



*'I learn new things and climb trees'*  
What children say about play in Wales

**Analysis of 2018/19 children's surveys**



PRIFYSGOL  
**BANGOR**  
UNIVERSITY

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# Introduction

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is part of the law in Wales and Article 31 states that *‘Every child has the right to relax, play and take part in a wide range of cultural and artistic activities.’*

In support of the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UNCRC on 20 November 2019 Play Wales is publishing this report where children and teenagers tell us about what’s good about the play opportunities in their local area and how satisfied they are about when, how and where they can play.

Data for the research comes from surveys completed by nearly 6,000 children across thirteen local authority areas in Wales as part of their Play Sufficiency Assessments in 2019. Data was collated with the considerable assistance of Michael Welsby from the Policy Evidence & Analysis Team, Office for National Statistics. This report was written by Dr David Dallimore of Bangor University for Play Wales.

## Background

Section 11 of the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010 places a statutory duty on local authorities to assess and secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficiency of play opportunities for children. The first part of the Duty, the duty to assess sufficiency of play opportunities, was commenced in 2012. Local authorities were required to submit their first Play Sufficiency Assessment (PSA) to the Welsh Government by 31 March 2013, and repeating this process every three years after that. This means that by 2019, three PSAs have been completed and submitted by Welsh local authorities.

The second part of the Duty, the duty to secure sufficient play opportunities, was commenced in December 2013 and sits within the Welsh Government’s overall rights-based approach to legislating for children and young people. This

is enshrined in Welsh law under the Rights of Children and Young Persons (Wales) Measure 2011. The measure places a duty on Ministers to have due regard to the UNCRC when developing or reviewing legislation and policy. This means that Ministers must give the appropriate weight to the requirements of the UNCRC, balancing them against all the other factors that are relevant to the decision in question. A rights-based approach therefore allows for an appreciation of the intrinsic value of play as a right as well as its instrumental value for addressing other policy concerns. It also makes a clear statement about how society views children and childhood.

In some societies, children are viewed as being ‘empty vessels’ and childhood a time for children to be made ‘ready to learn’, ‘ready for school’ and ‘ready to be adults’. Their value is often measured by academic attainment linked to their economic and social contributions as ‘future citizens’. Childhood is therefore a time for preparation and children’s play is seen as an important mechanism in this grounding. A large body of play research supports this, showing how play can help children:

- learn
- develop specific cognitive, physical, social and emotional skills
- develop resilience and risk assessment skills
- engage in physical activity and so on.

A children’s rights approach is more holistic, where childhood is seen as important in itself. Each child is valued as a unique and a competent and active citizen whose potential needs to be encouraged and supported. The child is viewed as a curious, capable and intelligent individual who needs and wants interaction with other children and adults. Play is valued for the here-and-now pleasures, vitality and connectedness of playing as well as for the future benefits<sup>1</sup>.

Assessing and quantifying the value of play in these terms is much more difficult and therefore play is often seen as having less instrumental value by local authorities and communities. Yet, this is the context in which the Play Sufficiency Duty in Wales is set.

## The research

Statutory Guidance<sup>2</sup> for Welsh local authorities includes a toolkit and template to guide the information required in the PSA. These were developed in a partnership between Welsh Government, Play Wales and the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA). The toolkit and template were updated in 2015 for the 2016 PSA and the template was further revised for the 2019 PSA. The toolkit includes a suggested survey template<sup>3</sup> that seeks to gain mainly quantitative data on children's views about their satisfaction with play opportunities in their local area. During the 2019 PSA process, Play Wales asked all 22 local authorities to share their survey data. This data was collated by Mike Welsby from the Policy Evidence & Analysis Team, Office for National Statistics as part of a Government scheme to support the third sector with analytical support.

## Data limitations

Play Wales received data from 18 local authorities, but when data were examined, 13 had provided information in a format required to support the development of a consistent data set. Additionally, because the sample is opportunistic (respondents were not chosen but chose to participate) the proportion of children and teenagers responding in each local authority varied widely.

It was also not possible to identify the ages of around 2,000 children (out of nearly 6,000) in the survey. Additionally, it wasn't possible to identify the exact age of around 400 children as the age question was banded – 0 to 4 and 5 to 10 years old. Naturally, if we were able to identify the exact age of these children, our estimates would be more reliable as we would have a larger sample.

## Data cleaning

The local authorities had used the survey template with varying degrees of consistency. Once the data were cleaned and collected into a single dataset, they were analysed using a statistical software package (SPSS v.25).



Taking the survey analysis undertaken in Conwy as the standard, all datasets were changed to match the same variables. This included re-ordering columns to match the order of Conwy and creating variable names. All datasets were then merged together into one. Finally, for consistency, some variables were recoded. For example, some local authorities asked 'Boy or girl', others 'B' or 'G' and the equivalent in Welsh.

### Sample size and confidence

In total, 5,884 responses from children were included in a final dataset. When set in context of the whole population of children in Wales (567,709<sup>4</sup>), the sample provides a 95 percent probability that the responses accurately reflect the attitudes of the whole population. The margin of error (confidence interval) is calculated as +/- 1.27 percent. This means that for a specific question, if 51 percent percent of the sample picked a particular answer, we can be 'sure' that if we had asked the question of the entire population of children, between 49.73 percent and 52.27 percent would have picked that response.

Not all children answered all questions so the number of responses analysed is included as '(n=)' in the analysis. Lower responses will inevitably affect the confidence of the data and in a small number of instances data are excluded from our analysis. Additionally, because data was not available from all local authority areas – postcodes were not collected in many areas – and with the variation in samples from different areas, no geographic analysis was undertaken and no comparison between local authorities is made in this report.

