

I've been in a few fights at school, but it was just handbags, really, nothing serious'



CAROLINE IRBY

Steve Ritchie 17

From Ludgershall, Hampshire.

Where would you like to live when you're older?

In a city - preferably London.

What's your dream job?

I did want to be a physiotherapist, but you need sciences and I only just scraped a C at GCSE. I'm doing a BTEC in sport and I'm looking at coaching.

Have you earned money?

I've got a part-time job at Homebase.

Would you like to be famous?

I'd love to. I think I'd be the best famous person.

Do you like shopping? I love it - I'm a bit of a ponce when it comes to clothes.

What's your favourite piece of clothing?

I got a well nice Lyle & Scott jumper recently. It cost £80, but it's so nice.

Have you been in a fistfight?

A few times in school, but it was just handbags, really, nothing serious.

Have you been stopped by the police?

Once, on New Year's Eve: they thought I'd been drinking under age, but luckily I hadn't.

Have you been offered drugs?

Yeah. I went on holiday with a group of lads and it was all offered, but I stay away from that sort of stuff. It's a mug's game. My mum and dad would break my back if they knew I was doing it.

What do you think adults could learn from teenagers?

To chill out a bit.

way, often giving us hostile looks. It feels weirdly empowering, but also annoying. What's wrong with them? Why stare at us when we're not bothering them?

7.30am Sunday, sunny but cold, and Nas (below) is stacking his newspaper trolley. Copies of the local paper with five leaflets to go with each one. "It can be pretty depressing when it's pouring down, delivering all those papers through the wind and rain. But at times it's really good. Especially Tuesday." Why Tuesday? "Payday."

Nas has been credit-crunched. Two years ago when he started he was paid £20 for delivering the papers, and with the leaflets it could rise to £30. Now it's just £10 for the papers, or £15 on a good day. I pull the trolley with both hands behind my back. It's heavy, cumbersome work. "They don't call us newspaper boys any more, we're walkers. I call myself a newspaper distribution expert." He rubs his hands together, and blows on them.

Nas's mother was born in Uganda, his father Rwanda. They divorced when he was three, and even here he considers himself fortunate - both parents remarried and now he's got two great sets of families. "These days my mum treats me like a sixth-former. She confides in me. Beforehand, certain things happened and mum would say, 'Ah, you're too young to know.' Now, she tells me."

Nas talks more formally than most of his friends - full sentences, little slang, no swearing. There are expectations of how a teenage boy will talk and act - especially a black teenage boy, he says. But he's not having any of that. "The bottom line is, it's not me. African parents want you to do well and they always push you to speak properly. Mum and Dad go mad if I say 'Innit'."

Nas is more confident than he was at primary school. Back then he was quiet, a little withdrawn. "It all changed when I joined the cadets." He learned practical skills such as map-reading and ironing, found his voice, even got himself a girlfriend.

At school, he says, the older you get, the more fixed groups become. Because he is so busy with extracurricular activities, he's left out at times. But he's turned this into a strength - he can float from group to group. "At school there is the cool group, and >>>



FREDRIKE HELWIG

96%
of teenage boys are ambitious about their future careers



Blue Addison and Barney Hodson Laybourne 14

Best friends who grew up in Lewisham, south London, both recently moved with their families to Kent.

Do you enjoy school?

Barney (right) I like my social life and friends. I moved in year six, and the kids in Ramsgate had never had any sex education. They knew nothing.

Blue (left) My school in London was really multicultural; here it's 99% English. Some people don't understand, when they say things about other races, it's quite bad.

Outside of school, what takes up most of your time?

Barney Our band. It started as a joke...

Blue We were taking the mickey.

Barney We thought it'd be good if we rapped about things we liked.

Rappers in America talk about gun crime and prostitutes; we rap about getting clothes from TK Maxx.

Do you get pocket money?

Blue £5 a week from

my grandparents; I spent it on a Mexican sombrero yesterday.

Barney £3 a week from my dad [when] I see him every other weekend.

What's your favourite item of clothing?

Barney Shoes! I've got 50 pairs of trainers.

Blue I absolutely love big, colourful clothes.

When were you happiest?

Barney I'm always happiest.

Blue I'm usually happy, apart from when I'm really hungry, then I get really angry.

When did you last cry?

Blue Sunday, at a paintball game. I got shot in the head and it really, really hurt.

Barney Last night, when I was on the back of the sofa and slipped and cut my heel.

Have you been stopped by the police?

