The Children's Society

The Good Childhood Report 2015

Summary

Executive summary

This is The Children's Society's fourth Good Childhood Report – the latest in a series of reports providing insight into how children feel about their lives. The report is based on The Children's Society and the University of York's collaborative well-being research programme initiated a decade ago and now established as a world-leading programme of research on children's subjective well-being.

The tenth anniversary of this programme of research provides an ideal opportunity to review what we have learnt and to consider what more we can do to improve children's lives. It is still the case that far too many children and young people experience low levels of well-being. While this research adds a valuable contribution to our understanding of childhood, for The Children's Society it provides us with a way to understand how we can respond to the young people most in need of care and support, who may be facing poverty, abuse or neglect. It is only by listening to children and understanding their personal experiences that we can give them the best chance of flourishing.

This report presents the latest national figures and trends, a digest of key findings from our research programme, and new findings from an international comparative study of children's subjective well-being that shows how children in England are faring compared to children in other countries.

It is crucial that people from all walks of life, including policy-makers and professionals working with children, act on these latest findings and what our research over the last decade shows us about children's lives. As we set out later, there is still much to learn but our depth of knowledge about children's well-being, led by this ground-breaking programme of work, has now grown enormously. There can be no doubt that children's well-being should be a central consideration in decisions affecting their immediate lives and futures.

Summary of findings

- Our well-being research programme has found that around 5-10% of children in the UK have low levels of well-being. Whilst, until 2008, evidence suggested that overall children's well-being was improving, since this date improvements in overall life satisfaction have stalled.

- This matters not only because we should be concerned about how young people feel about their lives, but also because low well-being is associated with a range of negative outcomes for young people including mental and physical health problems.

- Some groups of children raise particular concerns. More than half of those not living with their family have low levels of life satisfaction, compared to fewer than one in ten of those who live with their family.

- There are clear declines in levels of well-being as children progress into adolescence –2.4% of children aged 10 had low levels of life satisfaction, compared to 8.2% of children aged 16.

- In a new international comparative study of children's subjective well-being in 15 countries, children in England ranked 14th out of 15 for satisfaction with life as a whole. England was in the bottom half of the table (ie ranking 9 or lower out of 15) for 24 out of 30 aspects of life, with especially low rankings for children's satisfaction with their 'self' and with their school lives.

- Findings also indicate lower well-being amongst girls than boys in relation to satisfaction with their body, appearance and self-confidence. These variations were not replicated in many other countries, suggesting that these variations are not, as might be assumed, inevitable features of growing up.

- Children in England were unhappier with their school experience than those in 13 other countries. Almost twice as many children in Year 6 (34%) totally agreed that they liked going to school compared to Year 8 (18%).

- Bullying emerged as a key issue in England in comparison to other countries, particularly with regard to emotional bullying. More than a third of children bullied four or more times in the last month had low levels of life satisfaction, making them more than six times more likely to have low life satisfaction than those who hadn't been bullied at all.

- Although there is a substantial difference between low subjective well-being and mental ill-health, our research suggests links between the two. We propose that it would be a constructive way forward to helping young people if we could establish a broader model of positive mental health in which more emphasis was placed on experiencing positive levels of subjective and psychological well-being as well the absence of mental health problems.

Introduction
A decade of research into the subjective well-being of children

The idea that people's feelings about their quality of life – their 'subjective well-being' – are fundamentally important to society is not new, but many people have questioned whether these feelings can be measured. There is now a substantial body of evidence to show that they can, and that subjective well-being data has many uses for policy and practice.

In recent years, subjective well-being research has attracted growing interest from many quarters, including at the national and international level, but research into children's subjective well-being has lagged behind that of adults. In the UK, large-scale social surveys have been asking children about their subjective well-being since 1994, providing an invaluable source of data, but the questions included in these surveys are limited in scope. The Children's Society's research programme has been able to add crucial insights to our understanding of children's well-being.

'In recent years, research into children's subjective well-being has lagged behind that of adults. The Children's Society's research programme has been able to add crucial insights to our understanding of children's well-being.'

What is children's subjective well-being?

Subjective well-being is about children's own assessments of how their lives are going. Are children satisfied with their relationships with the significant people in their lives? Are they satisfied with the environments that they inhabit, how they spend their time and how they see themselves? Which aspects of their lives do their rate highly and which do they rate poorly? How are their lives going in the present and how do they feel about the way things are heading?

Subjective well-being consists of two key elements.

- The first – life satisfaction – relates to the evaluations that children make about their lives at a cognitive level, and comprises judgements about life as a whole as well as judgements about different aspects of life (eg happiness with family relationships).
- The second element relates to the experience of positive and negative emotions at a particular point in time.

A connected concept is psychological well-being, which is concerned with children's sense of meaning, purpose and engagement.

Children might be considered to be 'flourishing' if they score highly on measures of both subjective and psychological well-being.

Examples of survey questions on children's subjective well-being

Ratings-based questions

On a scale from zero to ten where:
0 means 'very unhappy',
5 means 'not happy or unhappy'
10 means 'very happy'

Please say how happy you are with:
- ... your life as a whole
- ... your family
- ... about the amount of choice you have in life

Statement-based questions

Please say how much you disagree or agree with each of the following statements:

- My life is going well
- My family gets along well together
- I feel safe at school

Response options were on a five-point scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'

We describe children as having low well-being if they respond lower than the mid-point of the scale (ie 4 or below on the 0–10 scale).

Why does children's subjective well-being matter?

At the most fundamental level, it hardly needs arguing that children's quality of life is a major concern for society and public policy. However, when we embarked upon this research programme in 2005, much of the public discussion about children's well-being was being conducted between adults, with children's own views remaining relatively unheard. As a result, the focus tended to be on children's well-being as future adults, rather than on their current well-being as children. The Children's Society's main goal in initiating the well-being research programme was to focus on childhood in its own right, rather than just as a preparation for adulthood, and to ensure that children's views and experiences are taken into account more fully in the debate about well-being.

Measures of children's subjective well-being provide a counterweight to measures that have tended to dominate discussions of children's lives, such as educational attainment or drinking and drug use. These are important indicators of well-being and 'well-becoming' but only part of the picture. As argued in the World Happiness Report 2015:

'If schools do not measure the well-being of their children, but do measure their intellectual development, the latter will always take precedence.'

Subjective well-being, 'flourishing' and mental health

As mentioned in the box on page 4, one approach to understanding when children are 'flourishing' is to consider both their subjective and psychological well-being. We presented some initial findings related to this idea in The Good Childhood Report 2013, and found that around four in five children aged 8 to 15 in the UK could be described as 'flourishing'. This is based on positive answers to two questions developed by the Office For National Statistics (ONS) regarding life satisfaction and finding life worthwhile.

Another issue to consider is the relationship between subjective well-being and mental health. The positive psychology movement argues that positive mental health is much more than merely the absence of mental health problems. In The Good Childhood Report 2013 we reported on some initial analysis of the links between children's life satisfaction and the presence of mental health problems. We found that, while there was a significant association between the two, there were also substantial differences. Thus only around a third of the child population with the highest levels of mental health problems also had low life satisfaction, while almost half of children with low life satisfaction did not have a high level of mental health problems.

