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Time well spent: a study of well-being and children's daily activities

Jane Aldgate and Miranda McIntosh

commissioned for the review of looked after children in Scotland



social work
inspection agency

Time well spent: a study of well-being and children's daily activities

Jane Aldgate and Miranda McIntosh

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1 Introduction and general context

Children looked after by local authorities

This study is about the daily lives of 24 children looked after by local authorities in Scotland. Eighteen were looked after away from home in either residential or foster care, while six were looked after at home on a supervision requirement. Looked after children are ordinary children who, as the study will show, engage in the same range of activities as other children. Some individuals are very active and busy while others have a narrower range of interests. Like all children, looked after children need to be given opportunities to be active and achieving, and to spend enjoyable time with those who look after them, their families and their friends. Like other children they also appreciate and need time to themselves within a life that is often characterised by periods of time dictated and organised by others. Choice about how they spend their leisure time is as important for looked after children as it is for other children.

Although they are ordinary children with the same interests as other children, looked after children are often living in extraordinary circumstances because of what has happened to them. Some children are resilient to change and will have retained their social skills, creativity and enthusiasm. The extraordinary experiences of rejection and maltreatment will have left others vulnerable, with their confidence eroded. As a result, they may not have the same skills in making new friendships and relationships with adults. At the same time, children may be living away from their own communities and be facing the challenge of being accepted by a whole raft of strange adults and peers. The most confident and mature child would find such a prospect challenging. It is even more daunting for those who are less confident and more vulnerable.

Those responsible for the daily care of looked after children have a duty to apply careful thinking, planning and additional resources, where necessary, to make sure looked after children have the same opportunities as others. This may mean finding a new music teacher, registering them at a gym or arranging transport so they can still play team games with friends. It is important that there are policies within all local authorities that allow for the individuality of every looked after child. A major source of complaint by children and their carers, for example, is that children cannot stay with their local friends without an elaborate vetting process. Sometimes, it is difficult because of a shortage of beds for children to have their friends to stay, where a camp bed might just solve the problem.

Creative solutions must be found to keep looked after children safe but also allow them to have as ordinary lives as possible so that any difference resulting from their looked after status is minimised. In some cases, it may take extraordinary effort to achieve ordinary experiences for looked after children. Such effort is not an option for professionals and carers but is a fundamental contribution to the building blocks of all aspects of these children's development, but especially to their social skills, confidence and sense of well-being.

Understanding the relationship between children's experiences and their well-being has increasingly become an important part of the context in which children's services are offered. Whether we are talking of universal concerns about children's obesity, the risk of smoking among young people or more specific worries about the educational attainment of children looked after away from home, how children spend their time is very much part of the current policy agenda.

There are several issues which inform approaches to understanding children's daily lives.

The concept of wellness

It is recognised that many factors may contribute to the physical and psychological wellness of children, irrespective of their circumstances. As Prilleltensky and Nelson have suggested:

Child wellness is predicated on the satisfaction of material, physical, affective, and psychological needs. Wellness is an ecological concept: a child's wellness is determined by the level of parental, familial, communal and social wellness (Prilleltensky and Nelson 2002, p.87).

Taking an ecological approach to children's development recognises that all of children's daily experiences will contribute to their overall wellness, and consequently, their well-being.

Glasses half full rather than half empty

One important strand in the wellness debate is the growing view that it is important to look at an individual's strengths and achievements. There has been a significant move away from looking at deficits to one which stresses strengths and achievements. Such an approach is equally applicable to adults and children:

The work of psychologists is moving from an emphasis upon the troubles, the anxieties, the sickness of people, to an interest in how we acquire positive qualities, and how social influences contribute to perceptions of well-being, personal effectiveness and even joy (Kelly 1974, quoted in Lorion 2000, p.5).

The optimism about growth and development has permeated research on children's development and well-being. There is a growing understanding that children can change their behaviour and equally, that children can recover from negative experiences of adversity, including the impact of rejection, separation and loss, provided they have subsequent experiences that help to build their resilience (Schaffer 1996).

Schaffer's optimism is validated by the work done in recent years on resilience as a protective factor in children's development. Resilience is defined as 'normal development under difficult conditions' (Fonagy et al. 1994). In the UK, Rutter's work on outcomes for young people, who have become resilient in spite of growing up in adverse circumstances, has given insights into experiences which are likely to protect children. Rutter (1985) cites three factors associated with resilience:

- a sense of self-esteem and confidence
- a belief in own self-efficacy and ability to deal with change and adaptation
- a repertoire of problem-solving approaches

Children's daily experiences will contribute to their resilience. Newman and Blackburn (2002), for example, have outlined a range of factors which can help to promote resilience:

- strong social support networks
- the presence of at least one unconditionally supportive parent or parent substitute
- a committed mentor or other person from outside the family
- positive school experiences
- a sense of mastery and belief that one's own efforts can make a difference
- a range of extra curricular activities that promotes the learning of competencies and emotional maturity
- the capacity to reframe adversities so that the beneficial as well as the changing effects are recognised
- the ability, or opportunity, to make a difference by, for example, helping others through volunteering or undertaking part-time work
- exposure to challenging situations which provide opportunities to develop problem solving activities and coping skills

Children's rights and parental responsibilities

The principles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) support the view that both family and state should give attention to various aspects of children's lives, including education, care, recreation, culture and health, and children's social behaviour.

Concern about lack of opportunities and poor outcomes for children looked after away from home led to the development of the Looking After Children (LAC) system in England and Wales (Parker *et al.* 1991). Children's progress is recorded along seven dimensions:

- health
- education
- emotional and behavioural development

- identity
- family and social relationships
- social presentation
- self care skills

(Ward 1995).

The LAC assessment and action records have been widely implemented within Scotland to record children's progress along the seven dimensions but there has been some inconsistency about their application (Social Work Services Inspectorate 2004).

The approach adopted by the looking after children framework is ecological, recognising that there are many influences on children's development and progress from within their families, their communities and from within the children themselves. The LAC forms are designed to ensure that there is appropriate assessment and actions in relation to children's progress. The way the forms are designed also means that it is possible for children to take the lead in their completion. This approach recognises that children have much to offer in evaluating their own progress and links to the view that childhood is a separate stage in itself, rather than a preparation for adulthood.

Children shaping their own lives

The fact that children can complete the LAC forms reflects the view of commentators that much more attention should be paid to children's participation and influence on factors that affect their own childhood (Clark and Moss 2001). It is argued that children have a right to participate in decisions and events that affect them directly. The mandate for children's participation comes from section 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989, which states that children should be seen as competent individuals who can be consulted and involved in decision-making that affects their lives. This principle is enshrined in various sections of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

As well as helping children to shape their own lives, there is also a growing movement that recognises children are able to provide both a competent commentary on their own lives and contribute to both policy and practice. This idea is exemplified by writers who have described children as ‘social actors’ (Clark and Moss 2001; Sinclair 2004).

Such an approach means that children should have full participation in any policies and plans for services and should be empowered to put forward their own agendas. In other words, children should be seen as:

Fellow citizens with rights, participating members of the social groups in which they find themselves, agents of their own lives but also interdependent with others, co-constructors of knowledge, identity and culture, who co-exist with others in society on the basis of who they are, rather than who they will become (Moss 2002, p.6).

Moss has proposed using the concept of ‘children’s spaces’ as part of children’s services to translate this idea into practice. A good example of taking into account ‘children’s spaces’ in Scotland comes from the consultation exercise carried out by Children in Scotland, as part of the Scottish Executive’s policy review of special educational needs of children in 2001. This consultation involved over 100 young people who employed different styles of communication, including disabled children and those for whom English was not their first language. The project showed that children possess a range of influential resources for policy makers including information and knowledge. It also showed that translating children’s views into action can be problematic if they do not fit into the adult agenda (Tisdall and Davis 2004). Indeed, one criticism of children’s participation has been that children are often asked to respond to the adult agenda rather than set their own (Prout 2003). Consequently, it has been argued by commentators, such as Holloway and Valentine (2000) and Hill *et al.* (2004), that unless adults are willing to try to understand how children themselves see their daily lives, there will be shortcomings in any attempts to promote a child-centred approach to children’s well-being:

It is important that adults thinking about children’s lives, needs and education embraces not only the spaces to be found in formal provision by adults, but also those territories and pathways claimed by children for their own purposes in myriad locations within the areas they inhabit and visit (Hill *et al.* 2004, p.84).

Combining children's rights with children's perspectives is a feature of Ben-Arieh's international research on how children spend their time (Ben-Arieh 2002). Ben-Arieh believes that children's experience of childhood, as reported by them, should be counted alongside adult indicators of positive well-being in children and suggests:

A re-defined concept of children's well-being, therefore, can be guided by two underlying assumptions: that children are entitled to dignity and basic human rights, and that their childhood is also a stage deserving our attention and respect (Ben-Arieh 2002, p.153).

He goes on to argue that, in order to study children's perspectives on their well-being, measures need to be developed that take a child-centred approach:

To better understand what children are doing and how they feel about their lives and activities from a child-centred perspective and to promote their self-fulfilment, empowerment, and life satisfaction, measures must be developed to assess their activities (Ben-Arieh 2002, p.155. See also Andrews and Ben-Arieh 1999).

