

the good childhood®

a national inquiry

evidence summary four
– lifestyle



The
Children's
Society



the good childhood inquiry:

what you told us about **lifestyle**

Foreword

'Lifestyle' is very much a word of the late 20th century. For some it conjures up an image of unfettered materialism, of consumerism and celebrity, of being able to buy the sort of life you want. However, in this collation of evidence to The Good Childhood Inquiry, we have used 'lifestyle' in its broadest sense to cover a whole range of pastimes, activities and beliefs.

The growth in consumerism has coincided with a measured decline of shared beliefs, of ideology and faith. One of the questions that the lifestyle theme raises is whether a materialistic society results in a loss of faith in ourselves, a growth in fragmented self-interest at the expense of community.

Revolutions in communications result in major changes in social behaviour, and many of us who were young adults in the early days of the Internet are now parents whose children understand its territory far better than we ever will. We need to balance the fear our ignorance brings with rightful protection, while taking into account the opportunities that the Internet brings to our children.

If we are aware of the benefits that come from the Internet, we are also concerned that these communication channels are controlled by large corporations selling lifestyles and acquisitive behaviours. In the past few years, there has been a significant growth in the level of advertising targeted towards children. Is childhood a space where developing minds should be free from concentrated sales techniques? Does treating children as consumers diminish the space of childhood, or are our intelligent, sophisticated, media-savvy children so familiar with these techniques that we have nothing to fear?

So much of consumerism is reliant on selling an unattainable dream in which consumers are often disappointed and left wanting more; a more sexy appearance, a 'better' body, a better-looking boy or girlfriend. Perhaps the dreams we should be encouraging our children to follow are about the good life well lived and based on values which help unite us rather than emphasise individualism.

*Bob Reitemeier
Chief Executive, The Children's Society*



“One of the questions that the lifestyle theme raises is whether a materialistic society results in a loss of faith in ourselves, a growth of fragmented self-interest at the expense of community.”

Summary

The evidence on lifestyle suggests that children engage in a wide variety of out-of-school activities. Among six to 10 year-olds the three favourites are playing video games, reading books and watching TV. Eleven to 15 year-olds have similar favourites, except that they prefer watching TV to reading.

There is widespread agreement that there are not enough structured activities available out-of-school. Not only are there too few facilities, but those that do exist are often expensive, dirty, vandalised and poorly maintained. In rural areas public transport is often inadequate. It is widely agreed there should be more child-friendly outdoor spaces as well as more traffic-free roads.

There is enormous variation in out-of-school activities available to children. The privileged, who are also those who are likely to have a better school experience, have masses of things on offer that are stimulating and enriching. But for many, and these are most likely to be poor and disadvantaged in other ways, what is available out-of-school is either boring or too expensive. This may lie beneath at least some of the antisocial activity in which a minority of young people become engaged as one of their out-of-school activities.

A major theme emerging from the evidence on lifestyle is the increasing concern of the negative effects of commercial pressures on children, with most concern about the advertising of unhealthy foods. Obesity is an increasing problem. In 2004 about a quarter of UK 11 to 15 year-olds were obese.

But commercial pressures may now be having wider effects. One factor that may be leading to rising mental health problems is the increasing degree to which children and young people are preoccupied with possessions; the latest in fashionable clothes and electronic equipment. Evidence both from the United States and from the UK suggests that those most influenced by commercial pressures also show higher rates of mental health problems.

In relation to drugs and alcohol consumption, evidence shows that the higher their disposable income the more likely young people are to drink alcohol and use drugs.

Philip Graham

Panel leader for *Lifestyle* theme, *The Good Childhood Inquiry*, Emeritus Professor of Child Psychiatry, Institute of Child Health, London.

Submission sources

A wide range of individuals and organisations submitted evidence to *The Good Childhood Inquiry* on the subject of lifestyle. Here we present a summary of the opinions, experiences and research that are expressed in these submissions. The views and experiences in this document have been submitted independently and do not reflect those of The Children's Society.

We received contributions relating to lifestyle from academics, local authority and health professionals, teachers, playworkers, authors, religious leaders and many others, which we refer to anonymously. We also received submissions from organisations that are listed on the last page of this document.



