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# Ways to well-being:

Exploring the links between children's activities and their subjective well-being

The  
Children's  
Society

*Research report*

by Saamah Abdallah, Gill Main,  
Larissa Pople and Gwyther Rees



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# Contents

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## **Executive summary**

p3

## **1. Introduction**

p5

## **2. Methodology**

p6

## **3. Findings from the survey**

p9

## **4. Findings from the focus groups**

p26

## **5. Discussions and conclusions**

p37

## **References**

p38

## **Notes**

p39

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# Executive summary

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## Introduction

This report describes the outcomes of a research study conducted jointly by The Children's Society and NEF (New Economics Foundation) which explores activities that children can do themselves that might be linked to increased feelings of well-being.

NEF had previously undertaken work for the Foresight Project to summarise the evidence on links between activities people undertake and their subjective well-being. A key outcome of this work was a framework of *five ways to well-being*: Connect, Be active, Take notice, Keep learning and Give. The research evidence on which this framework is based relates primarily to adults. The Children's Society, which has been involved in a child-centred well-being research programme since 2005, was interested to explore the extent to which the framework might also be relevant to children.

## Methodology

The research involved two components:

1. **A survey of 1500 children aged 10 to 15 which asked about time spent on various activities and about levels of subjective well-being**
2. **Eleven focus groups with around 90 children aged eight to 15 which explored their ideas about various activities which might promote their well-being.**

## Findings from the survey

- The survey provides some important descriptive insights into how children spend their time. Most children saw friends most days or every day, outside school. Chatting to friends on the telephone or through social media, talking to family about things that mattered to them and reading for fun were also relatively frequent activities. Volunteering and taking part in organised activities were two of the least frequent activities.
- Most (14 out of 17) of the activities that children were asked about had a significant link with their subjective well-being, even after socio-demographic factors were taken into account. Some of the activities that were most

strongly associated with children's subjective well-being were: noticing and enjoying one's surroundings; teaching oneself new things; talking to family about important matters and reading for fun.

- For some activities there was a fairly straightforward link between the frequency of the activity and subjective well-being. For example, each level of greater frequency of learning new things was associated with a higher level of subjective well-being. For other activities there was a more complex relationship. For example, children who paid attention to their physical feelings most days (but not every day) had the highest well-being.
- Analysis of the survey data suggests that there are five distinct categories of activity relating to learning, leisure activities, friendships, helping and being aware. These are relatively similar to the *five ways to well-being* proposed by NEF.
- Girls are more likely than boys to spend time on activities related to learning, helping and being aware; while boys are more likely than girls to spend time on sports and organised activities.

- There is a decline in the number and frequency of activities with age across the 10 to 15 years old age range. This pattern is particularly pronounced for activities relating to learning and to sports and organised activities.
- There was little evidence of variation in engagement in the activities according to household income. There was a link between higher levels of maternal education and a higher frequency of engagement with learning and being aware of oneself and one's surroundings.
- everyday acts of kindness) and taking notice (eg meditation).
- Children were also asked about factors which might enable or hinder them in carrying out activities that enhanced their well-being. Children identified a range of intrinsic factors (eg ill-health) and extrinsic factors (eg availability of money and transport).
- Children's discussions also focused on the issue of autonomy, both as a way to well-being in itself, and also as a factor that could enable or hinder the pursuit of activities that promoted well-being.
- The research provides support for the relevance of all of the *five ways* to children's lives and also suggest some ways in which this framework might be extended in relation to children (eg the additional value of activities relating to play and creativity and the importance of autonomy).
- The survey findings indicate a significant association between the frequency of various activities and children's sense of well-being. While this evidence in itself does not prove a causal link, it does indicate that it is plausible that encouraging children to engage in various activities may enhance their well-being.

## Findings from the focus groups

- When asked in general about activities that may be linked to a sense of well-being, children in the focus groups talked about the importance of spending time with others, being active and learning (in and out of school). These themes clearly link with three of the *five ways to well-being*.
- Children also identified, unprompted, the benefits for them of play, creativity (eg music, art, dance) and imagination.
- When prompted more specifically, children also discussed the value of giving (eg teaching others and
- Children also talked about the value of a sense of competence and achievement from certain activities which was perceived as an important factor in terms of a sense of positive well-being.
- Older children in our sample participated in fewer activities, and participated in activities less often, than younger children in our sample. At this point, we cannot say whether this is due to individual children doing less as they get older. Longitudinal research is needed to find out whether this is the case, and if so, what influences this.

## Discussion and conclusions

- The findings of this research suggest that the *five ways* framework, originally proposed on the basis of research with adults, is also useful for considering the connections between children's everyday activities and their sense of well-being.

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# 1. Introduction

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In 2006, NEF (New Economics Foundation) was commissioned by the Foresight Project to summarise the evidence on the determinants of well-being and produce clear messages on what individuals could do to improve their own well-being (Aked et al., 2008). The *five ways to well-being* framework produced – Connect, Be active, Take notice, Keep learning and Give – serves as a simple heuristic, echoing the five-a-day message around fruit and vegetable consumption. The evidence reviewed came from a range of techniques, including neuroscience, cross-sectional surveys and longitudinal studies.

The *five ways to well-being* framework is now used in a wide range of contexts. It is referred to in the most recent Department of Health mental health strategy document *No Health without Mental Health*. There is a page on the NHS Choices website devoted to it. A recent report commissioned by the NHS Confederation showed that the *five ways to well-being* are being used from Norway to New Zealand. There have been simple communication campaigns associated with the *five ways to well-being* (for example as part of Liverpool's Year of Well-Being) as well as more elaborate activities – for example children created an illustrated *five ways to well-being* story book in Stockport.

However, as with many areas of well-being research, most of the evidence on this issue relates to adults. So The Children's Society saw a need to explore the extent to which the framework might also be relevant to children and young people, and has undertaken a research project jointly with NEF to explore this question. In this report, we present the methodology and findings of this research, as well as practical implications.

## 2. Methodology

*We used a mixed methods approach, drawing on both survey and focus group research to provide an insight into ways to well-being that are relevant for children. These were informed by the perspectives of children themselves as well as by the five ways framework.*

### The survey

The evidence on the *five ways to well-being* comes from a range of sources, but there has to date been no in-depth analysis of a single data source on all five. The Children's Society survey generated the first available data that allows this in a representative population sample.<sup>1</sup> The survey sampled 1500 children aged 10 to 15. Involvement in the *five ways to well-being* was assessed with a series of questions asking children to say how much time they spend taking part in different activities related to the *five ways to well-being*. Seventeen questions were asked in total, three or four for each of the *five ways to well-being*. The full question wordings and the abbreviations that we use in the report are presented in Table 1.

The questions were developed based on a combination of consideration of how the *five ways to well-being* have been framed for adults, and on the kinds of behaviours that might be appropriate for children. For example, thinking of Give, children may be unlikely to donate to charity, but they might help with chores around the house. All 17 questions are asked in the same format, although the Take notice questions have a slightly different response scale.

**Table 1: Full wordings of questions about ways to well-being activities**

How often do you spend time out of school...	Abbreviation	Response options
<b>BE ACTIVE</b>		
... playing sports on a team (like football or netball)	Team sports	a. Never b. Hardly ever c. Less than once a week d. Once or twice a week e. Most days f. Every day
... playing sports or doing exercise but not on a team (like running, swimming or dancing)	Non-team exercise	
...walking or cycling around your local area to go to school or see friends	Walk or cycle	
<b>KEEP LEARNING</b>		
... learning new things for fun (like music, languages, art or drama)	Learn new things	a. Never b. Hardly ever c. Less than once a week d. Once or twice a week e. Most days f. Every day
... reading for fun	Read for fun	
... teaching yourself new things	Teach yourself	
... taking part in organised activities (like youth clubs or scouts/guides)	Organised activities	
<b>GIVE</b>		
... helping out around the house	Help at home	a. Never b. Hardly ever c. Less than once a week d. Once or twice a week e. Most days f. Every day
... taking care of or helping out with brothers or sisters or other family members	Care for family	
... volunteering or helping out in your community (this could include helping out a neighbour)	Volunteer	
<b>CONNECT</b>		
... seeing friends	See friends	a. Never b. Hardly ever c. Less than once a week d. Once or twice a week e. Most days f. Every day
... chatting to friends on the phone or via social websites (like Facebook, Bebo or Twitter)	Chat to friends	
... seeing people in your family that you don't live with (like grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins)	See family	
... talking to people in your family about things that matter to you	Talk to family	
<b>TAKE NOTICE</b>		
... paying attention to how you feel physically (like feeling full of energy or tired, feeling tense or relaxed)	Pay attention physically	a. Never b. Hardly ever c. Sometimes d. Often e. Very often f. All the time
... paying attention to your feelings and emotions	Pay attention emotionally	
... noticing and enjoying your surroundings (indoors and outdoors)	Notice surroundings	

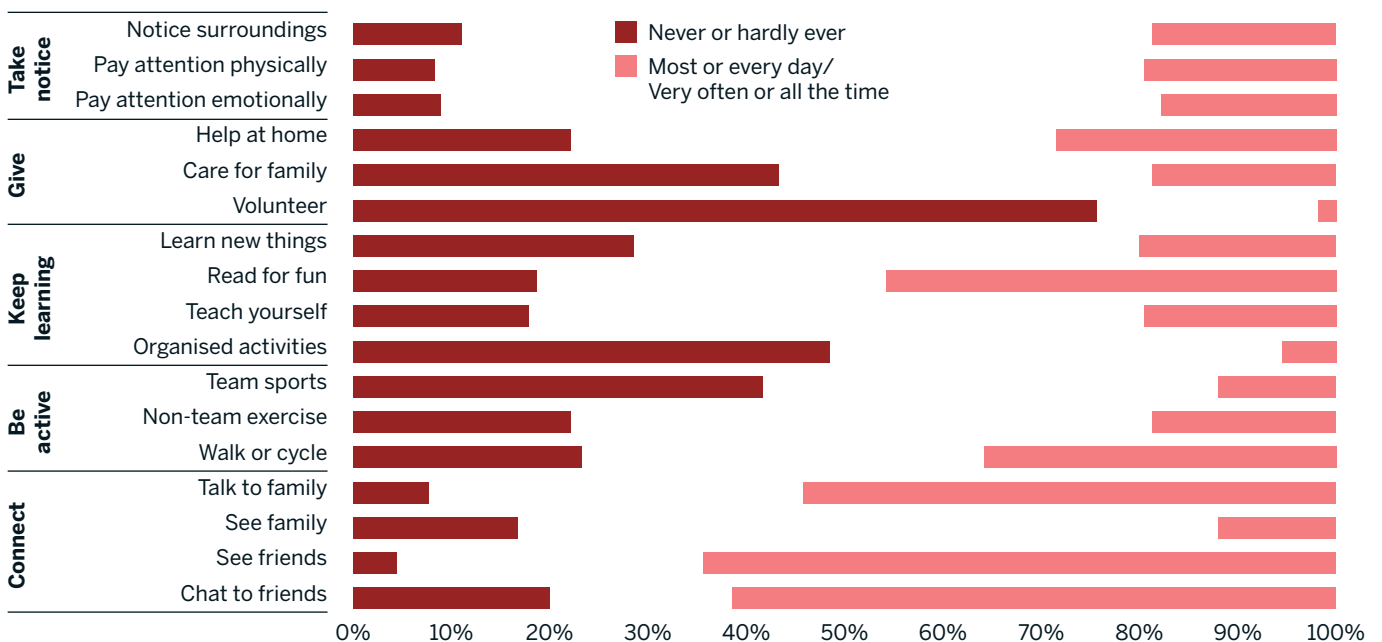
Figure 1 shows how often children in our survey reported carrying out these activities. Some activities are much more common than others. For example, almost two thirds of children (64%) reported seeing their friends when not in school most days or every day, while only 2% said that they do volunteering most days or every day.

