

Article

# Children's views on well-being and what makes a happy life, UK: 2020

A qualitative analysis of children's perspectives on their well-being and what makes a happy life for a child using UK wide focus groups.

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# 1 . Main points

- Feeling loved and having positive, supportive relationships, particularly with friends and family, including having someone to talk to and rely on were consistently stated as a top priority for children to have a happy life - "[Love means] people who care about you, family and friends, because if you're upset then they'll be there for you".
- Children described the importance of feeling safe as an essential element of their happiness including: safe places to hang out and meet with friends and a sense of safety at home, in their neighbourhoods, at school and online; however, generally focus group participants felt that their local areas lacked safe places and activities for children - "There needs to be somewhere to relax and be able to unwind".
- Children said being able to be themselves and express themselves without being judged by others was crucial to their mental health and well-being - "Like some 12-year-olds will be getting judged and that will make them change into someone they don't want to be when they're older".
- As a place where many children spend a lot of their waking hours, schools were described as having an important impact on children's well-being, particularly in reference to the physical buildings; environment and culture of the school; teachers and other staff; the learning content and curriculum; and opportunities for extra-curricular activities - "They had to rebuild our science labs because they were falling apart very slowly. The chair broke on me and I fell on the floor".
- Although children and young people may not deal with finances directly, they acknowledged the importance of family finances in meeting basic needs and fostering a sense of social inclusion, while stress around family finances could impact the mental health of everyone in the household; however, money was not equated with happiness - "Finance is really stressful, and it can stress the family out and then that can have an effect on the child".
- In discussing their future happiness and well-being, the main areas raised included living in a country at peace and where children's needs are considered by those in positions of power; empowering children to express themselves and have a say in decisions that affect their lives; and preservation of the environment and addressing climate change - "They should listen to children because sometimes the children are right".

## Statistician's comment

"Today's research gives a fascinating insight into the things that children say matter for a happy life, including feeling that their views are being listened to by decision makers.

"The children spoke to us before the pandemic took hold, and many aspects of life they spoke of, from time with friends and family and having enough to eat to what they need to have a happy future, may have been impacted over the past six months. This may give the findings an additional value in understanding how to support children during these times."

Eleanor Rees, Head of Social Well-being Analysis Team, Office for National Statistics

## 2 . Measuring children's well-being

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) has been [measuring national well-being](#) for 10 years, looking at how the UK is performing in 10 broad areas of life that people told us matter most to their well-being. For the past six years, we have also separately measured the well-being of UK children aged 10 to 15 years using a framework developed in consultation with children and experts in children's health and well-being.

[In October 2018](#), former Prime Minister Theresa May committed to the publication of an annual [State of the Nation report](#), integrating available evidence on children and young people's mental well-being and providing an "accessible narrative to guide discourse and action". The following year, the first State of the Nation report was [published by the Department for Education](#) (DfE). Among its principal findings were that well-being declines as children age and that the overall well-being of children in England has deteriorated since 2009. The report concluded that future work should aim to develop a more in-depth understanding of the context of children's lives to better comprehend the issues affecting their well-being.

[The ONS children's well-being measurement framework](#) includes both subjective and objective indicators to shed light on how children feel about their lives and the contexts in which they live. Broad areas covered by the framework include personal well-being; our relationships; health; what we do; where we live; personal finance; and education and skills.

As the indicators were developed six years ago, it is now appropriate to review how well they reflect children's lives today and the things that may affect their well-being. Additionally, as 2020 has also brought the unprecedented coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, it is also important to consider how well our proposed indicators may address the new circumstances in which children and young people are living and factors that may affect their future well-being.

To review the current relevance of the children's well-being measurement framework, we began by speaking to children themselves. In focus groups across the UK, we asked children what they feel contributes to a happy life for a child. The facilitated discussions were based on a [topic guide](#) to ensure we understood children's perspectives on the areas covered by the current children's well-being framework as well as providing opportunities for them to speak freely about other issues of importance to their lives. The findings were used to generate a proposed indicator set, on which [we are inviting feedback](#) to refine the final children's well-being measurement framework.

### **3 . Children's focus groups**

The findings reported here are based on 10 focus groups with children and young people aged between 10 and 15 years, including a total of 48 children.

The discussions took place between September 2019 and February 2020, with the last focus group held a few weeks prior to the national lockdown associated with the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. Because of the timing of the fieldwork, the findings do not capture any new perspectives children may have developed through being away from school, friends, teachers and extended family; spending more time at home; in home schooling away from their usual activities; and possibly experiencing greater exposure to issues associated with the pandemic such as illness, bereavement and anxiety. Although the findings here do not capture children's experiences of the pandemic or the "new normal" post-lockdown, young people shared their views on new and enduring issues, some of which may have particular relevance in the context of families and children living through the pandemic.

On the recommendation of the National Statistician's Ethics Committee, we worked with established children's groups, such as school student council representatives and youth groups, to ensure that respondents would be accustomed to and comfortable with speaking in front of one another. In practice, this limited the extent to which we could obtain a balanced sample in terms of individual characteristics as this depended very much on the composition of the existing groups. For example, this meant there were more females than males in the achieved sample. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that the sample only includes young people actively participating in children's groups, which may limit the diversity of perspectives in the findings.

