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An Overview of Youth and Adolescence in Ireland

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Young people in contemporary Ireland

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Introduction

Adolescence and youth is an inherently interesting time of life. It is a time of energy, dynamism and, perhaps most of all, potential. It can also be a time of uncertainty, awkwardness and a searching for one's niche in society. It is a period where tremendous physical, cognitive, emotional, and relational changes take place. One makes the fundamental shift from child to adult. Also, one becomes capable of reproduction and of creating one's own children. All of this happens between the ages of, roughly, 13 and 18. For most people, few other 5-year periods in their lives will see such change, transition, upheaval and re-orientation.

In the preface to his *Adolescence* (1904) G. Stanley Hall gives an eloquent description of 'coming of age'; the turmoil, change and sheer potential

> 'The social instincts undergo sudden unfoldment and the new life of love awakens. It is the age of sentiment and of religion, of rapid fluctuation of mood, and the world seems strange and new. Interest in adult life and vocations develops. Youth awakes to a new world and understands neither it nor himself. The whole future of life depends on how the new powers now given suddenly and in profusion are husbanded and directed. Character and personality are taking form, but everything is plastic, self-feeling and ambition are increased, and every trait and faculty is liable to exaggeration and excess' (p. xv).

Naturally enough, change and variation are interesting to social scientists. As a period of rapid physical, emotional and psychological development, adolescence has long been a focus of study for developmental psychologists. The years of adolescence and early adulthood are also important years for students of social care, social work, education and, of course, the years of adolescence and early adulthood are the main focus for youth workers. Sociologists, too, have seen the period of 'youth' as a fascinating fault-line between the cultural and social norms of one generation and the next. The 'sociology of youth' is a recognised specialism within academic sociology. In contrast, few professors of sociology have built their careers on the behaviour and attitudes of people in their forties!

This book is primarily concerned with the 927,230 people in Ireland aged between 10 and 24 years, although as will be seen throughout this volume, rigid age boundaries are neither possible nor advisable in the study of young people's lives. According to the latest available figures, 37 per cent of the population is under 25 years of age (CSO, 2003a). Given inward flows of immigration, it is likely that the figures for 20-24 year olds have increased from the 328,334 recorded in 2002.

The purpose of this book is to provide a unified commentary and analysis of research, policy and practice relating to adolescents and young adults in Ireland for third level students of psychology, sociology, social policy, social care, social science, social work, education, youth work and nursing. The text will also be of interest to a range of professionals working with young people, such as teachers, youth workers, psychologists, social workers, community workers and related professions. The text will draw on the authors' extensive lecturing and work experience in the fields of adolescence and youth work, and will be informed by their on-going research in areas such as adolescent attitudes and behaviours, youth crime and victimisation, recreation, media and youth work. We shall employ a theme-based approach, allowing for perspectives from multiple academic domains. Our goal is to provide a multi-disciplinary approach which extends beyond the boundaries of any one academic discipline.

This chapter firstly considers definitions of 'adolescence' and 'youth'. Then, some popular conceptions of young people are examined; specifically, that adolescence is a period of 'storm and stress' and that young people are more inclined than others to be troublesome and deviant. Thirdly, the development of young people's rights and status in Ireland in recent years is examined. Finally, a brief outline of each of the following chapters is provided.

Definitions

Internationally, a 'child' is deemed to be a person younger than 18 years. This is the definition used in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and many jurisdictions grant privileges of adulthood (such as voting) on the 18th birthday. In this sense, the term 'child' includes most of the adolescent years.

'Adolescence' is a less clearly defined period. It refers to the transition between childhood and adulthood. In pre-industrial societies, this period may be brief, ending when biological maturity brings adult status. In contemporary Western societies, adolescence is a much lengthier period and is often considered to be an 'invention' of industrial Western society.

'In many cultures … girls were expected to marry once they became capable of bearing children. But as the Industrial Revolution brought new technology and a need for more schooling, recognition of adult status was delayed and the long transition period we called adolescence evolved' (Passer and Smith, 2001, p. 481).

Of course, we should not be too simplistic in our thinking here. The transition from child to adult varied from time to time and place to place.

Conger (1997) describes the 20th century as the 'era of adolescence', an era that has evolved due to the social and economic changes arising from industrialisation and capitalism in Western Europe and the United States. Prior to the industrial revolution and widespread schooling, there was little opportunity for a 'youth culture' to emerge. However, increasing segregation of adolescents from adults, the growing complexity of work, and the need for prolonged education facilitated the creation of adolescence as a distinct phase of life - not a child, but not an active, adult part of the workforce either. In such a way, adolescence became a distinct phase of life in between childhood and adulthood. Of course, all societies acknowledge a transition between childhood and adulthood. Modern, complex societies differ from earlier societies because the distinction between adolescents and adults is not demarcated by a single widely-practiced rite of passage; instead the transition to adulthood is marked by protracted schooling/training and the (relative) delay in assuming adult roles such as work and parenthood.

