The Good Childhood Report 2012

A review of our children's well-being

The Children's Society

Foreword

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.
John 10:10

Most people would agree with the sentiment of Jesus' words that what we hope for, for ourselves and for others, is an abundant life. We also know that for human life to flourish it needs more than physical sustenance – it needs spiritual fulfilment.

If we wish to build a society where we nurture this abundant life, what are the practical tools we can use to help us know if we succeed? Can we move beyond narrow measures of human success such as health and financial security to ask harder questions about personal fulfilment or what is known as subjective well-being – in other words people's contentment with their life as a whole?

There is a challenge here. If, as is often stated, the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable, including its children, then we have to measure not just adult well-being, but children's too. Their inclusion in our measure of human flourishing is not just a practical problem but a question of morality.

That is why this report and the research behind it are so important for any national debate about how we are faring as a society. An analysis of the subjective well-being of children is not simply a question of how well our children are doing, but an acid test for our society.

And there is mixed news. The fact that, at any one time, half a million children between the ages of eight and 15 suffer from low subjective well-being should be a wake-up call to us all.

However, alongside the challenges these pages present are opportunities. Policy makers and public alike will find clear information about what causes our children to be unhappy with their lives, and with such understanding comes the opportunity to make changes.

How we as a society, within our churches or through Her Majesty's Government policy, respond to these challenges will determine whether we, as a society, pass our moral test.

In that light we should see this report not as simply an interesting piece of research but an urgent clarion call to action.

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1 Introduction

Children's well-being is central to that of society as a whole. Promoting children's well-being is not only important in order for children to have a good childhood, but also as a solid foundation for their future well-being as adults. In order to achieve this goal it is vital that we understand the key factors that affect children's lives. Listening to children's own views and experiences is at the heart of developing this understanding.

Fortunately many children in the UK are happy with their lives. However, substantial numbers of children do not feel so positive. At any given time, around 4% of eight-year-olds and 14% of 15-year-olds have low 'subjective well-being' – a term used to describe people's assessments of, or happiness with, their lives as a whole. In total it can be estimated that around half a million children in the UK in the eight to 15 age range have low well-being at any point in time.

These levels of unhappiness with life are not simply part of the day-to-day ups and downs that everyone experiences. Children who report low levels of happiness, compared to other children, are much less likely to enjoy being at home with their family, to feel safe when they are with their friends, to look forward to going to school, to like the way they look, and to feel positive about their future.

This type of deep-rooted unhappiness with life must be a cause for concern not only for its short-term impact but because of the evident potential implications for these children's future life chances. We know, from research in other countries, that children who are unhappy in this way are also more likely to be victimised, to behave in ways that are risky to themselves or others, to have eating disorders, and to be depressed.

Nevertheless, this situation is not necessarily permanent or inevitable. In most cases, children only experience this level of unhappiness with their lives for part of their childhoods and, with support, they can regain

their sense of well-being. This report is part of an ongoing programme of research to try to understand why some children feel so unhappy with their lives, and what can be done to prevent this happening and to support children who are in this situation.

It is the first in a planned series of annual reports that will describe and monitor the subjective well-being of children. It is written at a time of major change in the political, social and economic context in the UK with concerns about cuts to public services, high rates of youth unemployment and the repercussions of the rioting in major cities in England.

During 2011 the Office for National Statistics took forward a programme of work to measure the nation's well-being initiated by the Prime Minister in late 2010. This reflects a growing international interest in measuring well-being as a supplement or alternative to economic measures of the progress of society.

It is clearly important that initiatives to measure well-being fully include children who, after all, represent over a fifth of the total UK population. We hope that this report will make a useful contribution in this respect. It is based on the most comprehensive set of data yet gathered on children's subjective well-being in this country, from an ongoing research programme undertaken by The Children's Society in collaboration with the University of York, which has so far gathered the views of over 30,000 children aged eight to 16.

The findings we present in this report cover a wide-ranging set of issues in children's lives and provide insights which can be put to practical use by parents, policy makers and all those concerned with the welfare of children. A companion document – *Promoting positive well-being for children* – being published at the same time as this report, begins to set out an agenda of priorities for all decision-makers at central and local level, tasked with improving children's lives. The data summarised in this report also have other

practical uses. They provide a robust and representative national picture which can be used to compare the well-being of children in, for example, particular local areas or school populations. The Children's Society has begun to work with schools and local authorities to put this information to good use and plans to continue to do this in the future, in partnership with others.

Subjective well-being

This report is about children's subjective well-being. In this section we look at the concept of subjective well-being and how it applies to children; discuss why children's subjective well-being matters; and review some of the ways in which it is measured.

What is subjective well-being and how do we measure it?

Subjective well-being, as a concept, refers to people's satisfaction or happiness with their lives as a whole and with particular aspects of their lives. It is generally considered to have two components – one which focuses on people's evaluations of their lives and one which focuses on the positive and negative emotions which they experience. The first of these components – often termed 'life satisfaction' – is generally regarded as being fairly stable, whereas the second component – often termed 'affect' – is thought to vary more from day to day. This report focuses on the first of these components – life satisfaction – which relates to people's assessment of the quality of their lives both overall and in specific domains.

There has been a large amount of research on the subjective well-being of adults over the past 50 years (see Diener et al, 1999 for a review of progress up to that point; Eid & Larsen, 2008) and recently there has also been a growing interest in that of children. A number of measures of children's subjective well-being have been developed and tested internationally and these have been shown to be valid and reliable indicators.

Huebner in the US developed a set of questions which explore children's feelings about their lives as a whole, and about five particular aspects of their lives – family, friends, school, living environment and self

(Huebner, 1994). In Australia, Cummins and colleagues developed the Personal Well-Being Index. The original version of the index is for adults (Cummins & Lau, 2006) and includes questions about satisfaction with specific aspects of life – relationships, health, standard of living, safety, future security, belonging to community and achievements in life. Cummins and Lau (2005) also devised a version for school children. We have drawn on both of the above sets of measures in our research programme.

It is important to consider that the meaning and make-up of subjective well-being for children is not the same as those for adults. For example, one aspect of adults' lives which may affect their overall well-being is their job satisfaction, whereas for children it would be more appropriate to think about satisfaction with school. More fundamentally, children may place different emphasis to adults on the various elements of their lives and how they influence their happiness. Different aspects of life may also be more or less important for children of different ages.

Why children's subjective well-being matters

There are a number of reasons why we should be concerned about children's subjective well-being.

First, we should be concerned about subjective well-being (of adults and of children) in itself as a fundamental measure of the state of society. To argue that subjective well-being does not matter is to argue that people's own feelings about their quality of life do not matter.

Second, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasises the importance of adults listening to the opinions of children and taking these opinions into account. Asking children about their own assessments of their lives can be an important means of achieving this goal.

Third, there is now substantial evidence, mostly from the US, of associations between low well-being and a range of other issues in children's lives including violence, aggression and offending behaviour; likelihood of victimisation; risky behaviours; eating disorders; depression, loneliness and suicidal thoughts (see review by Proctor et al, 2008). Our recent Still Running 3 study found a strong association between recent

experience of running away and low well-being in England (Rees, 2011). There is still a need for research which explores in more detail the causal links between some of these factors, but the findings so far suggest that low well-being could be an important indicator of longer-term repercussions in people's lives. If this is the case then focusing on subjective well-being, and particularly on children who experience low well-being, offers opportunities for early intervention which could substantially improve these children's life chances.

So, for all these reasons, we believe that it is vital to understand children's own assessments of their lives and the key factors that influence these. In focusing on subjective well-being we are not suggesting that objective indicators of well-being (such as levels of infant mortality or educational achievement) do not matter. In the UK we are fortunate that there is already a wealth of information available on the well-being of children based on such objective measures. We do, however, believe that, as with adults, gathering children's own perspectives on this issue is essential in order to fully understand well-being and what affects it. Objective and subjective measures together can create a rounded picture of the condition of the well-being of children in the UK.

The research programme

The Children's Society's research programme on children's well-being began in 2005 and is being undertaken in collaboration with the University of York.

Aims

The programme aims to:

- Develop a better understanding of the concept of well-being as it relates to young people, taking full account of the perspectives of young people themselves.

- Establish self-reported measures of young people's well-being and use these to identify the reasons for variations in well-being and to monitor changes in well-being over time.

Research phases so far

The research programme consists of cycles of research involving consultation with young people; development and refinement of survey questions; and undertaking surveys and has generated a unique and comprehensive set of data on children's well-being. So far, over 30,000 children and young people in the eight to 16 age range have participated in our surveys.

- In 2005, as part of a survey covering a range of topics we asked young people aged 14 to 16 what they felt were the most important ingredients for them to have a good life and what things prevented this. Over 8,000 young people provided responses to these questions.

- We used young people's responses to this survey, together with a review of existing international work on children's well-being to devise and pilot our first well-being survey.

- This survey was conducted[1] in 2008 with a representative sample of over 7,000 children aged 10 to 15 in mainstream schools in England.

- We then undertook further consultation with younger children aged eight and nine years old and also tested out additional survey questions on topics not covered in 2008. From this work we developed two further surveys.

- The first was a follow-up to the 2008 survey in schools in late 2010 and early 2011. This survey[2] included a representative sample of just under 6,000 children aged eight to 15 in mainstream schools in England.

- We also initiated a cycle of brief quarterly surveys with children aged eight to 15 in the UK[3] through an existing household panel.[4] Each wave of the survey consists of a representative quota sample of 2,000 children aged eight to 15. The first wave of the survey took place in July 2010 and at the time of writing the sixth wave is nearing completion. Data from the first five waves of this survey are used in this report.

- We have also just completed some supplementary samples[5] of children in special schools and pupil referral units to represent the views of children who are not covered in mainstream schools surveys.

2005

National consultation of over 8,000 young people aged 14 to 16. They told us what they felt were the most important ingredients for them to have a good life and what things prevented this.

2007

The pilot of our first well-being survey using young people's responses to our 2005 survey, as well as review of existing international work on children's well-being.

2008

Our first well-being survey is carried out with a representative sample of over 7,000 children aged 10 to 15 in mainstream schools in England.

The findings presented in this report draw from all the surveys and consultation work undertaken so far. Quotes from children in the report are taken from the original 2005 survey and subsequent consultation exercises conducted from 2008 to 2010. Statistics are presented from the 2008 survey, 2010 survey and first five waves of the quarterly survey.

In the concluding chapter of this report we describe our future plans for research on this topic, which include participation in an international survey of children's well-being.

Reports published so far

Our first report from the research programme was a summary of themes from the consultation with young people through the 2005 survey, which was included in the launch report for The Children's Society's Good Childhood Inquiry in 2006 (The Children's Society, 2006).

Subsequent reports have focused primarily on statistical findings from our survey work as follows:

- a report on the first statistical findings from our 2008 survey (Rees et al, 2010a)

- a brief paper, presenting The Good Childhood Index (Rees et al, 2010b)

- findings from our quarterly surveys on the links between household economic factors and children's well-being (Rees et al, 2011)

- a paper presenting a new proposed child-centred index of material deprivation and links to well-being (Main & Pople, 2011).

All the above reports are freely available at the following web address: **www.childrenssociety.org.uk/well-being**

Findings from the surveys have also appeared in a chapter of an edited collection on children's well-being (Bradshaw et al, 2010a); in several chapters of a recent overview of children's well-being in the UK (Bradshaw, 2011); in two peer-reviewed journal articles (Bradshaw et al, 2010b), (Goswami, 2011); and in presentations at an international conference on children's well-being.

2009

We run further consultations with younger children aged eight and nine years old and we also test out additional questions on topics not covered in 2008.

2010

The second well-being survey begins. This includes a representative sample of just under 6,000 children aged eight to 15 in mainstream schools in England.

We also begin our quarterly Good Childhood Index surveys which sample 2,000 children aged eight to 15.

2011

The second well-being survey ends.

We carry out supplementary surveys of children in special schools and pupil referral units, to represent the views of children who are not covered in mainstream schools surveys.

This report

The purpose of this report is to draw together the research we have undertaken with children to date to present an overview of the current state of children's well-being in England (with some findings also covering the other countries of the UK). The report summarises previously published findings from the research programme and presents a range of new findings.

The structure of the report is as follows:

- **Chapter 2** presents summary findings for the key indicators included in The Good Childhood Index, including comparisons of well-being across different sub-groups of children according to individual and family characteristics.

- **Chapter 3** then presents more detailed findings on various aspects of children's lives. Each section covers one or more illustrations of the links between questions about each aspect of life and overall well-being.

- **Chapter 4** draws the above material together, summarising the key findings, identifying a number of important themes and also discussing areas for future research.

Many of the topics covered in the report warrant a much more detailed exploration and we hope to return to these in future phases of the research programme. For example, our research demonstrates a significant association between experiences of being bullied and overall well-being. However we have not yet fully explored how these factors are linked to other issues in children's lives and whether the association is stronger in some contexts than in others.

For brevity, throughout this report, we have used the term 'children' to refer to all children and young people in the 8 to 15 age range. Some of the findings refer to a narrower age range and where relevant this is specified in the text.

All differences identified as 'significant' in the report are based on accepted tests of statistical significance using a 99% confidence level. Further details on the technical aspects of the research are available from The Children's Society's research team (see contact details at start of report).

2 The Good Childhood Index

In October 2010 we published the initial version of The Good Childhood Index (Rees et al, 2010b). The aim was to develop an index of well-being which:

- covers the main aspects of children's lives, especially those identified by children themselves

- is statistically robust

- is brief enough for use in a variety of contexts.

One of the intentions was to use the index to monitor changes in children's well-being over time, and we have pursued this objective by conducting quarterly surveys as outlined in Chapter 1.

The index consists of a set of five questions about children's overall life satisfaction or well-being and a set of 10 questions that ask children about their feelings about particular aspects of their lives. The items in the index were developed through a combination of the consultation with children described in Chapter 1 and a review of international research literature.

In this chapter we introduce the index and summarise findings (some previously published and some new) generated by using it so far. The intention is to provide a brief overview of progress with this initiative to date. We then use the index as a structure for the remainder of the report which looks at the associations between particular aspects of children's lives and their well-being.

The Good Childhood Index is freely available to use and we have already supported a number of schools and a local authority in England to use it to measure the well-being of children at a local level. Contact details for further information the Index are provided at the beginning of this report.

Overall well-being

The measure

The main measure of overall subjective well-being included in the index consists of five statements to which children are asked to respond on a five-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree':

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

This measure is derived from a longer seven-item measure originally developed by Huebner (1994) in the US.

