

A brighter future

The impact of
the DofE on young
people's mental
health and wellbeing

—
September 2020



“

DofE has reinvigorated and cemented my purpose and drive in life. It showed me that I am more capable than I believe and can do anything I put my mind to.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

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Ruth Marvel

CHIEF EXECUTIVE, DofE

Improving young people's wellbeing is at the heart of the DofE. Since joining the charity in November 2019, I've seen first-hand how the DofE gives young people from diverse backgrounds the opportunity to get out of their comfort zone and grow in confidence.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic hasn't stopped DofE participants. Almost half a million young people are currently doing their DofE and enjoying the structure it provides. It's really inspiring to see their resilience shine through at such a challenging time but we also understand that the pandemic might have long-term effects on their mental health.

This survey provides a snapshot of the DofE's impact on participants' self-reported wellbeing and development of soft skills before COVID-19 (Autumn 2019). I'm delighted to see such positive feedback, with many agreeing that doing their DofE gives them the opportunity to face new challenges, improve their education and job prospects and become more independent – as well as have fun, of course.

We know that young people are worried about their future. As they find their place in the post-COVID world, we will be there to inspire and support them, to help build their self-esteem and give them a positive focus. I have no doubt, our 2020 cohort will do amazing things.

70%

of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that doing their DofE has made them proud of what they can achieve.



At a glance

What is the impact of the DofE on...



...general wellbeing?

72%

Fun and enjoyable

75%

Opportunity to face new challenges

78%

Enhance CV or UCAS application



...confidence and resilience?

62%

More confident in overcoming difficult situations

61%

Become more independent

70%

Proud of achievements



...communication, teamwork and leadership?

45%*

Community action (Volunteering section) teaches problem solving

47%

Expedition teaches taking responsibility for others

44%

Residential boosts confidence to speak to people participants do not know well

“DofE gave me the chance to... improve my teamwork and leadership.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

“

It helped when I was stressed about GCSEs... and made me feel more connected to my friends.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

How do the five DofE sections help the development of soft skills and personal attributes that contribute positively to young people's wellbeing?



Volunteering

At least half of respondents feel more **responsible** and more **confident**



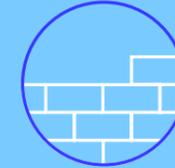
Expedition

At least half of respondents commented it helped them to **overcome challenges** and work with others to **solve problems**



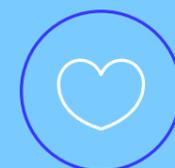
Skills

Around a third of respondents said this section helps with **confidence** and lets them work on something they **believe in**



Residential

More than a third noted that it **builds confidence** and **problem-solving skills**



Physical

Almost two thirds said they are **fitter** and **healthier** and a third are more **confident**

Introduction

“Children’s wellbeing in the UK is in decline”.¹ That is the opening statement of a 2019 report by The Children’s Society. It goes on to note that many young people in the UK are anxious, have low levels of literacy and numeracy and are not physically active.

Every year, the DofE helps thousands of 14 to 24-year-olds to thrive. We give them the opportunity to get out of their comfort zone and discover who they are. We encourage them to connect with new people, support their community, get fitter and gain skills for work and life. We help them to become more confident, more resilient, better communicators and better leaders.

Last year, 295,490 young people embarked on their DofE journey, including 72,577 from disadvantaged backgrounds. In Autumn 2019, we commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to conduct a survey to assess the impact of the DofE on young people’s self-reported wellbeing and explore whether specific activities in the five DofE sections are associated with the development of particular socio-emotional skills (often called ‘soft skills’) and personal attributes.

There is evidence that extra-curricular activities and the development of soft skills help to improve young people’s educational aspirations,² employability,³ social mobility,⁴ moral character,⁵ peer belonging and mental health.⁶

Where the last of these points is concerned, The Mental Health Foundation notes that good mental health is characterised by a person’s ability to fulfil a key number of functions and activities, including the ability to learn, the ability to form and maintain good relationships with others and the ability to cope with and manage change and uncertainty.⁷

Previous DofE surveys and ongoing feedback from DofE participants highlight the DofE’s impact on positive mental wellbeing – particularly in the areas of confidence, resilience, communication, teamwork and leadership.

What did the survey consist of?