After the eighteenth birthday, a further change in status occurs. Terms such as 'youth' and 'young person' can vary in meaning but it not uncommon in research and policy terms for them to refer to under-25-year-olds. This is the threshold used in much of the research described in this book, and it is also the definition used in the Youth Work Act 2001 and the National Youth Work Development Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2003a). Of course, there is considerable variation in how youth is experienced. For example, while many

24-year-old Irish men are living at home, studying full-time and financially dependent on their parents, others have been in full-time employment for many years and may be self-sufficient, married fathers.

'Youth' is a social construction and the normative experience for people in their late teens and early twenties has changed beyond all recognition in recent years. For instance, participation in further and higher education in Ireland has increased dramatically, as has progression to fourth-level education, all of which further postpones many young people's full-time engagement in the work force. This has implications for home life, with many young people living with parents until their mid-twenties. In Ireland, this trend has been aggravated by the dramatic rise in house prices since the mid-1990s. Thus, particularly for those in the higher socio-economic groups, offspring are unlikely to obtain full autonomy and financial independence until their mid-twenties. In this sense, 'adolescence' (the transition from childhood to self-sufficient adulthood) has stretched from the teenage years to the mid-twenties, given rise to the demographic jokingly referred to as 'kippers' (kids in parents pockets eroding retirement savings). The 'blurriness' of the boundaries between child and adolescent, and youth and adult, is outlined in the National Youth Work Development Plan:

'Social and cultural boundaries distinguishing youth from childhood on the one hand and adulthood on the other, which have never been rigidly fixed in any case, are being blurred further. Children are continuing to develop faster and earlier, in physical terms; and in the post-industrial age of information technology they often have readier access to certain types of knowledge than many adults, without necessarily having had the opportunity to develop the capacity for critical and responsible use of that knowledge. At the same time, the acquisition of full "social adulthood" is in many cases being delayed as young people stay in the education system longer, or for financial reasons find it difficult to develop a sense of (or an objective state of) full autonomy or independence' (Department of Education and Science, 2003a, p. 3).

Some popular perceptions of adolescence and youth

Which of us has not been berated with 'When I was your age …' or 'Young people these days …'? A mainstay of the relationship between the generations seems to be a perception

by the 'established' generation that the 'coming' generation is lacking in moral fibre, respect for their elders, work ethic and so on. Are young people really so different from their elders? Are Irish young people as bad as portrayed in the media?

A second popular perception of adolescents and youth is that they are, to a greater or lesser extent, grappling with internal turmoil, angst-ridden, riven by storm and stress. Is this true?

As they are mainstays of any examination of youth, we shall consider both of these popular perceptions in a little more detail.

Young people as 'problematic'

As elsewhere in Europe, the academic community, policy makers and the popular media in Ireland have tended to focus on the problematic aspects of young people and their lives; alcohol and drug use, early school leaving, early sexual behaviour, pregnancy, STDs, delinquency. Indeed, the origins of academic Youth Studies after the Second World War is characterised by a heavy focus on gangs, delinquency and troublesome youth. As noted by Skelton and Valentine (1988):

'Adolescents began to be treated as a problem for society after the Second World War, during a period in which young men, in particular, were gaining cultural and economic independence from their family of origin. Academic study of 'youth' as a distinctive social category became established during the 1950s and 1960s in the United States and Britain. The history of academic research about youth cultures reflects and reinforces the public condemnation of working class adolescents. Academic interest in teenagers was born within criminology, fuelled by moral panics concerning the nuisance value of young people on the urban streets of Western societies. Thus, the research into youth groups was marked by a preoccupation with delinquency and associated with the study of so-called 'condemned' and 'powerless' groups in society such as the working class, migrants and the criminal' (Skelton and Valentine, 1988, p. 10).

This, of course, is partly a product of the age-old tension between the established and the up-coming generation, the former viewing the latter as troublesome, poorly disciplined and even dangerous. Sociologists have long highlighted the never-ending series of moral panics about

young people and their behaviour, be they 'teddy boys', 'boot boys', punks, hippies or, more recently, goths (Cohen, 1973; Collins et al., 2000; Hall and Jefferson, 1975; Miles, 2000; Thompson, 1998).

There is nothing new in this. Indeed, Plato objected to various aspects of young peoples' behaviour. He advised against allowing the young drink alcohol, for 'fire must not be poured on fire.' He also described young people as argumentative - 'in their delight at the first taste of wisdom, they would annoy everyone with their arguments.' Aristotle, too, found adolescents to be 'passionate, irascible and apt to be carried away by their impulses' (cited in Fox, 1977).

