An evidence briefing on activities available outside school settings for young people



A partnership of

Kailo Anna Freud



Background

The Kailo programme works with young people, within their local area, to determine what matters to them about their mental health and wellbeing and then identify changes that can be made to address these factors.[1] This work begins with discussions with young people and local groups in a ‘small circle’ to develop a better understanding of local priorities.[2] The Kailo Newham small circle identified that young people rely on activities that are delivered outside school settings for their wellbeing. Understanding which activities have a positive impact on wellbeing and why, and what prevents and supports people to engage in these activities, may be important for developing interventions that seek to improve young people’s wellbeing.

What did we aim to find out?

The aim of this evidence briefing is to synthesise existing evidence on the relationship between activities outside school settings and mental health and wellbeing for young people aged between 11 to 25 years. This evidence briefing will address the following questions:

1. **Which activities have a positive impact on wellbeing?**
2. **What prevents and supports engaging in out-of-school activities?**

How did we answer these questions?

For question one, we summarised evidence from a review that has recently been conducted by Anna Freud.[3] For question two, we conducted a review of systematic reviews looking at barriers and facilitators to accessing activities outside school settings. We focused on key systematic reviews published after 2003, using a small number of search terms. We also carried out additional searches on specific topics of interest (for example, we conducted searches looking for research relating to barriers and facilitators for marginalised groups specifically).

Whilst we adhered to the above protocol as closely as possible, as our aim was to find evidence that best answered the question, our approach was adjusted where necessary. For instance, some papers that are not systematic reviews have been included in order to inform the question relating to marginalised groups. Search concepts for question two focused on four overarching categories: participants (e.g., young people, adolescents), out-of-school activity (e.g., sports, music, dance), outcome (e.g. barriers, facilitators), and study type (e.g., systematic review).



What did we find?

1. Which activities have a positive impact on wellbeing?

There are a wide range of activities available outside school settings. The following activities have been reported to have a positive impact on wellbeing:[3]

- exercise
- sports and dance
- life skills development
- creative arts activities
- mentoring
- mindfulness based interventions
- social action projects focused on a local community issue (e.g., knife crime)

Engaging with nature showed conflicting findings with a mixed impact on mood but positive impact on resilience, pro-sociality, confidence, self-esteem, and communication.[4] Whilst a positive overall impact was found for sports and dance activities, it is important to note that these activities were reported by some young people to increase levels of social anxiety due to worries about one's own abilities and comparing oneself negatively to others.[5]

The connection between faith or religious activities and mental health is reported to have both positive and negative associations.[6, 7, 8] Engaging in religious practices during adolescence is linked to better long-term psychological wellbeing.[7] Further, supportive religious environments can aid the wellbeing of marginalised groups like LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, intersex, asexual, and other communities) youth.[6] However, the impact of religious beliefs on mental health outcomes may be dependent on how strongly those beliefs are held and how important religious practice is seen to be.[8] Beliefs that are weakly held, and thinking of religious practices as unimportant, have been linked to a greater likelihood of emotional disorders.[8] One explanation may be that this is due to a mismatch between the expectations of the family and internal convictions. This may lead to struggles with self-expression which in turn may have a negative impact on wellbeing.

