



**Growing Up
in Ireland**
National Longitudinal
Study of Children



**QUALITATIVE RESEARCH REPORT
NUMBER 1**

Growing Up in Ireland

National Longitudinal Study of Children

CHILD COHORT - Qualitative Study

The Findings of the Qualitative Study with the
9-Year-Olds and their Parents

Growing Up in Ireland

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THE FINDINGS OF THE QUALITATIVE STUDY

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	3
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	8
1. Introduction	9
2. Conceptual framework	9
3. Design and methods	9
3.1 Profile of children and families	10
3.2 Data analysis	10
4. Children’s perceptions of health and well-being	11
5. Children’s self-perception, body image, and gender identity	11
6. Children’s perception of parenting	11
7. Children and their families	12
8. Children and their neighbourhoods	12
9. Life satisfaction and wishes and fears	12
10. Children’s activities	13
11. Peer relationships	13
12. Children’s perception of adolescence	14
13. Being a parent of a nine-year-old	14
14. Family decision-making	15
15. Parents’ aspirations and concerns for their children	15
16. Summary	16
SECTION 1 - THE CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY	17
CHAPTER 1 - INTRODUCTION	18
1.1 Background	19
1.2 The Aims of the Study	19
1.3 The Approach to the Qualitative Research	20
1.4 Structure of the Report	21
CHAPTER 2 - DESIGN AND METHODS	22
2.1 Introduction	23
2.2 The Domains of the Qualitative Study	23
2.3 The Methods used during the Child’s Interview	24
2.3.1 Ice-breaker activities	24
2.3.2 Draw and write technique	24
2.3.3 Visual prompts	25
2.3.4 Activities & worksheet exercises	25
2.3.5 Essay writing	26
2.4 The Methods used during the Parents’ Interview	26
2.4.1 The photographs	26
2.5 Data Collection	26
2.6 Data Analysis	27
2.7 Ethical Issues	28
CHAPTER 3 - THE PROFILE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES	29
3.1 Introduction	30
3.2 The Sampling Approach	30
3.3 Response Rate	31
3.3.1 Reasons for non-participation	31
3.4 Age and Gender of Children	32
3.5 Family Structure	32
3.6 The Geographical Spread of the Sample	33

3.7 Socio-economic status	34
3.8 Diversity among the Children	35
SECTION 2 - THE CHILDREN'S INTERVIEWS	36
CHAPTER 4 - CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF WELL-BEING AND HEALTH	37
4.1 Introduction	38
4.2 Understanding Well-Being and Health	38
4.3 The Children's Own Well-Being and Health	39
4.4 Experience of Illness	39
4.5 Perception of Weight	41
4.5.1 Understanding of obesity	41
4.5.2 Understanding of Being Thin	42
4.6 Perception of Smoking and Alcohol	44
4.6.1 Perception of smoking	44
4.6.2 Perception of alcohol	45
4.7 Summary	46
CHAPTER 5 - CHILDREN'S SELF-PERCEPTION, BODY IMAGE AND GENDER IDENTITIES	48
5.1 Introduction	49
5.2 Self-perception	49
5.2.1 Physical appearance	49
5.2.2 Personal traits	50
5.3 The Children's Body Image Scale (CBIS)	52
5.3.1 Perception of Body Image	56
5.4 Gender Identity	61
5.4.1 Physical appearance	61
5.4.2 Personality traits	62
5.4.3 Gender stereotyping	63
5.4.4 Hobbies and activities	64
5.5. Summary	64
CHAPTER 6 - CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF PARENTING	65
6.1 Introduction	66
6.2 The Role of a Parent	66
6.3 Positive Parenting	67
6.4 Rules and Boundaries	70
6.5 Methods of Discipline	71
6.6 Changing the Rules	73
6.7 Summary	74
CHAPTER 7 - CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES	75
7.1 Introduction	76
7.2 Relationships with Parents	76
7.3 Relationships with Siblings	81
7.4 Relationships with Grandparents	84
7.5 Relationships with Extended Family	87
7.6 Relationships with Pets	89
7.7 Dealing with Loss	89
7.8 Summary	91
CHAPTER 8 - CHILDREN AND THEIR NEIGHBOURHOOD	92
8.1 Introduction	93
8.2 Perception of their Neighbourhood	93
8.3 Perception of Children in Society	98
8.4 Summary	101

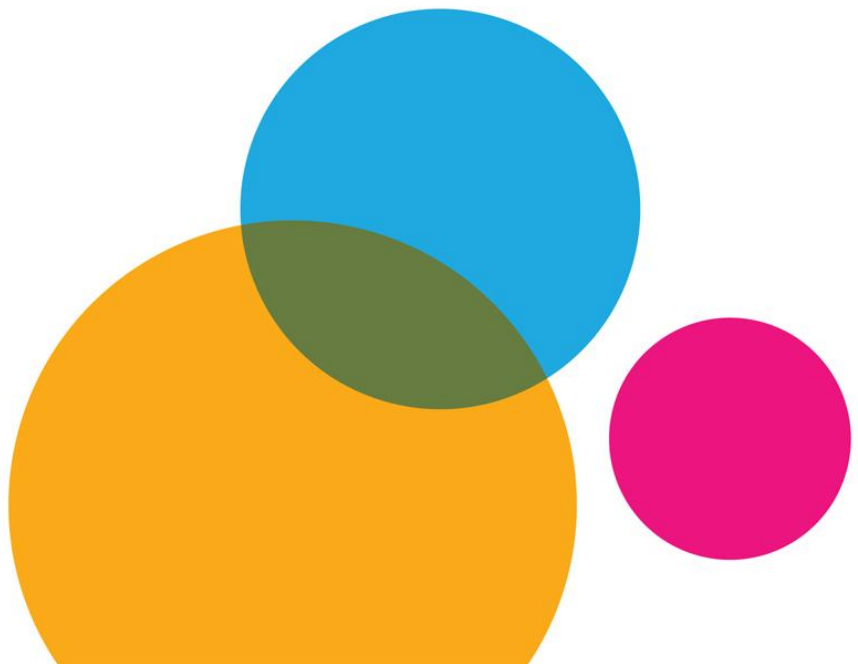
CHAPTER 9 - LIFE SATISFACTION AND WISHES & FEARS	102
9.1 Introduction	103
9.2 The Life Ladder	103
9.3 Making Life Better for Children	104
9.4 Hopes and Dreams for the Future	107
9.5 Fears and Worries for the Future	111
9.6 Summary	116
CHAPTER 10 - CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES	117
10.1 Introduction	118
10.2 Structured Activities	118
10.3 Participation in Unstructured Activities	120
10.4 Spending Time with Family	124
10.5 Selecting Activities	125
10.6 Summary	127
CHAPTER 11 - PEER RELATIONSHIPS	128
11.1 Introduction	129
11.2 Social Networks	129
11.3 Communicating with Friends	131
11.4 Bullying	132
11.5 Summary	135
CHAPTER 12 - CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF ADOLESCENCE	136
12.1 Introduction	137
12.2 Physical Development	137
12.3 Socio-Emotional & Cognitive Development	139
12.4 Relationships with Family	140
12.5 Peer Relationships	141
12.6 Interests and Activities	144
12.7 The Transition to Secondary School	146
12.8 Summary	148
SECTION 3 - THE PARENTS' INTERVIEWS	149
CHAPTER 13 - BEING A PARENT OF A 9-YEAR-OLD	150
13.1 Introduction	151
13.2 Parenting in 2009	151
13.3 The Rewards of Parenting	152
13.4 The Challenges of Parenting	154
13.5 Supports for Parents	158
13.6 Relieving Stress	160
13.7 Summary	163
CHAPTER 14 - FAMILY DECISION MAKING	164
14.1 Introduction	165
14.2 Making Family Decisions	165
14.3 Involving the Child in Decisions	168
14.4 Summary	171
CHAPTER 15 - PARENTS' ASPIRATIONS AND CONCERNS FOR THEIR CHILDREN	172
15.1 Introduction	173
15.2 Parents' Aspirations for their Children	173
15.3 Parent's Concerns for their Children	176
15.4 Building Resilience	178
15.5 Summary	179



SECTION 4 - CASE STUDIES	181
Introduction	182
Daniel	183
John	185
Molly	187
Sarah	189
Carol	191
REFERENCES	193
APPENDICES	195



Executive Summary





1. INTRODUCTION

The qualitative studies which are part of *Growing Up in Ireland* involve interviews with sub-samples of 122 children and their parents. They are designed to complement the quantitative studies of 8,570 nine-year-olds and 11,100 nine-month-olds. This is the first report on the qualitative study with the nine-year-olds.

The broad aim of the *Growing up in Ireland* study is to examine factors which contribute to or undermine the well-being of children in contemporary Ireland. The output from the study is expected to contribute to the formulation of effective policies and design of services which address issues pertinent to the lives of children and their families. The study is closely aligned to the National Children's Strategy (2000) which identifies as one of its principal aims that children's lives will be better understood, and will benefit from evaluation, research, and information on their needs and rights and on the effectiveness of services.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework adopted by *Growing Up in Ireland* emphasises children's connectedness to the world in which they live. The study embraces a dynamic systems perspective founded on five insights from different disciplines: ecology, dynamic connectedness, probabilism, period effects, and the agency of the child in the developmental process (Greene et al., 2009). The bioecological model proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner is a key tool in operationalising this perspective. This model highlights the importance of considering the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of the influences on development over the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). To emphasise this conceptualisation of children and in recognition of children's agency in their own lives, the qualitative study gives a more rounded picture of the children as individuals, in order to get a stronger sense of the complexity and diversity of each child's experience of the world. The qualitative study is child-centred in that child issues and children's experience are the primary focus.

3. DESIGN AND METHODS

Interview schedules for the qualitative study were developed for use with children and parents. The selection of questions and interview methods was informed by the literature review and guided by an advisory panel of experts in qualitative research. In addition, the Children's Advisory Forum (CAF), a panel of children established by *Growing Up in Ireland*, was involved in the design and selection of the methods. The CAF was made up of 84 children who sat on 12 committees in schools across Ireland. The developmental appropriateness of the methods was tested by the CAF and through pre-pilot and pilot assessment.

The child's interview schedule was semi-structured and designed to be both interesting and enjoyable for the nine-year-old participants, while also gathering important information for the study. A variety of prompts and activities were interspersed with the interview questions. To cater for children with diverse abilities, a mixture of visual and verbal methods was also employed. All interview schedules and materials can be found in Appendix 1.

The main topics explored in the interview with the nine-year-old child were:

1. Wellness, health, and physical development;
2. Emotional development;
3. Child's relationships;
4. Growing up and transition to adolescence;
5. Family and parenting;
6. Community, neighbourhood and sense of citizenship.

The methods used were:

- *Ice-breaker activities:*
 - My Time Capsule
 - My Passport
- Draw and Write technique (Backett-Milburn & McKie, 1999)
- *Visual prompts:*
 - Children's Body Image Scale (Truby & Paxton, 2002)
 - Feelings cards
- *Activity sheets:*
 - My Hand
 - Life Ladder (Cantril, 1965)
 - My Activities Calendar
 - My Family and Me map (Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996)
- *Writing:*
 - When I am 13 years old
 - Letter to the Minister for Children

In the interviews with parents, family photographs were used as an ice-breaker and to generate discussion of family routines, activities and relationships. The topics explored in the parents' interview included:

1. Parents' perception of the child
2. Parent-child relationship
3. Perception of being a parent
4. Family decision-making
5. Parental concerns and aspirations for their children

3.1 Profile of children and families

A total of 120 families from the nine-year cohort participated in the qualitative study. There were 58 girls (47.5%) and 64 (52.5%) boys, including two sets of twins. During the quantitative study, the families were invited to sign a consent form to have their name put forward for selection into the qualitative sample. The qualitative sample was stratified according to socio-economic status, rurality, and number of resident parents, with reference to the characteristics of the achieved sample.

3.2 Data analysis

A combination of inductive and deductive coding was used. The coding structures for inductive analysis were based on the topics covered by the interview schedules which map onto the domains of the main study. The questions asked of the participants were framed by the ecological perspective on child development and by hypotheses derived from the literature about what influences children's lives and the course of their development. Each interview was analysed by topic. Thematic analysis entailed the examination of data to deduce patterns in participants' responses, which were coded as emerging themes.



4. CHILDREN'S PERCEPTIONS OF HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The children were asked to talk, write or draw about the factors that contribute to keeping them healthy and well. For many of the children, their understanding of well-being was associated primarily with physical health. The main factors that children felt contributed to keeping them physically well and healthy were diet and exercise. In terms of diet, most of the children listed a healthy diet made up of lots of fruit and vegetables as the key factor contributing to their health.

"Eating fruit. An apple a day keeps the doctor away! Vegetables – you must eat your greens!" (Boy)

"Well, I would actually think that running around the garden and jumping up and down would be good exercise" (Boy)

The children perceived smoking as having a detrimental effect on health outcomes and described their understanding of the physical damage smoking can have on the body. Drinking alcohol in moderation was viewed as acceptable but excessive consumption was seen as unhealthy and potentially very damaging to people's lives.

"Well [smoking is] not very healthy for you 'cause it damages your lungs and, well like, it's disgusting to see as well 'cause loads of people just throw them on the ground as well" (Boy)

"You can get drunk. You can binge drink and it affects your memory" (Boy)

5. CHILDREN'S SELF-PERCEPTION, BODY IMAGE, AND GENDER IDENTITY

Using the My Hand activity sheet, the children were asked to write down five words to describe themselves. The majority appeared to possess a lot of self-confidence and on the whole their self-perception was very positive. The strongest themes in children's self-perception were physical appearance and personal traits.

"I am kind. I get grumpy quite easy. Have lots of friends because I am kind and helpful. I am small and I am thin because most of my clothes don't fit me" (Girl)

The children did not think that looks were particularly important; instead they valued individuality. Some gender differences were identified, mainly about dress and preferred activities.

6. CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF PARENTING

The children were asked a series of questions about parenting, including what they felt it would be like to be a parent and what they perceived to contribute to positive parenting. They were also asked to describe the rules in their homes and how they were disciplined. The strongest theme on parenting was responsibility; children recognised the time, effort, and energy required to take care of them.

"Well, I would have to cook, clean, I would have to work, listen to the children nag, listen to them fight" (Girl)

Most of the children could list some rules that they must follow at home, mostly related to behaviour, doing chores, and bedtime. They also described the discipline strategies used by their parents, which ranged from being sent to their rooms or grounded to, in a small number of cases, physical punishment.



7. CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Many of the children appeared to enjoy a very close relationship with their mother. Typically, the children spent most of their time with their mother and in many cases mothers were at home when the children finished school.

“Every day after school we talk, we have a chat. [...] Sometimes we play with each other and just last week we were dancing with each other in the kitchen” (Boy)

Fathers’ involvement was mainly in their children’s sporting activities and boys in particular seemed to enjoy their fathers helping them with their sporting pursuits.

“Yeah, we get on good ‘cause he helps me with my sports and to help me get better with my hurling and soccer and all that stuff” (Boy)

Children reported mixed relationships with their siblings, shifting quickly from getting along well to fighting.

“Play football and play the Playstation and sometimes we would read our books together and watch programmes although sometimes he is quite mean. [...] He says mean things about me or kicks me” (Girl)

Finally, children described very close relationships with their grandparents.

“Well, my Nana takes me everywhere because she minds me after school. I get on really good with my grandad as well” (Boy)

8. CHILDREN AND THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS

The children were asked to talk, write or draw about their ideas of what it is like to live in their neighbourhood. Overall, they appeared to be content with where they lived. Many discussed the positive attributes of their communities, which mostly centred on proximity to friends and facilities for children. Urban and rural areas both offered valued amenities.

“There’s loads of green and there’s a big green across the way and I can play soccer there” (Boy, urban)

“It is not noisy and you can walk in the woods and it is really close” (Boy, rural)

However, many of the children described how some of places in their neighbourhoods were badly maintained.

“There’s rubbish thrown around some places. [...] I’d take away the rubbish and if the paint was getting peeled I’d paint it” (Boy)

9. LIFE SATISFACTION AND WISHES AND FEARS

Cantril’s (1965) Self-Anchoring Ladder asks people to rate their satisfaction with life on a scale from zero to 10, anchored by their own identified values (Cantril, 1965). For the 122 children in the qualitative study, the mean score was 8.13 ($SD = 1.66$). Over half the children (51%) gave a score of nine or higher regarding their life satisfaction. When asked to give reasons for their scores, children reported that their

life satisfaction was influenced by factors such as comparison to others' lives, positive and negative experiences in their own lives, and how they were getting on in specific areas of their life, such as school.

"Because some people are more fortunate than you and some aren't. The people in Africa might circle zero and people with loads of money might circle ten" (Girl)

As with this example, the children in the study generally showed a keen awareness of poverty, unemployment, the environment and other issues.

The children were asked to create a wishes and fears list. Among their responses, four main themes emerged: health, relationships, financial security, and disasters. Some children had a clear image of how they wished their life to be.

"Fashion designer equals job, marriage to [boy], a good life, twins, like babies, get my own shop to do my own fashion designs, a good home for my children and my husband plus me, picture of my past when I am older, jewellery, and I want a snow mobile" (Girl)

10. CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES

The primary distinction in how children spent their time was between structured and unstructured activities. Structured activities can be described as those that are highly organised and occur on a predictable or timetabled schedule. Free time was also spent in unstructured activities at home, such as watching television, free play, or in the local community with friends.

"On Mondays I do basketball and I used to do a cycling course, Tuesdays I do soccer and TV, Wednesday I do basketball, Thursday I do hurling, Friday I do kickboxing, Saturday and Sunday I do TV" (Boy)

Most of the children's time at weekends was spent with their parents and their siblings. Common activities included trips to the shopping centre, to the cinema, and to visit grandparents.

11. PEER RELATIONSHIPS

Throughout the interviews, children talked about their network of friends from school and from the neighbourhood, and the various activities in which they were involved. Friendships clearly played an important role in their lives and the majority of children spoke about having a wide network of friends, with a smaller number of best friends. Friendships were established through shared activities and through proximity at home or in school.

For children of this age group, parents played an important role in facilitating peer interactions outside school. Arrangements were made between parents, and children were taken to and collected from their friends' houses. Only a small number of children used mobiles and texting to make direct contact with their friends.

I: "And if you wanted to go over to your friend's house how would you get in touch with them?"

C: "In school we talk, in school we do loads of stuff. [Outside school] like we have to organise things with their mam and dads" (Girl)

Bullying and the appropriate response to bullies were also discussed in the interviews. Bullying was described as 'a horrible thing' which made victims 'very sad' or 'scared and worried'. Children described physical, verbal, exclusion and electronic bullying. Reasons for bullying included differences in body size, ethnicity and appearance. When asked who they would tell about bullying, teachers and parents were



the people most often mentioned, though there was sometimes reluctance to disclose bullying, possibly reflecting the threat of a further negative response by the bully or bullies.

"I never really told Mum because I didn't want to be called more names by the person if Mum went in" (Boy)

12. CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF ADOLESCENCE

During the interviews, the children explored the changes that will happen to them as they enter adolescence. Discussion ranged across physical, emotional, and practical changes.

"Em, I think my voice would change" (Boy)

"I think I will be grown up and mature" (Girl)

"Well, you would have to do more jobs around the house because you're able to do more, and you'd probably have to do more work at home" (Girl)

Relationships both within families and with peers were expected to change in adolescence. Many of the children viewed adolescence as a time of increased independence and envisaged themselves having a lot more freedom and choice than at nine years of age.

"Be more free, with parents not following you around like when you are my age" (Girl)

"You would be allowed to go more places on your own and call for your friends and that, so that would be exciting" (Boy)

Finally, the transition to secondary school was raised as an important time in the lives of young adolescents. The children spoke with both anxiety and excitement of making this transition.

"School will be very hard 'cause all the subjects will be different and a lot harder" (Boy)

13. BEING A PARENT OF A NINE-YEAR-OLD

Both mothers and fathers included in the study were overwhelmingly positive about being parents. The positive aspects of parenting included the love they receive from their children, the fun they share with their children, nurturing their children, and watching them grow and develop.

"The love, I suppose, and the companionship of your children" (Mother)

"When you see progress in your children it gives you a sense of enjoyment and a sense of achievement" (Father)

Parents offered an insight into how they viewed parenting in the current social context compared with their own upbringing. They noted the increasing number of sources of anxiety, from threats to personal safety to the pressure of modern lifestyles.

“Scary, in a word, because, well I suppose, you are looking out and you are trying to do the best for them and get a good education because I know from my own background if you don’t have a good education you are not going to get a good job” (Father)

“It is a difficult world out there now the way things are, and with things like drink and drugs and pressures from friends, I suppose pressures on children themselves and on teenagers” (Mother)

Parents generally indicated that they coped well in meeting these challenges, with the support of family and friends. They had different ways of relaxing and making time for themselves away from the children. Some parents engaged in separate activities: fathers tended to play a sport or go to the pub while mothers mentioned shopping, walking or meeting up with friends. The role of the extended family, in particular the role of grandparents, was important in allowing parents to have some free time.

14. FAMILY DECISION-MAKING

Generally, parents felt that they had similar viewpoints and made joint decisions for the family; this applied equally to most separated couples. The discussion around making decisions offered an insight into the parents’ relationship with each other and how they approach parenting together. Many parents described how it is important to come together on decisions and adopt similar approaches with the child.

“We both sit down and discuss [it. ...] If something was happening we would have a chat about it” (Mother)

The parents discussed the role of the child in the decision-making process. A common theme among the families was that, rather than participating in all decision-making, children are consulted on issues affecting their lives directly. On the whole the parents appeared to encourage children to put forward their views and opinions, although decisions were ultimately taken by the parents.

15. PARENTS’ ASPIRATIONS AND CONCERNS FOR THEIR CHILDREN

The parents appeared to have a hierarchy of hopes and dreams for their children’s future. Their primary goal was for their children to be happy and healthy. Other hopes and dreams included: reaching their potential, developing positive personality traits, and achieving educational and career success. For many of the parents, their hopes and dreams for their children appeared to have been influenced by the lack of opportunities they themselves may have experienced growing up.

“That she grows up happy and she is happy with her life and that she does something she wants to do and enjoys doing it and she doesn’t feel under pressure to conform to anyone else’s ideas. That she ends up doing something she is happy with whatever it might be” (Mother)

Parents’ concerns at the most general level were for their children’s health; more specific issues such as mental health problems and drug and alcohol abuse were also discussed. Responding to the current economic uncertainty, some parents also talked about fear of unemployment and emigration, both in their own and their children’s futures.



16. SUMMARY

This report presents the results of the qualitative interviews with children and their parents across the domains addressed in *Growing Up in Ireland*. In general, it presents a picture of happy, active, optimistic children developing well across a range of areas. However, both children and parents referred to the approach of adolescence and the increasing challenges associated with that stage of development. The design of the sample and of the interview schedules enabled the qualitative study to capture the diversity of children's experiences and circumstances. The lives of children from all over Ireland, from different points on the socio-economic spectrum, and from many types of families are represented here. They shared their experiences and concerns on everything from healthy eating and hobbies to their expectations for life in adolescence and beyond.

Each chapter of this report deals with a distinct domain of child development but this is not to suggest that these domains can be divorced from the rest of a child's experiences; they are all inter-related. Five case studies, presented in Section 4, highlight the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of each child's development.



Section 1

THE CONTEXT FOR THE STUDY





Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION





1.1 Background

Growing Up in Ireland (GUI) is the national longitudinal study of children in Ireland, launched in 2006. The study is funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in association with the Department of Social Protection and the Central Statistics Office. The main aim of the study is to describe the status of two representative samples of children in Ireland and how they are developing in the current social, economic and cultural environment. This information will be used to assist in policy formation and in the provision of services which will ensure that all children will have the best possible start in life. The study incorporates a mixed-methods approach, combining both quantitative and qualitative methods, to gain a holistic understanding of children's lives in Ireland.

The first phase of the study, extending over seven years, follows the progress of two groups of children: 8,570 nine-year-olds and 11,100 nine-month-olds. During this time two sweeps of quantitative data will be conducted with each group of children. Smaller-scale qualitative studies, each involving 122 children and families drawn from the main cohorts, take place shortly after each sweep. This paper focuses on qualitative research with children and represents the findings of the first wave of qualitative research conducted with a sample of 122 children and their parents from the nine-year cohort of **GUI**.

The Study Team has carried out an extensive review of literature pertaining to children from this age group.¹ This literature review examines the factors that can influence physical, cognitive and socio-emotional development, mental health and educational outcomes for children. The Study Team also conducted a review of qualitative research with children to explore the following issues: methodological and ethical considerations in conducting qualitative research with children; assessing rigour in qualitative research; different qualitative research encounters; visual, creative and play-based techniques; and the analysis of qualitative data.²

1.2 The Aims of the Study

GUI has nine stated objectives:

1. To describe the lives of children in Ireland, to establish what is typical and normal as well as what is atypical and problematic
2. To chart the development of children over time, to examine the progress and well-being of children at critical periods from birth to adulthood
3. To identify the key factors that, independently of others, most help or hinder children's development
4. To establish the effects of early childhood experiences on later life
5. To map dimensions of variation in children's lives
6. To identify the persistent adverse affects that lead to social disadvantage and exclusion, educational difficulties, ill health and deprivation
7. To obtain children's views and opinions on their lives to inform policy-making
8. To provide a bank of data on the whole child
9. To provide evidence for the creation of effective and responsive policies and services for children and families

The conceptual framework adopted by **GUI** emphasises children's connectedness to the world in which they live.³ The study embraces a dynamic systems perspective founded on five insights from different disciplines: ecology, dynamic connectedness, probabilism, period effects, and the active role or agency

¹ See GUI Research Paper 2 in the **Growing Up in Ireland** Literature Review Series, *Review of the Literature Pertaining to the Child Cohort at 9 Years*

² See GUI Research Paper 1 in the **Growing Up in Ireland** Qualitative Literature Review Series *Qualitative Research Methodology: Review of the Literature and its Application to the Qualitative Component of Growing Up in Ireland*.

³ See Research Paper 1 in the **Growing Up in Ireland** Literature Review Series, *Background and Conceptual Framework*.

of the child in the developmental process. The bioecological model proposed by Urie Bronfenbrenner is a key tool in operationalising this perspective. This model highlights the importance of considering the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of the influences on development over the life course (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1993; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). **GUI** also embraces the whole-child perspective which is central to the National Children's Strategy (2000). Accordingly, in approaching the design and conduct of the study, an attempt is made to see each child as a person, not just as an aggregate of variables and outcomes.

To emphasise this conceptualisation of children and in recognition of children's agency in their own lives, the qualitative study gives a more rounded picture of the children as individuals to get a stronger sense of the complexity and diversity of each child's experience of the world. The whole study is child-centred in that child issues and child outcomes are the primary focus.

1.3 The Approach to the Qualitative Research

A total of 120 families from the nine-year cohort participated in the first data-collection wave of the qualitative study. Two of these families included nine-year old twin siblings. The sample of 122 children is not representative of all nine-year olds in Ireland, so it cannot be claimed that the qualitative sample is speaking for all children. However, the sample selected was drawn from the 8,500 child respondents in the quantitative study forming the nine-year-old cohort with reference to the characteristics of the achieved sample. The sample was purposive and stratified according to socio-economic status, gender, urban/rural location and family type.

The qualitative study with children and their parents complements the findings of the quantitative study by exploring further the same key domains. The qualitative component maps the quantitative domains by focusing on the child's experiences and perspectives in relation to: Wellness, Health and Physical Development; Emotional Development; Relationships; Growing Up; Family and Parenting; and Community, Neighbourhood and Sense of Citizenship. The interviews with the parents centre on the following themes: their perception of their child; parent-child relationship; being a parent in Ireland; service use; family decision-making; and concerns and aspirations for their children.

The schedule developed for the qualitative study consisted of two components; one interview for the children and one for the parents. The selection of methods was informed by the literature and guided by an advisory panel of experts in qualitative research. In addition, a panel of children established by **GUI**, the Children's Advisory Forum (CAF) was involved in the design and selection of the methods. The CAF is made up of 84 children who sit on 12 committees in schools across Ireland. The developmental appropriateness of the methods was tested by the CAF and through pre-pilot and pilot assessment.⁴

The child interview was semi-structured and designed to be both interesting and enjoyable for the nine-year-old participants, while also gathering important information for the study. A variety of prompts and game-like elements were interspersed with the interview questions. To cater for children with diverse abilities, a mixture of visual and verbal methods was also employed. Photographs taken by the family specifically for the study were used as prompts throughout the interviews with the parents. Bearing in mind the longitudinal nature of the study, the methods chosen captured the children's and parents' current views and experiences and their anticipation of life when the child is 13, the age at which they will be interviewed again as part of **GUI**.

⁴ A report on the pilot study was produced on 15th February 2008.



1.4 Structure of the Report

This report focuses on the findings of the first wave of qualitative research conducted with the nine-year cohort of **GUI**. The report is comprised of four sections:

- *Section One* describes the context for the study, the research design and methodology, and the profiles of the children and their families.
- *Section Two* presents the findings from the children's interviews, including: the children's perceptions of wellness and health; the children's body image and self-perception; the children's perception of parenting; the children and their families; the children and their neighbourhoods; the children's life satisfaction, hopes and dreams; and the children's perception of growing up.
- *Section Three* introduces the findings from the parent interviews and describes: the parent-child relationship; being a parent in Ireland; family decision-making; and the parents' concerns, hopes and dreams for their children.
- Finally, in *Section Four*, six diverse case studies of individual children are profiled, capturing the whole-child perspective and highlighting the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of child development over the life course.

Throughout the report the voices of the children and the parents in the qualitative study are quoted verbatim, with due reference to their anonymity, and a portrait is drawn of the children and the quality and character of their lives, their thoughts and their feelings. It is hoped that the qualitative data provide information which people can more readily identify with, alongside the valuable statistics generated by the quantitative studies.



Chapter 2

DESIGN AND METHODS





2.1 Introduction

This chapter describes the design of the qualitative research and the methods used to explore the key domains with the nine-year cohort. A lengthy preparatory stage preceded the choice of research methods to ensure that the most appropriate methods were selected to address the research questions. This groundwork stage involved: the establishment of a panel of experts in qualitative research; a review of qualitative research methods described in published research literature (Greene & Harris, 2011); the involvement of children in the design of methods through the Children's Advisory Forum; pre-pilot and pilot testing, and refinement of methods. The research design was subject to scrutiny by an ethics committee and ethical approval was obtained for the pilot and main qualitative fieldwork. The qualitative schedule is included in Appendix 1.

2.2 The Domains of the Qualitative Study

The areas explored in the qualitative study map onto the domains of the main quantitative study to provide a deeper understanding of the children's experiences of being nine years old in Ireland and their parents' experiences of their parenting role. Separate schedules were developed to interview the child and the parents. The children were interviewed by the researcher in the family home, with another familiar adult (typically the parent) in the same room. The researchers followed an interview guide consisting of specific questions addressing the domains to be explored, with probing questions used where appropriate to explore responses in more depth. The order of the themes was considered so that potentially sensitive areas were placed later in the interview when it was hoped the child would feel more relaxed and comfortable talking to the researcher. An overview of the main themes explored in the interview with the nine-year-old child is provided below:

1. *Wellness, health and physical development*: What is the children's understanding of the factors that help or hinder them in being physically healthy? What feelings and interpretations do they attach to being well or unwell? What is their understanding of physical development and their perception of body image?
2. *Emotional development*: What is the children's understanding of emotional development? How do they recognise different emotions and feelings? What perception do they have of themselves and their daily life? What hope, fears and aspirations do they have?
3. *Child's relationships*: How do the children perceive their relationships with friends? What is their understanding of the factors that help or hinder the development of peer relationships?
4. *Growing up*: What is the children's understanding of growing up? How do they perceive the transition from nine to 13 years of age? How do they imagine they will be at age 13?
5. *Family and parenting*: What is the children's understanding of their family's dynamic, of their role and relationships within the family? What is their understanding of the role of a parent? What do they perceive as positive parenting?
6. *Community, neighbourhood and sense of citizenship*: How do the children perceive their local community and neighbourhood? What is their understanding of a positive community life in Ireland? What aspects of life in Ireland do they enjoy and what would they like to change?

The parents were interviewed after their child and encouraged, where possible, to find a place for the interview where they could not be heard by the child. The aim of the qualitative component with parents was to gain further understanding of what it is like being the parent of a nine-year-old child growing up in Ireland. The themes explored in the parents' interview include:

1. *Parents' perception of the child*: How do parents view their child's personality, interests, nature and temperament?

2. *Parent-child relationship*: What factors support or prevent the parents and child from doing things together? What types of everyday activities do the child and parent do together? What places and spaces are important in their relationship?
3. *Perception of being a parent*: What is the parents' understanding of being a parent in Ireland? What rewards, difficulties or challenges do parents face? What supports do parents avail of to help them in their parenting role?
4. *Family decision-making*: How are decisions made within the family? What level of involvement, if any, has the child in the decision-making process?
5. *Parental concerns and aspirations for their children*: What concerns do parents have for their children at nine years of age and as they grow older? What do parents aspire for their children as they grow up in Ireland? What are the hopes and dreams they have for them in the future?

2.3 The Methods used during the Child's Interview

The child's semi-structured interview lasted around one hour. It was designed to be both interesting and fun for the nine-year-old participants, adopting a multi-method participatory approach, which allowed the children to express themselves through a variety of alternative forms of communication. These techniques, each of which is described below, included: ice-breaker activities, draw and write techniques; worksheets and exercises; the use of visual and verbal prompts; essay and letter writing. A copy of these methods is included with the qualitative schedule in Appendix 1.

2.3.1 Ice-breaker activities

Two ice-breaker techniques were used at the start of the child's interview: 'My Time Capsule' and 'My Passport'. Participants were first introduced to the concept of creating a time capsule. They were provided with a poster tube and invited to create a time capsule in which to place all the end products of the activities, drawings and exercises created during the interview. They were encouraged to personalise their capsules using markers, crayons and colouring pencils.

The children were also presented with the opportunity to create their own 'time travelling' passport. They were asked to complete a blank passport card where they completed details of their name, age and address, and listed the music, movies, food, colours and hobbies they liked. They also recorded the one thing they liked the most and the one thing they hated the most. Each child was also invited to have their photograph taken by the researcher, using an instant polaroid camera, to be put onto the passport card.

These techniques were relatively undemanding on the children and served a dual purpose: first, to ease them into the study by generating non-taxing talking points (e.g. favourite food) and, second, to help them understand the longitudinal nature of the study by explaining that a researcher would return at the next data-collection wave with the Time Capsule containing all their completed worksheets, including their 'passport', so that the children could see what aspects of themselves were different or still the same.

2.3.2 Draw and write technique

The draw and write technique involved inviting children to draw or write a response to a research question, rather than only reply verbally. The structure of the interview stressed the importance of allowing time for the children to interpret the meaning and context of their drawings or written work. The technique was used to explore various themes throughout the semi-structured interview with the child including: wellness, health and physical development; emotional development; family and parenting; and community, neighbourhood and sense of citizenship. With regard to wellness and health, the children were invited to write or draw those factors contributing to keeping them well or making them unwell. Further on in the interview, the draw and write technique was again used under the domain of child's functioning to elicit the child's views around their hopes and fears for the future. The researcher invited the child to draw or write their hopes and fears for the future on a 'wishes and fears' list. To introduce the theme of family, the researcher invited the child to draw a picture or write down on a worksheet the

members of their family. To explore the domain of community, neighbourhood and sense of citizenship, each child was invited to draw a picture or write down what they liked and disliked in their neighbourhood, which was then discussed in the interview.

2.3.3 Visual prompts

Visual prompts such as pictures and photographs were used to aid the exploration of the following themes with the children: wellness, health and physical development; emotional development; and family and parenting.

Pictorial images from the Children's Body Image Scale (CBIS) were used with the nine-year-olds to approach the topic of physical development and body image. The CBIS was developed for use with children aged 7 to 12 by Truby and Paxton (2002). It involves two pictorial scales, one depicting boys and one depicting girls, representing standard percentile curves for body mass index (BMI) for healthy children. The CBIS measures the accuracy of body-size perception by asking a child to select a body size most like their own from a range of picture-drawings of children of known BMI and comparing the selection with the child's actual BMI. Each child was asked to select which picture represented what they believed to be the healthiest size for a nine-year-old boy or girl.

A series of six photographs illustrating facial expressions were developed to spark discussions with the children around feelings and to gauge a sense of their socio-emotional development and coping strategies. They were asked to write under each photograph what feeling they felt was being depicted.

To explore the child's perception of parenting, each child was shown a trigger picture depicting a magician's wand. The child was asked to imagine that he or she had special powers and describe any situations or rules at home that he or she might wish to change.

2.3.4 Activities and worksheet exercises

Four worksheets were used during the children's interviews to explore different domains. Each of the four worksheets is discussed below.

The first worksheet, 'My Hand', was used to introduce the child to the theme of child functioning and explore self-perception. Explaining the concept of the hand and finger prints as being unique to an individual, the researcher invited the child to draw around his or her own hand on a blank worksheet and write down a word for each finger that described who they were. Once completed, the researcher asked the child to interpret those words he or she had chosen.

The second worksheet used was an adaptation of the widely used Cantril's Self-Anchoring Ladder (Cantril, 1965). This is a measurement technique that asks people to rate their present, past and anticipated future satisfaction with life on a scale anchored by their own identified values. This measurement tool has been previously modified for use with children to attempt to gauge their subjective well-being in terms of their satisfaction with themselves and their lives (UNICEF, 2007; WHO, 2004). For the purpose of our study, we created the 'Life Ladder' worksheet. The researcher described the concept of the life-satisfaction ladder to each child, explaining that the top of the ladder, 10, represented the best possible life for the child and the bottom, 0, was the worst possible life for the child. The children were asked to place a sticker on the rung of the ladder that they felt best described how their life was at nine years of age. The researcher then asked each child to explain the reasons behind his or her choice.

To explore the child's interests, hobbies and activities and to ascertain whether the child was involved in structured or unstructured activities, we developed a visual chart, called 'My Activities Calendar', in which the children could map the different extra-curricular and play activities they engaged in each day of the week. The researcher then used the visual chart as a prompt to introduce a number of questions from the interview schedule regarding play, activities, hobbies, peer relationships and bullying.



The fourth worksheet used during the children's interviews was another visual chart to look at children's perception of their relationships with family members. The 'My Family and Me' map was adapted from the concept of the Five Field Map and the Ecomap (Egg, Schratz-Hadwich, Trubswasser & Walker, 2004; Mann & Tolfree, 2003; Sturgess, Dunn, & Davies, 2001; Hill, Laybourn & Borland, 1996) as a visual prompt to explore children's perception of their relationships and emotional closeness with family members. The map is comprised of five concentric rings, with 'Me' in the centre, representing the child. Each ring represents the degree of closeness and strength of relationship. As the rings move outwards from the centre, the degree of closeness and strength of the relationship declines. The researcher asked the children to think about their relationship with everyone in their family and map these relationships on the worksheet in terms of their strength and closeness. Each child was then asked to explain the positions of family members on the map.

2.3.5 Essay writing

During the interviews, data was collected from the children through two essay and letter-writing techniques. To explore their perceptions of growing up and becoming a teenager, the children were asked to write a few sentences entitled '*When I am 13 years old*'. Once the child had completed their written piece, they were asked to verbally interpret it.

The children were also invited to compose their own letter to the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in Ireland. Therein they were asked to describe, if they were in charge of the country, what things they would do to make life better for children in Ireland. It was explained to the children that the minister might not have the opportunity to read the letter personally but that the Study Team would compile all the ideas from the children's letters in a report which would be submitted to the minister's office.

2.4 The Methods used during the Parents' Interview

The parents of the children participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately thirty minutes. The researchers followed an interview schedule and the interview included the use of photographs, as described below.

2.4.1 The photographs

In the weeks before the researcher visited the children's homes, each of the families was provided with one disposable flash camera with 24 exposures. The parents and the child were encouraged to work together to use the camera to take a number of photographs that they felt depicted something about their relationship. Suggestions included: everyday and/or special activities that they do together; barriers preventing them from doing things together; places and spaces that are important in their relationships; hopes and aspirations for the future. Two copies of the photographs were developed, the first for the family to keep and the second for use during the interview. The photographs were shown to the parents and they were asked to interpret each one. The technique served as a gentle ice-breaker into the interview and also generated useful data that could be further explored throughout the interview.

2.5 Data Collection

The qualitative data was collected over a four-month time-frame. A total of 120 families were interviewed between April and August 2007. A team of five researchers completed the fieldwork on a national basis. Each interview was recorded using a digital dictaphone. Data generated from the interviews, including any audio files, transcripts, photographs, drawings, and written documents, have been securely stored and are currently being anonymised in preparation for archiving.

2.6 Data Analysis

Each of the child and parent interviews was fully transcribed by the research team and additional experienced transcribers who were sourced to help manage the volume of data. The full transcriptions, fieldnotes, observations and materials generated during the interviews formed the data-set for analysis.

To assist with the management of the large volume of data from the first wave, the Study Team used the QSR software package NVivo. Subsequent waves will add substantially to the amount of data generated by the study. Management, organisation and classification of such a voluminous data-set would be incredibly arduous without the use of information technology. The NVivo software acts as a secure virtual storage tool for the qualitative data. An NVivo project file was established to house the complete data-set. The technology allowed for the team to create NVivo files for the two strands of the project: one folder space for the data generated by the nine-year cohort and a second folder space for the data generated by the nine-month cohort. Within each folder, the project team is building a database of documents relating to that particular cohort including verbatim transcripts, visual materials and memos containing researchers' fieldnotes and observations.

In addition to managing the qualitative data, the software facilitates the classification of the data to aid thematic analysis. It allows the creation of a coding structure for each cohort to categorise the data across various topics. For the nine-year cohort, a coding structure was generated for the children's interviews and the parents' interviews. The coding structures are based on the topics covered by the interview schedules which map onto the domains of the quantitative study. Each coding structure contains overarching themes known as 'tree nodes'. The topics on each tree node relate directly to the topics covered in the interviews. As the content of each interview was analysed, each tree node was further divided down into smaller branches of nodes, thus highlighting emerging themes. This allowed the research team to gain more understanding of the data. NVivo also allows linkage of the content across the same theme for different children as well as coding of any new themes emerging from within each child's interview.

The use of NVivo has made the classification process for the research team more efficient by making it easy to search the data, run queries, generate reports, highlight relationships and build models of analysis. Furthermore, different perspectives on the data were obtained from multiple researchers who can feed into the master copy of the NVivo project using the standardised coding structures, and also contribute new thematic codes where identified in the data. NVivo was also used to identify conceptual links across the data as well as exceptions to general patterns in the data. A 'by eye' inspection of data could never hope to interrogate all the data as systematically and comprehensively. It is important to bear in mind, however, that a technological device such as NVivo does not substitute for the researcher's role in deciding what matters in the interpretation of the data.

The qualitative study with the nine-year cohort is not driven by any one specific theory about children's lives and their development. The goal is primarily descriptive. However, some assumptions underpin the design of the study. They focus mainly on what matters to nine-year-old children and their parents. The questions asked of the participants are framed by the ecological perspective of child development and the hypotheses derived from the literature about what influences children's lives and the course of their development. Making sense of the data occurs within this framework, and the approach to analysis of the first wave of qualitative data has been thematic. This method of analysis is most suitable to **GUI** since the approach to the data-collection is question- rather than theory-driven. Thematic analysis entailed the examination of data in order to identify patterns in respondents' behaviours or responses. In **GUI** the themes have already been partly dictated by the domains tapped and questions asked in the semi-structured interviews. Other themes have emerged throughout the analysis. In the chapters below, the findings are described and common and divergent themes brought out. Some case studies have also been compiled to give a stronger sense of the 'whole child' and the diversity that exists in the life experience of the children and the parents.

Throughout the data analysis, the research team sought to be reflexive and to critically examine the strengths and weaknesses of the data which will inform the next wave of the quantitative study, with the children at 13 years of age, and the subsequent qualitative study. Each member of the research team has been encouraged to examine his/her own interpretive biases and reactions to the data. After the full analysis of the qualitative data, the link between the qualitative findings and the main survey will be examined. Furthermore, consequent data collected during the second wave of the study will be linked back to the first wave to inform the longitudinal qualitative analysis.

2.7 Ethical Issues

The qualitative study with the nine-year cohort has been designed within an ethical framework. Each stage of the research process, including the design of the pilot and main fieldwork, was subject to rigorous scrutiny and approval by an ethics committee. The ethical framework for **GUI** encompasses five principles of duty for the research team: beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, fidelity, and inclusivity. *Beneficence* recognises the researcher's duty to protect the well-being of those participating in the research process. *Non-maleficence* concerns the researcher's duty to do no harm. *Autonomy* recognises the researchers' duty to respect the rights of the participants, including the right of individuals to take responsibility for themselves. *Fidelity* stresses the researcher's duty to adopt a child-centred approach and treat children fairly and respectfully. *Inclusivity* highlights the commitment of the researcher to be inclusive and to support and enable the participation of children who might be at risk of non-participation without the availability of additional supports.