As well as questions about the *five ways to well-being*, children were also asked a series of well-being questions, including a five-item measure of overall life satisfaction based on a longer version developed by Huebner (1991). The scale consists of the following five statements, to which children were asked to respond on a five-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

- My life is going well
- My life is just right
- I wish I had a different kind of life
- I have a good life
- I have what I want in life

These five items can be combined into a single subjective well-being score from zero to 20. We conducted analysis to see whether children's scores on this scale were related to their involvement in the *five ways to well-being* activities that we asked about.

**Figure 1: Frequency of participation in *five ways* activities**



## The focus groups

We also conducted 11 guided focus group discussions with around 90 children and young people in six schools in England. Each focus group comprised between six and eight children of the same year group, including a range of ethnicities reflecting the ethnic profiles of the schools involved. Participants' ages ranged from eight to 15 years. In these focus groups, we started by asking children open questions about the activities that they do – or could do – that contribute to making life good for them. Key probing questions included what it is about a certain activity that is good, and what might help or hinder engagement in the activities in question. After this open discussion, we introduced the *five ways to well-being*, specifically those activities that had not been raised by participants themselves. So children had the opportunity to mention the *five ways* unprompted, but then were led into discussion about them.

In the following sections we present the main findings from our research. First we will look at the evidence about whether the *five ways* are relevant to well-being for children, initially considering the quantitative evidence from our survey, and then the qualitative evidence from our focus groups. In the final section, we will look at differences in the propensity for children to carry out the *five ways*, based on demographic variables such as age and gender, and socio-economic variables. The evidence presented here is summarised in Chapter 4 of The Good Childhood Report 2013 (The Children's Society, 2013), launched in July 2013.

# 3. Findings from the survey

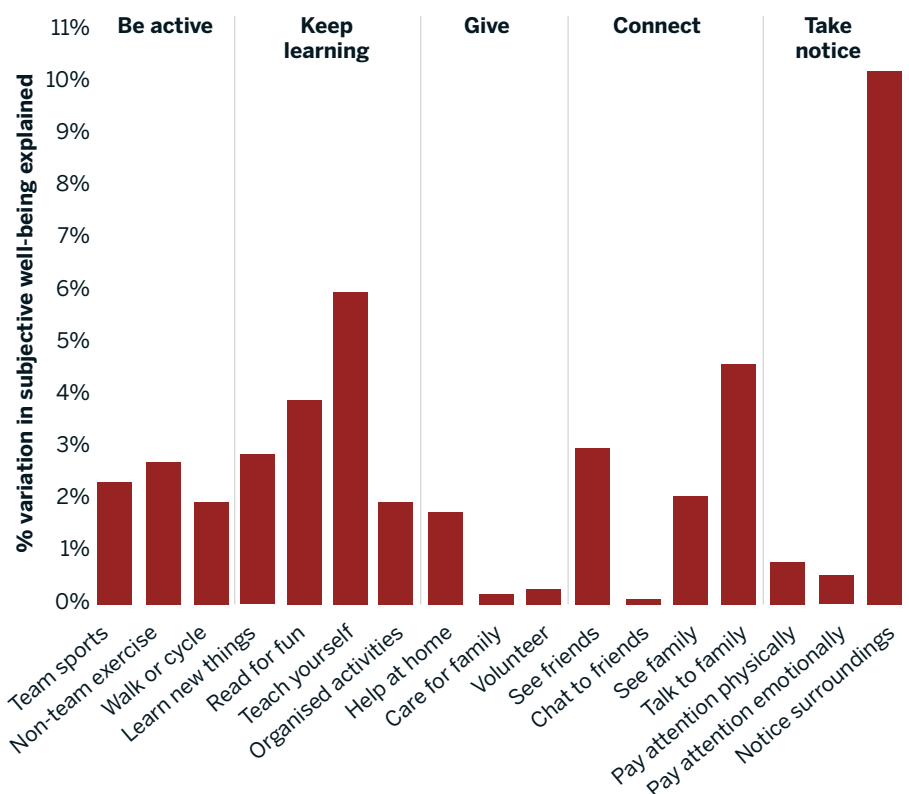
This section is divided into three parts. In the first part, we provide a summary picture of which *five ways* activities seem to be the most strongly associated with children’s well-being. The second part explores the different kinds of patterns of relationship between frequency of an activity and well-being. The third part considers each of the *five ways* in turn, and explores each activity.

## The relationship between the five ways activities and well-being

Figure 2 shows the amount of variation in well-being that participation in each activity explained, once demographic variables were controlled for.<sup>2</sup>

Fourteen out of the 17 activities that children were asked about had a significant relationship with well-being once demographic factors were controlled for. The three *five ways* activities with no significant association with subjective well-being were caring for family members, volunteering, and chatting to friends. However, there were differences in the amount of variation in well-being that each activity could explain. For example, just over 10% of the variation in well-being could be explained by how often children notice their surroundings – this is almost four times as much as all the variation that could be explained by the demographic factors that we considered. After this activity, the next strongest predictors of well-being were teaching yourself new things (almost 6%), talking to family about important matters (just over 4%) and reading for fun (4%). On the other hand, activities such as attending to feeling/emotions or physical feelings, explained less than 1% of variation in well-being. There was at least one activity for each of the *five ways* that

**Figure 2: Proportion of variation in subjective well-being explained by each *five ways* activity**



significantly predicted well-being. The weakest relationships were for the Give activities, with frequency of helping out around the house explaining just under 2% of variation in well-being, and volunteering and caring for family members not explaining any variation.

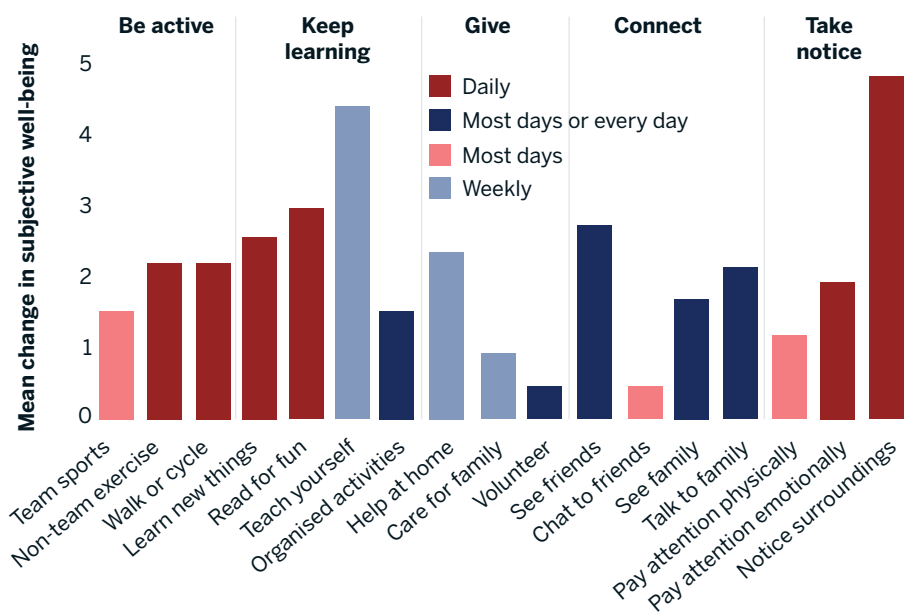
Another way to explore the relevance of different activities is to compare the frequency of doing an activity that is associated with the lowest level of subjective well-being with the

frequency of doing an activity that is associated with the highest level of well-being<sup>3</sup> (Figure 3). In most cases, the least optimal frequency was never, or never or hardly ever, doing the activity. The only exception is caring for family members, where those who care for their family members on a daily basis are less happy than those who never do so. As we shall see in Figure 3 and the next section, the optimum frequency for well-being is not necessarily the maximum frequency.

The biggest difference was between children who never or hardly ever notice and enjoy their surroundings, and children who do so all the time – a difference of 5.0 points on the Huebner scale (which ranges from zero to 20), even controlling for demographic factors. In other words, when children of the same age, gender, mother’s educational level, and parental employment status are compared, the average difference in subjective well-being between those who notice their surroundings all the time and those who never do is 5.0 points, which is substantial. The next two most important activities measured in this way were teaching yourself new things (difference in well-being of 4.3 points between children who never teach themselves new things and those who do this weekly), and reading for fun (3.1 points between children who never do this and those who do this daily).

Of course, due to the cross-sectional design of this study, we do not have evidence that there is a causal relationship between the *five ways* activities and well-being. Furthermore, there may be other unobserved factors influencing the relationship between the *five ways* activities and well-being. Nonetheless, the data shows that, for most activities, frequency of participation is associated with well-being, even controlling for several socio-demographic factors. Given the evidence of causal relationships for *five ways* activities amongst adults, we suggest that a plausible

**Figure 3: Mean difference in subjective well-being associated with optimal frequency of *five ways* activity**



explanation is that the activities in some way also positively contribute to children’s well-being.

### Linear or non-linear relationships between activities and *five ways*

Some of the *five ways* activities had ‘linear’<sup>4</sup> relationships with well-being, but many did not. It was not always the case that ever-greater participation in an activity is associated with higher well-being.

A good example of a non-‘linear’ relationship is teaching yourself new things (see Figure 11). Children who reported never teaching themselves

new things had comparatively low well-being – scoring 13.0 out of 20 on average. An increase in frequency to ‘less than once a week’ increased average well-being to 16.7. But increases in frequency beyond this point were not associated with equally large increases in well-being. Indeed, those teaching themselves new things daily saw a small decrease in well-being compared to those doing so weekly or most days. The relationship between this activity and well-being is therefore not ‘linear’, with increases in frequency beyond a certain point not being associated with commensurate increases in well-being scores.

We identified three patterns of relationship between frequency of activities and well-being:<sup>5</sup>

### **'Linear' – the more the better**

For a few activities, the relationship with well-being was 'linear',<sup>6</sup> with every increase in frequency being associated with a similar increase in well-being:<sup>7</sup>

- Learning new things
- Reading for fun
- Organised activities
- Talking to family
- Attention to feelings/emotions

### **Diminishing returns**

Seeing friends was an example of diminishing returns – a pattern whereby the biggest increases in well-being were seen at the bottom end of the frequency scale.<sup>8</sup> At the top of the scale, levels of subjective well-being were either stable, or increases became less pronounced. This pattern was seen in several other activities:

- Seeing friends
- Non-team sports/exercise
- Noticing surroundings
- Seeing extended family

### **Inverse U – too much is not a good thing**

Some of the activities that we included in our survey had an inverse-U relationship with well-being, meaning that doing the activity at the maximum frequency was actually associated with significantly lower well-being than one might expect:<sup>9</sup>

- Team sports (the optimal frequency appears to be 'most days')
- Attention to physical feelings (the optimal frequency appears to be 'most days')
- Teaching yourself new things (the optimal frequency appears to be 'weekly' or 'most days')
- Helping out around house (the optimal frequency appears to be 'weekly')

## Considering each way to well-being in turn

In this section, we consider each of the *five ways to well-being* in turn.

### Connect

Three of the 'connect' activities that we asked children about in our survey - seeing friends, talking to family about things that matter, and seeing extended family – were associated with well-being, as can be seen from the charts below.

