

# NICCY

northern ireland commissioner  
for children and young people

in association with



Queen's University  
Belfast



A boy not getting a say in a  
Conversation.

## Children's Report:

# CHILDREN'S RIGHTS IN NORTHERN IRELAND

What children and the adults who work with  
them had to say about children's lives

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## Thank You

A Research Team was asked to do this study by the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY). They would like to thank all the children and young people who talked to them and the adults, parent, schools, youth projects and children's organisations who also helped.

## CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

In 1991 the UK government signed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. By doing this, it promised

- 1** to protect children's rights - make sure children are allowed to do what their rights say, and
- 2** to promote children's rights - make sure people know what rights children have.

Some rights are general - everyone should have them (e.g. all children should be able to have a say about things that affect them and to be listened to). Many rights are about certain parts of a child's life (e.g. family, health, education, play). There are 54 Articles in the Convention. Each Article explains one right and how the Government or adults working with children should make sure that this right is part of their work.

Every 5 years the Government has to tell the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child what they have done to protect and promote children's rights. If the Committee thinks more needs to be done, they will tell the Government what they think should happen.

**For more information you could visit these websites:**

[www.childrenslawcentre.org](http://www.childrenslawcentre.org) - the green links  
[www.niccy.org](http://www.niccy.org)  
[www.therightsite.org.uk](http://www.therightsite.org.uk)

In Northern Ireland, Nigel Williams is the Commissioner for Children and Young People. He works with a team of people in NICCY (Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People) to help children and adults understand children's rights. NICCY protects and promotes the rights of all children in Northern Ireland - so that children are healthy, safe and happy and so that everyone understands the rights children should have (the rights they are entitled to).

## THE NICCY STUDY

To find out more about children's lives and what needs to be done to make things better for them, NICCY asked a team of researchers to carry out a study. The researchers spoke to:

- 1,064 children in 27 schools across Northern Ireland - primary, secondary, grammar, Catholic, Protestant, integrated (mixed religion), Irish speaking, and special schools in cities, small towns and rural areas.
- 107 children and young people who were not in school - youth groups, homeless young people, Travellers, children who were not educated in school, young mothers, young people who had been in trouble with the police, young women in prison.
- 350 adults working with and for children - teachers, social workers, doctors, nurses, lawyers, judges, police officers, people working in the Northern Ireland government, and people working in organisations which work with children.

The study found out what children thought was unfair about home, school, play facilities, the area where they lived and what they thought about crime and the police by asking them to draw, write stories, design posters, talk in groups. The adults working with children were asked what rights they thought need to be promoted or protected more, and what changes were needed to improve (make better) children's lives.

What the children and adults said is in a 332 page report for NICCY. This included:

- the issues talked about by children, young people and the adults working with them
- rights that were being ignored
- what NICCY could work on over the next few years.

This booklet is a summary of the report, divided into topics. Each topic includes the issues children and adults who work with them talked about. Children's own words are in a different font and some of their drawings have also been included, but no-one's real name is used. There are also suggestions for making things better - some are what children said, some are what the people who work with children told the researchers, and some are from other studies carried out with children in Northern Ireland.

## “Putting rights into practice - Making rights Happen”

We need to make sure that the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is implemented - this means making sure that everyone knows and understands what rights children have.

I didn't know I had  
any rights!

Where do you  
find out about  
your rights?

I have never  
heard of the UN  
Convention on the  
Rights of the Child.

How can I get  
advice or support?

How do I make  
a complaint?

I want to  
vote.

I don't have any say in  
decisions that affect me - at  
home, in school, in hospital, or  
in my local community.

If people do ask me  
what I think, they often  
ignore my views!

## Issues

- Children and young people did not know about the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- Children and young people did not know they had rights.
- Children and young people did not know where to get information that they could understand.
- It was difficult for children to get advice or support and to make complaints.
- Children had no say in things that affected them:
  - personal decisions, like how much pocket money they get
  - family decisions, like moving house
  - school decisions, like the subjects they study
  - local decisions, like what play facilities they want in their local area

“I know we’re just kids but we live in this world too. If we don’t say anything about it, who will?”  
(Girl, aged 10)