The data provided by the children and their families are treated confidentially and their identities are concealed using unique ID numbers. The child's right to be protected by adults has been upheld throughout all aspects of the study. At the initial stage of the research process, the Study Team sought the informed consent of the child's parents and the assent of the child to participate in the study. The family's right to withdraw from the study at any stage was respected. The interviews with the child and the parents/guardians took place in the child's home and were conducted by researchers experienced in working with children, in the presence of another adult from the household. The researchers who conducted the fieldwork for the qualitative interviews were psychologists and/or social researchers with experience in researching the views of children. The researchers were fully trained in the ethics of carrying out research with children and child-protection issues. All researchers, including the interviewers and field workers involved in both the quantitative and qualitative components of **GUI**, were vetted by the Garda Central Vetting Unit before becoming involved in the study. The children and their parents were informed of the **GUI** policy on child protection and made aware that the researchers follow the protocols of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (DOHC, 1999). These guidelines outline the responsibility of any person who suspects that a child is at risk to report their concerns to the Health Service Executive (HSE). For further details on the ethical framework guiding the qualitative study with the nine-year cohort, see Chapter 3: An Ethical Framework for the Qualitative Studies, in **GUI** Research Paper, *Qualitative Research Methodology: A review of the current literature and its application to the qualitative component of Growing Up in Ireland*



Chapter 3

THE PROFILE OF CHILDREN AND FAMILIES





3.1 Introduction

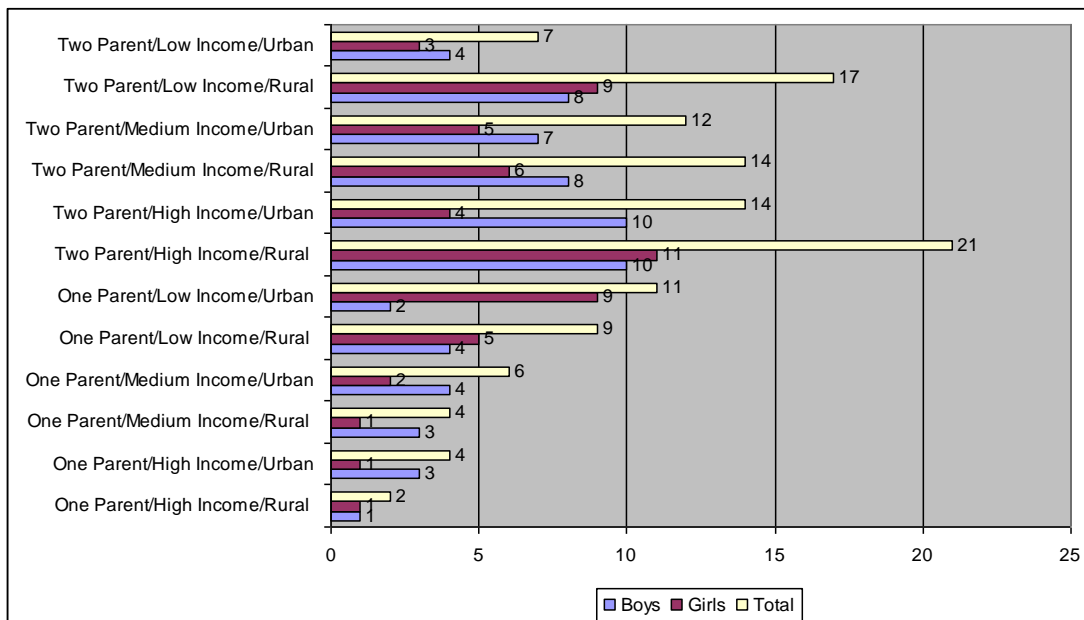
A total of 120 families from the nine-year cohort participated in the first wave of data-collection for the qualitative study. This chapter will describe the sampling approach that was adopted for the qualitative study with the nine-year- cohort and describe the profile of the achieved sample.

3.2 The Sampling Approach

During the quantitative study, the families were invited to sign a consent form to have their name put forward for selection into the qualitative sample. Almost two-thirds (65.9%) of the families forming the nine-year cohort (8,500 in total) gave their consent to be put forward for selection. Of these families, 160 families were selected and invited to participate in the qualitative study. An introductory letter, information leaflet and consent form with prepaid envelope were sent to each of the families, copies of which are included in Appendix 2, 3 and 4. The mail shot was followed by a phone call to each family from a member of the research team.

The qualitative sample was purposive and stratified with reference to the characteristics of the achieved main sample. As shown in *Figure 3.1*, the qualitative sample was stratified according to socio-economic status (i.e. high income, medium income and low income), urban/rural location, and family type (i.e. one or two resident parents). The income status of one family was missing. The largest category of children (17.2%) in the sample were classified as coming from a two-parent, high-income family and rural area. The breakdown of the achieved sample across gender was 58 girls and 64 boys (n=122).

Figure 3.1: The qualitative sample classified across socio-economic status, rural/urban location, family type and gender





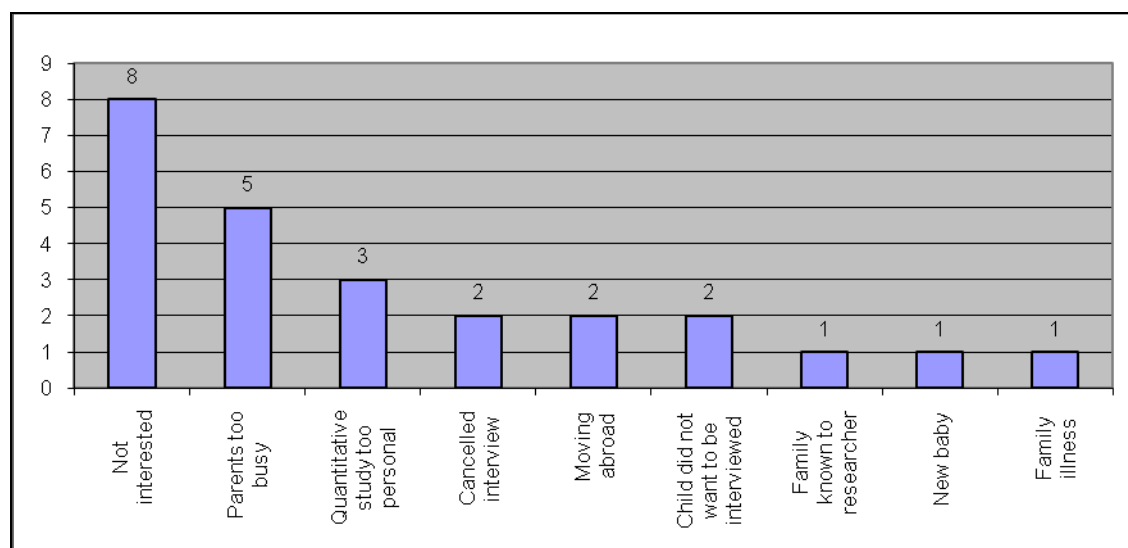
3.3 Response Rate

Of the 160 families contacted, 120 families participated in the qualitative study, giving a response rate of 75%. Two of these families included nine-year-old twin siblings, both of whom were interviewed, bringing the total number of child respondents to 122.

3.3.1 Reasons for non-participation

Of those families invited to participate, 38 families did not do so (23.3%). Thirteen (34.2%) of these families were non-contactable by the research team, in that they did not respond either to the initial letter inviting them to participate or to follow-up phone call(s). Twenty-five (65%) families declined to participate after being contacted. Figure 3.2 shows the range of reasons for refusals. Almost one-third (32%) of families cited 'not interested' as their reason for non-participation. Five families (13.2%) said they were 'too busy' to take part. Three (7.9%) of the parents thought the questions in the quantitative study were too personal. A further two families (5.3%) agreed to participate initially and then did not keep appointments. Two of the families (5.3%) were moving abroad. Two of the children (5.3%) did not want to be interviewed. In one case (2.6%) the family selected was known to the research team and so was substituted with another family. One family stated that they felt it was not a good time for them to participate as they had a new baby in the household. In the last case (2.6%) family illness prevented the family from taking part.

Figure 3.2: Reasons given for refusal to take part in the qualitative study





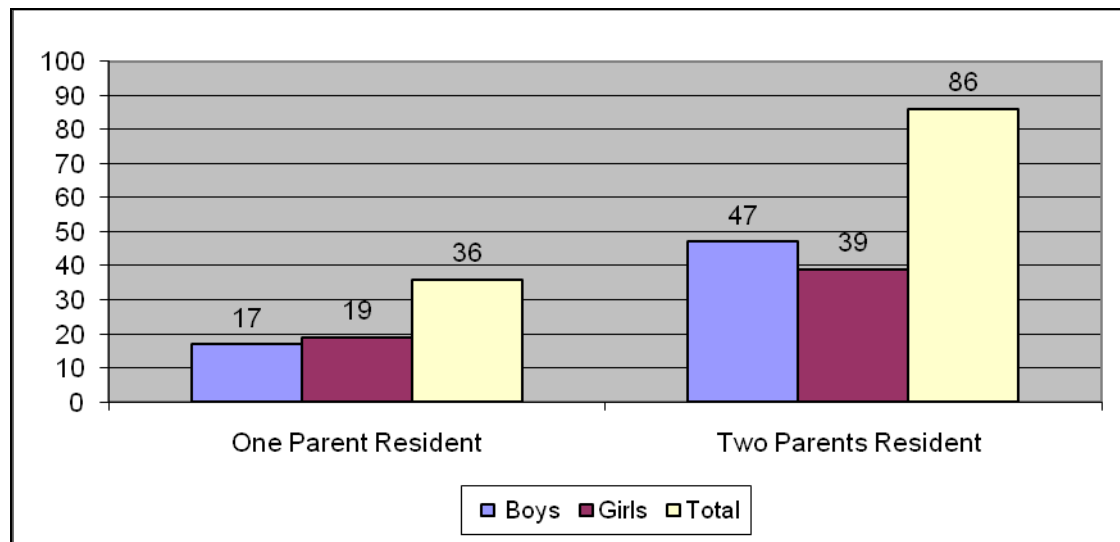
3.4 Age and Gender of Children

The children were aged between nine and ten when they were interviewed for the qualitative study. This interview took place some months after the quantitative interview in the home. Fifty-eight (47.5%) girls and sixty-four (52.5%) boys participated in the study. These proportions are similar to the gender breakdown in the population.

3.5 Family Structure

The qualitative sample included children from families with two parents resident and children from families with one parent resident. As shown in *Figure 3.3*, of the 122 child respondents, fewer than three-quarters (70.5%) were living with two parents resident in the family home and almost one-third (29.5%) were living with one parent resident.

Figure 3.3: The qualitative sample classified across family structure and gender

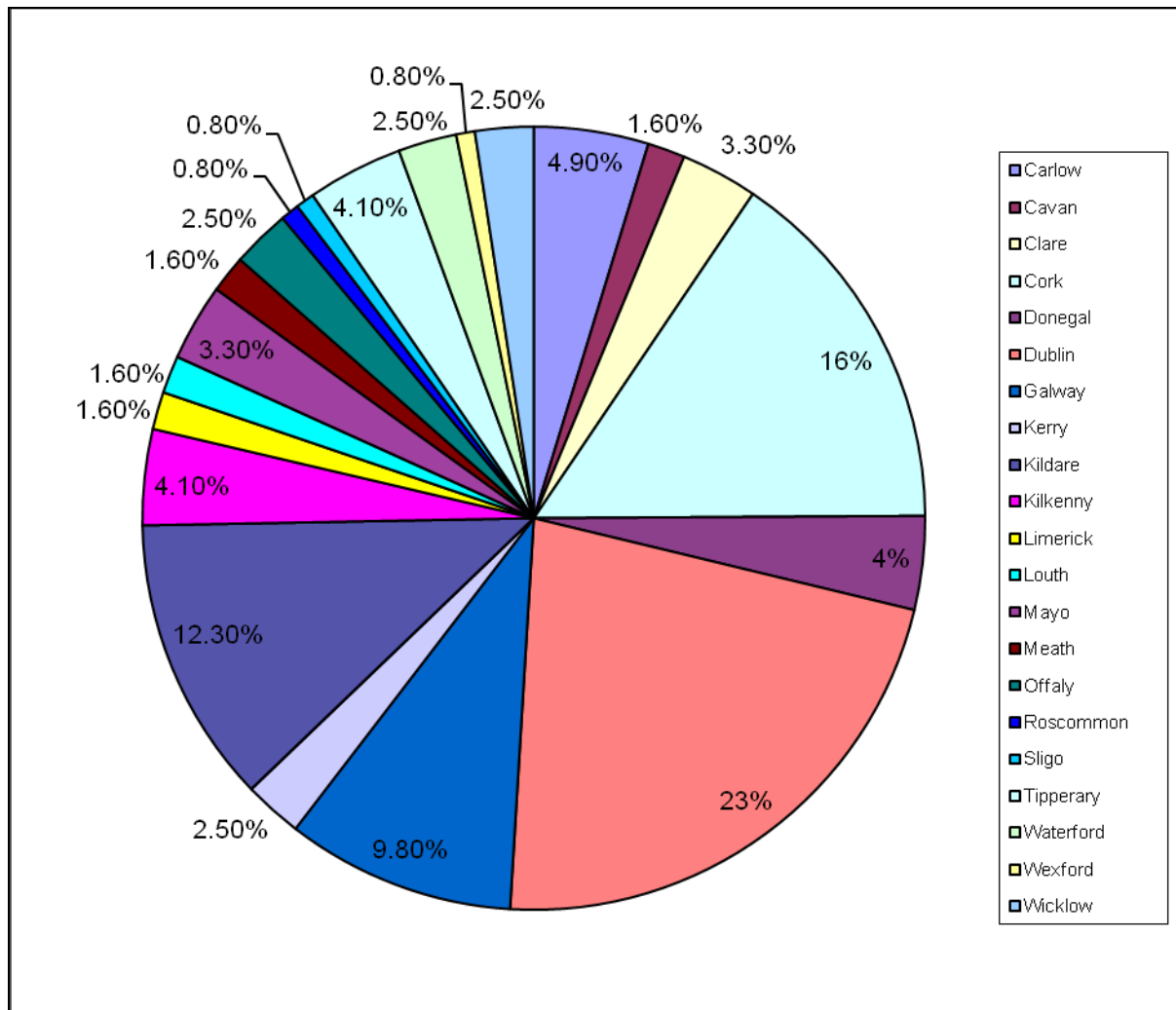




3.6 The Geographical Spread of the Sample

Although the qualitative sample was purposive it was not intended to be nationally representative. However, as shown in *Figure 3.4*, children from 21 of the 26 counties are represented.

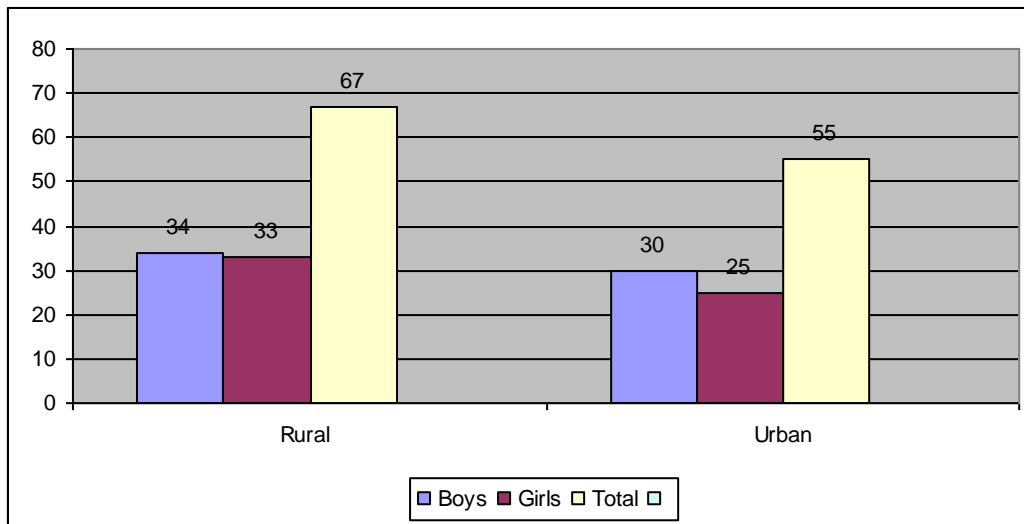
Figure 3.4: The qualitative sample classified according to county



Of the 122 children, 67 (55%) live in rural areas and 55 (45%) in urban areas. *Figure 3.5* shows the qualitative sample classified across rural/urban areas and gender. The same classification as used in the quantitative study was applied in the qualitative study. Children were categorised as coming from an urban area if they lived in a town of a population of 10,000 or more, or in one of the main cities: Cork, Dublin, Galway, Limerick or Waterford. Urban areas in the County of Dublin were also included in this category. Families resident in country areas, villages with a population of between 200 and 1,499 people, and towns with 1,500 to 9,999 people were categorised as living in rural areas.



Figure 3.5: The qualitative sample classified across rural and urban areas, and gender



3.7 Socio-economic status

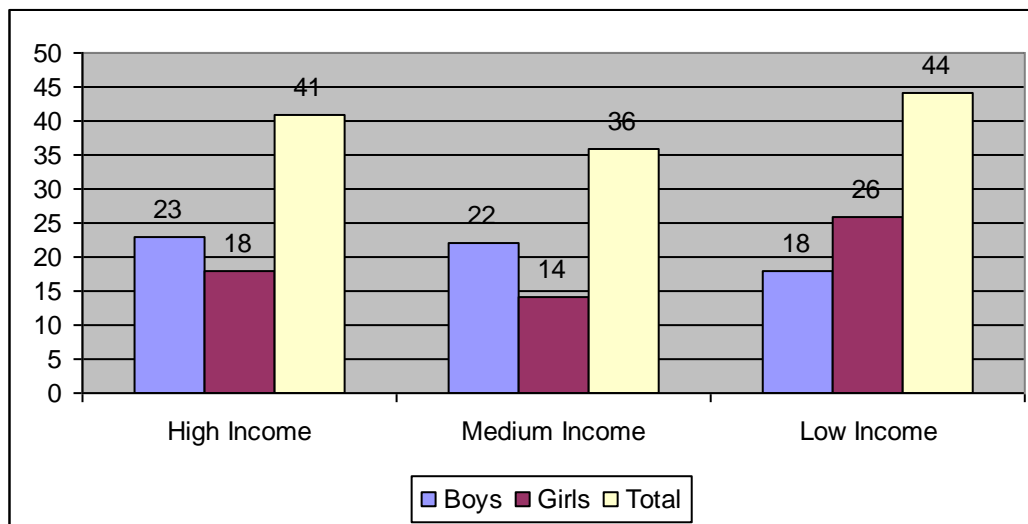
Annual income was taken from data collected in the *Growing Up in Ireland* quantitative study. The number of adults and children in the household was recorded and, using this and the figure for net annual income, equivalised income was calculated. The equivalised income allows the comparison of living standards between households that vary in size and composition and is distinct from other measures such as net disposable income. This adjustment reflects the fact that a family of several people requires a higher income than a single person in order for both households to enjoy a comparable standard of living. This adjustment was broken down into three categories:

Low income	=	0 – €13,757.83
Middle income	=	€13,757.84 – €20,494.95
High income	=	€20,494.96 +

As shown in *Figure 3.6*, over one-third of the children are from low-income families (36.3%), 29.7% from medium-income families and one-third (33.8%) from high-income families. The income status of one family was missing.



Figure 3.6: The qualitative sample classified across income



3.8 Diversity among the Children

The children included in the qualitative sample come from a variety of backgrounds in terms of family structure, socio-economic status and geographical location. Of the 122 children in the study, the majority (97.5%) are from Irish backgrounds, including one child from the Traveller community. Three children are from non-Irish backgrounds. Five children (4.1%) were experiencing a chronic illness or disability. Nine children (7.3%) have a specific learning difficulty, including dyslexia, autism, Asperger syndrome, dyspraxia, or a difficulty with visual/spatial awareness. Ten children (8.2%) have someone in their immediate family with a chronic illness or disability and four children (3.3%) were living with a parent experiencing a mental health problem.



Section 2

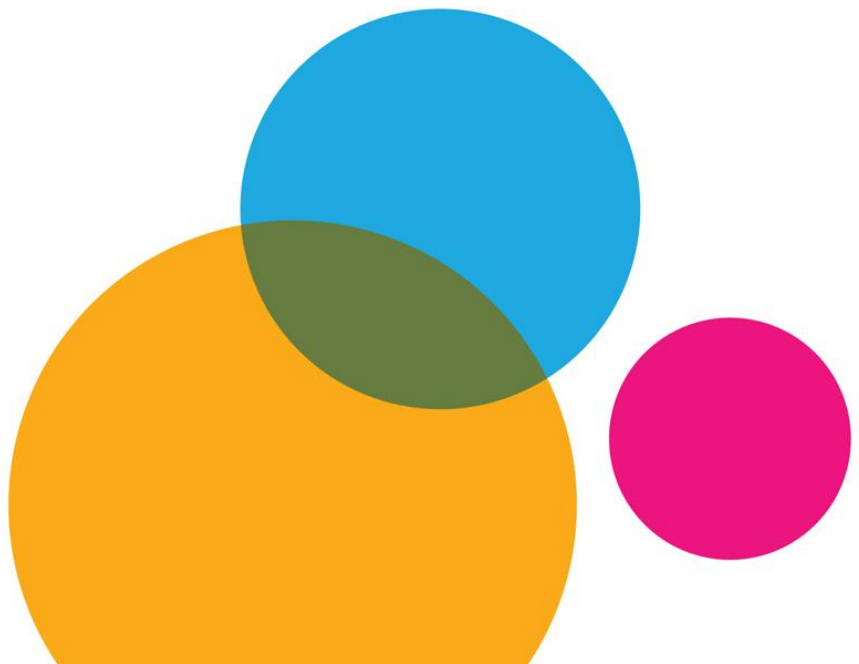
THE CHILDREN'S INTERVIEWS





Chapter 4

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF WELL-BEING AND HEALTH



4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings on the children's understanding of well-being and health. The children were asked to describe factors which influenced their health and well-being. They discussed their perception of their own health and described their strategies for keeping healthy. They were asked to describe their understanding of obesity and their attitudes to smoking and alcohol consumption.

4.2 Understanding Well-Being and Health

The children were asked to talk, write or draw about the factors that contribute to keeping them healthy and well. For many of the children, their understanding of wellness and health was associated primarily with their physical health and well-being. The main factors they felt contributed to keeping them physically well and healthy were diet and exercise. In terms of diet, most listed a healthy diet made up of lots of fruit and vegetables as the key factor contributing to their health.

"Eating fruit, an apple a day keep the doctors away ... Vegetables – you must eat your greens!" (Boy)

"Bananas are healthy, carrots are healthy, cabbage is healthy, peas are healthy, pizza is a good snack and apples are healthy" (Boy)

Physical activity was described as a very important factor in maintaining health. The children outlined many different forms of exercise, including outdoor play and sport, that they engage in to stay healthy.

"Mmm ... like if you're in the gym a lot you're healthier" (Girl)

"Well, I would actual think that running around the garden and jumping up and down would be good exercise" (Boy)

The children's understanding of being unhealthy was associated with a poor diet and a lack of exercise.

"[I am] not very [healthy] because I eat a lot of not good food like chips and pizza, sausages and junk food" (Girl)

"Well, you get chubby if you don't get out a lot or eat too many sweets or sitting around outside is not good either. The trampoline is good and I usually go on it" (Girl)

"Eating lots and lots of sweets and sitting in bed all day and like not doing enough exercise and eating too much" (Girl)

Fresh air, medicine, sleep, vitamins, oxygen and water are just some examples of other factors that a smaller number of children cited as important in maintaining their physical health.

"You remember to stay fit and you have to eat healthy foods and drink lots of water and fluids and try to get as much healthy things as you can into your diet" (Boy)

"Well, being healthy would probably be like, inside you would feel alright and you're happy and you would be able to get up and do all your exercise, be fine and do lots of stuff" (Girl)

"When someone calls for you and asks 'are you going out?' because it will not be good for you if you don't get any fresh air" (Girl)

Although the main focus of the children's sense of understanding of well-being and health related to physical health, issues associated with positive mental health emerged in a smaller number of the children's interviews. Friendships and having company were seen as an important factor in being healthy.

"My mum always says not to shut myself in my room too much because it is not good for a growing girl to be alone too much" (Girl)

4.3 The Children's Own Well-Being and Health

The children talked about their perception of their own well-being in terms of being healthy or unhealthy. Most described themselves as healthy. They described the different things that they did to take care of their health. For most, this involved eating healthy food and getting plenty of exercise.

"Sometimes I go on walks with my dad and my mom and sometimes I eat apples and I eat all my dinner" (Boy)

The children placed a lot of emphasis on personal hygiene to maintain their health. A particular focus was placed on oral hygiene, with many of the children outlining how they brush their teeth.

"I brush when I go to bed and I wash my hair to make sure there is no head lice or anything and I wash my hands and I do all those stuff" (Girl)

One girl explained that her mother gave her a book which she read to help her to look after her health.

"I read books. There is a book that Mummy gave me about how to look after yourself for girls. It tells you things like hair care, how to look after your teeth and your mouth and stuff. I read it all and now I am really healthy and I know how to look after myself now" (Girl)

4.4 Experience of Illness

Five children in the sample (4.1%) were experiencing a chronic illness or disability and most of the children had some experience of being ill or unwell. Many had at least experienced a minor illness, while some had experience of more serious conditions resulting in hospital visits. The most common illnesses the children had experienced were common colds and flu, vomiting, tonsillitis and asthma.

One boy talked about his experience of living with a chronic illness. He described coping with asthma and what he did to prevent attacks, such as limiting the amount of sport he played.

Interviewer: "Ok, so you mentioned asthma, what is that like, how does it affect you?"

Child: "I find that sometimes if I run too much I get it and I get asthma attacks sometimes."

Interviewer: "Do you, and what happens when you get an asthma attack?"

Child: "I think I kind of faint."

Interviewer: "OK. How does it feel for you? You know, how do you feel when you get an attack?"

Child: "I can't breathe that much."

Interviewer: "Ok, is it scary?"

Child: "Yep."

Interviewer: "Ok, and how do you watch that it doesn't happen?"

Child: "Em, I don't run that much and I kind of stay away from stuff that would make me have it."

Interviewer: "What kind of things would make you have it?"

Child: "One is if I play football too much, and any sport played too much."

Another boy described his experience of an accident which led to a hospital visit. He outlined how he had become unwell when he was six years of age after accidentally drinking weed-killer and had to go to hospital.

"[It was] really scary because it was after Daddy left out this kind of bottle and I thought it was a fruit bottle and I thought it was apple juice but it was weed poison and I drank it and I had to spit it out"

All of the children described how they would turn to their parents if they were feeling unwell. They described how their parents would give them medication or take them to the doctor or hospital if necessary.

"I would tell my mam and my dad and they would tell me to get a basin and water and a towel and they would bring me to the doctor and get medicine and then after a few days I would feel better" (Girl)

Unsurprisingly, the children described being unwell as an unpleasant experience, but some aspects such as staying home from school were viewed as positive.

Interviewer: "And what would you do if you weren't feeling well?"

Child: "If it was a school day I would stay home and watch TV. If it wasn't a school day I would stay at home and watch TV." (Boy)

The children's experiences of hospital were explored. Naturally the children did not enjoy being unwell and had different experiences of hospital. A few children found some aspects of their hospital stay enjoyable. One girl, who had been in hospital to have her appendix removed, had some positive views on the nursing staff. However, she did not enjoy having injections.

Child: "I liked it but sometimes I would be sore and they would have to give me injections and I didn't like that."

Interviewer: "What did you like?"

Child: "There was one nurse I really liked and her name was [nurse's name] and I really liked her and she was really kind and she would talk to me and there was a few games there and she would play them with me."

One boy discussed his stay in hospital with a broken elbow. He enjoyed playing with the computer games in the hospital but not enjoy being interrupted by visits from the doctors.

"It was OK because I got to play the Playstation but only for around ten minutes because doctors kept coming in and out."

Another boy talked about visiting Accident and Emergency after he hurt his arm. He described how he did not enjoy the experience in the waiting-rooms due to long waiting times and being moved around different areas of the hospital.

Child: "Well, one time I was ice-skating on real ice and I hurt my elbow and I got an x-ray and a tissue injury on my shoulder but I didn't really do that much."

Interviewer: "What was it like in hospital?"

Child: "I wasn't there for the night, just a few hours."

Interviewer: "What was that like?"

Child: "Well, it was a bit annoying because you just had to go from waiting-room to waiting-room and you were there for twenty minutes at a time because you get moved around and it wasn't that much fun."

4.5 Perception of Weight

The children's interviews explored their understanding of bodily weight, gaining some insight into their awareness of obesity and being thin.

4.5.1 Understanding of obesity

The researchers asked the children if they had come across the word 'obese'. The majority of children had never heard this word. Where the children did not understand 'obese', they were asked to describe what they understood by the word 'overweight'. Many interpreted 'overweight' as somebody carrying too much weight and associated being overweight with 'being fat'.

"It's like em ... most people would be kind of the right weight. And if ... like, em, overweight would mean that you are over the average weight." (Boy)

The children offered an insight into their understanding of the factors that can lead to somebody becoming overweight. They associated being overweight with unhealthy eating and a lack of physical activity and exercise.

"Not doing exercise or sports. Eating bad food like lots of chocolate" (Boy)

"They [people who are overweight] probably eat a lot of chips and are lazy and they might go to the shop a lot and get a lot of sweets" (Girl)

A number of the children associated being overweight with eating a lot of fast food and references were made to well-known fast food outlets.

“Well, my mum just told me about this thing in the car ... it’s like this movie. What’s it called ... it’s a documentary? It, like, this person ... it’s a documentary and somebody ate McDonald’s for like two months and they ended up getting like really, really fat.”

(Boy)

“Eating McDonald’s every day and then watching too much TV and eating it all the time”

(Boy)

4.5.2 Understanding of Being Thin

The children were asked what they understood by the word ‘thin’. Many associated ‘being thin’ with ‘being healthy’.

Interviewer: “And when you hear the word ‘thin’ what do you think that means?”

Child: “Being healthy and strong and going out to play a lot and going to the gym if you are an adult and taking a walk and sailing, swimming, a lot of sports.” (Girl)

The children often made connections between physical activity and exercise and being thin.

“If they exercise loads and eat like so much fruit and vegetables that make them really, really, really thin” (Girl)

The children were asked if they felt a person could be too thin. Most felt that it was possible to be too thin. A lot of children felt that being too thin could impact on health outcomes.

“Super-skinny ... When you are really skinny and you mightn’t feel well and you might feel dizzy” (Girl)

This boy describes how he thinks being very thin might be physically painful.

Interviewer: “Ok, can somebody be too thin?”

Child: “Yeah.”

Interviewer: “Could you tell me what that would be like? Or what ...”

Child: “It would be ... I don’t know ... it would probably be sore.”

Interviewer: “It would be sore.”

Child: “Yeah.”

Interviewer: “Why would it be sore?”

Child: “Cause you would be squeezed together and the bones would be hitting off each other.” (Boy)

Many of the children perceived under-eating and a lot of exercise as the main reasons that a person might become too thin.

“It means like if you’re not eating much meat or em anything to make you strong and muscle {sic}.” (Boy)

“Running every day, doing a lot of exercise, eating a lot of fruit and veg.” (Boy)

One girl associated being underweight with being wealthy.

Interviewer: “And when would you be too thin?”

Child: “When they are rich maybe.” (Girl)

Some of the children associated being too thin with eating disorders. Interestingly, it was mainly the girls who explored this issue. Their knowledge and understanding of eating disorders appeared to have come from discussions with family members.

This girl offers an insight into her understanding of an eating disorder, explaining that eating disorders can lead to serious illness resulting in hospitalisation or fatalities in some cases.

Interviewer: “And can someone ever be too thin?”

Child: “Yes. My mum says there can be a disease, as well they can say they don’t want to eat and they get really skinny and get tired and they will die sooner or later if they don’t eat and sometimes they can’t eat so they go to hospital and the doctors put a tube in their throat or mouth or something like that and that feeds them food instead of them trying to feed themselves.” (Girl)

Another girl described how she felt she was underweight for her age and how her brother had called her anorexic. She offers her understanding of why she is so thin which she believes is down to the fact that she does not finish her dinner:

Child: “My brother is always calling me anorexic.”

Interviewer: “Really, why is that?”

Child: “Because he thinks I am mad skinny.”

Interviewer: “Do you think you are too skinny?”

Child: “Kind of.”

Interviewer: “Why do you think that?”

Child: “Because I am nine, almost ten, and I am only four stone.”

Interviewer: “And do you think that is too light?”

Child: “Yeah, I should be around five, five and a half.”

Interviewer: “And why do you think you are so skinny?”

Child: “Well the weird thing is I never finish my dinner at my house, only on Friday because we get pizza. Over in my aunt’s I always finish my dinner so I don’t know why. My cousin never finishes his dinner in this house and never in his own house.” (Girl)

Another girl talked about her sister, whom she felt was very thin. She described how her parents expressed their concern over their daughter’s weight.

Interviewer: “And when you hear the word thin what do you think that means?”

*Child: "I think of [my sister]. My mum and dad say 'come on, you will have to go to hospital if you don't put on weight'. She is really thin and she doesn't eat much at all."
(Girl)*

4.6 Perception of Smoking and Alcohol

The children discussed their views about smoking and alcohol consumption. Both cigarettes and alcohol were viewed as unhealthy and the children demonstrated a good understanding of the health risks associated with both. Four of children (3.3%) were living in households where it had been reported in the main quantitative study that there were instances of alcohol or drug misuse in the family.

4.6.1 Perception of smoking

All of the children viewed smoking as a bad habit and associated it with negative outcomes including fatal illness and disease. Cigarettes were also seen as contributing to environmental pollution. The children perceived smoking as having a detrimental effect on health outcomes and described their understanding of the physical damage smoking can have on the body.

*"Well, it's not very healthy for you 'cause it damages your lungs and ... well, like, it's disgusting to see as well 'cause loads of people just throw them on the ground as well."
(Boy)*

Many spoke about the fatal consequences attached to smoking.

"I just know that cigarettes can like ... make you die" (Boy)
*"It makes you very sick and sometimes when we smoke a lot you would have lived longer if you didn't smoke and you can get addicted to them as well and you can't stop"
(Girl)*

A number of children made reference to their parents' smoking habits.

"My mum does that [smoking]. I think that it's not a really good thing to do, and on nearly every cigarette packet it says that 'smokers die young' so it's a bit scary." (Girl)
"Hate them [cigarettes]! I just don't like them. My dad was smoking once, and I came in, I took a breath and smoke went all the way down my throat and I did not like it." (Boy)

One child described how he worried about the consequences of his parents' smoking habits.

"My mam and dad used to smoke and I didn't like that because I got fairly worried about if they got lung cancer." (Boy)

When asked if they felt their attitude to smoking would change as they grew up, none of the children aspired to smoke when they became teenagers and, indeed, adults.

"I don't think I will ever smoke. I hope I won't." (Boy)
"I don't want to do it [smoking] when I am older because smoking kills you. It is bad for your lungs. That is why when I walk past cars and there is a smell of petrol fumes I hold my nose because it is bad to breathe in petrol fumes and smoke." (Girl)

“Well, I don't think I'll smoke when I grow up because I don't think it is very nice to be smoking because of what it does to your insides and stuff like that ...” (Girl)

The children were aware that, as they enter adolescence, they may experience pressure to try smoking. However, they felt very strongly that they would resist the pressure to take up smoking.

“I might be tempted but I wouldn't do it” (Boy)

“I can't see why people ... I know people have habits of doing it ... but how did they get into the habit? ... They might see other people doing it and like over in America years ago they, teenagers, used to sneak cigarettes and hide them under the pillow or something so their parents won't know.” (Boy)

4.6.2 Perception of alcohol

Many of the children demonstrated an awareness of the negative outcomes associated with alcohol misuse. Overall, they viewed drinking alcohol in moderation as acceptable but too much consumption as unhealthy and potentially very damaging to people's lives.

“It's OK to have it once in a while but drinking it too much isn't good” (Boy)

“If someone had one beer it would be OK for a treat like me having one Coke” (Boy)

The children outlined what they perceived to be the associated dangers of alcohol misuse. They spoke of both negative health outcomes and the influence of alcohol misuse on a person's life.

“You can get drunk. You can binge drink and it affects your memory.” (Boy)

“You could get drunk and kill someone in a car accident.” (Girl)

Very few of the children had experienced alcohol themselves; however, a small number described how their parents had allowed them to try alcohol. This boy recalls tasting cider on holidays with his parents.

Interviewer: “And what about alcohol, what do you think about drinking alcohol?”

Child: “Well ...” (laughs)

Mother: “Well, there's just a funny story behind this one.”

Child: “Yeah, when I was on holidays my mum and dad let me have a tiny sip of their alcohol drink.”

Interviewer: “What did you think of it?”

Child: “Not very nice ... remember when we were at the town square?”

Mother: “Oh, yeah, you had a drop ... a small sip of cider.”

Child: “Yeah, that was it.” (Boy)

The children were asked if they felt they would drink alcohol when they got older. The majority said that they did not intend to drink as they got older, although drinking was seen as something that was acceptable to do as an adult.

“It is OK if you have a little bit when you are over the age of eighteen but if you are younger and you have any it isn’t and you shouldn’t take too much of it” (Boy)

This boy, acknowledging that alcohol consumption was typical for most adults, felt that drinking alcohol would prevent him from achieving his goal of becoming a professional footballer:

“I am never going to drink it because if I want to become a football player I won’t be able to drink it but it is normal for people to drink” (Boy)

Only a handful of children, although aware of the dangers of alcohol misuse, spoke of their desire to drink alcohol when they grow up. One boy said he would like to drink when he was older but that over-consumption could lead to alcoholism.

“I would kinda like to drink ... but if you drink too much of it you could become an alcoholic” (Boy)

Although many of the children viewed alcohol as unhealthy and something that they did not intend to get into as they grow up, they saw it as more acceptable to drink than smoke when they are older. Three of the children suggested that, although they never intended to smoke, they were not as confident when it came to drinking alcohol.

“I don’t think I’d smoke a lot but I’d have a drink every now and then” (Boy)

“Well, I might drink wine or something but I won’t smoke ‘cause I don’t like smokes” (Girl)

“Well, I’ve sworn to myself that I’m not going to have cigarettes, and I don’t know about drinking, I wouldn’t like it but if I do I’m going to slap myself in the face as I usually do!” (Boy)

4.7 Summary

The children’s explorations of health and well-being focused primarily on *physical* health and well-being. Exercise and a healthy diet and lifestyle were the main factors considered as necessary in maintaining positive health outcomes. The concept of mental health was touched on by a small number of children who considered family and peer relationships as significant in promoting well-being. Overall, the children considered themselves to be healthy and well. They described how they maintained their well-being through diet, physical activity and personal hygiene. Most had suffered minor illnesses and a small number described their experience of hospital visits. Although very few had come across the term ‘obese’, the children perceived being overweight as unhealthy and recognised poor diet, including consuming a lot of junk food, and a lack of exercise as the main factors leading to obesity. Most of the children felt that it was healthier to be thin. However, they acknowledged that being too thin could also have negative health outcomes. Some of the children, mainly the girls, appeared to have an awareness

of the dangers of eating disorders. All of the children associated cigarettes with negative health outcomes and none aspired to smoke as they get older. Although the children demonstrated an awareness of the dangers of alcohol misuse, alcohol consumption appeared to be more acceptable and was seen as something they are more likely to experiment with when they are older.



Chapter 5

CHILD'S SELF-PERCEPTION, BODY IMAGE AND GENDER IDENTITY



5.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the findings on the nine-year-old children's perception of self and body image. They were asked to describe themselves using five words. They were also asked how they felt about themselves. More specifically, regarding body image, the children's thoughts on how they look and how important looks are to them were explored. Pictorial images from the Children's Body Image Scale (CBIS) (Truby and Paxton, 2002) were used to approach the topic of physical development and body image. The children's perception of gender identities was also explored and they were asked to highlight any perceived differences between boys and girls.

5.2 Self-perception

Using a worksheet called 'My Hand', the children were asked to write down five words that described something about themselves. Their descriptions of themselves offered a wide variety of interesting and diverse responses. The majority appeared to possess a lot of self-confidence. On the whole, their self-descriptions and self-perception were very positive. They generally felt very good about themselves.

One boy describes how being liked by other people makes him feel good about himself:

Interviewer: "And how do you feel about who you are?"

Child: "I feel very good. I like being who I am. I like that people like me. I have friends. I knew nearly every grandad I had except one passed away a month ago and I was very lucky to know nearly everyone in my whole family and I think I am very lucky too just for God creating me and my mam and dad and all that. But the things I like most is how people say I am nice and all that. That is the thing I love most, people saying that."

(Boy)

Many of the children chose to describe themselves using a combination of words regarding their physical appearance, personalities, hobbies and interests, likes and dislikes.

5.2.1 Physical appearance

The children used many different words to describe their physical appearance. Most appeared very comfortable in talking about how they look and many did so without inhibitions. One boy described himself as 'small'. He said he had picked this word because he was small but that it was not something he felt self-conscious about.

Interviewer: "Okay, great, and what about small; why did you put that down?"

Child: "Well, because I'm just small but I don't really let it get at me so I just wrote small." (Boy)

One child, suggesting that she was happy with both her personality and physical appearance, acknowledged that people can be judged on their appearances.

Child: "So, I have nice personality and looks."

Interviewer: "And why did you pick those words?"

Child: "Because some people might think you are not too pretty or nice or people might think your personality is good enough and they think there is better than yours. And

looks, because everyone has a look that they should like themselves, not other people think, like people have books and they judge them from their books, their cover. They judge them from their cover that it might be a good book and people are like that as well."

Interviewer: And are you happy with who you are?"

Child: "I feel ... I like myself, yeah." (Girl)

A number of the children chose words that they had heard their family or friends use when talking about the child's physical appearance. One boy described himself as handsome and it appeared that his mother often called him handsome when he wore his hair spiked.

Interviewer: "And the next one is 'handsome'?"

Child: "Cause my mam always says that I'm [handsome] ... after, like, I spike my hair." (Boy)

Similarly, one girl who chose the word 'beautiful' to describe herself explained that her family used this word to depict her.

Interviewer: "Tell me why you chose beautiful?"

Child: "Cause you know ... em ..."

Interviewer: "Who says you're beautiful?"

Child: "Me ma and me da, sometimes my sister."

Interviewer: "Do you think you're beautiful?"

Child: "Yeah." (Girl)

Another girl wrote the word 'pretty'. She had heard her parents use this word to describe her. She also suggested that she did not understand why she received a lot of attention from the boys in her class.

"Pretty, I do not know why but my mammy and daddy say I am. Loads of boys that used to be in my class like me but I don't know why." (Girl)

5.2.2 Personal traits

Although many of the children described themselves physically, they also offered a range of words depicting their personalities. They spent some time thinking about this task and would often report what they felt their peers thought of them.

One girl wrote down four words regarding her personality. She explained why she had chosen the words funny, stubborn, kind and playful.

"I picked 'funny' because at times I can make jokes and people laugh at them. Fun because I like to play a lot of games but not always. 'Stubborn' because if I want something I don't stop asking. I am 'kind' because if someone wants to play with me I would play with them and then play with the other person. I am 'playful' because ... I don't know why I am playful I just am." (Girl)

Another girl described herself as kind, smart and friendly. She gives examples of how she demonstrates these traits:

"Kind' ... because I play and people play with me every day. 'Smart' because I think I am good at reading and maths. 'Friendly' because I play with my best friend and if people want me to play with them I say yeah." (Girl)

This girl chose to describe both her personality and her physical appearance. With regard to her personality, she described herself as kind, grumpy and helpful.

"I am kind. I get grumpy quite easy. Have lots of friends because I am kind and helpful. I am small and I am thin because most of my clothes don't fit me. I need a belt with most of my trousers." (Girl)

The children often described themselves as 'cool' or said their friends described them as 'cool'. This boy explained what he thinks it means to be cool:

Child: "Cool."

Interviewer: "And why did you pick that?"

Child: "Cause I hang out with a lot of the cool kids in the class in school."

Interviewer: "And how, in what way are you cool, or cool kids, what do you do to be cool?"

Child: "You say funny things in class. You play football and you hang out with the coolest kids." (Boy)

The following two conversations indicate how self-aware some of the children were about their personal traits; they used quite sophisticated words to talk about their personalities. In the first example, a boy talks about himself as being "happy, anxious, pleased, sporty and energised". He shows a good understanding of the meaning behind each word.

Child: "Happy, anxious, pleased, sporty, energised."

Interviewer: "Why did you pick 'happy'?"

Child: "Because I never really get unhappy. And I picked 'anxious' because sometimes I am worried about time and we are supposed to be there on time and we are always late. And 'pleased' because I am usually kind of pleased with my rugby team when I win ... and my matches. 'Sporty' – I always play sports. I never really go inside much ... only if it's a bit windy or cold or not too hot. And 'energetic' cause I am never bored. I am never bored or kind of [im]patient. I always kind of need to do something." (Boy)

In this example, a girl describes herself as “confident, happy, self-controlled and quiet”. The interpretations of the meaning behind each of the words that she offers appears very mature.

Interviewer: “So can you read out the words that you wrote down to describe yourself?”

Child: “Confident, happy, self-controlled and quiet.”

Interviewer: “Very good. Why did you say ‘confident’?”

Child: “Because I mostly think about the future and I don’t take in what other people say about me because I know that they’re not right, I’m right about myself.”

Interviewer “What about ‘happy’?”

Child: “Because most of the time I’m not depressed, and every time I look at another person I usually have a big smile on my face, I can’t look at another person without having a smile on my face.”

Interviewer: “Brilliant, and the next word you have is ‘self-controlled’, can you tell me about that?”

Child: “Well I think myself that I’m self controlled because I don’t lose my temper really fast. Most of the time I lose my temper really slowly but ...!”

Interviewer “What about ‘quiet’?”

