

Children and the Outdoors

CONTACT WITH THE OUTDOORS AND NATURAL HERITAGE AMONG CHILDREN AGED 5 TO 12:
CURRENT TRENDS, BENEFITS, BARRIERS AND RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS

Summary Report

Taken from the Commissioned Report by the Heritage Council



An Chomhairle Oidhreachta
The Heritage Council



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Background to the Study

A growing body of evidence suggests that play patterns among children are changing; fewer children are playing outdoors and outdoor play is increasingly centred on the home rather than natural settings. This decline has been attributed to lack of safe spaces for outdoor play, parents' anxieties about their children's safety, and increasing pressure on children to participate in structured activities, among other factors. Children's reduced contact with nature has given rise to significant concern among those who work for, with and on behalf of children as regular access to the natural environment is fundamental to children's health, development and wellbeing. Furthermore, lack of access to natural spaces infringes on children's rights under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC).

The Heritage Council was established as a statutory body under the *Heritage Act 1995* and has responsibility for the promotion, protection and management of Ireland's natural heritage. Sharing in the widespread concern regarding children's declining access to the outdoors and the dearth of research on this issue from an Irish perspective, the Heritage Council commissioned a research team from the Child Law Clinic, School of Law, University College Cork to conduct a review of contact with the outdoors and natural heritage among children aged 5-12. The research team consisted of members from law and occupational science.

Aims and Objectives of the Study

The principal objective of the research project was to review existing research and relevant literature around children's relationship with the outdoors and natural heritage from a children's rights perspective. This included examining and analysing current trends and identifying gaps in the research on this subject, particularly in the Irish context. Through this process, the project aimed to:

- (i) Present an understanding of the barriers to ensuring children's enjoyment of their rights to contact with the outdoors and natural heritage;
- (ii) Identify the impacts and precise benefits to children of contact with the outdoors and natural heritage holistically, including health, education, social and environmental perspectives;
- (iii) Develop precise recommendations for further research and for specific measures for supporting children's engagement with the outdoors and natural heritage.

Methodology

The project is set against the backdrop of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and is informed by its principles and provisions. In keeping with the rights-based approach, a mixed methodology was adopted. This comprised a comprehensive literature, law and policy review and qualitative participatory research which was carried out with 123 children aged between five and twelve years from three different schools. One school each was chosen from a rural, a town, and a city environment to include the views of a broad range of children from different socio-economic and geographic backgrounds in the study. The rural school was the smallest, with just over one hundred pupils. The town and rural schools each catered for approximately two hundred pupils. A short survey was conducted with the school principal, and photographs were taken of the school environments.

A whole-class art project on the theme of 'what I do in my free time' was conducted with three classes in each school, and focus groups were carried out for eight of the nine classes, comprising 39 children (18 girls, 21 boys). These discussions were audio recorded, transcribed, and analysed together with the artwork, using a qualitative analysis software package.



Findings from desk-based research

Having conducted a comprehensive review of available academic and grey literature, the main findings are as follows:

- In Ireland, children's relationship with the natural environment has received little attention or support in national law and policy.
- An explicit and overarching national policy which supports children's engagement with the outdoors is yet to be developed.
- Although some elements of the Irish primary school curriculum support children's access to the outdoors, schools have a broad degree of autonomy and therefore the character and ethos of individual schools can influence the level of contact children have with the outdoor environment even where natural areas, such as school gardens and natural play areas are available. This is borne out by the experiences of children in three different school settings visited in this research. Nonetheless, schools have unmatched potential as places to nurture children's relationship with nature, particularly those children whose access might be limited in their home environments.

- Research shows that the changing nature of children's lives is a major concern in Ireland and that the child-nature connection is under serious threat. Particular groups, including children with disabilities face particular challenges in this regard.
- All things being equal, children prefer to play outdoors rather than indoors. They relish the freedom of exploring and playing in an unstructured manner. Location, weather and having friends nearby are strongly linked to the attractiveness of outdoor play.
- There are significant benefits, including to health and well-being, to contact with the outdoors and the environment.
- Play is central to these benefits, to children's development and to their lives. Risk, challenge and flexibility are some of the core components of play, provided best by the outdoor environment.
- Barriers include school rules in relation to break-times, sports, and access to the outdoors as well as the role played by gatekeepers (e.g. parents, teachers) whose attitudes influence children's behaviour.



Recommendations

In light of this research, the Heritage Council is encouraged to consider the following:

- **Policy** - consideration should be given to how best to advocate for a cross-government approach (working towards a national policy) to promote greater use by children of the outdoors and the natural environment.
- **Schools** - a number of concrete measures are suggested to encourage children's access to the outdoors in the school setting including educating children and young people about their connection to the natural world and facilitating children's access to outdoor play and learning spaces, amongst other measures.
- **Public Awareness and Engagement** - consideration should be given to showcasing on the Heritage Council website some of the key programmes and initiatives being implemented worldwide to promote children's contact with the outdoors. A public debate could be stimulated by convening a conference identifying the benefits to children of contact with the outdoors, to engage with policy makers, government departments, schools and civil society groups (from across the spectrum) on the issues in this report.

The Heritage Council should also consider using the National Play Day initiative run by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to generate support for a national policy in this area.

- **Children** - the Heritage Council should adopt the principle of children's participation into its way of working, in line with national policy, to ensure that children's perspectives inform its programmes, policies and initiatives. The Heritage Council should develop a children's advisory group to ensure that children's views inform its activities (see below). This group might assist to develop a children and young people's section on the Heritage Council website, could usefully feed into the development of the proposed national policy on children and the outdoors and inform awareness raising activities with schools and the public generally.
- **Research** - multiple areas for further research are identified throughout this report. The Heritage Council is recommended to develop a research strategy taking into account this study and using its child-focused research methods. In this regard, particular priority should be given to research to discover strategies for increasing the frequency and quality of children's contact with the natural environment, with particular regard to the perspectives of migrant children, children with disabilities, Traveller children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Evaluating Progress** - consideration should be given to developing a children's rights framework for evaluating children's contact with the outdoors. This could be done in conjunction with a children and young people's advisory group and could usefully take account of the trends, benefits and barriers identified in this study.

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for the full report please go to:
www.heritagecouncil.ie/education/publications/

