

LEEDS BECKETT UNIVERSITY

# EXPLORING THE FREE TIME USE OF CHILDREN LOOKED AFTER IN LEEDS

Final Research Report

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Article 31 of The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) states that all children have the right “to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities... and to participate fully in cultural life and the arts”. This however, may be particularly problematic for some young people, such as those in care, who face a host of additional issues that may mean their acute needs take precedence over many, free time, leisure activities including play, recreation and the arts.

As such, this report provides an analysis of the free time use of children who are looked after (CLA) in Leeds. The research specifically aimed to:

1. Explore how CLA spend their free time, including what meanings they ascribe to any activities they choose to undertake,
2. Understand what impacts on their use and availability of free time.

These aims were operationalised through the following objectives:

1. Establish a working relationship with the ‘Multi-Agency Looked After Children Partnership’ (MALAP) Enjoyment Subgroup and distribute a survey to CLA regarding their free time use in Leeds.
2. Formulate an understanding of how CLA use their free time and what might impact on their free time through analysis of the qualitative and quantitative survey response data.

The data collection phase of the project ran from May 2015 until August 2015. Online and hard copy surveys were distributed through key networks in an effort to reach to all CLA in Leeds. In total, 85 surveys were returned with boys accounting for over half of those who responded (boys = 63.5%, mean age 10.39; girls = 36.5%, mean age 10.29). Of these, the majority (81%, 69/85) were living with a foster carer at the time of responding. Seven (8%) were living with other family and five respondents (6%) were living with parent(s). Only three (4%) were living in residential care and only one (1%) reported to be a care leaver.

## **Findings**

The most popular type of activity that children who are looked after in Leeds reported engaging in during their free time were sports (boys = 68.5%; girls = 61.3%). Following this boys spent their free time engaged in what could be classed as sedentary activities, watching film (33.3%) and listening to music (22.2%), while girls appear to split their free time more evenly across art (25.8%), dance (29.0%), film (22.6%), music (29.0%) and doing nothing (22.6%).

Content analysis of qualitative responses revealed one of the main reasons identified for their engagement in these types of activities was 'enjoyment' (37%). Following this, many suggested they engaged in these activities for physical activity reasons (18%), with reports about engaging in sporting activities for competition, its cathartic nature, to be active and for a challenge. Some activities also offered young people the opportunity to be creative and express themselves (15%), while lifestyle (11%) and wellbeing (8%) reasons were also reported. Interestingly, fewer chose to engage in activities for the social element (10%).

Despite this, the majority of respondents reported taking part in activities with friends (boys = 53.7%; girls = 71.0%), while just over a third of boys (38.9%) reported engaging in activities with carers in comparison to over half of girls (51.6%). Of concern was that a third of boys (31.5%) and a quarter of girls (25.8%) reported engaging in activities in isolation, on their own. Typically, qualitative responses revealed they tend to engage in activities within a close 'proximity to home' (38%) in the front or back garden, in the street or in a park nearby, or in 'leisure/sport centres' (38%).

The main type of activities that young people in Leeds have recently had to stop doing were sports based (boys = 25.9%; girls = 29.0%) with the majority of responses centred on their disinterest (40%), (e.g. becoming bored and not liking the activities because they were sometimes forced into them by carers). Moreover, some reported their low self-competence and confidence as factors for not doing the activities any more. Another prominent factor for ceasing activities was various limitations (30%); including a lack of finance, their health and individual behaviour. Far fewer reported that transitions (7%) (e.g. moving care home and becoming unsettled) prevented them from continuing activities, while some (7%) also reported that to start a new activity they had to stop an old one.

When consider activities young people would like to try, boys were drawn to adventure activities (29.6%) while girls would like to explore lifetime (activities readily carried over into adulthood) (32.8%) and other physical activities (25.8%). These decisions were driven predominantly by experience (56%); seeking a new challenge and a thrill, looking to broaden their horizons and discover new things. Respondents also reported that they had seen the activities somewhere before, either on TV or online, or heard about it through word of mouth from friends or adults and they had expectations (32%) that the activities would be fun and enjoyable. Finally, participants identifying that the activities would help make them stronger, develop their confidence, help with their self-improvement and aid their health and fitness (21%).

With regard to young people's health and happiness, many reported that engaging in physical activities made them feel healthy, gain fitness, allowed them to exercise and be active. These types of activities also offered a form of stress relief and were inherently relaxing and thus had an impact on their overall wellbeing. As expected, many also reported that being able to have fun and enjoy activities was vital and directly impacted their happiness. However, missing out on activities was reported by some to impact on both their health and their happiness.

When asked what could make participants feel happier and healthier in the future, many again discussed the desire to remain active, increasing their levels of activity and eating better (31%). Several also discussed developing relationships (20%) and thus, it would appear that maintaining engagement in activities may have the potential to allow individuals to enhance health and build social networks that might increase their happiness.

### **Recommendations**

- **Aim to encourage more parent/carer joint activities** as this may provide a useful time/space to get to know carers or reconnect with parents and would help develop relationships with adults.
- **Ensure carers are aware of activities that children who are looked after enjoy**, since many reported that they used to engage in activities that they never really enjoyed in the first place.
- **Enhance the message regarding the benefits obtained through arts and cultural activities** since these activities are equally as important in helping support young people's positive development.
- **Consider ways of linking the 'Max Card' to arts, music and cultural activities** because not all activities that are prompted by Leeds City Council are currently linked to this venture.
- **Promote the activities available in Leeds within the Independent Visitor Scheme (IVS)** as a means to reinforce available activities and help develop relationships in an informal, enjoyable, activity based context.
- **Provide support for carers and children who are looked after around healthy eating and healthy lifestyles**, as this would reflect their desires reported here to engage in healthier behaviours.