



To be-Tween: Wellbeing and Becoming Young Male Teenagers Through Informal Sport

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Abstract

There has been a global movement towards the facilitation of informal sports as tools for community development focusing on the benefits and transformative aspects of these activities for ‘healthy’ young people. Wellbeing literature suggests that children and young people are engaging in healthy activities now as part of a concern for their future capabilities and opportunities for becoming. This paper provides new insights into the experiences of tweens as a life-stage of transition between childhood and adolescence during which young people negotiate child and teen identities in their navigation of leisure spaces, a practice that remains under-explored in youth research. Through innovative qualitative methods in photo elicitation and online paired interviews with young males aged 12 and 13 years this interplay between leisure, wellbeing and becoming as part of tweenhood is explored. Findings reveal new evidence of the positioning of informal sport by young male teenagers as healthy and productive, but the spaces themselves as polluted, unsafe and supporting of unhealthy behaviours, highlighting complex relations with other users and issues of neglect and maintenance of public space. Multi-generational co-participation of parents and young people supported access to resources, generating the development of spatial autonomy in finding alternative spaces; so constituting part of a process of independent mobility not yet fully realised.

Keywords Informal sport · Leisure · Wellbeing · Youth · Tween · Geography

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1 Introduction

In almost all OECD countries, life satisfaction for young people is declining (OECD 2024). In the UK the percentage of 15-year-olds reporting high life satisfaction has dropped from 28% to just under 16% over the previous 7 years (OECD 2017). Gennings et al. (2021 p. 84) define young people's wellbeing as 'a multifaceted perception of an interaction between an individual's positive feelings and external influences', and government policies are recognising the significance of external factors such as leisure choices and environments in addressing wellbeing issues such as social behaviour, inequality and health (Coakley, 2011). Childhood experiences are considered indicators of future behaviours and wellbeing as individuals move into adulthood. It is argued that concern for future capabilities and opportunities drives children and young people's engagement in healthy forms of leisure as part of an emerging discourse of well-becoming (Ben-Ariah 2000; Husbands et al. 2024), which reframes children's and young people's process of becoming as dynamic and shaped by their capacities and opportunities to grow, change and participate meaningfully in everyday environments.

Public health policy recognises active leisure as an important component of young people's wellbeing, seeking to improve public health by creating a 'culture' of physical activity (Jeanes et al., 2019, 2024). Recent Sport England strategy has shifted emphasis from children and teenagers playing sport, to making opportunities to embed physical activity throughout their lives more freely available (Sport England, 2021). In the UK, government strategy suggests that a significant policy gap remains, however, in ensuring that children remain active outside of school, and that they feel safe and supported in these practices (DCMS, 2023).

There has been a global movement towards the facilitation of informal sports as tools for community development with specific focus on the benefits and transformative aspects of these activities for 'healthy' young people (Beal et al., 2017; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2017; Säfvenbom et al., 2023). The effect of the COVID-19 outbreak and resulting lockdowns on young people's mental and physical health have focused more attention on informal sport with recent studies noting the role of sub(urban) informal sport spaces for supporting young people's wellbeing during this time (Clark, et al. 2023; Neal et al., 2023). For policy to be effective there is a need, however, to develop a fuller understanding that can differentiate the distinct developmental and social transitions and spatialities that are currently underrepresented in academic literatures and research on young people's informal sport participation (King & Church, 2017). This paper aims to fill this crucial gap in research and examines the role of informal sport in the process of becoming and the transition from childhood to adolescence with sporting activities acting as a vehicle for navigating wellbeing in youth, so adding to our understanding of the changing experiences, social norms and priorities occurring from childhood to adolescence (Gennings et al., 2021). In the following, we draw upon notions of wellbeing and well-becoming to deepen our understanding of informal youth sport by examining the positioning of children and young people as users of public leisure space and the subject of sport and leisure policy interventions to improve their health.

2 Tweenhood as becoming: local worlds and everyday negotiation

Established over twenty years ago, youth geographies have sought to increase the visibility of young people's political agency, subjectivities and participation in decision-making (Skelton, 2013) as part of attention placed on the lives of the young in what was referred to as the new social studies of childhood (Valentine & Holloway, 2000). This key body of work examined the everyday spatial practices of young people, viewing the independent navigation of public space as part of a process of transitioning to adulthood and their emerging sense of self (Mathews et al. 1998; Cahill, 2000). The focus of youth geographies on young people's everyday engagements with their local environment drew attention to complexities of the leisure experience in youth, exposing a struggle to find spaces to 'carve out for themselves' (Skelton and Valentine 1998:7). Since these seminal works in the early 2000s, a period of more disparate study has been observed, with recent reflections in *Children's Geographies* noting a lack of visibility and distinctiveness of youth geographies as a sub-disciplinary field (Valentine, 2019). Smith and Mills (2018, p.3) suggest that this constitutes 'a certain reticence to engage with the complexities of youth itself and the contemporary geographies of youth cultures'. More recently, there has been a renewed focus on the "micro geographies" of youth (Horton et al., 2014; Wijntuin & Koster, 2019; Weir, 2023; Hedrén et al., 2026) and the understanding of local place relations as part of youth leisure, including more focus on rural and suburban geographies of youth, recognising that issues related to using public space for young people are often situational, and tied to local conditions (Costa et al., 2020).

