

Oxford Children's Word of the Year

& Oxford Children's Language Report 2021

A report on the language of wellbeing
in the wake of a global pandemic

Written by

Samantha Armstrong, Senior Publisher

Dr Nilanjana Banerji, Senior Children's Language Data Specialist

Oxford Children's Language & Dictionaries

Oxford University Press, Great Clarendon Street, Oxford OX2 6DP

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Introduction

As part of on-going language and lexical research, the Children's Language & Dictionaries department of the Educational Division of Oxford University Press (OUP) analyses the language of children's reading and writing every year. This is used to track the different ways in which contemporary children's language is evolving and how language is being used to express the emotions and experiences that children engage with in their daily lives.

This report is one of a number of key papers published by OUP on children's language research in general and the "word gap" in particular. It is part of OUP's mission to develop a deep understanding of the language children need at each stage of their education to be able to support them, their teachers, and their parents with the very best educational resources informed by this insight.

In previous years, the Children's Language team has analysed children's writing submitted to creative writing competitions. This year, prompted by the global impact the coronavirus has had on children's education and wellbeing, the team decided to conduct some new research in schools through the Oxford Educational Research Forum (ERF), to track how the pandemic may have altered the way in which children use language and how an event of this magnitude shifts the vocabulary landscape.

This report presents key highlights from that research and the Children's Word of the Year 2021.



Oxford Children's Word of the Year 2021

anxiety

Key findings from the ERF survey

8000 pupils from Year 3 to Year 9 were given the opportunity to have their views represented by their teachers who asked their year groups to discuss and choose the words they would be most likely to use when talking about health and wellbeing and their experiences of lockdown and the past two years.

- *Anxiety* was the top children's choice with 21%.
- *Challenging* was a close second with 19%.
- *Isolate* was the next popular word with 14%.

85 teachers discussing our survey with these year groups were also asked for the word they would use most when talking to their pupils about health and wellbeing and the experiences of the year.

- *Resilience* was the top teachers' choice with 31%.
- *Challenging* was the second choice again with 19%.
- *Wellbeing* was the next close choice with 18%.

Wellbeing: research topic in 2021

The Children's Language team selected wellbeing as a focus area of vocabulary and language research for 2021. This was prompted by the growing awareness of children's mental health as a key concern at home and in schools, and the need to develop appropriate resources to support student wellbeing in primary and secondary schools.



The Good Childhood Report 2021 (The Children's Society)

Key findings from the report published by The Children's Society state that:

- An estimated 306,000 10-15-year-olds in the UK are unhappy with their lives
- Roughly ¼ million children did not cope well with changes during the pandemic
- Young people are particularly unhappy about school and appearance

(The Good Childhood Report 2021)

Measuring wellbeing in schools and colleges (Adrian Bethune)

Adrian Bethune, primary schoolteacher and author of the award-winning *Wellbeing In The Primary Classroom* (Bloomsbury, 2018), writes in a recent blog:

The evidence from NHS Digital, Good Childhood report and other sources shows that:

- children's mental health has been declining over the last decade or so
- children appear to be significantly less happy with their lives.

More recently, there has been speculation about the state of children's mental health because of the coronavirus pandemic with some articles claiming a 'generation of children could be scarred'.

('Measuring wellbeing in schools and colleges,' Adrian Bethune, 17 Jun 2020)



Oxford Children's Language Research 2021

Highlights from the ERF survey

- Language is key to self-expression, learning, and wellbeing. It is a positive sign for their wellbeing that children are comfortable and confident about sharing their feelings in the classroom – that they feel it is ok to express *anxiety*.
- The Oxford Children's Corpus has previously tracked the use of the word *anxiety* in children's writing in the context of action adventures or natural disasters such as hurricanes and tsunamis. This research has allowed children to express anxieties in the wake of the challenges of the pandemic, school closures, and isolation.
- Our children's language analysis over the years has revealed growth in children's vocabulary relating to technology, politics, and current affairs (Brexit, the refugee crisis, presidential elections, plastic pollution, and climate change) – it is no surprise that this year there is growth in the vocabulary of mental health and wellbeing.
- Teachers feel children are getting better equipped with the vocabulary they need to express and explore their feelings than before lockdown.
- Both teachers and students have chosen the word *challenging* as their second top word in acknowledgment of the changes schools and pupils have navigated in the past year.
- Teachers have chosen the word *resilience* as the top word they use to give children positive direction and encourage adaptability and strength of character through challenging times. *Kindness* and *wellbeing* have also been important words in the classroom.
- The message from this research is: *Everybody feels **anxious**, we will have **challenging** situations, but we can build **resilience** for our wellbeing, to deal with those challenges and keep safe and well.*
- The findings demonstrate the role we all play in making sure children have the words they need and know that they can use them to express themselves. They also demonstrate the importance of being aware that the language that adults use around children can influence their learning and wellbeing.