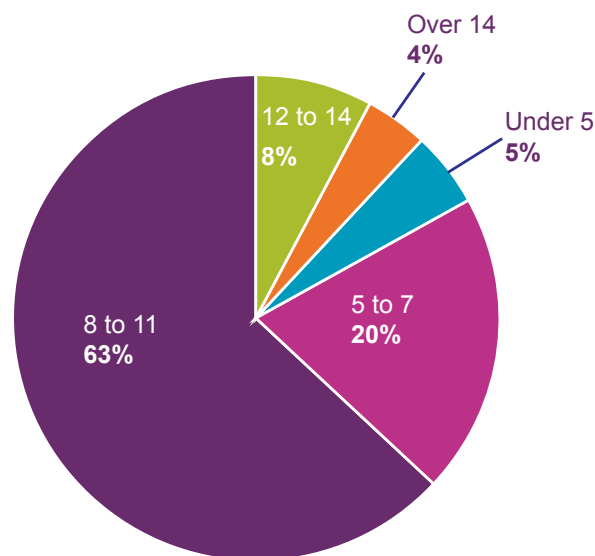
### Profile of respondents

- Of the 5,884 children responding 51 percent were girls and 49 percent were boys.
- Answering the question 'Do you think of yourself as disabled?', 5.3 percent said yes (281 respondents).
- Surveys were distributed in both Welsh and English but children were asked which

language they preferred to speak. 10 percent preferred Welsh, 87 percent said English and 3 percent preferred another language.

- By age, the largest group responding (where ages were given) were aged 8 to 11 years (63 percent).

Figure 1: Respondents by age-group (n=3,598)



We understand that a number of local authorities have focused their surveys on children in Year 5 of primary school to enable more accurate longitudinal data to be gathered to provide evidence of changing attitudes and sufficiency. While this is likely to provide more robust data over time, as Wendy Russell and colleagues point out in their recent report on the Play Sufficiency Duty<sup>5</sup> there is also an argument for extending the age range to gather the full range of views. They also highlight the limitations of such surveys more generally.

*'It is also important to recognise that whilst these surveys have value in terms of establishing generalised levels of satisfaction and identifying places where children report different levels of satisfaction, they are also a fairly blunt instrument that provides little detail in terms of how children's opportunities for play are affected by localised conditions within communities.'*<sup>16</sup>



Analysis of such a large dataset has the potential to highlight issues that are common across Wales. Further contextual information in the form of open questions on the survey where children were able to say what was good about play opportunities in their area, and what was not good, provides some additional depth. In this study, text from the open questions was imported into a qualitative data analysis package (NVivo v.11.4) where the responses were coded using the analytical frame described below.

### **Analytical approach**

As Wendy Russell suggested in a 2006 report<sup>7</sup>, opportunities for children to play away from the eyes of adults can be restricted across three domains and as such, these domains provide a helpful framework for assessing factors that impact on play sufficiency.

**Temporal:** The objective time that children have to play as well as children's subjective experience of the time they have to play – often in the context of other pressures on them.

**Spatial:** The range, quality and proximity of play spaces to where children are located.

**Psychological:** Children's subjective and perceptual experience of time and space, including factors such as permission, resentment, belonging, fear and so on.

Children's play is therefore reliant on having the space, time and freedom to play, and sufficiency of opportunities to play exist more prominently where all three are positively presented. The questions in the survey template were designed to examine these themes and therefore in this report the three domains form the structure for analysis.

# Temporal factors: time to play

## How often children play?

Over recent years children have told us that they have less time to devote to play as more of their free-time is taken up by structured, educational or technology-based activities, and while these can be perceived by adults as 'play' they are often associated with learning, rather than enjoyment<sup>8</sup>.

Although children today are less likely to report that they are 'bored' they are much less likely than their predecessors to have 'free-time' which by their own definition, consists of time spent away from adult supervision and control<sup>9</sup>.

When children 'play out' it has been shown that they are more active, and therefore gain more health benefits than when being supervised<sup>10</sup>. In the survey, children were asked how often they played or hung out with their friends. Nearly a half of children in Wales (42 percent) said that they go out and play or hang out with friends most days.