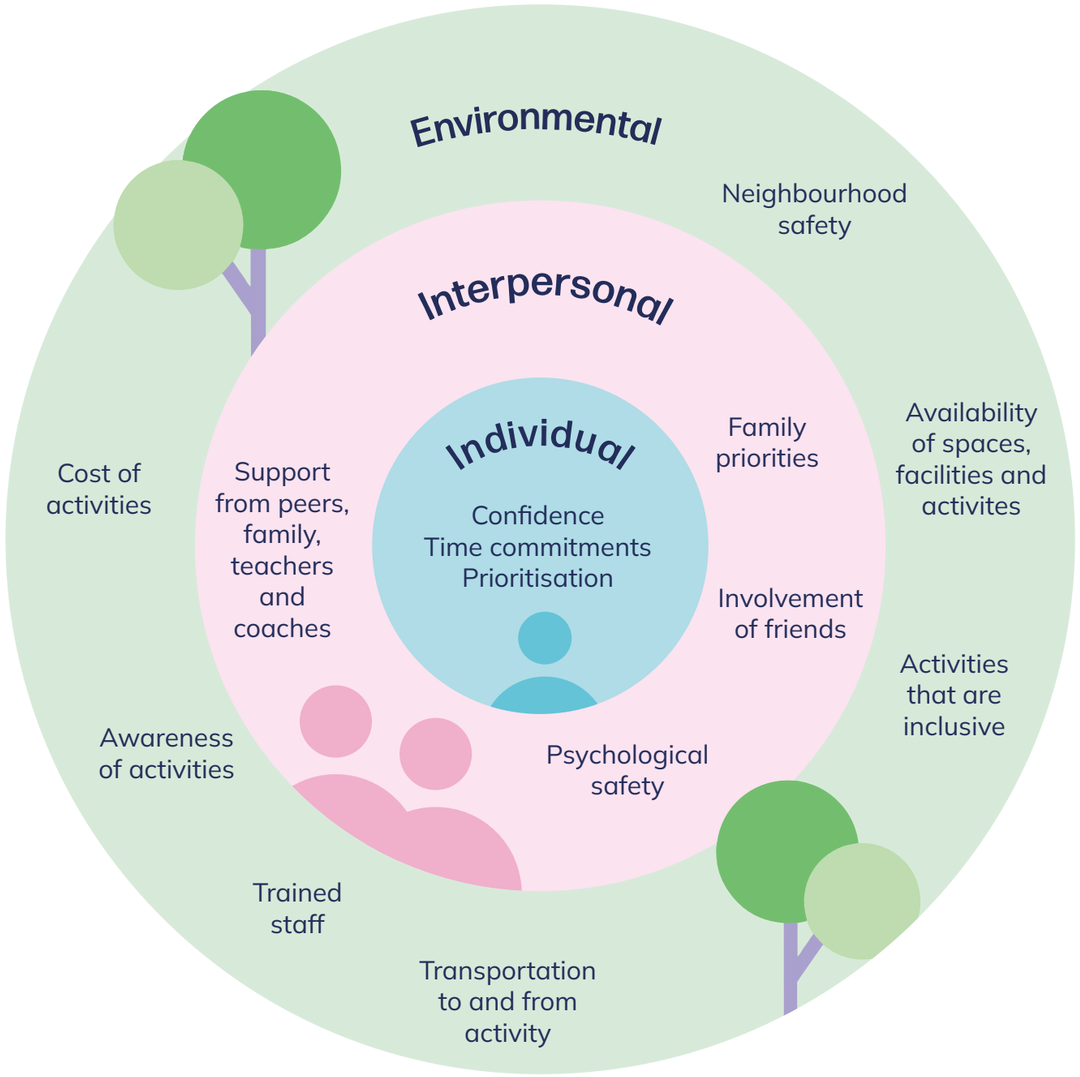
Several factors are believed to underpin the relationship between wellbeing and out-of-school activities. Engaging in out-of-school activities encourages the young person to leave their house, try out new experiences, and meet new people.[3] These activities often bring young people together in a new environment, away from their usual surroundings where they may be experiencing difficulties.[3] Bringing young people together who are going through similar difficulties can help create a safe environment for them to engage and talk about their problems whilst focusing on the activity, while creative activities can enable the young person to express themselves in different ways as an alternative to talking-based therapies.[3]



2. What prevents and supports engagement in out-of school activities?

Factors that affect engagement in activities

Figure 1. Summary of factors that prevent and support engagement in out-of-school activities according to individual, interpersonal and environmental levels (as discussed by Crane and Temple).[9]



Notes: Individual-level factors refer to the attitudes and perceptions of the individual; interpersonal refers to the relational factors arising from direct contact between the individual and others in their immediate environment, such as their peers, siblings and parents; and environmental factors refer to the formal and informal cultural norms that can indirectly influence an individual.