- Previous research has revealed that *mum*, *friend*, and *school* always appear as top nouns in children's writing and play a key part in their world of imagination as well as their daily lives.
- This latest research supports the findings from OUP's ongoing Word Gap research which highlight that teachers and parents can play a huge role in giving children the tools and the vocabulary to make progress in all areas.

As the recent Oxford Language Report says:

Knowing when and how to use the right words is key in life, not just in school.

(How Schools are Closing the Word Gap: Oxford Language Report 2021-22)

Teacher comments from the ERF survey

Comments from teachers and senior leaders participating in the survey suggest that the vocabulary of wellbeing is a growth area in children's language acquisition and there is an important role that adults can play in encouraging the use of positive vocabulary to promote health and wellbeing in children, in keeping with the guidelines from the DfE Wellbeing for Education Recovery programme:

to deliver wellbeing... on issues such as bereavement and loss, understanding anxiety and low mood, and actions for building resilience and recovery

(Wellbeing for Education Recovery, Department for Education, 2 June 2021)

Some teachers highlighted the influence of adults:

- *Children are using language absorbed from parents, media, peers, and other influences, but it may not reflect their true thoughts.*
(Alison Malcolm, Head of Middle School, Dragon School, Oxford, Oxfordshire)
- *I think that sometimes the language we use can increase anxiety, so we have to be very clear about how we address language and difficult topics with students.* (Nicola King, Head of Philosophy and Ethics, Ifield Community College, Crawley, West Sussex)

Some teachers highlighted the growth in children's vocabulary:

- *Children are familiar with a lot more vocabulary linked to health and wellbeing and are able to describe their feelings and thoughts in more detail than before lockdowns.*

- *Currently the most popular word among children of this year group (y9) is anxiety. To them this word includes the way they feel when they talk about the pandemic. It involves wellbeing, sadness, isolation, mental health, anguish and stress. It is a way for them to communicate how they feel.*
- *Some children are very able to discuss their wellbeing and are able to articulate their emotions. Some however lack the vocabulary and self-awareness to recognise and verbalise their emotions.*
(Steve Wilkinson, Senior Leader, Sir John Moore Primary School, Swadlincote, Debyshire)

Oxford Children's Language Resources

Highlights for children's language resources

- Analysis of the word **anxiety** in the Oxford Children's Corpus also shows a threefold increase in use from 2012 to 2020.
- In 2021, independent research from CHILDWISE also showed the word **anxious** was used by 33% of children aged 7-16 years to express feelings about the future and 32% of children aged 9-16 years said 'feeling worried/anxious' is the feeling they have experienced most often.
- The context has also changed from the anxiety and excitement of perils in fantasy and adventure stories to the realities of social anxiety and 'stress about schoolwork'.
- Our research additionally reports on similar changes in language and usage for other related words. This is used to keep our dictionaries and language research up to date and to enable OUP to provide appropriate support in our educational resources and publishing.

Some examples showing how existing words are used in new contexts:

bubble – the entry in the *Oxford School Dictionary* includes the following definitions:

bubble *NOUN* bubbles

- 1 a thin transparent ball of liquid filled with air or gas
- 2 a small ball of air in something, such as a fizzy drink

The School Dictionary content will be updated to include an appropriate definition to reflect the new sense of '(during an outbreak of an infectious disease) a restricted group of people whose members are allowed to be in close proximity when maintaining a physical distance is otherwise required.'

isolation – the entry in the *Oxford Student's Dictionary* includes the phrase 'in isolation' as an example of typical usage:

isolation *NOUN* being separate or alone • He lived **in complete isolation** from the outside world. ► **in isolation** without relation to other things or people • Art does not exist in isolation.

The Student's Dictionary content update will include the phrase 'self-isolation' to reflect the new common usage of the word in the last two years in the context of the outbreak of coronavirus, to mean: *A state or period of remaining apart from others, especially in order to avoid catching or transmitting an infectious disease. (Oxford Dictionary of English)*



lockdown – the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary for Schools* (OEDS) defines the word in the context of 'dangerous situations' as school children might expect to encounter the word primarily in the context of, for example, school shootings.

lockdown *NOUN* an official order forbidding people from leaving an area, a building, a room, etc. because of a dangerous situation

The OEDS content update will add the phrase '*or in the interests of public safety or health*' (*Oxford Dictionary of English*) to the definition to include the more common context of school closures and other social restrictions that children have become more familiar with during the current pandemic.