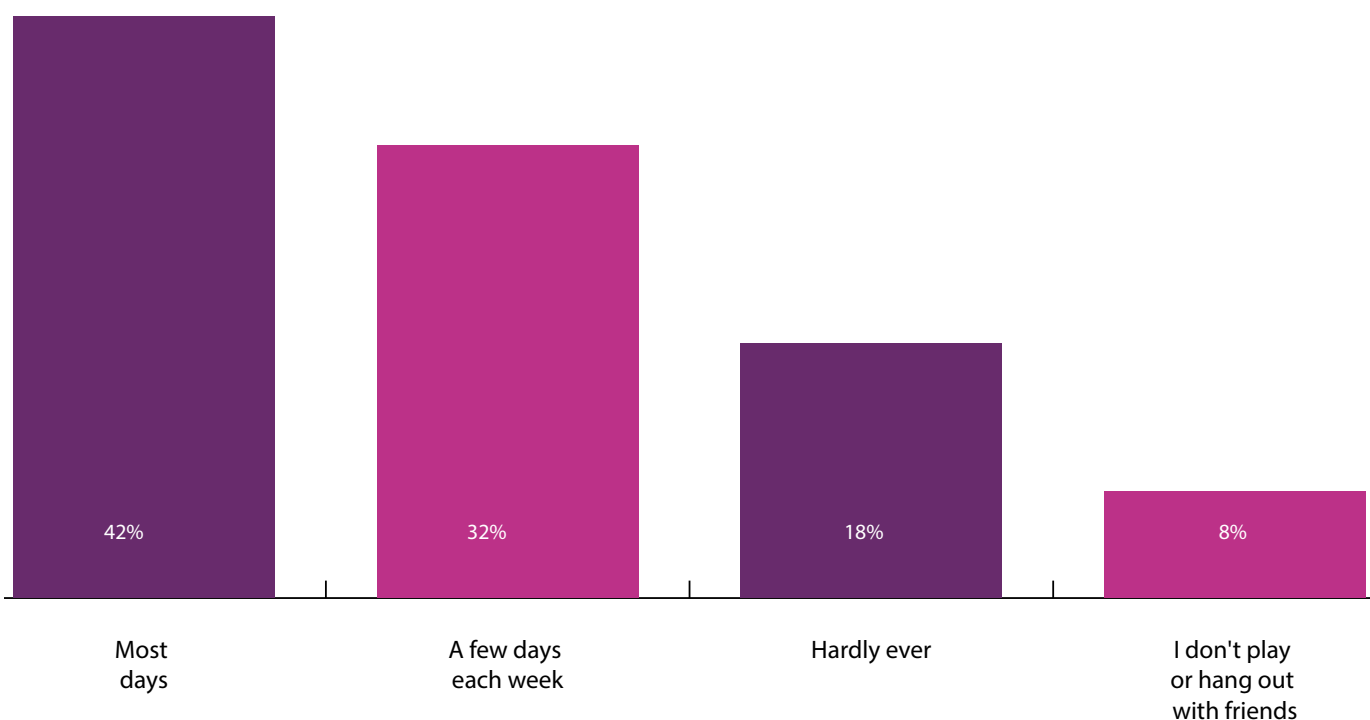
A further third play out a few days a week. However, a quarter of children never, or hardly ever play out.

We found little difference between the how often boys and girls play out, but we observed that only around 36 percent of children who said they were disabled played or hung out with friends on most days (42 percent of all children). By age-group, children in the 8 to 11 years age group played out the most.

Across the different local authority areas from which our data was drawn, there was a lot of variation in the time that children played-out. In one local authority (an area with high levels of deprivation), 53 percent of children played out most days, compared with 39 percent in another (an area with low deprivation levels). While not certain from our data, this may be supportive of other research<sup>11</sup> that has found that children are

Figure 2 Time spent playing out (n=5791)

**How often do you go out to play with friends?**



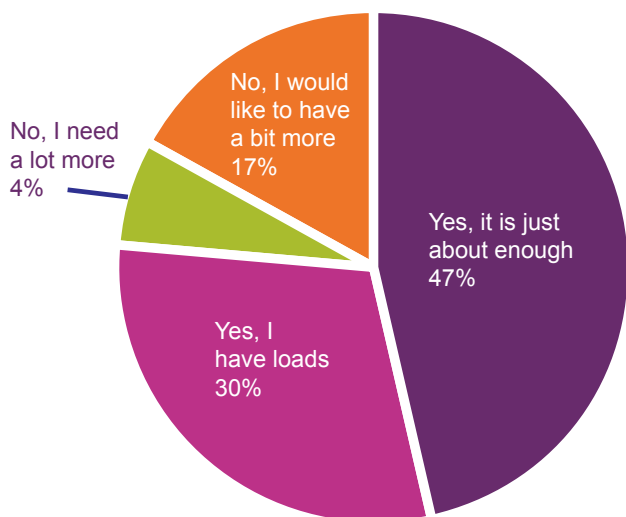


less likely to play out independently if they are from better-off homes, and if they do not have family networks close-by.

Over three quarters of children in Wales said that they had loads, or just enough time to play. Nonetheless, more than one in five children said that they did not have enough time or would like more time to play. Fewer girls than boys said that they had enough time, and children over the age of 11 were more likely to say that they did not have enough time to play or hang out.

Figure 3 Time to play (n=4663)

**Do you have enough time to play?**



By area, again children in the council area with high levels of deprivation were most likely to say that they had enough time to play (89 percent), while children in the area with least deprivation were most likely to say that they did not (32 percent).

From the comments made by children and teenagers, the time they have away from adults for unstructured play is highly prized, and being with friends is critically important.

*'I get to hang around with friends and get to have time alone without adults.'*

*'I like going to the park. I like spending time with my friends in our local area.'*

*'It's good because if you're with your friends you can just have a good time.'*

The comments made by children and teenagers also support the data, and other research<sup>12</sup> highlighting the pressures that children have on the amount of time they have to play and hang-out.

*'I don't have enough time [to play or hang out] because of homework.'*

*'I don't play out as I train in a gymnastics club up to 22 hours and five times a week. I also live 3.5 miles from friends and school.'*



## Spatial factors: space to play

While children need the time to play, they also need spaces that are accessible to them where they feel safe and that facilitate the kind of play that they want. While these include ‘formal’ designated play spaces such as playgrounds, playing fields or games-areas, the places that children value the most are often places not formally recognised.

### Where children play

The survey asked children about the types of places they played or hung out in. Unsurprisingly, most children played or hung out in each other’s houses or gardens.

Also popular were formal play areas with fixed play equipment. However, 60 percent of children played in local streets and many played in other outdoor unsupervised areas.