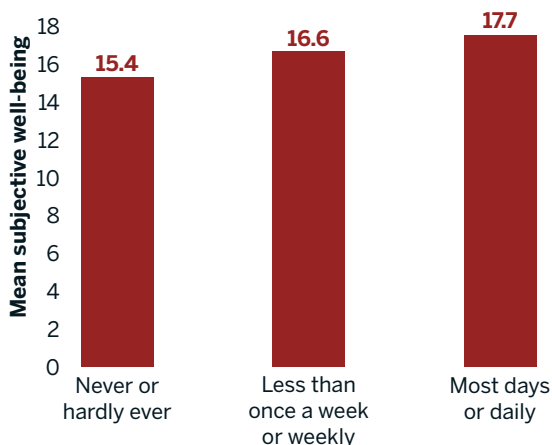
The 'connect' activity that explained the most variation in well-being was talking to family about things that matter to them (Figure 4) – 4% of variation after demographics had been controlled for. The relationship appeared to be 'linear', and there was a difference of 2.3 points between those who talked to their family 'never or hardly ever', and those who talked to their family 'most days or every day'.

However, the 'connect' activity that was associated with the biggest difference in well-being was seeing friends (Figure 5). Children who 'never or hardly ever' see their friends had a mean well-being score that was 2.8 points lower (on a scale of zero to 20) than those who see their friends 'most days or every day'. This relationship was one of diminishing returns ie levels of well-being among children were fairly similar as long as they see their friends more than 'never or hardly ever'.

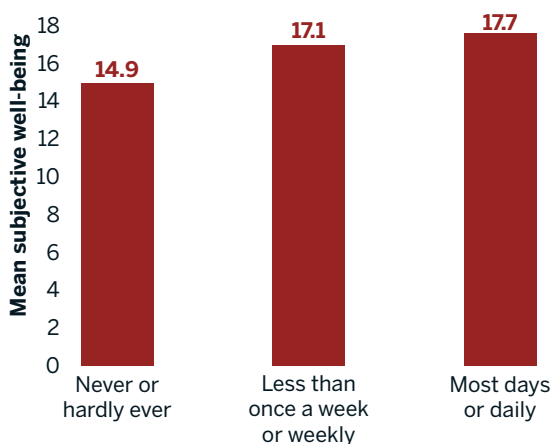
### Note about charts

For the *ways to well-being* activities where there were not enough children in each of the six categories for us to make confident estimates, the results are grouped into three categories. Otherwise all six categories are shown.

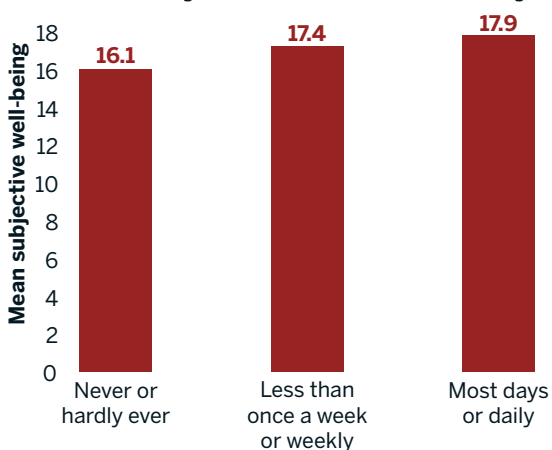
**Figure 4: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they talk to their family about things that matter**



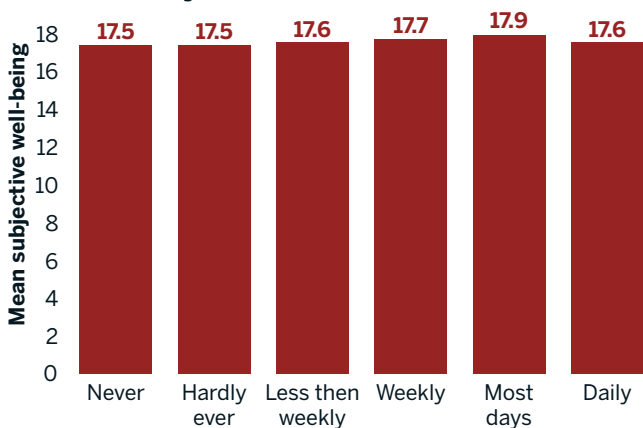
**Figure 5: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they see their friends**



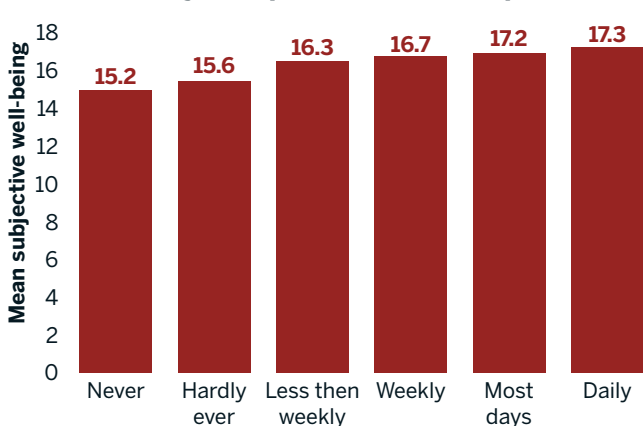
**Figure 6: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they see their extended family**



**Figure 7: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they chat to their friends online**



**Figure 8: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they take part in non-team sports/exercise**



Seeing extended family (Figure 6) also showed a 'diminishing returns' relationship with well-being. Well-being increased with frequency, but the differences were not substantial beyond 'never or hardly ever'. Interestingly, chatting to friends on the phone or via social media did not have the same relationship with children's well-being as spending time with friends in person. This activity was not significantly related to well-being (Figure 7).

**Be active**

All three of the 'be active' activities that we asked about – walking or cycling, team sports, and non-team sports/exercise – had significant associations with children's well-being.

The strongest predictor of well-being was non-team sports/exercise (Figure 8), for which well-being increased up until a frequency of daily. However, the difference between 'most days' and 'daily' was smaller than the differences between lower frequencies, suggesting a 'diminishing returns' relationship.

For walking or cycling (Figure 9), the well-being of the small proportion (8%, n=95) of children who never cycled or walked was 1.7 points below those who walked and cycled once or twice a week and 2.2 points below those who walked or cycled every day.

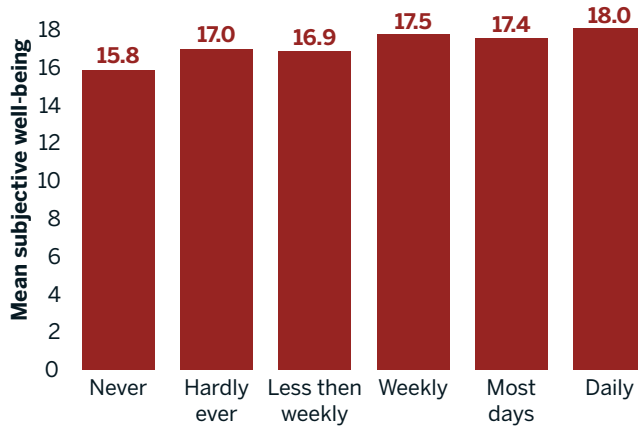
For team sports (Figure 10), the pattern was an inverse U-shape, with the small proportion of children who participated in team sports every day (2%, n=26) reporting significantly lower well-being. Indeed the well-being of children who took part in team sports every day was not significantly higher than the well-being of children who never did so, once demographics were controlled for.

**Keep learning**

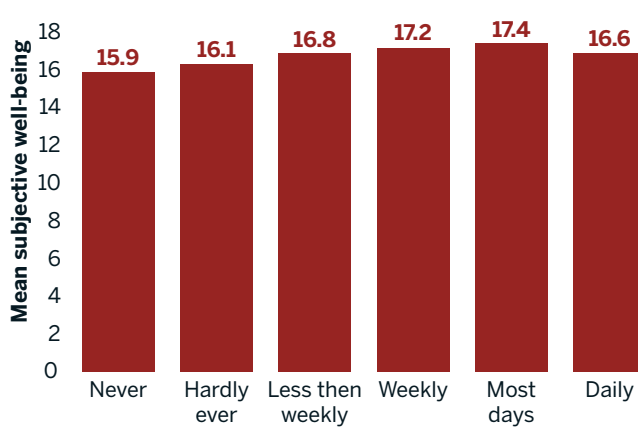
All four of the learning activities that we asked children about in our survey – reading for fun, learning new things for fun, teaching yourself new things, and taking part in organised activities - were significantly linked with well-being.

Teaching yourself new things (Figure 11) was the activity in this category that was associated with the most variation in well-being – 6% once demographics were controlled for. Children who reported doing this activity weekly had a well-being score 4.3 points higher than those who never did. However, this activity had an ‘inverse-U’ pattern. The 3%

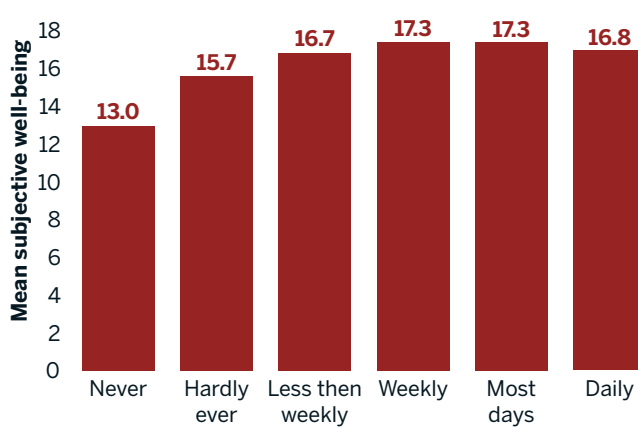
**Figure 9: Children’s subjective well-being according to how often they walk or cycle**



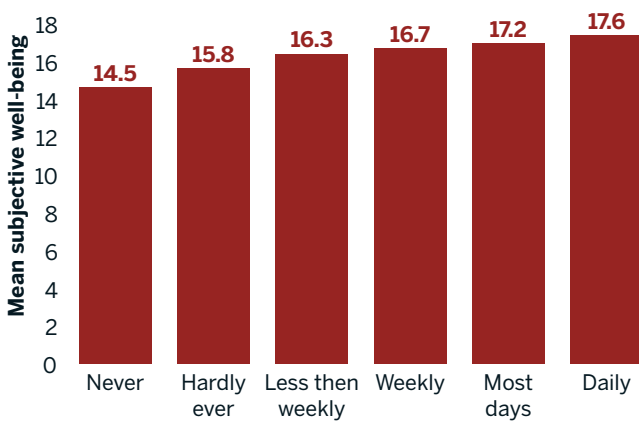
**Figure 10: Children’s subjective well-being according to how often they take part in team sports**



**Figure 11: Children’s subjective well-being according to how often they teach themselves new things**



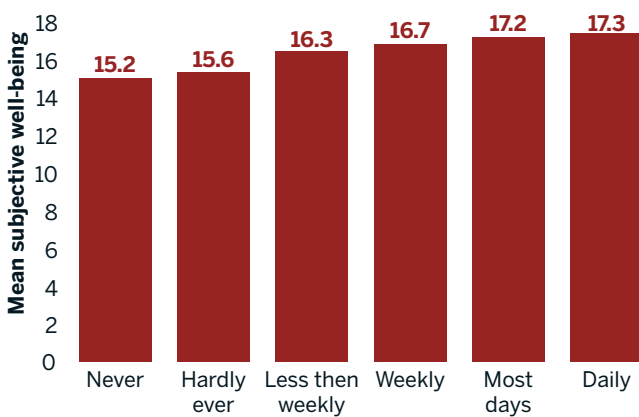
**Figure 12: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they read for fun**



(n=39) of children who reported teaching themselves new things 'every day' had lower well-being than those who did so 'most days', but their well-being was still significantly higher than those who never participated in this activity.

