

Tired of Hanging Around – Using sport and leisure activities to prevent anti-social behaviour by young people

Young People’s views from selected research studies

Introduction

This paper summarises research findings on young peoples’ views. Some studies had a wider research design which included analysis of data collected about young people and from research participants other than young people, for example, parents and officials working with young people. From these studies, only analysis of data obtained directly from young people has been included in this paper, to keep the focus on young people’s views.

Studies consulted children and young people from different age groups. Age related findings are reported below as appropriate. Some evaluative studies have included evidence of successful outcomes, and these too are reported within the overall structure of the paper outlined below.

Section A Young People’s Views

The findings on young people’s views can be categorised as follows:

1. Issues
2. Concerns
3. What they want

1. Issues

Young people raised a range of issues. These affected them in varying degrees, often with outcomes that resulted in change of behaviour and non-accessibility of opportunities. Young people’s issues relate to:

- a) lack of things to do;

- b) safety;
- c) portrayal and image; and
- d) confidential support.

a) Lack of things to do

In almost all the studies, young people complained about a lack of things to do or there not being enough for them to do, leaving them feeling bored and with plenty of time to pass. The lack of things to do was explained in terms of inadequate facilities in their area, existing facilities offering limited activities and with restrictive opening times. In particular, one study that specifically focused on finding out how young people spend their time outside school (Ref 1), reported the most vulnerable time for young people was after school. Even those who attended after-school clubs (closed between 5.30 and 6.00 pm) found they had much time on their hands with nothing to do. They could stay at home – often leading to family conflict – or hang out in public spaces.

Young people who reported hanging out on the streets and in other public spaces after the closure of schools or after schools clubs said that they experienced boredom. The boredom led them to engage in minor anti-social behaviour (for example, writing graffiti). Young people believe their peers get involved in anti-social behaviour and crime because they do not have enough to do (Ref 2, 3, 4, 5). A minority also believes that the resultant conflict with authorities tends to act as a buzz, motivating them to do more.

Some young people talked about availability of facilities in their area in the evenings, mainly youth clubs. However these had restrictive opening times: usually open a few days (2 to 3 days) in the week and closing around 9.00 pm. In addition, many young people who used youth clubs said that the activities were generally suitable for specific age groups, mainly lower age groups. Other local facilities, such as leisure centres, were too expensive – transport costs had to be added to the entrance fee (Ref 6, 1).

b) Safety

The key concern was personal safety. Young people feared for their safety when walking home from school (for example, fear from bullies, gangs, paedophiles). During winter, poor lighting contributed to increased fear. Young people adopted various strategies to deal with this, the main one being the avoidance of certain routes. This strategy led to some young people limiting their use of facilities: not going to youth clubs and leisure centres (Ref 7).

Some young people expressed concern about the existence of gangs and the pressure to join them. They described members of gangs engaging in drink and drugs as well as committing crime. Young people reported that they deliberately avoided places where the gangs hanged out. There were also fears expressed of being victimised by other young people who openly consumed alcohol and took drugs in public places. Young people explained they did not want to get picked-on by them and so avoided going to and through these spaces.

In localised areas, conflicts between different groups of young people caused some to fear for their safety and it also meant that opportunities to come together as young people in a particular area became limited. This impacted on optimising use of local facilities.

c) Portrayal and image

Many young people felt that older people and the media inaccurately portrayed them as troublemakers. Young people accepted that there certainly were a small proportion of young people who caused disturbances and caused inconvenience to others, but that the majority of young people were valuable members of their communities (Ref 8). Young people felt that politicians and the media helped to keep a misconceived image of young people alive (Ref 8).

Young people wanted to be recognised for the contributions they made to society. In their view, the effort they put into their education and learning to be good individuals needed to be recognised and appreciated. It was also stated

that many young people get involved in voluntary work and contribute to society. More opportunities to undertake voluntary work were welcomed.

d) Confidential support

Many young people considered that support, particularly emotional support, was important in their overall development (Refs 6, 9). They looked for confidential advice and support from trustworthy, caring and friendly officers based in various services for young people.

2. Concerns

Young people were aware of the need to engage in more activities to keep them occupied and relieve them of boredom. However a number of concerns were expressed regarding activities and some of these concerns also acted as barriers and deterrents from participating.

a) Lack of appropriate local area based facilities

In young people's views, the lack of facilities in their local areas limited their opportunities to be involved in activities (Refs 4, 7, 12, and 15).

b) Physical appearance of buildings

Young people talked about some facilities which were based in buildings that were decaying. These were viewed environmentally unattractive and unappealing to visit and stay in (Refs 7, 15).

c) Lack of information

Some young people had not been aware of the facilities and services in their area. Many had access to this information from their parents, peers and officials in their lives (including teachers). Parental lack of awareness of facilities and opportunities for young people in the area meant that young people often were not aware of how to access them (Ref 6).

d) Affordability

Activities for young people were described to have cost attachment. Young people reported cost as a barrier. In addition, if the facilities were not in walking distance, transport costs on top made it more difficult to make use of the activities (Refs 2, 6, 15).

e) Age insensitivity

One of the key complaints of some activities was that they were geared towards lower aged groups, presumably at the lowest denominator to facilitate access by all. This however meant that older aged young people did not feel that there was anything appropriate for them to do and they became bored easily and stopped attending (Refs. 2, 6, 7).