It was in the context of the debates about children's rights and children's well-being that this study was undertaken.

2 Methodology

Aim of the study

The main aim of the study is to provide a snapshot of the daily lives of a small number of looked after children across Scotland.

We aimed:

- to find out how looked after children in different settings spend their time in order to inform the adult agenda of concerns about the well-being of looked after children and the state's role in exercising parental responsibility towards children looked after by the local authority
- to look at children's daily activities from the perspective of children themselves in order to gain an insight into what they enjoy doing and why

Sample

The sample consists of 24 children, 11 female and 13 male, ranging from seven to 18 years of age. Children were located in four Scottish local authorities representing both rural and urban areas. They had been in their placements for at least three months. The children were in the following placements:

- six living at home who were the subject of a supervision requirement, including one child who spent time partly at home and partly with foster carers
- seven accommodated in full-time residential care
- eleven accommodated in foster care, including one young person who was in the process of making a transition to independent living

The study was severely limited by the constraints of time, being carried out in four months. A further major limitation was that the sample was purposive, not representative. The views presented here are those of only 24 children and are unlikely to reflect the whole population

of looked after children in Scotland. A major omission was the exclusion of any children with severe disabilities because of the constraints on the development of suitable research instruments in the time available. Nevertheless, the children's views do give an insight into the lives of the 24 children, and provide a starting point for child-centred investigations of this type.

Another constraint imposed by time was that the study does not place children's activities in the context of their background, nor their experiences of adversity and resilience. It was outwith the context of the study to explore children's backgrounds, length of time of their placement or their care plans.

Children were identified anonymously by local authorities if they fulfilled the criteria of being in a placement over three months and were aged seven years or older. The research team sent information about the study to local authorities who then asked the children and their carers to participate. Permissions were sought from the main carers of all the children, on an opt out basis. Once children and carers had agreed to participate, names and addresses were released to the research team, who then arranged interviews.

Children were interviewed on a first come first served basis, ensuring that at least four children were seen from each local authority. Even though children and families had agreed to participate before being approached by the research team, the refusal rate for this study, at about 40%, was quite high. The highest refusals were in the home supervision and foster care groups although it was unclear why this was so. Had there been more time, it would have been possible for the research team to have conducted introductory interviews to inform respondents about the study, and to return at an agreed date for the main interview. This might have prevented some refusals.

Measuring activities

In order to measure children's activities, we drew (albeit fairly loosely because of the severe constraints of time) on Ben-Arieh's work (2002) on measuring children's daily activities. We thought it important to look at children's daily activities from the perspective of the children themselves.

It has been suggested by Ben-Arieh (2002) that children's activities are diverse. We have adapted Ben-Arieh's preliminary scheme for classifying activities as follows:

- sleep
- productive activities: schoolwork, personal creative work, paid work, care of others and domestic/household work
- other activities that contribute to the community
- spiritual activities
- travel time
- personal care: eating, getting ready
- social interaction: interacting socially with others not for explicitly productive purposes (such as hanging out, listening to music and talking)
- leisure/recreation: such as play, sports, reading, watching television, arts and crafts

(Adapted from Ben-Arieh 2002).

The meaning and application of each of the categories is explained as they are dealt with in the findings.

The study used two research instruments. The first was a semi-structured interview schedule where children were asked to identify the frequency and duration of a range of child-centred activities, broadly based on Ben-Arieh's characterisation of children's activities. It was thought important that children should have the opportunity of contributing to the definition of the range of activities and this was done during the interviews. However, in order to give children a starting point, some activities were preselected by the researchers to reflect the adult agenda of children's well-being.

The second was a time diary, which children were asked to fill in. Ben-Arieh's main thesis is that children are active in a range of circumstances each day, including being with their families, with their friends, in schools and community and recreation settings. They are also consumers and 'users and creators of information networks and other media' (Ben-Arieh 2002, p.155). Consequently, the use of time diaries over a specified period can show the pattern, including the duration, frequency and context of children's daily activities.

In this study, diaries were developed in such a way as to be attractive to young people and were relatively simple to complete. We asked children to describe in their diaries what they did over a period of 48 hours, which included a weekday and a weekend day and to fill a diary a few days before their interview. Children were asked to give information about the nature of activities, where they occurred and whether the child was alone or with others. The interviewer then checked the content of the diary with the child and helped them complete it if necessary.

The combination of the two approaches used in the study gave us a general overview of the range of activities that made up the daily lives of the 24 children. The diaries gave us material to capture two days in the life of the children. This snapshot could be cross-referenced with the schedules to make sure no activities had been missed. They also provided us with case studies of children's daily lives in different looked after settings.

It was beyond the scope of the study to explore in depth children's perceptions of the relative contribution that different activities made to their lives but we were able to explore the range of activities and the degree to which children had control over their leisure time.

Although this study can only be seen as a pilot, it does provide, for the first time, an insight into the daily activities of looked after children in Scotland.

Ethical issues

As in any study undertaken with children, special attention has to be paid to ethical issues to ensure the study is child friendly. Accordingly, the same ethical procedures were adopted as in Aldgate and McIntosh's (2006) study of kinship care, paying particular attention to transparency about the process of the study, avoiding any coercion and giving children the opportunity to end the interview at any stage. Ethical standards developed by Barnardo's were adopted for use with young people in the study. Additionally, the research instruments were scrutinised and approved by the University of Glasgow's ethics committee.

Because the study was trying to be child-centred, children were given the opportunity to add their own ideas and categories to the research tools. Children were also asked to evaluate their participation and the use of time diaries as a means of understanding children's daily lives. Children's evaluations of the study are reported briefly in Chapter 6.

3 The findings

The findings are presented under the different headings within our adapted use of Ben-Arieh's (2002) classification.

Sleep

We explored with children how much sleep they get, on average, each night. Overall, children slept well and for sustained periods. Three children said that they had less than eight hours sleep, eight said they had about eight hours sleep and 13 said they had more than eight hours sleep. This was confirmed by the diaries where the average time logged as 'spent sleeping' was nine and a half hours.

Twenty out of the 24 children said they slept well and 21 said they had enough sleep. Two boys, who slept more than eight hours, told us that they had too much sleep! Two children who did not sleep well, attributed this to not being able to get to sleep. One child described she could not get to sleep because she could not 'shut off her mind'. The other two described having broken sleep but found it difficult to explain why they woke up several times in the night.

Productive activities

Productive activities tend to be those which are structured within a framework set by adults. Ben-Arieh suggests that children's activities are productive 'when they have functional equivalence with adult activities that are generally understood as making a social or economical contribution' (Ben-Arieh 2002, p.156). For example, school and work provide looked after children with structure to parts of their day. This structure is generally determined by adults but what children make of their productive learning activities will influence various aspects of their development, including their confidence, self-esteem and self-efficacy. In the context of looked after children, writers, such as Gilligan, have suggested that the structure of school may be helpful. Routines and rituals may 'convey consoling security to a troubled child' (Gilligan 1998, p.16).

In the study, we classified productive activities as follows:

- school activity
- homework
- paid work activity
- doing jobs at home
- activity clubs after school
- educational clubs
- professional intervention

School activity

A child's experience of school is relevant to many aspects of their development. Positive school experience is also associated with the development of resilience and can be a protective factor against the experience of adversity (Daniel *et al.* 1999). As Howe *et al.* have suggested:

School life with its rich environment of new relationships and tasks presents children with new occasions to identify, develop and establish a fresh, more robust and socially valued aspects of the self (Howe *et al.* 1999, p.26).

The experience of school has many facets. It provides children with the possibility of achieving in the classroom. It also gives children the opportunity of being supported by a significant adult outside the child's immediate family who can offer encouragement and serve as a positive role model. Gilligan (1998) suggests that school may play many important roles in children's development, such as being an ally and capacity builder for children, thereby giving them opportunities to build self-esteem and confidence through learning and achievement. Ideally, school can provide a secure base for the troubled child.

Another important role for schools is to provide the context in which children can develop friendships with peers and develop relationships based on personal choice. Where children have left school, employment may be seen as an alternative structure and a place where young people can gain confidence and self-esteem.

Although school can be positive, the experience of school for looked after children has long been a cause for concern, particularly in relation to children's attainment at school (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and Social Work Services Inspectorate 2001). Of care leavers in Scotland in 2002-03, six out of ten did not receive any qualifications, a similar proportion to the previous year (NCH Scotland 2004).

In this section of the study, we will look at children's productive activities in terms of the time they spend in formal lessons. Later on, we will be looking at the time children spend with their peers and the part this plays within their social activities.

Of our 24 children, two had left school. This left 22 children who were still eligible to be in the education system full-time. Of these 22, 14 children were in mainstream school, and six were in special needs schools. Of the remaining two children, one child had been excluded from school and had been waiting for a new placement for six months and one young person was attending college part-time for two hours a week. All of the 20 children who were attending school full-time went to school every day.

We asked the children how many times they had been absent from school or work in the past month. Fifteen out of 20 children at school said they had not been absent from school. Of the five who had been absent, one had been absent once, three children had been absent two to three times and one child had been absent more than five times. This was due to 'skipping school'. Neither of the two who were working had been absent. The child who was excluded had skipped school 'sometimes'.