With the current evidence in mind, the DofE and NFER identified three key areas as the basis for the survey:

- The impact of the DofE on young people’s general wellbeing
- The impact of the DofE on young people’s confidence and resilience
- The impact of the DofE on young people’s communication, teamwork and leadership skills

This resulted in the following research questions:

- How do you perceive your own wellbeing?
- How do you think that participation in the different levels of Award (Bronze, Silver, Gold) has influenced your wellbeing?
- How does taking part in different activities for each section of your DofE programme (Volunteering, Skills, Physical, Expedition, Residential) help you to develop soft skills and personal attributes that contribute positively to your wellbeing?

4,638 DofE participants took part in the online survey.

This report summarises the key findings and provides evidence that could help future DofE participants to create the best possible DofE programme for their individual needs. Further details about the survey methodology can be found on page 36.

What is wellbeing and how can it be measured?

The Oxford English Dictionary defines wellbeing as “the state of being comfortable, healthy or happy”⁸ while the New Economics Foundation says it “...can be understood as how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and a social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole”⁹ For the purpose of this survey and report, we use The Children’s Society’s definition of subjective wellbeing, namely: “...a positive state of mind in which a person feels good about life as a whole and its constituent parts, such as their relationships with others, the environments that they inhabit and how they see themselves”¹⁰

We acknowledge that it can be difficult to measure wellbeing directly as it is highly subjective and includes various components, such as physical health, mental health, happiness and life satisfaction.

Our survey therefore focuses on self-reported wellbeing in relation to the soft skills and personal attributes gained from the DofE – such as confidence, resilience, communication and teamwork – and provides a snapshot of a moment in time.

Why must we focus on young people's wellbeing?

A child’s mental health and wellbeing has an influence on their cognitive development, learning, physical health and mental wellbeing in adulthood, notes Public Health England!¹¹ 2020 has shone an even brighter spotlight on mental health and wellbeing as young people around the world have faced the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

While the full impact of this remains to be seen, many experts warn that the lockdown and social distancing could have damaging lifelong consequences for young people. There has been a sharp rise in sadness, depression and sleep problems among young people because of coronavirus¹² and many parents and carers are concerned about the long-term impact on their child’s mental health!¹³

Poverty and social exclusion are rising as families struggle to meet their financial commitments!¹⁴ Schools being closed has widened the education inequality gap¹⁵ and teenagers and young adults will bear the economic burden of lockdown for many years to come – with a significant recession

expected in the UK, an additional 640,000 18 to 24-year-olds could find themselves out of work this year alone!¹⁶

“Improving the wellbeing of the current generation of young people is one way to ensure that they grow up to become happy and confident adults,”¹⁷ says The Children’s Society. The DofE’s work will be more critical than ever as our society recovers from the COVID-19 pandemic – whether it is continuing with DofE activities at home or whilst social distancing (#DofEWithADifference) or returning to activities that require contact, when it is safe to do so.

We will help hundreds of thousands of young people to bounce back from the challenges of lockdown. We will build their confidence and resilience to support their mental health. We will give them the opportunity to do interesting things, meet like-minded and different people and make exciting plans for the future. And we will use the findings from this survey, along with other evidence, to guide us as we all navigate our new normal.

“The DofE will continue to champion young people all across the UK, supporting them to develop the adaptability, resilience and human skills they will need to thrive in the uncertain world that waits for us beyond COVID-19.”

Ruth Marvel, Chief Executive, DofE



Key findings

With more than 60 years of experience developing young people for work and life, the DofE works with organisations across the UK to help 14 to 24-year-olds gain essential skills, confidence and resilience.

It is our goal to enable young people of every background to achieve a DofE Award, regardless of any barriers they may face. As the infographic on the next page shows, we reached more young people than ever in 2019/20.

They include Philip, who volunteers for St John Ambulance, Sarah, who did not let her cerebral palsy hold her back from achieving her Gold DofE Award, and Tariq, who is doing his DofE in a young offender institution.

But how does a DofE programme help a young person to develop the soft skills and personal attributes they need to support their mental health and wellbeing – such as confidence, resilience, communication, teamwork and leadership? And which are the best DofE activities to aid the development of these characteristics?