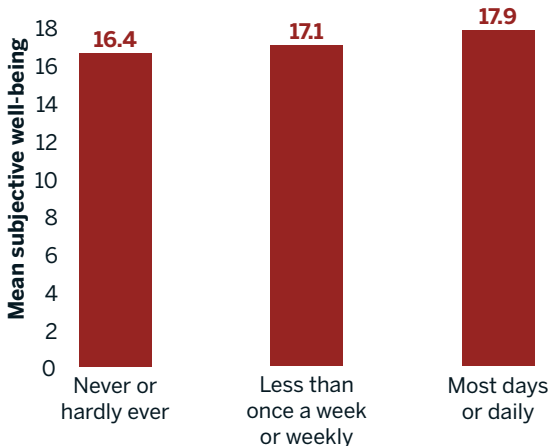
In contrast, reading for fun (Figure 12) and learning new things for fun (Figure 13) had a 'linear' relationship with well-being and predicted 4% and 3% of variation in well-being respectively.

**Figure 13: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they learn new things**



The fourth activity in this category – organised activities (Figure 14) – was the weakest predictor of well-being, explaining only 2% of variation. Nevertheless, children who were involved in organised activities 'most days' or more had significantly higher well-being than those who 'never' did.

**Figure 14: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they take part in organised activities**



### Give

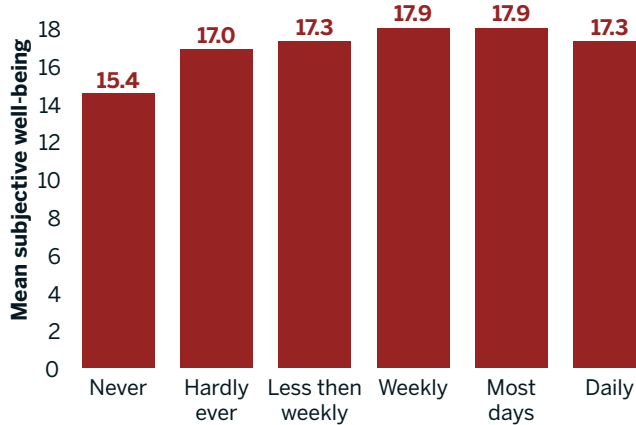
The survey evidence for Give was less convincing than for the other *five ways to well-being*. The strongest predictor of well-being was helping out around the house (Figure 15), which explained 2% of variation. Children who helped out around the house weekly had a well-being score that was 2.4 points higher than those who never helped out around the house. But this activity was also a clear example of an 'inverse-U' pattern, with children who reported helping around the house daily having significantly lower well-being than might be expected from a 'linear' relationship.

Taking care of siblings or other family members (Figure 16) and volunteering (Figure 17) were not significant predictors of subjective well-being.

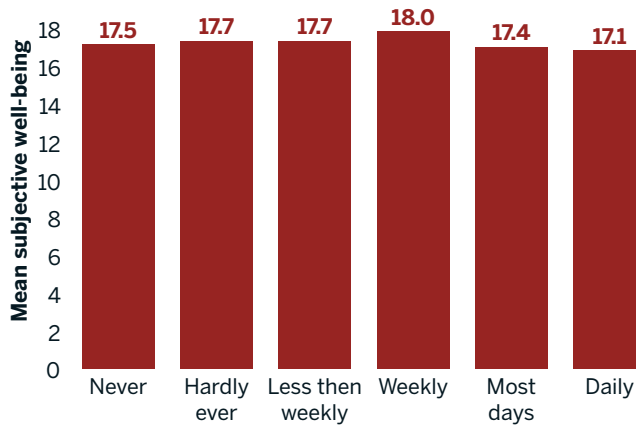
### Take notice

Perhaps the most difficult of the *five ways* to assess was 'take notice'. The principle on which it is based - mindfulness meditation - has very little precedent in UK culture and language, and has only recently been identified as useful for children through initiatives such as Mindfulness in Schools, set up in 2007.

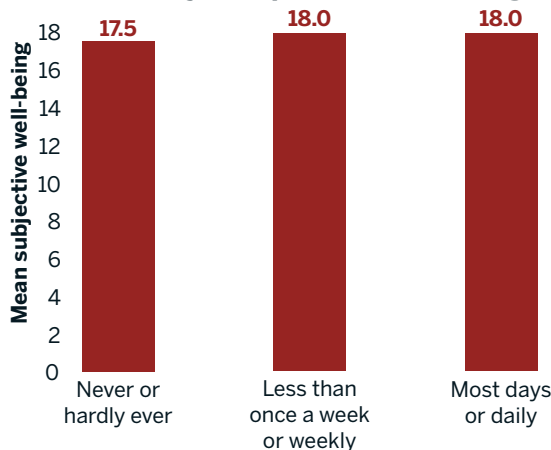
**Figure 15: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they help out at home**



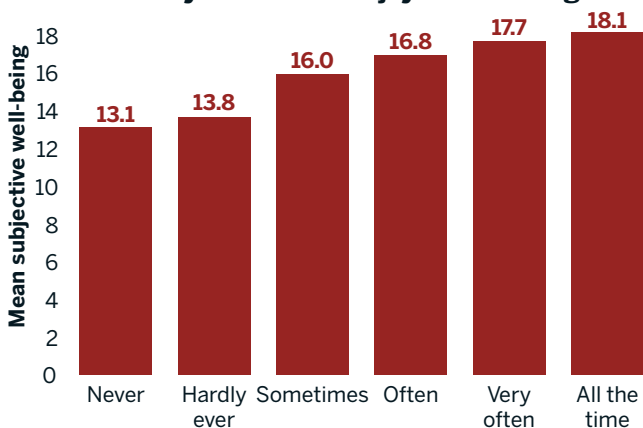
**Figure 16: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they care for siblings or other family members**



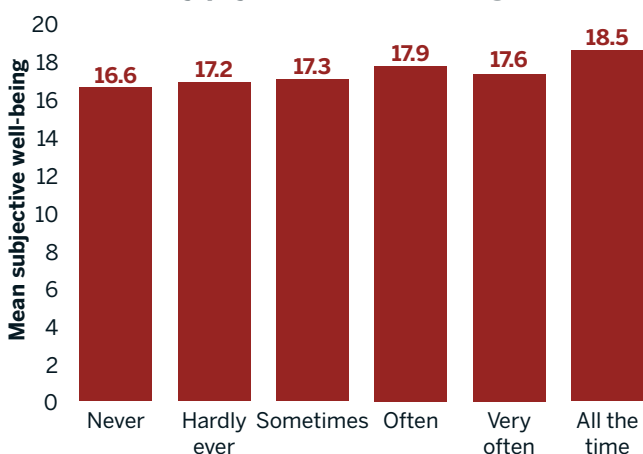
**Figure 17: Children's subjective well-being according to how often they take part in volunteering**



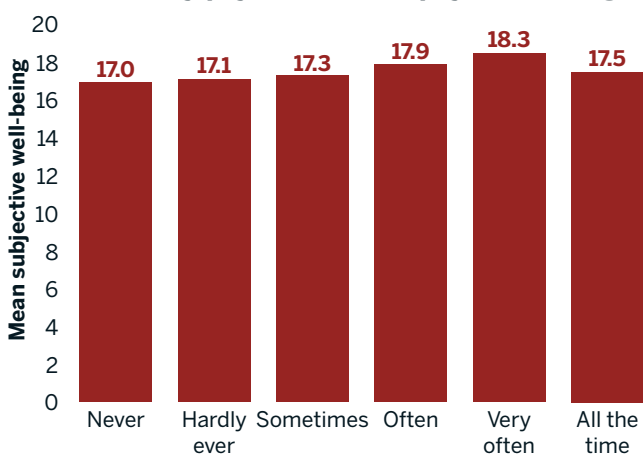
**Figure 18: Children’s subjective well-being according to how often they notice and enjoy surroundings**



**Figure 19: Children’s subjective well-being according to how often they pay attention to feelings and emotions**



**Figure 20: Children’s subjective well-being according to how often they pay attention to physical feelings**



Despite that, we found comparatively strong relationships between two of the three ‘take notice’ activities and children’s well-being. Indeed, the activity with the strongest relationship to children’s well-being in our analysis was the frequency of noticing surroundings (Figure 18) – explaining 10% of variation in well-being, even after demographics were controlled for. The well-being of the children who reported noticing their surroundings all the time was five points higher than those who reported never noticing their surroundings. However, increases in subjective well-being were more pronounced lower down the frequency scale, suggesting that the association is one of ‘diminishing returns’.

The relationships between well-being and paying attention to ‘feelings and emotions’ (Figure 19) and to ‘physical feelings’ (Figure 20) were also significant, although, for the latter of these, there was some evidence that too much of this activity may be associated with lower well-being; children who reported paying attention to their physical feelings ‘all of the time’ had lower well-being than those that reported doing so ‘very often’.

## Summary

The survey has produced valuable evidence to support the relevance of most of the activities identified within the *five ways to well-being* for children. Based on the different associations between the questions we asked on each activity and subjective well-being, it appears that the evidence for Give is weakest. The survey also highlights that certain elements of each of the *five ways* are more strongly linked to well-being than others. For example, talking to family about things that are important appears to be the most important element of connecting, and seeing one's friends in person appears to be more important than chatting via the phone or through social media. Meanwhile, reading for fun and other informal learning activities appear to be more strongly associated with well-being than organised activities.

## Factor analysis of five ways activities

So far we have considered activities individually within the *five ways to well-being*. We were also interested to explore whether clusters of activities formed statistically robust groups. There is no reason to believe that children who frequently carry out an activity related to one of the *five ways to well-being* are also likely to frequently carry out the other activities related to that way to well-being. So which activities are associated with one another? And how can that help us understand who carries out these activities?

To explore this issue we used a statistical method called exploratory factor analysis.<sup>11</sup> This type of analysis does not usually provide a single definitive answer and there are a range of different methods that can be used. Often factor analysis will suggest several different groupings of variables and it is up to the researcher to examine to what extent each of these groupings has practical value.

Table 2 shows one solution<sup>11</sup> which consists of five factors. In this table the highlighted areas show activities that were more closely related to each other than to other activities. There is a great deal of

similarity between these factors and the *five ways*. For example, the first factor links most strongly with the three questions designed to tap into the 'Keep learning' component of the *five ways*. However there are differences also, as discussed further below. Because of these differences we have chosen to use slightly different descriptors when referring to the factors as follows:

- Factor 1 – 'Learning' links most strongly with reading for fun, teaching oneself new things and learning new things
- Factor 2 – 'Activities' links most strongly with involvement in team sports, exercise and organised activities.
- Factor 3 – 'Friendships' links most strongly with contacts with friends and also walking/cycling (discussed below)
- Factor 4 – 'Helping' links most strongly with volunteering and helping at home with caring and housework
- Factor 5 – 'Being aware' links most strongly with paying attention to one's surroundings and to physical and emotional feelings.

While most of the activities fit reasonably neatly into one group it is interesting to note a few of the activities that do not:

- Walking/cycling seems to span two different factors – ‘Activities’ and ‘Friendships’. This makes sense because the phrasing of this question asked children about walking or cycling to school or to see friends.
- Volunteering spans ‘Helping’ and ‘Activities’.
- The activities relating to spending time with family do not fit neatly into a particular grouping. It seems likely that, for children in this age group, connecting with friends is a very different concept to connecting with family.