Barney In London once, Blue's dog pooped. This kid we were with tried to throw it. It went in this woman's garden, she told the police and they stopped us. »

CAROLINE IREY



94%

of teenage boys are happy in their home and family lives

then lots of others.” What is the cool group like? “They are really the kids who get up to no good.” Do many drink and take drugs? “More than you’d think. I’d say a third smoke or drink – cigarettes and a bit of dope as well.” Does he drink? “I don’t drink or smoke at all. Apart from when I was four and I thought wine was apple juice and drank it and spat it straight out.”

Why doesn’t he drink? “First of all, I’m Muslim. But also I don’t see the appeal. At our age people drink just to get drunk. I think it’s easier to speak to a girl if you’re drunk. Also, it’s much easier to get off with a girl if she’s drunk. For me, though, I think if you’re an interesting enough person you can be interesting at a party without alcohol.”

He’s been going out with Hannah for seven months now. Is it a serious relationship? Nas says he’s never sure what serious means. “Hannah goes to cadets. I like her, she likes me, and we’re really good friends. There are times you’ll go out with a girl cos she’s really fit, simple as that. Then you slowly realise you have nothing in common and she’s boring or really loud and in your face.” He usually sees Hannah once a week. “We might go to the cinema, or I’ll make her lunch and we’ll just chill in the park. It’s really nice.”

I’m gradually becoming more expert at newspaper distribution as Nas chats away about the difference between girls and boys. On the whole, he reckons, boys have it easier – less emotional upset, no periods, not the same pressure to dress well. “There’s so much more going on with girls. Boys, we’re simple creatures. As long as we’ve got some food, some entertainment, we’re pretty much fine.”

Character-wise, he says there’s also a big difference. “There’s always bitching going on in girls’ friendship groups. And often there’s a debate about who’s best friends, whereas with guys it’s pretty easy – we’re mates, and if you don’t like somebody you just give them a punch in the face.”

That’s only happened once, though. “I was around my dad’s, and this boy brought my mum into it. I warned him. Twice. I was 14, and I said, ‘This ain’t funny any more, I will hit you.’” Did he enjoy punching him? He looks embarrassed. “It felt so good, yeah. He got a really big bruise. The funny thing is, the same day he apologised.”

Joe France (left) is off school with a cold, and he’s not happy about it. He loves school. Joe, 14, is »



CAROLINE IRBY

Anthony Cadien 18

Lives in Kennington, south London, and has music lessons with the organisation Kids Company.

Do you have a girlfriend?

No, I have a boyfriend. From the age of 15, it was just boys, boys, boys.

Did you enjoy school?

I didn’t at the start, then I came up with a plan: hang out with the smart geeky kids and get all the brains.

What’s your dream job?

My mission before I die would be to play something [on the piano] that I made up, in front of a big audience. But there’s too much competition, so I’ll become an

accountant instead.

What music do you like to listen to?

Classical.

When did you laugh the most this week, and why?

I was in Portsmouth [with my boyfriend] and we went in the sea in wet suits.

He was showing me how to float. I was giggling cos there’s tens of thousands of people watching, thinking, “What are those two faggots doing?”

When are you happiest?

When I’m with him.

When was the last time you cried?

Two hours ago. I was thinking about what

I really want to do in life and when it’s going to happen.

Have you been stopped by the police?

Yes. The first time they saw me carrying a TV and thought, “Black boy, TV... doesn’t make sense”, but I was being the delivery boy for a family friend [who was] moving house. Two occasions they stopped me for weed; another for not having a bus pass.

What is the best piece of advice you’ve received?

Life is not a rehearsal, so anything you do, know that it’s done and you can’t change it.

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FREDRIKE HELWIG

'My home here is brilliant. In my country, the Taliban didn't let us live our lives'



CAROLINE IREY

Baba Dalwarzada 14

Came to the UK from Afghanistan six years ago; lives in Leicester.

Do you like where you live?

My home here is brilliant. It's much better than in my country: the Taliban, they used to tell us not to listen to music, not to watch TV. They just didn't let us live our lives.

Outside of school, what takes up most of your time?

Sometimes I babysit my little brother, sometimes I go to

football training, sometimes I go to town with my friends.

When are you happiest?

In school when I get good grades, or if I win a football match.

What makes you angry?

I can't take losing, especially at sport. Some of my friends just look at me like, "It's only a game."

Do you like being 14?

I don't mind - this is the time I have fun.

What's your dream job?

I want to be a footballer - I play for a county team. But I don't know if I can get there. If I don't, I might be an engineer.