“Before I did DofE, I felt anxious a lot of the time. I believe in myself more now.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

The DofE UK statistics

1 April 2019 – 31 March 2020

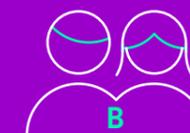
Awards started

295,490

young people started their DofE journey – up 2.6% on last year

This includes
72,577

disadvantaged young people – up 6% on last year



201,958

Bronze Awards started



63,031

Silver Awards started



30,501

Gold Awards started

490,535

young people are currently doing their DofE programme

27.6% of 14-year-olds in the UK started a Bronze DofE programme

Awards achieved



A total of
159,051

Awards were achieved – that's 3.9% more than last year



112,525

Bronze Awards achieved



34,123

Silver Awards achieved



12,403

Gold Awards achieved

Of those who started... **55.2%** ...achieved an Award*

Supporting young people



Around
40,000
Leaders and volunteers deliver DofE programmes



There are
3,937
Licensed Organisations actively delivering the DofE



DofE participants spent an amazing
3,397,043
hours volunteering to help others

In the UK since 1956, over 3.1 million Awards have been achieved and over 6.7 million have been started

* Figure based on previous years' starts.



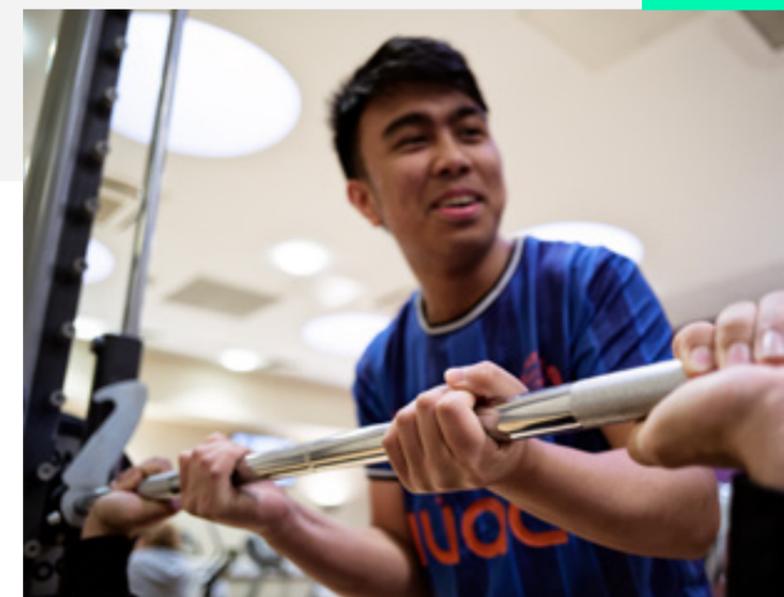
General wellbeing

As the State of the Nation (2019) report says, “All children and young people deserve to have good wellbeing and grow up equipped with the tools they need to understand and support their mental wellbeing as they move into adulthood”.¹⁸

“

DofE is not just an award but it is a training and lesson for life. It teaches you... how to cope with the hardest things.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

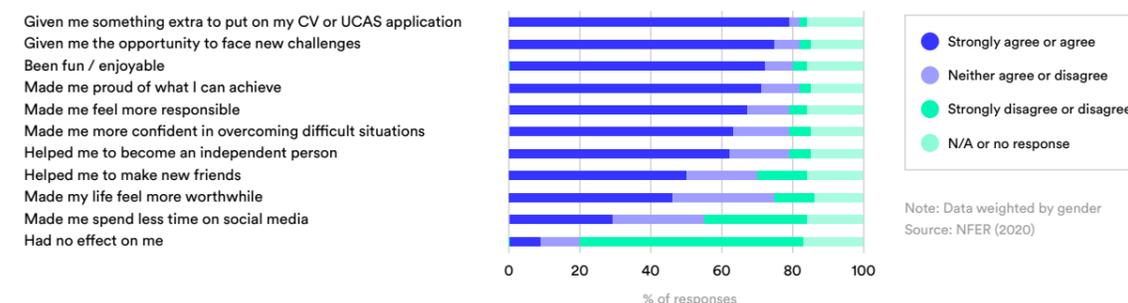


We asked respondents how participating overall in the DofE had affected aspects of their wellbeing.

The findings reveal that young people believe the DofE helps them to connect with others, become more resilient and improve their education and employment prospects.

Gold DofE participants, in particular, acknowledge that doing their DofE has a positive impact on their wellbeing.

Summary of all responses to the question ‘Taking part in the DofE has...’