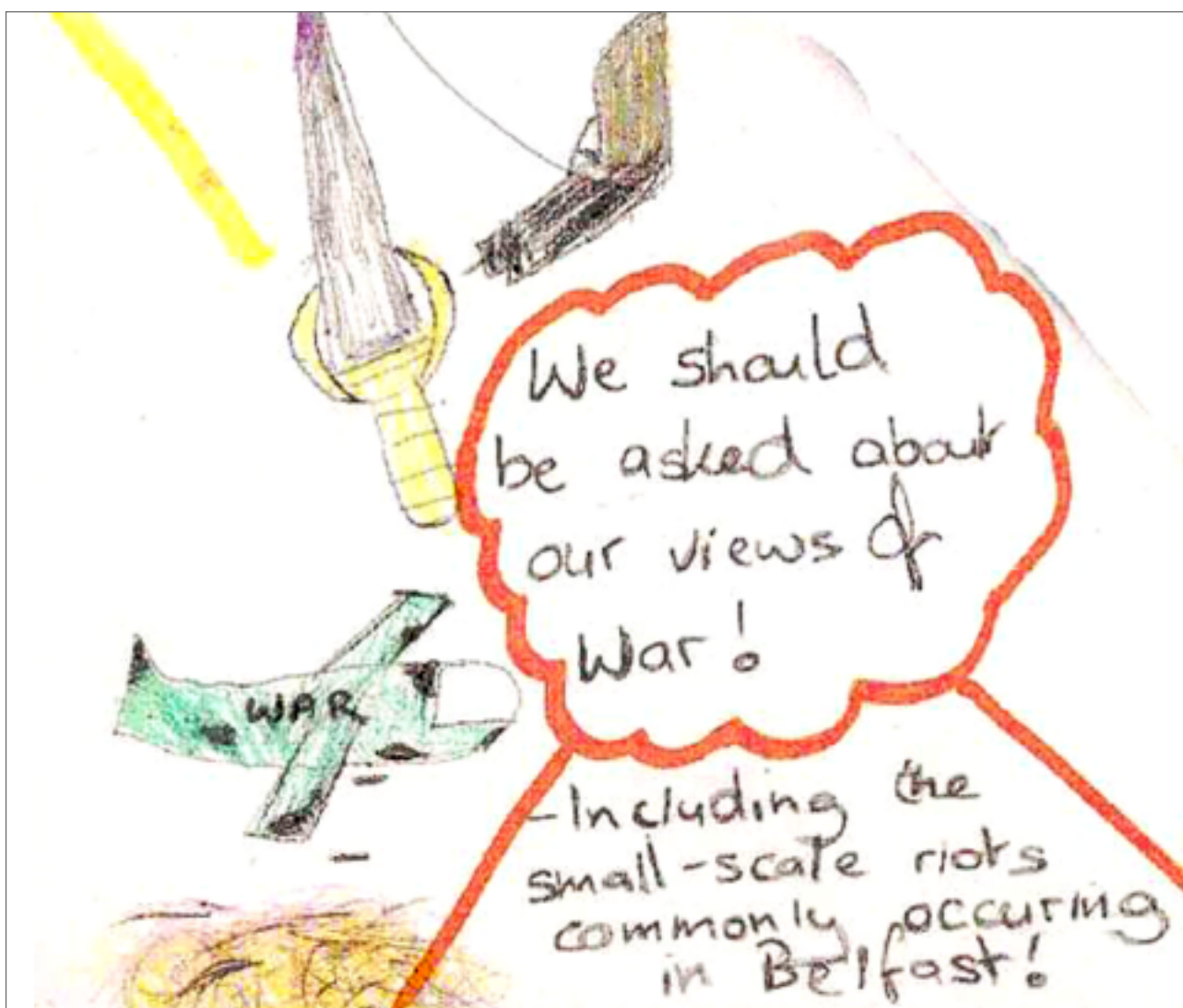
- Adults working with children thought that children were not listened to in schools, in courts, in the family or in care, when someone close to them died or when they needed health care.
- If children were asked what they thought, people often ignored their views.
- Some children wanted to be able to vote at a younger age:

“I think it’s so unfair the way kids don’t get a say in political voting. For flippersake, I know more about politics than some adults.” (Girl, aged 11)

## Suggestions

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child should be part of the laws of Northern Ireland.
- Checks should be used to make sure children’s rights are being met.
- A special person (e.g. Minister for Children) or group in government (e.g. a Children’s Unit or a Department for Children) should take responsibility for children’s issues.
- Children and young people should learn about their rights in primary and secondary schools, from NICCY and from the internet.
- Everyone who works with children should have training to help them understand children’s rights and learn how to work with children and young people in ways that respect their rights.
- There should be one place in Northern Ireland where children can go for information about their rights and information to help them make decisions or choices.
- There should be more services for children, where people listen to their complaints and help them solve their problems (e.g. information and advocacy services) or where people listen to their problems and give comfort and advice (e.g. counselling services).
- Up to date information should be collected about all children living in Northern Ireland. Information should also be collected about certain groups of children, to make sure that they have the help and support they need (e.g. children living in poverty, Travellers, young carers, disabled children, children from ethnic minorities, homeless young people, child refugees, children who live with domestic violence or have been abused, children who misuse drugs, alcohol or cigarettes, children in care or secure accommodation).

- Every year a study should be carried out to make sure that children's rights are being promoted and protected. If they are not, people in power (e.g. politicians) should make changes to improve children's lives.
- A strategy (plan) for children and young people should explain what will be done to promote and protect the rights of children in Northern Ireland and what is important to them. It should say what will be done, when, who by and how much money will be needed to make these things happen.
- Children should be involved in decisions that affect them. Parents, teachers, adults who work with them and the Government should find out what children think, listen to them and act on what they have to say.
- Children and young people should be involved in school councils, youth councils in local communities, city councils and the Northern Ireland Assembly so that their views count when decisions are being made.
- When they have been asked what they think (consulted), children should be told (given feedback) about whether their views have made a difference to decisions or have led to changes.



## Family life and alternative care - who children live with

Children live in lots of different types of families -

- with one or two parents
- with a relative like an aunt, grandmother, older sister or with a friend of the family (kinship fostering)
- with a family they are not related to (foster care)
- with parents they are not related to who have legally adopted them (adopted family)
- in a home with other children and adults who look after them (residential care)
- in a special home for children who are at risk of harm or who have been in serious trouble (secure accommodation).

No-one listens when you're in  
secure accommodation.

Adults don't listen  
to me - they think  
I'm too young.

I have no say in big  
family decisions - moving  
house, choosing holidays,  
who I live with.