Given that the greatest health and social benefits come from ‘playing out’ we have used the data

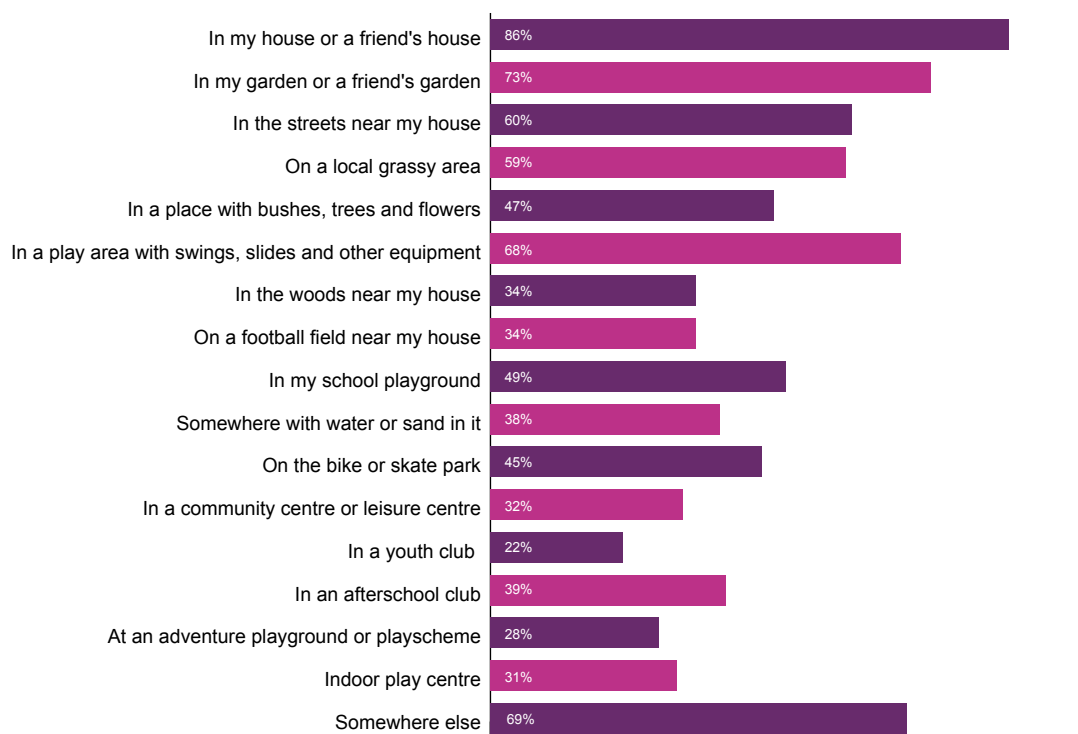
to look at the proportion of children that played in different categories of space. Overall, 28 percent of children mostly played in, 72 percent mostly played out. Also, 39 percent of children across both groups played in a supervised setting such as an after-school club, youth club or leisure centre.

We found that more boys (70 percent) than girls (66 percent) mainly played out. We also observed that on average, boys used a greater variety of outdoor spaces than girls.

Disabled children were found to occupy fewer play spaces than other children both ‘in’ and ‘out’. Across different areas, there was a lot of variation in the proportion of children who mainly played out, ranging from 90 percent in one local authority area, to just over 70 percent in another. Although our data cannot confirm it, it is likely that both social and economic factors, and issues of rurality influence these figures.

Figure 4 The places children play (n=4021)

### When you’re not in school, what types of places do you play or hang out in?



Children were asked whether they were able to play in all the places they would like to. Fewer than one in four children (24 percent) said they could play in all the places they wanted to, but a further third (33 percent) said that they could play in some of them. While only eight percent said they were very restricted and could play in hardly any places, 21 percent said that only a few places were available to them. By age, children under the age of 11 felt most restricted, but once they reach secondary school age, over 40 percent said that they could play wherever they wanted.

In answering this question, girls feel they are more restricted than boys in their choices of play space. More than 15 percent of disabled children said that they could hardly play anywhere, compared with eight percent of all children.

In their comments, children and teenagers talked a lot about parks and playing fields as focal points within their communities where they could play and hang out.

*'I love the parks with climbing frames as I like to hang upside down and do gymnastics. We like bug hunting too in the park. I love playing with my friends on the skate ramps at the park.'*

*'What's good about my area is that there are lots of places to jump and move. That helps me with my ADHD.'*

Respondents also talked about a wide range of spaces away from designated areas that they used, ranging from pavements outside their houses, to nearby hills.

*'I live near the mountain where there is lots of wildlife.'*

*'Good mix of lake, grass, woodlands, clifftop.'*

*'I play on my bike in our street with my friends.'*

*'The forrest is fun!' [sic]*

*'Making dens in trees and playing with my friends.'*



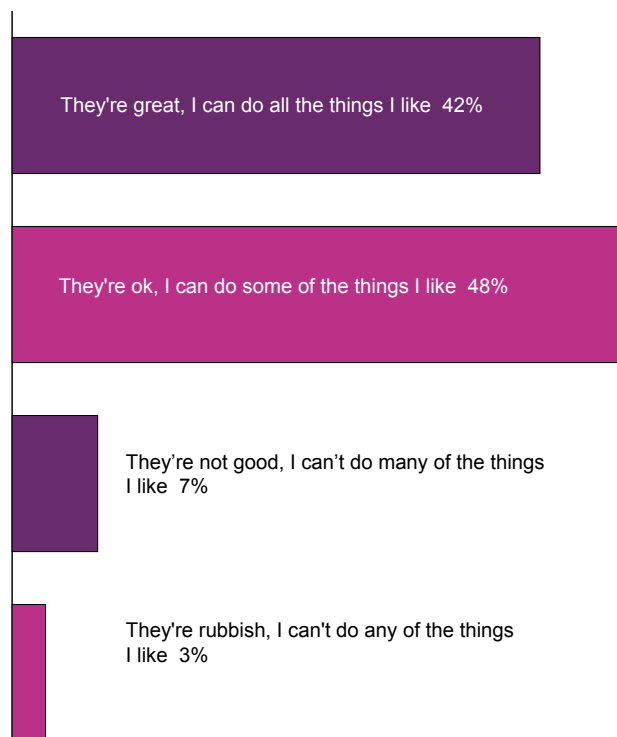
Nonetheless, some children clearly have difficulties in accessing play spaces.

