



The fact that access to quality play opportunities is important to the child's healthy development is indisputable. However, in a wider perspective, good play provision can - and should - result in a healthier society. Quality play provision has a role to play in impacting on the reduction of poverty and crime, lowering health service costs, creating longevity, developing a sense of community and citizenship and helping children grow up with a more balanced perspective. However, there are a number of environmental factors which combined, have impacted on children's lives and their inclusion in Northern Ireland society.

Poverty

“ *Children reared in poverty have few toys and possibly less consistent or less stimulating environments. They may also live in an entirely different family system, with different relationships between parents, different sources of family strain and different links* ”

(‘The Developing Child’, Bee Helen, 1989)

Poverty-related statistics in Northern Ireland do not make happy reading. One in three children in Northern Ireland are living in poverty, and the effects of poverty on them can be both devastating and long-term, impeding their healthy development from birth into childhood and beyond. For example, children born to parents living in poverty are particularly disadvantaged in terms of:

- being at risk from higher rates of infant mortality
- curtailed from educational and other life-enhancing opportunities
- suffering from poor housing and inadequate diet, which in turn can cause ill health
- suffering from more childhood accidents as a result of the lack of safe places to play
- witnessing high levels of parental stress, which in some cases can lead to less than satisfactory parenting and stimulation

In addition, linked closely to the effects of poverty are stigmatisation and low self-esteem, which recreates the cycle of poverty, making it difficult to break.

Political violence

Children and young people in Northern Ireland are growing up with the legacy of almost thirty years of political instability and violence. Segregation of the two communities still exists, with sectarianism continuing to foster on-going conflict, limit opportunities for development and growth and crucially, deny children their fundamental human rights as laid down in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Despite the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, divisions within Northern Ireland society still exist, and many children continue to find their access to play environments reduced by prejudice, bigotry and violence.

Play and Social Inclusion

PlayBoard has consistently demonstrated the power of play in bringing communities together. Providing play opportunities in local communities has also helped to reduce petty crime and anti-social behaviour, particularly in inner-city estates. Play has also been used as a measure to tackle poverty and deprivation by offering children access to free play and structured play activities which stimulate the child and offer the chance to escape from the oppression of poverty within the home.

Many successful out-of-school clubs offer this opportunity within community centres, youth clubs, community houses, leisure centres and can expand on the childcare needs of children and their families by providing open access facilities alongside childcare facilities. PlayBoard has successfully tried this approach in Belfast:

- open access community play provides a ‘non-stigmatising’ service which can help families to counteract the effects of poverty and social exclusion

- providing open access facilities also enables for varied play in areas where no open space exists
- community play should be built into anti-poverty and community crime prevention strategies
- community play could form part of a youth service provision
- community play needs to be facilitated by trained, skilled playworkers who are qualified to develop *age-appropriate*, stimulating activities for school-age out-of-school hours. *Such staff should always be police vetted.*



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