**Table 2: Factor loadings for the five ways activities**

	Learning	Activities	Friendships	Helping	Being aware
Team sports		0.64			
Non-team exercise		0.65			
Learn new things	0.40	0.27			
Read for fun	0.66				
Walk or cycle		0.23	0.25		
Teach yourself	0.56				
Organised activities		0.53			
Help at home				0.58	
Care for family				0.73	
Volunteer		0.33		0.36	
See friends			0.79		
Chat to friends			0.39		
See family					
Talk to family	0.28				-0.28
Pay attention physically					-0.79
Pay attention emotionally					-0.83
Notice surroundings	0.25				-0.53

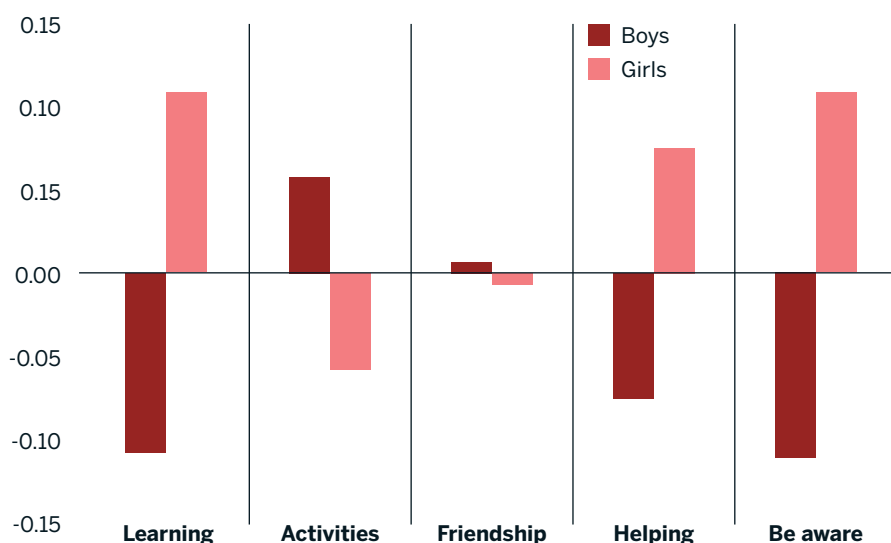
## Who carries out five ways?

We have presented evidence from our survey to show that many *five ways* activities are associated with higher levels of well-being. In this section we look to see if there are any demographic or socio-economic factors associated with frequency of taking part in *five ways* activities, and in the five factors described above. As well as looking at each activity separately and at factors, we have also created indicators of the numbers of *five ways* activities that each child carries out frequently (ie most days or every day<sup>12</sup>) and the number of *five ways* activities that they rarely carry out (eg never or hardly ever). Analysis of these indicators provides insight into whether different kinds of children are on the whole more likely to participate in activities.

### Gender

Looking at the five factors, we found significant differences between boys and girls for all factors apart from Friendships. Girls were more likely than boys to spend time on Learning, Helping, and Being aware, while boys were more likely than girls to spend time on Activities. Results are shown in Figure 21. The strongest differences between boys and girls are for Learning and Being aware.

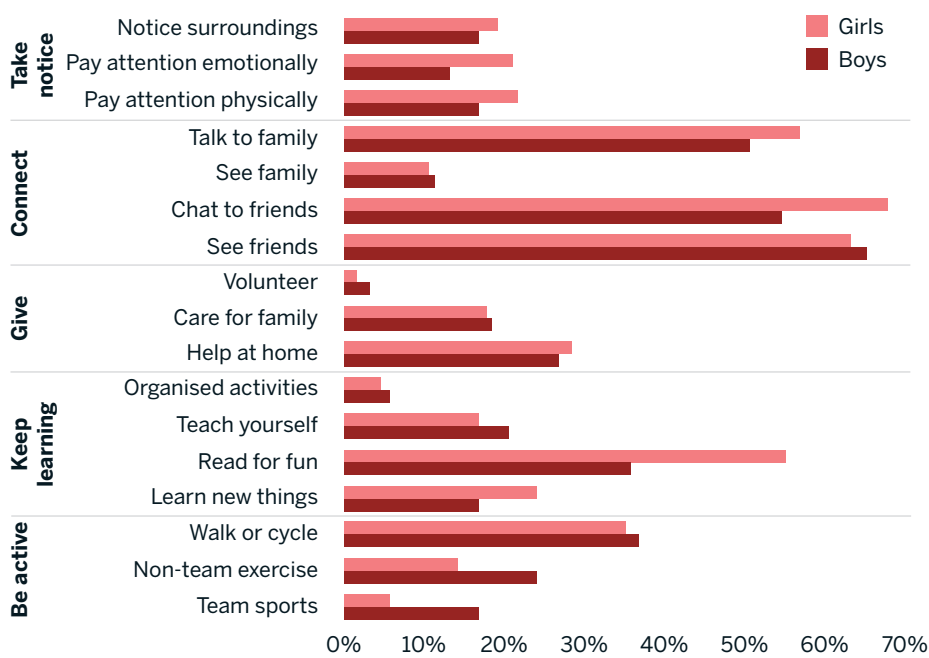
Figure 21: Mean factor scores for boys and girls



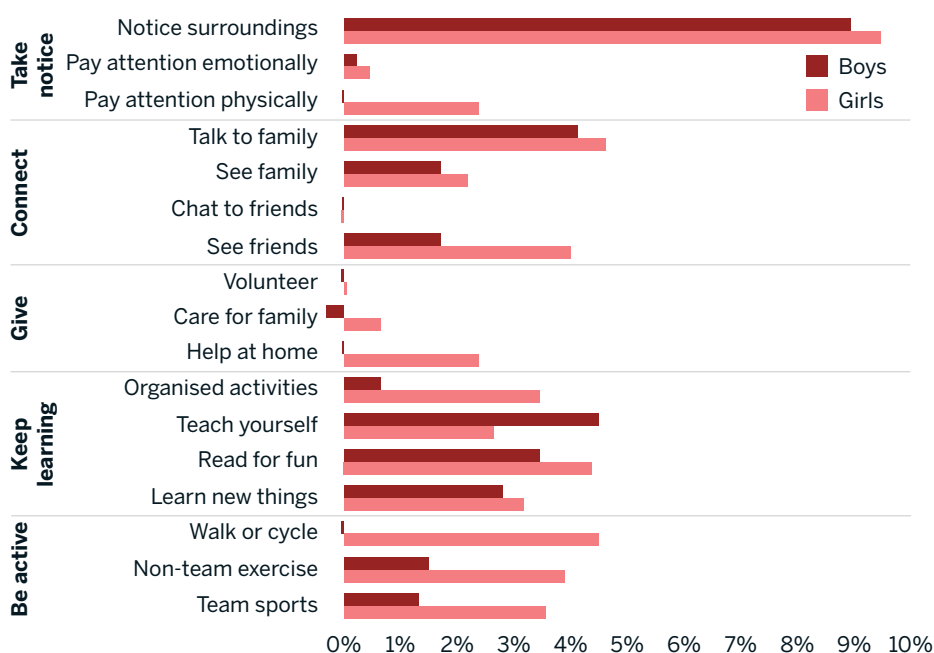
Gender differences were also found in some of the individual *five ways* activities. In nine cases, there is a significant difference between girls and boys in how often they do the *five ways* activities. Figure 22 shows the percentage of boys and girls doing each activity 'most days or every day'. Boys are significantly more likely than girls to do team sports, non-team sports/exercise, and teach themselves new things.

Girls are significantly more likely than boys to learn new things for fun, read for fun, chat to friends, talk to family, pay attention to how they feel physically, and pay attention to how they feel emotionally. This supports the above finding that there is a bias towards the 'be active' activities for boys, and towards the 'keep learning' and 'take notice' activities for girls.

**Figure 22: Proportion of children doing each activity most days or every day, by gender**



**Figure 23: Proportion of variation in subjective well-being explained by each five ways activity, by gender**



There was no significant difference in well-being between boys and girls in this survey. Regressions exploring the impact of demographic and *five ways* factors and activities were carried out separately for boys and girls to identify whether the impact of these variables were different for the different genders. Using only the socio-demographic variables, we found that these (age, whether anyone in the household was in paid work, and the highest educational qualification of the mother) explained more variation in girls' well-being (4%) than in boys' well-being (1%).

Figure 23 shows the proportion of variation in subjective well-being explained by the individual *five ways* activities, when demographic variables are controlled for.<sup>13</sup> Apart from teaching yourself new things, each of the *five ways* activities explains more of the variation in the subjective well-being of girls than of boys. Differences appear particularly large for the 'be active' activities – team sports, non-team sports/exercise, and walking or cycling. That is, for girls, participating in these activities is associated with larger increases in well-being than it is for boys. This is an interesting finding because, as we show above, boys are more likely than girls to participate in team sports and non-team sports/exercise. So the difference in well-being for girls who engage in these activities compared to girls who do not, is greater than the difference in well-being between boys who engage in these activities and boys who do not.

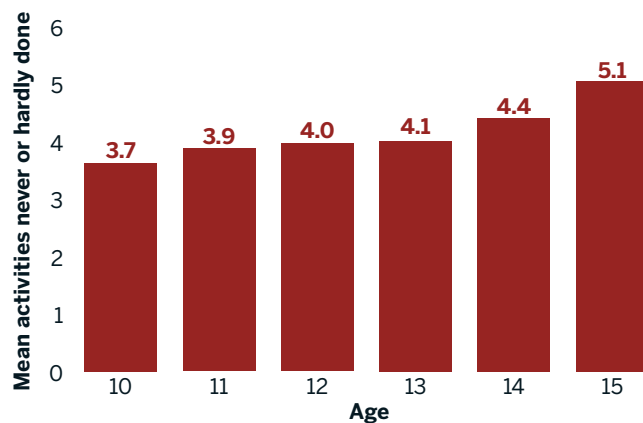
## Age

Unlike gender, age was strongly related to well-being. There was a significant decrease in well-being from age 11 to 15, with children's average well-being scores dropping from 14.6 out of 20 for 10 and 11 year-old children, to 13.0 for 15 year-old children.

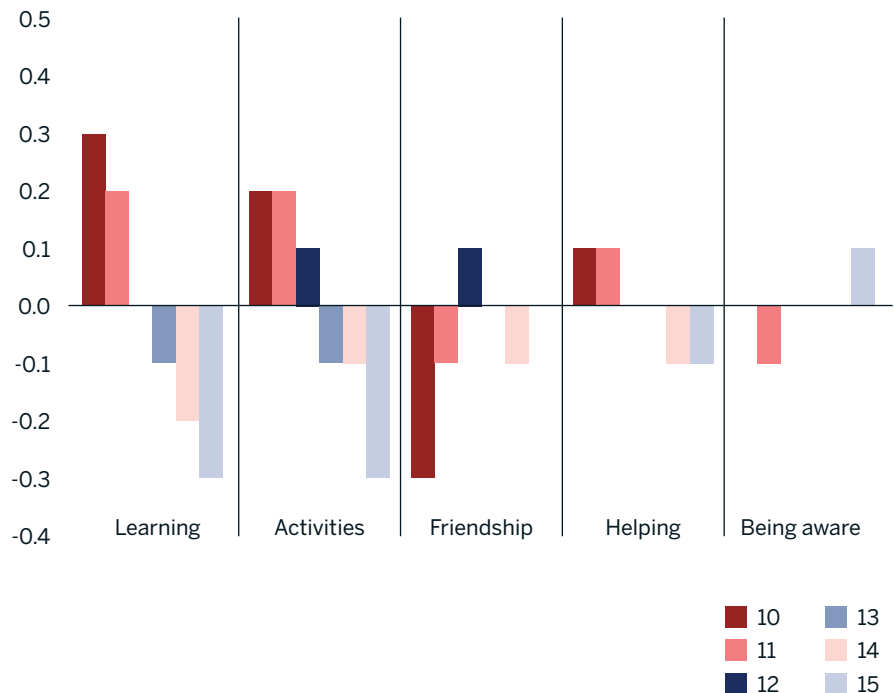
Figure 24 shows the difference in the number of *five ways* activities 'never or hardly ever' done, based on age. In our sample, 10-year-olds participate in markedly more activities than 15-year-olds; the average number of activities 10-year-olds do not participate in is 3.7, while for 15-year-olds this rises to 5.1.