In addition to the contributions to understanding young people's socio-spatial lives, youth geographies have drawn attention to an ambiguity of 'children' and 'young people' as parallel terms despite the vast multiplicity of difference in experiences both within and between them, and criticism over the construction of the unitary public child (Weller, 2006). Earlier work on youth transitions approached youth according to the social structuring of pathways to adulthood and the move from childhood dependency to economic and social adult status as a cause of uncertainty and tension (Macdonald & Shildrick, 2007). Fixed age categories such as those employed by the UN define 'youth' as those persons between 15 and 24 years, whilst the WHO adopts the same definition but further distinguishes adolescents as individuals aged 10–19 years old. Whilst the fluidity of boundaries has long been accepted (Sibley 1995; Roberts 2006), Smith and Mills (2018) suggest these now vacillate, describing an unsteady swaying and uncertainty between childhood, youth and adulthood. Punch (2002) forged the concept of negotiated interdependence as way of understanding how young people move in and out of relative autonomy and dependence, experiencing constraints of various structures and responsibilities yet sustaining the capacity to act within and between these limits.

There have been calls for a more relational understanding of age – one that foregrounds intergenerationality, attends to intersectional differences, and adopts a life-course perspective to illuminate diverse identity experiences of young people (Hopkins & Pain, 2007). This move away from the homogeneity of youth experience is important when considering the pre-teens life-stage and in the conceptualisation of 'twens'. The term, which originally emerged in the 1990's, is typically associated

with the pre-teen period between 8 and 13 years of age and has become popularised into everyday vernacular to describe a time of developmental significance in the progression from childhood to adolescence (Velding, 2017). Tweenhood is representative of the liminality of youth, manifested through the ongoing negotiation between child and teen identities and informed by socio-cultural norms, values and assumptions on what it means to be a child, teenager and adult (De Leyn et al., 2022).

This life-stage that involves the process of becoming during the transition from childhood to adolescence has often been missed in research falling between children's and youth or adult geographies (Weller, 2006) despite it being a key time of transition embodying the ambiguity and 'greyness' of what it means to be a child or a teenager. For example, research by De Leyn et al. (2022) found that tweens themselves do not report experiences of 'being in transition'; rather, they discuss a repeated negotiation of child and teen identities as they navigate the space between playfulness, risk-taking and freedoms of adolescence. It is claimed that pre-teens have few places in the public realm that they feel they own or that matter to them (Baber and Corkery, 2020). This is seen in the design and planning of play spaces, with a lack of play equipment provided for children over 8 years old (Amholt et al., 2022) and it is a situation that can exacerbate the lack of inclusive play environments for teenage girls (MSFG, 2023). Research on tween girls suggests that their consumption is intrinsically linked to their desire for belonging and independence in their own local social worlds (Macdonald, 2017) and focuses on tween girls' digital life-worlds (García-Gómez, 2018) or consumption in girlhood (Coulter, 2021; Weber & Maffezzoli, 2022). Whilst some tween studies of digital lives include both boys and girls (Jennings & Caplovitz, 2022; Reich, 2024), we know very little about the tweenhood of boys, especially their engagement with physical activity and the outdoors, and this article therefore focuses primarily upon male subjects to address the gap in understanding the related processes of becoming and transition from childhood to adolescence.

Work on youth transitions also utilises the concept of 'becoming' to explore the multiple experiences encountered throughout the life-course. For Worth (2009), a focus on the future is the essence of becoming and it is often used to describe a fluid process of identity formation, personal growth and transition, rather than a fixed stage of life. From this perspective, leisure can be positioned as an opportunity for personal development, such as nurturing their personal wellbeing. Batchelor et al. (2020) discuss the leisure precarity which organises young people's free time, noting that young people have come to fear empty time, positioning leisure as part of wider obligations to do something productive. In Jennings et al.'s (2021) work to define wellbeing in youth, they argue that determination to set and achieve goals was an important component of young people's perceptions of wellbeing. Young people who come to achieve 'wellbeing' are valorised as self-responsible and resilient (Coffey, 2020) and this can involve wider neoliberal pressures on young people to 'look good, feel good' (Threadgold, 2019) through healthy, 'fit' bodies; gain employability skills; and contribute value to society and also evade moral panic. This focus on personal potential positions children and young people as 'future agents' (Uprichard, 2008, p.312) with wellbeing aligned with a Deleuzian notion of health, as the body's capacity to form relations which ensure an 'open future' (Coffey, 2020, p.78).

There has been criticism in the use of ‘becoming’ for positioning children as developing towards something better as opposed to valuing childhoods, and children’s agency in its own right (Uprichard, 2008). A focus on becoming positions young people as non-adult, not yet independent, responsible or wise (Threadgold, 2019). Uprichard (2008) argues that perceiving children through a discourse of both ‘being and becoming’ brings into consideration the arrow of time, addressing the antagonism between the being child that becomes adult. This, it is argued, does not decrease children’s agency but extends it ‘to consider the child as a social actor constructing his or her everyday life and the world around them, both in the present and the future’ (Uprichard, 2008; p.312). For young teenagers and pre-teens, being and becoming may be particularly useful in exploring the personal narratives of change, with tweens rarely considered as a settling point, but instead as in transition to adolescence and a constantly evolving process of becoming.

