

# Taking chances: the lifestyles and leisure risk of young people

## Project Summary

Parents have become increasingly concerned about the safety of their children outside the home and school, but there have been few attempts to view the risks from the point of view of young people themselves. This two-year study examined how young people, aged 11-14, are exposed to the risk of unintentional injury during their leisure time. The study aimed to understand more about the lifestyle of young people in this age group from their own perspective. The research focused on Gateshead, Tyne and Wear, a relatively deprived borough. The study found that:

✎ Over 60% of the young people asked had been injured or had an accident at least once in the previous four weeks.

✎ Children that regularly played truant from school were significantly more likely to get injured.

✎ The most popular places to spend leisure time were friends' homes followed by local streets, cafes, parks and shops including shopping centres. Young people often viewed security guards and CCTV positively because they made places safer for them.

✎ Families rarely participate in leisure activities as a unit. There was little evidence of inter-generational mixing (e.g. with older people) in leisure time. Few young people take part in organised activities outside school such as Scouts and Guides.

✎ People in deprived areas felt significantly less safe in their local area than more affluent young people. Girls felt

less safe than boys. Places where drug taking was occurring had a major impact in creating 'no-go' areas in their town. A major safety strategy was to go around in groups – but often adults saw this as a problem.

✎ 40% of the young people said they thought they spent their leisure time in dangerous places. About half of the young people said they took risks and dares when out with their friends.

✎ More than half the children said they drank alcohol regularly and many parents seemed to tolerate this. Drinking alcohol can increase the chances of accident and injury in many circumstances.

✎ A large majority of children never wore a cycle helmet or reflective clothing when riding a bicycle.

✎ Young people wanted their local area to be made safer, cleaner and to have more interesting things to do in their spare time.

## Background

Children and young people are a particularly vulnerable to injury. They inhabit an environment that is largely constructed and designed for adults, not children. On streets, for example, young people experience a wide range of injuries as pedestrians, cyclists or skateboarders. Childhood is also a time for experimentation and trying out new, exciting activities. Each activity has its risks. For example sports such as climbing, exploring and swimming all carry a risk of injury from falling, entrapment and drowning.

Risky activity, and risk taking itself, is recognised as an essential part of growing up. Parents must balance their natural desire to protect their children with the knowledge that their children must be allowed to grow through experiencing the outside world. There is evidence that parents have become increasingly restrictive when it comes to unsupervised play and transport to and from school. Such strategies may help reduce the immediate risk of injury to children and young people in the short term. But there is growing concern that there might be long-term costs to a generation of children that have had less opportunity to experience the world, make mistakes – and learn by them.

**“Parents today are keeping their children too protected for them to be able to develop good risk awareness. They are not developing in the way kids used to. Many are simply not aware of the dangers of the outside world.”**

*RoSPA The Guardian, 9 October 2000*

Understanding this issue is an important, but neglected area. Researchers in this field have paid relatively little attention to young people aged between 11-14 years. Leisure activities of young people in this age group are often unseen or hidden from parents and other adults. This can make the subject difficult to investigate without understanding the point of view of young people. Taking their experience into account could also be invaluable for developing effective policies in this area, although little research has ever explored the issue from this perspective. The study aimed to address this gap.

## What do young people do with their spare time?

The main leisure activity for young people in this age group was watching TV, closely followed by listening to music and hanging out with friends. Doing homework, computing and watching videos were also very common. Sport was less popular –

football and cycling were the favourites for boys, walking and swimming for girls. Surprisingly, formally organised leisure activities away from school such as youth clubs, scouts and guides made very little impact on young peoples’ leisure time in Gateshead. Youth clubs attracted 17% of the sample while scouts and guides attracted less than 7%.

The study found that families rarely pursued leisure activities together as a unit. Evidence of inter-generational mixing (e.g. with older people) in leisure time was very scarce. Leisure time was spent in friends’ homes followed by shops, parks, streets, local cafes. The Gateshead Metrocentre shopping complex was a popular place to spend time. Girls visited relatives’ houses, shops and discos more than boys. Younger people went to cinemas, youth groups and libraries more than older youths.

## Risk Taking

Visits to dangerous places were reported by 40% of the young people surveyed. Wasteland, building sites and subways or underpasses were most popular along with rivers, abandoned buildings and quarries. Boys were significantly more likely to visit dangerous places than girls, as were people from the most deprived areas. Dangerous places varied, depending on the locality – for this reason young people from one school might be far more likely to visit, say, building sites than another school.

Young people said they enjoyed visiting such areas for several reasons including: being away from adult supervision; the challenge of getting in; the excitement of being chased by security guards; exploring abandoned buildings; discovering what is inside and what can be smashed up; and having place of your own – building your own den.

About half the young people surveyed said they took risks and dares when out with their friends. Boys were much more likely to take risks than girls. Worryingly, about 6% claimed to be constantly taking risks with their friends. Serious dares included: running across roads, sitting on railway tracks, lighting fires, standing on bridge parapets. About 14% were truant from school occasionally and 2% were regularly absent. Many went to their house or their friend’s house. Those who were regularly truant from school tended to experience more accidents and injuries.

There was significant evidence of experimentation with alcohol, less so with nicotine and other drugs. Over half drank alcohol on a regular basis. This is significant in terms of accident prevention, because alcohol can increase the chances of accident and injury in many circumstances. 10% smoked every

day – girls more than boys. Over 80% said they did *not* take other drugs. 1% were regular glue and solvent abusers. Places where drug taking was occurring had a major impact in creating “no-go” areas for young people in their town.

