

the good childhood

a national inquiry



The
Children's
Society

The Good Childhood Inquiry

Lifestyle: A summary of themes emerging from children and young people's evidence

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Summary

When we asked children and young people what makes for a good life, they told us that:

- They enjoy their free time (and would like more!) when they can socialise, take part in activities or just relax and do nothing.
- A common complaint is that there are a lack of places to go and things to do, in particular for older children and teenagers. They would like more activities and facilities that appeal to their age group, are affordable and situated nearby.
- The perceived consequences of having nowhere to go are groups of young people hanging around, particularly on the streets, and causing trouble.
- Drugs and alcohol are a key influence, mostly seen as lowering the quality of their lives although in some cases they were perceived as contributing to good experiences.
- The local environment is important to them, and they often complain that their neighbourhood is dirty, vandalised or feels unsafe.
- Considerable psychological benefits are attached to being able to earn their own money.

When we asked children and young people about their lifestyles, in addition to the above points they told us that:

- Friends are a major part of what they like to do in their spare time
- They like to chat to their friends via the Internet, play computer games and surf the Internet. They saw their technology use as compatible with other creative or active pursuits.
- They do feel some pressure to keep up with trends and “fit in”, but also strong support for resisting that pressure and “being yourself”.

Introduction

This briefing paper summarises children and young people's views about their own lifestyles emerging from a number of sources of evidence.

- 171 comments and 1,325 votes were submitted on the *BBC Newsround* and 'my life' websites in response to a set of questions about lifestyle during July, August and September 2007.
- 742 children and young people responded to *The Good Childhood Inquiry's* call for evidence, which was open from September to November 2006
- 8,000 young people took part in The Children's Society's national survey in 2005

Questions about lifestyle

We posed a number of questions about lifestyle via the 'my life' and *BBC Newsround* websites. 1,325 votes were cast in response to the following two questions:

- When you go out, do you tell your parents where you're going?
- How much TV should you be allowed to watch on a school day?

Children and young people also responded to the following open question:

- What do you like to do in your spare time?

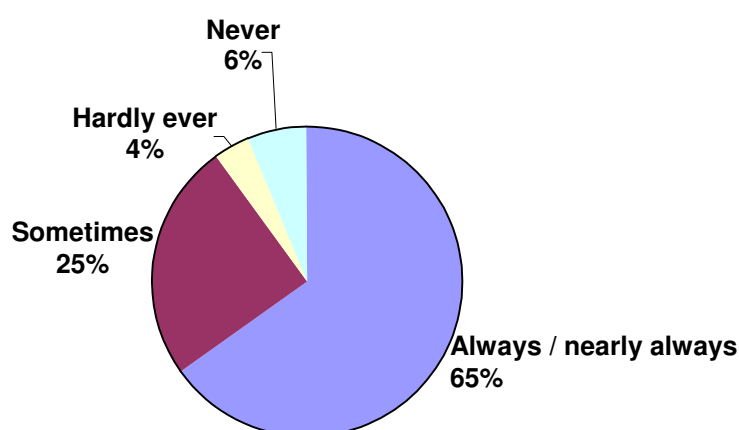
Finally, we asked children and young people to say whether they agreed or disagreed with four further statements and to give an explanation for their answer. These were:

- There are lots of things to do in my area
- I feel safe in my area
- I don't have enough money to spend on things for myself
- I feel under pressure to keep up with the latest trends