Individual

Confidence, perceived ability and interest

Many young people may lack confidence in their skills, and therefore are reluctant to take part in some types of activities. For example, participation in sports-related out-of-school activities was hindered by perceived lack of ability, disinterest in the activity, difficulties with gross and fine motor skills, and injuries and pain.[9, 10, 11] Improved self-image and confidence support participation in out-of-school activities, especially for physical activity in girls.[11] Family and peers can have a key role in promoting this.[11]

Time commitments

Competing priorities such as homework, socialising with friends and caregiving responsibilities can prevent access to physical activities, volunteering, and pro-social activities, as young people may not have time to take part in extracurricular pursuits.[9, 12, 13] These particularly impact older children, leading to reduced prioritisation of out-of-school activities.[14]

Interpersonal

Social support

Lack of support from family and teachers can prevent participation in out-of-school activities, as can a lack of staff to provide support during an activity. [15] A lack of peer support or of friends with whom to attend an activity have also been identified as factors that prevent access to activities.[14, 16] In addition, pressure from family and coaches or peers are associated with increased drop-out from physical activities.[9]

Family members can encourage engagement in activities by providing general encouragement and praise for taking part.[11] Family and friends who have been involved in similar types of activities before may also help to promote the benefits of taking part and provide practical information.[17]

Adult activity leaders, such as coaches, can provide further social support by creating a positive, safe, and fun environment for activities, and they can help young people feel a sense of achievement, develop their social skills and their connections with adults.[18]

Family priorities

There is variation across cultures in how parents/carers prioritise out-of-school activities compared with academic achievement, with engagement in sports seen as a distraction from academic activities for parents/carers from some cultures.[12, 19] There are also cultural differences in the role of young people within their families.[20] An example of this is varying expectations for young people to play a role in caregiving responsibilities, which may mean they have less free time to dedicate to out-of-school activities.[20]

Environmental

Availability of spaces, facilities, and activities, and neighbourhood safety

For outdoor activities there may be concerns for parents and carers about neighbourhood safety.[11, 12] Parents/carers may be less likely to allow their child to engage in an out-of-school activity if they perceive the neighbourhood to be dangerous. Less favourable weather conditions for outdoor activities can also prevent engagement with out-of-school activities.[14] Many young people lack access to out-of-school recreational programmes involving gardening and landscaping activities.[21] These activities are limited to boroughs and communities that feature disposable space for young people to engage in this type of activity. Access to spaces where out-of-school activities can take place, such as playgrounds for physical activity, increase the likelihood of participation in young people.[12, 22, 23] Participation can also be increased by providing a range of activities to choose from that are of interest to the children and young people.[15]

Cost of activities, transport to and from activities, and awareness of activities.

The cost of activities[11, 24] and lack of available transport to and from the activity's location are potential logistical factors that prevent taking part.[9] Lack of information or awareness about the available activities in the local area, and a lack of activities on offer altogether, can also mean young people are less likely to get involved in activities outside school.[14] Promoting out-of-school activities that are on offer within communities more widely to parents/carers means that they can provide permission and encourage participation.[17] Parents/carers can also assist by providing materials and necessary equipment.[11] Many of the above barriers may particularly impact children from low-income families.[18] These children are more likely to come from a single parent household, or have both parents working multiple jobs, which may mean parents have less time to support their child participating in out-of-school activities, for example, by providing transportation. Due to competing priorities, such as assisting parents with care for younger siblings or household chores, out-of-school activities may be prioritised less within these households. Low-income families may also be more likely to live in an area where there are increased concerns about neighbourhood safety and less facilities available for activities to take place. Available facilities may be underfunded and activities that are available may be of a smaller range. Due to financial constraints, children from low-income families may not be able to participate in traditional fee-based activities.[22, 24] Free transportation, as well as provision of snacks and meals may encourage participation for children from low-income families.[18]

Trained staff and inclusive activities

Some out-of-school activities are not inclusive of young people with additional needs, such as anxiety, depression, autism spectrum disorders or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), as a lack of specially trained staff means they are not appropriately supported.[10] Additionally, young people who have a lone parent/carer or dual working parents/carers have been found to participate in activities less than young people with only one working parent,[18] which could be due to the extra pressures these parents/carers are facing.

It is therefore important to consider that some parents/carers may require additional support to help their child engage in activities, such as lone parents/carers, dual working parents/carers, and parents/carers of children with mental health difficulties.[10] Engagement in out-of-school activities can be supported by having programmes designed specifically for youth that feature well-trained staff, flexibility, and disability awareness where needed.[10]



Differences across different marginalised groups

Studies report that students from ethnic minority backgrounds are less likely to attend out-of-school activities.[25] However, there was a lack of systematic reviews investigating factors that prevent and support engagement in these activities in young people, and we do not know if young people were less likely to attend the activities or if the activities were less likely to be made inclusive of them. When seeking to understand factors that influence out-of-school activity engagement across ethnic minority groups, it is important to recognise that this includes individuals from a wide range of religious, social and cultural backgrounds, and different factors may be relevant for different groups.

