and 41 per cent of 10/11-year-olds. This is not surprising, given that online spaces are the least regulated and that disrespect has few or no consequences there. Attitudes between different groups of children were generally very small, but 17 per cent of children with a disability or medical condition said that children felt ‘always disrespected’ or ‘mostly disrespected’ in school compared to 9 per cent of those without a disability. Boys (13%) were also more likely than girls (9%) to say children are ‘always disrespected’ or ‘mostly disrespected’ at sports or on playing fields.

However, there were more significant differences between groups of 16-year-olds. For instance, female 16-year-olds were significantly more likely than their male counterparts to say that young people felt ‘always disrespected’ or ‘mostly disrespected’ in school (48% and 34% respectively), in public transport (40% and 29% respectively), in public places (31% and 25% respectively), or at the doctor/in hospital (11% and 5% respectively). In addition, 16-year-olds from not well-off family-financial backgrounds were significantly more likely than those from well-off backgrounds to report that young people felt always or mostly disrespected in school (54% and 39% respectively), at home (21% and 13% respectively), in public places (38% and 28% respectively)

and in their neighbourhood (25% and 11% respectively).

Consistent with the KLT findings, 16-year-olds with disabilities or long-term health conditions were more likely than those with no disability to express that young people experienced disrespect in some locations, including school (52% and 40% respectively), health settings (13% and 7% respectively), in their neighbourhood (21% and 11% respectively) and at home (21% and 15% respectively).

