Growing Up in New Zealand

Now We Are Twelve

Life in early adolescence

Snapshot 9 of 9
June 2023

Relationships

With parents, peers and special adults

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What do we know about young people's relationships?

Young people's relationships with their parents and primary caregivers remain foundational through middle childhood. In addition, supportive and caring relationships with peers and a variety of non-parental adults become increasingly important as young people mature. For many people in New Zealand, including Māori, Pacific, and Asian families, the concept of family or whānau itself encompasses a wider familial and non-familial system of connectedness. Therefore, the distinction between parent or primary caregiver and other important adults does not predominantly feature, and instead, a collective responsibility for children exists (1,2). Shared rights and responsibilities for raising children and young people means that there are a range of skills and resources available to the child, that are not necessarily present in a nuclear family context (1). Accounting for an array of relationships is therefore culturally relevant, particularly for Māori.

In addition, we know that cognitive, physical, and social changes taking place during adolescence influence the depth and breadth of relationships (3). These changes create opportunities for young people to develop and form more complex relationships with others (depth) and increased independence and expanding social networks enable young people to form connections with others in the wider community (breadth). As a key component of positive youth development, positive social relationships during adolescence enhance wellbeing and provide a foundation for healthy transitions to adulthood (4). Furthermore, it is important to consider how diversity in social connections support child wellbeing, as higher levels of cultural connectedness, which are associated with diverse family forms, have been shown to promote socio-emotional development among tamariki Māori (5). Diverse family structures and childhood wellbeing have also been explored in other communities, including the many heterogeneous groups umbrellaed under the terms Asian, Pacific and MELAA (6,7,8,9).

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What can *Growing Up in New Zealand* add?

In this data collection wave we have been able to capture young people's self-reported experiences of their relationships with their parents (or primary caregivers, see below), their friends or peers, and other (non-parental) special adults. These relationships are often identified as the three central relationships that individually influence adolescent wellbeing (10,11). Examining these three key relationships holistically, and with an understanding of the limitations of each on its own, is particularly important in the Aotearoa New Zealand context where, for many young people, strong relational ties are not limited to the nuclear family. Furthermore, special adult relationships have not previously been reported in Aotearoa New Zealand in this age group. In this snapshot we present analyses comparing young people's experiences of their relationships across different groups according to their gender (including trans and non-binary), ethnicity (total response), household composition and area level deprivation score.

See Methodology describing the derivation of gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic deprivation.

Analyses of parent-child relationships and peer relationships by disability are presented in the Disability snapshot.

Measuring young people's relationships

To measure young people's experiences of their relationships with their parent(s) or primary caregiver(s) (hereafter parent(s)*), we used a validated 8-item scale, with questions including "I trust my parent(s)", and "My parent(s) understands me". They answered each question using a scale from 1-4, where 1 indicated "almost always true", 2 = "often true", 3 = "sometimes true", 4 = "almost never true". For more information about the parent-child relationships scale, see Relationships – Supplementary Material.

To measure young people's experiences of their relationships with their friends or peers, we used a similar, validated, 8-item scale, with questions including "I trust my friend(s)", and "My friends listen to what I say". Young people answered each question using a scale from 1-5, where 1 indicated "almost always true", 2 = "often true", 3 = "sometimes true", 4 = "seldom true", 5 = "almost never true". For more information about this peer relationships scale, see Relationships – Supplementary Material.

To measure young people's relationships with other important adults in their lives, we used a validated tool, identifying the 'Presence of a Special Adult(s)'. A special adult was, by definition, "someone who does a lot of good things for you but is NOT your parent or guardian. For example, someone (a) who you look up to and encourages you to do your best, (b) who really cares about what happens to you, (c) who influences what you do and the choices you make, and (d) who you can talk to about personal problems." Young people told us whether they had someone that fitted this description, how many people of this description, and their relationships to them. For more information about the Special Adult tool, see Relationships – Supplementary Material.

*Who are the 'parents'?

We asked young people specifically about their parents or caregivers, defined as "the people who look after you the most". This could be one parent if they are mainly looked after by one person in their family (e.g., Dad or Aunty), or both/several parents if they are normally looked after by two or more people (e.g., Mum and Grandma).

Note: Young people's voices are included throughout the report to bring the findings to life.