2.1 Youth and informal sport space

It is claimed that participation in informal sport is now more popular than organised club sport (Neal et al., 2023). As non-competitive activities they offer young people opportunities for self-expression, social relationships and connection with their local environments (Thorpe, 2021). Jeanes et al. (2019 p.79) recognise the diverse application of the term ‘informal sport’, offering a definition as ‘traditional recognised sporting forms, played by groups who are not affiliated to sporting bodies or pay membership fees.’ In later work, Jeanes et al. (2022) imply that ‘informal’ denotes participation that is characterised by flexibility as opposed to the structures of organised or club sport. Whilst informal sport can be spontaneous, it often sees repeated engagement with certain spaces, and at certain times (Neal et al. 2023).

Informal sports have important links to how public spaces are used and micro-leisure spaces are made and constructed by participants (Neal et al., 2023). Literature on informal sports draws attention to mundane leisure spaces in predominantly urban environments and the appropriation of these spaces by participants (Gilchrist and Wheaton 2017; Amholt et al., 2022). Young people’s informal use of public spaces is historically constructed as a form of urban pollution, a violation of socio-spatial order which renders their presence as ambivalent and contestable (Evers, 2019; O’Connor et al., 2023). Whilst much of their informal use may be innocuous, or in some cases considered productive, the gathering of young people together affects the feelings of others who also use or view those spaces (Amholt et al., 2022; Tani, 2015; Crossley et al., 2025; Stenning, 2025). Jeanes et al.’s (2022) research reveals a determination amongst informal sport participants to claim spaces for their own participation, to counter a spatial injustice in the public provision for informal sports.

Across debates about young people’s use of public space, behavioural approaches have long framed informal outdoor sports as tools for self-development or social improvement. Such perspectives emphasise the capacity of activities like skateboarding, mountain biking, BMX or parkour to cultivate confidence, discipline, resilience and prosocial behaviour (King & Church, 2020). Neal et al. (2023 p.8) describe this through the lens of ‘embodied citizenship’, where citizenship is enacted through everyday physical practices rather than formal civic participation (also see Howell,

2008). Similarly, Beal et al. (2017 p.14) identify a globalised belief in skateboarding as socially beneficial, producing shared discourses of the ‘good’ skateboarder and ‘good’ community among stakeholders. Gilchrist and Wheaton (2017) likewise challenge older narratives of street-based sports as rebellious or anti-social, instead positioning them as constructive practices that animate local spaces and foster engagement. In this behavioural framing, participants express citizenship through movement, claiming space and negotiating social relations through diverse physical cultural practices (see also Ugolotti, 2024; Book & Högdahl, 2024).

As participation increases, interest has grown beyond public good, to the value of informal sports as a resource for individual wellbeing. Much of this work positions the wellbeing benefits as a resource for future health. Säfvenbom et al. (2023) review the mental, biological, social and behavioural outcomes of informal sports for individual participants framing them in the context of their developmental potential. Skateparks are framed as spaces to develop personal responsibility (Howell, 2008) or, through the work of Clark and Sayers (2023), as spaces of healing offering a sense of ‘new possibilities’ to girls and non-binary participants who had experienced poor mental health. This focus becoming raises important considerations for young people who are exploring participation in the here and now.

More recent rights-based approaches, however, shift the emphasis from behavioural outcomes to structural entitlements. These perspectives argue that young people should have guaranteed access to safe, well-maintained and welcoming outdoor environments, regardless of whether their activities are judged socially productive. Calls to enshrine a formal ‘right to play’ (Welsh Government, 2014; Centre for Young Lives, 2025) reflect growing national and international concern about the deteriorating conditions of playgrounds, parks and other public spaces essential to children’s and young people’s development (Lott, 2025, p.7). In contrast to behavioural models that justify informal sport through its perceived benefits, rights-based approaches foreground young people’s entitlement to space, autonomy and play as fundamental civic rights essential to wellbeing and becoming.

Such developments point to the need for more detailed, context-specific understanding of how young males encounter and make sense of informal sport spaces as part of the process of becoming and the transition from childhood to adolescence. This paper explores the experiences of young males aged 12 and 13 years, considering in particular the interplay between wellbeing and becoming as part of tweenhood. In doing so, it addresses a notable empirical and conceptual gap in youth studies, where the everyday spatial practices of teenage boys remain under-examined despite their visibility in public space. The paper examines how teenage boys navigate and make use of outdoor space, and how their practices illuminate broader questions about autonomy, independence, and the conditions under which young people can flourish during the transition from childhood to adolescence. The paper therefore advances current scholarship by foregrounding the spatial, developmental and civic significance of informal sport for a group whose experiences are often assumed rather than researched.

