

The Good Childhood Report Brief

Recently The Children's Society (TCS) published their fifth Good Childhood Report, an annual publication that summarises the TCS well-being research programme in partnership with the University of York. This year's report presents concepts used to operationalise well-being, describes trends over time, analyses the link between well-being and mental health, and examines the relationship between local area differences and child well-being. The report focuses on measurements of children's subjective well-being, which refers to children's evaluations of their experiences and lives as a whole. These subjective measures are contrasted with objective and more traditional socioeconomic indicators of well-being like household income, employment, and education throughout the report.

Trends over time

The first portion of the report describes the origins of the research programme, which began in 2005, and traces trends in child subjective well-being over time. TCS have involved children in the development of their surveys since the programme's inception in an effort to give a voice to a portion of the population that is otherwise unable to engage in the democratic process. Through extensive qualitative research, TCS developed a framework of related components: self, relationships, and environments, which continues to serve as the foundation for contemporary research inquiries.

In examining trends over time, the report traces data from the British Household Panel Survey and its successor, the Understanding Society survey. The survey asks how happy children are with family, friends, appearance, schoolwork, school, and life in general. The trend analysis found that average life satisfaction for 11-15 year olds increased between 2000 and 2008, but slightly decreased from 2009-2014. Children became more satisfied with friendships between 2000 and 2008, but this trend declined significantly from 2009-2014. From 2009-2014, there was an increase in happiness with schoolwork and school in general, but significant decreases in happiness with friends and appearance. These trends reveal growing gender gaps in responses to some aspects of children's well-being, particularly happiness with appearance. In 2000 the gap in satisfaction with appearance was 3%, but by 2008 it was 5% and by 2014 it had grown to 10%. The report notes that there is evidence of an emerging gender gap in overall life satisfaction, as well. In 2013-14, there was a 3% gap between girls and boys, with boys being more satisfied.

The Good Childhood Report also introduces the concept of 'flourishing,' which is created by combining measures of children's life satisfaction and psychological well-being. To be flourishing, a child must have high life satisfaction and high psychological well-being. The measure refers to a child's degree of positive functioning, rather than simply being the opposite of mental ill-health. Using this measure, the research team has found that 4/5 of 12 year old English children are 'flourishing,' compared with 1/10 who are 'languishing,' or experiencing low life satisfaction and low psychological well-being. The remainder of children lie somewhere in between these two categories.

Subjective well-being and mental health

The Good Childhood Report emphasises that mental ill-health and subjective well-being are very distinct concepts. Low subjective well-being does not predict mental ill-health and the absence of mental ill-health does not imply high subjective well-being. To examine the potential link between subjective well-being and mental ill-health, the research programme analysed data from the Understanding Society questionnaire. The analysis explored age and gender patterns in subjective well-being. For instance, girls were found to be significantly happier with their schoolwork than

boys, but boys were significantly happier with their appearance and their lives as a whole than girls. The gap in attitudes toward schoolwork narrows after age 11. But by the age of 12, girls are significantly less happy with their appearance than boys, and this gap continues to grow until age 14. At the ages of 14 and 15, girls are significantly less happy than boys with their life as a whole. There was no significant difference in happiness with family, friends, or school between genders.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) was used as an indicator of mental ill-health though it does not provide a clinical diagnosis. The research team focused on four realms of the SDQ in their analysis: emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems, conduct disorders, and hyperactivity/inattention. Though both boys and girls had similar 'total difficulties' scores, girls reported experiencing greater emotional symptoms than boys. Boys, on the other hand, reported significantly greater problems with conduct and hyperactivity/inattention than girls. Emotional problems increase with age for girls and the gender gap widens as children get older. The gender gaps for peer, conduct, and hyperactivity/inattention problems narrow by age 13.

The analysis examined associations between mental ill-health and subjective well-being indicators. The research team found that happiness with appearance is most strongly associated with emotional problems, while happiness with schoolwork is more strongly associated with externalising problems, such as conduct and hyperactivity/inattention. Happiness with life as a whole is more strongly associated with internalising problems, particularly emotional symptoms. The associations between most variables were stronger for girls than boys, with the exceptions being externalising problems and happiness with schoolwork which were highly associated for boys. Happiness with life as a whole was also significantly more strongly associated with emotional problems and conduct problems for girls than boys. Happiness with appearance and with life as a whole were significantly more strongly associated with total difficulties scores for girls than boys.

