

Wellbeing and Nature: 2020 Parks and young people



October 2020

With thanks to National Citizen Service
and Brentford Community Sports Trust.



1. Project survey

This study took place at a time of unprecedented events when people were required to limit the time that they spent outdoors in order to protect their health due to a pandemic.

The data for the main study was gathered between May 20th 2020 and 1st July 2020 at a time when the government advice was to stay at home as much as possible, work from home if you can, limit contact with other people, keep your distance from people not in your household (2 metres apart), do not leave home if you or anyone in your household has symptoms of the disease for 14 days.

On 23rd March the British public were instructed that they must stay at home, except for certain very limited purposes which included "one form of exercise a day". On 10th May the UK government updated its Coronavirus (COVID-19) message from "stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives" to "stay alert, control the virus, save lives". The guidance on the outdoor exercise and open-air recreation was changed to permit meeting with no more than one member of another household. This was the situation when the survey opened on 20th 2020.

There was a further relaxation on 1st June 2020 when gatherings of people from more than one household limited to six people outdoors and are prohibited entirely indoors. Restrictions were still in place when the survey closed on 1st July with a promise of further easing later in the month.

The project had been planned and was beginning to recruit participants when the coronavirus measures were put in place. The project sought to understand how urban nature can best be used as a wellbeing resource for adults and children living in Richmond. It aimed to identify the potential benefit for people in Richmond, who are at risk of being isolated, to improve their wellbeing by engaging with outdoor learning activities. A further phase of the project sought to work with a group of participants to design outdoor activities.

The scope of the project was changed in order to incorporate the pandemic situation in order to understand how people were making use of nature to support their wellbeing at a time when everyone was isolated. We also wanted to understand how local people had changed their behaviour and developed resilience through spending time outdoors in nature.

Data was collected via an online survey promoted via social media throughout the period that it was open. There was a total of 117 responses over a period of 6 weeks just as government and local restrictions were easing.

2. Young people and parks

There were few young people included in the survey and we wanted to understand their experience. In order to fill in this gap we worked with a youth charity NCS to understand the experience of young people between the ages of 14-16.

Research has shown that in general young people's connection to nature drops sharply from the age of 11 and doesn't recover until they are 30 – with significant implications for their engagement with pro-environmental behaviours. Research shows that young people use parks to:

- relax
- improve their physical health
- make social connections
- provide peer support and as a place to socialise

We organised 2 short workshops on 8th and 14th August with 20 young people drawn from schools in the Richmond area. We asked them to think about their experience of parks and the different reasons for wanting to connect with them. We were particularly interested in discovering if they used parks to support their health and wellbeing and what are the benefits of spending time in parks. We wanted to learn about their experience during the lockdown.

The workshop covered a number of areas related to the use of parks by participants. The table outlines the discussion – young people were in 2 rooms and the workshop coordinator talked remotely to them. The young people had been given time to prepare with smaller group discussion before the meeting.

3. Workshops

Workshop discussions looked at how they used parks prior to COVID-19 and during the lockdown. They also discussed whether parks were used during lockdown to support their wellbeing.

1. Why do you spend time in parks?

Is spending time in parks an important part of your life?

Think about what it is that you like about it?

What don't you like about it?

The participants told us that spending time in parks has always been something that they did. They used to visit the playground with their parents after school and felt comfortable there by themselves.

They liked going there as they felt safe and could relax. There was always someone there to talk to.

The participants told us that they liked the trees and openness, "it's different from the town" and that they could relax there without anyone bothering them.

One male participant told us that he didn't like going to the park unless he was with his friends as he was once bullied.

The quickest way home from school is through the park but he always goes the long way round.

2. How do you feel?

How do you feel after you have spent time outside? Does this feeling last?

Do you feel close to nature and is this an important part of the experience?

Is there anything that stops you spending time in parks?

The young people told us that the park was somewhere to go to relax and this makes them feel good. Some liked the trees and wildlife but others were not interested. One participant told us that there was more nature in her garden than the park and that she could watch the birds there but wouldn't do that in the park.

One young person told us that he doesn't visit parks any more as he was bullied when he was younger. Another told us that his parents don't like him going there as they were concerned about his safety. They were strict about him returning before dark.

3. How often?

Before corona virus how often did you visit parks? During coronavirus how often did you visit parks? Has anything changed?

Is it easy to visit, can you socially distance and do you feel safe?