3 Methodology

The aim of this research was to explore young people's experiences of using local outdoor spaces as part of their independent leisure time. The project sought to include the voices of young people in the design of a suburban bike park, led by a grass-roots group of local campaigners involved in informal sports. The research adopted a youth-led approach grounded in the belief that society is enriched by the participation of all groups, including children and young people (Delgado, 2006). 'New' social studies of childhood positioned children as competent social actors, and has led to extensive child-centred research approaches and techniques which are inclusive and participatory, to be conducted with rather than on children and young people (Barker & Weller, 2003; Hopper and Iwasaki, 2017; Van Elsen et al. 2025). The aim of these methods is to get closer to young people's social worlds (Matthews et al. 2000) but also to address the power imbalance between researchers and youth participants.

The research process consisted of two phases. Phase one invited participants to submit photographs of outdoor places they valued in their local area. Phase two invited these participants to take part in small-group online interviews incorporating photo elicitation from phase one to establish how and why they use local outdoor spaces, and to explore their views on development of a new informal sport space. The project took place over a 4-week period in a small town on the south coast of the UK. Participants were recruited through local schools, social media posts linked to existing informal sport spaces, and/or local community pages. We report on the findings of 15 male participants aged 12 and 13 years old and all engaged in full-time education; our focus prioritised exclusively the exploration of the experience of young male teenagers. All participants had a background in taking part in informal sport activities including skateboarding, cycling (mountain biking and BMX), scootering and basketball.

Photo elicitation is a well-established method in youth research, where it is argued that task-centred activities conducted away from the researcher give young people more control over the research process, and more freedom to choose the focus (Heath et al., 2009). Visual methods further enable an exploration of aspects of young people's lives that may remain hidden through conventional methods that rely solely on research-led questioning designed to explore the personal interests of young people (also see Tani, 2015). During phase one, Participants aged 12 and 13 submitted a total of 24 photos and videos of existing outdoor spaces in the local town and surrounding area. Participants were provided with guidelines by the researchers, emphasising subject matter such as places they like or dislike, objects or equipment they like to use, and examples of activities they take part in; in essence, adopting the role of local experts. Photos acted as interview prompts to discuss their everyday leisure lives as part of photo voice methodology (also see Power et al., 2014). Photographs were also analysed as visual representations of their use of outdoor spaces in relation to the research aim, highlighting personal and collective issues and helping to develop deeper insights into participants' lived experiences.

Phase two invited the same participants to take part in online interviews in pairs or in one case a group of three. Interviewing in friendship groups creates a relatable setting for young people, more closely mirroring the social relations of the leisure envi-

ronment under investigation and enabling the discussion of their shared experiences. Interviews began by discussing the photographs young people had taken, before a discussion on how and why they used local outdoor spaces, and exploring their own ideas on design of outdoor spaces for informal sport. Interviews lasted between 35 and 50 min and were hosted online via the Zoom platform using password protection, enabling ease of participation whilst also supporting safeguarding (McGarry, 2015). Interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. In a review of youth research, Afkinich and Blachman-Demner (2020) suggest incentives are beneficial for successfully including children and young people in research. In this case £25 shopping vouchers were offered to encourage a wide range of young people beyond those whose parents were engaged in the broader bike park project, to recognise the time and effort participants committed to the research process, when, given their age, they have limited access to economic resources.

The research was subject to a full ethical panel approval in accordance with the lead researcher's institutional protocols of researching with children under 16 years of age. Parental/guardian assent was obtained alongside those of participants. Participants names below are pseudonyms and do not bear any resemblance to participants real names. Administrative communication regarding the research process such as interview details, online links and payment of incentives was also arranged via young people's parents or guardians. Parents were able to accompany young people during interviews, however, no parents chose to be present. This research formed part of a wider project of young people's experiences of outdoor leisure on the south coast and for the purposes of analysis of tween voices, transcripts and photographs for the demographic were extracted and subjected to an independent process of thematic analysis.

4 Findings

4.1 Productive leisure and (un)well spaces

Participants positioned informal sport as an activity that was both healthy and productive. For example, being outdoors was constructed as a way to live well, and their use of informal sport spaces was framed positively in opposition to sedentary and indoor activities such as screen time. As Oakley, a 13 year old boy who enjoys mountain biking describes 'fresh air is good for you, healthy. Um, it's exciting and also, it's just better than sitting inside all day. Isn't it?' Others described the natural elements of spaces, the physicality of the sport, and the excitement, exploration and adventure of moving through their local environment as healthy ways of being, and something that made them feel good. For example, Caspar reasons 'it's just the whole...I can go and explore here and, you know, I might find a tree root that makes a great jump and it's healthy'.

