



Research briefing: Children's access to adventure and play

2020

Introduction

In 2019 we launched Future Girl, our five-year plan based on the views of over 76,000 girls and young women aged 4 to 18 in Girlguiding. Future Girl is built around five topics – one of these topics is Adventurers. As part of this, girls told us they want adventure of all kinds open to every girl, without worrying about being treated differently or feeling unsafe because they're girls.

To build on this, we carried out research with children aged 6 to 18 to understand their experiences of adventure and play, and find out what would encourage them to go outdoors more. In this briefing we highlight differences between girls and boys because our *Girls' Attitudes Surveys* shows girls and young women face specific barriers which stops them accessing outdoor spaces and local facilities.

Importance of play

Play is essential to a child's development. It supports cognitive, physical, social and emotional wellbeing. It helps children to understand themselves, connect with others, make new friends, and try new things. It lets children challenge themselves and take risks - physical, social and psychological - so they can learn, grow and be resilient¹. A study by The Wildlife Trusts showed that children increased their personal wellbeing and health, as well as enjoyment levels and motivation, after taking part in supervised outdoor activities in nature².

The majority of parents (97%) and children aged 6 to 18 (95%) we surveyed think it's important for children to go outside and have fun. This was particularly true for younger children.

When asked why playing outdoors was important, the top reason for parents was so their children can exercise (87%). Through focus groups, parents also mentioned it's a good way for children to get fresh air, to be in the 'real world' as opposed to online, and a way for children to grow their independence. The top answer for children was so they can have fun (79%). Spending time with friends was particularly important for children as they got older (57% aged 6 compared to 80% aged 16). Girls were more likely to say because it makes them happy (67% compared to 57% of boys), to see nature (63% compared to 51% of boys) and to try new things (45% compared to 39% of boys).

'Being outdoors supports health and wellbeing and enables them to take risks and challenge themselves' - Parent

When children can't play outside it has a negative impact on how they feel. In our survey, children aged 6 to 18 said not being able to play outside makes them feel sad (24%), feel as if they don't do as much exercise (21%), feel less free (17%), and feel lonely (15%).

¹ <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Play-final-report.pdf>

² <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/sites/default/files/2019-11/Nature%20nurtures%20children%20Summary%20Report%20FINAL.pdf>

Having adventures

83% of children aged 6 to 18 said they like to go outside to have fun and adventures. Younger children were significantly more likely to agree 'a lot' to this (81% aged 6 compared to 24% aged 16). Children in rural areas were slightly more likely to agree 'a lot' than children in urban and town areas (54% compared to 46%). There were also some regional differences, with 54% in the South West and Scotland agreeing 'a lot' compared to 38% in the North East. Three quarters of children (75%) said they like to challenge themselves and try new things.

What children do to have adventures varies by age group. All ages like to play on their bike or go for a cycle, go for walks and have new experiences. Younger children are more likely to climb, play in the woods, play in the park, build dens or use their imagination to make up games. From age ten, having adventures is particularly focused around being with friends. Older children are more likely to play sports or go to the gym, cinema, town or shopping.

Boys are more likely than girls to go skateboarding, play football, rugby or basketball, build dens or play online. Girls are more likely to hang out with friends or go to the park. Children from higher socio-economic level households are more likely to go out with family. Children in rural areas are more likely to go biking, skateboard, play the woods, build dens, go for walks or hikes, walk their dog or horse ride. On the other hand, children in urban areas are more likely to go to the park.

Just over a third (37%) of children prefer to play indoors. This increases with age, especially for boys. Half of all children (51%) prefer to play online games compared to off line games such as board games, and this is especially true for older boys in urban areas.

Access to local facilities

Seven in ten (70%) children aged 6 to 18 would like to be able to go outside and have fun more often. Girls were slightly more likely to agree with this 'a lot' (35% compared to 31% of boys). Younger children were significantly more likely to agree 'a lot' (53% aged 6 compared to 11% aged 16). There were some regional differences (44% in London agreed 'a lot' compared to 24% in the East of England). 35% of children in urban areas agreed they'd like to go outside more often 'a lot' compared to 29% in rural areas. This is despite children in urban areas being closer to local facilities compared to children in rural areas.

72% of children aged 6 to 18 said they're a ten-minute walk away from parks where they can do sport and play games. However, less than half are that close to a football pitch (43%) or a playground (42%). Just over a quarter have a leisure centre (28%) or a basketball court (26%) close by. Just under a fifth have an outdoor gym (19%) or an adventure playground (18%) ten minutes' walk away. One in ten children (11%) don't have any of these outdoor spaces within ten minutes' walk of their home.

Half (48%) of children aged 6 to 18 think that both boys and girls use outdoor spaces such as playgrounds, parks and sports facilities both equally. Two-fifths (40%) of boys and girls think that boys use outdoor spaces the most (This is especially the case for older girls (72%)), while only 3% think this for girls. When asked why they think this, they said that boys are more likely to play football (29%), and are sportier than girls (14%).

'It's wrong but sport still seems to be encouraged more for boys than girls. Sometimes there are no girls at my park. Only boys' - Girl, aged 12

Our focus groups revealed that some teenage girls think outdoor spaces are more aligned to boys' interests (for example, football pitches or basketball courts), so girls are less likely to use them, instead meeting friends in cafes or going shopping. Some thought this was changing as more girls are playing football.

