

# A child's-eye view of social difference

Findings  
Informing change

September 2007

This participatory study explores children's views of social difference, with children guiding the research focus themselves. The children came from contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, 19 from a disadvantaged housing estate and 23 from an independent, fee-paying school. The research aims to raise awareness about social difference from a child's perspective and to inform Government strategies to eradicate poverty and social exclusion.

## Key points

- Key similarities between the children included:
  - Relationships and activities prioritised above their material circumstances;
  - Emphasis on the importance of education, free time, favourite things, and friends and family; and
  - Ownership of a similar core of most-valued possessions.
- None of the children identified themselves as poor or rich. Both groups of children stressed the importance of not being seen as different from their own peer group.
- 'Poverty' and 'wealth' were considered alien concepts by both groups of children, relating to 'other' people in extreme circumstances. However, the children perceived social difference in terms of 'chavs' and 'posh' people. Their perceptions of these groups were predominantly antagonistic in tone.
- The research found contrasting experiences of school:
  - Private school children had intensive school lives and were very positive about school.
  - The estate children were negative about education. Opportunities for after-school activities were limited, and school was associated with coercion and control.
- The research found marked differences in how children spent their free time:
  - Private school children's free time was structured and organised. They were involved in a wide range of cultural and sporting activities. The estate children's free time was dominated by street play and socialising with friends.
  - Private school children emphasised the importance of personal space within the home. Open public space was vitally important to the estate children's street play.
  - Private school children's free time was accompanied by adults. Though regulated by parents, estate children's street play was unsupervised. This meant they were more likely to be perceived as 'trouble'.

## The research

By the Centre for Research in Social Policy (CRSP), Loughborough University.

## Introduction

The research found a number of important similarities between the children. Despite their different socio-economic backgrounds, all the children saw relationships and activities as more important to them than what they owned or did not own. All the children stressed the importance of education, free time, their favourite things and family and friends. All owned a similar range of core most valued possessions, which included their pets, toys and games.

### Social difference: 'poor', 'rich', 'chavs' and 'posh'

The children did not see themselves as 'rich or 'poor'. Both groups of children emphasised the importance of not being seen as different from their own peer group and all were keen to be seen as 'average' along a continuum of poverty through to affluence. The estate children tended to 'talk up' what they owned. As one estate boy said, "I've got all the stuff I want". The private school children sometimes 'talked down' their material possessions, and particularly, played down their relative economic status.

'Rich' and 'poor' were terms that referred to those in extreme and absolute circumstances. Poverty was viewed by both groups of children as either belonging to those in the third world, or in the UK to homeless beggars. Being rich was associated both groups of children with having larger material possessions and more of them by. The children presented a richer and more in-depth discussion about social difference through their references to 'chavs' and 'posh people'. These terms were associated with lower and higher socio-economic circumstances respectively. The children's perceptions of both these groups were often antagonistic. For example, the estate children perceived being rich to equate with 'poshness'. Being rich and posh meant having few friends, being 'snobby' and mean. Estate children also perceived themselves as able to have fun whilst they believed that 'posh' children would have little fun in their lives. By contrast, private school children often perceived children who lived in council estates to be 'chavs', who were seen as badly behaved, with parents that did not care about them.

Boy 1: "Their parents would be a bad example, they would smoke in front of them and they would swear and drink, you know."

Boy 2: "The parents wouldn't care about them, would they? They wouldn't care what they do and just let them go off."  
(Older private school boys)

### The children's education and opportunities for the future

The children's educational experiences were very different. The private school children had long school days, far more homework and were involved in a wide range of after-school clubs and activities. By contrast, the estate children had shorter school days, were not as focused on their homework, and were involved in fewer after-school activities.

The private school children were involved in activities after and during school such as choir, chess, science, maths and orchestra clubs and a wide range of sporting activities such as rugby, netball, hockey, cricket, tennis, Tai Kwondo and swimming. Estate children, however, were aware that their involvement in any after-school activities would incur extra costs to their parents' and therefore limited their involvement accordingly. Some also commented that they would find it difficult to get home afterwards.

There were some differences in how the children saw their futures. The older estate girls tended to plan to avoid risks. For example, they were keen to avoid what they saw as ruining their futures by having children too early or by smoking, drinking and taking drugs. The older private school girls, on the other hand, tended to view the future in terms of obtaining professions. These included becoming doctors or vets.

Discipline was also much more of an issue for the estate children. Many of them talked about getting regular detentions and other forms of punishments at school and a few had been temporarily excluded. Compared with the private school children, the estate children associated school with coercive control. There was a certain status in skipping lessons, playing truant or misbehaving when in school. The older estate children in particular expressed a real sense of dissatisfaction with their schooling and the quality of the teaching they received. They believed that they were often not treated with respect by teachers, and were penalised unnecessarily when they requested more information or support.