Being outdoors was described not only as enjoyable but as a space for personal growth, skill development, and the cultivation of wellbeing through a sense of accomplishment. Although meaningful use of time is often framed as an adult-defined expectation (Owens, 2020), these accounts show young people actively taking up

that discourse themselves. Accounts reflected a moral imperative towards becoming, emphasising ongoing progress, improvement and self-betterment (Threadgold, 2019). This was evident in the visual material they chose to share: of the 27 photos or videos submitted, 13 depicted participants performing jumps or tricks on bikes or skateboards, demonstrating high levels of skill, mastery and purposeful effort (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Participants were sometimes challenged by adults when building jumps without permission in public spaces, and in the examples below, the narrative of the outdoors as healthy was presented as justification for their participation. Engagement in informal sport has been positioned as a way to affirm participants' worth and their claim to public spaces (also see Ugolotti, 2024), and similar dynamics are evident in O'Keeffe's work on DIY dirt jumps in Melbourne, where young riders construct and maintain their own trails as a form of place-making that both resists and reworks adult interpretations of public space (O'Keeffe, 2022). The focus on being active and outdoors as opposed to indoor and sedentary aligns with the notion of youth wellbeing linked to nature contact and physical activity articulated in policy goals (e.g. Sport England 2023; DCMS, 2023; DEFRA, 2018).

Alex: I find building like anything really fun so like it's just another excuse to keep us outdoors if we're building.

Seb: We're outside doing exercise I don't see what their problem is.

Whilst they saw their activities as positive, their view of designated informal sport spaces such as skate parks, dirt jump areas and sports pitches did not match their



Fig. 1 Dirt jumping in a local park (Oakley, Age 13)



Fig. 2 Jumping using portable ramps in a local car park (Matthew, Age 13)

positivity. In such cases, spaces were described as polluted, unsafe, even supporting unhealthy behaviours by others. The quality of informal sport space in terms of provision and upkeep was the subject of discussion. When accessing local parks, areas near to skate parks were identified as places to avoid because ‘that just feels the most dodgiest bit’ (Lucas, 13). The presence of litter in informal sport space was raised as a significant issue by many, for example Seb and Caleb discussed that there was

‘litter everywhere’ which made skate parks feel ‘dirtier’. This contradicted their own constructions of informal sport as healthy as Caleb contends; that ‘these should be an outside sort of space in like the natural, in the nature and stuff, not with litter’.

12-year-old Dexter talked about finding places to ride his bike in open spaces around his house but ‘most of the places we go there’s normally like a lot of litter’ and ‘it’s just puncture central really, glass everywhere’. He chose to submit a photo of a local playing field to show the ‘wonky, tiny football goals’ (see Fig. 3) in his local park. Other participants Tom and Finley submitted photos to demonstrate the poor quality of play equipment in local outdoor spaces as part of the research. Figure 4 shows missing swings in the park, whilst other photos submitted by them showed a broken zip wire and missing parts of a spinning wheel.

As well as the spaces themselves, other users of informal sport spaces did not align with tween participants positioning of these activities as healthy and supportive of wellbeing discussed above. For example, Dexter suggests the problem with littering occurs because ‘people are lazy’. Teenagers were constructed as ‘quite destructive, playing loud music, riding around shouting’ (Oakley, Age 13). Others discussed older teenagers using these spaces for drug taking or smoking as opposed to participation in informal sport, which was met with disapproval (see also Aalst & Brands, 2021).

Caspar: What they do is basically, they do them, go do a bit of skating, come back and do them again. It’s kind of like skate, drugs, skate, drugs.

Dexter: A lot of people that go there don’t even ride, they just go there to just sit down and smoke.



Fig. 3 Poor quality football goals in local park (Dexter, Age 12)



Fig. 4 Missing playground equipment (Tom, Age 13 and Finley, Age 12)

Four participants discussed the risk of theft and how they are ‘always on high alert, you can’t really put your bags down and chill out (Hudson, Age 13). Leon described the presence of older teenagers at the dirt jumps of a local park made him ‘feel like you you’re gonna get stabbed’. Leon talked about the wooded location of dirt jumps on the park fringes, and other participants also described feeling threatened by older teenagers in this location. Indy referred to an incident at the dirt jumps where an older

teenager shouted at him: ‘I think they shouted like ‘yo’ at me or something and then um, but in like a really aggressive way and that really scared me’.

Young people in this research had strong feelings about their local environment, expressing both frustration at the presence of litter and disappointment at the lack of care, associating it with neglect and a lack of respect for shared spaces by young people. Poor upkeep of outdoor play areas makes the space less functional, and the findings support the work of Evers (2019) who argues that the agency of pollution in leisure spaces requires further interrogation of its role and impact on users of these spaces.

Recent debates within leisure research have drawn attention to the role of grey spaces in children’s neighbourhoods; spaces that function as important resources for informal play yet often expose young people to environmental challenges such as pollution (Stenning, 2025). Tween narratives around informal sport spaces in this study align with Gennings et al.’s (2021) assertion that ‘feeling healthy’ is central to young people’s experiences of wellbeing. At the same time, these accounts reveal how tween males’ framing of informal sports as part of healthy, productive and active lifestyles is unsettled by the uneven quality of provision and the realities of sharing these spaces with other users. Their reflections highlight the tensions produced when leisure environments are polluted or poorly maintained, complicating the wellbeing benefits typically associated with outdoor activity (also see Evers, 2019; King & Church, 2020). Crossley et al. (2025) argue that such spaces should be recognised for the value they offer to children and young people as sites of play that do not compromise their health.

