

The background of the cover is a vibrant blue with a subtle, textured pattern. Three hands are shown holding puzzle pieces that feature children's drawings. One hand at the top left holds a piece with a colorful face. A hand at the bottom left holds a piece with a drawing of a landscape and a house. A hand at the bottom right holds a piece with a drawing of two children. The title "Pieces of Us" is centered in large white letters.

Pieces of Us

**A Children's Report to the UN
Committee on the Rights of the Child**

Reading the data, I believed that many of the children had feelings of exclusion and loneliness.



The title "pieces of U" encourages us to ask ourselves how society can fit all children into this picture.

The puzzle symbolises society and how it only assists particular children.



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Acknowledgements

The Ombudsman for Children's Office would like to thank all those who helped and supported in making this Children's Report possible. This includes UNICEF Ireland and the Children's Rights Alliance, along with the CRA member organisations who supported and facilitated the process.

We especially want to extend our heartfelt thanks to every child who completed the online questionnaire, who took part in the focus groups and the members of our own Youth Advisory Panel. It is only through their willingness to share their views and experiences, as well as to lend us their insights and talents, that this can truly be a children's report. Thank you to each and every one of you.

We want to thank the many schools that shared our survey with their families, along with every organisation that shared our survey with their members.

We would also like to thank the following organisations who supported us in convening focus groups, or facilitated them on our behalf.

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<i>Claddagh National School Galway</i>	<i>New Communities Partnership</i>
<i>Cork Life Centre</i>	<i>Nurture's Best Crèche</i>
<i>Dublin City Community Co-Op</i>	<i>Oberstown Children's Detention Campus</i>
<i>Exchange House</i>	<i>Roscommon Children & Young People's Services Committee</i>
<i>Foróige</i>	<i>SpunOut</i>
<i>French Park Crèche</i>	<i>The Ark</i>
<i>Henrietta Street School</i>	<i>Tusla Child and Family Agency</i>
<i>Inclusion Ireland</i>	<i>Youth and Education Service for Refugees and Migrants</i>
<i>Irish Second-Level Student's Union</i>	
<i>Linda Madden Crèche</i>	
<i>National Council for the Blind Ireland</i>	

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<i>BelongTo</i>	<i>Irish Wheelchair Association</i>
<i>Disability Federation of Ireland</i>	<i>Jigsaw</i>
<i>Early Childhood Ireland</i>	<i>Migrant Rights Centre Ireland</i>
<i>ECO UNESCO</i>	<i>National Parents Council Primary</i>
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Message from the OCO Youth Advisory Panel and the Ombudsman for Children

The United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child Reporting Process provides an invaluable platform to monitor the rights and welfare of children across the world. Not only are states obligated to participate in this process, other defenders of children's rights are also welcome to take part. The Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) co-ordinated this year's Children's Report to the Committee. Children themselves are at the core of the reporting process, recognising their unique role as stakeholders in upholding their own rights. Through their participation, this report provides an opportunity to hear directly from children about their experiences growing up in Ireland, as well as their own recommendations to the Committee.

The Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) at the OCO was fundamental in producing this report. We (the YAP members) come from all corners of the country and a variety of backgrounds, ensuring that every member can provide unique opinions and views as a child living in Ireland. We met regularly either online or in person and worked on different aspects of the report. We input into the survey questions, the methodology for focus groups, and the analysis of all of the data. Our perspective on the material gathered in focus groups and the outcomes of our discussions about issues directly affecting the children of Ireland are included at the end of each section of the report. It was our job to decide on how to present all of this data. We decided that alongside the report we would create a website and two films.

We want everyone to read this report. We would like to see this kind of reporting as standard. If you report on children, have children involved in the process. Nothing about us, without us. There is no one better placed to talk about the issues facing children in Ireland than children themselves. Throughout this report, children's experiences are told by children in the way they want their experiences to be told. We don't want people to think that this was a unique way to do this, it should not be a gimmick.

Children participated in this report because they wanted to make a difference. People with decision-making power need to respect that participation by reading, listening and learning from them.

As YAP members we have found this process challenging, hard work, fun, inspiring and cathartic. We learned from, related to and empathised with all the children represented in the report. We want the children who participated in the report to know that they are not alone.

We would like to thank both the children who participated in the survey and those who engaged with the various focus groups around the country as well as the organisations and individuals that supported them. Without their continued support, cooperation and honesty this report would not have been possible.

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On behalf of the OCO YAP



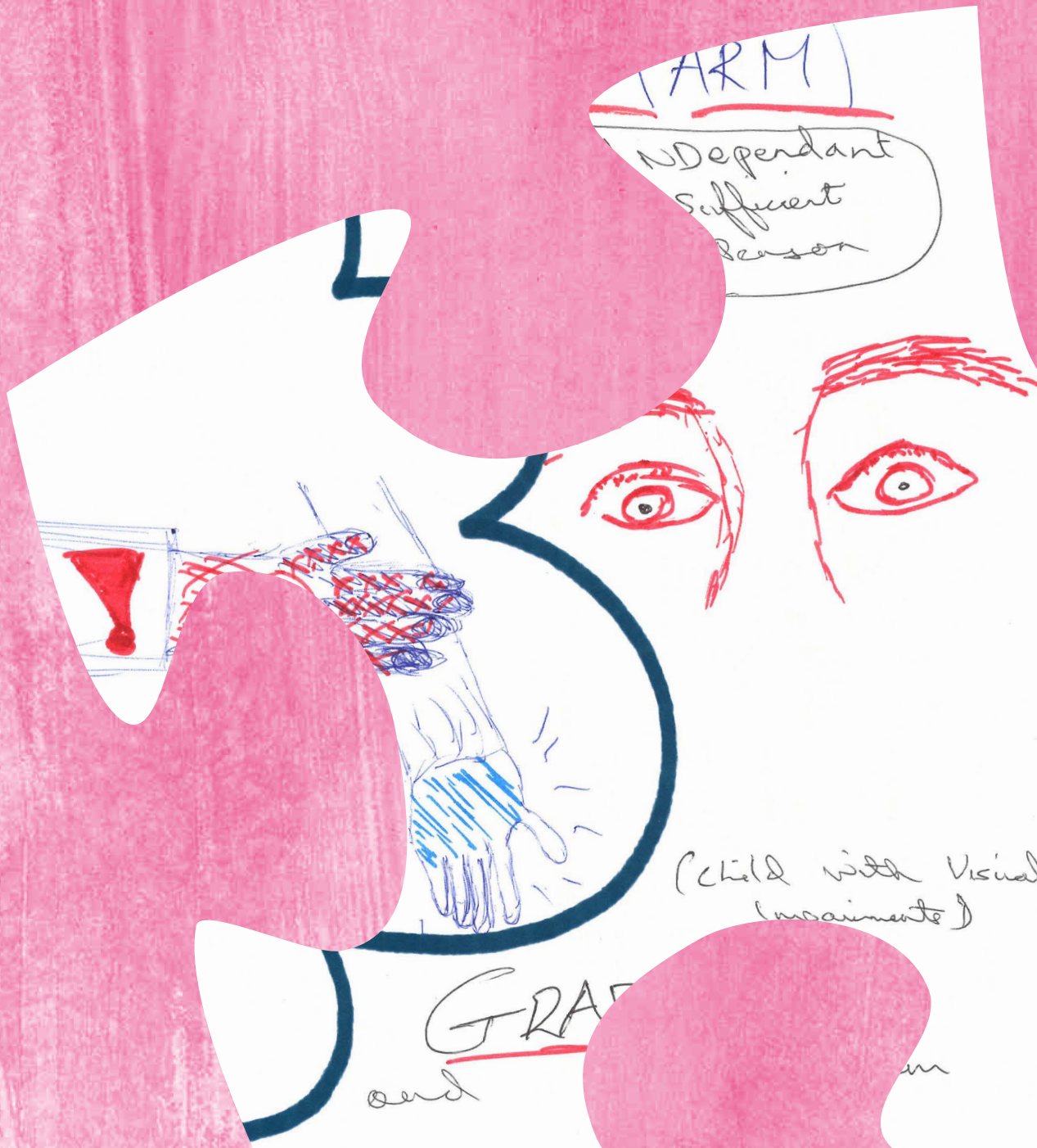
Dr Niall Muldoon

Ombudsman for Children



1

Introduction, Background & Methodology



1.1 Introduction

Ireland signed and ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991. By doing so, the State made a commitment to promote and protect the rights enshrined in the UNCRC for all children in Ireland and to periodically report to the United Nations Committee (the Committee) on the Rights of the Child on legislation, policy and provision to meet this commitment.

Ireland was last examined by the Committee in 2016. As part of that examination, Ireland's Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) and UNICEF Ireland worked with children and young people to produce a Children's Report called *Picture Your Rights*¹. In the current reporting cycle, the Ombudsman for Children's Office (OCO) undertook to produce a Children's Report for submission in 2022.

The OCO was established under the Ombudsman for Children Act 2002 (as amended) and the office opened its doors in 2004. The Office is an independent, statutory body with two main functions:

- To investigate complaints by, or on behalf of children about poor administration by public bodies that have an adverse effect on a child or children; and
- To raise awareness, promote, protect and uphold the rights of children under the UNCRC.

The activities of the OCO in respect of these functions are wide ranging. They include a free, impartial and independent complaints handling service, advice to Government on policy and legislation, research on matters affecting and of concern to children, a programme of awareness-raising for children, adults and the general public on children's rights and the UNCRC. They also include consultations with children and external stakeholders, and participative initiatives with children designed to elevate their voices and views and increase their engagement in decision-making processes.

1.2 Background to the Children's Report

In the years since the last Children's Report, children's lives in Ireland have undoubtedly changed significantly. As with the rest of the world, the Covid 19 pandemic hit children in Ireland hard, and the full impact of public health restrictions on their education, health and mental health, family and other personal relationships is still largely unknown and emerging. However, other issues that pre-existed this pandemic have also had an impact on children's lives. These include an ongoing housing crisis that has seen many children, with their families, experience insecure housing arrangements and homelessness; a shortage of child and adolescent mental health services; delays in assessment and service delivery for children with disabilities; prolonged asylum processes; and discrimination against minority groups.

On the more positive side, Ireland saw the introduction and implementation of its first National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making 2015-2020, which aimed to ensure children's voices were heard as part of decision-making processes. Ireland also published its first LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy 2018-2020, recognising the challenges that many children and young people of varying sexual orientation face and their need for supports. The full enactment of the Children First Act 2015 in 2017 has increased awareness of the need to report child protection and welfare concerns and mandated a wide range of professionals to

¹ See https://www.childrensrights.ie/sites/default/files/submissions_reports/files/PictureYourRights0515.pdf

do so. While the pandemic saw schools close for prolonged periods, their safe reopening and recommencement of classroom-based education was a priority for the Government.

Within this broad context, children in Ireland continued to live their lives, having varying advantages and facing different challenges. It is within this context that this Children's Report was prepared. A survey and consultations with children took place between May 2021 and March 2022. It reflects children's views and experience at a time when the pandemic was abating in Ireland and public health restrictions were easing gradually. Children's lives were becoming more 'normal' again. However, throughout the preparation of this report, the presence and impact of the pandemic loomed large. Although the new normal for children is somewhat different from their lives pre-Covid 19, many of the issues they are concerned with are very familiar and long-standing.

1.3 Methodology

The OCO began planning the UNCRC Children's Report in early 2021. We began by meeting the Children's Rights Alliance (CRA) and UNICEF Ireland who had conducted the 2016 Children's Report. The CRA agreed to facilitate a briefing with their members to garner support for the project and provide us with advice and support. This briefing took place in April 2021 and many of the CRA member organisations assisted us with the dissemination of the survey and with the focus groups.

The Online Survey

We worked with a market research company to design an online survey, which went live at the end of April 2021. This survey was open to all children and we encouraged parents and guardians to help younger children or those with learning needs to complete it. We posted information and a link to the survey on the OCO website and out social media platforms, and emailed information and the link to over 100 organisations that work with children and all primary and second level schools. The questionnaire was kept simple and in child-friendly language. It asked children for their age, gender and type of area they lived in, as well as three open-ended questions:

- What is good about being a child in Ireland?
- What is not so good about being a child in Ireland?
- What would make life better for children in Ireland?

The online survey remained live for three weeks, at the end of which we had received 5,515 completed questionnaires. The market research company collated this data for us and identified some of the key themes emerging.

Time, resources and the quantity of data received did not allow for further thorough thematic qualitative analysis of the survey data. However, having received the data in Excel format, we conducted some additional analysis of this using key word searches. This and, as far as was possible, the removal of double counting, allowed us to establish reasonably accurate counts of the number of times specific issues were identified by the children. These counts are included in the section of the report on the survey below.

The Focus Groups

Based on the survey results, we identified a number of key themes for discussion in the focus groups. In considering these themes, we paid close attention to what the children told us in the survey and to the children's rights framework in which we were working. The themes identified for discussion were:

- Services that support children
- Equality and non-discrimination
- Community and leisure
- Children's voice
- Children in need of special protections

Ongoing and changing Covid restrictions meant that the majority of these focus groups happened online.

Focus groups discussed what was good, bad, and what the children would change under the identified themes. Reflecting the survey data, younger children and those aged 13 and over discussed slightly different themes.

Using the recurring theme of weather for the children aged 12 and under, we used a sunshine motif to represent what was good, a cloud to represent what was bad, and a lightning bolt to represent what the children wished to change. We provided cards with these motifs to the children who we met in-person and many wrote or drew their responses to the questions on these.

The children aged 13 and over could use these cards if they wanted, however most chose to speak and be recorded.

We approached a wide range of organisations that work with children and asked for their assistance in organising focus groups. We offered to facilitate or co-facilitate focus groups in person and online. If the organisation wished to facilitate the focus groups themselves, we provided facilitator guidance notes and advice.

Each participating organisation was provided with parent/guardian information sheets, information sheets for children aged under and over 12, data protection consent and assent forms, and participation consent and assent forms. We were available to speak to children, parents/guardians, organisations who had questions about the Children's Report. We made short videos explaining consent and assent and the UNCRC Reporting Process.

Focus groups on Zoom and in person groups facilitated by the OCO were recorded and transcribed. Most focus groups facilitated by external organisations used note taking and drawings to capture the views of the children.

Covid restrictions affected our focus groups methodology, including having to conduct many of the focus groups online, and the participation of some organisations and groups of children. Additionally, Covid restrictions had been in place for some time when the focus groups occurred. Because of these restrictions, many of the supporting organisations and many children were struggling to stay engaged with each other. Therefore, some groups of children were more difficult to attract to focus groups than anticipated and, while supporting this report, some organisations representing different cohorts of children were unable to organise or facilitate a focus group.

This was particularly the case for children with disabilities. Despite efforts to include children with various types of disabilities, only two focus groups were possible: one with children who were blind or had visual impairment, one with children with intellectual disabilities. Some children in other focus groups self-declared less evident disabilities such as autism, dyslexia and ADHD.

It is also important to note that we did not conduct focus groups with asylum seeking children, children experiencing homelessness or children receiving in-patient mental health services. Since 2019, the OCO has undertaken in-depth consultations with children from each of these cohorts. The subsequent reports are available on our website:

- Take My Hand: Young People's Experience of Mental Health Services
<https://www.oco.ie/library/take-my-hand-young-peoples-experiences-of-mental-health-services/>
- No Place Like Home: Children's Views and Experiences of Living in Family Hubs
<https://www.oco.ie/library/no-place-like-home-childrens-views-and-experiences-of-living-in-family-hubs/>
- Direct Division: Children's Views and Experience of Living in Direct Provision
<https://www.oco.ie/directdivision/>

In total, 23 focus groups took place to inform this report. The cohorts represented at these were:

- Early Years
- Members of the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU)
- Children with intellectual disabilities (with parents/carers)
- Children who are blind or have visual impairment
- Children in detention
- Children in care or at risk of entering care
- Traveller children
- Roma children
- LGBTI+ children
- Children in alternative education settings
- Members of national youth organisations
- Primary school children
- Children engaged in creative arts

1.4 The Role of the OCO Youth Advisory Panel

The OCO Youth Advisory Panel (YAP) was formed in late 2020 to provide us with advice on the office's work and to engage with specific pieces of work they are interested in. The YAP consists of up to 20 children aged 13 to 17 years from diverse backgrounds and various parts of Ireland.

From early 2021, the YAP agreed that one of their key tasks would be to support the creation of this Children's Report. We engaged heavily with our YAP throughout this process. They acted as advisors and sounding boards for our methodology, including both the survey and the focus groups. They considered and fed into the identification of the key themes for focus groups discussion and have contributed to the analysis of the data arising from them. Various members of the YAP have worked on different aspects of this reporting process, including contributing artwork, being involved in the creation and making of the accompanying film and the design and content of the OCO UNCRC Children's Report webpages.

Their insight, perspectives and hard work have contributed significantly to the process and to ensuring that this report truly reflects the views and experiences of children.

1.5 Contents of the Children’s Report

Section Two of this report provides detail on the issues raised by children in the online survey, which were subsequently the basis of the themes discussed in the focus groups. Section Three provides feedback from focus groups held with children in Early Years services, largely in image form. Sections Four to Eight highlight the main issues discussed in the focus groups under the themes identified above, while Section Nine details discussions with children in need of special protections, namely unaccompanied minors, children in detention, Traveller children and children from the Roma community.

2

Results from the Online Survey



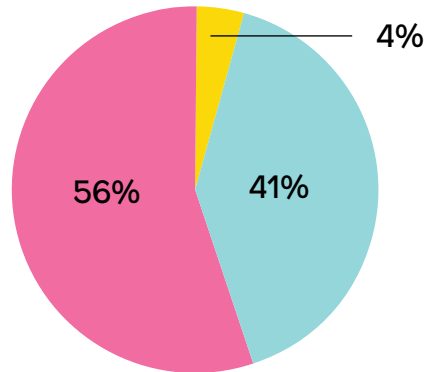
2.1 Results from the Online Survey

As outlined above in the methodology, in April 2021 we worked with a market research company, the Children's Rights Alliance Ireland and some of their members, and schools and youth organisations to undertake an online survey with as many children as possible. The main aim of this survey was to find out what key issues children were concerned with, what they liked about being a child in Ireland, what they did not like and what they would change if they could. In total, 5,515 children aged between 2 and 17 responded to this survey.

Who took part in the survey?

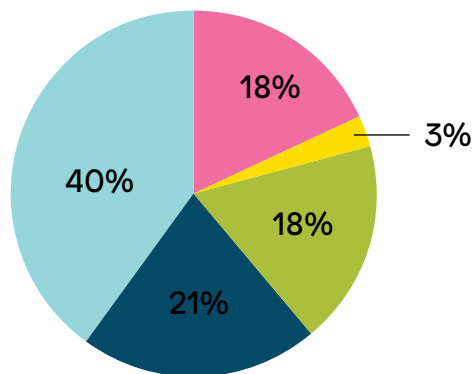
Gender

- Girls
- Boys
- Non Binary and Prefer Not to Say



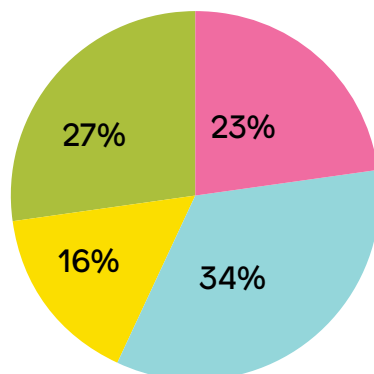
Age

- 1-5 years
- 6-9 years
- 10-12 years
- 13-15 years
- 16-17 years



Location

- City
- Town
- Village
- Countryside



While children of different gender, age and location all responded to the survey, only age proved to be a significant variable. Younger children (those aged 12 years and under) expressed quite different views to those aged 13 and over. We found no notable differences between the genders and between those living in urban or rural areas.

2.2 What Children Aged 12 Years and Under Told us was Good About Being a Child in Ireland

Play and Recreation

Opportunities to play and take part in sports and hobbies was very important to the younger children. A key word search of the survey data revealed almost 2,000 references to this when children identified what was good about life in Ireland.

Girl: I get to go to dance classes and get flexible. I get to do lots of shows.

Age 7, lives in city

Prefer not to say: I get to play at school and GAA and athletics. I also like to use our Kayak....

Age 9, lives in the countryside

Boy: Mó theaglach. Ag siúl sna sléibhte agus spraoi ar an trá. [My family. Walking in the mountains and having fun on the beach]

Age 3, lives in a town

Boy: We have many sports clubs and teams especially the GAA², meaning children are able to reach 60 minutes of exercise most days.

Age 12, lives in a city

Girl: Play Gaelic games and golf, we get to celebrate St Paddy's Day, the weather is always different.

Age 8, lives in a village

Girl: Ag seinm ceoil tradusiúnta agus ag imirt camógaiochta. Ag canadh sa séipéal. [Playing traditional music and playing camogie. Singing in church]

Age 9, lives in a town

Boy: Sport. I love sport. I play hurling, rugby and football.

Age 11, lives in a village

Parent of boy: The playgrounds. Loves being surrounded by nature where we live...

Age 2, lives in the countryside

School

The younger children identified school as one of the things they most liked about being a child in Ireland, with almost 900 positive comments returned in the survey. Children often linked school with learning, nice teachers, seeing friends and playing.

Girl: Children are able to get good education in this country and I like seeing my friends and teachers in school.

Age 11, lives in the countryside

Girl: Free education and free lunch in primary school I'm in... I feel relaxed and cool when I'm in school. It's fun to be in school.

Age 10, lives in a city

² Gaelic Athletic Association: The Gaelic Athletic Association is an Irish international amateur sporting and cultural organisation. The GAA promotes traditional Gaelic games and pastimes, including the sports of hurling (boys and men), camogie (girls and women), Gaelic football, handball, and rounders.

Girl: I attend a small school and because of that the children can be watched closely and bullying is unlikely to take place, which I'm happy about.

Age 11, lives in the countryside

Boy: Because being a child is fun, you can play with toys and school is fun. And school isn't that serious anymore. I like playing with my friends as well. And I like learning as well too.

Age 9, lives in a city

Boy: Being able to play with my friends in school.

Age 6, lives in a town

Boy: Being able to try new things, like trying pre-school on a Friday.

Age 5, lives in a city

Friends

Friends were enormously important to this age group. Having friends was mentioned approximately 800 times as one of the good things about life in Ireland.

Boy: Friends. I have good friends and we have a lot in common. Mixing with different ethnic groups is fun as we learn about their way of life.

Age 12, lives in the countryside

Boy: I have tons of friends.

Age 6, lives in a village

Boy: Being able to call for my friends

Age 11, lives in a town

Girl: You can play with your friends, going for play dates and visits when the germs aren't here. Age 5, lives in a town

Girl: Playing with my friends and chatting with them.

Age 9, lives in a city

Girl: You are never too far away from your friends.

Age 11, lives in a village

Family

Younger children told us that having, living with and spending time with family, including parents, brothers and sisters, cousins, grandparents, aunts and uncles is one of the things they liked about living in Ireland. A key word search of the survey data showed that this age group mentioned family approximately 550 times.

Boy: I can hold hands with my family.

Age 6, lives in a village

Non-binary: That most of my family live in Ireland so I can get to see them (when there's no pandemic).

Age 8, lives in a city

Girl: The best thing is having my mum to look after me.

Age 11, lives in a town

Boy: I love living near my nanny.

Age 12, lives in a town

Girl: Being with mummy and daddy.

Age 11, lives in a city

Girl: I love living here because Irish grannies are the best.

Age 11, lives in a town

Boy: Mo theaghlach [My family].

Age 3, lives in a town

Safety and Freedom

Safety and freedom were also reported by children aged 12 and under to be good aspects of life in Ireland. Again, using a key word search of the survey data, we found over 400 references to safety and freedom. Safety encompassed child protection, the absence of natural disasters, having no war, non-discrimination and feeling safe in their own communities. Children in this age group talked about not having to work, having safe open spaces to play, freedom of speech, and a general lack of restrictions on children's lives and activities. Many children linked these themes.

Boy: Safety... Ireland is a safe place to grow up no gun violence etc.

Age 12, lives in a town

Girl: Kind and mostly trustworthy people so that it's safe to go outside by yourself.

Age 10, lives in a city

Boy: Always feeling safe as there are no natural disasters here like hurricanes and earthquakes. Aged 12, lives in a village

Girl: Freedom of speech, I do not know about in all cases but in my school (which is an Educate Together³) we are not only allowed but advised to speak about our opinions on important topics such as politics and world news etc.

Age 11, lives in a town

Girl: I have the freedom to play outside and I don't have to go and work at a young age for money, for my family. And I feel safe in my community.

Aged 11, lives in a town

Girl: That you have freedom and you can express yourself.

Age 10, lives in a town

Prefer not to say: I can get to be myself without threat to my life because in other countries it is still legal to kill people for their sexuality.

Age 12, lives in a town

Natural Environment and Weather

The children aged 12 years and under thought that Ireland's natural environment and the mixed and mild weather were all good things about being a child here. There were just under 400 positive responses about these subjects.

Girl: We have a lovely mix of weathers each day, making our environment nice and green.

Age 12, lives in a town

Boy: Tall mountains and oceans and seas.

Age 7, lives in the countryside

³ Educate Together are non fee-paying-schools and are open to students of all backgrounds. They are co-educational and have no school uniforms.

Girl: I like exploring outside in nature and watching birds.

Age 9, lives in a city

Non-binary: That there's lots of nice places to visit - especially the beaches, woods and mountains.

Age 8, lives in a city

Boy: Love nature in Ireland. Love seeing different types of butterflies and birds every day and being able to see tadpoles growing.

Age 7, lives in a village

Boy: We've got good climate for biodiversity. We have nature close by and we are not destroying a lot of our plants (like the Amazon is).

Age 9, lives in a town

Girl: It rains a lot so you get to jump in lots of muddy puddles.

Age 5, lives in a town

2.3 What Children Aged 12 Years and Under Did Not Like

About Life in Ireland

While the children identified many good things about being a child in Ireland, they also told us about many things that they did not like.

School and Education

While many children identified school as part of what was good about Ireland, many also thought that there are bad things about school. Not liking going to school, homework, teachers, bullying, religion, Irish and lack of support for children with disabilities or additional needs were all included in the over 700 negative statements that children made.

Girl: I don't like being a child because sometimes I get scared of my teacher. She talks in a negative way and it doesn't motivate me. I don't like being a child in Ireland because my teacher said we did not deserve a golden hour on Friday. Because she said we were slacking and lazy and that really hurt me. It happens regularly.

Age 11, lives in the countryside

Boy: I don't like homework because I already spend 5 and a half hours in school and I want to chill out when I go home.

Age 9, lives in a town

Girl: Schools are very good but for me don't teach Irish very well. Their way to teach is if they speak Irish you'll learn.

Age 10, lives in a city

Girl: I have a disability. Next year I will have to go to a special school in another town far away, as there is no class in my school which I can attend... This makes me sad, as I will not have any friends in my community. I feel forgotten about...

Age 8, lives in the countryside

Boy: Religion in school because I am non religion. I don't like sitting for 30 minutes everyday just reading a book and I feel strange when the other kids are praying. In October a priest threw holy water on me even though I said I was non religion, it made my shirt wet. Other kids got hw [homework] passes and sweets for singing in the choir last year and I didn't which is not fair.

Age 11, lives in the countryside

Non-binary: ...even though im only 12 the school system sucks, they don't really do anything about bullying, the teachers will always snitch on you about ur mental health, they offer you terrible advice, and ever since Covid they will say that you can't go to the bathroom even if you tell them you really have to go.

Age 12, lives in a city

Covid-19 and Lockdowns

As we carried out this survey in April 2021, it is not surprising that many of the younger children were unhappy about Covid-19 and its impact on their lives. Over 400 responses to the question, what do you not like about living in Ireland? were directly related to Covid-19 and its impact. In particular, the impact of Covid-19 on school, family and seeing friends were what these children did not like.

Boy: Being stuck in lockdown and missing everyone I love in my family.

Age 6, lives in a town

Girl: At the moment I can't see my family in other parts of the country. Covid has changed my life and I'm fed up of it. School is very different and all the activities are restricted.

Age 12, lives in a city

Boy: Covid. I can't see my friends. I can't have birthday parties. My first Communion hasn't gone ahead last year because of Covid-19.

Age 10, lives in the countryside

Girl: Covid has been bad for children especially when school and playgrounds closed.

Age 7, lives in a village

Prefer not to say: It's not good when its lockdown because you have to stay at home for months. I miss school a lot in lockdown.

Age 5, lives in a village

Girl: Covid is awful and I worry my grandparents will get sick and die. I also worry my father will get it he has bad cancer.

Age 10, lives in the countryside

Play and Recreation

A lack of opportunities to play and take part in leisure activities was one of the most common things that children did not like about living in Ireland. Their comments here related to a number of different topics including the weather, lack of playgrounds and other places to play and safety concerns (primarily in relation to cycling). Many of these comments related to Covid-19 restrictions and too much homework. However, even when these are removed (and counted under school and Covid-19 above) children made over 350 additional comments on play and recreation.

Girl: I wish there were more parks for older kids. The weather. No where safe to cycle.

Age 12, lives in the countryside

Girl: I wish we had more theme parks or water parks to go to and there's hardly any sports to do other than GAA and football. I don't like that we have to do GAA in school for PE. I wish we could do other activities. There are no footpaths in the country. We can't cycle or walk from our house. I would like to be able to ride my bike when I want to.

Age 12, lives in the countryside

Girl: Not much choice in sports just GAA... football is around but no girls teams. I want basketball and gymnastics but not around or very small no availability.

Age 7, lives in a town

Girl: I want to be able to cycle more and safely. I want to be able to play outside safely without my parents having to watch me.

Age 10, lives in a city

Boy: No playground or green areas to play in where I live. I have no garden.

Age 7, lives in a village

Girl: Bad weather. In Ireland there is no underroof or indoor play areas such as sport pitch, gathering areas etc. Similar to ones in Iceland.

Age 11, lives in the countryside

Girl: I don't like that our playground is something that other people do not respect. They leave their litter around and break our playground toys.

Age 7, lives in a town

Boy: There are not enough play centres where mummies and daddies are allowed play with me.

Age 5, lives in a town

Social Issues

While the above sections cover the principle single issues that children aged 12 and under thought were bad about growing up in Ireland, they raised many additional concerns, albeit less frequently. These are broadly termed social issues here and have relevance to children's rights. These provide further insights into the children's lives and their awareness of issues that affect others. Taken together, children made over 400 references to such issues. Key among these are concerns about the environment and climate change, homelessness, discrimination on the basis of race, sexual identity or orientation and disability, as well as a lack of services, specifically transport and health.

Boy: Cost of housing. My family have rented in the same place for years and are now being asked to move because they are selling the house. I cried, I don't know where I am going to live. Things are very expensive and my mam sometimes has little money.

Age 11, lives in a city

Prefer not to say: I am autistic and school is difficult because they don't have a school that thinks about what autistic people need, only people who are not autistic get thought of. They should teach people that it's ok to be different.

Age 10, lives in a village

Boy: Racism. I am Irish born, my mom is Irish, my dad is Irish but my father isn't. Brown skin doesn't make me not nice.

Age 11, lives in a village

Girl: Not enough houses some people are homeless. Not enough doctors, nurses or dentists. Glasses waiting list is ages. Speech and language list is ages. My mam has to look it up on YouTube. There are bad people who make kids sell drugs in the lane you can't go down there or they get you.

Age 7, lives in a town

Boy: Not many transport options like there isn't loads of trains. And coverage isn't great in the countryside.

Age 10, lives in the countryside

Boy: When I got sick last year I had to be put on a waiting list to see the child doctor in my hospital. It took a long time to be seen and we couldn't afford to go private as a lot of our money goes on private therapies for me and my little sister.

Age 9, lives in the countryside

Girl: Climate Change, the fact that the government isn't treating it as the major crisis that it is and we're not making any major changes for the planet.

Age 11, lives in a city

Being Listened To

As the right to express a view and to have it considered and weight attached to it, according to age and maturity, is one of the general principles of the UNCRC, it is notable that a number of children identified not being listened to as one of the bad things about being a child in Ireland. A key word search found 135 negative references to this in the survey returns

Boy: People don't listen to children or ask us what we want. I want people to listen more to what us kids want.

Age 8, lives in a town

Girl: Social workers don't listen and took my brother to another house I asked why and they dint have proper answer.

Age 9, lives in a town

Boy: That children do not get to vote. Children should have their say too!

Age 11, lives in a village

Girl: Adults don't always take you seriously because you're younger and have less experience than them. People don't expect as much from you because you're younger.

Age 11 lives in a town

Prefer not to say: People don't always listen to children. Or sometimes if it seems people are, they are doing it to look good.

Age 11, lives in a town

Girl: I feel we are not taken seriously by authority figures (people in power) from what I have read online.

Age 12, lives in the countryside

2.3 What Children Aged 12 and Under Would Like to Change in Ireland

Changes to School

In excess of 1,000 responses to the survey referred to changes that younger children would like to see in school. These changes covered a very wide array of topics including homework, the teaching of religion and Irish, the desire for more physical and play activities and facilities, teachers, supports for children with disabilities and bullying.

Prefer not to say: No homework. It would give me more time to do what I want to do.

Age 12, lives in a town

Boy: I don't like feeling different in school because of my friends religion. Maybe they could learn about religion outside school.

Age 9, lives in a village

Girl: I feel left out. All local schools should have proper special classes, so all children with disabilities wouldn't have to move schools.

Age 8, lives in the countryside

Girl: Change the curriculum in primary and secondary school on teaching subjects like OLE [oral language education], SESE [social, environmental and science education] and SPHE [social, personal and health education] to give non-religious health education and also change the way we learn Irish because it is taught very badly.

Age 11, lives in a town

Boy: Another thing is that it would be nice if some of the teachers would be nicer for others from Ireland Poland China you name it.

Age 10, lives in a town

Girl: More enthusiasm from teachers in what kids want to learn as well as what they need to learn. More interactive projects such as projects on animals care and welfare, other countries and their cultures, growing food etc.

Age 10, lives in a town

Boy: Teachers stop shouting. Not being given out to for being slow.

Age 10, lives in a village

More and Better Play and Recreation Facilities

Play and recreation facilities is an area in which many children (almost 1,000 responses) wanted to see improvements. This reflects the importance of play and recreation as something that they identified as both good and bad about being a child in Ireland. These facilities included more clubs and local groups, physical facilities such as more playgrounds, parks and playing pitches, as well as improved access both inside and outside school.

Girl: Better if there is more play grounds and swimming pools.

Age 7, lives in a town

Boy: Bigger and better public play spaces even if mammy has to pay money to use them so that they don't get broken and are clean from bad germs.

Age 6, lives in a city

Boy: I would like more clubs and activities in smaller towns for the young people of Ireland.

Age 11, lives in a town

Girl: It would be nicer if they had cycling lanes for children in the country who want to cycle to school, and hedges can be in the way as well.

Age 10, lives in the countryside

Boy: More club or sport options in local area that is not GAA or rugby. Maybe animal or nature based. Something different. Like a kids walking or art club.

Age 11, lives in a town

Girl: Better facilities for school to enable sporting activities in all weather. Bigger indoor halls and bigger all weather pitches and yards.

Age 9, lives in a town

Girl: Having more places to visit that does not cost too much money as I have 4 sisters and my mammy cannot afford to bring us all to places that cost too much.

Age 8, lives in the countryside

Better Services and Supports

This is a broad category and includes children's responses in relation to services, supports and help that they would like to see improved for themselves and others, as well as supports for a safer and greener environment. The main groups they expressed concern about were homeless people, people experiencing poverty and children with disabilities. We received over 600 responses relating to these concerns.

Boy: Give help to children who are poor and homeless, give them money and homes.

Age 12, lives in the countryside

Prefer not to say: That poor people could have money.

Age 8, lives in the countryside

Girl: If we had more people to talk to about our feelings. If we learned more about self defence, mental health, other cultures, what to do in dangerous situations.

Age 12, lives in a town

Girl: A cleaner environment, climate change. Hopefully that doesn't need explaining. A safer environment, less hate crimes against people only adults see as different.

Age 12, lives in a city

Boy: Services and supports in place and as required. And skills in place for the professionals, who currently are not skilled in helping me. MDT approach in school and health setting.

Lifelong learning pathway for me in areas of interest, not just token offerings. An education particularly literacy. I am not receiving an education. A right to communication and helping me communicate through services, supports and AT [Assistive Technology]

Age 12, lives in a city

Boy: Free health and dental care for all kids. Maybe more nurse or doctor visits to the school. Some children I know never get to go to a doctor when they are sick or if something is wrong.

Age 11, lives in a town

Girl: We shouldn't have to wait a year to see someone about mental health problems and it shouldn't be a long tiring fight that puts pressure on the family's and children already struggling.

Age 12, lives in a town

Boy: Having more Gardai around parks and roads to stop anti-social and intimidation from teenagers and others like with drug problems and stuff like that!

Age 11, lives in a city

No More Covid-19 and Public Health Restrictions

Children identified Covid-19 and the restrictions it placed on their lives as one of the worst things about being a child in Ireland at the time of the survey. It is not surprising that they also wanted to see things change in this regard. Over 350 responses from children identified that an end to the Covid pandemic and restrictions would make life better. Many mentions of restrictions related to being able to see friends and family again.

Boy: Covid ends and we can play with friends and go to fun play areas.

Age 10, lives in a village

Girl: I think that Ireland would be better if we could find a solution for covid 19 and get Ireland fully opened.

Age 9, lives in the countryside

Boy: Being able to visit our friends in their houses. No more covid.

Age 6, lives in a city

Prefer not to say: If there was a cure for covid.

Age 10, lives in a village

Girl: I would like more vaccines to go out so I can see my granny and grandad and I can hug my friends.

Age 10, lives in a town

Girl: ...hopefully Covid 19 is over so we can get back to normal and not wearing any masks.

Age 12, lives in a town



*"Play and rest."
Child in Primary School*

2.5 What Children Aged 13 and Over Told us was Good About Being a Child in Ireland

Children aged 13 years and over identified many things that are good about being a child in Ireland, and most of these overlapped with those identified by younger children. Again using key word searches to identify and group responses, the following were the key themes that emerged for older children in the survey.

Education and School

Over 1,300 responses identified either school or education as a good thing about being a child in Ireland. These covered an array of areas including the right to education and to go to school, the quality of education, good teachers, being with friends and opportunities to study a wide range of subjects and take part in many school activities.

Girl: Education system is very well established. Everyone has a chance to go to school.
Age 16, lives in a city

Girl: Having access to good quality primary and secondary level education, and knowing that third-level education is open to me should I decide to continue my studies after the leaving cert. Having Transition Year in secondary school as a year to learn more about my interests and to get experience in workplaces and with community service.
Age 17, lives in a city

Boy: Being able to go to school every day and meet with friends.
Age 15, lives in the countryside

Girl: In my school we are given loads of opportunities to progress and take control in our school lives. I feel this helps build me for the future.
Age 15, lives in a village

Boy: Really enjoy school and the subjects I'm doing.
Age 15, lives in a town

Prefer not to say: In school, you get to meet all sorts of people from different places all over the world and you get to learn about their language and culture. You never know who's going to be your friend.
Age 13, lives in a town

Non-binary: I like the school system, it differs quite a bit from the other countries I've been to, but it's nice enough. However, I go to an Educate Together school, so it might be different from others' experiences.
Age 15, lives in a city

Friends and Family

Unsurprisingly, having friends and family, spending time with them and getting support from them was a common theme among older children. Just under 1,000 responses to the survey referred to friends and family as one of the good things about growing up in Ireland.

*Girl: Being close to most of your friends and being with them.
Age 16, lives in the countryside*

*Boy: My friends being supportive with my decisions mostly.
Age 13, lives in a city*

*Prefer not to say: Friends, hangout with them and talk with them, helps with wellbeing because people are understanding.
Age 13, lives in a town*

*Boy: My family are always supportive for me and help me when I need it most.
Age 16, lives in a village*

*Girl: That there are places to go to with my friends/family.
Age 14, lives in a city*

*Non-binary: Having family close by (I lived in the US until I was 16 but my father's family are all here in Ireland).
Age 17, lives in a city*

Leisure

Just under 1,000 responses from children aged 13 to 17 years referred to access to and participation in recreation and leisure activities, including sport, drama, music and other activities, or having places they can just hang out with friends as a positive aspect of being a child in Ireland. Many of these quotes referenced the easy access to such activities through local facilities, clubs and groups and through school.

*Girl: Sports. I absolutely love sports and have great fun with my friends at training sessions....I can have fun with my friends, play my best and stay fit at the same time.
Age 13, lives in the countryside*

*Boy: Access to public grounds like football pitches or parks. It was great and my childhood relied on being able to use pitches or parks for free to see my friends.
Age 17, lives in the countryside*

*Boy: Having the chance to play outside because of all the space and freedom.
Age 13, lives in a village*

*Girl: There are a lot of parks and shopping centers that I hang out with my friends (pre-COVID of course). We used to have fun during summer and other holidays, going to the city and watching movies, going to the beaches in Ireland for walks etc. It's quite fun to live in Ireland, in my opinion.
Age 17, lives in a town*

*Girl: Access to many activities such as sports or youth clubs in most communities.
Age 16, lives in a city*

*Boy: The amount of sport and extracurricular activities available is fantastic, as they can really take your mind off of any worries or stress you have.
Age 14, lives in a city*

Freedom

The children wrote of freedom from adult responsibilities and worries, such as work and bills, as well as freedom to engage in social activities. In total, almost 500 responses related to this theme.

Girl: The freedom that comes with living in a developed country. Not having a huge amount of responsibility and pressure to work at a young age.

Age 15, lives in a village

Boy: The freedom that I have to do what interests me - I do not have to be something or someone in particular.

Age 17, lives in a village

Non-binary: Ireland is full of freedom; it gives a child several options depending on their age. As for 16 - we get to be able to participate in work, we have an okay education system and further education. It has a lot of opportunities for young people like myself and a lot of others.

Age 16, lives in a town

Girl: You don't need to pay tax or bills.

Age 16, lives in a town

Boy: Having freedom to do things like go out with my friends and being able to go to school.

Age 14, lives in a town

Boy: Being carefree. The adults deal with all of the important stuff and the only thing you have to think of is whether you want to play tag or football at lunch.