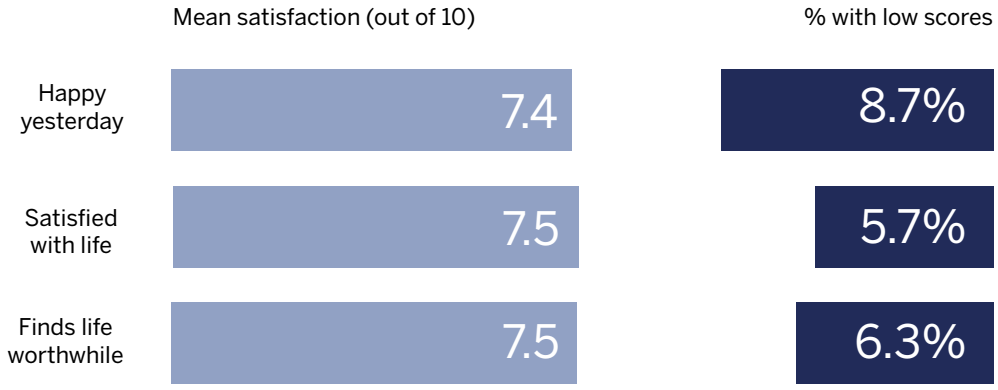
Ideally it would be possible to integrate these ideas into a 'complete state model of mental health'. In this model a person is mentally healthy if they have positive levels of subjective and psychological well-being (i.e. are 'flourishing') and the absence of mental health problems. Unfortunately at present there is not an available data set for children in the UK that contains measures of subjective well-being, psychological well-being and mental ill-health so this remains an area for future exploration.

The evidence on children's subjective well-being in the UK

Overall levels of subjective well-being

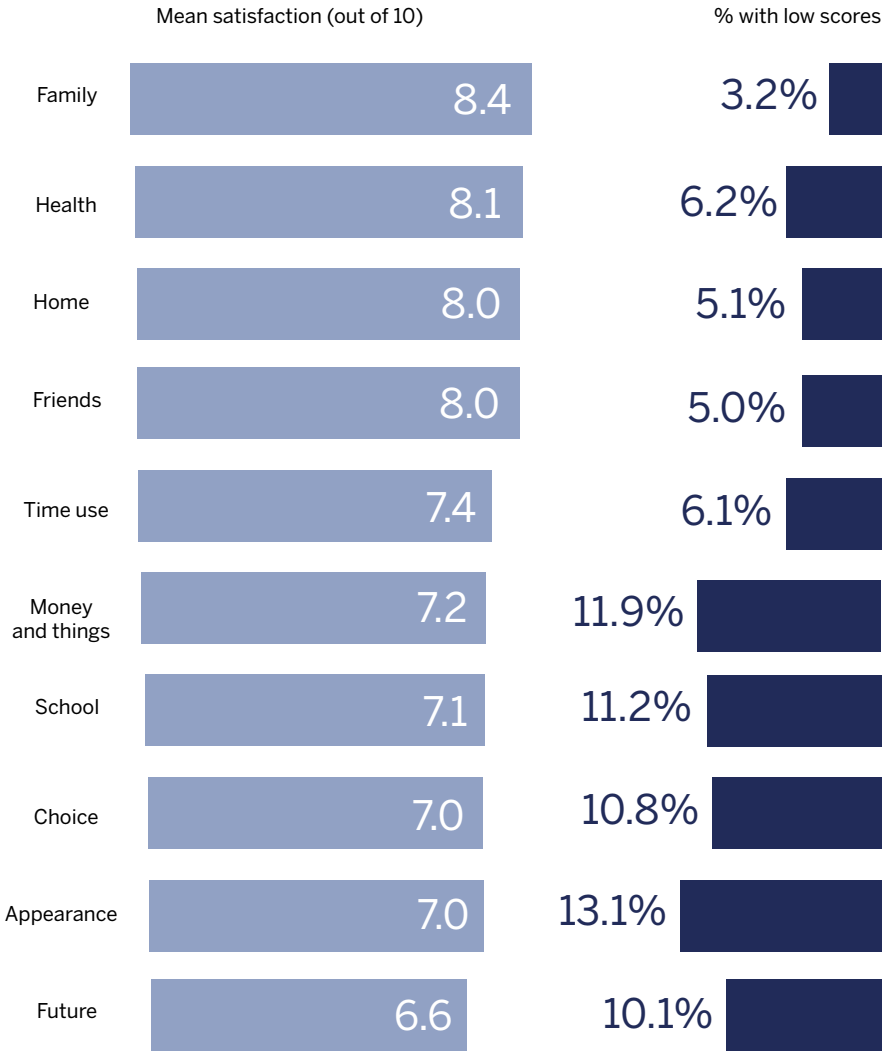
Our research has shown that children's mean subjective well-being scores tend to be between 7 and 8 out of 10, and the percentages of children with low subjective well-being – meaning those who score beneath the midpoint of the scale – tend to be between 5% and 10% depending on the exact measure of subjective well-being used and the age group surveyed. For example, as shown in figure 1 below, the latest figures for the ONS measure of life satisfaction show that 5.7% of children had low levels of life satisfaction. Furthermore, as can be seen in figures 7, 8 and 9 on pages 11 and 12, some groups of children are much more likely than others to experience low well-being.

Figure 1: Latest subjective well-being figures for ONS core measures of overall subjective well-being



The Children's Society's surveys, Waves 11 to 14 (2013-2015), children and young people aged 10 to 17, N=8,000

Figure 2: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index



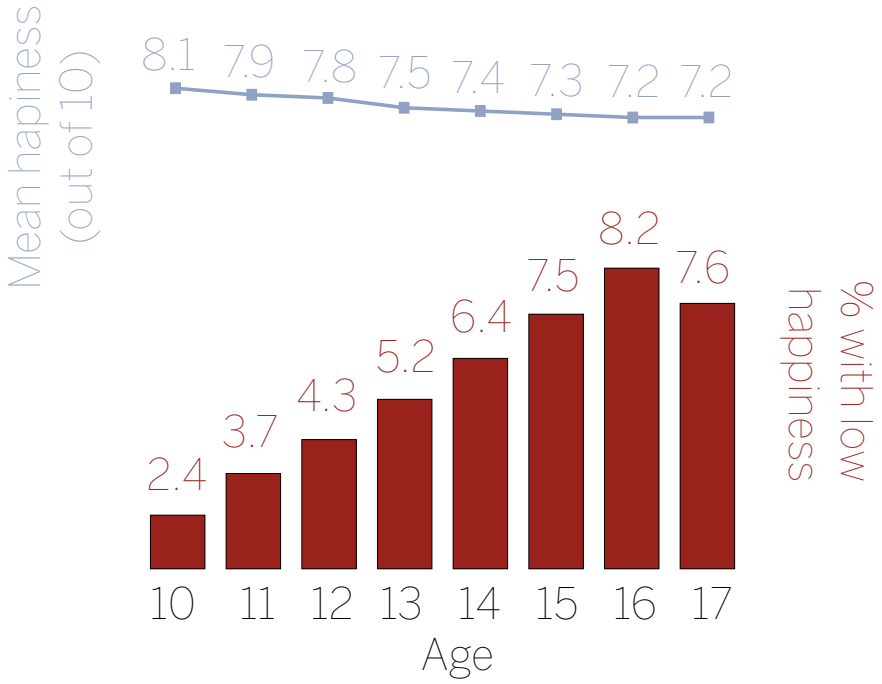
The Children's Society's surveys, Waves 11 to 14 (2013-2015), children and young people aged 10 to 17, N=8,000

Age differences

In line with our previous research we have found that as children move into adolescence, their well-being is likely to decline, with a statistically significant downward age trend between the ages of 10 and 13 or 14.[1]

As illustrated in figure 3 below, whilst 2.4% of respondents aged 10 had low levels of life satisfaction, this increased to 8.2% of respondents aged 16.