Poll questions

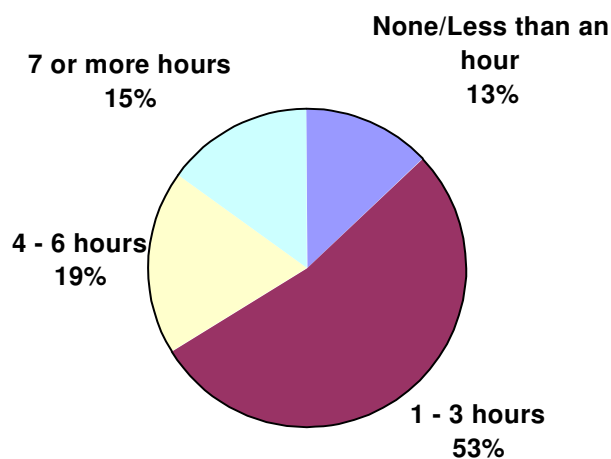
Firstly we asked children and young people whether they tell their parents where they're going when they go out. Of the 546 respondents, almost two-thirds said that they always or nearly always did, while a quarter said they did sometimes, and 10 per cent said hardly ever or never.

When you go out, do you tell your parents where you're going?



Next, we asked about watching television and how long children and young people felt they should be able to watch TV on a normal school day. The majority (53%) of the 779 respondents felt that 1 to 3 hours was a reasonable amount, which according to the Broadcasters' Audience Research Board (BARB) broadly reflects average daily viewing figures. However, more than a third opted for 4 hours and over, of which a surprising 15 per cent felt they should be allowed to watch more than 7 hours a day!

How long do you think you should be allowed to watch TV on a normal school day?



Q1. What do you like to do in your spare time?

Sports and physical activity

Sports and other forms of physical activity featured highly in children and young people's responses to this question. Popular activities included swimming, cycling, tennis, horse riding, dancing and trampolining, although plenty of other activities were mentioned.

"I like doing sports a lot, like gymnastics and dancing. I also like mucking about with my sister and friends. Sometimes I like to just relax." 7-year-old girl

"I do loads in my spare time, like modern, tap, jazz, Scottish and Irish dancing as well as swimming and going to town with my friends. I think it is unfair for anyone to say that teenagers don't do much because a lot of us are fit and active!" 13-year-old girl

Children and young people also talked about playing outside in ways that are active, such as building dens and running around with their friends. Many of the comments showed that they saw physical activity as compatible with indoor pursuits, and that the weather often influenced their choice of activity.

"In my spare time I like playing football or cricket. After that I might go on the web or play on my PS2. Also, if it's a cloudy or rainy day or my friends don't want to play I just play inside." 11-year-old boy

Friends

As with previous themes of *The Good Childhood Inquiry*, friends figured highly in children and young people's comments about what they like to do in their spare time. Spending time with friends, playing, chatting, "hanging out" or going out with their friends were all favourite pastimes.

"Most of all I chill out and hang with my friends." 10-year-old girl

"I like meeting my mates in town." 11-year-old girl

"When I'm at home, I go on my computer and chat to my friends, talk on the phone to my friends, read or see my friends." 12-year-old girl

Although most referred to "real" contact with their friends, children and young people also liked communicating "virtually" with their friends on the Internet via MSN and social networking websites such as bebo and myspace.

"I like to [...] chat to my friends on the internet" 13-year-old girl

Computers and the Internet

Apart from chatting to friends via the Internet, children and young people talked about using computers to play games and to surf the Internet. Their comments reveal a relaxed attitude to technology that suggests that they take its presence in their lives for granted.

"I never get bored though because I can always just watch TV or hop on the computer if I have nothing else to do." 12-year-old girl

"I like to relax by playing my PSP and reading." 7-year-old boy

In a handful of comments, children and young people revealed strong feelings about being able to choose how they spend their free time.

"In my spare time I usually watch about nine hours of TV and for the rest of the time I go on the computer. I don't see what's wrong with that because I still get high levels in school, even though I never watch educational shows." 11-year-old girl

Hobbies and activities

Listening to music was a common response to this question, while a number of children and young people talked about playing a musical instrument.

"I like to listen to music, or play my drums." 16-year-old girl

"I am in a band and in my spare time I invite my band mates round and we practise our music." 12-year-old boy

Children and young people were also enthusiastic about dancing, with comments about modern, tap, jazz and ballet as well as more uncommon types such as Irish and Scottish dancing.