Key findings

- Most young people experienced high levels of trust and communication with their parents. Ninety-seven percent of young people reported that their parents accept them "almost always" or "often", and 92% said they can "almost always" or "often" count on their parents to help them when they have a problem.
- Young people also experienced largely positive relationships with their peers. Most young people answered that they trust their friends and feel that their friends are good friends.
- Almost half (48%) of young people reported that they had one or more special adults in their lives – these adults came from many different areas of their social communities. Grandparents, uncles and aunts, and teachers were the three most common categories of special adult.
- Often, young people who experienced less close relationships with their parents were more likely to identify at least one special adult in their lives. For example, young people living in areas of higher socioeconomic deprivation were less likely to report strong relationships with their parents but were more likely to have a special adult relationship compared to those living in lower socioeconomic deprivation.
- Rangatahi Māori and Pacific young people were more likely to have a special adult in their lives compared to sole European young people.
- While transgender and non-binary young people experienced less trusting and communicative relationships with their parents compared to cisgender girls and boys, they were just as likely to identify a special adult in their lives.
- Cisgender girls reported stronger relationships with their peers compared to cisgender boys and transgender and non-binary young people.
- The majority of young people in the cohort had two or three strong relationships. Less than 1% of the total cohort 12-year olds reported having less close relationships with parent(s) and peers, as well as no special adult in their lives.

What does a close relationship mean?

It is important to note that throughout this snapshot, while we refer to relationships that are 'less close' or 'less strong', this does not mean that the relationships themselves are weak or distant. These are terms we have used to compare groups of young people who are experiencing relationships in slightly different ways. While relationships are an integral part of a young person's life, they are ultimately dynamic, and personal, and the weight or value of each relationship is dependent on many inter-related factors, including immediate and past experiences, personal needs and goals, family dynamics as well as wider societal and cultural contexts.

Young people's relationships with their parent(s) at age 12

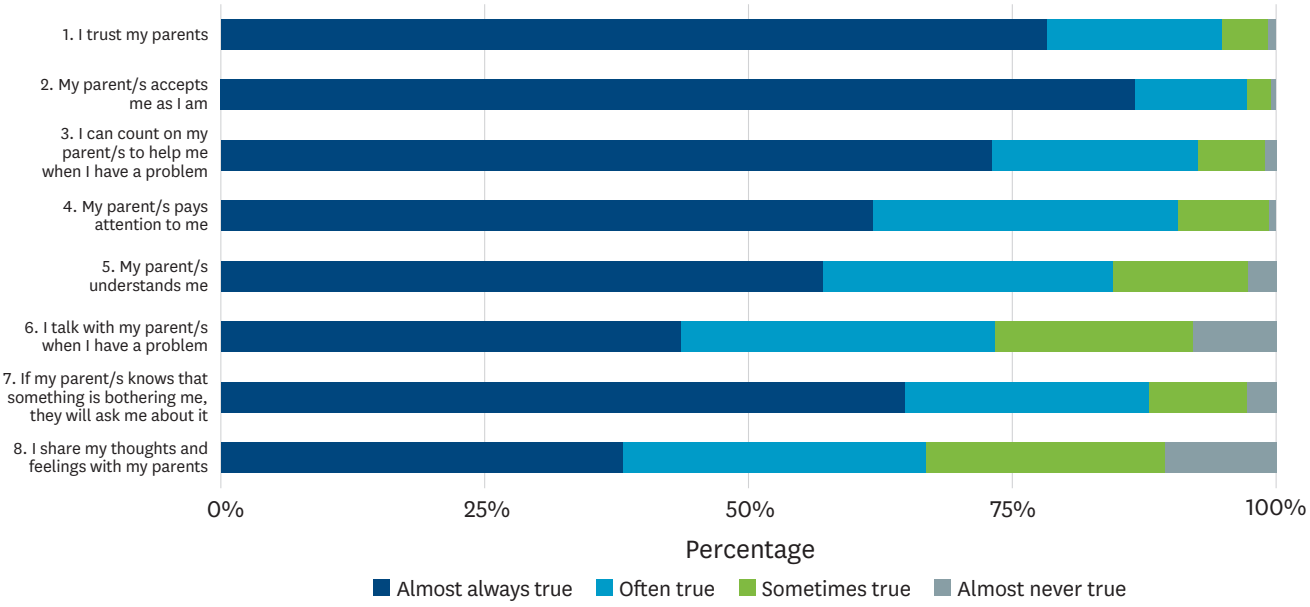

Figure 1: Young people's reports of their relationships with their parent(s)

Overall, we found that most 12-year-olds experienced positive, trusting, and communicative relationships with their parent(s) (mean sum score = 12.4, sd = 4.5, *n* = 4,199). When we examined the way young people answered each question individually, we found that the most positively answered question was parental acceptance – 96.9% of young people reported that their parents accept them "almost always" or "often". In addition, 93.8% of young people told us they trust their parents "almost always" or "often" (see Figure 1).

Young people overall reported higher levels of trust (questions 1-5; mean score = 1.4, sd = 0.5, *n* = 4,199) than communication with their parent(s) (questions 6-8; mean score = 1.8, sd = 0.8, *n* = 4,199). (Note that lower scores indicate more positive parent-child relationships). We also found that although just 42.4% of young people reported that they would "almost always" talk with their parents when they had a problem, 63.6% said that their parents would "almost always" ask them about something if they could tell that something was bothering them, and 71.6% said that they could "almost always" count on their parents when they have a problem. This may indicate the developmental progression of relationships with parents at this age – while communication can be challenging, levels of trust and general acceptance remain strong.