Devlin (2006) describes a process where four morning newspapers were monitored for three separate months (March, July, November 2000) for articles featuring 'Youths', 'teens', 'juvenile', 'minor' and related words. A total of 608 news items were identified, including 248 stories where the ages of the young people were explicitly given and were between 12 and 21 years. After a thematic analysis these stories about young people were found to consist of 32 specific categories in seven main themes.

- Criminal and violent behaviour (32.7 per cent of stories). Murder, assault, theft and so on.
- Victim hood (31 per cent). Young people as victims of physical and sexual assault, or of accidental death or suicide.
- Vulnerability (20.2 per cent). Young people as vulnerable to health problems inadequate services, homelessness.
- Problematic behaviour (5.2 per cent). Alcohol, drugs, sexuality.
- Good behaviour (8.9 per cent). Sporting, artistic, musical success, political commitment, environmental awareness.
- Attractiveness (1.2 per cent). Style, attractiveness or desirability of young people.
- Miscellaneous (0.8 per cent). General stories about demographics or youth as a category.

Thus, Devlin (2006) shows that almost 85 per cent of stories about young people feature them as perpetrators or victims of crime or as vulnerable in some way. "In short, Irish news stories

tend in the vast majority of cases to portray young people either as being a problem or as having problems" (Devlin, 2006, p. 47). There are interesting gender differences. For example, 44 per cent of the stories about young males focussed on crime/deviance, compared to 15 per cent of stories about young females.

As part of the same study, Devlin (2006) conducted ten focus groups with a total of 90 young people, primarily in their mid-teens. There was a strong consensus that media portrayals of young people were primarily negative and simplistic. As one respondent stated: 'It's all trouble, vandalism, joyriding, drinking, drugs, smoking. They never have any of the good stuff we do in it' (Devlin, 2006, p. 20).

Another very strong impression from these focus groups was teenagers' resentment that they were viewed suspiciously by adults when in groups in public places; as potentially noisy and troublesome. This was particularly so in disadvantaged areas with few amenities and facilities. Respondents were asked about their relationships with teachers, the Gardaí, youth workers and adults in shopping centres. The strong overall impression that young people have is that adults perceive them in a negative light; that many adults hold negative stereotypes of adolescents.

In contrast to the focus on 'youth problems', the more normative aspects of the lived experience of young people in Ireland have received little attention. A detailed case for a national longitudinal study was made in the Final Report of the Commission on the Family (Commission on the family, 1998). In their review of published academic work on adolescence, Hennessy & Hogan (2000) conclude with a call for a national longitudinal study that will address many of the gaps in our understanding of the experiences of Irish children and adolescents:

'The most notable absences from research in child psychology in Ireland are nationally representative longitudinal studies. With recent dramatic social changes, including legislation on divorce, a booming economy, increasing cultural and ethnic diversity and new legislation acknowledging children's rights, the need for such studies is now clear' (Hennessey and Hogan, 2000, p. 115).

Although such a longitudinal study is a commitment in the National Children's Strategy (and is now at an advanced planning stage), there remains considerable scope to widen our understanding of children's lives. It is important to examine the more day-to-day aspects of young people's lives not least to counterbalance the impression of wild hedonism associated with young people in the popular media. A research report published by Foróige (1999) suggests that society has lost touch with the young and tends to categorise young people according to simplistic stereotypes, with an emphasis on sexual activity and drinking. It is suggested:

'Society needs to develop a view of the mass of youth as individual persons who are members of families – sons and daughters, brothers and sisters; people who are friends and confidants of others, people who are concerned with the present and worry and hope about the future; people who want to be involved in the community and play their part in the work of society; people who enjoy healthy fun and frolics appropriate to their age; people who ponder serious matters of great concern to themselves and their society; people who know the reality of pressure and stress; people who sometimes make mistakes and do what is wrong and people who need the guidance and leadership of adult society' (Foróige, 1999, p. 19).

Storm and stress: is adolescence an unusually difficult period of life?

The first formal academic study of adolescence is usually dated to G. Stanley Hall's 1904 *Adolescence*. This two-volume work became widely read and was re-issued a number of times. Hall hoped that the book would establish a new field of scientific inquiry. This first delineation of the field was wide-ranging. In Volume one, he describes physical changes such as height, weight and proportions of body parts to the whole body. He also examined criminality, sexuality and the treatment of adolescence in literary sources. Volume two is more focussed on philosophical and paedagogical (educational) issues.