Child: “I’m not really a get up and jump on the couch kind of person, I don’t shout and scream all the time.” (Girl)

5.3 The Children’s Body Image Scale (CBIS)

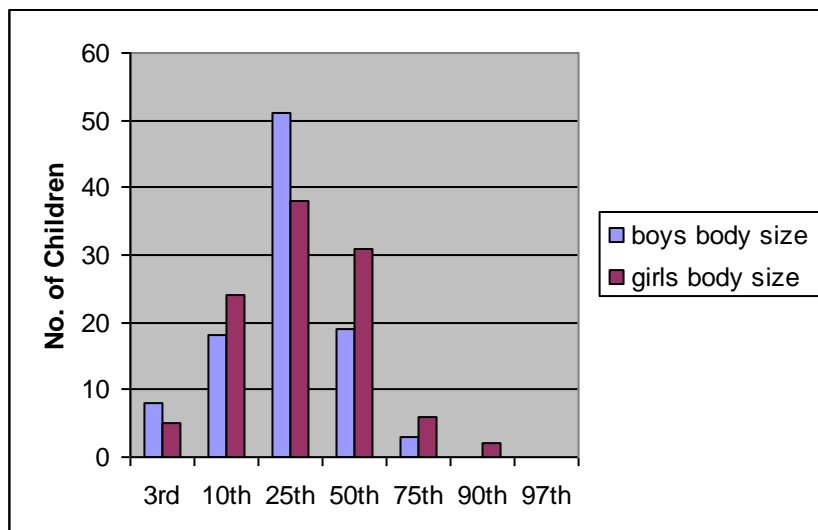
Truby & Paxton (2002) developed a gender-appropriate pictorial scale to measure body image in younger children. The Children’s Body Image Scale (CBIS) uses photographs of children of known Body Mass Index (BMI) ranging through the normal percentile bands for both males and females aged between seven and 12. BMI is an internationally used measure of obesity. A BMI that is less than the 5th percentile is considered underweight and above the 95th percentile is considered obese. Children with a BMI between the 85th and 95th percentile are considered to be overweight. Truby and Paxton (2002) found that, from the age of eight years, the CBIS provides a good measure of body-size perception in children. The **GUI** quantitative study contains data relating to each child’s BMI. An analysis of the BMI of the 122 children who participated in the qualitative study and their perception of body image will be carried out at a later stage.

Each child was shown two of the body image cards and asked to pick an image corresponding to their perception of the healthiest body image for a boy and a girl. Overall, 122 children completed this task, but, due to a misunderstanding of the task, 15 boys and 22 girls only completed cards for their own gender.



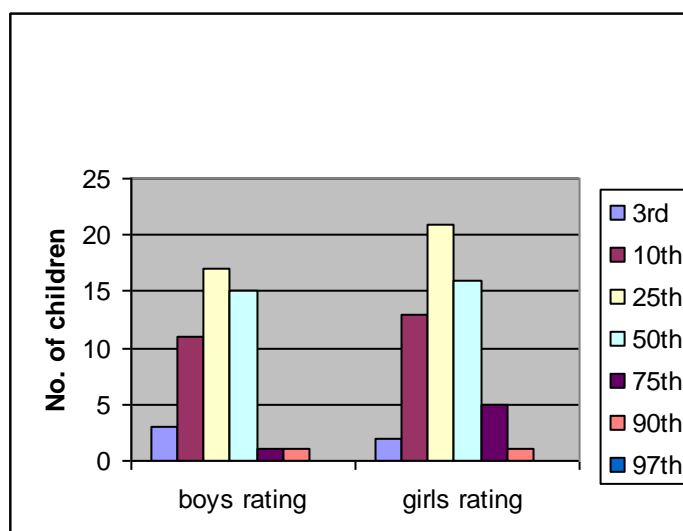
As shown in *Figure 5.1*, 38 children (31%) rated the healthiest body image for nine-year old girls to be at the 25th percentile, while 51 children (42%) indicated that this was the healthiest body image for a boy. Regarding the scores for the 50th percentile, 31 children (25%) rated this as the healthiest body image for girls in comparison to 19 boys (16%).

Figure 5.1: Rating of healthiest body size for boys and girls



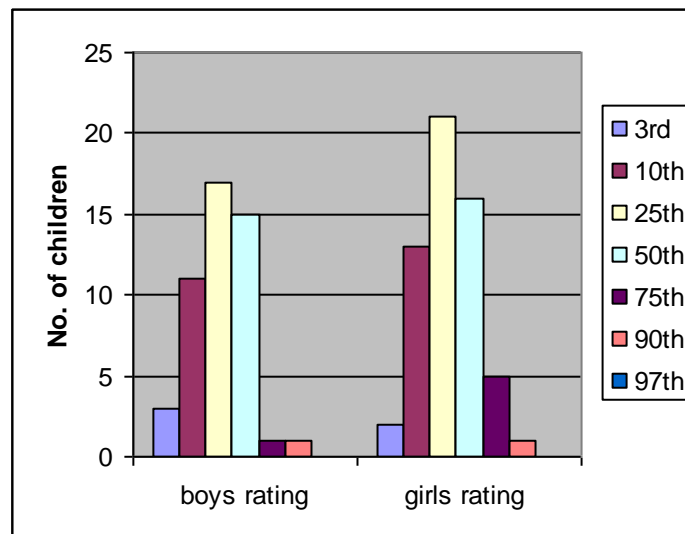
When the scores are broken down by gender, in *Figure 5.2* it can be seen that, of the 58 girls in the study, 21 (36%) rated the 25th percentile and 16 (28%) rated the 50th percentile as the healthiest body size for girls. Of the 48 boys who indicated the healthiest body size for girls, 17 (35%) stated that the 25th percentile was healthiest while 15 (31%) chose the 50th percentile.

Figure 5.2: Rating of healthiest body size for girls



As shown in *Figure 5.3*, in relation to a boy’s healthy body size, of the 36 girls who completed the task, 19 (53%) chose the 25th percentile and six (17%) chose the 50th percentile as the healthiest size for boys. Of the 64 boys in the study, 32 (50%) rated the 25th percentile as healthiest for boys and 13 (20%) rated the 50th percentile as healthiest.

Figure 5.3: Rating of healthiest body size for boys



Truby and Paxton (2002) in their research found that there was a consistent bias towards underestimation of their own body size when children used this technique. This may also explain why the majority of children in *GUI* picked the slightly smaller body size (25th percentile). However, over one-quarter (27%) of the children stated that the 3rd and 10th percentiles were the healthiest for a girl and over one-fifth (21%) indicated that this range was the healthiest for a boy. To put this in context, some of the children did not really differentiate between pictures 2, 3, and 4.

“Cause as well as the other one No. 1 is a bit too skinny and 2 is just the right size, so is 3 and 4.” (Girl)

“No. 1 is too thin, No. 2 this time is right in the middle, and the rest are ... I picked the one that’s right in the middle of it.” (Boy)

This child had difficulty deciding.

Child: “No. 2 and 3.”

Interviewer: “Okay, so do you want to pick one of them or do you want to pick both of them?”

Child: “Probably pick both.”

Interviewer: “Okay, so you can go ahead and put a circle around both of them ... Grand. So why did you pick No. 2?”



Child: "Well, I'd say the first one is really skinny and the fourth is a bit too fat and the fifth and sixth and seventh are too." (Boy)

However, a number of the children thought that the body-image pictures portrayed at 3rd and 10th percentiles were healthy-looking.

Interviewer: "So why did you pick No. 2?"

Child: "Because he's not too big and not too thin." (Boy)

Interviewer: "So why did you pick No. 2?"

Child: "Cause she looks very healthy." (Boy)

Interviewer: "Why did you pick No. 2?"

Child: "Cause she's kind of like me." (Girl)

Interviewer: "So why did you choose No. 1?"

Child: "Cause like she's thin, all the rest of them ... like the last one is very, very fat and I don't want that to happen to children."

Interviewer: "So you think No. 1 is the healthiest because she's thin?"

Child: "Yeah." (Girl)

It must be noted that the children interviewed in **GUI** were not asked to indicate their *own* body size or express their preference for their *ideal* body size – just to indicate what they felt was *healthiest* for nine-year-old children. The CBIS was used as a tool to open up a conversation about body image. When asked why they picked the body-image sizes in the 25th–50th percentile range, the children answered that this was in the middle range; that these children were in between, not too fat and not too skinny; or that they were normal.

This boy explained why he chose card No. 4 for the healthiest image for a boy of his own age:

Interviewer: "And why did you pick No. 4?"

Child: "Because he doesn't look too fat and he doesn't look too skinny." (Boy)

Another boy explains how he feels that girls should carry more weight than boys, in preparation for having children.

Interviewer: "Ok, so which one did you pick for the girls?"

Child: "No. 4."

Interviewer: "And why did you pick that one?"

Child: "Cause girls sometimes have to be a little fat."

Interviewer: "Do they? Why is that?"

*Child: "Cause they have to get used to looking big when they are getting pregnant."
(Boy)*

Another boy and a girl explained why they picked the 90th percentile for the healthiest girl:

Interviewer: "Yes. Okay, so you picked No. 6, why did you pick No. 6 as the healthiest?"

Child: "Because she looks average and that like she isn't overweight and she isn't too thin." (Boy)

Interviewer: "Why did you pick No. 6?"

Child: "Because she's not thin like one of those, 'cause I wouldn't pick that one 'cause she doesn't really look healthy."

Interviewer: "No. 1? What looks unhealthy about her?"

Child: "Cause she's very thin looking."

Interviewer: "What about No. 6 looks healthy?"

Child: "Because she's not thin – that's all." (Girl)

This girl says why she picked No. 4 (50th percentile) for the girls:

Child: "... No. 4."

Interviewer: "So why do you think that one is the healthiest?"

Child: "Well, she is not that fat and not that skinny. She is just right." (Girl)

5.3.1 Perception of Body Image

Following the use of the Children's Body Image Scale, the children were asked if they felt it was important how somebody looked. On the whole, physical appearance was not seen to be that important. Many of the children appeared to value being unique and individual.

Interviewer: "And you think looks are important?"

Child: "No."

Interviewer: "And why do you say that?"

Child: "Because everyone has a different face and shape and size so it doesn't matter because everyone is different in their own way." (Girl)

The children generally felt that a person's personality and behaviour was more important than appearance. One child said that she had discovered personal traits to be more important than physical appearance from watching television.

Interviewer: "And how important do you think looks are?"

Child: "Not very important because it is what is inside that counts. Just to tell you I got that from TV." (Girl)

Another child said she felt that, when it came to looking for a boyfriend when she was older, looks would not be as important as personality.

Interviewer: "And how important do you think looks are?"

Child: "Pretty important but they are not as important as the inside because when you are old enough to try and find a boyfriend, instead of looking at the outside, they may look handsome on the outside but it is the person on the inside that counts. They may look handsome on the outside but they may not be handsome on the inside. They might be very cruel." (Girl)

Some of the children recognised that some people put more emphasis on their appearance than others: This child describes how looks can be seen as more important to some people and not to others.

Interviewer: "And how important do you think looks are?"

Child: "Not that important."

Interviewer: "And why is that?"

Child: "Because some people put on clothes and try to look nice and other people don't care about how they look." (Girl)

Many of the children viewed in a negative light those people who think that looks are important.

Interviewer: "And what kind of people would think looks are important?"

Child: "People that think they don't like you or people you always fight with." (Girl)

The children's perception of how they look was also explored. Most felt content with their appearance, often describing it in very positive terms.

"I think I look nice" (Boy)

"I think I'm gorgeous" (Girl)

One girl explained how her feelings about her appearance could change from feeling good to feeling not so good about how she looks.

"Hmmm, I think I look alright for a normal person, I don't think I look like pretty, pretty, pretty. I don't think that at all because sometimes I just feel like I'm uuugh and sometimes I feel like ... yeah, I'm so pretty but em ... sometimes I just think I look normal." (Girl)



One boy said he enjoyed making an effort to look handsome on special occasions such as his communion, birthdays and when visiting relations.

Child: "I don't really like ... I don't really mind how I look most of the time but for some occasions I like looking nice and handsome."

Interviewer: "What kind of occasions?"

Child: "Like for my communion and going up to Dublin I like dressing up for that 'cause my granny and grandad live there, and my mum and dad's birthday I dress up for that and stuff like that." (Boy)

One child referred to cosmetic surgery, suggesting that he would not change his appearance by this means.

Interviewer: "And is there anything you would like to change about the way you look?"

Child: "No, I don't want to go to surgery or whatever." (Boy)

Although many of the children felt that physical appearance was not important, some suggested changes they would like to make to their physical appearance. Height was seen as an important physical attribute. One boy explained the significance of height on sporting ability.

Interviewer: "What about your height?"

Child: "Yeah, I feel tall and I like my size."

Interviewer: "How important do you think looks are?"

Child: "Yeah, really if you're playing sport if you're big, if you're playing Gaelic you can catch the ball easier, you get up further." (Boy)

It became evident throughout the interviews that a person's physical attributes could make them a target for bullying and name-calling. Many of the children expressed a desire to be taller. Lack of height was seen as one physical attribute that could be made fun of by other people. This girl describes how she felt that other children might laugh at a child who is smaller.

Interviewer: "Are you happy with the way that you look?"

Child: "I'm happy but I'm not special or anything."

Interviewer: "Okay yes, and what about your height and how tall you are; what do you think of that?"

Child: "Sometimes it's okay but do you know people they would be talking, they would be laughing at you if you were small."

Interviewer: "Okay, and do you think you are small?"

Child: "Kind of."

Interviewer: "You kind of do, do you? Okay, so is there anything that you would change about the way you look, about your appearance?"

Child: "I'd be a bit taller." (Girl)

This view is echoed by a boy who explains that if he were shorter in height he would be teased by other children.

"Well, I would think that my – that if I was smaller then nothing good would happen, if I was smaller the kids would be just teasing." (Boy)

This child described how she makes fun of herself for being small.

"I'm a bit small 'cause my friend she's younger than me but she's taller than me and everyone in my class is taller than me but sometimes I slag myself 'cause there's this mini bin and I goes now, 'I don't feel so small!'" (Girl)

Another girl explains how she would like to be taller for practical purposes such as being allowed to go on particular funfair rides.

Interviewer: "And what do you think about how tall you are? What do you think of that?"

Child: "Sometimes I don't like being small for my age because lots of people say you are too small for this and too small for that."

Interviewer: "Like what kinds of things?"

Child: "Like if I was too small to go on a really good ride." (Girl)

Not all of the children wanted to be taller. This boy describes how he enjoys being the smallest in his class:

Child: "I'm happy being the smallest in the class."

Interviewer: "And what is it like to be the smallest in the class?"

Child: "Fun." (Boy)

One girl explained why she would not like to be too tall as it would restrict her from going certain places.

Interviewer: "Why don't you want to be too tall?"

Child: "If I'm too tall I won't be allowed to go small places that tall people can't go in."

Interviewer: "Like where?"

Child: "A tunnel." (Girl)



Height was not the only physical trait that some of children wanted to change. Other attributes such as freckles, lack of strength, skin, teeth, having short hair and wearing spectacles emerged as factors that could make children self-conscious. This girl explains how she would prefer to have no freckles on her face. She describes how she finds them annoying.

Child: "I would like to take away my freckles."

Interviewer: "Do you not like them?"

Child: "Not really, they get all over my face and it gets annoying." (Girl)

One boy expressed his desire to be stronger. He explained that he did not think that he was as strong as other children his age.

Interviewer: "If you could change anything about your body, your appearance ..."

Child: "Probably my strength."

Interviewer: "Why?"

Child: "I'm not as strong as most people though."

Interviewer: "Oh right, most other nine-year-olds, do you think?"

Child: "Yeah." (Boy)

Another girl expressed her desire to have a slighter lighter skin tone, particularly in photographs:

Interviewer: "What would you like to change?"

Child: "I am not that black but just a little bit lighter and my hair, that's all."

Interviewer: "Why is that?"

Child: "Because I am a little bit too dark, especially in pictures." (Girl)

This girl talked said she would like to have fewer moles or spots:

Interviewer: "And is there anything you would like to change about the way you look?"

Child: "No, apart from I would like to get less spots."

Interviewer: "Do you get spots?"

Child: "I have two moles." (Girl)

One girl explained how she would like to change her teeth as she was a target of name-calling.

Interviewer: "What would you change?"

Child: "My teeth."

Interviewer: "Your teeth. Why is that?"

Child: "Everybody calls me 'Bugs Bunny'." (Girl)

One boy discussed the issue of having short hair. He talked about how his mother preferred him to keep his hair short while he liked to wear it longer.

Interviewer: "And is there anything that you would change about how you look?"

Child: "I don't know – my mum wants me to have shorter hair." [laughter]

Interviewer: "And what do you think about that?"

Child: "I don't like having short hair, I like having quite long hair." (Boy)

One boy explained that he would rather not wear glasses. When the researcher tried to explore his reasons for this, the child said he did not want to answer that question.

Interviewer: "And is there anything you would like to change about the way you look?"

Child: "The fact having glasses."

Interviewer: "So you don't like having glasses?"

Child: "No."

Interviewer: "And what is bad about having glasses?"

Child: "I don't want to answer that question." (Boy)

5.4 Gender Identity

The children were asked to think about what it might be like to be a child of the same age but of the opposite gender. Although some felt there were no differences between life for boys and that for girls, many did feel that differences exist.

One boy highlighted what he thought to be the key differences between boys and girls:

"They [girls] dress different and play different and they think different." (Girl)

The main differences cited appeared to be in terms of physical appearance, personalities, roles, hobbies and interests. The children's responses offered some insightful revelations about gender stereotypes and roles.

5.4.1 Physical appearance

The children acknowledged the physical differences between boys and girls. Many described how boys and girls look and dress differently. One child described the physical difference between how boys and girls go to the toilet, explaining that boys stand up.

"They [boys] have to stand up to go to the toilet." (Girl)

With regard to clothing, the children noted that boy and girls dress differently and suggested that girls are more concerned with their appearance than boys, with many explaining that girls are interested in make-up and clothes. This girl describes the different clothes that boys and girls wear:

“Boys wear tracksuits and girls wear skirts and shorts” (Girl)

Another girl suggests that girls are more interested in clothes than boys:

“Boys don’t really care about clothes and girls do” (Girl)

This boy describes how he thinks girls like doing their make-up and their nails while boys prefer to be outdoors:

Child: “It depends what they’re, from a girl’s point of view they like to do their make-up and their nails and puppies and everything cute. And they like pink things.”

Interviewer: “And what about boys?”

Child: “Boys like the outdoors more. They like to like stand in a field.” (Boy)

5.4.2 Personality traits

The children observed different personality traits among boys and girls of their age. Girls were generally thought to be gentler, more sensitive and calmer than boys. Boys were perceived to be more boisterous, active and prone to getting into troublesome situations than girls of the same age.

This boy explained how girls and boys have different personalities, with girls being more sensitive:

Child: “You would have different friends and a different personality.”

Interviewer: “And how do you think a girl’s personality would be different?”

Child: “More sensitive.” (Boy)

This girl describes how she feels that boys are more likely to get into trouble as they favour cars and fighting whereas girls are into more placid activities:

Child: “Because boys get into more trouble because boys are into cars and fighting and all that kind of stuff.”

Interviewer: “And what are girls into?”

Child: “Dolls, talking, chatting, groups.” (Girl)

A few of the children described boys in terms of doing mad or crazy things. This girl echoed this view, suggesting that boys appear to hurt themselves more than girls:

“Kind of ‘cause like sometimes boys can be mad and they can do silly stuff like they can jump off stuff and break their arms or something and girls can do that but like not as bad ‘cause like boys can jump off roofs and everything and that’s it.” (Girl)

One girl described how she feels that, at nine years old, boys are less mature than girls of the same age.

Child: "And they are much more immature than girls, I think."

Interviewer: "Much more what?"

Child: "Immature than girls, at my age."

Interviewer: "Ok. So in what way are they immature, what would they be doing that would ..."

Child: "They just, when you are trying to be serious with them ... they just ... like ... go and mess with their friends or something." (Girl)

Another girl stated that boys can act up a lot in school, talking and throwing paper at each other.

"You would talk a lot in school, throw papers at each other. They do that in school, untidy desks." (Girl)

5.4.3 Gender stereotyping

The theme of gender roles emerged from the children's exploration of the difference between boys and girls. A few of the children observed that gender can determine roles, positions and how people are treated. This girl described how she feels that boys are treated better than girls, with girls doing work while boys play.

Interviewer: "Do you think there is difference between girls and boys?"

Child: "Yes, there is like sometimes. Boys get treated better than girls."

Interviewer: "Do you think so? In what kind of way would they be the treated better?"

Child: "Well like, usually girls have to do all the work and everything but boys can just kind of just play football." (Girl)

One girl described how, even though she does more housework than boys, she would still rather be a girl as she can wear her hair long:

"Even though I wash the dishes and do all the work I am still a girl and it is much better than having short hair" (Girl)

Another girl, from her experience of having an older brother, suggested that, although boys may have less choice than girls regarding their appearance, they can get their way when they are older:

"Yes because they have very little choice when they get their hair cut and they have very little choice of clothes but at times they get their way if they are older." (Girl)

This boy, although expressing his frustration about people thinking that boys are better than girls, suggested some professions in which he feels boys excel.

"Because girls they are much different. They have different personality and different ways of doing stuff but girls, I hate people that think boys are better than girls because girls can do everything boys can do but athletic sports, boys have much better

experience on it and cook, cleaning, girls are better but cooking, everyone thinks girls are better but all the best cooks are boys like Gordon Ramsay and Jamie Oliver.” (Boy)

5.4.4 Hobbies and activities

Generally boys and girls were seen as being interested in different activities and pursuits. The children associated more traditionally masculine sports with boys while the girls were seen to engage in more feminine activities. This boy says boys play football and rugby while girls do ballet:

“Like um, girls would do like ballet and all and um boys would do like football and rugby.” (Boy)

This girl explains how boys play different sports, spend more time watching television and using the computer than girls, and do not read books:

“They [boys] are really different. They play different sports, wear different clothes, do different stuff. They spend way too much time watching TV and on the computer and don’t read books unless they were nerds.” (Girl)

Gender differences were also noticeable as regards the toys with which the children play. It is evident that the children play with traditional, gender-linked toys. One boy describes how boys are interested in typically perceived gender-specific toys such as ‘Action Man’ and cars while girls are more interested in dolls and musicals:

“Boys are interested in Action Man and cars, and girls are interested in Bratz, Barbie and High School Musical and stuff.” (Boy)

5.5. Summary

The nine-year-old children interviewed appear comfortable with their physical appearance and generally happy in their skin. They possess a lot of self-confidence and have an overwhelmingly positive perception of themselves. They recognise that a child’s personality and behaviour are more important than their appearance, but are aware that society can place a lot of significance on looks. They did not cite the media in relation to this but said that height and strength for boys and being pretty and having light skin colour for girls could be important, and that some children could be bullied because of lack of these. The children tended to rate the ideal body size for both boys and girls between the 25th and 50th percentiles. However, nearly a third rated the healthiest body size for both genders at the 10th percentile or below. They were also aware of gender differences, describing behaviour, personality, appearance and interests as the obvious differences.



Chapter 6

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF PARENTING





6.1 Introduction

The children were asked a series of questions about parenting, including what they felt it must be like to be a parent and those factors that they perceived to contribute to positive parenting. They were also asked to describe the rules in their homes and how they are disciplined. A visual prompt depicting a 'magic wand' was used to ask the children to suggest anything that they would do different to their parents.

6.2 The Role of a Parent

Many children perceived parenting to be a challenging role. They noted parental tasks such as caring for children, keeping children occupied and entertained, imposing discipline and conducting household chores.

One boy said parents need to be responsible for their children.

"You have to be responsible for your kids" (Boy)

Another boy described how parents spend a lot of time caring for their children.

"Look after the kids ... Spending lots of time with them" (Boy)

One boy felt that parenting might be difficult as children can be naughty.

Interviewer: "Why do you think it is hard?"

Child: "Because of the children. They might be naughty" (Boy)

Another boy said parenting was difficult and involved a lot of cooking and chores.

"It would be hard ... you would have to make dinner and do loads of jobs" (Boy)

This girl gave the impression of parenting as chaotic, saying that parents have a lot to do and very young children can be demanding:

"A bit crazy because they would be running all over the place and screaming when they are two or three. Rough, because you would have to do everything." (Girl)

Another girl explained that she would not like to be a parent because of the hard work involved.

"Well, I would have to cook, clean, I would have to work, listen to the children nag, listen to them fight. I don't think I want to be a parent." (Girl)

However, some positive attitudes to parenting also emerged. This girl, while recognising that parenting could be challenging, also said it could be fun:

Interviewer: "What is it like to be a parent?"

Child: "Hard and fun." (Girl)

This girl suggested it could be enjoyable to help and teach children:

Child: "Fun, helping your children grow up, cooking their dinner, cleaning and letting your children do the ironing."

Interviewer: "Do you like ironing?"

Child: "Yes." (Girl)

In a smaller number of cases, the children could not explain what they felt was involved in parenting:

"I don't know ... I have no idea!" (Boy)

6.3 Positive Parenting

To gain an insight into what the children viewed as positive parenting, they were asked to describe the traits that would make someone a 'perfect' or 'ideal' parent and also those that would define 'bad' parenting. Naturally, some of the children referred to their own parents and gave examples from their own experience. Many suggested that an 'ideal parent' was someone who took care of their children well. They offered many everyday examples of what might make somebody a good parent. Their responses highlighted that a 'perfect parent' was someone who did a lot for their children. This girl listed the many roles involved in positive parenting:

"Well, they'd be always doing the cleaning, always doing the cooking, making sure that you get to school, making sure you have everything, making sure everything is fine, making sure all your homework is done, making sure you are happy going to school ... making sure that you haven't forgotten anything ..." (Girl)

This girl explains that an 'ideal parent' would be well dressed and have perfect children and a clean house:

"Like clean the house, perfect children, perfect parent, well dressed, everything." (Girl)

Another girl described the 'perfect parent' as caring for and loving their children.

"Someone who cares for you and loves you and knows what is best for you" (Girl)

A 'perfect parent' was also described as one who was always there for the child. This boy suggested that a good parent was approachable and supportive of their children:

"You're never afraid to talk to them and that is always there for you" (Boy)

Another boy implied that good parents protect their children. He offers the example of how parents can help children when crossing the road:

"Make sure they look up and down when crossing the road, don't run out in front of cars"
(Boy)

Throughout their discussions, the value that children placed on boundaries was evident. They were aware that positive parenting involved setting boundaries and rules, and that parents could not always give children what they wanted. This boy suggested that positive parenting requires a balance:

"In between both. Too nice isn't great and too bad isn't good. In between is good."
(Boy)

Another girl echoed this view, suggesting that some parents can spoil their children.

"Like not spoiling their child, just like bringing them up like a proper child" (Girl)

This girl recognised the value in having boundaries for children. She suggests that giving children all their demands can have a negative impact on them in later life:

"... being nice and don't pressure the children on a test, and like don't spoil them, buy them a few stuff like if it's their birthday it's alright, but if it was just like if they start moaning, 'oh ma, that's not fair, get me that now', like it's, it wouldn't be fair on the parent, like if they keep getting the child everything they want they could lose money and everything" (Girl)

Some children thought their own parents were perfect and were doing a good job. This boy described his mother as the perfect parent. He explained how she looks after him and implied that she had helped him with bullying.

Child: "Probably like my mum."

Interviewer: "Why is your mum a perfect parent?"

Child: "Because she never lets anything happen to us and she helps us if we need help and if we are getting bullied she goes in to talk to my teacher." (Boy)

This girl recognised that her parents, in particular her father, had her best interests as a priority. Here she specifically mentions how her parents encourage her to eat fish as it is good for her:

"... so is my dad because they understand that I don't like fish but they make me eat it and tell me it is for my own good" (Girl)

Another boy suggests that his parents are perfect:

"An ideal parent would be fantastic kind of like the ones I have" (Boy)



Some of the children said or implied that 'perfect' parents do not exist. One child acknowledged that in reality parents are not perfect and that everyone has problems. He suggested that the best parents are those that do not appear to get too stressed.

"Well, there are no perfect parents. Like you have no problem with anything, like you just do it like you don't really fuss about stuff." (Boy)

This girl said she did not know what a 'perfect parent' was as she had never met one.

"I don't really know because I have never met them" (Girl)

In contrast to the children's discussions regarding positive parenting, they were also asked to highlight parenting practices that could be considered damaging to children. Factors such as neglect, emotional abuse and physical punishment emerged throughout the discussions.

Characteristics of neglect were described by the children. According to them, a 'bad parent' was one who did not take care of their children's basic needs.

"They abandon you and don't take care of you" (Boy)

One girl offered her understanding of neglect. She talked about a 'bad parent' as someone who does not provide appropriate food or clothes for their children or protect them from harm.

"They don't care for you, they don't buy you clothes but they would buy you ripped clothes, they would give you scraps of food, they would give you dirty water and they never buy you anything with no money" (Girl)

Similarly, this boy described parents who do not provide food for their children as neglecting them:

"Someone who doesn't feed their kids" (Boy)

The children also talked about symptoms of emotional abuse as opposed to positive parenting. They spoke of a 'bad parent' as someone who does not meet the emotional needs of their children.

"If they didn't pay any interest in you" (Girl)

This girl said a 'bad parent' was one who did not love their children or ill-treated them:

"Someone who doesn't love you or wouldn't treat you well" (Girl)

A boy suggested that a 'bad parent' does not communicate with their child.

"If they don't talk to you and they don't treat you nice" (Boy)



A 'bad parent' was also seen as someone who did not spend time with their children:

"Someone that you never see them, like once a year" (Boy)

This girl suggested that a 'bad parent' uses physical punishment:

"... slaps their children if they do anything" (Girl)

6.4 Rules and Boundaries

From the children's conversations around parenting, their ideas and experiences of boundaries and discipline emerged. The children were asked to describe any rules that their parents had for them at home. Most could list some rules that they must follow at home. Many talked about how their parents expected them to behave at home. Most, when asked what the rules were in the house, mentioned rules regarding their physical behaviour. The children's need to expend energy when playing in their homes was evident. Many explained how their parents did not allow them to run, play ball in the house, or jump on furniture. These were also the things that came to mind first when asked if they wanted to change the rules.

This girl talked about the rules she must follow at home, most of which related to her physical activity in the house:

"I'm not allowed slide on the banisters, I'm not allowed climb on the walls, I have to tidy my room ... I'm not allowed wreck the house with my friends or anything ..." (Girl)

One boy said his parents did not allow him to play 'kickboxing' at home.

"No kickboxing allowed in the house" (Boy)

Other rules concerned the children misbehaving, including arguments with their siblings, using explicit language and cleaning the house.

*"Yes, no messing or fighting or hitting or no giving out, no shouting and that is all really."
(Boy)*

"You [children] are not allowed to use bad language." (Girl)

"Whoever makes the mess cleans the mess, or not eating popcorn in here, like, or food, only on special occasions, no letting the dog up on the trampoline." (Boy)

Some children described the specific chores they had at home such as housework or looking after pets. This girl explained the chores that she and her brother and sister carried out at home. She was responsible for caring for her pets and fetching fuel:

“Em ... we have our jobs, me and [sister] do the coal, I do the gerbils, I do [pets'] house, and [brother] does the dishwasher.” (Girl)

Another boy described the chores he helped with at home:

“Em ... we have to put all our plates in the dishwasher. We are not allowed throw stuff on the fireplace, only in the bin. Turn off the lights. And brush our teeth when we go to bed.” (Boy)

This boy felt that there were too many rules in his house:

“Yeah, too many. No playing on the internet without permission, no sneaking sweets and going to friends' houses without permission, no sneaking sweets from the cupboard.” (Boy)

One child was not sure if there were rules in his house – and asked his mother about this during the interview.

“I don't really know the rules so I don't know what I'd change ... I've barely heard of the rules anyway, I don't think there is actually ... [to his mother] is there?” (Boy)

6.5 Methods of Discipline

The children were asked to describe what would typically happen if they disobeyed their parents' rules. Many commented that their parents would scold them or tell them off and sometimes restrict privileges. This girl explained that her parents could shout at or 'ground' her:

“You [children] get shouted at or you get grounded” (Girl)

Another boy said his parents would tell him off if he broke the rules:

“Just get given out to” (Boy)

This girl explained that her parents would punish her by sending her to her bedroom for the day:

Interviewer: “And what happens when you break the rules?”

Child: “Get punished.”

Interviewer: “What is your punishment?”

Child: “Sent to my room or something.”

Interviewer: “And what do you think of that?”

Child: “Bad because I have to stay in my room all day and do nothing, just lie there.” (Girl)



A smaller number of children spoke about physical punishment. Some described getting 'slapped' when they had broken the rules.

Interviewer: "What happens when anyone in the house breaks the rules?"

Child: "There will be tears."

Interviewer: "Okay?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "And what would your mum do or your dad?"

Child: "Slap us or put us outside the door with the dogs." (Boy)

This girl gives her opinion of physical punishment. She describes how her parents 'slap' her but clarifies that they do not want to hurt her. She suggests that she finds slapping sore and outlines how it can result sometimes in swelling:

Interviewer: "And what happens when you break the rules?"

Child: "We get in trouble if we are mean and fighting. Most the time we have to say sorry to each other or we get a slap but not that hard because you [the parents] don't want to hurt us that much. We go to our room and come back down and say sorry and we are allowed to go outside and play."

Interviewer: "What do you think of slapping?"

Child: "It's sore."

Interviewer: "Do you think it is good or bad?"

Child: "It is bad news because when you get a slap you know when your mum or dad come in you are going to get their hand and you say, 'oh no here comes the pain.' It does get sore but it goes straight away. The swollen is all gone." (Girl)

The children were asked to give their perspective on what modes of discipline work best with children. Negotiation and apologising were some of the suggestions.

"What works best would be apologising for doing it and not doing it again" (Boy)

"If you make a deal. Like if you have a very bad child and you say we'll make a deal. If you be good for the rest of this month, I'll give you this and I'll give you that." (Boy)

This girl explained how she would not yell at children if she were a parent:

"Em, I wouldn't yell at my children ..." (Girl)



6.6 Changing the Rules

The children were offered a visual prompt of a 'magic wand' and offered the chance to have 'magic powers' like the fictional character Harry Potter to change the rules in their house. Most of the children appeared to respect the rules at home and recognised the reasons underpinning the rules and boundaries set by their parents. Most suggested that their parents had their best interests at heart and that having no rules at home might not be beneficial for children. This girl explains how she feels her parents' rules keep her safe and protect her from harm:

"They keep you safe in case you burn the house, making sure you don't get hurt and making sure you don't run with scissors and stuff like that" (Girl)

Another girl spoke about the rule to turn lights off at bedtime. She felt that this rule was important as otherwise it could be difficult for children to get to sleep.

"Cause it's important – because if you just, like, don't bother turning off your lights you'd be just awake for ages" (Girl)

Children understood that if they did not go to bed at a certain time they would not be able to get up for school.

"I think I would have to go to bed by ten because I wouldn't be waking up for school" (Boy)

Most of the children felt that, as parents, they would not do anything differently from their parents.

"No, I would keep everything the same" (Girl)
"No, I would do the same things that my mum and dad do" (Girl)

Although most of the children said they would keep things the same, some suggested some changes they would make. Wishing to change bedtimes was a common theme.

"[That] we could go to bed whenever we wanted" (Girl)

Some children worked through the dilemma of wanting to change the rules and the safety consequences involved.

"Climbing on bannisters 'cause I like climbing on banisters, 'cause like I never fell or hurt myself before and it's not going to happen. Well no, I wouldn't change that 'cause you could break you arm." (Girl)
"I'd like to be able to turn [on the cooker], make my own lunch, but that is a bit dangerous without nobody in the house" (Girl)



Other suggestions the children made were to do with changing their diet, having pets and having different bedrooms.

“Have different food ... I like stir fries” (Boy)

This girl, who also wanted to have a later bedtime, suggested that children should have their own bedrooms.

Child: “I would like a ten o’clock bedtime or ... that’s it.”

Interviewer: “And if you were a parent is there anything you would do differently?”

Child: “I would try and give each child their own room maybe.” (Girl)

Another girl mentioned having more space in her bedroom and said she would like to have a pet.

“Get a puppy or kitten. I don’t know why but I hate big dogs and yet small dogs are so much cuter, and have a bigger bedroom” (Girl)

One boy suggested that he would like to be in charge in the household.

“Like that children were in charge of parents so I could boss my mother around” (Boy)

6.7 Summary

The vast majority of the children felt that parenting was a challenging and stressful job involving a lot of multi-tasking. The issue of positive parenting was explored; the children described what traits could make someone a ‘perfect’ or ‘ideal’ parent or a ‘bad’ parent. Positive parenting was seen as caring for and nurturing children, and creating rules and boundaries that are in the best interests of the child. The children valued their own parents, often citing them as ideal parents, because they loved them, did everything for them and kept them safe. They also highlighted parenting practices that they considered damaging to children. Factors such as neglect, emotional abuse and physical punishment emerged throughout their discussions. The children were asked to describe any rules that their parents had for them at home. Most could list some rules that they must follow at home. Many talked about how their parents expected them to behave at home. When asked what the rules were in the house, most mentioned rules regarding their physical behaviour. Asked to describe what would typically happen if they disobeyed their parents’ rules, many commented that their parents would scold them or tell them off and sometimes restrict privileges. A smaller number of children spoke about physical punishment. The children were offered a visual prompt of a ‘magic wand’ and offered the chance to have ‘magic powers’ like the fictional character Harry Potter to change the rules in their house. Most appeared to respect the rules at home and recognised the reasons underpinning the rules and boundaries set by their parents. Most of the children felt that their parents had their best interests at heart and that having no rules at home might not be beneficial for children.



Chapter 7

CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES





7.1 Introduction

In order to engage the children in conversation about their relationships with family members, they were asked to write the names or draw a small picture of each member of their family. In exploring their perception of emotional closeness with family members, they were asked to describe how they got on with their family members, how often they saw them and the type of things that they typically did together. The children placed the names on a worksheet entitled 'My Family and Me'. This comprised five concentric rings with 'Me' in the centre. Each ring represented the degree of emotional closeness and strength of relationship. The children then explained the physical positions of their individual family members on the map and this was used as a prompt to introduce questions about their relationships. Only the relationships with members of the family that the children had included on the family map were explored.

7.2 Relationships with Parents

The children described their individual relationships with both their mothers and fathers. Usually at least one of the child's parents was in the room with the child as they were being interviewed; it is unclear what impact their presence may have had on the child's responses. The researchers were conscious that many children were living in non-traditional family structures. Almost three-quarters of the children (70.5%) were living with two parents resident in the family home and almost one-third (29.5%) with just one parent resident in the family home. Nineteen of the children interviewed (16%) had experienced parental separation. The children residing with one parent all lived with their mother. Many had regular contact with their fathers, usually at weekends or during school holidays. A few of the children's fathers were living outside the country but maintained contact with their children. A small number of children did not have any contact with their dad. In cases where a child was not living with both parents, to avoid sensitivities, the parent-child relationship was only discussed if the child had initiated the discussion.

Overall, the children appeared to have very positive relationships with their parents and most identified a close bond with their parents on the emotional closeness map. When asked to describe their relationship with their parents, most said they got on well with them. 'Grand', 'great' or 'really well' were typical responses. The children went on to describe the types of things they did with their mothers and fathers.

Many of the children appeared to enjoy a very close relationship with their mother. Typically, they spent most of their time with their mother. In a lot of cases, mothers were at home when the children finished school. The children spoke about spending time with their mothers, communicating and enjoying activities together. One boy, living with both his mother and father, said he got on "really, really well" with his mother, talked to her every day after school, and, though they did not play together often, gave an example of how recently they had danced together in the kitchen:

Interviewer: "Ok, and what about your mum, how do you get on with her?"

Child: "Really, really well. Every day after school we talk ... we have a chat. It's not very often but sometimes we play with each other and just last week we were dancing with each other in the kitchen." (Boy)

Another boy described his relationship with his mother as 'good' but said they sometimes argued. He was living with his mother but saw his father at weekends. He said his mother would sometimes scold him.

Child: "Good, a little bit good. We sometimes fight."

Interviewer: "About what?"

Child: "If I want to go out she [mother] gives out to me and if I want to do something she gives out to me." (Boy)

This girl, living with her two parents, said she had a 'very good' relationship with her mother and they often talked together. She also spoke of reading and singing with her mother.

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your mum?"

Child: "Very good."

Interviewer: "And what kinds of things would you do with your mum?"

Child: "I'd talk with her [mother] and I'd read Irish books with her and sometimes I sing songs with her." (Girl)

One boy spoke of playing games with his mother and highlighted the help she gave him with his homework.

Interviewer: "Tell me about your mum."

Child: "Yeah, we play games and she'd [mother] help me with my work from school and she'd probably do some reading with me." (Boy)

Another boy, who lived with his mother and saw his father every second weekend, outlined how he felt very comfortable talking to his mother if he was upset. He explained how he had told her about his experience of being bullied.

"She [mother] always makes me feel that I don't have to worry to tell her about people in school that are bullying me or if I feel upset about everything." (Boy)

This child, living with her mother who is separated, explained how her mother could sometimes be stressed or angry. She described what that experience was like for her;

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your mum?"

Child: "Good. Just sometimes she gets really angry and she shouts at me for, 'em, stuff like when she is really angry about something and I ask her something she shouts at me because she is angry about that thing and then at night time she says sorry she was just really angry she couldn't help it." (Girl)

Many of the children expressed that they really appreciated and loved their parents. This girl, living with both her parents, said she had a very close relationship with her mother, who was very kind and helpful to her. She added that she "really, really loves" her mother.

Child: "I get on great with Mummy 'cause she is really nice to me and she does everything for me and she helps me an' all."



Interviewer: "What way does she help you?"

*Child: "She helps me sometimes with my homework and I just really, really love her."
(Girl)*

Many of the children also described having very close relationships with their fathers. In particular, they described engaging in a wide range of activities with them. This boy, whose father worked from home, told how his dad cooked his dinner and played with him outside:

"I always practice rugby with him outside. And he cooks my favourite food ... spaghetti bolognese." (Boy)

One girl said she spent time with her father playing football and fishing.

"We play football and we go fishing and I don't know what else" (Girl)

This boy, living with both his parents, says his father takes him on his motorbike:

"A lot of the time he takes us [children] on his motorbikes and I have a leather jacket and a helmet. It is not real leathers." (Boy)

Many fathers were involved in their children's sporting activities. The boys, in particular seemed to enjoy their fathers helping them with their sporting pursuits. One boy, who lived at home with both his parents, said he had a positive relationship with his father, who helped him with his sports.

"Yeah, we get on good 'cause he helps me with my sports and to help me get better with my hurling and soccer and all that stuff" (Boy)

Another boy, living with his two parents, told how his father usually took him to his sports training and matches.

"My dad brings me to all my training and my matches but if he's at work then my mam will bring me" (Boy)

This child, living in a rural area with his two parents, outlined the activities he did with his father on the farm:

*"Hunting, doing the cows, driving the tractor, going up to help loading up the cattle"
(Boy)*



On the map depicting the emotional closeness of relationships with family members, this child placed his father further away than his mother. He said he did not speak to his father as his father spent a lot of time at work.

Interviewer: "And why did you pick that one [pink circle] for dad?"

Child: "I don't talk to him 'cause most of the time he's in work." (Boy)

Some of the children who did not live with their fathers also described their relationship with them and the activities they did together. Most of the children who spoke about their non-resident fathers appeared to have close relationships with them. This girl explained how she visited her father regularly and he took her to a local farm and also took her swimming.

Interviewer: "And what kinds of things would you do with your dad [when you visit him?]"

Child: "I get to go to the pet farm which is my favourite place because they usually have kittens and guinea pigs and bunny rabbits and stuff like that there, we get to go swimming and do all the fun stuff." (Girl)

One girl, when writing her father down on the worksheet, said he lived outside of the family home. She talked about spending time with him two days per week and the activities they did together.

Interviewer: "OK, so that is you in the middle there? So I want you to write down who is in your family. So is it just you and mum that live here?"

Child: "My dad is here as well but he lives somewhere away ..."

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your dad?"

Child: "He brought me rock climbing once and pictures and bowling."

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with him?"

Child: "... good."

Interviewer: "Anything else you do with your dad?"

Child: "The pictures, the cinema."

Interviewer: "Is that on Sunday?"

Child: "I see him on Thursdays and on Sunday." (Girl)

This boy, whose father lived outside of the family home, said he did not get to see him often because of his job. He suggested that his relationship with his father could be strained. He explained that, when he spent time with him every second weekend, his father could sometimes be moody and scold the children.

"We don't see him [father] as much and because he travels five days a week and we go with him every second weekend and the rest of the times he is travelling and on the weekend he can be a bit grumpy and if myself and [brother] are shouting he can send us to our rooms a bit easy." (Boy)



One child talked about her parents' separation and appeared unhappy with the amount of contact that she had with her father. She sees her father once a month as he lives abroad but would prefer to see him every day:

Child: "My dad and mum split up and I only get to see him once a month."

Interviewer: "And would you like to see him more often?"

Child: "I would love to see him every day."

Interviewer: "Your mum told me he lives in [country]. What do you think about that?"

Child: "Most of the time I feel upset because he is not here but then it is really good because we get to go to [country] more than we would if he was here and I get to see [friend]." (Girl)

Another girl described her relationship with her father as poor. Although he lives close by, she rarely sees him:

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your dad?"

Child: "Not very good. I barely see him."

Interviewer: "And do you ever do anything with your dad?"

Child: "Not anymore."

Interviewer: "And did you used to do things with him?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "And does he live near?"

Child: "He just lives up around the corner but they are moving."

Interviewer: "And are they moving far away?"

Child: "I don't know where they are moving yet." (Girl)

In the few instances where parents' new partners were mentioned, the children spoke positively about them. This boy, who was living at home with his mother and her partner, outlined the activities they did together as a family:

Interviewer: "Okay, great, so who lives at home with you here?"

Child: "There is me, Mammy and [mum's partner]."

Interviewer: "Okay, and what type of things do you do together?"

Child: "We watch telly and go to the Chinese and the cinema together." (Boy)



7.3 Relationships with Siblings

The children talked about their relationships with their siblings and the activities they participated in together. Brothers and sisters appeared to be good company for the children, who played together often. The children were quite open in their descriptions of their relationships with siblings and most had positive relationships with them. However, they did discuss arguing with siblings and some suggested that they could be easily irritated by their siblings.

One girl, using the emotional closeness map, describes the typical relationship that most of the children experienced with their siblings. She says she loves her brother even though they do not always get along.