Is there anything you'd like to change?

Just war, I don't want war. I want my country to be free.

What is the best piece of advice you've received?

My family in my country, they told me to come to this country, they told me to come here to get a better life.

a clever boy from a working-class background in Walsall, in the Midlands, who already has his future mapped out. Last year, he came top of the class in his grammar school, and he's happy to be seen as a swot. "If I get called a geek I'll say, 'Yes, I am, what's the problem? Just because I get more A*s than you doesn't mean there's anything wrong with me.'"

Joe is on the small side for his age; many adults don't realise he's a teenager. Does he feel intimidated by groups of teenage boys? "Normally I'd just walk past them and not pay them any attention. I'd drift to one side probably, but if they were all walking together, blocking the main path, I'd just carry on, and not stare at them." The way they walk might look aggressive, he says, but it's rarely meant to be. "Most of the time they stand together so they can all talk without having to turn round. They don't like to have to drift behind each other."

There are changes he's noticed in himself. His emotions fluctuate more than they used to, he thinks more about girls, he gets annoyed more easily, and he's more self-conscious. About what? "The most obvious thing is spots. I didn't pay much attention to them till the summer holidays. Then I realised I had spots on my forehead and one on my nose. When I run my hand over my forehead I can feel them there. They feel bumpy and strange."

And then there's his height. "I'm definitely self-conscious about people growing past me. I had one friend who was the same height as me at the end of year nine and he's suddenly grown and now he's four inches taller than me." Does he feel jealous? "Not jealous, it just feels a bit late. They say you have a growth spurt at 13 and your voice will break at 14, and then when it doesn't happen you think, 'Hang on, is it ever going to - or am I just going to stay short?'"

But there are things he loves about being a teenager: not least the freedoms. He's got his own laptop, so he no longer has to share with his mum and dad. He likes the fact that his friends talk about more serious things these days, such as politics, and he loves shopping for clothes, which he used to hate. "I was in London a couple of weeks ago with my little cousin and we both needed a new pair of jeans. He just got really tired, moaning, walking everywhere slowly, but I don't get bored so quickly now. I'm much more interested in buying stuff than I was."

Recently he stood in a class election. "I wanted»

95%
of teenage boys believe their career prospects are good

I think adults should learn that we don't all have a gun under our jumpers'



CAROLINE IREY

Jonny Srebernik 14

From north London.

Outside of school, what takes up most of your time?

Football, guitar, friends... If I'm restless or sad, I go walking on my own, with music.

What do you listen to?

Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, Guns N' Roses.

When did you laugh most over the last week?

It was raining on Monday and me and my friend, Aiman,

missed the bus, so we walked home, and we just sang and that was good.

Would you say you're ambitious?

I'd say so. I have my goals and I'm not afraid of working to achieve them.

Have you earned money?

I've done things for my parents: I made a work presentation for my dad because he's clueless about computers.

Do you like the

way you look?

I'm happy with it - can't change that.

What do you think adults could learn from teenagers?

I think they can remember what it's like to be our age. They can learn that we don't all have a gun under our jumpers.

What's the best piece of advice you've received?

Be yourself. What's the point in being someone else?

10%

of teenage boys spend at least five hours social networking online each day

to be form captain, and then one of the kids from the popular group stood. He got 20 out of the 24 votes. My friend got three votes, I got one." Has it put him off standing again? "No, I'm going to keep trying till I beat him one day."

Joe's favourite hobby is reading; his class recently read *Lord Of The Flies*. If he was trapped on a desert island, does he think he'd become a savage like Jack or a civilising influence like Ralph? Typical Joe, he comes up with a third way. "I think I'd be more of the civilised influence. When we were reading *Lord Of The Flies* we had to do a role play and I was automatically chosen as Ralph in our group. But I think I'm a half Ralph and half Piggy figure. I've got the intellect of Piggy but I'm not quite confident at pushing ideas forward. Piggy knows more than he seems to."

Akeim Mundell (below) and his friends Isaac, Connor, Callum and Jamico have just had their photos taken and found themselves a car park to play football. They are in London for the day from Manchester - all have been brought up in the tough district of Moss Side. Some were on the verge of getting into trouble when they joined an organisation called Reclaim that has helped turn their life around.

Akeim is the smiliest boy I've met. "I've calmed down a lot now," he says. "I used to get in trouble for silly stuff like chatting back to the teachers."

Callum, a broad lad with red hair, puts in a lovely cross which Isaac heads past Akeim.

