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## **Friendships patterns among rural, farm and urban children and adolescents in Ireland**

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### **Introduction**

Some features of contemporary Irish life, such as the fast pace of (sub)urbanisation and the proliferation of scattered housing in the countryside (e.g. Corcoran, 2005; Peillon, 2005; Crowley, 2006) suggest that the socio-spatial context of children's and adolescents' lives in Ireland is changing considerably. The quest for a decent quality of life in modern times has altered the shape and significance of place in people's lives, as families weigh up the implications of ever increasing house prices, child care costs, commuting times and general changes in work patterns. As community and family life alters significantly, the implications are far-reaching for the way children and adolescents experience social interactions and relationships they can encounter, particularly with friends, within and beyond those places.

Friendships form such a central component of children's lives that indeed they are often taken for granted (O'Connor et al, 2004). Nevertheless, what influences friendships and social interactions among children and adolescents provides the focus of considerable, albeit not saturated levels, of academic research, most notably in relation to age, gender, social class and ethnic upbringing (e.g. Weinger, 2000; O'Brien et al, 2000; Mayall, 2002; O'Connor et al, 2004). In recent years, there has been a growing body of literature dealing with the impact that living in rural and urban environments has on children and young people's everyday encounters, social relations and identities (e.g. Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Morrow, 2000; Valentine and Holloway, 2001; Matthews et al, 2000; Panelli et al, 2002; Nairn et al, 2003; Vanderbeck and Dunkley, 2003; Karsten, 2005). Not surprisingly, place and community matter to children and adolescents in distinctive ways, not least of which include the possibilities provided for friendship relations, freedom, escape,

exploration, adventure and general well-being (O'Brien et al, 2000; Morrow, 2000; Panelli et al, 2002; Pooley et al, 2002; Nic Gabhainn and Sixsmith, 2005). However, our knowledge of the extent to which young people's social relationships and interactions within friendships are distinctly different or congruent within and between these environments is less than systematic. In particular, our understanding of the extent to which rural and urban socio-spatial contexts show distinct effects, over and above such crucial factors as a young person's age, gender or socio-economic status is generally limited. We use the following research questions to explore the complexity surrounding the degree of difference and similarity among children and young people in terms of the nature and quality of their everyday relationships:

1. To what extent do variables such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, rural/urban location and farm upbringing exert independent effects on children and adolescents' friendship processes?
2. Is there a distinct statistically significant difference between growing up in a rural or urban socio-spatial context in terms of children's and adolescents' sense of everyday relations with friends?
3. Within a rural environment, to what extent does living in a farm household influence these issues?

The research findings are derived from a survey of 8,316 children and adolescents aged 10 to 17 years who participated in the Irish component of the 2002 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study. Before attending to the substantive elements of the paper, we present a brief background to some of the issues informing the present research. Friendship relationships are multifaceted in nature, influenced by such factors as age, gender, residence, opportunity structures, changing communication forms (Internet, mobile phones) and resources available to children/adolescents. We address some of these considerations in the following section.

### *Friendship relations*

The study of children and adolescent friendships traverses several key disciplines, much of which concerns what friendships 'do' (O'Connor et al, 2004) while others attend to the sociological, cultural and political dimensions and significance inhering in young people's relationships. Much evidence from the 'social support' literature, which tends to concern what friendships 'do', suggests that the friendship group constitutes a key network source, in addition to parents, siblings and other adults (Feldman and Elliot, 1993; Cotterell, 1996; Dolan and McGrath, 2006). Friends, especially in the adolescent years, provide important sources of concrete help and advice after parents (Dolan, 2005). As Cotterell (1996, p. 74) notes affirmations through close friendships are crucial for stability and security, just as a caregiver provides reassurances for a distressed child. Studies indicate that peers provide an important sounding board for topics that might be off-limits with family and having strong friendship ties can buffer against bullying behaviour (e.g. Naylor and Cowie, 1999). Hendry and Reid's (2000) research reveals that issues relating to friendships and peers constitute a leading theme within adolescents' considerations about health and well-being (see also Cotterell, 1996; Morrow, 2000). In their study, managing conflict (teasing, bullying, criticism) with peers as well as making and negotiating friendships (e.g. being accepted) loom large in adolescents' narratives. Hey's (1997) detailed ethnographic research reveals that 'friendship work' need not necessarily be face-to-face and that phone texting is one contemporary symbolic and material strategy through which inclusion and exclusion operates.