Age 17, lives in the countryside

Safety

In total, just over 400 responses referred to safety as being a positive aspect of being a child in Ireland. This sense of safety and the above sense of freedom are closely related. While talking about safety, some children mentioned specific issues such as safety from child abuse, war and crime, but most talked about feeling a general sense of safety in going about their lives and being themselves.

Boy: Its safe we can go outside and we don't have our safety to worry about.

Age 14, lives in a village

Girl: In a way it feels safe to live in a country like this where there, for example, is no usage of guns. (As far as I know, for the 13 years of my life I've lived here I've never felt like I was in much danger).

Age 13, lives in a city

Girl: I am safe majority of the time and parents don't need to worry about me if I go out with my friends.

Age 14, lives in a village

Boy: Having freedom to do things like go out with my friends and being able to go to school. Feeling safe.

Age 14, lives in a town

Non-binary: It feels safe most times, there's not yet been a situation when I felt unsafe when I was out with my friends.

Age 14, lives in a village

Girl: Feeling safe on the streets when not with an adult.

Age 16, lives in a city

Non-discrimination and Respect

Over 300 responses from the children aged 13 and over referred to a lack of discrimination and a sense of being accepted and respected. These responses addressed a range of issues including racism, homophobia and gender, as well as a feeling that they could express themselves for who they are. The view that Ireland is a friendly, diverse, open and progressive country that was welcoming and accepting of people supported this.

Boy: A diverse community in modern Ireland means Irish children get to experience different cultures and customs while attending school in Ireland. This discourages issues such as racism and a lack of education around the LGBTQ+ community and more.

Age 17, lives in a town

Boy: I am treated very fairly as a child in Ireland and I think that is a very good part about living here. All my rights are being upheld living my life here so I have nothing really to complain about.

Age 15, lives in the countryside

Girl: Freedom to express my own opinion. Knowing that I will be accepted no matter who I am or who I like.

Age 13, lives in a village

Girl: I can come out as lesbian, transgender or non-binary and of course there will be those who say I can't but there are so many now that say I can or at least will keep their mouth closed. It's freeing as a child to know one day when I grow up I can be who and whatever I want.

Age 13, lives in the countryside

Boy: The respectful and friendly nature of Irish people.

Age 17, lives in the countryside

Non-binary: Ireland is a very much accepting country of non-binary/trans/anyone part of the LGBTQI+ community. This allows not only me but others feel a bit more safe knowing that there are people to accept us as who we are.

Age 16, lives in a town

Boy: Being free to be myself I have autism and dyspraxia and I'm always able to be myself even when I see things differently.

Age 15, lives in a town

Services and Supports

Good services and supports were identified just under 250 responses from older children. These services related primarily to health and mental health care, school supports, child specific support services provided by the state and NGOs. However, a number of children also talked about the support they received in their local community.

Girl: Social welfare, free healthcare, free primary and secondary education, free dentist.

Age 17, lives in a town

Girl: Children in Ireland have lots of rights. There are many organisation set up to help support children with absolutely anything from mental health support to educational needs, there is support for everyone.

Age 14, lives in a city

Girl: We have good services for people who struggle with mental health and I like the way people help each other when in need.

Age 13, lives in a village

Boy: Access to health care as I'm visually impaired.

Age 16, lives in a village

Boy: Education is at a high standard with amazing support and facilities.

Age 14, lives in a city

Girl: There is a great sense of community here. It feels as if there is a massive support network keeping an eye out for you, a sense of security; possibly stemming from the friendly, positive nature of anyone out and about.

Age 17, lives in a town

2.6 What Children Aged 13 and Over Did Not Like About

Life in Ireland

In addition to finding many positive aspects to life as a child in Ireland, the older children who took part in our survey also found many things that they were unhappy about. The key themes to emerge from the survey in this section were almost identical to those aspects of life that many children liked.

Education and School

Children raised a number of issues in relation to education and school. Commonly recurring issues were the memory-based nature of education and exams, the need for reform of the education and exam system, a heavy focus on State examinations, particularly the Leaving Certificate, excessive homework on top of the school day and the lack of supports available to them in schools. School-related stress was also mentioned frequently. Over 1,600 responses related to school and education.

Girl: The stress of the leaving certificate on young people, the department puts on extra things that add extra stress for us. In school it's always "we have a course to finish" we don't get any free time really for a study class or a sunny day to go out for a walk.

Age 16, lives in the countryside

Boy: Exams are so pressured as soon as you go into 1st year they are on about the leaving cert straight away... I would prefer predicted grades, exams are so much pressure and they don't suit me.

Age 15, lives in the countryside

Boy: The education system seems to cater for one type of learner only. Too many exams and not enough continuous assessment. This can stifle creativity.

Age 16, lives in a city

Boy: In school there is not enough student support in place. One day my vice principal, who is also the school DLP⁴, advised that if I was having a bad day I should park it when I get to the school gates or just not come in that day...

Age 17, lives in a village

⁴ Each school must have a DLP, or Designated Liaison Person. The DLP is responsible for ensuring that the standard child protection and welfare reporting procedures are followed and concerns reported promptly to the relevant authorities.

Non-binary: The leaving cert is a flawed system that affects mental health severely. Irish schools do not handle mental health issues such as autism and self-harm appropriately.
Age 16, lives in a city

Girl: The school system is annoying in my opinion. Everyone is told how useful they are to a college by how many points they can get in the leaving cert which are acquired from one skill; memory. There's close to no practical exams so no matter what type of learner you are or what you'd like to do in your future, you have to memorise all these things that are practically useless. Maths is a difficult subject for a lot of people yet you still need to pass it to be able to graduate. Irish is great to learn but they're teaching it to us as if we know it like English (teaching us poems and stories) when we don't. It's very unfair to a lot of people and in my opinion is built on the expectation for everyone to work at desk jobs and help someone else follow their dream.
Age 16, lives in a town

Services and Supports

Services and supports, including those related to health and mental health, disability, education, transport, broadband, homelessness and climate change, were all of concern to older children. These are areas in which they feel that there are inadequate services and help for children and society more widely and that the state should address these. In total, a key word search revealed just over 550 responses related to this topic.

Boy: Disability services are dire. Health services are dire. Living with chronic pain and severe Intellectual Disability and complex medical issues, life is mad so hard as my mum has to fight for everything.
Age 15, lives in a village

Boy: Believe there is inequality in access to good education and services and too much child poverty. Access to mental health services is not good enough. If you struggle with your mental health the system is against you.
Age 16, lives in a city

Girl: Terrible public transport (inexistent bike lanes, inaccessible bus stops). Not enough youth groups or social activities for teenagers. Loneliness rates are extremely high.
Age 17, lives in a town

Non-binary: I have ADD and dyslexia. I did 1st year but due to chronic anxiety I can't go back to school. I have a home tutor so I'm up to date, but it's torture being away from everyone. My mum had to pay for private diagnosis... Due to what happened my elder sister in CAMHS my mum will never go HSE route again. We rent. We have been homeless... my mum is divorced and is a teacher, we get HAP [Housing Assistance Payment]. No landlord will take HAP... I did the constitution in history and I do not feel valued as a child in Ireland.
Age 16, lives in a town

Boy: The worry that one day you can be thrown into the homeless population, here the homeless population is steadily rising and it can be quite scary to think about it. Living in a rural area the online education was hardest since WiFi is extremely unreliable.
Age 13, living in the countryside

Girl: DO SOMETHING ABOUT CLIMATE CHANGE!!! I mean actually DO something, not just talk about doing things.
Age 15, lives in a village

Respect and Acceptance

Many of the older children referred to the issues of respect and acceptance of them and others as being an area that was not good in Ireland. Just under 500 responses referred to this theme. Included in these were statements that showed the children felt a lack of respect from both adults and peers, lack of acceptance in Ireland of difference in terms of race, gender, gender identity and sexual orientation, and a disregard of them and their opinions because they are young.

Girl: I am a foster child and I am in the care of Tusla. I feel that my voice isn't being heard and they are only doing what they want... I have had a bad experience in my family with Tusla they have said that we're too young to have our voice heard this has really upset me as I feel they have more power over us and we can't do anything about it.

Age 15, lives in a town

Non-binary: Lack of respect from adults/being talked down to and degraded a lot. Parents forcing strict ideals on me rather than letting me express my individuality and be myself, same can be applied to school due to strict uniform rules or old-fashioned values.

Age 17, lives in a town

Prefer not to say: Older people assuming I'm useless because I'm young. People telling me I'm too young to make decisions for myself about my identity. Not having a say in most things I do.

Age 13, lives in a village

Boy: All kinds of bullying. Racism. I always have to try to fit in.

Age 13, lives in the countryside

Girl: Irish children aren't very accepting of people who are different, e.g. Travellers, people who dress different etc.

Age 17, lives in a town

Girl: Gender stereotypes can be very common especially throughout school education in Ireland. Boys are often pressurised to play rugby or act tough in order to fit in, which results in many girls feeling unsafe or abused. In girls schools, subjects involving politics or large scale issues are often seen as unimportant and almost unnecessary... it is often the opposite in boys' schools.

Age 14, lives in a town

Boy: Stereotypes, us teenagers are usually recognised as people that are in gangs and if we hang outside in groups we are always suspected of something.

Age 14, lives in a village

Feeling Unsafe

Many of the children raised concerns about feeling unsafe or in danger (just under 300 responses). This sense of being unsafe or exposed to harm referred to not feeling safe when out alone or at night, being exposed to drugs, crime and violence, and threats from a perceived growing number of gangs that were intimidating or dangerous. Feeling safe online was also raised by a number of children.

Girl: Safer environment. It feels like especially for girls there is more to worry about... like harassment and feeling of being unsafe.

Age 14, lives in a city

Girl: Safety. Recently with online sexual harassment, children are very at risk of being targeted. Young girls especially, online I do all I can to protect myself but there's no legislation protecting children or people from stalking or harassment. Children in Ireland are still victims of child pornography online, from personal experience I've had several people I know being targeted by this.

Age 17, lives in a town

Boy: Drug dealers are all around the place so I don't really feel safe.

Age 13, lives in a town

Boy: Fear of street gangs when out playing.

Age 13, lives in a city

Non-binary: It's not safe, there us a lot of drug dealers and gangs.

Age 16, lives in a city

Covid-19

Older children raised a number of concerns about Covid-19, with just under 300 responses referring to this. These concerns primarily related to the pandemic itself, restrictions and wearing masks. The children also spoke of anxiety related to the pandemic and having to delay normal things they would have done.

Boy: Being scared by everyone in charge who talk about Covid all the time. Having to wear a mask in school and feel like I can't breathe and will have a panic attack. Feeling trapped and like I'll never be allowed to leave the country or have a future.

Age 16, lives in the countryside

Girl: Honestly the government haven't had a notion about what to do regarding covid, and as a teenager going through a pandemic with other countries already out of lockdown, covid free and have dealt with the vaccines, it's a kick in the face as these are the years we are meant to be enjoying, and wearing a mask for our last few years in school is upsetting, of course there's not much we can do about that.

Age 16, lives in a town

Boy: At the moment all the Covid talk, everywhere I hate it. The restrictions on going places during now. I want to do my car drivers test and everything has been pushed back because of Covid. That's really annoying.

Age 17, lives in a town

Girl: Wearing masks is hard sometimes you'd get dizzy and i get headaches I can't wait to leave to take it off I also haven't got to make new friends cause of how things are but I know when things are back to normal hopefully that will change.

Age 13, lives in a village

Girl: Right now and for the last year it's awful because of all the school closures and the way my school deal with COVID. I can't go to school for months. I'm not doing well in my subjects anymore. I'm worried all the time because our principal tells us if we don't wear a mask we could kill our granny or a family member. He said this before Christmas and I was sick with worry.

Age 13, lives in the countryside

Boy: Covid restrictions, and impact on all people, especially people with disabilities.

Age 15, lives in a town

2.7 What Children Age 13 and Over Would Like to Change

About Life in Ireland

Older children had, like younger children, many ideas about what would make life better in Ireland. However, a number of key themes about change emerged in the survey.

Systems and Support Services

Many of the children referred to the need for changes in various systems of provision and support in Ireland. A key word search revealed almost 1,200 survey responses that spoke to this topic. The education system was primary among the systems they wanted to see changed, including changes to the entire system that would make it fairer and work better for students, along with changes to the exam system. The children also wanted to see changes to the health and mental health system, the public transport system and housing provision.

Boy: Intensive reform of Leaving Cert curriculum. Less emphasis on one major exam, instead the development and progress of a student through key assignments... Schools should be secular therefore ensuring everyone is accommodated.

Age 17, lives in a town

Boy: Change up the way the Junior and Leaving Certificate is ran, use different ways of testing students over longer periods of time to get a fairer grade.

Age 15, lives in a village

Girl: Change the education system ask the students what they think will help them and what they want to learn.

Age 15, lives in a city

Girl: Better health system. Assessment of needs take too long. When a child eventually sees someone it's too late as there was no early intervention. Pandemic has negatively affected young people's mental health. Anxiety levels are high in children and teenagers. I would like to see CAMHS provide a better service and shorter waiting lists please.

Age 17, lives in the countryside

Boy: More housing for people with children and more affordable houses. These children can't afford to spend all their lives in different hotels every night with nowhere to play or be loud as they want. More services for these children also.

Age 17, lives in the countryside

Boy: Free public transport for students of all levels and those in early employment to help us get ahead. Especially people from rural areas that may need to use multiple buses/ trains to get to a destination.

Age 16, lives in the countryside

Girl: Public transport that can bring you where you want to go, as quickly as possible. It's not connected up right now and we need to go by car most times. Also, DARTs⁵ are not reliable and I am afraid going on them and my parents won't let me go on them coming home from sports training as they are not safe.

Age 17, lives in a city

5 In Dublin, the electric rail system is called the DART (Dublin Area Rapid Transit).

Changes in School

In addition to changes in the education system more broadly, children also identified many things that they would like to see changed in school that they felt would make their lives better. In total, just over 1,100 responses related to changes in school and covered a range of issues. These included the length of the school day, bullying, uniforms, rules and homework among others.

Prefer not to say: Better school system because we are forced to go to this place and act like robots sitting in the same places with our desks lined up doing the same type of work every day for six hours... they throw out so much homework at us and the next day they take a few seconds of class to correct or not correct it and just want to see if we did it. If you did not do it you get in trouble and sometimes you get a letter home about it and then you get grounded and get taken away the only things that bring you joy.

Age 14, lives in a city

Girl: Make school be a little shorter so kids would have more free time and there would be less stress.

Age 13, lives in a town

Boy: If schools had to follow correct protocol in bullying situations rather than brushing it under the carpet and getting away with not dealing with it.

Age 14, lives in a village

Non-binary: Students can get to choose if they want to come to school or not because they have a huge anxiety or depressed for that day. They may choose between pants or skirts for uniforms for them to feel more comfortable. Not too much homework because students may easily get a sprite of anxiety and depression.

Age 13, lives in a town

Girl: Better resources for learning difficulties and mental health in schools.

Age 17, lives in the countryside

Boy: Make school more interesting, get rid of the old way of learning (it hasn't changed in 100 years) and come up with new ideas.

Age 15, lives in a village

Youth Facilities and Leisure

Lack of appropriate, accessible and affordable leisure and youth facilities was something that older children wanted to see changed to improve their lives. Over 650 responses to our survey referred to this theme.

Girl: More sports facilities, the changing and playing areas for girls are terrible and sometimes we can't get a pitch to play on. We definitely don't have the same opportunities as the boys.

Age 14, lives in a town

Boy: An investment in sport facilities, coaches etc. especially in disadvantaged areas with high crime rate and conversions of secondary to college students.

Age 17, lives in the country

Prefer not to say: Government paid/Public clubs, places for kids to go to improve skills or have fun something like Youth Centres/Club things (Free as well) that host these clubs to go to on a weekend and places for kids to hangout in.(Ex. Art clubs, Swimming Clubs etc.) (Also rural kids may have no access to buses to try and access these places).

Age 15, lives in a town

Boy: More access to wheelchair accessible activities in playgrounds.

Age 14, lives in a village

Girl: Making places that are fun for people under 18 to go to, an example would be a skate park, more sweet shops, maybe even playgrounds for older kids or teenagers, there are a bunch of playgrounds but only for little kids.

Age 14, lives in a city

Boy: More activities/places for young people out of school hours where we can hang out safely with their friends doing fun stuff, not just sport.

Age 17, lives in the countryside

Equality and Non-discrimination

Just under 400 responses from older children referred to the theme of inclusivity and respect, both for themselves and for others. In broad terms they wanted respect for themselves and their opinions from their peers and adults, as well as wanting a more inclusive, diverse and accepting society that respected everybody and treated them fairly.

Prefer not to say: Boys getting equal rights. No racism/other discrimination. No discrimination.

Age 15, lives in a town

Boy: People respecting under 18s.

Age 16, lives in a town

Girl: Equal treatment, opportunity and respect for people regardless of gender, race, sexuality, disability or family background.

Age 17, lives in a town

Boy: More equality when it comes to opportunity - not dictated by family income or address or ethnic background.

Age 16, lives in a city

Boy: Less homophobia, not educated about lgbt+ terminology and using gay as an insult.

Age 14, lives in the countryside

Girl: Teach children about diversity and equal opportunities for EVERYONE from a very young age, while some may say its 'too difficult for them to understand' if it's introduced to them early on they will grow up with a better grasp on it.

Age 14, lives in a city

Being Listened To

Over 200 responses from older children stated that adults listening to their views and opinions more would improve their lives. This included reducing the voting age to 16 so that they could have a say in politics at local and national level.

Girl: Actually listen to us, instead of speaking for or over us. Being disregarded as children with invalid opinions is very frustrating.

Age 15, lives in the countryside

Girl: Voting age reduced to 16. A government that includes us in the decisions they make too.

Age 17, lives in a city

Boy: Give young people a real voice. A lot has been done to make young people be heard but those things in my opinion aren't making a massive impact or been shown any relevance. Also the kinds of young people that do take part in those initiatives are very academic young people who have interests in politics. But I think the real young people that we need to give a voice to are young people from poorer backgrounds or young people who spend majority of the time on the streets just hanging around. But I get that would be hard to do as most of that stuff is neglected by those types of young people because it is seen out of the "norm". So maybe try and find a way to get them to speak out and how they could be helped.

Age 16, lives in a village

Girl: Having young representatives, a youth parliament or committee to advise government on decisions regarding young people.

Age 13, lives in the countryside

Boy: Providing students with a genuine voice and say in the matter of our own education.

Age 17, lives in a town

Non-binary: People caring about our voices more and genuinely trying to fix the problems we bring up. Understanding that we're capable of understanding about issues and might know more than you do.

Age 13, lives in a village

Greater Freedom

Although not mentioned as frequently as the themes above, two additional themes emerged in the survey. The first of these is the older children's desire for more freedom and autonomy in their lives, particularly from parents, but also from other adults. This theme arose in just under 200 responses and refers to freedom of expression and religion, lower age limits for certain activities and not being dismissed as too young to do things on their own.

Girl: More freedom at school with the uniforms. I think clothing is a way of expressing who we are and we can't do that.

Age 14, lives in a city

Boy: Protect children's religious freedom.

Age 14, lives in a town

Girl: Allowing for teenagers to get in contact with mental health professionals without the need to get parents or guardians involved and having schools take other steps before immediately notifying students' parents.

Age 15, lives in a city

Prefer not to say: Be able to drive at a younger age makes you independent at a younger age.

Age 14, lives in a village

Boy: The second thing is kids need to be able to express themselves in any way because if they make mistakes all they can do is learn from them.

Age 16, lives in a city

Girl: More public transport and better ways for children to be independent.

Age 17, lives in a town

Girl: Having your own decision NOT BEING RULED BY PARENTS.

Age 13, lives in the countryside

Covid-19

The second of these themes is Covid-19 and the worry and limitations that it gave rise to. This also arose in just under 200 survey responses from older children. Under this theme, children spoke of fears about Covid-19, the limits it placed on their schooling and social activities and wearing masks.

Girl: Sort coronavirus out. Sitting in school freezing every day because all windows are open and then having to eat lunch out in the cold sitting on a little stool because of COVID 19.

Age 16, lives in a city

Girl: If students were able to get the vaccine as early as possible so that we could feel safe going to school without the thought of our parents, grandparents or ourselves catching Covid (as we are in a building with hundreds of other people while trying to social distance).

Age 15, lives in the countryside

Boy: Covid should not impact on us kids the way it has masks - can't go to school unless you wear one, missing friends, cancelled sports, lockdowns are so bad for kids rights to freedom.

Age 15, lives in a city

Prefer not to say: Covid restrictions should be eased so we can see more of our families and friends.

Age 14, lives in a city

Boy: Restrictions lifted for Covid. It was a long 4 months. Missed a lot of schooling. Found online learning was really hard feel I missed out on soo much in first year, missed loads of six class too. Don't feel we can catch up with it all and it will mean we won't be able to do as well in the future.

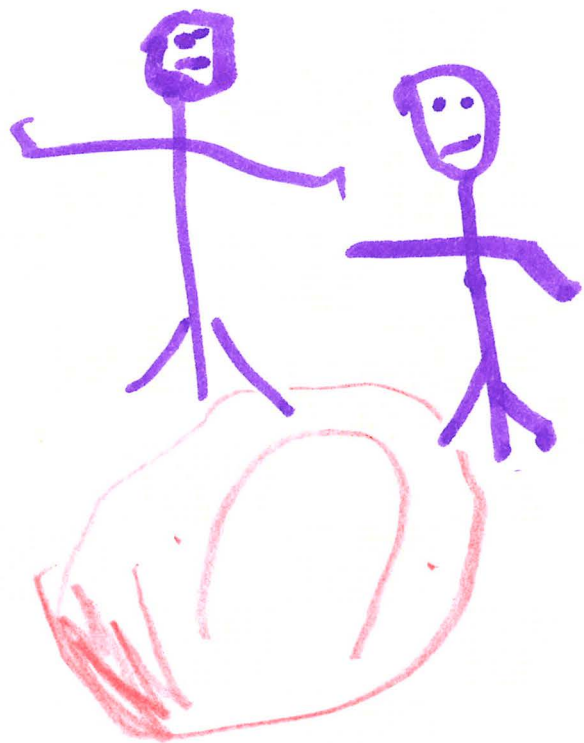
Age 13, lives in the countryside

Boy: If we didn't have to wear masks and socially distance. I feel my childhood is being destroyed. I feel isolated and very alone. The government need to act like they care about the youths in Ireland.

Age 14, lives in a city



I think children's rights
 in Ireland are all right



3

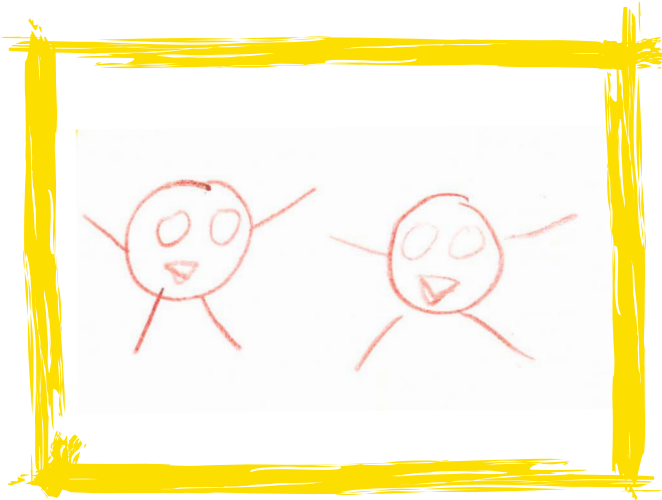
The Early Years Children



A number of Early Years service providers worked with very young children (under 6 years) to find out what they liked, did not like and wanted to see changed. Their views are captured in the images here.

3.1 What Early Years Children Like

For children in Early Years Services, family featured heavily in things that were good.



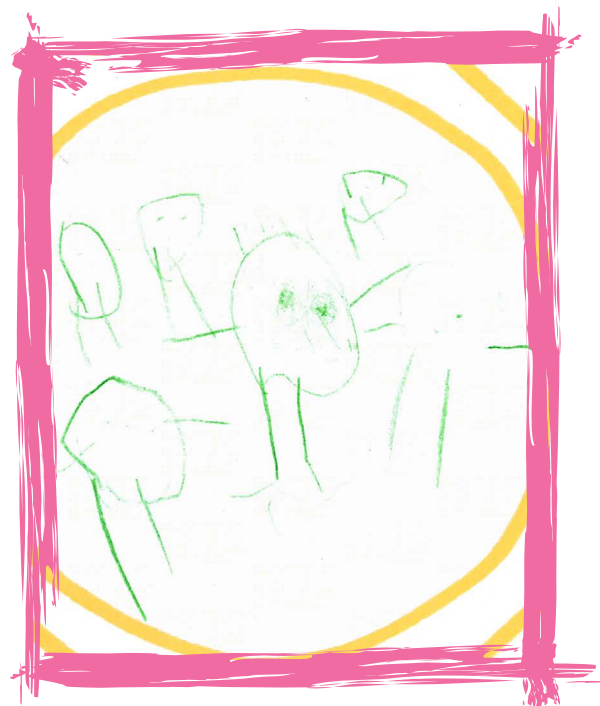
"My Mommy and Daddy."



"Mammy and Daddy. My family live in Ireland."



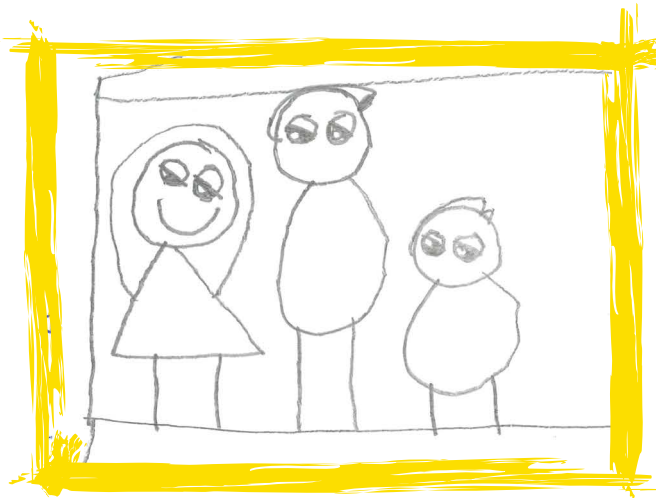
This child drew her mammy in the centre of the sun and her daddy who is in Portugal.



"I like to play football with my brothers."

This child drew himself, his older brother and his mammy and daddy all playing football together.

Children also said that they enjoyed doing things with their families.



*“Going for walks with mammy, daddy, and my brother.”
Girl in Early Years*

*“My sisters and my dogs.”
Girl in Early Years*

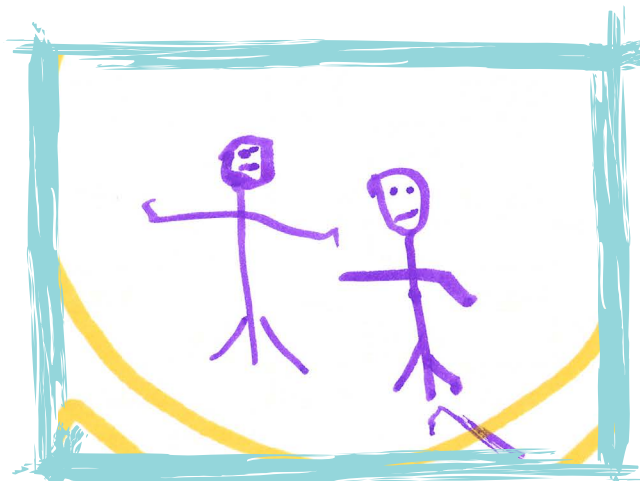
*“I like it when my sister loses her teeth, because she shares her money with me.”
Girl in Early Years*

“My family makes me happy.”

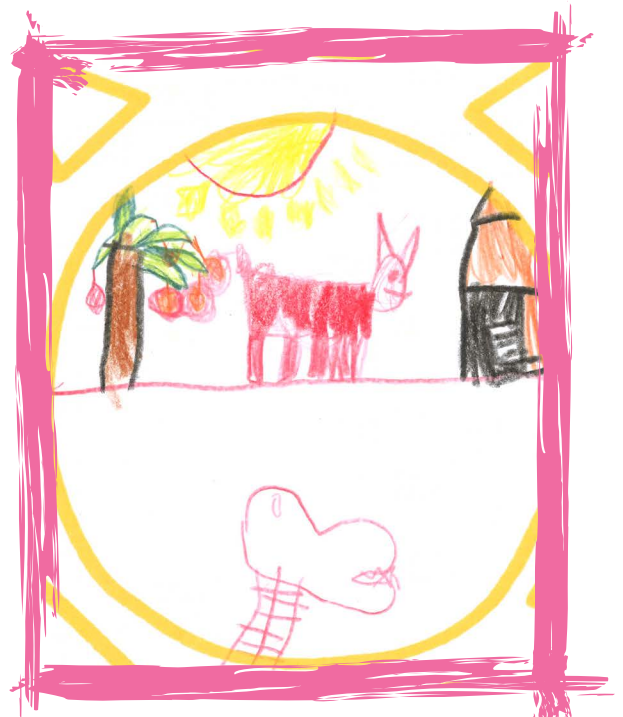
Playing and things the children enjoyed on a day-to-day basis featured as well.



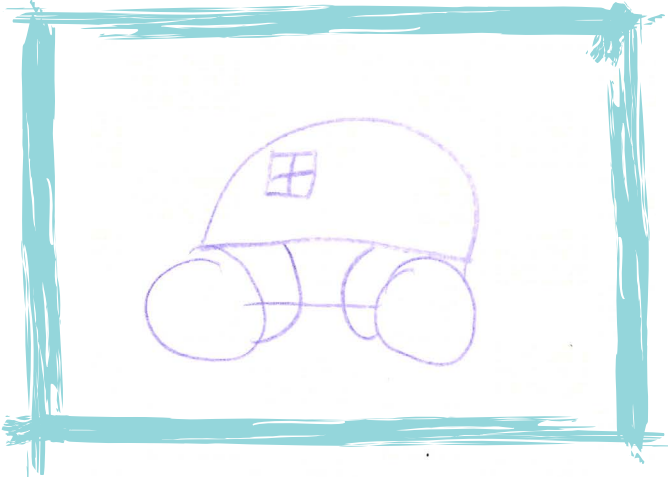
“I like living in Ireland because I'm happy. I like playing on the beach.”



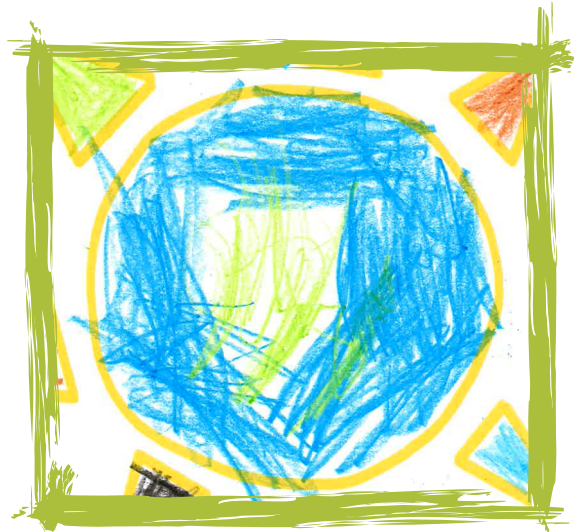
“I like playing.”



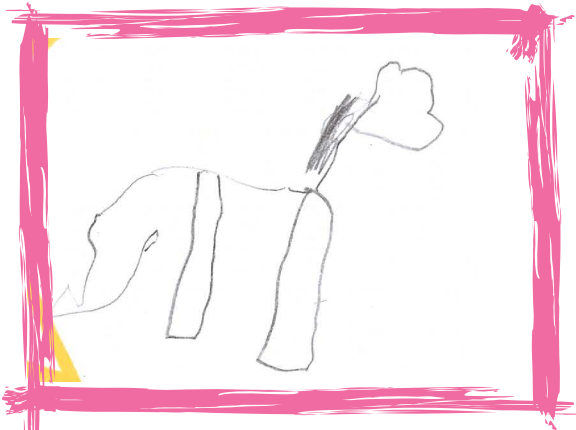
“Animals.”



"I like Christmas and monster trucks."



*"I love doing the bailing. I like the tractors."
This child also liked swimming in pools and at the beach.*



*"Football, ballet, and horse riding."
This child drew herself playing football in the sun, then doing ballet, and a horse outside the sun.*



"Being happy and playing in paddling pool."



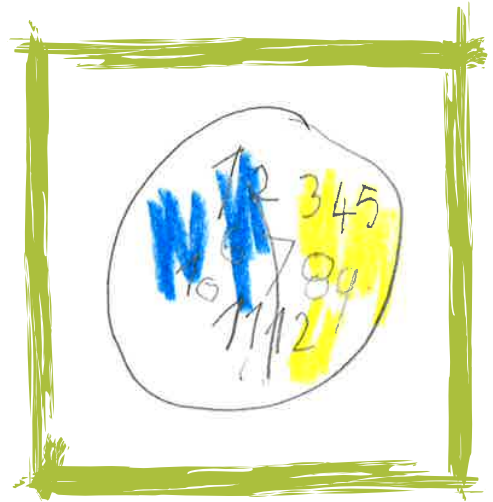
*"I like castles. Castle and the park and ducks."
This child also likes going to toyshops.*



*"Playing football."
This child likes playing outside in their early years' service.*



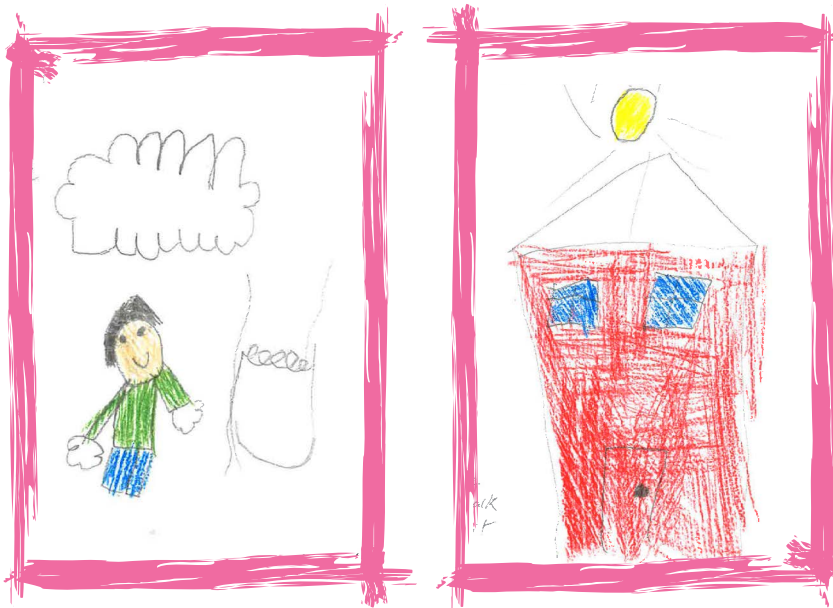
"Playing in the park."



"I like clocks and I have a watch."

I think children's rights
in Ireland are all right

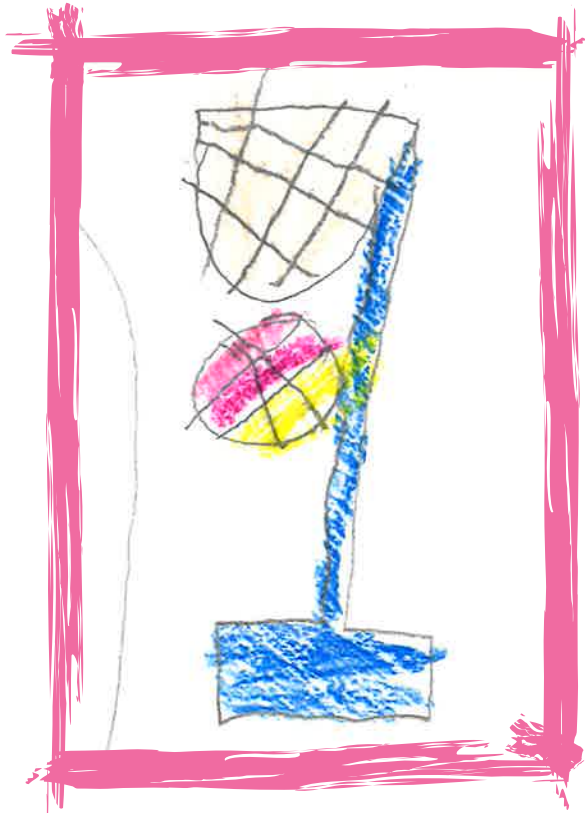
Play, in the park



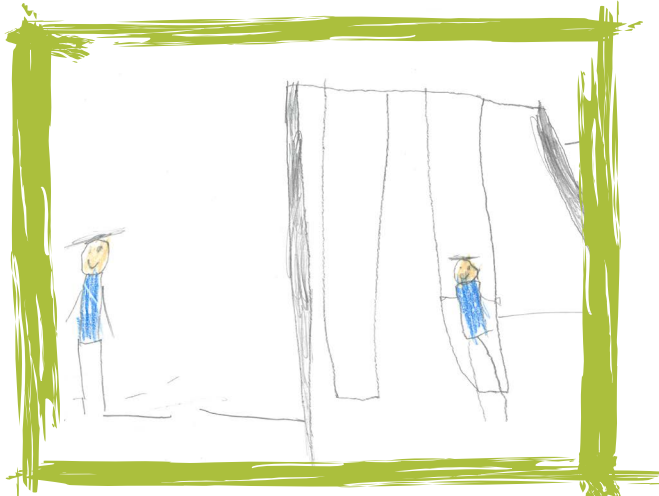
"Play in the park."
"I am happy that I have a park near my house. I can walk to it."



"Basketball court near my house."



"I am happy I can play at home."



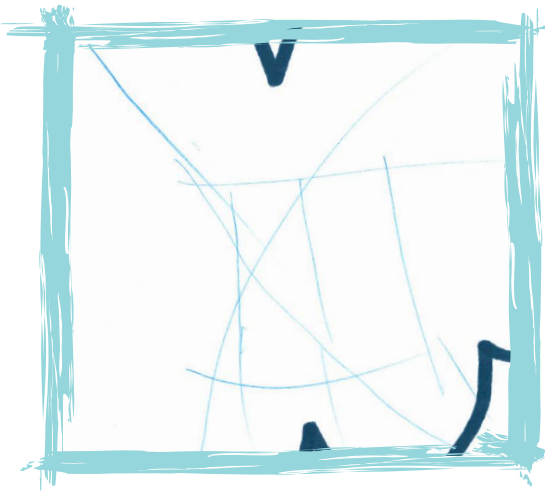
"I can walk to the park."



"Lots of play time."

3.2 What Early Years Children Don't Like

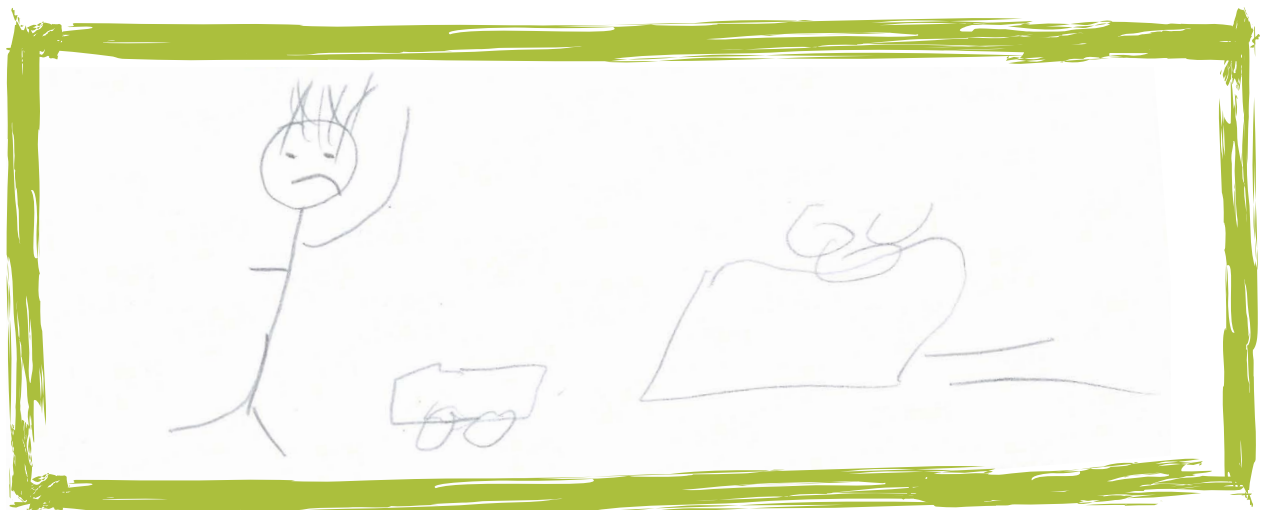
Most of the things that early years children did not like related to specific events or daily tasks.



"I don't want to take naps."



*"When I get hurt."
This child drew a sad face for when they get hurt.*



"I don't like tidying up."



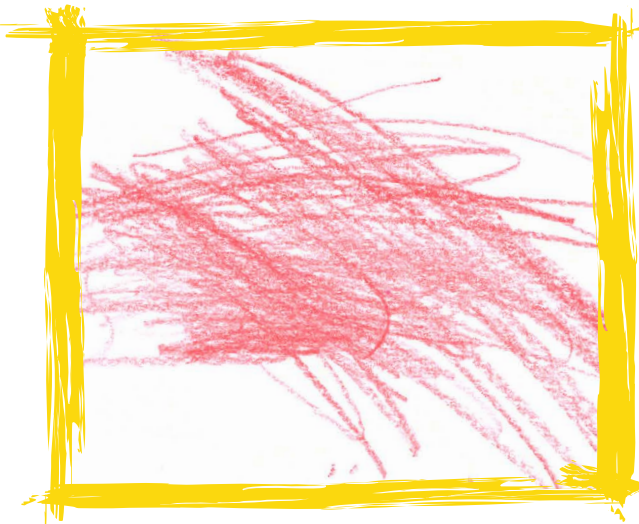
*"When I get bad news."
This child also said that playschool closing was bad.*



"Not being listened to."