'Girls don't want to spend time in outdoor public spaces because they mostly have adverts of boys playing football' - Girl, aged 13

Barriers to playing outdoors

Safety

Two in five (45%) girls aged 6 to 18 said they worry how safe they are when they're playing or having fun outside, compared to 36% of boys. Children in urban environments were more likely to agree (43% compared to 31% in rural areas). The majority of younger children, aged 6 to 12, said they felt safe in their local playground (77%). This could be because they are accompanied by an adult or it's somewhere very close to home.

However, amongst the older children (aged 13 to 18) two thirds (64%) felt safe using the outdoor facilities in their local area. Children aged 13 to 14 were the age group slightly less likely to say this compared to older children (aged 15 to 18) 60% vs. 65%, possibly as they start to go on their own, with boys slightly more likely to feel this way compared to girls (68% compared to 59%).

One in ten (11%) children aged 6 to 18 said bullying and harassment stops them from going out to play. Girls aged 12 to 14 reported this more, with 22% agreeing compared to 13% of boys the same age. One in ten (9%) of all children said traffic stops them going outside to play. This is especially the case for younger children.

Appearance

Over half (58%) of children said they don't mind how they look when they go out to play, with boys more likely than girls to agree (62% compared to 54%). As girls get older they start to care more, with almost half (47%) of young women aged 12 to 18 saying they feel the need to look nice when they go outside to enjoy themselves and have fun, compared to 33% of boys the same age.

A quarter (26%) of children say they feel embarrassed to run around and look silly. This increases with age - 42% of young women aged 15 to 18 agree, and 31% of young men. A fifth (22%) of children say they worry about getting dirty or messy. This is more of a concern as children get older - a third (33%) of girls aged 15 to 18 and 23% of boys have this worry. Just under one in six (15%) of children - and 37% of girls aged 15 to 18 - worry about messing up their hair or makeup.

17% of all children aged 6 to 18 say it's hard to find clothes and shoes to go out to play in. This is slightly higher for girls compared to boys overall (19% compared to 15%). A similar number (20%) of girls overall said they worry about getting sweaty and messing up their hair when they play outdoors, compared to only 10% of boys overall.

Permission and access

Three in ten (29%) children said that not being allowed out on their own stops them from going to parks, playgrounds and nature reserves. Over one in eight (14%) said they're stopped from going outside because there's no one available to take them. This is especially true for younger children. A fifth (20%) said they don't have friends to go with.

Other

A fifth (19%) of children said they find outdoor facilities, such as playgrounds, boring and mentioned that there's not enough for them to do in their area. This is especially the case for older girls, who said that most areas are designed for younger children. A small number of girls said there are too many boys in parks and playgrounds, and they feel they can't join in as a result.

[‘Nothing is ever designed for teenagers’ - Girl, aged 15](#)

The weather is also a barrier. In summer there's more opportunity for spontaneous fun outdoors, but girls mentioned that in winter, when it's dark, parents don't want their daughters spending time in public spaces. In rural areas, winter is less of a barrier and those families continue to have spontaneous fun outside as there's a range of outdoor spaces. One in twelve children said it's too expensive to visit a park, playground or nature reserve. In our focus groups many girls mentioned not being able to access transport. From ages 11 to 13, girls say homework becomes a barrier to going out to play. One in ten say parks and playgrounds aren't clean enough for them to use.

[‘There's too much litter and glass’ - Girl, aged 12](#)

What would encourage children to go out more?

Feeling safer was something that girls felt would encourage them to go outdoors more. A quarter (25%) of all children said they'd like safer roads and less traffic. This was a particular concern for younger girls. As girls get older, their concerns turn to street lighting (24%), preventing crime (28%) and tackling bullying and harassment (19%).

Having more spaces to have fun was also important. A third of children said they'd like better equipment in parks and playgrounds (33%) and more areas to have fun (30%). Girls also mentioned spaces that would cater to different interests and support different types of play. Age-appropriate equipment - from climbing nets and zip wires to rock climbing walls - was key too, especially as girls got older and wanted to be challenged. Girls want to be able to be creative, whether it be building sandcastles, crafting, building dens or dancing. Girls also want spaces where they can socialise and have a break from daily pressures by having dedicated areas to relax together, such as tree houses, picnic areas, quieter spaces and cafes.

[‘I'd like more innovative play equipment, not just swings and slides as that's mainly beneficial to younger children’ – Girl, aged 7-10](#)

Other things girls mentioned that would encourage them to go out more included more toilets, free buses and better transport, cleaner spaces, friends living closer and parents having more time. Some girls and young women liked the idea of spaces just for girls to help them try new things.

Methodology

YouGov carried out this research on behalf of Girlguiding in December 2019 and January 2020. 1,536 children aged 6 to 18 and 1,215 parents of children this age were surveyed online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+). YouGov also ran focus groups, which included online forums for girls aged 7 to 10 and online focus groups for those aged 14 to 16, plus separate groups for girls aged 7 to 10 and 11 to 13 with their parents.

About Girlguiding

Girlguiding is the leading charity for girls and young women in the UK, with almost 500,000 members. Thanks to the dedication and support of 100,000 amazing volunteers, we are active in every part of the UK, giving girls and young women a space where they can be themselves, have fun, build brilliant friendships, gain valuable life skills and make a positive difference to their lives and their communities. We build girls' confidence and raise their aspirations. We give them the chance to discover their full potential and encourage them to be a powerful force for good. We give them a space to have fun. We run *Rainbows* (4–7 years), *Brownies* (7–10 years), *Guides* (10–14 years) and *Rangers* (14–18 years).

[girlguiding.org.uk](https://www.girlguiding.org.uk)

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