3. What young people want

Most of the studies directly asked young people what they wanted to see developed and improved. There were a number of useful suggestions made which have been set out in categories below.

a) Neutral 'chill out' spaces

In every research study where young people were asked what they wanted, they always said the need for spaces to 'chill out'/ hang out with friends. They described these spaces to be neutral where any young person could go and feel comfortable. They wanted to own the design, in other words be involved in designing them physically and content wise, that is, to arrange a range of things to do that would interest the diverse group of young people (Ref 9, 4). Young people were very clear about the necessity of involving them in designing these spaces so that they could use them. It was also felt that these spaces would reduce the number of young people who hang out on the streets. Some wanted these spaces to be free from alcohol and drugs, but to have non-alcoholic drinks at affordable prices. They wanted these spaces to be safe, and offer other related services to meet young people's needs (for example, confidential emotional support services).

b) A range of activities

Young people wanted to have the opportunity to participate in a range of activities to cater for their interests rather than the usual conventional type of activities on offer at youth or sports clubs. For example, in studies that explored sports facilities in some detail (Ref 1), young people wanted the opportunity to try out and get involved in 'alternative' or non-mainstream activities and sports that were also part of Olympic Games (e.g. archery, boxing, fencing, canoeing, water sports, skiing, basketball). They felt they needed a range of activities and sports to keep them interested. A study on angling (Ref 10) found that while the project managers anticipated high drop out rates due to perceived boredom of the activity by young people, it was found that many of the young people wanted to keep coming back and the project sustained their interest. There was also interest in participation in activities where other age-groups were involved, for example with older or elderly people, to benefit from inter-generational communication. Where young people had taken part in such project, they had found the experience valuable (Ref 4).

c) Local safe and affordable facilities

Easy physical access to facilities (within walking distance) was considered important and so local activities are preferred. Young people believed that facilities locally also made the area a good place to live in (Ref 11). Safety of these places was equally important to young people, not only the places themselves but to be able to travel safely to these places too. Additionally, young people wanted affordable access to facilities. Those from lower income groups showed sporadic use of these facilities and reported that their ability to pay depended on what money was available in their households at the time (Ref 6). Young people wanted to avoid public transport costs and felt that local facilities would be much more accessible for them to use and be interested in.

d) Improved dissemination of information

Young people found out information about opportunities and facilities through parents, peers, teachers and other support staff. The younger age groups heavily relied on information from parents. All young people wanted

information about activities, facilities and opportunities available to young people and that it is made available freely and accessibly, particularly to parents who can then inform their children.

e) Sports activities

There was much interest from young people in sports activity. They wanted to do interesting things – they wanted access to a wider range and types of sports that conventionally offered to stretch and sustain their interests. A study specifically looking at participation in sport found that there were various motivating factors to get involved in sports: to try something new, to keep fit, to win, to socialise and be with others, to make new friends (Ref 1). Some young people did however want more role models to inspire them to take up sport. Young women reported needing more confidence to participate. Many perceived the benefits in terms of keeping them away from perpetrating anti-social behaviour and crime. A study which evaluated the impact of structured participation in sport by young people, found many benefits: drop in committing crime, reduction in exclusions, less anti-social behaviour, raised self-esteem, development of more friendships (Ref 11). Barclays Spaces for Sport initiative has been developed to specifically develop sports opportunities and facilities in local areas (Ref 1).

Section B Overall conclusions

The research reports reviewed show fairly similar patterns of findings. Most young people stated that they did not have enough to do generally, and believed that this leads to some young people engaging in anti-social behaviour and committing crime. However young people also expressed dismay at being generally portrayed inaccurately as trouble makers by older people, politicians and the media when in their view only a small proportion engage in anti-social and criminal activities.

Young people described a range of concerns including lack of appropriate facilities for the diverse groups of young people, issues of safety when accessing these facilities, being subjected to bullying by a small minority and

the pressures of being hassled to join gangs. Affordability and cost of travel to facilities and activities were highlighted as barriers.

Various proposals were put forward by young people when asked what they wanted. The most prominent of these was the need for spaces to chill out, where they could safely and comfortably hang out with friends and where a range of interesting activities would be available as well as confidential support services. Young people wanted to be involved in designing these spaces. Young people also wanted to have the opportunity to participate in a range of different activities and sports at affordable prices and in their localities. They feel that the provision of local activities makes their local area a good place to live.

References

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