4.2 Be-tween spaces

Participants revealed tensions in the way in which they viewed the suitability of people and practices in different spaces in their local area. They discussed a sense of uncertainty over the appropriateness of themselves and other bodies in outdoor spaces and a lack of designated spaces and activities for their age group (see Kato, 2009). They enjoyed ‘being’ outside but playing was a contested subject. Hudson describes playing manhunt as ‘sounding childish’ but ‘I love going out, it’s just so much better than sitting inside’. This theme of feeling out of place as a young teenager engaging in outdoor play emerged most clearly in discussion about playgrounds. Several participants described these spaces as no longer sustaining their interest or meeting their needs:

Riley: We sometimes do still go there, but we wouldn’t stay for as long as we used to. We get like bored after a while.

Indy: Obviously, uh, we, as teenagers, are less interested in playgrounds.

Boredom emerged in accounts where participants were trying to make sense of play equipment that wasn’t designed with their age or interests in mind. Two participants chose to photograph a playground busy with parents and young children (see Fig. 5), and in their interviews they reflected on the difficulties of sharing these spaces fairly; constructing playgrounds as environments still coded and intended primarily for younger children:



Fig. 5 Parents and children in the playground (Tom, Age 13 and Finley, Age 12)

Tom: In the day, you see groups of teenagers and it does feel a bit wrong that they are in a park that's not really designed for them and it does feel intimidating if you wanted to go in the park because it feels like yeah they're going to judge you and it's kind of weird that they should be in there, anyway, because it's not made for them, it's made for the younger kids.

In comparison to the experiences of playgrounds, informal sport spaces such as skate parks were constructed as spaces for teenagers. Tom and Finley discussed their use by older teenagers and the impact on their own feelings of belonging and uncertainties about rights to informal spaces as tweens. Tom described ‘I’m in the middle of both of those age groups, I don’t really get listened to that much as I’m a pre-teen, I’m not really listened to because I’m at that age when younger kids will look up to me and but they’ll also be like yeah, and then the old kids they’re just like - no you don’t know anything you’re dumb, you’re just 12’. Older teenagers were also seen as preventative for Matthew, who at 13 years old described building his own jumps in hidden areas of a park to evade older groups of teenagers knocking them down: ‘probably because that’s their space that they want to use to make a ramp so they just break ours to make one’.

Previous research on tweens has drawn attention to the role of peer relationships in shaping leisure practices for this age group with writers such as De Leyns et al. (2022) arguing this is a crucial developmental stage for navigating social ties and peer dynamics. Participants in this research demonstrated an acute awareness of other young people, reflecting on their own leisure practices as valid or not in comparison. Sharing space with older teenagers impacted not only their sense of legitimacy, but also their ability to progress in their sport for fear of judgement:

Finley 12: What if they make fun of me for not being able to do this or that? That’s what I felt for quite some time before I could land, it gets on your self-esteem.

Those more confident in their own skills and ability, however, described the presence of older teenagers in informal sport spaces differently framing this as an opportunity to improve and learn from others: ‘it almost makes you want to do more, when you see what they can do yeah’ (Alex, 13), demonstrating how interaction within informal sport spaces can become more purposeful when engaging with others productively. These tweens appeared to have developed what De Leyns et al. (2022) refers to as interpersonal competencies in building and negotiating the complexities of peer dynamics in this age group.

The ways young people access leisure spaces reveal their experiences of social and spatial constraint (Kato, 2009) with tween participants often attributing greater rights of access to older teenagers and younger children. Sharing these environments alongside these peer groups raised issues about their own identities, the legitimacy of their practices and their sense of belonging. Being accepted by others - and developing resilience in navigating social encounters - is recognised as an important dimension of youth wellbeing (Gennings et al., 2021). Some participants chose to distance themselves, echoing Aalst and Brands’ (2001) argument that feelings of being in or out of place shape young people’s engagement with public space. Others described adapting to the needs of different users or developing confidence in their ability to participate alongside them. These findings demonstrate that young teenage males’ negotiations of outdoor leisure spaces are deeply intertwined with the social relationships and hierarchies that structure these environments.

These accounts underscore the value of a process ontology, shifting attention from wellbeing understood as a fixed state – anchored in stable identities and settled roles – toward an emphasis on movement, emergence, and ongoing becoming (Worth, 2009). From this perspective, informal outdoor sports are not simply activities that

enhance wellbeing, but central to the process of becoming and the transitions from childhood to adolescence as they enable dynamic spatial practices that actively contribute to the unfolding processes through which individuals grow, adapt, and transform. Becoming is therefore not only temporal but spatial: it is enacted through the micro-geographies of outdoor environments that enable experimentation, risk-taking and embodied learning. Post-structural philosophers such as Gilles Deleuze (Deleuze 1994; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), feminist thinkers like Elizabeth Grosz (1994, 2011) and process-oriented psychologists such as Gordon Allport (1961) remind us that becoming is not a temporary phase but the fundamental condition of life, overturning the metaphysical priority of being, identity, and representation.