Figure 3: Age variations in feeling satisfied with life

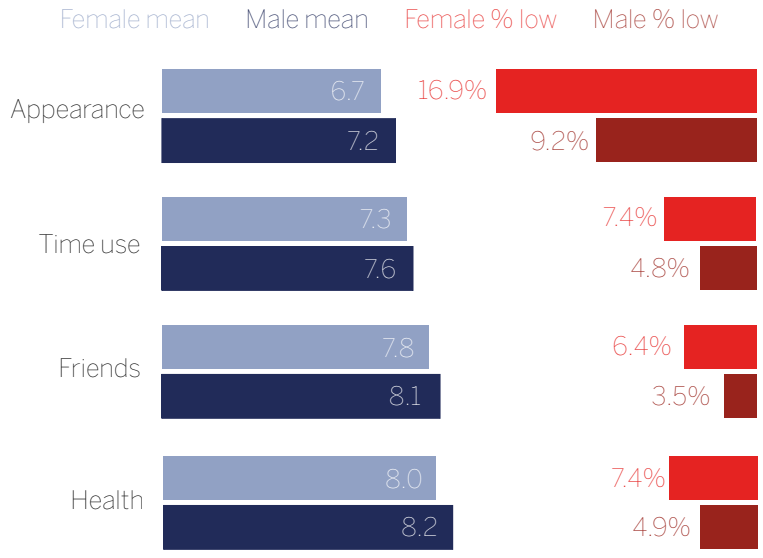


Gender differences

Girls were found to have lower average well-being scores than boys, and higher proportions of girls were found to have low well-being than boys for all of the ONS measures of overall subjective well-being. This was also true for four of the items in The Good Childhood Index – appearance, time use, friends and health.[2]

[1] Depending on the measure
[2] There were smaller and more marginally significant gender differences for home and money/things, while for family, choice, the future and school there was no significant gender difference

Figure 4: Significant gender differences for items in The Good Childhood Index



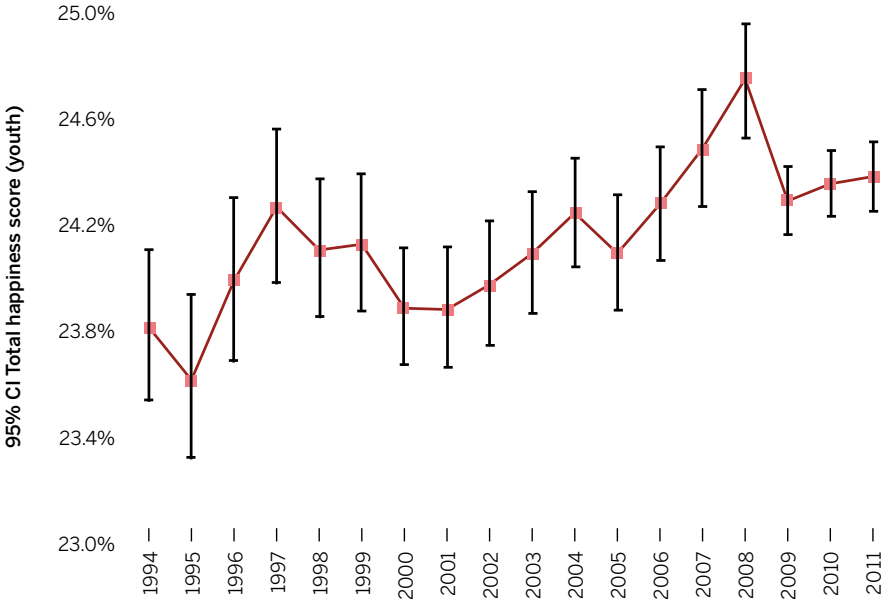
The Children's Society's surveys, Waves 11 to 14 (2013-2015), children and young people aged 10 to 17, N=8,000

Time trends in subjective well-being

We have been able to analyse longer-term trends in subjective well-being using data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and its successor, the Understanding Society survey. As mentioned earlier, these questions are rather limited but the dataset has the advantage of stretching back to 1994. Our analysis of this dataset suggested that there was a significant increase in satisfaction with life as a whole for children aged 11 to 15 in the UK between 1994 and 2007 but that that trend ceased in the period from 2007 to 2011. There was a similar pattern for children's satisfaction with their friendships, while their satisfaction with family and school work were relatively stable during that period. There was no clear overall trend in children's satisfaction with appearance, but a striking divergence in levels of satisfaction for boys and girls from 2002 onwards, with boys' mean scores increasing and girls' mean scores falling.

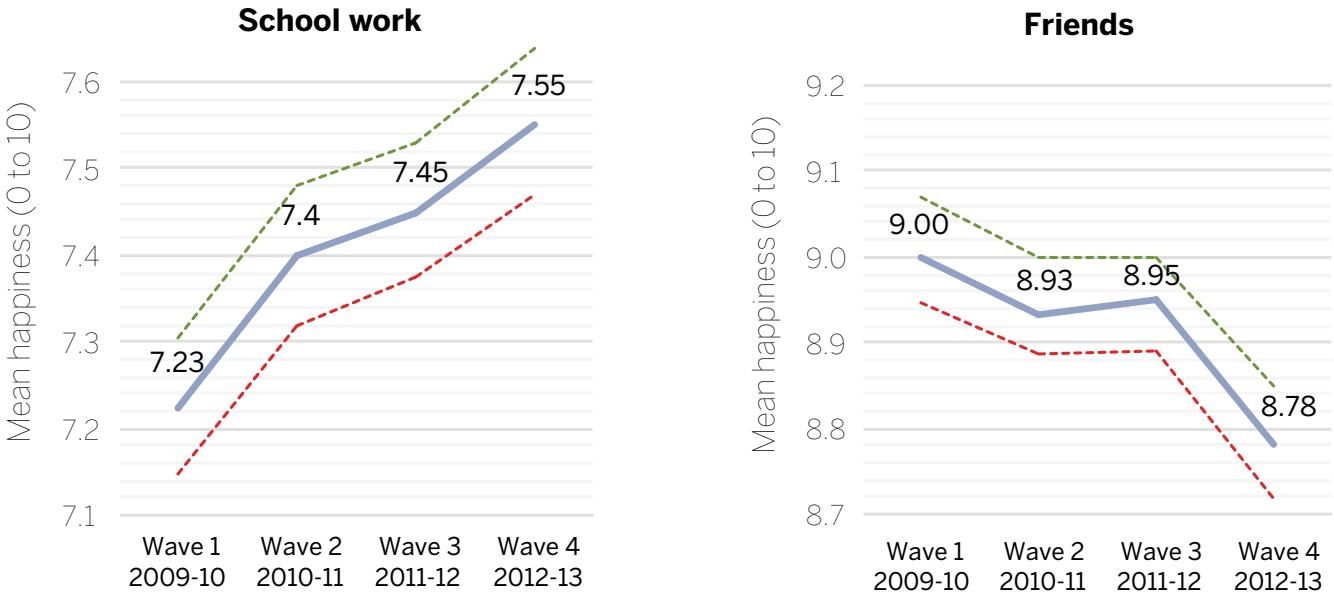
In this edition of the report we have also looked at time trends in four waves of the Understanding Society survey covering the period from 2009 to 2013. These show a small, statistically significant decline in happiness with friends over the period, as well as a small, statistically significant rise in happiness with school work. There was also a very small (but not statistically significant) decline in happiness with appearance. There was no discernible trend for happiness with family and school.