"See, I told you I was sick at crosses,"

Callum says.

The boys talk about some of the football fans they saw on the way down to London.

"They was drinkin' beer at 10 in the morning. It was 'angin'," Connor says.

'Angin'? "Yeah, horrible. Why would anybody do that?"

Does Akeim ever drink? "Nah. Except every Christmas I have a Babycham. We drink Coke and Grape Soda."

Akeim goes to Manchester Academy in Moss Side, and wants to be a doctor. If that doesn't work out, he'll settle for nursing. He's not going to go to the local sixth-form college because he thinks he'll concentrate better if he's not surrounded by his old friends. »



FREDRIKE HELWIG

48%

of teenage boys feel more confident talking to girls online than face to face



Ben Walker 15

Has appeared in West End musicals and the film The Golden Compass. He lives in Essex.

Would you like to be famous?

I don't want to be like Tom Cruise and have loads of people following me. I'd rather have a normal lifestyle, a normal-size house, normal cars.

Do you like the way you look?

I don't mind my personality: I'm quite outgoing, I'm up for a laugh... I just don't like the way I look. But some people have said good stuff, so I have to listen to them.

What's your favourite sport?

Skateboarding.

Do you like shopping?

I don't mind shopping with my mates - we'll just go into all the games shops, the music shops, try and get into Ann Summers and get kicked out.

Have you been stopped by the police?

Once, but not for something I did - I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time. One of my friends thought it would be clever to smash a window. I should have stayed away.

What's the most difficult thing that's

happened to you?

I've been bullied from quite a young age, but there was more of it when I started to get these [film] parts. It wasn't what I was expecting.

Have you had a hangover?

I've had a couple when I've been on holiday.

What's the best piece of advice you've been given?

To keep my mouth shut. Teachers tell me that all the time, and I wish I listened to them a bit more.

What's the biggest lesson life's taught you?

That it's not easy.

It's late September and the Sun has just splashed with the headline, "FERAL UK UNMASKED: Police allowed this teen and his gang to torment a mum and her disabled daughter to death."

The headline is accompanied by a photograph of a teenager in a hoodie, riding a battered bike. It's a desperate story, but is it at all representative, as we're led to believe? The same day Gordon Brown plays to the gallery at Labour's party conference, promising more asbos and tougher action on "teenage tearaways turning town centres into no-go areas".

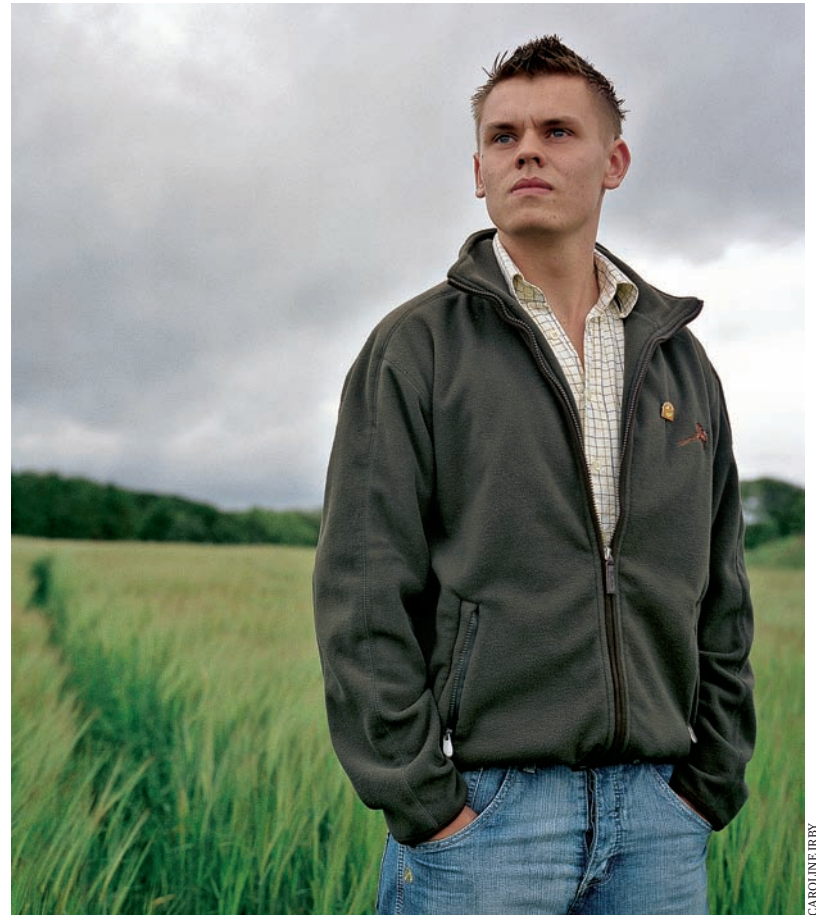
Nothing has been used to demonise teen boys more than the hoodie itself - a simple item of clothing that children and adults have worn for decades. Conor McPherson, a 15-year-old from Aberdour in Scotland, says that "it's the biggest stereotype in the country and has alienated almost the entire teenage population. Last night I went out in a hoodie and a woman crossed the street. When I passed her, she crossed back over. I felt confused, a wee bit upset. It means that the stereotype, which has been spread by the government, has crept into the whole population's mind."