Confidence and resilience

YoungMinds notes that children and young people with low self-esteem are “...more at risk of developing depression, anxiety, self-harming and other mental health problems as they grow up”. The charity also acknowledges that resilience is key to raising self-esteem.¹⁹

“

My confidence and ability to speak with new people has improved, as has my confidence to take risks and put myself in a position where I’m not entirely comfortable in order to learn from the experience.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent



The themes of confidence and self-esteem were common in the survey responses, particularly in relation to the Volunteering section.

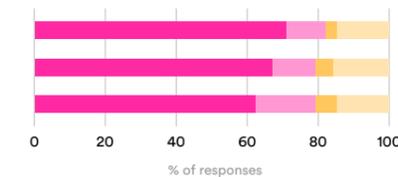
Resilience was also highlighted by respondents who believe that the DofE has taught them to bounce back in tough circumstances.

Overcoming challenges is a key learning for Gold and Silver participants, in particular.

Responses to statements that relate to confidence and self-esteem

Overall DofE experience has...

- Made me proud of what I can achieve
- Made me feel more responsible
- Helped me to become an independent person

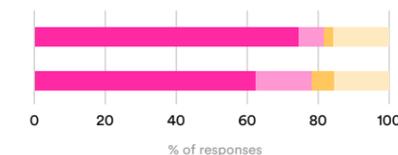


Note: Data weighted by gender
Source: NFER (2020)

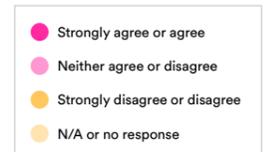
Responses to statements that relate to resilience

Overall DofE experience has...

- Given me the opportunity to face new challenges
- Made me more confident in overcoming difficult situations



Note: Data weighted by gender
Source: NFER (2020)





62%

of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the DofE made them more **confident in overcoming difficult situations**



67%

of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the DofE has helped them to feel more **responsible**



61%

said they have become more **independent** as a result of doing the DofE



75%

said that it gave them the opportunity to **face new challenges**



70%

agreed or strongly agreed that it has made them **proud** of what they can **achieve**, with more female respondents citing this than male respondents



“It has allowed me to see how resilient I am... and how easy it is to work as a team.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent



Communication, teamwork and leadership

Self-belief, communication and teamwork are key skills for young professionals, according to Youth Employment UK.²⁰ They can also have a positive impact on mental health.

“It showed me the importance of teamwork and talking to the people around me, to check they are OK and to solve things together.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

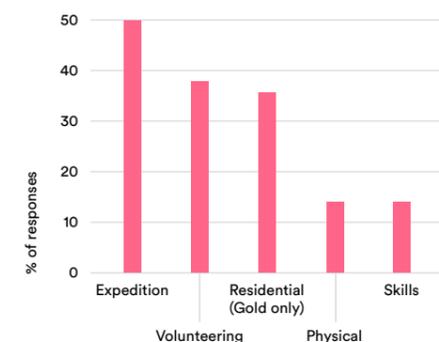
Many of the respondents to our survey acknowledged the positive impact of being part of a team during their DofE, especially when doing the Expedition, Volunteering and Residential sections.

Key skills gained from working with other people include communication and leadership. Growing in confidence and learning to take responsibility for others were also cited.

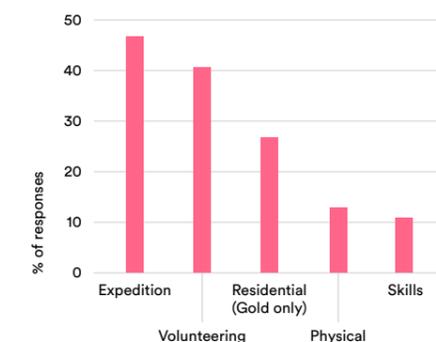


Effects related to teamwork and collaboration across all five sectional activities

It has taught me how to work with others to solve problems



It has taught me how to take responsibility for others in my group



Note: Data weighted by gender Source: NFER (2020)



45%

of respondents who were taking part in **community action and raising awareness** for their volunteering said that learning how to work with others to **solve problems** was an important outcome of the activity.



30%

felt that the Skills section has made them more **confident**, with Performance Arts activities especially beneficial for building confidence



44%

reported that the DofE residential made them more **confident** about **speaking** to people they do not know very well



47%

of respondents commented that the DofE expedition taught them how to **take responsibility** for others in their group



22%

of respondents doing **team sports** for the Physical section associated the activity with learning to **take responsibility** for others.