"I picked that one [circle] because we do get along but we don't always get along, but I still love him" (Girl)

Similarly, this girl suggests that, although she can enjoy a lot of activities with her brother, he is sometimes "mean" to her.

Interviewer: "And what kinds of things would you do with him?"

Child: "Play football and play the Playstation and sometimes we would read our books together and watch programmes although sometimes he is quite mean."

Interviewer: "What does he do that is mean?"

Child: "He says mean things about me or kicks me." (Girl)

One boy described his relationship with his younger brother and sister who are twins. He explains that he plays sports with his younger brother and sometimes plays with his sister. He touches on the responsibility he feels as their older brother, suggesting that as the eldest child he should not misbehave.

Interviewer: "How do you get on with your brother and sister?"

Child: "Good, well, my brother, I play soccer quite a lot and my sister she's nearly all the time at my friend's house."

Interviewer: "Would you and she ever play together?"

Child: "Sometimes she would."

Interviewer: "What sort of stuff?"

Child: "She likes to play stuff like when she's pretending to be little objects and I'll just play along with that."

Interviewer: "Your brother and sister are both younger than you?"

Child: "Yeah, they're both younger than me, they're twins."

Interviewer: "Do you like being the oldest?"

Child: "It has its ups and downs."



Interviewer: "What are the ups?"

Child: "You get to stay up later, you get to do more things than your younger brother and sister."

Interviewer: "What would be the downs?"

Child: "If you do something naughty you're the oldest and you shouldn't be doing it like." (Boy)

One girl appeared to have a less positive relationship with her brother. She felt that they did not get on well together and he refused to allow her play with him and his friends.

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your brother?"

Child: "Very bad."

Interviewer: "Why do you say that?"

Child: "Because if he is out playing with his friends and I see him and go over he gets embarrassed and he says like 'go away'." (Girl)

The children sometimes found younger siblings, in particular, to be a source of frustration.

Interviewer: "And what about [younger brother] then?"

Child: "We get along great and very good but at the same time he can be really, really annoying. He always takes my stuff and hits me and he screams and shouts." (Boy)

"Sometimes we play at night time with our little cuddly toys. But me and her [younger sister] get into lots of fights a lot of the time." (Boy)

This boy also appeared to have a more turbulent relationship with his younger brother. He talked about how he could get into physical fights with him:

Interviewer: "So how do you and [brother] get along?"

Child: "We don't really get along that well."

Interviewer: "You don't? Why would you say that?"

Child: "We mainly fight."

Interviewer: "What kinds of things would you be fighting about?"

Child: "Everything."

Interviewer: "And what happens when you have a fight?"

Child: "Well ... he'd start pushing me around."

Interviewer: "And what would you do?"

Child: "Push him back..." (Boy)

The children also described mixed relationships with older siblings. Some children appeared to admire their older brothers and sisters, while others had more changeable relationships. One girl talked about her brother who is in his mid-20s. She described them as being best friends.

Child: "Really good. My brother, we are like best friends because we have a lot in common. Everyone says I am like him and we play Playstation games together."

Interviewer: "And what age is he?"

Child: "25 or 26." (Girl)

Some of the children talked about their older siblings playing the role of their parents. One boy felt that his relationship with his older brother could sometimes be difficult and he described his older brother as acting like his father.

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your [big brother]?"

Child: "Sometimes I would fight with him and sometimes he thinks he is a big adult and he thinks he is my dad and bosses me around. But sometimes, twice we went to the cinema together." (Boy)

This girl suggested that her older sister could behave like her mother:

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with [sister]?"

Child: "Sometimes ok, sometimes not."

Interviewer: "Why is that?"

Child: "Sometimes when she is minding us and we want to do something she won't let me and I carry on and she acts like a mother."

Interviewer: "What does she do like a mother?"

Child: "Like she would shout really loud and she would tell us to go to bed and drags us up." (Girl)

A small number of the children had a twin sibling. They were all very close to their twin siblings, but mention having friction at times.

"Sometimes we get on really well and sometimes she can be a bit annoying but mostly she is really nice" (Girl)

Interviewer: "So [sister] is your twin, so what is it like being a twin?"

Child: "It is fun."

Interviewer: "What is fun about it?"

Child: "Because we're friends and we are always messing about with each other." (Girl)

Interviewer: "And what is it like having a twin sister?"

Child: "It is like having a sister but it is great because you have someone to talk to in the night time. Sometimes we have fun together and we do get on but not that much." (Girl)

A small number of the children had half-siblings or step-siblings. Some talked openly about these relationships but a small number did not include half-siblings or step-siblings in their conversations about their family. One boy talked about his teenage brother and sister from his father's previous relationship. He appeared to have a very close relationship with both of them and see them frequently. He described how they talked and played together.

Interviewer: "OK and who is next [in the map]?"

Child: "My big brother ... and my big sister ..."

Interviewer: "And do you see them much?"

Child: "Yes, I see them a lot."

Interviewer: "What kind of stuff do you do when you see them?"

Child: "Talk and play around."

Interviewer: "And do you get on well?"

Child: "Yeah." (Boy)

Another boy also talked about his relationship with his half-brother. He said they did not see each other that often as his brother spent a lot of time with his friends.

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with [older step-brother]? Does he live with your dad?"

Child: "No. Like he is my step-brother. I don't really see him that much anymore because he is with his friends." (Boy)

7.4 Relationships with Grandparents

Most of the children appeared to be very close to their grandparents. Those children who lived near their grandparents were in regular contact. In some cases, the children mentioned that their grandparents were involved in their lives on a day-to-day basis.



This girl, whose grandparents lived next door to her own house, said she saw both her grandmother and grandfather very often. She suggests that they help with child-minding when her parents take holidays:

Interviewer: "And what about your grandparents, do you see them much?"

Child: "Yeah, I see Nanny and Grandad loads of times in there."

Interviewer: "Cause they live next door?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "How do you get on with your grandparents?"

Child: "Good. When my mammy and daddy is away my nanny brings us to the park and my grandad he brings us for a walk." (Girl)

Another girl described her relationship with her grandparents as "brilliant" and said she saw them almost every day.

"I get on brilliantly well with my grandparents and I see my grandparents here very much ... nearly every day" (Girl)

It appears that grandparents support parents in providing after-school care for children and also take the children to their structured activities. One boy said his grandfather took him to school each day and that he spent a lot of time after school in his grandparent's house.

"My grandad, he brings me to school because my mam brings my brother to school and if I go to his house, my grandparents' house, he'll collect me and then he'll bring me over." (Boy)

One girl talked about going to her grandmother's house every day after school.

Child: "My nanny."

Interviewer: "Does she live near?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "And do you see her much?"

Child: "I go to her house all the time. I get the bus there after school." (Girl)

One boy talked of having a good relationship with both his grandparents and said his grandmother looked after him after school.

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your nana and grandad?"

Child: "Well, my nana takes me everywhere because she minds me after school. I get on really good with my grandad as well." (Boy)



Some of the children described the enjoyment they experienced from spending time with their grandparents. One boy was very proud of his grandfather's sporting history and enjoyed hearing stories about his achievements.

Child: "Grandad used to play hurling."
Interviewer: "OK."
Child: "For [county]."
Interviewer: "Really? So would he ever play with you or ...?"
Child: "He used to play with [hurler]."
Interviewer: "Really? So does he tell you stories about that?"
Child: "He tells me about some of the goals he scored." (Boy)

This girl talked fondly of how her grandfather played games with her.

Interviewer: "... and how do you get on with your grandad?"
Child: "Good."
Interviewer: "And what kinds of things would you do with him?"
Child: "He tries to scare me." [laughs]
Interviewer: "How does he do that?"
Child: "He sneaks up behind us and says 'woo!'"(Girl)

One boy said he got on very well with his grandparents and acknowledged that they went to great lengths for their grandchildren.

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your nanny and grandad?"
Child: "Very well."
Interviewer: "And what kinds of things would you do with them?"
Child: "We go to their house every Friday for lunch and they come to our house every Tuesday and Thursday for dinner ... and they would go to the ends of the earth to get us, if we asked for anything they would go to the ends of the earth to get it." (Boy)

In one case, the child appeared to have a closer bond with her grandmother than her grandfather. She placed her parents alongside her grandmother when completing the emotional closeness map. However, she put her grandfather on a more distant circle, stating that he did not spend much time with her.

Interviewer: "OK, so you put your mammy and your daddy and your granny in the first one. Why did you put them there?"

Child: "They are really important to me."

Interviewer: "Then you put your grandad in the next one?"

Child: "Because we don't do anything and he is too busy painting and then when he comes home he just gets his dinner and watches TV." (Girl)

In some cases, the children's grandparents do not live nearby. A few of the children talked about how their grandparents lived abroad. One boy said his father and his paternal grandparents lived outside Ireland. He suggested that they spent time with him when he visited his father.

Interviewer: "Do your grandparents live here?"

Child: "No they live in [country]."

Interviewer: "Do you see them much?"

Child: "I see them whenever I go to my dad."

Interviewer: "Ok. So how do you get on with your grandparents?"

Child: "They are really nice to me."

Interviewer: "Do you do things with them?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "What kinds of things do you do?"

Child: "Like we sometimes go to museums and stuff." (Boy)

This child spoke about having a positive relationship with his step-grandfather, with whom he played chess.

Interviewer: "And who is [name]?"

Child: "My step-grandad".

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with him?"

Child: "Really good."

Interviewer: "And what kinds of things do you do with him?"

Child: "Sometimes he comes up for dinner and we play chess." (Boy)

7.5 Relationships with Extended Family

Throughout the conversations regarding family members, some of the children included other members of their extended family such as aunts, uncles and cousins. As with the children's grandparents, the frequency of contact with their relations was often influenced by the proximity of their homes. Generally, if the extended family lived near the child's home, the children saw them regularly.



This boy spoke about seeing his aunts and uncles almost every day. He said he visited his uncle on his farm:

Interviewer: "Do you see them [aunts and uncles] often?"

Child: "I see them nearly every day ... When [uncle] started the farm we always go and say hello." (Boy)

Another boy talked about spending time with his aunts and uncles doing activities. He said he played football with his uncles and helped some of them to cook, and talked to his aunts.

Interviewer: "And how do you get on with your aunties and uncles?"

Child: "Grand."

Interviewer: "And what kinds of things would you do with them?"

Child: "Some uncles I play football with, some aunties I talk to and some of my uncles I help cook with." (Boy)

This boy talked about how playful his uncle could be, describing him as "funny":

Interviewer: "What's he [uncle] like?"

Child: "He's funny."

Interviewer: "What does he do that's funny?"

Child: "Like if you were sitting and waiting to go home, this is what happened once, he'd sneak up behind you and he'd go 'ah!' and give you a fright." (Boy)

Another boy said he often saw his cousins. He talked about playing games with them and visiting each other's houses.

Interviewer: "Do you see your cousins much?"

Child: "Yeah, my cousins are my age, if I go to their house or if they come to my house if they're visiting with their mum and dad we might play the Playstation or play games."

Interviewer: "Is there any cousin you're better friends with than others?"

Child: "Yeah, there's one living up the road." (Boy)

One girl described how she often turned to her cousin for advice on boys and clothes.

Interviewer: "Who would you talk to about your day?"

Child: "Mostly my cousin because I mostly see [cousin]. I ring [cousin] to talk about something like boys."

Interviewer: "And what would you be talking about boys?"

Child: "See who is cute or not and see who is in fashion and who isn't. Who looks good with their new clothes to their old clothes and if they had nice runners or something."
(Girl)

7.6 Relationships with Pets

For many of the children, pets were seen as part of the family. Some included their pets in their drawings of family members and when they listed the names of people in their family. Pets appeared to be very important to the children. They enjoyed playing with them and taking care of them.

This boy describes the activities he enjoys doing with his new dog:

Interviewer: "And so tell me about the newest member [of the family], your dog."
Child: "He is the best!"
Interviewer: "So what kinds of things are you going to do with [dog] now?"
Child: "Bring him for walks, play with him out the back, bring him on my trampoline."
(Boy)

In some cases the family pet appeared to be a source of emotional support for the child. This girl liked to talk to her pet about things going on in her life:

Interviewer: "So who would you talk to about your day?"
Child: "Em well, I know my rabbit can't talk but I talk to my rabbit sometimes." (Girl)

7.7 Dealing with Loss

Many of the children talked openly about the sense of loss experienced after parental separation, the death of a family member or the death of a pet. Some chose to include family members they had lost on the 'My Family and Me' map.

This boy included his deceased mother on the worksheet. He talked about how she had died when he was very young and that she was now in "heaven":

Child: "And then there is my real mam."
Interviewer: "And where is your real mam?"
Child: "Heaven."
Interviewer: "Okay. And when did that happen, pet?"
Child: "Just, I was only about a few months."
Interviewer: "You were very young."
Child: "Yes." (Boy)



This girl spoke about the death of her pet and her parents' separation. She first began by talking about her rabbit which died. She explained how his death affected her. Later in the conversation, the researcher explored how she felt when her father moved out. She said she found the experience very upsetting and to help her cope she would spend time in her bedroom.

Child: "My dad left and my closest pet died. He was [pet's name]. He was only two and he was a rabbit. I really loved him. He was the softest rabbit you could ever imagine."

Interviewer: "And how did you feel when he died?"

Child: "Really upset and lonely."

Interviewer: "And how did you feel when your dad left?"

Child: "Really upset."

Interviewer: "And what would you do when you feel upset?"

Child: "I would go to my room and have a good cry and when I am feeling angry and I really want to hit somebody, instead of hitting somebody, I go up to my room and beat up my pillow instead. It always helps." (Girl)

Another boy spoke of losing his cousin to cancer. He did not want to attend the funeral as he was too upset.

Child: "I would like to be a scientist to try and make something to heal people from cancer. My cousin died of cancer two days before her 18th birthday."

Interviewer: "Oh dear. That is very sad ..."

Child: "She was the cousin that was kindest to me."

Interviewer: "Really? And how did you feel when she died?"

Child: "I didn't want to, it was the same as my granny's friend ... yeah, I didn't want to go to her funeral. It was too sad."

Interviewer: "That is terrible."

Child: "I had to go to [cousin's] funeral as she lived in [another city] and they couldn't exactly leave me in [home city] when everyone else in the family was going."

Interviewer: "And when you are feeling sad about it what do you do?"

Child: "Cry." (Boy)

This boy spoke fondly of his grandfather who had recently died:

Interviewer: "Tell us about your granda?"

Child: "He died last week."

Interviewer: "Tell me about him."

Child: "He was a good singer. My ma brought him out in the wheelchair every day."

Interviewer: "What did you use to do with him?"

Child: "He just kept coming in 'can I have a cup of tea? can I have a cup of tea? can I have something to eat?'" (Boy)

7.8 Summary

The children were living in diverse family structures. Almost three-quarters (70.5%) were living with two parents resident in the family home and almost one-third (29.5%) with one parent resident in the family home. Nineteen of the children interviewed (16%) had experienced parental separation. Overall, the children appeared to have very positive relationships with their parents and most identified a close bond with their parents. The relationship between the children and their mothers was particularly strong; many children said they spent most of their time with them.

By and large, the children also enjoyed positive relationships with their fathers. In particular, the fathers appeared to spend a lot of time participating in sporting activities with their children. Most of the children who lived apart from their fathers had some contact with them. On the whole, the children spoke positively about their relationship with their non-resident father. However, in a small number of cases, the children suggested that their relationship with their non-resident father was strained and most expressed a wish to see their fathers more frequently.

The children talked about their relationships with their siblings. On the whole, brothers and sisters appeared to be good company for the children. However, it is evident that bonds with their siblings could be the most turbulent of the children's relationships. Younger siblings were a source of frustration for some children. In some cases, older siblings were admired while others saw them as domineering.

Strong attachments to grandparents were evident. Grandparents were often involved in the child's daily routine, providing a source of informal childcare. Children who lived close to other members of their extended family appeared to be in frequent contact, and the children often spoke fondly of uncles, aunts and cousins.

Many children saw pets as part of the family. A number included their pets in their drawings of family members and when they listed the names of people in their family. Pets appeared to be very important to the children. They enjoyed playing with them and taking care of them. In some cases the family pet appeared to be a source of emotional support for the child.

Throughout the children's discussions of family relationships, they talked openly about the sense of loss experienced after parental separation, the death of a family member or the death of a pet. Some of the children included family members they had lost on the 'My Family and Me' map.



Chapter 8

CHILDREN AND THEIR NEIGHBOURHOODS



8.1 Introduction

As stated in Chapter 3, the children in the sample came from 21 of the 26 counties in the Republic of Ireland and represented a diverse mix of communities and neighbourhoods; 55% lived in rural areas and 45% in urban areas. The children were asked a series of questions about their perceptions, thoughts and feelings concerning their communities and neighbourhoods. They discussed how they felt about living in their neighbourhood, their favourite place, and what they liked and disliked about the area in which they live. The children's thoughts about the adults living in their neighbourhood and how they treated children were explored. They were asked if they felt adults listen to children. Finally, the children were asked to imagine they were in charge of the country and think about the things they would do to make life better for children living in Ireland. Some chose to engage with the discussions of their communities and neighbourhoods through drawings and letter writing.

8.2 Perception of their Neighbourhood

The children were asked to talk about, draw or write their ideas about what it is like to live in their neighbourhood. On the whole, they appeared to be content living in their neighbourhoods. Many discussed the positive attributes of their communities. These mostly centred on proximity to friends and facilities for children.

"I have lots of friends here and I am close to activities" (Boy)

The children appeared to enjoy spending a lot of their time outdoors in the neighbourhood. Many listed or drew pictures of their favourite places in their local area. These commonly included green spaces such as parks, playing fields and the green areas of housing estates.

"There's loads of green and there's a big green across the way and I can play soccer there" (Boy)

Here a boy describes the picture he has drawn of his favourite place in the neighbourhood – the park and local football field –explains why he likes these facilities.

Interviewer: "So can you tell me about what you have drawn there?"

Child: "A park and a football field. It is up around the back."

Interviewer: "That is what you like. What do you like about them?"

Child: "What I like about the park is the slide and the thing you sit on and go real fast. What I like about the football is we play matches." (Boy)

Another boy describes living in a rural area. He explains how he likes the quiet in the countryside and enjoys living near woods. He tells how the mountains are his favourite place in the area.

Interviewer: "So what do you like about living around here?"

Child: "It's in the country."

Interviewer: "And what is good about that? What do you like about it?"

Child: "It is not noisy and you can walk in the woods and it is really close."

Interviewer: "Right."

Child: "You can walk up."

Interviewer: "Okay."

Child: "And it's fun, you know, to be living here."

Interviewer: "And do you have a favourite place around here?"

Child: "The mountains ... because it is fun when you are climbing it." (Boy)

Not all the children enjoyed the wide open spaces in their community. A few children suggested that they would favour more development in their area. In particular, this boy from an urban area explains how he would be in favour of the woods in his area being developed into a housing estate as it would mean that more children his age would be living close by:

Interviewer: "Is there anything that you don't like about living around here?"

Child: "Well the woods ... if there was like houses in there or something and if there was children in there. I could be friends with them." (Boy)

Many of the children described how some places in their neighbourhoods were badly maintained. Issues such as litter, neglected repairs to facilities and graffiti were described. This boy says there is a litter problem in his rural area and that some facilities need to be painted:

Interviewer: "Is there anything you don't like about living around here?"

Child: "There's rubbish thrown around some places."

Interviewer: "Is there anything you would change about the town or where you live?"

Child: "I'd take away the rubbish and if the paint was getting peeled I'd paint it." (Boy)

Another boy, from a more urban area, also described litter as a problem.

"Well, some people leave their rubbish on the ground" (Boy)

Some of the children living in more urban areas expressed the desire to have more space to play in their neighbourhoods, particularly in housing estates. This girl, living in a built-up suburb, describes how she would like her housing estate to have more space for children:

Child: "It is all right if the estate was bigger."

Interviewer: "It would be better, would it?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "You find it a little bit small, is it?"

Child: "Yes. There is not that much space." (Girl)



Another girl living in a built-up urban area described her housing estate as a fun place to play for children.

"I think it's fun because we have cul de sacs ... it means a big space and sometimes you can play hide and go seek and chasing" (Girl)

Further on in the interview, she recommended building a playground and introducing traffic lights to her estate to enhance the safety of the children.

"I'd put the playground there because in the cul de sac there's nothing we can play with and I'd put traffic lights in case we got knocked down" (Girl)

The safety of children living in large housing estates was explored further by a boy who described his estate as *"really dangerous"*. He explains how the incidence of joyriding and the presence of gangs in the neighbourhood can be very scary for children. He notes that, because of these factors, parents and neighbours are very protective of children in the housing estate.

Child: "You get [to] play around here and mostly it's more protective a bit around here."

Interviewer: "And who is protective?"

Child: "Your ma and your dad and anyone that lives near you that you know."

Interviewer: "And how are they protective?"

Child: "They would keep an eye on you and see what happens." ...

Interviewer: "What do you not like about living around here?"

Child: "There is mostly robbed cars and gangs going around throwing stuff at windows trying to break in. It is really dangerous around here whether you live in [names a housing estate] or [names a second housing estate]." (Boy)

Children living in rural areas also suggested that their neighbourhoods could have safety issues in terms of places to play for children, particularly due to busy main roads. This girl living in a rural area suggests that her least favourite thing in her neighbourhood is the busy roads:

Interviewer: "So what is the worst thing about living in this area?"

Child: "There is loads of cars going up and down." (Girl)

A boy, living in a rural area, explains the differences he sees between the countryside and more built-up areas. He suggests that the city is more dangerous for children because of the traffic.

"It's the country and it is not very busy ... Say if you were in the city and you stepped out the door a lorry could just run over you." (Boy)

One girl drew a picture to describe how she felt about living in the countryside. She depicted a girl skipping and cows in the field. She said she enjoyed skipping but did not like the cows that grazed in the nearby fields as she felt they were responsible for the smell in the countryside.

Child: "That's what I like. I like playing skipping. The cows I hate."

Interviewer: "Why do you hate cows?"

Child: "Because of the smell of the countryside." (Girl)

Some of the children offered their impression of the people who live in their communities. On the whole, they described having positive relationships with these people, but a small number described people in their area as having a negative influence on their neighbourhood. The children's descriptions suggest that criminal activity and anti-social behaviour, in particular from gangs, is an issue in some of the urban communities. One girl, living in a built-up urban area, said people in her housing estate could make a lot of noise at night.

"Sometimes I don't like it when they're making noise at night and people are trying to listen and I look out my window and [...] they make more noise" (Girl)

A small number of the children appeared to find some groups in the community intimidating. They expressed some concerns about gangs, people in their community being drunk, using drugs, guns and bullying. One boy, living in a built-up urban area, described how teenage gangs could be intimidating when he was out with his mother and younger brother.

Child: "Well, there could be gangs around here, that's the only really bad thing about it."

Interviewer: "And what are the gangs like?"

Child: "Well, they can push around people, they might be doing it if I'm out, like it's me and my brother and my mam out and the teenagers go 'ah mamma's boy' and all that kind of thing." (Boy)

Although more common in urban communities, intimidation by local teenagers was described as a problem in some rural areas. This girl, living in a rural area, describes the people living in her town as "not good". She goes on to make reference to how they can behave after being in the local pub:

Interviewer: "So what do you think of living around here?"

Child: "It's sometimes the kind of people here aren't good but it is a nice town to live in."

Interviewer: "And what about them isn't good; what do you find?"

Child: "That do you know when you can see them, you know, coming out of the pub and they would be, and some people aren't really nice, they could be talking to you in bad language or something."

Interviewer: "And would that be the grown-ups or children or teenagers?"

Child: "Kind of mostly teenagers and sometimes kind of boys as well. They say kind of more bad language than girls." (Girl)



In contrast, this boy, also living in a rural area, has a better experience of adults in the local pub:

Interviewer: "What are the adults like around here?"

Child: "They're nice, like, if you met them loads of the time in the pub they'd give you money." (Boy)

Some of the children spoke of other aspects within their communities that they were unhappy with or would like to change. Their ideas mainly centred on the lack of safe play facilities for children. The children identified a need to improve the range of activities in their neighbourhoods. Some of the children's ideas included play facilities, ski resorts, skate parks, and sports facilities. To describe their ideas, some of the children drew pictures or wrote letters entitled 'If I was in charge of the country'. This boy, living in a rural area, reads out his letter explaining the types of activities he would introduce if he were in charge of the country:

"If I was in charge of the country these are the things I would make better for the children in Ireland – to have more activities for the children ... like more soccer places 'cause there's only two places nearby where you can go and play soccer." (Boy)

This girl describes how children need more places to play and suggests that children should have more access to parks.

"I'd give more places to play in some of the places like big parks are closed off to children, and they're really big areas that would be perfect for playing soccer or a playground or just for doing things like that, and people don't like children on it playing so ..." (Girl)

A clear wish for playgrounds was evident from many of the children's responses. Some children did not have a playground in close proximity to their neighbourhood. Other children suggested that existing playgrounds were in need of repair. One child living in a rural area suggested that playgrounds are most essential for children living in more built-up urban areas. He felt that these children might not have as much to do as children living in the countryside:

Child: "Because we can do other things here [in the countryside]."

Interviewer: "Okay, right. So who would the playgrounds be for then?"

Child: "Children living in towns where there is nothing to do but walk around." (Boy)

Another boy, also from a rural area, was in favour of what he described as a "play gym" for children. He suggested that this would be an alternative place for children to play other than on the busy roads.

"Because the kids would be able to go places and if they're bored on the road and if they had extra time they could just go in and start playing" (Boy)

Another boy describes how he feels children in Ireland do not have many activities. He suggests establishing free community clubs for children in which they can do lots of different activities.

“Well a lot of towns in Ireland don’t really have much to do. I’d set up more clubs, more things for kids who don’t really have anything to do. And kids who can’t really afford to get into anything if you know what I mean ... like set up a little club in their community just for free like for a couple of hours like arts and crafts or something like that.” (Boy)

8.3 Perception of Children in Society

The interviews also explored the children’s ideas concerning how adults treat children, including whether or not the children feel that adults listen to them. Many felt that adults view children very positively. However, a small number felt that some adults can take a different view of children. In particular, some children think adults can view them as annoying.

This girl suggests that adults feel that children have both positive and negative characteristics:

“They think they are nice, mean, funny, em cool, lovely to talk to, very nice, amusing, annoying” (Girl)

One girl living in a rural area suggested that different adults can have different perceptions of children:

“Some adults think children are nice and helpful. Some adults think their children are horrible and not helpful.” (Girl)

Some children felt that some adults do not like children. This boy suggests that some adults “hate” children but notes that the adults in his own neighbourhood do like children.

“Well, some adults don’t really like children, like they hate them, and some of them, most of them around here like children” (Boy)

A few of the children suggested that a child’s individual behaviour and temperament can influence how adults think of them. This boy implies that adults favour children who are obedient:

“Well, it depends what they [children] do really ... I’d say if they [adults] thought the people who like worked hard at stuff and do something if they asked them to do it, I’d say they’d think that they were very good, but I’d say that people who wouldn’t do it and start messing and all, I don’t think they’d like them at all.” (Boy)

Many of the children gave examples of times when adults can get annoyed by children, as when children ask for things or are playing and making noise. This boy suggests that adults find it annoying when children ask for new toys or sports items. He gives the example of children wanting new football jerseys:

Interviewer: "What do adults think of children?"

Child: "Annoying."

Interviewer: "Why do you think that?"

Child: "Because if a kid wants something they are really begging for it all the time like the new Chelsea jersey which I have." (Boy)

This boy, living in a built-up urban area, describes how he feels adults in his neighbourhood can get annoyed with children playing on the road. He gives the example of how adults can get annoyed if a children's football hits their car:

Interviewer: "What do adults think of children?"

Child: "Sometimes annoying ... em ... maybe if you hit their car with a football or something." (Boy)

Another girl supported this view, describing an adult who lived in her housing estate close by as "narky". She says this adult complains if the children's ball goes into her garden:

"If the ball goes into her [adult's] garden when we are playing kerbs she comes out and gives out" (Girl)

Another girl suggested that adults can get annoyed by the noise that children make. She says that some adults get annoyed by children shouting.

"Sometimes they [adults] might think children are annoying because they [children] would be always shouting or annoying them." (Girl)

A girl echoes this view, describing how she feels adults might think badly of children who scream or shout:

Interviewer: "And what do you think adults think of children?"

Child: "Good but sometimes bad."

Interviewer: "And when do they think they are bad?"

Child: "When they [children] are screaming and shouting." (Girl)

She said some adults listened to children and explained why it might be difficult for parents to listen to their children:



Interviewer: "And do you think adults listen to children?"

Child: "Some do and some don't. Or if your mam and dad were busy they couldn't listen to you." (Girl)

One boy said sometimes adults did not take children seriously.

"Sometimes they don't take them too seriously" (Boy)

This view was echoed by another boy who feels that at times adults do not believe children, as, for example, when they say they are unwell. He continues by explaining that adults can break their promises to children and this can be unfair.

Child: "If children say they are sick, they mean they are sick."

Interviewer: "Why do you say that?"

Child: "I hate it when parents don't believe their children."

Interviewer: "Okay, and what do you think adults think of children?"

Child: "Well, I think that sometimes they are being very unfair to children."

Interviewer: "Like in what way?"

Child: "Like when they promise something and then they don't keep their promise, not good." (Boy)

This girl suggests that adults will listen to children when they need help but not about material things that children might want:

"Well, if you told your parents or somebody else that you knew well that you were being bullied at school they might try to help you so they'd listen to you if you needed help, but if it was like if you were moaning about what you wanted and you didn't get it and they weren't going to give it to you, I don't think they'd really listen to you." (Girl)

This girl proposes that adults sometimes only ask children questions out of politeness:

"Some [adults] do, like, some [adults], well, only ask what do you, like ask them [children] questions about what they are doing but it would only be out of politeness but others would really listen to what their child says" (Girl)

She continued to say that when she felt she had good things to say, adults listened to her.



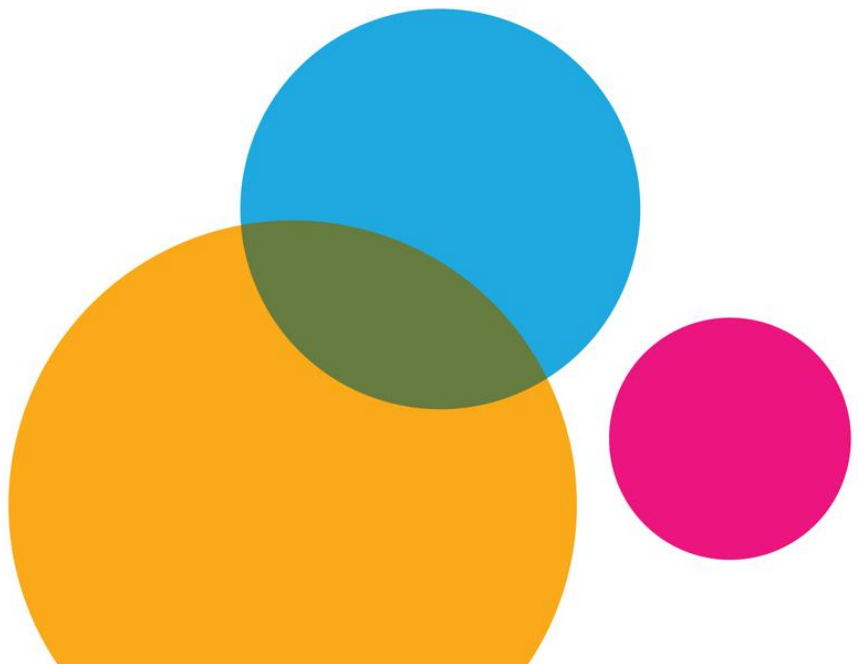
8.4 Summary

Overall, the children reflected positively on their local communities and neighbourhoods. Through discussion and drawings, they highlighted their favourite aspects of their neighbourhoods. Most commonly these centred on play spaces for children, including green spaces, parks and play facilities. The children also raised the issue of safety in their communities. Children in both urban and rural areas identified the need for safe play spaces away from traffic. The incidence of anti-social behaviour in local communities also emerged as a key safety concern. Some of the children outlined the intimidation they felt from local teenage gangs. They offered an insight into how they feel they are perceived by adults. On the whole, the children feel that adults do like children. However, many feel a sense of annoyance towards them from some adults. They recognise that their own behaviour and temperament can influence how they are viewed by adults.



Chapter 9

LIFE SATISFACTIONS AND WISHES & FEARS



9.1 Introduction

During the interview, the researcher explored the child's current life satisfaction, and wishes and fears for the future. The first section of this chapter details briefly the procedure used and how the children feel generally about their current lives. The second section focuses on their hopes and dreams and fears or concerns for the future.

9.2 The Life Ladder

Cantril's Self-Anchoring Ladder is a widely used measurement technique that asks people to rate their present, past, and anticipated future satisfaction with life on a scale anchored by their own identified values (Cantril, 1965). This measurement tool has been modified for use with children to attempt to gauge children's subjective well-being in terms of their satisfaction with themselves and their lives (UNICEF, 2007; WHO, 2004). **GUI** has adapted this technique and created the 'Life Ladder' worksheet (see Appendix 1). The researchers described the concept of the life-satisfaction ladder to each of the children, explaining that the top of the ladder, 10, represents the best possible life for the child and the bottom, 0, the worst possible. The children were asked to place a sticker on the rung of the ladder that they felt best described how their life was at nine years of age. The researchers then asked the children to explain their choice. The Life Ladder worksheet was administered to 101 children during the interviews. Only two children did not complete the worksheet. The minimum score recorded by the children on the Life Ladder was 4 (n=1) and the maximum score was 10 (n=30). The mean score was 8.13 (standard deviation=1.655). Over half the children (51%) gave a score of 9 or higher for their life satisfaction.

Some of the children talked about how their lives were good and they scored their lives at 8 or 9. They said they had lots of friends, went to barbeques and parties, and that their soccer team was doing well. This nine-year old girl compares her life to that of others:

Interviewer: "And why do you pick 8?"

Child: "Because some people are more fortunate than you and some aren't. The people in Africa might circle zero and people with loads of money might circle 10." (Girl)

Some children scored their life satisfaction between 5 and 7, stating that they had both good and bad times.

Child: "I [am] thinking the middle."

Interviewer: "And why do you say that?"

Child: "Because sometimes I feel like I am sad and angry but most of the times I feel happy and happy with what I have. I have a lovely family and most of the time I am allow[ed] get what I want."

Interviewer: "And when would you feel sad and angry?"

Child: "If I wasn't allowed get something." (Girl)



Another child is really happy with his life and describes what it is like:

Interviewer: "So tell me why you chose 10?"

Child: "Because nothing goes wrong."

Interviewer: "Nothing goes wrong, yeah?"

Child: "Everything goes right."

Interviewer: "So tell me all the great things that are going right for you?"

Child: "I have loads of friends and I can go to their houses and play and school is fun and it's easy and I have fun on my toys and all that." (Boy)

One boy rated his life satisfaction at 4 on the Life Ladder, his main reason being that he did not like school.

Interviewer: "And why do you hate school?"

Child: "Because you do loads and loads of work."

Interviewer: "Really? And what else do you not like about school?"

Child: "Homework and work."

Interviewer: "So you don't like doing homework and work?"

Child: "No."

Interviewer: "What kind of things do you not like?"

Child: "Irish writing, English writing, maths, well I do like that, history, science. I like history. I don't like English, Irish. Science, geography, well I do like geography, drawing and art."

Interviewer: "And you don't like writing. Why is that?"

Child: "Just don't." (Boy)

9.3 Making Life Better for Children

The children were asked to imagine that they were in charge of the country and to make suggestions as to what they would do to enhance life for children in Ireland. As mentioned earlier, some children wrote letters entitled 'If I was in charge of the country ...' The children put forward a huge range of suggestions, from eliminating poverty and increasing environmental awareness, to changes to the school day and increased material possessions.

A number of the children's responses demonstrated altruistic desires to help other people less well off than themselves. Many showed an awareness of issues facing people in the developing world along with those experienced by children and adults living in Ireland. This girl describes how she would help poor and sick people in Africa:



"In Africa I would like to bring more money for the poor people and help sick people to get better" (Girl)

Alertness to poverty and homelessness were evident in some of the children's responses. This girl explains that she would like to see homes created for homeless people:

"Like some people live on the street so homes for them." (Girl)

Another girl suggests that if she were in charge of the country she would create more employment, remove guns and help people experiencing poverty.

"More jobs, no guns and make Ireland take care of the poor." (Girl)

This boy described what he would do for children if he were in charge of the country. He suggested giving all children an education but indicated that this might not be a popular choice among his peers. He viewed education as influencing a child's health. He said that if he were in charge of the country it would be his job to ensure that children receive an education. He would encourage children to have healthy diets by reducing the availability of sugary foods. He also outlined how he would ensure that every family has adequate housing.

"I would give the kids education, I wouldn't like to say that though, but I still would because it would be my job to make sure they stay healthy. I would take a bit less of the sugar out of the shops {sic} so kids get a good diet. And I would make sure that every family gets a clean home and that they don't have to live in shacks and stuff like in Africa." (Boy)

Another boy demonstrated political awareness when explaining what he would do if he were in charge of the country. He felt that children were bored by news coverage of elections and made particular reference to the recent referendum on ratification of a European treaty.

"Well, I wouldn't want to have those things like, you know like, the Lisbon Treaty and all those things because when the elections come up it's like taking over the news and stuff and it's boring children out of their minds, boring people out of their minds." (Boy)

One girl expressed her concern over support for large families. She suggested that it might be more difficult for the parents of larger families to take the children out to places and she recommended more support for these parents.

"I'd say the mam should get a helper or someone in the house so then the mam mightn't go out with so many children and then the helper could stay home with some of them as well" (Girl)



A large number of the children highlighted their concern over environmental issues and expressed their desire for people to do more to improve the environment, including protecting trees and wildlife, recycling and reducing emissions. Some children appeared to be concerned about the welfare of animals due to the building of infrastructure. One boy from an urban area described how development can lead to some native animals becoming endangered species.

“Mind all the animals because the otters and hares and stuff and they’re all becoming endangered because we are building lots of roads. And the salmon as well because we’re building over rivers and they’d be gone, because they go back to the place that they were born, they mightn’t be able to do that because they wouldn’t know where to go.” (Boy)

Another boy highlighted his desire to protect trees:

“Take care of the trees” (Boy)

Many children made recommendations about school. The structure of the school day was one area they felt could be improved to make life better for children. A number of children expressed their desire to spend less time in school and to have longer summer holidays. The children also remarked on the homework they receive from teachers.

“Easier homework ... Less time in school ... No homework for everybody ... Or less homework” (Boy)

The children discussed some of the rules in school and explained how they would like to change some of them. This boy suggests that children should be allowed to play sport in the school-yard and go to the local shop during their lunch break:

“I’d let all children play sport at yard time, they could play games at yard time. Every school at break time would be allowed to go to the shop.” (Boy)

Another boy said children should have longer holidays in the summer. He suggests that the current primary school summer break of two months is not long enough as it goes by too quickly:

“Longer summer holidays ... I know two months, if you think about it, is a very long time, but it goes flying like. Like in a year I remember the very first day I was in third class and that flew by and that was a year and that is much longer than two months. So just longer summer holidays.” (Boy)

The proposal for less structured time for children was echoed by this boy who called for children to have more time to play:

“That the children... let them have more play time” (Boy)

Materialism was another area that came up during the children's conversation and their letters regarding changes they would implement if in charge of the country. Their ideas included more money, toys and treats for children and their families. This girl proposes to eliminate taxes for parents:

"I would like for the parents there be no taxes" (Girl)

Some children highlighted the cost of living in Ireland. This boy describes how he thinks Ireland can be expensive to purchase items in, particularly sports equipment and toys:

Interviewer: "So can you read out what you have written?"

Child: "That things weren't so expensive."

Interviewer: "Do you think it is expensive in Ireland?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "And what kinds of things are expensive?"

Child: "Footballs and skateboards cost loads." (Boy)

Another girl suggests that all children should have laptop computers so that they can keep in touch with their friends:

"Laptops ... so they can send messages to their friends" (Girl)

9.4 Hopes and Dreams for the Future

The children were asked to great a wishes and fears list. On their lists they either wrote down or created drawings demonstrating their hopes, dreams and fears for the future. They were then asked to explain what they had put down on their lists. When asked about their wishes or dreams for the future, they talked about many things ranging from being a princess, to getting a puppy, kitten or a horse, to going to the moon or buying a Ferrari. Girls often talked about having children, a nice husband, a job and a house. This girl talks about the plans she has for a job and a family:

Child: "Fashion designer equals job, marriage to [boy she knows], a good life, twins, like babies, get my own shop to do my own fashion designs, a good home for my children and my husband plus me, picture of my past when I am older, jewellery and I want a snow mobile."

Interviewer: "Tell me about the shop."

Child: "Cause me and my two friends we love fashion and we're good at drawing fashion and when my friend went over to my house we tried making clothes, now it didn't work out 'cause we were going to do it inside but I forgot and we all got mixed up and we left it for a while and for not this Christmas but the next Christmas I'm going to make after I'm going to get a sewing machine and lots of material and everything and marriage to [boy] ..."

Interviewer: "And why do you want to marry him?"

Child: "Cause I fancy him and he fancies me."

Interviewer: "And what is he like?"

Child: "What do you mean?"

Interviewer: "Why do you fancy him?"

Child: "Cause he's cute."

Interviewer: "And why twins?"

Child: "Cause like I was watching a programme, 'In Marie' I think it was called, and there was these two twins and they were gorgeous and they were just little babies and then they showed them two years or ten years after and they were all grown up and they just looked exactly alike and they wore the same clothes." (Girl)

The vast majority of boys wanted to be professional sports players. Soccer and hurling were the main sports mentioned.

Interviewer: "And tell me about Waterford hurling team, why would you like to be on the hurling team?"

Child: "Because in my school everyone dreams about being on the Waterford hurling team and it would be good if you were on it." (Boy)

Child: "Play for Tipp or play for Man United, and manage Tipp and be like Eoin Kelly."

Interviewer: "Why would you hope to play for Tipp or Man United?"

Child: "Cause I support the two of them and they'll probably be good."

Interviewer: "What do you think you'd have to do to do that?"

Child: "Practice and go to training."

Interviewer: "Would you like to tell me who Eoin Kelly is?"

Child: "Plays for Tipp and [inaudible] ..."

Interviewer: "He's someone you admire, is it?"

Child: "Yeah he's really good, he plays for Tipp." (Boy)

Child: "A soccer player like Cristiano Ronaldo."

Interviewer: "Oh right so, to be a super dooper soccer player?"

Child: "Yeah." (Boy)



Some children felt that the type of career they had would affect the rest of their lives. They suggested that they would need to do well in exams to get a good job. This child talks about both her fear of living on the street and having no friends or family, and about wanting to go to college to study science.

Child: "To get a scholarship to college, to have a good job, to have babies, to have a husband and to have a nice house."

Interviewer: "So that is your dreams and what would things you might fear be."

Child: "To live on the street, to have no friends, to have no money, to have no family and to be unwanted."

Interviewer: "Okay, so let's have a look: to get a scholarship; tell me about that?"

Child: "When I am going to college I would like to have one [a scholarship] so."

Interviewer: "And, okay, and do you have any ideas about things you might like to study in college?"

Child: "I would like to study science."

Interviewer: "Would you, okay. And why do think it might be a good idea to have a scholarship?"

Child: "So we wouldn't have to pay money."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Child: "And that to know that you are smart." (Girl)

Some children wanted to be artists, while others wished to be singers or in a band. One child said she would like the unusual career of an Egyptologist.

Child: "I hope to become an Egyptologist, I hope to have fun along the way and for a bright future."

Interviewer: "And what is an Egyptologist?"

Child: "It is a person that studies Egypt and the pyramids."

Interviewer: "Very good. So are you very interested in history?"

Child: "Yeah." (Girl)

One boy expressed his desire to become a musician. He describes how he would like to be in a music band with his friends. He currently plays traditional Irish musical instruments.

Interviewer: "What would you like to be?"

Child: "In a band with my friends."

Interviewer: "Do you play any music at the moment?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "What do you play? Do you play any instruments or learn any instruments?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "What instruments do you play?"

Child: "I play the bodhrán, the guitar, the flute, the whistle and the fiddle."

Interviewer: "Wow! That's amazing! And do you go to classes for them?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "Whose idea was that to go and learn all those instruments?"

Child: "My dad's." (Boy)

Many of the children who said they would like to be materially well off suggested that this could be achieved by using their talents.

Interviewer: "So tell me about your wishes what did you put down?"

Child: "Good friends, good life, be rich."

Interviewer: "So tell me about being rich. Why would you like to be rich?"

Child: "Because then I will have less difficulties."

Interviewer: "You will have less difficulties. So what do you think needs to happen for you to become rich? How does somebody become rich?"

Child: "They use their brains, strengths and abilities." (Boy)

For many of the children, their hopes and dream concerned their own families and the possibility of one day having a family themselves. The majority valued their relationships and wished to keep their established friendships, or make new friends when they moved into secondary school. This boy says he wishes to keep in contact with his friends and his family:

Child: "Emm ... to still see my friends."

Interviewer: "So that's important to you?"

Child: "Em, to still have my family." (Boy)

One child expressed her desire to have children in the future. She suggests that she would like a smaller family than the one in which she is growing up:

Interviewer: "You want to have two children. Why two children?"

Child: "Em, because like, my mam has five and it's like a mad house." (Girl)



Another child's wish was that her separated parents would get back together. To express this wish, she drew a picture of her parents together.

Interviewer: "So tell me a bit about your wishes, then. What's the first picture that you've done?"

Child: "That's my mum and dad."

Interviewer: "Your mum and dad?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "And what would you wish for there?"

Child: "That they would get back together." (Girl)

Some of the children were concerned about the environment and global warming. This boy describes what would happen and what could be done to avoid flooding:

Interviewer: "OK great, so tell me what you wrote down for your wishes."