Whilst we were unable to find systematic reviews looking into this specific question in young people, we did find several reviews in adults that may shed light on this. A number of these focused on factors influencing engagement in sport and physical activity for adults from ethnic minority backgrounds.
[26, 27, 28, 29]

One review focused on this question in Europe, with many studies in the UK, and across all age groups, including some studies from children and young people.[28] They divided factors into eight clusters, with "Social and cultural environment" and "Psychosocial" forming the largest clusters. These included religious and family commitments, religious requirements in terms of dress, parental attitudes towards physical activity and cultural and religious beliefs around gender, including social and religious expectations around gender roles. The authors discuss that in practical terms, a lack of gender segregated facilities may lead to lower rates of participation amongst females from Muslim backgrounds. Other factors include language capabilities which may impact both knowledge of activities within the area and how to access them.

In the absence of information relating to children and young people specifically, broad recommendations can be made to ensure out-of-school activities are conducted in a manner that does not exclude individuals from any cultural background. Activities should be conducted in a manner that is respectful of cultural differences, for example, by providing options for single gender groups and having flexible clothing requirements. Materials advertising out-of-school activities could be provided in a range of languages and should communicate that the activities will be conducted in a culturally sensitive manner. Ensuring parents are aware that their child will be included in a culturally respectful manner, may help to encourage participation in these activities.

Female pupils are less likely to participate in sport activities compared to male pupils.[25] Caring responsibilities and obligations may prevent participation for young girls more than boys.[14, 18] Feelings of shame related to physical appearance have been identified as factors that prevent participation for girls.[11] This may be related to traditional heteronormative gender norms which position these activities as masculine and not an activity that is suitable for girls and young women.[11, 30] The perception that girls are less competitive and strong has been identified as a barrier to girls choosing to participate in sports.[12] Gender norms also influence body image concerns.[11]

One study notes that body image concerns were reported to be a factor that motivates girls to participate in sports, however, care needs to be taken not to reinforce negative stereotypes. Instead, seeking to tackle gender norms and discussing the role that other people (such as peers, boys, teachers) play in propagating these norms, may help to create environments where girls feel more comfortable to participate in sports otherwise associated with masculinity.[11] The impact of gender also intersects with other socio-cultural categories; for examples, girls of Islamic faith may be less likely to participate in sports activities, not because it is incompatible with Islam for girls to be involved in sports, but because of the limited number of culturally sensitive facilities (such as opportunities to take part in single sex activities), as mentioned above.[28]

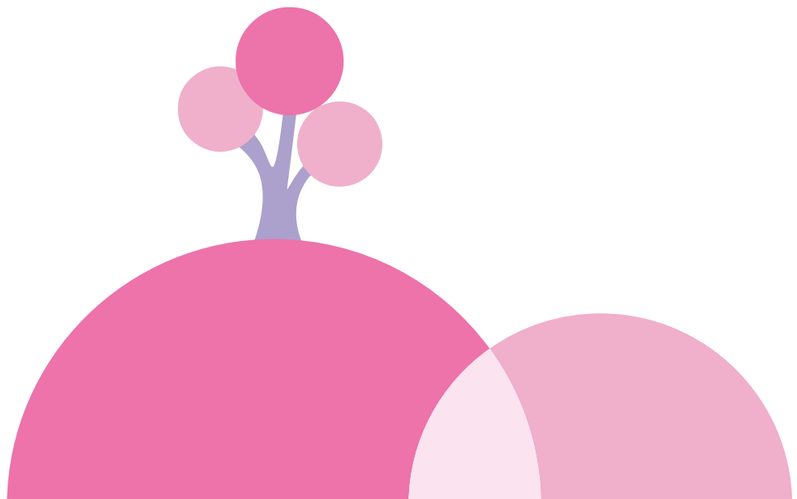


What are the implications?

