

Disabled teenagers' experiences of access to inclusive leisure

Leisure is a key area in paving the way towards full community inclusion and participation. It takes on an additional significance for disabled young people when barriers to full participation in education and employment result in them having more time for leisure pursuits whilst simultaneously experiencing greater difficulty in accessing leisure services, activities, and pastimes. This project consulted with over 100 disabled teenagers to uncover their experience of 'inclusive leisure'. The teenagers said that:

-  **Disabled young people felt that their experiences at school/college strongly affected their access to friends and leisure outside school.**
-  **Many young disabled people described their lives being tainted with the experiences of isolation, loneliness and exclusion.**
-  **Whereas professionals viewed inclusive leisure as a means of learning life skills, increasing independence and/or self-esteem, young people focused on friendships and fun.**
-  **Whilst wanting to participate in ordinary, mainstream leisure activities, disabled young people welcomed the opportunity to meet with each other in order to share their mutual experience.**
-  **Lack of appropriate support (such as transport, personal assistance, and support to facilitate and/or interpret communication) was a major barrier to the participation of disabled young people in ordinary leisure activities. This was particularly apparent for disabled young people with complex impairments and high support needs.**
-  **Beyond the specific experience of exclusion due to impairment, the interests and concerns of disabled young people are no different from those of non-disabled teenagers.**

The context

This exploration of leisure, specifically 'access to inclusive leisure', was firmly placed within the context of legislation such as the Disability Discrimination Act 1995; the Human Rights Act 1998; and *Valuing people: A new strategy for learning disability for the 21st Century*, 2001. Policy initiatives such as the Quality Protects Programme (England); Children First (Wales) and the Framework for Social Justice (Scotland) all aim to bridge the gap between legislative aspirations and the daily experience of vulnerable young people. Such legislation and policy initiatives state that disabled young people have the right to be included in mainstream society and opportunities. A major source of frustration for young disabled people lay in the gap they perceived between the rhetoric of the Disability Discrimination Act and their common experience of being denied access to public transport, buildings and open spaces. Young disabled people felt that their lives were not valued highly enough to motivate policy-makers to give the legislation the 'bite' it requires to facilitate change; nor for service providers and the general public to make accessibility a priority.

"I find going shopping the hardest because:

1. I have major problems seeing some of the steps because most of them are not marked in a different colour so I am sometimes afraid to go down them.
2. Some shopping centres do not have stairs or lifts so I find it very difficult to go up escalators because I cannot see when to get off and on them and if someone else tells me they do not tell me quick enough." (Mita, 15)

What do we mean by 'inclusive' leisure?

'Inclusive' leisure was widely understood by service providers to be something that is done to and for disabled people rather than something that benefits everyone. In sharp contrast to this, young disabled people described leisure as being about friendships and fun; being with people they wanted to be with, and who wanted to be with them (see Table 1).

"I made loads of friends during the summer which always makes me happy. My best friend was Robert." (Becky, 16)

Having placed leisure firmly in the context of friendships and fun, young disabled people described their interests as being the same as those of all young people – music, bowling, clubbing, hanging out, going to the pictures, the pub, going out for meals, going on holiday etc. At present, they are not able to take access to such places for granted as they frequently face barriers including lack of physical access, lack of personal support, difficulties with transport and a lack of respect and common courtesy.

Barriers to friendship

"The biggest barrier is that I'm not allowed to go out on my own or with my friends. There is always an adult with us." (Sally, 16)

Young disabled people who had attended both mainstream and special schools explained how both set them apart from non-disabled pupils and in doing so created barriers to the building of friendships.