Figure 5: Children's life satisfaction, 1994 to 2011



Source: British Household Panel and then (from 2009) Understanding Society/ BHPS youth survey, combined sample. Aged 11-15. Scope UK. Sample size: varies over time but in Understanding Society Wave C over 3700.

Figure 6: Trends in children's subjective well-being, UK, 2009 to 2013



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted (but confidence intervals do not take account of design effect)

Variations in children's subjective well-being

Our research over the past ten years has generated a wealth of insights into why the subjective well-being of children in the UK varies.

Personality

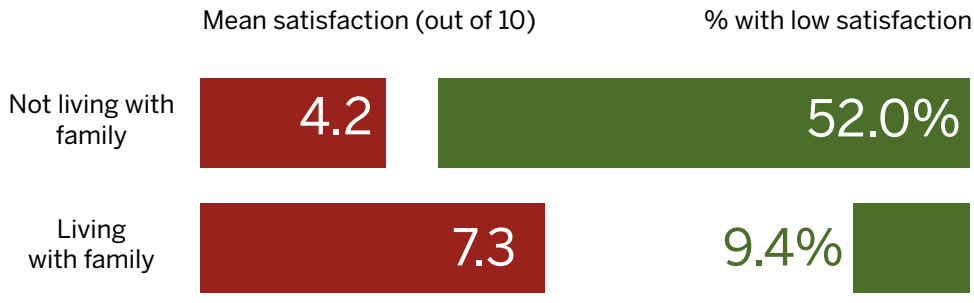
We have found that while personality traits play a part in understanding why children's subjective well-being varies, these kind of factors leave most of the variation unexplained. Alongside this, we have accumulated evidence of significant links between children's subjective well-being and a range of socio-economic factors, contextual factors, life events, activities and behaviours.

Individual and family factors

Demographic variables such as age, gender and ethnicity explain relatively little of the variation in children's subjective well-being. However, despite this general picture, there are important inequalities in subjective well-being, with some sub-groups of children reporting substantially lower than average subjective well-being. These include children living away from family, such as those 'looked-after' in residential and foster care and children who have difficulties with learning. As can be seen in figure 7 below, more than half of children not living with their family experience low levels of life satisfaction, compared with fewer than one in 10 children living with their family. Findings such as these strengthen the case for targeted service interventions to improve the overall quality of these children's lives.

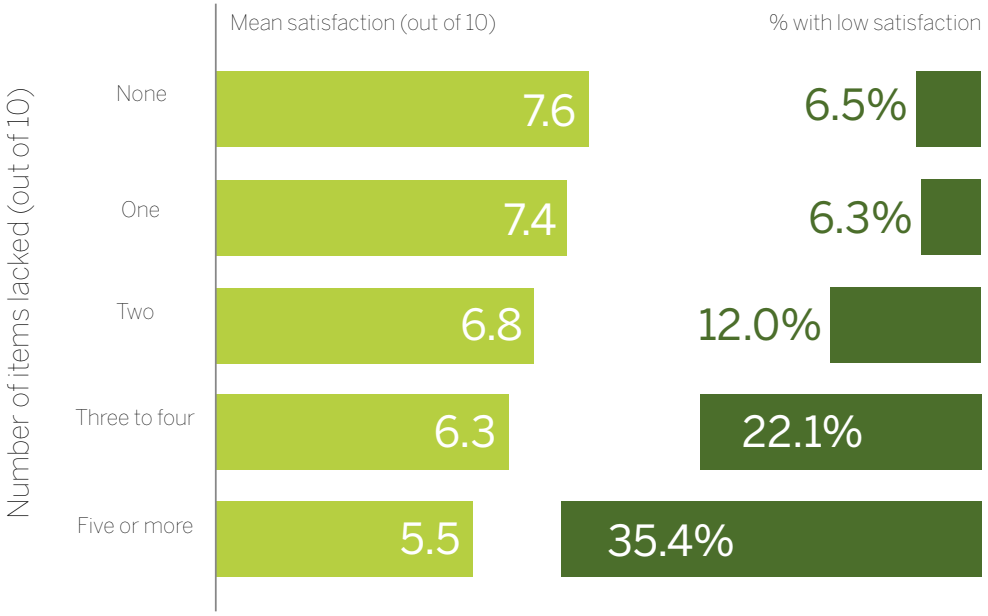
Another key finding is that recent changes in family structure are far less important for children's well-being than the quality of their family relationships (eg levels of family conflict) and that children's subjective well-being tends to be higher when they are in a family environment that provides a balance of warmth and support on the one hand and autonomy on the other. This may suggest that policies and services focused on supporting better family relationships should be prioritised over those which promote certain family structures. In terms of economic factors, we have found that traditional measures of family economic status (eg household income) explain a small amount of the variation in children's subjective well-being, but child-centred indicators of material deprivation explain much more. These findings clearly have national policy implications and should contribute to the current debates about re-prioritising targets to reduce rates of child poverty in the UK.

Figure 7: Differences in subjective well-being by living situation



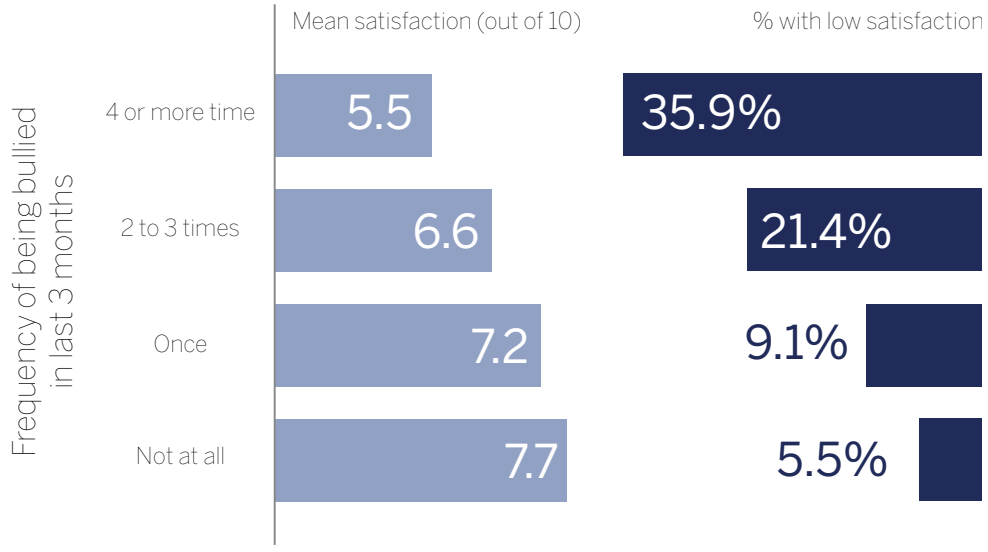
Source: Schools well-being survey 2010, aged 10 to 15 years old

Figure 8: Differences in subjective well-being by deprivation index



Source: Schools well-being survey 2010, aged 10 to 15 years old

Figure 9: Differences in subjective well-being by experiences of bullying



Source: Schools well-being survey 2010, aged 10 to 15 years old

Life events, stability and change

Our research has consistently highlighted the substantial links between recent experiences of being bullied and children's well-being. Effectively tackling bullying could have a substantial impact on children's subjective well-being and this is an issue that should be considered by all those concerned with children's quality of life – including national policy makers, those working in schools and children themselves.