"In my spare I like to do Irish Dancing, I go two to three times a week. On average every week I dance for about seven hours. I have been Irish Dancing since I was in Year Two. It keeps me fit and healthy and I also really enjoy" 13-year-old girl

Reading was a favourite activity, while other popular pastimes include taking part in groups and clubs, and creative activities such as writing, drawing and other arts.

Q2. There are lots of things to do in my area

Disagree

Most respondents disagreed with this statement, arguing that there is not much for children and young people to do in their area, and that what is on offer is not appealing.

“because no-one wants to turn up to these things” 15-year-old boy

“There is virtually nothing to do! The best fun I can have is going out on my bike - and even that gets a bit boring after a while.”

As a result, respondents often complained about being bored.

“Where I live there is nothing to do for my age, I get really bored at the weekends.” 11-year-old girl

“My area is BORING.” 12-year-old boy

Not enough facilities

Some lamented the lack of facilities such as leisure centres, youth clubs, play areas and other forms of entertainment.

“I think they should have some kind of free youth leisure centre, where children can go when they want to and meet friends and have fun. Because it is so boring, I spend most of the day sitting on my laptop or watching TV.” 12-year-old girl

“There is not enough to do in our area, no clubs to go to or any amusements.” 13-year-old girl

Not age-appropriate

Others pointed out that the problem is not so much an absence of facilities altogether as a lack of things for their age group. A common criticism was that the facilities on offer are intended or appeal only to younger children, and not to older children and teenagers.

“There's a park down the road from me but it's kind of babyish” 10-year-old girl

“the only thing that kids can actually do is go to the park but that is mainly for tiny-teeny children and slowly a lot of the things there have started to deteriorate and be broken by bored chavs” 14-year-old girl

Everything too far away

Another common barrier was that existing facilities are not walking distance away and public transport tends to be infrequent, costly and non-child-friendly.

“There is a bus service but it takes ages, and doesn't go anywhere of interest. [...] I live close to a seaside resort, but it takes an hour on the bus even though it's only 4 or 5 miles away.” 16-year-old girl

“There are plenty of things to do but we would have to catch the bus there and we have no money to do it all the time!” 13-year-old girl

Cost of things

The cost of the activities as well as the cost of transport to get to them was mentioned as one of the main obstacles to using them.

“There is quite a lot to do, but it all costs money or is not local enough to walk or catch the bus to. My parents pay for a lot of my things anyway so to ask them to pay more wouldn't be right. I think the government should put more money into children's (and teenagers!)

services and sporting activities so it can be free and as local as possible.” 14-year-old girl

“And most of my friends can't afford to go there very often. [...] I hardly ever see my friends outside of school because things are really expensive, too far away or unsuitable.” 16-year-old girl

Young people hanging around

A number of respondents saw a clear link between the various factors mentioned above and the fact that young people hang around in groups with nothing to do, and sometimes causing trouble.

“Younger teenagers hang about town causing a nuisance because there is nothing else to do.” 16-year-old girl

“There is nothing around so there is lots of gangs around” 16-year-old girl

The local environment

Children and young people also disliked local environments and public spaces that are not pleasant to spend time in. Respondents disliked graffiti and vandalism, and local parks and neighbourhoods that are littered, dirty or feel unsafe.

“No because idiots keep on vandalising things, then they're taken away and not replaced!” 8-year-old boy

“The park is dangerous, with glass everywhere” 11-year-old girl

Agree

On the other hand, a number of respondents, particularly younger children felt that there were plenty of things to do in their area.

Parks and countryside

Nearby parks and countryside were felt to be good places to spend free time.

“Because I’m next to a park, which has lots of activities.” 11-year-old girl

“My area has lots of things to do because I live in the countryside. There’s a trampoline just down a lane from me and we’ve got fields and a puppy. So it’s just fab!” 9-year-old girl

Friends

Having friends close by and being able to meet up with them was a common explanation for having enough to do.