Hall described a period of 'storm and stress' as adolescents adjusted to their changing bodies and roles in adult society. Is this an accurate description of teenagers' experiences? Not really. Certainly, there appears to be an increase in mood swings and family conflict, arguments and bickering. It is also true that many adolescents occasionally feel self-conscious, socially awkward, shy and lonely (Larson & Richards, 1994). However, most young people feel close to their parents and value their opinions on major issues. A recent

study in Co. Kildare (Lalor & Baird, 2006) asked a sample of 988 adolescents a range of lifestyle questions. When asked about their level of contentment and well-being, 68% described themselves as 'very happy' or 'happy most of the time', 18% were 'average: sometimes happy, sometimes sad' and only 6% said they were 'sad a lot of the time' or 'very unhappy.'

Similar results have been found in international studies. Daniel Offer of the University of Chicago conducted a well known cross-cultural study in ten countries of adolescents' self image in the 1980s (Offer et al. 1988). They surveyed 5,938 adolescents in ten countries (Australia, Bangladesh, Hungary, Israel, Italy, Japan, Taiwan, Turkey, US, West Germany). A key finding was that adolescents around the world share many similarities. Offer et al. coined the term the 'universal adolescent' to describe somebody who is happy most of the time and enjoys life. At a social level they are caring and enjoy being with others. They value work and school and enjoy doing a job well. They express positive feelings toward their families, and feel that both their parents are usually patient and satisfied with them most of the time. They can solve problems and feel positive about the future. Important difference based on age, gender and region were also found. They found, for example, greater self-confidence and openness to feedback in older teenagers:

'They feel secure about experiences that used to be frightening, such as sexual feelings and aggressive activities. The implication of these data is not that young teenagers are in the throes of tortured self-doubt and frightening lack of control of impulses. Instead, the implication is that the young are uncertain but are gradually finding their way; the older adolescent is more sure and is steadily reaching toward the maturity of adulthood' (Offer et al., 1988, p. 119).

These research findings illustrate that the simple stereotype of the 'teenager in turmoil' does not accurately portray the lived reality for the majority of young people.

Adolescence and youth in Ireland: Recent improvements in knowledge, rights and representation

A substantial body of knowledge about adolescence and youth has developed in recent years. For instance, Hennessy and Hogan (2000) reviewed all published work on developmental

psychology in Ireland between 1975 and 2000, with 'adolescence' as a key search term. What is notable is the lack of published work on adolescence until the late 1980s. In the mid-1970s, only three published papers per year were produced, but this increased substantially to 23 per year in the mid-1990s. Similar growth rates are found in other academic disciplines, reflecting the increasing emphasis in Irish IHEs (Institutes of Higher Education) on generating research papers and publishing internationally. Also, there has been increasing government funding to produce research reports (the so-called 'grey literature') on topics of public concern, both within academic departments and by external consultants. Acknowledging the lack of extensive research on which to base policy and resource decisions, a central goal of the National Children's Strategy is that 'children's lives will be better understood; their lives will benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services' (Department of Health and Children, 2000).

Is Ireland becoming more child- and youth-centred?

Service providers and policy makers are increasingly open to listening to the views of young people. A significant process of recognition of children's rights has taken place internationally and this is reflected in developments in Ireland. Many commentators date this to the 1979 United Nation's Year of the Child and, ten years later, the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (a 'child' is defined as any person below 18 years). Unlike UN Declarations, the Convention becomes law in those countries that ratify it. Ireland ratified the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1992, thus binding Ireland to its articles in international law.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child is perhaps the most significant international event for children's rights ever. Essentially, it is an international Bill of Rights for children (Hamilton, 2005). The Convention operates on the principle that there are universally accepted pre-conditions for any child's harmonious and full development. The Convention is an unprecedented attempt to collect in one document the minimum rights of all children in the world. The Convention recognises that children have needs and human rights that extend far beyond basic concepts of protection: children are recognised as having a full range of civil, economic, social, cultural and political rights. Specifically, the Convention has 54 articles detailing the individual rights of any person under 18 years of age to develop to his or her full potential, free from hunger and want, neglect, exploitation or other abuses. Each child

has the right to life; to a name and state; to a freedom from discrimination of any kind; to rest and to play; to an adequate standard of living; to health care; to education; and to protection from economic exploitation and work that may interfere with education or be harmful to health and well-being.

The view that children have rights of their own, rights that transcend the family setting, is a new idea. Unlike earlier statements of children's rights, such as the 1924 League of Nation's Declaration and the 1959 Declaration of the Rights of the Child, the 1989 Convention is liberating as well as protective. The Convention is unique in that it allows for the child's own wishes and opinions to be expressed and given careful consideration. As stated in Article 12: 'States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all the matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child' (UN, 1991, p. 20).