Researcher: "Is life more unfair to some children than others?"

Girl 1: "Yes, it is. It's unfair for us because we have to just listen to teachers all the time."

Researcher: "But isn't that the same for all children?"

Girl 2: “No. It’s not, because if you’re rich you get to go to a posh school where the teachers probably teach you with respect.”  
(Older estate girls)

## Space and free time

The researchers found stark contrasts in how the different children spent their free time. Private school children led more ‘chaperoned’ lives than the estate children. They were often driven to and from friends’ houses, clubs and activities and so tended to be accompanied more often by adults. They took part in a wide variety of organised activities which frequently emphasised learning. These included riding, shooting, fishing, tennis and gymnastic lessons.

Amongst estate children, by contrast, free time was spent socialising and playing games in the streets and open spaces within their estate, unaccompanied by adults. Street play involved traditional hide and chase games. The estate children were particularly angry over the loss of some of their open space to local developers. For children in households with few resources, limited opportunities to attend organised activities and often restricted space, open space which enabled children to interact socially was vitally important in their lives. Owing to the nature of their street play, they were often visible and therefore open to sanctions from those in authority and neighbours within their estate. As one younger estate girl commented:

“There’s only one park and no one goes on anything because the 18-year-olds go on and vandalise everything. There’s a playground near the shops and if the police catch you they take you back to your house. You’re not allowed to go in.”  
(Younger estate girl)

The private school children on the other hand emphasised the importance of their own personal space within their homes and tended to play with their friends at home more than the estate children did.

The children’s parents’ parenting styles reflected their different socio-economic backgrounds and circumstances. For example, the private school parents’ actions were based on perceptions of latent risks to their children’s safety, and their fears were often heightened by media stories highlighting ‘hoodies’ and gun crime. Subsequently, private school children perceived their parents to ‘baby’ them, allowing them less freedom to go out unaccompanied than they sometimes would have liked. The estate children’s parents, on the other hand, based their concern for their children’s welfare on immediate or acute risks to their safety. Whilst the estate children’s friendship networks offered some protection from the risks of

street play, their parents also set down rules covering where and when their children played. They warned them of potential problem areas and against going into areas where alleged paedophiles or drug dealers gathered. Whether or not children are permitted to play in the streets without adult supervision does not reflect a simple dichotomy between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ parenting, and policy-making needs to be cautious to avoid fostering this assumption.

## Policy implications

The researchers conclude that the children’s different life experiences have implications for policies which focus on children, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

- The children’s antagonistic talk about social difference highlights the need for a more informed and reflective understanding of some of the issues associated with poverty and affluence. This could be addressed through including socio-economic difference in the citizenship education curriculum.
- The findings have implications for policies on extended schools, which seek to enable parents and children to access services and activities in schools throughout the day and all year round. Children and young people are unlikely to relish the prospect of longer days at school if they are only receiving ‘more of the same’ beyond their usual hours.
- The children’s different experience of free time highlights a number of challenges for policy. Street play and open space were vitally important to the children. However, the importance of open space for children – not just playground areas – does not appear to be recognised in programmes to promote cleaner, safer and greener communities and to improve the quality of public open spaces and residents’ quality of life.
- Children who play in the street, or socialise outside with their friends, are often regarded as a problem. The estate children, who would stand to benefit most from the introduction of Youth Opportunity Cards in England and Wales, might be in danger of further exclusion if they were then penalised for engaging in perceived ‘unacceptable behaviour’. Youth Opportunity Cards, which enable disadvantaged children to take up subsidised activities in the community, are only being trialled with 13- to 16-year-olds. The findings show that children from as young as eight would benefit from being able to take part in the scheme.
- The quality of parenting has also recently become a specific focus of social policy. Parents who allow

their children to play outside can be at risk of the charge of neglecting their parental responsibilities. However, the findings show that the estate children emphasised their parents' active role in setting and monitoring street play. The research thus points to the need to challenge assumptions about associations between street play, antisocial behaviour and inadequate parenting.

## About the project

Forty-two children took part in the research from two contrasting backgrounds. Nineteen were from a disadvantaged estate and participated in services provided by Save the Children and Groundwork. Twenty-three were recruited from a fee-paying independent school. Each set of children took part in separate groups of younger (8- to 11-year-old) and older (11- to 13-year-old) boys and girls. The fieldwork took place from August 2005 to February 2006. The research was participatory in approach and design. Methods included role-play, mapping, 'draw and write', photography and 'walkabouts' with the children.

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## For further information

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The full report, **A child's-eye view of social difference**, by Liz Sutton, Noel Smith, Chris Dearden and Sue Middleton is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation. It is available as a free download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk).

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