

Understanding public attitudes towards early childhood

Report produced by Ipsos on behalf of the Royal Foundation Centre for Early Childhood

June 2023

First in a series of 2023 reports

Contents

1

Perceived
importance of early
childhood

Slide 5

2

Knowledge &
understanding of
early years

Slide 18



Methodology

- Ipsos interviewed 4,680 adults aged 16+ across the UK through the online Ipsos i-Say panel from the 19th April – 2nd May 2023.
- From these responses, we present nationally representative results from interviews with the **general population based on 4,000 interviews**. This includes grandparents, adults with no children, and those saying they are likely to have children in the near future. Data were weighted by gender, age, region, working status and ethnicity.
- Separately, we present results from interviews with **parents of children aged 0-5 based on 1,011 interviews**. This includes 331 parents of children aged 0-5 from the general population sample, and a boost of a further 680 interviews. Data were weighted by gender, age and ethnicity.
- As this is a sample of the population, all results are subject to a ‘margin of error’, which means small differences may not be statistically significant. Where results do not sum to 100%, this may be due to computer rounding, multiple responses, or the exclusion of “don’t know” categories.
- Please note, for the purpose of this study, the ‘early years’ or ‘early childhood’ was defined within the survey as: **“the period between the start of pregnancy and the age of 5”**.
- This is the second wave of the Annual Perceptions Survey. Where appropriate, we have shown differences compared to the 2022 survey which followed a similar methodology.

Background to research

The Centre for Early Childhood was established within The Royal Foundation in June 2021 to drive awareness and action on the extraordinary impact of early childhood. In support of this mission, The Centre commissioned Ipsos to conduct research into public perceptions and knowledge of the early years.

The research presented in this report builds upon a baseline understanding of the perceived importance of early childhood which The Royal Foundation and Ipsos established during an [initial wave of research conducted](#) in 2022.

We identified core trackers questions from that wave and repeated them this year to see how understanding has changed in the intervening period. Alongside these trackers, new questions were developed to explore key areas in more depth. This report is the first in a series to be generated from the research.

During the period between these waves, the Royal Foundation launched their “[Shaping Us](#)” campaign, spearheaded by Her Royal Highness The Princess of Wales, which aims to raise awareness of the critical importance of early childhood in shaping the adults we become.



1

Perceived importance of early childhood



Key findings

1.

Nine in ten (93%) recognise the importance of early childhood in shaping later life, with a small uplift in the proportion saying it is *very* important (70%, +4ppts).

Similarly, slightly more, now nearer one in five (19%, +2ppts), identify pregnancy to 5 as the most important period for shaping a child's future life.

2.

In line with previous years, seven in ten (70%) agree the development of children in early childhood should be more of a priority for wider society – around two in five (43%) think it currently is.

There has been an increase in the proportion of parents thinking early childhood needs to be more of a priority, however, there is little change among groups who need the most convincing (e.g. non-parents).

One in four (26%) now agree that children's development shouldn't be a priority given other problems facing the UK, which while still a minority is up 4ppts since last year.

3.

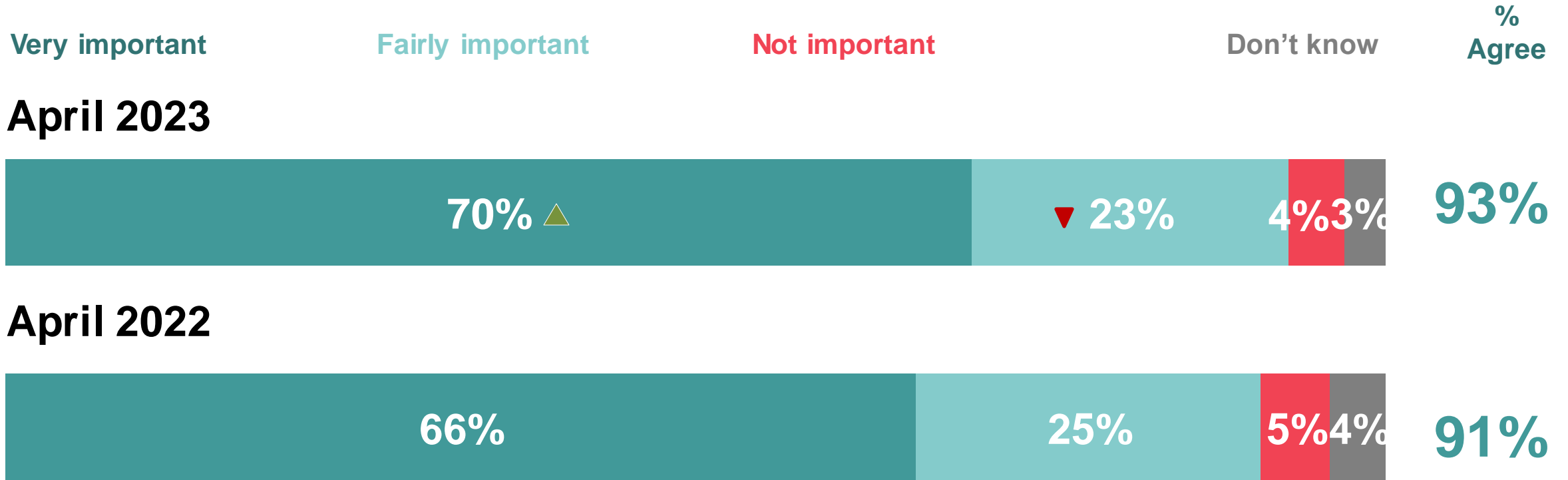
The public make the link between early childhood and a person's future mental health, happiness and relationship skills, with over two in five saying a child's development during this period has a *great* deal of impact on these areas.

However, the association between development in early childhood and a child's future career or academic achievements is weaker (nearer a third saying it has a *great* deal of impact).

People are most motivated by wanting to see children living healthy, happy lives and protecting their mental health. This is true of both potential long and short term benefits.

Nine in ten recognise the importance of early childhood in shaping later life, with the proportion saying it's very important up slightly from last year

Q How important, if at all, do you feel the period of early childhood is in shaping a person's future life?



