

Give children a chance to be children: memory, identity and holidays in the countryside



Holidays are always a special time for children, but for those from disadvantaged backgrounds they can be even more special. Many charities across the UK provide respite breaks for such youngsters, but funding is an enduring problem – in part because the impact of these schemes invariably transcends the constraints of a straightforward cost/benefit analysis.

The University of Exeter's Centre for Sport, Leisure and Tourism, in partnership with Country Holidays for Inner-City Kids (CHICKS), is aiming to provide a greater understanding of the worth of such projects by carrying out an in-depth investigation into how they help children develop positive memories, show them a different way of life and generally give them a very real sense of hope.



Overview

According to the NSPCC, nearly 50,000 children and young people in the UK are at risk of child abuse and neglect. Almost three million live in poverty, and the figure is rising. By providing life-enhancing respite breaks, charity organisations like CHICKS are doing what they can to help these disadvantaged youngsters.

From March to December each year CHICKS welcomes up to 16 children at a time – eight boys and eight girls – to each of its two centres. At its Moorland Retreat, based in Brentor, Devon, and its Coastal Retreat, based in Tywardreath, Cornwall, the charity provides a friendly and supportive “family” atmosphere and a range of activities such as rock-climbing, horse-riding and body-boarding. The overarching goal is to instil hope and happy memories and show children there are adults who value them, care for them and are there for them. In spite of this noble aim, funding remains a problem for many of these organisations – not least

in an age of austerity. An enhanced understanding of the benefits the likes of CHICKS deliver to children could prove vital to improving appreciation of this work and, crucially, encouraging further investment.

Academic studies of young people on holiday are scarce, and those that do exist completely overlook the marginalised and disadvantaged. The University of Exeter is attempting to fill this gap in the literature by using a variety of ethnographical methods – among them observation, interviews and art projects – to build a comprehensive picture of the CHICKS experience and so contribute to knowledge of this issue on practical, theoretical and policy levels.

The findings are due to be reported in early 2013, but already the results demonstrate the positive effects of these breaks. Most importantly, emotional and physical displacement from their normal environments allows youngsters to start forming the sort of memories they will always cherish rather than those they would prefer to forget.

KEY FACTS

- Many charities across the UK provide respite breaks for disadvantaged youngsters, but funding is a persistent problem.
- This is in part because the impact of these schemes defies the constraints of a simple cost/benefit analysis.
- The University of Exeter is seeking to enhance understanding of these projects' value by studying the benefits delivered by CHICKS, a charity based in Devon and Cornwall.
- The findings so far reveal how respite breaks help children develop positive memories, show them a different way of life and give them a sense of hope.
- It is hoped the outcome-focused results of the study will assist in attracting further funding for such schemes.

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Give children a chance to be children: memory, identity and holidays in the countryside (cont.)



Comments and implications

"It's well known that going on holiday has a positive impact on mental and physical health, but we don't know enough about the holiday experiences of disadvantaged young people who encounter stress and difficulties in their everyday lives," says PhD researcher and ESRC CASE studentship award holder Tea Tverin.

"Of course, it should be easy enough to communicate the value of respite breaks, but for many organisations the struggle for funding is constant – especially in the current economic climate. Our work has the potential to help gain funding for CHICKS and similar organisations, as well as offering new insights into how to help children who have suffered hardship."

As part of her efforts to develop a comprehensive picture of the CHICKS experience and the human interactions that make it work, Tverin, who took a break from her academic career to spend a year working in a day-care centre specialising in children with emotional and behavioural problems, has interviewed not just the youngsters themselves but staff, volunteers and referral agents.

"When I speak with the children I let them take the interview in the direction they want," she says. *"One thing I've always found frustrating about psychology is that it sometimes reduces human experiences to numbers, which is why I've tried to make this study as qualitative as possible. It's important to have face-to-face contact and bring out the richest evidence we can."*

It's safe to say CHICKS has benefited all the young people I've spoken to. I always ask if they have anything negative they would like to say, and they really don't. They use words like 'awesome' and 'great' and phrases like 'the best experience of my life'. These holidays give them an alternative kind of window on life – they show them there's a different way of living and that there are adults who don't shout, who can cooperate and who will care for them. One of the most important things CHICKS allows them to do is forget: it plants happier memories in their memory trajectories – and it teaches them to keep those happier memories alive."

"CHICKS has been providing free respite breaks for nearly 20 years, and those of us involved in the charity have seen first-hand the difference positive childhood memories and the gift of hope have made to the 9,000 disadvantaged children we've helped during this time," says CHICKS Chief Executive Elanor Hoskin.

"Tea's research is designed to measure the outcomes for the children, but we believe it will also provide the outcome-focused results more and more funders are looking for at a time when funding is becoming increasingly difficult to source."

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Tea Tverin
ESRC Researcher

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Elanor Hoskin
Chief Executive, CHICKS

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