Other changes, such as a reduction in household income and a change in family structure also, appear to have a detrimental impact on children's subjective well-being, at least over a period of a year. However, children who had experienced a recent change in family structure had significantly lower than average happiness with the amount of choice in their lives as well as with family relationships. It may be that involving children more in these processes and giving them choices where possible could help to maintain their sense of well-being during these periods of change.

Activities and behaviours

A recent development in our research has been to explore how children's behaviours link to their subjective well-being. This is an interesting area because it can suggest things that children could do for themselves to enhance their quality of life. Despite public concerns, we have found that the frequency of using modern technology is not significantly associated with children's subjective well-being, but that other activities and behaviours such as more frequently playing sports and exercising, paying attention to surroundings, connecting with other people and learning new things are all associated with higher subjective well-being.

These findings carry useful messages for children, parents and services. There is currently a wealth of public information on behaviours related to good physical health and it could be argued that a similar emphasis should be put on promoting and encouraging activities and behaviours that are beneficial to people's subjective well-being. Raising awareness among children about the importance of subjective well-being could also facilitate them to seek help if they are experiencing low well-being.

Comparing children's subjective well-being in England with other countries

In last year's Good Childhood Report we presented some initial findings from the first (pilot) wave of the Children's Worlds international survey of children's lives and well-being. Here, we focus on findings from the second wave of the survey which has so far been undertaken with over 53,000 children aged around 8, 10 and 12 years of age in 15 countries across four continents – Algeria, Colombia, Estonia, Ethiopia, Germany, Israel, Nepal, Norway, Poland, Romania, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Turkey and England. Full details about the survey are contained in the first comparative research report from this wave of the project, which is available on the Children's Worlds project website.[3]

This analysis has generated a number of key findings about the comparative subjective well-being of children in England.

Overall, children in England have relatively low levels of subjective well-being compared to other countries included in the Children's Worlds survey, ranking lower than 8th out of the 15 countries for 24 out of 30 aspects of life, as well as ranking 14th out of 15 for overall life satisfaction. As can be seen in figure 10 on page 14, England ranked particularly low for satisfaction with a number of aspects of 'self' and school.

Overview of content of questionnaires

Basic characteristics
(age, gender, country of birth)
Living situation, home and family
relationships
Money and economic circumstances
Friends and other relationships
Local area
School
Time use
Self
Overall subjective well-being
Children's rights

[3] http://www.isciweb.org/_Uploads/dbsAttachedFiles/ChildrensWorlds2015-FullReport-Final.pdf

Figure 10: England's ranking on mean scores for different aspects of subjective well-being

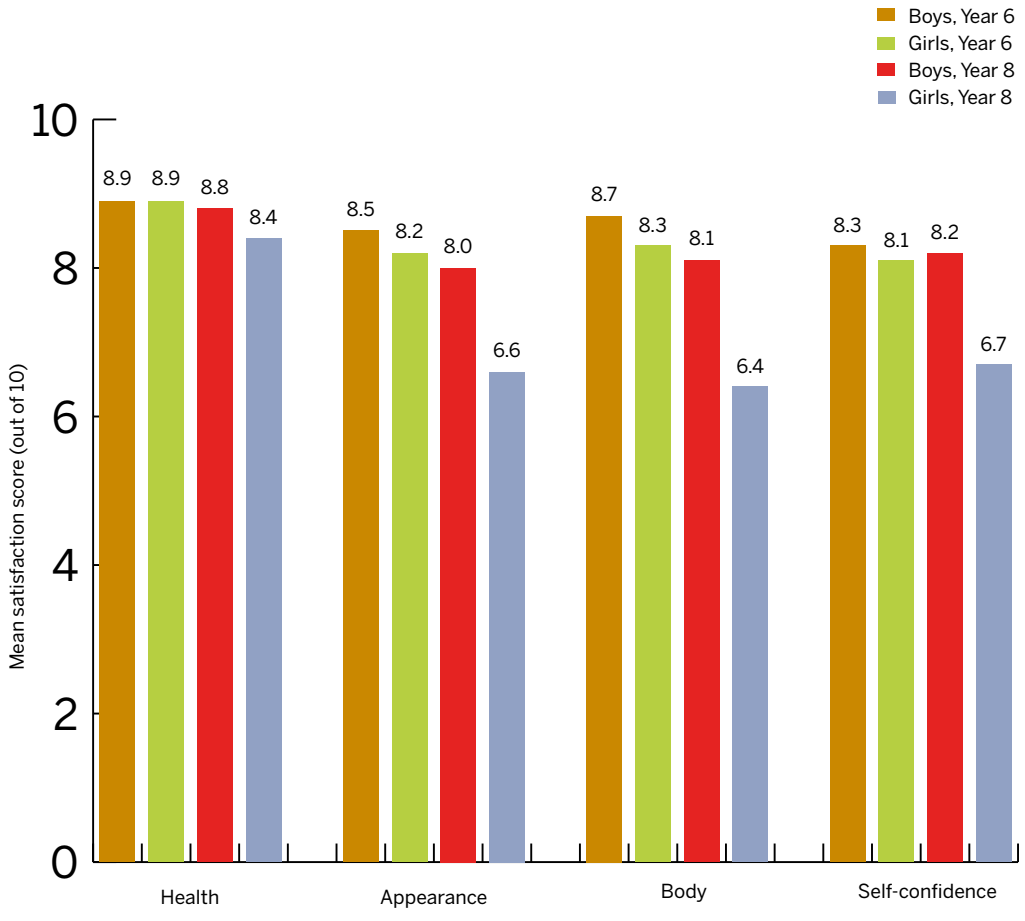
	England ranking (out of 15)
Overall subjective well-being	
Life satisfaction	14th
Happiness in last two weeks	11th
Feeling positive about the future	11th
Satisfaction with aspects of life	
The house/flat where you live	9th
The people you live with	10th
All the other people in family	7th
Your family life	12th
All the things you have	9th
Your friends	6th
Your relationships .. in general	10th
Other children in your class	12th
Your school marks	10th
Your school experience	12th
Your life as a student	10th
Things you have learned	11th
Relationship with teachers	14th
The people in your area	11th
The local police in your area	3rd
How dealt with at doctors	11th
Outdoor areas .. in your area	8th
The area you live in general	10th
How you use your time	10th
What do in your free time	10th
Your health	13th
The way that you look	13th
Your own body	14th
Your self-confidence	15th
The freedom you have	8th
Amount of opportunities ..	8th
Listened to by adults ..	10th
How safe you feel	11th
Things you want to be good at	13th
Doing things away from home	10th

Self

This aspect of children's well-being considered factors associated with children's sense of self, including children's satisfaction with their health, appearance, their body and their self-confidence. Across all of these topics there were significant age and gender variations in children's subjective well-being in England.