Parental relationship scores were investigated further to understand how specific groups of young people were experiencing these relationships.

I have a great family and good parents who love me the way I am and always support me in any way they can even if they are busy they still have time for me

Gender

There was a significant association between a young person's gender and their parent-child relationship score (Kruskal-Wallis $X^2 = 140.57$, df = 2, $p < 0.001$) (Figure 2). Transgender/non-binary young people (mean = 14.4, $n = 649$) experienced significantly less close relationships with their parent(s) than both cisgender boys (mean = 11.7, $n = 1{,}941$) and cisgender girls (mean = 12.3, $n = 1{,}609$). Cisgender boys experienced slightly stronger relationships with their parent(s) than cisgender girls and transgender/non-binary young people.

Ethnicity

When comparing each of the major ethnic groups to the sole European group, we found small, statistically significant differences. Rangatahi Māori (mean = 12.6, $n = 899$), Asian young people (mean = 12.9, $n = 602$) and Pacific young people (mean = 12.6, $n = 651$) experienced slightly less close relationships with their parents compared to sole European young people (mean = 12.0, $n = 2170$) (t = -3.24, df = 1548.8, $p < 0.01$; t = -3.91, df = 844.1, $p < 0.001$; t = -2.54, df = 979.0, $p = 0.01$, respectively).

Household composition

There were small, significant associations between a young person's household composition and their parent-child relationships score. Young people from two or more parent families (mean = 12.3, $n = 3{,}476$) experienced slightly stronger relationships with their parents compared to those from single parent families (mean = 12.8, $n = 680$) ($X^2 = 11.33$, df = 2, $p < 0.01$).

Additionally, young people not living with extended family experienced slightly stronger relationships with their parent(s) (mean = 12.3, $n = 3{,}710$) than those living with extended family (mean = 12.9, $n = 467$) ($X^2 = 6.65$, df = 1, $p < 0.01$). Young people not living in intergenerational households (mean = 12.3, $n = 3812$) also experienced slightly stronger relationships with their parent(s) than those living in intergenerational households (mean = 12.9, $n = 365$) ($X^2 = 4.12$, df = 1, $p < 0.05$).

There was also a small but significant correlation between a young persons' household size and their relationship with their parent(s) (F = 18.13, $p < 0.001$). Larger households were correlated with less close relationship experiences with their parent(s), however this correlation was slight (Multiple $R^2 = 0.004$).

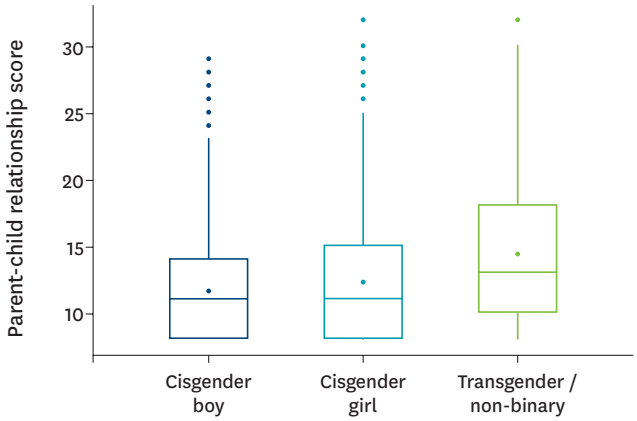

Figure 2: Parent-child relationship scores, by gender

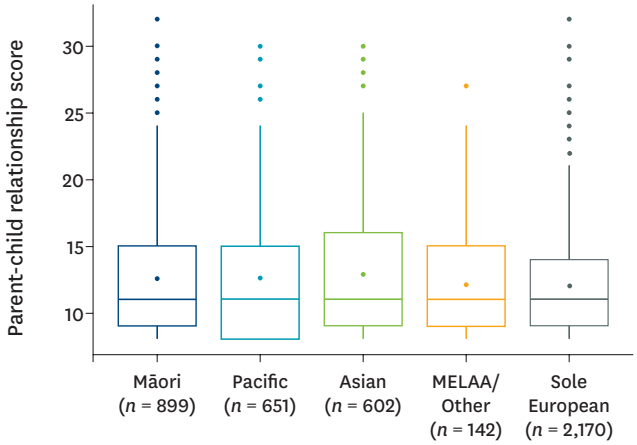

Figure 3: Parent-child relationship scores, by ethnicity

Area level deprivation

There was a significant association between the level of socioeconomic deprivation in the area where young people in the study live (2018 NZDeprivation Index) and their parent-child relationships score (Kruskal-Wallis $X^2 = 27.88$, df = 4, $p < 0.001$). Young people who lived in areas of highest deprivation (NZDep quintile 5) experienced less trusting and communicative relationships with their parent(s) (mean = 13.3, $n = 690$) compared to all other areas.

See Methodology for an understanding of area level deprivation and material hardship in our cohort.