Children's responses to each question are coded on a scale from zero ('strongly disagree') to four ('strongly agree'), with the score for the middle statement being reversed. Then these scores are added together to create an overall scale from 0 to 20. The scores on this scale for the first five waves of our quarterly survey are shown below:
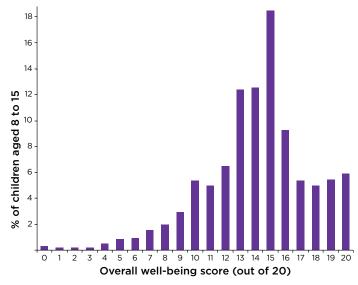

Figure 1: Children's overall well-being
Source: Quarterly survey, Waves 1 to 5, age 8 to 15, N = 9485

The mean score on this scale tends to be between around 14 and 16 out of 20 depending on the age group surveyed – which equates to a score of between 70 and 80 out of 100. This is very much in line with surveys of the well-being of adults which have tended to find mean overall life satisfaction scores for adults in the region of 75 out of 100 (Cummins, 2009). This scale has been shown to have good statistical reliability and stability (see Rees et al, 2010a).

Variations in well-being by individual and family characteristics

It is probably reasonable to think that children's level of well-being would vary according to individual and family characteristics. This is indeed the case, but the strength of association between these factors and children's well-being is much smaller than might be assumed. Our initial research report on the 2008 survey (Rees et al, 2010a) suggested that a range of factors in combination (including age, gender, disability, ethnicity, family structure and poverty indicators) were only able to explain around 7% of the total variation in children's well-being, with children's age being much the most important of these factors.

Here we briefly review the association of each factor with overall well-being when considered independently, using more recent data gathered through the 2010 survey and the quarterly surveys.

One individual characteristic which is significantly associated with children's well-being is their age. There is consistent evidence from our surveys that children's well-being declines with age. Figure 2 shows the percentage of children with low well-being from the first five waves of our quarterly survey. This percentage increases gradually from the age of eight to 14. (Note: There are apparent indications of a very slight drop in the percentage at the age of 15 but this statistic is not significantly lower than for 14-year-olds).
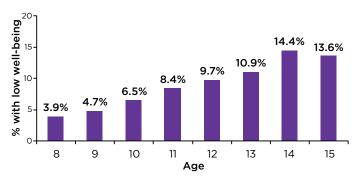

Figure 2: Age patterns in low well-being
Source: Quarterly survey, Waves 1 to 5, children aged 8 to 15 in the UK, N = 9485

However, there are only (at most) small associations between other individual and family characteristics and children's well-being:

- In some, but not all, of our surveys girls have had significantly lower well-being than boys.

- Data from our 2008 and 2010 surveys suggest slightly lower life satisfaction scores for children in some Black and minority ethnic (BME) groups than for White children.

- Family structure is another factor which has been shown to have some association with well-being. In general children living with both birth parents in the same house have higher levels of well-being than children living in other family arrangements. However, as will be seen later in the report, this is not necessarily comparing like with like. Children not living with both birth parents are also much more likely to have experienced recent family change which is also an important factor associated with levels of well-being.

- Our surveys show no significant difference in well-being for children who live with one or more siblings and those who do not.

- In our 2008 schools-based survey we found that commonly-used indicators of poverty (children living in households where no adults had a paid job and/or who received free school meals) had a small but significant association with well-being.

Overall, our analysis of the 2010 survey confirms our earlier findings that individual and family factors only explain a minority (less than 10%) of the variation in well-being. This general finding means that it is necessary to seek other explanations for the differences in children's well-being observed in our surveys. We will go on to discuss some potential explanations in the next section.

However, this broad finding does not necessarily mean that individual and family factors do not have a large influence for specific groups in particular circumstances. We need also to consider the well-being of groups of children who may not be present in large numbers in our surveys. As an illustration of this, we have combined data from our 2008 and 2010 surveys relating to the small group of children who were not living with their family at the time of the survey. This includes children living in foster care, residential care and in other non-family arrangements within the community. In total just over 130 children out of a total of around 11,000 children aged 10 to 15 in the 2008 and 2010 surveys combined did not currently live with their family. This is just over one per cent. These children were around five times as likely (50%) to have low well-being as those living with family (10%). This demonstrates the importance of gathering more data on sufficient samples of children in a range of minority groups to be able to understand overall variations in well-being.

Other explanations for variations in well-being

Given the general evidence in the well-being literature of the limited power of socio-demographic factors such as those considered in the previous section to explain variations in well-being, a lot of research attention has been focused on other explanations.

In relation to children, we proposed a number of possible alternative explanations for variations in well-being in our January 2010 report.[6] These included:

Aspects of well-being in specific domains
Our initial analysis demonstrated the association of factors such as the quality of children's relationships and children's sense of autonomy with their overall well-being. For example, simple measures of issues such as

family conflict have far stronger associations with well-being than measures of family structure (Rees et al, 2010a). Of course, we should not assume a simple one directional link between quality of relationships and well-being. For example, when children have low well-being this may create family conflict.

Better measures of income and poverty
As discussed earlier, the measures of poverty used in our 2008 survey were limited and we identified that better measures might explain a greater amount of variation in children's well-being. We also considered the possibility that household indicators of income and poverty were not the most helpful in explaining variations in children's well-being and that alternative measures might be more useful. We have published some initial work on child-centred measures of deprivation (Main & Pople, 2011) and summarise findings from this work later in the report.

Changes and life events
In our 2008 survey we found that events such as a change in family structure and experiences of bullying had a discernible association with well-being. In fact a child's recent experiences of bullying explained roughly as much of the variation in overall well-being as all the individual and family characteristics combined. Research with adults has also shown that life events have a significant association with well-being (e.g. Lucas et al, 2004). We have done further work on this issue and present new findings later in the report.

This is an important issue in the study of well-being because it emphasises its dynamic nature. It should not be thought that the 10% or so of children who experience low well-being are a static group. In fact, some (unpublished) analysis we have undertaken using data from the British Household Panel Survey, which surveyed children annually between the ages of 11 and 15, suggests that many children move in and out of low well-being and only a small minority experience low well-being consistently across this age range.

The influence of personality
Research with adults has suggested that personality factors (such as extraversion and emotional stability) may explain substantial amounts of the variation in levels of well-

being (Diener & Lucas, 1998). The implication is that, to some extent, responses to questions about well-being are pre-determined by personality (which may itself be influenced by genetic factors). However, a number of studies (e.g. Lucas & Donnellan, 2007) have suggested that after taking these factors into account there is still a substantial amount of variation in well-being. There is a relative lack of research on the links between personality and well-being for children and it cannot be assumed that findings for adults are directly transferable. We have undertaken some research on this topic and will be publishing initial findings later in 2012.

Throughout the remaining chapters of this report we present examples of ways in which the first three factors identified above are associated with variations in well-being.

Ten aspects of children's lives

The second component of The Good Childhood Index is a set of 10 questions about children's happiness with different aspects of their lives. These questions have been developed on the basis of consultations with children, previous research on children's well-being and statistical analysis of our survey data. Further details regarding the development of the index are to be found in Rees et al (2010b).

The 10 aspects of life we currently[7] cover in the index are as follows:

- Relationships with family
- Relationships with friends
- Time use
- Health
- The future
- Home
- Things (money and possessions)
- School
- Appearance
- Amount of choice in life

Children are asked to respond to each item on an 11-point scale where zero denotes 'very unhappy' and 10 denotes 'very happy'.

We have been monitoring children's well-being in relation to these 10 aspects of their lives through our quarterly surveys. The mean scores for each of the 10 aspects are shown in Figure 3. It can be seen that children are substantially happier with some aspects of their lives such as family, health, home and friendships than with others such as school, appearance, choice and the future.
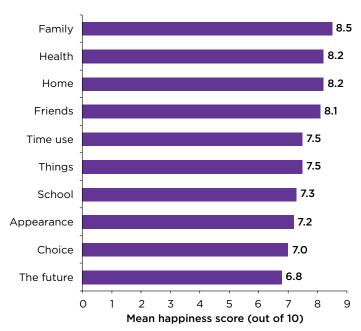

Figure 3: Mean happiness with ten aspects of life
Source: Quarterly survey, waves 1 to 5, age 8 to 15, N = 9973 to 9988

One of the notable things from our data so far is the relative stability of the ordering of children's mean happiness with these aspects of their lives. Across the first five waves of the quarterly survey (from July 2010 to July 2011), the mean scores for each aspects tend not to vary greatly. All the means stayed within a range of 0.3 out of 10 across the five waves except for school which ranged from 7.0 and 7.6. This also means that the same aspects tend to rank at the higher and lower end of the range of scores. This is shown in Table 1 where it can be seen that family has been consistently the aspect of children's lives with which they are happiest across all five waves of the survey, with health always in second place. At the other end of the scale children have consistently been least happy with what might happen to them in the future, followed by choice and appearance.

Aspect of life	Wave 1 July 2010	Wave 2 Oct 2010	Wave 3 Feb 2011	Wave 4 April 2011	Wave 5 July 2011
Family	1st	1st	1st	1st	1st
Health	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd	2nd
Home	4th	3rd	3rd	3rd	3rd
Friends	3rd	4th	4th	4th	4th
Time use	5th	6th	5th	5th	5th
Things	6th	7th	6th	6th	6th
School	7th	5th	7th	8th	7th
Appearance	8th	8th	8th	7th	8th
Choice	9th	9th	9th	9th	9th
The future	10th	10th	10th	10th	10th

Table 1: Order of happiness with 10 aspects of life
(Source: Quarterly survey, waves 1 to 5, age 8 to 15, N = 1970 to 2006)

This level of stability over successive waves suggests that the index is capturing something meaningful about children's levels of happiness with different aspects of their lives. The short-term stability also gives some confidence of the potential to detect any longer-term trends that do exist. A recent analysis of questions in the British Household Panel Survey on children's happiness with certain aspects of their lives stretching back to 1994 (Bradshaw & Keung, 2011) suggests that children's happiness with friends has improved over this period, particularly for girls, and that this was linked to an increase in overall well-being.

The index has a number of potential uses. One of the main purposes in the longer-term is to monitor trends in well-being across different areas of children's lives. A second important use is to understand more about how different components of well-being vary across different sub-groups.

As an example[8] of this potential, our index shows that age is associated with happiness for all 10 aspects, but there are much stronger age patterns for some aspects than for others. Figure 4 shows the percentage drop in well-being between the ages of eight and 15 for the 10 index items. The largest drops are for school and appearance, where average well-being at the age of 15 is over 15% lower than at the age of eight. This is a drop of over 2% each year. The differences in well-being for friends and home are much smaller with drops of less than 1% per year.

Aspect of life	% drop between ages of 8 and 15
Family	5%
Health	7%
Home	10%
Friends	8%
Time use	12%
Things	11%
School	10%
Appearance	15%
Choice	16%
The future	18%

Figure 4: Links between age and different aspects of well-being

Source: Quarterly survey, waves 1 to 4, age 8 to 15, N = 1952 to 1953

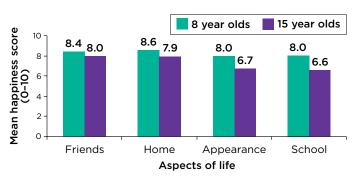The size of these differences is illustrated in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Differences in well-being between 8-year-olds and 15-year-olds

Source: Quarterly survey, waves 1 to 4, age 8 to 15, N = 1952 to 1953

There is also evidence of small but significant variations in happiness with particular aspects of life for other characteristics. Females tended to be less happy than males in relation to health, the future, family relationships, money and possessions, and appearance. They appeared to be happier than males in relation to school. For the aspects of friendships, time use, home, and choice there was no significant gender difference. Children living in poor households (no adults in paid work and/or receiving free school meals) were significantly less happy with their home and with the amount of money and possessions they had.

In the following sections of the report we use the aspects covered in the index to explore in more detail the connections between various factors and experiences in children's lives and their overall well-being. Before doing so, we summarise our overall findings on the association of happiness with each of these 10 aspects of life and overall well-being.

Figure 6 shows the correlation[9] of happiness with each of the aspects of life covered in The Good Childhood Index with overall well-being. All 10 aspects were significantly associated with overall well-being. Some aspects were more strongly associated than others. Children's happiness with the amount of choice in life is the aspect most strongly linked to overall well-being. Happiness with friendships was the least strongly associated aspect. This latter finding is surprising given the strong emphasis that children in our consultations have placed on the importance of friendships for their overall well-being. The pattern of associations is broadly similar to those found in the first wave of our quarterly surveys (see Rees et al, 2010b for further details) which also found that choice was the aspect with the strongest correlation with overall well-being and friendships was the aspect with the weakest correlation.

Aspect of life	Correlation[10] with overall well-being
Choice	.61
Family	.56
Future	.52
Time use	.52
Money & possessions	.52
Home	.51
Appearance	.51
Health	.47
School	.45
Friends	.41

Figure 6: Links between happiness with different aspects of life and overall well-being
Source: 2010 survey, children aged 10 to 15 in England, N = 3591 to 3668 (except 'time use' N = 1613)

3 Aspects of children's well-being

This chapter is divided into 11 sections looking in more detail at each of the aspects of children's well-being covered in The Good Childhood Index and also their feelings about their local area as follows:

a) Family

b) Home

c) Money and possessions

d) Friends and peers

e) School

f) Health

g) Appearance

h) Time use

i) Choice and autonomy

j) The future

k) Local area

a) Family

'A happy family is a family which communicates and supports each other. Loving each other, supporting, but allowing teenagers to grow up. Trusting them. But I suppose we've got to be good so they can trust us - earn it as my Mum and Dad say. Knowing they'll always be there and always love me, not nagging too much. Having fun - laughing together. Singing and watching films together, playing cards.'

As we have already seen, children's relationships with family and other carers are extremely important to their well-being. There is a growing diversity of the types of families in which children live in the UK today. Our surveys show that it is becoming increasingly complex to categorise family structures. For example, over a fifth of children aged 10 to 15 in our 2008 and over 17% in 2010 surveys said that they lived in more than one home. This has important repercussions because many statistics about children are linked to the household in which they live. This may generate misleading information if it is assumed that children only live in one household. For example in our 2010 survey less than 70% of children were living with their father in their only or 'first home' but in fact, when 'second' homes were taken into account, we found that over 80% lived with their father for at least some of the time. This illustrates that it is important to take a child-centred perspective on concepts of family.[11]

'They look after you and make sure you have everything you need. I wouldn't be able to survive without my mum.'

'It is really great to know that you are loved.'

Safety, security and stability within the family were also recurring themes in children's comments:

'Having a good, safe home with loving parents.'

'A stable family with parents or carers who love and provide for you.'

Family conflict was an issue raised by many children:

'What I would change is that my parents would never argue and always get along with each other.'

At the same time, children also identified the importance of their being listened to and taken seriously and allowed appropriate freedoms as they matured:

'They should listen to the child.'