### *Friendship variations*

It must also be borne in mind that the qualities that adolescents find important in friendships vary in age and gender terms (Griffin, 1985; Frost et al, 2002; O'Connor et al, 2004). The intrinsic benefits to friendship are the possibility for closeness and intimacy; aspects which are values for their own sake rather than any necessary exchange value (Cotterell, 1996, p. 67; O'Connor et al, 2004). O'Connor et al's (2004) textual analysis

of children and adolescents' narratives implies differences in how friendships are weighed up in age and gender terms. Young people aged 10 to 12 years show more evidence of friendship identification than those aged 14 to 17 years, with girls indicating more emotional connectedness, and wider networks, than boys, especially for the older group. Cotterell's review of the literature shows distinct gender differences in terms of friendship interaction and relationships. For instance, girls engage in more self-disclosure, revealing more intimate inner emotional problem-oriented feelings that tend to outweigh what is provided by parents in this regard. Girls tend to use telephones for lengthier conversations more often than boys, whose favoured way of cultivating friendships is through sharing in activities and conversing about events engaged in together. The nature of 'girl talk' appears to be more personal and geared towards the emotional difficulties of relationships and other vulnerabilities (O'Connor et al, 2004). Girls in effect tend to practice a different style to boys and engage in more expressive forms of communication and interaction with their girlfriends on issues that trouble them. Differences in style of interaction, according to Cotterell, 'may help to explain the frustrations experienced in communications between friends of the opposite sex' (1996, p.70-1).

Developing and maintaining friendships out-of-school not only requires confidence and social skills (Cotterell, 1996; Coleman and Hendry, 1999) but opportunities for engagement provided by family and one's environment. In the context of the latter, the nature of friendship interactions appears to differ between urban and rural environments, although the evidence is not entirely fruitful in this regard. Rural adolescents, for instance, tend to have smaller, more cohesive peer groups, which means that conflict and stress feature more prominently as concerns among rural adolescents than their urban counterparts, who tend to be part of a much wider network of peers (Elgar et al, 2003). Rural children and adolescents have less scope for conflict given the smaller number of friends they might possibly interact with.

#### *Opportunities for cultivating friendships*

As cultural geographers and sociologists of childhood make clear, place exerts a distinct influence upon social relations. Children need to actively cultivate local spheres beyond the home, albeit opportunities for cultivating friendships are contextualised by broader concerns and fears about societal risk. A general feature is that children's use of time and space has become structured increasingly in accordance with adult life and subject to heightened surveillance (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; O'Brien et al, 2000; Childress, 2004; Karsten, 2005). Risks associated with place, such as traffic concerns or strangers inhabiting public space have altered the nature of parent-child relations in terms of time-space usage (Hill and Tisdall, 1997; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Harden, 2000; Mayall, 2002; Maguire and Shirlow, 2004). The result is that young people's play and recreation is increasingly controlled and regulated by adults rather than spontaneous (Karsten, 2005; p. 287) and public space has generally narrowed in accessibility (Childress, 2004). Such aspects have led to an increase in the institutionalisation of leisure and play (e.g. swimming clubs, theatre groups) for children and adolescents, who have become what Karsten (2005) describes as the 'backseat generation', especially those from middle class backgrounds (Valentine and McKendrick, 1997; Lareau, 2000). While O'Brien et al (2000) question the assumption that 'chaperoned lifestyles' are somehow negative for friendships and peer relations, some authors (Adler and Adler, 1994) claim, however, that the growth in institutionalised play has negative implications for the development of children's self-reliance, co-operation, problem solving and interpersonal skills. Nevertheless, a recent phenomenon noted among childhood geographers and sociologists, such as Valentine and McKendrick (1997) and Karsten (2005), is that outdoor play has generally declined and tends to be undertaken increasingly within the confines of the home or its close proximity, such as private gardens.

Opportunities for developing friendships is further shaped by socio-spatial context. Meeting friends in a rural context is

especially constrained by lack of youth provision, which appears as an almost universal theme in young people's accounts of rural life; a finding that is well-documented in the international literature (Matthews et al, 2000; McGrath, 2001; Tucker and Matthews, 2001; Panelli *et al* 2002; Auclair and Vanoni, 2004; De Róiste and Dineen, 2005; Rye, 2006). Socialising in pubs can occur at a relatively young age, with the pub effectively being the de facto 'youth club' for many rural youth. Most of those in Geraghty et al's (1997) study of rural Northern Ireland youth felt that, apart from sport activities, there were no places for young people to meet their friends, which meant that most preoccupied their time with activities in the home; a growing feature of privatised leisure identified also by Valentine and McKendrick (1997). Females in the Geraghty et al study also appeared to be least satisfied with the leisure opportunities available to them, pointing out the dominance of a 'pub and football' culture and its creation of a male dominated public sphere.