Having a big loving family and being around the people I care about most

Young people's relationships with their peers at age 12

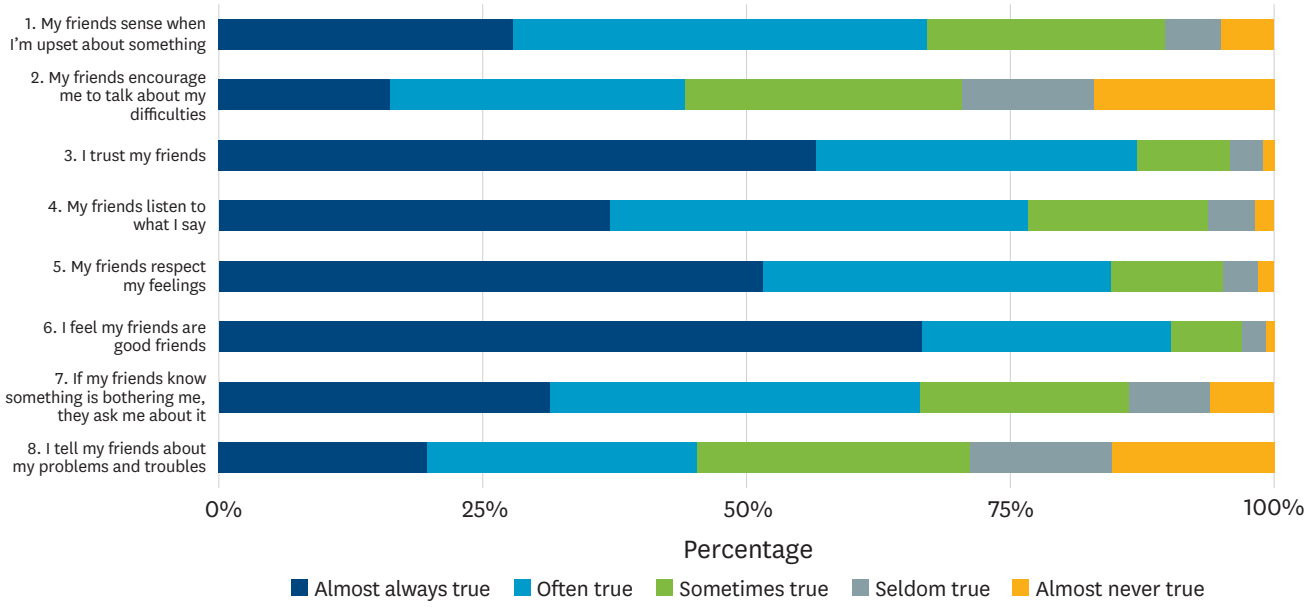

Figure 4: Young people's reports of their relationships with their peers

Overall, the average peer relationships score indicated that most 12-year-olds experience positive, trusting and communicative relationships with their peers (mean = 16.8, sd = 6.1, *n* = 3,744). (Note that lower scores indicate more positive peer relationships). When examining individual questions, we found that the most positively answered questions were "I trust my friends" and "I feel my friends are good friends" (answered "almost always true" or "often true" by 85.5% and 89.4% of young people respectively). The least positively endorsed statements related to communication: "My friends encourage me to talk about my difficulties" and "I tell my friends about my problems and troubles" (answered "almost always true" or "often true" by 42.0% and 42.7% of young people respectively). (See Figure 4).

As found within parent-child relationships, young people generally experienced higher levels of trust (questions 3-6: mean = 1.7, sd = 0.7, *n* = 3,744) than communication with their peers (questions 1-2, 7-8: mean score = 2.5, sd = 1.0, *n* = 3,744). Scores were then investigated across sociodemographic characteristics to understand how specific groups of young people were experiencing these relationships.

Being myself and having great, supporting friends around me!

Gender

There was a significant relationship between a young person's gender and their peer relationship score (Kruskal-Wallis $X^2 = 179.13$, df = 2, $p <$ 0.001) (See Figure 5). Cisgender girls reported stronger peer relationships (mean = 15.3, sd = 5.9) than both cisgender boys (mean = 17.7, sd = 5.8) and transgender and non-binary young people (mean = 18.0, sd = 6.7).

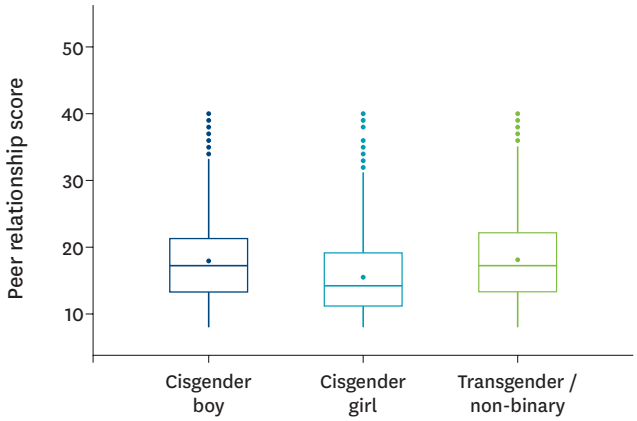

Figure 5: Peer relationship scores, by gender

Ethnicity

Across most ethnicities, young people told us they experienced strong peer relationships (see Figure 6). However, Pacific young people reported experiencing slightly stronger relationships with their peers (mean = 16.1, sd = 5.9) than young people of sole European ethnicity (mean = 16.9, sd = 6.1) (t = 2.75, df = 987.5, $p < 0.01$).