'Sometimes, my Nan wants to know everything - where I am, what I'm doing and I just want to do my own thing.'

What we have asked in our surveys

In view of the above, as well as the single question about happiness with family relationships which forms part of The Good Childhood Index, we included questions in our 2008 and 2010 surveys on the following topics:

• General quality of family relationships

• Being listened to and involved in family decision-making

• Change in family relationships.

Quality of family relationships

While the vast majority of children we have surveyed are happy with their family relationships, around 3% or so tend to give a score of less than five out of 10 in terms of happiness with this aspect of their lives. This equates to substantial numbers of children – over 140,000 of all children aged eight to 15 years old in England.

As would be expected, how children feel about their family relationships is strongly linked to their overall well-being. In our 2008 survey, happiness with family was the most important of the Index items in explaining overall well-being, and the same finding emerged in our 2010 survey and in our quarterly surveys (Rees et al, 2010b).

In our initial report on the 2008 survey (Rees et al, 2010a) we presented findings on children's responses to a simple statement about levels of family harmony/conflict – *'My family gets along well together'.*

Mean levels of well-being varied substantially depending on the response to this statement:

• Children who agreed that their family got along well together had a mean well-being score of 8.0 out of 10

• Those who neither agreed nor disagreed had a mean score of 6.9

• Those who disagreed had a mean score of 5.9.

Further analysis showed that children's responses to this question explained far more of the variation in overall well-being than the type of family structure that children live in as illustrated in Figure 7. It can be seen from this chart that for children who gave the same responses to the above question, family structure had little or no association with levels of well-being. For example, where children disagreed that their family got on well together their level of overall well-being was virtually identical irrespective of family structure. These findings attest to the power of quality of relationships in comparison with family structure.
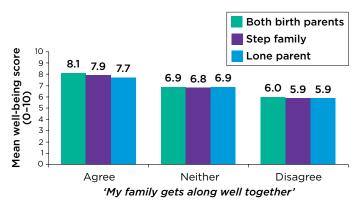

Figure 7: Family harmony, family structure and well-being
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 3677

The above statement is one of a set of seven questions on family well-being, proposed by Huebner (1994) which we included in the 2008 survey. Children's responses to the full set of seven questions are shown in Table 2. Again, responses to these questions indicate that most children are relatively happy with their family relationships. However over 10% disagreed with each of the last two questions which relate to family harmony/conflict; and one in 10 also disagreed that they did fun things with their parents or carers.

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
I enjoy being at home with my family	6%	14%	80%
My family is better than most	7%	31%	62%
I like spending time with my parents (or carers)	7%	16%	78%
My parents (or carers) treat me fairly	6%	13%	82%
My parents (or carers) and I do fun things together	10%	18%	72%
My family gets along well together	12%	20%	68%
Members of my family talk nicely to one another	13%	23%	64%

Table 2: Responses to Huebner's family questions
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 4215 to 4556

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
My parents (or carers) listen to my views and take me seriously	9%	18%	74%
I help make decisions in my family	14%	29%	57%

Table 3: Being listened to and involved in family decisions
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 4471 to 4581

We can put together the answers to these questions to create an overall score of children's family well-being. Our analysis shows that this family well-being score explains[12] over a third (37%) of the variation in overall well-being. The link between family well-being and overall well-being is hardly surprising but the strength of this link and the weight it carries is striking. For example, once this family well-being score is taken into account, children's evaluations of the quality of their relationships with their friends (see subsequent section) only explain[13] an additional 4% of the variation in well-being.

It is notable however that this family well-being score only explains around 38% of the variation in children's responses to The Good Childhood Index question about happiness with family relationships. This is lower than might be expected and suggests that there are other aspects of family relationships that are important to children and that are not captured by the above statements. This is an area which requires further discussion with children but it may be, for example, that specific aspects of relationships with siblings and with extended family are not being fully captured by the above items. For example a recent UK study (Wolke, 2010) has drawn attention to the level of bullying between siblings and the impact that this can have on children's well-being.

Being listened to and involved

We also asked two additional statements on family relationships in the 2008 survey questionnaire – about being listened to and involved in family decisions. The intention was to explore the importance of the general themes of respect and participation highlighted in consultation with children in relation to family life. The statements and children's responses to them are shown in Table 3.

- Just under one in 10 (9%) of children disagreed that their parents listened to their views and took them seriously.

- A higher proportion – around one in seven (14%) – disagreed that they were involved in family decision-making, and a further two in seven (29%) neither agreed nor disagreed indicating a relatively high degree of uncertainty on this issue.

There was some significant variation in responses by age and gender:

- Year 10 children (aged 14 to 15) were more likely to disagree with both statements than Year 8 children (aged 12 to 13). This suggests that there is perhaps an increasing mismatch between parents' treatment of children in these respects and children's own expectations as they grow older.

- Girls (10%) were significantly more likely to disagree with the statement about being listened to and taken seriously than boys (7%). There was no gender difference in relation to the question about involvement in family decision-making.

We were interested to explore the extent to which the above issues may be a helpful addition to the set of family questions developed by Huebner in understanding variations in children's well-being. Our analysis[14] shows that these aspects of family relationships are significantly associated with children's well-being, even when other aspects of quality of relationships are taken into account. This suggests that issues of respect for, and participation of, children within families are important aspects of children's quality of life. It would be interesting to explore this issue further through discussion with children and the use of a more detailed set of questions about these aspects of family life.

Stability

Children had also highlighted the importance of family stability to their well-being, and we included a question in both the 2008 and 2010 surveys to explore this issue. The question immediately followed a question about which adults the child currently lived with and asked: *'Were you living with the same adults this time last year?'*. Children were able to respond as follows: *'Yes, the same adults'; 'No, there have been some changes'; 'Not sure'.* As with all other questions on the questionnaires, children were also free to not respond at all. This is a fairly broad question and could encapsulate a number of situations – including a parent moving in or out of the home or the introduction of another significant adults

such as a step-parent. It could also be taken to refer to an adult sibling leaving the home to live independently, or changes in relation to adult members of extended family such as grandparents who may be living in the home.

In 2008, the question was asked in the secondary school questionnaire only. In total, 88% of children aged 12 to 15 said that there had been no changes in which adults they lived with, 9% said that there had been changes, and 3% were either not sure or did not respond. In 2010, the question was asked of children aged 10 to 15 in years 6, 8 and 10. The response patterns were identical to those for 2008.

The responses to this question had a significant relationship with overall well-being. For example in the 2008 survey, children who had experienced some changes in relation to which adults they lived with had close to double the chance of having low current well-being (18%) as those who had not experienced such a change (10%). The relative difference was higher in the 2010 survey (21% and 8% respectively).

Some caution is needed here in drawing conclusions from these findings about whether family change, in itself, has a negative impact on children's well-being. We do not have baseline information on children's well-being before the family change occurred. It is possible that children who experienced recent family change already had low well-being before this change occurred due to issues within their families. It is also possible that children's well-being improves after changes in family structure, especially if this leads to an improvement in the quality of family relationships. What these findings do indicate is that children who experience family change are also more likely than average to be experiencing low well-being and may need support with issues in their lives.

Summary

- Around 3% of children aged eight to 15 are unhappy with their family relationships.

- Children identify issues of caring relationships, respect and stability as important to their overall well-being.

- Children's feelings about being listened to and taken seriously by parents and being involved in family decisions have a significant link with their overall well-being.

- Children who have experienced recent changes in family structure are twice as likely as other children to be experiencing low well-being.

b) Home

'The most important things that make for a good life are being cared about by other people and having a decent home.'

As the quote above suggests, we have found that children's feelings about the quality of the home environment they live in make an important contribution to their well-being, over and above issues regarding quality of family relationships. Issues of safety, stability and privacy at home are all important factors affecting children's quality of life.

What children told us

Inevitably, there is a strong link between ideas about 'family' and 'home'. However, children do appear to distinguish between these two ideas as the following two quotes show:

'To be happy where they live and who they live with.

- good/safe home

- caring/loving families.'

This is borne out by our surveys. Most children who were unhappy with their family were not unhappy with their home; and most children who were unhappy with their home were not unhappy with their family (Table 4).

We asked children more detailed questions about how they felt about their homes in our 2008 and 2010 school surveys. We based these questions on themes identified through our consultation with children which included safety/security, privacy and stability:

'A good/safe home... a lock on all doors.'

'A safe, caring family. A good home, with privacy. A nice neighbourhood.'

'A stable home where they feel safe and secure.'

	Happy/OK with home	Unhappy with home
Happy/OK with home	93.5%	3.5%
Unhappy with home	1.8%	1.2%

Table 4: Overlap in unhappiness with family and with home
Source: Quarterly survey, waves 1 to 5, age 8 to 15, N = 9985

What we have asked in our surveys

In view of the above, as well as the single question about happiness with home which forms part of The Good Childhood Index, we included questions in our 2008 and 2010 surveys on the following topics:

- Feelings of safety at home

- Feelings of privacy at home

- Experiences of recent change of home.

Safety/security

Three-fifths of children aged 10 to 15 strongly agreed that they felt safe at home and only a small minority (3%) of children said that they did not.
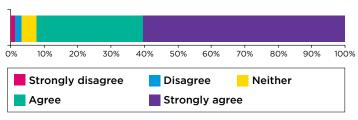

Figure 8: 'I feel safe at home'
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1861

Over 70% of the small group of children who did not feel safe at home had low well-being, compared to the average of 10% in the 2010 survey. This suggests that in the relatively unusual circumstances where children do have concerns about their safety at home, this is a strong indicator of the likelihood of low well-being.

Privacy

Privacy was another aspect of home life which was highlighted by children as important. Here, also, most children were relatively happy with this aspect of their home life, but a larger minority (around 9%) were not.
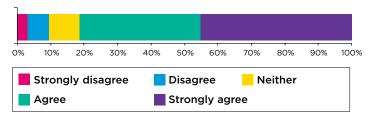

Figure 9: 'I have enough privacy at home'
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1853

We asked children whether they had their own bedroom. Around three quarters (73%) of children aged 8 to 15 said that they had their own bedroom and around a quarter (27%) did not. Overall, there was a significant association between this factor and overall well-being. Around 14% of children aged 10 to 15 who shared a bedroom had low well-being, compared to around 9% of those who had their own bedroom. Of course, this question may be indicative of the broader home environment (e.g. overcrowding) and family economic situation. Children who shared a bedroom were twice as likely to live in a poor household (either no adult in paid work and/or receiving free school meals).

It is interesting also that the link between this factor and well-being varies with age. In fact, for children in the last year of primary school (aged 10 to 11) there was only a small difference in well-being according to whether they had their own bedroom or not, and this difference was not statistically significant. For young people in year 10 at secondary school (age 14 to 15) the differences in well-being were much more substantial, and statistically significant, with those sharing a bedroom being around 1.8 times more likely to have low well-being than those with their own room.
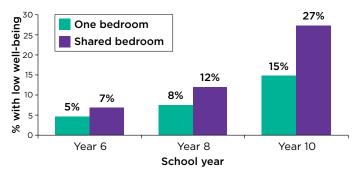
Figure 10: Age variations in link between having own bedroom and well-being
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1611

Not surprisingly, there was a link between children having their own bedroom and their sense of privacy. Around 18% of children who shared a bedroom disagreed that they had enough privacy, compared to around 7% of children who had their own bedroom.

Stability

We also asked children whether they had moved home over the past 12 months. Around 13% said that they had moved once during this period and around 5% said that they had moved more than once. Note that this is a child-centred measure and does not imply that the whole household moved. For some children it may mean that they moved from living with some members of their family to others; and some of the children who had moved home were not currently living with their family at the time of the survey.

This factor was also linked with levels of well-being, particularly for children who had moved more than once. Almost a quarter (23%) of these children in the 2010 survey had low current levels of well-being compared to the average of around 10% in that survey.
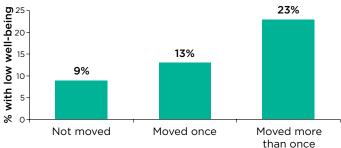

Figure 11: Change of home and well-being
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 2026

Summary

- The large majority of children are happy with their home environment

- Where children are unhappy with their home this has a strong link with their well-being

- Children identify issues of safety/security, privacy and stability in the home as important to their overall well-being and this is borne out by our findings

- Children who do not feel safe at home are at very high risk of low well-being

- When children lack privacy at home this can also affect their well-being and the effect of this factor appears to increase with age

- Recent changes of home have a clear link with current levels of well-being.

c) Money and possessions

'Enough money, not too much though.'

Money and possessions are an important aspect of children's quality of life, as they are for adults. Over the past year there has been a public debate about societal attitudes to material goods, including a comparative international study discussing the links between materialism and children's well-being (Ipsos MORI & Nairn, 2011). Our research suggests that household poverty and household economic changes do have an impact on children's well-being. However, more important are children's direct experiences of material deprivation, particularly in comparison with their peers.

What children told us

In our early consultations with children in 2005 it became clear that, while money and possessions were viewed as an important ingredient of a good childhood, children emphasised the importance of 'having enough' rather than being rich.

Children identified the absence of poverty as one of the key ingredients to a good life:

'If everyone gets on. If there is no money worries or problems. And if there is enough food and money to last the month.'

Relative family poverty was also identified as an issue:

'I think that loads of children and young people don't have a good home life because of the amount of money their parents have, it's not very fair. When other kids are bragging how many bedrooms and how glorious their house is it makes people feel useless and poor.'

Many children discussed issues of having enough money to be able to participate in leisure activities, to see friends and to fit in.

'Need more happyness parents always stressed, need so much money, for kids to go & enjoy their life, the after school clubs should be free. It's too much for parents to keep up with. It's hard to say no to anything. The kids miss out and their friends go.'

This was identified as an issue that could lead to bullying:

'I think a happy family needs a understanding pair of parents, who don't get angry and shout at you. They also have to need money. Young children like myself get bullied for my parent not having so much money.'

What we have asked in our surveys

In the 2008 survey we included two questions which are often used in surveys of children as rough indicators of family poverty. These were the number of adults in the household with a paid job and whether the child was receiving free school meals. As discussed in Chapter 2 there was a significant but small association between these factors and children's well-being. However we felt that these indicators were unsatisfactory measures of children's economic circumstances and we set out to do additional work on this issue through our subsequent survey work. We have explored two approaches further.

First, at the household level, we have been able, through our quarterly surveys which are drawn from a household panel, to gather more detailed information from adults about household economic circumstances. This has included household income and also information about recent and anticipated changes in economic circumstances.

Second, at the level of the individual child, we have tested and developed a number of measures which more directly assess the children in ways which are relevant to their lives.

In the two sub-sections below we summarise some key findings using both these approaches, including some previously unpublished findings.