I've no say in  
how my children's  
home is run.

In my family, I have no say  
in personal decisions - what time  
to go to bed, what time to come in,  
what to wear, how much  
pocket money I get.

Children should  
be able to decide what  
they want to do if their  
parents split up

I'm treated differently to  
my sister because  
I'm older.

I'll  
need  
extra help  
when I  
leave  
care.

I don't have enough privacy  
- people go in my bedroom, look  
at my mobile phone or in  
my diary.

I wish they'd told  
me that my gran was  
dying. I would like to  
have gone to  
her funeral.

## Issues

- Many children had no say in family decisions.
- Sometimes children had no say in personal decisions like what time to go to bed, what time to come in, how much pocket money they get, what to wear.
- Sometimes children felt that adults did not listen to them because they were too young:

"Things that annoy me about my family are that my brother gets 5 pounds a week and I get zilch. Also, my brother gets to do everything but I'm too young." (Girl, aged 11)

- Many children felt they were treated differently, or compared, to their brothers/sisters:

"Sometimes I feel that, because I am the youngest, so much is expected of me. For example, I have to be as smart as my brother and as good at drama as my sister is" (Girl, aged 11)

"I am the oldest child in my family so if I fight with my sister I get in the most trouble, even if my sister starts it." (Boy, aged 11)

- Sometimes children thought they should have more say in big family decisions like moving house, choosing holidays, buying new cars.
- Some children felt their parents were over-protective:

"I know they try to do their best but sometimes they look after us too much and don't give us our freedom. They're always worrying. I think children should do what they want but learn from their mistakes." (Boy, aged 13)

- A few children thought they did not have enough privacy in their home - parents or brothers/sisters went into their bedroom, looked at their mobile phone or diary:

"I love writing in school because that's the only time I can really write what I feel. I once kept a diary but I was betrayed when someone intruded on it. So I scrapped that idea." (Girl, aged 11)

- Children wanted to be included in decisions if their parents separated or divorced:

"When my parents split up I decided to stay with my mum and see my dad at the weekends. Other children should be able to decide what they want to do." (Girl, aged 11)

- Children wanted to be told when someone in the family was dying or had died and be involved in decisions (e.g. about the funeral):

"I can cope with the truth - I wish they hadn't lied to me." (Boy, aged 9)

"My baby brother died when he was born and I didn't even know what he looked like." (Boy, aged 11)



- Some children in foster care felt they needed extra help and support when they were 16 or 17 and leaving care.
- Some children in residential care (children's homes) needed very special care but staff were not always trained to meet their needs. Sometimes children had no say in how children's homes were run or the rules. They did not always have the education or health care they needed.
- Some children in secure accommodation did not have enough education, health care, play or leisure facilities. They felt that they were not listened to. Because there are not many places in Northern Ireland to help children in serious trouble or who need to be protected, they sometimes stay in secure accommodation for too long a time.



## Suggestions

- The Government should write a family policy (document saying what needs to be done, how, who by, when) which:
  - makes sure that all families get support, especially families living in poor areas or places where there is a lot of crime, parents who work, young parents and parents who have a disabled child
  - helps parents understand positive parenting - how to deal with children without smacking, hitting or shouting at them
  - helps parents learn how to listen to children and involve them in family decisions which affect them
  - lets parents know where they can get advice and help if they have a problem.
- There should be more training for families and adults working with children about children's rights and looking after children in ways that respect them and their views.
- Different organisations working with children and parents should work together to find out what children need or want, help them solve their problems and look after them.
- People who work with children should be trained and given enough time to do their work so that they do not get stressed or do their jobs badly.

- People working to make sure that children are not abused or hurt should all know what sorts of things harm children and when children might be at risk of being harmed.
- If parents decide to separate, they should be helped to sort out their problems. If the parents can't agree and have to go to court for a judge to decide where the child lives and what contact they have with each parent, the child should be asked what they want and her/his views should be listened to.
- When a child can't live with their own mum or dad, many studies have found that it is best for them to be cared for by a relative or family friend. Courts and social services should try to sort this out for the child.
- Children in care should be asked what they need help and support with when planning their education, work, health care and where they want to live when they leave care.
- People working with children in children's homes and secure accommodation should make sure that they respect the children and help them be safe, healthy and happy.

## Health and poverty - being well and having enough money

There are different types of health:

- physical (your body)
- mental (your mind and how you feel).

When people live in poverty they are poor - they do not earn a lot or have much money, they might not own a car or their house, they do not have the things that people think everyone should be able to afford and not have to live without (necessities).

Lots of studies show that there is a link between poverty and health - people who are poor tend to be ill more than wealthy people.

I'm paid less  
for doing the same job  
as an adult. I don't  
know about my rights  
at work.

I'm never included in  
decisions about my own health  
care - at the dentist's, doctor's,  
hospital or optician's.

There aren't many mental  
health services for children in care  
or prison.

Where I live is  
not nice - graffiti,  
rubbish, burnt  
out cars.

There's not  
enough housing  
for young  
people who are  
homeless.

We need  
better sex education  
in school.

I don't  
feel safe in our  
area - people  
fighting, drinking,  
using drugs on  
the streets.

Some children do not get the same  
health care services as others e.g. gay and  
lesbian young people, Travellers, disabled  
children.