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Children's views on lifestyle

We received evidence from a number of different sources:

- 171 comments and 1,325 votes were submitted by children and young people via the *BBC Newsround* and *The Good Childhood Inquiry's* 'my life' website in response to a series of questions on lifestyle.
- 742 children and young people responded to the inquiry's call for evidence.
- 8,000 young people took part in The Children's Society's national survey in 2005.

Spare time

Children and young people saw free time as important so that they could socialise, take part in an activity or just relax. Playing computer games and going on the Internet, dancing, listening to music, playing a musical instrument and reading were popular. Children said they enjoyed sports including swimming and cycling.

"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)

Most felt there was a good balance between outdoor and indoor activity which was largely dictated by the weather. They also linked doing exercise with the need for a healthy diet, and not eating too much junk food.

As with previous themes of *The Good Childhood Inquiry*, their friends were very important, with most children commenting that they liked to 'hang out' with each other playing, chatting and going out during their spare time. While they talked mostly about 'real contact', communicating on the Internet was also common.

Some children felt they should have the freedom to choose how to 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)

School work was considered to be an obstacle to free time, but most accepted that there should be a good balance between the two.

The majority of young people (65%) told their parents where they were going when they went out.



Things to do and places to go

While younger children were happy to go to a park or enjoy the countryside, most older children felt that there wasn't enough to do in their area, with many of them citing a lack of leisure centres, youth clubs, play areas and other forms of entertainments that are suited to their particular age groups.

In The Children's Society's national survey of young people aged 14 to 16, less than a third (32%) agreed with the statement, 'There are places for young people to go in my area', while 19% were 'not sure' and almost half (49%) disagreed. Lots of children and young people wanted more out-of-school activities such as youth clubs, discos and cafes as these provided an opportunity to make friends.

The cost of activities and public transport were sometimes seen as prohibitive but many children were also put off by the poor state of public spaces, which were often vandalised, dirty or felt unsafe.

The same survey found that 18% of 14 to 16-year-olds did not feel safe when they were out alone in their area, and 29% felt that violence was a growing problem in their area. However, 75% said that they liked living in their area.

Young people felt that a lack of leisure provision was forcing many of them to hang around in groups with nothing to do, sometimes causing trouble. Some children found these groups intimidating. Others resented being 'moved on' by adults when they were 'hanging out'.

"Places to be able to go without adults telling them to move on."
(respondent to national survey)

Keeping up with latest trends

Although many children felt it was important to 'be yourself' and not follow fashion slavishly, most children also admitted that the pressure to be fashionable existed and it was a case of either 'giving in' or not.

Among those who did assert their individuality, some talked 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)

Other children were indifferent and even defiant about what other people think of their dress sense, although their friends' attitudes were an important influence.

Drugs

Drugs were a common topic in children and young people's discussions of lifestyle. Most saw drugs as something that prevented them from having a good life. Around 5% of young people aged 14 to 16 considered themselves as having a problem with drugs, and 8% as having a problem with alcohol.

"If they think smoking or doing Drugs is a good part of there life it should be stopped. And they should think about what they are doing."
(respondent to national survey)

But a minority identified substance abuse as something that contributed positively to their lives.

A connection was frequently made between having nowhere to go and getting into trouble, including crime and substance abuse.

Money

Young people regularly mentioned money. Most of them were happy with the amount of pocket money they received and recognised that their parents bought them what they needed. Many saved up for things that they really wanted. Earning their own money was for some as important or more important than the value of the money.

Adult and professional views on lifestyle

These views were expressed in submissions from 1,184 adults and 442 professionals to *The Good Childhood Inquiry*.

Diets

Many professionals expressed concern about rising child obesity, with children eating more fat, sugar and salt.

'The number of obese children has tripled in 20 years. 10% of six year olds are obese, rising to 17% of 15 year-olds.'

One report (Childwise Trends Report, 2005) found that in 2005, 49% of five to 16 year-olds bought crisps, snacks and soft drinks for themselves and 59% bought sweets for themselves, with boys more likely than girls to buy unhealthy snacks.

