

Playscapes at 16

Jacqueline O'Loughlin, Brenda Stevenson and Dirk Schubotz



Introduction

Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) asserts that every child and young person under the age of 18 years has the right to engage in age-appropriate play and leisure activities. This is not a stand-alone right but should be viewed in the context of other Articles within the Convention and the interplay that exists between them – for example children's right to be consulted about decisions that affect them (Article 12) and the right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly (Article 15).

In Northern Ireland, the vision of the Ten-Year Strategy for Children and Young People (OFMDFMNI, 2006) is one where all children and young people will thrive and look forward with confidence to the future. The Play and Leisure Policy and its Implementation Plan are mechanisms intended to help deliver on the aims of the Ten-Year Strategy. The Play and Leisure Policy places high value on play as an essential element in the development of children's lives, their families, communities and society as a whole.

In 2010 OFMDFMNI part-funded the Young Life and Times (YLT) survey in order to engage directly with part of its target audience on questions of leisure and play. The YLT survey is an annual postal survey of 16-year olds undertaken by ARK, a joint initiative by Queen's University and the University of Ulster (www.ark.ac.uk/ylt). Questions on experiences of play and leisure were raised on behalf of OFMDFMNI and *PlayBoard*, the lead agency for the development and promotion of children and young people's play in Northern Ireland. This Research

Update also incorporates some findings on attitudes to young people which are based on questions funded by the Office of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). Fieldwork for the 2010 YLT survey was undertaken in November and December 2010. 786 respondents completed the survey.

The (un)availability of public spaces for play and leisure

One of the main findings of the 2010 YLT survey with regard to play and leisure is the discrepancy between the desire of 16-year olds to use public spaces during their leisure time and the negative attitudes and experiences they face when doing so. The results of the YLT survey give evidence that play and leisure remains an important aspect of 16-year olds' lives. Eight out of ten YLT respondents agreed with the statement that young people who have no space or time to play will not develop into healthy adults. In the same spirit, almost all respondents (97%) agreed that every child and young person should have easy access to public spaces for play and leisure whilst 64% of respondents disagreed with the view that playing is just something for younger children.

The ease with which young people can access public spaces for their leisure time pursuits is closely connected to their experiences about using such spaces. This in turn, relates to the public perception of young people and the way they are portrayed in the media. Here the YLT survey shows starkly the negativity 16-year olds experience from the adult

population, whether it is that they were told to move on when standing on the street with their friends, being treated with suspicion or being generally negatively portrayed by the media.

85% of respondents said that they felt that young people are judged negatively just because they are young (Figure 1), whilst 79% felt that the media portrays young people mostly negatively (Figure 2). The perception of the predominantly negative media portrayal of young people was universal among respondents regardless of any background variables. Only three percent of respondents felt that the media portrayed young people mostly positively. Females and males did not differ either in their perceptions about the negative judgment of young people, however, those who came from financially less well-off backgrounds were much more likely to feel that young people were negatively judged because of their young age (88%) than respondents who came from well-off background (84%) and those from average well-off backgrounds (85%).

With regard to having been treated with disrespect and suspicion, respondents' personal experiences were more varied by their social background and gender as Table 1 shows. Whilst 82% of respondents overall said they had been treated with suspicion in shops, well-off respondents were much less likely to say this (76%). Males (37%) were more likely to have been excluded from shops than females (29%). Half of well-off respondents said that they had been told to move on by someone when standing with their friends on the street compared to nearly two thirds (66%) of respondents from not well-off families. Overall residents were most likely to tell young people to

Figure 1: In general, do you think that young people are judged negatively just because they are young (%)

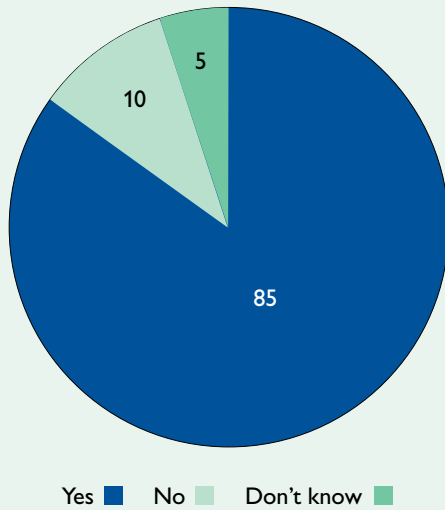
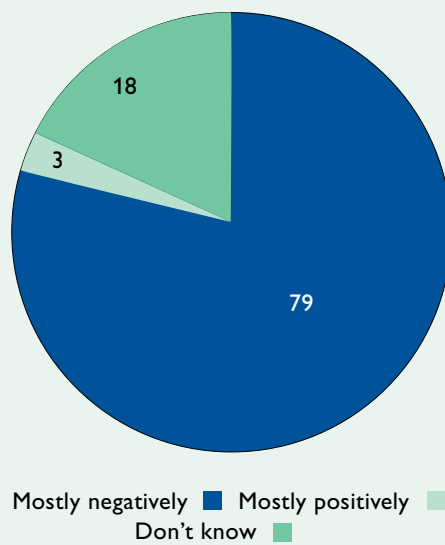