A report commissioned by the organisation Women In Journalism last year showed that the word most commonly used to describe teen boys in the media is yobs. Other common words were thugs, feral, louts, hoodies, evil, frightening, monsters, scum and heartless. More than 60% of the stories about teen boys concerned crime - 90% of which showed them in a bad light. Eighty-five per cent of a sample of 1,000 boys thought the press portrayed them negatively.

To accompany this article, Guardian Weekend commissioned a survey of 1,000 boys by Echo Research, which also carried out the Women In Journalism report. Some of the findings are predictable - 57% of boys spend at least one hour a day social networking online. More alarmingly, 10% spend at least five hours a day social networking online, 55% have been exposed to inappropriate online content, and 21% have had experience of cyber bullying. But perhaps the most astonishing finding is just how positive teen boys are: 95% believe their career prospects are good, 96% are ambitious about their future careers, 94% are happy in their home and family lives, 93% are happy in their social lives »

78%

of teenage boys believe that adults have a higher opinion of girls than boys



CAROLINE IREY

Matty Sharp 16

From Cramlington, Northumberland.

Do you have a favourite place?

Anywhere rural. My dad's a policeman; he's used to being in the town. I like being outside, free to do what I want.

Outside of school, what takes up most of your time?

Either farming or looking after the shoot.

Have you earned money?

March-April I'll be lambing, then May I'll

be injecting sheep and shearing. July, I get six weeks off school, and that's spent harvesting.

How do you spend your money?

Try to save it. Quite a bit goes on going out - the Young Farmers' Club. I'm busy with that.

Have you been in love?

No - just maybe, but definitely not love.

Have you been in a fistfight?

Never. I don't like fighting - I don't think I could hit anyone.

Have you been offered drugs?

Never been offered them and never done them. I think I'm quite happy enough as it is.

Have you had a hangover?

Yes. I often go to parties, have a few drinks. Nothing so stupid you're on the floor.

What is the best piece of advice you've received?

"If at first you don't succeed, try, try again."

and 91% are happy in their school or work lives.

But perhaps it's not so surprising, after all. The research chimes with my experience. Of the boys I have met, some have issues, yes, and there are definitely pressures, but none is unhappy with his lot.

Back in Manchester, Akeim is tired of reading that all teenagers are trouble. The image presented in the tabloids bears little relation to his friends. Yes, he has known a couple of lads who carry knives, but he always kept his distance. He says there have been times when he's got into trouble running his mouth off, but he's also used his mouth to talk his way out of trouble. "I've never been in a fight all my life."

What does he spend his time doing when he's not at school? "I'm not going to lie. All I do is go home and stay at my computer. Facebook, MSN and that's it."

Does that mean he's antisocial away from the computer? No way, he says. "Over the weekend I'm never in." Like Joe, he's recently discovered the joy of shopping. "I go to the Trafford Centre. You look in my room now, I've got four wardrobes full of clothes. I love buying stuff."

His weekends are hectic. On Saturday he gets the bus into town where he meets his friends. How many? "There are 25 of us. We go to the cinemas and then to Nando's every Saturday."

Life is fun, he says, but of course there are things for him and his friends to worry about. If he is to become a doctor, and Callum is going to be a police officer and Connor a soldier, as they hope to, they're going to have to focus.

Has his life been touched by violence? "No." He stops. "Well, only when Jessie got shot." In September 2006, 15-year-old Jessie James was killed while riding his bike through a park with friends. He was the 24th person shot dead in Moss Side since 1999. "We'd known Jessie since he was a baby and through primary school and secondary school. That was sad... We lived on the same estate." Did it make him scared? "No, it just made me more set that I'm not going in no gang."