Of those who attended school everyday, seven admitted that they had arrived late on at least one occasion. Children gave a variety of reasons for skipping classes or arriving late. The most common reason was children sleeping in, although occasionally buses were missed or children got stuck in traffic jams. Two children had missed school because they had appointments with professionals. Two children commented that their behaviour had improved because they had come to realise there was no point in skipping class:

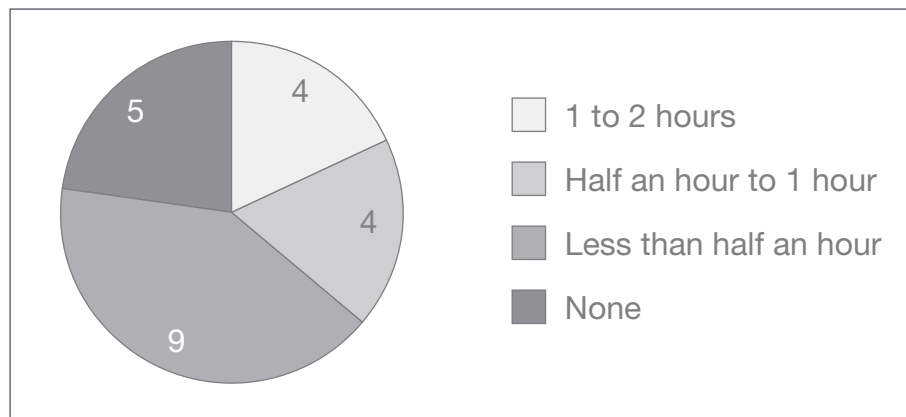
When you skip class the staff always find you.

Two mentioned that school was one aspect of the structure and routine in their lives they had experienced since coming to their placement:

It is better now that I have a regular routine.

Homework

Chart 3.1 Time spent doing homework each weekday



Of the 22 who were eligible for school or college, over half the children said they did not like doing homework. Consequently, it was not surprising that only four children spent more than an hour each day on homework, four spent up to half an hour, nine spent less than half an hour and the five remaining spent no time doing homework. Four children told us they never got homework. Encouraged by her carer, one child was in the process of asking to be given homework so that she could improve her grades. Only seven children reported 'doing homework' in their diaries and it was an activity often done in the context of 'multi-tasking', being undertaken while watching the television or listening to music.

Of those who got homework, 11 said they had to be reminded to do it. Those who did not mind doing homework were generally helped by a parent or a carer. The most popular subject was maths:

I like maths as it is about solving things.

I like sums.

Paid work activity

Two young people were over the age of 16 and were working. One worked full-time, seven hours a day, the other part-time, around four hours a day. Both thought working was acceptable but were not very enthusiastic about it.

We also looked at work patterns among the 22 children who were still at school. Hobbs and McKechnie (1997) suggest that many young people have had experience of work before reaching school leaving age. The experience of work can be both positive and negative. The negative effects are that children can be working long hours for low pay which can affect their health and abilities at school. On the positive side, it is argued that the advantages of work while at school are that children gain increased financial independence from their families. Work can foster self-esteem and social development and enhance self-efficacy. It can prevent children from getting bored and can be a good preparation for the responsibilities for work in later life (Hobbs and McKechnie 1997). In our sample, only two children had some part-time work outside of school hours. One child had two jobs, working as a waitress and as a cleaner for a total of nine hours each weekend, and the other child was a waitress.

Doing jobs at home

In common with many children, doing jobs at home was an activity that children endured rather than enjoyed, although 15 said they 'did not mind' doing these chores. Twenty-three children had to be 'reminded' about undertaking these activities although one or two were motivated by the promise of pocket money. It was, therefore, not surprising that half the children spent less than half an hour on a weekday doing jobs at home. Eight children spent half an hour to one hour and only three children spent more than one hour doing jobs at home. The activity was often undertaken with music in the background.

According to children, jobs included washing up, tidying their bedrooms, hoovering, laundry, taking the rubbish out, gardening and walking the dog. These jobs were usually done in the company of adults, apart from the tidying of bedrooms:

I am told to wash and clean the dishes all the time.

I do it because it is pocket money day.

I do not like doing it but it has to be done.

Activity clubs after school

Jack and Gill (2003) suggest that activities, groups and services within their communities can help children develop a positive identity. At the end of the school day, 15 of the 22 children in the study still at school participated in activity clubs, some of which took place in school. These clubs were not for the purpose of child care but were extra curricular interest groups. All 15 children said that participation in these clubs was their choice. The clubs tended to take place weekly with children spending between half an hour and two hours there, according to the activity. Clubs included drama, poetry, dance, football, karate, science experiments and also trampoline. One child described how much he enjoyed reciting the poems of Robert Burns at the poetry club.

Community based clubs for children

Structured clubs in the community have a part to play in promoting children's confidence. Gilligan (1998) suggests that the youth service, along with school and community work, can be of special help to children who are experiencing disruption and disadvantage in their lives. Only four children went to these clubs which comprised guides, air cadets, boys' brigade and cubs.

Professional intervention

Twenty-two out of the 24 children said they had social workers, whom they saw at least once a month or more frequently. When children saw their social workers, there was considerable variation in the amount of time spent with them. In general, at least half the children spent an hour or more with their social worker while they were with them. At least five children said they spent over two hours with them.

Social workers spent time talking with children about how they were getting on in their placement and school and getting an update on their progress. It was difficult to tell whether the children led the discussion or the other way round. An important issue on the agenda was to discuss children's families. Social workers also had a role in helping children deal with their emotions. In one case, the social worker was helping a child make a transition into college. There was one example where a child had moved placement and the social worker was held responsible for not continuing to promote her much loved leisure activity of going

to the gym. The young person was frustrated that her social worker had promised to arrange the membership of a gym but she was still waiting for this to happen several months later. In another case, a young person described how therapeutic it was to be able to vent her anger about her situation through sharing a game of pool with her social worker. There were similar examples of the usefulness of shared activities in Aldgate and McIntosh's (2006) kinship care study.

Many looked after children carry the legacies of their past and need specialist help in order to come to terms with these. Aldgate and McIntosh's (2006) kinship care study provided examples of groups run by voluntary agencies, which offered groupwork for children who had experienced loss and change. In this study, three of the children attended specialist groups or individual counselling sessions. One child met with counsellors for stress management and massage therapy once every three weeks; another met with a clinical psychologist once a week and the third child met with a bereavement counsellor every fortnight.

Contributing to the community

Ben-Arieh (2002) believes that children may benefit from being involved in making a contribution to the community in which they live. In the study, only one child contributed to the community by assisting disabled children with riding lessons which she did for two hours every weekend.

We felt that children's contribution to their community could be interpreted in another way. Responsibility within the school setting is a way children can learn about looking after others. Unfortunately, we did not explore this with every child as an aspect of daily activities. Because we relied on self-reporting, this section may well be an underestimation of children's contributions to their communities. One child spent time drawing a cartoon for the school newspaper. A second child commented on his contribution to the school community as a school monitor.

Monitoring means you go down to their wee playground right and you look after them [younger children]. I stop dogs and cats coming into school or people that aren't welcome to the school. I protect all the wee yins.

Spiritual activities

Eighteen children said they did not participate in any religious activity. Six children attended places of faith and particularly enjoyed this because of the friendships they had at church. This occurred at the weekend for an hour to two hours. It was evident that consistently spending time at places of faith was important for a minority of children. In all these cases, the place of faith was a church. One child went to church at the weekends and also attended a puppet club there during the week. Eight other children told us they studied religious education at school as part of the curriculum. Five of these children also told us that they did not believe in God, did not enjoy religious education and did not participate in this part of the curriculum by choice.

Travel time

There was considerable variation in the time children estimated they spent each day on travel. Children spent between half an hour and two hours on travel. During the week this was to and from school. At the weekends, travel was mainly for the purpose of shopping, meeting friends and other leisure activities. There was little difference between the three care settings or between urban and rural areas. Much depended on individual children's circumstances. Travelling was sometimes combined with other activities, such as meeting friends on the school bus.

Personal care

We explored two main areas of personal care. These were:

- eating
- getting ready (self-presentation)

Eating

Healthy eating is fundamental to children's well-being but it is more than a nutritional activity. The context in which food is eaten has social implications for both children and adults. Whereas sharing a meal together round the family table has historically tended to be seen as an important source of family activity across social classes, changes over time in employment patterns of parents and the arrival of the microwave, instant food and television means some families tend to eat individually in between work and activities. The consumption of food in the home has tended to become more functional with each individual eating different things at different times of the day. As a consequence of the dinner table not being a focus of family activity, Ben-Arieh (2002) argues that children spend less time eating with their parents or carers.

In this study, we explored with children how eating as an activity took place. We asked them about the frequency of meals and we also explored whether they ate alone or with others. We also asked them where the consumption of their main meal took place, for example at the dinner table or in front of the television and whether this was alone or with others. We found that the children in the study tended to eat with their carers at least once a day.