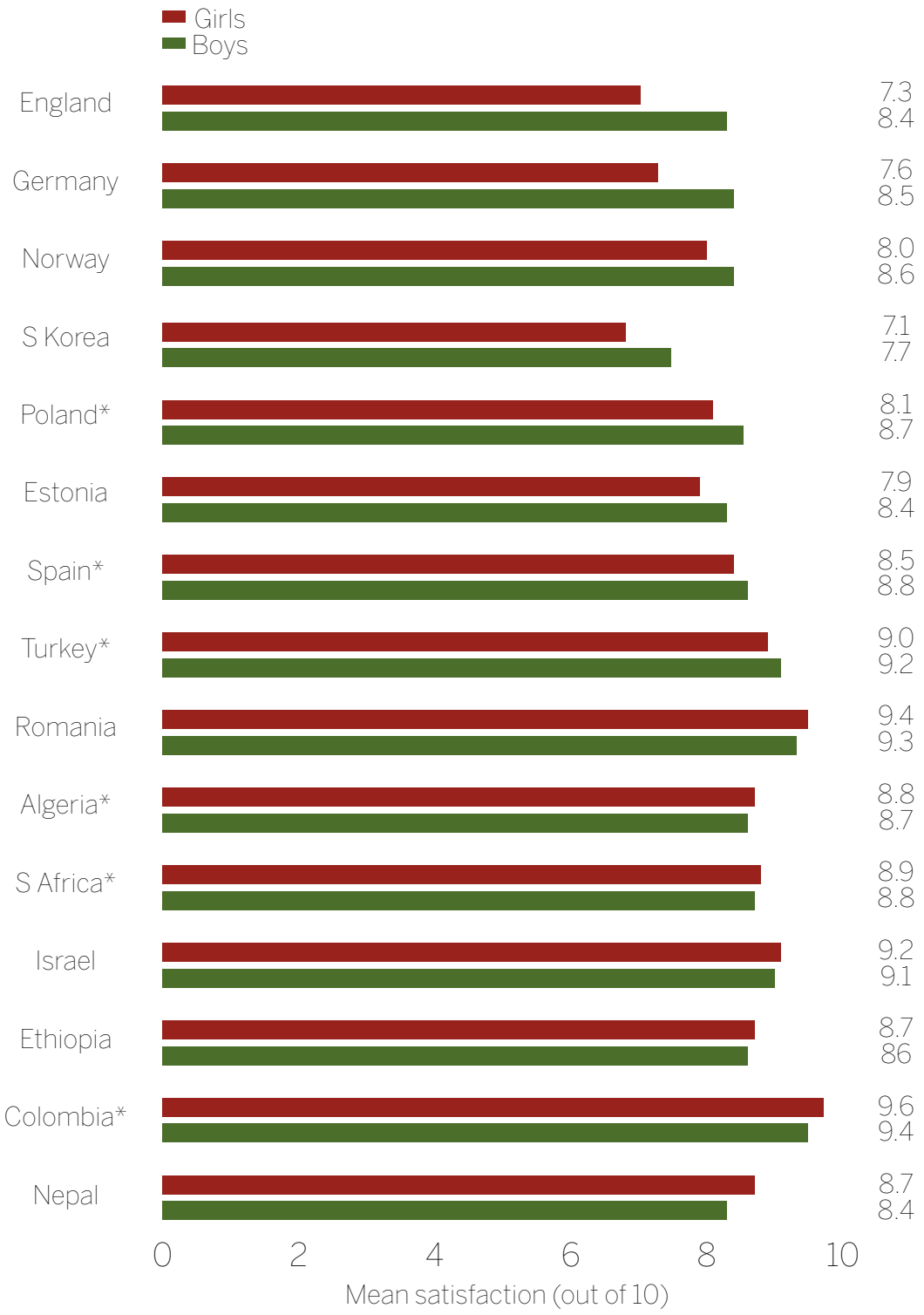
These gender variations in children's satisfaction with their body, appearance and self-confidence in England, as presented in figure 11 below, were not replicated in many other countries in the survey, suggesting that these types of gender variations are not inevitable, and may be addressed through social or policy change.

Figure 11: Satisfaction with aspects of self by age group and gender



Children in Years 6 and 8, equally weighted by age group

Figure 12: Satisfaction with body by gender and country



10 and 12 year old surveys, all countries, equally weighted by age group
(Reproduced from Rees & Main, 2015)

School

Compared to other countries in the survey, children in England tended to report poor relationships with their teachers. England ranked 14th for satisfaction with teachers and 14th for children feeling that they were treated fairly by teachers. It ranked slightly higher, but still below average, for children feeling that teachers listened to their views. England also ranked in the bottom third of countries for liking going to school as well as satisfaction with other children at school, things learned and the school experience in general.

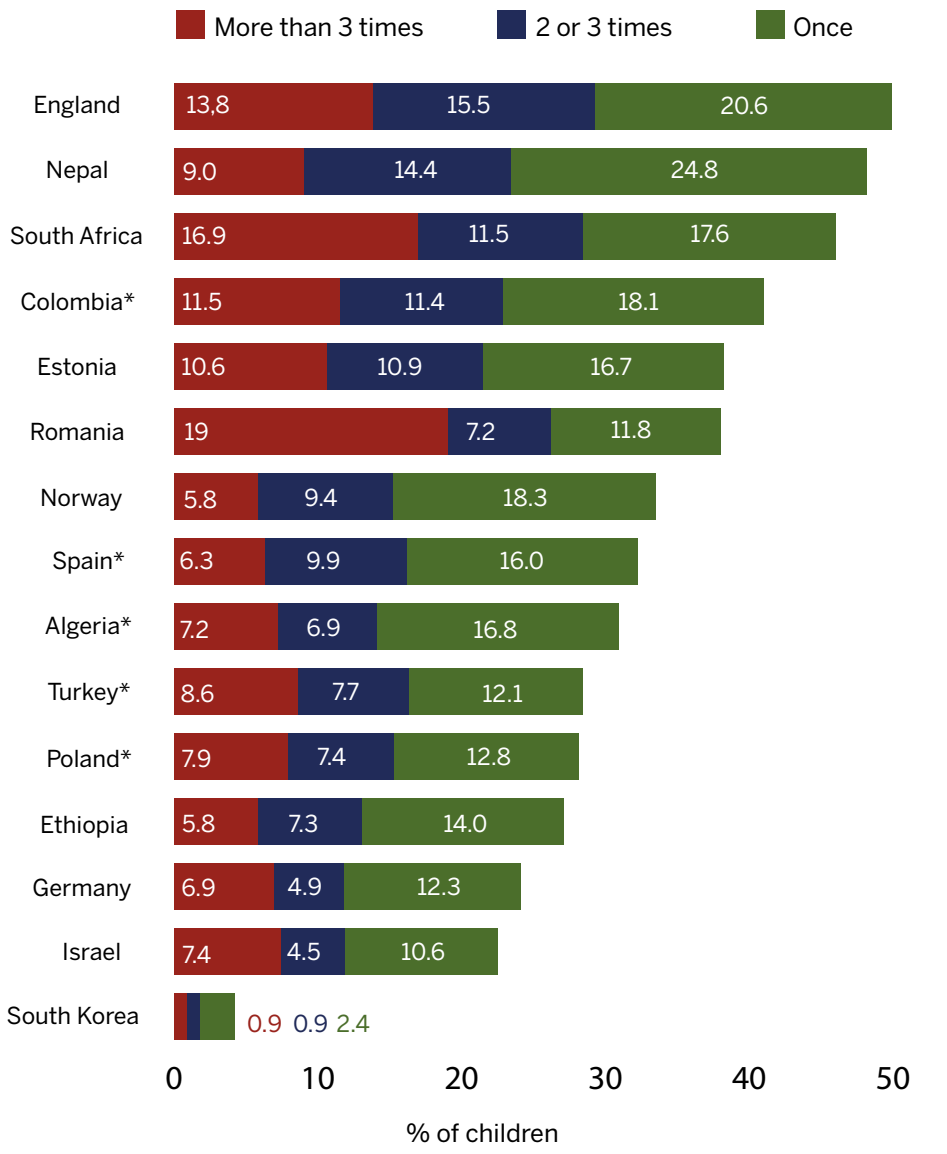
There was a fairly sharp decline between Year 6 and Year 8 in satisfaction with most aspects of school asked about (the exception was school marks). Almost twice as many children in Year 6 (34%) totally agreed that they liked going to school compared to Year 8 (18%).