Household economic circumstances

In the third wave of our quarterly survey in February 2011 we asked the parents of participating children some questions about:

- Current household income

- Changes in household income over the last year

- Levels of concern about the impact of the current UK economic situation on the household over the next 12 months.

We produced a report on the links between these factors and children's well-being in March 2011 (Rees et al, 2011). The key results are summarised in Figure 12.

- There is a significant link between household income[15] and children's well-being and this is particularly evident at the lower end of the economic spectrum. Children in the 20% of households with the lowest household income were twice as likely to experience low well-being as those living in the 20% of households with the highest income.

- There is a significant link between recent changes in income and children's well-being. In particular, children living in households which had experienced a reduction in income over the past year were significantly more likely than others to have low well-being (15%).

- Finally there is also a significant link between adults' expectation of the impact of external economic factors on the household and children's well-being. Around 13% of children living in households where the adult surveyed was 'very concerned' about this issue had low well-being.

Further analysis presented in the report shows that all three of these factors, when considered together, had an association with children's well-being. This is important evidence of the impact of household economic change and instability on the quality of children's lives.

On the other hand, the analysis also showed that the effect of these household-level factors, whilst statistically significant, was not that large and only explained a relatively small amount (around 3%) of the variation in children's well-being. As a consequence of this, we have also developed a set of child-centred economic indicators and describe some initial findings from these later in this section.

It is interesting to explore some of these patterns further using the 10 items on aspects of life from The Good Childhood Index. The mean scores for each aspect for children living in households that had experienced a recent decrease in household income and for children living in households which had not are shown in Figure 13.
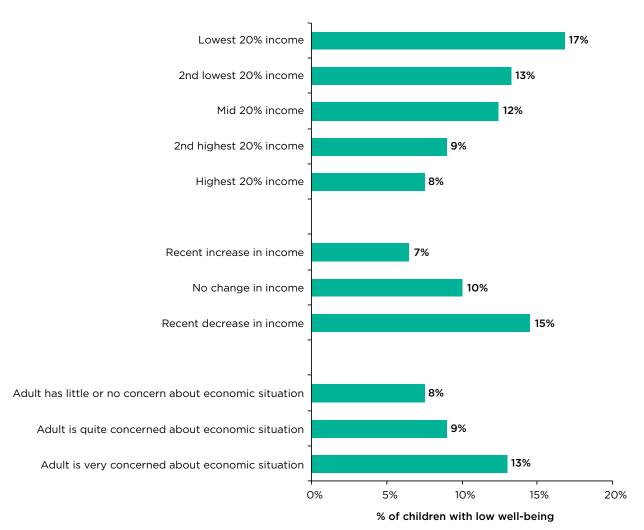
Figure 12: Household economic factors and children's well-being
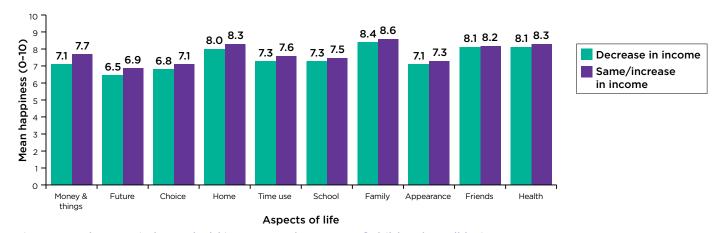
Source: Rees et al, 2011

Figure 13: Changes in household income and aspects of children's well-being

Source: Quarterly survey, waves 2 and 3, age 8 to 15, N = 3970 to 3974

There were some significant differences in mean happiness with all 10 aspects of life but most of these differences were relatively small. This is not surprising given the wide range of factors in children's lives which can affect their well-being. The largest difference, as would be expected, related to happiness with money and possessions.

The next two largest (and statistically significant) differences related to happiness with the future and with amount of choice. This provides tentative evidence that loss of household income may impact negatively on children's sense of autonomy and optimism.

Children's economic circumstances

Despite the aforementioned evidence of a small association between household economic factors and children's well-being, we know from qualitative research with children (Ridge, 2002) that economic factors, in particular poverty, have a substantial impact on children's lives in the present as well as on their longer-term life chances. In order to explore this further we have asked several types of questions in our recent surveys.

The first approach we have taken is to identify a set of items and experiences which children feel are important for them to have a 'normal' childhood. This work has included consultation with children and statistical piloting, which are fully described in one of our recent reports (Main & Pople, 2011). The outcome of this work is a child-centred material well-being index consisting of 10 items and experiences as shown in Figure 14.

Using children's answers we were able to create a child-centred index of material well-being. In our 2010 survey, almost half of all children aged eight to 15 (49%) lacked none of the 10 items or experiences, about a third lacked one or two items (35%), and about one in six (16%) lacked three or more items. The number of items or experiences which children lacked had a significant relationship with their overall well-being as shown in Figure 15. Children who lacked five or more of the items and experiences were over five times more likely to have low well-being than those who lacked none of the items.
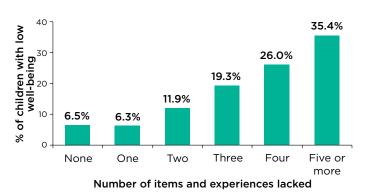

Figure 15: Material deprivation and low well-being
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 2904

Here is a list of items that some young people of your age have. Please tell us whether you have each item on the list:

1. Some pocket money each week to spend on yourself

2. Some money that you can save each month, either in a bank or at home

3. A pair of designer or brand name trainers (like Nike or Vans)

4. An iPod or other personal music player

5. Cable or satellite TV at home

6. A garden at home, or somewhere nearby like a park where you can safely spend time with their friends

7. A family car for transport when you need it

8. The right kind of clothes to fit in with other people your age

9. At least one family holiday away from home each year

10. Family trips or days out at least once a month

For each item or experience children were asked to respond in one of the three following ways – 'I have this'; 'I don't have this but I would like it'; 'I don't have this and I don't want or need it'.

Figure 14: Child-centred material well-being index

An important finding from this research is that this child-centred measure of material well-being explains around 9% of the variation in overall well-being. This is much higher than the 3% which can be explained by measures based on household economic factors as discussed above. For example, there is hardly any variation in the mean subjective well-being of children deprived of none or one items according to the household income group they are in. But in contrast there is considerable variation in subjective well-being in all the income groups according to the child's score on the above material well-being index.

There are a number of possible explanations for this but one key issue could be related to the distribution of resources within the family

In our quarterly survey in April 2011 (wave 3), among a sample of 1,800 children aged eight to 15, we found that:

• 43% of children living in the 20% of families with the lowest household income lacked one or fewer items from our index. These are poor children being protected from deprivation.

• In contrast, 12% of children living in the 20% of families with the highest household income lacked three or more items and 2% lacked five or more items.

A second approach we have taken is to ask children a comparative question – *Compared to your friends (on average) how much money do you usually have to spend for yourself?*. Children were offered five response options from *'A lot less'* to *'A lot more'*. Responses to this question are shown in Table 5. The pattern of responses is roughly evenly distributed around the mid-point with 31% of children saying they have less spending money than their friends and 31% saying they have more.

The relationship between children's responses to this question and their overall well-being proves to be interesting as shown in Figure 16. Not surprisingly the children who had a lot less spending money than their friends had the highest likelihood of low well-being (25%). However as can be seen the remainder of the chart is not so predictable, and in fact the children who were the least likely to have low well-being were those who had about the same amount of spending money as friends. There are no indications here that having more money than one's friends is an ingredient for higher well-being and, in fact, children who said that they had a 'lot more' money than their friends had a small but significantly higher chance of experiencing low well-being.

Figure 16: Comparative spending money and low well-being
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1346

These findings require further investigation and discussion with children, but it would seem that, although some of the differences are not that large, in terms of spending money, 'fitting in' rather than 'having more' is the key ingredient for children's well-being.

A lot less	15%
A bit less	16%
About the same	39%
A bit more	19%
A lot more	12%

Table 5: Amount of spending money compared to friends
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1550

Summary

- The findings presented in this chapter suggest that a range of economic factors impacts on children's well-being.

- Household income appears to have a relatively limited association with children's well-being. This is consistent with research with adults on similar issues. Household poverty has a discernible effect on children's well-being, but as a whole household income, changes in income and adults' economic worries only explain around 3% of the variation in children's well-being.

- It appears that adverse household economic factors may affect children's well-being and this includes a link with their sense of choice in life and their optimism about the future.

- The child-centred economic measures we have developed through this research programme show a much stronger association with children's well-being – explaining 9% of the variation in well-being.

- Our survey findings also show that having a lot less money than friends is associated with lower well-being, but also suggest that having more money than friends is not necessarily linked with higher well-being.

d) Friends and peers

'You can't have a good childhood without friends every child needs friends.'

This section looks at children's happiness in relation to friendships and other peer relationships. As highlighted earlier there is something of a paradox here. In talking to children about their well-being it is clear that friendships are fundamentally important to them, but our statistical analysis suggests that happiness with relationships with friends is not as important in explaining variations in children's well-being as many other aspects covered in The Good Childhood Index. In this section we explore not only the quality of children's relationships but also their satisfaction with the number of friends they have and also the connections between recent events related to friendships and their well-being. We also look at the connection between bullying and well-being.

What children told us

Children placed great emphasis on the importance of friendships for their quality of life in our initial consultation in 2005. Friends emerged as the second most important theme (after family) in young people's responses. Some of the key aspects of friendships that children drew attention to were having fun and friends as a trusted source of support:

'lots of close friends that you trust + have fun with.'

'lots of friends, to have a girlfriend or a special friend you can always talk to or ask questions to.'

'I think the most important things are to have a friendly and caring society around you with kind, considerate, loyal friends to keep you happy and look out for you.'

Children also commented on problems with friends that affected well-being. These included peer pressure and arguments:

'Bad friends that make them do things they wouldn't normally do.'

'Break ups between friends.'

'Bitchiness between friends who don't seem to care or understand how you feel.'

As seen in a number of the above quotes, children identified the number of friends as an additional important factor:

'Feeling lonely and having no true friends.'

Finally, although not necessarily specifically about friends, the issue of bullying was a very strong theme in children's responses.

'The good things about my life at the moment is: I am happy that I have lots of friends, I am not being bullied, I am enjoying myself.'

'friends that kind of bully.'

What we have asked in our surveys

In the 2008 survey we asked children to respond to a list of statements developed by Huebner (1994) in the US about satisfaction with friendships. These statements include positive and negative aspects of the quality of friendships as well as satisfaction with the number of friends. We also asked questions about experiences of bullying.

In the 2010 survey, as part of an exploration of the impact of recent life events on well-being, we asked children about a number of things, positive and negative, that may have happened to them recently in relation to friendships.

Quality of friendships[16]

By and large, children's responses to questions about their quality of friendships are very positive. For example less than 2% of children disagree with statements such *'I have a lot of fun with my friends'* and *'My friends treat me well'*. This may not be surprising in terms of the definition of friendship itself.

Some of our research on the quality of friendships shows that there are two different aspects – positive and negative. While there is an association between the two it is possible for someone to feel that they have both at the same time – for example having a lot of fun with friends but also arguing a lot (see Goswami, 2010). It does appear that questions with a more negative tone tend to elicit a slightly different response to positive ones. For example, 10% of children aged 12 to 15 in our 2008 survey agreed that *'I have a bad time with my friends'* and 7% agreed that *'I wish I had different friends'*. Nevertheless, whether measured through positive or negative statements, the large majority of children appear relatively happy with their friendships.

When looked at as a topic in isolation, children who are happier with the quality of their friendships have significantly higher well-being. However, when considered in combination with other aspects of well-being, it has been surprising to find that satisfaction with friendships is not one of the more

important factors associated with levels of overall well-being. There is a contradiction between children's views and the statistical evidence here which needs to be resolved. It may be that the questions asked above are not very effective at identifying the particular aspects of friendships that are important for well-being. This requires further discussion with children, but in the remainder of this section we explore some other aspects of friendships and peer relationships identified through our consultation.

Number of friends

Huebner's list of statements about friendships also includes one statement which is about the quantity rather than quality of friendships – *'I have enough friends'*. In the 2008 survey, around 6% of children disagreed with this statement and a further 15% neither agreed nor disagreed.

Around 29% of those who disagreed had low well-being compared to 16% of those who neither agreed nor disagreed, and 8% of those who agreed. So children who felt relatively socially isolated were four times as likely to have low well-being as those who did not.
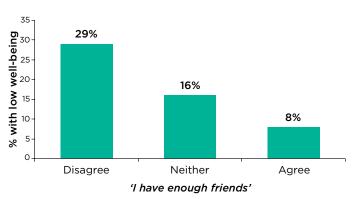

Figure 17: Satisfaction with number of friends and low well-being
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 3891

Please say whether each of these has happened to you in the last three months	Not happened	Once	More than once
You were pressured by friends to do something you did not want to do	60%	25%	15%
You had a serious argument with a close friend	36%	36%	27%
You made a new friend	12%	18%	70%
A close friend had a serious problem	36%	37%	27%
You broke up with a boyfriend/girlfriend	55%	18%	26%
You did really well at an activity outside school (like sport, music, drama, etc)	19%	23%	58%
A friend that you trusted did not keep a secret	37%	33%	30%
You stopped being friendly with a close friend	48%	35%	17%

Table 6: Recent events re: friendships
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N= 3174 to 3363

Recent events with friends

Another aspect of this topic we were interested in exploring is whether recent events in children's social relationships might be connected with their well-being. In the 2010 survey, we asked children a number of questions about events that might have happened recently in relation to their friendships. The topics for these questions were drawn primarily from our earlier consultations with children. Responses are shown in Table 6. As can be seen, all of the identified events had been experienced in the last three months by a significant proportion of children ranging from 40% who had experienced peer pressure to 88% who had made a new friend.

The frequency of occurrence of all of the negative events listed above had a statistically significant association with children's overall well-being. The strongest associations related to no longer being friendly with a close friend and peer pressure. The single positive event – making a new friend – was not associated systematically with levels of well-being. All of the negative events, when considered in combination, explained around 10% of the variation in well-being. Thus events and fluctuations in children's relationships with friends may help to understand the link between friendships and overall well-being.

Experiences of being bullied

As identified earlier, the issue of bullying was tremendously important to children and this importance is confirmed by our survey data. In 2008, we asked children how often they had been bullied in the past 12 months and, as reported in Rees et al, 2010a, we found a strong relationship between responses to this question and overall well-being. In fact, this single question had as much power to explain variations in well-being as all the individual and family characteristics included in the survey combined.

