



GROWING UP IN IRELAND – INFLUENCES ON 9-YEAR-OLDS' LEARNING: HOME, SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report looks at children's out-of-school activities and how these relate to the domains of family, school and neighbourhood. The report provides new information on the types of recreational activities engaged in by nine-year-old children and explores the relationship between their out-of-school lives and their academic performance at school.

The ***Growing Up in Ireland*** study collected rich information on the kinds and frequency of activities engaged in by children. The analysis presented in this report takes into account a range of different activities, including structured activities (sports and cultural clubs/classes), active recreation (sports and exercise), sedentary pursuits (including watching television and playing video games), the use of ICT for different purposes, spending time with friends, and helping out with chores at home. Cluster analysis was used to look at the combinations of activities in which children engage. Five distinct clusters emerged:

1. The *TV/sports group*, who spend their time playing sports, being with their friends and watching television; they have a very low level of computer usage.
2. The *social networker group*, who have a high and diverse use of ICT, being the only group to use it for social networking; they spend a lot of time with their friends, and also spend time reading and taking part in cultural activities.
3. The *sports/computer games group*, who spend more time on sports and computer games than other groups, spend less time reading and have no involvement in cultural activities.
4. The *cultural activities group*, who combine solitary and organised cultural activities in the form of reading for pleasure and after-school lessons/groups.
5. The *busy lives group*, who are characterised by the diversity of their activities, spending some time on ICT, reading, cultural activities, sports and video games.

There are clear gender and social background differences in children's recreational activities. Girls are more likely to be social networkers or spend time on cultural pursuits while boys are more likely to engage in sports/computer games. Children from more advantaged families (in terms of parental education, social class, and income) are more involved in cultural activities and social networking outside school. Children from immigrant families are more likely to fall into the social networker or busy lives groups and less likely to engage in cultural activities. Children with learning disabilities are most likely to fit into the TV/sports group and, to some



extent, the busy lives group; having a physical disability or chronic illness does not appear to affect out-of-school activities.

Clear differences are evident between urban and rural children in their out-of-school activities. Urban children are more likely to fall into the social networker and busy lives groups. Neighbourhood factors are associated with children's recreational activities; those in the cultural activities group are more likely to live in orderly areas with green spaces. There is tentative evidence, however, that engagement in structured or solitary cultural pursuits is associated with living in an area where it is seen as less safe to play outside. Social networkers, who spend a good deal of time with their friends, are more likely to live in an area where it is safe to play outside, and there are green spaces and safe parks to play in.

Children's school experience is found to be associated with what they do outside school. Children attending gaelscoileanna have a distinctive profile, being least likely to fit into the TV/sports group and being strongly engaged in cultural activities. Having Internet access in school is associated with greater use of ICT outside school, especially for social networking.

Clear differences are evident in reading and mathematics performance according to the types of out-of school activities in which children engage. Even taking account of a wide range of background factors, children who engage in cultural activities and social networking perform better in reading and mathematics than other groups. Those taking part in sports/computer games also have higher reading and mathematics scores. Thus, the lowest test scores are found among those who spend their time on TV/sports and among those with 'busy lives'.

Analysis of one wave of data requires caution about the causality involved. However, it is a matter of policy concern that children from less advantaged backgrounds are less likely to engage in the kinds of out-of-school activities which appear to enhance academic performance. In the longer term, children's recreation patterns may serve to widen the social class gap in achievement.

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