Youth Wellbeing in Havering: The Role of Leisure Activities

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Context

Since the pandemic, adolescent wellbeing has declined in the UK.[1] Within Havering, youth wellbeing is a key area of focus, particularly for girls and students with special educational needs (SEN) who report lower wellbeing than their peers.[2,3]

This study aimed to explore patterns of participation in various leisure activities by gender and SEN status. It also investigated the association between leisure activity engagement and psychological wellbeing across gender and SEN status among 12–15-year-olds in Havering, London, through data gathered from the 2023 #BeeWell survey.[2]

Key Findings

Overview of Young People's Participation in Leisure Activities

Among the 2,287 survey participants:

- 37% reported low wellbeing
- 45% reported moderate wellbeing
- 18% reported high wellbeing

Video games, sports, and creative activities were the most frequently performed leisure activities. Participation was lowest for music activities (e.g., choir, band), youth clubs, and religious activities. Those who participated in youth clubs or religious activities were most likely to do so on a weekly basis.

Top three leisure activities on a near-daily basis

All Young People	Girls	Young people with SEN
Video Games (41%)	Sports (28%)	Video Games (53%)
Sports (39%)	Video Games (21%)	Sports (36%)
Creative Activities(21%)	Creative Activities (20%)	Creative Activities(26%)

Activities Associated with Higher Wellbeing

Art and Creative Activities

- Near-daily participation was linked to more than double the likelihood of high wellbeing. Even occasional involvement was beneficial compared to never participating.

Cultural Activities

- Cultural activities (e.g., museums, art galleries) had the strongest overall association with high wellbeing.
- There was a strong association with high wellbeing, particularly when done several times a year, but benefits existed when done once a year or once a month as well.
- Cultural activities appeared to positively impact the wellbeing of girls more than boys.

- Girls who took part in cultural activities were nearly four times as likely to report higher wellbeing than boys who never participated in cultural activities. Among girls, participation once a year, several times a year, and weekly was associated with high wellbeing.

Reading for Pleasure

- Those who participated on a near-daily basis were about 2.5 times as likely to report high wellbeing. Yet, any frequency of participation was associated with a greater level of wellbeing than never reading at all.
- Reading positively influenced the wellbeing of SEN students more than non-SEN students with SEN students who read several times a year three times as likely to report higher wellbeing than non-SEN students who never read.
- Within the SEN student population, reading several times a year, once a week, or most days elicited strong associations with high wellbeing.

Religious Activities

- Associated with high wellbeing only when done weekly.

Sports

- Those who participated on a near-daily basis were almost 2.5 times as likely to report high wellbeing. Participation several times a year, monthly, and weekly was also associated with high wellbeing.
- Non-SEN students appeared to benefit from sports participation much more than SEN students.

Video Games

- Associated with high wellbeing only when done once a year.

Other Leisure Activities

- Participation in music activities, youth organisations, and watching live sports provided no clear link to high wellbeing.

Recommendations for Havering

Enhance Local Infrastructure

Revitalising and maintaining local parks and recreational facilities could ensure safe, accessible spaces for youth. Establishing “Little Free Libraries” in various wards could sustainably promote reading and a sense of community among youth while reducing barriers to access.[4] Expanding awareness of existing infrastructure, like libraries and youth centres, could improve uptake.

Educational and Cultural Opportunities

By increasing the frequency of school field trips, youth are more likely to find leisure activities to partake in more frequently as they are exposed to new interests. While school funding may

constrain implementation, utilising public transportation and partnering with local organisations could reduce the costs of trips significantly. Similarly, after-school groups could provide a safe space for youth to engage in activities like art with access to materials students may not have at home.

Inclusive Spaces

Policies must work to facilitate inclusive spaces for SEN students. Modified activities should be available in schools and local areas to support their participation. Schools and local organisations should work to create healthy interactions between SEN and non-SEN students, ensuring positive engagement during shared leisure activities. Crucially, any proposed policy or intervention should be co-produced with youth, parents, and community members to ensure buy-in and produce long-term, positive results.

Conclusion

The research proposes that leisure activities could promote youth wellbeing in Havering. Cultural activities are especially beneficial for girls, reading is especially beneficial for SEN students, and sports and creative activities are valuable for the general population. By investing in local infrastructure, cultural opportunities, and promoting inclusive spaces, young people within the borough could thrive.

References

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