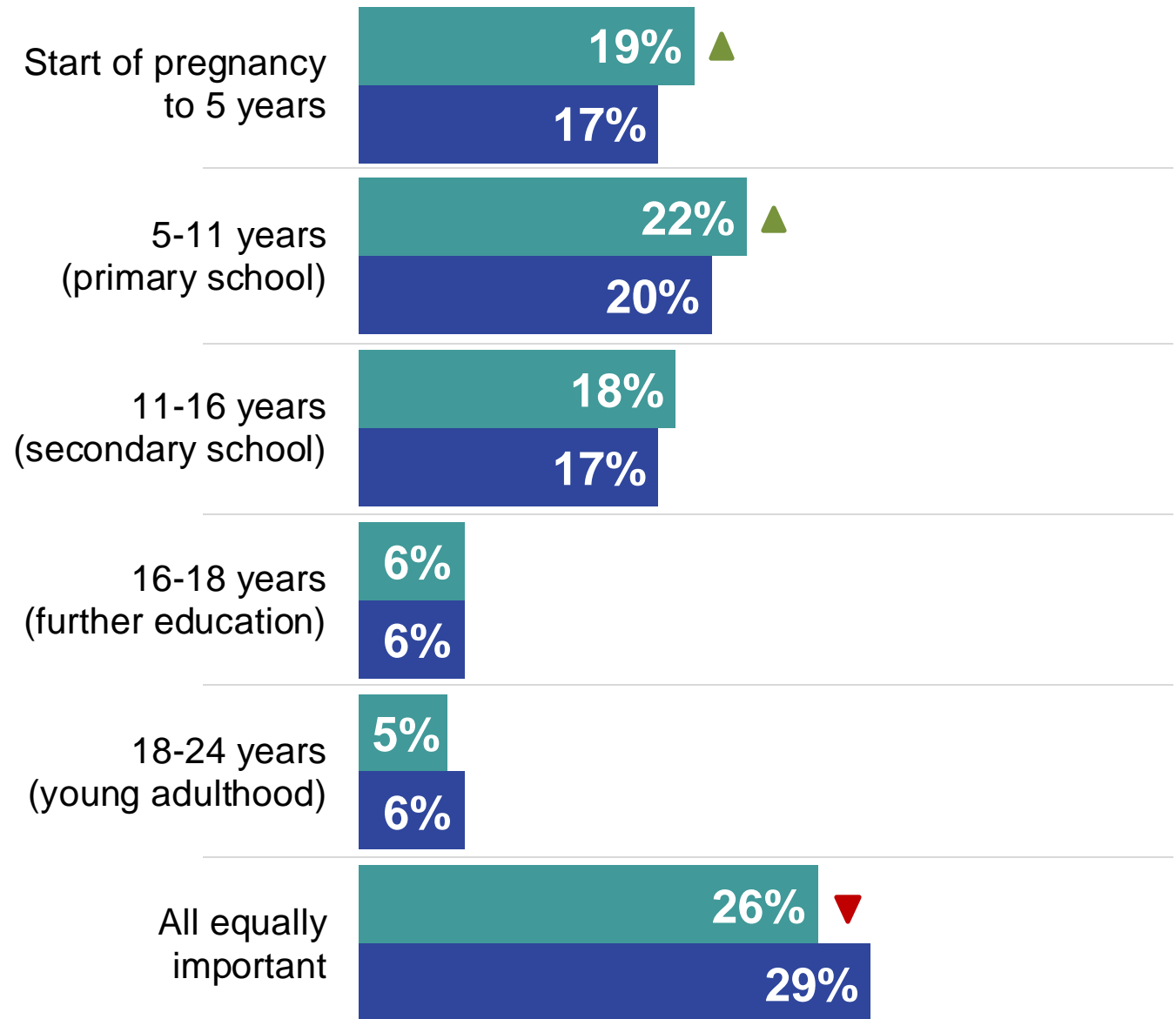
Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change, 95% CI

However, despite small uplift since last year, there is still relatively low recognition of the importance of early childhood compared with other life stages

Which period of a child and young person's life do you think is the most important for shaping their future lives?

2023 2022



Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change, 95% CI

Parents and grandparents are more likely to perceive the early years as important – and increasingly so when comparing figures to last year

	General Population	Parents of 0-5 year-olds	Parents 0-18 year-olds	Parents 18+	Likely to have first child	No children aged 45+	No children aged under 45	Grand-parent of 0-5 year old	Grand-parent any
% Saying early childhood is very important in shaping future	70% +4	76%	71% +5	76% +4	67%	68%	56%	85%	81% +4
% Pregnancy to 5 most important stage of development	19% +2	26%	17%	20%	18%	20%	13%	29%	25%

Only significant changes from 2022 are shown in the bottom right hand corner of boxes.

Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 85%) and the lowest (dark red 13%) figures between subgroups

Women and older groups also tend to place more value on the early years; male, ethnic minority and younger age groups less so

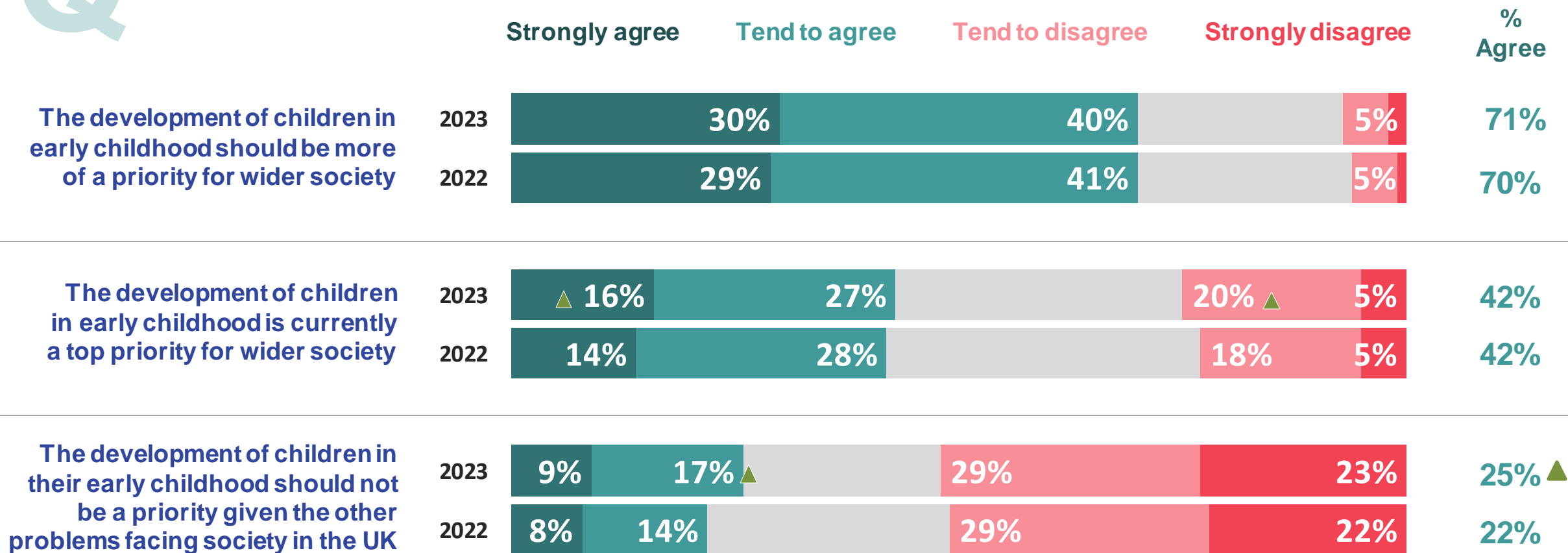
	General Pop	Males	Female	16-34 year olds	35-54 year olds	55+ year olds	White groups	Ethnic minority groups	Working	Not working	IMD1 (most deprived)	IMD5 (least deprived)
% Saying early childhood is very important in shaping future	70% +4	63%	76% +3	57%	71% +5	78%	71%	57%	68% +4	72%	68%	75%
% Pregnancy to 5 most important stage of development	19% +2	14%	24% +4	13%	19% +4	24%	20%	11%	17%	22%	17%	21%