As we aimed to capture a broad spectrum of children's views and experiences, we also included two groups among those at greater risk of disadvantage: young carers and children with disabilities. We also endeavored for all the groups to be as ethnically diverse as possible, which was discussed with the gatekeepers, though we did not collect data on the ethnicity of participants. We aimed for geographic diversity as different local circumstances may also affect children's well-being.

#### **An overview of the characteristics of the achieved sample for children's focus group participants in the UK, 2019 to 2020**

There was a total of 48 children in 10 focus groups, with the achieved sample distributed in the following ways.

##### **Type of group**

For general population groups, we had eight groups and 40 children. For special interest groups, we had two groups and eight children.

##### **Age group**

We had 16 10- to 12-year-old children and 32 13- to 15-year-old children.

Please note that all special interest groups were conducted among those aged 13 to 15 years.

##### **Sex**

We had 31 females and 17 males.

##### **UK country**

The geographic split was:

- 20 children in England
- 5 children in Northern Ireland
- 12 children in Scotland
- 11 children in Wales

We worked with charities, governments, commissioners and school councils to organise the group discussions, and we are grateful to them all for their support. Specifically, The Children's Society helped with the recruitment and delivery of focus groups in England and Wales.

Consent for participation in the research was sought from both parents or guardians and children. We also sought and received ethical approval from the National Statistician's Ethics Advisory Committee for this research.

## Topic guide

A [topic guide](#) was used as a flexible tool to ensure similar topics were covered with all the groups, while allowing scope for children to spontaneously raise issues of importance to them.

In the first part of each group discussion, participants were asked what they felt was needed for a child to have a happy life. They were then given post-it notes and asked to write down their ideas.

The discussion then focused on the domains of life covered by the current children's well-being measurement framework to explore whether and why respondents felt each area was important to children's well-being.

At the end of each discussion, children were asked to write down what they considered to be the top three things that matter most for children to live a happy life.

## Analysis

All focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed verbatim with signed permission from parents or guardians and the participants. Any potentially identifying factors were removed from the verbatim transcripts. The transcripts were used as the basis of the thematic analysis, coded line by line, with codes then grouped into themes and subthemes, focusing on the matters raised by children. Two researchers coded the transcripts separately to develop the initial themes. A third researcher went through all recordings and transcripts and through further discussions, minor amendments were made to generate the final themes. Subthemes were summarised by each focus group and plotted onto framework matrices to enable the exploration of individual accounts as well as comparison between and within the different groups.

## 4 . What children told us

The findings of the focus groups, as summarised in this section, encompass:

- participants' initial views of what children need to live a happy life
- participants' views about the current domains of the children's well-being measurement framework
- participants' views of the top three things that contribute to children living a happy life

Through discussion and elaboration of children's ideas, the following principal themes were identified in relation to what children need for a happy life:

- positive relationships
- safe spaces and things to do
- health and well-being
- skills and schools
- basic needs
- happy future

## Positive relationships

Children spoke in depth about how their relationships with others can affect their well-being. Love and affection featured strongly among the essentials for children's happiness. Socialising and being able to talk to others were also seen as highly important. When discussing relationships, children spoke about the need for trust, including having someone they can rely on and talk to, someone who "never lets you down".

Specific ideas children raised in connection with positive relationships included: supportive family relationships and quality family time; friendships and time with friends; and relationships with pets.

### Supportive family relationships and quality time

"[Hopefully in the future] there'll be more family time for certain people. Like my dad at the minute milks cows and it takes us three hours to do it and we never get to eat dinner together. But we're building this shed with these machines that actually milk them for us."

(Child in Scotland aged 10 to 12 years.)

Supportive family relationships were seen as very important for a good home life and, in turn, for children's well-being. Linked to this was the idea that parents and carers should protect and reassure children and should listen to them. Children acknowledged the benefits of parents enforcing rules for keeping them safe, such as online controls, but they also felt that parents should trust their children and not be overly restrictive or punish too harshly as this can affect a child's willingness to engage and be open with them.

### Feeling accepted and understood

Familial experiences relayed by children varied considerably. Some children described their families as providing feelings of safety, security and support as well as meeting basic needs. However, others felt their parents or carers lacked both understanding of them as an individual and self-awareness of how their own behaviour affected their children:

"I think a lot of [young] people ... feel like their parents can't relate to them, or don't understand them." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

Respondents suggested that some parents may lack understanding of children's emotional needs because of generational differences. This was raised particularly by children in the 13 to 15 years age group who felt that parents drew comparisons with their own generation, including the use of expressions such as "back in my day..." or referred to members of Generation Z as "special snowflakes", which led children to feel their parents discredited their experiences. This was raised, for example, in connection with mental health issues. An example given was a child being told to "calm down and get over it" by their parent when they experienced a panic attack.

Cultural differences may also exacerbate inter-generational differences and make it difficult for parents and children to share their different perspectives. For example, a respondent who reflected on cultural expectations about dating said their mother is from a culture where people do not date until university and she struggled to accept that her child, growing up in the UK, wanted to date much earlier than this. This made dating a difficult topic for them to discuss.

Although generational differences could make it difficult for children to express themselves openly with parents, the idea of a "happy family" was also discussed in relation to grandparents, who were described as more lenient than parents and provided a valued emotional and physical space for children to relax and unwind.

## Quality family time and memorable experiences

A desire to spend quality time with family was expressed by children in relation to everyday things like having dinner together. This sentiment was also connected to parents paying attention to their children and "spending less time on their phones", for example.