- **Breakfast** Just over half the children (13) said they had breakfast every day. Three children said they only had breakfast on weekdays, two said they ate it four times a week, four only had breakfast at the weekends and two never ate breakfast. According to the diaries, out of all those who ate breakfast, only two children ate breakfast alone and the rest ate with other members of the household.
- **Lunch** In contrast, 21 children said they always had lunch. Two said they did not have lunch at the weekends and one said he only had lunch four times a week. One child told us that he previously missed lunch but, after being told about the importance of lunch by his foster carer, now ate lunch regularly. All children who had lunch in the 48 hour period of their diaries had lunch with others, either with their peers or family.
- **Main meal** Twenty-two children had a main meal after school every day. One child only had tea three times a week and another said she never had tea. All children who had tea in the 48 hour period of their diaries had tea with somebody. This was usually with family.

- **Bedtime snacks** Thirteen children said they had a bedtime snack every night. The others had a snack if they were hungry. Children usually ate supper on their own in their rooms.
- **Eating dinner at the table or in front of the television** Twenty children said that they ate their main meal at a table 'most days'. Three ate their meal at a table but were simultaneously watching television and a further five said they occasionally ate watching the television but this was on special occasions. Two children said they ate dinner in their rooms watching the television. The remaining two children told us they did not have a table to eat at and so they ate on their laps in front of the television.

We can conclude from this that the majority of children ate three times a day. Four out of five ate their main meal at a table with others. All of those in residential care ate at a table and children who were living at home and in foster care varied in their patterns of eating.

Getting ready (self-presentation)

Appearance is considered to be an important indicator of self-esteem. The Looking After Children (LAC) system (Ward 1995) includes dimensions on self-presentation skills and self care skills in the assessment and action records. Gill (2001) and Jack and Gill (2003) suggest that adolescents place great importance upon their clothes and appearance. Where young people neglect their self care, this is seen as a sign of low self-esteem (Parker *et al.* 1991).

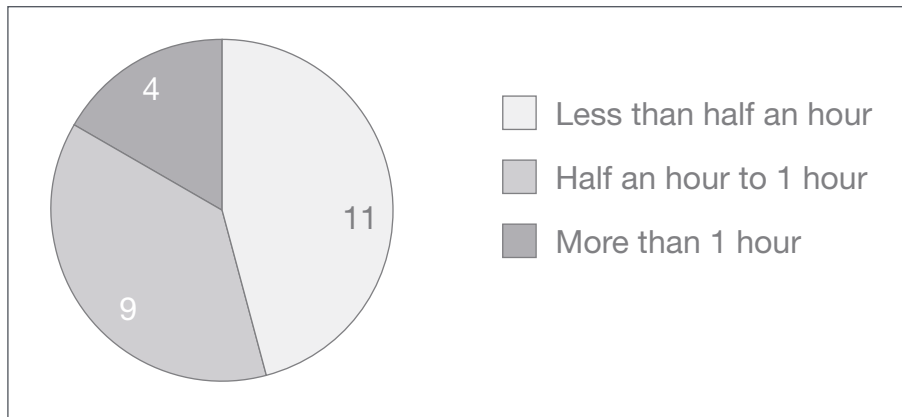
Given the emphasis on self care and presentation, both in the literature and in the looking after children assessment and action records (Ward 1995), we asked children how long they took to get ready to go out. Most of the older children spent time on their own getting ready but, according to the diaries, even the younger children undertook the 'getting ready' activities on their own.

There were examples of some children who had developed a very distinctive presentation of themselves. For example, there was one young person who spent a lot of time in the skate park and specially dressed in the appropriate fashionable attire of baggy trousers and trendy t-shirts. Another young person, who was fond of rap and heavy metal music, presented herself as a 'Goth', where clothes, hair and make-up were meticulously put together in order

to present a very definite self-image. As in the kinship care study (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006), children drew attention to the importance of trainers as part of their self-image. Hairstyles were also significant. There were some spectacular examples of spiky hairstyles in the boys, which were held together with copious amounts of hair gel and one child was eager to end the interview so that he could go off to the hairdressers. For these young people, the change to adolescence brought with it the patterns of self-presentation that would be typical of many of their peers within the community. There was little indication, either from the schedules or the diaries, that children were not paying attention to their self-presentation.

- **Getting ready for school**

Chart 3.2 Amount of time spent getting ready for school



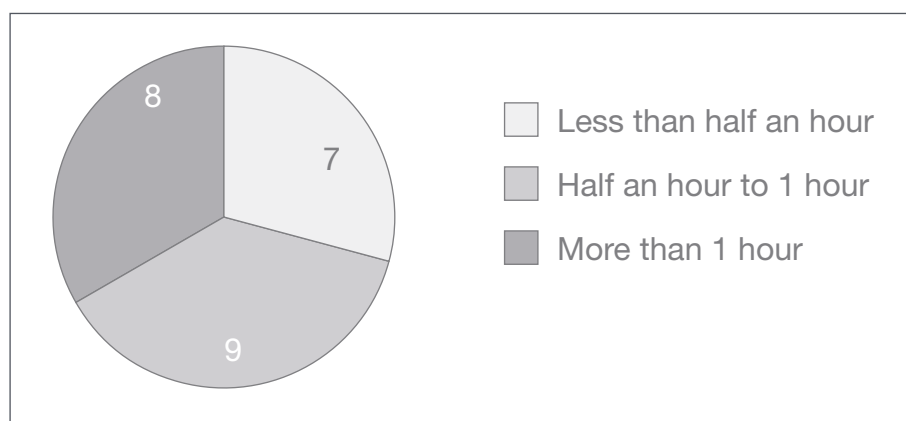
When we asked children to tell us how much time they took to get ready for school, 11 children told us they took less than half an hour. The quickest (five minutes), who also had the longest journey to school, told us:

I get up quick, out the door and into the taxi!

Nine said they took between half an hour to one hour. The four remaining, all girls, said they took longer than an hour, while one girl took an hour and a half to style her hair. This was also reflected in her diary (see Case Study 1).

- **Getting ready to go out**

Chart 3.3 Amount of time spent getting ready to go out



We also asked all children, in the schedule, how long it took them to get ready when going out. As can be seen from comparing charts 3.2 and 3.3, children spent longer getting ready to go out in contrast to getting ready for school. Children told us they spent more time getting ready at the weekend because they had more time and also more choice over what to wear. There was little difference between boys and girls, however. For example, three girls mentioned that they spent time trying on different outfits before deciding what to wear, while one boy took great pride in spending a long time styling his hair for 'the girls'.

Social interaction

We looked at social interaction under the following headings:

- friends
- breaktimes
- lunchtimes
- talking to friends after school
- time spent with significant members of the household or unit
- time spent with birth family

Friends

It is recognised that the peer group, with its constantly shifting membership, and its undefined roles, is an important vehicle for social growth and change (Aldgate *et al.* 2006). Apart from supporting children's development, friendships are one of the areas in which children can have control over their lives. Children can choose who their friends are. Through friendships, children also choose the spaces and places they meet in neighbourhood environments such as the street and shopping areas. It is suggested that there are connections between children's use of these places and their well-being, although the direction of influence may be connected to local factors. One recent study of youngsters' use of public space in an area of urban regeneration in Edinburgh, found that young people valued informal, wild areas near their homes but were also afraid of places they considered unsafe (Elsley 2004).

Writers on child development stress that middle childhood and adolescent friendships are important. Dowling *et al.* (2006) suggest that friendships with each other can provide:

- opportunity to learn social skills of interacting with peers, e.g. competition and co-operation
- fun and companionship
- self-knowledge and knowledge about others
- emotional support in times of stress

Where children do not have friends, this can inhibit their development in a variety of ways, including poor behaviour and attainment at school, and other emotional problems (Schaffer 1996). It has been suggested that children who have experienced secure relationships are more likely to have a positive relationship with peers (Aldgate and Jones 2006), while children who lack confidence and have a negative self-image may find it more difficult to make and sustain relationships. It has also been suggested that rejection by their friends may be one of the factors that influences young people's antisocial behaviour (Daniel and Wassell 2002; Rutter *et al.* 1998).

In the study, we found that, on most days, every child spent some time with at least one friend. It was clear from the diaries and schedules that children valued time spent with friends, both during and after school and at the weekends.

Breaktimes

Children told us that their primary activity at breaktime was to meet with friends. Sometimes this was combined with other activities such as having a snack or playing football. Three young people admitted that they 'had a fag together behind the bike shed'. As we shall see later, smoking was seen as a social activity amongst peers.

Lunchtimes

Children all valued their lunch break as it was a chance to meet up with friends again and they spent their lunchtimes in a variety of ways. The older children tended to 'sit in a café and talk with friends' or 'grab a bite to eat at the chippie'. Activities such as football, basketball and hockey were equally popular. One child reported that she had only one free lunchtime because she was heavily engaged in musical activities such as brass band, choir and orchestra.

Talking to friends outside of school

Half the children (12) spent two or more hours on a weekday talking to their friends, beyond time spent together within school. Three children spent one to two hours with friends everyday, while eight spent less than an hour and one child never spent time with his friends after school.

Children in residential units tended to confine their friends to other children in the unit. This had an effect on the data in relation to how often they saw their friends out of school and what kind of activities they did with their peers. For example, 14 children told us that they sometimes had dinner at friends' houses, particularly at the weekend. However, for those in residential units, dinner took place with friends every day. Twenty-one told us that they occasionally went out to eat with friends at fast food restaurants such as Pizza Hut, McDonalds and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Most children did not mention any restrictions on where they met friends and only one child indicated that there were restrictions on where he could play with his friends:

My mum reminds me not to go too far from the house and not to go to the park.