A couple of submissions suggested that those on low incomes tended to have poorer diets and eat fewer fruit and vegetables. The average for children in Britain was two portions of fruit and vegetables a day, with one-in-five eating no fruit at all.

A report (Barnardos, *Burger boy and sporty girl*) found that the more choice children and young people have, the less likely they are to eat a healthy lunch at school, with peer pressure influencing them to choose fast food which was seen as more desirable.

Many parents believed in not giving in to children's demands for junk food.

There was a general consensus that children should be protected from junk food advertising and that healthy foods should be as well promoted as unhealthy food options.

'Despite knowing that heavily marketed and branded foods are often unhealthy, children find the taste and presentation of these products hugely appealing.'

Exercise

A large number of respondents recognised the need for children to exercise and 'to run off energy'. Exercise was also seen as psychologically beneficial, with rules and boundaries that 'are easy for young people to understand and learn from. It can teach young people about values such as teamwork, equality, healthy competition, fair play and the rewards of practising and working hard'.

Media

A report (Childwise Trends Report, 2005) found that children are avid consumers of written, broadcast and online media, with particularly high levels of television and computer usage. It reported that 28% of five to 10 year-olds and 53% of 11 to 16 year-olds have bought magazines or comics for themselves, with an average monthly spend of £5.50.

Several submissions expressed concern about the violent and sexual content of the media and the potential impact of this on a young audience, highlighting its negative impact on children's 'behaviour, physical well-being, education, relationships and world outlook'.

Many professionals felt that children and young people need good adult role models 'not stick thin fashion models, drug addled rock stars or obscenely rich footballers'.

Some submissions also highlighted the portrayal of young people in the media, with one reporting that 70% of media coverage is negative in tone, focusing on the anti-social and disruptive behaviour of a minority of young people.

Good childhood: what you told us about lifestyle

'Older children are often perceived as a threat to adults, especially if they get together in groups. The media attention on adolescent risk taking, whether misbehaviour or health risks such as drinking and drug taking convey an image of young people which is increasingly demonising.'

Consumerism

Adults expressed disquiet about the rise in consumerism among children.

'The desire for material goods is to the detriment of childhood.'

Many adults and professionals concluded that advertising encouraged children's spending, even if they couldn't afford it. Other comments believed that consumerism increased the divide between those who had 'greater access to material possessions' and those 'disadvantaged groups, including some ethnic minorities, [where] access to this consumer lifestyle may be much restricted'.

Advertising

There was a general consensus that advertising to children was ruthless and exploitative and that they should not be viewed as small consumers, particularly for younger children with 'impressionable minds'. Many adults called for a ban on advertising directed at children.

'... The drive for companies and individuals to make money leads them to target children with their advertising, and treat children as consumers, not people.'

Freedom and risk

Many adults believed that children should have plenty of opportunities for play. However, some professional submissions suggested that parents' fears were inhibiting children from playing outside. Some agreed that these fears were justified but others felt that children needed to learn to negotiate risk.

'We need to realise that if we do succeed in eliminating all physical risk from our children's lives that we will produce young adults who are incapable of an autonomous life.'

There was also vocal support for allowing children to have space away from adults, so that they can explore their own environments.

Places to go

Many comments centred on the need for children to have structured and unstructured places to play and be with their friends, as well as providing a broad range of facilities for children of different ages.

However, the cost and availability of activities was seen to vary considerably between areas and groups of children, with young people in rural areas the least likely to have access to activities. The cost of transport was also seen as an obstacle.

Professionals called for safe and welcoming public spaces, and traffic-free roads. Some also called for communities to be more child-friendly and socially interactive, bringing children and young people of different backgrounds and generations together.

In the absence of productive things to do, it was acknowledged that children were likely to find other ways of entertaining themselves, including anti-social behaviour.

Technology, computers and the Internet

It was felt that technology had fundamentally altered the way young people communicate, with 90% of children aged five to six having a PC (Childwise Trends Report, 2005), and 80% of boys and 96% of girls aged 11 to 16 owning a mobile phone.

While computers and the Internet were seen as being empowering, many commentators shared concerns that technology was too 'fast paced', and that virtual communication could make children more vulnerable and isolated.