The importance of parents "making space" for their children was articulated particularly by the young carer group. When discussing quality time with family, children said this made them feel less alone "because you can't always be with your friends".

Another example of quality time mentioned related to special occasions such as going on holiday, which was described as "memories you will remember, and they'll stick with you throughout life". The concept of holidays was portrayed as a special time when families can have quality time together without other people around. However, it was acknowledged that not all families were able to afford them.

"I think your parents taking you out more. Like on holidays and playing board games with you just to make you feel like you're cared about ... [but] obviously if you don't have five grand to go abroad on a good holiday you lose out on those big family experiences, because it's just your family there and not your family's friends or your friends, it's just family time; whereas, if you don't have the money obviously you can't do that and you'll still be surrounded by the people you know, which you can get a bit sick of." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

## Learning life skills and values

Children, particularly those in the young carers group, spoke about the role of family in teaching them life skills and values. They felt a child's upbringing has a large impact on their life views and how they treat others, which can have either a negative or positive effect on their future behaviours.

Children also expressed appreciation of parents providing guidance and correcting them when necessary. For example, children in the young carers group discussed how this could be viewed positively: "because it means that I'm learning something new and they don't want me to make that mistake again". An absence of discipline at home was not seen as a recipe for happiness by children.

## Friendships and time with friends

"Like, a happy and secure friendship makes you feel like you've got someone to go to when things are bad." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

Good, close friendships, sometimes described as "like family", were viewed as an important part of a happy childhood. Strong and secure friendships can help children through difficult times "because if you're upset, then they'll be there for you". Good friends were described as being kind and reliable and having "the ability to cheer you up, like with humour and things". Children felt spending time with good friends they can relate to, share interests with and "be yourself around" contributed strongly to their happiness. Friends also make school more enjoyable, and going out with friends outside school to "have a good time and get a break" was viewed as important to children's well-being.

Linked to this, children also described how belonging to a peer group can provide feelings of inclusion and confidence and reduce loneliness. Children appreciated opportunities to meet new friends through clubs, such as youth groups, or through other friends and mentors. Some members of a local youth group attributed their social life to the group, with a child stating: "this group is the only reason I have friends".

Some children noted they "rely on friends more as you get older than you do your parents", and children from the older groups placed more importance on friendships and time with friends than younger children, and young carers. An older child stated: "you forget that you need to spend time with your family" (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years).

In some cases, seeking support from friends was preferred to parents because friends are more able to relate given their similar experiences and "there's certain things that you wouldn't share with your family that you might share with your friends", for example, romantic relationships.

## Relationships with pets

"With pets, like especially if someone's having a rough time with their mental health, sometimes looking after a pet, so something that's alive can keep [children] focused, like they have a responsibility." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children who had pets also referred to these relationships as having an important impact on their well-being. Pets were viewed as offering affection without judgement and provided a reassuring sense that "they wouldn't leave you". This links to our other findings around wanting to be accepted and understood by others.

Another perceived benefit of pet ownership is that looking after pets can provide something positive to focus on and a worthwhile activity that children found helpful in difficult times. Pets were also described as a source of support, responding to children's emotions, providing comfort and reassurance:

"Pets can keep you company, and some people with anxiety feel that when cats are purring it calms them down." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

## Safe spaces and things to do

Participants felt that children's happiness depends on having positive, enjoyable things to do and safe places to be.

## Hobbies and activities to have fun and unwind

"When you said expressing yourself, the immediate thought was acting, I love acting." (Child with a disability aged 13 to 15 years.)

Play was discussed in the context of engaging in activities children enjoy and "having fun".

Children described how spending time doing things they enjoyed, such as sports, computer games, art and social activities, enabled them to "relax and de-stress".

Activities participants enjoy and specifically mentioned included:

- sports, both inside and outside of school;
- creative activities such as art, drama or music
- gaming such as playing PC and Xbox at home (either alone or online with friends)
- going to arcades and cinemas

Other points children made in relation to having enjoyable things to do related to:

- variety and having "enough things to do"
- affordability and having the money to participate in activities
- proximity in terms of access to activities near home
- time to do the things you like around school and other responsibilities

Children sometimes felt that there was "nothing to do" in their local area. This issue was said to be problematic not only because involvement in activities outside of school is good for well-being but also because they felt it encourages young people to "stay out of trouble". For example, a child described how wider access to activities such as martial arts could support well-being in a range of ways:

"For a young person, because if you do like a martial art or a self-defence, not only does it stop you from being bullied, it teaches you respect, and it stops you bullying people. It stops you becoming a bully by nature, so I think it's very important, there should be more of that around every area." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

It was also noted that the amount of schoolwork children are given may not allow them much free time to do the things they value and enjoy.

### **Spending time online**

Children also discussed spending time online including both playing online games, as noted earlier, and using social media. They saw both advantages and disadvantages in social media use for children's well-being.

Advantages were described in relation to using social media as "a means to an end" for learning new things and communicating with friends. However, social media was also said to be a necessity because "you feel like you're missing out if you're not on it".

