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**The  
Children's  
Society**

# **The Good Childhood Report 2014**

*Executive summary*



# The Good Childhood Report 2014

## *Executive summary*

**The Good Childhood Report 2014 is the third in a series of annual reports published by The Children's Society about how children in the UK feel about their lives.**

**It contains new findings from our ground breaking, nine-year programme of research on children's well-being, involving around 50,000 children. This work is carried out in collaboration with the University of York and has become the most extensive national research programme on children's subjective well-being in the world.**

This report also makes use of the best and most recent data on children's feelings about their lives from other sources, including international comparisons. Among the key findings are:

- Children in England ranked 32nd out of 39 countries in Europe and North America for subjective well-being and ninth out of a sample of 11 countries around the world.
- Around 13% of 10 to 13 year olds are unhappy with the way they look, with girls faring much worse (18%) than boys (9%).
- Children who are regularly active have higher well-being compared to children who are not. And children who use computers and the internet regularly have higher well-being than children who do not.
- Around 15% of children living with a severely depressed mother had low well-being, compared to around 9% of children who did not.
- Children who felt poorer were twice as likely to say they were unhappy and almost three times more likely to say they had low life satisfaction.

The Good Childhood Report 2014 provides a comprehensive, up-to-date picture of the quality of our children's lives – as rated by children themselves. It is a wealth of crucial insights, putting children at the centre, and is essential to our understanding of the issues that impact on them. It lays the foundations for us to work together to change children's lives and give every child the greatest possible chance in life.

# Introduction

*The aim of The Good Childhood Report is to summarise the most reliable and up-to-date information on how children feel about their lives – their ‘subjective well-being’.*

Research into subjective well-being is important for a number of reasons. First, people’s satisfaction with their lives is a central concern for any society. Indeed, many would argue that well-being is an ultimate goal in life and that other factors, such as income, housing or physical health all contribute to it.

There are substantial variations in subjective well-being between different countries both for adults and children. We need to understand why this is in order to ensure a high quality of life for everyone. Rather than assuming that we know ‘best’ what children need, it is important that we try to understand what contributes to children’s subjective well-being by listening to children themselves.

Understanding what contributes to children’s well-being also means that everyone who has a role to play in improving childhood can better understand how to do so. For example, in The Good Childhood Index, we have identified the 10 aspects of life with the greatest influence on children’s well-being. We are also building up our knowledge of the personal, social and economic factors that are most clearly linked to high or low subjective well-being.

Finally, there is evidence that low subjective well-being may be a precursor to other issues and problems in people’s lives such as poor mental health<sup>1</sup>. A greater understanding of these links can help to target support earlier, and more effectively, to the people who need it. Ultimately, it means that we can contribute to our children growing up into healthy, happy adults, by improving the quality of their childhoods.

The Good Childhood Report 2014 presents findings from our most recent surveys of over 5000 children in the UK.

It also presents analysis of relevant data from other sources including the Children’s Worlds survey<sup>2</sup>; the British Household Panel<sup>3</sup> and Understanding Society<sup>4</sup> surveys; and the Millennium Cohort Study<sup>5</sup> to help build the most complete picture of the range of factors that impact on children’s well-being.

## What is subjective well-being?

The report uses the term ‘subjective well-being’, or just well-being, to describe children’s own evaluations of their lives. Typical subjective well-being questions include asking people how happy they are on a day-to-day basis (happiness), and how satisfied they are with their lives as a whole (life satisfaction).

# The current state of children's subjective well-being in the UK

## How are children in the UK feeling about their lives overall?

Whether we ask children about happiness or life satisfaction we find that most children in the UK (90% and over) have relatively good well-being. Between 1994 and 2007 there was a rise in children's average life satisfaction in the UK. However more recently, from 2008 to 2011<sup>6</sup>, this trend levelled off so that average life satisfaction plateaued during this period. As a result, the number of children in the UK with low well-being has also remained fairly static at around half a million.