“because my friends all live in Fleet and we can always meet up.” 13-year-old boy

Q3. I feel safe in my area

This question was only posed on the ‘my life’ website and not on the *BBC Newsround* website. Of the small number of children and young people that responded, almost half said that they felt safe, just over a third disagreed and one in six was unsure.

Agree

Reasons for feeling safe included there being little crime to worry about.

“There is hardly any crime and no knife attacks e.t.c” 13-year-old girl

“Crime rates are fairly low in this part of the UK, even the chavs are a bit mild in their actions.” 16-year-old girl

Others felt safe because they know everyone in the neighbourhood and have the support of friends.

“everyone knows everyone in my village and we all look out for each other.” 12-year-old girl

“because i got a lot of friends in the area who protect me” 14-year-old girl

Disagree

Explanations for feeling unsafe focused mainly on groups of young people and “chavs” hanging around, which made some respondents feel intimidated.

“There are gangs everywhere” 16-year-old girl

“i do feel quite safe but a lot of the time there are chavs hanging around on the streets and going past them makes me feel quite nervous but that is probably just me being paranoid.” 14-year-old girl

Q4. I don't have enough money to spend on things for myself

This question, like the preceding one, was only posed on the ‘my life’ website, with a low response rate. Of those, more than two-thirds disagreed with the statement, less than a quarter agreed, while the rest were not sure. The explanations given for agreement and disagreement tended to mirror each other, so we will look at them together.

Pocket money

On the one hand, many respondents felt that they received enough pocket money or hand-outs and that their parents bought them what they needed.

“my parents give me pocket money when i help around the house.” 12-year-old girl

“i get £4 a week, although sometimes my mum forgets to give me it, so i have enough for essentials [...] but my mum's quite good at taking me shopping to get things i need, and it doesnt bother me.” 13-year-old girl

On the other hand, and perhaps as a result of feeling that most children and young people get plenty of pocket money from their parents, some respondents were downcast about their lack of funds.

“unlike most children, i do not get pocket money. this is because my parents are market traders and do not make very much money so they cannot afford to give me or my sisters any.” 14-year-old girl

“my parents dont give me enough” 15-year-old girl

Saving up

A number of children and young people that were content with their cash flow said that they saved up their money to buy things they really liked.

“I always save up my money and when I want to buy something I think really hard about whether I really need it and I usually shop around for bargains”

“if there is something i NEED my mum and dad get it for me, an if its something i WANT i save up for it” 11-year-old girl

Working

A few respondents said that they had a job or could get a job if they wanted.

“I have a job so get regular income and save most of my money” 14-year-old girl

Others complained that they were not old enough to work or did not have time for a job.

“If I got a job then I might be able to buy more things for myself but you can't get a job until you're 16 which is a shame.” 15-year-old girl

“because i am at 6th form i have no time for a job” 17-year-old girl

Q5. I feel under pressure to keep up with the latest trends

Most respondents answered this question in relation to clothes, fashion and the latest technology, and opinions on the subject were divided. Children and young people showed considerable support for the principles of “being yourself”, not following trends and developing your own style. However, as a whole the comments tended not to question whether pressure to keep up with the latest trends existed, but rather whether they gave in to that pressure or not.

Agree

Some children and young people felt unable to resist the pressure to fit in at least sometimes.

“People have mostly got the same clothing and i feel like i have to fit in”

14-year-old girl

“I feel some pressure from my friends. When someone gets something new like a Wii, a new mobile phone or the latest Power Rangers toy, then I feel I have to get it too. Otherwise I feel left out.” 12-year-old boy

“I like being individual but sometimes I like to have things that my friends or celebs have.” 11-year-old girl

However, some seemed relatively unconcerned about it.

“I’m in a latest craze for skull and cross bones and playboy bunnies. Playboy bunnies are very cute and skulls are very punky and fashionable. I have most things skull and crossbones and I need to get more things Playboy (it’s an expensive name brand).”