*'In my village and the neighbouring village we have no park or playing area. It's really sad. We used to be able to play in the school grounds but now they are locked up. We only have our garden to play in otherwise my parents have to take me in a car to go somewhere. There's a lot of children who live in the village now and we have nowhere to play.'*

*'Near school and my friends there are green spaces to play on which won't last as it's now being demolished to make more houses or sold up to make a bigger school or be used to make money into allotments. There will be no green spaces left for us to play. We will have to stay in on our computers and play online with our friends instead.'*

Figure 5 Quality of play spaces (n=3598)

### How good are the places you play?



### How good are play spaces?

Children were asked to consider the quality of the spaces they played, or hung out in.

In the main, children said that the places they play in are good where they can do all, or some of the things they want to. Fewer than 10 percent of children said that they weren't good or were just rubbish.

We found little difference in how girls and boys perceived the quality of play spaces, but by age-group we observed that older children tended to be more critical. Over 25 percent of over 14-year olds said that the spaces they used to play or hang out were not good, or rubbish.

A large number of children and teenagers who commented were very critical of the state of parks and dedicated children's play areas.

As reported by local authority play officers<sup>13</sup> austerity has had a significant effect on budgets for designated play spaces, and this has not gone unnoticed by children.

*'There is nothing good, all the parks are ruined and always covered in glass or they are full of drug users.'*

*'Some play parks are a bit run down and the one near me needs work and is full of older kids hanging around on toddler things. It's not too nice for younger kids. Plus the older kids need something too. Dogs running around without leads.'*

*'The play equipment is old and needs updating and aimed at babies.'*

*'Too many dogs and poo. The stuff at the park don't work all time.'*

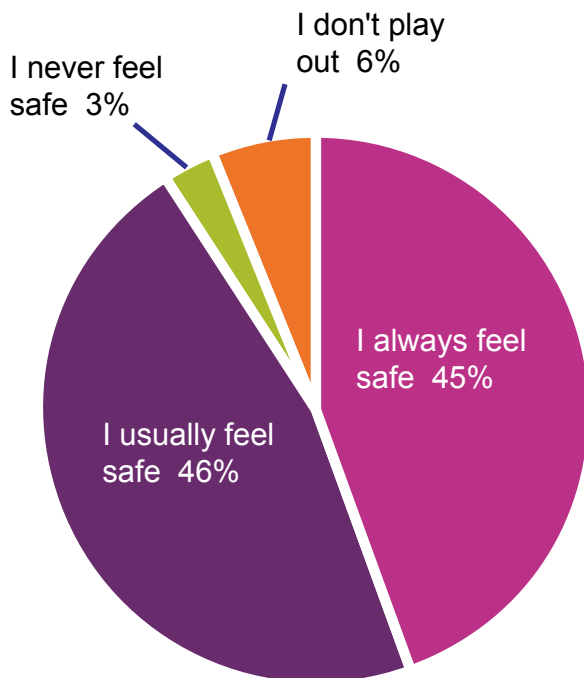
## Psychological factors: freedom to play

The freedom for children to play is not just dependent on the time they have and the access they have to suitable play spaces. Children's play is often dependent on how safe they feel in play spaces, whether they feel they 'belong' in social spaces, the freedom allowed to them by their parents, and the acceptance of children's play by the wider community.

The survey asked children how safe they felt in the places they played.

Figure 6 Feelings of safety (n=5222)

### Do you feel safe when you are playing?



Overall, most children feel safe when they play out. However, there is a proportion of children who do not play out, or only play in their, or friends' houses and gardens. From the survey data we can see that children who mainly play in tend to feel less safe than those who mainly play out. Whether children don't play out because they feel unsafe or feel unsafe because they don't play out cannot be established from this data.

As with other factors, in understanding children's perceptions of safety, social and economic considerations may be important. One particularly deprived area had a very high proportion (52 percent) of children who said they always feel safe when playing, whereas another with little deprivation had the lowest count (34 percent).