“ Taking part in DofE has made me value friendship and teamwork a lot more than I used to.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent



Key findings by DofE section



The DofE is made up of five sections:

- **Volunteering**
- **Skills**
- **Physical**
- **Expedition**
- **Residential** (Gold only)

Our survey explored how these sections – and the different activities within them – can be associated with self-reported increased wellbeing.

“Volunteering showed me the happiness that comes from helping others and throwing myself into the community.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

A 2019 report by social enterprise Jump revealed that volunteering has a significant positive impact on individual wellbeing and that formal volunteering as part of a group improves wellbeing significantly more than informal, irregular volunteering²¹

Every DofE participant gets the opportunity to volunteer, whether it is giving their time to help an individual, the wider community or the natural world.

Our DofE/NFER survey reveals that volunteering as part of the DofE helps young people to become more responsible, more confident, better problem solvers and more able to support the causes they believe in.

“The Skills section showed me that I could achieve things outside of standard school curriculum and that I could dive into new and exciting passions.”

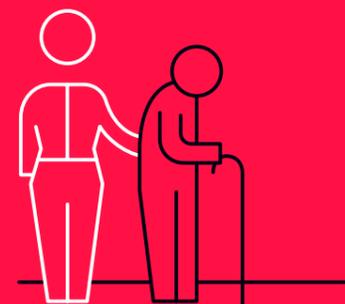
DofE/NFER survey respondent

The CBI/Pearson survey (2019) notes that employers are “...very clear about what they need from the education and skills systems: skills, behaviours and attributes that ensure school and college leavers, as well as graduates, are ready for the world of work”²²

For the Skills section, young people can improve an existing skill or learn a new one.

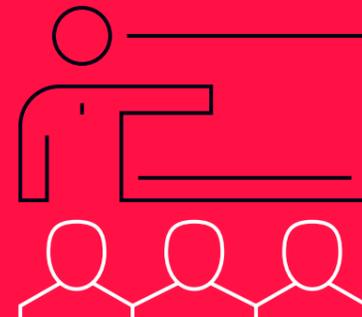
They can choose from a range of activities – from app design to singing, beekeeping to woodwork.

Our DofE/NFER survey highlights which activities within the Skills section can be linked to different soft skills and aspects of wellbeing, such as self-esteem, resilience, confidence and responsibility.



56% of respondents said volunteering as part of their DofE made them feel **more responsible**

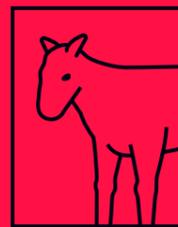
64% of those who coached, taught or led other people regarded **'responsibility'** as an important outcome



50% said their DofE volunteering made them **more confident** and 52% reported that it gave them confidence to **speak to people** they do not know well



45% of respondents who were taking part in **community action and raising awareness** for their volunteering noted learning how to work with others to **solve problems** as an important effect of the activity.



44% of respondents who worked with the **environment or animals** felt that being able to **do something they believe in** and **learning a new skill** were important outcomes of their volunteering.

Respondents indicated that activities in **Science and Technology (41%), Music (39%), Performance Arts (38%)** and **Creative Arts (38%)** are particularly good for realising potential and building self-esteem*



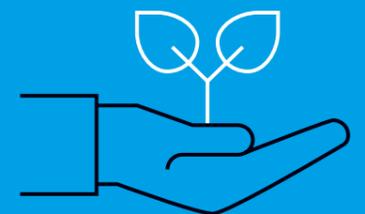
32% commented that this section allowed them to work on something they believe in and 30% felt it has made them **more confident**

46% of respondents said the Skills section has given them the opportunity to **learn a new skill**. 62% of **Media and Communication** participants, 61% of **Science and Technology** participants, and 56% of the **Natural World** participants rated this as a strong effect.

49% of **Performance Arts** participants said it has made them **more confident**



40% of respondents who learnt a **Science and Technology** skill felt it taught them how to **overcome challenges**



48% of respondents who learnt a skill in the **Natural World** noted that it made them feel **more responsible**

*These figures are based on respondents who took part in those activities and felt they were able to work on something they believed in.