We asked a slightly different question in the 2010 survey – *How often, if at all, have you been bullied in the last three months?* Possible response categories were: *Never, Once, Two or three times, More than three times.* Around 58% of children said that they had not been bullied at all in the last three months. The remainder were roughly equally distributed across the three categories – 17% had been bullied once, 11% two or three times and 15% more than three times. The proportions of children in each category who had low well-being are shown in Figure 18. Children who had been bullied more than three times in the last three months were six times as likely to experience low well-being (36%) as those who had never been bullied (6%).
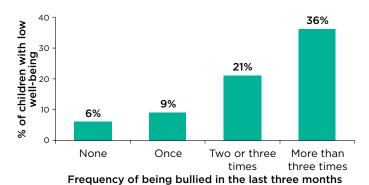
Figure 18: Experiences of being bullied and low well-being
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1510

In this survey, the responses to the question on bullying explained 11% of the variation in overall well-being.

Of course this is a complex issue and children who experience bullying may also be more likely to have a number of other factors in their lives which are linked with low well-being. For example, it is known that children who live in poverty are also more likely than average to be bullied and this is borne out to some extent by the 2010 survey which found that 32% of children who had been frequently bullied lived in poor households (either no adult in paid work and/or free school meal receipt) compared to 13% of children who had never been bullied.

Some sub-groups of children may also be at high risk of bullying and may have a range of other factors and disadvantages in their lives which increase the likelihood of low well-being. Nevertheless, the findings from these two surveys on the strong link between bullying and well-being concur with children's responses to our consultations and suggest that effective strategies to tackle bullying could have significant potential to improve children's well-being.

Finally, and consistent with other research, our survey indicates a decline in bullying with age – around 19% of children in primary school (years 4 and 6) had been bullied more than three times in the last three months compared to around 9% of those in secondary school (years 8 and 10).

There are therefore a number of additional issues to explore to develop a fuller understanding of the connections between experiences of bullying and overall well-being.

Summary

- Our survey findings indicated that a very large majority of children are relatively satisfied with the quality of their friendships. It appears also that the quality of children's friendships is not as important as some of the other aspects of life considered in this report in understanding variations in well-being.

- Having too few friends is another factor identified by young people as important to their quality of life. In our 2008 survey around 6% of children did not feel that they had enough friends and these children were at substantially higher than average risk of experiencing low well-being.

- We have also explored children's experiences of recent negative events in relation to friends such as arguments and peer pressure. These type of events are common experiences for children, and it would appear that the accumulation of a number of such recent events is significantly associated with children's quality of life. This supports other findings in this report regarding the dynamic nature of children's well-being in response to life events.

- Finally, we found that children who are bullied are also much more likely than average to experience low well-being.

e) School

'I am happy at school and at home. I am looking [forward] to getting good GCSE results and going to a good college.'

School is evidently a focal point of the lives of children in the age groups we have surveyed. As we have seen in the introductory chapter, school is one of the aspects of life covered in The Good Childhood Index with which a significant minority of children are unhappy. However, encouragingly there are some indications from other research that children's happiness with school may have slightly increased in the UK in recent years (Bradshaw & Keung, 2011).

What children told us

School was one of the key factors identified by children as being important to a good childhood. In our consultations with children there has been a huge number of comments about the ways that school can affect children's well-being, both positively and negatively. This is a multi-faceted topic with comments about school as an environment, the significance of relationships with teachers and with other children at school, and the importance of learning for children's sense of current and future well-being.

Comments about the school environment include issues about safety, facilities and resources, and rules:

'Feeling safe and happy at home and school.'

'More school budget, because the schools don't really take us any where because the school budget is so little.'

Comments about relationships with teachers focused around the broad themes of care, support, respect and fairness which children have identified as being fundamental to all their social relationships:

'Attending a good school with lots of supportive teachers.'

'being treated fair by adults and especially teachers!'

Comments about other young people mainly focused on issues of friendship and bullying which have already been covered in a separate section and it is clear that school is a key focal point for children's social relationships:

'Socialising with friends at school. Home is boring so I look forward to come to school to get out of home.'

Finally the importance of learning and getting a good education for future well-being was emphasised by many children but there were also many comments about the negative impact of stress related to school work:

'to go to school and concentrate, so that in the future they have a good opportunities of work and earn good money.'

'GCSEs. There is too much stress and pressure involved that is unhealthy for young people.'

What we have asked in our surveys

We have explored most of the themes identified above in our recent survey work with children. As outlined in Chapter 2, school is one of the aspects of The Good Childhood Index with which children are less happy, with around 12% of children aged eight to 15 being unhappy.

In the 2008 surveys we asked children a series of statements about school well-being developed by Huebner in the US (Huebner, 1994) which mainly focus on general satisfaction and engagement with school. We have also included questions about school achievement, safety at school and events relating to school life. Finally we have done some work on the development of a short school well-being index.

Satisfaction and engagement with school

Most of Huebner's questions in the school domain relate to engagement with school. Children's responses to these statements are shown in Table 7. There is more variability in children's satisfaction here than for some other aspects of their lives such as family and friends. Almost half (49%) of all children agreed that there were many things about school that they did not like; over a quarter wished that they did not have to go to school and a similar proportion disagreed that they looked forward to going to school.

Despite these relatively high levels of negative feelings about school, another question we asked in the survey suggests a good level of commitment to the learning process. We asked children how important it was for them to get good marks in their school work. More than three quarters of children (80%) said that it was very important to them, and almost one in six (17%) said that it was quite important. Almost 3% felt that it was not very or not at all important. The latter small group of disengaged children were four times as likely as average to have low well-being.

There was no significant difference in responses to this question for girls and boys, for children of different ages, or for children living in poor households (either no adult in paid job and/or receiving free school meals) compared to other children.

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
I look forward to going to school	27%	37%	36%
School is interesting	21%	38%	42%
I like being in school	18%	36%	46%
I enjoy school activities	11%	26%	63%
I learn a lot at school	9%	19%	72%
I wish I didn't have to go to school	42%	29%	29%
There are many things about school I don't like	25%	26%	49%
I feel bad at school	69%	23%	8%

Table 7: Huebner's questions about school well-being
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 2334 to 2491

School achievement

We asked children how well they felt they were doing at school. Over a quarter (27%) felt that they were doing very well and a further 62% quite well. Around 8% felt that they were not doing very well and 3% not at all well.
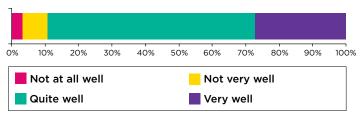

Figure 19: How well do you feel you are doing at school at the moment?
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1790

Here also there was no gender difference in response. There were however differences related to age and poverty indicators. Older children tended to have lower assessments than younger children. For example, around 16% of children in year 10 (aged 14 and 15) felt they were doing 'very well' at school compared to 38% in year 6 (aged 10 and 11). Children in poor households were more likely to feel they were doing 'not very well' or 'not at all well' (16% in total) compared to other children (9%).

This topic was also linked with levels of well-being. This may indicate that doing well at school can help to boost well-being but there are also other explanations for this association – for example, children with higher well-being may be more able to focus on school work and achieve well; or optimistic children may feel they are doing better at school and have higher than average well-being.

Safety at school

Almost three-quarters of children aged 10 to 15 agreed that they felt safe at school and only around 7% said that they did not feel safe (Figure 20).
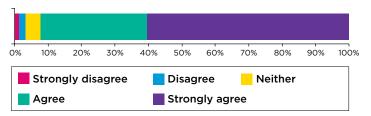

Figure 20: 'I feel safe at school'
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1861

Feelings of safety at school had a strong association with overall school well-being. In our 2010 survey, three-fifths (59%) of children who did not feel safe at school were also unhappy at school. As with feelings of safety in other contexts such as the family, there was a strongly increased likelihood of low overall well-being for children who did not feel safe at school. Over a third (35%) of the children who did not feel safe at school had low overall well-being, compared to the average of 11% in the 2008 survey.

Changes of school

We also asked children whether they had changed school over the past 12 months, bearing in mind that none of the children surveyed had made the transition from primary to secondary school in the past year. However, unlike a number of the other life events considered in this report, experiences of change of school only had a very small association with children's levels of school and overall well-being.

Recent events at school

As with the earlier discussion about friendships we were interested to explore the extent to which recent schools-related events, either positive or negative, were linked to children's current levels of well-being. We asked a series of questions about this topic in the 2010 survey relating to whether particular events had happened in the last three months. Children were offered three response options – *'Not happened', 'Happened once' and 'Happened more than once'*. We are still undertaking analysis of these data but provide two examples of events which appear important.

The event which appears most strongly related to general school well-being was feeling treated unfairly by a teacher. Around 6% of children who did not feel this had happened at all and around 8% of children for whom this had happened only once were unhappy with school. In contrast, around a quarter (25%) of children who felt they had been treated unfairly by a teacher on more than one occasion felt unhappy at school.

Positive events tended to have a weaker association with school well-being. However, for example, 19% of children who had not received an award or prize for something they had done at school in the last three months were unhappy with school compared to 10% of children for whom this had happened more than once.

This evidence does not demonstrate a causal link from school-related events to school well-being. There may be a two-way relationship here – for example, children who are not enjoying school may behave in ways which lead to them being punished and this may lead them to feel they have been treated unfairly. However, it is notable that both negative and positive events at school also appear to be significantly associated with children's happiness with life as a whole. This is an area where we need to undertake further analysis and will be publishing more detailed results.

Developing an index of children's school well-being

With this particular topic, we have also taken a different approach to measuring children's well-being in our quarterly surveys. This has involved attempting to develop a short overall index of children's school well-being using a series of questions which children answer on a scale from 0 to 10 as with The Good Childhood Index items. This is similar to an approach taken to school well-being in Australia (Tomyn & Cummins, 2010).

In the third wave of our quarterly survey in February 2011, we asked children to indicate how happy they were with five aspects of their school experience, on a scale from 0 to 10 – see Figure 21.

These questions use a scale from 0 to 10. On this scale:

0 means you feel very unhappy

10 means you feel very happy

5 means that you feel neither happy nor unhappy

1. **How happy are you with how safe you feel at school?**

2. **How happy are you with how you are doing with your school work?**

3. **How happy are you with your relationships with other young people at school?**

4. **How happy are you with your relationships with your teachers?**

5. **How happy are you with how much you are listened to at school?**

Figure 21: A short index of school well-being

The mean scores and proportions of children scoring below the mid-point for each aspect are shown in Table 8. Children were least happy with their relationships with teachers and happiest with their safety at school.

Developing a schools well-being index of this kind could have particular value in understanding the particular aspects of school life which are most important for children and are most likely to affect their overall feelings about school.

We have seen in Chapter 2 that school is one of the aspects of children's well-being which declines most rapidly with age. Analysis of age patterns in relation to the above five aspects suggest that all these aspects decline significantly as children grow older but that happiness with relationships with teachers and with being listened to decline the most rapidly, and happiness with relationships with other young people at school the least rapidly.

	Mean score	% with low happiness
How safe you feel at school	7.9	5%
How you are doing with your school work	7.3	10%
Your relationships with other young people at school	7.7	6%
Your relationships with your teachers	7.2	10%
How much you are listened to at school	6.7	15%

Table 8: Happiness with different aspects of school
Source: Quarterly survey, wave 3, February 2011, age 8 to 15, N = 2003 to 2004

The above items also shed some light on gender differences. Males had significantly lower happiness than females with school work, relationships with teachers and, to a lesser extent with feeling listened to and safety. There were no gender differences for happiness with relationships with other young people at school.

Overall, the five items explained almost two-thirds (65%) of the variation in overall happiness with school which is a high proportion and indicates that these topics may be capturing a substantial amount of children's views about school.

When considered together, all five aspects made a significant contribution to explaining variations in overall happiness with school. Happiness with relationships with teachers made the most important contribution. Tomyn & Cummins also found that satisfaction with teachers was the most important aspect explaining overall satisfaction with school, in a survey of a small sample of just over 200 children in Australia.

There may be other aspects of children's school experience which could be added to this pilot index – for example, happiness with school facilities, time use, space / environment. Tomyn & Cummins (2010) included nine different factors in their pilot work in Australia – behaviour, abilities, appearance, popularity, safety, travel, teachers, classmates and friends. However, the list of items in Table 8 appears to be a useful measure with good explanatory power, and it may be helpful to consult further with children before adding any further items.

Summary

- School is viewed as a central component of overall well-being by children and there are a range of specific components of school well-being including satisfaction with the school environment, relationships with teachers and other children at school, and school work and learning.

- A substantial minority of children give negative evaluations of their school life in general, but overall there is evidence of a very strong commitment to learning and achievement at school.

- Safety at school is an important issue for children and the small minority of children who do not feel safe are at very high risk of low well-being.

- Experiences of positive and negative recent events at school may be a significant explanatory factor in understanding variations in children's school and overall well-being.

- Males have significantly lower happiness than females with certain aspect of school life – in particular their school work and their relationships with teachers.

f) Health

'I think you shouldn't try too hard to get fit. All you need to do is go for walks every so often and get out on your bike and play with your mates. That's what I do. I get plenty of exercise without realising it. I walk to school, run around at playtime, play football at dinner time and walk home at the end of the day. So, I walk about two miles a day without realising it.'

The terms 'health' and 'well-being' are often used together and there are clearly important issues to explore in terms of the links between physical health, mental health and well-being. As in the quote above, many children discussed the connection between health-related behaviours and well-being.

What children told us

Health was not a particularly strong theme in our initial consultation with children in 2005. Where children did identify the link between health and well-being this was often in terms of emotional and mental health:

'Stress, depression, parents splitting up, not having any money to go out + have fun with mates.'

Children also identified health-related behaviours as contributing to their quality of life:

'Good diet and plenty of exercise, or being able to join clubs e.g. football, rugby etc.'

More recent consultation with younger children also indicated that children often equate questions about health with healthy behaviours and as a result we included an additional phrase in the general question about health in the 2010 survey for year 4 pupils to clarify that the question relates to 'feeling well and unwell'.

Physical health issues were only directly mentioned by a very small proportion of children:

'being overweight/health issues, having a disease.'

What we have asked in our surveys

Despite the above, children's level of happiness with health has proved statistically to have a significant association with their overall well-being and therefore health is one of the topics included in The Good Childhood Index. This is an area where we need to develop further our understanding of children's perceptions of the connections with overall well-being. It may be, for example that recent periods of ill health have a significant impact on well-being.

In terms of mental health, it is not entirely clear whether this is best viewed as a component of well-being or as a separate concept. The study of well-being originated

with a focus on positive functioning in contrast to mental ill-health. Our surveys have tended to focus on children's subjective evaluations of their lives and we have been reluctant to include more negatively framed questions exploring mental health issues. However, developing an understanding of the connections between subjective well-being and mental health and this is an area we need to consider further in future phases of the research programme. It has been suggested that low well-being may be a precursor to more significant mental health problems (Cummins, 2009) although this link still needs to be explored through research.