Where do you go? – playing fields, parks, along rivers, other open spaces such as gardens busy parks or quiet parks

Most young people visited the park at least once a week. All types of parks and open spaces were visited but parks with playing fields were important as it was where they met their friends. Cafes in parks were too expensive to use.

During the lockdown most people visited several times a week. Two visited daily because they wanted to get out of the house and two took the dog for a walk. Several people said that they went to the park as there was nowhere else to go as they were not able to visit friends in their houses any more. Sometimes they visited with their family, and at other times they went alone. Most visited parks local to their house. One person said that they didn't go to the park but sometimes went into the garden.

4. What do you do?

Who do you visit parks with?

Do you use the park as a place to meet other people?

Who do you see there?

Why do you go?

What do you do there?

The participants told us that they used parks before lockdown to meet friends, and to relax, to play sport, walk and jog, and to spend time outside. It was a place to get away from their homes with other people who were not members of their family. Most people used parks close to their homes.

They told us that spending time in parks help them to relax. The reasons for going included:

to meet friends,

exercise,

ride my bike not on the road
 spend time with friends and family,
 enjoy the being outside in the sunshine and fresh air,
 for exercise,
 to relax and unwind,
 to walk and Park run,
 to walk the dog,
 to be somewhere I like.

"Sometimes we have family picnics or birthday parties.

"I've played football in the park since I was young. I still play there with my mates."

5. Wellbeing

Do you think that your wellbeing benefits from spending time in parks? If not, your wellbeing, is there something else that is more important such as a place to meet friends that is out of the house.

Did you use parks to benefit your wellbeing during the lockdown?

"I like going to the park and being in the open getting fresh air, it changes our mood and helps your mental health."

"In lockdown, I've just stayed in my room and closed the door. Coming to the park helps my wellbeing as I see my friends, it's better than keeping in touch on my phone. It makes me realise that there is still a people out there."

"The park is where I've seen my friends on lockdown. It's important to see your friends because staying at home can be depressing. I can get exercise and it helps with emotional barriers."

"I like going to the park and being in the open getting fresh air, it changes our mood and helps your mental health."

"I took my football out, or went for a bike ride to get away from the house. Sometimes I'd see friends which was good."

"It helps my wellbeing"

"You can take time out and feel more relaxed. I can get away from my mum and spend time with my friends."

4. Recording experiences

We asked the young people to tell us about their experiences in any way that they wanted to. For the 2nd workshop they made 2 short videos which echoed discussing some the sentiments expressed in the discussions focusing on the role that parks play in supporting their wellbeing. *"The park is where I've seen my friends on lockdown. It's important to see your friends because staying at home can be depressing. I can get exercise and it helps with emotional barriers."*

5. Conclusions from workshops

1. The discussions indicated that parks had been an important part in the lives of many of the participants in their younger years, immediately before coronavirus and during the lockdown.
2. They recognised the benefits of visiting parks to their health and wellbeing and as a place to socialise and meet friends. Most felt that it was a safe place to spend their leisure time.
3. The teenage years are associated with a significant dip in connection to nature. This sentiment was expressed during the discussions with a few participants indicating that the natural elements of the park were not the reason for visiting, it was the other opportunities. It was opportunities to socialise, get out of the house and to exercise that were where the value of the parks for this age group.
4. It is unclear whether reduced opportunities for people to experience nature in urban areas was a factor in this view and could form part of wider research.
5. Research from ONS shows that 5% of the UK population felt chronically lonely during the lockdown of 2020. (Research into the emotional wellbeing impacts of COVID-19. https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/new-research-on-emotional-wellbeing-impacts-of-covid-19/?mc_cid=7c8019f69c&mc_eid=0942ac703e). There were some evidence of the emotional impact of COVID-19 on the group as a result of social distancing. This research highlighted the fact that with physical distancing during lockdown, teenagers had to rely increasingly on technology to connect with their peers. There is a risk that loneliness will increase along with social isolation in this age group. Younger adults, those living in overcrowded households, and individuals with health conditions (especially mental health conditions) reported more daily stressors. The group involved in the workshops were clear that parks had a role to play in managing their wellbeing in a positive way.

6. Parks provided a safe place for young people, to get away from their families and to exercise. The workshops support the findings of the main survey that parks played an important part in the lives of local residents during lockdown for COVID 2020.

Frances Bennett