Child: "That global warming will stop so that the world can go on, and have a nice life and have a good job so I can just have a good house ... a nice house and all, and everybody in the world should get along so there would be no wars or anything."

Interviewer: "OK, so tell me about global warming, what would worry you about global warming?"

Child: "Because if the sun warms up the world would, like the polar ice caps are melting and when they melt the world will flood."

Interviewer: "So what can we do to stop it?"

Child: "Use less electricity and when we're not using stuff that uses electricity, to turn them off when we're not using them."

Interviewer: "Is that something that you do?"

Child: "Yeah." (Boy)

9.5 Fears and Worries for the Future

The children had worries ranging from doctors and needles, going to jail or being homeless, ghosts and scary noises and tigers becoming extinct. They also mentioned global warming, fear of earthquakes, tornados, spiders and dinosaurs.

Interviewer: "Why would you worry about going to jail and being homeless?"

Child: "Because you'd be, if you go to jail you wouldn't be able to do anything and you'd get really bad food, and being homeless you wouldn't have any home."



Interviewer: "What do you think that would be like?"

Child: "Really bad 'cause you wouldn't have any food or you'd be living on the side of the road and you'd be sick." (Boy)

One girl expressing her fears about global warming, explains how she is aware of environmental issues from watching the news on television:

Child: "Well, I'm kinda afraid that the iceberg might ... you know the global warming?"

Interviewer: "Do you do some of that stuff in school?"

Child: "No, I watch the news." (Girl)

However, some of the more extreme fears centred on death, injury, family getting hurt, losing friends, and being poor or homeless.

Child: "My fears are drugs, smoking and death of anybody. Dreams – hairdresser, model and marriage."

Interviewer: "So what would you be worried about drugs and smoking?"

Child: "I don't want to start."

Interviewer: "And you are worried about death?"

Child: "Yeah, when you are old." (Girl)

Interviewer: "Can you tell me about what you have drawn?"

Child: "I don't want to die."

Interviewer: "And you would be worried about that, would you?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "What would you be worried about?"

Child: "If I die I wouldn't be able to see my friends anymore."

Interviewer: "And when do you think people die?"

Child: "They could die in a car crash, die of their heart, an infection or die of age, bad health." (Boy)

This girl was particularly worried about being murdered:

Interviewer: "And you would be worried about being murdered, would you? What would make you worried about that?"

Child: "Because if you were murdered at a young age you would lose half your life."

Interviewer: "And do you think there is a chance you might be murdered?"

Child: "Yeah, if you got in a fight or someone dislikes you loads." (Girl)

Reference was made to the high-profile case of the young British girl, Madeleine McCann, who went missing in Portugal in May 2007:

Child: "Arrest the baddies."

Interviewer: "What baddies?"

Child: "Like the people that go around kidnapping children. Like Madeleine got kidnapped and nobody has found her which I am kind of worried about. So I would like to arrest the kidnappers and for children like me that love and care about nature I would like to arrest the people that go around killing animals and nature." (Girl)

Among his worries, one boy talked about being poor and not being able to buy food. He also explained why people become poor and his fear of being robbed:

Interviewer: "So tell me about your fears, what did you put down?"

Child: "Poor. Robbers. Bad life. Mean friends."

Interviewer: "So tell me about being poor. Why would you be afraid of being poor?"

Child: "Because then I wouldn't be able to give money to my parents. I wouldn't be able to buy food. I wouldn't be able to buy water. That's all I can think of."

Interviewer: "Ok, and how does somebody become poor, do you think?"

Child: "Erm ... they don't have good abilities. And they are not smart. And they don't have a lot of strength."

Interviewer: "And what about robbers, what would you be afraid of with robbers?"

Child: "Them stealing my stuff." (Boy)

One girl talked about a gun shop in her local village. She described her fear of what could happen if a gun fell into the wrong hands.

*"Because in case somebody got like a fake licence done and the person that owned the shop took it and though it was real and gave them a gun and something happened."
(Girl)*

Worries about tests and exams were also mentioned, as was wanting to get a good job in the future.

Child: "Like I'd like to be good at school when I get older."

Interviewer: "Why would you like that?"

Child: "To get a good job."



Interviewer: "And what about your fears."

Child: "Tests, hurting myself."

Interviewer: "Why would you worry about tests?"

Child: "Like if there was a test at school I would like to try not to get anything wrong."

Interviewer: "[...] And the last one, to hurt yourself?"

Child: "If I broke my arm or something. If I broke my leg I wouldn't be able to play football." (Boy)

Child: "My hopes and dreams are to be a football player or a rugby player and the things I don't want to happen is for me not to do good in my exams."

Interviewer: "What kind of exams?"

Child: "Leaving Cert."

Interviewer: "And what do you think the Leaving Cert is like?"

Child: "Hard."

Interviewer: "And what do you think would happen if you didn't do well in your Leaving Cert?"

Child: "I couldn't do anything really." (Boy)

One boy talked about getting a job using maths and was aware that if he did not have a job he would not be able to afford a house.

Interviewer: "Okay, and what kinds of jobs would you like?"

Child: "Um, I'd probably like to have a job in ... like where you have to add up numbers."

Interviewer: "Okay, because you like maths?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "What would it be like if you didn't have a good job?"

Child: "I wouldn't get paid much and I wouldn't be able to get like um a house or anything." (Boy)

Some children talked about fear of bullies and their experience.

Interviewer: "The last one – you have 'no bullies', why?"

Child: "Because having bullies is not really nice and the person bullying someone could get bullied by someone else."

Interviewer: Is that something that's happened to you?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "What's that like when it happened."

Child: "Not nice."

Interviewer: "What do you do?"

Child: "I try and stop it." (Girl)

When children talked about their fears, the subject of friends came up again. Having enough friends and not losing friends was important.

Interviewer: "Is there anything that would be your fears in the future, anything that you are a bit worried about happening?"

(Child writes)

Interviewer: "Losing your friends? OK. And how could somebody lose their friends?"

Child: "If they went to different schools and then ..." (Girl)

Interviewer: "Why did you put 'to have more friends'."

Child: "Like I have hardly now, there's much, not much people down the lane from us."

Interviewer: "What kind of things do you think you'd do if you have more friends?"

Child: "Like play football." (Boy)

This girl was aware of the importance of good friends, ones you could rely on when things were difficult.

Child: "I hope there will be flying cars, a great job, lovely friends and a nice boss. My fears for the future, a bad job, annoying friends and a mean boss ..."

Interviewer: "And you would like to have lovely friends?"

Child: "Yeah, to always go places after work and cheer me up when I am sad."

Interviewer: "And what would it be like if you had annoying friends?"

Child: "Bad." (Girl)



9.6 Summary

The children appeared to view their lives in Ireland as largely positive. The majority ranked their life quite high on the Life Satisfaction Ladder. The average score was 8.13 (standard deviation=1.655). Over half the children (51%) gave a score of 9 or higher regarding their life satisfaction. Through letter-writing and conversation, the children offered their opinions on what is needed in Ireland to enhance life for children. They offered a diverse range of responses, outlining recommendations from eliminating poverty and homelessness in Ireland and in less developed countries to increasing material possessions. School was a key area where the children felt that changes could be made to improve their quality of life, such as: reducing the amount of homework, shortening the length of the school day and increasing the length of the summer holidays.

With regard to the children's wishes and fears lists, while some talked about aspirations and dreams such as being a princess or meeting 50 Cent (an American rapper), most had more down-to-earth hopes and dreams for the future. They valued family, friends, education and getting a good job. They realised that you had to work hard to achieve in life. In relation to fears or concerns, while some of the children had the expected fears of ghosts, earthquakes or reptiles, overall the children were quite rational about their fears; they included death or injury, and poverty. Topical issues such as environmental matters and child abduction also featured in their conversations, suggesting that they are very aware of current issues in the media.



Chapter 10

CHILDREN'S ACTIVITIES





10.1 Introduction

The children were asked to depict how they spent their free time outside of school hours by creating a weekly calendar detailing the activities or pastimes they participated in each day and at the weekends. This led to a discussion about preferred hobbies and activities and an explanation of how free time was spent. It was evident from the children's calendars that their free time is consumed by a mixture of structured and unstructured activities.

10.2 Structured Activities

Structured activities can be described as those that are highly organised, with pre-arranged participation for the child. Such activities might include sports training, extra-curricular classes or lessons such as drama, dancing or music which are either paid for or free of charge. Unstructured activities are less formally organised and include spontaneous play. From the interviews with the children, it was apparent that some children are more heavily engaged in structured activities. In particular, children from higher social-class categories appear to spend more of their free time participating in structured activities than their peers from lower household class categories.

Many of the children appear to be very physically active throughout the week. Although many of the girls participate in sporting activities, almost all of the boys play sport during the week. The range of sports the children are involved in can result in a highly structured week revolving around a lot of training sessions and matches at the weekends.

One boy describes his weekly schedule of activities. It appears that he plays sport each weekday:

"On Mondays I do basketball and I used to do a cycling course, Tuesdays I do soccer and TV, Wednesday I do basketball, Thursday I do hurling, Friday I do kickboxing, Saturday and Sunday I do TV." (Boy)

Another boy, who attends gymnastics, describes the intensity of his training sessions. He describes how he exercises at home in preparation for his training:

Child: "If it was bright I would go out the back and do some training."

Interviewer: "Explain to me what you mean by training outside?"

Child: "Well I'd do star jumps – I would do – one of my coaches wrote down a few things to do before my training."

Interviewer: "Okay?"

Child: "And I have to do 300 strata jumps on the trampoline, 150 shell jumps from standing and 150 forward rolls, straddle jumps ... On the Thursday when I come home I do my homework, I come home, have something to eat, change, put my leotard on, put my gym clothes on and go to gym up in [town] from four to six." (Boy)



He went on to explain how his weekly gymnastics training includes a four-hour training session.

Child: "Five till nine [pm]."

Interviewer: "Five to nine, so that is a long session, isn't it?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "Four hours?"

Child: "Yes, but we get a break in between."

Interviewer: "Do you, and do you bring something to eat?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "And what type of things would you do?"

Child: "I would do different pieces of apparatus, like the high bar, the vault, the parallel bar, the floor." (Boy)

As some of the interviews were conducted during the children's school holidays, it was possible to gain an insight into their activities during this period. This girl describes how she is enrolled on a five-week intensive sailing course during her school holidays. She explains how the course is on five days a week from 9am to 5pm each day.

Child: "I'm doing sailing at the moment."

Interviewer: "You are doing sailing, okay. Is that a sailing course for a week or so?"

Child: "Yes, five weeks."

Interviewer: "What does that entail; is it every day?"

Child: "Yes, apart from weekends."

Interviewer: "So Monday to Friday?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "And is it, you know, is it a full day or how does it work?"

Child: "It is like nine-to-five." (Girl)

The children also described a range of cultural activities in which they participated, including dancing and music lessons. A larger number of girls than boys seemed to be involved in such activities. This girl describes her weekly activities as including a mix of sports and cultural activities such as swimming, tennis and Irish dancing:

*"On Monday go to school, Tuesday Irish dancing, Wednesday tennis, Thursday swimming, Friday physical education, Saturday Irish dancing, Sunday go to the funfair."
(Girl)*



One boy spoke of attending a homework club one day a week. He explained how he was glad to attend the club as it provided him with a good opportunity to get his homework done.

Child: "I'm in an after-school homework group."

Interviewer: "Tell me about that."

Child: "You go like after school, like a homework group, and you go into it and you do your homework there."

Interviewer: "What do you think of that?"

Child: "It's OK, it's a good opportunity to get your homework ...[done]" (Boy)

Many of the structured activities in which the children participate involve coaches and teachers. Overall, the children suggested that they have a very positive relationship with their coaches or teachers. Interestingly, one boy described the influence the coaches' reaction could have on his self-belief. He said they could become angry when he did something wrong and this led to him being disappointed in himself.

Interviewer: "And are the coaches nice?"

Child: "They can get angry but they are nice."

Interviewer: "And how do you feel when they get angry?"

Child: "Well, they get angry when you do something wrong and you feel a bit disappointed with yourself." (Boy)

10.3 Participation in Unstructured Activities

A large number of the children described their week as being relatively unstructured. They did not seem to participate in as many organised extra-curricular activities as some of their peers. More often than not, the children spending most of their free time in a lot of unstructured activities are from lower household social-class categories. Usually, their free time was spent doing activities at home or engaged in free play in their house or in the local community with their friends. With regard to unstructured activities, the boys in particular appeared to spend more time than girls playing video games.

One boy explains how his routine after school is similar each day of the week. He describes how after school he does his homework, plays outside and watches television:

"Every day I do the exact same thing – homework, go outside and then watch TV"
(Boy)

Another boy describes a similar after-school routine of playing outdoors and afterwards playing computer games in the house:

"I just go outside, and play Playstation every day" (Boy)

One boy did not appear to be engaged in any formal after-school activities. He suggests that his favourite thing to do after school is play games on the computer. He says his father does not allow him to play computer games and often he watches his brother play on the computer.

Interviewer: "So say, like on Monday, what would you normally do after school?"

Child: "I would watch my brother play. And on Tuesday I would still watch my brother play and I would eat my food. I would do my homework. And for Friday, Saturday and Sunday I would ... that's all I can think of."

Interviewer: "That's fine, and what kinds of things would you watch your brother play?"

Child: "Games."

Interviewer: "And would you ever play with him?"

Child: "Not with him. Like sometimes we have separate times."

Interviewer: "And do you do any other activities after school?"

Child: "No. I walk from where my father parks. And I just walk home."

Interviewer: "Ok. So what is your favourite thing to do for fun?"

Child: [Coughs] "Play computer."

Interviewer: "And do you do that a lot?"

Child: "No."

Interviewer: "Do you get to do it as much as you would like?"

Child: "No."

Interviewer: "How come?"

Child: "My father won't allow me ... and if I want to play a lot and that will mean [not] a good life for me so it doesn't matter if I don't play a lot." (Boy)

Many of the children described spending time in 'free play'. They suggested that this could involve playing with friends, creating their own games and being physically active in the home and local environment. One boy said he sometimes "has a run" – running around in the back garden of his home, where the coal is stored.

Interviewer: "And the last thing [on the activities calendar] is having a run, tell me about that?"

Child: "They just run around."

Interviewer: "Would you play in here [the house]?"

Child: "Yeah, out the back where the coal is." (Boy)

Another boy tells of playing games with his friends in the housing estate, called 'tip the can' and 'walls'. He explains how they play the game 'walls':

Child: "I would play football and I would play 'tip the can' and I would play 'walls' with my friends."

Interviewer: "What is 'walls'?"

Child: "Well, around the estate there is different houses and they all have walls of that height, walls, but maybe a bit higher."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Child: "And they have pillars in between and we would pick a wall and would kick the ball at the wall and then we could play one touch or ..."

Interviewer: "Okay, so you kick it at the wall and it comes back?"

Child: "Yes, you have to play with more than one person."

Interviewer: "Yes, and they have to get it?"

Child: "Yes, you kick it against the wall and then they kick it."

Interviewer: "You take turns?"

Child: "Yes."

Interviewer: "And if you miss it, then what happens?"

Child: "And then if you hit it wide it is point to the other person." (Boy)

It became apparent from the interviews that the children appeared to place less value on informal free time. Some children viewed their unstructured free time as *doing nothing*, as it is less formalised than their time spent in structured activities. Some implied that this free time could be seen as 'a day off' from their more formal schedule of activities. When asked what she did on a typical Wednesday, one girl answered that she did not do anything. However, when the interviewer probed her further on how she spent her unstructured time, she suggested that typically she would be outside playing with her friends.

Interviewer: "And what do you do on Wednesday, then?"

Child: "I don't do anything on Wednesday."

Interviewer: "You know the days when you don't do anything, what do you do? Are you just hanging out at home or what kind of things would you do?"

Child: "I play outside with my friends." (Girl)

Similarly, this boy implied that he did not feel he did anything during the week. When the interviewer explored with him what activities he might be engaged in when he felt he was "doing nothing", it emerged that he would usually be on the green in his housing estate playing soccer.

Interviewer: "What would you be doing when you're 'doing nothing'?"

Child: "Out playing soccer."

Interviewer: "Where would you be playing?"

Child: "Out in the green maybe." (Boy)

Another boy explained how he did not have any extra-curricular activities scheduled on a Friday and described this day as "having nothing on". He suggested that on this type of free day he would play football, watch TV or play computer games.

Interviewer: "And then Friday?"

Child: "Don't have anything on."

Interviewer: "So what would you do when you don't have anything on?"

Child: "Just play football or something."

Interviewer: "Would you come home here?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "What else would you do when you come home here when you don't have anything on? What do you like to do?"

Child: "Well, if it's raining I'd probably watch a bit of TV, or play my Nintendo." (Boy)

The activities calendars were useful to visually highlight the demands placed on the children in terms of their formalised activities. Although some of the children appeared to be engaged in a highly formalised weekly schedule of activities, most enjoyed a mixture of both structured and unstructured activities. One girl read out what she had written on the activities calendar, describing her typical week. She explains how she is involved in structured activities including swimming, dancing and horse-riding and also outlines some of the unstructured activities she enjoys such as watching TV and spontaneous play.

"Mondays I watch TV and play, Tuesday I do swimming, Wednesday I do dancing, Thursday I watch TV and do PE and art in school, Friday I do horse-riding, on Saturday I stay up late and Sunday I watch TV and play." (Girl)

A boy also read aloud from the activities calendar how his free time was spent. While he gives examples of time that he spends playing in the garden of his house and with his friends next door, he also says he participates in sports training and matches.

"Mondays I usually play out in the garden, Tuesday I usually go to the neighbours' house or he comes, Wednesday I have rugby and tennis training, Thursday I play out the back, Friday I usually have a friend over, Saturday is tennis tournaments and Sunday is rugby match." (Boy)



10.4 Spending Time with Family

A number of the children described spending time with their families. Mostly they described doing activities with their families at weekends. Most of the children's time at weekends was spent with their parents and siblings, if any. One boy said that at the weekend he would visit the local shopping centre with his parents and his sister. He described how they would usually go to the cinema there.

Interviewer: "Sunday you might go over to [shopping centre]?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "And who would you go over there with?"

Child: "Um, with my mom and dad and sister."

Interviewer: "And what would you do going shopping?"

Child: "Um, well we might go to the cinema." (Boy)

This girl explains how most of her time at the weekend is spent with her mother. She describes how they like to watch their favourite television programmes together:

Interviewer: "And would you do anything with your family then, say on the Saturday or the Sunday."

Child: "Well on Saturday me and my mum would spend most of the time together on the Saturday because we have no school the next day we would go in on the couch and we find a good TV programme."

Interviewer: "Great, and what would your favourite be?"

Child: "Well, I like stuff like 'What Not to Wear' or stuff like that, maybe any house programmes, maybe decorating in hours ['60-minute Makeover'] or something like that." (Girl)

Another boy who engaged in highly structured activities throughout the school week described Sunday as a rest day. This is a day where he does not participate in any formal activities and instead visits his relatives and participates in unstructured activities such as free play and watching television.

Child: "And Sunday is kind of a rest day."

Interviewer: "And what do you like to do on your rest day on a Sunday?"

Child: "I go over to my nana's and all my cousins come as well and we all start playing and watching TV as well." (Boy)



10.5 Selecting Activities

The children were asked about their experience of becoming involved in particular structured activities. For a large number of children, the original decision to take up an activity was initiated by their parents. Many had tried out activities that their siblings, other relatives or friends were already involved in.

One boy, who was attending Tae Kwon Do each week, explained how he originally got involved in this activity; his mother encouraged him to join in order to keep him healthy.

Interviewer: "How did you get started with Tae Kwon Do? How did you get involved?"

Child: "My mum put me in to make me healthy." (Boy)

Another boy explained how his mother wanted him to learn to swim. He originally did not like swimming but now attends swimming lessons on a weekly basis.

Interviewer: "Whose idea was it for you to do swimming?"

Child: "Well I didn't like swimming so I didn't but my mam wanted me to learn and I started swimming." (Boy)

Another boy, who also swims weekly, said his dad took him to swimming lessons. He spoke about how he did not like to swim as he found the pool dirty, but said his dad liked the pool they attended as the instructors made the children work hard.

Interviewer: "And how come you go to that [swimming pool]?"

Child: "I dunno, my dad likes it because they make you work hard and do good things."

Interviewer: "And what do you think of that swimming?"

Child: "I don't really like it."

Interviewer: "Why not? What don't you like about it?"

Child: "The pool is all dirty, there's like fluffy stuff on the floor." (Boy)

This girl indicates that her mother suggested she take up tennis. She now plays tennis one day a week:

Interviewer: "And whose idea was it for you to start tennis?"

Child: "I think it was my mum's." (Girl)

Some of the other children outlined how they became aware of various activities because friends or members of their families were involved in them. This girl explains how she got involved in Irish dancing after her cousin had begun to participate:

Interviewer: "So you like Irish dancing?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "And why did you pick to do it?"

Child: "My cousin started it and a week later I joined it." (Girl)

Another boy suggests that he took up soccer after his cousins began playing:

Interviewer: "Whose idea was it for you go to soccer training?"

Child: "My cousins were going so we started going." (Boy)

When asked how he got involved in playing Gaelic football, hurling and soccer each week, this boy explained that his friends were doing these sports and he wanted to spend time with them:

Interviewer: "So why do you think you wanted to do those sports?"

Child: "Because I wanted to and I'd be with my friends." (Boy)

In some cases, the children implied that they might have preferred to pursue alternative activities but their continued participation was encouraged by their parents. One boy, who appeared to be involved in a lot of organised extra-curricular activities, explained how he became involved in tennis and music. He describes how he began to play tennis after his mother, father and brother began to play the sport:

Interviewer: "So how did you get involved in tennis?"

Child: "Well, my mum started playing it and then she ... my dad ... she taught him how to play and then my dad was teaching my big brother how to play and I used to go up with them and watch them and then I got into it." (Boy)

He went on to explain how he was learning the piano and music theory. He said both his mother and grandfather had played the piano. He suggests that sometimes he can find this activity monotonous:

Child: "I'd have music and that's all on Tuesday."

Interviewer: "So what's music like?"

Child: "Well it's kind of boring and then I have ... when that's over, well, I just chill really to just wait ... and then after that we have piano, me and my brother have piano log, which is sight-reading like so we're able to read the notes."

Interviewer: "So how did you get involved in music theory and playing ...?"

Child: "My mum, she used to do it and my grandad did it, then my mum got my brother into it and then I was able to play it." (Boy)

However, in other cases the children, independent of their parents, relatives or friends, sought to actively participate in certain pastimes themselves. This boy says he wanted to take up soccer for a long time and was very excited when he was finally able to join a team:

Interviewer: "And did you choose to play soccer?"

Child: "I wanted to play soccer for ages on this team and three years ago, I was six or seven, I was getting ready and my mam walked in and said, '[son] get your football boots on because you are going to training', and I couldn't believe that I finally would be playing." (Boy)

Another boy discusses his decision to start drama after school. He explained how he had the chance to try drama during school and as he enjoyed it he took up the offer to attend classes after school also.

Interviewer: "And do you enjoy drama?"

Child: "Yeah."

Interviewer: "How did you get involved in that?"

Child: "Well I did it ... it got started in the school and I enjoyed it and a letter got sent home with our school report for everybody, did we want to do drama after school, and my mum asked me did I, and I said yeah." (Boy)

10.6 Summary

The children's weekly schedules of activities ranged from highly structured to very unstructured. Those children who seemed to have the most densely organised schedules appear to come from higher social-class categories, while their peers with very informal weekly schedules tend to be in the lower social-class categories. Typically, the children are spending their free time by participating in a mixture of structured and unstructured activities. Many appear to be very active during the week. In particular, almost all of the boys are involved in at least one sporting activity. The girls are also participating in sport but to a lesser extent than the boys. Many of the girls participate in cultural activities such as dancing. The children appear to place less value on the time they spend in unstructured activities; many class this time as 'doing nothing'. Parents appear to play a large role in influencing the type of activities in which the children are involved. The weekend was seen by many children as time to spend with their parents and families.



Chapter 11

PEER RELATIONSHIPS





11.1 Introduction

The children referred to relationships with peers throughout the course of the interviews. They talked about their networks of friends from school and the neighbourhood, and the various structured activities in which they are involved. They discussed the dynamics involved in meeting up with their friends. The interviews also explored bullying as an issue for children. The children explained the different forms that bullying can take and some outlined their own personal experience of being bullied.

11.2 Social Networks

Friendships clearly played an important role in the lives of the children; the majority of children spoke about having a wide network of friends from both school and their neighbourhoods. They described having a small number of 'best friends' and referred to those attributes they liked most in these friends. This girl talked about having two best friends. When asked why she felt they are her best friends, she explained it is because they play together a lot and they have told each other that they are best friends.

"Well, I don't really play with anybody else really that much, and we just ... we just said to each other that we're all best friends." (Girl)

One boy stated that he has known his two best friends, a boy and a girl, since they started school and began playing together. He explains how they became friends:

"Probably because they were in baby infants when we started school and they were the only ones that would play with me." (Boy)

Another boy talked about having a group of best friends. He explained how the children invite each other to their birthday parties. He discussed how birthday parties can be expensive for his family given that he has six siblings. Thus he was allowed to invite just five friends to his parties.

"I have, I don't know, around six best friends. I always get invited to their birthdays and see, we, Dad and Mam have to afford money for us because seven children and two adults is a lot so we are only allowed really five friends. I always invite my most best friends." (Boy)

Another boy had emigrated from the Middle East and was living in Ireland for one year at the time of the interview. He spoke of his best friend who lives in the Middle East. He says he is no longer in touch with him and he does not think he will get to see him again, but he has memories of him.

Interviewer: "And do you [and best friend] still keep in touch?"

Child: "No. I only have memory of him. He was a great friend."

Interviewer: "And will you get to see him again?"

Child: "Em ... I am not sure. I don't think so." (Boy)



This boy describes what he likes most about his best friend, who plays and shares with him and allows him to play on his trampoline:

Child: "Cause he mostly plays out with me, shares with me and lets me play on his trampoline."

Interviewer: "And what do you like about him?"

Child: "He plays with you when you are bored and is nice to you." (Boy)

Friendships appeared to be a central part of the children's lives, offering them not only companionship but also support. One girl described why she feels friends are important. She suggested that friends can offer children a lot of emotional support:

"Em, well, friends are someone you can talk to or you'd be round with a lot and you could go to if you're feeling sad or something" (Girl)

For some children, friendships are not readily available in their neighbourhoods. A number talked about the lack of friends they have living near their house. This girl describes how the children that live in her housing estate are younger than she. She plays with a boy who is seven years of age:

"There is a girl this side of me and then there is two girls this side that are six and two. Then next door to the girl on this side is a boy that is seven and I play with him more because he is more like my age and there is no-one really down from them except there is a boy in No. 2 that is four but he is not out much." (Girl)

This boy explains that, although some children his age live close by, he is not friends with them. He would like more children to play with in his area:

"There is a couple my age but none really friendly or something, they hang around with other people like" (Boy)

Other children spoke about difficulties experienced with their peers both inside and outside the classroom. One girl, when asked if she had a best friend, described the nature of her friendships in school. She suggested that her friends could leave her out when they became friends with other girls. She reacted by making new friends.

Interviewer: "And do you have a best friend?"

Child: "They keep walking away on me."

Interviewer: "Really, and why is that?"

Child: "I think they find new friends but I find new friends too." (Girl)

11.3 Communicating with Friends

During discussions about their relationships with friends, the children described how they communicate with them. The researchers explored how they make arrangements to see their friends. Often the methods used for communicating depend on how close their friends live to their home. For children of this age group, parents play an important role in arranging and facilitating peer interactions. Only a small number of children appeared to use landlines, mobiles and text directly to make arrangements with their friends.

For many of the children living in urban settings, friends tended to live close by, either in their housing estate or within their immediate neighbourhood. For these children, the main method of communicating with their friends was calling directly to their houses.

This boy, who lives very close to his friends, described how they walk to each other's houses to play.

"Well, they might come down to my house or I'd walk up to them" (Boy)

A girl who has friends in her housing estate explained how she would make arrangements with her friends over the telephone if it was raining and they would play inside her house.

"Well, if it was raining I'd maybe call them and ask if they wanted to come down to the house and play and just find out what time they have to go home at" (Girl)

A number of the children said their friends lived some distance from their house. For these children, it is not possible to visit their friends' houses without some prior arrangements being made, typically involving the children's parents. School was also seen to be an important place where the children could make arrangements to meet up outside of school hours.

A boy living in a rural area said his friends lived in a different village to him. When asked how arrangements would be made to meet up with his friends outside of school, he said he would ask them after school or his mother would ring them.

Interviewer: "And if you wanted to go over to your friend's house how would you get in touch with them?"

Child: "Maybe ask them after school or ring them."

Interviewer: "And would you ring them or your mum?"

Child: "She [mum] would." (Boy)

This girl, also living in a rural area, said her mother would telephone or text her friends to arrange times for her to play with them.

"My mum rings them or texts them" (Girl)

Unsurprisingly, the children see their friends most often in school. Therefore, the school is an important meeting point where the children can make arrangements to meet up outside of school hours.

One girl outlined the importance of school as a place where the children can communicate with their friends. She described how the children talk and make arrangements in school and also through their parents. She offered an example of birthday parties and said the children gave out invitations to their parties in school.

Interviewer: "And if you wanted to go over to your friend's house how would you get in touch with them?"

Child: "In school we talk, in school we do loads of stuff, in school on your birthday you give out invitations and we do loads of stuff like we have to organise things with their mam and dads." (Girl)

11.4 Bullying

From the findings of the quantitative data, it was apparent that 21 children (17.2%) in the qualitative sample had experienced bullying: 13 (61.9%) of these had experienced verbal bullying; six (28.5%) had experienced physical bullying, and two (1.6%) had some experience of being excluded. It emerged in the interviews that all the children in the sample were aware of bullying. They described their interpretations of bullying and the different forms bullying might take. Some outlined their personal experiences of being bullied.

One boy suggested that bullying can be both physical and verbal and can lead to somebody getting seriously hurt or injured.

"Like slagging, hitting, people can get seriously injured" (Boy)

Similarly, another boy included name-calling and causing physical harm.

"Um, probably they call them names or they could push them around" (Boy)

This boy, suggesting the different forms that bullying can take, referred to cyber-bullying. Children could spread rumours and send nasty emails to other children, he said. He added that another form of bullying involved children being left out of games by their peers.

Interviewer: "And what are the different ways that children could bully other children?"

Child: "They could spread rumours that aren't true."

Interviewer: "Okay."

Child: "They could send mean emails."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Child: "They could, if they were playing they mightn't let you join in." (Boy)

One girl described how she thinks children might act if they are being bullied. She said that, if a child was being threatened by a bully, they might be scared and not tell anyone about the bullying.

“Yeah, because if someone bullies you and they say ‘don’t tell anyone about it or else I’ll keep bullying you’, you might get scared and you just act weird and you won’t tell anybody about it and you’ll still get bullied” (Girl)

This boy implied that children can be bullied because they are different and he gives the examples of weight and ethnicity. He said children should not be picked on because of their differences.

“Because even though some children do have [a] problem like they are overweight or they have glasses or are from a different country they are just, they shouldn’t be bullied because there is not such a big difference between you and them a lot, it can upset them a lot, and while you might think it is funny your friends might not like you as well because they find you are bullying them.” (Boy)

He went to describe how he had been bullied in school because of his weight. He explained that initially he was afraid to tell his mother as he believed if she went into the school it could make things worse. He described how the bullying upset him and resulted in him being afraid to go to school. It was only when his mother heard him crying at home that he told her what was happening in school.

“I never really told Mum because I didn’t want to be called more names by the person if Mum went in. But I did tell Mum and I think it was when I was in junior infants there was this boy and I used to always say to Mum, ‘I don’t want to go into school’, and she said, ‘Oh you will be grand.’ And one night I went up to bed and she heard me crying and she said, ‘What is wrong?’, and I said, ‘I don’t want to go into school tomorrow’, and she said, ‘Why?’, and I said, ‘There is a boy in our school-yard and he used to bring in nail clippers and penknives and he used to chase us around the yard.” (Boy)

Another boy told of his experience of bullying. He described how children in his housing estate could be verbally intimidating and had been physically abusive to him. He had told his mother about these incidents, which he had found very upsetting.

Child: “What I don’t like about where I live is when people bully me.”

Interviewer: “And who would bully you?”

Child: “People from around the corner. They are really mean.”

Interviewer: “Are they boys or girls?”

Child: “Sometimes they could be boys and sometimes they could be girls.”

Interviewer: “What would they do?”

Child: “Like if I was looking at something they would think I was looking at them and they would say ‘What are you looking at?’ or else they would be kicking me.”

Interviewer: “And what would you feel when they are doing that?”

Child: “Upset.”

Interviewer: "And would you tell someone about it?"

Child: "My mam." (Boy)

In their conversations around bullying, the children made some references to peer pressure, particularly concerning physical appearance and clothes. One girl explained how she had a difficult time from some of the children in her neighbourhood because she did not have a particular style of shoes known as 'crocs'.

Interviewer: "Is there anything that you don't like about living around here?"

Child: "The kids."

Interviewer: "Why?"

Child: "They're mean and say we're not cool, saying that 'cause we don't have crocs we're not cool."

Interviewer: "They say that?"

Child: "Yeah, we don't know where to get them and we just don't want to get them. 'Cause what's cool about having holes in shoes?" [Crocs have holes punched in them.]

Interviewer: "What does that feel like if someone says that to you?"

Child: "Makes me feel upset 'cause I am cool. Everyone has their own style." (Girl)

Another girl outlined her experience of being bullied. She stated that bullying upset her but she felt that crying in front of the bullies would be very embarrassing. She went on to explain how a friend, who had been in a similar position, gave her advice to try to stop the bullying. She was now friends with the girl who had once bullied her.

Interviewer: "And have you ever had a problem with bullying?"

Child: "Yeah, they were being mean to me and I felt like crying but I didn't because it is a bit embarrassing as well."

Interviewer: "And did you talk to anyone about it?"

Child: "My mam or dad."

Interviewer: "OK, and did it stop?"

Child: "Yeah. My friend actually told me that [name of the girl] used to bully her as well like she did to me and she told me that she did the same to her so all you have to do is say stuff to her that she won't like or stuff she won't like or don't talk to her."

Interviewer: "And are you happy now that it's over?"

Child: "Yeah, we are friends now." (Girl)



When asked about the children living in her neighbourhood, one girl explained that a lot of children lived close by and that some of them bullied her – including a five-year-old boy. She revealed that she was embarrassed by this as he was younger than she.

Interviewer: “Are there any kids around here?”

Child: “Yeah, there’s loads of kids but we don’t really like them ‘cause some of them bully me. There’s a five-year old who bullies me.”

Interviewer: “What does that feel like?”

Child: “Terrible, embarrassing ‘cause he’s so younger than me.” (Girl)

Another girl spoke of her experience of being bullied when she was smaller. She explained how both she and her friend had been picked on by a girl in their housing estate. She said that the bullying stopped after both she and her friend stood up for themselves.

Child: “Because people get bullied and it is not very nice because when I was smaller there used to be a girl that bullied me and her name was [child’s name] and she wasn’t very nice.”

Interviewer: “And what kinds of things did she do?”

Child: “Well, when we were smaller we thought bird feathers gave you diseases and she used to chase us around, me and [my best friend], until one day we stood up for ourselves.”

Interviewer: “And then did it stop?”

Child: “Yeah.” (Girl)

11.5 Summary

Friendships play an integral role in the children’s lives, offering both a source of companionship and socio-emotional support. Most of the children described having a close network of friends both within school and in their local community. A smaller number described their experience of finding it difficult to make friends outside of school. Parents play a clear role in facilitating the children in spending time with their friends outside of school hours. This is especially pertinent for those children, mainly in rural areas, whose friends live some distance away. Children living in closer proximity to their friends, usually in urban settings, tended to make arrangements directly. Communicating with friends using technology such as email, text and phone calls appeared to be relevant only for a small number of children. The children openly discussed the issue of bullying and all demonstrated an awareness of the many forms of bullying. They indicated that individual differences can lead to a child being a victim of bullying. It emerged that bullying is a prevalent issue in the lives of children; some of the children offered their unique personal experience of being bullied. Children who disclosed that they had been bullied reported finding the experience upsetting. The main sources of support the children had sought were their parents and their peers.



Chapter 12

CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF ADOLESCENCE





12.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the findings of the children's perceptions of growing up and entering early adolescence. In particular, the children were asked to describe what they envisaged life would be like for them at 13 years of age, the age at which the children are due to be re-interviewed for the second wave of data-collection. Some of the children talked freely about this theme while others chose to write their responses down in the form of a short-story template entitled 'When I am thirteen ...' The children were asked to describe what they think teenagers do and what they feel it will be like to be a teenager. These conversations offered an insight into how the children feel about entering early adolescence.

Adolescence was described as a time of great change in children's lives. Some of the changes that the children discussed related to physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development, peer relationships and the transition from primary to secondary school. Throughout the interviews, the children referred to adolescents whom they know personally, such as teenage brothers and sisters and young people in their communities.

12.2 Physical Development

During the interviews, the children explored the changes that will happen to them physically as they enter adolescence. These conversations provided an understanding of the children's knowledge of puberty and their constructions of how teenagers look visually. The researchers were conscious that not all the children would have the same level of knowledge about puberty and therefore the issues were discussed sensitively and explorations were only made around the issues the children raised themselves.

The children spoke of the physical changes that may happen to their bodies as they become teenagers such as changes in their height and weight. Many noted that as teenagers they would grow taller. One boy said would be taller and stronger at 13 years of age.

"I'd be tall, I'd be in 6th class, I'd be strong and able to run better, I'd know more things than I do now" (Boy)

Another boy touched on the changes that would happen to his vocal chords during adolescence.

"Em, I think my voice would change" (Boy)

One child suggested that adolescents need plenty of sleep as they are growing and developing. She explains that this is why teenagers usually sleep late in the mornings.

Interviewer: "So what do you think teenagers do?"

Child: "Em ... well, they are kind of normal when they're 13 but they sleep quite late in the mornings."

Interviewer: "Do they? Why do they do that?"

Child: "Because they are growing and their brain is developing a bit more." (Girl)

In particular, many of the children talked about how they might look at 13 years of age. Most felt they would look very different as they moved into adolescence. Many spoke about having more control over



their appearance as teenagers. One boy outlined his desire to have braces when he is a teenager to straighten his teeth.

“Well, if I’m 13 my teeth will look different, because they’re sticking out now, just I’m going to have braces and they’ll go back in” (Boy)

One girl suggested that she would have a different hairstyle by the time she was 13 and might develop more freckles.

“My hair would probably be different and I might, I might have more freckles and I might be more grown up” (Girl)

Another girl felt that she would have fewer freckles and would be wearing make-up by this age.

“My freckles might be gone, I’d wear lots of make up ... I don’t know” (Girl)

Many of the children described teenagers as being more grown-up, having a different style to nine-year-olds, and taking more of an interest in their physical appearance. This girl explains why she thinks she will be worried more about her physical appearance as a teenager:

Interviewer: “Do you think you will dress the same?”

Child: “No. I’d be worried about how I dress or how I look at 13.”

Interviewer: “Why do you think that, do you think it’s important?”

Child: “I think I’d feel like I’m more special than anyone else ‘cause that’s sort of how you feel when you’re 13.” (Girl)

One girl described her impression of how adolescents look along with how they can act. She suggests that teenagers can develop spots. She also describes how teenagers may develop grey hair, caused by stress.

Interviewer: “And what do you think it would be like when you are a teenager?”

Child: “A lot of fun, a lot of study, get pimples on your face, ignoring your parents, getting grey hair from stress, being very busy, forgetting a lot of things, not caring about important things, wearing black stuff.” (Girl)

One boy said he anticipated wearing a lot of black clothes as a teenager. He envisaged himself becoming a ‘Goth’ (a member of the Goth youth sub-culture). He interpreted ‘Goth’ as being somebody who wears a lot of black clothes and who is interested in the supernatural.

Child: “I’m going to be a Goth.”

Interviewer: “Really? And why do you think that? Why would you like to be a Goth?”

Child: “Because they are interested in the things I am interested in like horror and the supernatural and stuff like that.”

Interviewer: "And what do you think it might be like to be a Goth?"

Child: "Exactly like what I am like at the moment but I will wear more black and I'll have spiked-up hair." (Boy)

12.3 Socio-Emotional & Cognitive Development

Some of the children mentioned the socio-emotional changes that they expected to experience during early adolescence. They suggested that they would become more mature and responsible as they become teenagers.

A few of the children described how their personality may change as they grow older, for example:

"You would have a different personality" (Boy)

Another boy explains that he expects to be more responsible as a teenager. He gives details of an incident which happened a few weeks previously, where he accidentally left his mobile phone in his clothes as they were being laundered. He implied that this was not something he would do as a teenager.

Child: "I'll be more responsible!"

Interviewer: "And why do you think you might be more responsible?"

Child: "Because I had a phone a few weeks or months ago for around a week and I put it in a pocket of my trousers and my mum washed them and it was broken. It is over there in the press. It was a hundred and something euro."

Interviewer: "And how does that make you feel?"

Child: "Very, very, very annoyed." (Boy)

Similarly, this boy suggests that he anticipates having more sense when he is older:

"Probably when I am 13 and I have more sense" (Boy)

One girl envisages herself maturing and becoming more grown-up during adolescence:

"I think I will be grown up and mature" (Girl)

Another girl felt she would have to take on more responsibility at home and do more chores.

"Well, you would have to do more jobs around the house because you're able to do more, and you'd probably have to do more work at home" (Girl)



Some of the children made reference to the increased cognitive abilities they will have as adolescents. They described how they will be smarter at 13 and be working harder in secondary school. One boy felt that as a teenager he would look back on himself at nine years of age and feel that he had been stupid.

“Because I am much more smarter when I am bigger. So it will make me feel much more stupid when I am small.” (Boy)

Another child felt that, although teenagers may play-act, they are good at school-work and have good concentration.

“Well, they mess around a bit, then they’re very good at school-work as well and they have good concentration as well” (Boy)

12.4 Relationships with Family

The children felt that relationships with their family will change during adolescence. Many viewed adolescence as a time of increased independence and envisaged themselves having a lot more freedom and choice than they did at nine years of age. They suggested that during this stage of their lives they would begin to become more self-reliant, spending more time apart from parents and more time with friends. A few of the children implied that, already at nine years of age, they would like more independence from their parents. One girl described how if she was in charge of the country she would give more freedom to children. She felt that, at nine, she did not have much independence from her parents.

Child: “Be more free.”

Interviewer: “What do you mean by that?”

Child: “With parents not following you around like when you are my age.” (Girl)

A boy said he would like to have no parents as then he would have nobody to tell him what to do.

“No mam and dad ... So no-one could boss you around” (Boy)

Another boy reveals how he expects to be allowed to do more things independently of his parents as a teenager as he will have a mobile phone to contact them with.

“I’d be allowed outside the house ‘cause I’d be allowed hang around with my friends ‘cause I’d have a phone with me so if anything came up I can just call my mum and dad and ask them to collect me or something” (Boy)

Although most of the children appeared to be looking forward to their increased independence, a few indicated that they were also apprehensive about their impending autonomy. This girl explains how being independent might also be scary as she will have to make her own decisions and may not always know what to do:

Child: "I will be a lot more independent which will be a little scary because I won't know what to do."

Interviewer: "And do you think it will be good to have more independence?"

Child: "Yeah. Not really sometimes because my dad would say you're getting older, you have to make your own decisions which will be a bit scary because I might not know what to do." (Girl)

Many children suggested that it might be more difficult to get along with siblings during adolescence. They acknowledged that teenagers can experience changes in their mood and they made reference to the varying moods they had witnessed in older siblings. They spoke of how some of the teenagers they knew had no time for younger children and could bully them. One boy described how his sister acted as a teenager. He said she would hit him and suggested she did not like having her privacy interrupted when she was on the phone.

Interviewer: "Is your sister a teenager?"

Child: "Yeah ... [whispers] a bad one."

Interviewer: "What makes her a bad one?"

Child: "She hits you and anytime she's on the phone and you come into the room she pushes you out." (Boy)

This girl describes how she expects her relationship with her younger siblings to change as she becomes a teenager. She suggests that she might bully her siblings and act out to her mother and teacher:

"I might boss my sisters around and call my brother mean names and give my mum cheek and give the teacher cheek" (Girl)

12.5 Peer Relationships

Peer relationships were described as an important part of adolescence. Some of the children suggested that teenagers, rather than having a couple of close friends, tend to socialise in groups. A lot of the children anticipated having a wider network of friends as teenagers.

One boy describes how he expects to have a lot of new friends when he is 13:

"When I am 13 I will have a heap of new friends" (Boy)

Many of the children were enthusiastic to spend more of their free time with their peers during adolescence. This boy was looking forward to spending more time with his friends, independently of his parents:



"You would be allowed to go more places on your own and call for your friends and that, so that would be exciting" (Boy)

A few of the children talked about using social networking websites when they are older to communicate with their peers, for example:

"I'll probably go onto Bebo." (Girl)

Another girl explains how she uses the Bebo website, keeping in touch with her friends by posting messages on their web pages:

Interviewer: "And what is Bebo like?"

Child: "You go on to a page and you put decorations and there are photos and stars and then you scroll down and you do quizzes to see what kind of princess you are and all. And you talk to your friends and give them messages and they all have Bebo pages as well." (Girl)

Adolescence was also seen as a time when the children would become interested in members of the opposite sex. One boy anticipates that he will be interested in girls. He explains that he feels this is something that happens to most boys:

Interviewer: "And how would it feel different to be a teenager?"

Child: "I forget the name of it but it something that makes boys want to be interested in girls."

Interviewer: "Do you think you might be interested in girls?"