In terms of physical health, we have asked several additional questions in the 2008 and 2010 surveys. We briefly cover two of these below.

Subjective health

One question asks children to rate their health on a scale from 'Very bad' to 'Very good'. Results using this scale are shown in Figure 22 below. Around 6% of children rated their health as poorer than 'fair'. Almost half (48%) of this small group of children had low well-being.
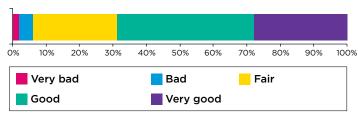

Very bad   Bad   Fair
Good   Very good

Figure 22: Subjective health ratings
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1812

Long-standing illness or disability

In the 2008 survey we also asked children whether they had a 'long-standing illness or disability'. This is a slightly modified version of a question used in health surveys of adults. Around 13% responded 'yes' to this question and these children were twice as likely (16%) to have low well-being as other children (8%). However, this question combines the concepts of illness and disability and there is a great deal more to explore in relation to connections between disability and well-being. We are currently undertaking additional research with disabled children, including a survey of children in special schools, and will be publishing a separate report on this issue.

Summary

- **In our consultations with children, health issues have not emerged as an important theme in terms of well-being, although children do identify health-related behaviours as important contributors to a good quality life.**

- **However, our survey work suggests that there is a statistical link between self-rated levels of health and overall well-being. So there is a need for further exploration of these links.**

- **There is also some evidence in our surveys of a link between poverty and self-assessed health.**

9) Appearance

'I am being bullied. I feel unhappy with my body. Friends tend to leave me out because they don't want to get bullied.'

'I have a lot of friends. I am healthy and good looking. I have a good looking girlfriend.'

What children told us

As discussed in Chapter 2, children's appearance is an aspect of their lives that many of them are unhappy with. Concerns about appearance were evident in many of the comments in our consultations with children about well-being:

'do not have enough money. do not see my dad very often. unhappy about the way I look.'

'At school you are under pressure to be pretty, wear make-up and have the right figure. If not, you don't fit in. I don't like the way I look because I am not skinny or tall. I have good days and bad days. Some days I feel pretty and other days I feel really ugly, and when I have those days I pile on the make-up. I think that I need to love myself more.'

'I quite like the way I look, but sometimes people can be horrible about you and it can make you feel bad about yourself. I think it's unfair of people to do that, it's not as if they're perfect.'

What we have asked in our surveys

In addition to the question about appearance (the way that I look) we have tested several additional questions in our surveys. For example, in the 2010 survey we asked children to respond to the statement 'I often worry about the way I look'. Over a third (35%) of the children aged 10 to 15 who were asked this question agreed with the statement.

In an earlier report we drew attention to some significant age and gender patterns in relation to this issue. These are confirmed and illustrated again in relation to the above question.

- First, in terms of age, worries about appearance increase sharply with age. A quarter (25%) of children in year 6 at school (aged 10 to 11) often worried about the way they look. This increases to 37% in year 8 (aged 12 to 13) and then further to 42% in year 10 (aged 14 to 15)

- Second, there are strong gender differences with girls being more likely (42%) to worry about appearance than boys (29%).

As in our earlier research these two factors are connected as shown in Figure 23. In year 6 the difference in the proportion of girls (26%) and boys (23%) who worry about the way they look is relatively small and only marginally statistically significant. However the gender gap grows with increasing age and in year 10, well over half of girls say that they often worry about the way that they look, compared to just under a third (32%) of boys.
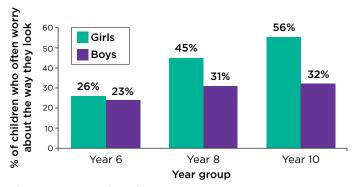
Figure 23: Worries about appearance, age and gender
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1750

From data in our quarterly surveys, happiness with appearance does not appear to be statistically connected with household income, although the children living in the 20% of households with the highest income had slightly higher mean levels of happiness with this aspect of their lives (7.6 out of 10) than other children (7.2 out of 10).

However, feelings about appearance do have a link with the child-centred material well-being index discussed in an earlier section (Figure 24).
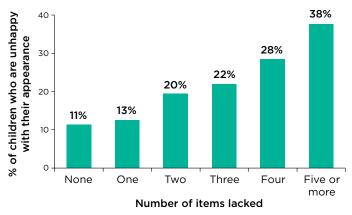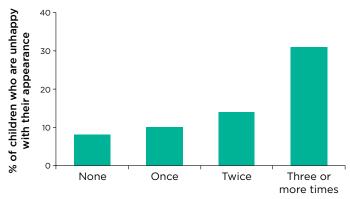

Figure 24: Child-centred material well-being and unhappiness with appearance
Source: 2010 survey, age 8 to 15, N = 3815

Figure 25: Experiences of being bullied and unhappiness with appearance
Source: 2010 survey, age 8 to 15, N = 2678

Perhaps not surprisingly, the item in the material well-being index most strongly associated with unhappiness with appearance was *'The right kind of clothes to fit in with other people your age'.* Around 13% of children who said they had this item were unhappy with their appearance compared to over 39% of children who said they did not have this item but would like it. This provides another example of the important difference between household-based economic measures and child-centred measures of material well-being.

We have also looked at the links between unhappiness with appearance and experiences of being bullied (Figure 25). There was a significant link here with children who were frequently being bullied also being much more likely to be unhappy with their appearance.

There are suggestions here of an interconnection between a network of factors involving relative material deprivation, feelings about appearance, and experiences of being bullied, all of which have significant associations with overall well-being. These interconnections are also evident in the quotes from children cited at the beginning of this section.

Summary

- **Children told us that their feelings about the way that they looked were an important factor determining their well-being and our statistical findings also suggest that this is the case.**

- **A substantial proportion of children have concerns about their appearance – with between 10% and 15% being unhappy with this aspect of their lives and over a third saying that they often worry about the way that they look.**

- **Unhappiness with appearance increases with age and is greater amongst girls. The gender gap between boys and girls emerges and appears to intensify in the secondary school age group.**

- **Feelings about appearance are not linked to household income but are linked to child-centred measures of material well-being based on a list of items and experiences.**

- **There is also a link between children's feelings about their appearance and the likelihood of their being bullied.**

h) Time use

'A balance between relaxation, socialising, enjoyment and things they like to do, and education. Being with their family.'

Issues regarding the 'work-life balance' are common in debates about adults' well-being and we have found that a good balance of time spent on different activities and relationships is also important for children's well-being.

What children told us

Time use and a healthy balance of time spent on different activities has been identified in our consultations with children as an important ingredient of their overall well-being.

'Friends, family, school and a well balanced leisure time with social activity.'

'Homework - there is so much and at the end when you have finally finished it there is no time to do anything fun.'

What we have asked in our surveys

In both the 2008 and the 2010 surveys we asked children aged 10 to 15 about how satisfied they were with the amount of time they spent on the following aspects of their lives:

• Spending time with family

• Spending time with friends

• Time to yourself / relaxing

• Activities (hobbies, clubs, sports, etc.)

• Doing homework

• Helping around the home

Children had three response options – *'not enough', 'about right'* and *'too much'.*

In this section we have used the responses from the 2008 survey because in this case a much larger number of children were asked these questions than in 2010. The responses to the questions are summarised in Figure 26 and show that:

• The majority of children were fairly satisfied with the amount of time they spent with family, with friends, relaxing and on activities. A slightly lower proportion (between 40% and 50%) were satisfied with the amount of time they spent doing homework and helping around the home.

• The activity which children were most likely to feel they did too much of was homework.

• The activity which children were most likely to feel they did too little of was helping around the home.
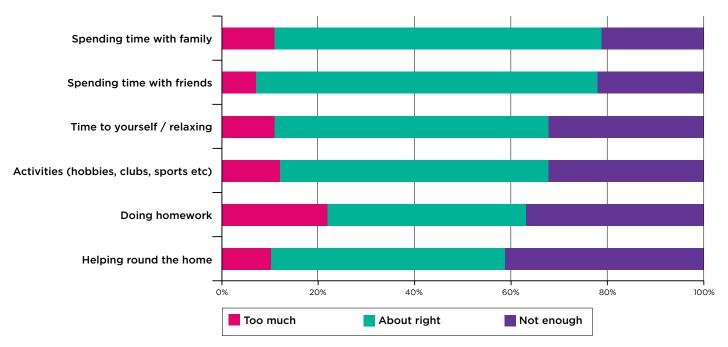
Figure 26: Satisfaction with time spent on various things
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 4160 to 4439

We created an overall score from these responses by categorising children as either 'satisfied' or 'not satisfied' (i.e. either too much or not enough) and adding the responses. There was a wide range of scores. Some children (around 10%) were satisfied with all six aspects of their time use, while around 3% were not satisfied with any of these aspects. There was an association with these scores and well-being. 30% of the small group of children who were dissatisfied with all six aspects had low well-being, compared to only around 1% of the children who were satisfied with all six aspects.

We can also look individually at the strength of association of satisfaction with each aspect of time use on overall well-being. All six aspects were significantly related with well-being – but satisfaction with time spent with family, friends and relaxing had the strongest associations while satisfaction with time spent doing homework had only a very small link with well-being. Once again these findings emphasise the fundamental importance of relationships to children's well-being.

For most aspects not having enough time for the activity was linked with lower well-being than having too much time. The exception was 'helping around the home'. Children who felt they spent too much time on this activity were likely to have the lowest well-being. This

may, in part, reflect the issues faced by young people who take on caring responsibilities within their families.

Table 9 (overleaf) summarises a more detailed exploration of the links between responses to the two questions about time spent with family and friends and overall well-being. We have used mean well-being scores rather than proportions with low well-being here because of the relatively small sample size in some categories. The children with the highest average well-being were those who felt that both the time they spent with family and the time they spent with friends was *'about right'*. Setting this group aside it is clear that spending *'too much'* time with friends and family is generally linked with higher well-being than spending *'not enough'*. The main exception to this is that the group of children with the lowest well-being were those who felt they spent too much time with family and also not enough time with friends. These patterns suggest that lack of time spent with family and friends is important but so is the balance of time spent with family versus friends.

Time with friends	Time with family	Mean life satisfaction
About right	About right	15.1
Too much	About right	14.7
Too much	Too much	14.4
About right	Too much	14.0
Not enough	About right	13.7
About right	Not enough	13.2
Too much	Not enough	12.9
Not enough	Not enough	11.9
Not enough	Too much	11.3
All	**All**	**14.2**

Table 9: Satisfaction with time spent with friends and family and overall well-being.
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 4224

Summary

- A healthy balance of time use is important for children, as it is also for adults. Overall, children who are most satisfied with this balance also have higher levels of well-being.

- Of the aspects of time use we have considered in the research so far, the most important for children appear to be the amount of time spent with family and friends. In general, a feeling of not having enough time with either family or friends is associated with low well-being. In addition, an imbalance in satisfaction with time spent with family and time spent with friends also appears to be experienced negatively by children.

i) Choice and autonomy

'When parents force a way of life on children which they do not want to take. When parents do not give children the freedom of choice. When parents do not give their children independence to go out and have fun with friends.'

[Response to: What things do you think stop young people from having a good life?]

Our research has shown that issues of choice, and related concepts such as freedom and autonomy, are fundamental to children's well-being in our society. In fact, among the 10 aspects of life covered in The Good Childhood Index, children's happiness with the amount of choice they have in life tends to be the most strongly associated with their overall well-being. The importance of choice and autonomy has also been identified in other research on children's well-being (Fattore et al, 2007). There may be many similarities in the links between choice and well-being for children and adults, but there are also likely to be differences. Due to their legal status, children's choice and autonomy are much more dependent on the willingness of others to grant them these things. Thus it is important to explore this issue from a child-centred perspective. It is also important to recognise that a growing sense of autonomy is important for children as they develop towards adulthood and that opportunities to make decisions with support can help children with this process.

What children told us

Choice was identified as an important concept in our initial consultation with children in 2005 and was often talked about in connection with other ideas such as freedom (as in the quote above), fairness and respect:

'Treated fairly. Respected. Allowed to make own choices.'

Many of children's comments about choice in this initial consultation were of quite a general nature like the ones above, but some comments highlighted specific aspects of their lives where choice was important to them:

'Having the freedom to go out and have a social life, feeling independent and trusted to make your own choices.'

More recently, in preparation for the 2010 survey we undertook some focus groups with children and we asked about the topic of 'choice' in relation to different aspects of children's lives – home, school, friendships and the future. Children's comments indicate the range of issues that may be encapsulated by the idea of 'choice'. The following are some quotes entered by children aged 12 to 15 as part of an online focus group:

'food choices/meals.'

'Which classes they take, like if they like one more than the other, they do it more often.'

'how much u go out and wot u do.'

'social networking, my parents disaprove of me using it.'

'be friends with who u want.'

What we have asked in our surveys

In addition to the question about happiness with the amount of choice in life which forms part of The Good Childhood Index, we have also asked a similar question about happiness with freedom. We found an association between children's happiness and these two aspects of their lives that is strong enough to mean that it is probably unnecessary to ask both.

We have also asked children a set of five questions on the concept of 'autonomy' which is often viewed to be an important aspect of people's psychological well-being. Most of these questions have been adapted from a set of questions for adults originally developed by Deci & Ryan based on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Responses to these questions in the 2010 survey are shown in the table below. Overall, most children gave relatively positive responses, but clearly a significant minority of children feel that they do not have enough autonomy.

Children's responses to the above items can be added together to create an overall score of their sense of autonomy. This set of questions worked well together and had good statistical properties.[17]

Perhaps surprisingly, whilst it would be expected that the amount of autonomy that children have will increase with age, children's satisfaction with this aspect of their lives reduces as they get older. This suggests, perhaps, an increasing mismatch between children's expectations in this regard and the reality which they experience.

There were no significant differences in responses to the above set of questions according to gender or measures of household poverty.

There was a significant and strong association between children's responses to the above questions and their overall well-being.[18]

The links between choice, autonomy and well-being

So, we have strong evidence of links between children's happiness about the amount of choice they have in life, their sense of autonomy and their overall well-being. What is not clear at this stage is exactly how these things are linked together and how they relate to the other aspects of life covered in this report.

It is possible that concepts like choice and autonomy are not components of well-being in the same way as many of the other aspects of life included in The Good Childhood Index such as happiness with particular relationships, environments or aspects of one's self. Issues of choice and autonomy cut across many of these other aspects – for example, how much autonomy children are granted by their parents, how much choice they feel they have in school, and so on.

A number of our research findings have highlighted significant associations between children's happiness with choice and other events and issues in their lives

- We have already seen in an earlier section that one of the aspects of life which varies most strongly in relation to changes in household income is children's sense of choice.

