

GENERATION AI-LONE: 48% in ACROSS LONDON TURN TO AI FOR SUPPORT, COMPANY OR ADVICE

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OnSide's Generation Isolation Report reveals 39% of young people in England aged between 11 and 18 have turned to AI chatbots for advice, support or company.

Across London, that figure is 48% showing how many young people are relying on technology for connection.

23% say it's easier to talk to AI than to a human, while 9% report feeling lonely.

This use of tech for companionship and advice is shown against an underlying trend of loneliness in young people with 20% reporting high or very high levels of loneliness** across London

Young people crave in-person friendship but report a lack of opportunities to meet new people. 44% said spending time with friends in real life helps them feel most connected.

Young people say real-world spaces are crucial with 15% saying affordable, in-person social spaces and activities like those offered by OnSide's four London Youth Zones: Future in Barking and Dagenham, Legacy in Croydon, Unitas in Barnet and WEST in Hammersmith and Fulham would improve their lives outside of school.

Future, Legacy, Unitas and WEST, who form part of the OnSide Network, warns that growing digital dependence and lack of real-life social spaces is driving loneliness and disconnection in young people — as new research published today highlights that 48% young people in across London. are turning to AI for advice, support or company.

OnSide's Generation Isolation 2025 is the largest annual study of its kind into the way 11–18-year-olds spend their free time outside of school, based on a survey carried out by YouGov of 5,035 young people in England.

Now in its third year, the report shows that 33% of this age group feel lonely while 40% report high or very high levels of anxiety.

Of those who turn to AI, 20% are seeking help with feelings and emotions like stress, sadness and loneliness. A further 21% say they are looking for advice about friendships whilst 16% want someone to talk to.

These findings highlight just how vital spaces like Future, Legacy, Unitas and WEST, are for helping young people across London access the support, friendship and connection they now seek online.

Commenting on the findings, Unitas Youth Zone's Chief Executive Robin Moss: "When three-quarters of young people tell us that they spend the majority of their time on screens, as a society we need to sit up and take note. And with the rise of AI chatbots, the lure of the online world is only going to grow. Young people need safe places they can go in their free time to take part in meaningful activities, to build their skills, to connect with friends old and new 'IRL' and to have youth workers – trusted adults – to support and mentor them. The Generation Isolation report shows us both the challenge but also the opportunity, because there is a solution to youth loneliness and screen addiction – youth centres. Here at Unitas Youth Zone, over 3,000 young people use our services every year, and the benefits to them and the community are clear and measurable. Every young person deserves to live a full and rich life that isn't simply tied to a screen – and every community should invest in a youth centre to provide them with just that"

Young people across London and AI

When asked why they use AI, 59% in across London responded that they use it for schoolwork or revision, 43% say it's quicker and 23% because it's easier than talking to a real person. 13% say it's because they didn't have a friend or anyone else to turn to and 11% say it's too embarrassing or awkward to talk to an adult.

However, when it comes to levels of trust in what chatbots are telling them - only 9% of young people

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who use a chatbot say they trust it more than a real person, revealing a tension between what is easy for young people, and what genuinely provides the most appropriate support.

A post-pandemic death of real-life social interaction is taking its toll on young people, with 29% stating they do not have opportunities to meet new people or make friends beyond their social group outside of school.

68% of young people spend most of their free time on screens, a figure that has remained steady since 2023, and 35% of young people spend the majority of their free time in their bedroom.

Digital friendships

As online friendships and AI interactions fill the gap left by fewer real-world opportunities, young people are finding that quick digital connection often lacks the depth, trust, and belonging they crave.

61% say using social media and the internet makes friendship easier, 61% say being in person with their friends drives real connection 38% believe someone can be a real friend if you have never met them in person. However, young people are also struggling to navigate how to communicate and maintain friendships through their phones. 48% say they have had a negative friendship experience online during the past year, and of those, 32% said it led to feelings of anxiety 28% suffered a lack of confidence and 20% experienced loneliness.

Young people are clear that real-world spaces matter with 15% saying affordable, in-person social spaces and activities would improve their lives outside of school. Youth clubs like Future, Legacy, Unitas and WEST offer this - social, safe and affordable spaces for young people to make new friends and try new things. While 93% of those attending a youth club reported it had made a positive difference to their lives and 46% those saying this because they had made new friends, only 21% of young people surveyed attend a youth club.

Myke Catterall, CEO of Legacy Youth Zone says "While it's no surprise that young people are turning to AI for quick answers, what this report shows is something deeper; a generation searching for belonging. At Legacy, Croydon Youth Zone, we see every day that when young people are given real-world spaces to connect, create and be themselves, everything changes. They open up, build friendships and find the trusted adults they can't always access online.

The findings reinforce what Youth Zones across London already know which is that digital tools can support, but they can't replace the power of genuine human connection. Our job is to make sure every young person has somewhere safe, social and inspiring to go and a space that reminds them they never have to navigate life alone."

Since 2019, Future, Legacy, Unitas and WEST Youth Zones have supported over 32,000 across London, with 100's of young people in across London visiting each week to make friends, gain vital youth worker support and to take part in engaging and fun real-life activities. Young people say attending Future, Legacy, Unitas and WEST helps them feel happier, more confident and more connected to others in their community.

Milan, 18, is a member of Unitas Youth Zone. Commenting on Generation Isolation 2025 they said: "Unitas is amazing. It's for the young people and it's always there. It's helped me. It's given me friends, skills and confidence. You could say it cracked my shell - released me out into the world."

To read the full Generation Isolation report, visit: www.onsideyouthzones.org/generationisolation from 00.01 on 19 November 2025

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