Child: "Probably. It happens to most boys." (Boy)

Some of the children anticipated having a boyfriend or girlfriend by age 13. One boy explains how he imagines he would have a girlfriend at this age.

"At 13 I will have a girlfriend probably" (Boy)

One girl suggests she is concerned about her height as a teenager as this might affect her ability to kiss potential boyfriends.

Interviewer: "Is there anything that might worry you about being a teenager?"

Child: "Fighting with my friends or taller because I don't want to be that tall because it would be really difficult like if you had a boyfriend and you couldn't reach to kiss him."

(Girl)

The children's images of adolescence alluded to pressure from peers. Some spoke about the pressures they felt teenagers can experience from their friends to behave in certain ways or engage in activities



which they may not want to get into. One girl worries that her friends might influence her to wear more feminine clothes:

Interviewer: "Is there anything that might worry you about being a teenager?"

Child: "That if your friends force you to do things and they might force me to wear girly stuff." (Girl)

Some children revealed the pressures they perceived to be associated with adolescence. Their responses illustrated a sense of rebellion associated with being a teenager. They made reference to teenagers being under pressure to smoke, drink alcohol and participate in fights. One girl highlighted her concern that some teenagers can look favourably on smoking, drinking and driving.

Interviewer: "Is there anything that might worry you about being a teenager?"

Child: "People that think they are so great like smoking and drinking and driving, people like them." (Girl)

One boy said that teenagers could become addicted to cigarettes and alcohol:

"They [teenagers] might become addicted to drinking and smoking" (Boy)

Another girl described how teenagers could get into fights with their peers:

Interviewer: "And what kind of trouble do you think you might get into?"

Child: "Fights."

Interviewer: "And why do you think that?"

Child: "Because you will be hanging around and if someone goes near you or does something to you, you will do it back and you won't think before you do it." (Girl)

Although the children frequently associated smoking and drinking alcohol with adolescence, very few mentioned drugs. The issue of drug-taking arose in only a small number of interviewees. For example, one boy indicated that a concern he had about entering adolescence was that he might be offered cigarettes and drugs by his peers.

Interviewer: "Is there anything that might worry you about being a teenager?"

Child: "I mightn't be but if my friends started offering me cigarettes or people, you know, the way people try to offer teenagers drugs. Like I wouldn't take them but I hope no-one would offer them to me." (Boy)

12.6 Interests and Activities

The children perceived teenagers to have a lot more freedom than they themselves have at nine years of age. They talked about the activities in which teenagers participate. Many saw the main thing that teenagers do as chatting with their friends. Some said that teenagers *hang out* a lot in public places.

“Just hang out places and just go around and talk and play sports maybe with each other” (Boy)

This girl says that teenagers go out often, meet up with friends and talk:

Interviewer: “So what other things will you be able to do when you’re older?”

Child: “I’ll be able to go out with my friends.”

Interviewer: “Where would you go with them?”

Child: “I would go to the park with them and just talk and all.”

Interviewer: “So what kinds of things do you think teenagers do? When you see teenagers around here what kinds of things are they up to?”

Child: “They’re always going out.” (Girl)

Another girl says teenagers meet up on the streets in the city or go to discos.

“They would be on the streets or they might go to [the city] somewhere or maybe go to a disco or something” (Girl)

The children described the different freedoms that they will have as adolescents, doing things they are currently not permitted by their parents such as staying up late and socialising with their friends. One boy outlined his expectation to have a lot of fun as an adolescent. He spoke of teenagers staying out late with friends, going to parties and staying up late at night.

Interviewer: “So what do you think it is going to be like to be a teenager?”

Child: “I think it will be fun.”

Interviewer: “Yeah. What will be fun about it?”

Child: “Well, you will be able to stay out really late and stuff.”

Interviewer: “And what do you think teenagers do?”

Child: “They ... ehthey like ... go to parties and stay out really late at night. And like stay up until like 3 and stuff. And like 2 and 1.” (Boy)



One girl said she would be allowed to sit in the front seat of the car when she gets older.

"I will be sitting in the front of the car" (Girl)

Another boy suggested he would have a part-time job in the local pub:

"Doing jobs over in the pub like getting bottles" (Boy)

Overall, the children felt that they would be engaged in new activities as teenagers. They placed less emphasis on structured activities and envisaged adolescents as spending their free time in unstructured ways such as spending time with friends. One boy suggests that children are interested in different things during different phases of their lives. He feels that as a teenager his personality will change and he will no longer have an interest in skateboarding:

Child: "I will probably have stopped skateboarding and my personality will have changed."

Interviewer: "And why do you think you might have stopped skateboarding?"

Child: "Because things are usually in a phase." (Boy)

Sports were seen as still playing an important role in the lives of adolescent boys.

"I still want to play Gaelic" (Boy)

One boy outlined how he might be scouted for a professional UK soccer team. He explains that to become a professional footballer he would have to start playing professionally as a teenager.

Interviewer: "And do you think you might be interested in anything different?"

Child: "If I train a lot for soccer because I want to be brilliant. Like in three years or that I would have to start for the youths in Liverpool and the FAI would have to see if I was good and see who wants to have me. You have to start that when you are 16 because any later you won't be able to become a footballer." (Boy)

Some of the girls placed more emphasis on engaging as teenagers in unstructured activities such as shopping, rather than participating in sports.

"When I am 13 I would like to go shopping" (Girl)

Another girl suggested that teenagers spend more time by themselves or with boyfriends. She also suggested that they go to the cinema.

"You might kind of ... I don't know, go around by yourself more. And then you might like to go to the cinema and maybe see your boyfriends. Yeah, that's all." (Girl)



Many of the children associated music and popular culture with adolescence. One boy said he might develop more of an interest in music. He is currently interested in wrestling but did not envisage that this will continue into adolescence.

“Like I might be into music, like a lot of music ... I am into wrestling now but I wouldn’t say I will be into wrestling when I am 13.” (Boy)

Another boy indicated that his taste in music will change as he enters adolescence. He anticipated that he will be interested in different bands.

“And I might like a bit different bands, if there is going to be new bands I might like them” (Boy)

12.7 The Transition to Secondary School

The transition to secondary school was raised as an important time in the lives of young adolescents. The children spoke with both anxiety and excitement of making this transition. They described how secondary school would be very different to primary school.

One child expressed her concern at turning 13 as it means she will have to go to secondary school. She went on to explain that she expected secondary school to be very hard.

“It will be alright to be 13 and I don’t want to be 13 because I will be in secondary school” (Girl)

This boy drew a picture to describe secondary school. He explained that he had drawn a boy in school with his friend beside him.

Interviewer: “Ok, so do you want to tell me a bit about your picture?”

Child: “It’s just a lad sitting down and a lad standing beside him in school.” (Boy)

Some of the children appeared anxious that they would find the school-work much harder in secondary school. One boy explained why he felt this; he expected the subjects to be very different.

“School will be very hard ... ‘cause all the subjects will be different and a lot harder” (Boy)

The children expected to receive a lot more homework, including homework at weekends, in secondary school. One girl said she would have to write more in secondary school.

“Different homework, you have lots more writing” (Girl)



A number of the children appeared anxious about changing classes during the school day, something they do not have to do in primary school.

Child: "School will be stressful."

Interviewer: "So okay, so why do you think it would be, school would be stressful?"

Child: "Because like, like, kind of getting to the next classes and for kind of college and it would be very hard." (Girl)

Another girl said she would prefer to remain in primary school as she was anxious about the changes. She was not looking forward to having to do homework at the weekends. She was also nervous about bigger class sizes and moving around classes during the school day.

"You get homework for the weekend and you get homework for the week if you are off so I want to stay in national school. There are bigger classes during the day and it will be different moving from class to class." (Girl)

The transition to secondary school was expected to have an impact on their peer networks. Some of the children looked forward to making new friends in secondary school, while others were nervous about losing ties with their current friends as they moved to new schools. One girl said she was worried about moving to a different secondary school without her friends.

Interviewer: "Is there anything that might worry you about being a teenager?"

Child: "Basically if you are really good friends with someone and they are not going to the same school." (Girl)

Some of the children spoke of their concern about bullying in secondary school. Mainly the boys suggested that a lot of physical bullying could occur in secondary school. One boy thought that there are more bullies in secondary school.

Child: "I don't know, oh probably ... I might be bullied a lot more because, I don't know."

Interviewer: "Why do you think you'll be bullied a lot more?"

Child: "I don't know, because probably, well, with high school, there's a lot more bullies there. A lot more classes in high school too." (Boy)

Another boy expressed his concern that he would be physical harmed in secondary school:

"Well, I would be worried in case I would be beaten up in school" (Boy)



12.8 Summary

The children anticipated that adolescence will bring with it many changes to their current lives. They explored how they will physically develop during adolescence. A particular emphasis was placed on how teenagers have more control over their individual style and appearance. The children expected that they will be more interested in their appearance as teenagers. They acknowledged socio-emotional changes that they expected to experience during adolescence, such as maturing and becoming more independent and responsible. They also touched on how they will develop cognitively. Relationships with parents and siblings were discussed and the children expected adolescence to put a strain on these relationships. It was felt that teenagers are more independent of their parents and the children appeared excited about gaining more freedom. Some references were made to the children's relationships with teenage siblings. Teenagers were described as having less time for younger children. It was anticipated that, as they become teenagers, the children would find it more difficult to get along with their younger siblings. Peer relationships were seen as becoming even more significant during adolescence. Teenagers were described as spending much of their time 'hanging out' with friends. The children envisaged widening their circle of friends as they grow older. Many appeared enthused about spending more of their free time with their peers. Adolescence was also seen as a time when the children would become interested in developing relationships and boyfriends or girlfriends would become more important. Pressure from peers was mentioned and some of the children expressed their apprehension about the negative influence friends might have on them during adolescence.

Many felt that their interests and activities would change as they became adolescents. Unstructured activities would take on more significance although the boys, in particular, felt that structured sporting activities would still be important to them. Experiencing the transition from primary to secondary school was described as a central part of entering adolescence. Many of the children expressed anxieties over the changes that this transition would involve. Concerns were raised about the impact on friendships, the level of homework and the increased difficulty of school-work. Some of the children also worried about the increased incidence of bullying in secondary school.



Section 3

THE PARENTS' INTERVIEWS





Chapter 13

BEING A PARENT OF A 9-YEAR-OLD



13.1 Introduction

Throughout the interviews with the parents of the nine-year-old children, they were asked a series of questions about their perceptions of being a parent. The parent conversations covered how they find being the parent of a nine-year-old child and their conceptions of both the challenges and rewards of parenting. They were also asked to describe how they cope with difficulties and any strategies used to alleviate the stresses associated with parenting. Throughout the findings, some references are made to photographs that the families took to show the researchers in the course of the interviews.

13.2 Parenting in 2009

Throughout the interviews the parents offered insights into how they viewed parenting in the current social context compared with their own upbringing as children. Many of the parents talked about how their children's lives were different to their own as children. Some felt that they may have had more freedom and independence when they were younger, compared to their own children.

One mother spoke about how as a child she could disappear playing for long periods and return home for mealtimes.

"I remember having the freedom to just go off for several hours and then be expected home for meals"

Another mother recalls having more independence as a child. However, she expresses her anxiety and fear about leaving her nine-year-old and 12-year old children alone.

"I'd be too scared to leave them go off on their own or anything like that. [Child's siblings] are now 12 and I let them walk locally to the local shop but I'd still be really nervous about leaving them off more. I think at 12 I was probably left off more, but I wouldn't leave [child] off more, she's nine, you know."

One father remarked that, even though technology changes, the basic skills needed for parenting remain the same.

"What do I think it is like? I think it is probably the same as it ever was. Technology changes but the basics have to always be the same for a parent. You have to have your head on your shoulder and deal with everything that comes."

Another father suggests that today's children experience a lot of pressure to perform academically.

"They just need to develop away along themselves – that is what I want them to do, be exposed to as many things as they can, make their own choices when they are 14 or 15 ... he is fine, he does his own thing but nowadays there is so much pressure on kids to perform."

Other parents, comparing the freedom they had as children to their own children's lives, described how children commonly now have a heavy weekly schedule of structured activities. Many of the parents spoke about their own role in facilitating and organising the children's involvement in activities. Some felt that the over-burden of activities could have a negative impact on the child's development.

One mother placed a lot of value on unstructured free time, suggesting that the over-reliance on structured activities means that some children find it difficult to entertain themselves.

“I think they should learn to do nothing ... actually do nothing ... they are so used to being organised that to occupy themselves can be a problem and it is very important.”

This view was echoed by another mother who emphasised the importance of teaching children the skills to manage their own free time.

“I think it is really important for them to have down-time and boredom time so they can structure their own time. So not having the TV really helps that ... I think it is resourcing children to make decisions and make choices to the best of their ability and give them opportunities and time.”

The difficulties of achieving a good work/life balance were apparent with many parents. Some spoke about the challenges of balancing paid work, household duties and spending time with their children. One mother, separated from her husband, describes the challenge of parenting children while working full-time. She sees life as a parent as pressurised but also rewarding.

“For me it is very full on for a couple of reasons. Because I work so I’m not here so I don’t have time in the morning to get all the chores out of the way. So I work, then I have to get everybody out the door, parenting, homework, housework, putting the wash on, taking the wash off, getting the dinner, driving here, driving there. It is very pressurised, it is very rewarding obviously but I wouldn’t have chosen to be a parent in the first place. I think trying to find the balance between work and home life is difficult, so I think the biggest challenge, trying to find that balance, trying to find time for everything, you know.”

Some mothers and fathers described the burden of the responsibility they can feel as parents. One father described the responsibility of caring for children and preparing them for their adult life as “scary”.

“Scary in a word, because, well, I suppose you are looking out and you are trying to do the best for them and get a good education because I know from my own background if you don’t have a good education you are not going to get a good job, get the life that you are supposed to ... I think they understand they have to work hard at school and they do.”

13.3 The Rewards of Parenting

Both mothers and fathers included in the study were overwhelmingly positive about being parents. They described the personal rewards they experience from parenting. For many, the positive aspects of parenting include the love they receive from their children, the fun they share with their children, nurturing their children, and watching them grow and develop. Talking about the rewards of parenting proved very emotive for some parents.



One father describes the whole range of emotions he has experienced in being a parent and the sense of joy and achievement he feels when his child is making progress.

"I've always found being a parent, I suppose, enjoyable, stressful, awful, beautiful, tough, the whole lot, everything like, you know, but like at the end of the day as [his wife] said when you see progress in our children it gives you a sense of enjoyment and a sense of achievement, like to see [child] progress through school to the best of his ability and whatever the future brings ... that is it, you know."

Similar thoughts were offered by other parents, describing their unconditional love for their children and the love they receive from their children.

"Having people to love and to love you, I suppose, yeah."

"The joy from your children. Seeing the kids when they are happy and safe."

This mother describes how she takes pleasure in the spontaneity of everyday life with her children.

"I suppose the love that you get back, the love that you give unconditionally and the continual positive reinforcement that you get from your kids, the fun, the laughs, the fact that you can never predict what is going to happen and you just ... mad things will happen ... its unpredictability, that it's lovely and the fact that you're able to care for other people. I like that and being able to look after others and help others ... so yeah, being a parent is just fantastic."

A separated mother explained how, though she came from a large family herself, she was reluctant to have children but now found parenting extremely worthwhile.

"I love being a parent. I wouldn't swop it for anything, and I didn't before I had the older one, I never wanted to have any. I was the eldest of 11 children so I had seen enough of children to last me a long time and I swore I'd never have any but as it turned out I got pregnant ... it makes everything worthwhile but whatever I did beforehand, before I had them, seems worthless. It just didn't mean anything. Having them means absolutely everything."

Another mother, a single parent, described the joy she receives from being a parent. She explains how physical affection from her son can lift her mood if she is feeling low or worried.

"There is so much joy. It is just amazing being a parent. If I am down or worried and a hug from [child] and that is it."

Other parents spoke of how they enjoyed and valued the company of their children.

"Oh god ... the love, I suppose, and em, the companionship of your children"

A large number of the photographs taken by the parents offered insights into how they enjoy spending time with their children. A mother described a photograph that she took of her son playing cards:

“That is us [mother and son] playing cards. [Son] is mad into cards. That was probably ‘50s’ we were playing. He loves cards. We do a lot of things together and that is one of the main ones I’d say at the moment. The weather was so bad we couldn’t get out. We, usually we play hurling and football out the front.”

Parents also enjoyed being there for their children and listening to the funny stories their children produce.

“Well, I love when they come to you with their little problems and, you know, or they tell you something funny.”

“They make you laugh an awful lot too and the things they come up with, the cuddles. The favourites in this house are jumping and cuddles.”

One father talked about nurturing his children and enjoying a friendship with them. He outlines how he enjoys listening to what is going on in their lives.

“Just nurturing them and being close to them and having friendships with them. Just hearing what is going on in their life and working with them, that is the rewarding thing.”

A mother spoke about the overwhelming emotions she sometimes experienced when thinking about how she had produced her son.

“The joy, the look of love from your child, the laughter ... Christmas morning I love ... to see the pride on their face when they get, or even when they just say ‘I love ya’, or sometimes when you’re walking to school or when you’re sitting watching telly or something you get this overwhelming feeling I produced this little person and they’re beautiful inside and out.”

Another mother, a single parent, talked about the fun she had with her two children. She said that, although they naturally sometimes caused her stress, they were her “two favourite people in the world”.

“They are so much fun. They just amaze me every day the things they come out with. I always say to people they are my two favourite people in the world. They are just great fun. They drive me mad. They drive me mental but they are still the best people I know.”

13.4 The Challenges of Parenting

Even though the parents’ perception of being a parent today was overwhelming positive, the difficulties in caring for children were not glossed over. Parents discussed the many challenges involved in parenting, such as protecting and safeguarding children, nurturing and disciplining them, and the financial pressures involved in bringing them up.

A recurring theme was the impact of consumerism and the financial pressures experienced by parents. They described the pressures of providing for their children. Many noted that this pressure can often come from the children themselves.

One parent outlined how she can struggle to keep up with the financial demands raised by the children's interests and activities. She suggested that her children had so much already that they were not missing out on anything.

"It is hard to keep up with everything they want to do, the dancing, the school trips, and they want to do swimming. The book club that comes to the school, they would always want a book but this year I said we just can't afford it. But they have loads of books. They have loads of everything. They are not missing out as such."

The photographs taken by the families highlighted the number of structured activities in which the children were involved. One mother, showing the researcher a photograph of her son at a sports match with his friends, explained the impact of her son's activities on her as a parent. She described herself as a 'taxi' bringing the children to sports training and matches.

Interviewer: "Is there a lot of driving around and going to matches?"

Mother: "Loads, it's like being a taxi, yeah, constantly on the road with sport."

Another parent suggested that nowadays children expected expensive material possessions and clothes.

"The kids are looking for a lot more. The stuff they want is expensive like computers and different types of expensive clothes."

Linked to this was the issue of materialism and how the children were influenced by advertising and peers to want things.

"Also they are bombarded with stuff. Everything has to be 'I want it now'. They see something and want it now. There is no such thing as save up your pocket money. It is 'I want it now' and 'why can't I have it?' and 'everyone else has it, why can't I?' And we, ok, time to time I give in to it ... They get it and it is dumped in the corner ... When we were growing up you got something for your birthday and something at Christmas and you minded it and put it away. So I wouldn't like to be growing up now because I just think there is so much pressure on them and to fit in and wearing the right clothes."

The cost of living in Ireland and the price of housing emerged throughout the interviews. One father suggested that the price of houses was the big deciding factor in determining where his family could live. He suggested that quality of life is affected by the location of the family's house as the children rely on a car as they are unable to walk to most places, including school.

"I do wish we could walk more, I do regret the fact that we have to drive most places, for example to school. Had house prices been much cheaper we could have moved closer to the school."

Another father described the financial pressure of providing for his children, in terms of housing and education. He outlines his fear of unemployment and the impact this would have on his ability to provide for his children:

Father: "You have to work to keep the roof over you head. You know the financial difficulties."

Interviewer: "Does that restrict you ... in the type of things you do?"

Father: "Well, we have to get the house finished and painted and just finished but we don't have the money and we won't have it for god knows how long. And they will be going to college. The future, will we have a job the way things are going at the minute? If we don't have a job where are we doing to get the money to keep the roof over our heads?"

A lot of the parents discussed the challenge of raising children, disciplining and setting boundaries for children. One parent, separated from her husband, talked about the firm stance parents need to take to impose rules and maintain discipline. She mentioned the comparisons that children will make to their friends in terms of what they are allowed to do and the freedoms they have.

"Trying to maintain discipline, it is not a problem, it is just work, 'cause if you give kids rope they'll take it. And there is also peer pressure, you know 'so-and-so has something', or 'so-and-so is allowed to do x, y and z'. You just have to be firm and put down your rules."

This father described parenting as tough and suggested that parents need to strike a balance between giving their children independence and setting boundaries.

"It is just trying to find the line between making them streetwise and making them not to be bold, you know, it's very hard, I think, you know, I hope I am doing it ... you only get one chance at it and I just find it's tough."

One mother, parenting alone, described the advice that she was given by her mother about raising children. She described how she wanted her son to develop into a "good man". The boy's grandmother had suggested that if her grandson was "rough" he might have better life skills.

"My mum said to me it might be better to raise [child] a bit rough to cope with the world he is growing up in, whereas I don't want to do that. I want to raise a good boy and a good man. It is tough, that part. It is never easy being a parent but it is worth it."

Some of the parents discussed the challenges they faced in preparing their nine-year-olds for entering young adolescence. One mother talked about the pressures she perceived might affect her children as teenagers.

"It is a difficult world out there now the way things are, and with things like drink and drugs and pressures from friends, I suppose pressures on children themselves and on teenagers. I think the suicide rate things in relation to males in particular is worrying and I suppose you have always concern that they will do well themselves, and that they will have friendships that will carry them through difficult times."



Another father felt that the teenager years would be tough for him as parent. He anticipates having a more turbulent relationship with his son as a teenager:

“The bad thing is you go through periods of time where you just seem to be saying ‘no’ a lot, in particular sometimes in the teenage years there is a bit of angst.”

Separated and single parents, mainly mothers, described the challenges of bringing up children on their own. One mother, separated from her husband, showed the researcher two photographs. The first showed her daughter getting into the car in the morning and the second showed the family having breakfast together. She described the pressures of juggling parenting with working full-time. She explained how morning times could be particular stressful, as she tried to organise herself for work and the children to get to school.

Mother: “This is [daughter] getting into the car on the way to school. It’s always a rush, isn’t it, in the mornings [to daughter]?”

Child: “Yeah.”

Mother: “We’re always in a rush.”

Interviewer: “Is school far?”

Mother: “Well, it’s [town] so it’s about a ten-minute drive depending on traffic, it’s just trying to get out the door. That’s when all the shouting happens, isn’t it [to daughter]?”

Child: “Mmm.”

Mother: “We’re all shouting, well, not all of us!”

Financial pressures seemed particularly pertinent for one-parent families. One mother, a single parent, described the financial difficulties of raising her daughter alone.

“It is expensive. I am a lone parent and I am on lone parent’s money and it doesn’t stretch that far, as far as the Government thinks it stretches. Other than that I can cope and I get by. I have my part-time job.”

Another mother, also a single parent, outlined the pressure she felt to materially provide for her children within the tight constraint of her household budget. However, she found that her children appreciated and understood the value of money.

“I’d say it is tough being a single parent, particularly. I think there is a lot of pressure to, eh, provide stuff, what I call stuff, materialistic things. To have the Sky TV, to have the Nintendo games, to have the latest designer gear. Like the Heelies, everyone wanted them for Christmas. I find that hard because I am not a materialistic person and I am on quite a tight budget so it is quite hard sometimes to try and explain to the kids they can’t have everything they want. Em, but I’d say on the other hand that they do appreciate what we do have and they do understand the value of money and they like the simple pleasures like picnic lunches in the garden. They think that is absolutely wonderful to eat in the garden rather than at the kitchen table.”



In the case of mothers who are parenting alone, another concern included the absence of a male role model. In particular, this issue resonated among the mothers of sons. One mother said her son rarely asked about his father. She describes how he is very close to his maternal grandfather:

“He would ask what is his dad’s name, or what he looked like but then it would be gone and it is not mentioned again in months ... he would say ‘my grandad is my dad’. They are very close. They fight like cat and dogs as well but no, he wouldn’t ever really bring up his dad.”

13.5 Supports for Parents

Throughout the interviews, the parents were asked to describe how they coped with the challenges of parenting and to outline their sources of support. Many spoke about the role of their relationship, family and friendships in supporting them with the children. Many of the photographs taken by the families to show the researchers during the interviews featured various members of their extended family, friends and neighbours, who are important people in the lives of both the parents and their children.

Some parents made clear that their main source of support came from their relationship with their partner. This mother describes how she and her husband talk about issues relating to their children:

“Well, I’d just talk it through, we just talk it through myself and [father], you know, every parent worries and you just take every day as it comes, you can only give them as much information and support and hopefully ... if they do slide off they’ll come back on track again, you know.”

Other informal support networks were also deemed important, including extended family, friends and the relationships that may have developed with the parents of other children. Many of the working mothers found invaluable the support they received from extended family and friends.

This mother, showing the researcher a photograph of her place of work, said she was in full-time employment and found her mother to be a great source of support to her son while she was at work. Her mother often cared for her son after school and took him to his activities in the afternoon. Her mother was her son’s “second mother”.

Interviewer: “The next picture, what’s that?”

Mother: “That’s my work.”

Interviewer: “Do you work full-time?”

Mother: “I do, yeah.”

Interviewer: “How do you find that?”

Mother: “It’s okay, obviously I’d prefer not to work but for financial reasons these days I think it’s necessary.”

Interviewer: “How does [child] ... ?”

Mother: "No, he never ever complains. I've a good back-up with my mother, she's like a second mother if there's ever birthday parties or anything happening in the afternoon. She's actually taking him to a party now tomorrow afternoon at 4 o'clock."

The support networks many parents have nowadays were seen as positive factors of modern life, compared to previous generations where often mothers did not go out to work and did not drive, and the children were not involved in as many activities. One mother compared the informal support network available to her to that of her mother's generation. She spoke of how parents supported each other and gave the example of sharing the school run.

Mother: "Like my mother [child's grandmother], she didn't go out to work, she reared three of us, but she thinks we have a great network. She thinks it is great how, you know, because most of us are working, and you do the school run this week and somebody will do it the next."

Interviewer: "So you [friends' parents] help each other out?"

Mother: "And my mother is at the door and maybe one person is bringing [child] home today and someone else is bringing her home tomorrow and I would do something on my day off and my mum thinks this is marvellous."

Many of the parents turned to their friends for advice on parenting. One father explained how he and his partner got a lot of advice and support from their friends with older children.

"And a lot of support is coming from your friends, friends who are a couple of years ahead of us"

One mother appeared reluctant to seek advice from her family, explaining how she would rather turn to friends for advice. She said she would seek advice from friends only regarding what she saw as the bigger issues involved in parenting.

"I'd only talk to my friends about big issues, not day-to-day parenting, I mean we'd all have a bitch and a moan about trying to get them out the door, but only if there was a big issue would I go to a friend for support, but there'd be support there if I needed it, but it'd be more friends than family."

A smaller number of parents referred to more formal support groups. Those that did access formal groups found them to be a positive source of support.

"There are support groups there that you can go to and it is up to you to go to and find out and the school is great. They are very approachable."

Many of the parents found that their network of friends had expanded since they had children. Meeting new friends through the local groups and activities in which their children were involved was perceived as a valuable experience. A father described how he had developed some close friends as a result of his son's participation in football clubs.

“Well, I find there is a whole new circle of friends, and some people are actually very close friends now, and a lot of people that you wouldn’t have met, heard of, have anything to do with, but through the football and again it’s through the kids, your neighbours, your new friends are friends of your children.”

Similarly, many of the parents had developed close relationships with the parents of their children’s peers in school.

“Chat, meeting new people through them ... Yes, a lot of our friends here now we would have through the children by being in the same class, yes, a lot of them around the area.”

13.6 Relieving Stress

Parents had various ways of relaxing and making time for themselves away from the children. Some engaged in separate activities; some fathers tended to play a sport or go to the pub, while mothers mentioned shopping, walking or meeting up with friends. The role of the extended family, in particular the role of grandparents, was particularly important in allowing parents to have some free time.

One father said he and his wife took turns to have some free time to unwind. He went to the local pub for a drink most week-nights while his wife went dancing and unwound by watching television.

“Oh, I go for a pint five nights a week, well, you see, when she’s out dancing, so when she’s out dancing I tape her soaps and then she watches her soaps and half ten and I go up the road for a pint”

This mother described her strategies to relax from the stresses of parenting. She said she would smoke or go for a walk to unwind. She sometimes took the children to the beach so the whole family could let off steam.

“Mm ... have a cigarette. Basically go for a walk. Or I’d say ‘Come on, let’s go for a walk ‘cause we’re all stressed’ and I’d say ‘Come on, we are going to the beach and do you know what you can do? You can run wild, off you go’. I’ll rush it and just get them into the car and say ‘Come on, let’s go. You can argue, continue the argument, not from me, not from here, not in this environment, let’s get out and go to the beach and you can run, shout and jump’.”

Many mothers spoke about walking as a means to relax and unwind. One mother said she liked to walk to clear her head and lift her mood.

“I don’t know, actually walking, have been doing it quite a bit, it clears my head quite a bit, and puts me in a more positive frame of mind, rather than cabin fever being stuck in the house”



Another mother also spoke about finding walking a good way to relax. She was also completing a computer course in the mornings while the children were at school and found the experience of meeting new people enjoyable.

"I'd often go walking. I mean I have the mornings to myself so I'm going back doing computer classes so that is nice, meeting different people. It is fun."

One mother talked about how her husband unwound by playing sport while she preferred to go shopping.

"He'd [husband] go playing tennis or something and I'd go for some retail therapy"

This mother showed the researcher a photograph of her husband's retreat, a recording studio where he unwound.

"That is [husband] haven. He has a recording studio at the bottom of the garden. Just when I was thinking of things that were important to all of us. That is his sanctuary ..."

One father said he rarely got time for himself but felt it was important for him to keep fit, so he played football every week.

"I don't get time for myself! I go down to football on a Monday night, I enjoy football but I was going to hang up the boots a year ago and then we got a new manager and they wanted me back. It's for my own fitness 'cause I put on two stone. I don't like putting on weight."

Another father would eat out with his wife. He also made time for attending football matches, an activity that his son engaged in with him.

"We would go for a meal, that is more or less it. We are not drinkers. We don't go to the pub ... a glass of wine or a few beers. I go to a lot of football matches and [son] comes along too."

Some parents talked about the importance of spending quality time together without the children. One couple spoke about how they felt it was important for them to make time for themselves away from the children.

Father: "On Saturday afternoons and evening to go away and make time for ourselves, just to a garden centre or a cup of tea or coffee."

Mother: "Because you can sometimes feel that you are just constantly fetching, carrying, toing and froing, cooking and washing and you are just feeling 'oh my god this has to stop', and you have to get some quality time, even if it is just an hour."



The extended family played an important role in facilitating many parents in spending time alone together. One mother said her family offered a good source of support in terms of babysitting.

"We have a good family around as well. Everything is good, if we want to get out there are plenty of babysitters."

One mother, who is separated from her son's father, showed the researcher a photograph of her son with his grandparents. She talked about how her parents took care of her son one night each week so that she could socialise.

Interviewer: "And this one?"

Mother: "This was one of my parents when they came down to visit so we thought it would be an ideal opportunity to get a picture with James with his grandparents, my parents. My father is also James's godfather."

Interviewer: "And do they get on well?"

Mother: "Very, very close. My parents would see them every Tuesday and Thursday for dinner. I go out on a Tuesday so they baby-sit and they have a very good relationship with them."

Many parents talked about the role of grandparents in supporting them and their children. This emerged as particularly important in the case of single parents. One mother, a single parent, said her mother played a huge role in providing help and support to both her and her son.

"And he [son] would actually tell my mother more things than he would me ... and my mom is 83 this year. And she [mother] is great. My mom just lives through the back gate there."

Another mother, also a single parent, explained how she needed space to unwind. She said she sometimes took a nap and highlighted the role her mother played in helping out with the children. She often brings the children to her mother's house to get a break and unwind:

"What I normally do is take myself away from everything. I say 'I am going to my room for a lie-down', for a nap. Once I have had my nap for half an hour I am fine. If they are driving me really mad I would go to my mother's and I say "Just take them for half an hour and I'll be back' ... and a change of scenery changes them as well."

One mother, who was parenting alone, stated that each Saturday the children went to stay with her mother, which gave her some free time for herself.

Mother: "Saturday they usually stay with my mam. So I have a night to myself."

Interviewer: "And is it good having your mam around?"

Mother: "My mam is great. They are always over in their nan's."



13.7 Summary

Overall, the parents spoke very positively about parenting and outlined the many rewards they experience as parents. Their immense love for and enjoyment of their children emerged throughout the interviews. They acknowledge the difficulties and challenges involved in parenting such as protecting and safeguarding children, nurturing and disciplining them, and the financial pressures of bringing up children. Parents had different ways of relaxing and making time for themselves away from the children. Some couples engaged in separate activities, with some fathers tending to play a sport or go to the pub, while mothers mentioned shopping, walking or meeting up with friends. The role of the extended family, in particular grandparents, friends and neighbours, is particularly important in allowing parents to have some free time.



Chapter 14

FAMILY DECISION-MAKING



14.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at the parents' descriptions of how decisions are made within the family and the child's involvement in the decision-making process.

14.2 Making Family Decisions

Many of the families differed in their approach to decision-making. The degree to which some families had a clear-cut strategy for decision-making varied. The parents' descriptions of the process surrounding decision-making offered insights into the dynamics of their own relationship and the impact of this on their parenting styles.

For many families with two resident parents, mothers and fathers commonly adopted a particular role in the process. Many of the couples acknowledged their differences in parenting styles. One couple described the different roles they adopted when making decisions about the children. Although they said they made the decisions jointly, it appears that the mother's role was to devise a plan while the father was responsible for its implementation.

Interviewer: "And how are decisions made within the family?"

Mother: "Jointly. We both sit down and discuss or I would make the decision ..."

Father: "And I would agree."

Mother: "If something was happening we would have chat about it. I would probably be a bit more dynamic in thinking about things."

Father: "You have a plan and I put it into action."

In another case, the couple appeared to take different approaches to decision-making. The father recognised that he was generally a stricter parent than his wife. They said they found a balance in terms of their parenting styles and described how they could adopt the roles of 'good cop' and 'bad cop' when it came to the children.

Interviewer: "How would you make decisions, then, between yourselves about the kids?"

Mother: [laughs] "He [husband] says something and I say no, you are too hard on them. [laughs] Em... yeah, it is pretty much like that really. It's kind of [husband] would tend to be a lot stricter than I would be. Em ... so between us we kind of strike a balance. That's it, you know."

Father: "I would be stricter, I would be."

Mother: "I made her [daughter] pay for her own hoodie top 'cause he said she didn't need it. He said I would have paid for it. [laughs] We kind of do 'bad cop, good cop' routine, going somewhere along the line. But you know, we actually don't argue at all about the kids. We very seldom argue. We kind of both want to be the same. The only difference is really he would be a bit more strict than I would. And I suppose I tend to get my own way most of the time." [laughs]

This father said he and his wife had different perspectives on decisions regarding the children. He felt that his wife was best placed to make most of the decisions as she looked at situations from a wider perspective than he did.

Father: "No, it depends who we are with and what the decisions are. In fairness to [wife], she would be the more, as she said, realistic, but the more, em, she would look at things in a broader way than I would. I would probably look a bit shorter distance but she would have the bigger picture pretty quick. So that is why she makes most of those kinds of decisions within the family."

Direct contact time with the children appears to influence the parents' role in decision-making. In families with two parents resident, many of the mothers felt that, as they were spending more time with the children on a daily basis, they were more involved in the day-to-day decisions concerning the children. In these cases, the fathers were more likely to participate in the major decisions affecting the family rather than minor day-to-day decisions. One couple suggested that consultation between them was not always possible as some decisions regarding the children needed to be made immediately. They said that, because of this, most often decisions were made by the child's mother as she spent most of the time with their daughter.

Mother: "I would say in general most of them I make on my own because that is the nature of the job or if you [husband] are there we will talk about certain things but some things we just, what do you think? A lot of them are to do with the kids, you have to make the decision there and then, I have to do it. I have no choice but we talk about everything."

Father: "Yeah we had a week ago, [wife] was at work and she, [daughter], put me in a situation where I had to make a decision and I wasn't able to ask her [wife] but [daughter] knows that and she knows I am the softer one, softer than [wife], and she puts me on the spot then and I say 'OK you can go' or 'that girl can come to visit us' and so on and, yeah, most of the decisions because [wife] is at home all the time would be in her hands but if I am around I would be involved in it."

The reverse was true in a smaller number of families, where the father was seen as the main decision-maker. A mother said her husband had the final say in decisions concerning the children. She described her husband as domineering but implied that she had her own strategy for influencing the decisions.

Mother: "I am usually the one that comes forward with the ideas but other than that my husband has the final say."

Interviewer: "Okay?"

Mother: "He would be quite domineering. What he says goes, but through the years I know how to kind of manipulate things, to put words into his mouth, which is quite, you know, I can do that. You can do it with your own kids, maybe not with the big girl but with the younger guy, you can manipulate him but he [husband] makes the decisions, the final decisions."

On the whole, parents felt that they generally would have similar viewpoints and make joint decisions for the family. The discussion about making decisions offered an insight into the parents' relationship with each other and how they approached parenting together. Many parents said it was important to come together on decisions and adopt similar approaches with the child.

This mother said she and her husband had similar attitudes and beliefs about parenting, and that this was something they had discussed before they had children. She suggests that they can rely and trust each other to make the right decisions without always consulting the other parent.

Mother: "Yeah, I would never look to [husband] and he would never look to me ... it is just kind of ... he would decide something or I would decide something ... and if we hear about it ... if there was a problem we would say it ... we don't have to check up on each other, we would just kinda agree. A lot of what we want to be as parents was discussed before we had kids. Our beliefs and what we would do, discipline and stuff like that. We are very strong about that."

A few of the families appeared to have more conflicting styles when it comes to making decisions. In cases where parents took differing viewpoints on a major decision, it was apparent that one parent would back down to enable a decision to be reached.

This father said that he and his wife could disagree over decisions relating to the children. He found that disagreements could create tension within the family and suggested that acquiescence was sometimes needed to restore family unity.

Father: "I don't agree with them [wife and children] but I might as well shut up because there's no point in carrying on and disagreeing with something for the sake of it, you know what I mean, so that kind of thing, that's what I'm saying, it puts certain tension there. I mean you have people with two different views on something; somebody has to give in."

For families who have experienced parental separation, the role of the non-resident parent in decision-making appeared to vary. However, the non-resident parent's level of involvement appeared to be determined by the nature of the relationship that now existed between the parents. In families who seemed to have a more positive, co-parenting relationship, the non-resident parent was more involved in decisions concerning the child than among families with a high level of parental conflict.

One mother described how she and her husband, although now separated, discussed issues concerning the children and decisions together. She described how both she and her husband agreed on the same rules for the children quite early on in their separation.

"Myself and their dad, we would discuss things, be it education ... we'd always have a discussion about it. We're only separated a year so really the rules that applied in this house would also apply to his house – things like how often they watch TV, how long they can spend on the computer, that kind of thing. I presume, I think they're the same in this house and that house, and that's something we decided a long time ago and just kept it up every since."

Another mother spoke of having an amicable relationship with her ex-husband. She indicated that the responsibility of day-to-day decision-making rested with her, although he participated in the more significant decisions concerning their son.

"Obviously in the beginning there wasn't a decision between the both of us but we get on OK so unless ... If it is a major decision we would but if it is anything to do with school I wouldn't have to ask [ex-husband]. It is automatically I do everything."



Some single parents described the lack of support they can experience when making decisions. A single mother described how it could be difficult to make family decisions as a single parent. She suggested that as a parent you may not always know the best decision to make. She said that leaving full-time employment had been a big decision that she had to make on her own.

“Sometimes myself I don’t know what is right or wrong or what is for the best or will I just take a chance. Like to give up work was a huge decision.”

14.3 Involving the Child in Decisions

The parents discussed the role of the child in the decision-making process. A common theme was that, rather than participating in decision-making, children are consulted on issues affecting their lives. On the whole the parents appeared to encourage children to put forward their views and opinions on issues affecting their lives. However, ultimately decisions are taken by the parents. The nature of the decisions to be made and the child’s age are important factors in determining whether or not the parents consult the child. The parents used interesting narratives when asked about the children’s involvement in decision-making. Most parents suggested that the children are involved in family decisions but that the extent to which they have a say is limited. Phrases such as “yes but”, “it depends” and “to a certain extent” were frequently used to describe how children participate in decisions.

The value in consulting the children was recognised by some parents who outlined how they try to make family decisions as democratic as possible. This mother suggested that parents could sometimes make the wrong decisions and therefore she felt that it was important to listen to the child and involve them in decision-making.

“She has to go to school. That is one thing she has to do but most things are optional. You have your set rules that they need but otherwise they would obviously, yeah, they try things and if it doesn’t work out they leave them, basketball or whatever. They all have a good say. That’s one of the things, that they have a say in what they do or what I am doing wrong and are strong enough to give their option, I think is important and that we take it as well, ‘Yes I made a total bags of that.’ When you are under stress or pressure you can make bad decisions and you have to go back and make it right for them so as not to mix them up.”

In those families who had attempted to establish a more democratic process, the difficulty of reaching a consensus among all family members was noted. One couple described how they involved the children in family decisions. The father suggests that they use a relatively democratic process and says his decisions have been overruled by the family members:

Interviewer: “How are decisions made within the family?”

Mother: “Together.”

Father: “I won’t say it is democratic but it is as good as you get. I am always pulled up because I can be the one [to] stamp a decision and I’m overruled then when it comes down the family forum.”



Another father suggested that adopting a democratic style to family decision-making can prove challenging. He said he sometimes found it difficult to take the children's opinions on board. He suggested that his wife was more democratic.

*"They [children] would [have a say]. They would have more of a say with their mother than they would with me. Their mother would be more, 'This is a democracy', whereas I would be, 'No, it is a f***ing committee that isn't working'. I would be more ... but I try not to be like that." (Father)*

Similarly, another father suggested that it could be difficult to reach a consensus among the different views of everyone in the family. He described the decision-making process as more autocratic.

Father: "There is an element of democracy but we can't have – there is six of us and you can't have six of us going off in different directions."

Interviewer: "Yes?"

Father: "So maybe we are autocratic."

Some parents suggested that a balance must be reached between involving children in decisions and ultimately safeguarding their welfare. A father described how his son was consulted on issues concerning him but as parents he and his wife would make the decisions that were in their son's best interest.

Father: "Ah, about stuff that would concern him, yeah ... like, I mean, he wouldn't be forced to do things that he didn't want to do, but if it was for his own good."

A smaller number of parents appeared to place no value on consulting their children in decisions. Some felt that involving children in decisions is unrealistic and unnecessary due to the child's age. One father felt quite strongly that children should not be consulted on decisions. He suggested that he would not allow his daughter to influence him.

Father: "I won't be dictated to by a nine-year old."

Another father, echoing this view, said he and his wife made the decisions and then informed their son.

Interviewer: "Does [child] ever have a say in how decisions are made?"

Father: "Not really. He is nine. Like what decisions? ... We would say 'you are going where we are going and that is it'. I am not going to say to [child] 'do you fancy a week in Egypt'."

This mother, while showing the researcher photographs of the various activities that her child was involved in, suggested that she decided on the choice of activities. When asked how decisions were made on the child's activities, the mother's narrative does not suggest that she consults her daughter.

Interviewer: How would you decide what activities [child] would get involved in?"

Mother: "She's doing drama as well, she could be at anything, she loves her drama, she's at tin whistle, I don't like her getting into too many things at the same time, there's badminton now, I have her signed in for that and that's coming in September, it'd be a good sport for her, just something different, she might enjoy it, I'll see how she gets in with it and if she doesn't like it I'll take her out of it ... She done Irish dancing before as well, she only done that for a while, she gave it up as well, she didn't like it. I'll try badminton now in September and see how it goes."

Parents suggested that this stage in the children's lives led to little conflict in terms of the families' decisions. According to some parents, given the child's age, no significant decisions had yet to be made by the family. One mother anticipated that the decision-making process within the family would become more challenging as her daughter grew older. She suggested that she and her husband would experience more conflict with their daughter as she enters adolescence.

Mother: "It's definitely when they are older there is the conflict. At nine years of age they are fine, it is when they get older that the big decisions come in."

Another mother suggested that her children at nine years of age were not equipped to make big decisions.

Mother: "I mean we're not at that stage where they're ready to make big decisions, you know, they're younger, like."

The nature of decisions was also seen as an important factor in determining whether or not the child was consulted. Most of the parents listened to the children's views on what were seen as minor day-to-day decisions. Overall, children did not appear to participate in the more significant family decisions. Many parents felt that the children should only be consulted in areas where they could offer realistic views and where safety concerns were not an issue. Most children were consulted daily on issues such as their food choices, after-school activities, and films or television programmes. Some parents sought the children's views on occasional decisions – for example, holiday destinations, holiday activities and preferences in home decorating. In all cases, the parents would retain the right to veto the child's preferences in what they considered to be the best interests of the child.

One couple gave examples of the type of decisions in which they involved their children. The mother suggested that the children could have input to decisions of which the outcome was trivial, such as their choice of activities for the weekend. The father echoed this, view saying that the children would influence minor decisions such as their choice of soft drink.

Mother: "Well, decisions as regards what they're doing for the weekend, if they're, if we're going somewhere, if we're in town or whatever, they'd be able to have their choice if it was inconsequential to me, you know, where they were ..."

Father: "Well it wouldn't be anything major ... it'd be what kind of [chocolate] bar you want or what kind of soft drinks you want or something ..."