As well as looking at how many activities children of different ages participate in, we were interested in whether children of different ages do specific kinds of activities. To look into this, we used the five factor scores as described above, then looked at children's mean scores on these factors, by their age. We found that there were statistically significant differences between children of different ages for four out of the five factors – Friendships, Activities, Learning and Helping. No significant association was found between age and the Being Aware factor.

**Figure 24: Differences in number of *five ways* activities 'never or hardly ever' done, by age**



**Figure 25: Mean scores representing frequency of participation in each of the *five ways*, by age**



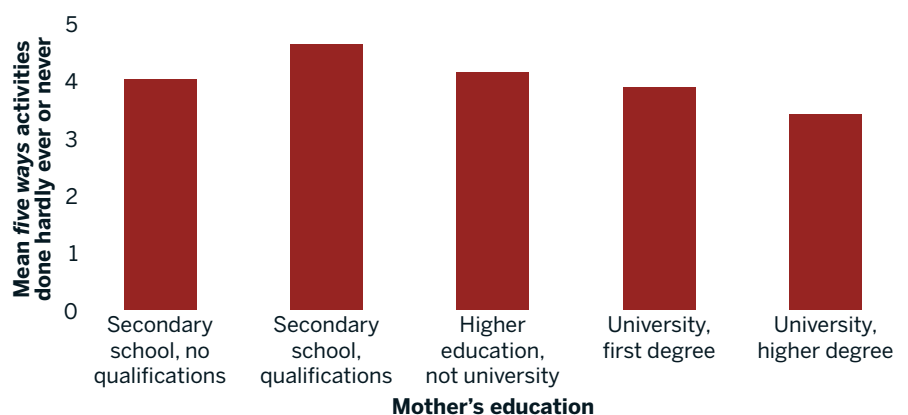
Another way of looking at age differences is in the mean scores for children of different ages in terms of their frequency of participation in each of the *five ways to well-being*, which are shown in Figure 25. For Activities, Learning and Helping, older children reported lower levels of participation in the activities than younger children. This trend is strongest for Activities and Learning. For Friendships the age-related trend ran in the other direction.

An interesting finding, then, is that both well-being and participation in some *ways to well-being* activities decline with age. However it is not clear what the mechanisms underlying this decline in certain activities are. Further research looking at age-related differences in activities, ideally using longitudinal data, would help develop a better understanding of the determinants of well-being, and how well-being might be improved among older children.

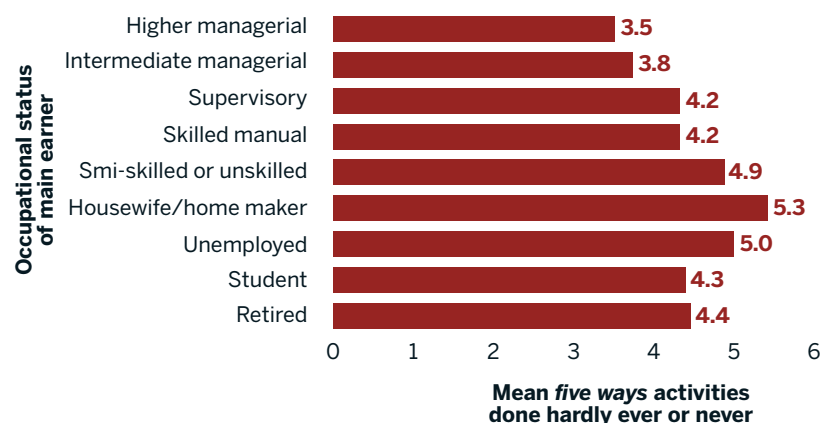
### Socio-economic variables

Do children from different backgrounds participate in *five ways* activities to differing degrees? Using income quartiles, we found no difference in the mean number of activities which children did most days or every day, and only a very small difference in the number of activities children did never or hardly ever (4.8 for children from the bottom quartile,

**Figure 26: Number of *five ways* activities done never or hardly ever, by mother's education**



**Figure 27: Number of *five ways* activities done never or hardly ever, by occupational status of main earner**



compared to 3.9 for children in the top quartile). Looking at those who do not do five or more *five ways* activities, in the lowest income quartile this is 50% of children, while in the highest income quartile it is 35%.<sup>14</sup>

Our analysis shows that there is a small but significant relationship between participation in *five ways* activities and mother's

education<sup>15</sup> and employment of the main earner, with children of more highly educated mothers and those in managerial or skilled jobs generally carrying out slightly more activities on average (Figures 26 and 27). For example, children whose main household earner was a homemaker did not do 5.3 activities, while children whose main earner was in a higher managerial position did not do 3.5.

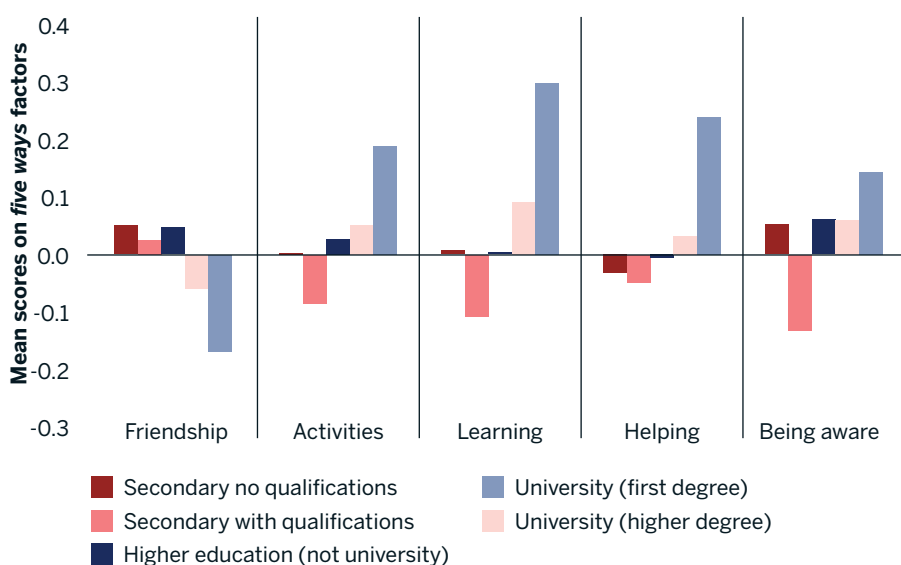
Associations between the factors described earlier and socio-economic variables were examined through looking at the mean scores on each of the factors, according to the highest qualifications of their mothers, and according to their household income quartile.

Looking firstly at mother's education (Figure 28), significant differences were only found for Learning and Being aware. Those with mothers who had a first degree or a higher degree scored higher on the learning factor than those whose mothers had secondary education with qualifications; and those whose mothers had a higher degree scored higher than those whose mothers had higher education (not university). Those whose mothers had higher education (not university) scored higher on the Being Aware factor than those whose mothers had secondary education with qualifications.

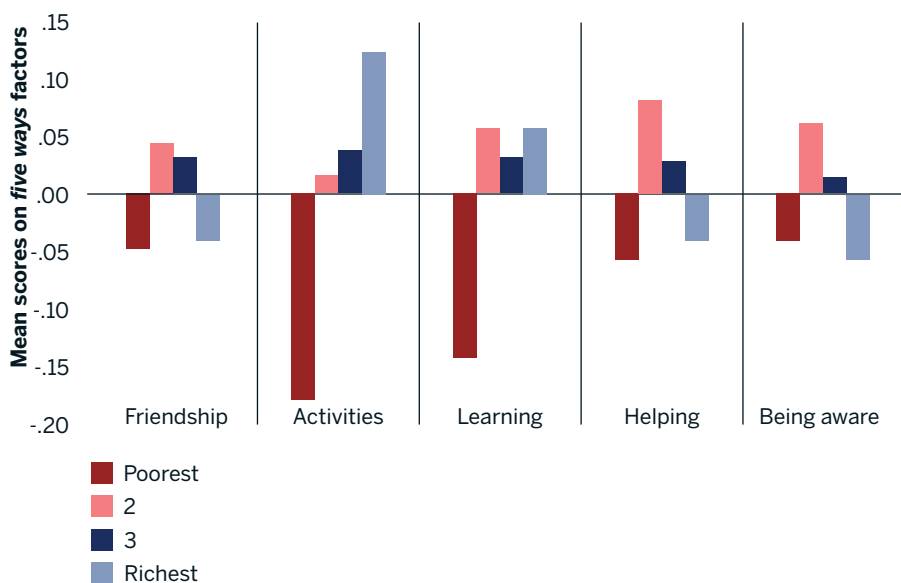
For income quartile (Figure 29), those in the lowest quartile scored significantly lower than those in any other quartile in relation to the Activities and Learning factors. There were no other significant differences according to income.

In all, then, we found very little evidence of a socio-economic gradient in terms of participation in *five ways* activities, and the effect was very weak. Learning may be a way to well-being that children from less advantaged families do less of, but the effect is not large.

**Figure 28: Factor scores according to mother's highest educational attainment**



**Figure 29: Factor scores according to income quartile**



## Summary

- Our survey evidence provides support for the relevance of the *five ways to well-being* for children, although the evidence for Give was weaker.
- Looking at individual activities, the most strongly associated with children's well-being were:
  - Noticing and enjoying one's surroundings (Take notice)
  - Teaching yourself new things (Keep learning)
  - Talking to family about things that matter (Connect)
  - Reading for fun (Keep learning)
- While it did not explain as much variation in well-being, seeing friends (Connect) was an important activity, in that children who never or hardly ever saw their friends had an average well-being score of 15 out of 20, compared to 18 for those who saw their friends most days or every day.
- The evidence demonstrates positive relationships between well-being and a whole host of other *five ways* activities, including learning new things for fun, taking part in sports and exercise, walking or cycling, seeing extended family, taking part in organised activities, helping out around the house, and paying attention to emotions and physical feelings.
- For three activities, we found no evidence of a relationship with well-being:
  - Chatting to friends via social media or phone
  - Caring for family members
  - Volunteering
- The relationship between well-being and the frequency of doing an activity was not always 'linear'.
  - For some activities, such as seeing friends, there was a pattern of 'diminishing returns', with greater increases in frequency associated with smaller rises in well-being.
  - For some activities, for example teaching yourself new things and participating in team sports, there appeared to be an optimal point, beyond which increasing frequency was actually associated with lower well-being.
  - There were some differences between girls and boys in how often they did *five ways* activities. There were some indications that boys might more frequently participate in 'be active' activities, whilst girls more frequently participated in 'keep learning', 'give' and 'take notice' activities.
- Well-being was higher for younger children in the sample, and lower for older children. Older children also participated in fewer of the *five ways* activities. However, older children were more likely to participate in 'connect' activities than younger children.
- Only very small associations were found between the socio-economic status of a child's family and their participation in the *five ways* activities. However, looking at the average number of activities children participate in, 50% of children in the bottom income quartile do not do five or more activities, while this is the case for only 35% in the top income quartile.

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## 4. Findings from the focus groups

*In this section we present the main findings from our qualitative research with children. In order to place children's voices centre stage, we report first on the things that children themselves cited, unprompted, as being important for their happiness. We then turn to their responses to specific questions about the five ways to well-being.*

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Many of the comments that children made unprompted in the focus groups fitted neatly with the five ways. Other themes that they highlighted were substantively different to the five ways, but nonetheless shared important concepts with them. Others still – like eating snacks and treats, shopping, and watching television - did not appear to be consistent with the five ways. In the section below we present children's comments thematically, either under headings that relate directly to the five ways to well-being, or under other headings that better summarise the underlying concepts that were being discussed.

### Connecting

Spending time with friends and family was felt by many children to be fundamental to making life good for them. For some children, this was intrinsically linked to a certain activity – such as playing or going on holiday – while for others, spending time with friends or family was the main emphasis.

When talking about family, children mainly referred to parents and siblings.

'I like being with my family.'

However, wider family, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins were also felt to be important.

