

THE KEY ISSU

“Through play children develop spontaneity, flexibility, risk-assessing skills. They learn to communicate, problem solve, interact socially and navigate the world. Play is essential to their future survival and adaptation”.³

This quotation illustrates how play and leisure should be understood as a central part of a child’s development, with the potential to impact on both their current lives and their future development.

Making sure that all children and young people have access to play and leisure opportunities in NI has historically been neglected at strategic level. This has impacted on the lived experiences of children and young people with many lacking access to safe, age appropriate facilities and spaces in their local areas.

For example, research by Monteith and McLaughlin (2004)⁴ found that one in five children living in severe poverty did not have access to nearby, safe play areas and the Equal Lives Review by DHSSPS (2005)⁵ noted that for many children and young people with a learning disability, play and leisure provision was often inaccessible and unwelcoming.

In NI, children’s experience of play is also influenced by the legacy of the conflict seen, for instance, in the segregated nature of school and community based provision which can restrict children and young people’s access to play and their use of public space.⁶

Definitions of ‘play’ or ‘play and leisure’ should reflect the UNCRC which includes the right to rest, play, leisure and participation in cultural life and the arts. This includes activities such as unstructured play, organised sport, drama, art, festivals and events.

Themes and priorities

In NICCY’s report Children’s Rights: Rhetoric or Reality (2008) children and young people of all ages and from all geographical areas voiced a number of concerns regarding the lack of facilities in relation to play areas, youth clubs and sporting activities.

Four key themes emerged during this research:

- **Safe places to play - children worried about the lack of play and leisure spaces and the safety of existing play and leisure facilities**
- **Affordable activities - young people expressed concern about the cost of leisure activities, particularly as they get older**
- **Accessible activities - children talked about the importance of having play and leisure facilities they could access close to where they live and that meet their needs**
- **Age appropriate activities - young people shared their frustration about the lack of leisure activities available to them as they became teenagers**