

ASBOS OR MEDIATION

Groups of young people meeting and congregating in public spaces are increasingly seen as a threat. Rob Wheway investigates these fears, and how the public realm can be made safer for the whole community.

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Children and teenagers are often seen as causing problems in the community. The solution is simple: 'cut off their goolies'. Or that was the answer according to a famous current affairs sketch from the Not the Nine O'clock News television show in the 1980's.

It was meant to be a joke about intolerant attitudes rather than a thoughtful predictor of policy, yet Government policies since then have been based on reactions stemming from fears and prejudice, rather than on reality.

The fears are real enough. However they have been tackled as reality rather than fears, leading to young people – by which I mean junior age up to late teens – being demonised. As recent research on knife crime suggests, this approach to tackling the problem may have made matters worse.

The Government's 'Respect' campaign arguably had little respect for young people. It cited the British Crime Survey as justifying the need to move young people on. "Teenagers hanging around is a big cause of concern to the public". This kind of statement promotes the view that teenagers are a problem just by being around, not because they are doing anything wrong.

Police are encouraged to disperse groups if their presence has resulted, or is likely to result, in a member of the public being alarmed or distressed. Teenagers do not have to do anything wrong. Someone just has to feel that they might.

A colleague telephoned by the British Crime Survey was asked, "Has the following anti-social behaviour got better or worse in the last year: vandalism, graffiti, burnt out cars, young people hanging around on the street?" So, even if the public doesn't think young people are a problem, the British Crime Survey will inform them that they are, and comparable to burnt out cars or vandalism at that. It is easy to judge how offensive this is by putting the name of any other minority group in place of 'young people'.

In the recent Fair Play document the Government demands that "children and young people behave in a way that respects other people and property", without suggesting that children and young people themselves are worthy of respect.

So what is the reality of the issues with young people, and why is there so much fear? My knowledge is based on observational research at 60 areas of housing, numerous consultations and inspections of thousands of playgrounds. Most of the time I am alone and therefore vulnerable, yet I am alive and virtually unscathed.

Often adults complain to me about young people being rude and aggressive, but I find they are not doing anything different to what the adults did when they were that age. My experience has found that when talked to reasonably young people respond reasonably, usually politely.

During consultations people regularly talk about the syringes found on their local play area, yet in 18 years of inspecting I have never found a single syringe on a playground. The fears are based on what might happen, what might be found or an isolated unpleasant experience, rather than direct experience.

Contributing to the problem is that for years facilities have been put where they will be out of sight and out of mind, following the theory that the nuisance behaviour could be moved. The result is that the facilities feel isolated. Young people and parents feel vulnerable there, and so use them less. What really happens in the park or playground is not seen, and so fear takes the place of reality.

It is not uncommon for people sit in their homes becoming increasingly annoyed with the noise of the young people. In anger they rush outside and vent their frustration by shouting at them, only to be met with rude replies in response. Alternatively, they complain to the council or housing trust and, in accordance with the customer focused culture of today, a 'no ball games' sign is quickly erected, the parents are sent a letter threatening action, or an ASBO is suggested. Is it any wonder the reaction of the young people is sometimes resentful?

Knightstone Housing Association became aware that some issues were arising around children and young people playing or hanging out on their estates. They commissioned observational research and consultation at 20 of their estates, and as a result they have changed their management structure and practices.

One example of their new approach being put into practice is when they were receiving regular complaints about an area of green space surrounded by houses. In response, they organised a meeting to which all residents were invited. To everyone's joy and surprise the young people were polite and understanding (why should we expect any different?).

The adults who had complained expressed their concerns and admitted they had been a bit hasty. Parents stressed that they wanted their children to play out in front of the houses where they knew they would be safe. Agreements were reached on what was reasonable. One parent organised a quick whip-round and went to the supermarket to get a supply of soft balls to alleviate the worries concerning the hard balls, and the complaints dried up.

It would be naïve to suggest that it is the end of the story because at some point another meeting will have to be held, but this approach based on mutual respect and understanding is surely better than the Government's 'Respect' based on fear.

This is also reflected by the outcomes of an initiative where the Thames Valley police advocated the provision of youth shelters. While they produced positive results in the Thames Valley, when copied by other councils they were often deemed unsuccessful. It transpires that in the Thames Valley the local residents and the young people were both fully involved in the decisions surrounding the schemes and came into greater contact with each other. Again, mutual respect and understanding was the key.

Design and location can also play an important part in determining whether a park, playground or green space meets the needs of young people.

In research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation it was found that children and young people tend to play or hang out in places that fulfil two criteria: they can 'see and be seen' and it is 'where it's at' – meaning there was a good chance that they would meet other people. Facilities which fail to meet these criteria tend to be less well-used and more likely to be mistreated through vandalism and other anti-social activities.

Opening up the sightlines to a facility will make people feel less vulnerable and therefore more likely to make use of it, lessening the likelihood of anti-social behaviour.

Supervision is always put forward as an answer to anti-social problems but those proposing it have given very little thought to the costs involved. As children only go to school for half the days in a year and as they also play out in the evening, it is common sense to conclude that cost of supervising young people would be more than the cost of staffing the nation's schools. To be blunt, it just won't happen and to suggest that it might is misleading.

Parents are often asked whether they would let their children go to the park if there was supervision provided. The response is bound to be positive. The chances of receiving the same answer if asked if they would be prepared to pay a substantial increase in council tax are less likely, even though that is what would have to happen in reality.

There are a few places where increased staffing levels can be justified on the basis of a decrease in anti-social behaviour, but these are the exception rather than the rule. They are likely to be the large town parks, where a high proportion of park users are visitors, rather than local residents. The majority of parks and green spaces are small and local.

Increased use of the park creates supervision. Severe traffic calming if a park is across a road can enable an area to be used much more by local people. Traffic in residential roads reduces community cohesion and is the main reason for "risk aversion" by parents.

There are of course a small number of incidents of criminal or threatening behaviour and prosecutions may well be necessary. However, police time will be better spent if these are treated as uncharacteristic and tackled directly, rather than a scatter gun approach which assumes all young people are a problem and so alienates them.

Those who manage our parks and green spaces have a vital role to play. Young people use these places to a greater extent than the facilities provided by the youth service, who have largely abandoned those who just want to hang out and instead concentrate on the provision of 'positive activities'. This is not cost-effective and lacks respect for what the teenagers want to do themselves.

Park rangers and officers are therefore ideally placed to help different groups to reach reasonable compromises with young people, and to promote understanding and community cohesion. For this reason local authorities and police should have a strategy which enables claims of anti-social behaviour to be tackled by mediation based on mutual respect.

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