The Convention is overseen by the process whereby each State is required to present a National Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in Geneva. This has had a real impact on policy in Ireland. For example, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child recommended in 1998 that Ireland prepare a comprehensive National Strategy for Children. Previously, in 1997, the Government indicated that it had no immediate plans to draft a National Children's Strategy. However, as noted by Hayes (2004): 'in October 1998 the Minister for Health and Children announced … that, in response to the UN Committee recommendations, his department was coordinating the production of a National Children's Strategy. An interdepartmental group was established in 1999 and the Strategy was published in November 2000' (Hayes, 2004, p. 52).

More recently, the Irish government submitted its Second Report for the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child in July 2005 (National Children's Office, 2005a). This report details the progress that has been made in the development of policies and services for children since the First Report (in 1996), including the launch of the National Children's Strategy, the establishment of the National Children's Office, the creation of the post of Minister for Children and the appointment of the Ombudsman for children. The Report is a useful and comprehensive overview of the situation of young people in Ireland. It describes the government's progress on children's issues, and also highlights areas of concern, such as

obesity, high levels of binge drinking and drug use and suicide, particularly among young men.

An alliance of NGOs working with children and young people (The Children's Rights Alliance) also submitted a 'shadow' report (*From Rhetoric to Rights*) which highlighted continuing areas of concern, such as 'the absence of mental health services … and the alarming incidence of alcohol misuse; drug abuse and suicide among children and teenagers' (Children's Rights Alliance, 2006, p. 3). Representatives from the Children's Rights Alliance were also consulted by the National Children's Office in the preparation of Ireland's Second Report to the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, and commented on early drafts of the Second Report (National Children's Office, 2005a, pps. 44-9).

Ireland's hearing at the UN Committee for the Rights of the Child took place in September 2006. The report of the Committee is on the UNCRC website (www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/crc/index.htm), as report CRC/C/IRL/CO/2. In its report the Committee welcomed legislative and policy developments since Ireland's last hearing, including The Equal Status Act and the Education (Welfare) Act (2000); the Children Act (2001); the Ombudsman for Children Act (2002); the National Children's Strategy (2000); and the National Play Policy (2004) (UNCRC, 2006).

However, a number of areas were singled out for critical attention. For example, the slow pace of the implementation of the Children Act (2001), which governs the administration of juvenile justice. This is a topic we shall look at in greater detail in Chapter 9 (Young People and the Law). The Committee also expresses concern that the Ombudsman for Children is precluded from acting in investigations related to children in prisons or Garda stations. The Committee was 'deeply concerned that corporal punishment within the family is still not prohibited by law' (p. 9). However, as noted by the government's submission (National Children's Office, 2005a), such a development is not a priority for Ireland. Another area of concern is the high level of alcohol consumption by adolescents and its apparent link to the increase in young male suicide and the government is urged to implement 'a comprehensive strategy which should include awareness-raising, the prohibition of alcohol consumption by children and advertising that targets children' (p. 11).

The National Children's Strategy

There are three National Goals in the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000):

- Goal 1 - Children will have a voice in matters which affect them and their views will be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.
- Goal 2 - Children's lives will be better understood; their lives will be benefit from evaluation, research and information on their needs, rights and the effectiveness of services.
- Goal 3 - Children will receive quality supports and services to promote all aspects of their development.

The first goal of Ireland's National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000) echoes a key principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – that children will have a say in matters that affect them in accordance with their age and maturity. As noted in the National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-2007:

'… put forward to achieve this goal are the establishment of a National Children's Parliament [Dáil na nÓg] and an Office of Ombudsman for Children. Additional measures under this goal will include a review of existing arrangements at local level, particularly with respect to County and City Development Boards to ensure that children's views are obtained in formulating and implementing their Economic, Social and Cultural Strategies (Department of Education and Science, 2003a, p. 7).

Thus, involving young people in discussions and policy making is a central feature of important documents such as the UNCRC and the National Children's Strategy and is an important fundamental principle for policy makers and service providers.

The importance of listening to children and young people is emphasised in the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children, 2000) which clearly states the need to give children a voice in matters affecting them. In *Hearing Young Voices* (2002), Karen McAuley of the Children's Rights Alliance, and Marian Brattman of the National Youth Council of Ireland, argued that involving children requires more than merely paying lip-service to the Strategy. Their work highlighted the need to involve children and young people

in decisions about what constitutes 'consultation', and discussed the importance of using accessible language and providing the support that children need in order to become partners in policy formation; for example, 15 young people were consulted by the Eastern Health Board's *Forum on Youth Homelessness* and their views informed the Youth Homelessness Strategy (2001). Also, the National Economic and Social Forum talked with a group of early school leavers in 2001-2002, and fed their views into policy recommendations to Government.

With a view to facilitating the involvement of children and young people, the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC) established a Children's Consultation Unit in 2002, supported by the National Children's Office, to provide support and training for professionals involved in consulting children and young people. In addition to training, the Children's Consultation Unit offers an event management service to organisations wishing to consult with children. It also offers training to schools on the establishment of School Councils and has developed a Schools Council Training Pack.