'It's like a treat when you get to see [wider family] cos you don't see them all the time...'

'I like seeing my cousins, they're like friends. I like going to stay with my cousin or when he comes down to stay.'

Children's comments about their siblings indicated that they often have mixed feelings about spending time with brothers and sisters.

'Sometimes I hate my brother cos he wants to do everything I'm doing but sometimes I like him cos he helps me a lot.'

One of the aspects of family relationships that children valued most was the support that they received:

'I think it's important to tell your parents stuff as well as your friends. like if it were anything really serious or if it involved them I'd let them know. Like with school if

anything were to happen like bullying or anything then I'd talk to my parents and they could help.'

Also notable, especially in the comments of older participants, was the way in which they made an effort to help their families in various ways, which in turn enabled them to feel a sense of responsibility and maturity.

'If my mum's been working all day she'll come home and be really stressed and I'll like wash the pots to help her, like tidying up.'

Friends were cherished for many reasons: for the qualities that were prized in good friends, for the activities that could be enjoyed together, and simply for the company that friends provide.

'You look out for each other, look after each other. Me and my friend say that we'll protect each other and stand by each other's side, like if one of us gets bullied we'll help each other cos that's what we always do.'

'You do things together like say, you go shopping, you play with them. They make you happy cos they keep you company. Say you're bored, you phone them up and you go and play out and you're not feeling bored anymore.'

**One of the benefits of spending time with friends emphasised by children was being able to be yourself.**

'With my best friend we always have fun together, it's never boring. And we know each other really well. It's nice being able to be yourself and for them to be able to be themselves. To say what you want without someone going 'what? You feel perfectly comfortable... like at school sometimes I feel a bit scared saying stuff, but with my best friend I could say absolutely anything in the world and it would be ok.'

Making new friends, as well as spending time with existing ones, were both felt to be important for children's happiness.

More generally, in relation to the Connect theme, children acknowledged the importance of social interactions for their happiness. However, there were different views about how much time should be spent with other people. Some clearly liked to spend all their time with others:

'I like to have people with me whatever I'm doing.'

'I'd hate to do something on my own.'

**While others placed much greater importance on having time on their own:**

'I like my bedroom. I don't like going out. I do all my things in there so I'm used to it. It's my own private space.'

'You can sort things out in your head with no-one weighing in on what's going on, it's more peaceful.'

## **Being active**

Another common response to our questions about the kinds of things that make life good for children was some form of physical activity. This sometimes took the form of organised sessions, such as playing football within a club setting, and sometimes referred to informal activities such as riding a bicycle in the local neighbourhood. When probed on what they enjoyed about, and how they benefitted from, physical activity, children often made reference to the social aspects of sports and exercise.

'[Football] that's a good thing... so you can be active with your friends and you can make new friends and you can have fun.'

**However, the well-being benefits were also felt to be important in and of themselves:**

'The park has obstacle things where you can be active and you can go on the swings, it just makes you feel happy to do it.'

'When I play football I get happier, either playing on the football team or playing with my mates.'

As well as associating physical activity with feeling good, some children also associated it with functioning well. As one child indicated, for her it engendered a sense of vitality:

'I used to go running in the mornings, before I hurt my knee. I would be in a better mood in the day, and feel wide awake.'

In addition to the more immediate well-being effects of their physical activities, some children also acknowledged the longer-term benefits for their health.

'If you keep fit, you know that you won't get diseases later in life like obesity... That makes you feel good'.

## Learning

An enthusiasm for learning and its positive effects came through strongly in the focus groups. While for some, learning was associated mainly with school, for others it encompassed learning outside of school too. Participants described non-school based learning in both formal and informal settings.

'Well you learn everyday even if you don't go to school cos there are so many things around you and you don't actually know what everything is, so you actually learn something all the time even if it isn't school or a game, just by seeing things.'

For some children, learning was a sole pursuit:

'I really like reading my own books that are not fiction books, you can experiment with them, like I'm trying to make something at the moment with battery acid, trying to make that

out of some stuff I've got around the house.'

Whereas for others it was social, an experience to be shared with others:

'You know like Grandmas and Granddads? Well I really like going with them cos they've learnt all this stuff before cos they've got longer experience than your mum and dad even ... I've learnt all about WW1 and WW2 with me Grandma and Granddad.'

For some children, an understanding of the longer-term benefits of learning is a key part of what makes it enjoyable.

'I enjoy learning, I absolutely love learning in my favourite lessons. I also enjoy learning in other lessons cos I know they'll contribute to what I want to do when I'm older.'

There was also a sense in which learning and being informed about the world around them is important for helping to keep them 'in the loop' and for facilitating social relationships with peers.

'I like watching the news, you come away thinking you've learned something about the world and you can tell your friends and it gives you something to talk about.'

For some, enthusiasm for learning was very much linked to the sense of achievement that ensued. We discuss this in more detail in the 'cross-cutting themes' section.

## **Playing, creativity and imagination**

A key set of activities mentioned by children in our focus groups related to playing, doing things for fun, and taking part in creative pursuits. This over-arching category encompasses a broad range of activities including engaging in artistic, music-related and organised activities, playing computer games and – for younger participants in particular – simply playing.

These activities are not specifically referred to within the *five ways to well-being* framework, although they overlap considerably with the 'Keep learning' and 'Connect' themes. Indeed, many of the 'Keep learning' activities that we asked about in our survey are relevant here, for example, our question about 'learning new things for fun' specifically mentioned music, languages, art and drama, while our question about 'taking part in organised activities' mentioned youth clubs and scouts/guides. However, it is important to highlight that children in our focus groups valued these activities for the pleasure that they derived from them rather than any associated learning benefits. Children described their enjoyment of playing in the park/playground or inside, alone or with friends.

'[The adventure playground is] really fun and you get to all sorts of things there.'

'At the park, they have a humungous slide and bungee jumping and a climbing net and table tennis.'

Listening to music, playing instruments, dancing and singing were also popular activities.

'[Singing] just makes everyone happy!'

'I like dancing, I go to dance classes... I just enjoy it, I like dancing... it's fun.'

Children also emphasised finding pleasure in creative activities like arts and crafts, or acting.

'I like designing stuff. I like sketching things, copying things - it just makes me feel good that I can draw stuff.'

'[Acting] is fun, you can just go out there and no-one judges you. It's not really you so if you do something embarrassing you can say 'oh it was my character' and get away with it.'

**Imagination was a key element of many of these activities.**

'If you get to use your imagination it makes you happy.'

'When you're doing something where you can use your own imagination and you can do your own thing, like write a book about something, like a short fairy tale or something like that, anything can happen in there and that makes you more excited about what you're doing.'

**Playing computer games and going online were enjoyed both for the activity itself, but also for the opportunity to connect with friends.**

'[Computer] games are fun. You play with other people and you can talk to your friends on it.'

'[On Facebook] you can chat with your mates, upload pictures, and just keep in touch with what's going on.'

**Children also talked about organised extra-curricular activities, such as after-school clubs.**

'You can cook, make bracelets, paint, play Xbox, play football.'

**As might be expected, for younger participants many of the activities that they reported as making them happy were associated with being at or close to home, whereas for older participants the opposite was the case.**

'I like the laptop because you can talk to your friends, give a message to them, you don't always need to go to their house and come back.'

'When you're out you can get food, go to parks, whatever, just sit and meet people. So there's not really any set plan, just do whatever. If you go out you can do more, you can do whatever.'

**[Older child]**

**As mentioned earlier, many of these activities relate to other 'ways to well-being' such as learning and connecting. However, we group them together here because they were so pronounced in the focus group discussions that we believe that 'playing and creativity' merits being considered as a way to well-being in its own right.**

## Give

Within the focus groups, our questions about giving were framed, in the first instance, in terms of helping at home or with siblings. These yielded mainly negative or problematic responses insofar as participants expressed clear expectations that helping out at home would be met with a reward.

'I like helping my mum 'cos I get extra pocket money and I get to go on the quad bike after.'

However, when the discussions were broadened out to include doing things to help others in non-specified ways, children's comments were far more positive.

When children talked freely and positively about giving, it was usually linked to other activities. For example, one participant spoke of her love of creative activity in terms of how this allowed her to give something to others:

'I like making things and drawing things because I can give it to someone and make them happy... like my sisters and my mum'.

Another participant spoke of her love of dance, noting that what she really enjoyed was teaching others:

'It's nice seeing the younger ones and how they progress and get better; it's a good feeling and makes me feel like I've helped them get there'.

For many, giving was achieved through everyday acts of kindness such as holding doors open for people or putting money in a charity collection tin:

'It's like if you go to a shop and put your change in the charity box it makes you feel good cos you've helped'.

Children themselves were aware of the expectations that sometimes accompany supposedly altruistic acts:

'The other day I told my friend I was going to buy her something, then she asked for it and I was like 'don't ask' and then I didn't want to get it for her cos she's expecting it.'

## Taking notice

Perhaps the most difficult to get at of the *five ways to well-being* was 'Take notice'. This is not surprising, as the principle on which it is based (mindfulness meditation) has very little precedent in UK culture and language, and has only recently been identified as useful for children through initiatives such as Mindfulness in Schools, set up in 2007.

It is therefore not surprising that all of the data collected on this way to well-being was in response to prompting, and further, in response to a short, age-appropriate explanation of mindfulness. For the most part, participants had not heard of mindfulness and did not report undertaking activity that they could connect to mindfulness practice. There were three exceptions to this. One was the group of year 10 students who had the following conversation:

'I go in the bath, like taking yourself out of everything that's busy, to calm myself down I'll just go in the bath and it makes me forget everything.'

'I always have candles in the bath and then I just stare at them.'

'Yeah, I like staring at fires.'

'I don't like notice a good feeling but it kind of like, what if you didn't do it? Like it's kind of, I feel like a deeper person.'

**One child made a connection between mindfulness and meditation, or prayer, with which she was familiar through her religious practice. When asked if anyone had heard of mindfulness she responded with the following:**

'Like meditation you mean? Like it's part of our religion to pray, we do like praying where we focus on more important things... Yeah it makes you feel more calm, it makes you understand more what's going on around you and makes you improve yourself.'

The third set of children who were familiar with the practice and principles of mindfulness meditation (if not the vocabulary) attended a school where it had been introduced – via a particular teacher – to the whole school. From these children there was a positive response, with reports of the feelings generated including a sense of calmness, happiness and freedom from 'bad thoughts'.

'It makes me feel nice and calm and happy and peaceful'.

**[Student on mindfulness meditation]**

'It makes me feel not stressed, not like 'I need to do this, then I need to do this, then I need to do this'. It's like it gets the bad thoughts out of my head'.

'I feel calm and peaceful and I feel like I want to take on the day'.

Our qualitative research has a potential contribution to make to this literature, in demonstrating that for those practising mindfulness in childhood, positive states of mind can ensue.

## Enabling and preventing factors

As well as asking children what activities they thought contributed to a good life, we also asked them what factors would enable or hinder them from carrying out those activities. The enabling and disabling factors that children mentioned can be categorised as either intrinsic (physical and psychological), or extrinsic. Some children spoke of intrinsic factors such as having certain health conditions – for example asthma – which prevented them from participating in physical activities of their choice. There was also a discussion of psychological factors such as lacking the belief that they can do something well enough.

However, most of the barriers or enablers were extrinsic. The most predominant here was having permission, usually from parents, to do certain things.

'If parents say no they can't come round, or if your friend is busy.'

'Mum's so strict, she's strict about what time I come home. Every time I come home she shouts. If you want to hang around with your friends and it's

too late your parents are going to stop you, if it's too late.'

Another obstacle was siblings – either because they got in the way or because they needed to be cared for – and household chores.

'Cleaning the house and looking after my little sister.'

'And help your mum if she has babies.'