I can't drive my dad's tractor
on the road until I'm
16 yr's old

"I can't drive my dad's tractor on the road until I am 16 years old."



"I don't like when you get a really sore knee and have to go to hospital."
This child was asked if he had ever been in a hospital. He said "No, but I have been to the chemist."



"It rains too much and we can't play outside. I am sad cos it's raining. Mum calling me in out for the rain."



"People who complain about the rain."



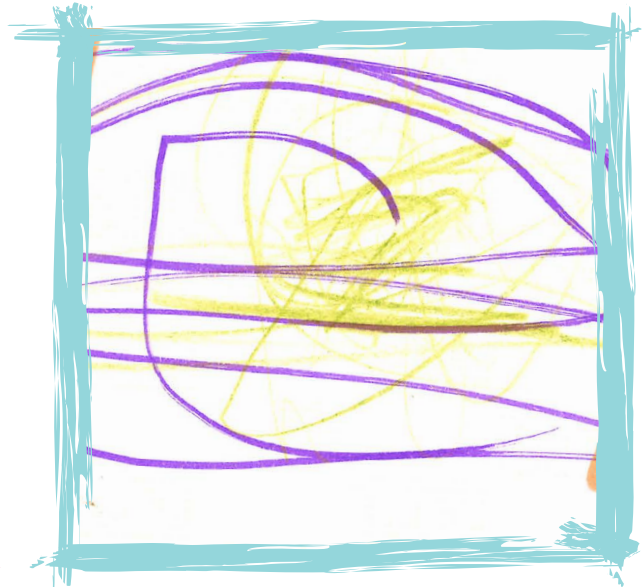
"There is too much rain."

3.3 What Early Years Children Would Like to Change

An end to Covid-19 was one of the changes the children wanted.

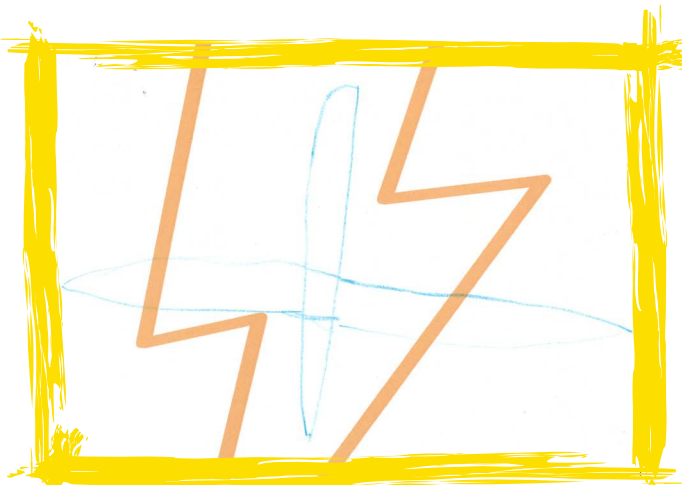


"I would stop COVID 19."

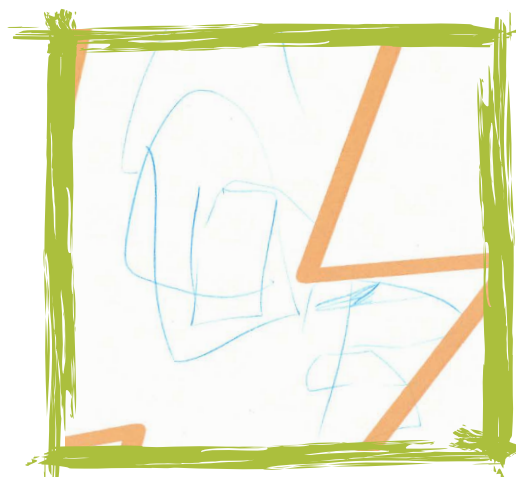


"COVID 19 to stop."

Some children also expressed that they wished they saw their family more.

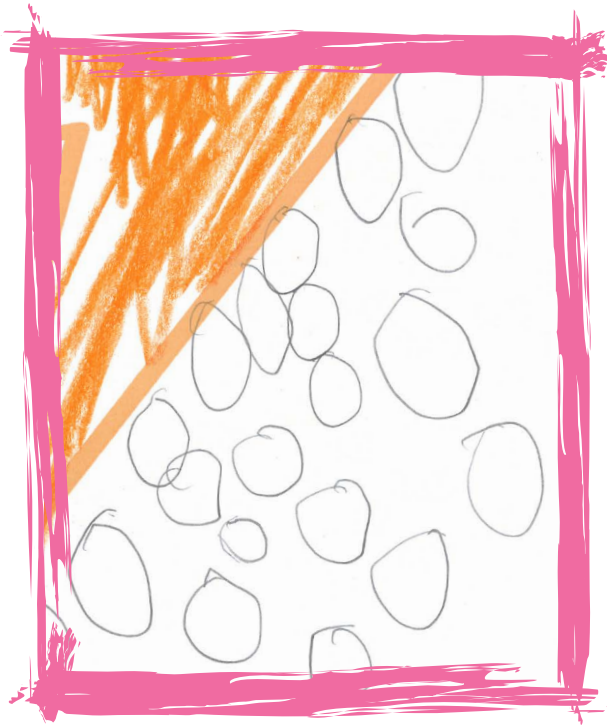


"I want to be able to go ot Portugal to visit my other family."



"See my nanny more."

For lots of children in this group what they wished to change was to have more of what they enjoyed.



"More snow. I like snow. I can make snowmen."



*"I want to play music in big school and when I am big I will be in a rock band."
This child drew a guitar, a drum, and musical notes for his rock band. This child also doesn't know what would make Ireland a nice place to live, but thinks his dad would like it if there were no rushes in his field.*



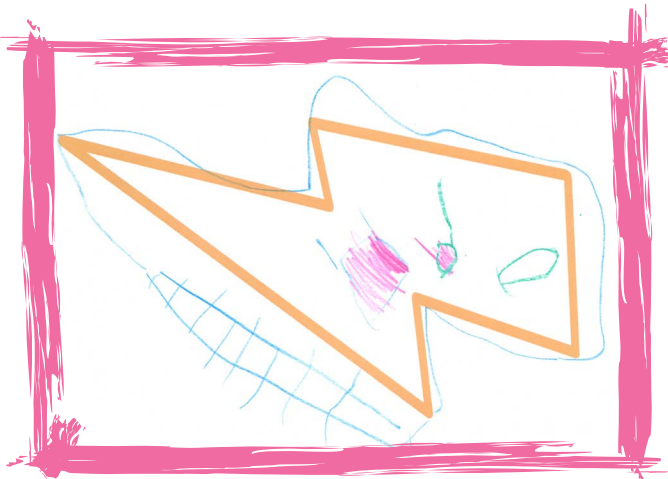
*"I wish I could have a birthday every day.
More elevators and escalators."*



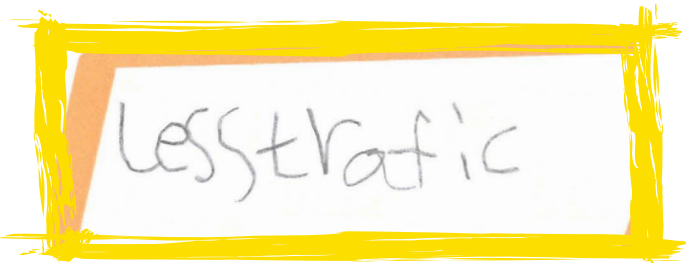
"More football."



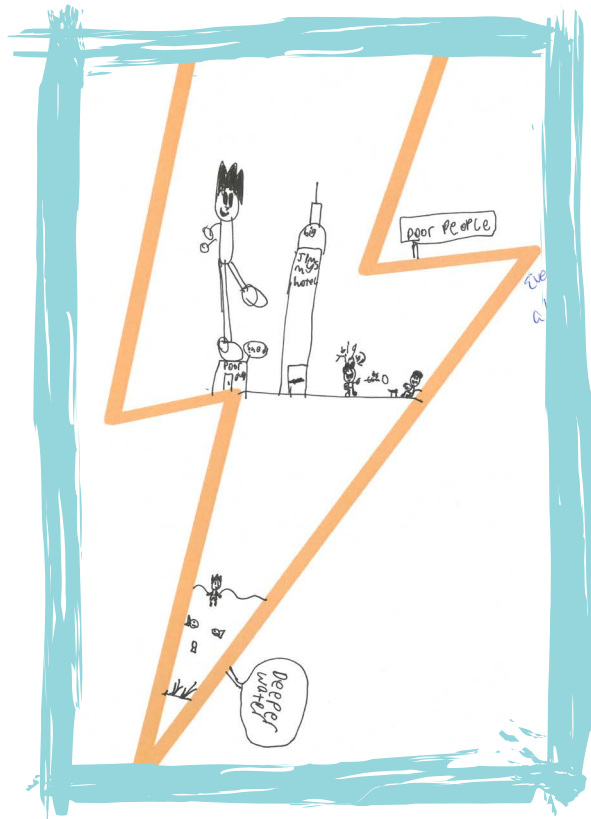
"More babyinos. More milk. More playing."



"I would like a fairy garden and a playground near my house."



"Less traffic."



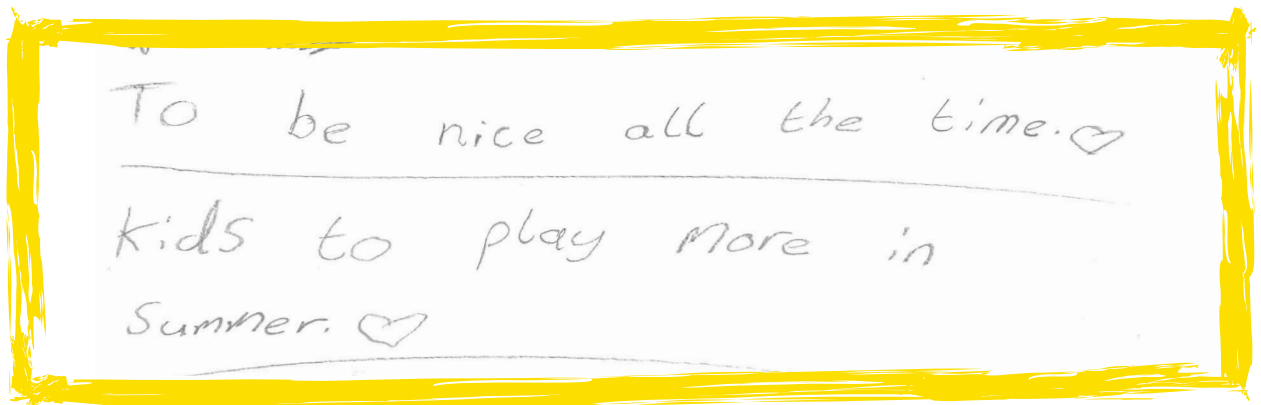
"Everyone needs a home."



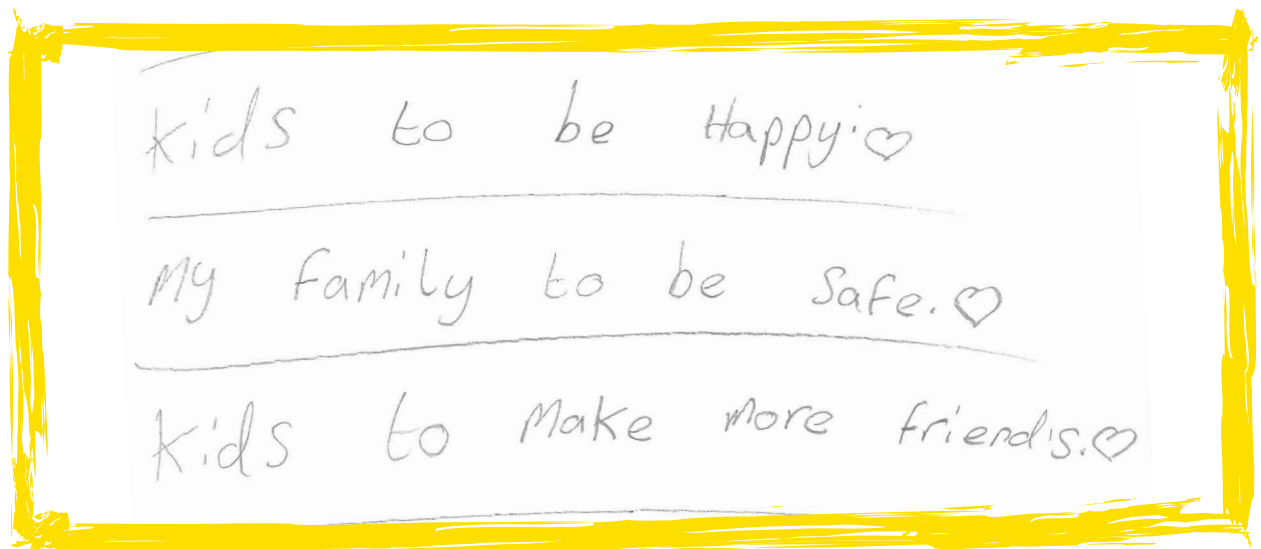
"I would like to fly in the sky. I would like a playground that I can ride or cycle my princess bike."



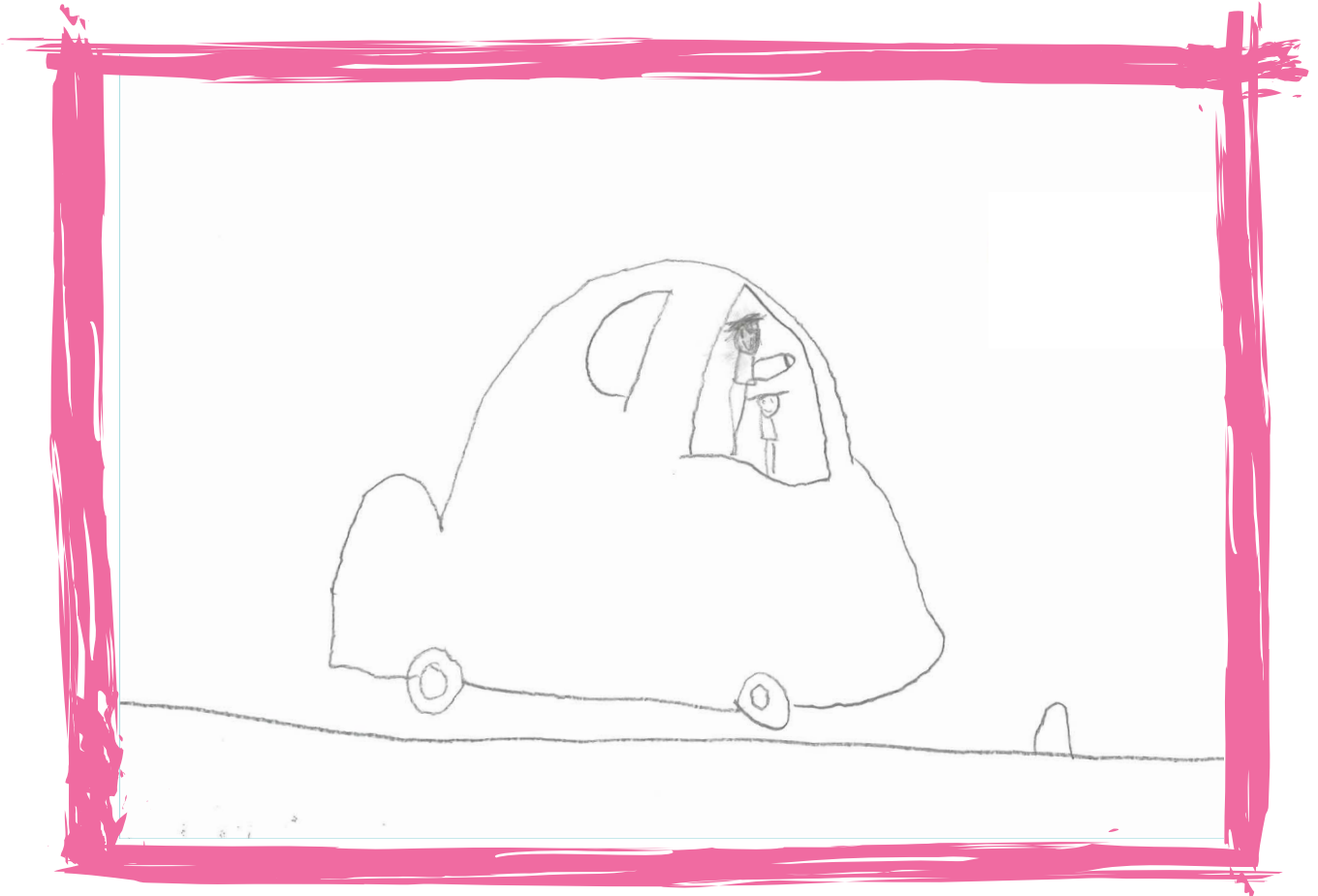
"Get a playground in every village."



"To be nice all the time. Kids to play more in the summer."



"Kids to be happy. My family to be safe. Kids to make more friends."



"I would change the bumps on the road."

ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

Proper mental health counsellors

- offers a system that accommodates all

- Strong links with families and the surrounding communities

Lack of teaching of cultures

School cares more about

making the school look good rather than focus on the students

Lack of Alternative

4

Views from Focus Groups: Education



Based on the survey results above, and focussing on children's rights, we worked with our YAP to identify a number of key themes for discussion in the focus groups with various groups of children. The agreed themes are:

- o Education
- o Services that support children
- o Community and leisure
- o Equality and non-discrimination
- o Children's voice
- o Special protections

4.1 Education and School

The most common theme that arose in both the survey and the focus group discussions was education and school. Children had mixed experiences within school. Primary school children frequently identified school as a place to meet their friends and learn new things. Several children also noted the kindness of their teachers and that school was a safe place for them.

Boy: It's very nice here. Every time someone gets hurt, the teachers always go and try to help them as much as they can. Yeah, it's mostly caring and learning.

Child in Primary School

Girl: Well, school in general, it just means that you're able to communicate and it can help you with social skills and stuff, because you're spending lots of time with people.

Child in Primary School

Boy: It's good that school is kind of like a safe place for some people.

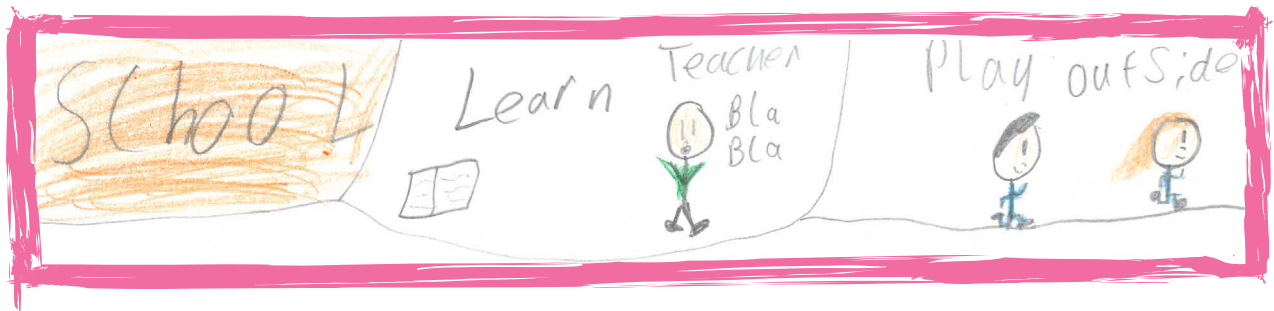
Child in Primary School

Boy: It's good because you get to meet new people.

Child in Primary School

Many primary school children valued being able to play outside during their breaks.

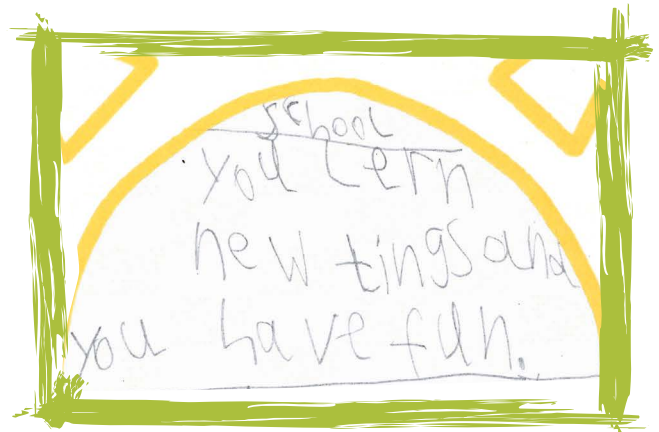




Some children valued the intercultural and interdenominational education they received.

Girl: Because like we learn about different countries in my school and everything, and it's good to know different cultures and everything like that... I go to an Educate Together school... because you get to learn about everything, and you get to learn about all different cultures and all different religions and everything, and all of their, and all of their beliefs and everything. So, it's very good to know.

Child in Primary School



"School/You learn new things and you have fun."

Children in secondary school also valued school as a place to socialise and learn. They identified a number of other positives about school, including free access, affordable and accessible third-level education, a more progressive and inclusive approach by schools, and promotion of the Irish language.

Girl: For the most part, school is free, like secondary school, your primary school, that's all free. Anyone in Ireland can go to it, and we're really lucky that we have that ability, and everyone has access to an education.

Child in Secondary School

Girl: Obviously not everyone wants to go to third level, but there's a lot more access to it compared to other countries, especially with things such as the HEAR⁶ scheme and the DARE⁷ scheme. It's trying to create equity with access to third level.

Child in Secondary School

Boy: There are teachers and principals that are willing to go out of their way to accommodate students with different needs, with different subject choices. And in our school, which would traditionally have been a mixed Catholic school, they have become much better in recent years in terms of accommodating all people, there is a progress within it, and it is becoming less and less sort of conservative and more, more progressive in some elements.

Child in Secondary School

⁶ Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) is an admission scheme that supports students from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds by offering third level places at reduced entry requirements.

⁷ The Disability Access Route to Education (DARE) is a third level admission scheme for school leavers whose disabilities, including learning needs and mental health, have had a negative impact on their secondary education.

Girl: If we want to, we can go to an Irish school, like a Gaelscoil and we can speak in our native language. I think that's really important that Ireland has that, and there is that opportunity for people if they want to go to that.

Child in Secondary School

Some children in rural Ireland found school was a good place to meet people with different perspectives.

Boy: Secondary school offers a really good opportunity to sort of connect with more people... the more that you're surrounded by people with different talents, different abilities, different passions that it does affect your own learning as well. And so that's one great [thing about] secondary schools in Ireland, in rural areas.

Child in Secondary School

A number of children placed particular emphasis on the fact that many schools now provided breakfast clubs and free school meals for some children. They saw this as particularly important for less well-off children and families.

Boy: Our school has access to the breakfast and lunches like available freely for people that might not have lunch or breakfast themselves like at home.

Children in Secondary School

Girl: This obviously doesn't go for every school, but I personally go to a DEIS⁸ school which means that we have reduced costs for school meals which can be like a big weight of a family's back, and that they could go into school, and they could get like a full meal.

Child in Secondary School

One of the most positive experiences identified by children in secondary school was Transition Year⁹.

Boy: I've just been through the Transition Year, and it is – I found it an invaluable resource. It has been amazing for opening up new opportunities for new horizons, and it's also been very good for sort of getting involved in things.

Child in Secondary School

Girl: Yeah, TY like, even though it was in a pandemic, and we couldn't do as much as we might have wanted... I had so many like incredibly options to do online and that like different, even different government – like the Bar of Ireland did a great course, like so many great courses where you can kind of figure out what direction you want to go and competitions and things. I was able to do barista training and I work as a barista now, so like, you know, there's different, like incredibly opportunities like that. It was just a really great year to like kind of figure things out and maybe take a bit of a break, a little bit of less stress round Covid and things like that.

Children in Secondary School

While many children spoke of the benefits of 'free education', other children pointed to the general costs of education in Ireland.

Boy: The education itself may be free, but the books, uniforms, other pieces and the voluntary contributions, which are in theory involuntary... There's certain elements of it that can be very costly, especially if say from First to Third Year. What happened with us is that they switched the course nearly twice, and that means that you have to buy new books every year. There's no resale. There are certain costs to it that can mount up over the years.

Child in Secondary School

⁸ Delivering Educational Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) is a government programme that provides additional and targeted resources and supports to schools with high levels of socio-economic and educational disadvantage.

⁹ Transition Year (TY) is an optional one-year school programme that can be taken in the year after the Junior Certificate and before Leaving Certificate in Ireland.

4.2 State Examinations

The Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate¹⁰ loomed large in children's lives from an early age. All children at secondary school level that we spoke to wanted the state exams to be reformed.

Girl: I don't know if this is the same for everyone, but I feel like in my school, and maybe in some schools, the focus is kind of more on just doing well in the Leaving... the school has just been focusing on spewing out high points every year, you know, instead of like help us develop as full people.

Child in Secondary School

Many children believed that reform of the Leaving Certificate was crucial, as they saw it simply as a memory test.

Boy: The key word to kind of sum it up is it needs to be more holistic, and enabling students with a set of skills [and] knowledge, instead of the memory game, that they have skills to apply to it and to get rid of the rote-learning. If I had one word I would rip out of a dictionary, it would be rote learning because I hates it so much.

Child in Secondary School

Some children fundamentally questioned the purpose of the education system.

Boy 1: Yeah, the education system, you see we talked about it here like a few months ago. It's completely the same as it was when it was first made.

Boy 2: Yeah.

Girl 1: It's the exact same system from hundreds of years.

OCO: Do you think school then is setting you up for life?

Boy 2: No.

Boy 1: No.

Girl 1: No, it's setting you up to just like-

Girl 2: For the life they want you to have.

*Boy 2: No, it's setting you up to pass an exam. Once you pass the exam, you're f**ked.*

Children in Alternative Education

Some children also believed that their guidance counsellors did not help them to identify their options post-Leaving Certificate or that schools did not inform them of alternatives to, and after, the Leaving Certificate. They felt that the emphasis is on the Leaving Certificate as an end in itself.

Girl: I know we have guidance counsellors like preparing us for our careers and everything, but in my school anyways, when we talk to guidance counsellors they'd hand us like a college prospectus or something and send us on our way. They wouldn't really show us, educate us about the other routes that we could take.

Child in Secondary School

Girl: It can be difficult if your school doesn't give you access to information....the way it is presented, it does kind of seems like the Leaving Cert is the be all, end all.

Child in Secondary School

¹⁰ The Junior Certificate is the first set of State exams taken by children in Ireland, usually taken after three years of post-primary education. The Leaving Certificate is the second and final set of State school exams, usually taken following five to six years of post-primary education.

Some children added that the hidden costs of the Leaving Certificate creates inequality in terms of the state examinations.

Girl: And just on that as well though, I think it's really important when we're talking about like the whole Leaving Cert and the Irish education system, like it's not equal. So many people spend so much money on things outside of school like grinds, just to get those points to get into the courses they want. And that's not feasible for everybody. You know, grinds, some grind schools can cost up to €700 a semester for grinds in one subject, and that will give people an unfair advantage in the Leaving Cert. And some people can't afford it, and it's just really not fair... Like even just buying revision books, which cost €10 each, and we do seven subjects... I had to buy eight books and they're each priced at 9.99 each, so that's €80 just for the revision books that I felt I need, I needed to do better.

Child in Secondary School

4.3 Effects of Covid-19 on Education

The Covid-19 pandemic had a profound impact on children's education. Although children identified many negative impacts, some identified tangible positives from home schooling and others praised the levels of support that their schools provided.

One child who has an intellectual disability particularly enjoyed online schooling.

OCO: What was school like when you had to stay home?

Boy: So, it was better than being in it, because if you, if you screamed you would just get muted. If only people had a mute button, especially for some of them.

Child with a Disability

Another child acknowledged the technological support provided during a period of home schooling.

Boy: Our school in particular managed to get as many laptops as they could out to people, they tried their best to be accommodating in that way.

Child in Secondary School

In general, many second level students we spoke to expressed frustration with home schooling during the pandemic. They did not want to be "at school" while at home, they experienced digital poverty problems with technology and felt unsupported by their teachers.

OCO Staff: So how did home schooling go?

Girl 2: Shocking. I learned nothing.

Boy 1: Oh Jesus, it was terrible.

OCO Staff: What was the worst bit about it?

Boy 3: Just being at home and having to do all the work, like for, in a place you're not used to doing work.

Boy 1: The motivation to get up and actually do it. And then you get up and it's like pointless because the teacher's Wi-Fi is bad or something. Oh Jesus.

Girl 2: I remember I had an extra Maths class with my Maths teacher and another class, and she completely forgot. So, I was there, sitting there for an hour waiting.

Children in Care

Boy: ...especially in rural areas, if you didn't have a connection to the Internet, or a good connection to the Internet, or if you didn't have a laptop that you could use, or a PC, there are certain students that really struggled over the pandemic in order to access classes, access their education.

Child in Secondary School

Boy: I guess they [had] the choice now to be lazy. For instance, I've seen people who've just... like just copied the thing online. Like some teachers gave me the answer sheet with the questions, because they weren't bothered to delete it away.

Child from a Migrant Background

Primary school children also felt the pressure of school closures and home schooling.

Girl: Sometimes, I feel like sometimes the schools, sometimes schools don't care about the kids' mental health. Like they kind of – if there's, if there's homework and there's so much homework going out and going out and going out, they don't really notice that it's going to have an effect on the kids, especially in lockdown.

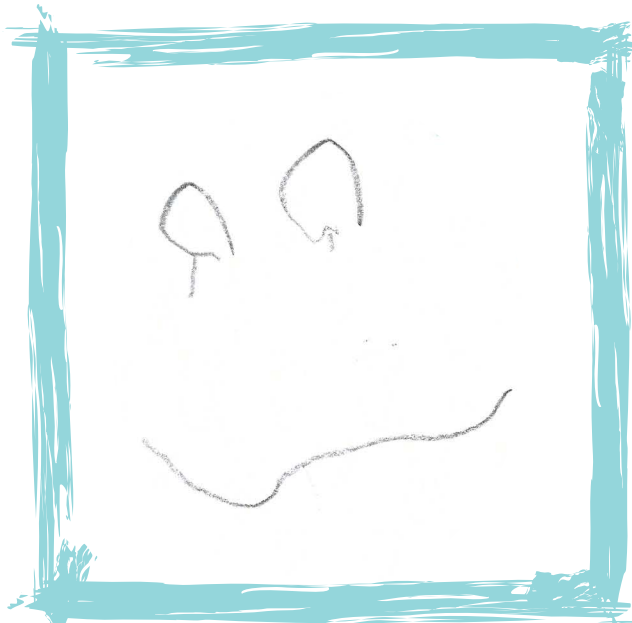
Child in Primary School

At the time of the focus groups, primary schools had reopened but were operating under public health restrictions that affected socialising in class and at school breaks. Some children found this confusing and frustrating.

Girl: I don't really understand why we're still doing, well, why we're doing pods because it made sense at the start but now it's not difficult to stay apart at break.

Child in Primary School

Children in Early Years setting were also unhappy that their playschool had to close during the restrictions.



*"Playschool closing."
Child in Early Years setting*

Many children spoke of the stress of the Junior and Leaving Certificate, which they believed was compounded in 2021 by the uncertainty about exams caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Girl 1: ...and then there's obviously, in the Leaving Cert, like there are just so many flaws with it, it's so stressful already. And, you know, thinking of will there be accommodations made to my Leaving Cert? I don't know. How hard do I have to work? Will I have predicted grades? We're online, what's going to happen? That was something I found really difficult...

Child in Secondary School

Many children at Leaving Certificate level believed that it was more difficult for them to get onto the third level courses that they wanted because of their perception of grade inflation during the pandemic when predicted grades were awarded.

Boy: ...other students got predicted grades and everyone got high points, and now the college points are high, so it's harder for us, those who are doing Leaving Cert, to get the courses we want.

Child from a Migrant Background

4.4 Mental Health Supports in School

A common theme across mainstream education was a lack of mental health support offered to children in their schools. Children frequently cited that their guidance counsellors did not have sufficient or specialised mental health training or expertise. They also had a number of roles including guidance and academic teaching. Children felt that this resulted in poor advice and mental health services and a minimisation of mental health concerns.

Girl: Most of the time if someone wants to go for like wellbeing or for like mental health or advice, they're usually sent to the chaplain, which causes a lot of issues in my school in terms of like gender identity, and sexual preferences, because... the chaplain is there for like, is our religious role in the school rather than guidance, if that makes sense. Like there's certain things you don't want to talk to a priest about, and it's kind of, they kind of intermix a little bit, so, that causes some issues.

Child in Secondary School

Boy: I went to my guidance counsellor whenever I had a loss, and I – the prescription for me was a week off homework, and I ended up being even more stressed because the next week I had to catch up on the double of those homework. And I was in Third Year, so I was going through my Junior Cert. And they didn't refer me to [charity mental health service], didn't refer me to any other mental health service. And they didn't even do a good job themselves, so that left me hopeless, and I didn't know that there were other services out there. I didn't know that I could get help myself until like this year. And this year I was like, 'Oh, there are people out there, there are services out there'.

Child in Secondary School

Girl: ...the guidance officer, well they barely listen in [mainstream] schools. Like you're going in there, say have a 10 minute conversation before you're told like, 'Here, back to your class now, you need to catch up on your work', even though it's the work that's stressing you out.

Child in Alternative Education

Boy: I found in my own experience that certain roles have become amalgamated in certain schools, that guidance counsellors, wellbeing, a few different other elements that may sort of be considered in the same area but are very important each, that there's one teacher, or one person who's assigned for all of them, in certain schools. And then you have to sort of think about the workload and what are they sort of prioritising.

Child in Secondary School

A common suggestion was that schools should provide on-site, professional mental health supports.

Boy: ...a thing that would like help with a lot of various issues is getting trained mental health professionals into schools, because I think that that's going to like get rid of a lot of the other stress points in people's lives. Because I just think like a lot of guidance counsellors, like it's not their job to give therapy to students, and it shouldn't be their job. They're guidance counsellors, they're supposed to help you with like careers and college and stuff that I think – and they don't have the necessary training. They're not fully equipped to deal with like people dealing with depression and anxiety and other mental health issues.

Child in Secondary School

*Boy: It'd be, it'd be very handy like to have someone like that in your school, because there's a lot of students like most days that are fairly having a sh**ty day. Like some people can talk to you about stuff that's going on in their mind like, and there's no one in school that you can talk to about that like.*

Child in Care

4.5 Bullying

Many of the children that we spoke to had experienced bullying in primary or secondary school. For most children this was traumatic and shaped their experience of school. Many children felt that schools did not listen to or believe them when they reported bullying or that schools did not report or investigate incidents properly. The children that we spoke to all believed that their school did not do enough to deal with bullying or to discipline bullies. They saw schools as over-reliant on informal ways of dealing with bullying, awareness raising and inclusion rather than addressing the cause of bullying. This frequently led them to feel let down by their school.

*Girl: Like when I was being bullied at secondary, the teacher said something to the principal there, and there seemed to be nothing [done]. When I tried to talk to my parents about not going to school anymore, they didn't want to listen. When I talked to my counsellors about the stuff that was going on, I never felt like they really listened... I don't think anybody f**king listens to the children, because I don't think they actually believe teenagers, they don't believe, they don't want to believe that s**t's going on.*

Child in Alternative Education

Boy: ...I go to an all-boys school, so I definitely see that school management don't put in the time to deal with like incidents... And it kind of, by not dealing with it, they do condone the behaviour a lot in schools ...it's just them condoning that behaviour, no matter how strict they say they are. If they don't investigate incidents properly, they condone behaviour.

Child in Secondary School

Boy: In my school, some kids there are being bullied. The teachers would like stop the bully, but like the bully would keep bullying them after it, and the teachers like would just keep stopping and there would be no consequences to actually bullying them. Just the teacher would stop them and tell them to not do it again, but they'd do it anyway. And like they wouldn't really get in real trouble.

Child in Primary School



Girl: ...all our school really did, I know the principal came to talk with them, but like aside from that, all they really did was put a few posters, like how to stop a bully and stuff like that. But the thing is, I don't really read those posters because half the time when I'm walking by, I'll be in a rush, or I need to go to the bathroom or something.

Child in Primary School

OCO: Do you feel like you were helped enough by your school whenever you were being bullied?

Girl: Oh, for the bullying situation, not really. They would mainly just sort of bring us in and just talk about sort of making sure to include everyone.

OCO: How did that make you feel?

Girl: It – well I was a bit anxious when I first start school. I was pretty nervous, and I don't really know. I guess it just made me like not that confident in myself.

Child in Primary School

Girl: ...the first time it happened I was in First Year, so they knew they kind of had to do something. But it wasn't really much like, yeah, it solved it for a day or two, but it was just came back again. I had the counsellor in the school, but you know, at the same time she doesn't have much authority. She can say it. It doesn't mean it'll, anything else will come out of it.

Child with a Disability

4.6 Subject Content and Teaching

An issue that children in secondary school raised frequently was the provision of Relationships and Sexuality Education.

Girl: The range of standards in sex ed. in Ireland is just so, like it's weird that it's so acceptable and it's so normalised. There was like a section called like 'The Dangers of Casual Sex', which is so weird to be teaching 17-year-olds who like are clearly of the age where they're probably – they might already be sexually active, but you're not teaching them any practical information about what to do or how to be safe. It's just like, 'This is how you don't get pregnant', also, 'This is what AIDS is, you might get that'.

Child in Secondary School

Children perceived that there was a lack of oversight to ensure that there was a national approach to subjects such as Relationships and Sexuality Education.

Girl: if you're talking about education in terms of Junior Cert and Leaving Cert, everything will be the same no matter what school you go into. There'll be some difference, there'll be inspectors sent around to check that they're all according to the same exacting standards of learning, otherwise the school and the teachers will get in trouble for not upholding the standards. But when it comes to other things like physical education, sexual education and SPHE and sometimes even religious education, you know, it's up to the school. And I could be learning something another school might not even be learning at all.

Child in Secondary School

Standardisation of sexual education was a frequent recommendation.

Girl: Standardise sex education, exclamation mark, exclamation mark, exclamation mark

Child in Secondary School

Many children believed that their schools prioritised religious education over practical sex education.

Girl: ...the religion in our school was put at the expense of our sexual education in that we would have, you know, we're 16, 17-year-old girls, we need to learn about things.

Child in Secondary School

Some children believed that there needed to be more emphasis placed on physical education and less on religious instruction.

Girl: I think sometimes there was too much of an emphasis on religious education at the expense of other education. We had a very, very, very, very, good kind of social, personal health, SPHE education, but when I was in Fifth Year we had one 40-minute PE time slot a week and we had more than double that of religious education, which we weren't studying as an exam... I think things like that, you know, we need kind of take a step back and kind of look at the quality of our schools and say, you know, are we promoting the religion at the expense of other things that are so important.

Child from Migrant Background

Some children of colour also questioned the narrow content of some subjects such as history and the lack of education on other histories and cultures.

Girl: So like, like everything that I know now about like my history, or even about other cultures, not only black people, it's literally because I had to go out there myself and I actually had to look it up, or I had to ask the family members, something like that.... So I

feel like, we should be able to do something in the education system so that it's not only – so that everyone still feels like we're, like we're being recognised at least. Yeah, because that's even what led me to ask my school if we could celebrate Black History Month.

Child from a Migrant Background

Children in primary school also wanted a better variety of subjects.

Girl: People have extra classes, like people who want to can have a choice [of] extra classes for languages. You have a choice to take it or not.

Boy: I would like to have more baking.

Girl: I would like, I would like a cooking class, and I would like more History and Geography.

Boy: More PE.

Children in Primary School

4.7 Subject Gender Stereotyping

Frequently children believed that the subjects they were offered perpetuated gender stereotypes. While some children attended co-educational schools that offered the same subjects to all children regardless of gender, most did not.

Girl: So I go to an all-girls school, and I have been to an all-girl primary school, and up the road there is an all-boy primary school and an all-boy secondary school, like literally up the road. And we have different subjects, we have different opportunities, we have different facilities. And they have all the technology, they have all the computers, and we have a kitchen, we have the Home Economics, we have the sewing, we have all the machines for all that. They have Woodwork, they have Metalwork, they have TG [technical graphics], Computers, they have Politics.

Child in Secondary School

Boy: [there is] blatant the sexism is in school facilities and school subjects. It's not hidden.

Child in Secondary School

This sexism permeated to what subjects boys believed that they should study.

Boy: I go to a mixed school, and it's not even like this external thing where like the school is like, 'Oh, Home Economics for the girls school and like Metalwork for the lads school'. It's like an internal social thing, like if you choose Home Economics for Second Year, and you're a lad, you're going to get slagged.

Child in Secondary School

Boy: Get rid of sexism in subject choices... Girls' schools offering only some subjects and boys schools, and that's a big issue that we identified, and that's something I hope to bring to the minister so they can do something. Because subject choice is such a big issue, and it really doesn't enable students to progress further, whether they go to a third level institution or higher, or further education.

Child in Secondary School

4.8 Alternative Education Settings

Children's journeys into Alternative Education settings varied greatly. Some had been permanently excluded from mainstream schools, others refused to attend school, some were on reduced timetables, and others had additional needs such as learning disabilities or mental health issues. In discussing their Alternative Education settings, they were often keen to reflect on their mainstream schools.

Some children believed that their teachers in mainstream school did not support them, understand their needs or notice when they were struggling. Mainstream schools' responses to their needs were also often unhelpful.

Girl: My Sixth Class teacher, I did not like her at all. I'm not saying that in a bad way. It's just that I could not concentrate, and she'd just tell me, 'Aw, you're grand, you can do it'. So I'd copy everybody's work and say I did it, and I wouldn't do homework. I've never done homework.

Child in Alternative Education

Girl: I used to have a difficulty with spelling, so like even when I did get like say five out of 10 right, the teacher would like, 'Oh, so who were you cheating off this time?' and I wouldn't be cheating. It's because how she [thought] I was not good at spellings. And when I do try and improve, she's like, like, 'Oh, that's not you. You should be getting this much', instead of like saying, 'Oh, well done on improving on your spellings this week'.

Child in Alternative Education

OCO: Were any of you on a reduced timetable?