By the time many reach the age of sixteen, youth clubs no longer appear attractive spaces in which to meet other young people (Geraghty et al, 1997, pp. 79-80). De Róiste and Dineen's (2005) evidence suggests that older adolescents (seventeen and eighteen year olds) in rural areas are those most likely to encounter transport constraints as they seek to widen their social boundaries at this age.

In the context of isolation and distance, contemporary communication technologies, such as email and the Internet, can hold especial significance for rural children and youth. Valentine and Holloway (2001) demonstrate how email and Internet are actively used by rural young people in cultivating friendships and social networks in an everyday context. As the authors clearly illustrate, these technologies help 'to create and (re)configure relationships with their off-line peers, to establish new friends on-line, as social capital to enhance their standing amongst their off-line friends, and to have fun (often on-line with their off-line friends), for example by playing with their, identities' (2001, p. 392). In their findings, on-line technologies were actively

utilised to prevent bullying and to organise social get-togethers and, in this sense, such technologies should be considered as everyday social practices through which young people make sense of their worlds.

In sum, many studies suggest that child and adolescent friendships and opportunities for their cultivation are conditioned and circumscribed by such distinct factors as age, gender, socioeconomic status and the socio-spatial contexts of rural and urban residence. However, we know less about the interactive effects of these and in particular, the extent to which each or any of these aspects assume more importance in understanding differences among young people. It is to this complexity that the current study is addressed.

### **The research**

The findings presented are based on the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) Survey undertaken in 2002, which surveyed 8,316 pupils in the Republic of Ireland. HBSC is a cross-national study conducted in collaboration with the World Health Organisation European Office. Data are collected every four years within participating countries, from children aged 11, 13 and 15 years covering late childhood, early and mid-adolescence. Multidisciplinary teams from forty-one countries collaborate in the design of the survey, which involves the administration of self-completion questionnaires to students in classrooms, and must conform to the international protocol in relation to sampling and data collection (see Currie *et al*, 2004). The Irish data reported here were collected from a sample designed to be representative of the distribution of children in the target ages throughout the country. Primary and post-primary schools were randomly selected from lists provided by the national Department of Education and Science. Classrooms within schools were subsequently randomly selected for participation.

Friendship measures included within the survey were: number of

close friends (of same and opposite sex); ease of communication among friends (of same and opposite sex); level of interaction with friends by telephone, email or texting; amount of time spent with friends outside of school; how equally friends decide how they spend their time and involvement in clubs as potential source of friendships. All statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences). For the current analyses, the response options for all variables were dichotomised (e.g. between response of 'strongly agree'/'agree' and response of 'strongly disagree'/'disagree'). A series of chi square analyses were employed to test for the significance of differences in reported behaviours and perceptions between urban and rural children and within the rural group, between those who come from farm and non-farm households.<sup>1</sup> To avoid masking any possible effect of gender, these analyses are conducted separately for males and females. Gender, age group, parental occupational group, urban/rural status and farm/non-farm household were employed as predictors simultaneously in the regression models tested.

### Findings

Our primary interest in this paper is to disentangle the effects of socio-spatial context on the nature and quality of childrens and adolescents' friendship formations. In the analysis, we assessed whether friendships differed that much from one another among boys and girls in rural, farm and urban environments.

<sup>1</sup> We have classified 'urban' from respondents' description of where they live as 'city or town' while 'rural' indicates 'village or country'. This of course does not capture fully the socially constructed meaning of 'rural' and 'urban' in the sense that places can share elements of both in their symbolic and material composition; for example suburban areas or satellite towns can retain a 'rural' feel while having material elements that we associate with more urbanised environments (see Corcoran, 2005). In our analysis, we also generalise in our treatment of the 'farm' category, where the main parental occupation is described by the young person as simply 'farming'. Such characterisation does not distinguish in terms of farming system, size or type which is beyond the scope of the present paper.