Hayes (2004) further describes the trend towards inclusion of young people in policy/services development in Ireland:

'A number of different associations have held forums to access children's views on different issues, including the Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (ISPCC), which hosts regional Children's Forums annually, and the National Youth Council of Ireland's youth parliament. In addition a number of local communities and partnerships have specific projects which give voice to children on issues of importance to them such as play space (Dublin North Inner City) and creativity in the classroom (Dublin Canal Community Partnership)' (p. 49).

Hayes (2004) details the consultation process with children that was adopted for the development of the National Children's Strategy itself. Consultation with children took three forms:

- Publication of notice inviting children to make submissions on being a child in Ireland
- Visits to 10 schools by the Minister of State for Children

- In-depth consultations with children conducted by 10 children's agencies. In total, submissions were received from 2,488 children.

The results of the consultation process were published by the National Children's Strategy in September 2000: 'The summaries received from the different consultations represent a diversity of issues of interest to children. They include such key themes as Play and Leisure, The Environment, Social Issues, Having a Say, The Right to a Good Life and Expectations for the Strategy' (Hayes, 2004, p. 54).

The Education Act (1998) contains provisions for the establishment of student councils in post-primary schools, to represent students' views and give them a voice in the affairs of the school. By 2004, a majority of secondary schools had such student councils (561 out of 744). However, only a very few such Student Councils are represented on School's Board of Management (National Children's Office, 2005b).

The National Children's Office (NCO) is a main 'driver' behind increasing and enhancing the participation of young people in civic society and policy making. The NCO website (www.nco.ie) details a range of child and youth participation projects:

- Comhairle na nÓg
- Dáil na nÓg
- Dáil na bPáistí
- The Student Council Working group
- Guidelines on participation by children and young people
- Establishment of an NCO Child and Youth Forum
- Supporting the Young Social Innovators Exhibition
- Supporting RTE News2Day
- Involving children/young people in the appointment of the Ombudsman for Children
- Involving children/young people in the development of a code of children's advertising
- Involving children/young people in the Children Conference on adolescent health and service planning

In June 2005 the National Children's Office, the Children's Rights Alliance and the National Youth Council of Ireland published *Young Voices: guidelines on how to involve children and young people in your work.* This is a useful document for anyone working with children and young people. It outlines the importance of an inclusive approach to working with young people, describes principles of best practice and contains sections on ensuring quality outcomes, support systems, service planning and including young people on delegations.

The importance of involving young people in the youth work process is highlighted below:

'As a society we are not good at involving young people in decisions that impact on their lives such as education, housing, health, relationships, sex, parenthood or career, despite the knowledge that decisions are most effective if all the stakeholders are involved in the process. Youth work, through providing opportunities and support for young people can significantly support the democratisation of young people's lives and supports the development of active citizenship' (National Youth Federation, 2003, p. 11).

A further initiative has been the National Youth Work Development Plan (Department of Education and Science, 2003a). This document outlines the recent economic, political, technological and cultural changes in Irish society and describes a vision of youth work to meet the needs of young people in contemporary Ireland.

In the area of research, also, it is increasingly recognised that conducting research on children's issues should include the direct attitudes, views and opinions of young people, and sensitively tackle the methodological and ethical issues this raises. That is, research should be 'conducted <u>with</u> rather than <u>on</u> children' (Greene, 2006, p. 13). This approach has been strongly advocated by researchers at the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin (for example, Hogan and Gilligan, 1998; Greene and Hogan, 2005; Greene, 2006). Indeed, 'participation' has been the main buzzword in children's research over the last decade.

Enhancing the constitutional status of children

In November 2006, as this book was going to press, the Taoiseach Bertie Ahern, TD, announced a constitutional referendum to protect the rights of the child. The purpose is to tilt the balance of rights towards the child by way of a specific provision protecting their

interests. Such a constitutional amendment would have implications in cases of abuse, fostering and medical care. For example, long-term foster parents find it very difficult to adopt the children in their care, due to the weight placed on the rights of the natural parent, even where s/he plays no part in the care of the child and the foster-parent is, psychologically and emotionally, the 'real' parent. Also, there was a recent case where a parent sought to refuse a blood transfusion for her child, on religious grounds, even though the medical advice was that it was necessary to save the child's life. In that instance, the transfusion went ahead but a constitutional amendment would formally prioritise the protection of the child, over the religious beliefs of parents.