Boy 3: Yeah. Since Fourth Class.

Boy 1: Same.

Boy 3: I missed on loads, yeah. I missed all the tours, all the trips and all because I didn't go in for full days, I wasn't allowed to go. Well it was a bad thing. I never [went on a trip], til this school, I went on everything.

Children in Alternative Education

Girl: I was in school and then another school, but I only lasted like a month there because I was so behind on the work, because the teachers didn't have time to actually focus on the student. And then I struggled, so I stopped showing up.

Child in Alternative Education

Often, children believed that schools did not see them as individuals but as numbers and a potential source of exam results.

*Girl 1: Mainstream school is s**t.*

Boy 2: Yeah, in mainstream school, you're just a number on the records.

Boy 2: In here, you're an actual person.

Girl 1: My whole school didn't realise that I had dropped out for like three months.

They just thought I wasn't in. They called my name on the roll for a year after.

Children in Alternative Education

Boy: They just want to be numbers. Once they get their grades then they're grand, they don't care about how students are. They just care about the group and not the individual.

Girl: Like [mainstream] schools really are like, 'Oh, we're a family to you, you're our family', until it actually comes to taking that role of caring about you.

Children in Alternative Education

Many children who were in Alternative Education settings saw their new schools or centres as safe havens and positive environments. Often children in Alternative Education settings spoke of their motivation to succeed due to the time, support, understanding and kindness shown to them by their teachers and support staff.

Boy 2: You're given like a reason to want to learn and want to do good in it. You're given inspiration to go on to college or do whatever with your life, yeah.

OCO: And how do they do that?

*Boy 2: They're just positive of it like, because then in mainstream, like I'd be flat out and thinking f**k, like I hated the teachers, I hated the people in there, so I just didn't show up. But here like they're actually nice to me, they actually want me to learn, so I want to do good, like I want to impress them.*

Child in Alternative Education

Boy: Well, if I was having a bad day in mainstream, either I wouldn't show up and then no one would ask or anything, like it would – I didn't exist like... or else I'd go into the bathrooms and get given out to. But here, if they sense that there's something minor wrong like they'll talk to you about it and they'll say, 'Look, if you need a break or anything, take the time you need because there's no point being in school if you don't want to be in school like, because you're not going to learn anything.'

Child in Alternative Education

Girl: We have [Name Redacted], who's the social worker, and she like, if you got issues you can go straight into her.

Child in Alternative Education

Boy: Something [not] great happened for me throughout the summer. The school actually reached out to us and allowed me to have some counselling on Wednesdays every second week.

Child in Alternative Education

These children commonly believed that attending an Alternative Education setting had fundamentally altered and improved their lives.

Boy: If I'd stayed in my old school, I'd say I'd be locked up.

Child in Alternative Education

OCO: So if [this centre] didn't exist, where would you be?

Boy 1: Six feet under the floor.

Boy 3: Yeah, because it would be dark for me because I would actually, no joke, probably be dead.

Girl 3: I didn't plan to get this far.

Boy 2: That's why it was such a big for me, finishing, because I never thought I'd ever finish school. I didn't think I'd make it this far in life at all

Children in Alternative Education

Some children in Alternative Education placed importance on everyone in their class succeeding and believed that their school had helped them with their social skills, to communicate their needs and to resolve conflict. This led to a more co-operative approach to their fellow students.

Girl 1: The teachers help you communicate your issues with each other.

Girl 2: There's a person in my class that's about 14 I think he is – but I go, if he's struggling, I go over and help him, because like we all want to succeed. It doesn't matter... Like if you can't read time, you know, let me help you. I can read time. Can you help me [with] something that I'm struggling with?

Children in Alternative Education

When asked what made Alternative Education different, the children universally agreed that they could express themselves more freely than in mainstream school and got more time with, and individualised attention from their teachers. They felt that they were treated with respect and on a more equal footing with staff.

Boy 2: You can actually like be yourself.

Girl 2: You're not forced to conform into being someone that you're not.

Boy 2: No, it's like the – we have like the one-to-one teaching as well, so it's much easier for people who sort of have like a, you know-

Girl 1: Social anxiety.

Boy 1: Yeah, or Attention Deficit Disorders – to like actually focus.

Children in Alternative Education

Boy 1: ...in here, they treat you with respect and like you can actually make your own decisions.

Girl 1: They treat you like a person.

Boy 2: Yeah, yeah. That's another thing too like the kind of power dynamic. In mainstream, it's teachers up here, students [down here]. But in here like we're both on the same level, like we're treated equally, with respect like. Not even just among races or genders or whatever, like even just as roles, we're all treated the exact same.

Girl 1: Even the name, you say their first names. You don't say Miss or Mister or whatever

Children in Alternative Education

When asked to say what this felt like, one group explained:

Boy 2: It's just, it's inspiring really... It makes such a huge difference in your life, and I don't think, like they say they understand that, you know, they helped us out, but I don't think they fully can comprehend exactly how much they help us. It's like a smile and a 'Good morning, how are you?' and then, you know, teachers start filing out of like the kitchen and waving at everyone, and it's like, 'Are you ready to get going?'. It's like, it's like you actually – what's crazy, and I always felt stupid saying it, was like I was excited to go to school after a week here.

Girl 3: Like I feel like the entire school, well it doesn't really feel like a school in the first place, and it also feels-

Boy 3: It feels like family.

Boy 2: It's a big, it's a big family, yeah.

Children in Alternative Education

The children in Alternative Education also appreciated that there was not the same level of emphasis on their exams as in mainstream settings.

*Boy: Like [teacher] spoke to me before and he was saying, he said, 'Well, to be honest, I don't really give a s**t what grades you get'. He said, 'You can get an A, but you can go home after the Leaving Cert and stay inside your bed for months', and he was like that doesn't matter then, because you're not doing anything with it.*

Child in Alternative Education

4.9 Children with Disabilities

Children with disabilities who took part in the focus groups were primarily blind or visually impaired, had an intellectual disability or learning need. Children with disabilities faced multiple barriers to full enjoyment of the right to education. These range from a lack of appropriate school placements, difficulty in securing Special Needs Assistants (SNA), to a lack of understanding of their disability. Nevertheless, school was a valuable source of fun and to most children with intellectual disabilities.

OCO: Okay, so your SNA is really good?

Girl 3: She gives me a lot of support.

OCO: What's good about school?

Girl 3: I love to read.

Girl 3: And drawing.

Boy 2: Friends.

OCO: Tell me, what do you do with your friends?

Boy 2: I play football with them.

OCO: In school?

OCO: What else is good about school?

Boy 2: You get to do PE.

Children with a Disability

School was also a place for learning vital life skills and had outdoor spaces, which the children valued.

Mum: He loves going for walks in the garden, they have a garden, and like they had little butterflies. They do a lot of baking. He loves baking, following the instructions because he can read. So he follows all the steps and does all the stuff like that, he loves in school.

Child with a disability supported by a carer

However, children we spoke to were very aware that, while they were in school, other children with disabilities did not have school placements, either in special or mainstream schools.

Girl: Not everyone has a school.

Child with a Disability

Boy: I have Autism and there's a lot of cases being reported recently where there's kids can't get to the kind of schools that they need, either because of where they live, or they're just straight up being rejected.

Child in Secondary School

Positive Supports in School

Children with disabilities sometimes need assistive technology in order to participate fully in school. This is a particular priority for children who are blind or visually impaired who require technology such as a digital magnifier.

Girl: I feel school is good for me now. Like I use the Connect 12¹¹ a lot as well, and I use a lot of – like my books are all in enlarged and with the visiting teacher as well, like you know, she orders my books and stuff, so I know with like the Connect 12 for example, it's a great thing to have in school because like with my vision so low, it's just, you know, it helps me a lot, so, yeah, that's what I've got.

Child with visual impairment

11 The Connect 12 is a powerful digital magnifier with desktop and distance viewing.

The Department of Education and Skills Visiting Teacher programme provides support to a number of children with visual impairment. The Visiting Teachers helped the children secure assistive technology, enlarged font books and exam accommodations, which meant that they were able to participate fully in school.

Girl: The visiting teacher is good. So basically... they come into the school, and they like – I don't want to say they give out to the teachers and give out to SNAs, but they kind of do. And they kind of like help you, and like resource things outside of the school campus. They have to order all my books, like Connect 12, they have to order like all my technology and like they like help the school with the process for like exam accommodation and stuff like that.

Child with visual impairment

Occasionally some children found that they could rely on and trust a specific teacher in their school who took an interest in supporting them. While the children valued this support, they were frustrated that not all teachers provided this level of support.

Girl: I do have this great teacher and honestly, I'll praise her for the rest of my life. She's helped me with getting the larger print books and with the new device... with the new device she's keeping me updated on it and she's just been a great help. Like I only had her as a teacher, like an actual teacher in First Year, but like my mom would even say as well like she's just been so much help, between – with everything... There's like 40 or 50 teachers, like that's one out of that many like.

OCO: How does that make you feel?

Girl: It's frustrating. Like because she's not going to be able to do everything, you know. There's going to be another teacher who can do something that she can't, like, and it's just kind of like it's my only option.

Child with visual impairment

Lack of Awareness and Accommodations Among Teachers

A more common experience for children who were blind or visually impaired was that teachers did not seem to be aware of or understand their disability and needs, and therefore did not accommodate their disability. This was frustrating and upsetting for many children.

Boy: I'm just disappointed that some teachers don't even bother to learn, no matter how much I mention it, no matter how much I say, 'Okay, I need this in large print'. I've had to mention it to this one teacher in Third Year every single class. Every single class.

Child with visual impairment

Many children with disabilities said that they had to explain their needs to their teachers repeatedly. This had an impact on their ability to do their work in class and at home. One child explained that his teacher made them feel very upset when they insinuated that his parents should help him more.

Boy: This teacher kept giving handouts when we had said, 'I'm not – I don't want to take handouts anymore'... I'm not bringing home paper that I can't read, that my mum or my dad has to look through it, find the answers for me and tell me the answers. That's not me doing the homework. That's them doing homework. And like they work from half nine to half six. I don't want to come home then at half six and be like, 'Okay, now you've got to spend about an hour and a half helping me with this because the teacher's too lazy to make it actually workable for me'... and she actually insinuated that my parents wouldn't spend time helping me on it. She said, I believe her exact words were, 'Well as a parent, I always make sure to set aside time to help my son with anything he needs help with'.

Child with visual impairment

Many children believed that informing teachers should have been the responsibility of the principal.

Boy: Surely the principal is aware of our visual impairments. I think they should have the responsibility to tell every new teacher, or ever teacher that's in the school about our impairments.

Child with visual impairment

The children we spoke to were often exasperated by their teachers' inability to adapt their resources so the children could use them.

Boy: Please God, don't send me a picture of a book. I'm blind, I can't see it. Like, yeah... I had to explain this to a teacher, and I was half laughing and saying, 'No Miss, sorry, the completely braille device I am holding with absolutely no screen whatsoever cannot somehow render this image in a way that I can read it. No, no, I can't see it. No, no, I can't'. That hasn't changed in the last five seconds.

Child with visual impairment

Often children who were blind or had visual impairments found that they had to take on more responsibilities to explain their barriers to education. For example, braille exam papers do not necessarily have the same questions as the print version. As such, the children had to spend extensive amounts of time with the teachers to identify the differences. This proved frustrating for many children.

Boy: I have a meeting with my biology teacher in which we shall dissect the exam papers and have a look at the differences... She has the print copy, I'll have the braille copy and it'll literally be, 'Okay, my question one is this', 'oh, that's the same, move on'. 'My question one is - my question three is this', 'Oh, that's different'. Because the teachers know nothing, like well that sounds bad, but the teachers know nothing about how the course is different for me. Some of my teachers didn't know that there was a different, you know, a modified exam paper for me. They didn't know. We had to tell them.

Child with visual impairment

Difficulties Securing Resources

The lack of easily accessible braille exam papers was highlighted as a barrier to exam practise and grade attainment.

Boy: There are very, very, very few modified exam papers and getting them is really difficult, because like we're looking at exam papers in class and my visiting teacher is looking for them, but we have again no, you know, timeframe on when they'll be here. And yes, my Biology teacher managed to get some, but she got two years, two years of braille exam papers because other students had sat them at that time and there were copies lying around. That, like where everyone else can have 20, 30 I don't know how many, but an amount that isn't two.

Child with visual impairment

Many children also struggled to access the books on the curriculum. Some children with visual impairments require their books in different formats and prints that need to be ordered in advance. The books frequently take a long time to be delivered which negatively affected the children's ability to participate in class. As such, the children relied on other means of learning that could potentially be out of date or incorrect.

Boy: Yeah, we ordered books in November-cum-December, and we currently have no estimated arrival date. They are coming, that's all we know. We have a few, but that's about it. It's so annoying because like while I want to study, I can't. I physically cannot study

*without going through finding loads of YouTube videos that might be six, seven years out of date. Then, if I learn that, okay, oh wait, that's wrong now. S**t. Have to unlearn that when the books actually arrive... it's very annoying, and yeah, it's not fun.*

Child with visual impairment

While they waited for their books to arrive some of the children asked their teachers to focus on a different part of the curriculum for which they had modified books. Teachers sometimes ignored these requests, much to the frustration of the children.

Girl: Yeah, so like at the moment like, in English, I have one English book arrived and I was like, 'Yeah Miss, one English book has arrived. We should dodge all poetry', and she goes, 'We're doing poetry', and I was like, 'Okay, right'. And that's like the one book I don't have.

Child with visual impairment

A lack of set books on the curriculum and teachers ability to choose which books their class could study was seen as a barrier to education by children with visual impairments.

Girl: It actually is the government that's to blame... Like I went into English, and I ordered let's say it's The Handmaid's Tale in large print... and then she turns round and is like, 'Oh, I don't want to do that one. I don't like that one'. Then she goes and changes that. So, I think it's actually, they need to like assess like core books that like are set for three years, like from like Fifth, like Fifth Year, and they're like the books used by every school for that long. So then, they'll know in advance the books for the time.

Child with visual impairment

Lack of SNA Support

A lack of SNAs was an ongoing source of frustration for children, as they believed more support could help them achieve more in school.

Girl: I actually don't even have enlarged books even. My books are normal. Like I do use the device I have sometimes, but again, kind of my anxiety kind of shoots through the roof when I have to try and take it out, but I feel like if I had an SNA in the class that could help me take it out, or like, I don't know, like that would, I feel like the students don't want to really saying anything because there would be an SNA in the class. But I think if I asked for an SNA even, and they haven't really even got back to me. I do have an SNA for every exam I have, like for my Junior Cert, we had to do tests that would then like, like equal our Junior Cert. So, I had an SNA for every single one of those tests, but I found that a lot better. Or then when I do have an SNA in the class, which is very rare, they sometimes they would do the writing for me, but I feel like if I had that for every class, school would be 10 times easier.

Child with visual impairment

Combined with lack of awareness and accommodation by teachers, the lack of SNA support was exhausting for children. Sometimes this meant that children became disengaged from school.

Boy: During the whole of primary school there was never no help because the teachers weren't really even aware. Well they knew I can't see the board and stuff, but they never like, they never helped me to see the board of anything. They just said, 'Go closer to the board', and I'm like, 'I still can't see it'. There's an SNA in like one of my classes a day. I've nine classes a day. I just honestly some classes I just don't even do the work. I just leave my paper there because I'm like I can't be assed, like I can't see the board, or sometimes I would just pretend I did the work, because I feel like if I say to the teacher all the other students will just be, I don't know, they'd look at me weird I guess. I have a [new] year head, and I'm not even sure if he's actually even aware of my visual impairment.

Child with visual impairment

This lack of awareness and understanding meant that some teachers made unhelpful suggestions as opposed to offering assistance to the child.

Boy: I had a class two days ago and the teacher like wrote on the board, and he was like 'Why don't you have your work done?', and I [said] 'Because I can't see', and then he was, he was like, 'Why don't you wear glasses?' and I was like, 'Glasses don't help me'... I guess they need to be made aware of my impairment.

Child with visual impairment

Underestimating Ability

Some children believed their schools and teachers underestimated what they could achieve.

Girl: With the school, they've had kind of a dismissive attitude because I want to become a teacher, and they feel that it's not possible because of being visually impaired. It's kind of the principal as well.

Child with visual impairment

One child spoke about how much she achieved during her Transition Year outside of the school environment. On returning to full time study in school, the lack of resources, knowledge and accessible education tools negatively affected her ability to excel.

Girl: Last year I tried do another year in BT Young Scientist, I won awards in that. I did all my work experience in the Oireachtas [Irish houses of parliament], got loads of different awards, but then we went back to like the normal school curriculum of like sit down and learn this. And because I don't have the materials, I can't do it, and like oh well, that's me gone. Like, no, I even like, I even could do everything else if I had the stuff I needed to do it, like. If like it was made available to me. I could 100% be on a par with every other student in my year.

Child with visual impairment

Perceptions of Peers

Many children across focus groups spoke about how their peers viewed disabilities, which left them feeling misunderstood and unsupported.

Girl: But it's like even when it comes up to where like we have exams like every 10 weeks, and it's like, because I don't do any. I don't do French or German or Irish, and they're like, 'Oh well you've got it easy' and all of this, 'because you don't do French and German and Irish'. I'm like, 'I still have to do every other exam that I'm sitting and that aren't easy'- for me, because my dyslexia affects my reading and spelling and grammar and everything, but they don't remember that when they're saying it, so.

Child living in care

Some children experienced stigma when they used their assistive technology.

Boy: I did get a device. It's like a device to help me to see the board and zoom into, into papers and stuff, but I kind of – it's very obnoxious so I kind of struggle with taking it out in class because I'm the actually only visually impaired person in my class. When I take it out, people would be wondering like what's this, what's this for and be touching it and stuff, and I'm just trying to get my work done. I don't know, it's kind of annoying.

Child with visual impairment

Suggestions for Change

Ultimately, children believed that teachers needed more information about disabilities, and again the children believed that it fell to them to raise awareness. One child who attended a blind and visually impaired support group said they had ideas to create resources to improve knowledge within teaching staff.

Boy: One of the things we were planning to do... was put together a little five-minute informational video for teachers with, you know, dos and don'ts, and like oh, this is, you know, this is best practice.

Child with visual impairment

Children with sensory or intellectual disabilities often found the school environment disruptive and had clear recommendations for change.

Girl: I like everybody. It's just when I do my homework or play or something, or eat my lunch, they make too much noise and hurt my ears. To make it better, you could do... quiet time and quiet spaces.

Child with a Disability

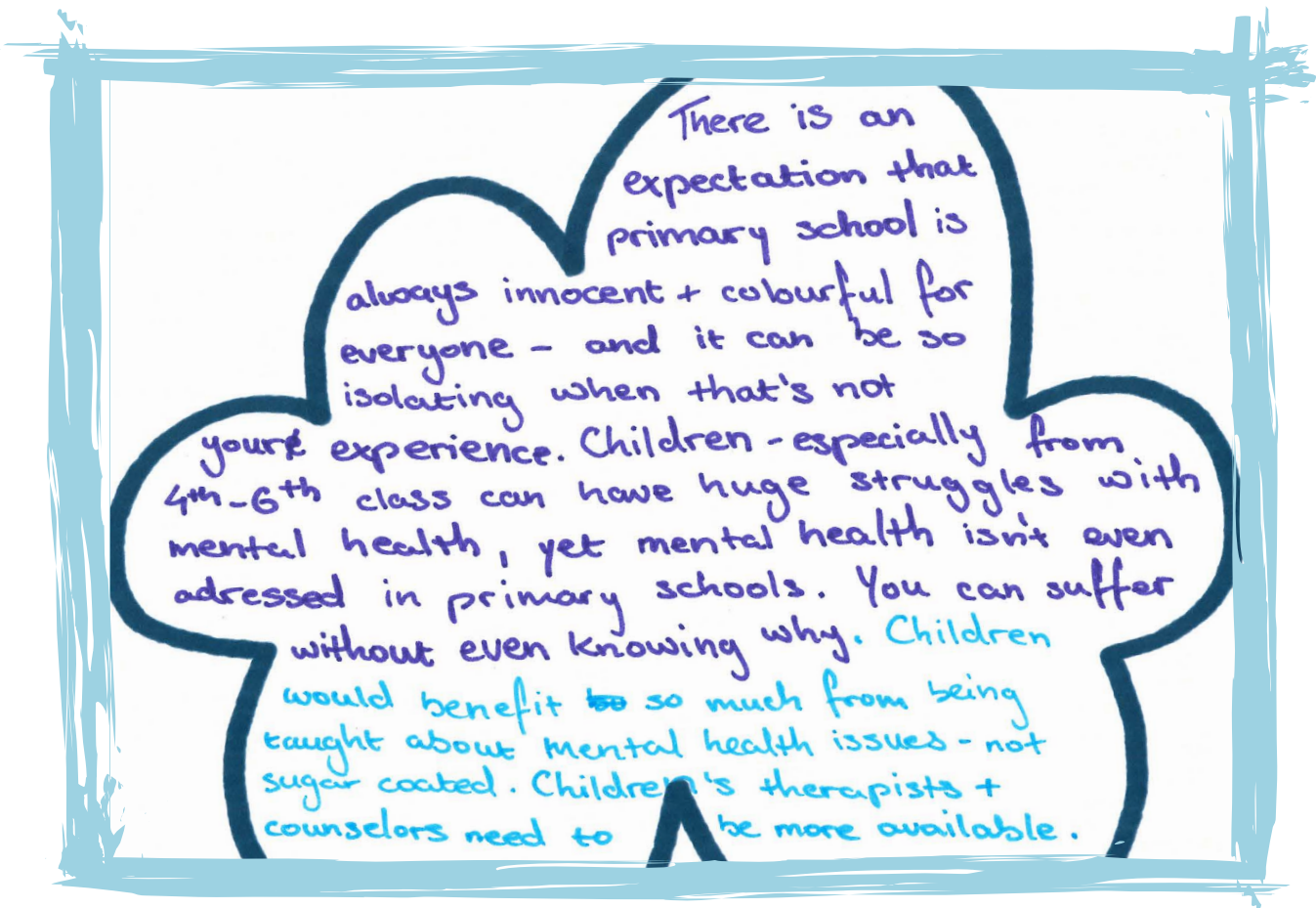
Some activist students were working extremely hard to instigate reform of Special Education Needs (SEN) services to the highest levels of Irish and European policy makers.

Boy: I'm trying to get more SEN facilities in schools, like sensory rooms, trying to improve like MHID services for like mental health services for intellectually disabled people, and you know, just increasing the service capabilities. And there's also this like huge project I'm undergoing at the moment is trying to find a universal definition for disability to bring to the Dáil to like try annoy the EU to do it. So like that means that everyone across the EU will get like the same resources, because [now] disability is classed as something else in each country. So yeah, that's the huge thing I'm working on at the moment.

Child in Secondary School

4.10 What our YAP Said

The YAP frequently focused on the issue of wellbeing and mental health supports in school.



"There is an expectation that primary school is always innocent and colourful for everyone – and it can be so isolating when that is not your experience. Children, especially from 4th-6th class can have huge struggles with mental health, yet mental health isn't even addressed in primary schools. You can suffer without even knowing why. Children would benefit so much from being taught about mental health issues – not sugar coated. Children's therapists and counsellors need to be more available."

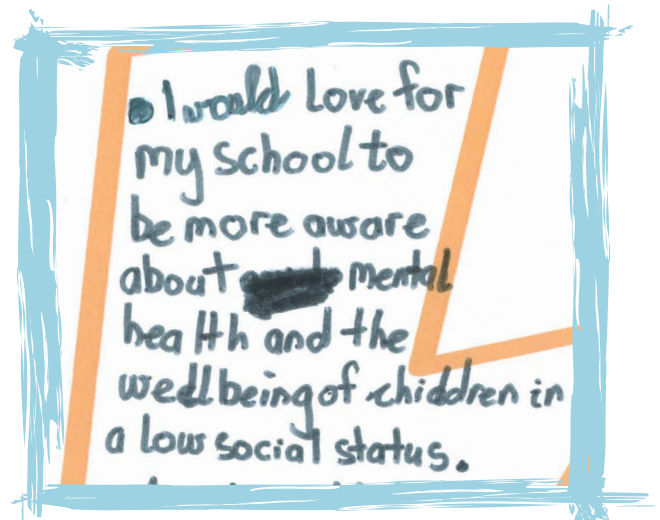


Primary School / "Why can't I be like them?"

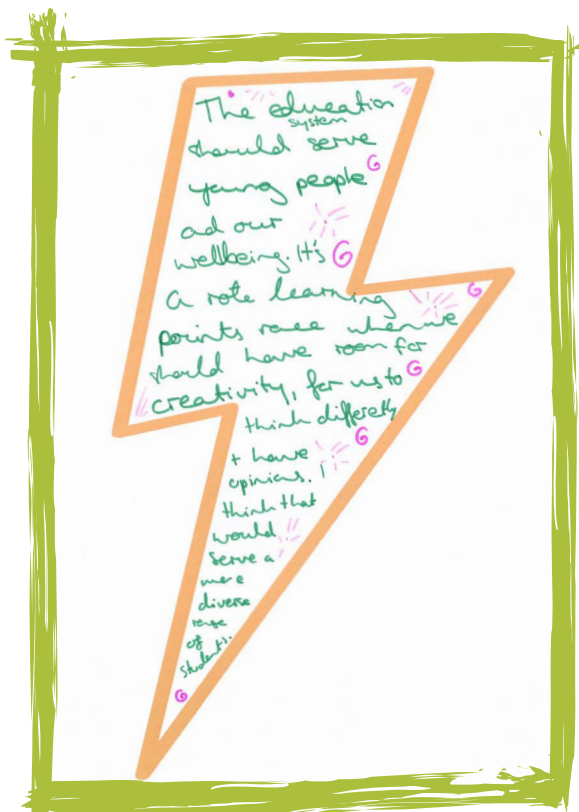
The YAP members frequently linked poor mental health with State Examinations.



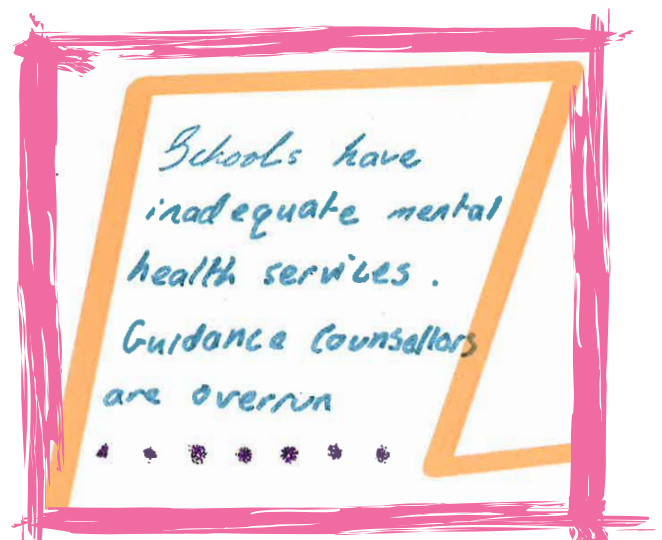
"Education should serve young people's wellbeing."



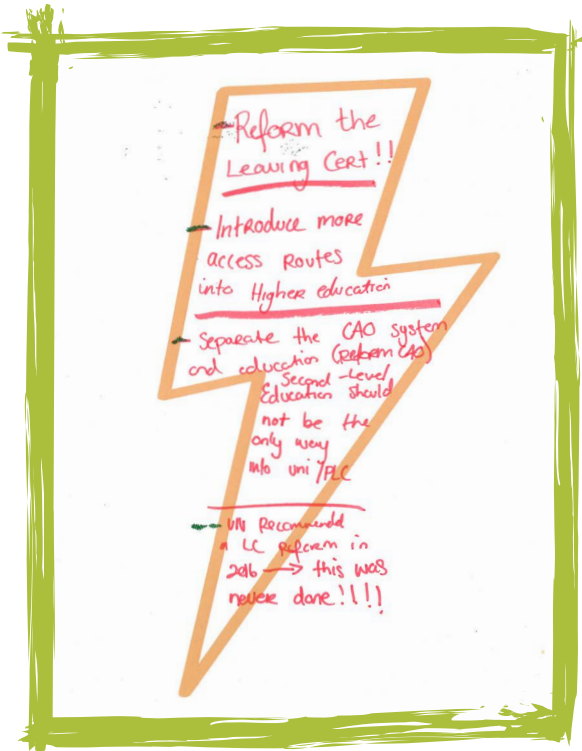
"I would love for my school to be more aware about mental health and the wellbeing of children in a low social status."



"The education system should serve young people and our wellbeing. It's a rote learning points race when we should have room for creativity, for us to think differently and have opinions. I think that would serve a more diverse range of students."



"Schools have inadequate mental health services. Guidance counsellors are overrun."

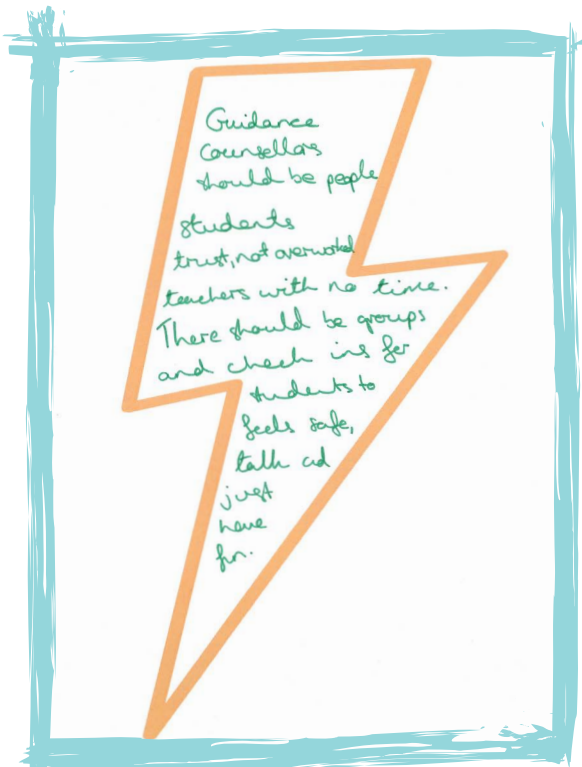


“Reform the Leaving Cert!!

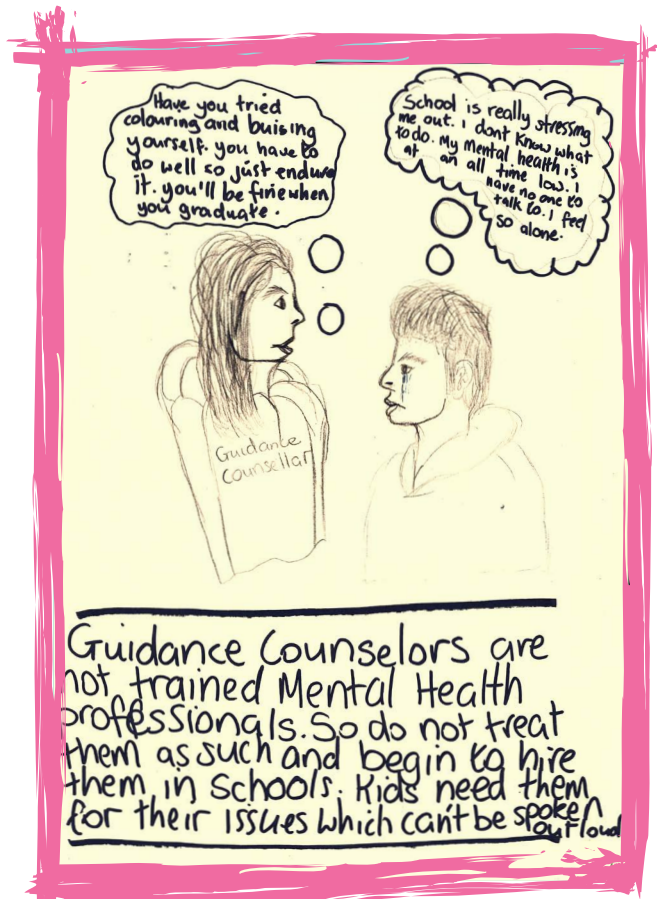
Introduce more access routes into higher education.

Separate the CAO system and education (Reform CAO).
 Second-Level education should not be the only way into Uni/PLC.

UN Recommended in 2016 – this was never done!!!! “



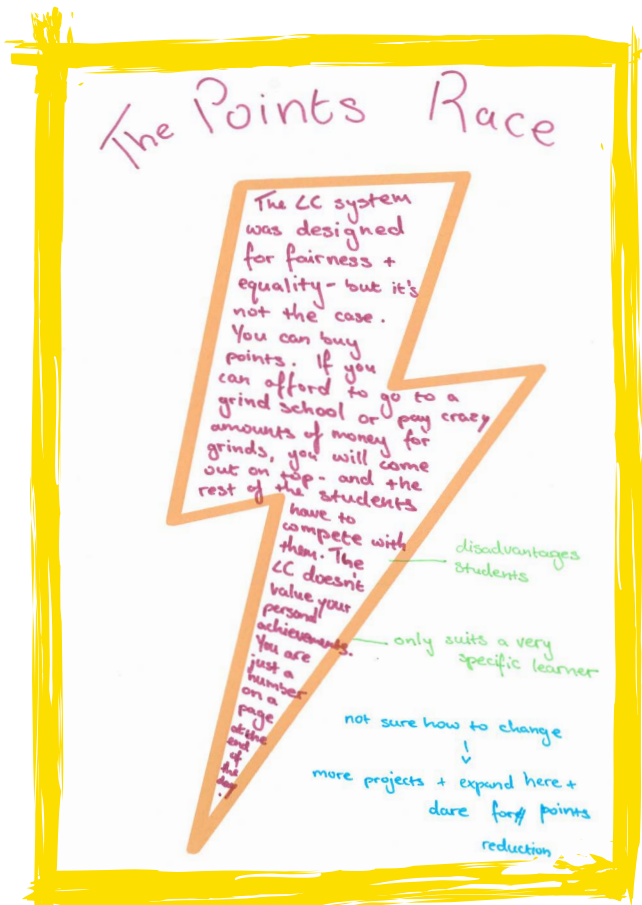
“Guidance counsellors should be people students trust, not overworked teachers with no time. There should be groups and check-ins for students to feel safe and talk and just have fun.”



“Child: ‘School is really stressing me out. I don’t know what to do. My mental health is at an all-time low. I have no one to talk to. I feel so alone.’

Guidance Counsellor: ‘Have you tried colouring and busying yourself? You have to do well so endure it. You’ll be fine when you graduate.’

Guidance counsellors are not trained Mental Health Professionals. So do not treat them as such and begin to hire them in schools. Kids need them or their issues which can’t be spoken out loud.”



"The Points Race"

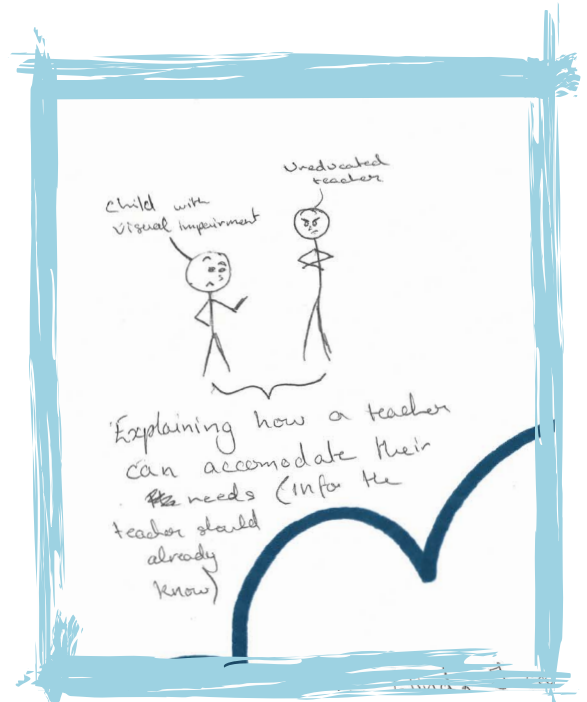
The LC system was designed for fairness and equality – but it is not the case. You can buy points. If you can afford to go a grind school or crazy amounts of money for grinds, you will come out on top – and the rest of the students will have to compete with them. The LC doesn't value your personal achievements. You are just a number on a page at the end of the day.

Disadvantages students.

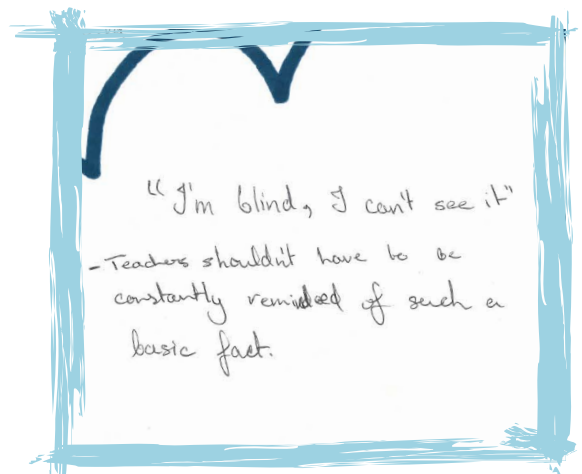
Only suits a very specific learner

Not sure how to change

more projects and expand HERE and DARE [schemes] for points reduction."



Child with visual impairment (L), uneducated teacher (R) "Explaining how a teacher can accommodate their needs (info the teacher should already know)."

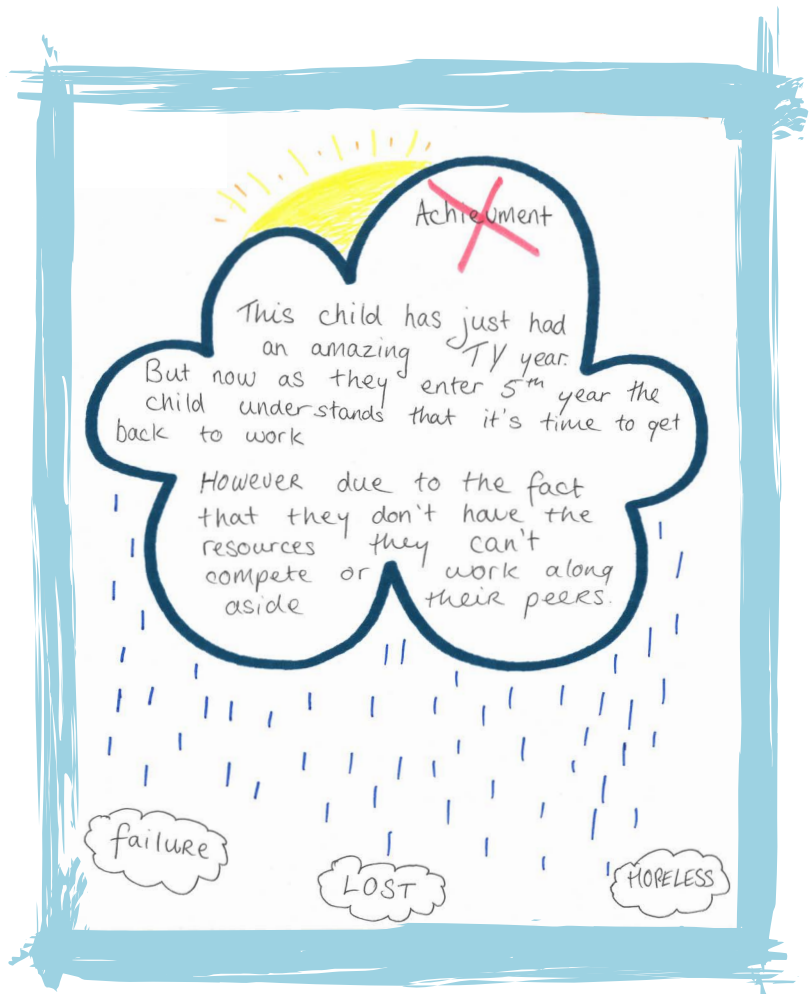


"I'm blind, I can't see it."

"Teachers shouldn't have to be reminded of such a basic fact."



"This child has just had an amazing TY year. But now as they enter 5th year the child understands that it is time to get back to work. However due to the fact that they don't have the resources they can't compete or work alongside their peers."



Well for me I get where she is coming from like everyone says I have it handy but really we don't on a normal day. I have to use my brain more than others. The education is the worst for us like they don't even try to make things simpler for us there isn't enough help going around. We are very forgotten. One thing I would change is the way they always don't let us try something hard.

"Well for me I get where she is coming from, like everyone says I have it handy but really we don't on a normal day. I have to use my brain more than others. The education is the worst for us like they don't even try to make things simpler for us and there isn't enough help going around. We are very forgotten. One thing I would change is the way they don't let us try something hard."

Lonely
RAGE

CMHS Bad

LISTEN

STIGMA
ground

Young lad

Stressful

doctors

Waiting

lists

Garda

Stereotyping

Unapproachable

15/0/17

5

Views from Focus Groups: Services That Support Children



5.1 Mental Health Services

The discussions on support services in all focus groups centred on the lack of mental health supports or the perceived poor quality of these supports.

Accessing Mental Services

Information about and awareness of poor mental health seems to be reaching the children that we spoke to but they were acutely aware of the lack of services available to them, which led to general frustration. While comfortable talking about seeking support when they need it, many children said that when they seek support it is not there or there are very long waiting lists for public services.

Girl: Like they're just saying, it's okay not to be okay, but like you already know that is drilled into us, but when we go to get help, we're put on a waiting list for a good six months instead of getting that help that we need.

Child in Alternative Education

Girl 1: And [website for children and young people] do a great job of the information, but when it comes to things like beds and treatment, you know, that's what we're really lacking here. We have all of the information, but we need the physical, you know, the physical infrastructure for things like that, and we don't have it. And it's really important, and it needs to be there.

Girl 2: And where do you go when you've found all this information? You realise, 'Oh hang on, I might need help here', but the help's not there. Information can only do so much, and you know, if there's nothing there to back it up, then really what is the point, you know?