This processual framing of tween leisure provides a conceptual bridge to our analysis of brokering and becoming, where spatial autonomy is negotiated by and for tweenage boys. The between-spaces they inhabit – alleyways, parks, skate spots, woodland edges – are not merely backdrops to growing up but active sites of negotiation, experimentation, and self-making. Our study shows that tweenage boys' identities are shaped less by inherited categories than by the dynamic, relational processes through which they learn to inhabit their worlds, fundamentally rooted in the movement and performances of their bodies in outdoor space, and often achieved with parental help. In these spaces, autonomy is brokered, tested, and reworked, and becoming takes place through the risks and improvisations of everyday spatial practice.

4.3 Brokering and becomings

It is argued that outdoor spaces such as those encountered through informal sport are considered to provide young people with important spaces to meet with peers away from parental control (Lovelock et al., 2016). Previous research has sought to expose the challenges young people face in negotiating time and space away from the family as they move into later adolescence (Horton et al., 2014), noting gender is a key component of young people's independent mobility, with boys being given greater freedoms and girls facing more spatial restriction and surveillance (MSFG, 2023). In this research, tweens talked about informal sport spaces as part of an assemblage of places they negotiated access to both alongside and independently of their parents. Participants shared their experience of parental rules around access to informal sport spaces based on distance or timings:

Riley: Quite a lot of spaces that I like to like mountain bike, um, I'm not allowed to go there on my own, so something that's a bit closer would be quite nice.

Jaydon: It's a nice place to go in the morning, but like, as soon as it goes, like past lunch or something I'm not allowed to go on my own.

Participants expressed clear understandings of the rules governing their use of outdoor leisure spaces - mirroring the observations of Horton et al. (2014) - there was little to suggest these were experienced negatively; in some cases the rules even appeared reassuring. Marley reflected on how their use of informal sport space shaped where their parents were willing to let them go, noting the importance of choosing nearby locations 'so it doesn't matter if our parents are working, they don't just want to ferry us around'. His account illustrates how young people's spatial practices are

negotiated through the everyday logistics and expectations that structure family life (also see Worth, 2009).

These tween participants are newly mobile and in the early stages of negotiating independent leisure experiences yet they discussed the influence of their parents positively, echoing the work of Gennings et al. (2021) for whom family relationships emerge as more important than friendships in how young people rank topics contributing to their sense of wellbeing. Our participants discussed their preferred leisure experiences often involving accessing informal sport space as a family:

Indy: When you bring your stuff and then you just have a good time right, because all the adults come as well.

Caspar 13: If you have like families go like, I don't know, like have a Barbecue or something on the trails, on the green you can like, chill out.

The role of fathers in pre-teen boys' leisure lives has been highlighted in previous work (Baber and Corkery, 2020) and similarly emerged in these findings. Paternal co-participation in informal sport activities can shape how skills and competencies develop, with fathers being an enabling presence (Nash & Moore, 2021). Participants discussed their fathers' previous experience as informal sport participants as a source of knowledge and reassurance, such as Indy, whose dad 'has done it with his friends since he was a kid, so he sort of knew and introduce me to stuff as well'. Parents, and specifically fathers, were seen as facilitators to access (also see Knoester & Randolph, 2019), particularly to undesignated areas such as secret jump spots or trails, or in some cases as co-participants, such as Fig. 6, submitted by Riley to show a portable ramp he made with his dad.

Oakley: I asked my dad where the good jumps were and then he suggested, and that's what I've been doing.

Seb: My dad showed me the way there and now it's just easy to find.

In contrast, for those whose parents were not familiar with these spaces, a lack of family culture around informal sport involvement was seen as limiting. Dexter discussed his reliance on friends and their families to take part in mountain biking:

Dexter: My family just doesn't really do things like that, they do do sport, but just not mountain biking.

In addition to parents, the presence of other adults in informal sport space was also experienced favourably. When discussing skate parks, Leon commented 'it's just safer to have a parent there'. Others suggested a 'security guard' (Oakley), or a café or skate park manager to oversee these environments would help them feel safer as captured in the conversation between two friends below:

Lucas: Not necessarily telling them what to do, but just making sure that everything's okay making sure that no one's smoking, or just like trying to break the jumps, or like littering.

Matthew: Or like, like start something with people.

Lucas: Right, yeah trying to start conflict.

Matthew: Yeah and I think it might make it safer for like little children to go there, so they don't feel it as like as scared of like the big boys like doing stuff there.

The accounts in this section show a desire for multi-generational presence in informal sport spaces. The relationship between family sport culture and participation in club-based sport for young people is well documented (Strandbu et al., 2019), Nash



Fig. 6 Homemade ramp used with father (Riley, Age 12)

& Moore, (2021) draw upon Wheaton's (2017) work on ageing in surfing communities to highlight how lifestyle and action sport researchers are beginning to address ageing and multigenerational participatory cultures arguing the importance of family support in male-dominated action sports. This paper shows that for tween participants, becoming involves a gradual independence from family support and a flexibility in their understanding of their own identities as has been revealed in other aspects of the youth transition (Worth, 2009). What also emerges in this context is the role of fathers in brokering "a participative connection" (Wenger, 1998) to masculine coded leisure space through their part membership of the community as current or previous participants.