There were no significant differences between young people's peer relationship scores according to their household composition, household size or area level deprivation. This indicates that young people living in a diverse range of households and contexts experienced relationships with their friends and peers in similar ways.

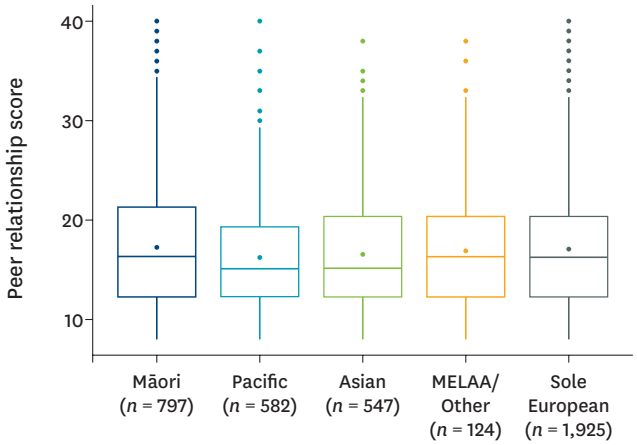

Figure 6: Peer relationship scores, by ethnic identity

Young people's relationships with special adult(s)

There were 2,124 out of 4,461 12-year-olds who reported having a special (non-parental) adult in their lives, representing almost half of all the young people in our cohort (47.6%). Around one third (35.4%, n = 1,577) reported not having a special adult in their lives, and 17.0% (n = 760) answered "I don't know". For young people who reported having a special adult(s) in their lives, the mean number of special adults was 4.8 (sd = 3.0, range = 1-10, n = 2,124).

We then explored the characteristics of young people who reported having a special (non-parental) adult in their lives and those who did not. [Those who answered "don't know" were treated as missing for these analyses].

Firstly, we found that cisgender girls and transgender and non-binary young people were more likely to have a special adult in their lives than not have a special adult (51.1% and 48.4% respectively) and the proportions who had a special adult were higher than that of cisgender boys (44.5%)($X^2 = 46.96$, df = 4, $p < 0.001$). Rangatahi Māori and Pacific young people were more likely to report having a special adult(s) in their lives than sole European young people ($X^2 = 13.16$, df = 2, $p = 0.001$; $X^2 = 18.40$, df = 2, $p <$ 0.001). In contrast, Asian young people were slightly less likely to report having a special adult(s) in their lives than sole European young people ($X^2 = 6.05$, df = 2, $p <$ 0.05). There were no significant differences for MELAA and "Other" young people's reporting of a special adult compared to sole European young people.

Having family, teachers and friends who support me

We also found that young people living in more socioeconomically deprived areas were more likely to identify a special adult(s) in their lives compared to young people living in less deprived areas ($X^2 = 15.86$, df = 4, $p < 0.01$). There were no differences in young people's reporting of a special adult according to their household composition or household size.

Who are young people's special adults?

The young people in our cohort then told us who the non-parental special adult(s) were in their lives (see Figure 7). Young people were able to select more than one special adult, and in total there were 15 categories. Two thirds of young people who reported a special adult (n = 2,124) identified them as a grandparent (65.0%, n = 1,381). The second largest category was 'aunt or uncle', chosen by over half of young people (50.8%, n = 1,079). Note that 'aunt or uncle' could potentially include close family friends, given the varied meanings of these terms for different families.