Children Secondary School

Girl: If you have a mental illness and you want to go to a therapist and you don't have the money for one, it does come back to money quite a lot in Ireland. Waiting lists are huge, and if you're a very, very depressed person and you have some very, very suicidal thoughts, and you're on a waiting list to go see a therapist, that could be six months long. You might not be here in six months. And that's such a big thing for younger people as well. And even for things like eating disorders, you know, there's too few beds in Ireland, and that's a big thing for teenage girls and teenage boys as well which isn't talked about nearly enough.

Child in Secondary School

Children in rural areas were keen to point out that they struggle with accessing mental health supports in their communities and that online services are not always an appropriate replacement.

Girl: The mental health services in my community and area are severely lacking. And even the online mental health services that people seem to praise so much are very bad with dealing with teenagers, like in my personal experience anyway. They don't know how to talk to us, they don't know how to like interact with us really. They don't know how to help.

Child in Secondary School

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS)

Many children we spoke to found the interactions and relationships between NGO and HSE services difficult to navigate.

Boy:..so when I went to [mental health charity], I actually didn't like it at all, kind of I just knew kind of it wasn't for me. So then I went to [youth mental health charity], and I thought it was good, but they said that they think that CAMHS would be the best for me because of like the situation I was in and stuff. So, then I went to CAMHS, and I disliked that, and I tried to go back to [youth mental health charity] actually like last week... they said once I deal with CAMHS that CAMHS has to deal with me. So, that was quite frustrating that I can't go back to [youth mental health charity], like even though I think it would be the best place for me, but yeah.

Child with visual impairment

Frequently, children pointed to the fact that when they got into CAMHS services that they did not think that the professionals interacted with them well. Many felt that professionals did not listen to them and took their parents' views more seriously.

*Girl: I think CAMHS is s**t. I hate it, and it did absolutely nothing for me, but I went there when I was 14, but I was on the waiting list for like a year and a half. And then they listened to my parents more than they listened to me.*

Child in Alternative Education

Non-binary child: I had been diagnosed with anxiety when I was like nine, and then when I left school it got like really bad to where I couldn't leave my house and stuff. So I went to [mental health charity]. And then the [mental health charity] referred me to CAMHS... and gave me like a little survey and they were like, 'Are you okay?', and I was like, 'No'. And then my dad was like, 'She is', and they were like, 'She's fine'. And then they [CAMHS] didn't bring me back after.

Child in Alternative Education

Other children explained that they found it difficult to open up in CAMHS appointments when their parents were present.

Boy: It's actually my mam, like my mam raised me on her own, so I didn't want to talk about like things... I feel like, like I don't want her to blame herself for things... So I think it's unhealthy to have a parent in the room with you when you're trying to talk about things like that.

Child in Alternative Education

Other children found CAMHS to be an unpleasant and stressful environment.

*Boy: I went to [mental health charity] for 12 weeks, and then I've been going to CAMHS since then, like three or four years, and I actually, every time I'm going in there, I get nervous. I went in there before and I used to see a doctor and I used to actually come out more angry, more upset than I would go in and just have a screaming match around... but I f**king, like I genuinely hate, I hate going in, I hate every single minute inside there, and I can't quit it.*

Child in Alternative Education

Children who had experience of CAMHS were also aware of staff pressures and shortages within the system.

Boy: Since they're student doctors, they're only here on placement, so there is no permanent support for a lot of young people, because they move on very quickly.

Child in Secondary School

Based on their experiences, several children made recommendations for change to mental health services that included reducing the reliance on NGO services, increased inpatient placements and, consulting with children who use the services.

Girl: I do think that like there does need to be a better infrastructure of like the public, free mental health services, because... people have not had good experiences, and I do think that just the government probably does need to consult like young people who actually would use those services to like see where they need to improve on that.

Child in Secondary School

One child believed that NGOs and charities provided services that the government should.

Boy: I think in Ireland, like with mental health, there's a big attitude of, you know, NGOs filling the responsibilities that government organisations fail to meet... these should be government organisations doing these duties for proper oversight and scrutiny.

Child in Secondary School

When speaking to LGBTI+ children several of them expressed concerns in getting appropriate mental health supports for their needs, which they believed exacerbated feelings of isolation, particularly for children in rural areas. As such, children frequently recommended that supports were school based to ensure access.

Girl: I'm lucky because I'm one of the few like young queer people who have access and are confident enough and feel safe enough to go to and attend an LGBT group, which has worked wonders for my mental health. But like I know so many others who just aren't able to access that and it can be extremely, extremely lonely and feel very isolating, especially when you live in a rural area and you're a young queer person. So I'd definitely improve that. And I'd just give a lot more – I'd have more accessibility to mental health services, maybe through schools.

Child in Secondary School

5.2 Health Services

Children with a disability experienced difficulties accessing general health services. They experienced delays, long waiting lists for diagnoses and in some instances difficulty in procuring essential medication.

Boy: We have to go to London to get a certain medication.

OCO: That's a long way to go, isn't it?

Boy: Yeah.

Carer (mother): He was there for four nights in Great Ormond Street.

OCO: And is that because it's not available in Ireland?

Boy: Yeah.

Carer (mother): Yeah, exactly. It was, yeah, a treatment that wasn't available in Ireland, but we – yeah, so we had to pay for it for ourselves. The EU directive came in on 24th October 2013, or 24th October was when the government would have been fined I suppose if they hadn't committed to their people. We flew back from Great Ormond Street on Friday, 23rd October 2013.

Child with a Disability assisted by his mother

For children with visual impairment or blindness delays in medical appointments caused extreme worry and uncertainty. These children also expressed worry that their sight was not regularly monitored.

Boy: I don't think I've had a medical appointment with my eyes since like Sixth Class [several years] or something. We never got an appointment. We did, we used to semi regularly get one like Third Class, Fourth Class, Fifth Class, Sixth Class. I can remember going up to Dublin, and then it just stopped. It was gone.

Child with visual impairment

Delays in essential sight checks and new glasses caused a lot of frustration.

Girl: So, yeah, appointments for me, they can be very slow. They can take a few months. It can get very frustrating. I know my recent one, because my sight had like deteriorated very badly and it took quite some to get like new glasses and stuff and it was pretty frustrating.

Child with visual impairment

Delays in assessments by public health services was a recurring theme that caused anxiety in children who were concerned with the cost of private assessments.

Girl: I'm waiting to get tested for ADHD. I applied in early March [8 months earlier]. I'm not going into Sixth Year, and I have no idea when I'm going to be tested. And obviously, that's going to give a way different, a way different experience of Sixth Year than maybe someone who's in like a higher income bracket and can afford to get tested privately.

Child in Secondary School

Where children were able to access services they sometimes expressed concerns with the appropriateness of the service that they received.

Girl: ...with speech therapy you're put on a waiting list, and you're thinking that you're going to get one on one, then it turns out like you're in six of you doing speech therapy. That doesn't help [the children]... When you're in the group, they're not focusing on how you speak. Like you can't – the speech therapist cannot sit down with you and focus, like, 'Oh, you can't say your S, so we're going to focus on S today', because it's a whole like group thing.

Child in Alternative Education

It should be noted that not every child that we spoke to struggled to get a diagnosis or access services. These children saw themselves as lucky and potentially as the exception to the rule.

Boy: Like there's a disparity. I'm definitely on the luckier end of special educational needs because I was diagnosed when I was in Senior Infants, so I had it like fairly early. I got a diagnosis within three weeks of my teacher like spotting anything. Got an SNA like that year, and I've had one ever since. And other people aren't like that because a lot of people aren't diagnosed. And the older you get, the harder it is to get a diagnosis. Like I know several friends that were maybe looking at getting an ADHD diagnosis and it was costing over a grand, and it would take a few months to get it. So, and unless you have a diagnosis, you've got like no hope at any accommodations. Then if you live in a more rural area, there may not even be those accommodations available in the first place.

Child in Secondary School

5.3 Transgender Healthcare Services

One particular group of children that experienced frustration with the health care system were transgender children. They experienced unique challenges relating not only to their mental health but also to their ability to access transgender specific therapies and surgeries.

Boy: Yeah, like because for me, for years I've literally been saying I want to get top surgery, I need to get it, but the thing is that I have to wait for some cis person to be like, 'Oh, you've gender dysphoria', even though you don't need that to be trans. But, and then like the thing is that it's not a case of, 'Oh, you're still growing. You don't know. You're 15'. It's like I know. I've been this way for my entire life. I haven't identified as female for my life, ever. I know. I know more than you.

Child in Alternative Education

A number of transgender children that we spoke to wanted to access hormone treatment and surgeries that are not available to children in Ireland. The unavailability of these services caused great distress to these children, resulting in extremely poor mental health.

Boy: I haven't, like, me and my mam, we've been working a lot for me transitioning, like, we're still trying to find a place to go and get the hormone blockers. But here in Ireland I think we can't do it really because they're saying, like, we're stopping it so we have to go over to, like, Germany.

Girl: Yeah, that's something that I also faced, like, I was supposed to get them from England but they're like anyone that's under 18, 'No, you're not getting them'.

Boy: Yeah, they were like, 'You have to be 18 now to get hormone blockers', they were saying, and I was like, 'No, I want to get them now so I don't get more of the female hormones'. Because, like, I've been having, I have had breakdowns over my period, because I'm still have a female body and it still hasn't transitioned yet.

OCO: Have any of you been able to access blockers?

Boy: No.

Girl: Not at all. And, like, it's so, like, damaging, like, to know that I can't get any support over here and I have to live, like, so many years over here without having to get help. Like I literally have to wait two years just to legally change my name. Which is like, horrible.

OCO: Has anyone had surgeries?

Boy: No.

Girl: There's no top surgeon in Ireland anymore. Now you have to go over to England and it's just too expensive.

Boy: It's very, very expensive. Like, I might be doing surgeries when I'm, probably when I'm in my adulthood.

OCO: And how does that make you feel?

Girl: Not great.

Boy: It's horrible, it's horrible waking up every day seeing there's, like, people that are transitioning and you're, like, I wish that was me. Even though [in Ireland] it's 'Yeah, LGBT, we'll support all of that', it's only supporting the gay, kind of, side, the marriage and all, but they're not looking at the kids who are transitioning, who are stuck in the bodies that they don't want to be in. And some kids don't even make it to when they're older, like, they take their lives too early.

Girl: And it's just heart-breaking. I think more lives are lost because of it than lives that are helped.

Children in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

In the absence of the health services they wanted, children described what living with gender dysphoria was like for them.

Girl: And no one, like, understands how hard it is, to constantly deal with the struggle of dysphoria... I just don't actually see myself as a full woman knowing that people don't see me as that because that's constantly there in my head and, like, am I passing, like, am I doing everything I can to look like a woman? Like, do I sound like a woman, like, do I look it? Everything that I've seen as masculine in myself I will change no matter what. But it's so tiring to constantly keep up with that... I constantly do everything I can to look feminine. Only to be dead named and then misgendered and, like, what am I doing wrong?

*Boy: That's, basically, that's being thrown down the drain. Like, you've been getting up every day trying your hardest to become the gender you want to be just for someone saying, 'how are you doing, insert your old deadname?' and you're like, what the f**k, why did you f**king do that?*

OCO: Can anybody describe to me gender dysphoria, how that manifests in emotions, how does that feel?

Boy: I have intrusive thoughts just wanting my chest to be gone, I just want it, like, oh, I wish I just can grab that knife and just slice them off.

Girl: I just wish that my, my body would look more feminine...

Boy: Yeah... You just want to wake up to be in the body that you wish you were in.

Girl: It's, like, going to sleep is my only way of actual escaping but it's just that it doesn't last long enough and then I'm waking up and having to start, every single day over and over again. Like, every day it's the same nothing changes.

Children in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

Interactions with health services proved frustrating for a lot of transgender children, even simple things such as using children's preferred names and gender pronouns were not respected and this caused some children a lot of distress.

Girl: I've [had] a lot misgendering and deadnaming in hospitals, like I feel it should change.

Boy: I have my Covid cert and it's under my deadname.

Children in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

When asked what could be changed about transgender health care the children resolutely believed that it should be made available to them before the age of 18.

Boy: So, having [hormone therapy and surgery] under the age of 18, we're still only developing and growing, isn't it better to get that done instead of [when] we're all developed and grown and it would be much harder to transition... And make the surgeries they do a bit cheaper.

Child in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

5.4 Children in Care

Many children who are in care have extensive experience with support services. We spoke to two sets of children in care, one under and one over 13 years of age. The issues that these children faced were broadly the same, with the older children having more experience of the care system.

Experience of Entering Care and Placements

While most children were able to acknowledge that they were in foster or alternative care for their own safety and wellbeing, removal from their families was difficult and upsetting in the early days of their placements.

Boy: I have to get changed from one school to another.

OCO: Are you going from primary school to a big school?

Boy: No, primary school to primary school... Because I was in fourth class in [town] and now, I have to come to [town].

OCO: And why?

Boy: It's because there was trouble in the house and fighting.

OCO: Okay, so you had to move house as well, did you?

Boy 1: Yeah.

OCO: And how does that work for you?

Boy: All right.

OCO: How did it make you feel?

Boy: Sad.

Child in Care under 13

Even when children feel safe in their placements, many of the children that we spoke to believed that, even after time, it is not the ideal place for them to live.

Boy: I think it's okay that I'm living there, but it's not the best place.

OCO: What's the not good things?

Boy: God, it's not really your family... It's the people, like you might get to know them but they're like still strangers that's taking you in.

OCO: And how does it make you feel?

Boy: Sad and happy.

Child in Care over 13

Many children under 13 that we spoke to really wanted to return to their parents. When asked what would make things nicer for children in living in foster care, one child answered:

Boy: Turning them into non-foster kids.

OCO: And how would you do that?

Boy: Give them back to their parents.

Child in Care under 13

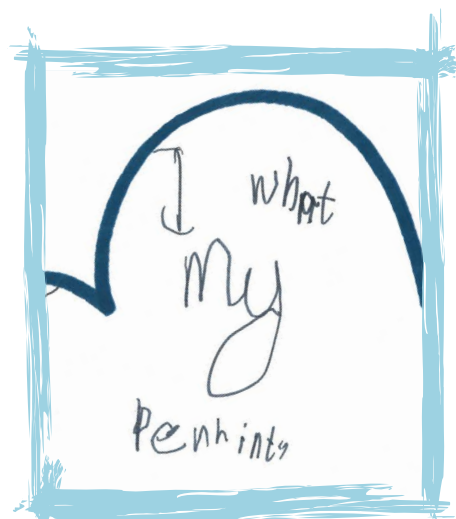
Similarly, over 13s wanted foster placements to be like respite.

Boy: What would make it nicer for children in foster care? Hmm, if they didn't have to go to foster parents.

Girl: And they could just stay at it for a break.

Boy: Yeah, that would be class.

Children in Care under 13



*"I want my parents."
Child in care under 13*

While the children generally had very positive experiences with their social workers, but struggled with the upheaval of entering care and multiple placements.

Girl: I like my social worker, she's amazing. I've had her for five and a half years. My foster parents here now, they're – they really listen. But my placements before that were, weren't great. Like I've been in 11 placements.

Child in Care over 13

Children found adjusting to new placements difficult. As one child explained:

Girl: Very. But you just get so used to it, you know what's going to happen and whatever. You know all the different things that are going to happen and what you have to go through and everything. So, it's not really – once you get used to it, there's like, there's no difference. It's still upsetting, but you just you end up getting used to it like. And you shouldn't get used to it because it ain't right like.

Child in Care over 13

Foster placements can break down for numerous and varied reasons that may not have anything to do with the child. However, this does not mean that the child won't feel rejected.

Boy: I moved like 10 months ago... I was there [in the previous placement] for like eight years.

OCO: And were you happy there?

Boy: Yeah, but they just wanted to like get on with their own life like, they wanted to move away on to a different country, so we had to move.

OCO: How did that make you feel?

Boy: Fairly angry, because we were their family and they just threw us away, so fairly angry.

Child in Care over 13

Knowing more about and meeting new foster carers before going to live with them would help some children.

Boy: She [social worker] picked me up and dropped me to the house.

OCO: And that was the first time you met them?

Boy: Yeah. Yeah.

OCO: How did that feel?

Boy: Well, I didn't really care because I didn't know much else, but like it'd still, like it would be better if you could meet them before you actually moved.

Child in Care over 13

We asked the children if they got professional help to support them through these difficult transitions and experiences.

Girl: Well, I have a play therapist... I go to her... every week, once a week for an hour... but there's a massive waiting list. Like we were on the waiting list for a good while, so.

OCO: And what do you do there?

Girl: You can do whatever you want. Basically, playing. And then there's art therapy.

OCO: What about the rest of you guys, are you getting any support to cope and process what's going on in your life?

Boy: Yeah, yeah, I work with someone, and I can speak to him about how I feel and all that like, and he's very sound.

Children in Care over 13

Children also expressed concern that there were not enough young foster parents, but they disagreed on whether the process to become a foster parent is slow.

Girl: There's not enough young foster parents, which leads me into a whole other conversation. I know from my own foster parents, they had to wait three years to become foster parents, and they ended up nearly not doing it and going into the private sector, but they didn't, luckily. But they had to wait so long just so they could do fostering, and they were like, 'Well, is it ever going to happen', like, 'What's going on?', and like it's nuts like. Like young people have to wait three years just to become a foster parent like.

OCO: So, what can we do to change that?

Girl: Make it quicker, because I know there was like one whole year where they didn't have any like check-ups or anything going on, on them potential foster carers like.

Boy: I think that's good though. It makes, like that means that they're learning something in that three years.

Girl: Yeah, but what are they learning? They have no training in that three years. They've no, like they're not learning anything from the social workers. They literally come out to spot check the house three times, that's it. They had a full year of no contact with social workers, there was no testing or anything going on, or background checks, I don't think. And it was just – they [potential foster carers] weren't happy. Like they nearly ended up ringing up and saying, 'No, we don't want to do it', or whatever.

Children in Care over 13

They agreed that it would be better if their foster parents had more information about them.

Girl: I remember asking my foster mom and dad like did they get much information on me, and they were like, 'No'. They basically said to me, 'We learned more from you being here and telling us than your own social worker'... Now you can also say that there's a benefit on that side because the foster parents might say, 'No, we don't want them because of their background'. But I still feel like the [foster] parents should know. And if they are genuine about being foster carers, then they would still take the child.

Child in Care over 13

Some children that we spoke to wanted to tell us about their journey into care.

Girl: I ended up going into emergency placement when I was 10, and I literally only had the clothes on my back, and I had no toothbrush, no toothpaste, no toiletries, no nothing.

OCO: And how did that make you feel when you didn't have any of those things?

Girl: Scared. Nervous because then I knew I had to go shopping with my foster mom, but I didn't know what my sizes were. I didn't even know the size of my own foot, so it was like trying to figure all that out.

Child in Care over 13

The OCO staff asked what the child thought would be the best scenario for a child in care to live in and the child responded:

Girl: If they were safe and happy in their placement and if they never got moved or nothing happened.

Child in Care over 13

Getting Information

In discussing information provision, one child was very clear that he believed that telling the child the reason that they were being taken into care at the start of the process would help.

OCO: So, what information do you think that children going into care need?

Boy: The exact, the exact reason why they're going into care. I didn't know why I was going into care until nine years, and then I found out. Well, when I found out I was a bit shocked. Well, you ask a few times, but I think you've to get angry before they actually tell you.

Girl: You see sometimes it depends on whether you made an accusation against your parents, or whether somebody else, like an aunt or a teacher, was the one who did it... if a teacher makes the accusation against your parents, then you're not going to know why, unless, as [boys name] says, you keep pushing and pushing.

OCO: And do you think that's fair?

Girl: No, because it is denying us our rights for information and safety.

Children in Care over 13

The children were clear that their own social workers provided them with enough information on how to make complaints, while acknowledging that other children might not know.

Girl: My social is always like, 'Well if you've ever got a complaint against me or anything now, you know you can just do this and this and this', so I – it's drilled into my head now. And I have the leaflet on it, on how to make a complaint against a foster parent or a social worker. But I know there's people out there that haven't a clue because their social worker is – they mightn't like their social worker, the social worker mightn't like them, or they mightn't just get on at all, so the social worker might just be a complete so and so, so they don't end up telling the child how to do it.

Child in Care over 13

The children believed that there could be more emphasis on providing child friendly and age appropriate information.

Girl: Oh God, their vocabulary needs to change. So, if you go to a five-year-old and basically say you've a care plan, they're going to not know what in the hell that is, or what access is, or what any of that means. So, you kind of really need to like, I'm not going to say dumb it down, but make it more simple for them.

Child in Care over 13

Suggestions for Change

The children had many suggested changes for the system, ranging from supports within police interviews, to information provision about placements to accessibility of social workers, which they believe would improve the lives of children living in care.

When discussing entering care one child described needing to fidget when she was talking to the professional support services. She made several suggestions of what should be in a Garda Station to put children at ease.

Girl: The worst thing was when I was getting interviewed by the cops and the police and all of the different social workers, I had nothing to mess with. Like even if you had a pen like this, like I would have felt so much better, and probably would have spoke more. So, I feel like kids should have something to fidget with, like even a Rubik's cube or something soft like a teddy or even what, like because I've gone to [social worker] with all of this and said that we should have puppets, two different puppets so that the child isn't talking to the social worker directly, that they're talking to the puppet. And like there should be a, like we came up with the idea of you know the gym balls? So, the child can sit on that and even get the social worker to do it, so the social worker can say, 'Well, I'm going to sit on this, and if you want to join me there's another one over there'. And the other good thing about that is the adult is lower than the child, so the child doesn't feel looked down on, they feel empowered, because they're the ones – the adult has to look up to them then.

Child in Care over 13

Several children believed that one practical change - the provision of care packages to support children who did not have many belongings or were not able to take their belongings with them – would help children entering care.

Girl:.. I think Dublin has started it, but like care packages. Now I, I actually came up with this idea from my play therapist before I heard about it, so I'm not actually taking the idea, we should have a fidget kit for the child, and a change of clothes or pyjamas because you don't know what background they're coming from. And they should be unisex... And actually writing a story [about going into care] as well for them... so when you're brought into care, that the social worker will read the child the story.

Child in Care over 13

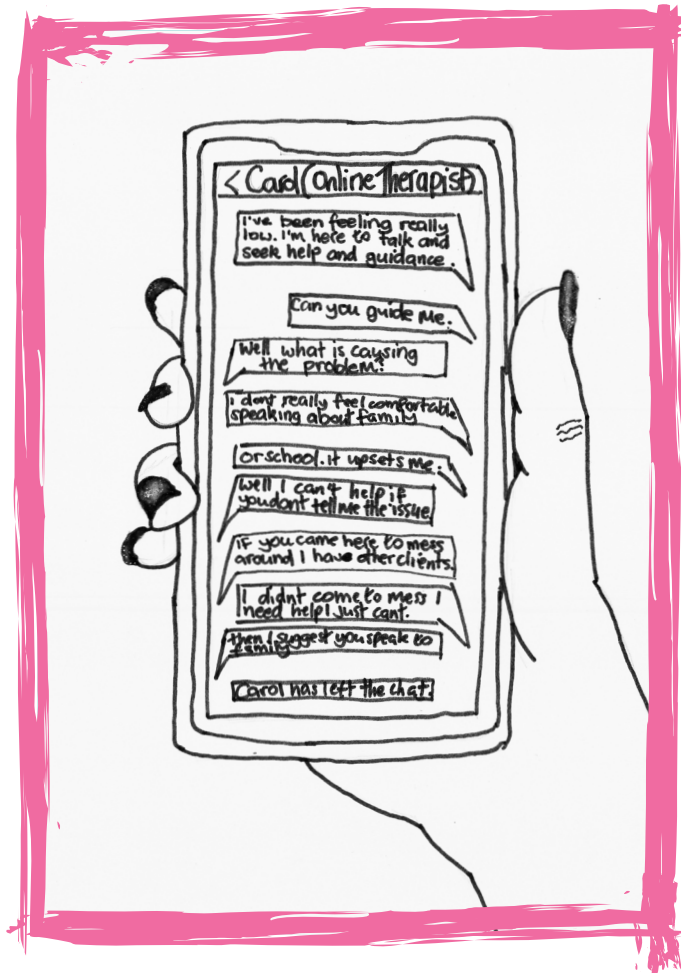
Some children craved the stability of having an allocated social worker and addressed the issue of continuity of care over the weekends.

Girl: Just I feel like you can't, like if something happened on the weekend or anything and you needed to call your social worker for something serious, you wouldn't be able to get a hold of them because they're off. Now there is support there to get you, but you wouldn't hear from them until like the Monday, if they're working on a Monday, but... like the word wouldn't get to your social worker until the next day that they're in.

Child in Care over 13

5.5 What our YAP Said

Our YAP members were very disappointed by the levels of mental health support that children were receiving.



“Carol (Online Therapist)

Child: I have been feeling really low. I'm here to talk and seek help and guidance.

Child: Can you guide me.

Therapist: Well what is causing the problem?

Child: I don't really feel comfortable speaking about family.

Child: Or school. It upsets me.

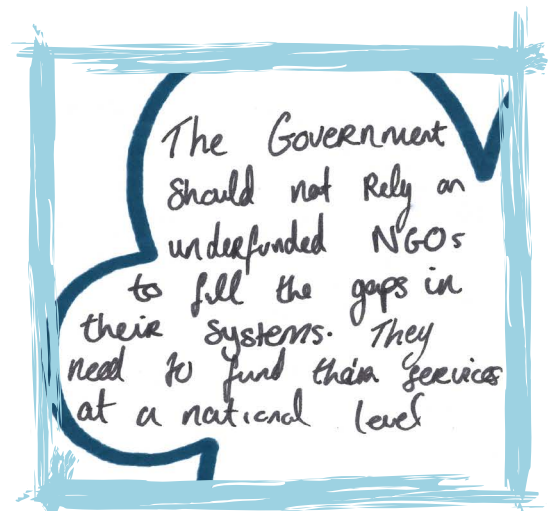
Therapist: Well I can't help if you don't tell me the issue.

Therapist: If you came here to mess around I have other clients.

Child: I didn't come to mess. I need help, I just can't.

Therapist: Then I suggest you speak to family.

Carol has left the chat.”



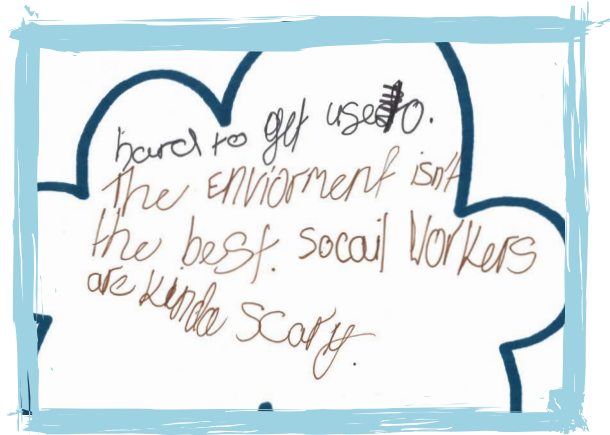
“The Government should not rely on underfunded NGOs to fill the gaps in their systems. they need to fund their services at a national level.”

The YAP gave serious consideration to how children in care would feel and attempted to describe the emotions that they would go through.



"Feelings/emotions"

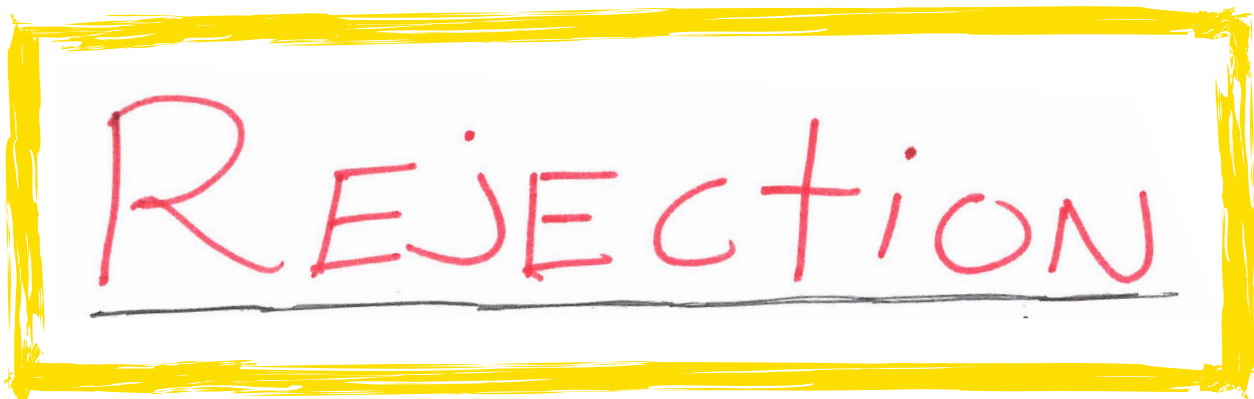
Rejected. Disruption. Unhappy. Disrespected. Hopeless. Lost. Gloom. Trouble. Anger. Disappointed. Heartbroken. Complicated. Unhappy. Stress. Miserable. Lonely."



"Hard to get used to. The environment isn't the best. Social workers are kinda scary."



"Being constantly moved."



"Rejection."



"Loneliness."

The YAP considered what is like to be LGBTI+.

"It's like I have to prove something"
→ No one is going to come out for the fun of it, what exactly ~~is that~~ would prove that they are in fact part of the LGBTQIA+ community
↳ Especially when many people are going to have a negative reaction

"It's like I have to prove something". No one is going to come out for the fun of it. What exactly would prove they are part of the LGBTQIA+ community? Especially when many people are going to have a negative reaction."

People asking for proof is more so directed at trans people imo but other than the fact that they have nothing to prove, getting an official diagnosis costs money + if under 16, one ~~is~~ would need a parent ~~etc~~ + they may not be out to their parent

"People asking for proof is more directed at trans people, imo [in my opinion] but other than the fact that they have nothing to prove, getting an official diagnosis eats money and if under 16, one would need a parent and they may not be out to their parent."



"I'm gay/trans/bi/etc."

"Prove it."

"Huh?"

Misconceptions

Racist

FEAR

FEAR

Gender

Equality

BLM

Movement

STER

STIGMA

Gender

BOY
EOTYPES

BLM

Intersectionality

STIGMA

Kali

6

Views from Focus Groups: Equality & Discrimination



Some children believed that Ireland was an accepting country that welcomed diversity, which was evident in the ability of younger children to express themselves.

Girl: I think my school is relatively like open and accepting to everyone. Like I think especially you can see in the younger years that people are more able to express themselves, and it's just really nice to see. And I think people are relatively free from like homophobia and racism in my school, but maybe I'm just not seeing things, you know. So, from what I can see, it's pretty good.

Child in Secondary School

However, a large number of children that we spoke to faced multiple forms of discrimination and intersectional discrimination. These were in all spheres of their lives, from school, to social lives to their interactions with adults and support services such as the Gardaí.

6.1 Gender Discrimination

Many children identified gender discrimination within their schools. We asked if schools were attempting to tackle issues of sexism or toxic masculinity and almost all children were clear that their school did not address these issues.

Boy: I feel like they're [teachers] part of the problem, to put it blatantly. You know, they try to segregate us as much as possible. And I'm obviously queer and transgender, so it's always been like very weird for me, but like in general it is, like I feel like teachers like almost foster this like behaviour at the back of your head that, oh, girls must do this, boys must do this, and there's like no in between, there's no grey area.

Child in Secondary School

This sexism also extended to boys who do not conform to gender norms having their sexuality questioned and potentially leading to social exclusion.

Boy: ...in my school, so long as you fit into what the description of a lad is... I'm in an all-boys school... then you will generally be fine, but anyone who tends to drift outside of that, if they're LGBT or if they're a bit more effeminate, they wouldn't be as accepted.

Child in Secondary School

Gendered school uniforms proved frustrating for most girls that we spoke to.

Girl: There can sometimes be a very, very annoying trend of schools refusing to allow girls to wear simple things like trousers on a cold winter's day in a building with no heating, things like that aren't allowed. Or you know, skirts of certain lengths, you know, you hear all these crazy stories and it's just like can they not just wear trousers if they want to? Like why not?

Child in Secondary School

One child in particular spoke about how her teacher did not intervene when she was a victim of sexist bullying, leaving her to question her safety.

Girl: I don't think I've ever felt comfortable in school. I'd just know that I wasn't completely safe. Like they never like tried to physically harm me or anything, but I knew that I couldn't be authentic or at ease because there was always like some comment that was going to be made, and whether that be because, you know, I was gay, or because I was a girl... And I remember my mum was at a parent teacher meeting, and she said that this is what the teacher told her, 'Oh sure she's definitely able to handle herself anyway. I hear her saying

like "Shut up" and all these kind of things to the lads all the time'. And it just made me upset because the teacher had noticed, they noticed that they were doing these things and there was nothing said and they were just like, 'Oh, it's okay though because she handles it herself', even though it obviously wasn't working considering all the amount of times I would have to say it to them.

Child in Secondary School

Some children that we spoke to identified national developments in gender equality through the passing of the abortion referendum.

Boy: it was good that that passed, and it was definitely progress because we passed that, and it was something really important to pass.

Child in Secondary School

However, other children spoke of how their peers handled the referendum debates and that it led to sexist bullying.

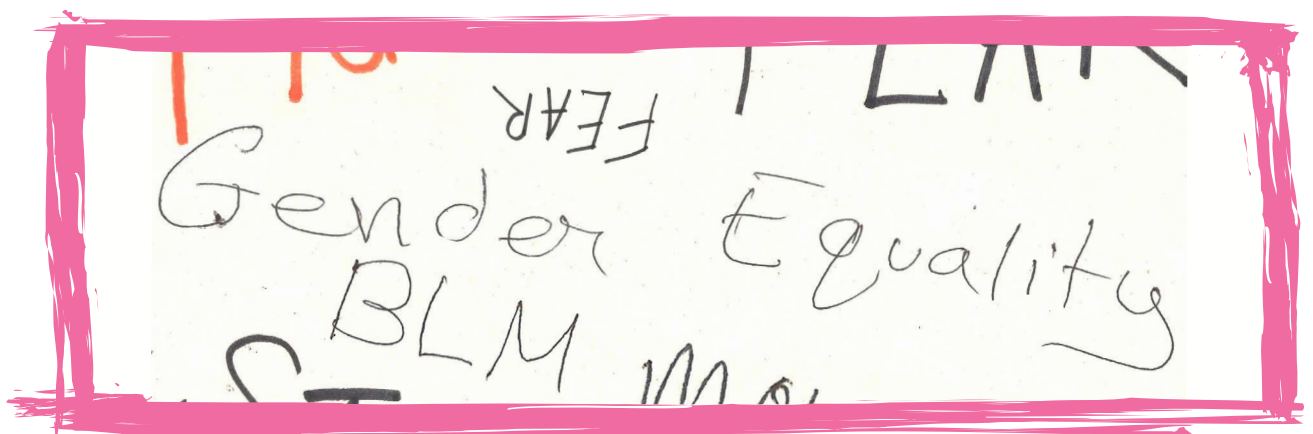
Girl: In regards to like the abortion referendum, I personally was very much like pro, yes, and you know, very for it. And I remember being like SHPE class and we got into a big debate about it. And I just remember like the boys in my year being like, you know, abortions shouldn't be a thing, that's horrible. And I remember being like, 'Shut up, this does not affect you. Just be quiet please'. And I think kind of from there I think that had a real knock-on effect of like misogyny directed towards me. And I remember I was like, you know, I was the feminist of the year and I feel like I had a lot of sexist jokes directed towards me, I was quite young dealing with that.

Child in Secondary School

Gender discrimination was also identified in sports.

Girl: I play Gaelic football in school, it is so put down compared to what sports the boys play. If the boys need the jerseys, the boys get the jerseys, and we have to wear the jerseys from like four or five years ago that are really old and just shouldn't be worn anymore.

Child from a Migrant Background



6.2 Socio-economic Discrimination

Some of the children that we spoke to believed they experienced discrimination based on their socio-economic background, or perceived background. Sometimes this was based on the area that the children lived in, the clothes that they wore, or the people that they spent time with. Mostly the impact of the discrimination was that the children felt judged, on other occasions it impacted their ability to access housing.

Girl: Like even because we all lived in the flats, there's people that look down on people that live in flats, like landlords who are looking down at, 'Aw, they're poor', so we don't want them in our apartments'.

Child in Alternative Education

The children experiencing socio-economic discrimination frequently described the feeling of 'being watched'.

*Boy 2: So like I live up the road, like I'm grand, but I'm 16 as well, so everyone thinks I'm a f**king scumbag. So when I walk into shops, everyone's looking at me. When I'm anywhere like people are looking at me. I just think it's bulls**t though because I haven't done anything.*

Boy 1: It's just profiling.

Boy 2: Yeah, it's – I can kind of see where they are coming from because a lot of people my age around where I live are like that. But it's just unfair but I don't think there's anything you can really do with that then though like.

OCO: And how does it make you feel?

*Boy 2: A bit sh**ty like, but I understand why, but it is sh**ty. Like I can't deny it. It just sucks the way I'm not, I'm not allowed to be kind of trusted, just because of where I'm from and my age. I can't control neither of them like, and it's again watched constantly because of where I'm from like. It's just a lot of bulls**t like.*

Children in Alternative Education

Mostly children felt frustrated that they were perceived to be “trouble makers”.

*Boy: ...if I'm out with friends like, we're up to trouble... even if we're doing nothing. We're up to trouble. I've had a few run-ins but like nothing kind of very discriminating but no, it's just bulls**t like. And especially a lot of people, like, 'Oh, you're from the north side', and then straight away it's like, 'Oh, he's a f**king scumbag, he does this, he does that'.*

Child in Alternative Education

6.3 Discrimination by the Gardaí/Police

Often children faced socio-economic discrimination in their dealings with the Gardaí (Irish police force).

Boy 3: Like we'd be... standing say at the flats or something, and they'd just pull up, talk to you, arrest you for a drug search or something. They just hate us.

Boy 2: Our family as well.

Boy 3: They'd pick on, like over your family too.

Boy 1: Yeah, like say you're wearing a tracksuit or something, they think you're like scumbags straight away, the minute they see you.

Children in Detention Facility

Stop and search powers were used against children and some attributed this to their socio-economic background, where they lived and the clothes that they wore. One child described being stopped and searched wearing his school uniform.

Boy 2: ...this only happened last week. I got off the bus from coming home from school, four coppers hopped out and said, 'Drug search'. I was in my jocks in the middle of the road... literally, they had me in me jocks searching me. It was horrible, yeah, but you don't get a choice. Yeah, it's like I'm targeted. Me and my mates are targeted... It's horrible, especially, especially when you're searched on your own road... all me neighbours seen me... It was horrible, yeah, but you don't get a choice.

Girl 1: They always target inner city kids.

Boy 2: Well like, my whole road judge me now because they seen me getting stopped so many times, but they think I'm a little scumbag or something.

Girl 1: Yeah... I have friends that live in Howth, but if I'm out with them, they never stop me, but they know I'm out with my friends from like the inner city, they'll always look at me.

Children in Alternative Education

Some children described being asked where they got their clothes by the Gardaí if it they were seen to be expensive.

Boy: The police need to learn how to stop accusing young fellas around 14, 15, 16 of selling drugs, [if they're] wearing like a Canada Goose or Moncler jacket saying, 'Where did you get it? Who did you get it off?' Taking all of your stuff, your electric scooter, all that off you...

Child in Alternative Education

Various children identified experiences of racism with the Gardaí. These ranged from the use of stop and search powers to directed racist comments. Some children believed that there was intersectional discrimination due to their race and their age.

Non-binary: As a person of colour living in Ireland, it's very bizarre going around with a backpack, you know, just doing my bits and bobs in town with my mates, who are white. And I'd be stopped to get my backpack checked you know like for alcohol and whatever, but no one else will be [checked]. Like it's like intersectional between youth and racial inequalities. I just get checked a lot more, you know, than my white counterparts, my white mates.

Child in Secondary School

Children in detention described overt racism they experienced at the hands of the Gardaí.

Boy 4: Yeah, I had a Garda say racist stuff. The guards-

Boy 1: They're all racist.

Boy 4: A lot of Garda say to me, 'Brother, how's your little black scumbag brother?'... And how does that even make sense, genuinely? That's what, that's what a Garda said to me, 'Brother, how's your little black scumbag brother?'

Child in Detention Centre

Children from the Traveller community described receiving slurs and taunts directly from the Gardaí.

*Boy: I was told that I should hang myself because I'm a Traveller, by guards and by most people like... my dad's sick, he's locked up in jail dying with cancer, and guards knew before I did like obviously because my mum didn't want to tell me... the guards told me before that like, do you get me, laughing about it like. Sure like Jesus, he's a k****r, he's going to die in jail and s**t like that... he used those words yeah.*

Child in Detention Centre

Two children from the Traveller community described one instance of racism that was particularly disturbing.

Boy 1: There was a gas leak, well they say it was a gas leak, right, up on a site... and the whole family and all that died. I mean his da and his uncles and all died, all little kids, babies died in the fire. But... the guards – what did the guard say to him?

Boy 4: The guards arrested him, 'Oh, you should have burned with the rest of them'-

Boy 1: 'You should have burned with the rest of your family'.

Children in Detention Centre

Many of the children in detention distrusted the Gardaí, with several children expressing doubt that the Gardaí would help them.

*Boy 1: They're f**king supposed to be people who if you're feeling like at risk or whatever, you can ring, and they'd come out and help you...*

Boy 2: Yeah, the guards take hours to come.

Boy 1: Like they just do that in spite, because you'd ring and give the address and your name, and you probably won't even get seen that night.

Children in Detention Centre

Other children also had misgivings about trusting the Gardaí to protect them.

Girl: Just again in my personal experiences, especially situations with guards, in regards to protecting teenagers; they can have a lot of personal biases which is very hard to get around, I guess.

Child in Secondary School

In particular, some girls believed that the Gardaí would not support them should they make an allegation or complaint against boys in their local communities.

Girl: There's been a lot of incidents of where like certain lads in the community will do stuff, and it's just let slide because like, oh like they're well-respected in the community, like we'll just let them off, a little slap on the wrist then they're gone. So personally, just I don't think that, especially as a woman as well, I don't think that the Gardaí, particularly in rural areas, are altogether supportive, if that makes sense.