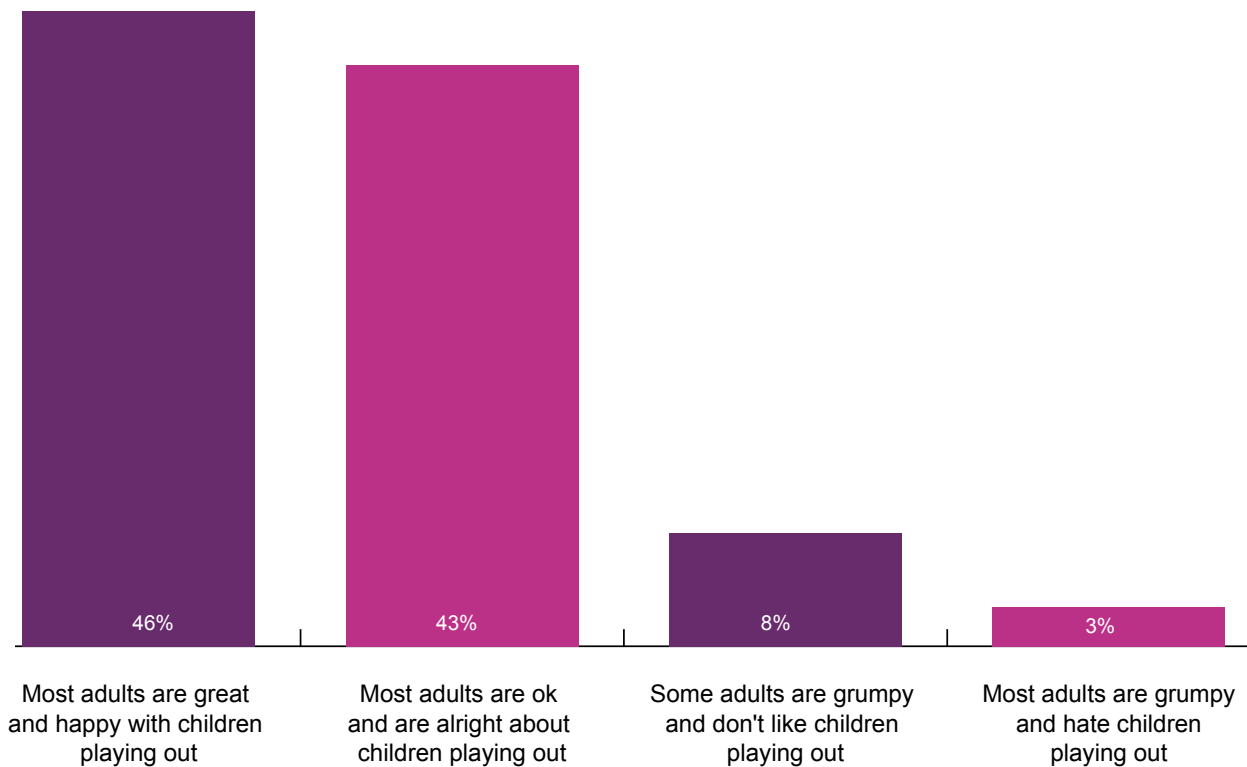
The attitude of adults – both parents and the wider community – towards play has been found in previous research to be important in children's freedom to play<sup>14</sup>.

According to our data, in Wales, children seem to have few problems with adults in the places they play or hang out. Nearly 90 percent of children said that most adults are great, or at least okay about children playing out. There was almost no difference in the proportion of children reporting negative attitudes from adults between boys and girls.



Figure 7 Adult attitudes (n=5222)

**What are adults like when you play?**



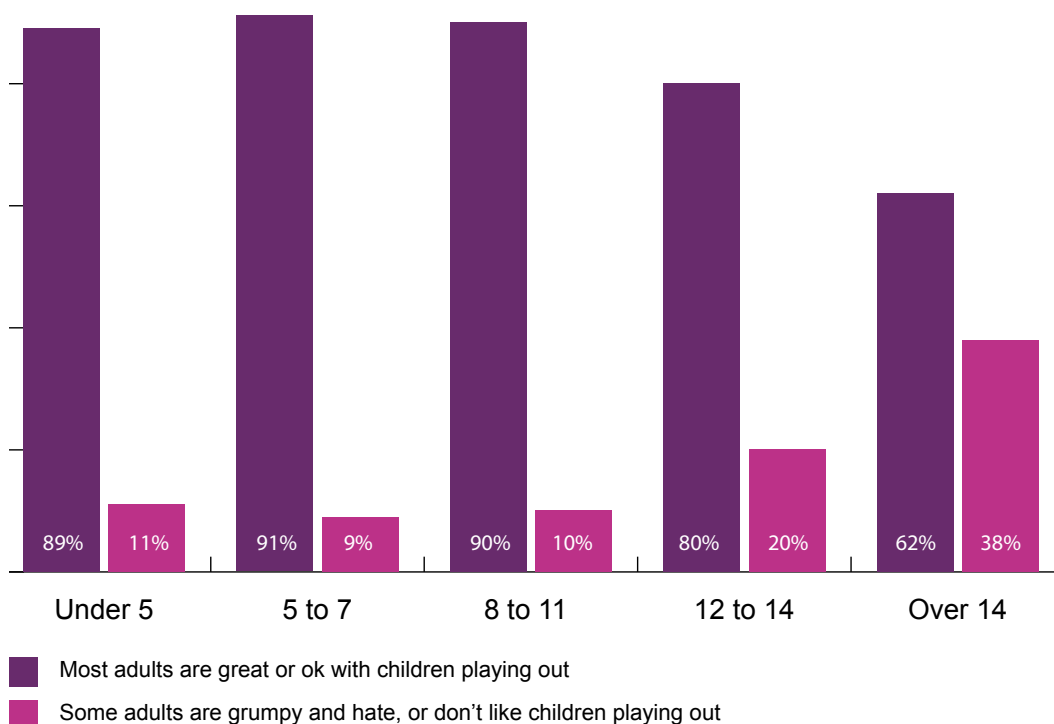
There was however, considerable difference across the age range. Many older children clearly feel that adults don't like them playing or hanging out. This has been observed in other studies<sup>15</sup> with negative attitudes found to come from a lack of understanding of what children's play is, and differing views on what should be considered as being acceptable behaviour. Adults often have different views of children and can associate older children and teenagers congregating together as anti-social behaviour.