We then went on to ask what activities they engaged in with their friends. All the children engaged in social interaction with friends. Sometimes this was combined with a leisure activity.

Table 1 Children's activities with peers

Activity	Number of children who participate in these activities with peers
Playstation and other computer games	11
Hanging out	9
Playing sport	9
Watching television and videos	6
Sitting and talking	6
Window shopping	5
Clubbing	4
Going to the pub	3
Talking on the phone	2
Eating out	2
Activity clubs	2

The most popular activity undertaken with friends, cited by 11 children, was to play computer games. Nine children played sports with their peers which included ice skating, swimming, football, rugby, skateboarding, bowling and hill walking. Less active 'hanging out' was also popular with nine children. Watching the television or videos at each other's homes was cited by six children. The remaining activities included window shopping, clubbing, talking on the phone, eating out and going to activity clubs. Three young people told us they 'went to the pub'.

We also asked the children if they wanted to see more of their friends. Slightly more than half the children (13) said they saw enough of their friends, while one said he would rather go hill walking with his carers. Eleven said they would like to see friends more. Those who lived in rural areas found it especially difficult to see their friends as much as they would like. Another issue for some was that their school was quite far from home, which made meeting up with school friends difficult:

They're too far away.

A further issue was that children had lost touch with their friends when they moved to their new placement:

I would like to see more of the friends that I had before I moved to this unit.

I do miss my old friends but I do feel that I get enough time with the other young people in the unit.

Overall, the children in this study confirmed the consensus in the literature that spending time with friends is a very important daily activity.

Time spent with significant adults in households or units

We thought it important to explore the time children spent with carers or parents, in the light of the research findings that suggest that adults may have a key role to play in relation to the well-being of children (Ben-Arieh 2002). Where children have experienced separation, loss and rejection it is argued that it is even more important to have one-to-one relationships with adults who can help them come to terms with their situations (Daniel *et al.* 1999).

We wanted to explore how much time the children spend with the most significant adults who looked after them in their household or unit. This question was asked to all children. What we found was that children were spending more quality time with adults than might have been expected, and there was very little variation in the time spent with adults between the three care settings. Most children spent between three to five hours of their time with their carers, the exception being two children who spent one to two hours and one child who was with key workers 24 hours a day. The time spent with adults reflects the findings about children in the general population in Egerton and Gershuny's (2004) study on time diaries. They found older children spent on average three hours a day with parents on weekdays and five hours at the weekends. All of the children in this study were happy with these arrangements, although two children in residential care did indicate that they would like to have more one-to-one quality time with their key workers:

I can say anything I want. Staff are a good support.

I'd like more one-on-one.

There are several ways in which children spent quality time with the adults who looked after them. Of the benefits from these relationships, feeling they were being cared for ranked first. This also included being able to give affection to their carers:

I like it because I know I am cared for because they are like my grandparents.

I like giving them a great big hug.

Giving affection was also connected to a feeling of being able to communicate with and trust carers. Talking things over with carers was an important activity in its own right but was one which sometimes occurred in the context of a physical activity such as gardening, or going for walks or baking:

I like education and when staff explain things to me.

Some children drew attention to the value of living in a group where there were adults and children. This was not confined to residential care but applied to those at home or in foster care:

I like being with her and talking to her and being with other kids.

I enjoy talking. I prefer it when there are more people in the unit.

Just having a chat with mum.

By contrast, a minority of children in residential care found it difficult to be in an environment where other people were always around. These children preferred to escape to engage in outdoor activities such as walking, gardening, fishing, going for a drive and going to different places:

I like just going out somewhere and talking.

I like going for a drive away from the unit.

I prefer being outside.

Children also found it difficult to be challenged by carers, for example, when they had behaved badly:

I don't like it when I have to go to the quiet room and discuss my behaviour.

I would like less lecturing time.

Nevertheless, the majority of children were happy with the time spent and amount of activities they were doing with their carers. Being exposed to new activities was generally well received. One very active child had been given the experience of mountain climbing and fishing and was eager to spend even more time with staff doing these activities. Another had been taken to the pantomime for the first time in his life and thoroughly enjoyed it.

Time spent with birth family

Contact with birth family is a major factor in the lives of looked after children. While there are no unequivocal findings on the merits of contact for all looked after children in every circumstance (Cleaver 2000), contact remains an issue which is significant for looked after children themselves, including those who are looked after by extended family (Aldgate and McIntosh 2006).

We explored with children their contact with birth families. There were 19 children who were looked after away from home. Of these, 11 told us they had contact with birth parents. Two saw at least one birth parent two to three times a week; four saw at least one parent once a week; four saw at least one parent once a month and one saw a parent a few times a year. When contact took place it was for three to five hours, on average. Ten of the 19 children were happy with the level of contact and, out of the remaining nine, seven wanted to see more of their birth parents and two wanted to spend less time with their parents but more time with their siblings, a finding similar to that in Aldgate and McIntosh's (2006) study on kinship care.

Children valued the time because it helped them accept their situation:

It doesn't make you upset when you see them because you miss them.

They also valued doing ordinary family things:

I like cooking dinner with mum and talking to my little brother.

We asked the children if they were happy with the amount of activities that they did with their birth families. Eight told us they were happy and, of the three who were not, two wanted to go out, for example, to the cinema or engage in more structured activities such as sports. There were indications that these children felt bored by just sitting around watching the television. However, these were a minority. As Aldgate and McIntosh (2006) found in their kinship care study, just being with parents was seen as an activity in its own right for most children.

Time spent with siblings was seen as equally important, if not more so, than time spent with parents, another finding that was similar to that in Aldgate and McIntosh's (2006) kinship care study. Children described participating in active pastimes, such as bowling, go-karting, and playing football. They also liked chatting and watching television with siblings or just being with siblings and doing practical things for them. One child said:

I love being with my wee brother and sister and playing with them and doing my sister's hair.

Leisure activities

How children spend their leisure time is an issue which has come to the fore in relation to children's healthy development. Concerns have been expressed by policy makers about the impact on children's health of a lack of physical activity (Scottish Executive 2003). There have been special concerns about the health of looked after children (Scott and Hill 2006).

Sedentary pursuits, such as watching television and playing computer games are areas of contention. While it is argued that playing computer games helps with aspects of cognitive agility, this is counterbalanced by the impact on children's general well-being by the absence of regular physical activity.

The influence of television on children is a very contentious area. Mussen *et al.* (1990), for example, argue that watching television may influence children in three main ways: by teaching intellectual skills and information, providing social learning and selling products. Children gain some of their knowledge about social relationships by watching television, which may be positive or negative. Children may learn about situations beyond their normal everyday lives, such as understanding about environmental issues or being able to observe wildlife. On the other hand, there has been much research looking at the impact of television violence on children and, it would be fair to say, that the jury is still out on this issue. Concerns about children's obesity have recently led policy makers to consider the banning of the adverts of 'junk food,' especially at times when children might be watching.

Those writing about child development have consistently drawn attention to the benefits of creative activity such as playing music and engaging in arts and crafts. Such activities not only help aspects of children's cognitive development but are also seen as being helpful in promoting children's self-esteem and self-efficacy (Mussen *et al.* 1990).

To give us a good idea of how children spent their leisure time, we constructed a list of activities to which children could add their own. We asked the children what activities they participated in, whether they liked them, the amount of control they had over doing the activity and how much time they spent on them on a normal school day. The activities were:

- listening to music
- playing on the computer
- watching television

- doing sport
- playing games
- playing a musical instrument
- arts and crafts
- reading
- chilling out
- going out places

Listening to music

All 24 children spent some time listening to music every day. Thirteen children told us that they spent two hours or more listening to music, two spent one to two hours, four spent half an hour to one hour, and five spent less than half an hour listening to music, all five of whom were younger children. Twenty-two said they really enjoyed listening to music:

This is my favourite thing.

I love hip hop, rap and heavy metal.

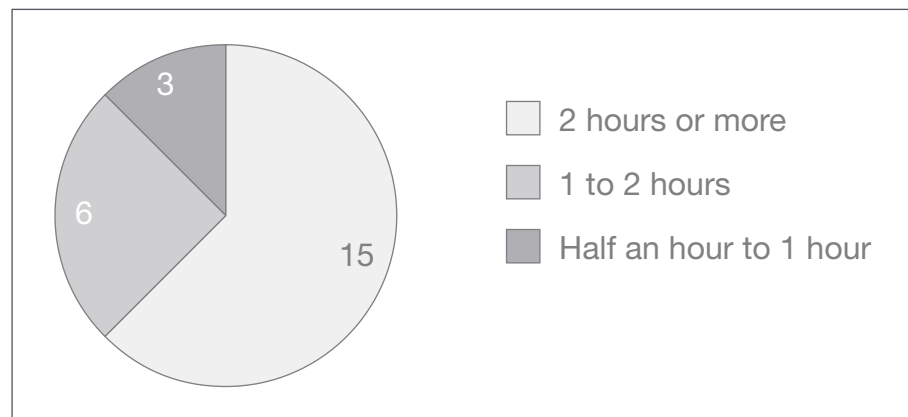
Two children were 'not bothered' about music. Listening to music created tensions for four of the children, who were told to 'turn it down' by the adults in the household and it was often done in conjunction with other activities, such as chatting with friends, eating or doing homework.

