

THE KEY ISSU

Community space is often the place where children experience least adult supervision. Unsupervised leisure time represents an important part of growing up. It allows them the opportunity to interact with their peers and explore their role within society.¹ However, the challenge is ensuring the safety of children and young people within their communities.

Community Space

Increasingly, parental concerns about the safety of their children have resulted in significant restrictions being placed on children's personal freedoms. Children may be limited to indoor activities and not permitted to spend time outdoors unsupervised. Children are therefore spending greater periods of time watching television, 'surfing' the internet and playing video or computer games – all of which carry potential risks for their health and safety.²

Children can be limited in how far they can travel, due to their reliance on parents or public transport and safety considerations. This can make them particularly dependent on the provision of local facilities such as libraries, shops, and recreational spaces. Although older children may have more opportunities to travel, research shows that these are limited by the availability of transport, particularly in rural areas, and the associated costs. For many children playing on the street, traffic can be a major threat to their safety.³ For other young people, political and religious segregation can limit their ability to move safely.⁴ Depending on the location, their 'neighbourhood', the area in which they feel they belong, can be limited to only a few streets.

Hanging Out On the Streets

Young people may 'hang out' on the streets because they have a lack of things to do, few places to go, and little money for activities.

The 2007 Young Person's Behaviour and Attitudes Survey (YPBAS) of 11-16 year olds across Northern Ireland, found that 56% of respondents identified a lack of safe facilities

as a problem. Many, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, cannot invite friends to their homes, due to a lack of private space. Where youth provision or leisure facilities exist, these may not reflect what children want to do, the costs may be prohibitive or they may have to walk through areas in which they do not feel safe in order to access them.⁵



Young people also report that they simply enjoy 'hanging out' together without adult supervision. Arguably the teenage years represent an important transition period from childhood to adulthood, and the freedom to explore and to develop independence is essential.

In most situations, young people get together without causing any problems, however there may be little tolerance within communities for the presence of groups of young people on the streets.⁶ Even during the daytime and when they are not presenting a risk or nuisance, there can be intolerance of children's play, as illustrated by the frequency of street signs banning ball games or skateboarding. Young people may also be spoken to negatively or