Disadvantages related to accessing social media unsafely or accepting content uncritically or unwisely. Another criticism of social media was its perceived falseness, for example, through presentation of enhanced images, which sets up unachievable expectations in children:

"Well, I think [social media] is good for your communication. Obviously, the invention of text messages is great because that's such a quick way to communicate with somebody. And the fact that everyone basically has a phone, if you need to email someone or something you can just speak to them straightaway. But with things like Instagram, you're constantly looking at other people and you're thinking ... you're comparing and you want to look like the person that's got more likes. If they've got more likes, why haven't I? And I think that damages your well-being, because you think you're not as good as other people. Whereas actually, in reality, they're probably not that all that, but they've tweaked it to make it look like." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

### **Safe local area with accessible local places and facilities**

"You need somewhere to relax because a lot of the time, people at school, they don't have a very relaxing time, so whenever they go home it's still not relaxed. So there needs to be somewhere to relax and be able to unwind." (Child in Northern Ireland aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children's descriptions of the local areas where they live included specific community and activity spaces as well as the wider area itself.

Aspects of places described positively by children as conducive to well-being included the following:

- safe
- quiet
- clean
- warm
- well looked-after
- with a relaxed, accepting atmosphere
- with nice walks or other facilities for children and young people nearby

A child aged 13 to 15 years described the dream venue to spend time in as "a room full of pillows, and everyone just sitting there just like 'hello'".

Access to both indoor and outdoor spaces were regarded as important. For example, some children expressed a desire to spend more time outside, whereas others preferred indoor activities. Children in Scotland also noted that it was often too cold to be outside and felt it was important to have places to go where they would feel warm.

Having access to safe and relaxed spaces, such as youth and sports clubs, was seen as important to children's well-being because it provided:

- an alternative to home and school, which can both be stressful and gave children somewhere to unwind
- a venue to pursue their interests and hobbies, including sports
- an opportunity to connect with friends

Children described both advantages and disadvantages associated with youth groups as a particular space set aside for children and young people. Advantages included that they may provide:

- inviting, comfortable spaces
- youth workers who are young and easy to talk to
- somewhere that is easily accessible in some local areas

Disadvantages were:

- they are not accessible to children throughout the country
- some may be seen as unsafe places where young people go to engage in anti-social behaviours

Overall, focus group participants felt that their local areas lacked places and activities for children and young people. Some children described a lack of perceived safety or the need for substantial improvements to make local areas more child-friendly.

"I don't think we just need a place or a building, I think the whole area needs to be improved so people shouldn't have to actively try and find an area to feel safe, they should just feel safe in the area that they're in." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

Some children said they needed to be escorted by an adult to go to places in their neighbourhood, such as the corner shop. For example, an older child in Wales explained:

"I actually can't step outside the door without my nan ... My nan walks me up to the bus stop, waits for me to get on the bus, and then goes back home. And then I've got to alert her when I'm on the bus coming home". This was because of the behaviour of the people living in the area.

Children also spoke about having limited leisure facilities for people their age, with inadequate access to public transport. Travelling distances could be difficult, relying on intermittent public transport or lifts from adults to be able to go places. Linked to this, children who used public transport described it as unreliable, expensive and unsafe.

## **Health and well-being**

Children discussed the connections between general physical and mental health and well-being and happiness, often in terms of factors that could negatively impact both. They also described their strategies for coping and regaining well-being.

### **Emotional well-being, mental health, and sources of support**

"I think mental health's always going to affect young people. Like, I think most young people have, at least they'll go through a little bit of it, especially doing exams and having all the stress and going through tough times." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

### **Mental well-being challenges for children**

Emotional issues, particularly stress, were attributed to difficulty coping with academic aspects of school such as too much homework and too many exams. Children described feeling overworked at school and pressured to be involved in extra-curricular activities. Other sources of stress included bullying, changing schools, social media, family finances and experience of bereavement:

"Yeah, but like talking about healthy, someone might not be healthy but mentally not healthy, so it's also something because maybe if you lost a dear one or like something like that. It could play a big role." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

Linked to children's perceptions of social media, it was felt that platforms encourage social comparisons that children felt could erode their sense of well-being because of feeling inferior to others.

## Seeking support

Mental health and well-being were discussed in depth, including the perceived importance of professional support, such as youth workers, support group leaders and trained school counsellors. Children talked openly about mental health challenges that they, or their close friends, had experienced including anxiety, depression and panic attacks. They described a sense that children's mental health challenges were sometimes met with stigma and insufficient support, particularly in schools.

The perceived lack of support related both to a lack of access to a school counsellor and, in some cases, to a personal reluctance among some children to seek help from professionals because of worries about confidentiality or an unsympathetic response:

"In our school they have a policy where people have to be referred to see a school counsellor. But it's good that they actually have a counsellor, but they don't keep anything confidential. Like you could say anything, and it could be nothing. You could say like 'I'm breaking up with my girlfriend'. They would tell your parents. And for a lot of people that's something that they don't want. So most people don't even see the school counsellor." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Another reason why children described feeling wary of seeking pastoral support at school related to the degree of comfort they felt with characteristics of the person in the pastoral role. For example, the sex of the person offering support can make a difference to the extent to which children feel comfortable and confident in seeking help: "I feel like men, they have different - so like if you're upset and you're crying, they're a bit like 'oh what do I do?'" (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

## Children's strategies for regaining well-being

Opportunities to "clear your mind" and strategies that help children cope with emotional and mental health issues were viewed as important for their well-being. These included spending time with friends and engaging in activities children enjoy as a form of escapism to "take your mind off things", such as doing something creative or listening to music to calm them down. Children from the young carers group also spoke about the importance of emotional resilience: "don't be sensitive, because people say stuff and half the stuff isn't even true." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

As well as having enjoyable "things to do", children spoke about the importance of engaging in activities seen as worthwhile such as helping others, looking after a pet or giving back to the community through volunteering. This was seen as beneficial in supporting children's mental health: "helping out with the community and stuff like that. Like over Christmas we did hampers to help people." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

## **Able to be yourself; free from judgement, bullying and peer pressure**

"People wind me up for the sake of it, and I tell teachers and they don't do nothing about it ... Yeah, people in general. If you're a human being, the nicest thing to do would be to not be a total jerk." (Child with a disability aged 13 to 15 years.)