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
I feel pressured in my life	48%	25%	27%
I feel like I am free to decide for myself how to live my life	15%	22%	63%
I generally feel free to express my ideas and opinions	10%	16%	75%
I feel like I can pretty much be myself in my daily life	8%	13%	79%
I have enough choice about how I spend my time	9%	15%	76%

Table 10: Children's sense of autonomy
Source: 2010 survey, children aged 10 to 15, N = 4044 to 4097

- Children's responses to our child-centred material well-being index are associated with their feelings about choice. Around 4% of children who lacked none of the items or experiences in our index were unhappy with the amount of choice they had in life, compared to almost a third (32%) of those children who lacked five or more of these items or experiences.

- There is also evidence of associations between choice and life events. Figure 27 summarises variations in The Good Childhood Index in relation to recent experience of changes in family structure (in terms of the adults with whom children lived). In this chart the aspects covered in The Good Childhood Index are ordered from left to right in terms of the size of the difference between children who had experienced a change in family structure over the last year. At the left of the chart, the aspect of life showing the biggest

difference is happiness with family (as might be expected). This is followed by choice which shows the second biggest difference. Towards the right side of the chart the difference are smaller and in relation to the last three aspects – health, appearance and friends – are not statistically significant.

This evidence does not necessarily indicate a causal link between family change and choice as there may be a range of other factors we have not measured which shed further light on the mechanisms at work in explaining these patterns.

In conclusion, children's sense of choice and autonomy emerges as a key factor in understanding their well-being. Further exploration is needed of the ways in which this occurs and whether enhancing children's sense of choice and autonomy might help to buffer the effects of adverse life circumstances on their overall well-being.
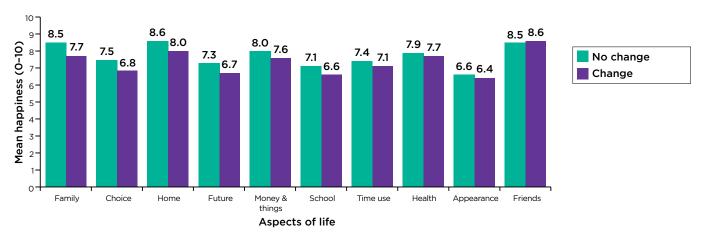

Figure 27: Changes in family structure and aspects of children's well-being
Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 4386 to 4533

Summary

- **Choice, autonomy and freedom are important aspects of children's lives which are strongly connected to their overall sense of well-being.**

- **Children's sense of autonomy and choice decreases as they get older.**

- **Our research also indicates strong links between choice and factors such as material well-being and adverse life events which need further exploration.**

j) The future

'I'm looking forward to success in academic terms, going to Uni if I get the grades. I have my future planned out in my mind.'

[Response to: What are the good things about your life at the moment?]

Expectations of the future have been identified through research as a key element of adults' well-being (see, for example, Cummins & Lau, 2006). Our research shows that this is also true for children. In this section we explore two key issues – how children feel about their future and also what they aspire to do when they leave school.

What children told us

In our initial consultation with children aged 14 to 16 in 2005, future aspirations and expectations were identified by children as an important ingredient of their well-being. Often this age group of children drew links between educational achievement and their hopes or fears for the future.

Many children identified this issue in response to the question *What are the good things in your life at the moment?*

'I have just got a job, which is good for the future (hairdresser).'

'that all my family is helping with my school work to help me get a better future.'

'I am studying. This makes me feel happy because in future it will help me to get a job.'

Thoughts about the future were also prominent in children's comments in response to the question *What are the bad things in life at the moment?*

'I am worried about my exams & the future.'

'There is so much pressure on you in High school to pass your exams. I'm bright and it's a burden so it must be hell for those people who are slower and need more help. I think my school holds me back as it has no money and no resources and I therefore receive a slightly inadequate education which may affect my further career.'

'Weekend jobs. loads of responsibility. Important mistakes could make future at risk. Less time with friends because of school work.'

'Stress from GCSEs. Coursework. Fear of my future at college (will i get in).'

'I dont work hard enough or care about my future.'

What we have asked in our surveys

The general question in The Good Childhood Index – *How happy are you with what may happen to you later on in life (in the future)?* provides some interesting potential insights into the relative links between feelings about the future and overall well-being at different ages during childhood. We have found that the statistical link (correlation) between happiness about the future and overall well-being increases steadily as children grow older between the ages of eight and 15. This is not true for some other aspects of life measured by the Index such as happiness with friendships. This type of evidence suggests that different aspects of children's lives have different importance for their well-being at different ages.

In addition to the general question in The Good Childhood Index, we have asked a number of other more specific questions in the 2008 and 2010 survey. Here we focus on two of these which relate to:

• whether children always felt positive about their future

• future aspirations after leaving school.

Feeling positive about the future

In our 2010 survey, over two-thirds of children (68%) aged 10 to 15 agreed that they always felt positive about their future. A further 22% neither agreed nor disagreed. This leaves around one in 10 children who disagreed with this statement.
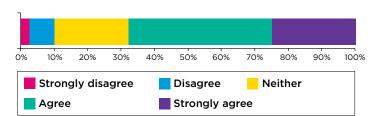
Figure 28: 'I'm always positive about my future'
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1776

There were significant gender and age differences in responses to this question:

• Girls (63%) were less likely to positive than boys (72%)

• Children tended to feel less positive as they grew older – 77% of year 6 children (aged 10 and 11) agreed with the statement, compared to 71% of year 8 children (aged 12 and 13) and 56% of year 10 children (aged 14 and 15).

This is another aspect of life where the gender gap appears to differ significantly with age with girls appearing to begin and continue to feel more pessimistic at younger ages than boys (Figure 29). In year 10 (a year before taking GCSEs) less than half of girls (46%) always felt positive about their future compared to over three-fifths (62%) of boys.

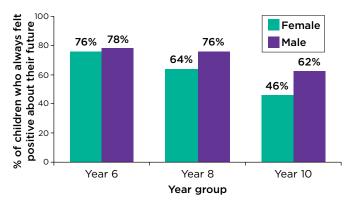Figure 29: Positivity about the future, age and gender
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 1734

We also found a link between household poverty and children's feelings about the future. In the 2010 survey, 15% of children in poor households (either no adults in paid work and/or receiving free school meals) disagreed that they always felt positive about the future, compared to 9% of other children.

Aspirations for the future

In both the 2008 and 2010 surveys we asked children aged 10 to 15 what they hoped to do when they left school. Results from the 2010 survey suggest the following:

- Just over half (52%) of children hoped to study to go university

- Around one in seven (14%) hoped to study and then get a job at 18

- A similar proportion (13%) hoped to leave school and get a job at 16

- Of the remainder, 14% did not know yet and 6% wanted to do something else.

Children who hoped to go to university had the highest scores in relation to The Good Childhood Index question about happiness about the future and those who planned to do 'something else' had the lowest.

Girls (60%) were significantly more likely than boys (44%) to have aspirations to go to university. This is interesting in the context of the finding above that boys are more optimistic about their future than girls.
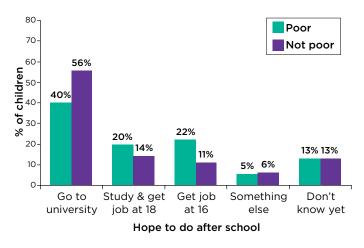
Here also there was a link with household poverty, as can be seen in Figure 30.

- Children living in poor households were much less likely (40%) than other children (56%) to hope to go to university

- They were more likely to hope to get a job at 16 or study and then get a job at 18

- There was no difference between children in poor households and other children in relation to hoping to do 'something else' or not yet knowing about future hopes.

There is therefore a difference in aspirations for the future for children living in poor households compared to children living in better off households.

Figure 30: Household poverty and future aspirations
Source: 2010 survey, age 10 to 15, N = 3732

Summary

- **The importance of feelings about the future for children's overall well-being appears to increase between the ages of eight and 15.**

- **Most children felt relatively positive about their future, but around 10% disagreed that they always felt positive about this aspect of their lives.**

- **Positive feelings decrease with age and girls are more likely to feel pessimistic about their future than boys.**

- **There is a significant link between household poverty and expectations about the future with 15% of children in poorer households feeling pessimistic compared to 9% of other children.**

- **Around half of children aged 10 to 15 hope to go to university.**

- **Here again there are gender differences with girls being more likely to have this aspiration than boys.**

- **There was evidence of differences in aspirations here with poorer children being less likely to hope to go to university and more likely to plan to leave school and get a job at 16 or to study until 18 and then get a job.**

k) Local area

'Most young people like to go out a lot and have fun. It would be better if there were more youth clubs and places we could go nearer our homes.'

Children's feelings about the area where they live emerged as an important ingredient of their well-being in our initial consultation exercise in 2005. Happiness with local area was one of the aspects of life which we included in the developmental stages of The Good Childhood Index described in Chapter 2. We found a strong association between children's happiness with this aspect of life and their overall well-being. In restricting the total number of items in our final short index we decided to omit this item on statistical grounds.[19] Nevertheless, this is an important issue for many children, and we have continued to explore children's feelings about their local area in our recent survey work. We briefly summarise our recent findings on this issue here, as there are a number of points of connection with themes outlined earlier in the report.

What children told us

In our initial consultation in 2005 many children commented on issues related to their local area which impacted either positively or negatively on their quality of life. We identified three key themes within children's comments.

First, children were concerned with the quantity and quality of facilities available to them in their local area – having somewhere to go and something to do:

'to be able to go out of the house and have plenty of things to do but don't have to spend money.'

'Somewhere for them to go and hang around with friends. There's no-where for 15-16 yr old to go except the streets.'

Many children linked the availability of facilities with a lack of money to spend on leisure activities.

A second key issue was safety and freedom in the local area. Children wanted to have autonomy and freedom in their locality but also expressed concerns about levels of safety and perceived risks:

'Drunk people fighting on the street, setting a bad example. Police, stopping people from skateboards.'

'There aren't very many leisure activities for young people which makes us feel useless. There are also many restrictions for young people & more things to do for adults rather than teens.'

'Fear of violence/feeling unsafe going out at night - so parents are more worried about our safety and are more reluctant to let us go.'

'Not being picked on, No drunken adults making us feel unsafe. Somewhere to go in our spare time.'

'restrictions on fields to play football.'

'having nowhere to go, nothing to do being afraid of going out alone.'

The third inter-related theme was experiences of adults within the local area:

'People treating you as if you don't belong anywhere.'

'Getting kicked off parks when they aren't near houses and not making any noise. Being labelled as a typical teenager!'

'Parents can be too strict stopping young people from going out. Neighbours and people complaining about problems.'

'Everybody telling us to move on when we're doing nothing (police, neighbours).'

What we have asked in our surveys

In our 2008 survey we drew up a list of questions to cover many of the above issues. Some of these were taken from a set of questions by Huebner (1994) on the living environment and some were developed specifically for this research. There were three questions on each of the following topics:

• Local facilities

• Safety/freedom

• Local adults.

We also asked questions about overall satisfaction with the local area.

These questions worked well from a statistical point of view and so we have also more recently included them in the fourth wave of our quarterly survey in April 2011. The findings presented in this section are from this survey which covered a balanced sample of 2,000 children aged eight to 15 living in family households in England, Scotland and Wales.

Views about the local area in general

Overall most children were relatively happy with their local area, but overall levels of happiness with this aspect of life tended to be lower than for many of the aspects covered in The Good Childhood Index. The mean score out of 10 for all children aged eight to 15 was 7.1, and 13% of children were unhappy with this aspect of their lives.
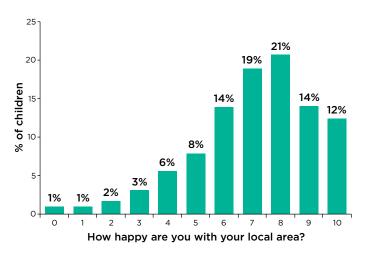

Figure 31: Happiness with local area
Source: Quarterly survey, waves 1 & 2, age 8 to 15, N = 4006

There was no significant gender difference in overall happiness with the local area but there was a substantial decline with age. Just over 7% of children aged eight and nine were unhappy with their local area, compared to almost 17% of children aged 14 and 15.

There was a significant association[20] between children's level of happiness with their local area and their overall well-being.

Local facilities

Table 11 shows children's overall responses to the three questions about facilities in their local area. Between 27% and 40% of children aged eight to 15 responded negatively to these questions.

There were no significant differences between males and females in response to these questions. However there was a strong age profile. We added up children's answers to the questions to create an overall score for local facilities ranging from 0 to 12 where higher scores reflect a higher degree of satisfaction.

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
There are places for me to go in my area	27%	15%	58%
There is nothing to do in my area	37%	23%	40%
There are lots of fun things to do where I live	31%	26%	43%

Table 11: Children's views about local facilities
Source: Quarterly survey, Wave 4 (April 2011), age 8 to 15, N = 1984 to 1992

The mean overall score for the whole sample was 6.5 out of 12. This ranged from 7.3 out of 12 among eight and nine-year-olds to 5.5 out of 12 among 14 and 15-year-olds (see Figure 32). So children's satisfaction with local facilities drops quite sharply with age and is much lower for secondary school aged children than primary school aged children.

Figure 32: Age variations in satisfaction with local facilities
Source: Quarterly survey, Wave 4 (April 2011), age 8 to 15, N = 1969

There were also some indications of variations according to economic prosperity. We do not have measures of local area prosperity in this survey, but there was a significant association between household income, social class and children's satisfaction with local facilities.

In our 2008 survey we were also able to explore differences in satisfaction with local facilities for children living in urban and rural areas. Here there was also a significant difference with significantly lower levels of satisfaction in rural areas (6.4 out of 12) compared to urban areas (6.9 out of 12).
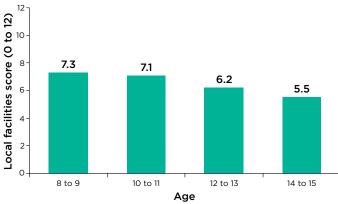
Safety and freedom

Children's answers to the questions on safety and freedom are shown in Table 12. The large majority of children (78%) felt safe when they were out in their local area during the day and relatively few felt unsafe (8%), but over a quarter (27%) did not feel safe when out at night. Two-thirds of children agreed that they had plenty of freedom in their local area.

Here there was no evidence of age-related differences. However, females scored lower on this aspect of local area than males, and the difference was primarily due to feelings of safety at night. Around 30% of females did not feel safe when they were out in their local area at night compared to around 24% of males.

There was a marginal difference here between urban and rural children, with those living in rural areas being a little more likely to feel safe and that they had freedom in their local area.

