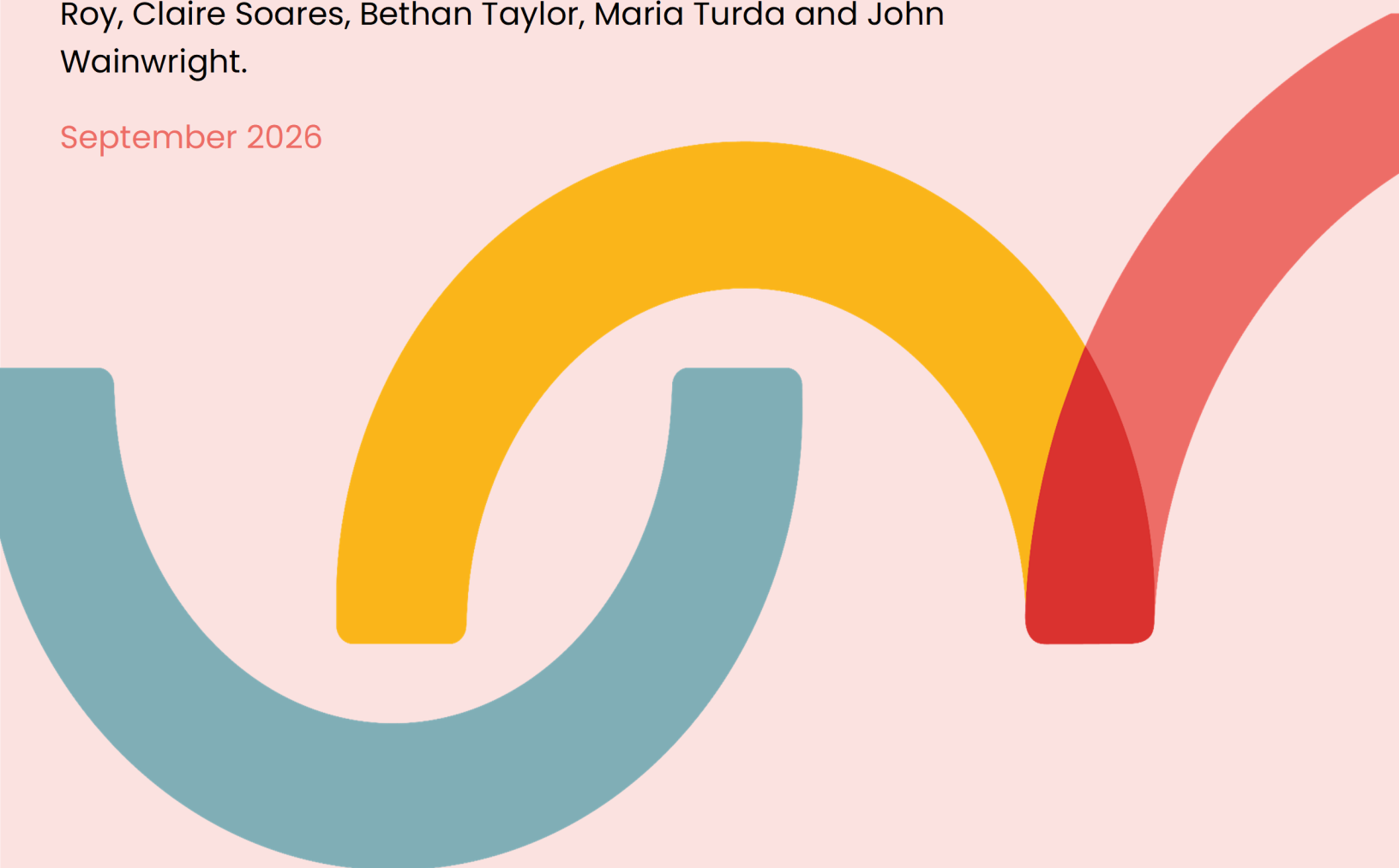


Child-centred policing in practice: Insights from children and young people

Executive summary

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About the study

This research explored children and young people's views on how policing could become more child-centred, specifically how police can build trust with and listen to children and young people in encounters with them. The study was commissioned by the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) and led by Professor Debra Allnock from the University of Bedfordshire and Professor Helen Beckett and Dr Rebecca Hibbin from the University of Lancashire, with the support of colleagues at these universities. The project ran from September 2025 to February 2026 and addressed the five core questions below.

Research questions (RQs)

RQ1. Context: What is the nature of children's interactions with the police?

- Where do children see, hear and engage with the police?
- Which officers/roles are they engaging with?
- How do reasons for engagement (e.g. being suspected of a crime or experiencing a crime) shape encounters?

RQ2. Trust: How can police build trust with children?

- What positive examples do children give of trust-building and where trust was undermined, what could have improved the interaction?
- How do experiences and needs differ for:
 - children and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds
 - children and young people who are neurodivergent or have special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)?
- What specific steps should police take to build trust with these groups?

RQ3. Voice: How can police better listen to children?