Figure 2: How do you feel the media portrays young people? (%)



move on (65%) followed by the police (40%) and community representatives. Male respondents were much more likely than females to have been told to move on by the police (50% and 35% respectively) whilst not well-off respondents (70%) were more likely than well-off respondents (62%) to say that residents had told them and their friends to move on.

Many YLT respondents commented how angry and annoyed this made them feel, especially when they had 'not done anything wrong'. Some respondents commented that they 'had every right to be there', which made them felt unwanted, judged and even discriminated against.

Access to leisure time facilities

Respondents were asked to assess the range of leisure time facilities available to them in their areas. Overall just over one quarter (26%) assessed the facilities available in their area as very good or good. 30% felt they were average, whilst 45% felt they were poor or very poor. Respondents from not well-off families were significantly more likely to assess their leisure time facilities as poor or very poor (58%) than well-off respondents (37%). Those who live in rural areas were also somewhat more likely to view their leisure facilities as poor (53%) than those living in urban areas (40%). 51% of respondents with a longstanding illness or disability assessed their leisure time facilities as poor compared to 43% of those without such illness or disability.

This finding reflects the concerns about access to play and leisure for disabled children in the UK expressed by the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child in their concluding observations when cross-examining the UK Government in 2008 about the implementation of the UNCRC.

The UNCRC's Implementation Handbook states that children and young people need some space for themselves between work and education. However, the 2010 YLT survey shows that lack of time was the greatest factor restricting respondents' participation in play and leisure (Figure 3). Four in ten respondents said that lack of time restricted their participation 'a lot'. Cost of using a facility and transport to and from this facility was seen as a factor that restricted participation 'a lot' by 27% of respondents each. Concerns about personal safety and cleanliness of facilities

Table 1: Respondents who said they experienced the following because they are a young person.

	%					
	Gender		Financial Family Background			All
	Males	Females	Not well-off	Average	Well-off	
Told to leave schoolbag outside shop	75	71	74	69	76	72
Excluded from a shop	37	29	34	29	34	32
Treated suspiciously by staff in shop	82	82	85	85	76	82
Told to move on when standing on street with friends	58	56	66	56	50	56

Figure 3: Extent to which certain factors restrict respondents in taking part in leisure time activities (mean score)*