Playing on the computer

Twenty children said they liked to use the computer. However, when asked how much time they spent at home in a day using the computer there was some variation. Seven children never used a computer at home, either because they did not have a computer or it was broken. Four children told us that they used the computer for less than half an hour. In two cases, children were restricted by having to share the computer with other children in the household. Seven children said they used the computer for one to two hours and six said they used it for two hours or more. Those who used a computer at home used it for 'surfing' the internet and email, homework and to download music.

Watching television

Chart 3.4 Time spent watching television



All the children liked watching television. All watched the television on a normal school day and 15 children told us that on a normal weekday they watched two hours or more. Six children watched between one to two hours and three children spent half an hour to one hour watching television. Eleven children said that their viewing was restricted, either in the amount or content:

She [carer] moans at me for not doing more exercise.

I'm not allowed to watch violent programmes.

When I am bad I am not allowed to watch television.

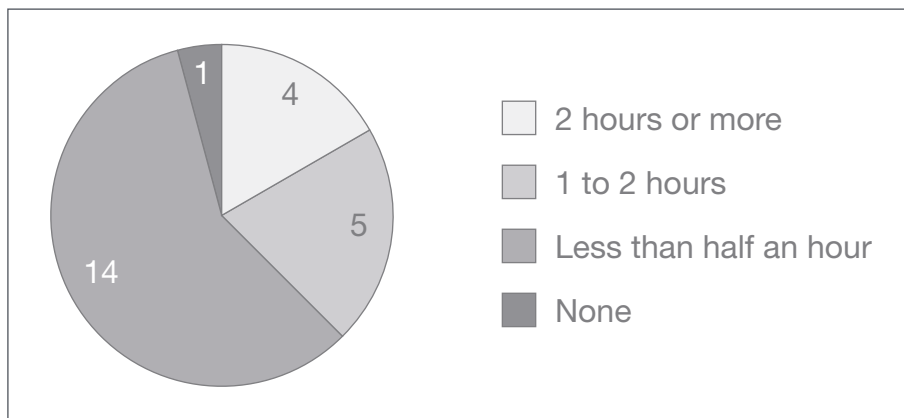
The children's diaries showed that the majority of children watched the television with another person. In a small number of cases, where children watched the television alone, they did so because they had a television in their bedroom.

In one instance, the television was used as a device to help a hyperactive child to calm down:

I watch TV when I'm angry.

Doing sport

Chart 3.5 Time spent doing sport



Twenty-three children said they played some active sport and all said they liked it, although three children added they had to be encouraged to do it. Four children spent two hours or more a day playing sport, five children spent one to two hours and the rest spent less than an hour playing sport. The most popular sport was football.

The number of sporting activities varied too. About one quarter of the children (6) actively engaged in more than one sport, with one undertaking five sports (running every day, weights, hill walking, snowboarding and cycling).

It is of interest to contrast the amount of time spent playing sport with that spent watching television. Fifteen children spent two or more hours a day watching television compared with five who engaged in sport for this time. Fifteen children spent less than half an hour doing sport, including one who did none, whereas only three children spent less than half an hour watching television.

Playing games

Four children spent two hours or more playing games, six children spent one to two hours, ten children spent less than one hour playing games and four children never played games.

Playing a musical instrument

Ten children played a musical instrument by choice with the most common practice time being less than half an hour a day. Instruments included woodwind and brass instruments, recorders, piano, drums, keyboard and guitars. Four children played more than one instrument. The positive achievement of playing music was exemplified by one child, who played the trumpet in a brass band:

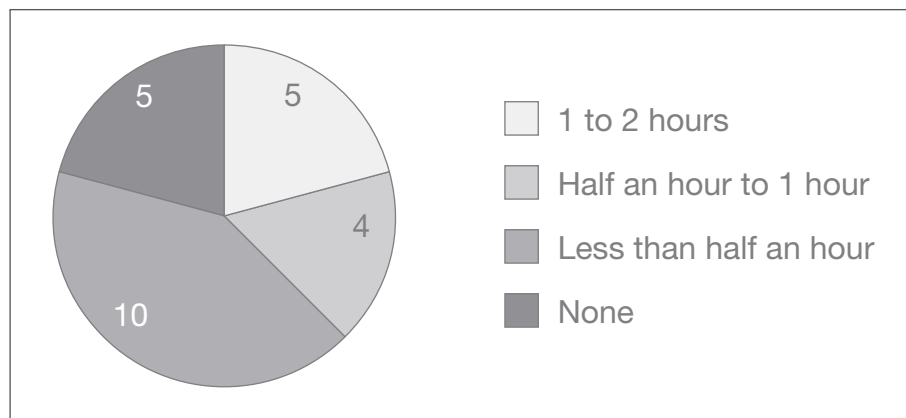
It is very demanding but it is really good afterwards when you hear everybody clapping.

Arts and crafts

Seventeen children chose to spend some time doing arts and crafts. Thirteen spent under an hour on this activity. One child very proudly told us that he drew comic strips for the school newspaper and another told us he liked doing 'graffiti'. In contrast to the others, for whom arts and crafts were pleasurable activities, one child told us that he was instructed by his carers to draw as a punishment for bad behaviour.

Reading

Chart 3.6 Time spent reading each day



Nineteen children spent some time reading on a weekday. Of these, ten spent less than half an hour a day reading, four spent between half an hour and one hour and five children spent more than an hour a day reading. Once again, the contrast between activities such as listening to music and watching television and reading are quite noticeable. Sixteen children said they liked reading but eight had to be encouraged to read:

Staff and my care worker encourage me to read.

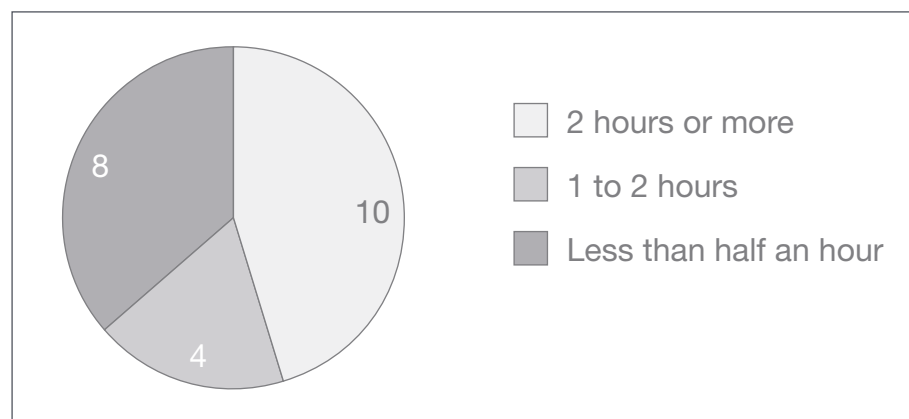
My English teacher always nags on at me.

I am encouraged to read more suitable things.

The range of literature was eclectic with favourites being the Harry Potter books, horror stories and detective stories. According to the diaries, reading usually took place before bedtime as a means of getting to sleep. Given the messages on the low educational attainment of looked after children (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education and Social Work Services Inspectorate 2001), it seemed that little time was spent by adults and children reading together. Three children told us that their carers often put on story tapes for them at bedtime.

Chilling out

In the increasingly structured world children inhabit, the ability to be able to spend time alone and 'chill out' is seen to be an important resource for children's emotional health (Scott and Hill 2006). In the study, we explored with children how much time they spent relaxing on their own.

Chart 3.7 Time spent alone chilling out each day

Twenty-two children liked ‘chilling out’. Ten children spent more than two hours on this activity, four children spent one to two hours and eight spent half an hour or less:

It helps you if you are down, if you are all uptight.

One younger child said they never spent time chilling out:

I like being active. I’m not really the chilling type.

Another child said she found it difficult to chill out as:

I never get a moment’s peace in the unit.

One child was told to ‘chill out’ when he was stressed and another was told to do more with her free time.

Going out (discos, concerts)

We asked the children whether they spent any time going to discos or concerts. Four went clubbing, usually on a Friday or Saturday night and told us that dancing gave them a real sense of exhilaration. Two children also told us of the pleasure they got from going to the pantomime.

Consumption

Consumption was broken down into the following areas:

- shopping
- cinema
- smoking
- drinking

Shopping

Six children never went shopping. Eighteen children went shopping on a weekly basis. Six of these went shopping twice a week or more. Of those who went shopping, 17 enjoyed it. For some this was not necessarily buying goods as young people used this activity to meet their friends, have fun and to check out the latest fashions:

We like to try on clothes that we would not usually wear.

We get all the make-up and try it on.

For others, part of the attraction was being able to have control over choosing where to shop and what to buy:

I like it but I take a long time to choose stuff. Once it took me half an hour to choose hair gel.

Some children did not have the confidence of making choices themselves but valued the help of their carers:

I like it when staff point out clothes for me and help me.

Others found the activity overwhelming or not enjoyable:

I can't handle it.

I don't like going for the sake of it. I do not have the patience.

I know what I want and I get out as fast as I can.

Cinema

Cinema was a popular activity with eight children in the study and five children recorded going to the cinema in their diaries. All children were accompanied by their peers or adults. Children looked after at home tended to go less frequently to the cinema. This may have been because of the fact the cinema was seen as too expensive (see also Aldgate and McIntosh 2006).