13-year-old girl

Some respondents that asserted their own individuality recognised that other people might find it more difficult.

"I'm sure that there are many people who do feel pressurised at my age. I think it matter completely on who your friends are, what type of friendship group you are in and also what television or Internet sites you visit for example." 15-year-old boy

"People at school look down their nose at you if you don't have an iPod or whatever." 14-year-old girl

There were quite a few comments about being teased for being different

"A lot of the time I feel I have to follow the trends and if I don't people just laugh at me! I think people should stop following the trends and have their own style!" 10-year-old girl

Disagree

Being yourself

Children and young people placed a lot of emphasis on the importance of "being yourself". In some cases, they recognised that there is pressure to follow the latest trends but stressed that they prefer to be an individual, go with their own ideas, rather than being "a face in the crowd".

"I only find out about the trends so that I can avoid them at all costs. I like to be myself. I wear what I like and would hate to look like a sheep in the crowd." 13-year-old girl

"You should wear what you like, it shows who you are. I don't let people tell me what I should wear." 9-year-old girl

Others claimed that they did not feel under pressure to follow trends, but admitted that they liked fashion and clothes anyway.

"I don't feel the pressure to follow the trends - I just love the clothes. I wear clothes that make me look nice and make me feel comfortable. It's not what other people think that matters!" 13-year-old girl

Not interested in trends

Some explained in vehement language that they were not interested in fashion and saw following trends as a worthless pursuit.

"I don't care what's in fashion! I wear what I like, when I want to. And to be honest, I don't see the point in most trends." 13-year-old girl

"I just don't care about trends. They're not important at all, if you follow trends then you're weak I suppose in a way." 15-year-old girl

Appearance is unimportant

Another perspective was that appearance is unimportant and that other people are not concerned about how you dress.

"no one honestly cares what you look like as long as you dont look like an idiot with a 50's style attire." 15-year-old boy

Don't care what people think

Responses from some children and young people showed an indifference to what other people think.

"i don't care what other people think about me. i don't follow fashion - i go my own way." 14-year-old girl

"I dont care ! I do my own thing ! :)" 13-year-old boy

Accepting friends

A key influence seemed to be the attitudes of friends, and 'how accepting they are of you' and of 'difference'.

"No, I don't live in a atmosphere of any sort of "trends". None of my friends follow a particular trend and if they did then they would not inflict that pressure for me to follow suite." 15-year-old boy

"I am accepted by my friends as we are a mixed bunch really and I accept other people like clothes I hate to we don't comment on each others appearance." 16-year-old girl

Questions about a good childhood

The call for evidence

Between 18 September and 13 November 2006, we received submissions from 742 children and young people aged 5 to 17 years in response to our call for evidence. In most cases the three questions being answered were:

- What do you think are the most important things that make for a good life for children and young people?
- What things do you think stop children and young people from having a good life?
- What changes do you think could be made that would improve things for children and young people?

National Survey 2005

In 2005 The Children's Society carried out a national survey of a representative sample of young people aged 14 to 16 years in partnership with University of York, in 16 areas of England. In this survey, we posed two questions relating to a good childhood, which were answered by 8,000 respondents:

- What do you think are the most important things that make for a good life for young people?
- What things do you think stop young people from having a good life?

Many of the themes emerging from these two sources of evidence were very similar and so we discuss them together below.

Drugs, alcohol and smoking

The words 'drugs', 'drink', 'alcohol' and 'smoking' all appeared in the fifty most common keywords in the national survey, with drugs being mentioned most often. The majority of comments focused on the negative influence of drugs.

"if they think smoking or doing Drugs is a good part of there life it should be stoped. and they should think about what they are doing."

"Being kept away from drugs and alcohol"



Around 5% of young people in the national survey self-defined as having a problem with drugs, and 8% as having a problem with alcohol.

But a significant minority of the responses identified substance use as something which could contribute to a good life for young people.