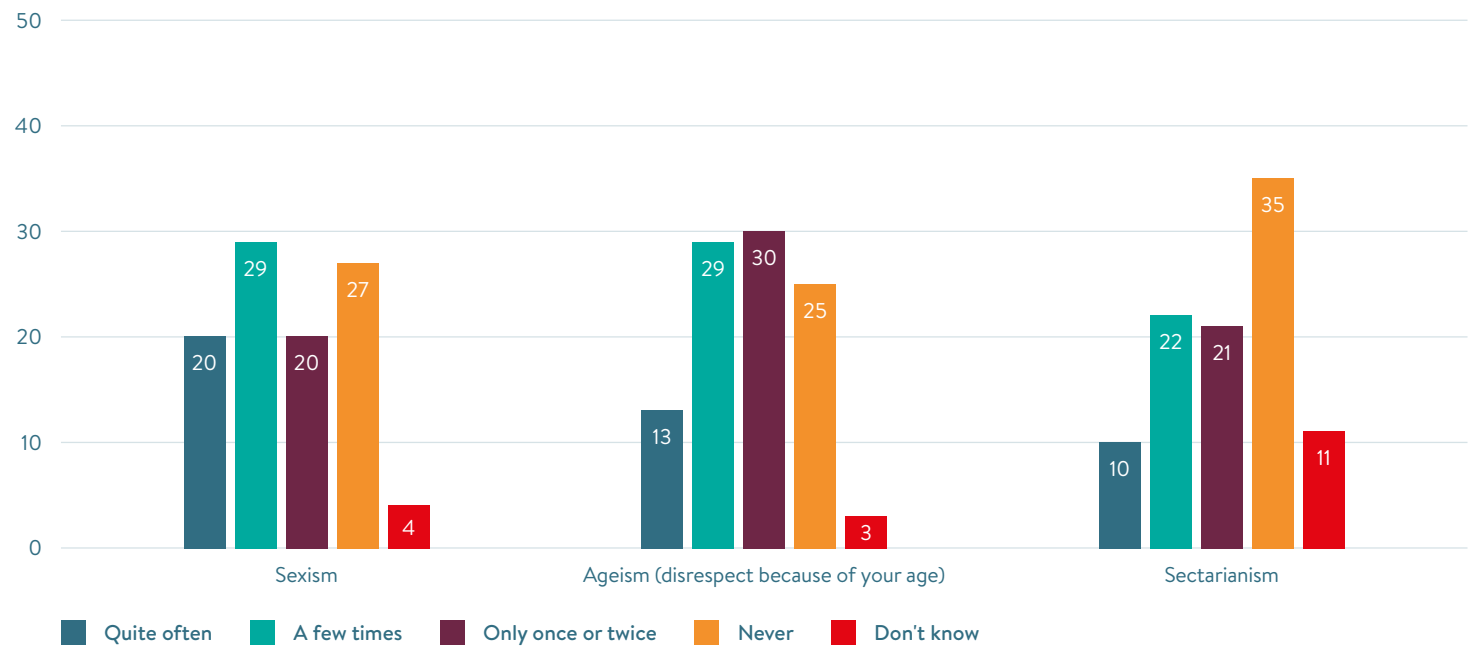
Personal Experiences of Disrespect

In the YLT survey, young people were asked an additional question on the frequency with which they had personally experienced different types of disrespect. The older CYPAG added this question as they felt that not everyone experiences respect/disrespect in the same way.

The data suggested age discrimination was a prevalent and overarching experience, with 72 per cent of YLT respondents reporting having experienced disrespect on the basis of age at least once (42%

experiencing it ‘a few times’ or ‘quite often’). There were no significant differences among different groups of young people in this respect. The other two most common types of disrespect were sexism (experienced ‘a few times’ or ‘quite often’ by 49% of 16-year-olds) and sectarianism (experienced ‘a few times’ or ‘quite often’ by 32% of 16-year-olds) (Figure 2). In addition, about one in five 16-year-olds (21%) said they ‘often’ or ‘a few times’ experienced disrespect from their boyfriends or girlfriends.

Figure 2: How often have you personally experienced any of the following forms of disrespect? (%) (YLT 2025)



There were considerable differences among groups of young people with regard to these experiences of disrespect. For instance, girls were twice as likely to report experiencing sexism than boys, with 62 per cent of females saying that they had experienced sexism ‘quite often’ or ‘a few times’ compared to 31 per cent of males. Same-sex attracted young people were also more likely to experience sexism compared to those who were opposite-sex attracted. Sectarianism and ageism were more likely to be experienced by those from not well-off family backgrounds. For example, 47 per cent of these young people experienced sectarianism ‘a few times’ or ‘quite often’ compared to 28 per cent of those from a well-off background.

Other types of disrespect also affected particular groups of young people. For instance, 68 per cent of same-sex attracted 16-year-olds reported having experienced homophobia at least once, with 20 per cent saying they had experienced this ‘quite often’. Experiencing racism at least once was reported by 64 per cent of 16-year-olds who identified as a member of a minority ethnic community, with a quarter saying they had experienced this ‘quite often’. Also, over half (54%) of those with a disability or long-term illness reported experiencing disrespect on the basis of a disability ‘at least once’, with 39 per cent saying they had experienced this ‘a few times’ or ‘quite often’.

Overall, the data demonstrates the high levels of disrespect experienced by young people generally (i.e. on the basis of age), as well as how some groups of young people experience particular and intersecting forms of disrespect on the basis of their sex, race, dis/ability, etc.

## Feelings and Impacts of Respect and Disrespect

Being respected or disrespected often has a substantial impact on how individuals feel. Both surveys asked children and young people how they feel ‘when you know someone respects you’ and ‘when other people do not respect you?’. Very few reported that they did not care whether they were respected. In both surveys, they were provided with a list of feelings identified by the members of the CYPAGs, and numerous responses were permitted.

### Feelings of respect

The most common feelings and emotions that children in the KLT survey associate with being respected were ‘happy’ (62%), ‘included’ (45%) and ‘accepted’ (42%). In contrast, feeling accepted (66%), being taken seriously (65%) and happy (63%) were the three emotions identified by the largest proportions of YLT respondents. There were stark differences between 10/11-year-olds and 16-year-old respondents. YLT respondents were much more likely than

KLT respondents to report feeling ‘taken seriously’ (65% and 30% respectively) and ‘accepted’ (66% and 42% respectively). Some CYPAG members felt that was probably because older young people care more about being taken seriously than P7 children.