Smoking

Concerns about young smokers are very much part of the current health agenda. Four children owned up to smoking and described smoking as an activity in its own right. Smoking was seen as a social activity undertaken with peers although children also smoked on their own. Two children (aged 13 and 15) incorporated 'fag breaks' in their diaries. Smoking was the first activity in their day and the last activity before bed. The 13 year old summed it up:

I can't get through the day without a fag.

Drinking

Drinking was also seen as a social activity, albeit by a minority. Two of the older young people (aged 17 and 18) told us they socialised in the pub. One 13 year old told us that Friday night consisted of drinking on the street with peers because 'there was nothing else to do'. Indeed, this was verified by his diary.

4 Summarising the findings

It is clear from the study that there were different patterns to different types of children's daily activities. Combining the findings from the schedule and the diaries, some overall conclusions can be made about how children spend their time. We did a crude averaging of the time children spent on various activities throughout the weekday and the weekend day studied.

Sleep

On average, children slept around nine hours a night. There was very little variation between weekdays and weekends, with children sleeping on average nine hours on the weekday sampled and nine and a half hours at the weekend. Children who shared rooms had more interrupted sleep.

Productive activities

Most of children's time spent on productive activities was concerned with going to school or, in two cases, working. The total average time spent in productive activities on a weekday was six hours and 48 minutes, with four hours of that time being spent on lessons or working. This may be an underestimate of the time normally spent at school and is accounted for by the fact that some children were interviewed on a Friday when a number of schools finished an hour earlier than normal.

The majority of children who were eligible to go to school did so most days. There was little truancy or skipping lessons, which may reflect the combined vigilance of carers and teachers. Homework was not an activity much liked or undertaken to any length, with four fifths of children spending less than one hour on homework.

Only three children had any part-time paid work. With one exception, this was for less than two hours. However, most children were expected to help with household chores, although over half spent less than half an hour on these, often reluctantly.

After school clubs were attended by over half the children for between half an hour and two hours a week. Only four children attended activity clubs such as scouts.

Although 22 children said they had a social worker, it was difficult to elicit from children the normal amount of time spent with social workers as this seemed to vary. There was also no regular pattern of meeting. In addition, three children were engaged in regular therapeutic counselling.

At the weekend, the total average time spent on productive activities had dropped to one hour and 48 minutes. If the three children who worked part-time are removed, the time drops even further to 54 minutes, reflecting a pattern of activities that might be expected in the general population (see Ben-Arieh 2002).

Contribution to the community

From the diaries, there were no examples of children contributing to the community, although one child did help disabled children for two hours, once a week. Two others contributed to the community of their school, on average between one to two hours a week.

Religious activity

No child, either in the diary or from the interview schedule, engaged in religious activity during the week, except for participating in religious studies in the school curriculum. At the weekend, six children spent an average of an hour to two hours at a place of faith.

Travel

The average travel on a weekday in the diaries was one hour and 18 minutes, which was mainly to and from school. Some children felt deprived of after school contact with friends because of distance.

Travel on weekend days was around an hour, mainly concerned with socialising with peers and consumption.

Personal care

The average time spent on eating over the two days of the diary was one and a half hours on a weekday and slightly less, one hour twenty minutes, at the weekend. There was most variation in eating breakfast. On weekdays, lunch was generally eaten with friends while, at the weekend, there was no consistent pattern. Evening meals tended to be eaten with others – staff and friends in residential care, carers or other children in the household in foster care and no pattern across home supervision. There was a surprisingly consistent pattern of four fifths of children eating with others at a table although, in a minority of cases, this activity was combined with watching the television. Eating was a structured activity in many households, irrespective of setting.

Getting ready (self-presentation)

The average time spent getting ready for school was one hour 12 minutes although, within this average, there was a wide range from five minutes to over two hours, therefore, the average may be slightly misleading. Indications from the schedule were that more children spent less than one hour getting ready on weekdays while the average for getting ready at the weekend was just under two hours. This accords with children's accounts of spending more time choosing clothes and styling their hair at the weekends.

Social interaction with peers

Children indicated social time with peers after school was important to them. On a weekday most social interaction took place at school breaktimes, lunchtimes and after school. In general, children spent on average one and three quarter hours on a weekday on social interaction, according to their diaries. This rose to three hours and ten minutes at the weekend, which reflected time spent with peers in leisure activities.

Time spent with significant adults

The average time spent with adults on weekdays was four hours and, at the weekends, just slightly more. There was considerable variation within this average, from one child being in the company of a key worker 24 hours a day to a child who, by choice, spent one hour with the foster family and the rest in her room. The findings overall support the idea that looked after children are spending periods of time with carers or parents but it is difficult to tell from the findings the quality of this time. A minority of children in residential care expressed a wish to have more time with their carers.

Time alone or with others

The diaries were able to tell us how much time children spent alone. Children spent more time with other children or adults than alone. Over the 48-hour period of completing the diaries, on average, children only spent six hours alone in total, excluding time for sleep.

Leisure activities

Overall, children spent, on average, four hours on a weekday doing a variety of leisure activities. They spent two hours 48 minutes watching television on a weekday while, at the weekend, children were spending five hours 18 minutes on leisure activities with less time (two hours) spent on watching television.

Some children were very active and sporty and some spent all their leisure time watching television (see case studies in Chapter 5). The time children spent on different activities varied and there were no patterns within the three care settings. Much seemed to depend on the culture of the household or unit. Some children said that being looked after had given them opportunities to engage in activities they had never done before. Once presented with that opportunity, for example, to learn how to climb, children wanted more of the same. A minority of children were expert at one activity and spent a good deal of time improving their performance. Overall, being looked after away from home seemed to present children with opportunities for active leisure pursuits but it was not clear if children were encouraged to make maximum use of these and what happened if they chose to be sedentary. However, having time to be alone and to chill out may also be an important activity for looked after children.

Consumption

This was an interesting category since consumption, in terms of shopping or going to the cinema or, more rarely, going to theatre/concerts, was generally undertaken with others. During the week, only half an hour a day was given to consumption, most of which was buying snacks and lunch with friends. At the weekend the average time spent on consumption rose to one hour and twenty minutes, reflecting time spent shopping with peers or carers or going to the cinema. Consumption was less an activity for those living at home though it was difficult to ascertain why this was so. It might well have been that these children came from families whose level of income did not permit them to engage in this activity.

Conclusion: children's daily activities – so what?

This small study has shown that looked after children spend their time doing similar things to other children who are growing up. In fact, their daily lives are often ordinary but can be rich in their diversity, as the case studies in the next chapter show. Like others, the children in this study go to school, spend time with friends and adults and have leisure time to pursue active or quiet interests. Sometimes, they just want to be alone.

Being good at something is important for every child. Some children test themselves actively by climbing mountains or dancing. Others achieve through artistic creativity. Such activities help to build self-esteem and confidence. For looked after children, being confident is critical to building resilience. Resilient children are more able to overcome adversity.

The study reveals the importance of relationships in children's lives, both with adults and other children. Setting appropriate boundaries helps children feel safe and cared for. These are essential components of good parenting. Looked after children, like all children, develop effective social relationships by being with their friends. They learn how to like other children and be liked by them. Being accepted and included are particularly important in helping looked after children develop a positive sense of self.

What the study shows is that, when children are given opportunities, they make choices. Such choice gives children a sense of control over their lives and teaches them to be responsible. We need to listen to the views of looked after children about what they want to do. We need to plan and put in sufficient resources to provide them with the opportunities they need to flourish.

5 Case studies of children's diaries

These case studies represent the spread of daily activities undertaken by the children we saw. The following diaries have been constructed by the researchers using the children's own words as given in taped interviews, together with the diary entries which the children completed. We were impressed with the detail children brought to the diaries. Completing the diaries confirmed that children enjoy doing things that are child friendly and relate to their world. On the whole, children enjoyed filling in the diaries and this was illustrated by the amount of detail and application to the task. We have chosen five case studies which represent the range of daily lives evidenced in the diaries and show the varied regimes. Some children are very active while others do very little. All have in common time spent with peers and family. The diaries show the role of school as a place of productive and social activities. The type of setting in which children are placed is less important in influencing their daily lives than the individual circumstances and attitudes within their living places.

Case study 1: 48 hours in the life of a 13 year old girl in foster care – from Thursday 7 pm to Saturday 7 pm

At 7 pm on Thursday, I was in my house chatting to my friends on the internet. I was with my carers. At 7.30 pm I was doing my homework in the house at the kitchen table, alone for an hour. I then went to my bedroom and practiced my dance steps while listening to music. At 9 pm I was in the shower. I spent 1 hour drying and straightening my hair in my bedroom on my own. Before bed I spent half an hour reading. I went to bed at 11 pm.

I got up at 7 am and straightened my hair for half an hour. I then went down to the kitchen and ate breakfast with my carers. At 8 am I got the bus to school with friends. I had classes from 8.30 am to 3.30 pm. I spent my morning break and lunch time in the playground with friends.

I got the bus home and walked the rest of the way alone. I had some dinner in the kitchen with my carers. I then went to my bedroom, straightened my hair and got dressed to go out.