The announcement was widely welcomed by children's rights groups and opposition politicians, but many commentators noted that such an initiative was called for by the Kilkenny incest case investigation 13 years ago, and by the Constitution Review group 10 years ago. Scheduled for March 2007, some commentators have noted the coincidence of such a 'feel good' referendum being held just months before the general election scheduled for summer 2007. At the time of writing, it is too early to speculate how any amendment will be reconciled with the cherished protection of the family in the constitution, so that the amendment is not perceived to be an intrusion by the State on the family's 'inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law' (Article 41.1.1 of Constitution).

Outline of this book

The extant literature on adolescence and youth issues in Ireland is now sizeable/substantial and it is timely to provide an overview of our state of knowledge in a single volume. Throughout, our focus shall be on the experiences of contemporary youth. There are three primary reasons for this focus.

Firstly, an exhaustive analysis of all historical documentation on adolescents and youth in Ireland is beyond the scope of this text. Such a work would require a number of volumes, analysing texts stretching back 150 years. Such a historical work would provide interesting comparative material, but is beyond the scope of this text.

Secondly, Ireland has seen considerable social and economic change since the early 1990s. Many commentators on contemporary youth in Ireland refer to the rapid social and economic change of recent years, such as the decline in emigration, increase in immigration, near disappearance of unemployment, legalisation of divorce, rise of mass higher education, globalisation, rise in women's participation in the work force (for example, O'Connor, 2005; Sweeney and Dunne, 2003). While social change is normal, it is certainly the case that such change has been dramatic in recent years. For anyone over the age of 35, it is sometimes hard to believe that there is a new generation, just a few years younger, who have no experience of emigration and unemployment; who have disposable incomes unimagined by any but the extremely wealthy in the 1980s; and who enjoy a consumer lifestyle, world travel, new cars and fine dining. Writing as recently as 1995, Forde concluded that Irish young people live 'in the worst of all possible worlds – unemployment, violence and hopelessness are everywhere' (Forde, 1995, p. 6). The experience of being young in Ireland today is profoundly different than it was only a few years ago. Whilst we will frequently refer back to trends over the last two decades and highlight the changes that have occurred, our primary interest is in the state of young people today.

Thirdly, this text is aimed towards students and professionals aspiring to work, or actually working with young people; social workers, youth workers, teachers, nurses, psychologists, social care workers, doctors and so on. We hope that we can bring an overview of research on the issues impacting on young people that these professionals can apply to their day-to-day work with adolescents and young people in Ireland.

Where research is available, we shall also refer to findings from Northern Ireland. However, as different legislation, policies and structures exist in the two jurisdictions on the island, our examination of, for example, educational structures, the criminal justice system and youth work, shall primarily be focused on Ireland.

Chapter 2 describes the main theoretical perspectives on adolescents and youth. As the philosopher Kurt Lewin noted, 'there is nothing so practical as a good theory.' Theories provide us with a framework, a set of explanations, with which to approach an object of study. This chapter looks at some of the central debates in the study of adolescence and outlines some key theoretical perspectives; biological, cognitive, socio-emotional, sociological, focal and ecological theories. Each theoretical perspective has its own

contribution to helping us understand the behaviour of young people and their position and role in their families, communities and wider society.

Chapter 3 examines the literature on families in Ireland. The composition of households is described, primarily from census data. With regard to children and young people, this will show that the vast majority live together with both of their parents. However, with divorce available since 1997, small, but increasing, numbers of children will experience the separation/divorce of their parents. We shall examine some recent research findings on the effects this has on children. We shall also examine the issue of 'lone parents' and the role of the father in Irish families as the relationship between fathers and their off-spring has been little studied in Ireland. Finally, we shall examine research findings on policies that promote family well-being and also briefly consider the issue of the domestic division of labour.

Chapter 4 examines adolescents' social worlds and peer relationships. It looks at the types of groups young people form and the stages of peer-group development. The processes of peer pressure, peer acceptance, neglect, rejection and bullying are also examined. Adolescent friendships and romantic relationships are examined with a particular focus on two issues that resonate strongly for parents and professionals working with young people, 'loneliness' and 'sexuality'. A review of numerous recent studies on early sexual behaviour in Ireland shall be examined, along with related issues such as contraception use, early pregnancy, abortion and STIs. The particular challenges/issues facing young gay/lesbian people will be examined.

In Chapter 5, we shall see that Irish young people experience very elevated levels of mental health problems, parasuicide and suicide. Also, Irish young people, relative to their European peers, use high levels of illegal drugs such as cannabis and have the highest levels of binge drinking on the continent. These are extremely serious societal problems; not only for the young people directly affected, but for their own children in the years to come. The issue of binge drinking first emerged in the mid-1990s. Many of those people have now started families of their own. What habits and values are they passing onto the next generation? What mental health and social stability outcomes can we expect? There also serious concerns about child and adolescent obesity. Chapter five shall also detail the results of recent surveys on the habits and lifestyles of Irish teenagers. These habits store up problems for later life; ongoing obesity, heart disease, diabetes.