Many children don't have enough  
exercise, don't eat a good diet and are overweight,  
don't have good dental care. Lots of teenagers have  
problems with drugs and alcohol, sexual health and  
mental health.

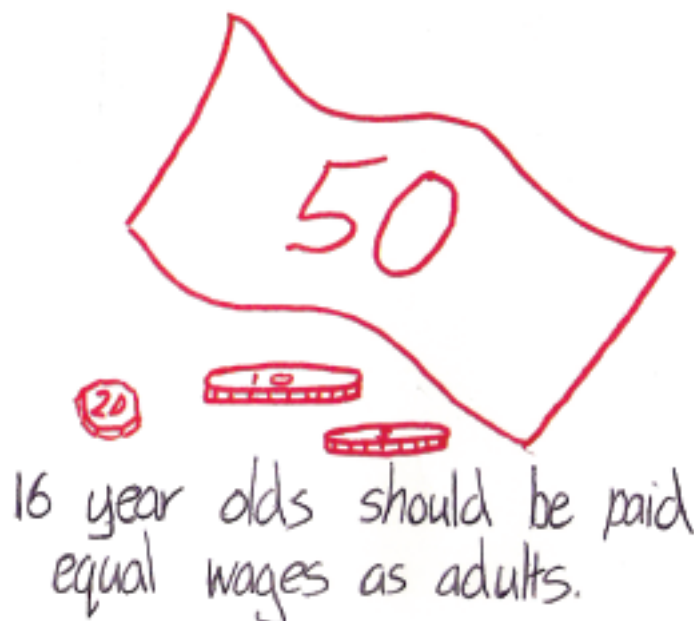
Some health  
care staff use  
words that are hard  
to understand or talk  
to my mum as if I'm  
not there!

## Issues

- Many children lived in poor areas where graffiti, rubbish, and burnt out cars made the area unpleasant:

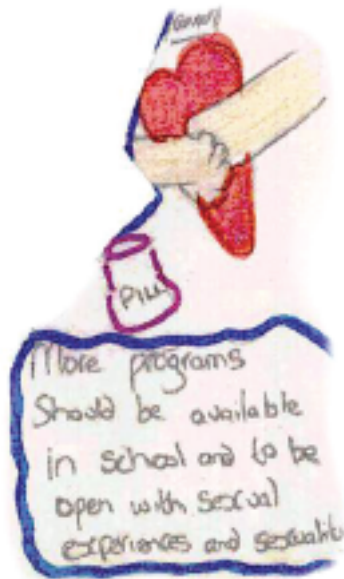
"In my area... there is always glass everywhere you look and last year my sister fell onto the glass and cut herself. The oldish people go round drinking on the streets and the little children don't feel safe. Rubbish is thrown about everywhere. They need more bins and the police need to waken up a bit - they don't do anything." (Girl, aged 11)

- Some children felt unsafe in their local areas (e.g. people fighting, anti-social behaviour of children and adults, people drinking and using drugs on the streets).
- Adults working with children were worried about children not having enough exercise, not eating a good diet and being overweight, not having good dental care. They also worried about teenagers having problems with drugs and alcohol, sexual health and mental health.
- Children were not included in decisions about their health care - going to the dentist, doctor, hospital, optician.
- Sometimes health care staff used language, which was hard for children to understand so they did not know what they were being told. At other times, they talked to the child's parent as if the child was not there.
- There were not many special mental health services for children - especially children in care, secure accommodation or prison.
- Children and young people thought they needed better sex education in school.
- Some groups of children and young people were treated differently and did not get the same information about health or health care services as others (e.g. young people who were gay or lesbian, disabled children and young people, ethnic minority and Traveller children).
- There was not enough good housing for 16 and 17 year olds who left home, young people leaving care or young people who were homeless.
- Young people were paid less than adults for doing the same job and did not know their rights at work.



## Suggestions

- Health care staff and parents should involve all children (including disabled children) in decisions about their health care, using language that they can understand.
- There should be more special mental health services for children, especially children in care, secure accommodation or prison and young people aged 16-18.
- Sexual health services should be easy to get to wherever children and young people live. Information should be given to young men and women in ways that they can understand.
- Children should learn about sex, sexualities, relationships and sexual health in primary and secondary schools.



- All children and young people should be given information to help them make positive choices about health and mental well-being, safety, bullying, healthy eating and substance misuse (e.g. in primary and secondary schools or at 'one-stop-shops' like drop-in centres or a mobile bus).
- All children and young people should be able to use private (confidential) health services.
- Children who have had a traumatic (shocking or upsetting) experience should be supported by services, which help them recover.
- All the agencies working with children should work together to make sure that young people who might harm themselves because they feel sad have the help they need.
- There should be more housing for young people who need it. Education about homelessness should be given to children and adults working with them.
- Young people should be paid the same as adults when doing the same job. They should be told about their rights (e.g. to holidays or health and safety at work).

## Education

Children and young people can be educated in different places:

- different types of schools (primary, secondary, Protestant, Catholic, integrated, special)
- at home
- in community projects
- in colleges.

All children have the right to education, whatever their background or abilities. While they are being educated, they should be helped to develop their knowledge, skills and abilities as much as possible.

Our bus to school is always overcrowded.

It's embarrassing to have to use the yellow buses to go to our special school. We're picked up early and get home late.

I live in the country and have a long walk to the bus stop. I have to wait ages on dark mornings in a lonely road.

It took a long time for the school to find out what special help I need.