Child in Secondary School

Most children struggled to believe that anything could change with regard to the Gardaí's treatment of them. Where they could suggest changes and improvements, these generally related to Garda education with an emphasis on encouraging them to listen to adolescents.

OCO: So what would you change?

Boy: ...make the training much harder, and make them listen to the kids and the victims

Girl: I'd get them to listen more.

Children in Alternative Education

Some children from a migrant background thought that the Gardaí were less likely to believe them because they were new to their communities.

Boy: And there's a lot of assumptions and like you know, Gardaí are kind of a community-based policing organisation, so they maybe tend to take the word of people who might have been in the community a long time, and they shouldn't you. You know, they should investigate it, but they tend to just say, 'Well, I've known [them] for 50 years'.

Child from a Migrant Background

Children also acknowledge that the Gardaí were frequently not representative of the communities that they serve.

Boy 3: Yeah, but like I see them, like I have seen like guards going around and there's never a black guard...

Girl 2: They're all Irish.

Boy 3: Yeah, exactly.

Boy 2: There's one Chinese guard I know, but that's all. The rest of them I know are all like-

Boy 3: White Irish.

Children in Alternative Education

6.4 Racism

We spoke to children in the wake of high profile police killings and shootings of black men and the mainstreaming of the Black Lives Matter movement. The ensuing public debate about racism in Ireland was something that children were very aware of and engaged in.

Girl: Like everywhere you go, you're going to find some sort of discrimination against you. Even at my young age, like me and my dad were driving and then some people screamed some like nasty words at us outside the car window, and then they drove past us. So, I don't think anywhere is perfect. So we also like need to get out of the mentality that racism is only in America, or Ireland is fine and there's no racism here. I don't think we should be turning the blind eye and say Ireland is perfect.

Child from a Migrant background

Children of colour described both overt and covert displays of racism in their everyday lives, which had an effect on speaking out against racism.

Girl: We had an event for Pride, and everyone showed up, everyone was in colour and there was music. But then next week there is an event [addressing] racism, no one showed up. And not even the people of colour in my school, because they were scared to support themselves because there is like stigma around that.

Child in Secondary School

Children also experienced racist bullying at the hands of their peers in school.

Non-binary: ...for like First to Third Year, I was terrified like going to school, like because of like, like I was bullied, but I didn't know I was being bullied because it was like so normalised, you know, like ha ha, racial jokes.

Child in Secondary School

Some children discussed the micro-aggressions that they faced in school or the community, wherein teachers, peers or others displayed a lack of cultural awareness and understanding. This led some children to feel ashamed or embarrassed of their culture.

Girl: My friend had a bandana over her head. She has curly hair by the way... and she was told by her deputy principal that it wasn't school appropriate and she was supposed to take it off... she said that she can't because her hair would be big and poufy, and he asked her if she had a medical condition, as in like the only reason why she wouldn't take it off, or she's not able to take it off is if she has a medical condition. So, I feel like they don't, I feel like they don't listen to you.

Child from a Migrant background

Non-binary: Like my lunch would have rice in it, like I would have – and it would smell weird because it wasn't their taste, and they would point it out and then I would get embarrassed about my culture, and so there's always – it's kind of normalised. But I've learned to accept that now, but to like still not let that change me. So I think it's just, it's normalised, so yeah.
Child in Secondary School

Boy: My dad is Indian, and my mum's white, well Irish, so actually a few times in the shops... I'm like, I don't know, standing next to my mum, and then the person's like, 'Oh, is this your guardian?', and it's like, 'No, it's my birth mum'. So, some people make the mistake because I'm darker than her.
Child in Secondary School

Children from ethnic minority backgrounds also felt that others view them as a homogenous group and do not consider their unique experiences.

Non-binary: In religion, we had a discussion about kind of minorities, and I was the only Asian person there. I was the only coloured person in my class. And there was a question about the black community, and there was no one in my class that was black. And suddenly, they asked me the question, and all of a sudden, I'm the representative for the black community and the Asian community, and like, 'How do you feel? Like I don't know, I'm not, I'm not black. Like I'm Asian, and they were like, 'Oh yeah, but how are you feeling?'
Child in Secondary School

Experiences of racism in the past or the potential for racial harassment mean that some children did not feel safe.

Girl: To be honest, I live in Dublin, and I'm scared to go out alone. Last week, I was a bit scared to come home from the city because there's so many drunk people at night on the street, especially if you're a girl, and a Hijab as well.
Child from a Migrant Background

Frequently children described incidents of racism coming from adults, not their peers.

Girl 2: ...I've seen a lot of hostility from adults towards queer or teenagers of colour and just like a lot of hostility and violence.
Girl 6: I have like similar experiences where my friend group is, we're all queer and there's a few people of colour as well. And... we've like had experiences with people who've been rude or whatever, and like discrimination and that kind of stuff. And it's always been adults. Like it's never, like well it's rarely people our age; it's usually adults.
Children in Secondary School

6.5 Homophobia and Transphobia

Children spoke extensively about homophobia and transphobia, which permeated many aspects of their lives from school to sports groups. However, some children acknowledged that some positive change happened in the wake of the success of the Marriage Equality referendum in Ireland in 2015. When asked about its impact, some children described the following:

Boy 1: Positively, kind of, because it kind of makes me feel more comfortable as myself because like, it's legal that I can marry who I want. And it gives you that, kind of like, safety that you know that, like, you can marry the person who you do love without getting probably killed for it.

Boy 2: It's, like, basically, you just know that it's not a bad thing to be gay, in a way, like. Like... if it's illegal you see it as a bad thing but if it's legal and you can marry who you want, then it's seen as like, an okay thing, in a way.

Boy 1: And, like, you know there's many other people out there that are like you so you'd be more like, like encouraged to say, 'This is who I am'.

Children in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

However, some children felt that debates surrounding the Marriage Equality referendum were damaging.

Boy: ...in terms of LGBT rights, the fact that there's arguments, and they are things that are not arguments at all, that people's right... If you saw debating about whether people with brown hair should be allowed in places, like the things that are intrinsically you, when those are being debated on media, on television, in papers, that it can be – it's really disheartening.

Child in Secondary School

Similarly, the ongoing debates on Trans Rights perpetuated on social media channels have proved upsetting for many transgender children.

Boy: Like especially if you're like transphobic, because you're just doubting a person's entire existence, and I just don't understand why like people are like, 'Oh no, that's my right, that's like my right to free speech'.

Child in Alternative Education

Children described being bullied or ridiculed for their gender identity, which led to feelings of self-loathing.

Boy: I'm Trans, and basically, I first tried to come out as non-binary when I was 11, and I literally got laughed at. And I remember just feeling like so disgusted at myself for being Trans.

Child in Alternative Education

Transgender children experienced many barriers to the realisation of their rights within their schools. Particularly, they faced issues with school placements, the wearing of gendered uniforms and using bathrooms. Some children described their schools as being unprepared to meet their needs; this led children to question their own safety.

Boy: It's very difficult because you have the principal saying to my mam, 'Oh, can [he] go to the boys' school that's around the corner?' But if I was at that boys' school I would have been killed if they found out that I was Trans because my brother has told me, he used to be in that school. He told me that school is very homophobic and transphobic and I wouldn't be safe in there. It's, it is very hard and all walking around in a girls' school,

getting teachers mis-gendering me even though they know I'm a male and all, and, like, just pushing me over to the girl stereotypes and all of that stuff even though I'm sitting here, like, 'No, I'm a boy, what are you talking about?'

Child in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

This was a common experience amongst the transgender children in single sex schools. This was fraught with difficulties as they navigated simple things like attending Physical Education class.

Boy: I was in an all-girls Catholic school because I used to be a woman of course, but when I first came out, like, they did not care, basically... for sports you needed to wear a skirt. Meanwhile, I kept on having breakdowns over breakdowns wearing that skirt that we actually had to fight with the school for me to be allowed to wear the PE tracksuit.

Child in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

Even where children attended co-educational school transgender children found themselves excluded from sports.

Boy: I'm not allowed play for the boys football team in school because I was born female and they told me I wasn't allowed play for the boys' football team so... And they were like, 'Would you play for the girls' team?', and I was like, 'No, why would I play for the girls' team, I'm not a girl, I'm a boy'.

Child in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

Which bathroom children were permitted or felt comfortable to use was also traumatic for transgender children. The children we spoke to described not using the bathroom for the entire school day or face abuse if they used them.

Girl: I'm actually so scared to use the girls' toilets in the school, I just can't use the toilets at all. Even though there is a non-binary toilet in my school, I can't use that because I'm afraid of people judging me for that anyways. So, I can't, I literally can't go to the toilet at all during the hours of school.

Boy 1: Yeah, same here because, we still have all girls' bathrooms but then there's only male bathrooms... for the staff and I'm not allowed to use those toilets.

Boy 2: Like, it would be great to have just a non-gendered bathroom, like.

Boy 4: Yeah, there's one in my school now, me and one other student use a universal toilet.

Boy 2: When you go to the bathroom there are slurs all over the walls. Even though our school painted over the thing... you can still see them. And then they are still coming back writing on the walls, drawing on the walls and I never go to the bathroom, like, I always have to hold it in and wait until I go home because I don't want to look at those and just cry seeing like how, basically, horrible my, the school is.

Children in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

Transgender children that we spoke to all described being misgendered in school, which they found upsetting and frustrating.

Boy: I only came out as trans last year so, and even still to this day, I still get misgendered and stuff by teachers in school, it's, sometimes it's so frustrating though they don't mean it, it's just, like, ah, do you get me? I've been out now a year, it's, like I know it's hard to get used to it but every day the teachers... they call me a she at least three times a day, I'm like, 'No, it's he'. I used to be too socially awkward to correct it.

Child in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

Some children spoke of threats of violence when they first began identifying as gender non-conforming.

Boy 4: Yeah. I got threatened before by a person I used to be friends with before I came out as Trans... he absolutely hated me for it and threatening to hit me and stuff like that over it... I was threatened by him, that he was going to kill me because I was Trans. He was like, 'Oh, you're a boy now, I can hit you, and all that and, like... Like, why, why would you say that? Just because...I found out who I really want to be, why would you say that?

Child in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

Children spoke of schools being ill prepared or teachers who are not trained to deal with homophobic and transphobic bullying in school.

Girl: Yeah, I'd say it's really just more of a place of ignorance, like it's just – teachers not being prepared and stuff. You know, they just aren't taught about it well enough. So even though you wouldn't face like very like physically violent discrimination or anything like that, like on a daily basis or anything, the best you can hope for is that they'd see you as bizarre.

Child in Secondary School

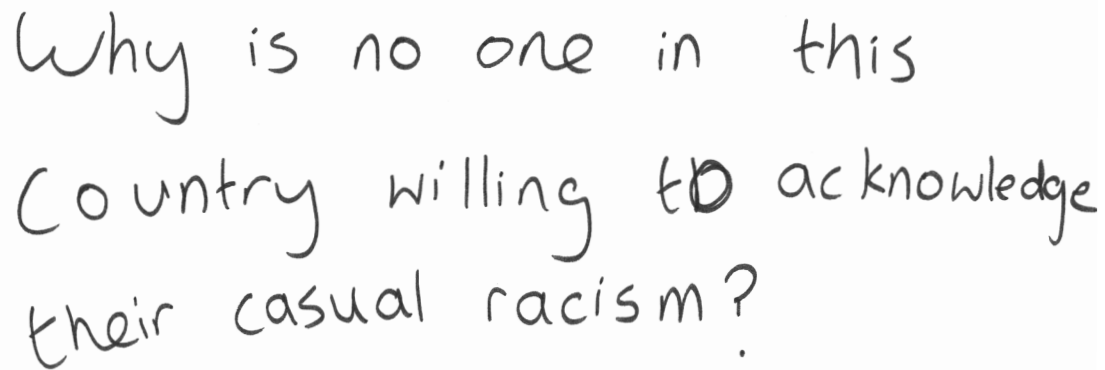
As numerous children we spoke to felt isolated from, or intimidated by, their peers and school community due to their sexuality or gender identity, many found their LGBTI+ youth group a safe haven.

Boy: It's like a community that I can go to and I don't feel alone. Because I know in school, like, I'm the only gay guy that I know in my school so it's... really lonely, kind of, because all my friends are straight and, I come here and... everyone's different... It just makes me feel included for a change... I came out a year ago and ever since that, I've been kind of excluded from things in a way. Like, it's not even the teachers or anything, it's people in my school, the students... I'm excluded because I'm different, but here I'm just treated as equal, and I love that.

Child in an LGBTI+ Youth Group

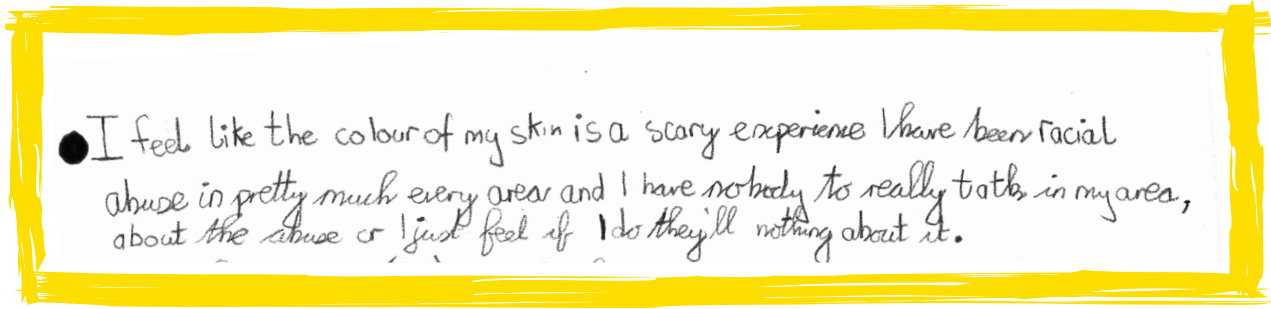
6.6 What our YAP Said

Some of our YAP members spoke about their own experiences of racism within Irish society.



Why is no one in this
Country willing to acknowledge
their casual racism?

"Why is no one in this country willing to acknowledge their casual racism?"



● I feel like the colour of my skin is a scary experience I have been racial abuse in pretty much every area and I have nobody to really talk to in my area, about the abuse or I just feel if I do they'll do nothing about it.

"I feel like the colour of my skin is a scary experience. I have been racial[ly] abuse[d] in pretty much every area and I have nobody really to talk to in my area, about the abuse or I just feel if I do they'll do nothing about it."



"Yoo, can I have the n-word pass?"

"You trippin!!"

Homophobia was also an issue that members of our YAP had experienced first-hand.

If you have to follow
the sentence 'I'm not
homophobic' with the word
'but', then you're **homophobic**

"If you have to follow the sentence, 'I'm not homophobic' with the word 'but', then you're homophobic."

The RIGHT TO AN:
Opinion / Your Own Humour
Should NEVER Be an
excuse to be Openly Racist
or Homophobic

"The right to an opinion/your own humour should NEVER be an excuse to be openly racist or homophobic."



"Trapped."



"!Boys Only!"

The skirt symbolizes a prison.
A tool to suppress this child's
real and true self.

This child was forced
to wear a skirt.

This simple piece of
clothing caused this
child so much pain
and was
used by
a religious
school as
a weapon.

"The skirt symbolizes a prison. A tool to suppress this child's real and true self."

"This child was forced to wear a skirt. This simple piece of clothing caused this child so much pain and was used by a religious school as a weapon."

I think there should
be a gender neutral
Toilet in School.

"I think there should be a gender neutral toilet in school."

Fun SAFE

Lobbies are AMAZING

Safe places

They are Diverse +

Green Areas

Inclusive

Safety

Things for teenagers.

No options

Fun SPACES

7

Views from Focus Groups: Community & Leisure



Where children live in Ireland has an effect on their ability to access rest, leisure, recreation and cultural and artistic activities. Children in rural and urban settings described enjoying these rights differently. Rural children believed that their areas lack things for children to do but they enjoyed a lot of time outside. Children in urban areas recognised that they had access to cultural and artistic activities but frequently had fewer outdoor safe spaces.

7.1 Hobbies

Leisure activities were an important part of self-expression for children of all ages.

Boy 4: I like the way with hobbies that, of course with some limitations, your age doesn't stop you from doing hobbies. Like, I do trapeze.

Boy 2: I like doing welding with my grandfather and sailing.

Girl 5: Well, I do competitive cycling, and I'm joining a trampolining club.

Boy 3: I do wind surfing, and sometimes I do scuba diving.

Girl 6: I do Japanese-style drawing, you know, called Manga or Anime.

Girl 4: I play volleyball and hockey, and I also love to draw.

Children in Primary School

Being engaged in hobbies helped children learn new things and gave children a sense of achievement.



Cricket the pony. "woo woo!!!"

Boy: I can swim now, right. Like a week ago I didn't – it might sound weird, but I couldn't swim a week ago.

OCO: And how do you feel now that you can swim?

Boy: Safe.

Child in Care under 12

Importantly, the children described their hobbies as increasing their inclusion and sense of wellbeing.

Girl: [I do] sports, camogie, hurling, dancing, [and] Girl Guides. It feels like I'm happy because when I'm in my Girl Guides can I really learn a lot and have fun with them and go for walks and have ice cream and all kinds of things.

Child with a disability

For some children their leisure activities, particularly sports, afforded them opportunities to compete at an international level.

OCO: Are you on the basketball team?

Boy 2: Yeah. I'm the best on the team... next year, I can compete for the Special Olympics.

Child with a disability

Some children with disabilities got a real sense of freedom and independence through participating in mainstream sporting activities.

Girl: Well, I'd say like in sports, because I do sailing, so I sail on a fully-sighted team, and I've gone to worlds and everything like, and like everyone else is like 20/20 vision there, and I'm like, really enjoying that like as well. But they don't really like pay much difference to it.

Child with a Disability

Competing with fully-sighted children allowed some children with visual impairments to express themselves and showcase their abilities.

Boy: I did free-style wrestling... so we were doing loads of different competitions, and at the start they accommodated for the visual impairment. Me and my opponent had to be blindfolded and I didn't much like that, so I just decided what if I just took off my glasses and competed without telling them that I was visually impaired? And then afterwards I would say to them, and said, 'Oh yeah, you didn't know I was visually impaired, right?' and I'd pull out the cane, and they'd be like, 'Oh what? Are you serious? Wow'. And actually, I'm just smirking and like, 'Yeah. You were beaten by me'. It felt absolutely amazing.

Child with a Disability

However, some found that there was less choice of activities that were suitable for children with disabilities. Frequently, this was dependant on the local area.

OCO: Is there something that you would like to do but you cannot do because it doesn't happen where you live?

Boy: Yeah, music or drama.

Girl: Drama. And then coaches in GAA, good coaches, and yeah, a good dance teacher.

Mum: There isn't the same level of choice as what neurotypical children have.

Children with a disability supported by carer

Children with disabilities frequently described barriers to the enjoyment of their hobbies. This was often upsetting and frustrating for them.

Boy: Yeah, so I used to do boxing, and there it was something I loved, but like of course when you're doing boxing you need to pass a medical to actually be able to fight. So, I was kind of aware that this might not work out for someone who's visually impaired, but I – so I went to my local GP to actually try and see what's the story with it. And as soon as I went in, he's obviously aware of my visual impairment. He said, 'There's no way that I would be able to do any sort of like sport like that'. So that like instantly kind of lowered my self-esteem and I got quite upset over not being able to do a sport that I loved, I guess.

Child with a disability

Visual impairment sometimes interfered with children's ability to spend time with their friends.

*Boy: All my friends, they're not visually impaired, and they all got new bikes. So I got a bike, and then I kind of instantly knew after crashing like five times in like a few days, I'd say this isn't right and say I can't do this. So, like and my mam was like, 'I think it's the best thing, if you don't cycle', because she's like, 'I don't want anything to happen to you', so she was obviously quite bummed as well that I wasn't able to do anything that might – like the normal things that my friends were doing as well. I was quite frustrated and, I don't know, quite pi**ed, I guess, because it kind of seems like anything that I try to do just gets shut down by my visual impairment.*

Child with a visual impairment

Many children that we spoke to felt that their sporting and recreation options were limited due to the dominance of Gaelic games in Ireland.

Boy: There are, literally, if you're not mad into GAA... in terms of clubs, in terms of things to involve yourself in, in terms of activism, no, nothing, absolutely very little... and that leads directly to deteriorating mental health.

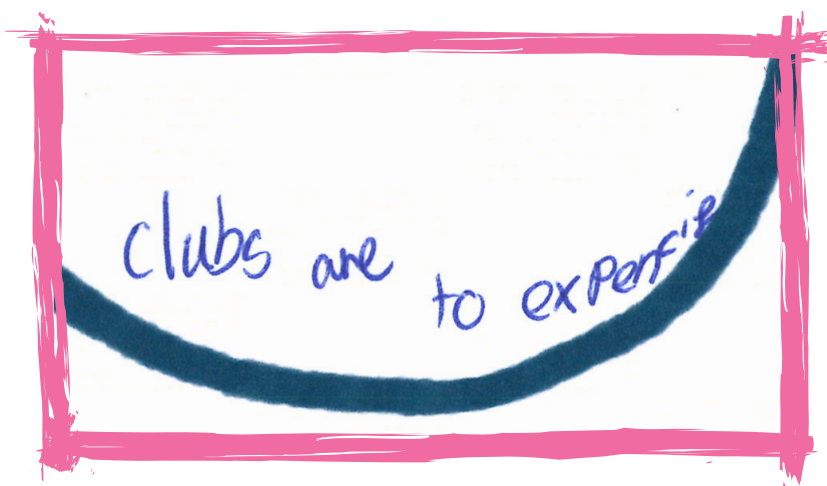
Child in Secondary School

This was echoed by children in primary school who felt that the GAA dominated sporting activities.



*"More varied sports."
Child in Primary School*

Some children worried about the cost of extracurricular activities.



*"Clubs are too expensive."
Child in Primary School*

7.2 Community Facilities

Some children were involved in community-based activism and frequently raised the issue of having somewhere for adolescents to socialise, this affected children in rural and urban areas.

*Girl: I'm with a group in my community– it's a youth steering group, so we kind of bring issues all together and we try to sort them out and stuff. And that was a big thing that came up, that there's not many facilities... for teenagers to go to. You know, there's playgrounds for young children to go to, there's places that adults can obviously go out for a coffee or something, but usually for young people who are like teenagers, there's not really anywhere...for them to go, apart from the youth centre... maybe that mightn't be somewhere that people would want to go, you know, people who are more... shy and stuff...
Child in Secondary School*

Children often described being asked to leave if they sat in parks and playgrounds in their local areas. They often felt judged because of their age and others perception of them as troublemakers. This was compounded by Covid restrictions when youth clubs were closed.

*Girl: I think some adults have a specific perspective of teenagers that they think like all teenagers are the same. Like in my community there's like a lot of... young people around my age, who are going out and doing good things or whatever... then there's also teenagers who are making maybe not the best choices...I know there's not many places for teenagers in my community to kind of hang out... without having to walk around. Like there's – in the youth hub that I go to, but you know, that obviously hasn't been open for the past year. So you've kind of had to compromise and try and find places to hang out. The playground was kind of our only option. But my friend group, no one really does anything that you're not supposed to do, and we'd just be sitting. Like we wouldn't even be on the swings or anything, and we'd be told to get out because it's a place for children to hang out, and I think everyone just has – like some adults have a certain perspective of teenagers and think like all teenagers are the same. And like, you know, some people are kind of overlooked, you know what I mean?
Child in Secondary School*

Children described adults believing that groups of children were anti-social and shouted at them before calling the Gardaí.

*Girl: One thing I've noticed over the summer is me with a group of friends, we were sitting in the playground in our local park, and a group of women... came up to us and started giving out to us for being in the park. Sitting around in the playground, chatting, not doing any ridiculous, just chatting, because we looked too old to be 12... And then started giving out to us and said that they'll call the police, [and] went on to do so.
Child from a Migrant background*

One child told us about anti-loitering alarms in her area to disperse children.

*Girl: An issue in my area is anti-loitering alarms... So there's one wall at the end of my estate, and they have this sensor, the sensor will go off, and it creates a noise that is for a frequency for younger children and teenagers to hear, and you won't be able to stand around it for a very long time. So, it's for anti-loitering. They don't want people like gathering near them, but even just walking past it, it's very infuriating hearing this like grating noise in your ear. And I know a lot of shops have begun to use them for like teenagers outside. So, that's quite annoying.
Child in Secondary School*

A lack of places to go and play affected younger children too.

Boy: Behind my house there's a church, but like there's loads of signs like 'No ball games, No dogs', no anything, but there's at least like five acres of nothing... it's just wasted on nothing. There are more children on the other side of the church living there. There's no playgrounds, anything, like skating parks or anything for them. So it'd be good to build at least something there for them.

Child in Primary School

Children in Early Years settings also wanted more services in their locality.



*Get a new playground near my school and a swimming pool.
Child in Early Years setting*

Children in urban settings sometimes acknowledged that they had a lot more local activities and community facilities than children living in rural areas.

Girl: Well, I think it's really good in Dublin in terms of like sports and stuff, because I think it's so cool that we have... a dry skiing slope which we can go to, and then there's skate parks and there's swimming pools and there's the National Aquatic Centre and different tracks and stuff. But then also in the countryside, there isn't as much of that I think because like a lot of it is concentrated in like Dublin, or maybe like in Belfast as well. So, I think there should be more for other people who don't live in Dublin.

Child in Primary School

However, some children living in urban areas also believed that there was not enough green space for them to play.

Girl: I would like more green areas in the city, yeah, because [in] the city... I barely see any green areas at all. I just see concrete blocks, concrete blocks.

Child in Primary School

Some young children also described their play parks being vandalised.

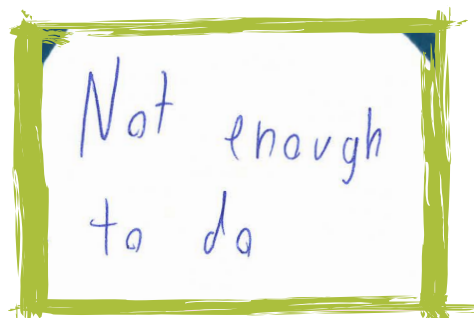
Girl: there's not many bins around, so... some people leave just cans around anyway. And... the park there, I don't know why, but it's just completely graffitied over so that like they have made a new one. I think it's teenagers or something wrecked one of the swings. So little by little, it's kind of like receding away, because there's only a few swings and a slide and other small things left now. So, maybe people could add more playgrounds for little kids, or like a zip-line because that'd be cool.

Child in Primary School

A number of children believed that their areas were not child friendly.



*"No parks near my house."
Child in Primary School*



*"Not enough to do."
Child in Primary School*

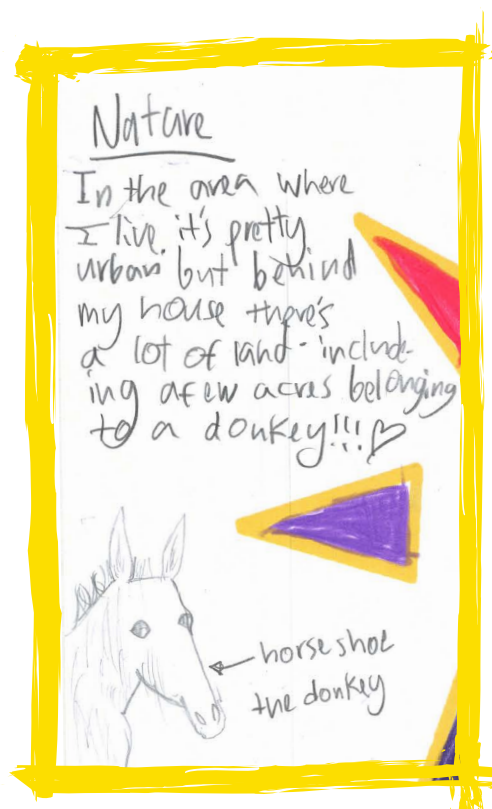
*Girl: I think it's more designed for adults... It's not child friendly like there's no grass. I don't really see any kids around, unless they're coming home from school.
Child in Primary School*

Frequently, children with disabilities told us that their areas were not inclusive in their design and it was extremely difficult for them to navigate.

*Non-binary: And I'm disabled... So the services there are like a really bad rural community, like in my town we don't have a bus stop. Even though the bus stops off, we don't have a bus stop in the village, or the start of the village. Services in general in the rural community are horrendous... even for young people in general, but it's even worse if you consider the disabled community, how a lot of activities are inaccessible. It's just horrendous really.
Child in Secondary School*

Some children who were blind or had visual impairments made some strong recommendations for changes that could make their communities easier for them to get around.

*Boy: Please God, can people please cut branches back from outside of their house [that are] going out onto the footpath? I'm like six foot three, so I get branches right in the eyes. It's horrible. Can there not be a law made? Come on, you can't have half the footpath for your miniature jungle?
Child with a disability*



"Nature

In the area where I live it's pretty urban but behind my house there's a lot of land, including a few acres belonging to a donkey!!!!

Horseshoe the donkey."

Child in Primary School

Obstacles on footpaths was a major issue that was a source of frustration.

Boy 3: Oh yeah, stop cars from parking on the footpaths, please.

Boy 1: I don't know why but where I live there's barely any bins... But wherever they are, they're smack bang in the middle of the footpath. And like, oh my God, and there would just be random pillars around the place, and like I often remember going downtown with a few friends, you know, walking around, like even with my cane, hopping like my left leg off of one of these pillars. And I'm just like why are they here? Like they are nothing but an inconvenience.

Children with a disability

Several children with visual impairments found it challenging to navigate public transport.

Boy: You know... the thing that tells you what, like how long is left 'til the bus has to come? They're quite small and I can't see them at all. Or the numbers on the busses, I can't see them. I take public transport everywhere... so I think that's probably one of the most difficult things I have to do in public...

OCO: And so how do you deal with that?

Boy: Well, if I'm with someone, which I usually am, they would, they would tell me what number the bus is, or how long's left. Yeah... you have to ask someone everywhere I go, like to do something for me and it's probably – well my mom is used to it by now but if I'm like with someone, like my friends are sometimes probably, it's annoying for them as well for me to ask them.

OCO: Is it hard to ask for help?

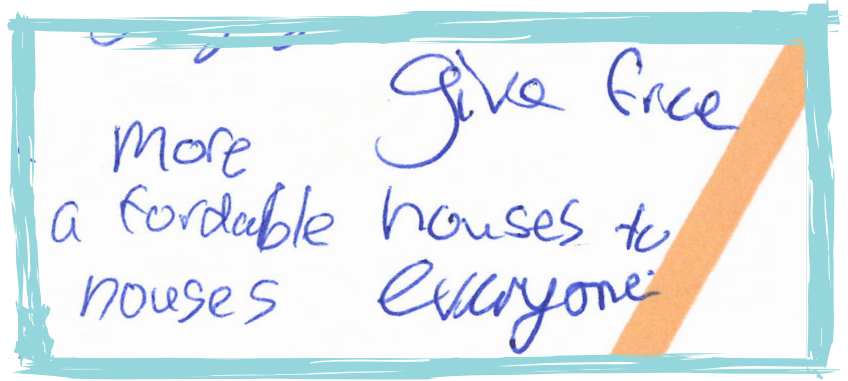
Boy: Yeah, it's, sometimes, I don't know, it's like I just don't want to ask someone because I don't know, it's kind of embarrassing.

Child with a disability

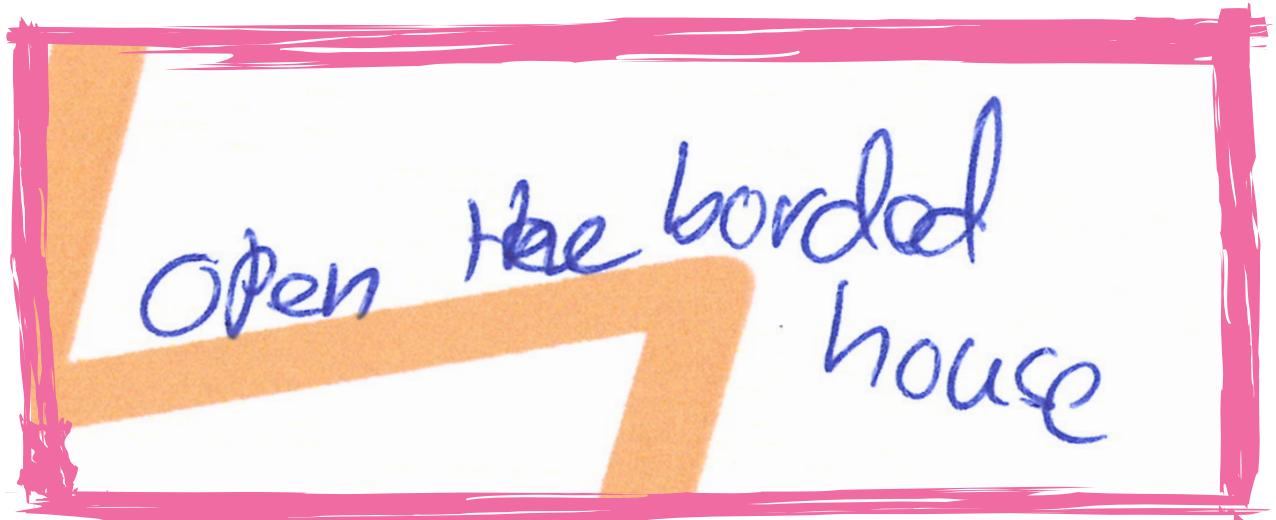
Primary school children raised the issue of inadequate housing in their communities. They were acutely aware of criminal damage to homes, dereliction, boarded up houses and expressed hopes that everyone had a home.



"People should stop bombing houses."
Child in Primary School



"More affordable houses.
Give free houses to everyone."
Child in Primary School



"Open the boarded house."
Child in Primary School



"Affordable houses."
Child in Primary School

7.3 Safety

Children in urban areas often worried for their safety in their communities.

Girl: The Garda helicopter has become quite a normal sound... there was a shooting a while ago and I didn't even know it happened because I was just so used to hearing it. It's very frustrating that you don't sometimes feel [safe], especially like as a young woman in the place where you live... I feel like not feeling safe where you live is so, I don't know, it makes you feel really small.

Child in Secondary School

The child continued to explain the rapid population growth in her area meant that it changed and she no longer felt safe.

Girl: I would walk to the shops, the quickest way I could walk to the shops is an alleyway lined by trees, really scary. Between rats and drug deals, it's not a great place to go... I lived here my whole life, but there [used to be] fields all around, and now it's, I think it's the fastest-growing suburb in Ireland at the moment, and there's lack of schools, lack of sort of like social areas, parks, everything.

Child in Secondary School

Some children living in inner city areas described gangs and drug dealers operating in their communities.

OCO 2: Is your area safe?

Boy 1: No.

Boy 3: No.

OCO: What is the thing that makes you feel unsafe?

Boy 1: Drugs, they're bad... what's going on is right, there's all the drugs, young fellas, crimes going on, and killings. The bad thing is there's kids... from a young age getting involved with drugs and all, and they're getting awards from it. I've seen young fellas myself around, a little young lad come over to me and I said it to him, 'Listen, don't be doing it', and he's like, 'Shut up, you don't know what you're doing'. I said, 'I do because I'm not stupid getting involved with the drugs'. I'm surprised I haven't got approached yet, but I know not to do it.

Boy 3: I walk out of my house and there's gangs on the steps.

Girl 2: There's a gang of the drug dealers right there waiting next to the pitch where the kids play.

Girl 4: Yeah, where I live, there's a big laneway where, like where all the kids were there and they take drugs there.

Children in Alternative Education

These issues meant that there was an increased Gardaí presence in their areas.

Boy: Do you know the worst part of it is, there's this school is right across the road from me, and they're [Gardaí] always parked outside at half 12 doing a check. But it's not even a main road they're doing the checkpoint on. It's literally the estate road.

OCO: And why do you think they're doing that?

Boy: Because they're watching the estate for robbing cars and all.

Child in Alternative Education

Increased Gardaí did not seem to make the children feel safer, but they were very keen for the drug misuse in their areas to be addressed.

Boy 3: The one thing I'd like to change is get rid of the drugs, gangs...

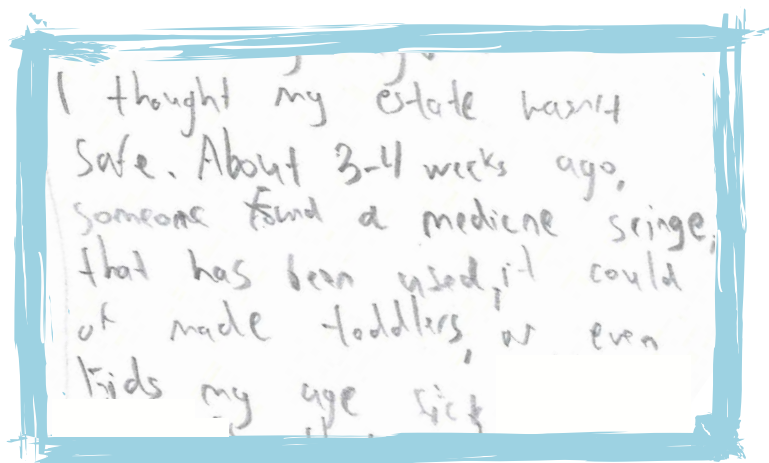
OCO: How does it affect your life?

Girl: It doesn't make you feel safe around that area. Because like-

Boy 1: Crack heads and all running around.

Children in Alternative Education

Children in primary school also found evidence of drug use in their areas, as drug paraphernalia was visible, leading them to question their safety.



*"I thought my estate wasn't safe. About 3 – 4 weeks ago, someone found a medicine syringe that has been used, it could have made toddlers or even kids my age sick."
Child in Primary School*

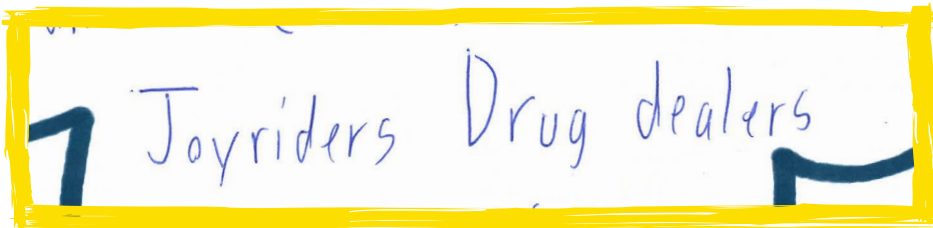
Younger children living in urban environments also wanted to see increased safety in their areas.

Girl: Maybe more safe places for children in the city centre or something, because say, for example, if you live in the middle of the city centre and your parents are at work, and you come home from school, and there's kind of like nowhere that you could [go]. I mean you could walk places, but it might be like dangerous just to walk on your own to places.

Boy 1: Less crime.

Children in Primary School

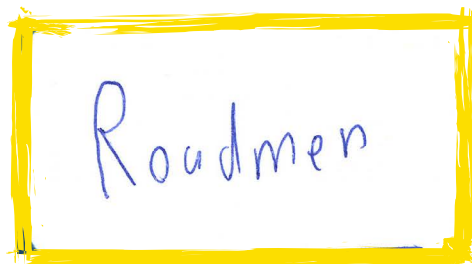
Some children in socio-economic disadvantaged areas wrote about levels of crime in their area, which affected their sense of safety. They wrote about joyriders, drug dealers, fighting in the area and 'roadmen' (someone who hangs out in the area, often showing intimidating behaviour).



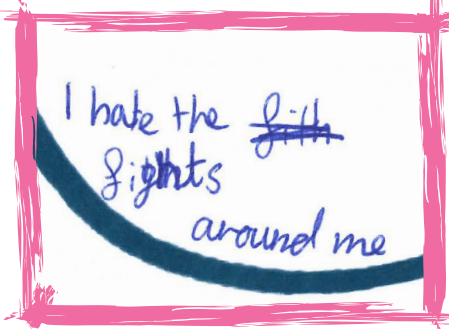
Joyriders Drug dealers



Violence
in my
area



Roadmen



I hate the ~~fights~~
fights
around me



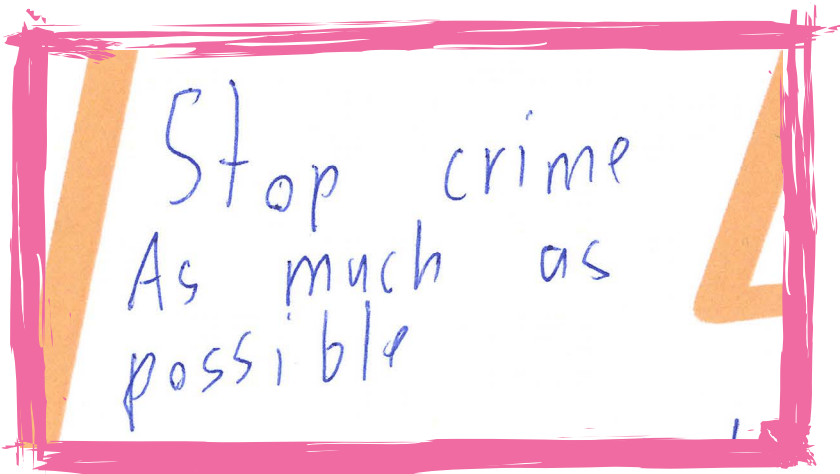
No
playground

"Joyriders. Drug Dealers./Roadmen."
Child in Primary School

"I hate the fights around me."
Child in Primary School

"Violence in my area/
No playground."
Child in Primary School

The children were very clear on their recommendations for change.