Children's view of their local area

Though all of the research presented in the report is beneficial to policymakers, this section of analysis emphasises the relevance of children's evaluations of their local areas to local authorities in policy development. The research team sought to compare geographical differences in children's well-being through several different surveys. They examined how region, indicators of deprivation, and household income affect child subjective well-being. The analyses found that, overall, children's level of subjective well-being does not seem to be affected by the objective socioeconomic indicators of the local area in which they live. Rather, children's life satisfaction and subjective well-being are influenced by their personal experiences and assessments of their local area, material deprivation, and family relationships. Parents from disadvantaged backgrounds, however, reported lower levels of life satisfaction.

The Children's Society asked children in various local areas how much they agree or disagree with statements about safety/freedom, facilities, local adults, and problems in their local areas (such as graffiti, alcohol and drugs, rubbish, and noise). Children who felt more positively about local facilities, safety and freedom, local adults, and who reported fewer problems in their local area had higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction, and feeling that life was worthwhile. After conducting analyses of the association between specific local area problems and subjective well-being, they found that noisy neighbours and people drinking or taking drugs were the two local area problems with the strongest associations to subjective well-being. In the analysis, the report specifies that the findings do not show that local area characteristics cause variations in children's subjective well-being, but that children's own perceptions and experiences strongly influence their life satisfaction.

The report conducted a review of factors associated with children's subjective well-being. Among these factors was family. When examining survey data on the association between well-being and family, the research team found that family structure only explained 2% of the variation in children's life satisfaction, while responses to "my family gets along well together" explained 20%. This analysis again showed the value of self-reported, subjective measures in analysing child well-being. Likewise, a child-centred material deprivation index from a household survey on income found that children's perceptions of their material deprivation were more highly associated with subjective well-being than the traditional measure of household income. They were asked about 10 items identified as important to have for a "normal kind of life," including pocket money and clothes to fit in. Children who reported having "a lot less" than friends had the lowest well-being. Interestingly, children who had the highest well-being were those who had "about the same" as their friends, not more.

Comment

The Children's Society research programme in partnership with the University of York continues to produce valuable data regarding children's subjective well-being in the UK. The fifth edition of the Good Childhood Report should be of interest to anyone involved in child welfare and children's policy. The results of this report demonstrate that social policy cannot address issues related to socioeconomic indicators of well-being and expect the benefits of those solutions to trickle down to children. TCS's research provides further evidence that improving the lives of children requires a child-specific approach to policy development and programme intervention.

Data collection on child subjective well-being must continue in order to understand fully how children are affected by community issues, and how to better address their needs. For example, an analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study found that certain factors reported by parents (family structure, financial status, and parental well-being) were significantly associated with child subjective well-being at age 11, but the explanatory power was weak. A second stage analysis introduced child reports of bullying, peer conflict, and safety in the local area, which were much more strongly associated with child subjective well-being than the parent-reported demographic information. Some experiences of children that contribute to low subjective well-being, such as local area safety, could be related to traditional socioeconomic measures of well-being. However, to fully comprehend how those measures affect the community's most vulnerable residents, it is necessary to speak with children and hear their perspectives and experiences.

The Good Childhood Report says that a practical outcome of the research into subjective well-being is that it may provide a source of monitoring that could help identify children at risk of mental ill-health. Tracking child-reported subjective well-being data could also help identify other issues in children's lives that contribute to low levels of life satisfaction but may not receive a great deal of attention. For instance, the report highlights a bullying survey question that asks where the bullying takes place. Despite the media spotlight and adult attention on cyberbullying, the vast majority of bullying took place in school and on the way to or from school. Monitoring survey data on child well-being may also provide an opportunity to research larger cultural issues that may be linked to SDQ scores that in turn, contribute to low life satisfaction. This may be particularly useful in understanding the trend of declining satisfaction with appearance among girls and the trend of conduct problems and hyperactivity/inattention among young boys.

The report identifies future directions for research into children's subjective well-being, one of which is to conduct further analyses into gender differences on some aspects of the Understanding Society questionnaire. A second direction is to examine the extent to which psychological well-being and life satisfaction are related to other issues in children's lives. To illustrate the complex and sometimes

counterintuitive relationship between these two indicators, the report states that experiences of being bullied are more strongly linked with life satisfaction measures than indicators of psychological well-being. Future research into both of these preliminary findings would provide a more comprehensive view of the factors that contribute to a child's development of a negative perception of themselves and their life as a whole.

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