Connected to the idea that relationships are fundamental to children's happiness is the importance of the quality of those relationships so that children do not feel judged, pressured or bullied.

Children said that they want to be able to be themselves and feel happy and confident within themselves, without judgement or pressure from others. The suggestion of a "judgement-free zone", where everyone should be accepting of one another, arose in discussions. This includes children being able to express themselves through their clothing, dressing in a way that makes them feel positive and comfortable. For example, an older child described going out in a particular item of clothing but then: "realised there was a bunch of teens, and they were all making fun of me and taking videos of me because I'm wearing [item of clothing]. And I'm like: 'well fight me, I look fabulous'. But on the other hand, I wanted to rip it off and be like: 'OK, I'm not wearing [this]', even though it made me feel confident. It was like that confidence was squashed as soon as I saw that man glaring at me and saw these teens taking videos of me and making fun of me." (Child in Northern Ireland aged 13 to 15 years.)

Participants said that experiences of bullying from peers who "judge you for no reason" undermined their well-being and can also impede a child's ability to learn at school, with examples given of having to resort to homeschooling to avoid bullying.

Children discussed how bullying can occur in different settings, such as in schools and on social media, and for different reasons. Examples included being bullied about a lack of material possessions (for example, "not having trendy things") and physical appearance (for example, weight and skin colour). A young carer described how peers often lacked consideration for those who are less privileged. When children felt bullying was not addressed effectively or was dismissed by authority figures, this further undermined their well-being.

Focus group participants also noted that although peer group support is very important to well-being, "mixing with the wrong crowd" can lead to young people engaging in anti-social or risky behaviours such as drinking and drugs. Peer pressure was seen as an important reason why children and young people may engage in behaviours harmful to themselves or others.

Peer group norms and a desire to "fit in" with others can be damaging to children's self-esteem, making it difficult for children to accept themselves as they are:

"[Children are judged for] how they do stuff and what they do. Being too loud or too quiet or having a weird small group instead of a huge one with loads of friends." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

"If you want to have fun, then people think you're too childish, and if you try and act mature and it's like you're too boring." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

Those in the young carers group also noted the pressures they face to act as adults from an age, which can deprive children of "fun" childhood experiences: "I feel like we're expected to act like adults ... like we don't get the chance to actually get out there and do what we want, trying new sports and going out with friends more." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

## **Physical health and sleep**

"If you don't get enough sleep, you're not going to be as happy, you're not going to be really happy. Because I know that when I do not sleep for quite a while, especially on New Year's Eve, later on in the night I'm like really groggy because I haven't really had much sleep." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children described good physical health and energy in the context of being able to do the activities they enjoy and as being important for their well-being, such as playing in the park or doing sports.

## **Good quality sleep**

Getting sufficient sleep was viewed as important to children's energy levels, which in turn was described as essential for being well and happy:

"Your mental state deteriorates with your sleep because your brain doesn't have downtime, and it can't like do stuff." (Child in England aged 10 to 12 years.)

Children also described the quality of sleep as important in relation to having "good dreams" and avoiding "bad dreams" such as nightmares. Bad dreams and poor sleep were said to sometimes be a result of issues children face in their day to day lives:

"Some problems kids might be dealing with when that stops them from sleeping is some have like reoccurring nightmares." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

## **Positive physical health**

Apart from the important issues relating to how children feel physically in themselves, they also noted the support needed from others to maintain positive health. This arose, for example, in relation to good health care helping children with illnesses or impairments to have better well-being: "we need good medical things so people can actually, say if they have got a disability, they can go out and live a normal life".

It was also a theme among young carers who described how poor physical health of family members can affect their own mental health:

"Yeah, like being a young carer is obviously something, because you might have a family or something that have health issues and maybe it's not like they were born with it, but that it just came, so it would affect you mentally." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

## **Skills and schools**

As somewhere children and young people spend much of their time, prepare for their future and connect with others, schools were described as having an important influence on children's happiness. A range of aspects of school life were discussed during the focus groups, including: physical buildings; environment and culture of the school; teachers and other staff; the learning content and curriculum; and opportunities for extra-curricular activities.

### **Physical buildings, environment and school culture**

"This is kind of a superficial one but having pretty classrooms, like classrooms that are inviting to be in, rather than desks and chairs. Those are good for some things." (Child in Northern Ireland aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children described what they like and find conducive to well-being in the physical buildings. Generally, their well-being priorities for the school environment were very consistent with the issues raised in relation to desirable local spaces for children outside of school and home.