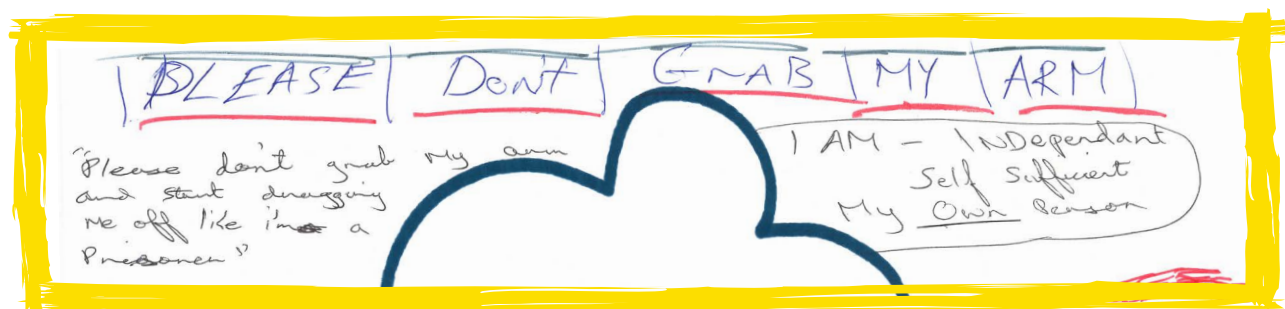
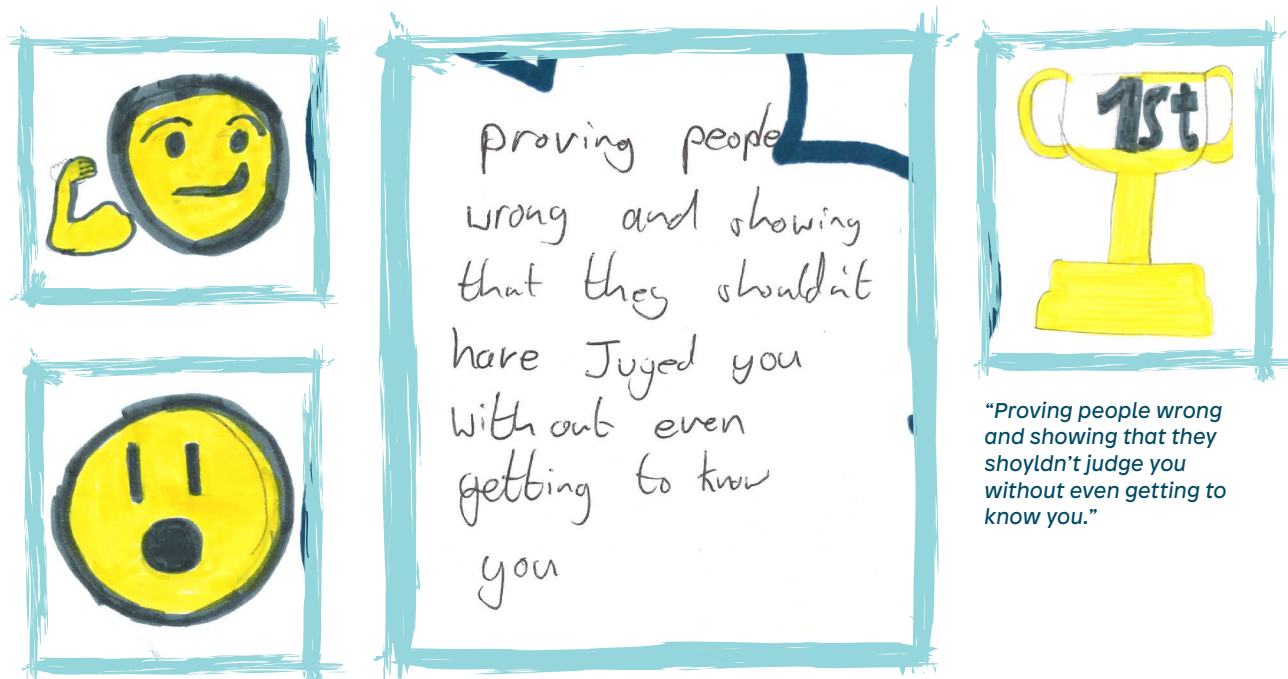


Stop crime
As much as
possible

"Stop crime as much as possible."
Child in Primary School

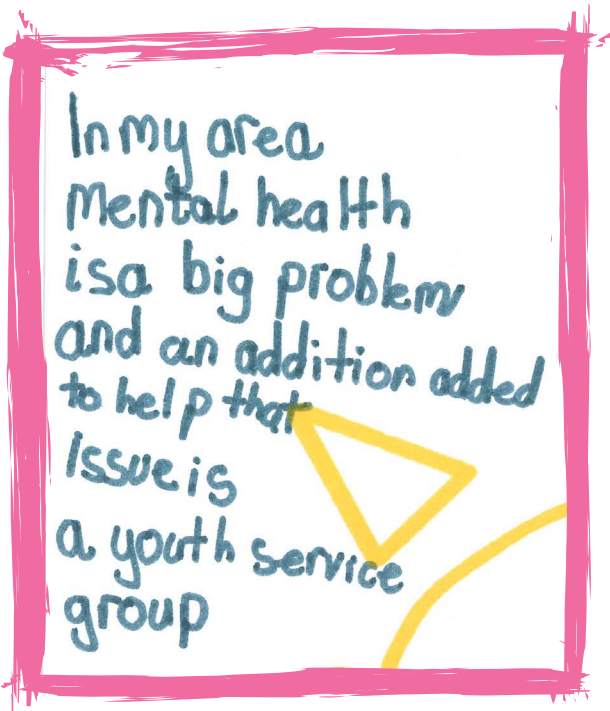
7.4 What our YAP Said

The YAP members were particularly concerned with the experiences of children with disabilities.



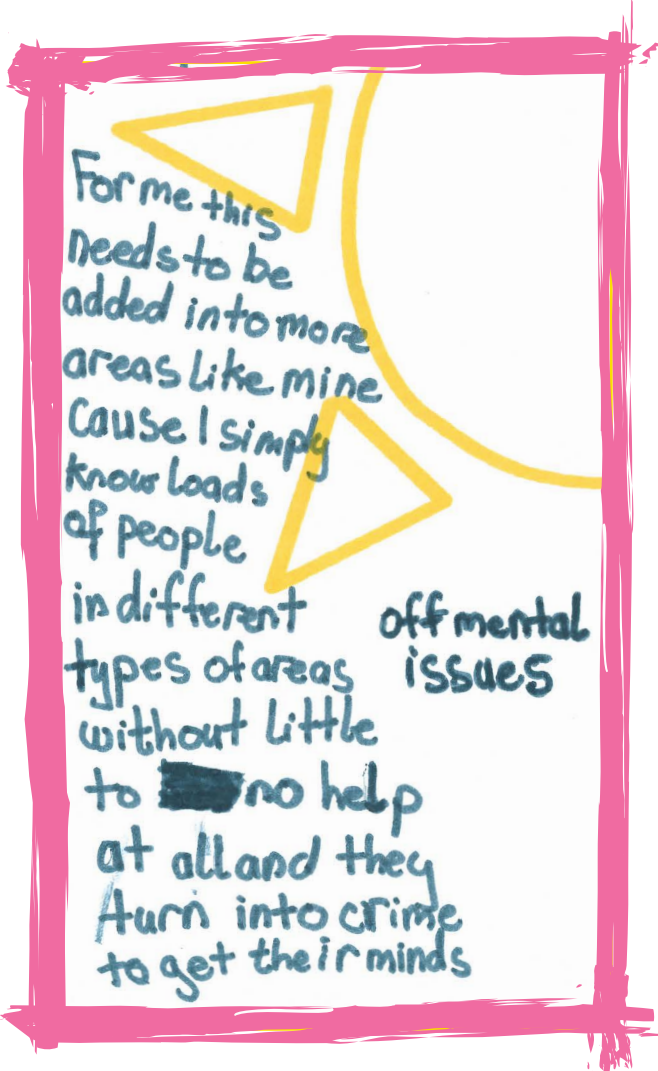
"PLEASE DON'T GRAB MY ARM.
Please don't grab my arm and start dragging me off like I'm a prisoner.
I am independant; self-sufficient; my own person."

Some of the YAP also shared their own experiences of a lack of services in their areas, and the need for a youth group to support children's mental health and reduce crime.



In my area
Mental health
is a big problem
and an addition added
to help that
Issue is
a youth service
group

"In my area mental health is a big problem and an addition added to help that issue is a youth service group. For me this needs to be added into more areas like mine. Cause I simply know loads of people indifferent types of areas without little to no help at all and they turn to crime to get their minds off mental issues."



For me this
needs to be
added into more
areas like mine
Cause I simply
know loads
of people
in different off mental
types of areas issues
without little
to ~~no~~ no help
at all and they
turn into crime
to get their minds

FEMALE TAOISEACH

Representation 16

silence

Not asked for
Not heard
Not listened to

Quiet
Pretending
to Listen

political parties
want you to
join but
you can't
vote for
them

No Voting

Muted

not Being heard

Not asked for
Ignored

They only care
when it makes
them look
good

Voices

Voices

8

Views from Focus Groups: Children's Voice

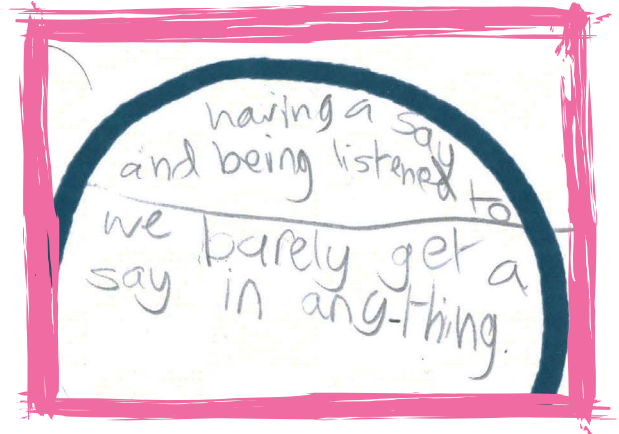


8.1 Younger Children's Views on Children's Voice

Children in primary school frequently believed that adults did not listen to them.



*"Not being listened to because you're a child."
Child in Primary School*

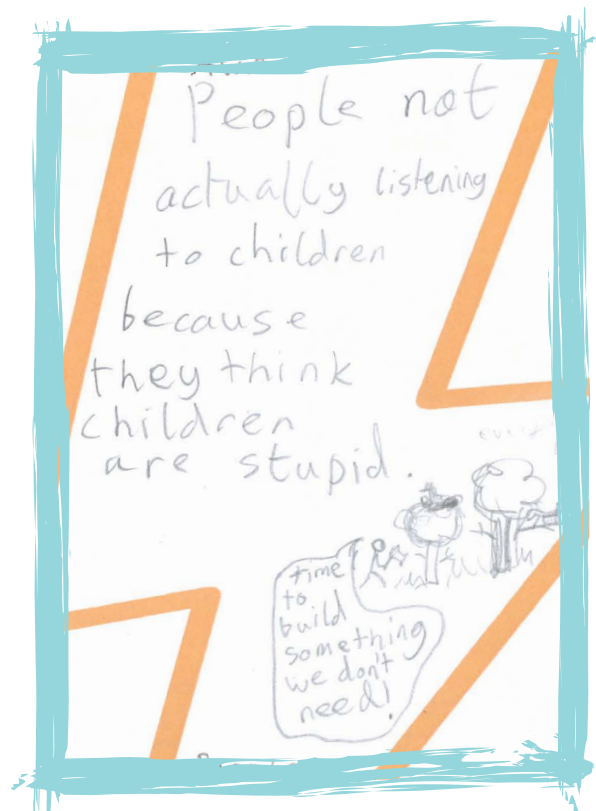


*"Having a say and being listened to.
We barely get a say in anything."
Child in Primary School*

Children in Early Years settings also believed that they were not listened to when they were younger. Adults listening to children was frequently a recommendation for change.



*"When I was a baby people didn't
listen to me."
Child in an Early Years setting*



*"People actually listening to children
because they think children are stupid."*

*"Time to build something we
don't need!"*

Child in Primary School

8.2 Children's Participation Structures

Throughout the focus groups, children discussed whether they felt listened to by adults, including parents, professionals, institutions and the State. Several children pointed to the importance of school student councils and the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU) in ensuring that they had a voice in decision-making, particularly during Covid restrictions and the impact this had on State examinations.

Girl: I think it's really important... the amount of power our student councils have and that we actually do have a voice in our schools, and I think that's really, really good. And I think [school union] as well are like, they're brilliant at what they do, especially the past year, lobbying for Leaving Cert students, we're so lucky to have that and have that voice.

Child in Secondary School

Ireland has official participation structures through Comhairle na nÓg (local youth councils) and Dáil na nÓg (youth parliament). While children were aware that their opinions are often sought through these structures, it was not a perfect process. They believed that they could not contact their local council or government if they wanted to raise an issue directly, and that they are often only asked for their views when their help is needed. Additionally, they were aware that not all children participated in these structures and that this excluded their opinions.

Boy: ...within our government and the Seanad, they just don't listen to us. They only listen to us if they want to... I got this opportunity [to be on a Youth Council] and we are only contacted by the county council if they want us to do something. We can't just contact them if we feel like we have something to say to them, or we want them to make a difference so that young people have a better life. And it's a problem on a national, local and international level. There's people in my school that wouldn't be involved in [a Youth Council] or things like that, and their voice just isn't being heard because they're not a part of these groups, ut they still want change, and they still want their voices to be heard. But governments and politicians don't reach out and don't give us an open way to say, 'Reach out to us if you have a problem'.

Child from a Migrant Background



*"Things for you to do in your area.
Nothing. Only concrete."
Child in Primary School*

8.3 Engagement with Political Structures and Processes

A few primary school children had the opportunity to speak at the Oireachtas (parliament) about the impact of Covid-19 on their lives. They had a positive experience but they wished that it would become normal for children to speak to the government directly.

Girl: Well, I was going to say like kind of in the government because me, [friend] and [friend] did our speeches to the Oireachtas, which was a really cool opportunity, but I think that should happen more often. Like that should be more of a normalised thing, because we don't really get listened to that often in terms of in the government and stuff.

Child in Primary School

Another child had the opportunity to participate in the first ever Youth Assembly on Climate Change convened in the Dáil Chamber. However, she questioned how much politicians listened to them and if they considered their views because the children did not receive any further contact or information after the event.

Girl: I was in the, the Dáil Assembly there in 2019 for the climate change thing, and the recommendations and all the discussions that we had were like seemingly completely disregarded because I've had like no further follow up from that. There was just no follow up from the government. It was just, 'Oh look, we listened to you. Now you can go'?

Child in Secondary School

Many of the children believed that they were not listened to because they did not have a vote.

Boy: Yeah, it's important for children all around the world, because normally people turn to adults with voting and things like that. They turn to adults for answers and stuff, but not many people turn to the children to ask what their opinions on things are.

Child in Primary School

Some children voiced scepticism about political parties' agendas as they can join a youth wing of a party but were unable to exercise a vote.

Girl: The issue with this is we do not have the right to vote. We have the right, and we are actively encouraged and sought out by political parties to join when we are as young as 16. Now, I smell a rat there because what's the point of joining the political party when you can't vote for them? And when you're so young, you know, they want you to join their party, but they don't want to let you vote.

Child in Secondary School

8.4 The Contribution of Children's Voices

Many children believed that children were adaptable, knowledgeable and had new ideas and skills to share with adults. They want adults to have empathy and compassion for them and listen to their views. Ultimately, they wanted adults to know that they had opinions but they need political will for those opinions to be heard.

Girl: ...Things are always going to change, and if you don't change with it, then you're always, you're going to be left behind. So have our new generation [at] the table, into the discussions, then you'll be able to get that empathy and that compassion for us, and I think that's all we can ask for, just to listen to us. We have a voice, just unity, that's what we need.

Child from a Migrant Background

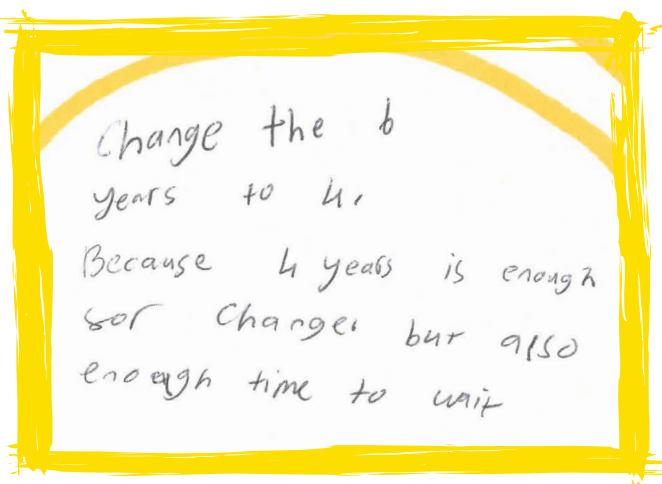
Many children believed that the process of a Children's Report was an important way of considering and listening to children's opinions.

Boy: It makes me feel really good that somebody cares about what our opinions are.

Child in Primary School

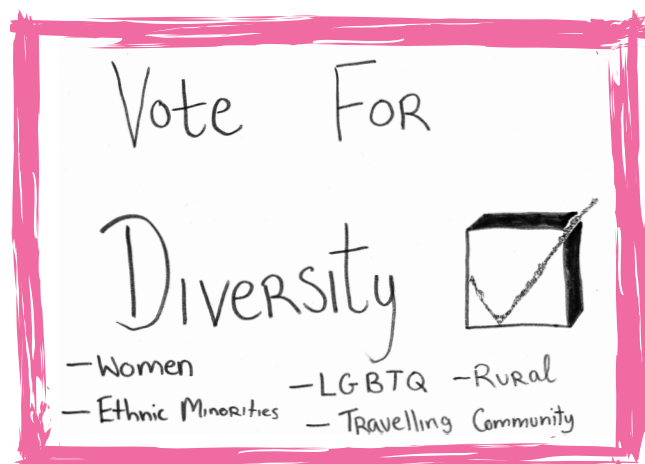
However, one child believes that the gap between UNCRC reporting cycles should be reduced to four years so they were not waiting for change to happen at an Irish level.

8.5 What our YAP Said



"Change the years to 4. Because 4 years is enough for change but also enough time to wait."

Child in Secondary School



*"Vote For Diversity
Women, Ethnic Minorities, LGBTQ,
Travelling Community, Rural."*

Representation

Representation

INEQUAL

Travelling
The Committee
Racism

BORN INTO Illin

STEREOTYPES

Committee

9

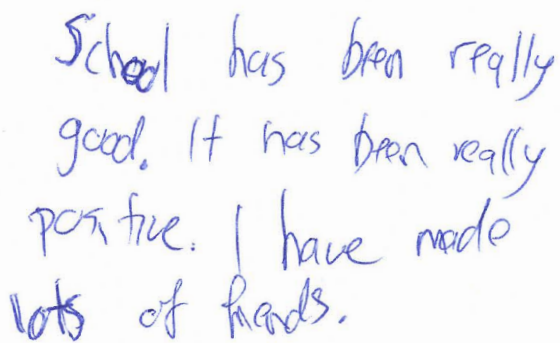
Views from Focus Groups: Children in Need of Special Protections



9.1 Unaccompanied and Separated Children

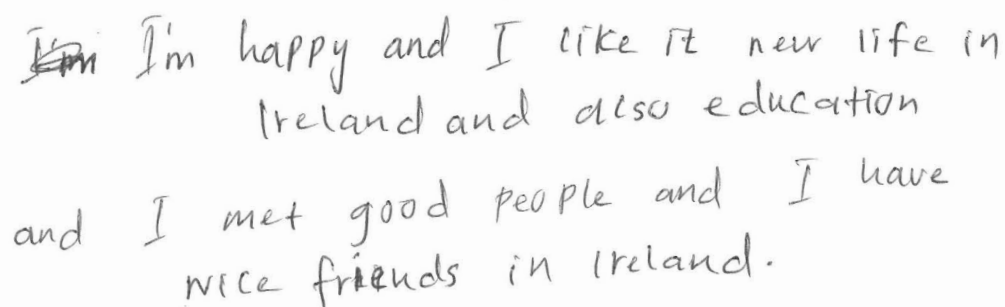
We spoke with a number of unaccompanied and separated children who were from a range of countries. Some had arrived to Ireland and claimed asylum, others arrived at the invitation of the State. They lived in two different settings: residential care and foster families.

Most of these children were enjoying their new schools in Ireland.



School has been really good. It has been really positive. I have made lots of friends.

*"School has been really good. It has been really positive. I have made lots of friends."
Unaccompanied child*



~~I'm~~ I'm happy and I like it new life in Ireland and also education and I met good people and I have nice friends in Ireland.

*"I'm happy and I like it new life in Ireland and also education and I met good people and I have nice friends in Ireland."
Unaccompanied child*

A number of the unaccompanied and separated children were newly arrived and had little experience of life in Ireland. As such, they mostly spoke about the differences between Ireland and their home country. When asked about school, the children again valued the fact that it was free and safe.

Girl: It's different.

OCO: How is it different?

Girl: In Ireland, it is easy. School is free. In [home country] they kill, violence. School costs money.

Separated child

Some children had managed to make friends in Ireland and get involved in local sports teams.

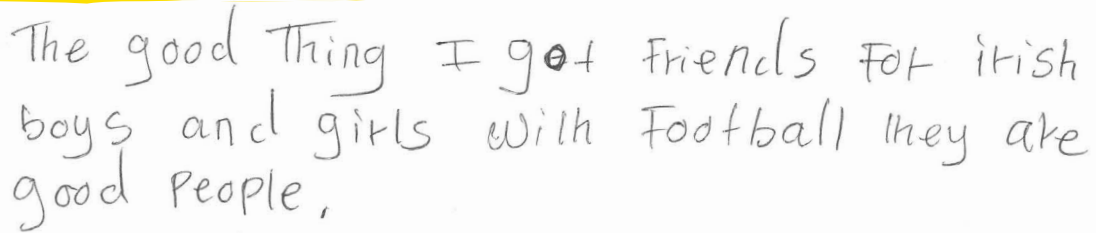
OCO: So is there anything you want to add on what is good about Ireland?

Boy 1: I have friends with Irish boys and Irish girls in the football. Some people are bad, but most are good.

Boy 2: ...the Irish people are good. The education is good. The government is good. Everything is good.

Unaccompanied children

Sometimes unaccompanied and separated children were reluctant to say anything negative about Ireland. This could be because it is difficult to speak out about a country that is supporting them.



The good thing I got friends for Irish boys and girls with football they are good people.

*"The good thing I got friends for Irish boys and girls with football they are good people."
Unaccompanied child*

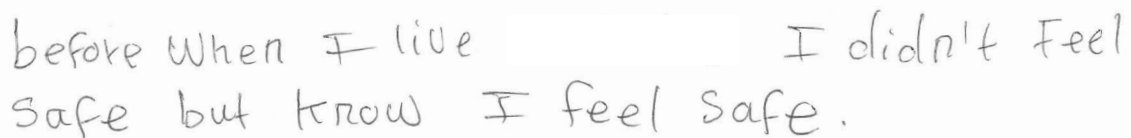
While they may have had difficult experiences in Ireland, they often focused on the issues in the home countries.

OCO: What is equality like in [home country] then?

Girl: The fighting, the violence. Discrimination to, not for the country, different people. Different tribes. In [home country] you have too much, village... tribal violence. War. In Ireland I'm calm. I know I go out, I no scary. It's good for my life.

Separated child

Understandably, safety was the most important issue for unaccompanied and separated children.



before when I live I didn't feel safe but now I feel safe.

*"Before when I live in [home country] I didn't feel safe but now I feel safe."
Unaccompanied child*

J'aime ici par ce qu'il ya pas ~~beaucoup~~ des rebelles
comme dans mon pays, chaque fois les gens s'enfuient
les rebelles tuent, détruit.

*"I like it here because there are no rebels like in y country.
Every time people flee, the rebels kill and destroy.
Separated child*

Other children were reluctant to talk about their home countries due to the trauma they had suffered.

Boy 1: Sometimes when I stay in room, I remember my family and sometimes I'm worried and I feel afraid of what I remember.

OCO: Are there people to help you with that?

Boy 1: Yes, I have counsel. And social [worker].

Boy 2: We don't want to remember something bad.

Unaccompanied child

Covid-19 quarantine restrictions were in place when we spoke to these children. This created an added difficulty for children arriving into Ireland. We spoke to one child who had only arrived into the country.

OCO: How have you found the two and a half weeks?

Boy: 2 weeks on quarantine

OCO: Oh so only half a week out? How was quarantine?

Boy: Not good.

OCO: Tell me about that? Were you in a hotel?

Boy: A house.

OCO: Who else was there?

Boy: It's not good.

OCO: Was there many people?

Boy: Yes younger people [4 others].

OCO: Stay in one room?

Boy: Yes I stay in quarantine then go to another home.

OCO: When you were in quarantine did you have to stay in one room?

Boy: Sometimes I go into the garden for air. Then I go back to the room.

OCO: Did they bring food?

Boy: Yeah they say 'what else you want to eat?' and I say rice and pasta and chicken and apple juice. Then they bring for me.

OCO: Did you have internet when you were in quarantine?

Boy: No because I don't have mobile. They give little phone to call staff. They give iPad for YouTube.

OCO: Could you talk to friends or family on that?

Boy: No because I don't have the phone to call my family. I don't have the phone number.

OCO: That sounds very stressful.

Boy: Yes.

OCO: Do you feel safe in Ireland?

Boy: Yes, yes, yes. There's good people. The staff are so good. The younger people are so good. They are... I feel safe here.

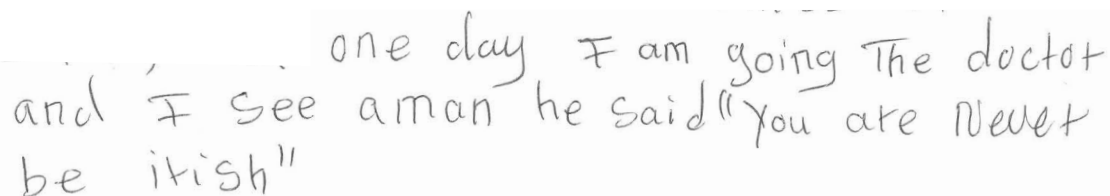
Unaccompanied child

Many of the children craved understanding. Frequently, they expressed wanting Irish people to know that they had come here for their safety and not for any other reason.

Boy: If they learn about other countries, they would understand why I come here. I think if they knew problems in [home country] or all the world problems, they would feel emotional. They would assist people.

Unaccompanied child

Some children reported that they had experienced racism in Ireland.

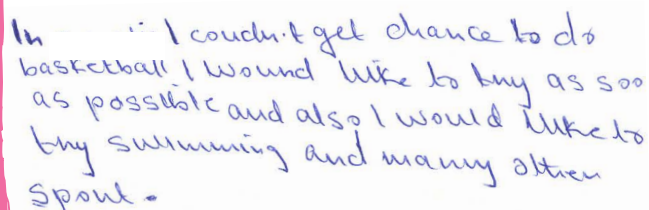


one day I am going The doctor
and I see a man he said "you are never
be Irish"

"...one day I am going to the doctor and I see a man he said 'you are never be Irish.'"

Unaccompanied child

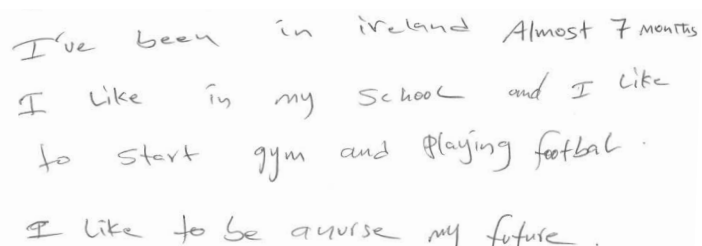
The children were optimistic for their future and wanted to try new things in Ireland.



In [home country] I couldn't get chance to do
basketball. I would like to try as soon
as possible and also I would like to
try swimming and many other
sports.

"In [home country] I couldn't get chance to do basketball. I would like to try as soon as possible and also I would like to try swimming and many other sports."

Unaccompanied child



I've been in Ireland almost 7 months
I like in my school and I like
to start gym and playing football.
I like to be a nurse in my future.

"I've been in Ireland almost 7 months. I like my school and I like to start gym and playing football. I'd like to be a nurse in my future."

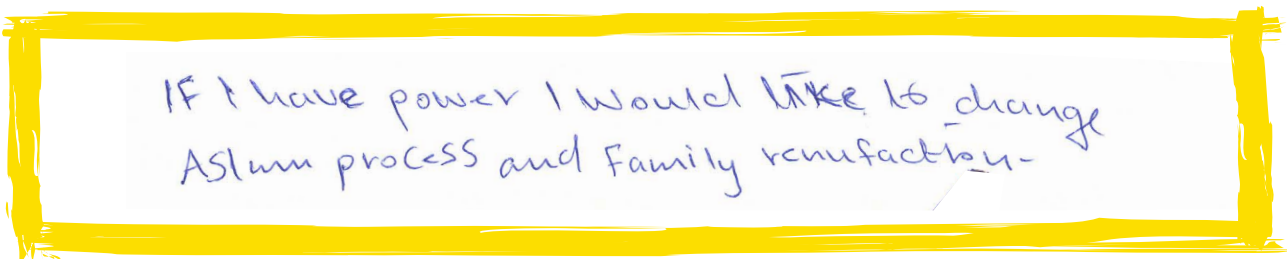
Unaccompanied child

Fundamentally, all the children that we spoke to want greater stability.

OCO: Could Ireland give you something that you need that you don't have right now?

Boy: To get... accepted asylum.

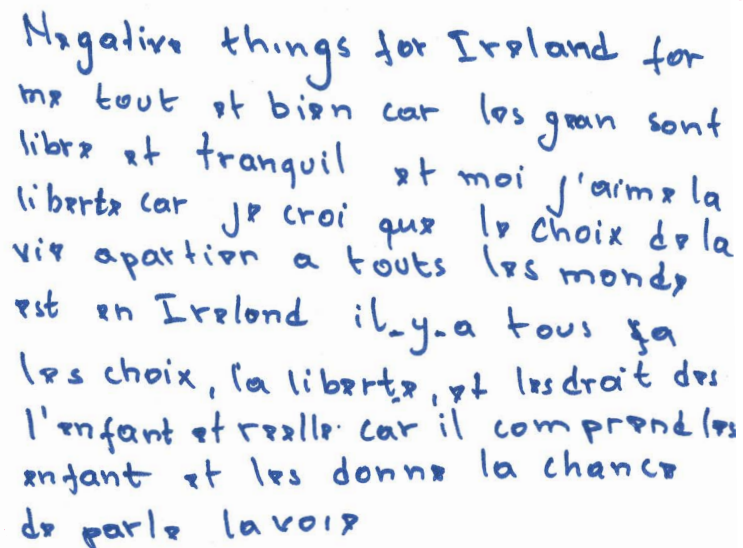
Unaccompanied child



IF I have power I would like to change
Asylum process and Family reunification.

"If I have power I would like to change asylum process
and family reunification."

Unaccompanied child



Negative things for Ireland for
me tout est bien car les gens sont
libres et tranquils et moi j'aime la
liberté car je crois que le choix de la
vie appartient à tous les mondes
est en Irlande il y a tous les
les choix, la liberté, et les droits des
l'enfant et réelle car il comprend les
enfant et les donne la chance
de parler la voix

"Negative things for Ireland for me. Everything is good because the people are
free and peaceful, and I like freedom because I believe that the lifestyle is for
everyone. And in Ireland has it all, choices, freedom, and children's rights, and
real life, because it includes children and gives them a chance to use their voice."

Unaccompanied child

9.2 Children in Detention

Ireland has one Children's Detention Campus for those aged under 18 years. Children accused of a crime and who are awaiting trial are placed here on remand, those who have been convicted are placed in four-person units in a separate area of the detention facility.

Entering Detention

The children's journey to detention was never far from their minds. They spoke about the anxiety of being arrested and appearing in court, which seemed to be traumatic for some children.

Boy: I'm in a cell and the hatch is opened. And there's a guard gave me me charges that I had and told me Ma what I was up for... And I asked, 'Can I talk to me ma please by herself, and me barrister?'... And I'm in a cell... The hatch is down to me like down to me waist. I have to bend down on me two knees to see me Ma.

OCO: How did that make you feel?

*Boy: It's not scummy but like not good as well at the same time. And me Ma as well, it's me Ma at the end of the day, do you get me? And me Ma can't f**king talk to me about anything like that. She can't even f**king touch me. I just don't find, like even if I'm in the cell and there's a guard there, I can't put my hand out for just for her to touch me. You have to – she has to keep back from the door and all, and all like s**t like that.*

Child in detention

After their arrest, most children entered remand. They were highly critical of the remand section of the detention centre.

Boy 2: Remand's a bad spot now. If you're going into remand, that's a different –

OCO: Tell me about remand, what's it like?

Boy 1: Remand is the dirtiest place-

Boy 2: Poxy.

Boy 1: -you'll ever get in your life. I mean water dripping on your head and all. The place is manky.

Boy 4: What can you do? You can't do nothing about it. Like that's what – I don't know, it's like they put you up on remand but up on remand it's – I find this place easier than remand

*Boy 3: Yeah, because that place is in bits. Everything's broken, falling apart, f**king lights, the heating, and then the showers, f**king everything in remand is broken.*

Children in detention

The children spoke of the uncertainty they felt when they were being sentenced.

OCO: Is it scary being in court?

Boy 3: Oh yeah. It is, it's scary-

Boy 1: It's – some people find it scary. Like he might find it scary.

Boy 3: Yeah.

Boy 1: But I find it, yeah, I'd find it nervous, not nervous but I'm telling you, I find it a bit-

Boy 4: Anxious.

Boy 1: Yeah anxious... because I'd sit there and you'd get butterflies in your stomach because you're thinking, like when you seen the sentences that she's [the judge] giving to other people here, you think like is she going to be hardest to me?

Children in detention

When asked what advice that they would give to children entering detention many of the children had the same response:

Boy: Come in and keep your head down and just get on with your sentence, yeah.

Don't be stressing.

Child in detention

Daily Life in Detention

We discussed daily life in detention extensively. The main issues related to the unresponsiveness of the system. They believed that it took an inordinate amount of time for the system to respond to even small requests. One child summed it up as:

Boy: The gears of [detention centre] move very slowly.

Child in detention

This lack of urgency on the part of the detention facility's decision-making process led the children to believe that their views and requests were not listened to.

Boy 3: One lad, so chef comes down to the unit, the lad asks, 'Here, can we get some breaded fish filets?'. Six months later, the lad leaves. He's not even there anymore, and then about a month later, after he leaves, the fish fillets come down... He was the one that asked for it, not – but in the end he didn't even get to – he left by the time they got them.

Child in detention

When asked about having a say and having their views heard, the children had mixed responses. Some had a trusted worker to talk to. Others spoke about not being listened to.

Boy 1: If you ask someone something and they won't do it for you.

*Boy 4: This big problem with this place is the squeakiest doors get the most oil in this place, all the time... You're almost probably better off acting the b*ll**ks in this place than being good. But I hate hounding people. If I ask someone to do something for me once and they don't do it, I won't ask them for anything again.*

Children in detention

The children were very clear that they did not feel safe in the detention centre.

Boy 2: Safe, no. Sure a young fella got cut down the face there only last week. How's that – that's not one bit safe. And you might as well be up in [adult prison] like if that's the case.

Child in detention

We spoke to the children about equality and discrimination within the detention facility. One child raised the issue of culturally appropriate barbers and hair products being provided to children of colour in the detention facility.

Boy 4: I wouldn't let that barber cut my hair because my hair grows different.

OCO: So do they get a barber for your afro?

Boy 4: Do you think they'd get a barber in for an afro?

Boy 1: No. I think there's one – there's a lad out of the unit, the boy who's got black hair, the fella destroyed his hair.

OCO: And do you get the right products then for your hair and for your skin when you're here like?

Boy 2: They give you a bottle of Head and Shoulders and a bottle of Nivea.

Boy 4: But you see over in the UK, they're making them mandatory now for hairdressers that they have to be able to cut afro hair.

Children in detention

Feelings that they did not receive individualised care were compounded by the use of communal hygiene and housekeeping products, such as nail clippers, towels and bedding. Providing individual products to children was one recommendation for change.

Boy 2: Like when lads first come into the unit, they should be given their own set of towels, their own set of sheets, and then the other-

*Boy 1: The f**king nail clippers too like, it's the same nail clippers that all the boys use. It's just washed. Not even, it's probably just run under a tap... And the razor... You should, you should be able to get new blades to get put into them? But obviously do it in front of the staff, so you're not taking the blades. Or let the staff put new blades in. We should probably have that, like I'm going to be here 18 months, and if I use that same razor blade for 18 months, the blade's going to get a bit bad like.*

Children in detention

Education and Training

The detention facility offers mainstream education and some additional skills training to all children held there. Some of the children enjoyed the education available to them.

Boy 1: School is brilliant. It's good. You get to do a few activities and everything, so it's handy. It's not the worst. Do your Junior Cert and all.

Boy 2: And your Leaving Cert, Mechanics course and everything, do a good few stuff.

Boy 1: I'm doing the gym instructing course.

Boy 2: Life skills and all... safe pass and manual handling.

Boy 1: You learn how to be a mechanic and all, car mechanics.

Children in detention

Nonetheless, children acknowledged that being in detention was not an ideal learning environment, but accepted some personal responsibility for their circumstances.

Boy 4: The teachers are, the teachers are sound, it's just sometimes, it's not the greatest environment to be going to school from, but... it's no one's fault that –

Boy 1: Yeah.

Boy 4: I'm here, he's here-

Boy 1: It's our own fault.

Boy 4: It's everyone's responsibility to take for being here. But school's all right.

Children in detention

The availability and timing of courses had an impact on the ability of children to access these. The children said that they often had to ask for activities and courses multiple times before they became available. Sometimes, by the time the course was available, the child had left the detention centre.

Boy 4: I've been asking for them to do personal trainer course for ages and they won't bring it in. They're going to bring it now in five months' time... when I'm not here.

Child in detention

Many saw increased training courses, as opposed to mainstream school subjects, as key to helping them when they left detention. However, the children found that vocational training courses, such as Safe Pass and Gym Instruction, were only offered at certain times of the year and were not always available to children who only had a short sentence to serve.

Boy 3: Like unless you're here for ages, you don't really actually get to do stuff, because since things are moving so slowly, if you're not here for – if you're only here for six months...

Boy 4: No, you see if you're not here at the right time, because if you're not here when that gym instructor course is going on, you're not doing that course.

*Boy 1: You're f**ked, yeah.*

OCO: So what if you had more courses year round?

Boy 1: I'd love that because-

Boy 4: You'd get a job, wouldn't you?

Boy 1: Then I could go out and actually get a job.

*Boy 4: You wouldn't have to sell all them drugs and do all that s**t.*

*Boy 1: But if I had me f**king course there to go out and work on a site, a building site – I'd get out, I'd stop all that s**t. I'd get married like straight away, and I'd just go work and make a living that way.*

Children in detention

Even where children had engaged in full-time school and taken exams, they found that life in a detention centre presented further barriers to planning their future.

Boy: There was a lad here who was 18, finished his Leaving Cert, and he wanted to start an online college course. And he went onto the laptop, typed in the site, Open University, blocked, banned.

Child in detention

Children in detention experience many aspects of life in the same way as all children. However, the children that we spoke to raised specific experiences directly related to their detention. Some identified the routine and structure of life in detention as a positive and being busy was important to many children.

OCO: What is good about living here?

Boy: Your routine. It's good, nine o'clock, ready for school. Come back from school, activities and the day is, basically, done, over... you're busy all day... the days just fly.

Child in detention

Mental Health

Children in detention have the same struggles with their mental health as children living in the community. Several multi-disciplinary services operate in the detention centre. The children refer to two services: Assessment Consultation Therapy Service (ACTS), and Forensic Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (FCAMHS). The children had various feelings about these services. Some found them helpful.

Boy: They're all right like. It's someone to talk to... They try and get you help with things like, you know, addiction and all, drinking and all. Help you with your drink problem. Well that's what they said they're going to do anyway.

Child in detention

Some of the children found it hard to trust the mental health professionals. Some children expressed frustration that the mental health staff did not visit the units where they lived. As a result, the children felt that they did not understand the conditions and environment that they lived in.

Boy: It's hard, it's hard to trust people in this place. There's only one, there's only one ACTS worker there I trust that I go and talk to. Because they don't try to build a relationship with you. They don't ever come down to the unit half the time to ever see. They don't ever come down to see you down... I'm talking about like FCAMHS and ACTS and all. They don't even have an understanding of the environment you're sitting in half the time. They genuinely don't because they don't come down to see.

Child in detention

Some of the children experienced significant mental health difficulties, they questioned the level of support that they received, and that they only felt better temporarily.

*Boy: Like myself, I f**king tried to kill myself before. I up and told the people up there that too, and the staff... they just do nothing for you. I told her [the ACTS worker] like that's how I felt. And she literally said, 'Right, so you just stop eating before bed, stop doing this before bed. Do this during the day, do that during the day'. It f**king helps for that day, but then it comes back to you. Like it only helps [for a while] it's the same as weed, you know, like weed and drugs, if you take drugs and it blocks everything out for the time you're stoned, and then everything is back to you. It's the same when you go up to her I think, you go and you're talking to her, it's all good for that whole day and you feel all right. Then after that you're back f**king depressed.*

Child in detention

There was also frustration surrounding the detox procedure, wherein some of the children felt that they did not have enough support when they arrived to the detention facility.

Boy 4: When we come in here, we could be coming down off anything, any drugs or anything, and they just give us nothing.

OCO: So what happens then whenever you're coming down?

Boy 2: ...I was strung out on tablets there about two year ago. I came in here, nothing. Withdrawal up in the room with nothing.

OCO: So if you have to withdraw, you have to detox here, how does that work?

Boy 2: You're just – you're left there.

Boy 1: You're just left there in your room.

Boy 2: I was strung out on coke as well, and they just left me in my room.

Boy 1: They did nothing [for] me. I came in with heaps of coke and benzos in me system here, about a week ago. They didn't do nothing, just put me in a room.

Children in detention

The children also experienced the same delays in accessing mental health services as their peers living in the community, which sometimes had an impact on their access to timely justice.

*Boy: Sure I was waiting on it five and a half months for a psychologist's report and they wouldn't f**king give it. They said they had no psychologist. For court, and they wouldn't get it. They said, 'We have no psychologist, we can't do it'. What the f**k do you mean like, the judge is after requesting a report.*

Child in detention

The Impact of Covid-19

Like most children in Ireland, the pandemic had a significant effect on children in detention. However, the addition of visitation restrictions exacerbated the impact of Covid-19. Initially all visits were remote. These then moved to screen visits, which were ongoing at the time we spoke to the children.