Only significant changes from 2022 are shown in the bottom right hand corner of boxes.

Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 878%) and the lowest (dark red 13%) figures between subgroups

Seven in ten still think the development of children in early childhood should be more of a societal priority; however, marginal increase in proportion who think it should not be a priority given other problems facing the UK

Q To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements...?



Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change, 95% CI

Compared to last year, there has been an increase in the proportion of parents of younger children who think the development of children needs to be more of a priority

% Agree with each statement	General Population	Parents of 0-5 year-olds	Parents 0-18 year-olds	Parents 18+	Likely to have first child	No children aged 45+	No children aged under 45	Grand-parent of 0-5 year old	Grand-parent any
The development of children in early childhood should be more of a priority for wider society	71%	83% +4	77% +6	76%	70%	60%	63%	80%	79%
The development of children in early childhood is currently a top priority for wider society	42%	54%	55%	46%	46%	29%	38%	44%	44%
The development of children in their early childhood should not be a priority given the other problems facing society in the UK	25%	33%	37% +6	25% +4	31%	18%	26%	17%	19%

Only significant changes from 2022 are shown in the bottom right hand corner of boxes.

Meanwhile the small increase in the proportion saying it shouldn't be a priority given other problems is driven by women, younger groups and those from white ethnic groups

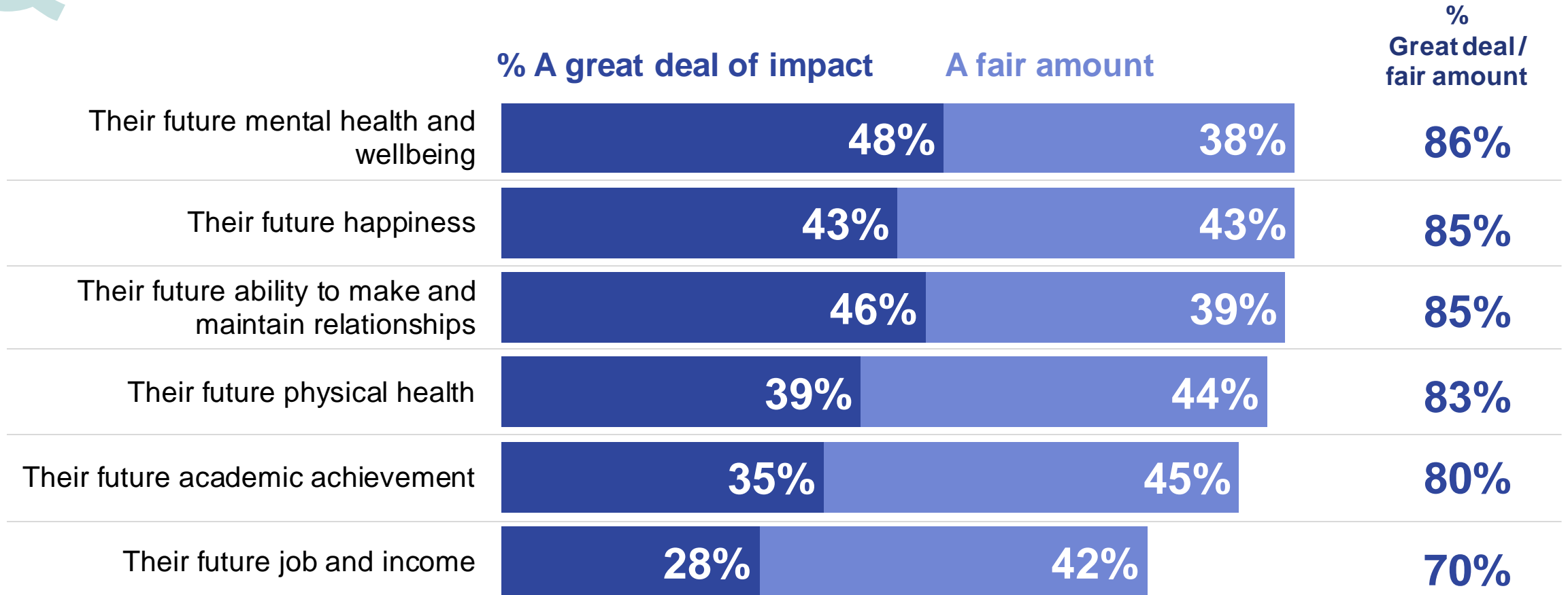
% Agree with each statement	General Pop	Males	Female	16-34 year olds	35-54 year olds	55+ year olds	White groups	Ethnic minority groups	Working	Not working	IMD1 (most deprived)	IMD5 (least deprived)
The development of children in early childhood should be more of a priority for wider society	71%	67%	74%	68%	71%	73%	71%	69%	71%	70%	72%	72%
The development of children in early childhood is currently a top priority for wider society	42%	42%	42%	50%	43%	36%	42%	52%	45%	37%	46%	41%
The development of children in their early childhood should not be a priority given the other problems facing society in the UK	25% +3	28%	22% +3	34% +4	27%	16%	25% +5	31%	29%	19%	29%	19%

Only significant changes from 2022 are shown in the bottom right hand corner of boxes.

Over two in five say early childhood has a *great deal* of impact on a person's future mental health, happiness and ability to maintain relationships as an adult



Thinking about different aspects of adult life, how much impact, if any, do you think a child's development during their early childhood has on each of the following?



Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

Parents and grandparents are consistently more likely to think early childhood has an impact on later adult life – non-parents less so

<i>% Saying it has a great deal/fair amount of impact</i>	General Population	Parents of 0-5 year-olds	Parents 0-18 year-olds	Parents 18+	Likely to have first child	No children aged 45+	No children aged under 45	Grand-parent of 0-5 year old	Grand-parent any
... Their future mental health and wellbeing	86%	91%	89%	89%	87%	82%	82%	93%	91%
... Their future happiness	85%	89%	88%	88%	85%	81%	78%	92%	91%
... Their future ability to make and maintain relationships	85%	92%	90%	88%	86%	80%	79%	90%	90%
... Their future physical health	83%	89%	87%	87%	80%	79%	74%	90%	90%
... Their future academic achievement	80%	85%	84%	83%	79%	74%	74%	86%	85%
... Their future job and income	70%	78%	78%	74%	69%	61%	61%	77%	75%

Q: Thinking about different aspects of adult life, how much impact, if any, do you think a child's development during their early childhood has on each of the following? (First two statements)
 Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 93%) and the lowest (dark red 61%) figures between subgroups

Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

Men, younger people and lower earners are also slightly less likely to think the early years have an impact on adulthood

% Saying it has a great deal/fair amount of impact	General Pop	Males	Female	16-34 year olds	35-54 year olds	55+ year olds	White groups	Ethnic minority groups	Working	Not working	<£25k per year	>£100k per year
... Their future mental health and wellbeing	86%	83%	90%	84%	86%	89%	88%	84%	86%	87%	84%	89%
... Their future happiness	85%	81%	89%	82%	85%	88%	86%	83%	85%	86%	82%	88%
... Their future ability to make and maintain relationships	85%	81%	89%	82%	85%	88%	86%	84%	85%	85%	82%	89%
... Their future physical health	83%	80%	86%	79%	84%	86%	83%	86%	83%	84%	80%	87%
... Their future academic achievement	80%	77%	83%	77%	79%	82%	80%	83%	80%	79%	78%	85%
... Their future job and income	70%	66%	73%	67%	71%	71%	71%	69%	71%	68%	67%	82%

Q: Thinking about different aspects of adult life, how much impact, if any, do you think a child's development during their early childhood has on each of the following? (First two statements)
 Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 90%) and the lowest (dark red 66%) figures between n subgroups

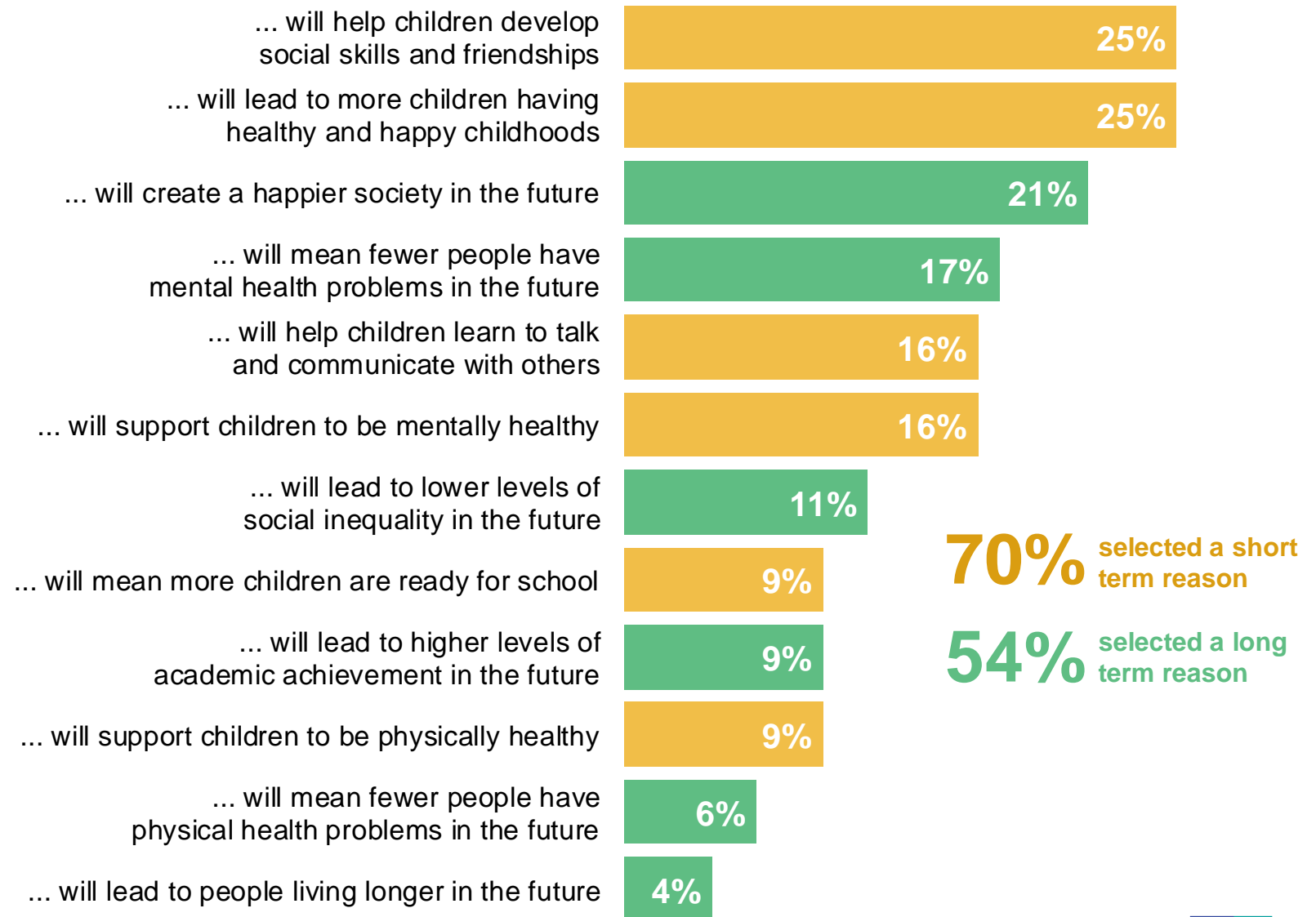
Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.



The public are most motivated by wanting to see children living healthy, happy lives and protecting their mental health. This is true whether these benefits are phrased as more immediate or longer term; however, shorter term reasoning is generally more appealing.

I'm now going to show you a list of things some people say are important reasons for investing in early childhood. Which, if any, of the following statements MOST appeal to you?

