



## Social and Physical Ecologies of Childhood: A case study of children's perspectives on their neighbourhood

### 1. What is the study's background?

This study was the subject of a PhD thesis (2009) by Margaret Rogers of the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College, Dublin, with funding from the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children's Research Scholarship Programme.\*

### 2. What is the study's purpose?

This study set out to gain a greater understanding of children's lived experience during middle childhood in the setting of their local neighbourhood (an area of urban disadvantage in Ireland). The purpose of the study was to explore the daily lived experience of a group of children as perceived and described by themselves. The study was conceived and implemented as an attempt to add to our understanding of children's perspectives on their lives. It is underpinned by a conceptualisation of children as active agents in their own development and active participants in their environment, having an in-depth knowledge and expertise. The study took an ecological perspective, based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory and Gibson's theory of affordances. Specifically, the study's objectives were:

- » to explore how children enact and transact their daily lives in their neighbourhood during middle childhood: what are their views of that experience and what does this reveal about their neighbourhood as a context in their lives;
- » to examine how various elements of the physical environment (both private and public spaces)

feature in children's play and daily lives, and how they perceive and use spaces in their neighbourhood, both those designed specifically for children or spaces that exclude them;

- » to discover the opportunities and risks afforded to children by the neighbourhood and what adaptations they make to exploit or avoid these;
- » to present children's views on what would make their neighbourhood a better place for them and children generally.

A secondary aim of the study was to test and evaluate the effectiveness of a range of participatory methods used to engage children as active research participants, intended to facilitate children to reveal and authentically present aspects of their daily lives, frequently unobserved by adults.

This briefing note summarises the method of research, key findings and conclusions of the study. The full report is available from the Library, Trinity College, Dublin.

### 3. How was the study undertaken?

The local primary school was the main point of contact with the children participating in the study, with fieldwork taking place over the period of one year (during the summer holidays, contact was maintained through local community summer projects). In total, 32 children, aged 9-11, participated in the study and a further 132 children, aged 7-12, took part in an in-school peer survey.

\* The views expressed in this report are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The methods used were designed to facilitate children's active participation in both choosing and generating data in a variety of formats and settings, particularly visual methods. Methods included:

- » photographs taken by children;
- » drawings created by children;
- » photo-elicited interviewing;
- » children's logs of daily events;
- » semi-structured interviews, tracing movement and space use on local maps;
- » themed small group discussions;
- » an in-school peer survey;
- » individual interviews with local service providers.

At the outset of the study, each child was provided with a disposable camera and asked to take photographs of places and things in their neighbourhood where they spent time, played and 'hung out' during their everyday lives, including places or things they liked or did not like about their neighbourhood. This exercise was followed by a photo-elicited interview with each child. Logs of children's daily activities (e.g. 'What I did yesterday', 'What I did at the weekend') were completed in class. Each child also participated in individual interviews using local maps and all participants took part in small group discussions based on the themes of 'Friends and Friendship' and 'Adults in the Community' which emerged from the data-gathering process.

## 4. What are the key findings?

The study revealed 'neighbourhood' to be a key setting in the lives of children and one that acquires an increasing prominence during the period of middle childhood (aged 7-12 years). The children who participated showed a clear preference for self-directed, autonomous outdoor play. Children use the physical spaces of their neighbourhoods in fundamentally different ways to adults and develop an intimate knowledge of their characteristics. Neighbourhoods function both as sites of action and spaces of social encounter. The interconnectedness of their social and physical characteristics was revealed through children's physically and socially located activities. These were shown to be socially embedded, manifested primarily in their interactions with peers (i.e. play), but also in their adaptations or avoidance of certain sites or activities.

### 4.1 Social ecology of children's daily lives

The children who participated in this study were shown to be embedded in intergenerational networks of kinship in their immediate and extended families. The children and their parents and grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were involved in reciprocal support systems characterised by warm and affectionate relationships and shared care. Cousins provided a ready-made cohort of friends and playmates. A shared history of family presence contributed to the children's sense of belonging and attachment to place. The children themselves were contributors to these networks by, for example, providing practical assistance to their grandparents (e.g. shopping or gardening) and in caring for or occupying younger children through their play.