- Where do children feel heard (and not heard) in police encounters, and what would improve this?
- Do children want and have opportunities to voice their opinions and concerns to police, and do they feel comfortable doing so?
- How do they want to be engaged, and what do they most want to say?
- How do opportunities and barriers differ for:
 - children and young people from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds
 - children and young people who are neurodivergent or have SEND?

RQ4. Settings: Do children want different things from the police depending on where they interact?

- What differences do children describe in how they would like to engage with police in different contexts: on the street (including stop and search), at home (e.g. domestic abuse callouts), in and around school, online, in public spaces and in custody?

- How do reasons for engagement (e.g. being suspected of a crime or experiencing a crime) intersect with settings to shape what children say is needed?

RQ5. Practice: What specific changes should be made to operational policing practices to ensure policing is more child-centred, focusing on building children’s trust and listening to their voices?

- How can these changes be embedded across officers, teams and forces?

The study combined a scoping review of existing research with focus groups and interviews with 59 children and young people and an online survey involving 64 young people. The participants reflected diverse backgrounds, identities, needs and levels of prior police contact, ensuring that the findings drew on a wide range of lived experiences. The study also conducted consultations with strategic and operational police officers, focusing on translating the findings into practical actions for frontline practice.

The study produced three linked outputs:

- this research report, presenting the evidence base and the eight child-centred policing principles that arose from it
- an operational resource for frontline officers, translating children’s insights into practical guidance
- a summary of the study’s findings for children and young people.

While child-centred policing applies to all children, longstanding evidence shows that Black children and young people and neurodivergent children and young people – including those with SEND – experience policing differently and more intensively. Centring their perspectives is therefore essential to understanding how trust is built, how voice is enabled and whether policing is genuinely child-centred in practice.

Policy context

The National Police Chiefs’ Council’s (NPCC’s) Children and Young Persons Policing Strategy (2024–27) and the Children and Young Persons Policing Charter (2025) set out a national framework for child-centred policing, placing children’s rights, needs and perspectives at the core of police interactions. They emphasise procedural justice, particularly the centrality of trust and voice, as essential to developmentally appropriate and respectful practices. However, national inspections and research continue to identify wide variation in how police engage with children and young people, including inconsistent responses to vulnerability, safeguarding delays, persistent communication gaps, the failure to take action as promised and entrenched inequities that affect Black children and young people and those who are neurodivergent or have SEND.

Key insights

Child-centred policing is achieved through interactional and systemic conditions that consistently support children’s safety, understanding, voice and fairness across all contexts and interactions. The following

insights synthesise findings across the five RQs and highlight what the participants told us matters most for children and young people's experiences of policing.

Insight 1: Children and young people's core needs remain consistent, but context shapes the conditions required to meet them.

The participants encountered police across a wide range of settings, including public spaces, homes, schools, transport, online environments and custody. Across these contexts, they consistently identified a set of core needs: calmness, fairness, clarity, emotional safety and non-escalatory behaviour. Reflections on the different settings suggest that while these needs are enduring, the ways in which they are experienced and the emphasis placed on them vary by context. For example, public encounters were described as benefiting from slower, non-accusatory approaches; custody from predictability, care and reassurance; home settings from gentle entry and early explanation; and schools from familiar, relational contact rather than crisis-only involvement.

Insight 2: Trust depends on interactional behaviour that signals safety, fairness and legitimacy.

The participants judged police trustworthiness less by the formal purpose of encounters and more by how officers interacted with them in the moment. A calm tone, a clear and age-appropriate explanation, proportionate responses and visible care supported trust, while rushed or accusatory approaches, a lack of explanation, bias and unnecessary escalation undermined it.

Insight 3: Children and young people made clear that feeling heard required more than being given an opportunity to speak.

Children felt heard and felt they could express their needs when officers created predictable, emotionally safe conditions, listened attentively, used developmentally appropriate communication and provided clear explanations about what would happen next or how the children's views had informed decisions. Voice was undermined when children were interrupted, dismissed or spoken over or when nothing changed after concerns were raised.

Insight 4: Identity shapes how police encounters are experienced and their emotional impact.

Children and young people's experiences of policing cannot be understood without attention to identity and intersectional factors. For Black children and young people, routine suspicion, adultification and racialised assumptions shaped how even ordinary encounters were experienced, undermining their trust and sense of being believed or protected. For neurodivergent children and young people and those with SEND, harm most often arose from unmet sensory, communication and processing needs, particularly in fast-paced or high-stress encounters. These identity-related patterns shaped not only how encounters were experienced in the moment but also their longer-term emotional impact on children's sense of trust, voice and safety across different settings. These patterns highlight the need for anti-bias practices and neurodiversity-informed adjustments in child-centred policing.

Insight 5: Police encounters gain meaning through their accumulation over time and across communities.

Children and young people's views of policing were shaped not only by their own direct encounters with officers but also by what they witnessed happening to peers and family members and by police activity encountered online and on social media. These broader narratives, often negative, provided an important backdrop against which individual encounters were interpreted. As a result, routine interactions could either reinforce existing mistrust or interrupt and repair it. Predictable, fair and transparent behaviour was therefore particularly important, as children often drew on single encounters to confirm or challenge broader expectations about policing.