Children and young people face common challenges which prevent them from engaging in out-of-school activities, such as restricted time to take part in these activities due to educational commitments.[9, 11, 14] Yet there are clear benefits to participation,[3] and clear ways that participation can be encouraged.

Endorsement and praise of children and young people taking part in out-of-school activities by their parents and carers is an important factor found to support involvement.[11] This not only encourages participation in activities themselves but may also help to counter barriers to taking part due to low self-confidence and perceived lack of abilities. In line with this, promoting local out-of-school activities to parents and families will help ensure they are aware of the types of activities that are available in the surrounding area.[3, 17] Promotion of local activities should also include information about the benefits of taking part, to ensure parents are aware of the benefits. Supportive coaches that create a positive environment for activities to take place in will help to encourage young people to continue being involved.[18]

Practical considerations may include access to facilities, including both indoor and outdoor space.[21] Where possible, a range of activities should be made available so that young people can choose activities depending on their interests, although this may be dependent on local resources. In neighbourhoods where safety getting to and from an activity may be a concern, providing free or affordable transportation to and from activity centres may ensure young people can still attend.[11] Similarly, aiming to keep activities free or low-cost will help ensure young people from all socioeconomic backgrounds are able to get involved.[22, 24]



How does this apply to Newham?

Several of the factors preventing and supporting engagement in out-of-school activities may be particularly relevant to Newham. Newham is London's most ethnically diverse borough, and the most ethnically diverse local authority in England and Wales.[31] As a multi-cultural neighbourhood, it may be important to take into consideration the components that support and prevent access to these activities across different marginalised groups. Activities should seek to be accessible to individuals from a range of socioeconomic and religio-cultural backgrounds by being conducted in a culturally sensitive manner, including adaptations to ensure all individuals are able to take part. Information about activities should be provided in multiple languages and should highlight that they will be conducted in a culturally sensitive way.

As is the case across many London boroughs, residents in Newham experience a wide range of household incomes, with families from lower socioeconomic backgrounds living alongside families from higher socioeconomic backgrounds. Fee-based activities may serve as a deterrent for young people's involvement in out-of-school activities, as families from low socioeconomic backgrounds may find it difficult to fund out-of-school activities for their children. It will be important to consider providing low to no-cost out-of-school activities for young people in this area.

As an inner-city area, considerations may be given to both access to outdoor spaces and safety concerns since perceived neighbourhood safety is an identified environmental barrier. Possible solutions to these issues may be to increase the number of activities offered indoors, or to implement a buddying scheme to ensure people feel safe travelling to and from activities. As a London borough, Newham may be restricted in terms of access to outdoor green spaces which are required for some activities, such as gardening and outdoor sporting activities. Focusing on making use of local indoor community spaces may be beneficial. To access outdoor spaces, young people may be able to travel to other parts of London. Whilst transport links are well-established in London, transport still comes at a cost which may be prohibitive for low-income families. Alternative ways to assist families with transportation could be helpful, such as reimbursing parents who pay for public transport to drop off or pick up their child from an activity.

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Anna Freud

Our vision is a world where all children and families are supported effectively to build on their strengths and to achieve their goals in life. Our mission is to close the gap in wellbeing and mental health by advancing, translating, delivering and sharing the best science and practice with everyone who impacts the lives of children and families.

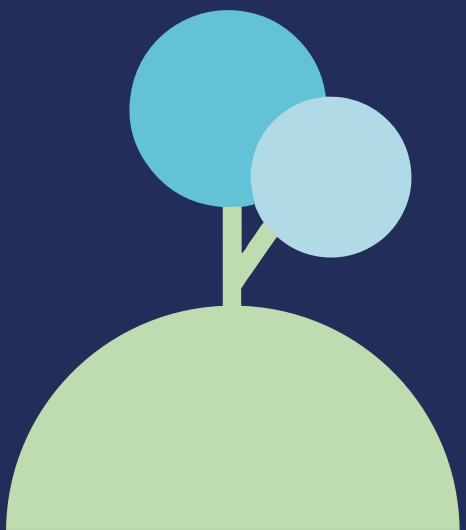
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Kailo

The Kailo programme aims to help young people and their communities find local solutions for better mental health in the UK. It will develop, test and scale an evidence-informed framework that will support local partnerships to co-design strategies that address the underlying drivers of poor adolescent mental health.

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