5 Conclusion

This study has contributed new knowledge on the leisure lives of tween males who have previously received limited attention in research about youth leisure in public spaces (Amholt et al., 2022). According to Kato (2009; p.53), the ‘social in-between place’ of teenagers is located in their experience of public space, with work by De Leyn et al. (2022), arguing dual identity negotiation is particularly apparent for tween young people. The participants in the study articulated some complex experiences of their feelings of belonging, safety and purposefulness in their use of informal sport spaces, and in the positioning of these spaces for supporting wellbeing, revealing episodes in gaining confidence to lead independently mobile lives as part of becoming and the transition to adolescence.

The findings also extend the concept of becoming by grounding it in the everyday spatial, relational and embodied practices of tween boys, showing how becoming is not only a temporal or developmental process but also a spatial and civic one. Rather than treating becoming as an abstract trajectory, the study demonstrates how young males actively perform, negotiate and materialise their becoming through informal sport: developing independence and testing autonomy in contested micro-geographies, and experimenting with identities in ways that are situated, contingent and relationally produced. This reframes becoming as a lived, spatialised process shaped by access to public environments, peer relations, and the material affordances of outdoor settings, and it highlights how these practices are negotiated within families. The negotiated interdependence (see Punch, 2002) of tweenhood frequently unfolded through parental knowledge and presence – often with fathers acting as brokers to negotiate and navigate leisure spaces that are coded as masculine such as the outdoors and skate parks (Knoester & Randolph, 2019; Nash & Moore, 2021). In this way, tweens create their own ‘microgeographies’ within their local environments (Matthews et al., 1998), learning to anticipate, mitigate and sometimes cede encounters with others; such ceding can be read as an exercise in independent mobility and spatial autonomy. Taken together, these accounts show that the tweens’ ideal of independent mobility is itself a process of becoming – partly realised, continually negotiated, and deeply embedded in the social and material worlds they inhabit.

Previous work has highlighted the dichotomist position of young people as potential threats, or as innocent minors in need of protection (Tani, 2015) which as shown in this paper is reified by tweens in informal sport space. The dominant theme for tweens young people is that space is always to be shared, and access to be negotiated alongside others, highlighting the importance of skills in negotiation and peer relationships as an important part of becoming (also see De Leyns et al. 2022). Fears over personal safety and security emerged for this group through unsettling confrontations with older teenagers, even if at a distance and if no physical harm occurred, whilst it was felt younger children had more legitimacy in their use of public play space. These narratives challenged their construction of their activities as healthy, productive and linked to wellbeing. Informal sport spaces were experienced as polluted, consequently ‘muddying’ the meanings of wellbeing (Evers, 2019) that young male teenagers felt should result from these encounters. This has important implications

for understandings of well-becomings where futurity is critical, but is dependent on the lived reality of the present (Worth, 2009).

In revealing tween participants' expectations of others, including how they relate to older and younger users, we begin to see how our male teenagers articulate the types of social life that should be valued (Layton & Latham, 2022), and how these link to their understandings of these spaces in the context of their own (and others) wellbeing. Such expectations extend to how they relate to older teenagers' polluting and anti-social presence, but also to issues of neglect and the maintenance of public space. The participants shared concerns about how poor environmental quality made sites for informal sport activities less inviting, so contributing to a sense of disconnection from their local community (also see Evers, 2019). As highlighted by Stenning et al. (2025), this is an important reminder of the realities of children's experiences in public space. The provision of quality public for youthful social infrastructure does not always need to lead to new and costly infrastructure projects (e.g., destination parks or formal sport space) but for a routine level of continued maintenance and preservation of existing facilities and ensuring environmental hazards are minimised.

The findings contribute to debates on open spaces as social infrastructure (Layton & Latham, 2022) by showing that informal sport sites are not merely recreational amenities but active sites of well-becoming and civic claim-making for young people. While tween participants link informal sport participation in outdoor spaces to their own wellbeing and future selves, they also encounter polluted, poorly maintained and contested environments that constrain those very trajectories. This disjunction points to a clear policy imperative: strategies aimed at improving young lives (e.g. DCMS, 2023) must recognise and protect informal sport spaces as essential public goods – prioritising maintenance, pollution mitigation, proximity and inclusive design – and ideally should do so through co-production with young people themselves (Centre for Young Lives, 2025). Crucially, public space should be planned to serve diverse needs across age, gender and ability rather than a broader brush approach to a youth demographic; only then can informal sport spaces support equitable pathways to wellbeing, autonomy and embodied citizenship. These granular insights into teenagers' spatial practices point to the need for responsive, locally negotiated interventions – developed with young people – that maintain and animate informal sport spaces as sites of wellbeing and well-becoming.

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Data Availability Data will be registered and discoverable via the lead institutions research data repository and linked (where applicable) to any associated research outputs via the institutional repository.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethics approval and consent to participate This research was reviewed and approved by the Bournemouth University Social Sciences and Humanities Ethics Panel. All participants provided informed consent and in addition parents / cares consent was provided for all participants under 16. All responses are anonymised and identifiable information has been removed.

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