“having loyal budz, having a good smoke”

Things to do

Comments about having ‘something to do’ and ‘nothing to do’ were made by a large number of children and young people.

“more things for children to do and places to go” 14-year-old girl

“Spending time doing things that you like doing - outdoor activities, walking.” 11-year-old girl

Out-of-school activities and clubs were popular with children and young people, both for their intrinsic value and as an opportunity to make friends.

“more activities for children in their local area e.g. proper youth clubs”
14-year-old girl

“more clubs so children can make more friends” 15-year-old girl

Cost of activities

However, a barrier to enjoying organised activities was their cost.

“more things to do that are cheap and accesable”

“More things for children to do, and not at full 'adult' price” 16-year-old boy

“cheaper things to do ie football is way too expensive” 12-year-old boy

Places to go

The perceived consequences of having nowhere to go were hanging around, particularly on the streets, and causing trouble. Another consequence was that young people might be ‘hassled’ by others.

“things to do in your area so you don’t get into trouble because you’re bored”

“places to be able to go without adults telling them to move on”

“not having nowhere to go then Being moved at”

In the national survey, only 32% agreed with the statement ‘There are places for young people to go in my area, whilst 19% were ‘not sure’ and almost half (49%) disagreed. Three-fifths of young people in the national survey (60%) agreed with the statement ‘I often hang about with my friends doing nothing in particular’.

Safety was also sometimes mentioned in connection with comments about ‘places to go’.

“places to go, which aren’t dangerous”

“a place for kids to go and have a laugh but are still safe from other drunk gangs”

“places to hang out. (not too many rules but safe)”

Getting into trouble

Some young people talked about getting into trouble, including involvement in crime:

“Getting into trouble with police / family. Becoming addicted to substances.”

“hanging around the streets with the bad people cause there’s not enough leisure places around”

As the quotes above show young people made connections between these issues, substance use and lack of facilities in the local area:

“Having nowhere and nothing to go and do as this means they hang around the streets in gangs and getting into trouble, when people think they are causing trouble and call the police for no reason that’s when”

we kick of as we dont want to get into trouble for nothing, and the police never listen to us and always believe the other older person.”

Having free time

Children and young people talked about the importance of having ‘enough’ free time or wanting ‘more’. Free time was felt to be important so that young people can socialise, take part in activities or just relax and do nothing.

“enough free time for hobbies”

“having time to do nothing & relax”

Schoolwork was presented as a thief of free time.

“too much revision or homework from school - although it can be beneficial in the long-term, the amount of work you have to do in the short-term really swamps your free time - especially since you should be relaxing more in your "youth years" before you get a job & family”

These issues were also summed up by young people in terms of the balance of their lives:

“Doing well in school and having a good social life, getting the balance right.”

The local environment

Another important topic identified by young people was the quality of their local area.

There were a number of comments about the significance of the local environment for young people’s quality of life

“brought up in a safe and quiet area.”

“living in poor, depressing, bleak places”

Three quarters of young people in the national survey (75%) said that they liked living in their area. However, safety was a key issue. 18% of young people said that they did not feel safe when they were out alone in their area, and 29% felt that violence was a growing problem in their area.

“A good and safe environment, a place to go and play and to enjoy your selves.”

“Feeling unsafe to go out”

Money

Money was the twelfth most common keyword in the national survey. Most of the time young people simply listed ‘money’ as one of the things that makes for a good life, and ‘no money’ as one of the things that stops them from having a good life.

The more detailed quotes, however, suggested a few important aspects in young people’s thinking about this topic.

As already mentioned, there were a number of comments about the cost of activities.

“Give them more oportunitys. things to do. whatching a filmcosts around 8 quid for 1 person and that is the only money people get.”

The ability to earn their own money was also felt to be an important aspect of well-being. This suggests that, for some, the psychological aspects of the source of money may be as important as the amount of money available.

“having own freedom, being able to earn money, young people cant get jobs easily because you have to be 18”

“independence -> able to earn own money”