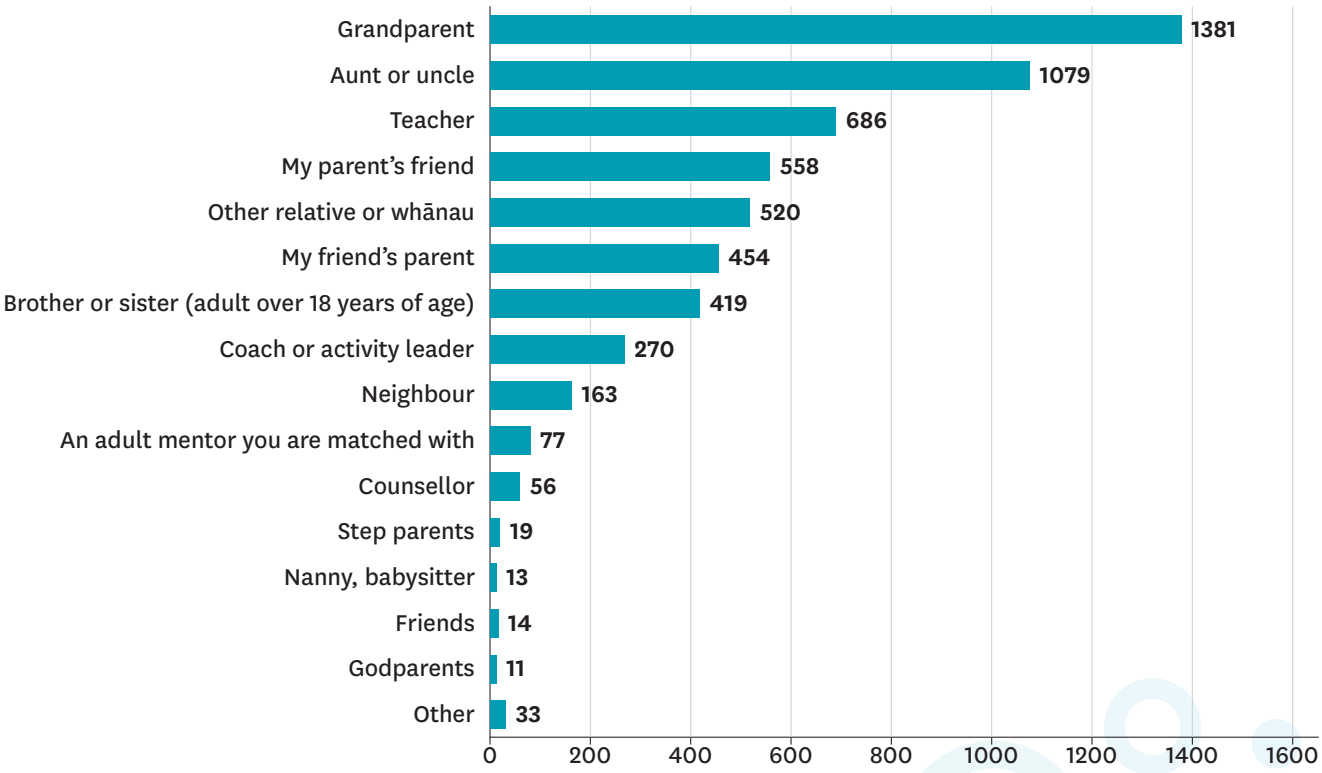

Figure 7: Type of special (non-parental) adult

We also examined the most common categories of special adult to see how young people of different ethnicities are gaining support from different members of their community. The highest proportion of young people reporting having a grandparent as their special adult were rangatahi Māori (71.0%, n = 368). Of those who reported having an aunt or uncle, a brother or sister, and other relatives or whānau, the highest proportions were reported by Pacific young people (65.8%, n = 263; 34.3%, n = 137; 36.5%, n = 146, respectively).

Of those who reported a parent's friend, or a friend's parent, the highest proportions were reported by young people of sole European ethnicity (29.7%, n = 311; 24.9%, n = 261). Again, this finding may reflect different interpretations of 'friend', 'aunt', and 'uncle' in different cultural contexts as well as different languages.

Because I have an awesome family and have two really nice big brothers who sometimes love me a lot

Young people's networks of social and familial support

To understand how parental, peer and special adult relationships were experienced together, we combined a young person's relationship with their parent(s) (using a collapsed binary 'less close'/'strong' parent-child relationship variable), their relationship with their peers (also using a collapsed binary 'less close'/'strong' peer relationships variable), and whether they reported having a special adult in their lives (yes/no) (n = 3,079, see Figure 8).

By examining these three sources of support together, we can begin to explore young people's networks of support at 12 years of age to see if there are groups who experience these in similar ways, and whether there are any gaps in their support networks.

See Supplementary material for a description of how these variables were created.