“Taking part in DofE has absolutely had a positive impact on my health and wellbeing.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

A report by the Association for Young People's Health in partnership with Street Games (2016) revealed positive associations between sport and organised activity and mental health outcomes for young people.²³

As part of the DofE, young people choose a sport, dance or fitness activity that they would like to improve in.

Our DofE/NFER survey found that different activities within the Physical section are associated with certain soft skills and aspects of wellbeing, such as confidence and responsibility.

63% of respondents said doing the **Physical** section has made them **fitter** and **healthier**



33% commented it has made them more confident, with 42% of dance participants, 41% of martial arts participants and 38% of extreme sports participants saying it has helped to **build confidence**



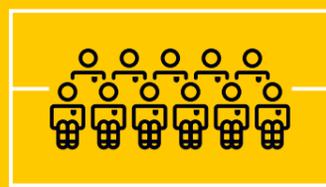
41% of respondents doing **martial arts** and 40% of those doing **racquet sports** rated being able to **learn a new skill** as an important effect of these activities.



Dance was the activity most associated with enabling DofE participants to work on something they **believe in (34%)**



22% of respondents taking part in **team sports** said it made them feel **more responsible for others**.



“[the expeditions have] given me a connection to nature and to my body... that has instilled in me so much confidence and happiness.”

DofE/NFER survey respondent

The Social Mobility Commission's 'An Unequal Playing Field' report (2019) notes that there are "huge disparities in children's participation rates across a wide range of extra-curricular activities depending on their social background". This can have a negative effect on confidence, social skills and educational aspirations.²⁴

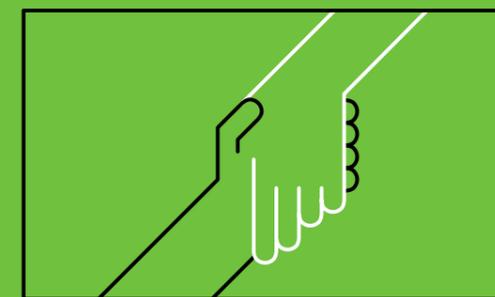
For the DofE Expedition section, young people have to plan, train for and complete an unaccompanied expedition.

According to our DofE/NFER survey, the most commonly reported effects of the expedition are increased resilience, problem-solving, responsibility and fitness.

51% of respondents said the expedition taught them to **overcome challenges**



50% reported that they have a better understanding of how to **work with other people to solve problems**



47% commented that they learnt how to **take responsibility for others** in their group



47% said the expedition made them physically **fitter and healthier**

“
The DofE has improved my confidence and made me step out of my comfort zone – to talk to new people and try new things.”

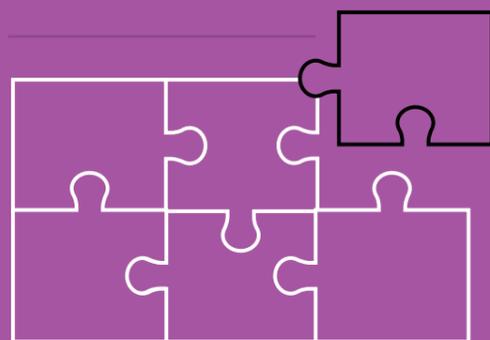
DofE/NFER survey respondent

A survey by the British Heart Foundation (2017) found that more than half of people in the UK stick to their daily routines and do not leave their comfort zone. Over two fifths said they would not be described as an adventurous person.²⁵

For the DofE Residential section, Gold Award participants undertake a shared

activity or specific course with people they don't know, in a residential setting away from home.

Our DofE/NFER survey found that the Residential section is particularly useful for increasing confidence. It also helps young people to work in a team, problem solve and build resilience.



36% commented that it taught them how to work together with others to **solve problems**



39% of respondents said the DofE residential made them **more confident**



44% reported they are now more confident about **speaking to new people**



34% said the DofE residential helped them learn how to **overcome challenges**



Closing remarks

Can participation in the DofE improve young people's self-reported wellbeing? That was the question that drove the development of our DofE/NFER survey. The findings illustrate that many young people experience improvements in three key areas of wellbeing as a result of doing their DofE.

1. The DofE has a positive impact on young people's general wellbeing – respondents noted that they had fun, made new friends, faced new challenges and believed that the DofE improved their education and employment prospects.
2. The DofE has a positive impact on young people's confidence and resilience – the survey revealed that many respondents are more confident in difficult situations, had the opportunity to face new challenges and feel more independent and responsible.
3. The DofE has a positive impact on young people's communication, teamwork and leadership skills – respondents said they learnt how to work with others to solve problems, felt more confident about speaking to people they do not know well and now understood how to take responsibility for others.