We also have new findings on how children in England compare with children in other countries:

- Children in England ranked ninth in well-being out of a sample of 11 countries around the world in a large-scale pilot study – behind Romania, Spain, Israel, Brazil, USA, Algeria, South Africa and Chile; and ahead of South Korea and Uganda.
- Children in England tend to have slightly lower well-being than children in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

- Children in England also tend to fare poorly in terms of well-being compared to other countries in Europe and elsewhere – ranking 32nd out of 39 countries in Europe and North America – using an index of subjective well-being. Children in Wales (26th) and Scotland (31st) rank a little higher. Comparative data is currently not available for Northern Ireland.

'The environment does make me feel unhealthy because I live in a bad, dangerous, ugly, poor and horrible town'

Year 7 student

**Table 1: Summary of mean scores for different measures of subjective well-being by age group and gender**

	All	Year 6	Year 8	Female	Male
Life satisfaction score	8.5	8.8	8.3	8.5	8.6
Satisfied	8.1	8.3	7.9	8.0	8.2
Happy	8.6	8.9	8.3	8.5	8.8
Relaxed	8.1	8.3	7.9	7.9	8.3
Calm	7.9	8.1	7.7	7.9	8.0
Active	8.5	8.8	8.3	8.3	8.7
Full of energy	8.6	8.9	8.2	8.4	8.8

Source: Children's Worlds Survey, 2013-14. Age: 10 to 13 years old.

Scope: England. Sample size: 2276.

**‘I don’t really care how I look, if others don’t like it fine: I don’t wake up to impress people every day. Plus the older I’ve gotten the more mature I’ve gotten to realise it’s just other people’s opinions’**

Year 11 student (boy)

### **How do children feel about particular aspects of their lives?**

Since 2010 we have been using The Good Childhood Index to track children’s feelings about 10 aspects of their lives which were identified as particularly important through our surveys and consultations with children. This year, we found that issues around appearance continued to arise. So when we looked at gender and age differences, time trends, and international comparisons in relation to children’s feelings about different aspects of their lives, we found that:

- Children tend to be much happier with some of these aspects of their lives – such as money and possessions, family, home, and friendships – than with others – such as appearance, future and school. For example, only 4% of children aged 10 to 13

were unhappy with their family relationships compared to 13% who were unhappy with the way that they looked.

- There are some important gender differences. Girls tend to be a little happier with school than boys. On the other hand girls are much less happy with their appearance, particularly as they get older.
- This gender gap in happiness with appearance has been widening in recent years.

This year, for the first time, we are also able to assess how children in England are feeling using The Good Childhood Index, compared to a sample of other countries around the world, using data from a large-scale international pilot study.

- Happiness with appearance is an aspect of life where children in England seem to fare particularly poorly compared to the other countries in the study. Children in England ranked 10th out of the 11 countries on this aspect of life. And the gender gap in England for appearance was statistically larger than the other 10 countries.
- The aspects of life in The Good Childhood Index for which children in England ranked highest were choice, their material situation, their home and their friendships.

**‘People are judged on looks. Sometimes you feel like you can’t enjoy yourself unless you are pretty’**

Year 8 student (girl)

**‘Popularity is very important, but to be popular, you have to be pretty, rich, skinny, clever. If you’re not you get bullied’**

Year 9 student

**What factors explain variations in children’s well-being?**

Being able to identify reasons for variations in children’s well-being and sub-groups of children at particular risk of low well-being is important for thinking about how children’s well-being might be improved.

However, it is important to note that while socio-demographic factors are important they only explain a small amount of the variation in well-being. This means that there must be other important factors that can help us to better understand why some children have much higher or lower well-being than others.