Table 1: Differing views of the benefits of 'inclusive leisure'

<i>Young disabled people</i>	<i>Service providers</i>
Friendships	Increasing personal independence
Having fun	Creating a safe learning environment
Peer support	Improving social skills
Sharing of mutual experience	Developing group work skills
Information	Establishing what real and informed choices are
Support to communicate	Developing the social esteem and confidence of the group

"Mainstream schools treat you differently to the other students." (James, 14)

"It's a bit harder being out in the real world after special school." (Ian, 19)

Both the experience of being in mainstream and in special school, therefore, resulted in disabled young people being isolated and lonely. Disabled young people attending special schools or integrated units in mainstream schools talked about the difficulties they had seeing their school friends out of school due to the fact that they often lived some distance away from school and each other. Disabled young people attending mainstream schools described the difficulties they experienced in making friends with non-disabled young people resulting from the different treatment they received within mainstream schools.

Several young disabled people with visual impairments spoke of the social exclusion they experienced as the result of being unable to read new and popular books – Harry Potter was the example given – at the same time as everyone else. Having to wait until the book was produced in large print, by which time their friends had stopped talking about it, they had been unable to participate in discussions at the time when the majority of their friends had been reading it. Such exclusion was felt keenly by the young people and had an adverse effect on their relationships with non-disabled teenagers.

"I am excluded from so much and I am so lonely and have few friends..." (Osian, 20)

Peer support

Many of the young people involved in this project, whilst wanting to be welcomed and included in mainstream leisure activities alongside non-disabled young people, attributed positive value to the existence of segregated clubs and holiday schemes. For Ben and Lizzie, the segregated leisure project in their hometown had "saved their lives". It was to the friends they made at this project that they turned

when they found themselves isolated in mainstream school. Sharing experiences with each other gave them the understanding that the problem did not lie with them as individuals but rather, within a disabling society.

"Coming to Atlantic College means that I get some freedom and a rest from my mum ... I get to meet new friends with the same problems I have."
(Emma, 16)

Access to appropriate support

"I can't always do the things I like, because I always need someone with me and I don't have transport."
(Dwayne, 17)

Several themes on the issue of support emerged – transport, money, personal assistance, physical support, communication support, medical support and the support to facilitate friendships. The denial of any or all of these types of support forced young disabled people into an increasing, rather than a decreasing, dependency on their parents giving disabled young people a more isolated experience from the majority of teenagers. The total lack of support or the provision of piecemeal, inappropriate support created barriers to the building of relationships between disabled and non-disabled young people.

Young people taking part in this project were keen to spend time with each other and were asking for and giving support to each other in a very natural way. In doing this, the support given becomes as ordinary as helping a friend.

"I am getting quite a lot of help at school. Recently I had decided to have no help in two of the lessons and right now my friend helps me in those lessons."
(Mita, 15)

Conclusion

In all conversations with young disabled people on the subject of inclusive leisure, the emphasis has been on friendship and fun. Whilst opportunities to try

out a range of leisure activities and pursuits are appreciated, it is the opportunity to be in mutually valued relationships that young disabled people identify as the key to the possibility of their inclusion in mainstream culture. Leisure provides a natural building ground for the development of relationships based on a common interest; placing such valued relationships in the mainstream allows discriminatory and oppressive attitudes to be broken down as natural enjoyment and positive relationships become visible.

About the project

The broad background to the research, spanning a period of 10 months in total, was made through networking with a large number of projects (mainly in the voluntary sector) providing leisure opportunities for young disabled people throughout the UK. From this initial information gathering, approximately 100 young disabled people from four different projects (in England and Wales) providing a range of leisure activities for disabled teenagers, then chose to participate more fully in the research. Another five young disabled people were involved from within their family situation. Professionals, ranging from project co-ordinators, development workers, and support workers also participated.

How to get further information

For more information please contact: Pippa Murray, Parents with Attitude, c/o 14 Jarrow Road, Sheffield, S11 8YB. Email: pippa@pippamurray.fsnet.co.uk.

The full report, **Hello! Are you listening? Disabled teenagers' experience of access to inclusive leisure** by Pippa Murray, is published for the Foundation by YPS (ISBN 1 84263 074 1, price £14.95).