Earlier in this report, the impact of bullying on children's well-being was raised as an issue of real concern. The international survey similarly raised concerns about the prevalence of bullying in England, with children in this country the most likely to say that they had been left out by other children in their class at school. This was a particular issue for girls.

As can be seen from figure 13 on page 18. Romania and South Africa had the highest rates of children experiencing the most frequent bullying ie percentage of children reporting 'more than three times', but England had the highest levels of prevalence ie percentage of children reporting having been left out at least once. The prevalence of physical bullying in schools in England was fairly average for the 15 countries surveyed.

The survey also found that there are some substantial differences in how children in England spend their time in comparison with children in other countries. Children in England spend a relatively large amount of time doing organised leisure activities and being alone, and a relatively small amount of time attending classes outside school and doing homework.

Figure 13: Incidence and frequency of being left out by other children in school class in the last month by country

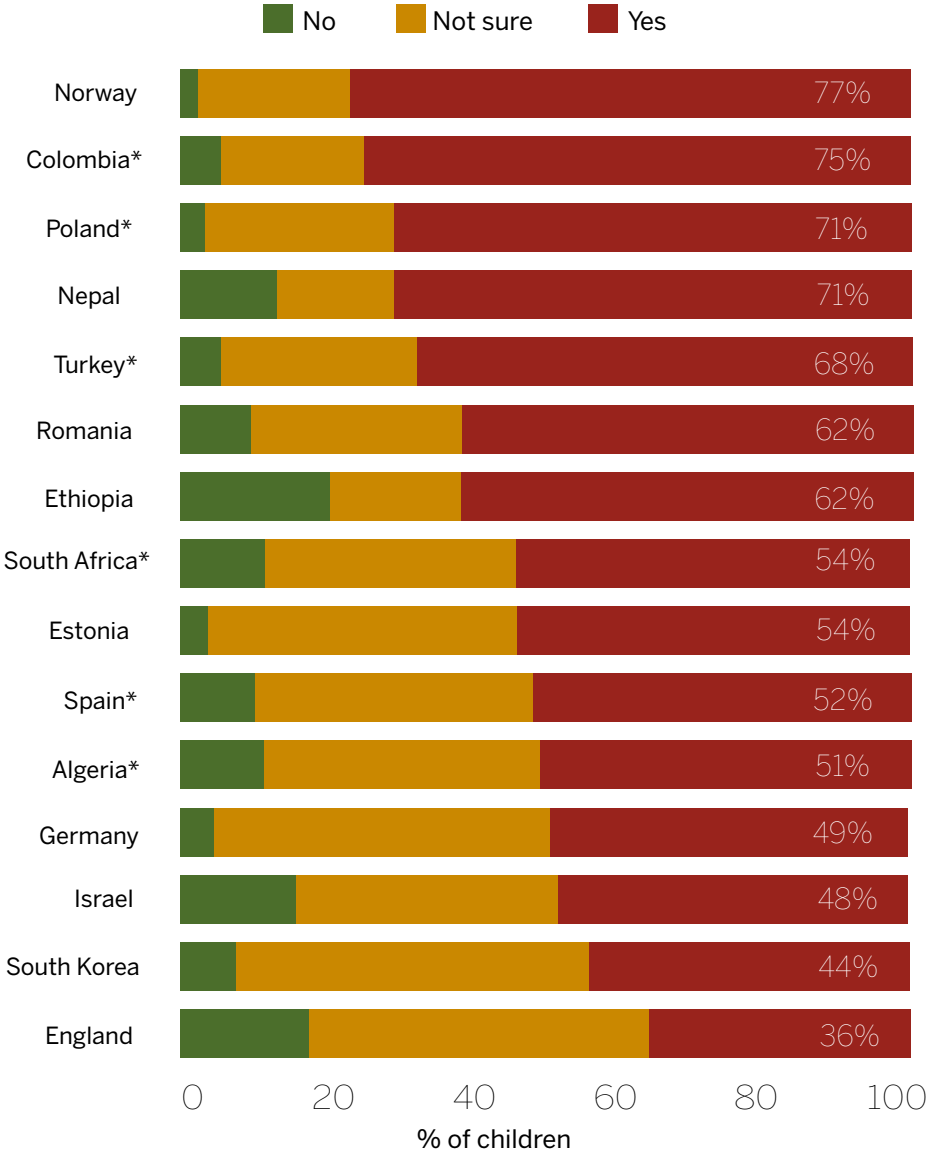


10 and 12 year old surveys, all countries, equally weighted by age group
(Reproduced from Rees & Main, 2015)

Children's rights

Children in England had relatively poor knowledge of their rights, compared to children in other countries. In particular, just 36% of children in England agreed with the statement 'I know what rights children have' and this was the lowest level of agreement for any of the 15 countries. This compares with levels of agreement above 70% in Norway, Colombia, Poland and Nepal. These findings suggest a need to learn from other countries about how children in England can be taught about their rights and protections.

Figure 14: Responses to 'I know what rights children have' by country



10 and 12 year old surveys, all countries, equally weighted by age group
(Reproduced from Rees & Main, 2015)

Conclusions

It has been argued that subjective well-being is the overarching purpose of government and should be considered alongside – or even instead of – economic indicators such as GDP. But, even for those who do not agree, the links between subjective well-being and other desirable outcomes such as improved physical and mental health show that there is a growing case for subjective well-being to play a crucial role in public policy development, as well as broader debates about how we are faring as a society.

There have been major improvements in the availability of data about children's subjective well-being in the UK over the last decade. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has developed a set of national indicators of children's well-being, which include subjective measures in six domains, and there is substantial overlap between this framework and the aspects of life covered in our programme of research. Furthermore, longitudinal studies such as Understanding Society and the Millennium Cohort Study contain subjective well-being indicators relating to family, friends, appearance, school and school work, as well as life as a whole. However there are important gaps here in terms of, for example, satisfaction with money and things, home environment, health, time use and choice, all of which have been found to have a strong association with children's overall subjective well-being. Future studies of this kind should include a wider range of measures in order to provide data for monitoring children's subjective well-being in the UK.