Our most recent analysis shows that:

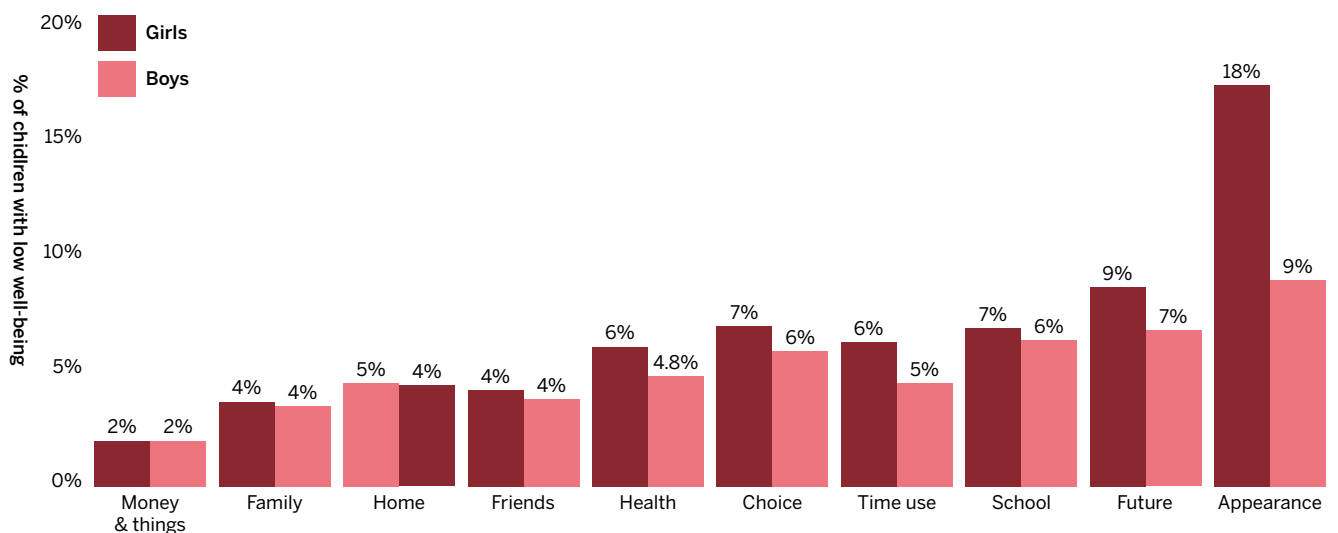
- Children’s well-being tends to vary with their age, with children around 14 and 15 tending to have the lowest well-being.
- Boys tend to have higher well-being than girls.
- Children in households living in poverty (less than 60% of the average income) tend to have slightly lower well-being than those not living in poverty.
- Children living in families where no-one is in paid work also tend to have lower than average well-being.

Our previous reports have provided some insights on this matter – for example, showing that factors such as the quality of family relationships and children’s sense of autonomy have strong links with their sense of well-being.

In this year’s report we explore new data on the links between children’s subjective well-being and:

- What children do
- Parental subjective well-being, and mental and physical health
- Parenting styles
- What children have.

**Figure 1: Gender differences for The Good Childhood Index**





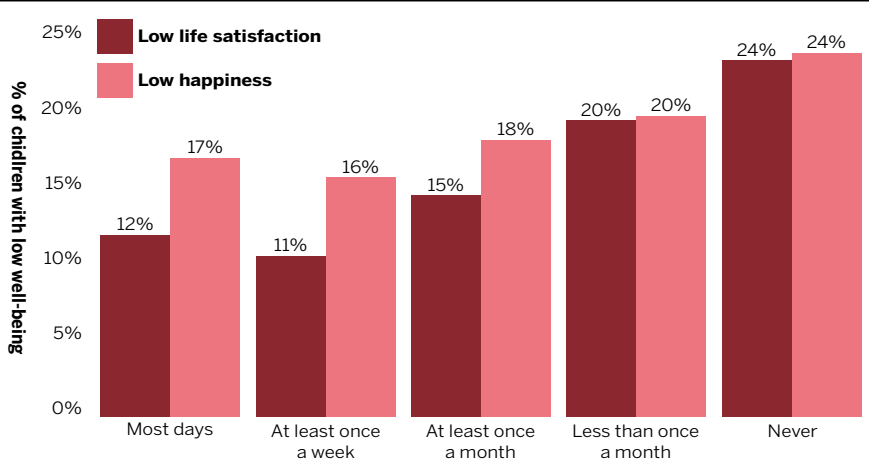
# Factors associated with children's subjective well-being