Our school has got a bullying policy. But it hasn't stopped children calling me names and teasing me when I speak my own language.

I don't think it's fair that the boys can do more sports than the girls. I'd like to play in a girl's football team.

Tests and exams put too much pressure on children.

I'd like more say in personal decisions - what subjects I study, what extra help I need and how I prefer to learn things, who I sit with in lessons.

Some teachers don't listen or respect what we say.

**Boys should be allowed to wear earrings and have long hair in school - like the girls.**

We should have more say in school decision making - about our uniform, what we're taught, school dinners, rules, sport and leisure facilities, how the buildings are used.

We should learn about things that matter in real life at school and have more time to play or do sports.

## Issues

- Some children were unhappy about school transport. Children in rural areas had long walks to bus stops and then had to wait for buses on lonely roads on dark mornings. Some children living in poor families could not afford bus fares.
- School buses were often over-crowded:

“Our bus is way over the limit. People are standing and falling over each other, and people are struggling to get past one another. Has the depot ever thought of people who are sometimes short of breath or nervous? No. It’s like a sauna in there. Everyone is jammed together.” (Girl, aged 14)

- Some children who went to special schools felt it was unfair that they had to go to school in a yellow bus. The bus often picked them up very early in the morning and they did not get home until late. Some felt that it was embarrassing to have to use this bus - it made them different from other children:



“We don’t come home at the right time. It’s too slow, the banana bus. We’re embarrassed on that bus - we hide under the seats.” (Girl, aged 14)

- Sometimes it took a long time to find out what support was needed by children with special educational needs.
- For some children, not enough was done to meet their needs (e.g. children with emotional and behavioural difficulties, children with autistic spectrum disorders, children with speech and language difficulties, and children needing occupational therapy).
- Although a lot of schools had policies on bullying, some children felt this was not enough:

“I think it is unfair when you’re bullied and there is nothing done about it. The school has put up signs like ‘Stop the Bully’ and ‘Say No To Bullies’. But they don’t do anything to stop them.” (Girl, aged 10)

- Some children talked about racist bullying:

“Algumas pessoas charmou-nos mames. Quando nos estamos a falare Portugeeses, algumas pessoas ri-em de nos” - Some people call us bad names. When we are talking Portuguese, some people laugh at us” (Girl, aged 9)

- Some children felt that boys and girls were treated differently in school, which was unfair (e.g. girls could not wear trousers, boys could not wear earrings or have long hair, girls could not do as many sports activities as boys):

“In school I don’t think it’s fair that there is a boy’s football team and no girl’s team. Also, we are not allowed to play rugby on the pitches. It would be nice to have a girl’s school rugby team.” (Girl, aged 11)

“The girls should be in more tournaments for sports. We only get one tournament in hockey and cricket, but the boys get loads... The boys also get to go to a golf club and play golf. The girls should get more opportunities like this.” (Girl, aged 14)

- Some children and young people felt that their school work was boring, what they learnt wasn’t useful, and that too much time in school was spent on work:

“I think at the minute schools aren’t really paying enough attention to the things that matter in real life such as sexual education and information on drugs... we should be more prepared for the things we face when we leave home” (Girl, aged 14)

“Our school doesn’t have enough sports. We have too much work and not enough playing time.” (Boy, aged 10)

- Children in Key Stages 3 and 4 complained about having too many tests and exams:

“I think there are far too many tests that take place. There shouldn’t be so many. A lot of tests put too much pressure on pupils.” (Girl, aged 15)

“I hate the way that teachers put so much pressure on us. When it comes to exams they are always putting pressure on us. My parents put pressure on me as well to do well, which makes it even harder to cope with. I don’t think we should get as much homework, especially when the exams are on. We need to revise, never mind do our homework. It’s hard to do everything. We need our own free time as well, to relax and not worry about anything.” (Boy, aged 14)

- Many children thought it was unfair that they did not have a say in decisions made at school - personal decisions (e.g. which subjects to study, what their special educational needs were) or school decision making (e.g. about school uniform, what they were taught, sports and leisure, school dinners, rules, use of buildings and grounds).



- Some children felt they were not listened to in school and that this put them off saying anything:

"Sometimes school can get on my nerves because I don't think children get enough respect from teachers and caretakers. And I think some children are scared about speaking their minds in case they get shouted at." (Girl, aged 11)

- The conflict in Northern Ireland affects everyone, including children and young people (e.g. children's school uniforms showed which religion they were and some were shouted at or attacked by children from other schools. Some children had to move schools because their families had been forced to leave their homes. Some children felt they could not go to certain places or areas because of their religion.):

"I was crossing the bridge and they were all shouting at me and I was in my uniform as well. It didn't really register until afterwards to me." (Young female - Youth group).

# School's unfair!! 😞

**Streamin'**  
It's unfair to make people split from their friends coz of their IQ.

Smart  
↓  
dumb

**Fitness**

It's unfair that some people have more money than others.  
eg. £50

**School trips.**

We should have more trips at the end of the year. Low budget because there are limited places for trips abroad and cost a lot.

**Uniform**

Individuality is important because people get criticised for what school they go to because of their uniform.



**Homework/Exams**

There are too many homeworks being given out too close to exams so there is no time to revise.

**Cantine/foods.**

The cantine should have more choices of food in it. Sometimes, when you go to the cantine there will be no food left. The cantine should have healthier food & should not be too limited.