Oxford Children's Language Corpus

For over a decade OUP children's lexicographers, publishers and editors have teamed up with academic researchers and experts in children's language acquisition at the University of Oxford and other research groups to track changes in children's vocabulary and self-expression. The database of language developed by OUP to enable this research is the Oxford Children's Corpus. This is Oxford's unique electronic database of writing for and by children, the largest children's English language corpus in the world, which enables in-depth, authoritative linguistic analysis of children's reading and writing.

Each year OUP publishes a language report on children's engagement with topics ranging from politics, climate change, and natural disasters to books, films, music, technology, and their favourite sports and celebrities. As part of this analysis, OUP announces the Children's Word of the Year, throwing light on the changing language. In previous years OUP collaborated with Chris Evans and the BBC Radio 2 500 Words short story writing competition to analyse the 1 million stories submitted by children aged 4-13 years as part of this ongoing research. In 2020 OUP also worked with the 500 Words: Black Lives Matter children's writing competition to produce a report on children's engagement with this important issue.

Oxford Children's Word of the Year 2014–2020

The Children's Word of the Year has reflected the influence and impact of media news stories and important topics of conversation in the grown-up world on young minds and imaginations. The positive impact of this influence and exposure has been a growth in the vocabulary that children use in their own writing and their confidence to explore these areas.

Previous Oxford Children's Words of the Year included:

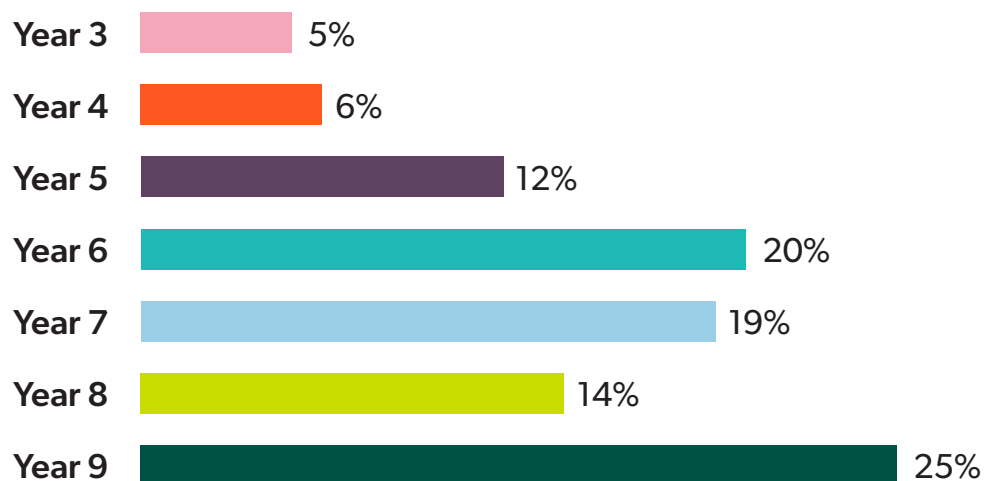
- 2020 coronavirus
- 2019 Brexit
- 2018 plastic
- 2017 trump
- 2016 refugee
- 2015 #hashtag
- 2014 minion

Educational Research Forum (ERF)

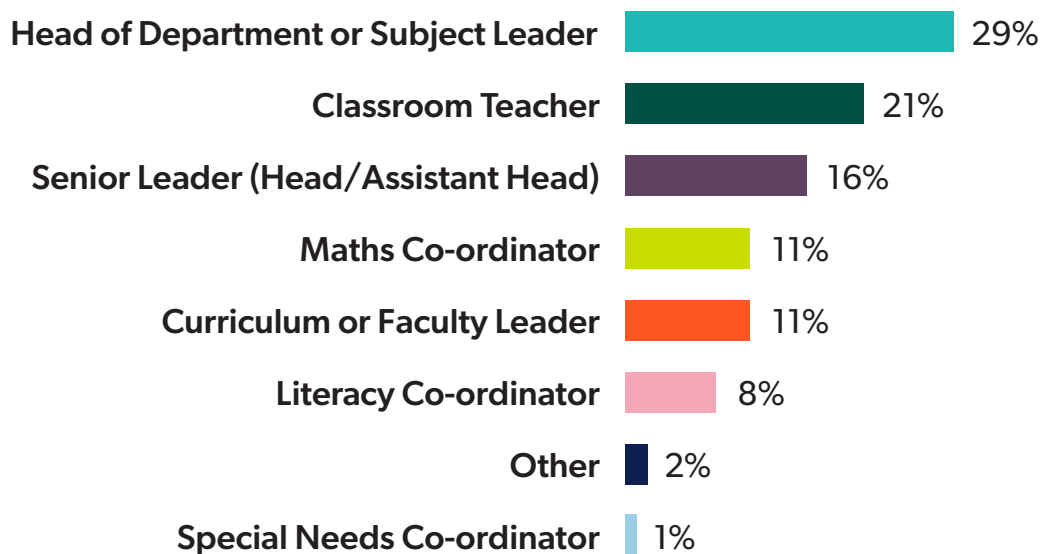
This year our research was conducted in 85 schools in the UK through the Oxford Educational Research Forum, our global community of teachers and educators who work with OUP on various research projects. We sent a survey to just over 1000 UK teachers of pupils aged 7 to 14 years and received completed responses from 85 schools.