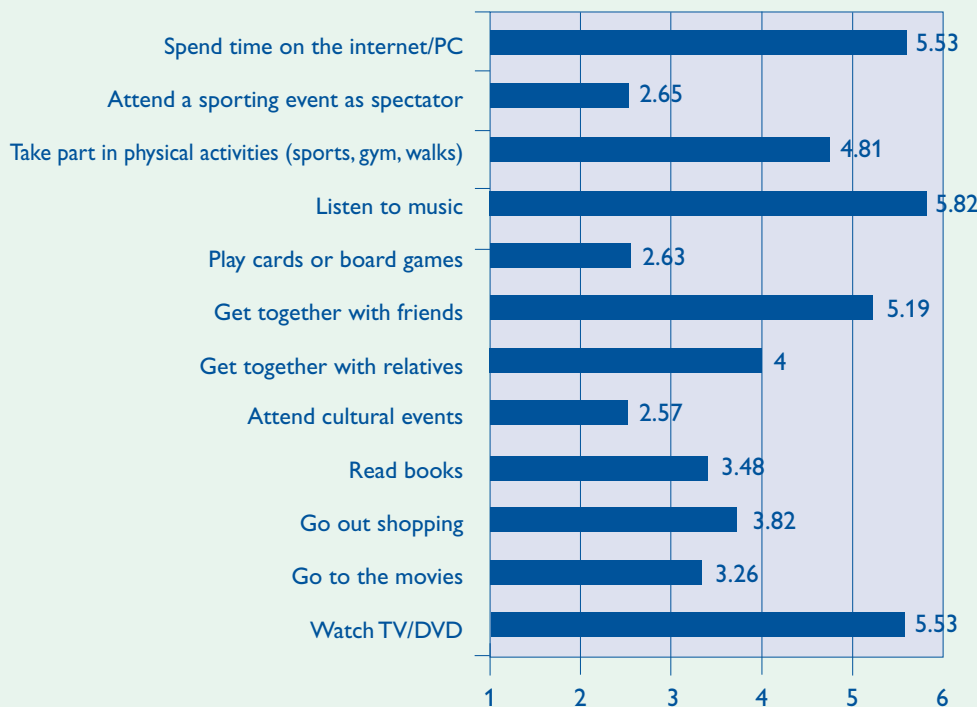


*Meaning of scores: 4='a lot', 3='a little', 2='not very much', 1='not at all' ('don't know' responses excluded)

Table 2: Proportion of respondents saying the following factors below restricted them 'a lot' in taking part in leisure time activities

	%					
	Financial Family Background			Rurality of respondent's home		
	Not well off	Average	Well-off	Urban	Small town	Rural
Lack of time	40	38	44	41	40	38
Cost involved	47	26	16	31	28	25
Transport	38	27	22	18	17	42
Personal Safety	10	4	4	7	6	3
Cleanliness	12	8	4	8	9	7

Figure 4: Average frequency* with which respondents are involved in the following leisure time activities



* **Meaning of scores:** 6='daily'; 5='several times a week'. 4='several times a month'; 3='several times a year'; 2='less often'; 1='never'

were much less likely to be perceived as restrictive factors as Figure 3 shows.

Favourite activities

Respondents were also asked about the type of activities they undertook in their free time. Figure 4 shows that the three activities that respondents on average most often undertook were listening to music (88% said they did this on a daily basis), watching DVD/TV and spending time on the Internet/PC (65% each did this daily).

The fourth most likely activity respondents got involved in was getting together with friends. 44% of respondents did this daily and a further 37% several times a week. This reiterates again the earlier finding that young people must be given an opportunity to meet with friends in safe places without being told to move on by adults. Figure 4 shows that 16-year olds in Northern Ireland are also still quite frequently involved in physical activities. Nine out of ten respondents said they undertook physical activities at least several times a month with three out

of ten saying that they were involved in physical activities on a daily basis.

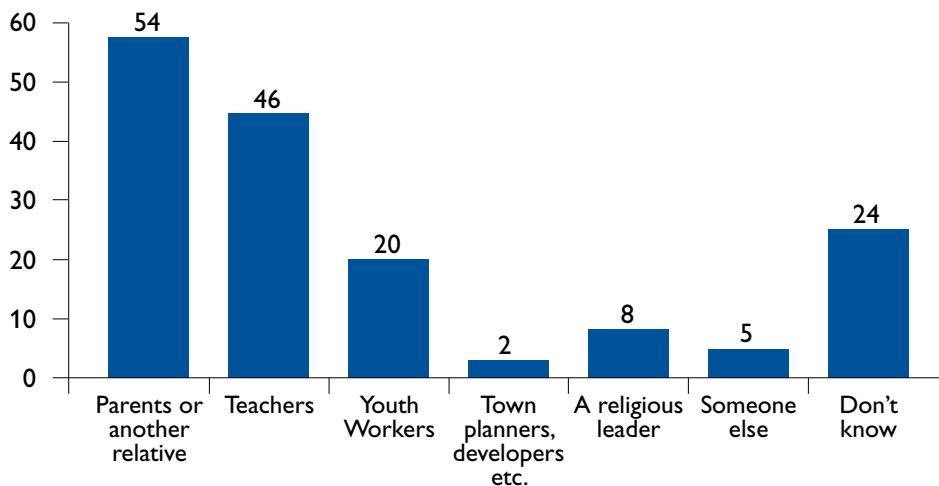
The question on what activities YLT respondents would choose to undertake if there were no limits of any kind reflected this interest in physical activity as many named their favourite type of sport - such as football, tennis, basketball or horse riding, to name just a few - as the activity they would undertake. However, the overriding theme among these responses was that young people would choose unstructured activity, for example hanging out and socialising with their friends.

Consultation on places for play and leisure

Over nine in ten YLT respondents (91%) felt that children and young people should have the right to be consulted about the design of spaces for play and leisure whilst 78% disagreed that the design of these spaces should be left to adults only. In reality, however, a much smaller proportion of respondents had ever been asked their opinion about leisure time activities, as Figure 5 shows.