Insight 6: Embedding child-centred policing requires organisational alignment, not just individual effort.

Although children and young people did not typically describe organisational systems explicitly, their accounts of inconsistency, delay and broken follow-through implied wider structural and organisational influences on practices. Police consultations built upon these implications, helping to identify the specific system-level conditions needed to support consistent delivery, including leadership, supervision, training, continuity, adapted environments and follow-up systems. Child-centred policing was viewed as achievable, but only where frontline practice was enabled and reinforced by supportive system-level structures.

Practice implications: Eight child- and young-person-centred policing principles

A set of eight principles was developed from children and young people's accounts to reflect the core expectations they hold across all policing contexts, including clear communication, fairness, emotional safety, proportionate responses and reliable follow-through. These principles provide a coherent child- and young-person-centred framework that is responsive to both identity and context.

Chapters 8 and 9 set out the detailed operational actions that translate these principles into day-to-day policing practices. Developed directly from children and young people's accounts and refined with policing stakeholders, these actions are designed to be realistic, proportionate and usable across roles and settings.

Principle 1: Child- and youth-centred communication

Police should communicate in calm, clear, age-appropriate ways, avoiding jargon, using ordinary language and demonstrating empathy and attentiveness. Tone, pacing and body language are central to helping children feel safe and respected.

Example: Officers take time to introduce themselves, speak in a calm and reassuring tone and use simple, age-appropriate language, checking in to make sure the child feels comfortable asking questions.

Principle 2: Making sense in the moment: clarity, explanation and immediate predictability

Children need simple explanations of what is happening and why, what will happen next, how their information will be used and when they will be updated. Predictability and transparency reduce fear and misunderstanding.

Example: Officers narrate each step of a stop and search or welfare check (“Here is what I’m going to do next, and this is why”).

Principle 3: Relational visibility and everyday familiarity

Regular, relational presence in schools, neighbourhoods and community spaces helps children see officers as approachable and human rather than as appearing only in moments of crisis. The continuity of personnel strengthens trust.

Example: The same neighbourhood or school-link officer routinely checks in with children in everyday settings, so encounters are not limited to crises or enforcement.

Principle 4: Fairness, dignity and anti-bias practices

Officers must treat every child as a child, free from assumptions about guilt, race, gender, disability or appearance. This includes actively countering adultification (the tendency for children, particularly Black children, to be perceived and treated as older, less innocent or more responsible than their age warrants) and racialised or stereotype-driven suspicion.

Example: Officers explicitly state the lawful reason for approaching a child (“I stopped because of X”), helping to counter bias and reassure the child.

Principle 5: Supporting voice and participation

Children should have real opportunities to speak, be listened to and influence what happens. Officers’ approaches could include offering choices (e.g. officer gender, where to talk), creating safe spaces for discussion and ensuring that listening leads to action.

Example: Officers offer simple choices (“Would you like to talk here or somewhere quieter?”) and explain how the child’s input is shaping their next steps.

Principle 6: Welfare–first and proportionate responses

Officers should begin with welfare, curiosity and de-escalation, using the least intrusive intervention necessary, avoiding unnecessary force and responding seriously to distress or safeguarding cues.

Example: Upon first contact, officers open with a welfare check (“Are you okay? Is anyone hurt?”), helping to set a calm, safety–first tone before asking any investigative questions.

Principle 7: Safe, child–appropriate environments and processes

Environments, especially custody and interview spaces, must feel safe, private and appropriate for children. Police should minimise public exposure, avoid sudden or intimidating actions and ensure that transport and facilities meet children’s needs.

Example: Officers physically position themselves at the child’s level and minimise the number of officers speaking at once, reducing intimidation and sensory overload.

Principle 8: Reliable, accountable and follow–through practices

Trust depends on whether police do what they say they will do. Clear recordkeeping, timely updates, consistent handovers and accessible feedback/complaint routes are essential to demonstrating reliability and accountability.

Example: Officers give a clear time for when they will return with an update, even if there is no progress, and ensure the next officer continues the same explanation.

Concluding observations

Overall, the findings show that children and young people’s experiences of policing are shaped as much by how officers communicate, behave and follow through as by the formal purpose of an encounter. Across all settings, children emphasised the importance of clarity, fairness, emotional safety and predictable processes and expectations, which closely reflect the core components of procedural justice and align with what adults say they want from policing. In this sense, the children were not asking for anything exceptional; rather, they were articulating widely shared expectations of respectful, transparent and trustworthy practices.

At the same time, the study shows that identity, lived experiences of harm and misrecognised and unmet needs shape the extent to which these expectations are realised in practice and can undermine or distort children’s experiences.

Embedding child-centred policing, therefore, requires not only strong relational skills at the point of contact but also system-level alignment, including leadership, training, continuity, accountability and adapted environments, so that every interaction with a child delivers the fairness, respect and legitimacy that procedural justice demands.