## What children do

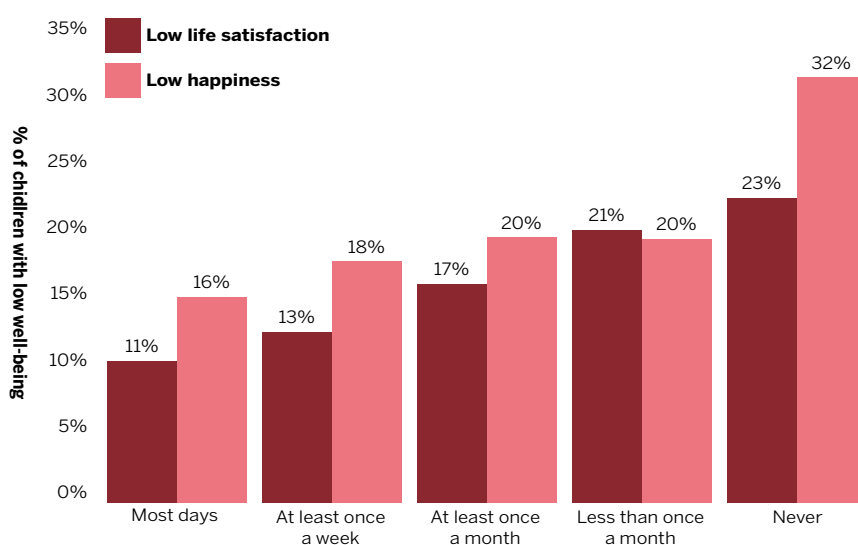
In last year's Good Childhood report we showed that there were links between various activities that children took part in and their subjective well-being. We have been able to explore this topic further this year using newly available data on 11-year-olds. Key findings are:

- Regular use of computers and the internet is not associated with lower well-being. In fact, children who never use the internet outside school have much lower well-being than children who did so regularly.
- Children who regularly play sports or active games have higher well-being. Children who never do this were around twice as likely to have low well-being as those who did so at least once a week. There is little variation in the well-being of this age group in relation to how much time they spent with friends. But children who regularly argue or fall out with friends are much more likely than average to have low well-being.
- Children who are more likely to seek help from someone at home if they have a problem, have higher well-being. Those who are likely to keep problems to themselves tend to have lower well-being.

**Figure 2: Frequency of using the internet (not at school), and low well-being**



**Figure 3: Frequency of playing sports or active games, inside or outside, and low well-being**



## 'Girls grow up around their mums constantly saying that they need to lose weight, so you are under the impression that you are unattractive'

Year 10 student (girl)

### Parental well-being and mental health

There is relatively little research on the links between parental and child subjective well-being, although some previous research studies have found an association. In this year's report we present new analysis of the links between parental subjective well-being, parental depression and children's subjective well-being. Key findings are:

- There is a significant link between parent and child subjective well-being, which is of fairly similar strength irrespective of the age of the child (between eight and 15 years old), the gender of the child and the gender of the parent.
- This link may help to explain the ways in which factors such as household income affect children.
- There is also evidence of a link between parental depression and child subjective well-being. Around 15% of children living with a severely depressed mother had low well-being, compared to around 9% of children who did not.
- Children had also lower than average well-being scores if a parent was currently being, or had ever been, treated for depression.

### Parenting

Last year's Good Childhood Report also began to look at the links between a range of parenting styles and children's well-being. In this year's report we begin to look at how specific parenting behaviours may impact on the well-being of children aged 14-15 years old. The behaviours are split into four main areas: supervision, physical care, emotional support and educational support. Initial findings include:

- Learning support varies: 97% of young people said that their parents often or always made sure they attended school, but only 63% said the same when it came to parents helping them to learn things outside school.
- The areas covered under emotional support, such as praise for doing well or support when upset had the strongest link to children's well-being.
- The areas covered under supervision, such as making sure you went to school or asking where you were going when you went out, had the weakest association with young people's subjective well-being.