A decade of research into children's subjective well-being carried out by The Children's Society and the University of York has generated important insights into children's subjective well-being. The research has shown that a wide range of factors are associated with children's well-being, from personality traits through to life events and socio economic factors. The work has identified some groups that face particularly high rates of low well-being, including children experiencing frequent bullying, children not living with their family, and children facing high levels of material deprivation. New findings presented in this report on international comparisons of children's well-being provide further insights. Children in England were found to have relatively low levels of subjective well-being compared to a diverse range of 14 other countries. There are some unresolved issues about the precision of these types of cross-national comparisons of subjective measures due to cultural and linguistic factors. However, it would be complacent to explain away the low scores for children in England on this basis, particularly as the findings are consistent with those from previous international studies in which the UK also ranked relatively poorly.

The findings indicate that children in England fare poorly in terms of their satisfaction with self and school. This suggests two possible areas to focus on in order to improve children's lives in this country.[4]

Furthermore, variations in children's well-being by age and gender carry some very important messages for thinking about children's lives in the UK. One of the consistent findings from our research programme has been the substantial gender gap in children's satisfaction with their 'self' – girls, for example, have much lower satisfaction with the way they look. It has often been suggested that this is an inevitable feature of adolescence. However, the international findings now show that this argument is incorrect. In a range of other countries there is no gender difference in children's feelings about their appearance, their body or their self-confidence. This suggests that we need to do much more to understand why girls in the UK have such low levels of satisfaction in relation to these aspects of their lives.

A similar argument applies to the decline in children's satisfaction with their experience of school life in the UK between the ages of 10 and 12, which is also not observed in a range of other countries.

[4] These findings only relate to England but our other analysis suggests that there are only small differences between the subjective well-being of children in the four nations of the UK.

There are many practical applications to carrying out well-being research with children and considerable potential for interventions to be developed that focus on improving children's subjective well-being. However, improving children's well-being in England today requires joined-up action from a wide range of agencies – from national and local government, through to schools and voluntary sector services. Some of the findings appear to be amenable to national and local policy initiatives, while others are more relevant to services and practitioners, to parents and to children themselves.

The Children's Society has been working with local authorities to explore children's well-being at a local level and this has yielded valuable, and sometimes unexpected, insights into the issues that children in a particular area or school may be facing. This knowledge enriches what is already known about a local population and can guide priorities and planning.

There are also practical applications at the national level. As understanding of and confidence in subjective well-being measures grows, national and local governments are increasingly making use of research into the well-being of their populations to guide policy development and service provision. In the UK, this has led to the establishment of an independent 'What Works Centre for Well-being' to explore policies that promote people's well-being.

But well-being research is of use beyond local and national governments. Our research programme has generated a whole host of insights into the drivers of children's well-being that are of great interest to parents, professionals and children themselves.

This report in particular, has identified a number of issues that have a profound impact on children's well-being, which may be addressed through schools. From the vital work that is needed to reduce bullying in school, through to exploring other interventions to improve children's well-being – this work has identified a number of challenges and opportunities for professionals working in schools.

The Children's Society has also explored 'ways to well-being' – activities that children can do themselves that are linked to greater well-being – which confirm the importance of spending time with friends and family and of physical activity. The research behind this has also helped to quell some of our fears about children's use of technology.

Priorities for future research

Two other important gaps still remain in research on children's subjective well-being in the UK and, to a great extent, internationally.

First, there is a lack of research exploring the connections between children's subjective well-being and other issues across childhood and into adulthood. An exploration of this could strengthen our understanding of the factors that influence children's subjective well-being and identify ways of improving it. Evidence on associations of this type would strengthen the case for the policy-salience of children's subjective well-being. We are fortunate in the UK to have several excellent longitudinal studies including some measures of children's subjective well-being that can be used for these purposes.

Second, there is a need for researchers to become more engaged in evaluating initiatives to improve children's subjective well-being. This includes helping policy-makers and others to develop realistic and useful ways of identifying the impact of their actions on subjective well-being. It should also include developing pilot studies on particular interventions. For example, we know that children who more frequently play sports or pay attention to their surroundings have higher than average subjective well-being, but we don't yet know what interventions to encourage these activities would lead to improvements in the subjective well-being of children.

Policy recommendations

Many of The Children's Society's services are engaged in supporting children's positive mental health, and this is an ongoing priority for the organisation. But there is much more that the Government can do – drawing on The Children's Society's research programme on subjective well-being.

1. Including children's subjective well-being questions in the upcoming children's survey of children's mental health

The last reliable data on the prevalence of mental health problems amongst children is from the 2004 ONS prevalence study. It is widely recognised that, as a result, data on the state of children's mental health is now substantially out of date. The Department of Health is now working with the ONS on a new prevalence study.

This report has shown that there is a lack of data on how children's mental health problems relate to measures of subjective well-being and psychological well-being. The new prevalence survey provides an ideal opportunity to address this.

Incorporating subjective well-being questions into the children's mental health prevalence survey would help to ensure that policies and programmes focused on addressing children's mental health problems also consider how they could work to address and improve children's subjective well-being.

2. Ensure that some of the additional CAMHS funding is spent on promoting children's subjective well-being and positive mental health, as well as dealing with mental health problems

The Government has confirmed its intention to provide substantial additional investment (£1.25 billion over a five year period) in CAMHS services over the course of the next five years.

As shown by this report, good mental health is about more than just dealing with mental health problems when they occur. It is also about promoting positive mental health through driving high levels of subjective well-being.

Learning from The Children's Society's subjective well-being programme, the Government should use some of the additional CAMHS investment to provide programmes to promote positive mental health and well-being – particularly targeting particular groups of children (such as those affected by bullying and living outside of the family) for whom levels of well-being are known to be lower.

3. The Government should consider making the provision of counselling services in schools a statutory provision.

According to a recent review, approximately 61-85% of secondary schools in England provide young people with access to counselling, meaning that between 50,000-70,000 young people attend school-based counselling per year in England, similar to the numbers in this age range attending specialist CAMHS. This makes school-based counselling one of the principal forms of CAMHS intervention in England.

Given the evidence from the Children's Worlds survey that children's satisfaction with their school experience ranks low compared to other countries, the Government should explore the effectiveness of making school-based counselling a statutory provision as is the case in Wales and Northern Ireland.

The evidence from this report suggests that such a review should consider the role of school-based counselling services in working with the school, dealing with bullying in school, and improving children's exercise, as ways of promoting children's positive mental health.

4. Monitoring the subjective well-being of children in care and care leavers.

This report indicates that children in care are substantially more likely to have low subjective well-being than other children, with more than half of children not looked after by their family having low subjective well-being.

The Children's Society supports the recommendation of the alliance for children in care and care leavers that there needs to be robust assessment and measurement of children's well-being and progress through their care experience, so as to understand when children are doing well and when they need more support. It also needs to be recognised that there are other groups of children who are not living in their families, eg older teenagers in supported accommodation whose well-being should also be taken into account as part of support planning for this group.

It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect.

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local projects, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable and have nowhere left to turn.

We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future.

The Children's Society

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