'Children need to develop and learn through rich, experiential processes and it seems that today their experiences are cut short by computer programmes and a fast paced consumer driven lifestyle that is intent on speeding things up.'

However, it was also felt that access to multi-media 'could well be essential as a route out of poverty'.

There were some concerns also about the high level of usage and violent content of video and computer games.

Television

A report found that although 82% of children aged five to 16 had a television (Childwise Trends Report, 2005) there has been a gradual downward trend in television viewing with children watching an average 2.5 hours a day, down from three hours in 2001.

Many of the submissions believed that children should watch less – and better quality – television. There were also concerns that watching television was displacing the parental role, eclipsing 'by a factor of five or ten the time parents spend actively engaging with children'. Many parents also lamented the 'corrupting' influence of TV and the adult content of programmes and suggested that television viewing should be limited.

"(Children's) experiences are cut short by computer programmes and a fast paced consumer driven lifestyle that is intent on speeding things up."

Sex

Some professionals and adults were uneasy about children's sexuality and felt they should be protected from sexual knowledge for as long as possible. Others felt that we should take a more liberal or pragmatic view, pointing out that more liberal countries had lower teenage pregnancy rates and higher rates of contraceptive use, with Britain's teenage birth rate five times that in Holland and three times that in France.

One submission pointed to evidence that regular smoking, drinking and experimenting with drugs and low self-esteem were linked with having sex earlier. It was also noted that in some cultures early parenthood is encouraged.

Submissions were divided on the subject of sex education, with the majority believing there was a need for age-appropriate sexual health and relationships education from primary school onwards, while a small minority believed that such education is counterproductive.

The media's portrayal of relationships, sex and sexuality were found to be 'frequently unhealthy and unhelpful', while reporting of young people's sexual activity was seen as often imbalanced and inappropriate, with young people 'collectively maligned for the actions of a few'.

Drugs, alcohol and smoking

Compared to other topics, there were fewer submissions about drugs and alcohol. The point was made that contrary to popular belief most young people do not take illegal drugs, although a significant minority use drugs, mostly cannabis, at least monthly (Hope UK). In addition, many children and young people suffer as a result of parental alcohol and drug abuse, with between 780,000 and 1.3 million children affected by parental alcohol problems (Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy).

One report demonstrated that children, particularly girls between 12 and 16 years old were most vulnerable to smoking and that family habits and parenting style are all important factors in take-up. Those in lower socio-economic groups are more likely to take up smoking at an earlier age with lower rates of stopping.



Submission sources

Active Training and Education	Media March
Alcoholhelp	National Children's Bureau
Anorexia and Bulimia Care	National Consumer Council
Association for Family Therapy	National Heart Forum
Baptist Union of Great Britain	National Youth Agency
Barnardo's	New Economics Foundation
British Association of Social Workers	Nurture Group Network
Brook	Play England
BT Better World Campaign	Polka Theatre
Children's Links	Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents
ChildWise	Save Kids TV
Commission for Racial Equality	Save the Children
Entertainment and Leisure Software Publishers Association	Scripture Union
Family Links	Sex Education Forum
Food Standards Agency	Skills Active
Girlguiding UK	St John's Wood Adventure Playground
Hertfordshire Children's Trust Partnership	Sustainable Development Commission
Hope UK	Teens In Crisis
Kids	The Wildlife Trusts
Leckhampton After School Club	Turtle Key Arts Trust
Matson Neighbourhood Project	Victim Support

The Good Childhood Inquiry

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- The Right Revd Tim Stevens, Bishop of Leicester and Chair of the Board of Trustees, The Children's Society
- Professor Kathy Sylva, Professor of Educational Psychology, Department of Education, University of Oxford

How to contact us

For further information about *The Good Childhood Inquiry*, please visit www.goodchildhood.org.uk or call our Supporter Action Team on 0845 300 1128.

We will continue to gather the thoughts and views of children and young people until early 2008. They can tell us what they think by visiting www.mylife.uk.com

For further information about the work of The Children's Society, please visit www.childrenssociety.org.uk

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