### What children have

We know that children's living standards have a strong influence on their lives both now and in the future. But the relationship between household income and children's subjective well-being is complicated. Our key findings include:

- Material deprivation is significantly associated with subjective well-being, and explains 13% of the variation in children well-being in 2014.
- Children who saw themselves as poorer were twice as likely to say they were unhappy and almost three times more likely to say they had low life satisfaction.
- Children who felt their families had about the same level of material resources as others tended to have slightly higher well-being than those who felt their families had more.
- Children who said that the economic crisis had a greater impact on their families had significantly lower levels of subjective well-being.

### What is material deprivation?

For this report we measure material deprivation using an index of 10 items, such as pocket money and family day trips, identified by children as necessities (see Main and Pople, 2011). Children were considered deprived if they lacked and wanted two or more items from this index. Children who lacked but did not want items were not considered deprived.

# Conclusion

***The Good Childhood Report 2014 provides crucial new insights into how children in the UK feel about their lives, how this is changing over time and how they compare with children in other countries.***

We explore the relationships between children's well-being and a number of factors in their lives – their activities and behaviours, parental well-being, parenting and household economic factors.

Our findings indicate that most children in the UK have relatively high well-being and that after a slight drop in 2008, this remains stable. However, we are far from being able to rest on our laurels; quite the opposite. We expose where there is significant room for improvement, particularly in the area of appearance. The gender gap in satisfaction with this aspect of life only occurs in some countries, suggesting that we should not accept as inevitable that girls will feel worse about their appearance than boys. More needs to be done to understand the factors at play in creating this gender gap in the UK and in leading to children in the UK faring so poorly on this particular aspect of their well-being.

We also show that, while the direct impact of household income on child subjective well-being is relatively small, children's sense of well-being is more strongly linked to the level of material resources they have and whether this level is similar to their peers. Worryingly however, the findings also indicate that where children are aware of their family's worsening economic situation, this also can have a significant impact on their well-being.

Finally, the new findings in this report showed that low parental subjective well-being, parental depression and poor parental health are all associated with lower subjective well-being for children. The four areas of parenting that we explore – emotional support, physical care, educational support and supervision/monitoring – are also all significantly associated with children's overall sense of well-being. We plan to carry out much more work in this area with a particular focus on young people with the lowest well-being and their experiences of parenting.

The Good Childhood Report 2014 highlights just how vital it is that we continue to monitor children's well-being, particularly during the current period of economic hardship and major societal change. New international surveys, such as Children's Worlds, should make it easier to identify factors at a national level that are associated with international variations in child subjective well-being.

This work provides important insights for everybody, from teachers, to parents and opinion-formers, as it goes right to the very heart of what makes for a good childhood. It has particular value for local and national policymakers in providing an understanding of the links between political, economic and cultural factors and children's experiences of childhood. The Children's Society will build on this deeper understanding of children's well-being as we continue to work towards a society where all children are free from disadvantage.

***While most children in the UK have relatively high well-being, there is significant room for improvement, particularly in the area of appearance.***

# Notes

1 For example, in a sample of over 4000 young people aged 13 to 18 in the US, perceived life satisfaction was found to be significantly related to poor mental health, suicide ideation and suicide behaviours (Valois et al, 2004).

2 The Children's Worlds survey is a new international survey of children's lives and subjective well-being, currently funded by the Jacobs Foundation. Data available in 2015, for further information see [www.isciweb.org](http://www.isciweb.org)

3 The British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) was a longitudinal study of households in Britain running from 1991 to 2009, funded by the ESRC. For further information see [www.iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps](http://www.iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps)

4 The Understanding Society survey is a longitudinal study of households in Britain which is the successor to the BHPS. It is funded by the ESRC and a consortium of Government departments. For further information see [www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/about](http://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk/about)

5 The Millennium Cohort Study is a research project following the lives of a sample of children born in the UK in 2000-01, funded by the ESRC and a consortium of government departments. For further information see [www.cls.ioe.ac.uk](http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk)

6 Between 2007 and 2011, which is the most recent year for which this time series data are currently available.

**To find out more about this research programme, including additional publications and information about our well-being consultations with local authorities please visit: [childrenssociety.org.uk/well-being](http://childrenssociety.org.uk/well-being)**

**Or contact our research team at: [well-being@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:well-being@childrenssociety.org.uk)**



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