*'Sometimes, I feel judged by adults when going out in a large group of friends, as I think they feel uncomfortable around a lot of us, perhaps intimidated.'*



Figure 8 Adult attitudes by children's age (n=3552)

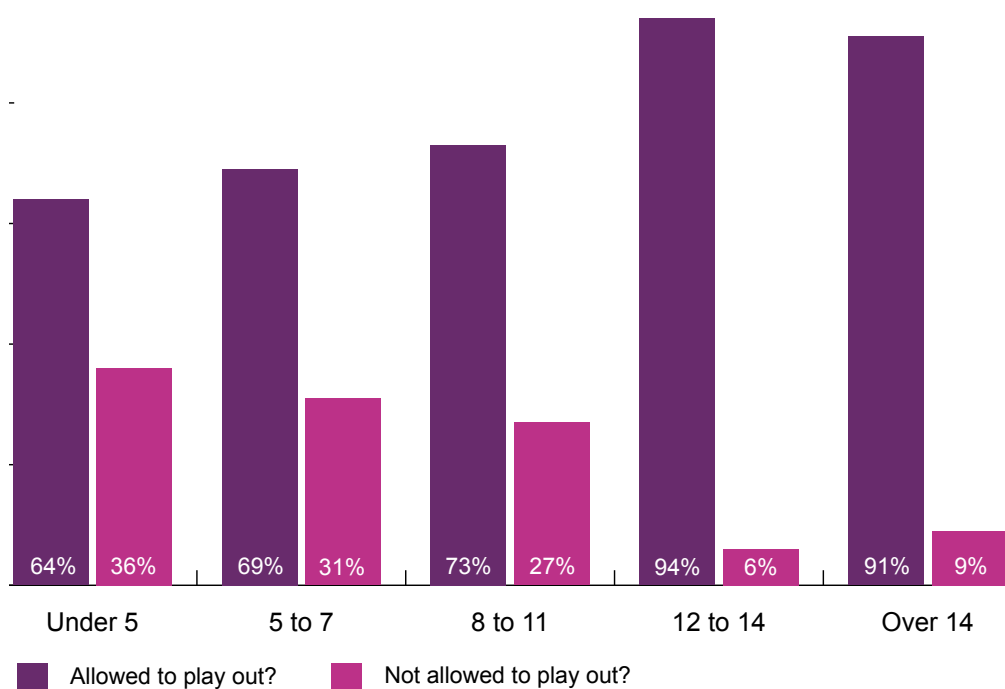
**Attitudes of adults, by children's age**



Our data suggests that a quarter of all children in Wales are not allowed to play out on their own or with friends. Fewer girls than boys can play out, while predictably, as they get older almost all are allowed to play out.

Figure 9 Permission to play by age (n=3556)

**Permission to play by age group**



Our data shows a strong link between feelings of safety and children being allowed to play out by their parents. This finding is supported by other studies<sup>16</sup> finding that parental perception of neighbourhood safety is associated with levels of children's independence. The following comment highlights this and the consequences not just for the individual children that parents are trying to protect, but for the whole local community of children.

*'Me and my little brother are the only ones allowed to play outside on our own. All my friends need an adult to go with them, there is no-one playing outside on the streets.'*

*'I don't play outside of my garden without my mam, dad or a family member watching me.'*

*'I'm supervised by an adult like my mum wants me to be so I never play out when I want to.'*

While not evident from the survey questions, there were lots of additional comments from children highlighting the issue of traffic in their freedom to choose where and when they play.

*'I live near [the] park but I'm too young to go to the park on my own without an adult because there are too many main roads.'*





*'People speed down the street, my street is now very busy since traffic lights have been put on [the] main road. My mum said it is because people are using my road as a short cut. The cars are very fast. I can't go out on my bike.'*

*'There's a lot of space, there's not much traffic. It's nice and clean and most adults enjoy us playing outside.'*

*'My mam takes me to lots of places like the beach, parks and play centres.'*

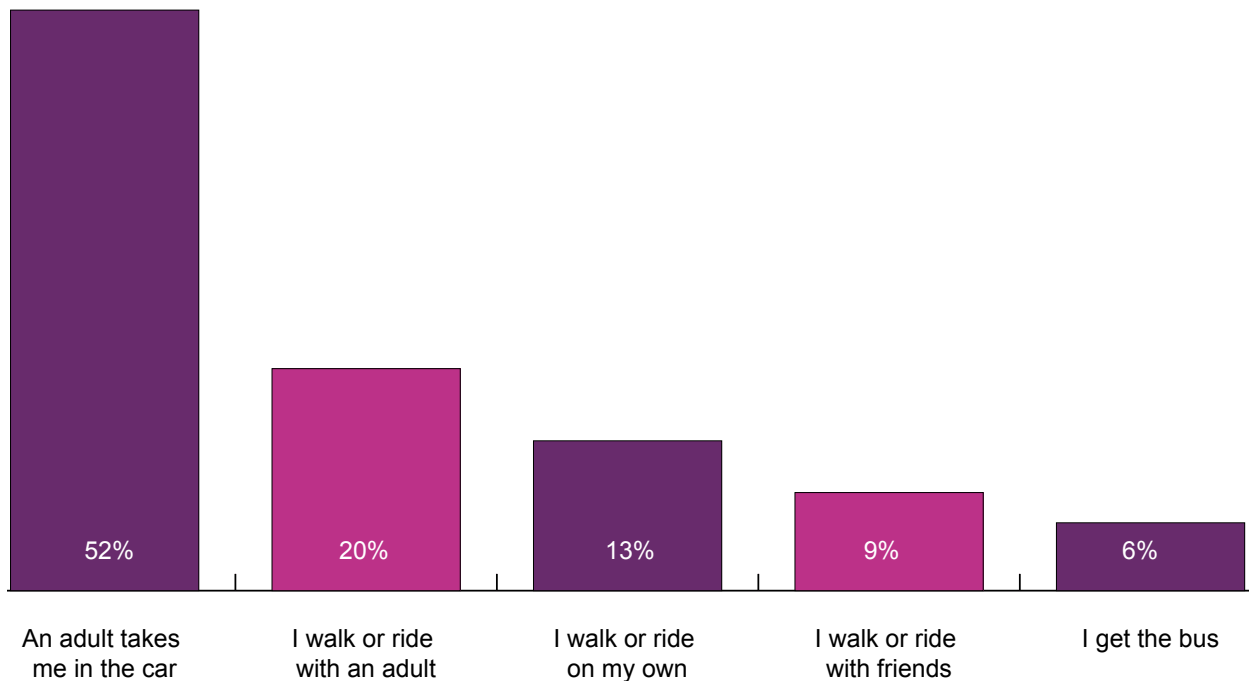
*'There is no park or safe place that I can go without my parents or that doesn't need me to go in the car. The roads are too busy and there are no safe spaces for me to play ball by my house.'*