## Suggestions

- Children should be able to travel to school safely.
- Children at special schools should be able to travel to school using the same buses or transport as other children.
- There should be limits on the amount of time it takes to find out what support is needed by children with special educational needs. Schools should have more services for these children.
- All people who work in education should be trained to spot bullying in classes, the playground and on school transport. They should keep a record of any bullying that happens and help children who are being bullied. Teaching about different cultures, religions and abilities might stop some bullying.
- There are plans to change what is taught in primary and secondary schools - with more play, personal and social education, and learning skills, which will be useful in life and work. Teachers will need to be trained so that they can teach these subjects in interesting ways.
- Children should be more involved in school decisions about things that affect them and have their views listened to. Schools could set up school councils - where some children and teachers meet together to talk about school decisions and children have the chance to say what they think.
- Schools should understand how the conflict in Northern Ireland affects children and support them.
- Children who are educated outside ordinary school should get a good quality education.

## Leisure, play and recreation - what children like to do in their free time

Play, leisure and recreation are the things that children like to do in their free time. Some children like to visit their local play park. Some like to play sport, go to the local leisure centre or youth club. Others like to go to the theatre, a museum or the cinema.

Out of all the topics children were asked about in the study, this was the most important to them.

There are no facilities in the country and it costs a lot to travel to the nearest town.

Teenagers need more to do - youth clubs at weekends.

It annoys me when you can't do things because you're too young.

The parks are horrible - dirty and vandalized, with broken bottles and needles on the ground and broken equipment.

There's not much to do where I live.

I'd like more arts subjects in school - music and drama.

Being in a wheelchair shouldn't stop me from being able to go to the leisure centre with my friends.

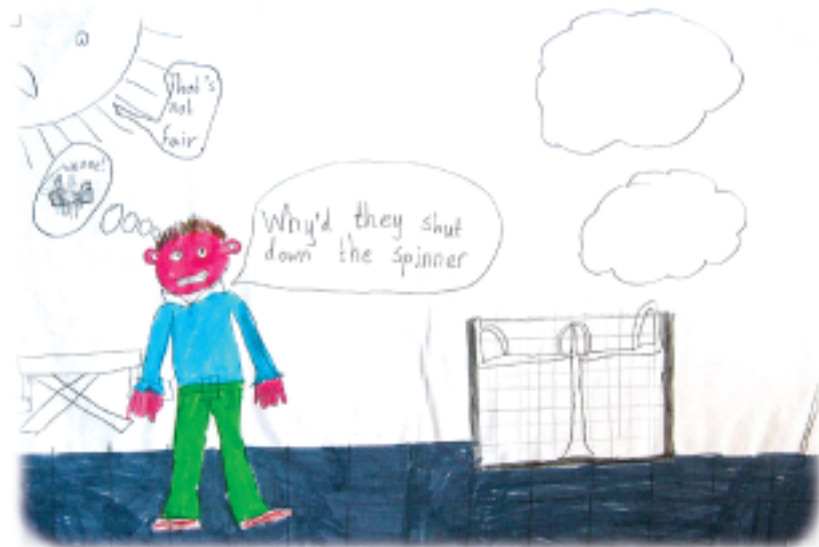
The sports facilities in school are not very good - there aren't enough sports, games or clubs and the equipment is really old.

I don't feel safe in my local park - older children hang around smoking and drinking. Sometimes they bully the smaller children.

There are no play facilities where I live. So we have to play by the roads, which is very dangerous.

## Issues

- Children of all ages wanted better play, leisure, sport and art facilities in their local areas and in schools.
- Some children said there was not much to do where they lived. Others said that the things that were in their local area were either broken or not very good:



"Mr Williams, could you please give us money for the park? The swings we play on are rusty and dirty and breaking down. There are big holes in the grass and dog's dirt. On the ground there's glass and stones and rubbish. Every day the bigger ones are on the swings and when they leave, the swings are flipped over and spat on. What we need now is swings, new slides and monkey bars. Please give us money for our park." (Girl, aged 10)

- Children of different ages wanted different sorts of facilities. They complained about the age limits on some activities:

"Children are denied loads of things because they are under age. Like in swimming - you have to be 12 to go swimming on your own. I think we should have some sort of licence to let us do it if we are capable." (Girl, aged 11)

"It annoys me when you go to a leisure centre of some kind and you are not allowed to do something because you are not old enough, or tall enough, or you don't have an adult with you. It's not fair! These things were made for us anyway, so why can't we use them?" (Girl, aged 11)

"There's not enough youth clubs that I would be interested in... no youth clubs at the weekend to get young people off the streets" (Girl, aged 15)

- Not all children and young people had the same choice of play and leisure facilities (e.g. there were less facilities for children living in rural areas or disabled children, and it cost too much for these children to get to and from activities):

“Just because you are in a wheelchair, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be allowed to do things.”  
(Boy, aged 16 who had problems using his local leisure centre)

- In some areas there were no play facilities so children had to play at the side of busy roads, which was dangerous:

“My area has no play facilities and nothing to do. There are no places where we can play football or just run about and play something else. It is all just roads and nowhere to play. It could be dangerous for young children who want to play - they would go onto the roads and they could get knocked down and hurt, or even killed! All the facilities are too far away from where we live” (Boy, aged 14)

- Some children were not able to cross roads safely:

“In my area there is no grass to play on, so sometimes we go down to the local park. But the road we have to cross is really dangerous and there are no traffic lights to help us cross the road.” (Boy, aged 11)

“I live on a road near a roundabout and I think there should be traffic lights there, so it is safer to cross the road and easier to get our car onto the road in the morning.” (Boy, aged 11)

- Lots of children and young people talked about how horrible the places where they played and spent their free time were - parks and streets were dirty and vandalised, equipment was broken, dangerous broken bottles or needles were left on the ground:



“Where I live there are quite a few parks nearby but there’s just one problem. Every time I go to one, it’s full of people screaming, swearing and drinking. I think it’s appalling. And to make it worse, they leave beer cans and bottles lying around and it is just so dangerous. They smash them up against the wall and don’t clean it up. And they write very rude things all over the playing equipment.” (Girl, aged 11)

- Lots of children did not feel safe in their local parks or play facilities because older children hung around drinking alcohol and smoking. Sometimes, these young people bullied the children using the park:

“Tá duine ann agus bíonn séag ól an tam ar fad agus cuireann sé eagla orm. Tá an páirc sugradha salach. Bíonn daoine ag ól agus ag caitheamh toitíní ansin. Bíonn daoine ag déanamh grafetti. Tá an páirc sugradha salach” - “There are people who drink all the time and they frighten me. The play park is dirty. People drink and smoke there. People write graffiti” (Girl, aged 10).

- Lots of children felt that there were not enough sports facilities in schools, or they were not good quality:

“In school there aren’t enough sports and games. The clubs aren’t very good either. We need a proper football club.” (Boy, aged 9)

“The facilities here are very poor. The football pitches are easily flooded. The nets have no netting and there are no cricket fields... The cricket bats are like old, old things.” (Boy, aged 13)

- Many children wanted more variety of arts subjects in school (e.g. drama club, music) and more equipment for arts.
- Some young people felt that teenagers were often moved off street corners but had nowhere else to go because there were no facilities for them.



## Suggestions

- More money should be set aside to improve play, leisure, sport and art facilities for children and young people.
- A strategy (plan) should be written to show how play and leisure facilities will be improved, with different activities for children of different ages.
- The Government should find out which areas in Northern Ireland have the worst play, leisure, sport and arts facilities so that it can start work to improve them.
- Play and leisure facilities need to be built for children who do not have facilities nearby or can't use the ones that are there because of their disabilities.
- School playgrounds could be kept open after school so that everyone in the local area could use them.
- Children's play and leisure spaces should be made safer (e.g. with lighting, fences, cleaners picking up broken glass, Play Wardens in parks).
- Children should be involved in making decisions about planning in their local areas (e.g. building parks, road safety, turning empty houses into youth clubs).
- Children and young people should be involved in decisions about how to improve the play, leisure, sports and arts facilities in their local area and in schools.
- Children from all communities should be able to share the play and leisure facilities in their area. This could help children from Catholic and Protestant communities mix and learn from each other.

## Youth justice - children in trouble

Children and young people can sometimes get into trouble with the police and courts.

The law in Northern Ireland says that no child under the age of 10 can be found guilty of committing a crime because children under 10 do not fully understand what they have done.

The police pick on us because we're young, even though we're not doing anything wrong.

I don't know what the Police Ombudsman does, or how to make a complaint.

I don't think the police do a very good job - they don't do enough to help people or spend enough time on real crimes like catching robbers or killers.

I didn't understand what was happening when I went to court.

The police are out to get the public, who aren't doing any harm - people slightly over the speed limit or people who don't have car tax.

They are putting a curfew on groups of children, although it might just be one or two who are causing trouble.

I wanted to visit my mum in prison, but my aunty didn't want me to.

I don't like people in our community using drugs or alcohol. Young people get into trouble for being drunk, but adults don't.

The paramilitaries are scary - they beat up kids who they think have done something wrong and made a family down our road move house.



## Issues

- Some young people felt the police picked on them because they were young, even though they were not doing anything wrong. They did not like being moved on for no reason:

"We were just standing by the fences the other day and the police came and told us to move on. We said 'We're just having a smoke'. They said 'You're not allowed to stand there. Move on!'" (Young woman, aged 18)

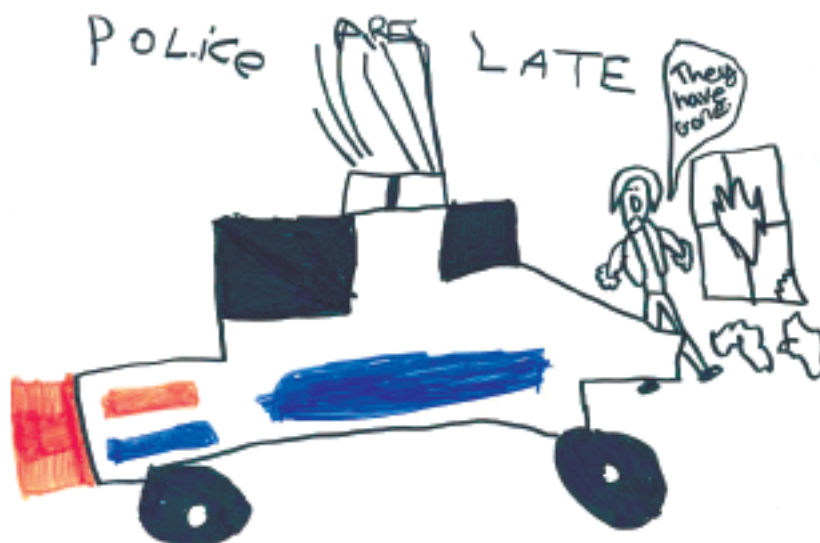
- Some children and young people felt that the police picked on them because of where they lived, or who they were (e.g. Travellers):