### 4.2 Family structure

56% of children lived in two-parent families and 44% in lone-parent households, all with their birth mother. 13 children did not live with their birth fathers; of these, 8 (31%) had regular contact with their fathers, while 5 (19%) made no mention of fathers in their daily lives. 84% had a meaningful relationship with their fathers.

### 4.3 Friends and friendship

Friends and friendship emerged as key themes throughout this study. The development of sustained and durable friendships is a key feature of the life phase of 'middle childhood'. Friendships were formed on the basis of proximity, i.e. children who lived close to one another, family ties and kinship and shared interests. Children's friendships were durable and central to their sense of satisfaction with their neighbourhood. Some of the qualities of friendship were identified as loyalty, solidarity, kindness, generosity and emotional support, as well as companionship. Some of the responses from the focus groups included:

- » *'They [friends] stick up for you when you're in trouble. When you are down, they cheer you up.'*
- » *'You have fun with them, you trust them not to leave you out or tell your secrets.'*
- » *'They are kind and generous. They help you when you need help. A good friend is someone who trusts and respects you.'*

#### 4.4 Adults in the community

The children who participated in the study generated a diverse list of non-family related adults in their neighbourhood, whom they identified as helpful. These included:

- » people who provide everyday services, such as bin men, coal men, vegetable men;
- » people who provide care, such as doctors, ambulance drivers;
- » people who provide direct services to children, such as school teachers, sports coaches and (youth) club leaders;
- » people involved in community or estate management;
- » neighbours;
- » parents of friends.

The children's discussion of helpful and supportive adults demonstrates an awareness of their place within personal and institutional support networks. While the roles of many adults are defined by the policy environment which structures their neighbourhood role, the characteristics appreciated by children were their helpfulness and contribution to their everyday lived experience. Some of the responses from the focus groups included:

- » *'Bernie, because she does all the things down in the [youth] club every Friday night, like pool and soccer.'*
- » *'The people going around picking up rubbish and the coal man and leaders in the club.'*
- » *'When I was in my club, they were very nice to me. They bring up swimming and shopping.'*

#### 4.5 Physical ecology of children's daily lives

The study found that accessible outdoor space is a key resource in the lives of children. The outdoors was a constant reference point in all the children's accounts of their daily activity and play. All of the children participated in physically active outdoor play, such as street games, chasing, football, cycling, skipping and 'walking around'. For many, the plentiful availability of outdoor space, combined with the availability of friends, was named as what they liked best about their neighbourhood. Some comments included: *'We play in the field sometimes'; 'We spend most of the time in the big green across from the house'; 'What I like about my area is all the parks and soccer fields'.*

#### 4.6 Use of neighbourhood space

The children described, drew and photographed many natural and built features of the neighbourhood landscape, ranging from large open spaces to specific areas or objects that they routinely used. These included:

- » streets, roundabouts and pathways within their local areas;
- » green spaces close to their homes;
- » 'fields' or open green space between housing clusters;
- » boulders ('the rocks') used as a site for gathering, dancing and games;
- » low walls or metal electrical junction boxes served as meeting points and places to sit;
- » local sports facilities, e.g. the soccer pitch and an all-weather pitch;
- » school grounds and other community buildings (e.g. church and community centre);
- » local shops.

The study revealed how children creatively used spaces and features of their neighbourhood in ways that were never intended. While they used and enjoyed designated children's amenities and spaces, such as the neighbourhood playground and various sports fields, the majority of their time outdoors was spent in non-designated public spaces, such as greens adjacent to their homes and green verges between neighbourhoods, on streets and pathways. Within these spaces, children availed of or adapted features such as trees, fences, hedges, walls, kerbs, lamp posts or gates as props, boundaries or markers incorporated into their imaginative play. Open space facilitating physically active, vigorous outdoor play (e.g. running, chasing and football games) was what the majority of children identified as the 'best thing' about their neighbourhood. This, combined with the ready availability of friends and playmates, constituted the most satisfying attribute about their neighbourhood.