The education and employment experiences of young people shall be examined in Chapter 6. A key developmental task for our target audience is the transition from secondary school to further or higher education and/or the work place. The decisions taken during this period (age 18-25) will have a profound impact on later earning capacity and thus on one's socio-economic status and security. Larger numbers of teenagers are combining low-paid part-time work with studying. Is this a good or a bad thing? The Further Education sector has grown enormously, offering greater avenues/options for career progression. The 1990s has seen a burgeoning of 3rd and 4th level courses and the growing maturity and status of the IoT (Institute of Technology) education sector, as all third level institutions orient themselves towards a more competitive environment, with a smaller cohort of school leavers.

Chapter 7 examines young people's values, attitudes and beliefs in relation to politics, religion, sexual morality and social issues. Young people's lack of engagement with institutionalised politics, common with other European jurisdictions, is considered and we look at suggestions as to how this might be addressed. Attitudes to religion are also examined and we trace the growth of secularisation among young Irish people, while also noting that engagement with organised religion is still relatively higher than elsewhere in Europe. Attitudes to sexual relations and the trend toward more liberal values are also considered. Finally, we look at attitudes to a range of 'social issues' such as equality, social justice and development issues.

Chapter 8 describes the developmental functions of recreation and leisure for young people. Theories and research that have illuminated the role of free time use in psychosocial development, mental and physical well-being, gender socialisation, deviance and resilience will be discussed. Gender differences in leisure pursuits are examined, as are changing trends in how free-time is spent by young people. In particular, we look at common activities such as television viewing, playing computer games, reading, listening to music, shopping, hobbies and sport. Finally, Chapter eight examines what factors constrain, and facilitate, Irish young people in their recreation and leisure.

The Children Act 2001 is the primary statutory instrument for dealing with 'troubled and troublesome' children. The issue of youth justice is complex. Juvenile offending combines both child welfare and criminal justice concerns and is the responsibility of three Government sectors – justice, health and education. What is the reality of juvenile offending in Ireland? Is

it increasing, decreasing or stable? Have we struck the right balance between child welfare, diversion programmes and custodial sentences? How do the Irish Youth Justice Service and the Children Court operate? These and related questions shall be addressed in Chapter 9.

Chapter 10 outlines some of the major types of services and policies relating to young people and summarises where relevant the legislation which applies. The origins and development of youth work in the late 19th century are outlined. The establishment of the City of Dublin Youth Service Board, initially as a response to youth unemployment in 1940s Dublin, is sketched. A brief account is given of the emergence of the major voluntary youth organisations, including Foróige, Youth Work Ireland and the National Youth Council of Ireland. The complex relationships between these organisations and their government funders are described, as is the consultation process which resulted in the Youth Work Act (2001). The structure and functions of the National Youth Work Advisory Committee are outlined, as are the main provisions of the National Youth Work Development Plan. An overview of the National Children's Strategy is provided and its progress to date is assessed. Chapter 10 also outlines the system of child care services in Ireland, and concludes with a summary of recent developments in the field of child protection.

The focus of Chapter 11 is categories of young people who experience marginalisation and social exclusion and, as such, are of particular concern for social policy makers and service providers. The situation of the following categories of young people are described; young people with disabilities, young Travellers, young separated asylum seekers, young people in care and leaving care, young homeless people and rural young people. In one way or another, and to a greater or lesser degree, they face additional challenges to those faced by other young people.

Finally, chapter 12 briefly reviews the contents of the book and identifies a number of emerging trends and issues of relevance to young people in contemporary Ireland. These include the changing demographic profile whereby young people account for a diminishing proportion of the population but one which will for some time remain high by European standards. Due to a projected continuation of net inward migration the multicultural nature of Irish society, which has already become much more pronounced in very recent years, will increase further. Diversity in the formation of families and households also looks set to increase; and issues of gender inequality, far from being resolved, are if anything becoming

more complex. Socio-economic inequalities remain a challenge in policy terms and a blight on the lives of many young people and communities, and there is a persistent spatial dimension to such inequalities. An enormous increase in material resources, and its impact on an already increasingly globalised Irish youth culture, has introduced an increased element of risk which needs to be managed by both young people and adults. Finally, the increasingly 'extended' nature of adolescence and youth is being accompanied by a much greater complexity and contingency, presenting both opportunities and challenges for young people negotiating their pathways towards adulthood.

Recommended reading

Sweeney, J. & Dunne, J. (2003 *Youth in a changing Ireland: A study for Foróige, the national youth development organisation.* Dublin: Foróige. Provides a good overview of the situation of young people, with reference to historical changes and trends identified in other countries.