### Feelings of disrespect

Regarding how respondents felt when they were not respected, the most common answer in both surveys was ‘annoyed’, although the proportion of 16-year-olds who reported feeling ‘annoyed’ was much higher (66%) than the proportion of 10/11-year-olds (46%). Other key differences were the higher proportion of YLT respondents who reported feeling ‘not taken seriously’ (56% compared to 31% of KLT respondents); and the higher proportion of KLT respondents who reported ‘I don’t really care’ (21% compared to 12% of YLT respondents). It was notable that among 10/11-year olds, boys were much more likely than girls to say they did not care.

### Impact of disrespect on mental health

KLT respondents were asked to self-assess their mental health. The answer options were ‘excellent’, ‘very good’, ‘good’, ‘fair’ or ‘poor’. Figure 3 suggests that respect and mental health go hand in hand, with 10/11-year-old children reporting that they did not feel respected more likely to report poorer mental health. Over half (54%) of children who said they did not feel respected self-assessed their mental health as ‘fair’ or ‘poor’, compared to only 14% of those who did not report feeling disrespected. Among 16-year-olds, all of the YLT respondents who said they did not really feel respected stated their mental was either ‘fair’ or ‘poor’.

## Conclusions

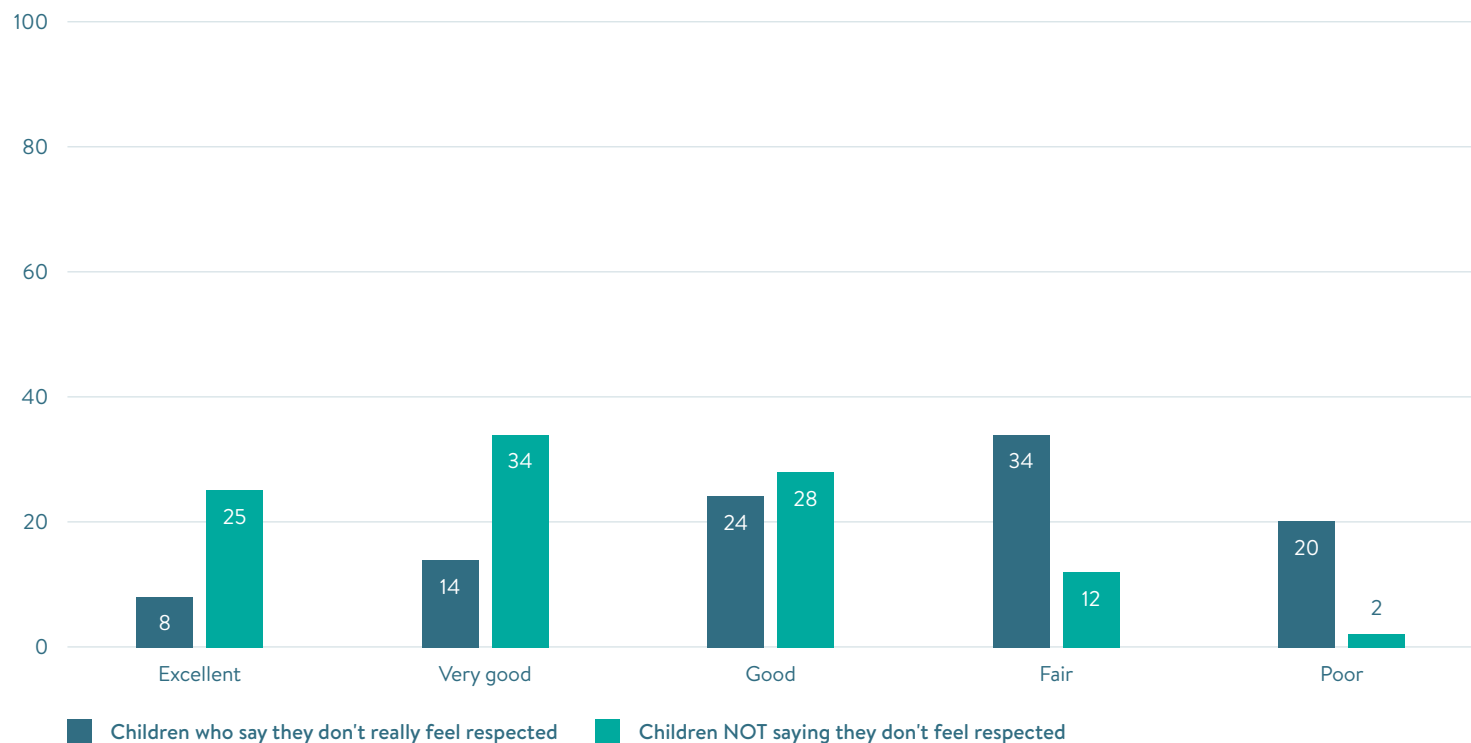
This Research Update explores the understandings and experiences of respect and disrespect among respondents to the KLT and YLT surveys in 2025. These data have never been collected from children and young people before. All questions were co-designed and co-analysed with children and young people. Although we found significant differences in responses between the two surveys, 10/11- and 16-year-olds agreed that respect is about listening to other people’s ideas. Most also understood it as treating others with kindness. For 16-year-olds, being taken seriously was particularly important. YLT respondents were also much more likely to agree that young people are less respected because of their age. We found that online spaces (KLT and YLT), school (YLT) and public transport (YLT)