#### 4.7 Children's participation in clubs and groups

Less than half of the children (14 out of 32) in the study used local children's services, such as those provided by the youth service or community development projects. Some participated in local summer projects. Those that did participate found them enjoyable and worthwhile (e.g. *'We do homework, arts, crafts, swimming, soccer, cooking,*

*we do everything*). The majority of the boys (10 out of 17) were members of local soccer teams and most played soccer informally. Sports provision for girls was noteworthy by its absence, with many of them expressing an interest in a range of sports or activities (such as basketball, swimming, volleyball, gymnastics, and dance) for which there were no local facilities.

#### 4.8 Indoor play

All of the children described some measure of indoor play. Girls' indoor play was frequently with friends and included imaginative role play, craft play and 'sleep-overs' featuring DVDs and food treats. Boys more commonly used electronic media (such as PlayStations, X Box or DVDs), either alone, with siblings or with individual friends. The extent of indoor play was largely determined by cold or wet weather, or was time-related – early morning or later evening times. It was almost universally seen as a compensatory alternative to outdoor play.

#### 4.9 Children's concerns

Concerns identified by children as problematic included poor estate management, refuse dumping and exposure to anti-social and criminal behaviour. A key concern related to boarded-up vacant dwellings, frequently subjected to vandalism and sites for dumping of domestic refuse. Remnants of outdoor drinking (such as the burnt-out remains of bonfires and broken glass) impinged on children's play spaces. Many used their photographs to highlight their concerns graphically.

Children also spoke about being kept awake at night by stolen cars, excessive noise or rows associated with outdoor drinking. Many were aware of violence and intimidation experienced directly, witnessed or learnt about third-hand through neighbours or extended family members. The extent of children's knowledge and exposure to risk within the neighbourhood, both directly and indirectly, was a sobering reality and one which calls for a much more targeted and determined response than that which has been evident to date.

#### 4.10 Children's work

Almost all of the children who participated indicated that they were involved in some level of work within the home or family. Tasks ranged from tidying their own bedrooms to general domestic work, such as washing up, running errands for their parents,

grandparents or neighbours, as well as helping care for younger children. Looking after family pets also featured. Within the school setting, children also undertook a variety of 'jobs' such as distributing and clearing lunch supplies or participating in the school 'Green Flag' programme. The children's descriptions of work they undertook demonstrates the contribution they make to their own households and families. Through these activities, the children establish themselves as contributing, reciprocating members of the social ecology of their families and community.

### 5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

#### 1. Neighbourhood as context in the lives of children

- » This study confirms neighbourhood to be an important setting in the lives of school-aged children. In common with comparable international studies, the neighbourhood was shown to be comprised of a diverse range of micro-settings, which children occupy and transit and which structure their daily lived experience. While family influences remain predominant in children's developmental outcomes, neighbourhoods acquire an increasingly prominent role, especially during the primary school years. Neighbourhoods are more than the sum of their parts: they function simultaneously as sites of action and spaces of social encounter. Children's physical, spatially located activities were frequently linked to social factors, such as the presence of friends or proximity to home or family.
- » The influence of macro-system generated events and practices such as housing policy, community resourcing and policing, which determine much that pertains to local neighbourhood, served to structure the micro-settings within which children transacted their daily lives.
- » The study findings revealed the diversity of children's lives and circumstances. Such diversities illustrate the limitations of relying on undifferentiated classifications or social addresses, such as 'disadvantage', which belie the complexity of neighbourhood life.