Focusing greater attention and investment on helping children develop in early childhood today...



Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

2

Knowledge and understanding of the early years



Key findings

1.

In line with last year, three in five (60%) say they know how children develop; roughly a third still know just a little or nothing.

Understanding is higher among parents and mums slightly more so than dads. Those less knowledgeable include non-parents, those not in work and lower earners.

Regardless, the vast majority (75%) still recognise their parent's approach in these years has had a big impact in shaping them today. Over half (55%) also say in the past six months they have thought about how their childhood has shaped them.

2.

There has been a decrease in the proportion saying they know about the specific areas of a child's development (e.g. physical, social and emotional and cognitive development).

Across all three areas, slightly fewer than half of the public claim some knowledge.

3.

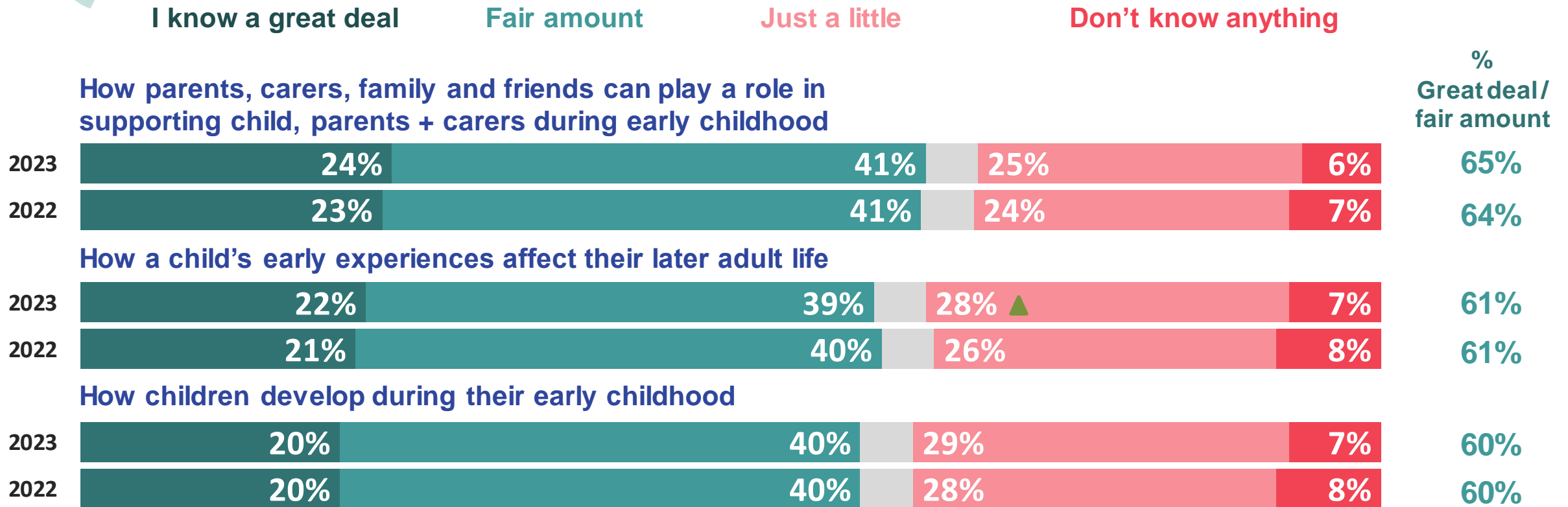
Over half (55%) pick a safe home and living environment as making the most difference to children in early childhood.

While this is the same for parents of children 0-5, they are also more likely to mention a child's relationship with their caregivers, the mental health of parents and high quality childcare.

Mums are more likely to prioritise a safe home and the parents' mental health than Dads, who in turn focus slightly more on being active and childcare.

Three in five say they know something about how children develop which is unchanged since last year; roughly a third still know just a little or nothing

Q How much, if anything, do you personally feel you know about each of the following?

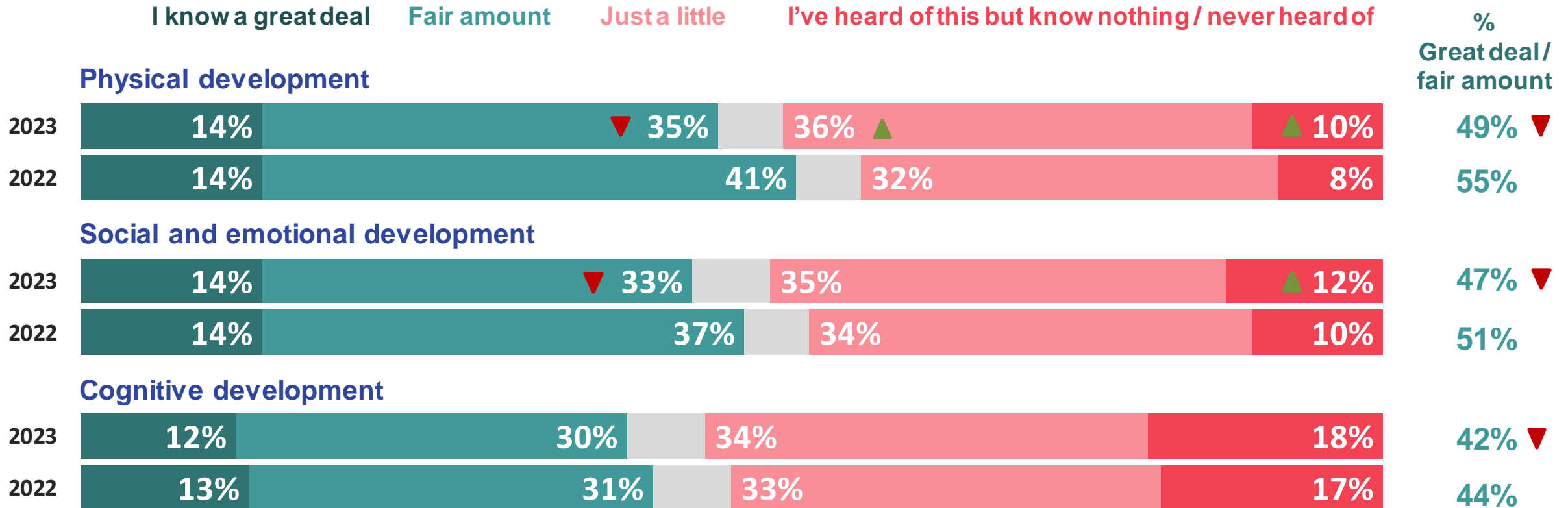


Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change, 95% CI

Meanwhile, around half say they know something about the different areas of development – all down slightly from last year

Q How much, if anything, do you feel you know about each of the following areas of development during early childhood?



Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower change, 95% CI

Parents more likely to have an understanding of early childhood – increasingly so among mothers. Claimed knowledge amongst grandparents has fallen.

% Saying they know a great deal / fair amount about...	General Population	Parents 0-5 year-olds	Dads 0-5	Mums 0-5	Parents 0-18 year-olds	Parents 18+	Likely to have first child	No children aged 45+	No children aged under 45	Grand-parent of 0-5 year old	Grand-parent any
How a child's early experiences affect their later adult life	61%	76%	72% -8	80% +5	75%	70%	63%	39%	49%	71%	71%
How children develop during their early childhood	60%	80%	78%	83%	77%	74%	55%	30%	42%	75%	75%
Physical development during early childhood	49% -5	71%	69% -6	72%	68%	58% -7	47%	26%	33%	54% -13	54% -12
Social and emotional development during early childhood	47% -4	70%	64%	75% +5	65%	54% -5	44% -9	24%	36% -6	50% -14	49% -12
Cognitive development during early childhood	42% -2	61%	59%	64% +5	60% +4	46% -6	40%	23%	33%	41% -12	40% -11

Only significant changes from 2022 are shown in the bottom right hand corner of boxes.

Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

Q: How much, if anything, do you personally feel you know about each of the following?
Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 83%) and the lowest (dark red 23%) figures between subgroups

Men, those not in work and lower earners are less likely to be knowledgeable about early childhood. Groups which have seen drops in understanding since last year include older people, white ethnic groups and those not in work.

% Saying they know a great deal / fair amount about...	Gen pop	Males	Female	16-34 year olds	35-54 year olds	55+ year olds	White groups	Ethnic minority groups	Working	Not working	<£25k per year	>£100k per year
How a child's early experiences affect their later adult life	61%	55%	67%	61%	62%	61%	61%	68%	61%	61%	60%	71%
How children develop during their early childhood	60%	54%	66%	59%	60%	62%	61%	61%	60%	60%	57%	72%
Physical development during early childhood	49% -5	45% -5	53% -5	48% -6	52%	47% -8	49% -5	54% -9	51% -5	44% -8	42%	66%
Social and emotional development during early childhood	47% -4	40%	54% -4	50%	49%	42% -8	46% -4	55%	49%	43%	41%	61%
Cognitive development during early childhood	42% -2	36%	47%	46%	46%	35% -7	41% -3	46%	45%	36% -5	37%	60%

Only significant changes from 2022 are shown in the bottom right hand corner of boxes.

Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

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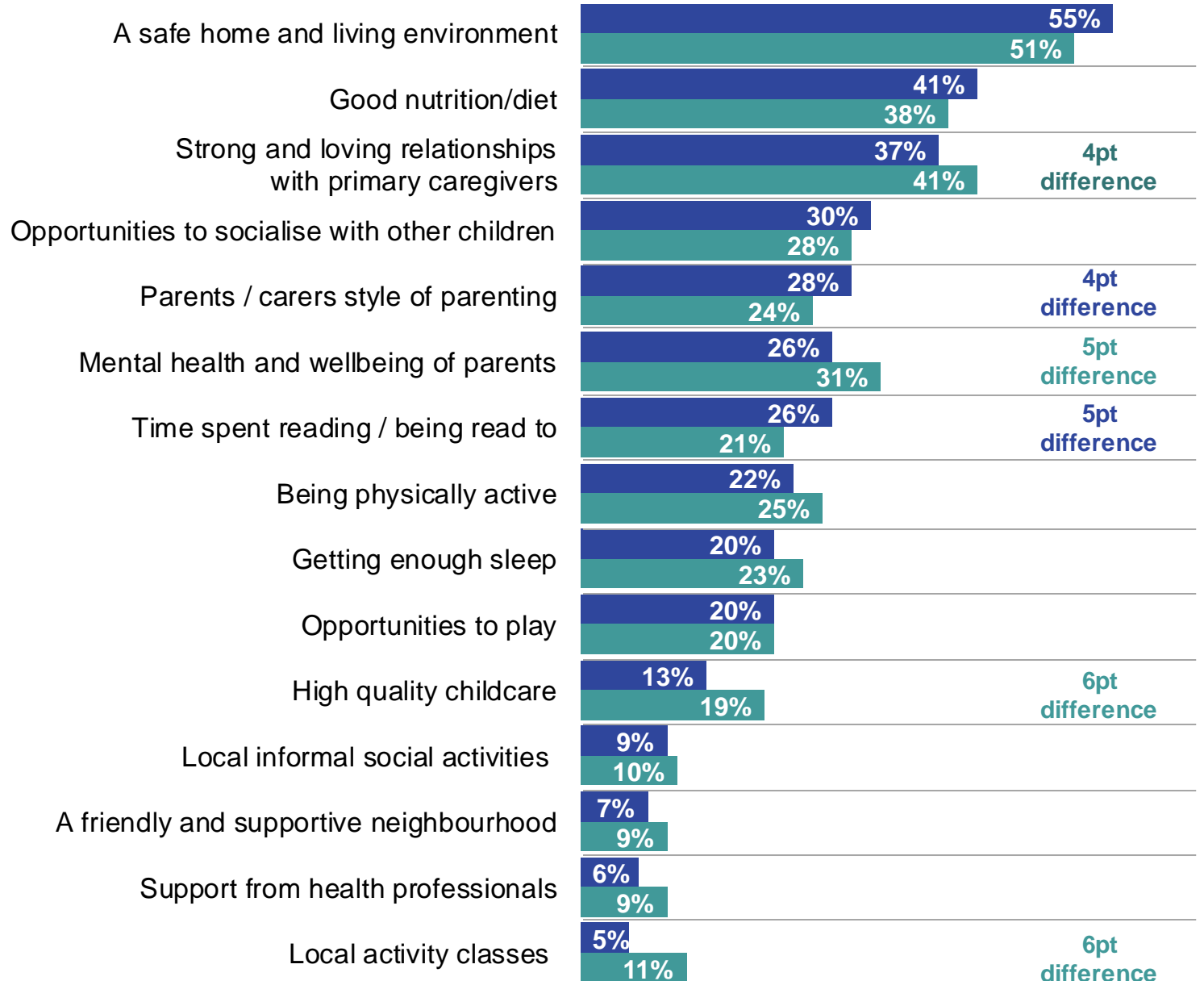
Q: How much, if anything, do you personally feel you know about each of the following?

Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 68%) and the lowest (dark red 36%) figures between subgroups

The majority think a safe home and living environment makes the most difference to children during early childhood. On average, parents 0-5 are more likely to mention relationships with caregivers, parents' mental health and high quality childcare.

Which of the following, if any, do you personally think makes the **MOST** difference to children in helping them develop during early childhood? Please select up to four

General public | **Parents 0-5**



Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.
Only significant differences are highlighted with text.

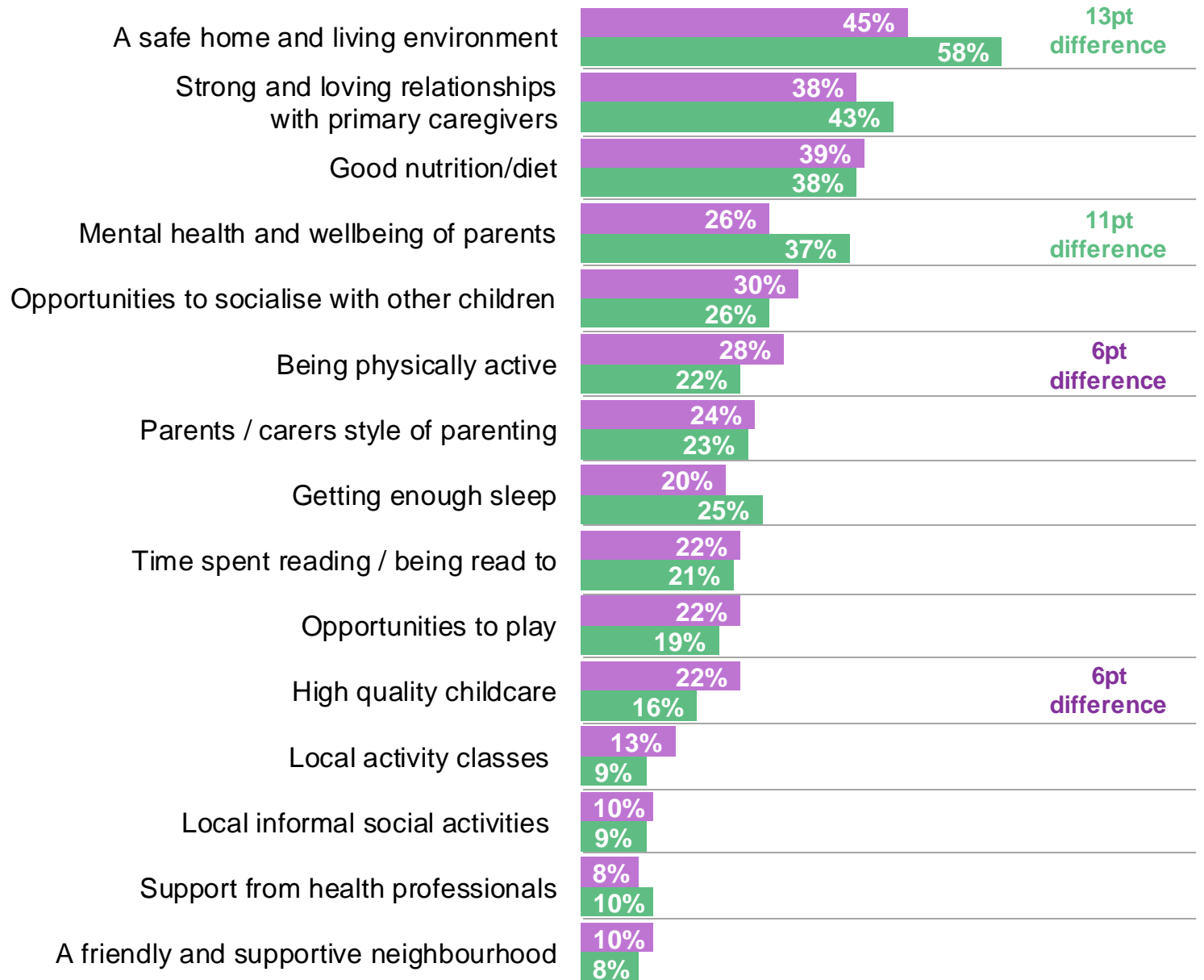


Mums of children aged 0-5 are more likely than Dads to prioritise a safe home and the parents' mental health; whereas Dads are slightly more likely to mention the importance of physical activity and high quality childcare.

Which of the following, if any, do you personally think makes the **MOST** difference to children in helping them develop during early childhood? Please select up to four

Among dads 0-5

Among mums 0-5



Base: 1,011 UK adults aged 16+ with a child aged 0-5, surveyed in April – May 2023. Only significant differences are highlighted with text.



Three in four agree their parents approach to parenting during early childhood has had a big impact in shaping who they are today

Q To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?

Strongly agree Tend to agree Neither Disagree Don't know / not applicable % Agree

My approach to parenting today is shaped heavily by the things I want to do similarly or do differently compared to how I was brought up (Among parents 0-5)



My parents/carers approach to parenting in early childhood has had a big impact in shaping who I am today



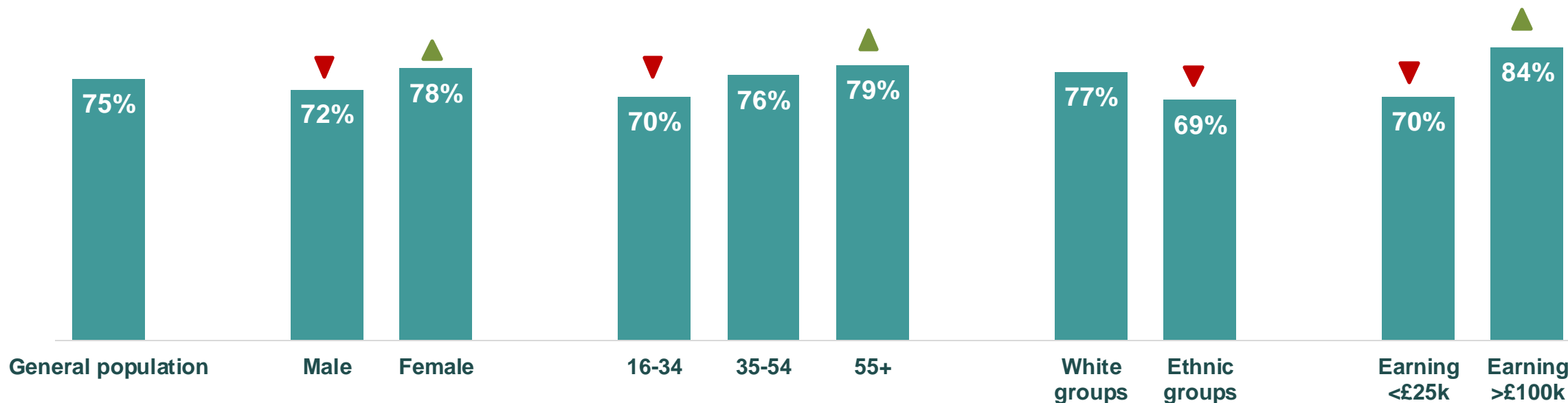
Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

While majorities across demographic groups recognise the role their parents played in shaping them, those most likely to do so include women, older groups aged 55+ and higher earners.