Lack of money or transport was another important factor preventing some children from attending activities outside the home.

'Sometimes with the activities it's too far away so you always have to have someone to pick you up and drop you off, so it could be a problem.'

'If it's an indoor skate park you need money and if you don't have money you can't go.'

Children often mentioned homework as stopping them from doing the things that they enjoy doing.

'Work, like if we get too much school work.'

'You have to do your homework, that's important.'

For some children, busy schedules were also a barrier, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

'Hobbies... like I go dancing five days a week and sometimes I think 'oh I want to be out with my friends, my school friends' but then if I stop dancing I'd lose my dancing friends and my hobby.'

Related to the above, there was also a sense that one way to well-being could be a barrier to engaging in another. For example, commitments to friends or family could prevent children from spending time doing a much-loved hobby, and commitments to learning – though enjoyed – could prevent children from spending as much time with family and friends as desired.

Several children spoke of bullying or power imbalances within groups of children that prevented them from engaging in desired activities.

‘Big kids, they take over the adventure playground and make it really hard for little kids, and sometimes they just take the ball and then they keep it to themselves... So then you can’t play.’

‘When you’re trying to play with one friend but another friend takes you away from them.’

Many of these enabling and preventing factors point to the way in which the issue of autonomy is particularly important for children. We turn to this, as well as to other cross-cutting issues, in the following section.

## **Cross-cutting issues**

In this section, we report briefly on two cross-cutting themes, which arose throughout discussions of each of the ways to well-being – a sense of autonomy and a sense of achievement. The emergence of these two themes corroborates the self-determination theory of psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci, which posits that autonomy, a sense of competence and relatedness are universal psychological needs (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

### **The importance of autonomy**

Perhaps the most significant issue to cut across all areas of our focus group discussions was that of autonomy. Indeed, for some children it was cited directly as a way to well-being in itself, although we have not considered it as such because it is not amenable to being ‘done by’ children as the other ways to well-being arguably are.

Clearly, feeling independent and being able to make choices about what they do was of fundamental importance to children.

‘Like playing with your friends, you don’t want your mum holding your hand all the time, you want some independence, some time to play by yourself.’

‘At school you have your own independence, you can do your own topics sometimes, you get to pick what you want to do and that, in your school lessons. I find that really good.’

When probed for what it was that they enjoyed about a certain activity, children often described the feeling of independence it afforded them.

‘It’s not the actual game playing on my PS3, it’s having that time and the independence to do what I want’.

‘I’m independent when I’m out on the street cos I live on a hill and there’s not many cars so I can keep going on my bike and going round in a circle.’

And for some the focus was on the negative aspects of having little or no say in what they did.

'When your mum keeps you in. Parents, sometimes your parents let you go out but sometimes they're like 'no, you're not going out.'

'Mum doesn't want you to spend time with [friends]. I get quite annoyed about it. I've got one friend who my parents didn't like and called him stupid but we've got to be really good friends now and he's not like that at all.'

**When autonomy is constrained in ways that are felt to be unreasonable, a previously enjoyed activity can cease to give pleasure.**

'I used to play the piano and my step dad made me practice every single day, like every day I had to play for an hour, and it just became horrible cos, well I really enjoyed playing the piano but the fact that he would like tell me I had to

do it for an hour a day, it just really annoyed me. Now I'm trying to teach myself the guitar and I enjoy that cos no-one's telling me to do it.'

#### **The importance of a sense of achievement**

For many children, activities cited as making them happy transpired to have positive effects because of the sense of achievement that they engendered.

'I always say after a session I come out and I feel a sense of achievement, like I've achieved something, done something new and mixed with different people.'

As well as emphasising other benefits of certain activities, children often spoke of the sense of development they achieved and the pride they took in this. As one older boy noted with regard to skate-boarding:

'You can see yourself progressing'.

Similarly, a sense of being capable, and feeling good as a result, was evident in children's narratives.

'I made a cake the other day and all my mum did for me was put the oven on, I did everything else.'

A similar sentiment is evident in the statement of a young girl, who spoke of her love of skipping.

'At first I didn't know criss-cross jumping, it's so hard, but now I know and I can do it. It makes me feel proud'.

## Summary

- 'Connecting' or spending time with friends and family was felt by children to be fundamental to their well-being. Children valued their relationships with friends and family principally for the love and support that they provided, and for the activities that could be done together.
- 'Being active' was another aspect of life that children highlighted as contributing to their well-being, in part because of the social aspects of sports and exercise, but also because of the intrinsic benefits.
- Children talked about 'learning' mainly in relation to school, but they also recognised a number of ways in which they learn more informally. Enthusiasm for learning was often linked to the sense of achievement that it entailed.
- Children also described their enjoyment of playing, being creative and using their imagination. There is some overlap between this theme and the 'learning' and 'connecting' survey questions that we put to children eg learning new things such as music, art and drama, taking part in organised activities, reading for fun, and seeing or chatting to friends.
- When we asked in our focus groups about 'giving' in terms of helping out at home and looking after family, children did not necessarily feel that these activities contributed to their well-being. However, when children talked freely about activities that made them feel good, they often recognised that 'helping', 'giving' and kindness were important aspects of what made particular activities enjoyable.
- In general, children only made comments about 'taking notice' in response to specific prompts and questions. However, some of the children that we spoke to understood the concept when we described it to them and recognised the calmness and focus that they derived from mindfulness, prayer and 'taking notice' of the things around them.
- When we asked children about the factors that enable or prevent them from carrying out activities that contribute to their well-being, they mentioned both intrinsic factors such as health conditions and self-belief, and extrinsic factors such as permission from parents, busy schedules, money, transport, and the behaviour of other children.
- A common thread running through the focus group discussions that we had with children was the fundamental importance of autonomy, independence and choice. On the one hand, children described enjoying particular activities because they gave them a sense of self-determination, while on the other hand, they cited lack of autonomy as a major constraint on their participation in activities that contribute to well-being.
- Another explanation for why children enjoyed certain activities was the sense of achievement and development that they acquired as a result.

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## 5. Discussion and conclusions

*The findings presented in this report make an important contribution to knowledge about the links between activities that people choose to undertake in their daily lives and their subjective well-being. The research study on which the report is based is, as far as we are aware, the first to comprehensively explore this issue in relation to children.*

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The research set out to explore the relevance to children of the *five ways to well-being* framework consisting of five types of activities – Connect, Be active, Take notice, Keep learning and Give. This framework was originally developed on the basis of a review of research mainly with adults. The findings both from the qualitative and quantitative components of our research, suggest that it is also a useful starting point for thinking about the kinds of activities that children might undertake that could enhance their sense of well-being.

The focus group research we undertook provided strong unprompted support among children aged eight to 15 for the value of three of the *five ways* – connecting with people, being active and learning. Through prompted discussion, children also endorsed the relevance of the other two of the *five ways* - taking notice and giving (in relation to acts of kindness and informal help). In addition to the *five ways*, children drew attention to the benefits of activities related to creativity, imagination and play (which may represent an additional ‘way to well-being’ for children); the relevance of a degree of autonomy to be able to choose activities that may enhance well-being; and the important part that a sense of competence and achievement may play in the link between activities and subjective well-being.

In the survey research, we were able to develop a set of questions, based on the *five ways*, which asked about everyday activities relevant to children’s lives. The survey data provides valuable new insights into the ways that children spend their time and the connections between the frequency of various activities and their overall sense of well-being. It also provides evidence on variations in frequency of activities according to age, gender and other factors.

In broad terms, probably the most important finding from the survey research is that there are significant associations between a range of everyday activities and children’s subjective well-being. So, for example, children who more frequently take notice of their surroundings, teach themselves new things, connect with people around them and read for fun are likely also to have a higher level of subjective well-being (controlling for the effect of other factors such as age, gender and household income).

This finding regarding the association between everyday activities and children’s subjective well-being does not in itself provide evidence of a causal link. However, the new evidence presented in this report suggests it is plausible that the activities in which children choose to engage can have an impact on their sense of well-being.

If this is the case, then it is also possible that encouraging children to engage in these activities may well lead to improvements in their well-being and quality of life. There is already some evidence from research with adults of this potential. Our research therefore provides an important message for children themselves and for all those concerned with maintaining and enhancing their well-being.

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# Notes

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1. Since the analyses we present here, data for adults has become available from the 2012 European Social Survey well-being module which included six items on *five ways* activities ([www.europeansocialsurvey.org](http://www.europeansocialsurvey.org)). The environmental charity Wastewatch has also developed a tool to evaluate their projects based on changes in frequencies of engaging in five ways activities, but this asks respondents to report whether they have increased their participation in activities, rather than provide a measure of their frequency of activities. Purvis E (2013) *What's good for the environment is good for us: contributing to wellbeing through environmental projects*. Available at [www.wastewatch.org.uk/data/files/resources/138/WW-contribution-to-wellbeing-report-completed.pdf](http://www.wastewatch.org.uk/data/files/resources/138/WW-contribution-to-wellbeing-report-completed.pdf)
2. We controlled for age, gender, mother's education and whether the child comes from a household where no adult works. Analysis was performed using linear regression, and findings in Figure 2 are based on the adjusted r squared statistic, which describes the amount of variation explained by the model. The figures in this chart are based on the total adjusted r squared for models with each *five ways* activity, minus the amount of variation explained by a model including just demographic variables.
3. In some cases we did not have enough children in each group to do analysis based on all six frequencies. For these cases, frequencies were grouped into three categories as in Figure 1 – that is, never or hardly ever; less than once a week or once or twice a week; and most days or every day.
4. When we say 'linear', we really mean 'monotonic' because the response categories are ordinal not continuous, but we use the term 'linear' for ease of understanding.
5. Note that these patterns broadly fit most of the *ways to well-being* variables. For some (including walking/cycling), the pattern is not so clear. Figures 4 to 20 below show the relationships with socio-demographic characteristics controlled for.
6. See note five above
7. For all these activities, a multiple linear regression including frequency of the activity as a single scalar variable produced the highest adjusted r squared value, meaning that this type of regression explained more variation in subjective well-being than alternative types.
8. We tested this by comparing the results of a multiple linear regression with the *five ways* activity as a linear predictor, to the results of a similar regression but with the *five ways* activity as categorical predictors. Where categorical predictors produced a higher adjusted r squared value than a linear predictor, and where increases in well-being between the categories were greater towards the lower end of the frequency scale, relationships were classified as diminishing returns.
9. As above, we tested for this by comparing the results of a linear regression with the *five ways* activity as a linear predictor, to the results of the same variable as categorical predictors. Where categorical predictors resulted in a higher adjusted r squared value, and where increases in well-being could be seen towards the lower end of the frequency scale, but decreases occurred higher up, relationships were categorised as inverse U.
10. We chose to use exploratory rather than confirmatory factor analysis because, at this stage, we feel that work on conceptualising different 'ways to well-being' is still relatively undeveloped.
11. This solution was generated using Principal Axis Factoring with Oblimin rotation. Using a cut-off of eigen-values greater than 1, a five factor solution, explaining 56% of the variance, that is shown in the table.
12. Or 'very often' or 'all of the time' for the 'take notice' activities.
13. As in Figure 2, the proportion of subjective well-being explained by each *five ways* activity was calculated based on the adjusted r squared statistic, and the proportion stated here is the proportion of variation explained by the model including the *five ways* activity, minus the proportion of variation explained just by demographic variables.
14. Correlation between income and number of activities never done:  $r = -0.11$ ,  $p = 0.001$
15. We used mother's education as an indicator because we had data on this for all children. Due to variation in the family structures children were living in, we only had data on father's education for 833 children, and all of these children were living with both their mother and their father.

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For more information about our  
well-being programme, email:  
**[well-being@childrensociety.org.uk](mailto:well-being@childrensociety.org.uk)**

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