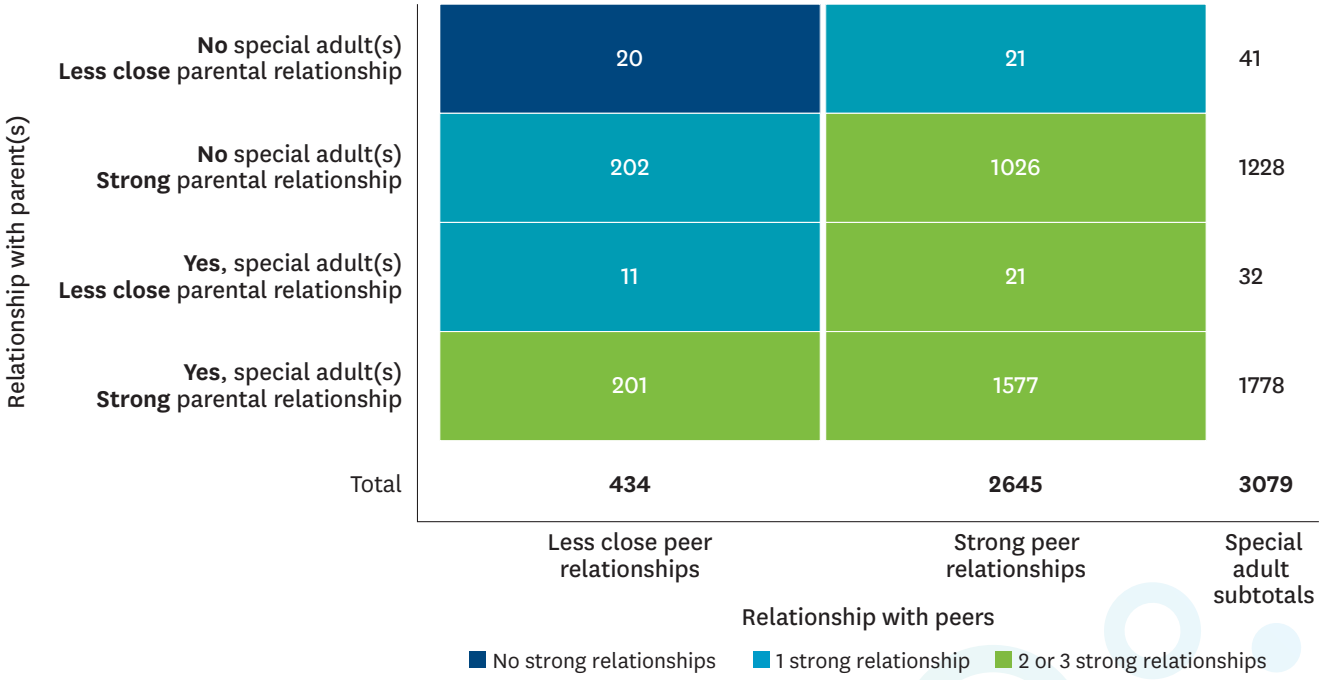

Figure 8: Young people's networks of social and familial support

The largest group of young people experienced strong relationships with their parent(s), strong relationships with their peers, and additionally had at least one special adult in their lives (n = 1,577). The second largest group had strong relationships both with their parent(s) and peers but did not have a special adult in their lives (n = 1,026).

Together, 91.8% of young people experienced two or three strong relationships (n = 2,825), while 7.6% of young people experienced only one strong relationship (n = 234). Importantly, there were only 20 young people – less than one percent of our sample – who reported having less close relationships with parent(s) and peers, as well as no special adult in their lives.

These results indicate that the majority of 12-year olds in Aotearoa New Zealand in our study are able to rely on the support of trusting and communicative relationships with several people in their lives. Additionally, often where one area of support is lacking, another relationship is strong, demonstrating that young people are able to draw from multiple sources of support. For example, 403 young people who experienced less close relationships with their peers reported that they experienced strong relationships with their parent(s).

Together, these results provide the opportunity to further explore whether there are any demographic characteristics of groups who experienced strong and diverse relational support compared to those who did not. Furthermore, future research could explore the positive outcomes associated with young people's networks of support in Aotearoa New Zealand, including self-esteem, mental wellbeing and educational outcomes. See the Mental Health Snapshot for an exploration of how relationships impact wellbeing outcomes, and the Covid-19 Snapshot to read about how young people with stronger relationships with their parents were less worried about the impacts of COVID-19.

Relevance for policy and practice

Young people are generally experiencing positive relationships

Most young people experienced strong relationships with their parent(s). Importantly, although young people are extending their social networks during middle childhood and tend to spend less time with their parents, the primary caregiver-young person relationship remains central and important, as it continues to provide a framework for relating to others (12). It is crucial to support and maintain these relationships for all young people and their families, as the quality of this relationship is associated with a number of positive developmental outcomes for children, including self-regulation, coping, prosocial behaviour, and positive relationships with others (e.g., siblings and peers), and can persist into adulthood (13).

Most young people also experienced positive, trusting and communicative relationships with their peers, and almost half of the cohort reported having at least one special adult relationship in their lives. Together, less than one percent of the cohort reported having less close relationships with their parent(s), peers and no special adult relationship in their lives. These are promising findings given the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy's vision that children and young people feel 'loved, safe and nurtured' and 'accepted, respected and connected' (14), and the connection between relational support and youth thriving (10).

Material support may improve parent-child relationships

We found that 12-year-olds living in the most socioeconomically deprived areas experienced less close relationships with their parent(s) compared to young people living in other areas. This finding may reflect how experiences of poverty and material hardship disrupt the opportunity to create strong relationships between parents and children. For example, parents living in areas of high deprivation are more likely to work multiple jobs, or work night shifts (15), which is likely to influence how much time parents are able to spend with their child. Greater material support for parents could alleviate some financial pressures, thereby creating the conditions for young people to have stronger relationships with their parents.