Drinking seemed to be more accepted by parents whereas smoking was still a thing to be hidden from them. Some people said that drugs were available everywhere. Some people were completely against drugs, others hadn’t tried them but thought they would eventually, some had tried them once but the experience had put them off. Cannabis seemed to have a lesser risk rating than other drugs – some people discussed the wider problems of harder drugs – death, aggression from other users or dealers, being hooked.

When cycling, most of the young people surveyed did not use safety clothing. 65% never used a cycling helmet and an even greater proportion never wore florescent or reflective clothing.

Almost all young people had rules to obey about getting home at a fixed time. Most people had to be back home between 9-10pm although a significant number were free to stay out later. Some were allowed to come home after midnight at weekends (8%) and even weekdays (2%).

**“And they (the police) say go in your houses but like when your mam says go out and then they’re telling you to go back in so its basically nothing but you can’t get 20 people in your house and say if you want to meet up at your friends house and go to the Metrocentre – well you can’t do that on a Friday night cos it costs money”** (Harry, 13)

Young people said that what they did in their spare time depended on many things. The major factors were a lack of facilities, boredom, lack of money, places being too far away, parents or family relationship problems and a desire for variety. Young people also said their activities were restricted by the weather, lack of daylight, fear of places, victimisation, not being allowed to go where they want to, problems arranging things and friends living too far away.

**“I don’t go out if no-body knocks on me. And they live too far away. We meet next to mine or we just don’t go out and stay in all the time”** (Wendy, 14)

When asked what could be done to improve the situation, young people put great emphasis on services for people their own age. They particularly wanted their local area to be made safer, cleaner and to have more interesting things to do in their spare time.

Angus (11) **suggested a roller blade rink, providing more lights on the way home (a common suggestion) and stopping kids from using areas to drink rather than to play.**

Sharon (13) **said that youth clubs were too static – she wanted to move about more. She also wanted access to computers where there are people her own age.**

## Safety Strategies

The young people expressed a range of people and places they considered safe: at home, with their parents, where their parents could see them, open spaces near the house if they know their neighbours, places without big roads and areas with lots of people around. Security guards and CCTV were often viewed positively as adding to the safety of places. Girls generally felt less safe than boys and people in deprived areas felt significantly less safe in their area than the more affluent.

Rather than being unaware or not considering risks the young people had a wide range of safety strategies in operation. Common strategies included avoiding particular people, and places where they might be, varying routes home, having a mobile phone, having a plan of action to deal with possible situations and going around in groups. While groups are sometimes felt to be threatening by others, young people felt much safer in a group.

**“We all stay in a big group so if anything happens we are all together. We just try to avoid the pubs on Friday and Saturday nights. We walk different ways home. But we always try to walk each other home because my sister got followed and I’ve been followed twice. So it’s quite scary”** (Wendy, 14)

## Accidents and Injuries

Most of the major unintentional injuries that the young people spoke of were connected with being run over by cars or buses. Other discussions were about sports injuries, falling off bikes or scooters, and having accidents while trespassing. Over 60% said they had been injured or experienced an accident in the previous four weeks. People who had been bullied were more likely to need serious treatment. Boys tended to have more injuries than girls, older children more than younger children, and those from deprived areas more than affluent areas.

## Conclusions

Exploring, extending knowledge of a local area and pushing the boundaries of everyday life is a crucial part of growing up. Some children are in danger of being over-protected, not under-protected. The challenge is to get the balance right between risk and safety. Young people must be realistically informed of the potential danger of their activities so that they can make their own decisions. They must also be given the opportunity to learn by taking calculated, unsupervised risks.

That is not to say that particularly vulnerable groups cannot be identified and targeted. The study identified a small but significant proportion of young people who are highly at risk of accident and injury in their leisure time. Efforts must be focused on this group, along with providing better safety education and relevant information that all young people can use.

It is also important to encourage parents and young people to realistically appraise what the true risks are. Abduction by strangers, for example, is a common fear but an extremely rare occurrence. Traffic, however, is a common killer and needs constant vigilance. Measures such as traffic calming and speed restrictions can go a long way to reduce the one in fifteen children who experience a road accident by the time they are 16.

It is also important to understand the perspectives of young people on safety and risk; to hear their voice and consult with them when determining policy. This is particularly necessary in any attempt to make local areas safer for young people and in developing activities that are interesting and relevant for them.

The challenge is to increase safety without limiting young people's mobility. Safe places to meet are scarce – except the streets, where groups of young people are often automatically perceived as a nuisance. Young people should be allowed to participate in the outside world, influence their own environment and have enough information to be able to make their own decisions about the amount of risk they are prepared to take in their everyday lives.

## About the study

The research involved a survey of five comprehensive schools in Gateshead based on nearly 2000 questionnaires. Over half of the respondents lived in deprived areas. Additionally 37 young people kept a diary of what happened in their spare time. Participants were also encouraged to take photographs with disposable cameras to supplement their diaries. In-depth interviews were conducted with each young person who kept a diary along with some focus group work. A video was made of the hazardous places that people identified.

A parallel study took place in Huddersfield, a town with a different ethnic mix from Gateshead. Detailed analysis of the Huddersfield data has not yet been completed, so the findings reported in this synopsis are based solely on the Gateshead data.

This study, which was supported by the Community Fund, formerly National Lottery Charities Board, had four partners – Child Accident Prevention Trust, which was the grant holder (Mike Hayes), the Department of Child Health at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne (Sue Grundy, Liz Towner), the University of Huddersfield (Kate Hughes, Geoff Sparks), and the Geography Department at the University of Northumbria (Mike Barke, John Towner, Rachel Pain, Graham Mowl). The study would be possible without the support of the Community Fund.

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