

Children's activities, childhood and being a parent today

Who took part in the survey?

In the summer of 2008 we ran a questionnaire survey with parents who have children involved in organised activities. The survey explored parents' perceptions of organised activities, what they think their children get from them, and their views about life as a parent today. Since then we have been running in-depth interviews to learn more about parents' attitudes and values. This pamphlet summarises some of the information we gathered from the survey. We hope you find it interesting.

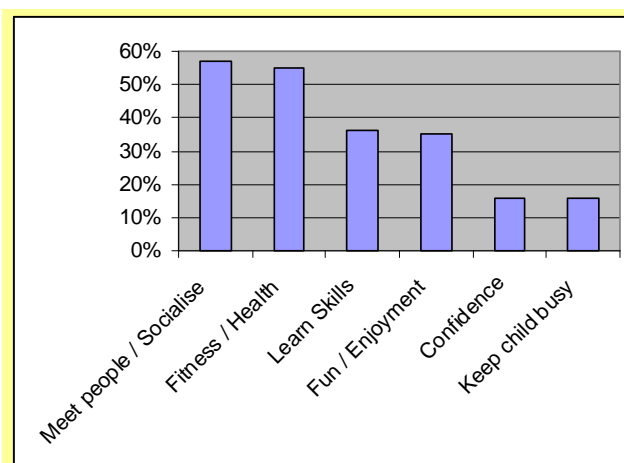
The survey was run across a wide variety of venues including clubs and leisure centres. 564 parents completed the questionnaire. Most had children who were participating in sports activities (typically swimming, football, gymnastics, trampoline, athletics, tennis, and martial arts) whilst some were involved in performing arts, such as dance, and others were chess club members. Venues were spread across the city, and people from a wide range of backgrounds took part. Children were aged from 4 to 14, with the most common ages being 7 to 9.

What sort of activities are children taking part in?

Parents were asked about the organised activities their child does outside of school time. 20% of them have a child involved in one activity, whilst around 30% have a child in two such activities, and another 30% have children involved in 3 activities (another 20% are involved in 4 or more activities). Of all these other activities just under half the children do sports activities only, whilst typical other pursuits include Guides, Beavers, dance, drama, music lessons, often alongside sports.

What are the main reasons parents like their children doing organised activities?

Parents were first asked an open ended question (that is invited to write down their own reasons, rather than choosing from a list). The most common reasons given were as follows.



(People could give more than one reason so percentages do not add to 100)

Here are some examples of the sorts of things the parents said about why they like their child doing organised activities:

"Good for fitness and keeps him off the street. Enjoys football and being with his friends"

"Stimulation. Enjoyment. Exercise. Aids development. To be safe in water"

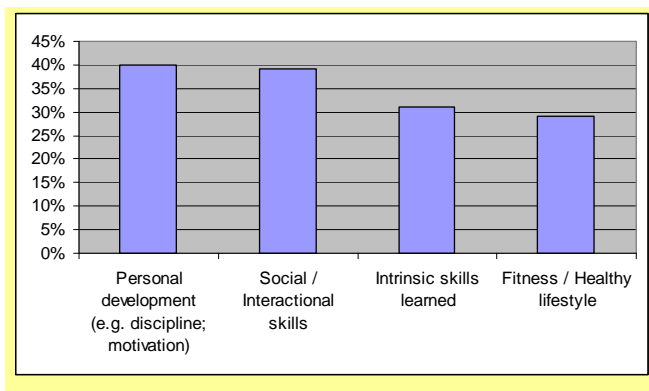
"It helps develop social skills. It also helps my child deal with success and disappointment. My child does not hang around the streets on a night time due to his involvement with sports"

"I believe structured activities promotes self confidence and discipline whilst having fun. I would rather my daughter's time be used constructively and organised activities provides opportunities for her to develop"

"I am keen for her to play sport and not enough time is spent doing sport in school"

Do parents see longer term benefits to their children taking part in organised activities?

Nearly all parents (94%) said they see long term benefits. A wide range of reflections were given here, but the most commonly cited long term benefits related to these areas:



Here are some examples of what was said:

“Discipline, and learn that you need to put effort into things to gain results”

“Learn to enjoy the benefits of being fit at an early age to carry on into adulthood”

“Enjoyment of football, development of his skills, who knows where it might lead?”

“It teaches them to work as a team. It shows them there is more to life than TV / video games”

What do parents see as important to doing well in life?

Respondents were asked how important they felt various characteristics are for doing well in life. There is quite a strong consensus around some points. Almost everyone (at 97%) sees emotional support as very important for doing well in life, whilst almost no one (3%) sees how well off someone’s family is as very important to doing well in life, although 36% think wealth is fairly important here. Having a good education and hard work are also seen as very important (by 80%, and 67%).

Around half of parents thought that emotional support, as well as education and hard work, have become *more* important than they were in the past.

What would make life as a parent easier?

65% of parents felt something could be changed to make their life as a parent easier.

Many parents said that more income or lower costs would help, often referring to the costs of childcare and the cost of organised activities. Another concern was pressure on time, with some people wanting more flexibility at work, and some wanting childcare to be easier to organise. Also important was a desire for greater availability of organised activities, clubs and facilities in local areas. Other commonly mentioned issues were matters around schooling including concerns about the quality of schooling, pressures of SATS, and concerns related to secondary school choice. Also concerns were voiced about media, consumer and advertising pressures, about violence, and about safety on the streets. Here are examples of the sorts of things parents said would make life easier:

“Less expensive activities available for all children in local areas”

“More time, money and support”

“Taking pressure off children to perform educationally”

“Less advertising aimed at children for all the latest things. A little more discipline generally in some areas of children’s life”

“Extra support for childcare for working parents”

“More support for working parents of older children as well as younger”

“Money would make things easier. A society that is more child/family friendly would as well”

“Obedient children!”

We hope you have found this pamphlet interesting. The study was run as part of ‘Real Life Methods’. Further information about this ESRC funded project is available at the website <http://www.reallifemethods.ac.uk>