

Young people's thoughts about and experiences of age-related negative stereotyping

An analysis of questions from the Young Life and Times Survey 2010

Introduction

The negative stereotyping of children and young people has been a matter of concern for the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People since the establishment of the office.

This concern is shared by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child which, in commenting on the UK Government report on the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2008 stated:

'The Committee is ... concerned at the general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children, especially adolescents, which appears to exist in the State party, including in the media, and may be often the underlying cause of further infringements of their rights.

The Committee recommends that the State party ensure full protection against discrimination on any grounds, including by taking urgent measures to address the intolerance and inappropriate characterization of children, especially adolescents, within the society, including in the media ...'ⁱ

The NICCY Youth Panel, established to provide advice to the Commissioner, has consistently identified this as a key priority, and over 2010-11 planned and implemented a campaign to challenge negative stereotyping with the call to 'Disable the Label'. As part of this the Youth Panel worked with NICCY staff to draw up a series of questions for inclusion in the ARK Young Life and Times survey 2010. They have subsequently advised on the analysis of the data, to inform the production of this paper.



The survey

The Young Life and Times survey is run by ARK, a joint project of Queens University Belfast and the University of Ulster. It is a survey of 16 year olds in Northern Ireland, and uses the Child Benefit register to access young people whose 16th birthday fell during February and March 2010. The young people were invited to complete the questionnaire using three possible methods: by phone, online or using the paper questionnaire. Survey content included questions on a range of issues, some of which were funded by and asked on behalf of a range of government and non-government organisations. From an eligible sample of 3,725 young people, a total of 775 completed the questionnaire.

The findings

1. Most young people believe that young people are judged negatively because of their age

The first question on the issue of negative stereotyping asked respondents *'In general, do you think that young people are judged negatively just because they are young?'* An overwhelming 85% agreed, with only one in ten (10%) stating that they didn't think this was the case. Significantly, young people who considered themselves to be 'not well off' were considerably more likely to agree (89%) compared to those who identified themselves as 'well off' (77%).

2. The majority of young people have personally experienced discrimination because of their age.

The second question asked about their own experience of discrimination: *'And have you ever been treated with disrespect because you are a young person?'* Only one in ten (11%) said that this had never happened to them with 87% saying that they had experienced discrimination because of their age. While the majority said that this had rarely happened to them (57%), one in four (26%) said it happened regularly and a small number (4%) said that it happened all the time.



3. Young men and those from less well off families are most likely to have experienced discrimination because of their age.

Males were more likely to say that they were treated with disrespect because of their age 'regularly' or 'all the time' (35%) than females (28%). Similarly young people who identified themselves as 'not well off' were more likely to say that they were treated with disrespect because of their age 'regularly' or 'all the time' (38%) than those identifying as 'average' (29%) or 'well off' (28%).ⁱⁱ

4. Young people frequently experience age-related discrimination in shops

Respondents were asked to indicate whether they had experienced specific types of age-related discrimination in shops or shopping centres. Almost 6 in 10 had been told to leave their schoolbag outside a shop (59%), around a quarter had been excluded from a shop or shopping centre (26%), and two in three (67%) had been treated as suspicious by staff in a shop. In each case the respondents believed that this treatment was related to their age.

5. Most young people have, at some time, been talking with friends on a street, and been told to 'move on'.

More than half of respondents (57%) said that they had been told to move on when standing with friends on a street. This was more likely to happen to young people who were 'not well off' (66%) than those who came from families with 'average' income (56%) or 'well off' families (49%).

6. Young people were told to move on by residents, police, community representatives or paramilitary representatives.

For the majority of young people, residents were responsible for telling them to move on (64%), followed by police (39%) and, to a lesser degree, community representatives (17%). One in twenty young people (5%) had been told to move on by paramilitary representatives.

Young men were considerably more likely than young women to have been moved on by police (48% and 34%) or by a paramilitary representative (7% and 4%). 'Well off' young people were less likely than 'not well off' young people to have been moved on



by any of the groups listed. 'Not well off' young people were twice as likely to be moved on by paramilitary representatives compared to other young people (10% and 5%).

7. Being told to move on when standing outside with friends has, in general, a profoundly negative impact on young people.

The young people who had been told to move on were asked to write how that had made them feel. The responses are generally very negative and emotional, and reflect a deep unhappiness at their treatment. Words that were most commonly used were 'angry', 'annoyed', 'awkward', 'bad', 'confused', 'disrespected', 'embarrassed', 'frustrated', 'hurt', 'insignificant', 'misjudged', 'sad', 'un-trusted', 'uncomfortable', 'unwanted', 'unwelcome', 'upset', 'victimised', 'worried', 'worthless'.

Many talked of how they felt judged, that they had been doing nothing wrong, but that any group of young people gathered were viewed negatively. Their responses demonstrate a strong sense of injustice.