At 5.30 pm I walked to the town green with friends. We spent an hour on the rides and an hour watching fireworks as it was bonfire night. On the way home we got fish and chips.

Back at home I watched half an hour of TV in the living room with my carer. I then practised my dance steps alone in my room for half an hour. Before I went to bed I went on the internet for half an hour in the living room with my carers. I went to bed at 11 pm.

I woke up at 10 am and went dancing for 3.5 hours. I walked home and had lunch on my own in the kitchen. I then met up with my friends in town and we went shopping. At 4.30 pm we went to McDonalds. I then got the bus home. Back at home I surfed the internet until 7 pm.

Case study 2: 48 hours in the life of a 15 year old girl in foster care – from Thursday 7 pm to Saturday 7 pm

At 7 pm I was having a fag out the back. From 7.30 pm to 11.30 pm I was watching television in the lounge at home. I had another fag break at 9 pm. I then got ready for bed and fell asleep by 12.30 am. I slept through to 8 am when I got up and got ready for school. It took me half an hour to walk to school. I was in school from 8.30 am until 3.30 pm. I had a morning break at 10.30, which I spent with friends and I spent my hour lunch break with friends at a Chinese restaurant.

Once I got in from school I got some dinner and spent 3 hours watching TV in my bedroom. At 7 pm I wrapped some Christmas presents, called my mum to arrange seeing her next week and settled down to watch some more TV till midnight. I got washed, took my make-up off and went to bed.

I got up at 2 pm on Saturday went outside for a fag and watched TV for the rest of the day.

Case study 3: 48 hours in the life of a 13 year old girl in shared care – from Thursday 7 pm to Saturday 7 pm

I spent 5 minutes playing my trumpet alone in the sitting room. I then painted my flowerpot until 7.30 pm in the kitchen with other young people in the house. After that I drew on the blackboard for 10 minutes with other children.

I watched television until 8.30 pm in the sitting room with my carer. At 8.30 I spent half an hour in the shower. I then went to my bedroom, alone, read my book for half an hour and listened to a story tape for a further half an hour and fell asleep.

I slept for 9 hours but woke up once in the night for a short while. At 7 am I woke up but fell asleep and had to be woken up again at 7.30 am by my carer. I had breakfast in the kitchen with my carer and other children.

I took the bus to school with other kids, which took half an hour. From 9 am to 3.30 pm I had classes with other children. From 11 am to 11.30 I ate a sandwich on my break in the dining hall with friends. Lunch was at 12.30. I ate in the dining hall with friends and then played in the orchestra for half an hour.

After school, I went to Mum's on the bus. It took half an hour and I had to stand up all the way. From 4 pm to 9 pm I watched DVDs with Mum. We also watched half an hour of TV before I got ready for bed. I had a shower in the bathroom and was asleep by 10 pm in my bedroom at Mum's house.

I woke up at 11.30 pm for half an hour and then slept right through until 7 am when I woke up and read a book for an hour.

I watched TV until 10 am and then went to the shops. At 11 am I visited my gran's grave with my mum. From 11.30 I played the trumpet and sang from 12 to 12.30 in my bedroom alone. I spent half an hour on the internet in the living room, watched TV for an hour and played Playstation for an hour. At 3 pm my carers picked me up and we went swimming for an hour and a half. I then got the bus to town, bought a pair of shoes with my carer and went to the cinema.

Case study 4: 48 hours in the life of a 15 year old girl in foster care – from Thursday 7 pm to Saturday 7 pm

I was at the pictures for most of the evening with my foster siblings. We arrived back at the house by 11 pm and watched the television for half an hour. I got ready for bed with my foster sister as we share a room. I slept until 7 am. I spent 1 hour getting ready in my room by myself. I had breakfast by myself in the dining room.

I spent 4 hours in classes on Friday morning. Lunch lasted half an hour and I spent it with my friends. I had classes for 2 hours in the afternoon. My foster carers picked me up from school in the car and it took 15 minutes to get home. I did my homework in my room for an hour and a half. My foster sister was also in the room.

All the family had dinner in the dining room and then we all watched TV in the living room for 4 hours. I also chatted to my friends on the computer in the hall by myself for an hour and a half. I had a bath, and read till I fell asleep. I slept for 9 hours, watched an hour of TV in my bedroom with my foster sister in the morning. All the family had breakfast in the kitchen from 10 am to 11 am. I watched TV with my carer for half an hour, chatted to my friends on the PC for half an hour, did my homework in my room alone for 3 hours. My carer took me out shopping for the rest of the day.

Case study 5: 48 hours in the life of an 11 year old boy in a residential unit – from Thursday 7 pm to Saturday 7 pm

I was playing table tennis until 8.30 pm in the activities hall with other young people and staff. We all then went to the unit and had supper and watched TV for half an hour. At 9 pm I went up to my room to get settled and watched TV on my own. I fell asleep at 10 pm.

Staff woke me up at 7.30 am, shouted at me and I stayed in bed for a while. I had a shower at 8.30 am. I went to the kitchen and had breakfast with other young people in the unit and we all went to registration. I had classes until 3 pm. I got a 20 minute morning break and an hour lunch break. I spent both breaks back at the unit with other young people and grabbed a snack. After classes I watched TV in the unit with staff for half an hour, got ready to go to town and travelled in the car for half an hour with staff and other young people from the unit. We spent 2 hours shopping in town. When we got back to the unit we had tea and watched TV for half an hour. I returned to the activities hall and played table tennis for an hour. I went up to my room had supper and watched TV. I went to sleep at 10 pm.

I slept for 12 hours, got up, had a shower and watched TV for an hour and a half till lunch. After having lunch with other young people in the unit we played table tennis for an hour and a half, watched TV for 3 hours, had tea and got ready to go ice skating.

Case study 6: 48 hours in the life of a 9 year old boy on home supervision – from Thursday 7 pm to Saturday 7 pm

I spent from 7 pm to 8.30 pm watching soaps on the TV in the lounge with my mum. I then played with toys for half an hour and watched a movie for half an hour with mum in the lounge. I was in bed by 9.30 pm.

I got up at 7.50 am, washed and brushed my teeth, got dressed, put on deodorant and fixed my hair. I had a quick breakfast in the lounge with Mum and got the school bus with my pals at 8.15 am. I arrived at school by 8.50 am. At school I go into school, put my bag down and then go back out again to see my pals before class starts.

I was in classes from 9 am to 3 pm. I had a 20 minute break at 10.40 am and I went outside running and racing with my pals. Lunch was at 12.35 pm, for an hour, where I had something to eat in the dining hall and then went outside with pals. After school mum picked me up and we got the bus home.

I spent half an hour with Mum doing my homework. I then watched TV till my pal came over. My pal arrived at 5 pm and I went across the road to his house to stay the night. At 5.30 pm my pal's mum took us both to the fair. We spent all evening on the rides. We got back to my pal's house at 10.30 pm and got a take away. I phoned my mum at 11.30 pm and then my pal and I played Playstation. We fell asleep at 12.30 am.

We got up at 10.30 am and had breakfast with my pal's mum. The two of us then went out to play until 2.30 pm. I went home, got changed ready to go to the fair again. I watched TV with my mum in the lounge from 3 pm to 5.30 pm and Mum and I had tea.

6 Children's evaluations of participating in the study

We thought it important in the part of undertaking a child-centred study to ask children for their evaluation of their participation in the study. This is what they said.

All the children said they enjoyed filling in the diary:

It was fun!

It reminds me of all the things I do. I have never sat down and written these things down.

Nine children told us that they had learned something about themselves by filling in the diary. The responses varied, and indicate the value of such an exercise. It also shows the insight children have into their lives and the way children can learn from self-evaluation:

I realise that I don't do a lot with my time except sit around and be lazy.

I watch a lot of television.

It made me think that I don't do much with my time. I don't get out enough, I sit around and watch TV and I should get out more.

I go to the pub a lot. But I am a very organised person and do quite a lot in a day.

Yes, I have learned that I am a boring person and I do the same routine over again. But then again I am not that boring because I do keep myself busy.

I've never done this kind of thing before and I was quite astonished at all the things I do all day. It does not seem like a lot when I am doing it but when I read over it, it is a lot.

I've learnt that I do more things than other people.

I've learnt how important the time I spend with people is.

I do a lot of interesting things.

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Time well spent: a study of well-being and children's daily activities

This study was commissioned by the Social Work Services Inspectorate, now the Social Work Inspection Agency, as one of several supporting documents for a wider review of services and outcomes for looked after children, the main report of which is entitled *Extraordinary Lives*.

This is the first study to focus on the everyday activities of children and young people who are looked after by local authorities in Scotland. Its aim is to help us better understand how looked after children spend their time, what activities and interests are most important to them, and how their activities relate to their physical and emotional development and well-being.

The key messages of this study are that looked after children are ordinary children with the same interests as other children. They therefore need to have the same opportunities as other children to develop and pursue those interests. But where looked after children differ from their peers, is in the circumstances in which they live, and often, the experiences they have had in the past. They may find it harder than other children to participate in ordinary activities. The adults in their lives therefore need to think and plan carefully, and provide additional resources where necessary, to make sure that looked after children have the same opportunities as others.

Sometimes, it may take extraordinary effort to achieve ordinary experiences for looked after children.

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