At school, it was felt children's well-being was enhanced by:

- separate areas to connect with others as well as spaces to retreat (that is, quiet and less crowded, for example, libraries)
- inviting, comfortable spaces, colourful, decorated with cushions, artwork and positive messages, similar to what some had experienced in primary schools
- well-maintained buildings and grounds
- a sense of physical and emotional safety
- supportive environments

Participants also noted a range of ways in which school buildings and the wider school environment and culture detracted from their well-being in practice. These included:

- uninviting buildings that were uninspiring, lacked colour, needed renovation or were "falling apart"
- security features that eroded children's perceived sense of safety and made schools feel like "prisons", including bars on windows and gates with chains that could make children feel "trapped": "So your school has got security, but say you've got police coming in, you've got like, your school's getting cotton swabbed and stuff like that. That just makes you feel..." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years)
- vandalism that makes the school a less comfortable place to be and undermines trust between teachers and pupils, leading to restrictions imposed on everyone
- bullying in schools that undermines a sense of safety, both physically and emotionally

Children felt that their reports of bullying were not always taken seriously at school, with bullies perceived to go unpunished and others told to ignore them or teachers insisting that bullying had to be witnessed by them to be acted on.

## **Teachers and other staff**

"Most of my teachers are actually very kind during lessons. They're not like shouting really bad. Like my science teacher, he's a really nice, kind teacher. Someone you can actually talk to." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children described how teachers could have an important impact on their happiness, with their whole experience of school coloured by the temperament and behaviour of their teachers. This also spilled over into the degree of enthusiasm children felt for particular subjects.

Participants emphasised that teachers' interpersonal skills were as important as their teaching ability and should be given equal weight in teacher selection: "You've gotta look at their personalities a little bit more as well as their qualifications" (Child with a disability aged 13 to 15 years).

Attributes children associated with "good teachers" who contributed to children's well-being included:

- respectful
- good listener
- positive attitude
- approachable
- understanding of individual circumstances
- fun

Children wanted teachers they felt comfortable speaking to, who would listen to them and take what they say into account:

"If they're a reasonable teacher, they'll let you have a say and if they're grumpy ... then they don't let you have a say." (Child in Scotland aged 10 to 12 years.)

"It's like really nice to know that there's teachers like that that you can go and talk to and that they're not like really shouty all the time." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Linked to what children said about wanting to feel accepted, they felt teachers should be: "adaptable and can accepting and things, rather than having like a cardboard cut-out of what [children] need to be" (Child in Northern Ireland aged 13 to 15 years).

Attributes of teachers who children felt had not enhanced their well-being included those considered:

- lacking in empathy
- dismissive or unapproachable
- inconsistent
- overly rigid
- not addressing children's individual needs and abilities.

"[The teacher] didn't really offer any support. Her way of speaking is 'you do my work, or you fail and it's not my fault'." (Child in Northern Ireland aged 13 to 15 years.)

## **Learning content, curriculum and exams**

"I think different schools need more variety. It's like my school didn't have that much of a variety when we were choosing our options. Like we didn't have music or woodwork or anything like that; it was just like art, business, child development." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children felt that a good education is essential to "a good future" and therefore to their future well-being. From their perspectives, a good education includes:

- a contribution to personal growth and development of life skills including social skills, how to cook, wash, raise a child, manage finances, get a job, pay taxes and get a mortgage
- getting the right qualifications and skills for good and fulfilling future work
- getting the support needed to choose the right qualifications
- options for a range of courses
- less emphasis on exams

"Education isn't fully just about memorising equations and doing sums. A lot of the school life, particularly high school, is about actually preparing us for living on our own. Like the modern curricula teaches us how to cook, it teaches us like enterprising, teaches us entrepreneurial skills and teaches employability, so it's all setting us up." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Although the importance of exams and achieving good grades for future opportunities was acknowledged, it was felt that children were under too much pressure at school. Aspects of the approach to education in the UK that children found particularly stressful included:

- long school days
- too much homework, without regard for the cumulative workload across courses
- multiple exams taking place on a given day, leading to difficulties prioritising and feelings of insufficient preparation

## **Opportunities and approach to extra-curricular activities**

"I think it's very important to keep yourself active as well. Like, after school don't just go home and sit in your room or don't just go home and go out straightaway. I do a lot of after school things, so I think I have something on every night and it just keeps me out of trouble." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

Although children appreciated the availability of extra-curricular activities at school, some felt pressured to join school clubs with their participation presented as essential to their future success. This was viewed by some as counterproductive.

Children also discussed how options for school clubs could also be more well-being- enhancing. For example, creative options for activities, such as music, art and drama, would be helpful as well as clubs focused on sports or academic activities, such as debate.

"Something that makes most people happy in my school is that every lunchtime or break time or after school they do like at least three clubs there and they do like football, rugby, tennis; they did trampolining last year for year seven. They do loads of different things, and it's like really fun, I think that would help a child. It would also help them develop like friendships with other people who go to the club. So it's really important in schools to have some sort of club, like after school or during school, so you can connect to other people who's not in your class." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

## **Basic needs**

When discussing requirements for a happy life, children also referred to having access to the basic things that most people in UK society have and enjoy. These included stable family finances to be able to afford the things they feel they need, home comforts and basic necessities such as food.

### **Basic needs and comforts**

"I think having no bed and just sleeping on something, like just sleeping, like some people like sleep on the floor. But you should really have a bed to sleep in or something similar to a bed to sleep in." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children described what they see as important features of a "happy home", which included:

- a positive environment without conflict
- a nurturing environment where children are looked after and not left on their own
- where parents or carers are not abusive and are not addicted to drugs or other substances
- somewhere comfortable, safe and clean, though not necessarily where their parents live
- somewhere doors can be locked to keep out strangers
- somewhere where you can have your own space and privacy

The basic necessities children felt everyone needs to be happy include:

- food
- water
- a bed
- electricity
- heating

An emphasis was placed on having "nice" food and enough not to go hungry, "because when you get a hungry child it is horrible" (Child in Scotland aged 10 to 12 years). Food was described as providing a sense of comfort, for example, "having like a nice tea or something after a really hard day" (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years).