'Victimised and frustrated as we were not doing anything wrong.'

'Angry and upset for being treated as suspicious'

'Like I was doing something wrong'.

'Makes you feel bad as you could just be standing there with friends and not doing anything wrong but because you're young people assume that you are up to the wrong things when you aren't'

'Like I was being judged because I was a teenager'

'Feel guilty even though I was doing nothing wrong.'

'I was quite confused as we were only waiting on a friend.'

Frequently the young people said that, when they were told to move on, they were made to feel worthless.

'I felt like a criminal.'

'Disrespected, in many ways offended. Looked down upon.'



'Worthless.'

'Degraded, untrustworthy and small.'

'Awkward and out of place.'

'As though we were scary/causing trouble/unwelcome.'

'Humiliated and embarrassed.'

'Less important, judged that we were doing something wrong even after we were not.'

'Like a bad influence on society.'

'Unloved, useless.'

'Like I didn't matter.'

'This made me feel insignificant and inferior as if I were being treated like a child.'

Being told to move on also made many feel excluded from their community.

'It made me feel like I couldn't be myself in the place I live.'

'Felt excluded from the community and confused because they done the same thing at my age.'

'Undermined as if I was some sort of human pollution littering the street. I felt rejected from society to a certain degree; lost my hope in the vision of equality in human treatment.'

'Gutted, that we were made to feel different and outsiders.'

'It made me feel as if I wasn't as important as the rest of the people around me just because I'm young. Older people think that just because we are young we will get up to bad behaviour but I know I wouldn't cause I respect the place I live in and the people who live there. It made me feel bad for just standing around (almost ashamed).'

'Like I wasn't wanted there.'

'Like we didn't belong in the community.'

'Unwanted, feeling I had nowhere to go.'



In contrast a small number (around 8%) seemed less annoyed by the incident. For some this appeared to be because they understood that their behaviour may have caused annoyance, while others seemed to make little of the situation or to have become used to being moved on.

'Fair enough – probably annoying them, I probably wouldn't like it.'

'Don't care.'

'It didn't bother me too much its normal but it shouldn't be.'

'It didn't really affect me very much as I have other places that I could go.'

'Made me laugh.'

8. The majority of young people feel that the media portrayal of young people is mostly negative.

Respondents were asked about how they felt the media portrays young people, and 79% stated that they felt that this was done 'mostly negatively', with only 3% choosing 'mostly positively'.

Conclusions

It is clear from the responses to the survey that the majority of young people in Northern Ireland have experienced age-related discrimination. Almost nine in ten (87%) said that they had been treated with disrespect because of their age, 67% had been treated as suspicious by staff in a shop, and 57% had been told to move on when standing with friends in a street. Eight in ten (79%) felt that the media portrayed young people negatively.

Where the young people were asked to say how they felt about being moved on, the level of distress and humiliation was very evident. Many young people said that this made them feel excluded from their community and angry at how they were treated.



Tackling the age-related discrimination experienced by young people across Northern Ireland must be a priority for the Northern Ireland Executive. NICCY is pleased, therefore, that the UK Government and three devolved governments in November 2009 made 'Addressing the negative portrayal of young people in the media' one of their four priorities for joint working across the UK, in response to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child's recommendation.

While addressing the media's role in promoting negative stereotyping of children and young people is important, it is also important that the Executive and its agencies review their own roles in the age-related discrimination of children and young people.

Policies relating to Community Safety, for example, which should be about making communities safe and inclusive places for children and young people, instead tend to conceptualise young people as problems that need to be contained. Increasingly punitive measures have been implemented or proposed over recent years such as Anti-Social Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Dispersal Zones, and Parenting Support Orders to keep young people off the streets. In addition, Mosquito Devices, ultrasonic devices emitting a high pitched noise designed to cause discomfort or pain to children and young people, are in use in Northern Ireland as 'teenage control products'.ⁱⁱⁱ

The Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People calls on the Executive and its agencies to tackle the negative stereotyping of children and young people by reviewing their policies to ensure a more positive focus on children and young people. The Executive should ensure that the new Community Safety Strategy and subsequent Action Plans work towards making our communities and town centres safe and welcoming places for children and young people. As part of this, mosquito devices should be banned and positive, effective alternatives to Anti-Social Behaviour Orders developed.



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References

ⁱ Paragraphs 24 and 25 of UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, (2008), Consideration of Reports submitted by states parties under Article 44 of the Convention, Concluding Observation: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, (Geneva).

ⁱⁱ The survey defined 'rarely' as not more than twice a year, 'regularly' as two to three times a month, and 'all the time' as most days.

ⁱⁱⁱ For more information see NICCY's policy briefing on Community Safety at www.niccy.org/Makeitright/communitysafety and consultation responses at www.niccy.org/article.aspx?menuld=1272

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