"They know you, your families an' all. They tell you 'You're next' and that you're up to no good, and they're watching for you." (Young man, aged 17)

"Every time I see their cars I run an' all. I don't want them to see me. I'm not afraid, I just don't want them to see me because each time they come they think I have done something bad." (Traveller boy, aged 8)

- Only a small number of young people had bad experiences with the police. But a lot felt that the police did not do a very good job - they thought the police were lazy, not doing enough to help local communities, slow to arrive when crimes or accidents happened, not spending enough time on 'real' crimes:

"The police don't do anything about the people in [town], they just walk around the town at night and watch young people drink and take drugs. Over the past year, our town has lost lots of things because of the teenagers and older people - for example, the circus and the fun fair festival. Some people suffer for the things they didn't do and they leave us with nothing. It's about time the police did something about it." (Girl, aged 12).



“The cops sometimes get it right by catching the robbers or killers. But most of the time they are out to get the public who are not doing anyone any harm such as people who are slightly over the speed limit or people with no tax or even, in some places, they put a curfew on all the kids even though it may just be a small percentage of the kids who are causing the trouble.”  
(Boy, aged 14)

- Children felt picked on by adults for making a noise or running around when they were just playing games. Paramilitaries and the police often stopped children playing where they wanted:

“The police should try and let us play in our area because sometimes they would have a complaint saying we’re not allowed to play in the streets. But it’s our street and we should be able to. They should try and get the people causing the trouble off the street so we can have a safer time.” (Boy, aged 13)

- Some children felt that they were not treated with respect when they were questioned by police on the street or at the police station.
- Some children were asked by the police to tell the police about other people in their communities.
- Children did not know how to complain about how they were treated by the police.
- Some children had things stolen from them or were picked on by other children, which frightened them.
- Some children and young people complained about people in their community using drugs or alcohol, which led to a lot of violence:

“I would dread [Dad] coming in from the pub. He was always drunk and anything would set him off and we would take a beating.” (Young male)

- Young people were annoyed that they got into trouble for smoking or drinking, but adults didn’t:

“The peelers are after us for drinking or blow, but no-one says anything about adults getting out of their heads.” (Young man)


“It’s one law for them and another for us. All we’re doing is hanging out, a few cans an’ all. We don’t even have to be making any noise and they’re down on us... but when adults kick off it’s just a laugh for them.” (Young man)

- Sometimes paramilitaries beat children and young people, or forced them to leave their homes with their families. Lots of young people aged 15-16 were worried about paramilitaries and what they did in communities.
- If children who had got into trouble with the police went to court, they did not understand what was happening or what they should do.

- Children and young people who were in prison did not have the help or support they needed:

“If you’re suicidal, they threaten you with the punishment block. It puts your head away. They don’t even look in on you.” (Young woman in prison, aged 17)

- Children who had a mother or father in prison did not have the help they felt they needed.

**DRUGS** 

We should not have to  
worry about being offered  
drugs or worry about how to  
refuse them.

## Suggestions

- The police should work more with young people and not treat them differently (discriminate against them) because they are young or live in certain areas.
- The police should be trained so that they understand children's rights and treat them with respect.
- Plastic bullets are sometimes used in crowds. But the UN Committee said that because they can harm children, they should not be used.
- Children should be given information about the Police Ombudsman and how to make a complaint.
- The police should ask children about the problems in their communities and how they think these could be solved (e.g. safe places to play, more activities for young people in local communities).
- Some projects in Northern Ireland are based on the idea of restorative justice - this is when the person who has committed a crime meets the victim of the crime. They talk about what happened so that the person who committed the crime understands how the crime made the victim feel, and the victim has the chance to talk about the harm they feel was done to them. These projects should be studied to make sure they work well.
- The new law about anti-social behaviour (noise, vandalism, graffiti, litter, bad or threatening language, bad behaviour on the streets) might be used a lot against children and young people. Instead of going to court and being given an anti-social behaviour order, children who are behaving badly should be helped to understand how their behaviour affects other people and to change how they behave.
- A child can be convicted of committing a crime once they are 10 years old. This is a very young age - children should not be able to be convicted of a crime until they are much older (e.g. 16).
- Sometimes when a young person commits a crime, people from their own community will punish or hurt them. This is wrong and should be stopped.
- More information should be collected about the number of crimes carried out against children - whenever a crime against a child has been committed, the police should find out why it happened and how they could stop it happening again.
- The police should work to make sure that drugs do not come into Northern Ireland. Community programmes should be set up to help young people and adults who misuse drugs.
- If children have to go to court to tell the police, lawyers and a judge what they saw when they watched (witnessed) a crime happening, they should be helped to understand what will happen in court. The police, lawyers and judges should have training so that they can help child witnesses.
- Children should not be put in prison. If they are put in secure accommodation, they should not be kept in a room on their own away from everyone else (solitary confinement).
- Some children and young people have parents or other family members in prison. These children need help and support - to understand what happens in prisons, stay in contact and visit the person in prison, make decisions about what might happen when the person comes out of prison.