Participants in this survey ranged from heads of departments, subject coordinators, and classroom teachers to senior leaders who were asked to discuss with their pupils the words they would use when talking about their experiences in 2021. The views of over 8000 children from Year 3 to Year 9 were represented by teachers taking the survey and this report highlights the key findings of this research.

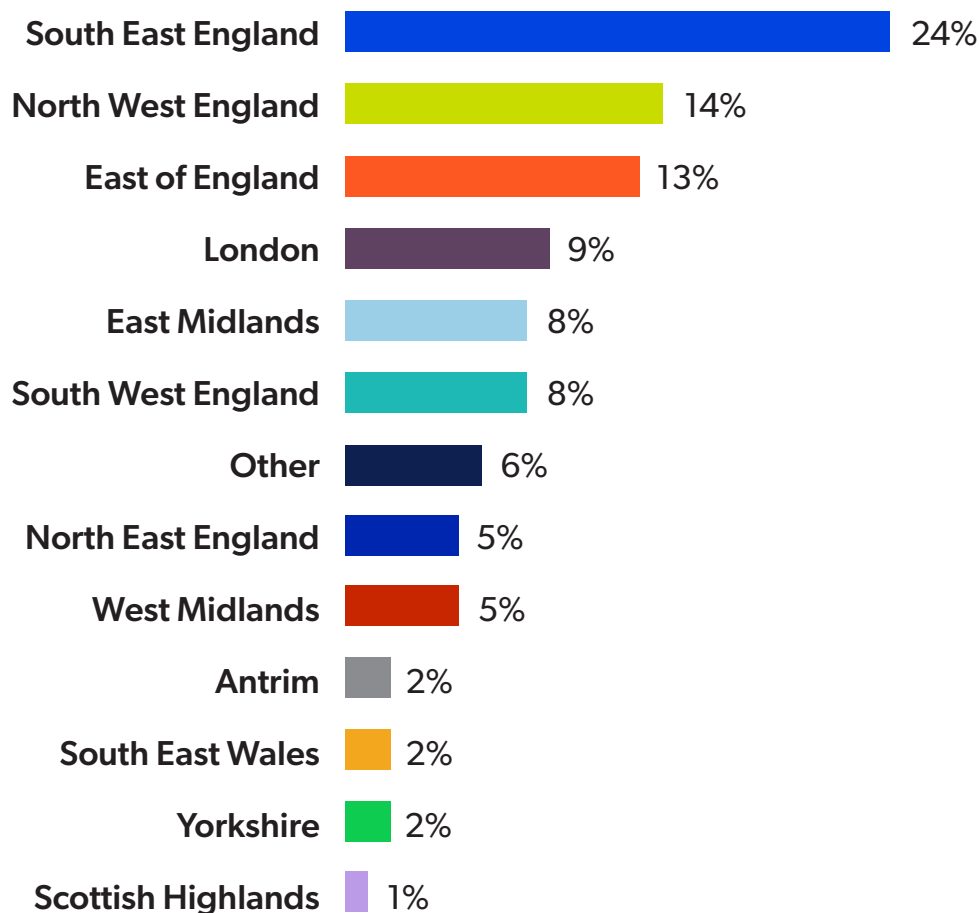
Distribution of pupils participating in the survey



Distribution of teachers participating in the survey



Regional distribution of schools participating in the survey



Conclusion

This document records the highlights of the research conducted through OUP's Educational Research Forum in 2021 on the language of wellbeing that is being used in schools during the current pandemic. This research is part of OUP's programme of wider research into children's literacy, reading, vocabulary, and all aspects of children's language acquisition. This is enabled by the Oxford Children's Corpus which also supports academic research into children's language learning, from the early years into secondary education. OUP continues to partner with leading experts, universities, educational bodies, and charities to further its understanding of children's literacy, education, and wellbeing, and continues to spread the word through its children's language reports and campaigns on the Word Gap, the Gift of Words, and the Children's Word of the Year.

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For more information, please contact:

Helen Freeman helen.freeman@oup.com

Caroline McCourt caroline.mccourt@oup.com



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