The findings reveal how the different DofE sections (Volunteering, Skills, Physical, Expedition and Residential) and specific activities within them are linked to self-reported wellbeing. For example:

- Volunteering activities that focus on coaching, teaching and leading others were mostly linked to a range of increased self-reported wellbeing areas. Volunteering for a charity and helping others also seems to have significant positive outcomes on participants in all three wellbeing areas.
- For the Skills section, musical activities particularly enhanced self-reported confidence and self-esteem as well as resilience and collaborating with others. Doing activities that focus on gaining life skills also had a positive impact on participants' self-perception about all three areas of wellbeing.
- In terms of activities in the Physical section, increased confidence was mostly linked to team sports, whereas individual sports seemed to be more strongly linked to building resilience.

There is already an increasing focus on young people in the UK taking part in extra-curricular activities and developing broader skills for work and life. For example, the Department for Education's Character Education Framework²⁶ provides guidance for schools on personal development and acknowledges that programmes like the DofE help to improve young people's wellbeing.

Little did we know when we commissioned this survey last year how different life would look in 2020, however. With young people's wellbeing already in decline, a separate DofE

survey conducted during lockdown reveals that almost half (46%) of respondents are concerned about how coronavirus might impact their mental wellbeing.²⁷ With the threat of a mental health pandemic, a global recession and many other challenges, COVID-19 looks likely to have a major impact on young people's wellbeing for many years to come.

The DofE will be more vital than ever to help young people have a brighter future. The findings of this survey, along with other evidence, will therefore be used to:

- Further enhance the mental health and wellbeing elements of a DofE programme so we can support young people in key areas, such as confidence, resilience and teamwork.
- Help young people to design a DofE programme that works for them, by matching their individual needs with wellbeing outcomes commonly experienced by other participants.

Methodology

This survey was available online in Autumn 2019 and all DofE participants who had logged in to the eDofE online portal in the last two years were invited by email to take part.

Over a four-week period, 5,435 DofE participants started the survey, of which 3,816 completed it. Anyone who answered at least one question was included in the analysis, resulting in **4,638 respondents**.

Whilst the sample included in this survey is broadly representative of the current DofE cohort, it is important to note that slightly more female than male participants completed this survey.

NFER considered the following survey features during the development phase:

- Including items that capture the following areas: confidence and self-esteem, resilience and overcoming adversity and working with others.
- Including, where possible, existing items that have already been trialed and validated with an age-representative national sample.
- Having all multiple-choice questions, except for one open-ended question (How has taking part in the DofE affected your health and wellbeing?), which gave respondents an opportunity to talk more broadly about their personal experiences.
- Maintaining objectivity and impartiality at all times by avoiding leading questions or confirmation bias.
- Facilitating survey access via an online platform and keeping the survey concise (under 15 minutes to complete).



References

- 1 **The Children's Society, What Works Wellbeing and The Gregson Family Foundation (2019) The case for national measurement of children's well-being**
<https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/case-for-national-wellbeing-measurement.2019.pdf>
- 2 **Mahoney et al (2003) Promoting interpersonal competence and educational success through extracurricular activity participation**
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“
Completing DofE
made me feel
happy and proud.”



The Duke of Edinburgh's Award

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award (DofE) gives young people the chance to learn new skills and enhance existing strengths.

Any young person aged 14-24 years old can do their DofE, regardless of ability, gender, background or location and it isn't a competition or about being first; it's all about setting personal challenges and pushing personal boundaries.

The DofE takes young people out of their comfort zone and supports them in building a vital set of skills and attributes for life and work, such as confidence, resilience and communication, as well as providing the foundations for life-long friendships.

NFER

The lives of children and young people worldwide are inextricably linked to the amount and quality of education they receive. NFER's mission is to improve outcomes for future generations everywhere and to support positive change across education systems. Since 1946, it has delivered impact by creating and sharing research evidence and insights on education policy and practice, informing policymakers and other key decision makers, and strengthening practice in the classroom.

A brighter future

The impact of the DofE on young people's mental health and wellbeing

September 2020

[DofE.org](https://www.dofe.org)