A mother suggested that she had the final say on decisions although she would consult her son on what she viewed as minor decisions, such as food and film choices. She felt that at his age he was not capable of making major decisions.

Mother: "Serious decisions I make them, but little things I'll ask for his input, like this things about the rules. We make rules together but to be honest the final decision will most time come down to me and I will be the one to decide but he does get his own say ... Things about the rules, not watching TV when having the dinner, sitting at the table. This thing about the football in the house, I got it out of him like reverse psychology. The kickboxing he can't be doing that, I knew where I wanted him to go with the decision. He gets to make decisions like what he wants for dinner and I will give him a few choices and he will get to pick, stuff like that. Going to the cinema he will get to pick the film, what card game we play, hurling or football outside. The minor things I let him decide most of the time. Serious things obviously I will do that. He is only nine. He is not old enough to be making serious decisions."

An emphasis was placed on transparency and honesty between the parent and the child regarding the decision-making process. Many of the parents stressed the importance of informing the child as to why a decision had been made. One mother suggested that she felt it was important that her children understood why she had made particular decisions.

"I suppose it is just being able to be a bit more honest with my children than perhaps my parents were with me in terms of communication, so they do understand why I am making certain decisions."

14.4 Summary

The parents offered valuable insights into how they make decisions concerning their children. Among many families with two resident parents, the couples acknowledged their differences and similarities in parenting styles and the roles they each can take in making decisions. Direct contact time with the children appears to influence the parents' role in decision-making; many of the mothers make the bulk of day-to-day decisions as they appear to spend more time with the children. Among families who have experienced parental separation, the role of the non-resident parent in decision-making appeared to be determined by the nature of the relationship that now existed between the parents. The lack of support that single parents can experience when making decisions was evident. The parents also spoke of involving children in the decision-making process. Although some appeared to value the child's participation more than others, on the whole parents appear to be listening to their children and consulting them in day-to-day decisions regarding the children's and the family life. However, ultimately, decisions are taken by the parents. The age of the child and the nature of the decision were seen as significant in determining the degree of participation the child would have in the decision-making process.



Chapter 15

PARENTS' ASPIRATIONS AND CONCERNS FOR THEIR CHILDREN





15.1 Introduction

This chapter explores the parents' concerns and aspirations for their children as they grow up in Ireland. The parents were asked to describe what concerns, hopes and dreams they had for their children.

15.2 Parents' Aspirations for their Children

The parents appear to have a hierarchy of hopes and dreams for their children's future. Their primary goal was for their children to be happy and healthy. Other hopes and dreams, although seen as less important than the child's ultimate happiness and health, included reaching their potential, developing positive personality traits, and educational and career success. For many of the parents, their hopes and dreams for their children appear to have been influenced by the lack of opportunities they themselves had experienced growing up.

The child's happiness was the most important hope that the parents held for their children. An overwhelming majority emphasised their desire for their child to be healthy, happy and content, above all other hopes and dreams. Happiness appeared to the parents' priority for their children.

One mother highlighted that her daughter's happiness was her main focus as a parent. She said she did not set goals for any of her children and her priority was their happiness.

"I am not one of these mothers who sets goals for their kids. As long as they are happy. As long as they are not put[ting] themselves in danger. I honestly think that is the most important thing. As long as they are happy I'm happy."

Similarly, this couple describe their wish for their son to continue to be happy as he enters adolescence and young adulthood:

"We just want him to be happy, that he'll go from being a happy child into a teen to an adult. I know he won't be happy all the time ... Just that he's happy in general."

Another mother, outlining her aspiration as a parent, emphasised her daughter's future happiness. She hoped her daughter would have a career that she enjoyed:

"That she grows up happy and she is happy with her life and that she does something she wants to do and enjoys doing it and she doesn't feel under pressure to conform to anyone else's ideas. That she ends up doing something she is happy with, whatever it might be."

Many of the parents expressed their desire to see their children grow and develop into mature and responsible teenagers and adults. They described many of the personal traits they would like their child to retain or develop such as being independent, strong-minded and self-sufficient. One mother said:

"I want him to be a good man, with a bit of conscience and a bit of character but determination and strength to go after what he wants at the same time." (Mother)



Many parents wished that their children would succeed in reaching their potential, which was defined in terms of both academic and non-academic success. In some cases, parents outlined how they were trying to foster the talents currently displayed by their children. One mother said he hoped her or his son would fulfil his potential.

“I just hope that ... he seems ... everybody says he’s great potential, and that he’ll actually fulfill it. And that he’ll fulfil it for himself and make him happy.”

This mother expressed her wish that her daughter would develop a career in music and said she planned to help her daughter to have her voice trained.

“Hopes for us would be that she fulfils all her dreams, she’s very musical and I’m gonna get ... we’re hoping to get her voice trained this year. I would definitely say ... I hope she goes into something music-wise because she has a beautiful voice.”

A good education was seen by parents as an important goal for their children. Many hoped their children would complete third-level education. The child’s experience of secondary school was seen as an important stage influencing academic attainment. Choosing an appropriate secondary school was considered an important parental decision.

One mother spoke about the importance of secondary school in laying the foundation for further education and career opportunities. She suggested that the choice of school is important as it is the place where children will meet their peer network.

“You see, I think, the boys, it’s the education in secondary is so important. Because it gives them a foundation and even in years to come, looking for employment or whatever, it’s very important who they socialise with and how they get on, like ... what they want to do in life, you know?”

Another mother hoped that her daughter would do well in school and go on to third-level education.

“College. That she would do well in school. That she goes to college. She wants to be a teacher so far. Hope that she does well in school, that she will be happy and go to college and get a proper for herself, a good job.”

This father expected his daughter to go to college and felt that this was non-negotiable. He felt that completing third-level education was essential nowadays:

“College, she’s no choice! That’s it, that’s it, definite, I’ll drag her in kicking and screaming, I don’t care, both of them are going to college, they need it this day and age, you know.”

Some of the parents described the career goals they had for their children. In most cases, their main wish was that their children would have a career which they found rewarding and enjoyed going to work.



One mother placed a lot of value on her child finding a career about which she was passionate:

"I don't know. Wherever she wants to go. I hope she will be motivated enough and feel confident enough that she can make her own decisions to go for what she wants to do, something she feels passionate about. I think, for me, a lot of people end up in jobs they hate and it makes their life miserable. I would like if my kids were able to find something they are passionate about and were able to do it."

Another mother emphasised the importance of job satisfaction over financial rewards:

"My wish for her would be that she would get a career she would enjoy because you could get a fortune but not enjoy it. My wish for her would be that she would stay in education and find a career that makes her satisfied and happy."

Other goals mentioned by a smaller number of parents related to their children developing romantic relationships, having children of their own, travelling and being financially successful. One father, suggesting that his son might be quite sheltered living in a small rural community, outlined his aspiration for his son – and other children – to travel.

"They do need to travel really, they need to see because they've lived here all their lives, and we've I suppose shaded them as well ..."

One couple joked about how they would like for their daughter to marry a millionaire and take care of them in their old age.

Mother: "Just that she is happy, that she is able to make her way in the world and that she has good friends around her and that she is fulfilled and marries a millionaire."

Father: "That she is a 'glass half full' person."

Mother: "Exactly, and marries a millionaire and looks after us and gets a good nursing home for us."

Father: "No, a house in the south of France."

An overwhelming desire to support their children emerged throughout the parents' interviews. Many talked about the assistance they would offer, in terms of guidance, encouragement and financial support, to help their children achieve their individual goals.

This mother suggests that she has already begun to save for her daughter's college education:

"She will have me. I have savings for her if she wants to go to college. She will have the option of it, like, the choice."

A father describes how important it is to him that his children know that he and his wife will support them regardless of what situation they find themselves in:

“I’ve been trying to do this thing since they were like ... maybe four years ago I’d be saying, ‘God, girls I hope you all call no matter what happens, you’d always come to me or Mammy if there’s a problem or something.’”

One mother expressed her desire to support and protect her child but recognised that this would become more difficult as her daughter grows and develops and becomes more independent.

“Obviously I would do everything to protect her, protect her from harm, but she is evolving into ... as her development progresses she is evolving into ... Eventually it’s, she is on her own. I will always be there for her but more and more she’s got to be ... her own behaviour ... independent.”

Some of parents were reluctant to consider their children’s lives in future and emphasised the importance of living in the moment. These parents suggested that they felt it was futile to worry about the future and instead preferred to focus on the present. One father, when asked about his wishes for his child’s future, suggested that he did not have any aspirations as life is so unpredictable.

“Listen to me, you can’t plan anything nowadays. You can say we will do this and do that and tomorrow you don’t know what is going to happen.”

15.3 Parent’s Concerns for their Children

The parents openly discussed their concerns and fears for their children as they grow and develop. The main concern for many was the health of their children. The development of physical and mental health issues worried some parents.

One mother highlighted her fear that her daughter would develop a long-term illness.

“[It’s] worrisome that there’d be some long-term illness like that, that you never know what the hell is going to happen or what kind of phone call you’re going to get in the middle of the night”

Most, if not all of the parents, viewed the arrival of their child’s adolescence with some degree of anxiety. Adolescence was seen as a particularly vulnerable stage in the child’s life, influencing outcomes in adulthood. One mother anticipated that her child’s entry into adolescence would present new challenges to her as a parent.

“I suppose getting through the teenage years the best we can”

The parents did not paint a very positive light of teenage years and appeared apprehensive about their children’s increased independence and responsibility to make their own decisions. Parents appeared specifically concerned about the influence of peers on their children as adolescents. Peer pressure,



bullying, relationships and substance misuse were all mentioned as concerns associated with parenting teenagers.

One mother said she would be more worried about her daughter's whereabouts during adolescence. She always knew where her nine-year-old daughter was now, she added, but this was something that she expected to change.

"Yeah, when they are snuggled up in bed at nine o'clock at night at least I know where they are. Five years down the line when they go out the door at nine o'clock you would be watching the clock."

Another mother, showing the researcher a photograph of the family home, said she was currently fearful of allowing her daughter to play out in the neighbourhood. She explained how she found some of the children in the area more mature than her daughter.

"I don't really let her out, she's still very young, she's very naïve, which I'm very happy about, but I'm also very nervous about life out there now, so that's why [neighbourhood] is brilliant, there's security at the gates, she has her little mobile if she's going into someone's home or text, but the freedom she has is nothing compared to ... she's allowed in this court {sic}, but the majority of the children are 11 and 12 and they have the maturity of a 13, 14."

One father outlined his concerns for his daughter during the teenage years. He suggests that parenting can be challenged by the influence of peers during adolescence:

"As time goes on, again it's the peer pressure thing, the parents' advice versus peer pressure, who's going to win out in that, you know, are they going to take parents' advice or are they going to take their peers' advice – 'oh try this' or 'do that' or 'don't mind them parents they're not cool', so you can only do your best like at the end of the day like, we learned that as well, you can only actually do your best."

A mother highlighted her fear about her daughter socialising with a negative peer group during adolescence. She was concerned that peers might influence her daughter to drink and take drugs.

"That she [daughter] would get in with the wrong crowd, drink, drugs. That she [daughter] would be just hanging around with the wrong people and get in trouble."

Many of the parents suggested that drug-taking and alcohol misuse was a common problem among teenagers in their communities. This father describes how his son at nine years of age witnesses teenagers in the neighbourhood taking drugs and drinking:

"They're selling ecstasy tablets for only €1, you'd be walking down there and you'd be horrified what you see down there, young fellas and girls 14, 15 years of age and he's [son's] looking at that like, they're looking at that at the weekends, they're going down there, coming back falling down drunk like. It's society gone crazy, it's frightening now like."



Their child's transition to secondary school also emerged as an imminent concern for many parents. Some worried that their children might experience difficulties academically. A mother said she was concerned about how her daughter would adapt to secondary school as she was currently experiencing some learning difficulties in primary school.

"I suppose she's ... she would be slightly behind in school. So I would be concerned about how she will react when she goes into secondary school. I think she will actually struggle a little bit in secondary school. Now that would be my only concern for her."

Although the interviews were conducted in the spring and summer of 2008 at the cusp of the economic recession, issues relating to economic security and employment opportunities in Ireland emerged as concerns for a small number of parents. One mother placed a lot of emphasis on her son achieving a good education as she was concerned about employment opportunities in the future.

"Because who knows what state the country will be in or jobs"

Some concerns were unique to individual families. In particular, specific concerns were raised by a small number of parents of children with disabilities. Parents of nine-year-old children with a disability were fearful of the opportunities that might be closed to their child. Where a sibling had a disability, parents talked about the impact of the disability on their other children. This mother feared that her children would have to shoulder the burden of responsibility for their sibling after her death and that of her husband. She said they were making provisions for such an eventuality.

"I would hate for [children] to be burdened with [child with disability] and I could see [son] taking it on and I don't want him to. That could have a big implication on his life, you know, and even at the moment we have stuff in place for that. We are working, like it is so morbid, we are working on our will and the bottom line is the majority of what we have, like we would be very comfortable and we wouldn't want for much and the majority of our assets would be left to [child with disability] in a trust so he could pay for care for him so the rest wouldn't be burdened with him. We have to think of that now even though he is only seven."

15.4 Building Resilience

In the discussions regarding parents' aspirations and concerns for their children in the future, conversations about resilience emerged. Many of the parents outlined those factors that they felt are necessary to foster resilience in children to cope with the future and to achieve the best possible outcomes.

As highlighted earlier, adolescence was seen as a fundamental stage in the child's life, influencing outcomes in adulthood. The parents focused on how best to equip their children with the necessary life skills to survive this vulnerable period. Metaphorically, adolescence was portrayed as a 'gateway' to adulthood, an experience which the parents hoped their children would survive unscathed.

Some parents talked about fears for the future when their children reach their teenage years and become more independent. Involving the children in sport was seen as one way of keeping them safe.



One mother suggested that participation in sport is one way of keeping children occupied and building resilience throughout adolescence.

“Sport we’d be hoping would keep them occupied, there’s a social vibe to it which is very important which means they’ll always have friends, their peers and a group to identify with, so hopefully then they wouldn’t have to identify with groups that we don’t want them to identify with! It’s just hopefully steering them in the right place, ‘cause you would be worried, the bullying and then further down the line drugs, alcohol and the whole ...”

Similarly, another mother described participation in sport as essential in supporting children through the challenges of adolescence. She also suggests that it is important to monitor their development of peer relationships.

“Dreading the future, dreading when they get older ... It is great but it is just fear about the society we are living in at the moment and parenting the kids is no problem. Getting them involved in sport is the only way out. Not to wrap them in cotton wool and let them decide for themselves and I suppose keep a close eye on them and their friends.”

Communication between parents and children was seen as a key factor in supporting young adolescents.

“But you have to ... but I mean if you create a relationship that your children can come to you no matter what the circumstance is like.”

One mother described how they as parents talked to her daughter about the risks surrounding drinking and taking drugs, and described the value of a sex education programme in primary school.

“I suppose just sit down and talk to them. Tell them the bad points of drinking and drugs. That there is money involved. If you get into a habit you have to pay for it ... I do think they listen. Even, say, there was a talk on last Monday in the school on sex education for fifth and sixth class and we were brought down to prepare us what the slides they will see and if you want to go ahead. Telling her what is involved.”

Parents acknowledge that the dynamic of the parent-child relationship will change during the teenage years and they recognise the importance of building resilience in their children to have the coping skills to make good decisions and choices during their adolescence.

15.5 Summary

The main goal parents had for their child was health and happiness. Other hopes and dreams included reaching their potential, developing positive personality traits, and educational and career success. A smaller number of aspirations included their children developing romantic relationships as adults, having children of their own, travelling and being financially successful. An overwhelming desire to support their children emerged throughout the parents’ interviews. Many talked about the assistance they would offer, in terms of guidance, encouragement and financial support, to help their children achieve their individual



goals. Most parents viewed the arrival of their child's adolescence and the transition to secondary school with some degree of anxiety. Adolescence was seen as a particularly vulnerable stage in the child's life, influencing outcomes in adulthood. Parents acknowledge that the dynamic of the parent-child relationship will change during the teenage years and they focused on how best to equip their children with the necessary life skills to survive this vulnerable period. They recognised the importance of open communication with their children, monitoring their peer relationships and involving them in structured activities as key factors in building resilience during adolescence.



Section 4

CASE STUDIES





Introduction

In this section, six diverse case studies of individual children are presented, attempting to give a picture of the whole child and highlighting the multi-faceted and multi-layered nature of each child's development. In each case study, the names of the children and their families have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities and the confidentiality of their data. Some possibly identifying information has been removed or altered.



DANIEL

Daniel is nine years old. He lives with his mother, Mary, and his two older siblings in a large house in a built-up urban area. Daniel's mother separated from his father when Daniel was quite young. His father has since remarried. Daniel regularly spends time with his father. Daniel is in 4th class in school and is experiencing a learning difficulty. He has trouble with reading and writing and can find spelling difficult. He gets worried and nervous about his exams in school. He says he can sometimes feel confused if he has an exam in school and he has to concentrate really hard. He is doing his exams at the moment and describes some of them as hard while some have been easy. To prepare for his exams, he asks for help from his mother.

Daniel plays lots of sports after school with his class, such as football, rugby and tennis. After school, he likes to watch TV and then normally has dinner with his family. He enjoys Playstation and has a lot of computer games. He thinks he is "medium" healthy. To maintain his health he eats protein and vegetables and plays a lot of sport. However, he doesn't like fruit. He believes that people can become obese by eating a lot of junk food. He says that he watched a film about this before. He thinks that people can become thin from not eating enough food. He thinks that cigarettes are smelly and can make people die. Daniel also thinks that people should not drink too much alcohol. If he were in charge of the country he would make sure that children spent less time in school and got less homework.

Daniel describes himself as having lots of friends. In particular, he likes playing with his three best friends, normally in each other's house. He knows that some children can be bullied. He describes bullying as fighting and taking somebody's money. On the life-satisfaction ladder, Daniel describes his life as an 8 out of 10. It makes him happy when somebody tells a funny joke or he wins a game. He can get annoyed if the children in his class take his stuff.

When Daniel imagines being 13, he believes that he will be very similar to how he is now. He thinks that it will be fun to be a teenager; however, he feels that the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate will be difficult. He says that teenagers go to parties and stay out late at night. He thinks that he will look different when he is a teenager and he imagines that his hair colour will change and he will have adult teeth. Although Daniel does not think how a person physically looks is important, he thinks clothes are important.

DANIEL'S MOTHER MARY

Daniel's mother is called Mary. She is divorced from his father and is now in a new relationship. She works full-time and Daniel is looked after at home by a childminder. Mary can find it stressful at times to balance work and family life.

Mary's main priority is her children. She is concerned about the impact that the divorce will have on Daniel's development. She states that although she has a successful career and financial stability, this means nothing to her if her children are, as she says, "dysfunctional". Mary says that, although Daniel's father is involved in his life, she feels very much like a single parent. She makes all the decisions concerning the children. However, she is finding that her relationship with her ex-husband is getting better. She feels that her role as a parent is to heal any hurt that the children might experience, particularly from their parents' divorce.

She suggests that Daniel may not be as confident as he appears. She thinks that this might be because he is one of the younger boys in his class. She is concerned about his learning difficulty and she hopes that he can get some support in school. Mary feels that it is difficult to get Daniel to focus on his homework but he will spend a lot of time on a drawing. She suggests that, although Daniel is smart and bright, he is doing average in school. She thinks that this is because the education system does not



encourage skills other than academic. Although Daniel is very happy in school, Mary is concerned that the type of school he is in will not reflect the different types of people he will meet in society. She is concerned that the education system is not going to equip him for what life is really like.

Mary says that Daniel is fearful of the dark and also of burglars. At night he sometimes sneaks into her bed. She feels that he can sometimes be jealous if other people are looking for his parents' attention. She talks about him wanting to please people, such as teachers in school. Mary thinks that Daniel has a tendency to watch too much TV and play at computer games too much if he is allowed.

At nine years of age, she finds, Daniel is becoming more independent and she can no longer make arrangements on his behalf. She says that both she and he would decide on his activities. As a parent, she finds learning to let go difficult and scary. However, she feels that Daniel is a safe child and he would not do anything without asking her first. She is considering allowing him to cycle to school with his friends. At the moment she allows him to go to the park with his friends as long as he has a mobile phone with him.

One of her fears for Daniel as he grows up is underage drinking. She has begun to talk to Daniel about drinking. She knows that he sees teenagers drinking and he thinks that it is cool and she thinks that this image is going to be hard for parents to beat. Mary feels that Daniel is equipped to do everything he wants in the future. She thinks that her goal as a mother is to help him get to 18 years of age having kept as many doors open as possible in terms of opportunities. Her aspiration for Daniel is that he will be happy and at peace with himself. She hopes that he will be able to get a job and support himself. She would love him to go to college. She feels that the student life would be a good experience for him.

She is concerned about what the world will be like in the future. She is not interested in straight As and would prefer to see her son happy, having friends and playing sports. She hopes that he would have a happy and reasonably stable life. She says that she has such a full life herself that she does not want anything to be held back from her children. She does not imagine herself living her later life off her children's lives. She was recently asked by a friend living abroad if Ireland was a place that she would recommend for bringing up children and she says that she is not sure anymore.



JOHN

John is 10 years old and in 4th class in school. He is the youngest in his family and lives with his mother, father and his four older siblings in a detached house with a big garden in a rural area. John is very active and plays sports every day. His family are very involved in sports and his dad is one of his coaches. John believes he is healthy enough. To look after his health, he cycles, eats vegetable and brings a good lunch to school. He thinks that people can become obese if they eat sweets and a lot of meat. He says that people can become too thin when they do not eat enough food. He thinks that cigarettes and alcohol are very bad and he says that people are not allowed to drink and drive. He does not believe that he will drink or smoke when he is older.

John likes how he looks, although he believes that being kind and helpful is more important than how a person looks. He describes himself as being kind and helpful. He says that he is kind because if someone falls in school he brings them to see the teacher. He says that he is helpful because he helps his mother and father in the garden.

John has three best friends in school. He usually gets a lift from his parents to meet up with his friends outside of school. He says that some people in his class get bullied. If he knew someone was being bullied he would tell them to ignore the bullies and tell the teacher or their parents. It would make John angry if someone was teasing him at school or if someone hit him. If this happened he would tell his teacher. He likes school and, although everyone in school thinks he is really smart, he can sometimes find Maths confusing and difficult.

John is happiest when he gets new toys or a new pet. He likes animals and loves his dog. He rates his life at 9 out of 10 because he gets good toys for Christmas and gets to go to special places, for example on holidays. When he is older, he hopes to have lots of money and a Ferrari car. At the moment, he is afraid of doctors and needles and gets worried about people being sick.

John gets along well with both his parents. He says that good parents go places with their children. He and his mother go for walks together and she watches his soccer and Gaelic matches. She always bakes nice cakes. His father plays sport with him. He also gets on well with his older brothers and sisters. He sees his extended family frequently, as many of them live close by.

John likes where he lives and says that it is a lot of fun. It is also close to his school. His favourite place is the soccer pitch. He also says that there are good places to walk. He thinks that life would be better for children in Ireland if children could walk or cycle to school. He is also concerned about the environment. He believes that when he is 13 years old he will be happy and still be playing lots of sports. He thinks that by this age he will be allowed to have a TV in his bedroom, a mobile phone and a quad bike. He thinks that he will be in a different secondary school to some of his friends but he is hopeful that they will still keep in touch.

JOHN'S PARENTS

John's parents, Maggie and Jim, were in their mid-40s when he was born. Jim is self-employed and Maggie works in the home. Jim says that over the last ten years he has worked hard to build up his business and he is now in a more comfortable financial position. Because of this, he feels that he no longer has to work such long hours and the family has more money to go places. Jim says that having John later in their lives gave a whole new meaning to their lives. Maggie feels that, as older parents, they have more time to spend with John. She feels that having John has brought her and Jim closer together and they now do a lot more things together as a family. She would advise anyone when they get married to wait to have children until they will have more time for them. She feels that it means a lot to have the time to spend with the children.



Maggie and Jim both describe John as very active. They say that he plays every sport and is a great little soccer player. Jim also describes John as very placid. He thinks that John is very mature for his age and could handle a lot of situations. He says it sometime feels as if “John was here before”. Maggie and Jim say that everybody loves John. Jim describes his relationship with John as super. He says they get on great and he finds their relationship “brilliant”. Jim says he always makes time for his son. He finds that being self-employed has allowed him strike a good work/life balance. John spends a lot of time with his parents. Jim takes John to sports and when he is not in school John sometimes goes to work with his father. Maggie talks about how John helps her when she is baking in the kitchen.

Jim says the family have a good house and everything that they could want for. He says they have always lived within their means. Neither Maggie nor Jim drinks alcohol or smokes and they believe that this gives them more time for their children.

Jim feels lucky to live in the countryside. He feels that he does not have the same fears or concerns for his children as he would have if they were growing up in the suburbs of a city. He says that drugs are less prevalent in the countryside and feels that the children are less likely to be hanging around getting into trouble in the countryside. Although Maggie’s main concern for John in the future is drugs, Jim is more concerned about John mixing with “bad company”. He feels that John in some ways is quite innocent and can sometimes try to please people. However, he feels that John has good coping skills and could foresee trouble. Both Maggie and Jim would love for him to get a good job in the future and to travel. They feel that travelling is important to gain independence. Maggie thinks peers may play a big role in influencing what John does in the future. Both Maggie and Jim feel that John is doing well in school and that his teachers are happy with him. They would like John to finish secondary school and get his Leaving Certificate. They feel he is too young at the moment to know if college is something in which he would be interested. However, if John was interested in college, both Maggie and Jim would be very supportive.



MOLLY

Molly is nine years old. She lives at home with her two parents and her two younger brothers. She says she gets on great with both her parents. Her relationship with her two younger brothers is more turbulent. Although she loves them, she feels they do not get on that well as they can fight a lot and do not always share. Molly's extended family live close by and she sees her grandmother often. She misses her grandad who recently passed away.

Molly describes herself as "a bit pretty" and says she likes herself. She thinks she is healthy and says that eating fruit, vegetables and taking medicine can keep children well and healthy. She thinks that eating too much junk food can make boys and girls unhealthy and overweight. Although she describes herself as "not a great eater", she says she eats fruit and vegetables and always eats her breakfast, lunch and dinner. She was in hospital once and did not find the experience pleasant as she had to stay quiet late at night and sit in a bed for about four hours. Molly thinks that cigarettes are bad for a person's chest and heart. She has heard from television that people can die from too many cigarettes. She does not want to smoke when she is older because she wants to stay healthy. She thinks she might drink alcohol when she is older but she knows that having too much alcohol could make somebody ill.

She likes school "a small bit" but does not enjoy sitting at the front of the class and having lots of school-work to do. She says that sometimes she can get confused in school if she is doing her work and cannot think of a word.

Molly enjoys her birthday and Christmas time. In terms of how she feels about her life at the moment, Molly rated her life at 6 out of 10 – "*Because sometimes my life can be bad and sometimes it can be good, but it's mostly very, very good so that's why I picked 6.*" She can get sad if her younger brothers hurt her, if her friends are not feeling well or if she is ill herself. She is scared of spiders and does not like worms, bees and wasps.

Molly's favourite thing to do for fun is play with her friends. Most days after school she does her homework, goes outside and plays with her friends. Molly has lots of friends both in her housing estate and in school. She has known her best friend all her life. Molly thinks that bullying can be a problem for some children. She knows about one boy on her road who is bullied by older teenagers and says her brother can sometimes experience bullying. She says that sometimes her friends can be mean to her and she wishes they would always be nice.

Molly likes her neighbourhood and her favourite place is the town. She enjoys going to her local park. She likes dancing and she sometimes teaches her friends new dances to perform in the park. Molly sometimes feels that the children in her area have nothing to do. She says she would like a playground in the park. She attends dance class and swimming, and goes to Mass on Sundays. She thinks that when she is 13 years old she will be spending more time with her friends and will have different hobbies.

MOLLY'S PARENTS

Molly's father, Bill, works late nights and is at home in the daytime. He sees Molly in the morning and collects her from school. Molly's mother, Sue, works part-time and is home every evening. Molly is taken care of by her grandmother when both her parents are at work. Both her parents try to spend individual time with Molly. Sue feels that this is particularly important now as Molly is growing up and getting closer to adolescence.

Bill describes Molly as "the perfect kid". He feels that she is doing well in school; she listens to the teacher and does her homework before she goes out to play. Her mother Sue describes Molly as undemanding and explains how she does not take issue if plans change or she does not get what she wants. Bill agrees with this sentiment and hopes that this aspect of Molly's personality will not change as

she grows older. Both her parents describe Molly as easy-going and popular, and says she has a lot of good friends. They describe her as a “tryer” who puts “her heart and soul” into everything she does and say that they rarely need to give out to her. They both feel that she is very good at sports and dancing. Molly likes to watch her mother dressing to go out and both parents suggest that she cares about her appearance and is interested in clothes and make-up. Her parents suggest that Molly is very sensitive and can sometimes worry. They are very proud of Molly’s caring nature and says she makes sure that other children are not left to play on their own.

Sue says Molly talks to both her and Bill about a lot of things going on in her life. Sue thinks that this is important for children and feels that she had a similar relationship with her own parents when she was growing up. Sue describes being a parent of a nine-year-old as “tough”. She says there are a lot of financial pressures on parents to buy their children the same material possession as their peers have. She says that “you feel you don’t want them to lose out, [but] you have to draw the line, though. Obviously you can’t afford to get everything”. Both Molly’s parents feel that it is important to teach children to save up for things as money is not always available. They feel that setting these boundaries now will be important as Molly enters adolescence.

Sue describes the rewards of parenting as seeing children grow up and gain in confidence. She says that Molly’s achievements indicate that she and Bill are parenting well. Bill and Sue say they are able to share their worries and concerns with each other. They think that their personalities complement each other and that they help to calm each other down when feeling stressed. They suggest that they make decisions concerning the family in consultation with each other. They feel it is important that both of them are happy with the decisions made. Bill and Sue agree that decisions concerning Molly may get harder as she grows older. They feel it is important that they appear united and that she does not overhear them disagreeing.

At this stage in Molly’s life, her parents say that they would not have many concerns for her. However, they are concerned about the pressures Molly may face as a teenager. Bill says: “I suppose it’s grand now ‘cause you can control it now, it’s when they get older, when they get to that age, when they’re teenagers, they really have their own mind.” Sue hopes Molly will have the ability to cope with peer pressure. Both her parents hope that she will continue to be able to talk to them about issues in her life as she grows up. Sue says that, as a parent, it is important to stay calm and let children know that they are not in trouble.

Both parents hope that Molly has the opportunity to fulfil her dreams in the future. They would be very proud if she continues to be the type of person that she is now. Bill and Sue feel that she is very musical and would like her to pursue a career in music, dance or singing. Bill notes that they would not push Molly into anything. As parents, they are trying to instil in Molly the confidence to know that she can achieve her goals. Sue says, “She [Molly] can do it, we told her that, ‘you could be whatever you want’.”



SARAH

Sarah is the eldest of three children. She has two younger sisters and lives with her parents in a rural area. Her father is self-employed and her mother is at home with the children. Sarah describes herself as friendly and funny because she makes her friends in school laugh. She also describes herself as fit and sporty because she can run far and plays soccer, basketball and mini-handball. She thinks smoking and drinking are bad for you and can affect your lungs. To keep healthy she does not eat chocolate and eats fruit. She thinks her looks are fine but doesn't know why. She says her friends think looks are important because if you look bad you might get teased.

Sarah enjoys school because she gets to see her friends every day but does not like Maths and Irish. She does not like Maths because it is hard and they get tests. Irish dancing is her favourite pastime; she also enjoys her singing and drama class on a Saturday. She has friends who live along her country road but is not allowed walk to them as it is too dangerous. Friends come to play on a Friday or she goes to their house. The family owns some horses and she enjoys going to see the horses with her father. Her favourite place is either in her friends' house or in her garden. The girls play soccer and hang around and talk and make up games pretending they are teenagers or that they are famous. They dress up and use make-up.

When asked about being a teenager, Sarah did not understand how her body might change or how she might look. In relation to how her life might change, she said it would be different because she would be in secondary school and it would be harder. She might have another brother or sister and she would have a pet.

Sarah felt it would be difficult to be a parent and a lot of responsibility because you would have to keep your children safe, but there were also advantages. She said that, as a parent, you get to have children and you get stuff that you really wanted when you were a child. She had particular ideas about what makes a good parent – good parents are really nice to you and really good. They never give out and they are not really mean.

Sarah likes living in her area, with plenty of space and friends to play with. She describes what her rural environment is like. There are always people around, and most of the time she is asked to come over and play, which she says is really good. She values having a nextdoor neighbour who has children and having a good school and a lot of space to run around.

Her father takes her swimming and she goes shopping with her mother. She describes visits to her extended family in the West of Ireland where she feeds the lambs with bottles. In relation to being in charge of the country, like a lot of the children Sarah thought there should be more playgrounds, especially in places where there are "no parks or fun stuff".

SARAH'S PARENTS

Sarah's mother, Maria, described Sarah as quite "scatty" and a little bit of a worrier, and said sometimes her attention span would not be great. She would try out activities and then not want to continue with them, but Maria felt that this might be just a phase. She sees Sarah as being in a world of her own, a bit of a fairy, living in her own bubble. Sarah is an easy child and does not demand things. Her father, Ciaran, thinks she is quite innocent and quite childish still, and is happy with that.

Maria and Sarah spend a lot of time together travelling to Irish dancing *feiseanna*. Maria describes Sarah as headstrong but as she is getting older she is mellowing and they get on better. Ciaran is proud of Sarah. He says she wants to do well, is competitive and wants her parents to be proud of her. Ciaran would hope that Sarah has friends and would be able to talk to her parents if something happened. Her



parents' concerns for Sarah's future include the effects of the economic recession, pressure to do well in school and the transition to secondary school from a small rural primary school. They hope Sarah stays on the right track and does not get mixed up with the wrong crowd. They have no particular goals for Sarah, just that she would be well rounded and get on with people. They hope she would go to college and get a good job but would not push her to do something she did not want to do. Ciaran feels that if Sarah is nice to people she will do well in the world.



CAROL

Carol is of mixed racial origin and lives with her younger brother and parents in a medium-sized town. Both her mother and father work outside the home. Carol is a friendly, chatty child, with two younger brothers. She describes herself as being artistic, happy, pretty, tall and kind. The family have a pet cat.

She describes school as a good place to be because she sees her friends and gets some time to draw or read. She loves Art and hates Maths because she gets confused sometimes. She does not like getting homework because she feels the children “do enough work in school”. On a normal day she would just play with her friends and do her homework. She thinks boys are annoying because they swear and think they are better and stronger than girls.

Carol thinks she is healthy because she likes and eats a lot of fish because she thinks it is good for her brain. She plays on her trampoline nearly every day and uses the Wii Fit (a video exercise game). She is happy with the way she looks and would not like to change her appearance. She would like to act and does drama on a Saturday but no other structured activities. She is a happy and aware nine-year-old. She plays with lots of friends on the road. They play on the trampoline, go on the computer or go on the Wii.

She sees her paternal grandparents, who live nearby, a lot. Her grandad brings her to and from school every day and she spends time with them some afternoons after school.

She is a little anxious about growing up and the changes that will happen to her body and about being “forced to smoke and drink”, but she discusses these things with parents. She thinks smoking and drinking are bad because you can get addicted and they can affect your speech and your heart.

Carol understands a little about what it may be like to be a teenager. When asked what things will be like when she is 13, she says she will still like acting drawing and painting, and will be going to a much bigger school. She also thought she might be tired because she would be growing and bashing into things. She would also be taller and she might get spots, and she might get angry with people. She said that teenagers sleep quite late in the mornings because they are growing and their brain is developing a bit more.

When taking about bullying, Carol said she had been bullied verbally and called “black” and “mean” things because she is different. She has told her teacher and her parents and they are dealing with the situation. Her father talks to her a lot about this. He is from a mixed-race background and is very open with Carol about her family history and answers any of her questions. She knows she is a good person and her self-esteem is strong.

For Carol life is good. She scores it 10 out of 10 because she likes her life. She wants to do more drama and perhaps get a chance to do a play or go on TV. Her dream would be to act in the movies and be a famous artist. She would also like to contribute to a solution for global warming.

CAROL'S PARENTS

Carol's parents, Tim and Stephanie, are relaxed parents even though both are currently studying and working. Time is quite pressured because of this and money a little tight but they have no major concerns for the future for Carol. They describe Carol as a compassionate child who is encouraged to ask questions in a respectful way. Stephanie describes her daughter as being very funny, and having a great wit about her.



When Carol is bullied, Tim advises her to be respectful towards other people even if they are behaving badly towards her. Her parents are well aware about the challenges of growing up in a media age. They says she is aware when things are not suitable for her to watch on TV and that she avoids programmes that are not appropriate for her. They say she knows to not watch them as she knows the effects this will have on her – for example, she knows that horror films will probably play on her mind. Regarding goals or concerns for Carol as she grows up, her parents would like her to continue to be the same lovely person that she is. They felt she would be all right and that she could do whatever she wanted to do in her life; she should just continue doing what she is doing and be lovely, fun, caring and compassionate and just all the things that she is. If she keeps going that way she will be all right.



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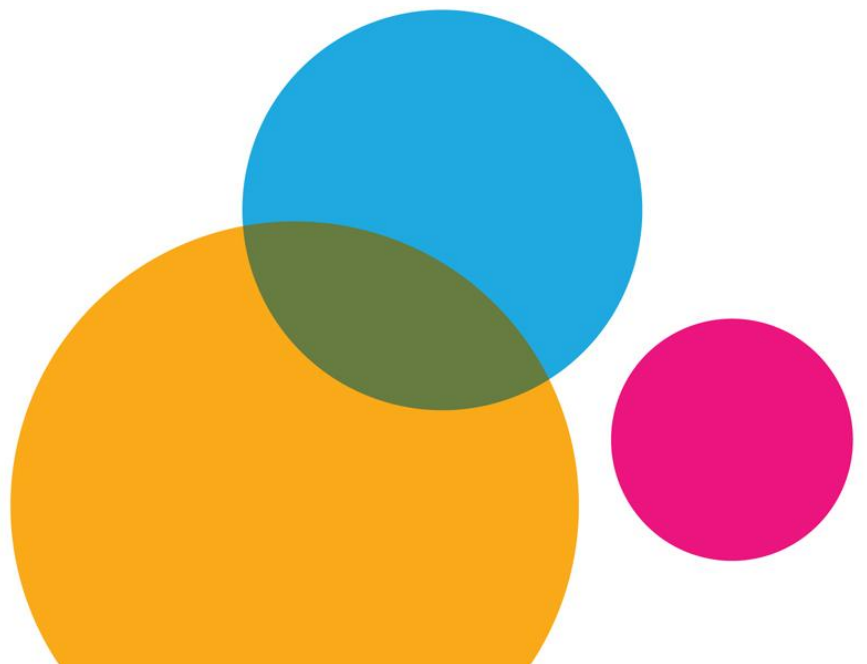
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Appendix 1

THE QUALITATIVE SCHEDULE



APPENDIX 1: THE QUALITATIVE SCHEDULE

- The Child's Interview Schedule
- My Passport
- Who is in my family
- Body Image Cards
- Feeling Cards (1-5)
- Magic Wand
- My Hand
- Life Ladder
- My Activities Calendar
- My Family and Me
- When I am 13 yrs old
- Letter to the Minister
- The Parents Interview Schedule

The (Main) Interview Schedule to be used during the semi-structured interview with the 9 year old child

1. Introduction to the Interview

The researcher outlines the structure of the interview with the child with the following introduction:

“Today I want to find out lots about what it is like being 9 years of age! I would like to ask you some questions to find out more about yourself and your family, friends, where you live, what you like to do for fun and how you feel about growing up. To help you I have some activities and exercises sheets that you can write or draw on. How does that sound?”

The researcher explains the process of mandatory reporting and issues of confidentiality to the child.

“Everything that we talk about today is just between us. I will not show anyone any of the activities or drawings that you do today. The only people who will see them are the researchers working on the project back in my office. But if you did happen to tell me something or write or draw something that made me worried about you, then I might have to tell someone who might be able to help you. Do you understand? Are you happy to start?”

The researcher will show the child the Dictaphone and ask the child's permission to record the interview.

“This is a tape recorder. The reason for this is to help me remember everything that you say today. Do you want to have a look at the Dictaphone and see how it works? Is it ok with you if I record our conversation?”

1.1 The Time Capsule

At the start of the individual interview, the child is introduced to the concept of the time capsule.

“As I said, we want to find out lots about what it is like for you right now, being 9 years old. We really want to come back to talk to you again when you are 13 years old to see how things have changed for you when you are four years older! Today you can create a time capsule and all the activities that you work on today will go into your own time capsule that we will keep. That way when you are 13, we can look back at your time capsule and find out what types of things have stayed the same for you and what may have changed. We will leave some time at the end of our chat today for you to decorate the time capsule whatever way you want. Is that ok?”

The child is given a poster tube and asked to create a time capsule in which all the activities, drawings and exercises that are used during the interview could be stored and given to the researchers. Time is to be given to the child at the end of the interview to personalise and decorate the time capsule using markers, crayons and colouring pencils.

1.2 “My Passport”

To break the ice between the child and the researcher, the child is asked to complete a blank passport card. The researcher explains the idea of creating “My Passport”:

“Here is a copy of a time travelling passport card for you to complete if you wish. There are spaces for you to fill in your name, age, and hometown and fill in the questions about things that you like. This is a Polaroid camera. If you like we can take a photo of you now that you can stick onto your passport!”

On the passport card the child fills in his/her name, age, hometown and answers questions about the types of bands, singers, movies, food, colours and hobbies that they like along with the one thing they like the most and the one thing they hate the most. After the child is finished, the researcher asks the child to interpret what they have written. To build a relationship with the child, the researcher can complete a passport while the child is doing his/her own and share what they have written with the child.

2. Wellness, Health and Physical Development

The researcher explains that he/she is going to ask the child some questions about keeping well.

2.1 Write / Draw Technique:

The researcher invites the child to write or draw what keeps him/her well and unwell and time is provided for the child to interpret his/her drawings or written work. The researcher uses the child’s art or written work as a prompt to explore the following questions:

- *What do you think keeps you well?*
- *What do you think can make you unwell?*
- *What does being healthy mean to you?*
- *What does being unhealthy mean to you?*
- *How healthy do you think you are?*
 - *Why do you think that?*
- *How do you take care of your health?*
 - *What types of things do you do?*

- *Have you ever been sick?*
 - *What was that like for you?*
 - *What happened?*
 - *Did you have to stay over in hospital?*
 - *What was that like?*
- *If you weren't feeling well what would you do?*
 - *Who could you talk to?*
- *When you hear the word "obese" what do you think this means? [If the child doesn't know the word ask when you think of "a boy or girl being heavy or overweight" what does this mean?]*
- *When you hear the word "thin" what do you think this means?*
 - *Can somebody be too thin?*
- *What do think about smoking and cigarettes?*
- *What do you think about alcohol?*
 - *How do you think you will feel about smoking and drinking when you are older?*
 - *Why do you think this might be / might not be different?*
- *What do you think about how you look?*
 - *Would you like to change anything about your appearance?*
 - *Why is that?*
 - *What do you think about how tall you are?*
 - *How important do you think looks are?*
 - *Do you think your friends think looks are important?*
 - *What might make a person think looks are important?*
- *How do you think your body will change by the time you are 13 years old?*

2.2 The Body Image Cards:

The researcher shows the two body image cards to the child. One card shows seven pictures of a girl and the second card shows seven pictures of a boy. The researcher gives the following instructions:

"Here I have some pictures of a boy and a girl and I want you to tell me which picture you think is the healthiest for a 9-year-old girl to look like and the healthiest for a 9-year-old boy to look like. So here are the pictures. There are 7 different girls.

- *Which picture do you think looks the healthiest for a 9-year-old girl?*
 - *Why did you pick this one?*
- *Now which picture is the healthiest for a 9-year-old boy to look like?*
 - *Why did you pick this one?*

3 Child's functioning

The researcher explains that he/she is going to ask the child some questions about themselves.

3.1 “My Hand”

The researcher introduces the child to the “My Hand” worksheet. On the worksheet there is a blank space for the child to draw around his/her hand.

The researcher gives the following instruction:

“Everybody’s hand and finger prints are different, just like the way there are lots of different types of people with different personalities. Would you like to draw around your hand on this sheet and write down a word for each finger which you think describes who you are?”

When the child is finished the researcher asks the child to interpret what words they have chosen. The researcher uses the “My Hand” worksheet as a prompt to explore the following questions:

- *Why did you choose this word? (Explore all 5 words)*
- *How do you feel about who you are?*
- *What words do you think your friends would use to describe you?*
- *What do you think it is like to be a boy/girl? (Opposite sex)*

3.2 “My Feelings” Photo Cards:

The researcher introduces the child to the “My Feelings” photo cards. The researcher gives the following instruction:

“Here are some photographs. Can you have a look at each picture and tell me what way you think the girl / boy is feeling in each picture? There is space for you to write down what you think on each picture.”

Using those feelings identified by the child for each picture, the researcher asks the child to complete the following stem sentences: For example

- *[Sad] is when.....*
- *[Happy] is when.....*
- *[Angry] is when.....*
- *[Worried] is when.....*
- *[Stressed] is when.....*

The researcher uses the photographs as a visual prompt to explore the following questions:

- *Have you ever felt any of these feelings?*
- *What happened?*

- *What do you think might cause you to feel (any of the feelings)? What kinds of things might make you feel (any of the feelings)*
- *Did you have any different sensations or feelings in your head or in your tummy, like the butterflies? What was that like?*
- *Sometimes kids can bite their nails, or twist their hair, or suck their thumb. How do you act when you feel...?*
- *If you are feeling like that, what would you do?*
- *Who can you talk to when you feel.....*
- *What types of things can help you when you are feeling like that?*
- *If your friend was feeling that way, what would you do?*

3.3 “The Life Ladder”

The researcher explains the concept of the life ladder to the child and gives him/her a copy of the worksheet.