Children with disabilities and younger children particularly spoke about how personal possessions can affect happiness, as "having personal items to help you feel more comfortable". These include items with sentimental value, such as teddy bears, and items related to children's hobbies, including a computer, videogame console, musical instrument and a bicycle.

## **Financial stability**

"Money is good because it helps you obtain the things that you want or need, but I hate the idea of needing money to feel happy." (Child with a disability aged 13 to 15 years.)

Children spoke generally about needing enough money to have the basics, to be comfortable, and to be able to afford opportunities, such as activities or a family holiday. All of these things were thought to contribute to children's well-being.

By contrast, some children described how family financial difficulties could adversely impact children's well-being, which links to what children told us was important in regards to good family relationships, mental health, education and feeling accepted:

"Finance is really stressful and it can stress the family out and then that can have an effect on the child, which it might affect their education and maybe bullying if they don't have the trendiest shoes in school or their mental health because they're worried about maybe being kicked out or something like that." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15.)

A lack of money could also lead to children missing out on things that most other children enjoy:

"Some parents might not work, and they might get benefits that can't help your family go on holiday or go on days out and buying these things to entertain children. For as much as you could be a loving family, you don't have those experiences that other children have because you don't have the money to do it." (Young carer aged 13 to 15 years.)

However, it was agreed that although money provides comfort, stability and a better head start in life, which are all important for children to have a happy life, "[Money] doesn't bring you happiness. It might give you things that you want, but it's not, I don't think it's true happiness." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

## Happy future

Both optimism and pessimism about the future were expressed in the group discussions, along with the sentiment that adults need to "make up for their mistakes". Three areas were raised in relation to children's future happiness and well-being:

- living in a country at peace with a government that is responsive to children's needs
- preservation of the natural environment and addressing climate change
- empowering children to express themselves and have a say in decisions that affect their lives

## Stable, honest government that listens

"Government don't listen to children, because like loads of us have raised issues, like [the] higher-ups in schools and all that, they don't listen." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

In the focus group discussions, the concept of government was linked to "decision-makers" who have the ability to make improvements in areas children described as important to their well-being, such as schools and local facilities. Although contrasting opinions were expressed regarding whether participants felt old enough to vote, it was agreed that important attributes of a "good government" included:

- stability
- honesty
- working together
- clarity about what they are doing
- understanding and addressing issues that matter to children
- attentive to children's voices

"We would just appreciate a stable government, or the government to be honest, one that's all together" and "one that actually knows what they're doing." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

All but one of the focus groups were held in the months leading up to the date the UK's EU Withdrawal Agreement became a binding treaty between the EU and the UK (31 January 2020). Children expressed uncertainty about what was going to happen after Brexit and how well the process was being handled. For example, a 10- to 12-year-old in Scotland stated: "We can send people into space, but they can't do Brexit".

Participants also felt that adults in power should have an obligation to protect children's futures and to deal with issues such as climate change, employment and war with that in mind.

Other priorities for children included:

- avoiding a third world war
- improving equality and equal treatment particularly in light of children's own experiences of having been treated differently because of their sex, skin colour and physical ability
- reducing homelessness
- reducing tuition fees

## **Preservation of the natural environment**

"Adults should do a lot more to basically show us like to start I guess really properly thinking 'hang on a minute, we've done so many things wrong'. Let's teach them like carbon emissions, wars that are completely pointless." (Child in England aged 10 to 12 years.)

Children expressed worry about the future of the natural environment, including climate change, deforestation and carbon emissions. These issues were described as damaging to children's health and robbing future generations of opportunities to co-exist with species at risk of extinction. As one child explained: "I want my kids to know what an elephant is." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

When discussing the environment, children referred to activist, Greta Thunberg, with admiration, with some wanting to be involved themselves in activities to improve the environment, such as recycling and planting trees. Linked to this was the view that greater efforts needed to be made by adults to reduce our carbon footprints to improve the world and the environment for future generations.

"Adults should start really seriously thinking about, 'we've done all this stuff, why don't we start saying hang on, this is not right, and start correcting ourselves?'" (Child in England aged 10 to 12 years.)

Some children were also concerned that the future would be "too filled with technology", which could damage the environment through increased emissions.

## **Freedom of choice and having a voice**

"I feel like a lot of adults don't listen, it's like our opinion doesn't matter in a way, it's sort of like 'you're doing this and that's what you're doing'." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

When discussing what a happy life for children looks like, children referred to a right to their own opinions, which may be different from those of others, and the ability to have a say in matters that affect them, such as sports clubs, school subjects and some political issues.

Participants did not tend to feel that children's voices were given sufficient regard by adults, and they believed children were not taken seriously enough:

When opportunities were given for children to be included in decision-making, such as feedback boxes, some children described these as tokenistic gestures, which resulted in disappointment because of a lack of positive action being taken:

"Like in most classes they have like a feedback box. If they actually acted on the feedback they were given, because they'll say that they, 'oh we're doing so and so, we're doing so and so'. Changes are never made, and nothing ever happens. I've never seen one thing come out of the school council." (Child in Wales aged 13 to 15 years.)