What makes him happiest? That's hard to answer, he says. "I'm always happy." Does he like the way he looks? "Yeah. I used to be short, but now I'm taller. Is there anything I'd change? No. Not really. I think I'm all right." He bursts out laughing. »

Echo Research conducted a survey of 1,000 boys aged 13-19 resident in the UK; echosearch.com

Richard Deane, 16, goes to grammar school in Tonbridge, Kent and is just starting his A-levels. He plays guitar in a band, and when he suggested to his mother that he could skip university if the band takes off, she gave him a look he's not forgotten.

He thinks there are different expectations for boys than girls - boys, for example, always want to be the best. If you're good at sport, you're made, he says. If you're not, you can struggle. "There is a sporty group at school, and you have to be really good to be part of it. I've never been good at sport, and don't even talk football. One of my friends joined the sporty group and we've become less close." He's more interested in music.

Yes, there are stresses, he says - he's sick of hearing about boys who left school with amazing A-level results and still couldn't get into university. And yes, his parents are a little overprotective, and don't seem to trust him quite as much as they could. But he's become more understanding of that, and they're not nearly as bad as many people he comes across. Richard is offended by adult attitudes towards teenage boys. "The other day I was standing outside the house and a woman came out and said, 'Would you mind not swearing cos I'll be reading a bedtime story to my children?' She just assumed that we'd be swearing

Jamie Prowse 13

Lives in Hungerford, Berkshire, and goes to a nearby boarding school.

When are you happiest?

Probably at school - that's when I laugh the most. Or round the table with the family having a meal.

When did you last cry?

A couple of months ago. I first got ill in year seven - I was admitted to hospital and they told me I had leukaemia. For the first eight months you have chemo every day; after, you have chemo once a month. You get tired quite easily, so it's hard to control your emotions.

Outside of school, what takes up most of your time?

I love sport, but for the

first eight months of treatment you can't do much. You can't kick a ball about because you feel lethargic. All you really want to do is sit on the sofa and wait to get better.

Have you been in love?

Kind of. It's a family friend. I wouldn't call it "in love", but I had quite a crush.

Do you like the way you look?

I don't like my teeth - they're a bit wonky - but I'm going to get braces.

Do you think teenage years are difficult?

Probably the difficultest because everyone's trying new stuff like drugs and smoking, and if you don't want to do that, you're going to have peer pressure.



CAROLINE IRBY





Jack Legend 15

From Lowestoft, Suffolk.

Outside of school, what takes up most of your time?

Xbox, seeing friends, practising bass. I play in a band called Unforgotten - Christian rock.

Would you like to be famous?

Pros would be you get to play music and spread what you have to say, but cons would be late nights.

Do you think most people your age have had sex?

I don't agree with sex before marriage, but if people choose to, then it's up to them.

Have you been bullied?

In middle school I was bullied quite a lot. It wasn't dealt with, so



CAROLINE IREBY

I moved schools. It's been all right since.

When were you happiest?

At New Day, this big Christian camping event last year.

Have you earned money?

I had a job a couple of years ago, walking donkeys on the beach, and I sold food at school for a while.

Have you been stopped by the police?

Once when I was cycling through a shopping centre in town.

Have you been in a fistfight?

A couple of times when I was getting bullied, but not recently.

What are you most grateful for?

Grateful that I know God.

because we were teenage and we were boys. There are people who aren't so nice. But most teenagers are good people."

It's Monday evening and Nas and I are on the way to Air Cadets - two buses and a short walk. He's pleased because his group finished third out of 15 in last week's drill competition. They put in so much time and effort (Nas spent eight hours polishing his boots) that tonight, as a reward, they don't have to wear their uniform. Nas will give a map-reading lesson to the junior cadets, some of whom are older than him, and he warns me that it's all extremely disciplined. The juniors must address him as Corporal and he has to address his next in line as Sergeant. There's a lot of shouting and bossing, but they are having a good time. The group is racially mixed, and the kids appear to be colour blind, yet as they line up to salute the picture of the Queen, we could be back in the 1950s. Many arrive in their hoodies and, if photographed on the streets, could doubtless be portrayed as yobs. Like all the teenage boys I've met they exude an inspiring mix of innocence, joie de vivre and experience. Perhaps I've just struck lucky, but I don't think so. Nas, Joe, Richard and Akeim all seem so much more mature and prepared for adult life than my generation was. In a strange way, maybe Britain's demonisation of teen boys has made them grow up more quickly ●

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