## 2. Children as users of public space

- » The study analysis identified a range of factors that promote or constrain children's neighbourhood experience. Accessible outdoor space, access to plentiful friends and playmates, local knowledge and children's agency, expressed through imaginative and adaptive play and activities, underpinned a positive neighbourhood experience. Adult-centric planning processes that view children as vulnerable or uninformed place constraints on children's visibility, participation and voice in decision-making. Public spaces are predominantly designed and built with adults in mind. Children's presence in neighbourhoods or other public spaces is frequently conceptualised as problematic. When children and young people are considered, it is often in terms of 'token space', such as playgrounds. In public spaces, such as streets, parks, greens or shopping areas, children are frequently perceived and responded to as 'trespassers', in some way out of place or suspect by their very presence.
- » Adaptive spontaneous play was enacted in the local streets and cul de sacs where the children and their friends lived. Features of the streetscape (e.g. kerbs, low walls, parked cars, lamp posts) were incorporated into games as 'furniture', props, markers and boundaries. Here, however, the children's use of space was more likely to be contested by adults who sometimes 'moved children on' or complained of noise or nuisance.
- » In this study, the daily lives of children were shown to be largely ordered by adult routines and scheduling – school time, domestic routines, structured activities. Much of this activity took place indoors (with the exception of football). However, the children's strongly stated preference was for time spent outdoors, in the company of other children, engaged in autonomous, self-directed physically active play. Local hazards and risks related to crime, anti-social behaviour and institutional neglect of the housing infrastructure gave rise to and compounded parents' anxieties and children's own fear and concerns, and consequently placed constraints on their use of public space.

Without an appreciation of the importance of outdoor neighbourhood space in children's lives, such hazards and constraints are not considered in local planning and development.

## 3. Central importance of access to space and friends

- » In this study, the children's self-initiated play and activities, their adaptation to and of their environment and the transaction of their social exchanges illustrate the many ways in which they actively constructed their cultural world. Even within the constraints of adult structures, children demonstrated their irrepressible agency, managing to snatch moments of self-directed, autonomous activity, during waiting times, transition times or moments of adult inattention. Children engage in a continuous process of negotiation and bargaining to wrest time from adult control. It is frequently in the context of neighbourhood play that children have the greatest opportunity to exercise self-determination, choice and judgement, and to experience themselves as autonomous beings. It was observable in the course of this study the extent to which children used their unregulated time in their neighbourhood setting to develop their autonomy, when they initiated, chose and carried out planned activities and negotiated peer relationships. This has been identified as a key contributing factor in the development of resilience.

## 6. What are the benefits of the study?

This is the first study of its kind to be undertaken on this topic in Ireland. Recent Irish studies have included ones that focused on young people's leisure and recreation, children's conceptions of well-being, the impact of neighbourhood on children's education and aspirations, and pre-school children's experience of outdoor settings. However, until now, children's own perceptions and use of their neighbourhood spaces have not been a focus of substantial research in this country.

This study's contribution is to present children's own accounts of their lived experience, to highlight their local expertise, priorities and concerns, and to make explicit what, for them, creates a meaningful and





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satisfying experience of neighbourhood in middle childhood. Much of what was found in this study confirms findings from similar work, but several points of differing emphasis and interest are revealed:

- » A key finding is that the study showed the social and physical ecology of the neighbourhood to be a context that afforded the children's expression of agency, in the enactment of their play and social interaction – the 'ordinary magic' of daily life. The children's autonomous peer-based play appears for them to be an important source of resilience and satisfaction, supporting them in dealing with the challenges and adversities they faced and endowing them with a sense of well-being, optimism and a hopeful view of their neighbourhood. This is an important revelation in terms of extending our understanding of resilience in childhood.
- » The use of ecological models accommodated a conceptualisation of children as active participants and developing persons, and took account of the wide variety of settings and systems within which children enact and transact their daily lives.
- » Adoption of a constructivist approach allowed the phenomenological experience of children's daily lives, both in the present and during this life course period, to be explored, revealing insight into their experiential perceptions and perspectives.
- » The study's methods and approach, which were central to the research process, contributed to progressing the practice of engaging children as active research participants through implementing a responsive and flexible design, sympathetic to emergent themes which vary from those anticipated or prioritised by adults. This aspect of the study demonstrates that taking a constructivist approach enabled children's

views, voice and perspectives to be accessed and authentically presented. This process facilitated the young participants, as active agents, to extend and enrich the research enterprise.