### Friendships

The analyses revealed several distinct differences in the nature of friendship relations and interactions. There are few significant differences in terms of the size of friendship network overall although a smaller proportion of both boys and girls from farm backgrounds have three or more close friends, which tends to be significantly different ( $p < 0.05$ ) to their rural non-farm counterparts. Generally, a higher proportion of boys claimed to have close female friends than girls having male friends, and more so in the rural context. In terms of ease of communication with best friends, it appears that although girls show higher levels than boys, a lower, but statistically significant, percentage of rural girls, compared with urban, found it 'very easy' or 'easy' to talk to friends about 'things that bother them' (84 per cent 'rural' versus 86.5 per cent 'urban'). In the rural context, more non-farm girls find it easier to communicate than farm girls, again in significant terms. Similar differences are also noted in relation to communication with friends of the same sex. When it comes to communication with friends of the opposite sex, significant differences ( $p < 0.001$ ) are apparent in the lower proportion of boys who live in rural locations who find it easy to communicate (53.1 per cent of 'rural' versus 58.1 per cent of 'urban'). A lower proportion of boys and girls from farm backgrounds felt that they had easy communicative relations with friends of the opposite sex (48.6 and 41.1 per cent respectively).

### Modes of communication

When we assess young people's use of communication modes that do not involve face-to-face encounters, such as use of telephone, texting and emailing, we can see distinct gender and location patterns. Girls generally tend to use such modes far more often than boys on a weekly basis (three or more days per week), although it appears that urban girls spend significantly ( $p < 0.001$  level) more time than rural girls communicating this way (26.5 per cent compared with 22.2 per cent). Within the rural environment, a notably higher proportion of non-farm children, especially girls, communicate like this (71.7 per cent compared with 60.7 per cent of farm girls); differences which are

again significant. A significant difference can be noted between urban and rural girls in terms of spending one hour or more per day emailing (21.2 per cent and 18.8 per cent respectively). Within the rural population itself, however, there are significant differences in terms of texting time (one hour or more per day), with boys, and especially girls, in non-farm environments showing greater propensity towards this.

#### *Evening and after-school time*

There are also distinct differences in the amount of evening and after school time that rural and urban youth spend with their friends. Three quarters of urban boys indicate that they spent three evenings or more per week with friends, compared with 47 per cent of rural boys. There is a marked decline in this time use among girls in the sample, especially among rural girls, 38 per cent of whom spent three evenings or more compared with 60 per cent for urban girls. The proportion further declines to just over a quarter for girls from farming backgrounds. A higher proportion of girls indicated that they decided equally how to spend time with their friends. Similar patterns are evident when young people were asked how many days per week they spent with friends straight after school. There are no significant differences in terms of the amount of club involvement, although boys from farming backgrounds show the highest proportion of those who spend three days per week involved with a club.

#### *The multivariate analysis*

The multivariate analysis investigates the extent to which living in a rural, urban or farm environment changes the odds of friendship relations and are influenced by socio-spatial context, over and above other important criteria, such as the young person's age, gender and occupational background. We discuss the analysis in terms of odds ratios, which assesses the odds of one category against a 'reference' category with an odds value of one (for example, female odds are discussed against males who constitute the reference group in the gender variable; under fourteen year olds against over fourteen year olds in the age

variable and so on). An odds value greater than one means there is a greater likelihood of expressing a behaviour or attitude vis-à-vis the reference group.

On all measures that analyse friendship relations, gender is shown to exert a powerful independent effect, most typically at the 0.001 significance level. What stands out in this regard is that being a girl significantly increases the odds of having a network of close friends by a factor of five, although reduces the time spent with friends after school or in the evening by almost half. Girls and those over fourteen years of age show significantly easier communication with best friends and friends of the same sex, and to use forms of communication that are non-face-to-face. When we introduce parents' occupational status, we find that there are fewer differences, with the exception of the higher number of male friends and ease of communication with members of the opposite sex among 'blue collar' children and adolescents.<sup>2</sup> These young people are more likely to spend more time per week with friends, are less involved in clubs and spend less time emailing. The effect of urban/rural location appears to minimise with the distinct exception of the lower likelihood of spending time with friends straight after school or in the evening among rural children and adolescents; the odds being half that of urban young people. However, once we deconstruct the rural context between farm and non-farm children, the influence this has on friendships is again quite apparent. Less use is made of communication involving technologies, less time is spent with friends and there appears to be less involvement in clubs among farm offspring (the odds are reduced to between 0.6 and 0.7 among the latter). In turn, farm children seem to have less ease of communication with friends of the same sex and to have fewer female friends within their networks (reduced odds of 0.8).