*'There is nothing good near my house. My mum or dad has to take me to different places.'*

Related, is how children actually get to the places where they play. More than half of children said that they are able to walk or ride on their own, or with friends. However, two in five children (42 percent) rely on an adult to either walk, or drive them to where they play.

Figure 10 Getting to play space (n=5111)

### How do you usually get to places where you play?



We found some differences in the answer to this question by gender, where 52 percent of girls were able to travel to play on their own compared with 62 percent of boys.

Unsurprisingly, we found that children's independent mobility increased with age, and by the age of 14, the majority of children travel to play or hang out on their own and reliance on adults is minimal.

## Overall satisfaction

Children were asked how satisfied they were with their opportunities to play. In total, 84 percent of children said that their opportunities were good, or great. There was no difference in the response between boys and girls, although one in three children over the age of 11 said that their opportunities were poor, or bad.

### Predicting play satisfaction

Using a statistical method called 'regression' we were able to see which factors are most likely to predict children's satisfaction with their opportunities to play in Wales, and therefore identify the most important barriers that children face. We took all of the variables listed in this report along with the demographic details and looked for the factors that were statistically important in predicting play satisfaction.

From the data we have from the 13 local authorities, the following factors were found to be important in predicting children's overall satisfaction (in order of importance):

1. Being 'allowed out' to play
2. Feeling safe when out playing
3. Having enough time to play
4. Not having a disability
5. Being in a place where most adults are great and happy with children playing out
6. Being under the age of 11.

Other factors including the quality of play spaces, where children play, how children travel to play spaces and being a boy or a girl, were not found to be strong predictors of play satisfaction.



# Conclusions

While not a complete picture of children's thoughts and feelings about the play opportunities they have in their area, the large number of participants in this survey means that there is a strong likelihood that the findings would be similar had all children in Wales taken part.

In line with Welsh Government's policies relating to children and young people, the concept of play sufficiency is rights based, with children's rights seen not as held individually but as held in common. Sufficiency of play opportunity should therefore be the right of all children, rather than a privilege enjoyed by a few, and while the data presented here suggests that many children in Wales have the time, space and freedom to play, some do not.

## Time to play

- While most children in Wales go out to play most days, or at least a few days a week, a quarter of children might be seen as experiencing 'play poverty' in that they never, or hardly ever play out.
- More than one in five children said that they did not have enough time or would like more time to play. Many children clearly have less time to devote to play, with other evidence suggesting that their free-time is taken up by structured, educational or technology-based activities.

## Space to play

- While children told us that on average they play or hang out in around five different places, the most common places they played were each other's houses or gardens. While most children regularly 'play out' around a quarter of children in Wales rarely do so, and mainly 'play-in' with potential consequences for their well-being.
- The places children want to play in, are not always those that they are able to. Girls feel

more restricted than boys. Although children are generally satisfied with the places they are able to play in, many are very dissatisfied with the state of local designated play spaces (parks, playing fields).

## Freedom to play

- How safe children feel in the spaces they play is an important factor in whether they play out with links between their own feelings of safety, and the restrictions placed on them by parents (rules), and how independently mobile children are.
- The attitude towards children's play by adults within communities has an effect on their freedom to play, particularly for teenagers who are more likely to feel that adults have negative attitudes towards them playing or hanging out.

Overall, the picture presented by children across Wales is that when they are allowed out, and able to play in the places they want to, most children are happy with the choice of good quality spaces, and overall are satisfied with their play opportunities. Nonetheless, a number of factors would seem to be important in restricting children's rights and may be causes of harm.

Some children are time-poor with evidence from other sources suggesting that this is related to academic pressures and the 'over-scheduling' of children's lives. While some children excel from this, over-scheduling children's time has also been linked to stress and depression, amongst other mental health issues. Disabled children encounter further barriers that prevent them from spending their free time playing.

It is clear even from this limited evidence, that play is the default position for children, and they will intuitively seek out spaces to play. Play sufficiency is therefore an issue of spatial justice<sup>17</sup>

with children having a reasonable right to use their surroundings and not just be corralled into low-quality designated spaces or be subjected to negative adult attitudes.

Finally, the concept of 'surplus safety'<sup>18</sup> is highlighted by this data where parental restrictions – often with well-meaning concerns – result in children not being able to play out. Ironically, with such restrictions, children:

- may come to greater and longer-lasting harm as they miss out on important developmental experiences (physical development as well as social, intellectual and emotional development)

- are more likely to become overweight or obese, and to develop a range of health problems related to inactivity
- are exposed to higher levels of in-vehicle pollution, as they spend more time inside cars; and traffic danger is increased, paradoxically, by parents driving their children to keep them safe.

Surplus safety is also harmful to the broader community of children, and therefore wider society as it denies opportunities for children to exercise their rights of association, assembly and recreation.



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