However, we also found that young people living in areas of high deprivation were also more likely to have a relationship with a special adult compared to those living in the least deprived areas. While there may be confounding results as experiences of socioeconomic deprivation and ethnicity overlap, this finding indicates the strength of collective caregiving in these areas and merits further exploration. When families are contending with significant financial pressures, they have strategies in place to provide their children with strong, secure relationships with other adults. This finding also points to the importance of understanding how best to leverage social capital and social assets in poor communities (16). Initiatives such as youth-initiated mentoring could play a role in further enhancing and supporting positive youth outcomes (17). Our findings also show that when considering policy and funding initiatives, it is crucial that collective caregiving is taken into account.

Collective Care – Recognising who supports our young people

Getting to have all the people in my life there for me and having loving and supportive family and friends

The number and diversity of special adults identified by young people clearly illustrates that they are sourcing support from many special adults in their lives, including grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers, adult siblings, and other adult friends and whānau. 12-year-olds are identifying members of their extended family and whānau as well as members of the community, and recognising the special and unique place they hold in their everyday lives. It is important to note that the qualities used to define a special adult included someone a young person can talk to if they have personal problems. Given some young people reported lower levels of communication with their parent(s) and/or their peers, it is encouraging to know many have a special adult they can turn to for additional support. A diverse range of social supports in the form of positive and sustained adult-youth relationships both within and outside the family, are crucial for young people's development and growth (18).

Our findings suggest that policy interventions for children and young people should engage with young people's broader communities, which may better reflect their diverse and complex relational networks. Policy interventions that primarily target parents and 'primary caregivers' may only cater to a subset of young people in New Zealand where the nuclear family is the primary source of support. Our results can also inform immigration and housing policy around the importance of young people's extended networks of support including consideration for multi-generational households. For example, previous research in New Zealand has explored how the current NZ immigration scheme does not readily accommodate some groups' cultural preference for living as multi-generational families in NZ (7).

While young people's relationships with their primary caregivers remain foundational through middle childhood, it is important to note that parenting itself is informed by wider socio-cultural values, thus the specific expectations parents have for their children may vary across ethnic groups and cultures. Consequently, the parent-child relationship may hold different weight for young people depending on their culture and worldview. Furthermore, Māori, Pacific and Asian worldviews of childrearing differ from the western worldview that considers the parent-child relationship the primary one. For Māori, childrearing comes with a principle of collective whānau responsibility to children, and young people are understood to be part of a wider whānau, hapū and iwi rather than just being in relation to their parents (1). Other researchers (2) also note that among Pacific peoples, caring for children is not the sole responsibility of parents, as is common in European families. Instead, it is common for extended family members, including grandparents and adult siblings, to play an active role in raising children (2).

Further measurement and analysis of relationships including who provides care and support for young people at age 12 needs to better reflect a contemporary vision of Aotearoa. In the future it will be important to understand how the diversity of young people's relational networks grows as young people continue to develop their sense of identity and connection with other social institutions and communities.

Supporting transgender and non-binary young people

We found that transgender and non-binary young people were, on average, significantly less likely to have strong relationships with their parents compared to cisgender young people. This may indicate that these families face societal pressures that can place additional strain on their relationships. Our findings highlight the need to improve whānau support around understanding and embracing a range of gender identities in children and young people, especially for grandparents and aunts and uncles who are a common source of support at this age. Another GUiNZ report demonstrates that transgender and non-binary children are a part of all ethnic communities, therefore culturally responsive guidance is also required for families and whānau (19).

However, transgender and non-binary young people were just as likely to have at least one special adult relationship as cisgender young people, and were also as likely to have strong relationships with their peers as cisgender boys. Both special adult relationships and strong peer relationships are clearly very important to transgender and non-binary young people. One policy mechanism for supporting the strength of these non-parental relationships is through ensuring safe and supportive school environments (20). Professional learning about gender can strengthen knowledge and can prepare teachers and school staff to act as special adults for transgender and non-binary young people. Further, ensuring a safe school environment for transgender and non-binary young people may also require anti-bullying programmes in schools, as outlined in the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy (21).

See the School Engagement snapshot for information about young people's school engagement and the importance of the teacher-child relationship.

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Growing Up in New Zealand

Now We Are Twelve

Life in early adolescence

Further Details

Supplementary material for this snapshot is available to download.

The introduction to the 12-year data collection wave and the methodology used to analyse the 12-year data can be downloaded as a PDF.

About the *Growing Up in New Zealand* Now We Are Twelve snapshot series

The Now We Are 12 Snapshots are accessible summaries of policy-relevant research findings from *Growing Up in New Zealand*, this country's largest longitudinal study of child health and wellbeing. Other snapshots in this series can be found **here**. An **introduction** to the 12-year data collection wave and the **methodology** used to analyse the 12-year data can be downloaded as a PDF. **Supplementary material** for this snapshot can also be downloaded.

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