Only two percent of respondents had directly been asked about facilities and spaces they use to play by those who are responsible for the planning of these facilities, namely town planners, architects, developers or builders. Parents and relatives were most likely to ask about play spaces, but still only just over half of respondents were asked their opinions by their relatives, as Figure 5 shows. Females were a little more likely than males to have been asked their opinion by teachers and youth workers. Parents and relatives of well-off respondents (63%) were more likely than those of not well-off respondents (56%) and average well-off respondents (50%) to have asked about leisure and play spaces. Well-off respondents were also most likely to have been asked their opinion by religious leaders (11%). Teachers in Grammar schools were most likely to ask their students about leisure facilities (48%) whilst respondents in rural areas were

Figure 5: Respondents saying they have ever been asked their opinion about play and leisure facilities and spaces they use by the following people (%)



least likely to say they were asked their opinion by youth workers – probably due to the fact that 16-year olds in rural areas have less access to youth workers.

Conclusion

The findings for the 2010 YLT survey highlight that play is not just something for younger children. The voices of young people in this survey tell us loud and clear that affording young people adequate play and leisure opportunities through appropriate spaces and places is essential to their holistic development. Young people may not label what they do in their free time as 'play', however, they have identified that they need the same time, space and freedom as their younger counterparts to engage in unstructured social activities to get together and hang out with their friends. The manner in which young people choose to express their right to engage in age-appropriate leisure time activities - enshrined in Article 31 of the UNCRC - is sometimes different to that desired by many adults, or even poses a challenge to adult control of public spaces. The results of the YLT survey highlight the increasing demonization and marginalisation of young people.

During middle childhood and the early teenage years, young people have little earning power therefore limited economic independence. They have more opportunities to socialise outside the family structure, but little financial independence to engage in either travel

or costly structured leisure activities. As the YLT survey results show, young people from poorer backgrounds are less likely to be able to participate in activities, due to the associated costs which confirms the findings from a *Save the Children* study (2007) and feeds into the current discussions about the need of a Child Poverty Bill. Especially, but not exclusively, young people from lower-income families who find it difficult to afford the fees attached to commercial activities (such as the cinema) spend a considerable amount of time in a myriad of unstructured and informal street-leisure 'hanging out' pursuits; which is used to explore, extend knowledge and push boundaries. Creating such socially interactive private groupings away from adult scrutiny is an essential part of becoming a socially independent adult (Lester and Russell, 2008).

Leisure time activities increasingly help to define the identities of young people and represent a desire for them to know and understand their world. Age-appropriate play and leisure opportunities, and experiences enable children and young people to feel connected to their community. This is particularly important for those living in deprived, urban or rural environments (McAlister, Scraton and Haydon, 2009). As the 2010 YLT survey shows, young people are being told to move on from 'the street' for simply hanging around and we need to be aware that this can sometimes be the only choice available to them in the current climate of inadequate play and leisure provision for young people.

In order to achieve a situation where public spaces have playfulness at their heart, it is key that young people participate in the design process from the outset. Young-people friendly communities are crucial for creating local neighbourhoods in which young people can feel connected and thrive.

References

- Lester, S. and Russell, W. (2008). *Play for a Change - Play, Policy and Practice: A Review of Contemporary Perspectives (Summary Report)*. London: Play England.
- McAlister, S., Scraton, P. and Haydon, D. (2009). *Childhood in Transition. Experiencing Marginalisation and Conflict in Northern Ireland*. Belfast: Queen's University, Save the Children, Prince's Trust.
- OFMDFMNI (2006). *Our Children – Our Pledge. A ten-year strategy for children and young people in Northern Ireland 2006-2016*. Belfast: Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister.
- Save the Children (2007). *A 2020 Vision: Ending Child Poverty in Northern Ireland. Annual Child Poverty Report 2007*. Belfast: Save the Children.

Jacqueline O'Loughlin is Chief Executive Officer of PlayBoard Northern Ireland.

Brenda Stevenson Children's Policy at OFMDFMNI

Dirk Schubotz is YLT Director of ARK and is based at the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Queen's University Belfast

This project has been funded by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister in Northern Ireland. In collaboration with Queen's University Belfast and University of Ulster.

Aberfoyle House, Magee Campus
University of Ulster, Northland Road
Londonderry BT48 7JA
Tel: 028 7167 5513 Fax: 028 7167 5510
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk

School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work
Queen's University Belfast,
Belfast BT7 1NN
Tel: 028 9097 3034 Fax: 028 9097 3943
E-mail: info@ark.ac.uk