Freedom, autonomy and independence were viewed as important aspects contributing to children's well-being. Linked to freedom was the view that reasonable limits should be set for children at home and at school, alongside a view that too many restrictions may often be imposed on them.

Freedom of choice was discussed particularly in relation to school, where children described feeling a lack of freedom:

"You feel like you're constantly trapped, so you feel like you're in a hamster wheel and you're just going around in the hamster wheel and it's like really frustrating because it kind of intimidates you because it kind of makes you think like we don't mean anything to this world." (Child in England aged 13 to 15 years.)

Independence and opportunities to learn from their own mistakes were described as important for children's personal growth. Autonomy and self-reliance were also valued and were thought to prepare children for situations when others may not be able to help them.

## 5 . Future developments

Based on the findings from our discussions with children, we have [reviewed our children's well-being measures](#) to ensure they better reflect what children say is important to their happiness and well-being. We have revised the measures through taking the results of these discussions, comparing with other national and international indicator sets on children's well-being, and reviewing findings from published literature.

The proposed update to the children's well-being measures and a [survey seeking user feedback](#) are available.

We will use this stakeholder feedback, along with statistical analysis of the indicators, to develop a final update to the indicator set.

## 6 . Topic guide

### Introduction

#### Consent and information

Exercise: ice breaker - where do you stand game.

Set up markers on a wall, with one side being "agree" and the other "disagree".

Some ideas might include:

- I like pineapple on pizza
- there are lots of things to do where I live
- I love sugary cereal in the morning
- I like going to the cinema
- I know what I want to be when I grow up

### Main session

Exercise: what do you think helps children to have a happy life?

Ask children to write down all the things they think are important for a good life for children; they do this on different shaped post it notes and put them up on a board.

Things that might help include:

- using the different-coloured post-it notes to represent good things, bad things and neutral things
- drawing a person on flipchart paper (a stick figure is fine) and ask them what that person (a child) needs to live a happy, safe and satisfied life; they can stick post-it notes on the drawing
- getting the children to draw things instead of writing them and then explain what they mean

The principal areas covered in the current children's well-being framework are:

- personal well-being (feeling happy and good about your life)
- relationships (satisfaction or happiness with friends and family and loneliness)
- health (physically or mentally)
- home and community
- money and security
- education and skills

## Discussion

- What matters in different areas of our lives?
- What helps children to be happy at school?
- What things at school are important to feeling safe?
- What things at school are important to feel well?
- What could make school better?
- What helps children be happy in their social life? Think of social spaces, community and activities outside of school.
- What is important in children's lives outside school and home?
- What helps you feel safe in the community and neighbourhood where you live?
- What helps you feel happy in the community and neighbourhood where you live?
- What activities do children do outside of school? Would these activities help children live happy lives?
- Where do you like spending time, either with family, friends or on your own?
- Are there any places or spaces you think aren't welcoming for young people? Where are these?
- Are there any places or spaces you think are not good for young people? Where are these?
- What does it take to have a good home life?
- How important are relationships?
- What's important to help children feel safe at home?
- What's important to help children feel happy at home?
- What helps children express themselves?
- How important is it to have a voice and choice in things that matter to your lives?
- What opportunities do children like you have to express yourselves and your opinions?
- Do you think there are issues where the views of children and young people are not heard or listened to? If so, what are these?

## Children's well-being now and in the future

- Looking to the future, what will children need to have a happy future?
- Is there anything that you are looking forward to? Or anything that you are worried about?
- Do you think that these things will be different for children of the future?

Actions for adults: what suggestions do you have for how adults could support children's well-being?

Exercise: prioritising what matters.

- What are the most important things for children's happiness and well-being?

Look again at the flip chart and with new topics added; ask if there anything else that is missing and add this on if they come up with anything else. Ask each young person to rank their own top three things that they think are important for children to have happy lives individually on their own sheet first without discussing.

Ask children to leave us their sheets with the top three things listed on it.

Hand them the complaints or debrief sheet.

Remind them not to discuss other people's responses outside of the room.

## 7 . Related links

### [Personal well-being in the UK: April 2019 to March 2020](#)

Bulletin | Released 30 July 2020

Estimates of life satisfaction, feeling that the things done in life are worthwhile, happiness and anxiety at the UK, country, regional, county and local authority level.

### [Children's well-being and social relationships, UK: 2018](#)

Article | Released 26 March 2018

A picture of how children aged 10 to 15 years in the UK are coping in a range of areas that matter to their quality of life.

### [Children's and young people's experiences of loneliness: 2018](#)

Article | Released 5 December 2018

Analysis of children's and young people's views, experiences and suggestions to overcome loneliness.

### [The Good Childhood Report 2020](#)

Report | Released August 2020

The Children's Society's ninth annual report on the well-being of children in the UK.

### [State of the Nation 2019: Children and Young People's Well-being](#)

Report | Released October 2019

Department for Education's (DfE's) report to integrate the available evidence on the state of children and young people's well-being and to provide an accessible narrative on current evidence to guide discourse and action.

### [Universal approaches to improving children and young people's mental health and well-being - report of the findings of a Special Interest Group](#)

Report | Released October 2019

Public Health England's summarised findings from a mixed-methods approach to understanding evidence about universal approaches to improving the mental health and well-being of children and young people age 4 to 18 years.