<sup>2</sup> 'Blue collar' refers to occupations categorised as skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled manual work. 'White collar' occupations refer to professional and managerial positions.

Finally, in the regression model, we introduced a set of measures that help to identify the level of affluence within the young people's families, such as the number of family cars, holidays per year, having their own bedroom and owning a computer. Children from farm families are statistically more likely to deem themselves not to be 'well-off' and to lack those items that signify a degree of contemporary affluence. While children from rural areas are more than likely to be living in households where there are two or more cars, they are also less likely to go on more than two holidays per year or to have two or more computers at home (the odds rate drops to between 0.3 and 0.5 for these measures).

### Discussion

The analysis from the large scale survey seeks to broaden our understanding of how children and adolescents differ in their friendships. Some of our findings can confirm existing evidence, while others elicit new insights and areas for further research and policy consideration. Overall, significant variations are apparent in this regard, which point not only the distinct importance of age, gender and socio-economic positioning but also the socio-spatial contexts of rural, farm and urban environments. While our knowledge is more complete concerning how the former variables have influenced young people's relationships and interactions, less comparative data about the latter contexts has limited our understanding about their substantive influence. The evidence suggests that such factors impact on children and adolescents in pronounced, albeit complex, ways. Incorporating these in a multivariate regression analysis allows us to compare and disentangle the significance of these key contexts on the lives of young people and serves to strengthen our understanding of the key influences on their social lives.

The present study clearly confirms existing evidence surrounding the importance of gender and age in the formation and maintenance of friendships (O'Connor et al, 2004). Being a girl and over fourteen years of age significantly increases the

possibilities for communicating better with a best friend and friend of the same sex, and using forms of communication that are non-face-to-face. Being female significantly increases the chance of having a network of close friends (ibid), although reduces the time spent with friends after school or in the evening. Despite less time spent together, the higher usage rate of telephone, email and texting suggests that girls and over fourteen year olds are far from being isolated from friends. Rather, given the statistically significant lower proportion of girls and older adolescents who feel safe in their local area, such forms of communication may be more pragmatic. It would seem to confirm Childress's (2004, p.203) point that: '[s]ocial life that is prohibited in space may reappear for many young people through chat rooms, instant messaging, virtual gaming and the telephone.' O'Brien et al (2000) likewise suggest global communication networks as a source of enrichment rather than entrapment for children and adolescents. In policy terms, programme developers and practitioners would do well to devise ways in which they might reach this audience (as commercial companies seem able) using the everyday forms of communication adopted by young people, especially in relation to critical health and well-being concerns.

The regression analysis reveals that aspects of friendship, such as processes and means of communication, are not significantly different between urban and rural young people in terms of the effect of location above the other independent factors. Much of the differences noted in the initial analyses therefore can be accounted for by age and gender. Where a significant difference does emerge, however, is in relation to the amount of time young people spend socialising together. In definitive terms, we can see that rural youth do not match their urban contemporaries in the amount of time they can spend in each other's company. This is perhaps not surprising given the paucity of opportunities and the extra burdens associated with meeting people in the countryside. Geographical isolation and considerable time spent commuting to and from school constitute strong barriers for young people's ability to mix socially in rural communities. The inability to have



such needs met within one's community, particularly in the formative years, should be an important public policy concern. The development of safe, creative and appropriate play areas for children and teenagers in rural areas would constitute an important step in improving the lives of young people in the countryside, villages and small towns of Ireland.

As some authors (Geraghty et al, 1997; Song, 1996) make clear, young people are not necessarily as free as might be assumed, and leisure time tends to be constrained by study, employment, childcare, elderly care, helping in the family business or farm and domestic responsibilities. The lack of public recreational space for young people also means that behaviour appears highly visible and scrutinised, mostly by adults. Tucker and Matthews's (2001) research among girls in rural Northamptonshire illuminates the resultant conflict present in their relationships with adults and other younger people in the use of rural space. The authors suggest that growing up in the countryside or village, far from being a rural idyllic experience, is problematic and that girls generally face a difficult time. Our research likewise suggests a need to reveal more about this aspect among Irish children and adolescents. It would appear then that school functions as an important social milieu for rural youth, especially young females; a finding that policymakers and practitioners ought to consider carefully in terms of programme design for young people. Geraghty et al (1997) make the point that school assumes particular importance in the lives of young females because it is less acceptable for them to 'hang out' on the streets in the absence of suitable activities and facilities (see also Tucker and Matthews, 2001), and also because they have more domestic responsibilities and less time available for themselves (Geraghty et al, 1997, p.74).