To what extent do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?
My parents/carers approach to parenting in early childhood has had a big impact in shaping who I am today

% Agree



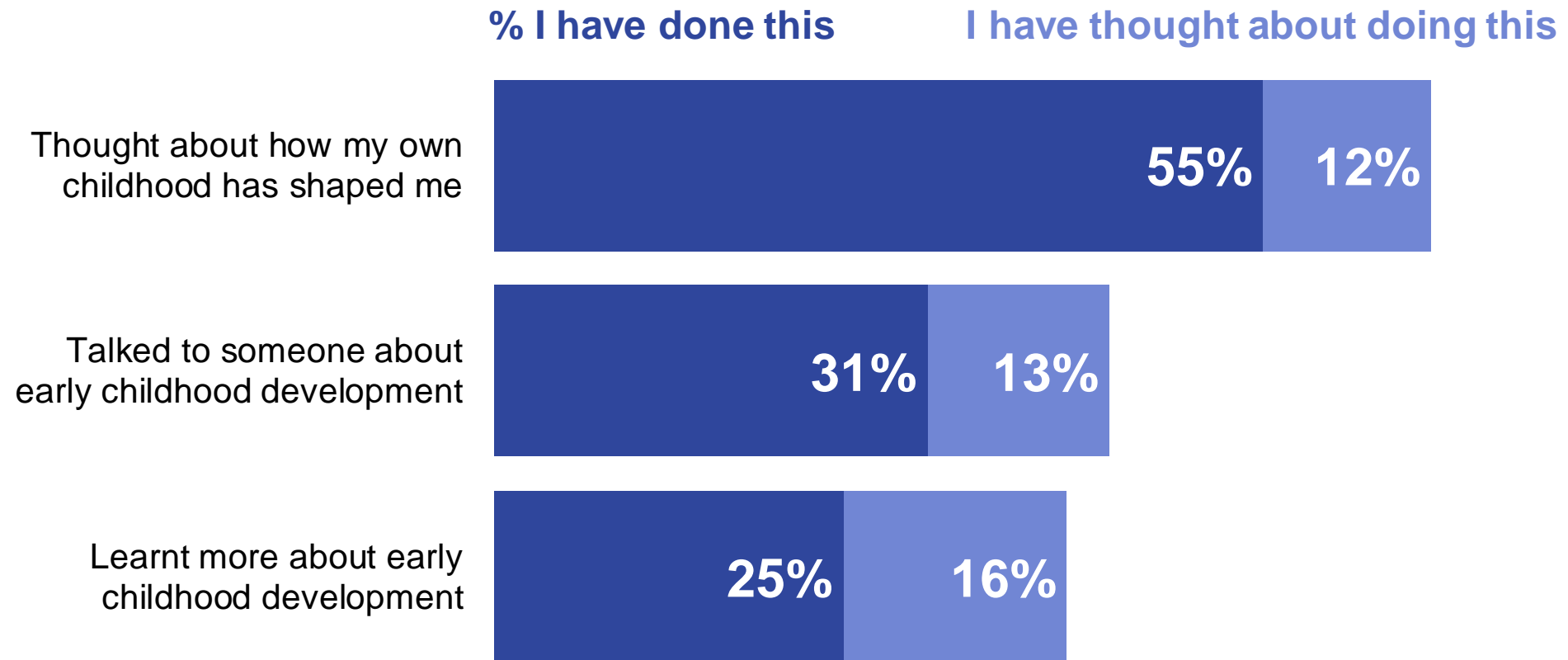
Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

▲ ▼ Significantly higher/lower than average, 95% CI

In the past six months over half have thought about how their own childhood has shaped them, while a third have spoken to someone about early childhood development and one in four have learnt more about it



Thinking about supporting children, parents and carers during early childhood, which of the following actions, if any, have you personally taken in the past six months?



Base: 4,000 UK adults aged 16+, surveyed in April – May 2023.

Parents and grandparents are more likely to have recently reflected on or learnt about early childhood, while non-parents aged 45+ are far less likely

<i>% They have done each of the following</i>	General Population	Parents 0-5 year-olds	Dads 0-5	Mums 0-5	Parents 0-18 year-olds	Parents 18+	Likely to have first child	No children aged 45+	No children aged under 45	Grand-parent of 0-5 year old	Grand-parent any
Thought about how my own childhood has shaped me	55%	68%	66%	69%	62%	56%	56%	45%	53%	60%	60%
Talked to someone about early childhood development	31%	54%	53%	56%	45%	33%	33%	13%	27%	43%	38%
Learnt more about early childhood development	25%	56%	54%	58%	43%	25%	32%	9%	23%	24%	24%

Q: Thinking about supporting children, parents and carers during early childhood, which of the following actions, if any, have you personally taken in the past six months?
 Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 69%) and the lowest (dark red 9%) figures between subgroups

Women, younger people and ethnic minority groups are also more likely to have reflected on or learnt about early childhood

% They have done each of the following	Gen pop	Males	Female	16-34 year olds	35-54 year olds	55+ year olds	White groups	Ethnic minority groups	Working	Not working	<£25k per year	>£100k per year
Thought about how my own childhood has shaped me	55%	49%	60%	56%	55%	54%	55%	55%	55%	54%	49%	58%
Talked to someone about early childhood development	31%	27%	36%	37%	32%	26%	31%	36%	34%	27%	28%	42%
Learnt more about early childhood development	25%	23%	27%	34%	28%	16%	24%	38%	29%	19%	22%	39%

Q: Thinking about supporting children, parents and carers during early childhood, which of the following actions, if any, have you personally taken in the past six months?
 Colour coding used to illustrate difference between the highest (dark green 60%) and the lowest (dark red 16%) figures between subgroups

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GAME CHANGERS