Boy 1: I wouldn't drag me ma the whole way up here for a screen visit.

OCO: Okay, so are people skipping the screen visits?

Boy 1: Yeah. For the full 18 months I'll be here, I'm not going to get one visit, just Zoom calls. That's what I'm going to get.

Boy 2: I haven't hugged my mum or my sister in about a year and a half now.

Children in detention

One child pointed out that although screen visits were continuing in children's detention, adult prisons had returned to unscreened visits. This led to feelings of frustration.

Boy 3: Like in a normal prison you get a visit... and there's no screens, you get me? Sitting at a table like this. So why can't they do it here?

Boy 1: Covid. It ruins everything.

Boy 3: Even in [adult prison] now, we'd still get normal visits.

Children in detention

Mobility outings (where a child is re-integrated to society through a series of phased releases) had been cancelled due to Covid.

Boy 2: It's going back to normal for the staff, yeah? Like they can all come in in a big group and all. How come it can't go back to normal for us like?

Boy 1: Like so mobilities are like, you get home visits... Like they start off with like they bring you to your house for an hour or two... and then say next week they bring you for the day. They drop you off at your house, and they come back and collect you that night. And then say they do like one, like say the weekend, they drop you home. You stay there for the weekend, and you have to come back to [detention] then, that Monday morning. That's all stopped over Covid.

OCO: Okay. So do you think COVID is making things harder?

Boy 1: Yeah, a little harder. Everything, everything's just harder.

Children in detention

Leaving Detention

Children spoke of the impact that longer sentences have on their day-to-day functioning once home. Again, re-integration into the community while still in detention was important.

Boy 4: I think they don't do enough of that kind of community work in this place. Genuinely. The lads would be locked up in here for nine months, going back into the community. Like they haven't seen people... They've been living in this environment-

*Boy 1: That's like myself, I just went out after only doing four and a half months the first time and I didn't know what the f**k I was going out to.*

Boy 2: I feel you'd rot in here if you didn't get out of here. I done nine months last year and I got out and I went all a bit weird.

Boy 4: I remember I got out the first day, I was waiting at doors for people to open them for me.

Boy 1: ...you know in all the rooms, you're made do that (waves hand) for the light to turn on, the bathroom light, and I often woke up in the middle of the night when I'd go home and tried to do that with me hand to turn the lights on and stuff like that, do you know what I mean?

*Boy 2: ...then traffic coming up next to you, you don't know what the f**k does be going on, you didn't see it in so long.*

Children in detention

The children had many suggestions of how to help them reintegrate into society when they left detention. These suggestions ranged from community work and involvement in their local area to allowing them to work while they were in detention. They believed that this would reduce recidivism.

Boy 4: This place should do more for lads to get them in, get them qualified in things so they don't come back. But if you all just to take one thing from me, this place needs to do more community work with the lads and getting them on the outside.

Boy 2: Working in a charity shop or something.

Boy 3: Yeah, that'd be epic.

Boy 4: I mean just get lads [involved], like the football club would be – the Gaelic club across the road, like stuff like that. There's loads of stuff round this area that they could be trying to be getting lads to do. I just don't think, I don't think they do it enough.

Children in detention

The children acknowledged that there might be security concerns if they were involved in community based activities but they believed that if a child had stopped being “on levels” they could be involved in these activities. Levels refers to the system of categorising the children based on their behaviour. The better the child behaves in detention the lower their level, until they can eventually come off the level system. They believed that involvement in the community and local sports teams could give them something to work towards.

Boy 4: I love football. I'm off levels and all. They said to me, 'Oh, if you go, if you're off levels for three months, we'll try and get you into a club, for a club. You'll be going training', but you still have to-

Boy 2: But... they can't take the risk if you, like you-

Boy 4: Yeah, but that's what we're saying, you have nothing to work to.

Children in detention

Other ideas included allowing the children to gain work experience while in detention. They believed that this could run alongside the barista training offered in the detention centre once a year, and that they could run a café for staff and visitors. They believed that this would offer life skills and give them the opportunity to redirect their lives.

Boy 4: Can I ask you, do you think this place, it's possible for them to get lads qualified in the barista course, then actually open a café on the campus, have lads working in there, staff and all say can go over and get the coffees and all this?

Boy 1: I'm not being – like not trying to put you off but the staff ain't going to go up and pay for coffees here that they're getting made by youse.

Boy 4: If it's €2 for it, they would. You think the amount of people that work up in them offices? Sure even lads, even having the café open, from say one o'clock in the day, Unit 7 are going to the café. If any of the lads wanted to, they go. They have money on their cards and all. Get one of them machines, the cards, our cards then, the ones where you can tap.

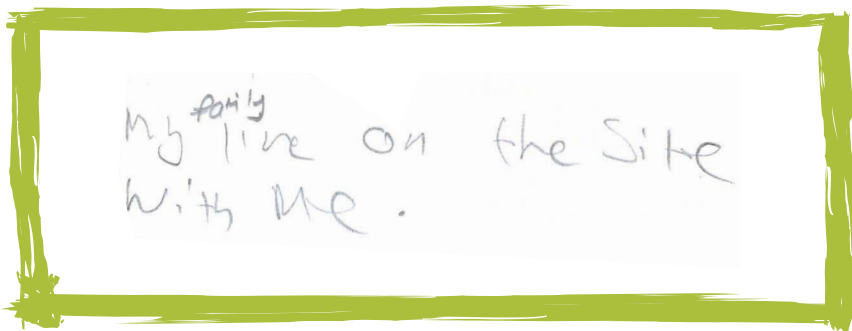
Children in detention

9.3 Traveller Children

A number of Traveller children under the age of 12 took part in a focus group and shared their views with us with support from their Traveller youth service.

Living Conditions

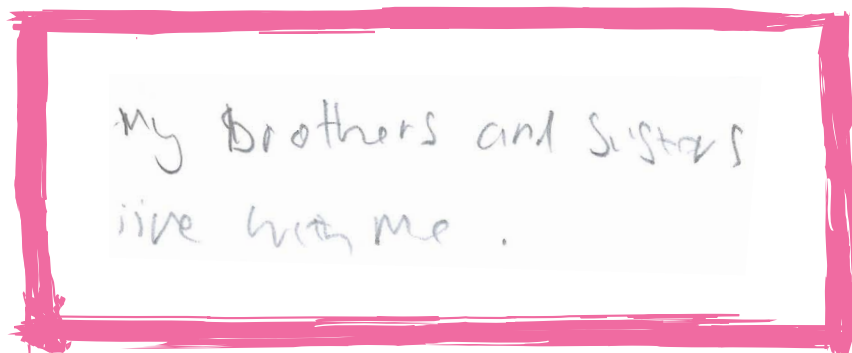
The children lived on a Traveller halting site. They identified many positives to this and particularly enjoyed living close to their families, including their extended family.



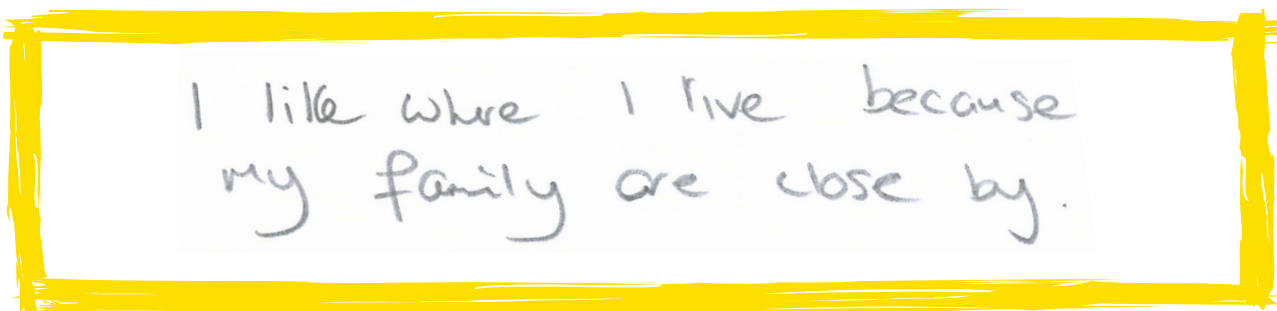
*"My family live on the site with me."
Child from a Traveller background*



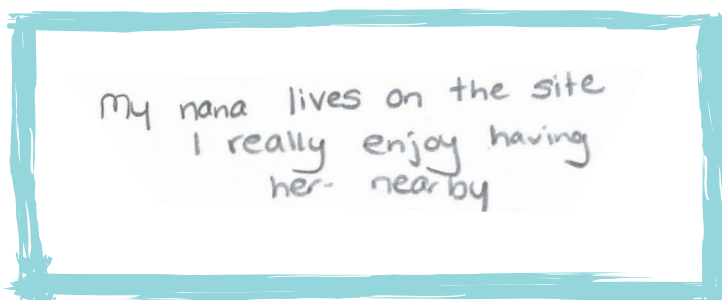
*"Friends and family live in site."
Child from a Traveller background*



*"My brothers and sisters live with me."
Child from a Traveller background*

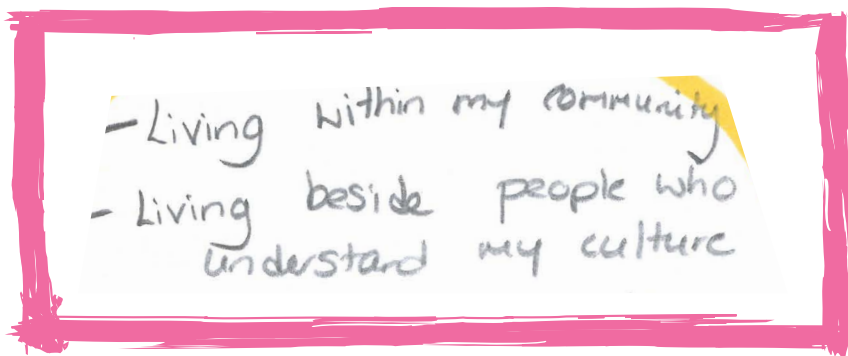


*"I like where I live because my family are close by."
Child from a Traveller background*



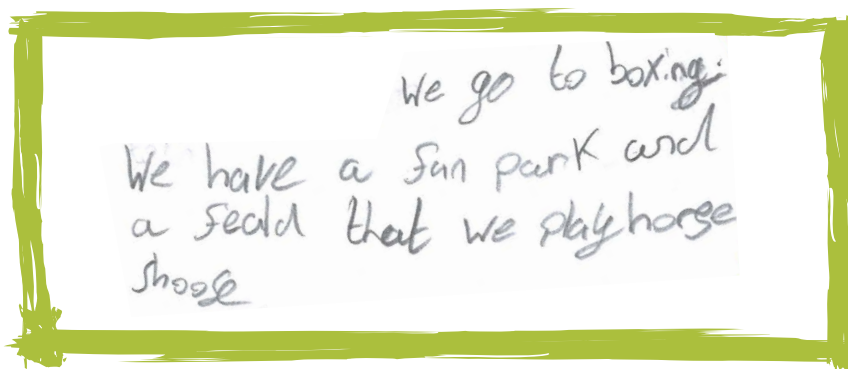
*"My nana lives on the site. I really enjoy having her nearby."
Child from a Traveller background*

Children believed that it was important that they lived amongst their community and with people who understood their culture and values.



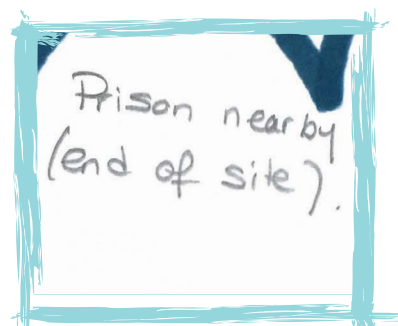
*"Living within my community. Living beside people who understand my culture."
Child from a Traveller background*

There is a play park on the site and many children attend a local boxing club.



*"We go boxing. We have a fun park and a field that we play horse shoes."
Child from a Traveller background*

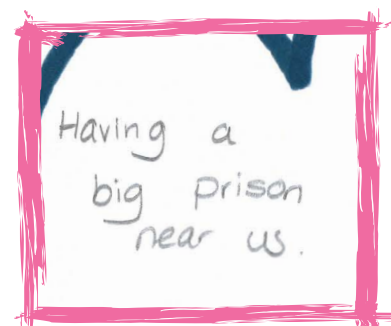
However, many of the children acknowledged the difficulties associated with living on their site, such as unreliable electricity supply, the close proximity of a main road and a prison to the site and a lack of public transport.



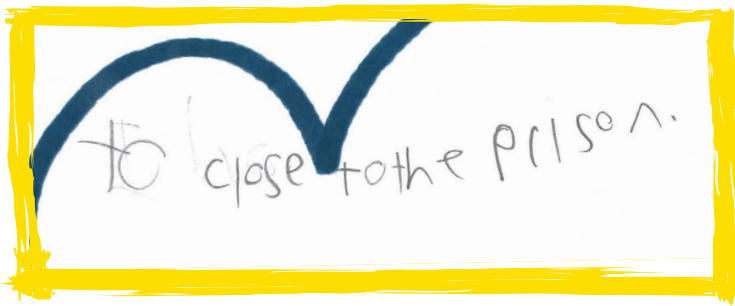
*"Prison nearby (end of site)."
Child from a Traveller background*



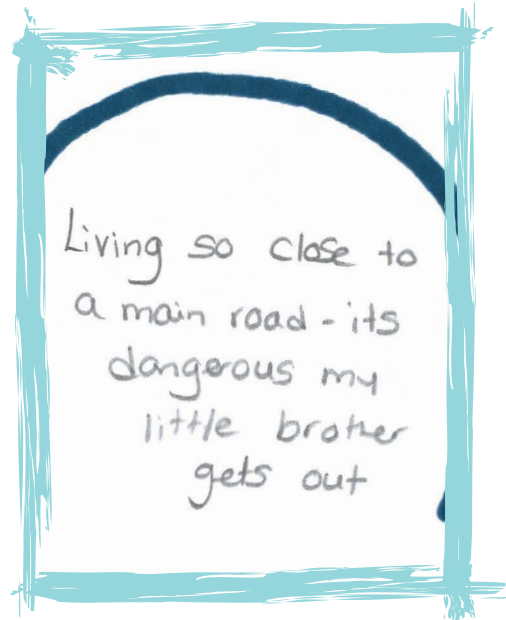
*"Electricity goes off alot."
Child from a Traveller background*



*"Having a big prison near us."
Child from a Traveller background*



"Too close to the prison."
Child from a Traveller background

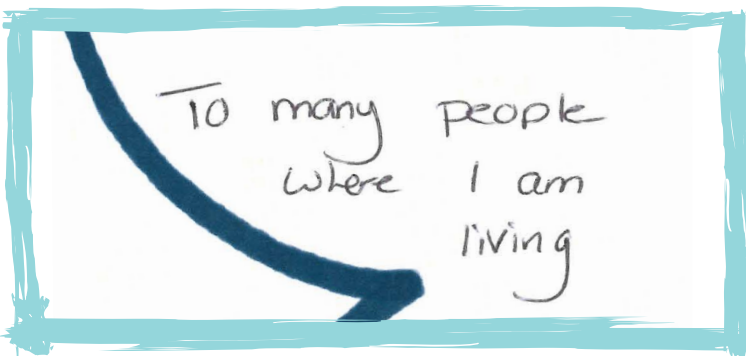


"Living so close to a main road - it's dangerous, my little brother gets out."
Child from a Traveller background

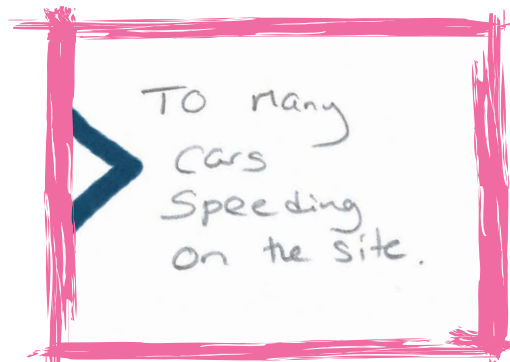


"No access to a bus stop."
Child from a Traveller background

Some children believed that their site was overcrowded. Others thought that there was an issue with speeding cars on their site.



"Too many people where I am living."
Child from a Traveller background

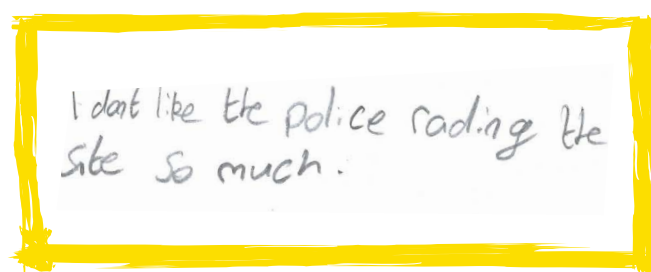


"Too many cars speeding on the site."
Child from a Traveller background

Several children told us that there was a heavy police presence on their site.



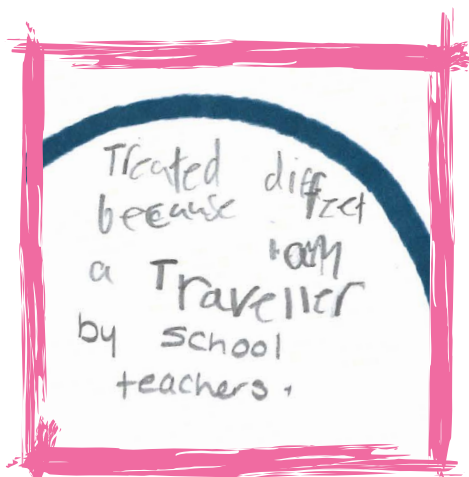
"Police visit site alot."
Child from a Traveller background



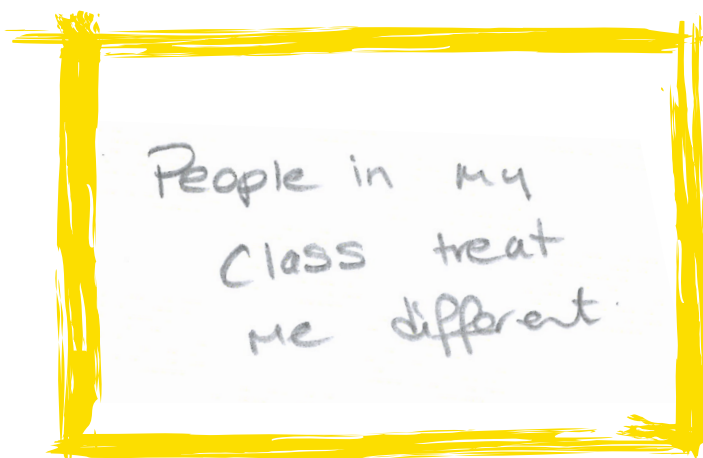
"I don't like the police raiding the site so much."
Child from a Traveller background

Education and School

Children reported having difficulties in school. They attributed this to their ethnic background. Several children experienced racism from their peers and their teachers.

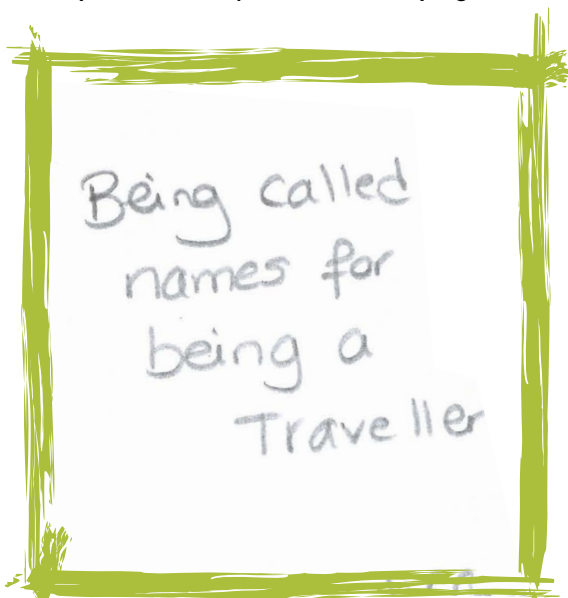


*"Treated different because I am a Traveller, by school teachers."
Child from a Traveller background*



*"People in my class treat me different."
Child from a Traveller background*

Many children experienced bullying due to their ethnic minority.



*"Being called names for being a Traveller."
Child from a Traveller background*



*"Name calling."
Child from a Traveller background*



*"Racism."
Child from a Traveller background*



*"Feeling different."
Child from a Traveller background*

Discrimination in the Community

Whilst feeling excluded in school, children also experienced stigma in the wider community and reported that staff had followed them around shops or they had been accused of shoplifting.

• Dont Feel included
in School

• Followed around
Shops.

• ACCUSED OF Shop lifting

"Don't feel included in school.

Followed around shops.

Accused of shoplifting."

Child from a Traveller background

Fundamentally, children believed that people and society in general judged them based on their ethnic status.

Not being
liked because
I am a
Traveller

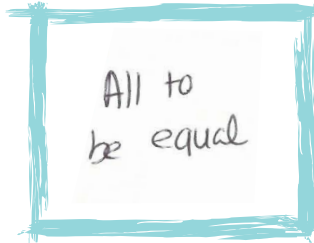
*"Not being liked because I am a Traveller.
Child from a Traveller background*

Suggestions for Change

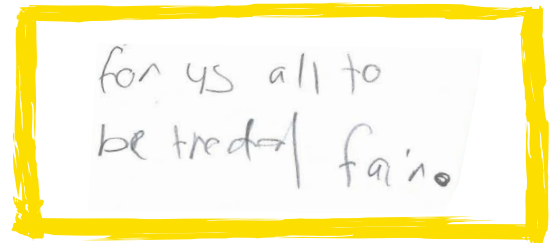
The children had many recommendations for change related to equality.



*"Everyone treated the same."
Child from a Traveller background*



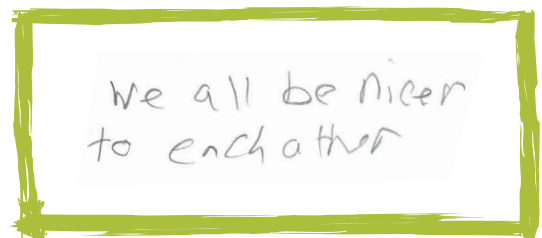
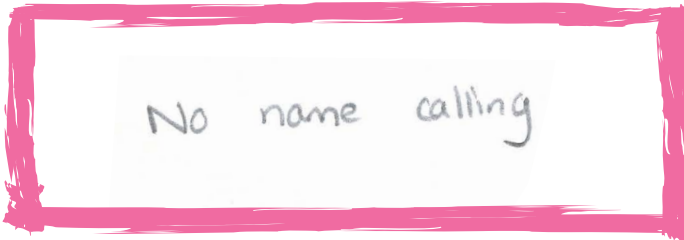
*"All to be equal."
Child from a Traveller background*



*"For us all to be treated fair."
Child from a Traveller background*

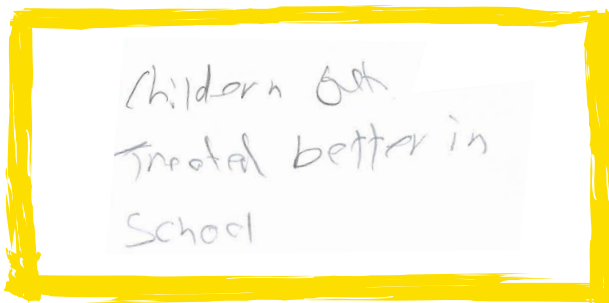


*"For everyone to be treated equal / No name calling."
Child from a Traveller background*



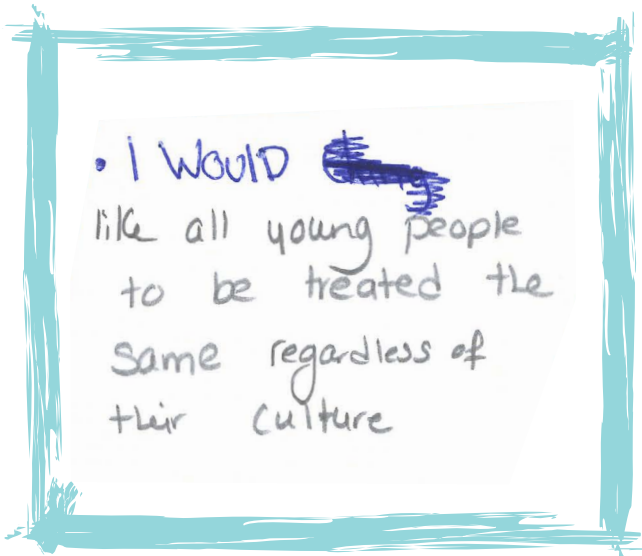
*"We all be nicer to each other."
Child from a Traveller background*

In particular, children wanted better and equal treatment in school and society more broadly.



*"Children get treated better in school."
Child from a Traveller background*

Overall, children from the Travelling community wanted to be treated equally and their culture to be respected.



*"I Would like all young people to be treated the same regardless of their culture.
Child from a Traveller background*

9.4 Roma Children

Education and School

School was frequently seen as a positive experience by Roma children.

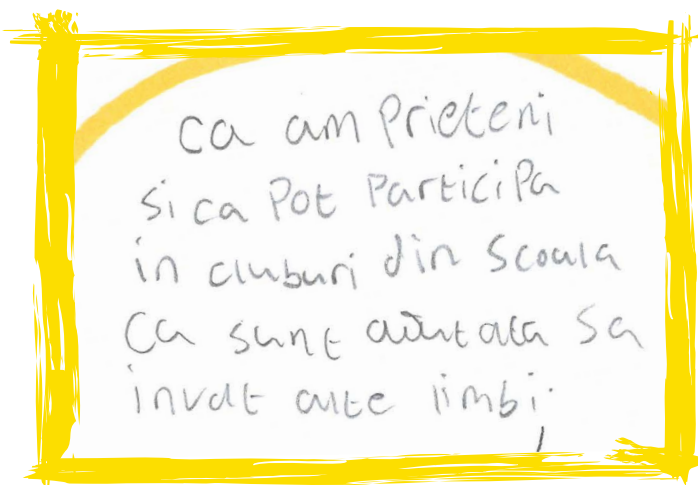
Girl 2: The education... They teach you well.

Girl 3: And it's really good, which maybe in other places they don't get such an education.

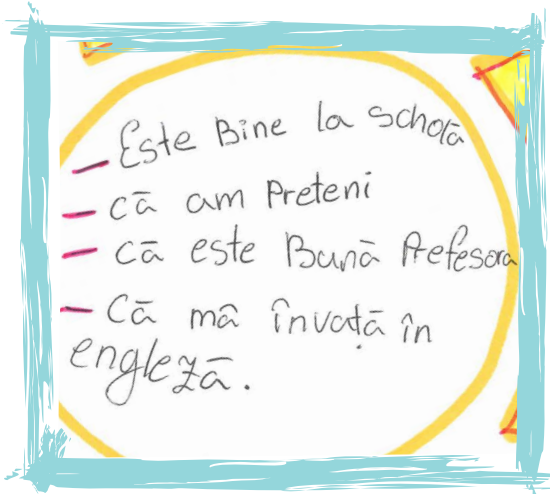
OCO: Other places, such as?

Girl 3: Back home.

Children from the Roma Community



*"That I have friends and I can participate in clubs in school, that I am helped to learn other languages."
Child from the Roma Community*

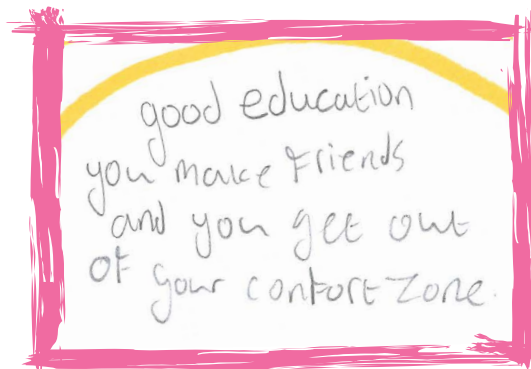


- It's good at school
 - That I have friends
 - That the teacher is good
 - That I am taught English."

Child from the Roma Community



"Learning and playing."
 Child from the Roma Community

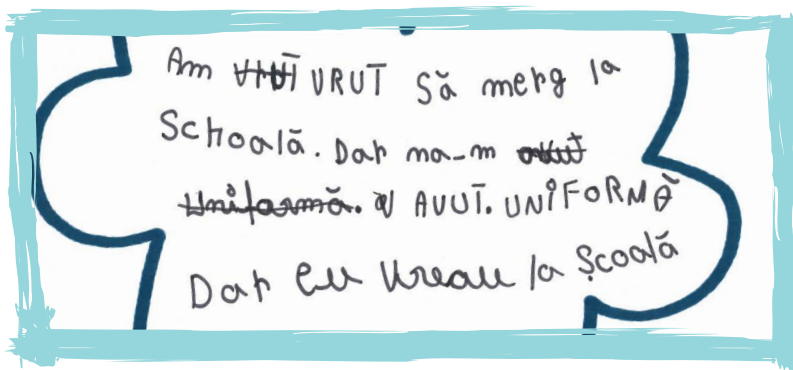


"Good education, you make friends and
 you get out of your comfort zone."
 Child from the Roma Community

However, both primary and secondary aged children had difficulties at school. For some, this was for practical reasons such as not having the school uniform, for others it was the experience of racism and bullying that made school difficult.

Girl supported by an interpreter: So, they registered me for the school, but I didn't have the uniform.

Child from the Roma Community



"I wanted to go to school. But I didn't have
 a uniform. But I want to go to school."
 Child from the Roma Community

Girl 2: The bullying as well... Racism. So basically, like Irish girls, let's say, when they see a coloured girl from another country, they see the easy target, like to bully them or pick on them. Well, when I was in primary school I just came to Ireland, they were just like pushing me and calling me names, but I didn't understand anything. I didn't know any English. But it kind of stopped, because like I didn't take it.

Girl 5: Sometimes it's not the students, it's teachers as well.

Girl 2: Yeah, sometimes teachers are very like racist... Yeah, the tone is different when they're talking to you.

OCO: Okay, in what way?

Girl 5: They look. Like there's a type of inconvenience, so it's like, it's a different way to how you talk to other students. It's like, like if you need help or something, they will [not give] a proper explanation.

Children from the Roma Community



“Boy: I hate school.

OCO: This little guy, what is he doing?

Boy: He is sad.

OCO: Why is he sad?

Boy: We have to go to the yard.

OCO: Do you not like that?

Boy: I feel happy when I leave the school.”

Child from the Roma Community

Girl: When we first came here, it was like different. They would pick on us for no reason, or like they'd call us names. But like now they don't really anymore. They just see that we're here a long time, that English, English improved a lot, so we're going to pick on somebody else that doesn't have English anymore.

Child from the Roma Community



"Not good at school.

Bullying

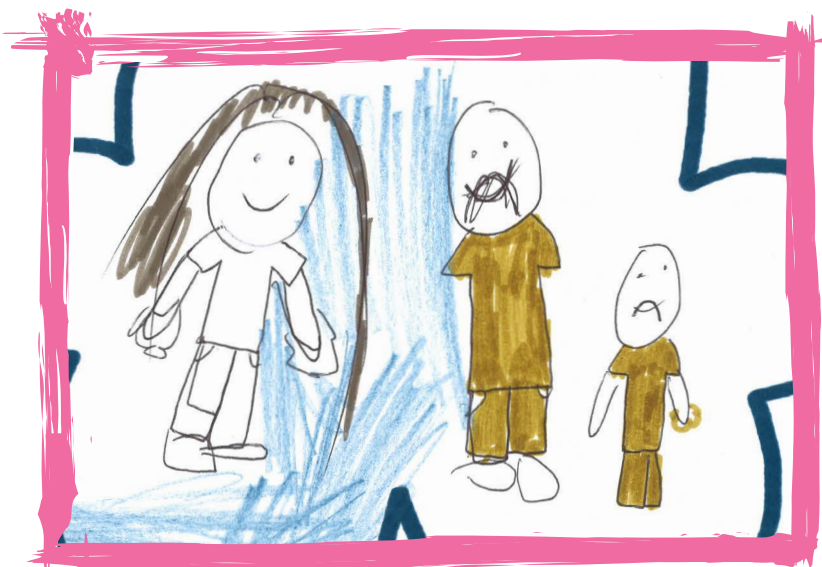
Long Hours

Homework

No free time

Racism."

Child from the Roma Community



This child explains that she does not like her teacher and that she is bullied.
Child from the Roma Community

Some of the children that had been in Ireland longer believed that it got easier for them in secondary school.

Girl 3: Well, at the start, for me, it was like really hard. Basically, they wouldn't talk to you. In my class, it was only Irish people.

Girl: Secondary was a bit easier. They're different – mature maybe.

Children from the Roma Community

Discrimination in the Community

Some children had experienced racism in their communities.

*Girl 5: When you walk on the street and they're like, 'Oh P*ki, 'Oi g*po' and things like that.*

OCO: How does it make you feel when you experience racism?

Girl 5: Not welcome.

Girl 2: A bit pushed away.

Children from the Roma Community

In December 2021, a young woman was murdered in Ireland while out running. In the wake of this murder, some children explained that they had experienced a racist backlash as the man initially arrested in relation to the murder was Roma and from Romainia.

Girl 2: My dad got a punch in the face because of that.

OCO: How does that make you feel?

Girl 2: Sad and angry.

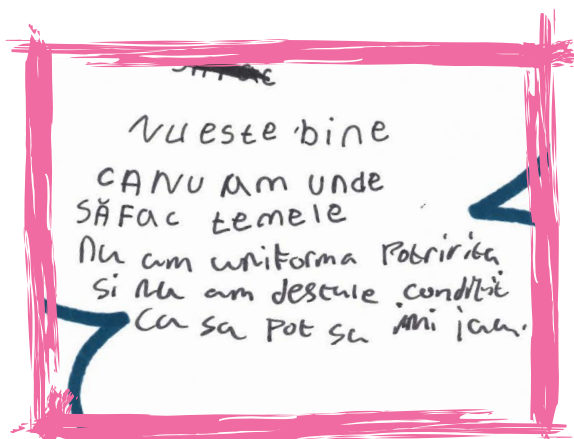
Girl 4: Yes, they all calling us murderers and all. Like they're saying it's our fault, what happened to her, to that girl.

Children from the Roma Community

Living Conditions

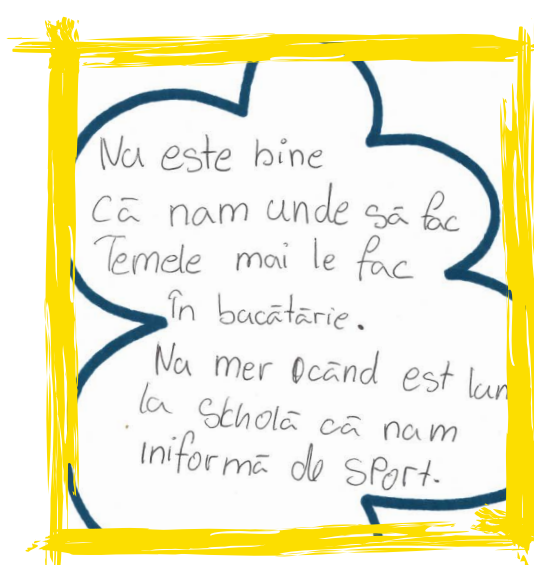
Some of the Roma children that spoke with us were experiencing homelessness. In some instances this affected their education.

The children who were experiencing homelessness with their families either lived in hotels or family hubs.



"It's not good because I have no place to do my homework. I don't have a suitable uniform and I don't have enough conditions to get one."

Child from the Roma Community



"It's not good because I have no place to do my homework, sometimes I do it in the kitchen. I don't go to school on Mondays because I don't have a PE uniform."

Child from the Roma Community

Girl: [I live in] a hotel [name redacted] in Dublin.

OCO: How long have you lived there?

Girl: Six months down there. It's okay.

OCO: So, how many of your family live there?

Girl: Right, five in one room... It's a bit run down, but in a room, me and my mum and dad, my little sister and my older sister. There's like a big room with [access to] outdoors and all.

OCO: How does it make you feel?

Girl: I don't know. Like, I wanted to have my own room, you know?

Children from the Roma Community

Two siblings we spoke to lived in a bed and breakfast and explained its impact.

Girl 4: [I live in a] bed and breakfast... But then like all your books, your studying books, everything, your clothes have to go in a certain way, and when you have too many you have to throw them out.

Girl 3: We have two rooms. Seven kids and two parents, so there are nine...

It's too – like it's hard together. It gets suffocating when so many people in one room. And they're all girls and just one boy, so like I imagine the boy would be like suffocating with so many girls and doesn't have his own privacy.

Children from the Roma Community

Other children lived in overcrowded accommodation.

Girl: We're [living] there [for] 11 years. We're eight, and then there's like three rooms and two bathrooms and a living room. Four girls in one room, two boys in one room and my mum and my dad. Yeah. It's like all the girls has to sleep in one room.

OCO: And how does that make each of you feel?

Girl: We need our own space... no privacy.

Children from the Roma Community

When asked about how they express their culture they explained that they can do it through language and dress if they choose to. However, due to their housing situation they struggle to meet as a community.

Girl: We can't really, we don't really get to talk to each other, because one is in the hotel, one is far away, one is there, one is there. We don't really get to see each other. We don't get to talk about it, we don't get to do anything.

Child from the Roma Community

Suggestions for Change

When asked what they wanted to change to improve lives for Roma children in Ireland, the over 12s in particular had many suggestions from improved housing to building community relations.

Girl 2: Maybe build more houses. More people are going to come in, so it's [the government] are going to have to do more buildings.

Girl 4: Rebuild the houses, because there's a lot of abandoned buildings. Rebuild them, because there's not really much being done about those houses. And they could really be used.

Children from the Roma Community

Girl 4: Try to understand [us]. Try to put themselves into [our] shoes and see the way it is. Well, most of them [Irish people] are kind. But then there is these people that just don't care and they're like, 'You just come here for money, just come here to do this and that and then just take over our country'. They say it a lot. But we don't have a life in our country, we're on the streets. So, [we are] coming here to get a new life, to start over.

Girl 2: The perspective should be if someone isn't happy in their country and they don't have the conditions to live well, they're obviously going to want to improve. You have to understand that, if you can't help them just leave them alone, let them be. Normalise the fact that we're all here and we're all the same. Like to be treated equally.

Children from the Roma Community

Girl 3: Maybe make schools talk about it as well? Like, like make somebody go into school and talk to them. Like talk with the Irish people and Romanian people, all together in one room, and see what the Irish people have to say as well because they have an opinion too.

Girl 2: There should be an ambassador or something. Somebody who can speak up for the whole community and listen to the community.

Children from the Roma Community



Boy: To say people homeless people can live there [in a house].

Child from the Roma Community

9.5 What our YAP Said

The YAP discussed and wrote about the experiences of Unaccompanied Minors.

MISUNDER
STOOD

They may think they will have
freedom but in reality they still have
no freedom.

"They may think that they will have freedom
but in reality they still have no freedom."

Promise of
Safety

all children should
have the opportunity
to play sport
when ever
they come
to Ireland

"All children should have the opportunity to
play sport whenever they come to Ireland."

MISSING
Family

"Misunderstood.
Promise of safety.
Missing family."

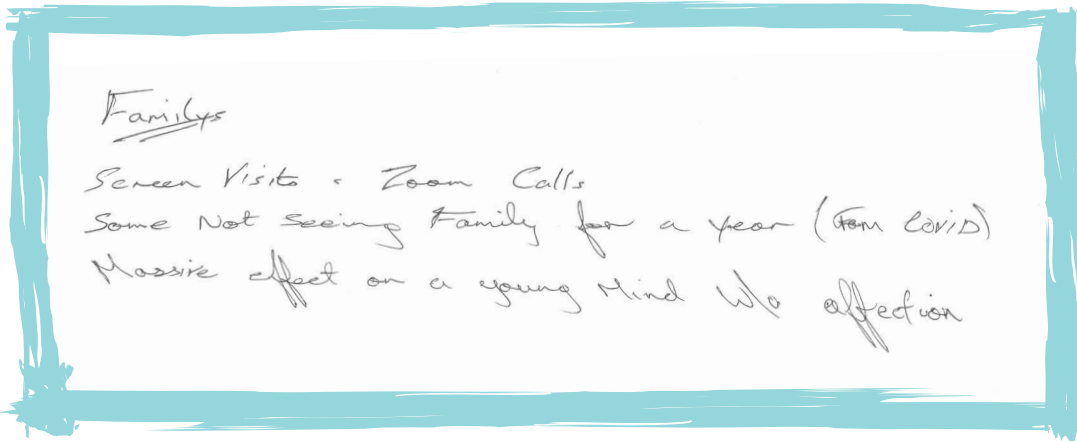
They are afraid of their past and
are trying to move on and
forget it.

"They are afraid of their past and are trying
to move on and forget it."

The YAP discussed the emotions that they believed children in detention might be feeling.



“Isolated
Loneliness
Depression.”



“Families
Screen visits and Zoom calls
Some not seeing family for a year (from COVID)
Massive effect on a young mind without affection.”

The YAP empathised with children from ethnic minorities in Ireland, including Traveller and Roma children.

Unhappy =
The overall
emotion of not
being particularly
happy with a situation
/ experience

Robbed =
The emotion



Lost =
The feeling
of losing a particularly
item or a sense of
hope

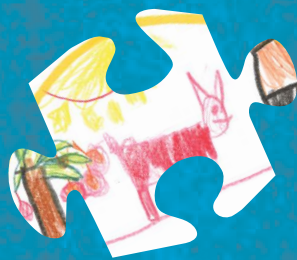
"Robbed = The emotion,

Unhappy = the overall emotion of
not being particularly happy with a
situation/experience,

Lost = the feeling of losing a particular
item of sense of hope."

We need people to listen to us,
our experiences of discrimination +
oppression rather than meet us with
defensiveness + shut us down. We need to
learn about other perspectives. Listen.

"We need people to listen to us, our experiences of
discrimination and oppression rather than meet us
with defensiveness and shut us down. We need to
learn about other perspectives. Listen."



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for children



Youth
Advisory
Panel