“Here is a picture of a ladder. The top of the ladder, number 10, is the best possible life for you, and the bottom, 0, is the worst possible life for you. Can you use this sticker and place it on a rung on the ladder that you feel best describes how life is for you right now at 9 years of age?”

The researcher uses the ladder as a visual prompt to explore the following questions:

- *Why did you place the sticker here?*
- *Is there anything you would like to change about how things are now?*
- *What things worry you now?*
- *Is school a good place to be?*
- *Why is that?*

3.4 Write / Draw Technique:

The researcher invites the child to write or draw his/her hopes and fears for the future on a wishes/fears list. The researcher asks the child to interpret what he/she has drawn or written.

- *What are your hopes and dreams for the future?*
- *Do you have any fears or worries about the future?*

4 Child’s Relationships

The researcher explains that he/she is going to ask the child some questions about what he/she likes to do for fun and some questions about his/her friends.

4.1 “My Activities Calendar”

The researcher explains the “My Activities Calendar” worksheet. The researcher invites the child to complete the calendar.

“This calendar shows all the days in a week. Can you have a think about what types of activities you do each day, like when you play at home or with your friends, what hobbies you do etc. If you want you can write each activity on one of these stickers and put it up on each day that you would normally do these things?”

The researcher uses “My Activities Calendar” as a prompt to explore the following questions with the child:

- *What do you like to do for fun?*
 - *Who do you do this with?*
 - *Do you go to a class for this or do it in your own time?*
 - *What other hobbies do you have?*
 - *How did you pick to get involved those activities?*
 - *Whose idea was it for you to get involved in that?*
 - *When do you get to do this?*
 - *How often?*
 - *Who do you do this with?*
- *Do any grown- ups do any of these things with you?*
 - *Is there a coach?*
 - *How do you get on with the coach?*
 - *What do you think of them?*
- *Tell me a little bit about your friends?*
 - *Who are your friends?*
 - *Do you have a best friend?*
 - *Why do you think you are best friends with them?*
 - *What do you like most about them?*
 - *How do you get along with your other friends?*
 - *What types of things do you like to do together?*
 - *How far away do you live from your friends?*
 - *How do you keep in touch with your friends?*
 - *If you wanted to go out and play or meet up with one of your friends how would you let them know?*
 - *When do you get to spend time with your friends?*
 - *Where do you meet up?*
 - *How do you get there?*
 - *Can you remember what you did last week with your friends?*
 - *Who did you meet?*

- *What did you do?*
- *Some adults talk a lot about bullying being a problem for children. Do you think bullying is a problem for children?*
 - *What are the different ways that children can bully other children?*
 - *Have you ever experienced any difficulties with your friends or classmates?*
 - *What happened?*
 - *What did you do?*

5 Growing Up

The researcher explains that he/she is going to ask the child some questions about growing up.

5.1 Short Story or Picture “When I am 13 years old”

The researcher explains the concept of the short story or picture “When I am 13 years old”. The researcher invites the child to write a short story or draw a picture of what being 13 years old will be like.

“Would you like to write a short story about what things will be like for you when you are 13 years old? If you prefer you can draw a picture? What might be different about school, home, and your friends when you are 13?”

The researcher asks the child to interpret what he/she has written. The short story or the picture is then used to explore the following questions with the child:

- *What do you think it will be like to be 13 years old?*
 - *What do you think will be different for you or the same for you?*
 - *What do you think you will be interested in?*
 - *What you think you will look like?*
 - *How do you think you will feel?*
 - *What do you think you will be doing?*
 - *What do you think it might be like to be a teenager?*
 - *What do you think teenagers do?*
 - *Do you think you might have any pressures or worries as a teenager?*

6. Family

The researcher explains that he/she is going to ask the child some questions about his/her family.

6.1 Family Drawings or “My Family” Worksheet

The researcher invites the child to draw a picture or write down each member of his/her family a sticker on the “Who is in My Family” worksheet.

“Would you like to draw a picture or write down who is in your family?”

The researcher asks the child to interpret his/her drawings or written worksheet. The researcher then uses the drawings or the worksheet as a prompt to explore the following questions:

- *Tell me about your family. Who lives at home with you?*
 - *How do you get on with [mum]?*
 - *What types of things do you do together?*
 - *How do you get on with [dad]?*
 - *What types of things do you do together?*
 - *How do you get on with your brothers and/or sisters?*
 - *What about your grandparents, aunts, uncles or cousins?*
 - *Do they live close by?*
 - *When do you get to see them?*
 - *How often is that?*
 - *How do you get on with them?*

6.2 “My Family and Me” Map

The researcher introduces the child to the “My Family and Me” Map.

“Now let’s look at this map. The circles that are nearer to your name are for the people in your family that are the most important to you or that you get on the best with. So your name is in the middle and then you have all these circles on the outside and what this is all about is trying to describe how close you are to everyone in your family and how you get on with them. I want you to think about who in your family you like to talk to and whom you could tell if you are worried. So the first circle, this green one, that is for people who you really like talking to who you get on well with, then the pink circle is for maybe anyone else in your family that you get on well with but maybe not as well as the people in the green one and then this mustard circle is for people who aren’t as close as the green people or the pink people. So do you understand?”

The researcher asks the child to interpret his/her map and then uses the map to explore the following questions:

- *So who did you put in each circle? Why is that?*
- *Who would you talk to about your day?*
 - *Who do you talk to if something good has happened?*
 - *Or if you were in trouble, who would you ask for help?*
- *How do you get to school?*
 - *Where do go after school?*
 - *How do you get there?*

- *Who is at home when you get here?*
- *What do you think about that?*
- *Would you like to change anything about that?*

7. Parenting

The researcher explains that he/she is going to ask the child some questions about his/her parents.

The researcher explores the following questions with the child:

- *What do you think it is like to be a parent?*
 - *What is an ideal parent like?*
 - *What makes a bad parent?*
- *Do you have rules in your house?*
 - *What rules do you have?*
 - *Who sets the rules?*
 - *Do you get to have a say in the rules?*
 - *What things are you allowed to do / not allowed to do?*
 - *What would you like to be able to do?*
- *Why do you think your [parents] have rules?*
- *What happens if you break the rules?*
 - *What would your [Mum] do?*
 - *What would your [Dad] do?*
 - *What do you think about that?*
 - *What do you think works well with kids?*

7.1 “The Magic Wand”

The researcher shows the child the magic wand prompt and asks the child to:

“Imagine you are Harry Potter with special powers that can change things”.

Using the magic wand as a visual prompt the researcher explores the following questions with the child:

- *Is there anything you would like to change about the rules?*
- *If you were a parent, what would you do differently*
- *What would you keep the same?*

8. Community, Neighbourhood and Sense of Citizenship

The researcher explains that he/she is going to ask the child some questions about his/her community.

8.1 Write / Draw Technique

The researcher invites the child to write down or draw a picture of the things the child both likes and dislikes in their neighbourhood. The researcher asks the child to interpret what he/she has drawn or written. The researcher uses what the child has written or drawn to explore the following questions with the child:

- *Tell me what it is like living around here?*
 - *What is good about your neighbourhood?*
 - *Where is your favourite place?*
 - *What do you not like about living around here?*
 - *What would you like to change?*

8.2 “Letter to the Minister” Worksheet

The researcher shows the child the “Letter to the Minister” worksheet and the “Post Box”¹. The researcher gives the following instructions:

“If you want you can write down your ideas on this sheet called the Letter to the Minister for Children. Would you like to write a letter saying what things the Minister for Children should do for children in Ireland? We don’t know if he will read it personally, but we will be putting all the ideas that children give us together and sending the government a report on it”

[If the child is not familiar with the Minister for Children ask: “if you were in charge of the country what would you do to make life better for children in Ireland?”]

The researcher uses the “Letter to the Minister” worksheet to explore the following questions with the child:

- *What is missing in your neighbourhood for 9 year olds?*
- *If you were in charge of the country what would you do different for kids?*
 - *What would you change, or create for kids?*
- *What are the people like who live around here?*
 - *What are they like to you?*
 - *Why do you think that is?*
- *What do you think adults think of children?*
 - *Do you think adults listen to kids?*
 - *Do you think adults listen to you? Why is that?*
- *Are there things that children can do in the neighbourhood to help people?*
 - *What types of things do you do?*
 - *How do you help other people?*

9. Conclusion to Interview

¹ The “Post Box” is a cardboard posting box

The researcher ensures that all materials are placed in the time capsule. The child is given time to decorate the time capsule.

The researcher winds down the interview with the following instructions:

“Well, that is the end of all of my questions! Do you have questions for me? Is there anything else that you would like to say? Do you want to finish off decorating your time capsule! Thank you so much for taking part.”

ENDS

MY PASSPORT

My Name:

My Age:

My Hometown:

IDENTITY INFORMATION:

A band or singer I like is: _____

A movie or TV show I like is: _____

Food I like : _____

The colour I like is: _____

One hobby I like is: _____

The 1 thing I like the most is: _____

The 1 thing I hate the most is: _____

Photo



Case Number

Researcher

Who is in my family



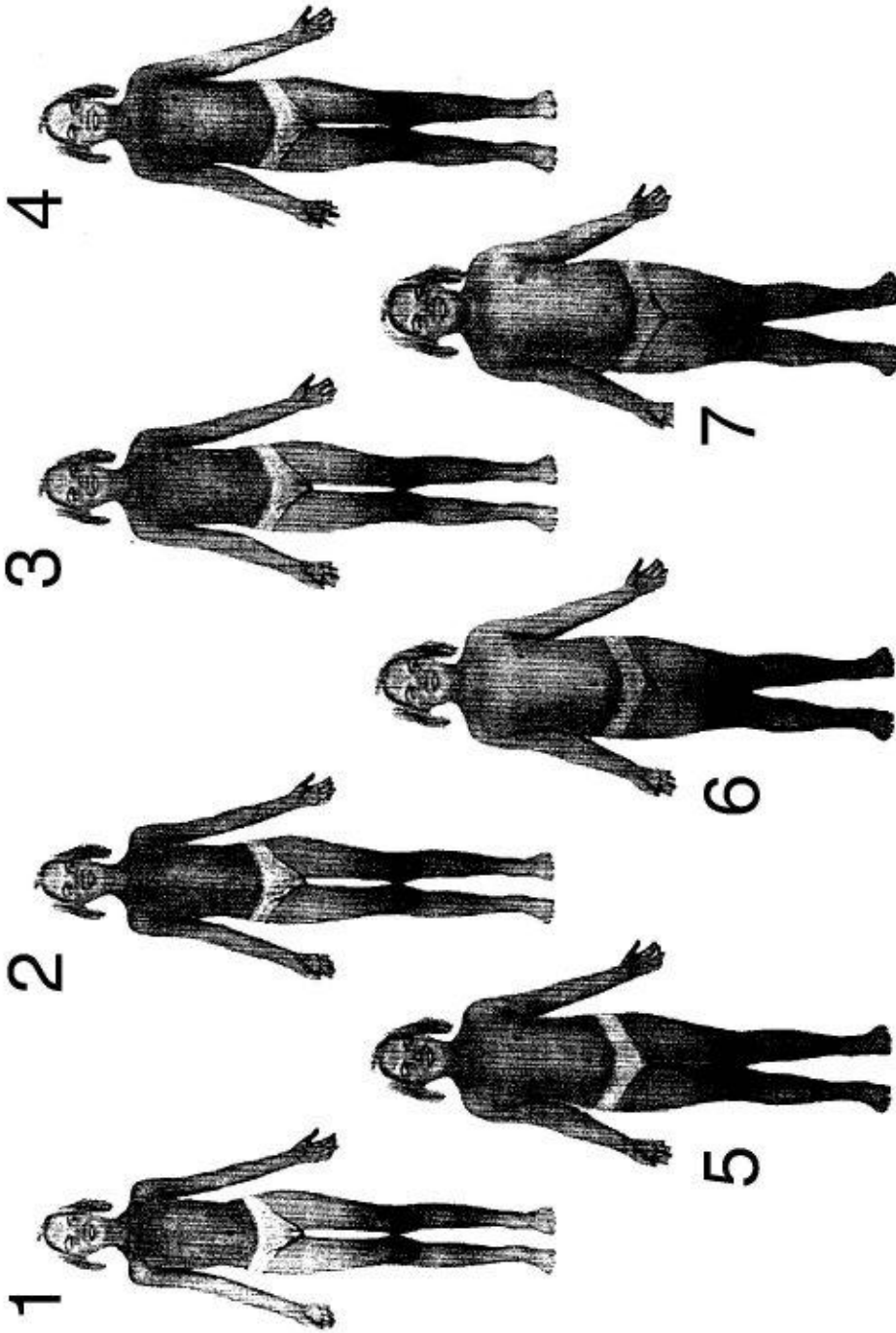


Figure 1 (continued). The Children's Body Image Scale (© 2001 Helen Truby).

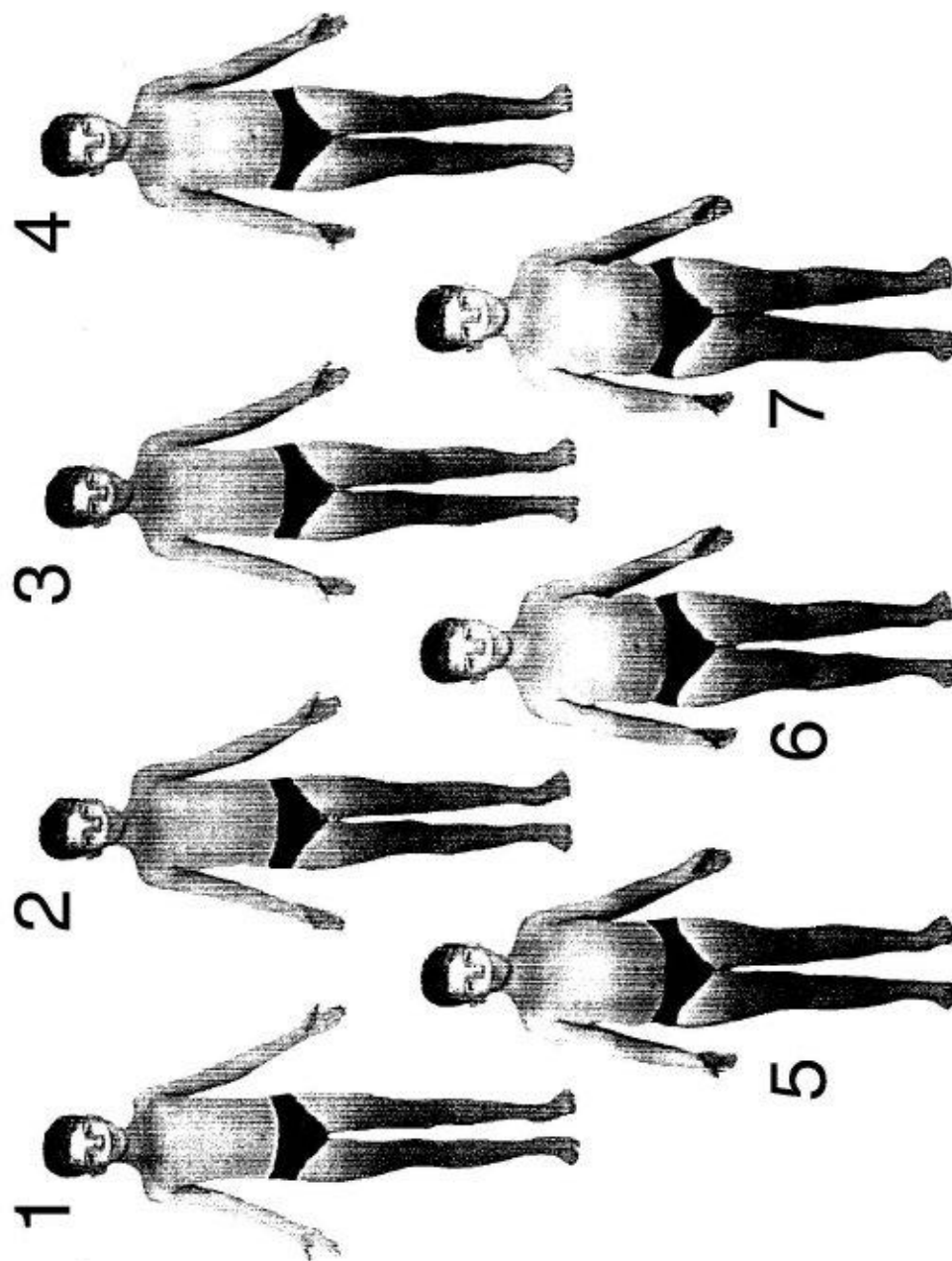
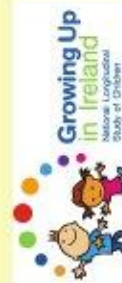


Figure 1. The Children's Body Image Scale (© 2001 Helen Truby).

Researcher

Case Number



Feeling Card 1

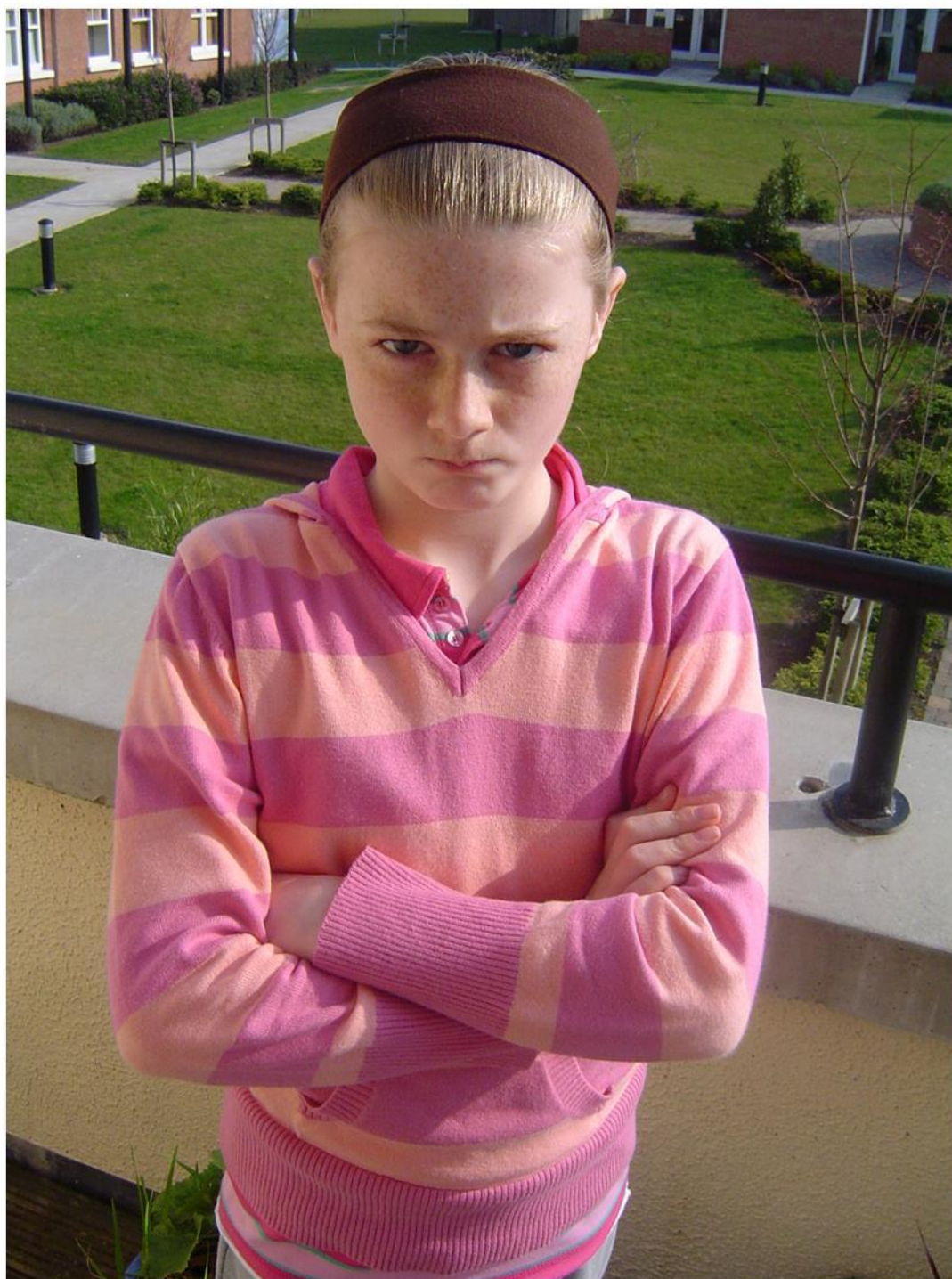


What way is the girl feeling? _____

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--	--

Feeling Card 2



What way is the girl feeling? _____



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National Longitudinal
Study of Children



Office of the Minister
for Children
Oifig an Aire do Leanai



Feeling Card 3



What way is the girl feeling? _____



Case Number

--	--	--	--	--	--	--

Researcher

--	--

Feeling Card 4



What way is the girl feeling? _____



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Feeling Card 5



What way is the girl feeling? _____



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Office of the Minister
for Children
Oifig an Aire do Leanaí



Case Number

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Researcher

--	--

Feeling Card 1



What way is the boy feeling? _____



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Feeling Card 2



What way is the boy feeling? _____



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Study of Children



Feeling Card 3



What way is the boy feeling? _____



--	--	--	--	--	--

--	--

Feeling Card 4



What way is the boy feeling? _____



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Case Number

--	--	--	--	--	--

Researcher

--	--

Feeling Card 5



What way is the boy feeling? _____



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Case Number

--	--	--	--	--	--

Researcher

--	--

Magic Wand



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My Hand

Draw around your hand in the space below. Please write one word above each of your fingers and thumb which you think best describes who you are!



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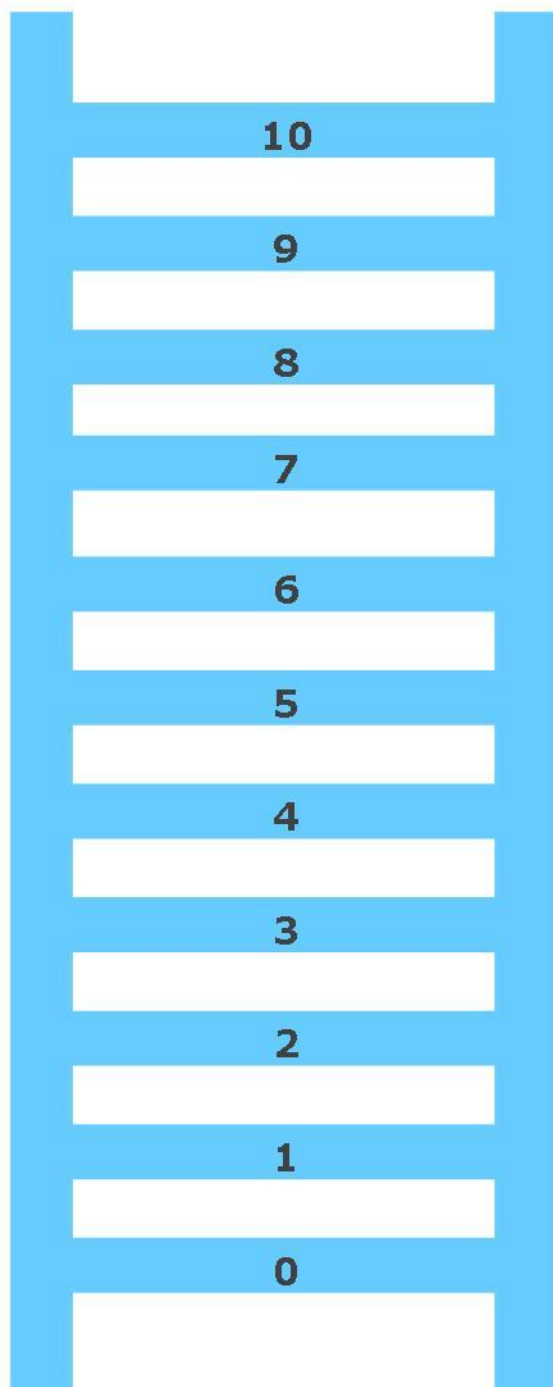
Case Number

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Researcher

--	--

The Life Ladder



**Growing Up
in Ireland**
National Longitudinal
Study of Children



Case Number

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Researcher

--	--

Activities Calendar

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday



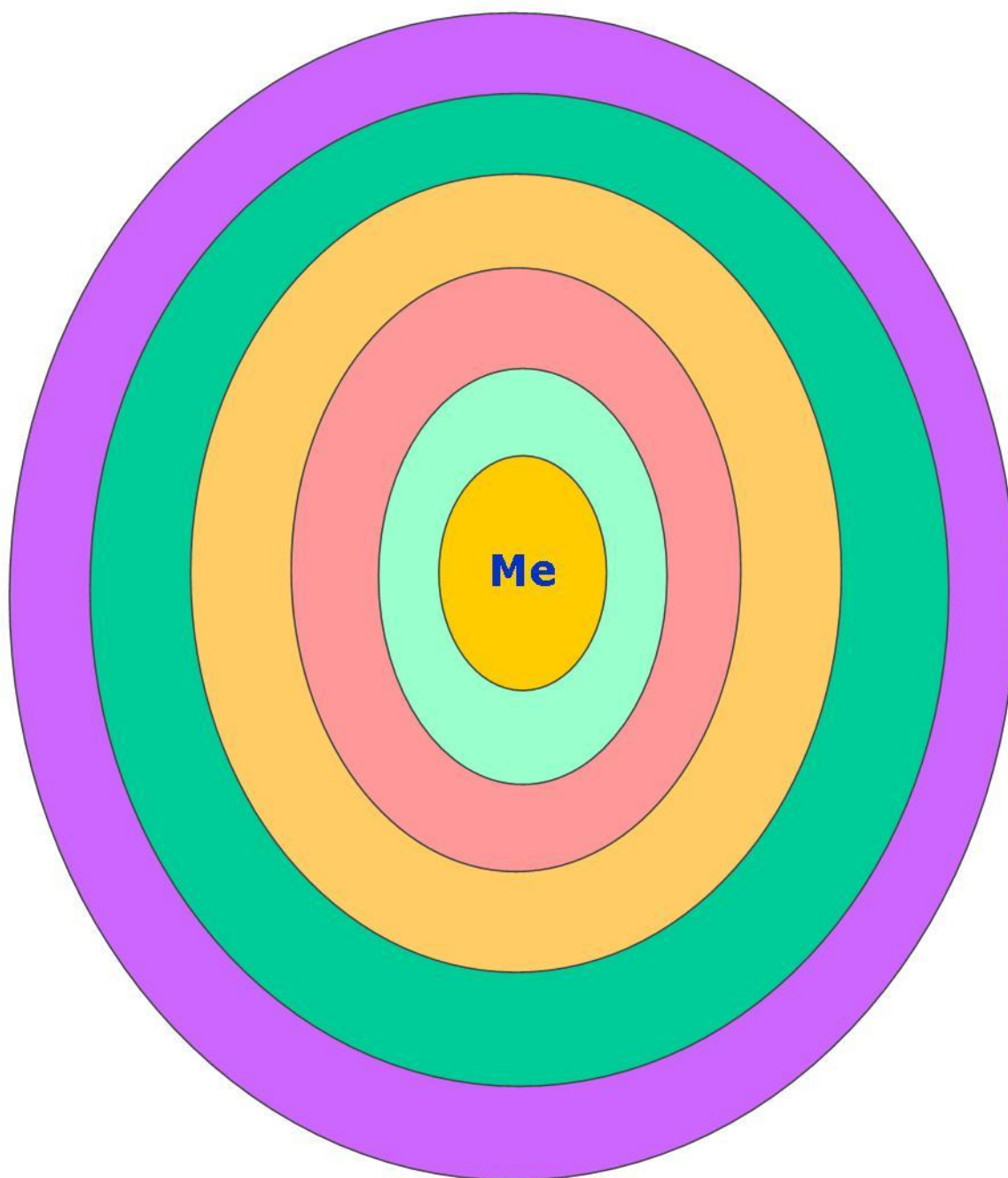
Case Number

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Researcher

--	--

My Family & Me



**Growing Up
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--	--

Short Story

When I am 13

What things will I be doing?

How will I be different?

What will it be like to be 13?



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A copy of the interview schedule to be used during the semi-structured interview with both parents

1. Introduction to the Interview

The researcher outlines the structure of the interview with the parent(s) with the following introduction:

“Today I want to find out lots about what it is like being the parent(s) of [child]! I have brought with me a copy of the photographs that you have taken. I would like to ask you some questions to find out more about the photographs. Then I would like to ask you some questions about [child], your relationship with [child], how you feel about being a parent, how you make decisions and your Concerns and Aspirations for [child] in the future. How does that sound?”

The researcher explains the process of mandatory reporting and issues of confidentiality to the parent(s).

“Everything that we talk about today is just between us. I will not show anyone any of photographs you have taken. The only people who will see them are the researchers working on the project back in my office. But if you did happen to tell me something or take a photograph of something that made me worried about [child], then I might have to pass on that information. Do you understand? Are you happy to start?”

The researcher will show the parents the Dictaphone and ask the parent(s) permission to record the interview.

“This is a tape recorder. The reason for this is to help me remember everything that you say today. Is it ok with you if I record our conversation?”

2. Interpreting the Photographs

The researcher shows the parent(s) the two sets of photographs and explains that they would like the parent(s) to talk the researcher through each photograph

“I have brought with me two copies of the photographs that you and [child] took. One copy is for you both to keep and the other copy is for us to look through now. Is that ok?”

The researcher asks the parent(s) to explain what each photo represents and why they chose to take this picture. The interviewer asks the following:

- *Can you tell me why you chose the photo(s)?*

- *Would you like to write a brief caption or comment on this label about*
- *what this photograph represents?*

3. Perception of Child

The researcher explains that they are going to ask the parent(s) some questions now about the child.

- *Tell me about [child].*
- *What type of child is [he/she]?*
- *What words would you use to describe [child]?*
- *What activities does [child] like to do?*
- *Does raising [child] differ from raising your other children?*

4. Parent / Child Relationship

The researcher explains that they are now going to ask the parent(s) some questions now about how they get along with [child].

- *Tell me about your relationship with [child]?*
- *What words would you use to describe your relationship with [child]?*
- *How do you think you and [child] get along?*
- *Do you and [child] get to do things together?*
- *What kind of things do you and [child] like to do together?*
- *When would you get to do that?*
- *How often do you get to do this together?*
- *What might stop you from getting to do this together?*

5. Perception of being a Parent

The researcher explains that they are now going to ask the parent(s) some questions about being a parent.

- *Tell me what it is like being a parent today in 2007?*
- *How do you find being a parent?*
- *What do you think are the good things about being a parent?*
- *What do you think are the difficult things about being a parent?*
- *What difficulties have you encountered?*
- *What about being a parent might cause you worry or stress?*
- *What do you do when this happens?*
- *What things do you do to help you cope with this?*
- *How do you think this can impact on [child]?*
- *How do you make time for yourself?*

6. Decision-Making

The researcher explains that they are now going to ask the parent(s) some questions about making decisions.

- *How are decisions made within the family?*
- *Does [child] get to have a say?*
- *How would [child] get to have a say?*

7. Future Concerns and Aspirations

The researcher explains that they are now going to ask the parent(s) some questions about their concerns and aspirations for the child.

- *What are your concerns for the future regarding [child]?*
- *What pressures does this put on the family?*
- *What goals do you have for [child]?*
- *Do you think [child] will have the opportunity to do this?*
- *What do you think needs to happen for [child] to get to do this?*

8. Concluding the Interview

The researcher winds down the interview with the parent(s).

“Well that is all of my questions. Would you like to add anything else? Have you any questions for me? Thank you so much for taking part today!”

ENDS

Appendix 2

SAMPLE LETTER



APPENDIX 2:

- Introductory Letter to Sample

«Mother» & «Father»
«Address_1»
«Address_2»
«Address_3»
«Address_4»

XXX April 2008

Dear «Mother» & «Father»

In recent months you and «Child» were one of 8,000 families who took part in the ***Growing Up in Ireland*** study. From everyone here at the ***Growing Up in Ireland*** team, we would like to say a big thank-you for your support and participation.

The team is now carrying out a much smaller and more in-depth study known as a '**qualitative study**' which will add to our understanding of children and their development. We are inviting 120 families from the original 8,000 families to take part in this study and your family has been one of those chosen.

I am enclosing an information leaflet about the qualitative study for both you and «Child». Should you both agree to take part in the qualitative study, a specially trained researcher from the Children's Research Centre in Trinity College Dublin will arrange to visit your home to carry out the qualitative interview with you and your child lasting about one hour and thirty minutes. Please find enclosed a consent form to be completed by you and an assent form to be completed by **xxxx**.

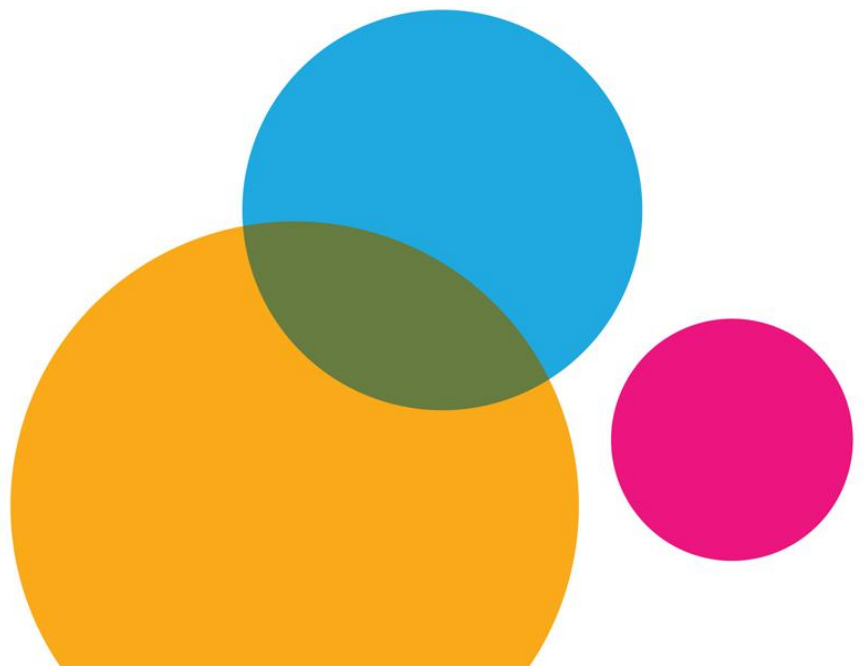
Over the next few days, a member of the study team will contact you by telephone to clarify any queries you may have about the qualitative study. In the meantime please do not hesitate to contact me on tel. (01) 8963379 if you have any questions.

Yours truly,

Elaine Harris
Growing Up in Ireland Research Fellow
Children's Research Centre
Trinity College Dublin

Appendix 3

INFORMATION LEAFLETS



APPENDIX 3:

- Parents/Guardians Information Leaflet
- Child's Information Leaflet



Growing Up in Ireland Qualitative Study

Information for Parents / Guardians

In recent months you and your child were one of 8,000 families who took part in the ***Growing Up in Ireland*** study. From everyone here at the ***Growing Up in Ireland*** team, we would like to say a big thank-you for your support and participation.

The team is now carrying out a much smaller and more in-depth study known as a 'qualitative study'. We are inviting 120 families from the original 8,000 families to take part in this study and your family has been one of those chosen.

What is the qualitative study?

The main ***Growing Up in Ireland*** study involved 8,000 families and aims to put together a broad picture of children in Ireland and their development. You will remember that taking part mostly involved ticking boxes on a questionnaire.

The qualitative study is a much smaller study with just 120 families. It aims to complement the main study by gathering more detailed information on the everyday lives of children and their parents as told in their own words.

How was my child selected for the pilot qualitative study?

We have randomly selected 120 families from the original 8,000 families that have taken part in the main study.

What happens if I take part in the pilot qualitative study?

If you and your child agree to take part, a specially trained Study Researcher will arrange another visit to your home at a time which is convenient to your family. During the visit the Researcher will interview you and your partner (if relevant) and carry out a separate interview with your child.

What kinds of things will my family be asked to talk about?

You and your partner (if relevant) will be asked to talk about your everyday lives including: the types of things you and your child do together; how you find being a parent and your hopes and concerns for your child in the future. The interview will last about 30 minutes.

Before the interview your family will be given a disposable camera and you will have the opportunity to take some photographs of your family to talk about with the Researcher.

Your child will be asked about things such as their hopes and dreams, their family life and friendships and their community and neighbours. This interview will last approximately an hour.

To make the experience more enjoyable for your child they will be asked to draw some pictures, fill out some worksheets and charts and complete some written work such as a letter.

Growing Up in Ireland Qualitative Study

The interview with you, your partner (if relevant) and your child will be recorded on tape. This will allow the researcher to chat to you properly and will ensure that we remember everything you tell us.

Although the topics you and your child will be asked to speak about are straightforward, they will be quite detailed and some will address relatively sensitive issues such as family relationships, parenting, friendships and bullying.

Confidentiality

All the information you and your child give to the Researcher during the qualitative study will be treated in the **strictest confidence** except in circumstances where a child or vulnerable person is thought to be at risk.

Although you or another adult will be present in the room when your child is being interviewed, the information given by your child, including written information, drawings etc., will not be seen by anyone other than the researchers– not even you will have access to it.

Storing your data

The information that you and your child give to the researchers will be stored securely. Identifying information will be removed from the data and names and addresses will be stored separately.

Following up in four years time

As you know **Growing Up in Ireland** is a long-term study. The qualitative study is also long-term and we would like to come back to your home in four years time when your child is 13 years old to do a similar qualitative study. This will be in addition to returning in four years time for the main study.

Who are the Researchers?

The Researcher who will call to your home is from Trinity College, Dublin. Each interviewer is a specially trained social researcher and has been subject to security vetting by An Garda Síochána.

The Researcher is not allowed to be alone with your child unless you or another adult is present. This is for the protection of both your child and the Researcher.

Each interviewer carries a photo ID card. If you have any concerns about the study or the Researcher or would like to confirm his/her identity you can contact Ms Jillian Heffernan at Trinity College, Dublin on 01-896 3378.

What are my rights if I take part?

- Just as in the main study you may choose to withdraw from the qualitative study at any time, even after the Researcher has called to your home. At that stage, if requested, we would delete all information previously collected about you.
- If there are any question(s) you do not wish to answer you do not have to do so.

Growing Up in Ireland Qualitative Study

What happens next?

One of our research team will contact you by telephone in the coming days to answer any questions you may have about the qualitative study. If you are happy to take part, you can complete the two consent forms enclosed and post them back to us in the pre-paid envelope.

Where can I find out more information?

Freephone: 1800 200 434
or contact our Communications Officer,
Jillian Heffernan, on 01 896 3378

Web: www.growingup.ie

Email: growingup@esri.ie

Post:
Growing Up in Ireland,
The Children's Research Centre
Trinity College, Dublin
Dublin 2



Hello again!

In the past few weeks you and your parents took part in a very big project called **Growing Up in Ireland**. You will remember that 8,000 nine year olds from all around Ireland were picked to take part in this project. We are now starting a much smaller project with just 120 nine year olds. We would like to invite you and your parents to take part in this smaller project.

So what is the smaller project about?

In the big **Growing Up in Ireland** project you answered lots of different questions about your life by ticking boxes on a booklet. For the smaller project we would like you to tell us more about yourself in your own words. Instead of ticking boxes we will be asking you to draw some pictures and fill out some charts.

What happens if I take part?

- Another person from our team, called a Researcher, will call to your home to have a chat with you. They will ask you lots of different questions about your life, your hobbies, your friends and family and how you feel about growing up.
- Instead of ticking boxes you and the Researcher will have a chat, draw some pictures and fill out some charts.
- The Researcher will also have a chat with your parents, or whoever looks after you at home. They will talk about you and also about themselves and what it is like being a parent.

Other things you should know.

If you do not want to be a part of the smaller study any more, even after the researcher has called to your home, that is your decision and it will be okay with us. If there are any questions you do not want to answer you do not have to do so. All the information you give to the Researcher during the interview will be treated in the *strictest confidence*, except in circumstances where we feel that you or someone else might be at risk or danger.

Four years time:

Just like the bigger study we would like to come back and talk to you and your family again when you are 13 years old. This will help us to understand how much things have changed in your life over that time.

What do I do now?

When you have read this leaflet talk to your Mum or Dad about taking part. We have also given your parents a leaflet to tell them all about the small study so you can decide together.

Thank You!

We would like to thank you for all your help so far with **Growing Up in Ireland**. You are helping to make a better future for all children in Ireland.

Where can I find out more information?

Freephone: 1800 200 434 Or contact our Communications Officer, Jillian Heffernan, on 01 896 3378

Web: www.growingup.ie

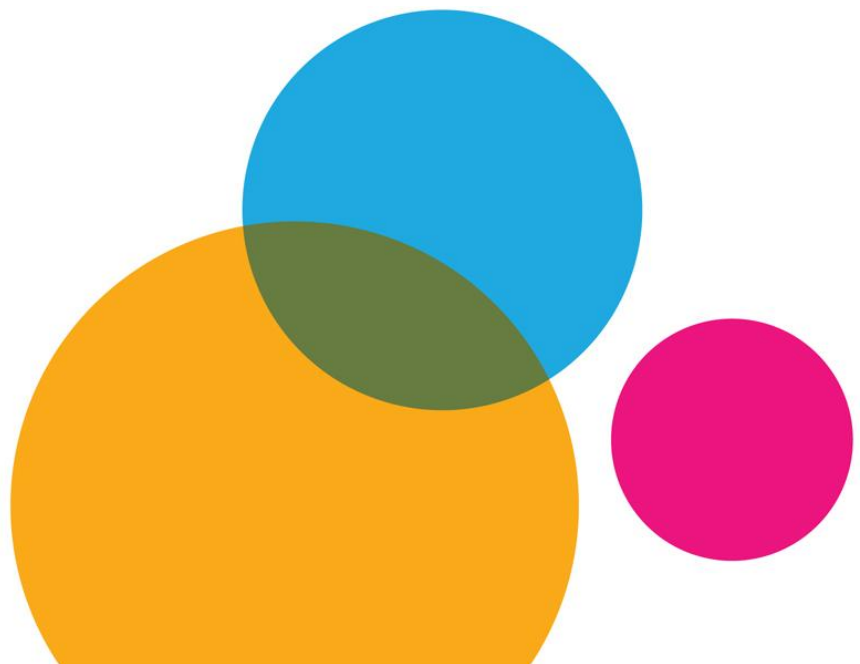
Email: growingup@esri.ie

Post:

**Growing Up in Ireland,
Economic & Social Research Institute,
Whitaker Square,
Sir John Rogerson's Quay,
Dublin 2**

Appendix 4

CONSENT FORMS



APPENDIX 4:

- Parents/Guardians Consent Form
- Child's Assent Form

PARENT / GUARDIAN CONSENT FORM –Qualitative Study

Name of Child: _____
(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

Child's Date of Birth: _____
(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

- I have read and understand the information sheet provided about this qualitative part of the study.
- I understand that I can ask any questions I may have at any time before or during the interview.
- I consent to my child, and myself, being included in research being conducted for the **Growing Up in Ireland** qualitative study.
- I confirm that I am the legal guardian of the child and entitled to complete this survey on his/her behalf.
- I understand that the main aim of the project is to collect more detailed information on the lives of children and their parents as told in their own words.
- I understand that my child has been selected from the 8,000 original families who took part in the main study
- I understand that information will also be collected from my child's other parent and my spouse or partner (where different), and my child.
- I understand that the information will be stored, on a confidential basis, on a computer and will be used for research purposes only.
- I understand that although I will have access to the information given by me, I will not have access to the information given by my child.
- I understand that, because this study looks at children's development over time, I will be asked to participate in a follow-up study when my child is 13 years of age.
- I understand that I may withdraw my participation, and that of my child, at any time, including after the information has been collected.
- I understand the information collected from me and my child may be written in a report about the study.
- I understand that all real names and identifying details will be taken out of the report so readers will not be able to identify my family.
- I understand the conversation that I and my child have with the researcher will be taped, that that these tapes will be transcribed to allow analysis to be carried out. The tapes will be strictly confidential and used only for analysis purposes.

Name of Parent/Guardian _____
(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

Address of Parent/Guardian: _____
(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

Signature of Parent / Guardian: _____

Date: _____ Contact telephone: _____

If relevant:

Name of parent/guardian not resident in your household: _____
(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

Address of parent/guardian not resident in your household: _____

(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

Signature of parent/guardian not resident in your household: _____
(BLOCK CAPITALS PLEASE)

Date: _____ Contact telephone: _____



Growing Up in Ireland Qualitative Study

Child's Assent Form

My name is: _____
(CAPITAL LETTERS PLEASE)

My date of birth is: _____
(CAPITAL LETTERS PLEASE)

- I would like to take part in the **Growing Up in Ireland** smaller study. I have been given and have read the information leaflet and have talked to my parents about taking part.
- I will be asked to talk about me, my pastimes, my family, my school and the place where I live.
- I will be asked to draw some pictures and fill out some charts but I understand that this will be fun and not like work in school.
- My parents (or whoever looks after me) will also be interviewed about themselves and me.
- I do not have to answer questions that I do not like.
- I know that the chat I have with the researcher will be taped on a tape recorder so the researcher does not have to do a lot of writing and will remember everything I said.
- I can stop taking part in the study at any time.
- I know that the chat I have with the researcher will be taped on a tape recorded so the researcher does not have to do a lot of writing and will remember everything I say. The tapes will be strictly confidential and will be used only to help us analyse the information.

Your signature: _____

Date: _____

Your parent's signature: _____

Date: _____



**If you would like further information about
Growing Up in Ireland,**

please visit www.growingup.ie

e-mail growingup@esri.ie

or freephone 1800 200 434