What is striking about the evidence are the differences in friendships between young people from rural non-farm and farm backgrounds. Children from farm families find it more difficult to communicate with friends of the same sex on matters of importance to them and spend less time with friends than other

rural non-farm young people. They spend less time communicating with friends via telephone, email or text and are less involved in clubs, where there may be chances to develop friendships. The findings would suggest that farm children and adolescents experience a greater degree of isolation from peers and activities, which may be accounted for by the greater significance of the farm and family in their lives. Elder and Conger's study of farm families in the United States (2000) suggests that there are social and cultural properties unique to such families which suggest closer relationships at a family level. These include the strength of generational continuity and extended family, the interdependence and responsibility associated with collective or shared activity associated with farm life. Such families tend to be quite active in the cultivation of cultural capital through family social capital processes and nurturing activities which as identified by Israel et al (2001), might include: helping children with homework, discussing school activities with them, holding out strong expectations as well as monitoring and control of leisure time (p.45). In this regard, we could hypothesise that children from farm families tend to experience more restrictions in their time-space usage. While there are no similar studies to Elder and Conger's in the Irish context, O'Hara's (1997) evidence distinctly shows how mothers in farm families actively communicate to their daughters the importance of acquiring cultural capital in the form of educational qualifications, in 'an attempt to ensure that the cycle of dependent farm wife is fractured and that the next generation have better choices' (p.153). Such cultural factors provide important contextual cues to our appreciation of children and adolescents' friendship possibilities.

If such studies (e.g. Esterman and Hedlund, 1994; Elder and Conger, 2000) hold true in the Irish case, it may indicate a greater degree of family connectedness and cohesion for such young people, whose need for socialising with friends may not be as necessary; albeit farm adolescents in Esterman and Hedlund (1994) saw isolation from peers as a disadvantage. On the other hand, like some young people in O'Connor et al's

(2004) study whose family and friendship network were distinctly absent from their discourses, there is a need to investigate further the 'emotional landscapes' and needs of such young people. As Esterman and Hedlund (1994) suggest, such children and youth represent a unique population, who encounter not only financial stress within family life, but also a different social connectedness revolving more towards family confidants. When we examine the differences in family affluence levels, we find that the statistically significant lack of resources among farm children might account for the boundaries to their social possibilities. This aspect is consistent with the findings that many farm families encounter serious deprivation and income poverty (see Commins 2004). As our study reveals, being a child in a farm family increases the odds of not having access to family cars, holidays, computers, bedroom space and of viewing oneself as less well-off.

These findings that young farm dwellers appear to have less social connectedness than other young people within the community - whether for reasons to do with family social capital or the degree of financial capital - are difficult to interpret in the absence of more evidence, but point to a phenomenon worthy of more serious investigation in our view. Such research should also incorporate a focus on whether young people's emotional wellbeing is correlated with such issues. If more compelling evidence confirms this, as a policy consideration it would be important to find ways of reaching this particular group of children and adolescents, whether through programme design aimed at fostering and developing friendship networks or informing young people about adolescent well-being issues.

### Conclusion

We conclude that the socio-spatial context of children and adolescents' lives exerts variable dimensions upon their view of the world and their social landscapes. We concur with the view expressed by Nairn et al (2003) that there is no such unitary essence to being a young person in the countryside or in more

urban places. In fact, our evidence suggests the need to further deconstruct notions such as the 'rural' to illustrate how differences emerge within socio-spatial contexts. Here, we have demonstrated that within rural life itself, there are key distinctions to be drawn between farm and non-farm ways of life. To this we can add that gender, age and family resources also structure how young people go about engaging with one another. The evidence discussed here suggests that in view of its significance there can be no straight forward reading of socio-spatial context on children's and adolescents' lives. We have focused on a number of dimensions within the general category of friendships, a certain range of which reveal distinct socio-spatial patterning.

Finally, while the present study is based on quantitative findings that reveal patterns and statistically robust analyses of Irish children and adolescents, further qualitative sources of data could provide more insights to the differential ways in which friendships are experienced and understood among children and adolescents in different contexts.

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