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
I feel safe when I am out in my local area during the day	8%	15%	78%
I feel safe when I am out in my local area at night	27%	30%	43%
I have plenty of freedom in the area I live in	13%	21%	66%

Table 12: Children's views about safety and freedom in the local area
Source: Quarterly survey, Wave 4 (April 2011), age 8 to 15, N = 1763 to 1976

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
Adults in my area listen to young people's views	23%	41%	36%
Adults in my area treat young people fairly	12%	37%	51%
I like my neighbours	10%	24%	67%

Table 13: Children's views about local adults
Source: Quarterly survey, Wave 4 (April 2011), age 8 to 15, N = 1797 to 1951

Local adults

Children's responses to three questions about local adults are shown in Table 13. Responses tended to be more positive than negative with two-thirds of children (67%) agreeing that they liked their neighbours. However, almost a quarter of children disagreed that adults in their area listened to young people's views.

There were no differences between females and males here but again older children were significantly less satisfied with this aspect of their local area than younger children. For example, around 30% of children aged 14 and 15 disagreed that adults in the area listened to young people's views, compared to around 16% of children aged eight and nine.

An index of local area well-being

Overall the nine questions discussed above, covering three different aspects of children's feelings about their local area, worked well from a statistical point of view and explained over 30% of the overall variation in children's happiness with their local area with all three aspects making an important contribution. This suggests that these questions are tapping into relevant topics for children.

At the same time there are probably some other aspects of children's feelings about their local area that need to be explored further in order to improve this list of questions as a child-centred subjective index of local area well-being.

1. **How happy are you with your local area?**

[The above question uses a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 = very unhappy; 5 = neither happy nor unhappy; and 10 = very happy]

Please say how much you agree or disagree with the following sentences:

2. **There are places for me to go in my area**

3. **There is nothing to do in my area**

4. **There are lots of fun things to do where I live**

5. **I feel safe when I am out in my local area during the day**

6. **I feel safe when I am out in my local area at night**

7. **I have plenty of freedom in the area I live in**

8. **Adults in my area listen to young people's views**

9. **Adults in my area treat young people fairly**

10. **I like my neighbours**

[Children are asked to respond to each question on a five-point scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'.]

Figure 33: A short index of local area well-being

Summary

- Children's feelings about their local area – including local facilities, local people and safety/freedom – are important ingredients in their overall well-being.

- Generally, most children are happy with their local area but the level of happiness declines substantially with age.

- In particular older children are much less satisfied than younger children about local facilities and their perceptions of adults within their community.

- There are relatively few gender differences on this topic but females have significantly greater concerns about safety in the local area.

- We have not yet been able to explore associations between happiness with the local area and indicators of local economic prosperity, but information on household income suggests that there may be a link between lower levels of satisfaction and lower levels of prosperity.

- There are also some interesting differences in the views of children in urban and rural areas. Children in rural areas are less satisfied with local facilities but appear to be a little more likely to feel safe and have freedom in their local area.

4 Conclusions

This report has provided an overview of key findings from our ongoing research programme on children's subjective well-being. The topics discussed in the report cover a wide range of aspects of children's lives relating to their feelings about themselves, their relationships with other key people in their lives and the environments in which they live. The report provides a number of examples of how different aspects of children's quality of life vary according to factors such as age and gender; how it can be affected by experiences of poverty; and how it can be disrupted by adverse life events at home, at school and with friends. Overall the report demonstrates the importance and value of asking children how they feel about their lives in order to help to understand the key ingredients of a good childhood in the UK today.

The growing interest in children's subjective well-being is part of a wider international trend which recognises that people's quality of life can not simply be captured by measures of economic progress and that people's own evaluations of their lives are an important indicator of the state of society. In the UK, in 2010, the Prime Minister launched a new initiative to measure the nation's well-being having stated four years earlier:

It's time we admitted that there's more to life than money and it's time we focused not just on GDP, but on GWB – general wellbeing. Wellbeing can't be measured by money or traded in markets. It's about the beauty of our surroundings, the quality of our culture and, above al, the strength of our relationships. Improving our society's sense of wellbeing is, I believe, the central political challenge of our time.

David Cameron (2006)[21]

The Measuring National Well-being initiative is being led by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which, in October 2011, following an initial national consultation (see Matheson, 2011), published a discussion paper on domains and measures of well-being (Beaumont, 2011). This paper outlined six key factors directly affecting an individual's well-being:

1. **Our relationships**

2. **Health**

3. **What we do**

4. **Where we live**

5. **Personal finance**

6. **Education and skills**

Cutting across these domains the ONS identifies issues of equality and fairness and of sustainability over time.

There is substantial overlap between these domains and the issues that we have identified through our research programme as being important to children. We have therefore used the above framework as a means of drawing out key themes covered in the report which suggest areas of focus for improving children's well-being.

Key themes

Relationships

Our research has highlighted the central importance of children's relationships for their subjective well-being. Within this broad category, children's relationships with friends and peers are, of course, very important. We have presented findings in this report demonstrating that children who are bullied by peers and those who are socially isolated are at much higher than average risk of experiencing low well-being.

However, it is important to recognise that children's feelings about the quality of their relationships with key adults in their lives appear to be even more important to their overall well-being. In particular, our consultation with young people, together with statistical analysis of survey data, has identified two key aspects of children's relationships with adults, both of which need to be taken into account.

First, children identified the nurturing aspects of their relationships with adults as fundamentally important. The amount of care and support they receive from parents, teachers and other key adults is vital. So is their sense of safety and security in these relationships.

On the other hand, children also identified the importance of adults treating them with respect, recognising their increasing competencies as they grow up and allowing them freedom of choice and expression. Our research has demonstrated, for example, that children's participation in family decision-making is linked to higher well-being, as are feelings of being listened to at school and in their local communities. Moreover, feelings of choice, freedom and autonomy are important ingredients in what it means to have a good childhood. Given children's position within society these are often ingredients that they are dependent on adults to grant them.

Self

Our research has explored various aspects of children's feelings about themselves.

The analysis we undertook for the development of our Good Childhood Index demonstrated that children's feelings about their health were a key component of their overall well-being. In consulting with children about this we have found that health behaviours are seen as an important aspect of this.

Our research has also explored other aspects of self which are linked with children's sense of well-being. Children's feelings about their appearance is another important issue. We have found that children increasingly worry about the way that they look as they grow older (between the ages of eight and 15) and that this aspect of life is a particular concern for girls.

We would suggest therefore that the ONS's proposed domain of 'Health' might usefully be broadened for children, and perhaps also for adults, to incorporate other aspects of 'self'.

Activities and time use

In the ONS's paper, a healthy 'work-life balance' is identified as a third important factor determining overall well-being. Our research suggests that this is a key issue for children as well as adults.

In our initial consultation in 2005, children identified leisure time, access to activities and a good balance of time use as key ingredients of a 'good childhood'. Many children mentioned academic work pressures as something which prevented them having a good life.

Our survey research suggests that the balance of children's time with family and friends is the most critical aspect of time use. Generally speaking children who felt they spent too little time with these two sets of key people in their lives had lower overall well-being.

Thus our research supports the importance of including this domain in relation to children's well-being.

Living environments

Children have also identified their feelings about the main environments where they spend time – home, school and local area – as key factors affecting their well-being.

Not surprisingly, children's home environments are very important to them. Findings presented in this report show that children who did not feel safe at home were particularly likely to have low overall well-being. Issues of privacy at home also become increasingly important as children grow older.

Children are also concerned about the quality of the local environment. Our research on children's feelings about their local area suggests that many feel that there are not sufficient local facilities geared to meeting their needs, and that this perception is particularly prevalent amongst older secondary school aged children.

Money and possessions

As for adults, economic factors are a fifth key factor which impacts on children's quality of life. Our consultation with children suggested that 'having enough' is much more important to children than being wealthy. This idea has been confirmed by our statistical analysis. For example, it is interesting that children who felt they had roughly the same amount of money as their friends had the highest overall levels of well-being.

Our research also draws attention to the need to adopt a child-centred approach to defining poverty and material deprivation. There is a small significant link between household income and children's well-being, particularly in relation to children living in the poorest households. However, there is a much stronger link between measures of children's direct experience of material deprivation and their well-being.

Learning and development

The final domain we consider relates to children's learning and development. It was clear from our initial consultation with children about well-being in 2005, that children view school and learning as vital ingredients for their well-being in the present as well as the future.

This is one of the aspects of life where children have mixed feelings of subjective well-being. A greater proportion of children tends to be unhappy with aspects of school life than is the case for family relationships, home life and friendships, for example; and over a quarter of children do not look forward to going to school. On the other hand, our survey findings indicate a high degree of commitment to achieving well at school, with around three-quarters of children feeling that this is 'very important'.

We have also explored children's expectations about, and aspirations for, the future. This aspect of children's lives appears to carry increased weight as children get older. Most children are relatively optimistic about their lives, but this decreases somewhat between the ages of 10 and 15. Over half of children hope to go to university. There are differences in these respects according to family economic status. Children living in poorer households have lower expectations of going to university and are significantly more pessimistic about their futures.

Cross-cutting theme: stability

Cutting across the above six domains, our research has highlighted the extent of stability and change in children's lives as a key theme in helping to understand variations in subjective well-being. We have presented a range of findings on this theme throughout the report.

Our survey work provides evidence that changes in children's lives, particularly in relation to family and home – such as a change in family structure, moving house and changes in household income – have a discernible negative impact on children's well-being. We have also shown that other ongoing life events, such as problems with friendships and positive and negative experiences of school life, appear to have an impact which may be cumulative.

These findings demonstrate the dynamic nature of children's subjective well-being and also provide useful pointers as to how well-being can be enhanced. Levels of subjective well-being are changeable and low subjective well-being is not fixed or inevitable. It should be possible to prevent low well-being and avoid some of the potential longer-term repercussions, by providing support for children during key transitions in their lives, and when they are facing particular challenges and adversities. It may also be possible to support children to develop the capacity to withstand shocks and negative life events and our research provides some tentative indications that children's sense of autonomy and choice may be important factors in this context.

Turning the six themes into priorities for improving children's well-being

Focusing on the six areas of well-being outlined above, and the relevant drivers of well-being within each of the areas, can help to ensure that decisions that affect children are made in a way which gives the best possible chance for improving children's well-being.

In our report *Promoting positive well-being for children*, published alongside this paper, we set out how decision-makers in central and local government, and other public agencies, can use the evidence on children's subjective well-being to make decisions, implement policy, and ultimately improve outcomes for

children. Ensuring that the evidence on what makes children happy plays a central role in decision-making will help make the UK a place where every child can enjoy a good childhood and a positive outlook for their adult lives.

Future work

It is hoped that this report makes a valuable contribution to understanding children's well-being in the UK today. We now have a substantial amount of unique information about overall levels of children's well-being, how these levels vary according to key individual and household characteristics, and some of the key factors that impact on the subjective well-being of children. These findings already suggest a range of ways in which children's well-being can be enhanced.

The report also raises a number of questions and identifies areas for future exploration. Three of the key areas which we feel require further attention are as follows.

First, there is a need to explore in more detail the well-being of specific sub-groups of children who may not be well represented in general population surveys. We produced some findings in Chapter 2 of this report which suggest that children not living with their family are a key minority group who may be particularly vulnerable to low well-being. More work is required to identify particular sub-groups of children who are at high risk of low well-being and to understand the factors involved in this. In a similar vein, findings presented in this report indicate that the importance of various aspects of well-being may vary for different age groups of children. There is a need, therefore, to develop a more fine-grained understanding of the key constituents of well-being at different ages. This might include attempts to broaden the age range covered in our research to also include children below the age of eight.

Second, there is a pressing need to undertake research that explores the connections between well-being and other issues in children's lives. There is now substantial evidence of associations between children's subjective well-being and a range of issues and problems in their lives. However, there is very little research which has shed light on the causal links involved in these associations.

Longitudinal research studies tracking well-being and the emergence of other issues over time is needed to take this further. This a very important topic because it has been proposed theoretically that a period of low well-being puts people at increased risk of longer-term problems.

Third, and linked to the previous point, there is a need to learn more about ways in which children's well-being can be enhanced. The findings presented in this report suggest that there may be a variety of actions which could be taken at individual, family, school, community and national levels which could improve levels of well-being. For example, these might range from greater involvement of children in decision-making within the family and at school, tackling bullying and broader issues such as incorporating a child-centred perspective into measures to reduce economic inequalities in our society. There is also scope for pilot studies which test out ways of enhancing children's well-being.

The final overarching point is the importance of continuing to monitor children's well-being, particularly in view of changes in our society. We plan to continue to track the well-being of children through using our Good Childhood Index. The Children's Society is also involved in an international initiative which, over the next few years, will provide valuable additional comparative data on children's subjective well-being in a diverse range of countries. At a more local level, we have already worked with schools and local authorities to measure children's well-being within particular contexts and compared this with national averages. The measures described in this report provide additional opportunities for this type of work and we hope to continue to collaborate with others to further develop understanding of children's well-being and its practical application.

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Notes

1. The 2008 survey was administered for The Children's Society by Ipsos Mori.

2. The 2010 survey was administered for The Children's Society by the National Foundation for Educational Research.

3. The surveys have included all four nations of the UK although due to sampling issues children in Northern Ireland have only been represented in some waves of the survey.

4. The quarterly surveys are conducted for The Children's Society by Research Now.

5. These supplementary surveys were administered for The Children's Society by Dubit.

6. See Rees et al (2010a), pages 40 to 48 and 87 to 89.

7. We are continuing to explore other topics that may be important to children, including consideration of different aspects of life that are important at different ages during childhood. Later in the report we discuss children's feelings about their local area. It may be that this or other aspects could be added to The Good Childhood Index in the future.

8. This example was originally published in one of our web newsletters on well-being in 2011.

9. A correlation is a measure of the strength of association between two variables. It ranges from 0 to 1 (or –1) with numbers further away from 0 denoting a stronger association.

10. Using Spearman's rho

11. The material in this section does not include the small proportion of children who were not living with their family at the time of the survey. As discussed in Chapter 2 these children tend to have substantially lower levels of well-being than those living with family.

12. Using linear regression.

13. Using linear regression.

14. Using linear regression.

15. Equivalised household income – i.e. taking into account the size of the household.

16. The questions discussed in this section are taken from the Friends sub-scale of Huebner's Multidimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1994).

17. Cronbach's alpha = 0.78.

18. The Spearman's rho correlation between the above five-item scale and overall well-being was 0.57.

19. The main reason for this was because of the overlaps between answers to this item and answers to other questions in the index such as home, money and possessions and school.

20. Spearman's rho = 0.41.

21. www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2006/may/22/conservatives.davidcameron

The Children's Society

The Children's Society wants to create a world where all children and young people are respected, valued and heard. We believe that childhood should be happy and that young people deserve to reach their full potential.

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