are perceived as places where children and young people are more likely to experience disrespect. While a high proportion of young people reported experiencing disrespect because of their age, some children and young people were more likely to feel disrespected than others. These findings highlight the importance of respecting children and young people, as it can be associated with their emotional wellbeing and mental health.

These findings are relevant to many adults who interact with children and young people in a variety of spaces. Respect is about listening to children and young people, taking their views seriously, and showing care and kindness. Respect impacts on their feelings of inclusion, self-worth, emotional well-being and

mental health. Children and young people understand respect as reciprocal or mutual. Children and young people don’t feel respect is dependent on age; they feel they cannot be expected to give respect if it is not also shown to them. Reflecting on the survey findings, the CYPAGs felt that if children and young people are treated with respect, they are more likely to show respect to others, and to feel safe, secure, and happy. In turn, they are more likely to engage with and trust adults who show them respect. For children and young people, respect is very much about communication – so we should listen to them and take them seriously. This is their takeaway message.

**Figure 3: Mental health of children who say they don’t really feel respected compared to those who do not say this (%) (KLT)**



### Key Points:

- Children and young people (KLT and YLT respondents) identify respect as primarily about listening and being taken seriously.
- KLT participants (aged 10/11 years) tend to understand respect as something that is universal, whereas YLT participants (16-year-olds) are more likely to think of respect as reciprocal.
- Respect for oneself is more likely to be understood as respect by 16-year-olds than it is by 10/11-year-old children.
- Over three-quarters of YLT respondents (78%) agreed that young people are more disrespected because of their age.
- Young people (YLT) reported feeling more disrespected in a range of spaces than children (KLT) did, especially in school and on public transport.
- Particular groups of young respondents were more likely to experience disrespect than others, including female respondents, those with a disability, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, same-sex attracted young people and those from less well-off family backgrounds.
- Feeling disrespected was found to be associated with poorer mental health.



## References

**Fargas-Malet, M. et al. (2025)** *Respect in Northern Ireland: Exploring understandings, perceptions and feelings of respect*. Research Update 159. Belfast: ARK.

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The Young Life and Times (YLT) survey is carried out annually and records the opinions of 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland on a range of issues. YLT is a joint project of Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, and provides an independent source of information on what young people think. In total 2,129 16-year olds took part in the 2025 YLT survey. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/ylt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/ylt)

The Kids' Life and Times survey is also a joint initiative between the two main Northern Ireland universities, and provides an independent source of information on what children think about the issues affecting their lives. In 2025, 4,191 10/11-year-olds completed the survey in school. For more information, visit the survey website at [www.ark.ac.uk/klt](http://www.ark.ac.uk/klt)



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