

Developing an index of children's subjective **well-being in England**

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This is a summary of the second in a series of reports from The Children’s Society’s programme of research on children’s well-being, being undertaken in collaboration with University of York. The research programme aims to develop a better understanding of children’s well-being, taking full account of children’s own perspectives, and to:

- Identify the reasons for variations in children’s well-being
- Monitor changes in children’s well-being over time.

The report proposes a new short index of children’s well-being that can be used for the above purposes.



Well-being: What is it and why does it matter?

‘Well-being’ is a broad term, which refers to the quality of people’s lives. There has been considerable concern about children’s well-being in England following several studies making international comparisons.

In the UK we now have a lot of information about children’s well-being through available social indicators such as income, poverty, infant mortality rates and educational attainment. However, we still know relatively little about children’s subjective well-being – i.e. their assessments of satisfaction with life as a whole and with particular aspects of their lives. There is some evidence that the subjective well-being of children may have increased over the last decade or so. But, there is currently no satisfactory index of children’s subjective well-being in England.

To fill this gap, The Children’s Society, in collaboration with University of York, has developed a new short index of children’s subjective well-being. This work is based on three surveys undertaken with a total of over 17,000 young people in 2005, 2008 and 2010.

The index consists of two parts which measure:

1. Overall subjective well-being (or ‘life satisfaction’)
2. Well-being in particular aspects of life.

Measuring overall subjective well-being

The report proposes using a measure of overall subjective well-being (or ‘life satisfaction’) based on a shortened version of a scale originally developed in the US.¹ This consists of five statements, which young people are asked to say how much they agree or disagree with:²

- ‘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’.

The scale produces a total life satisfaction score in the range from 0 to 20. It is a reliable and stable measure of young people’s overall level of well-being. Figure 1 summarises young people’s scores on this scale from our most recent survey. The average score was just over 14 out of 20. Nine percent of young people scored below the mid-point of the scale and could be said to be relatively dissatisfied with their lives.

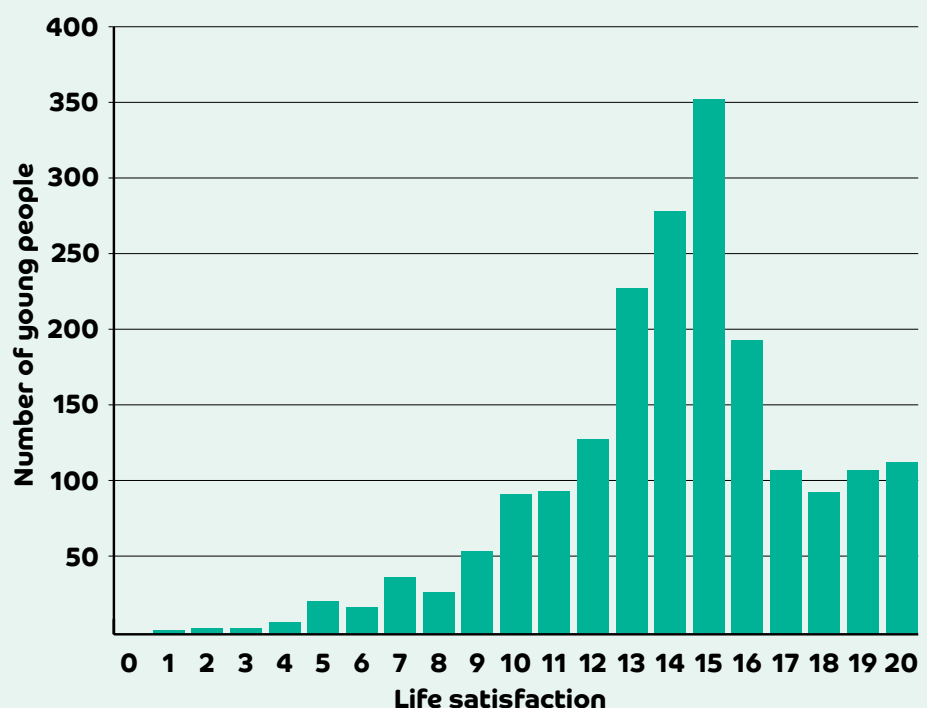


Figure 1: Overall scores for Life Satisfaction Scale (derived from Huebner)

There were no significant differences in the average life satisfaction scores for females and males aged 8 to 15.

However there was a noticeable drop in well-being for young people in older age groups as shown in Figure 2. The average life satisfaction score for eight-year-olds was 15.3 and for 15-year-olds it was 13.2. Low life satisfaction more than trebled across the age range from 4% of children aged 8 to 9 to 14% of young people aged 14 to 15.

Well-being in particular aspects of life

Subjective well-being can be thought of both in terms of life as a whole (as above) and in relation to particular aspects of life – such as satisfaction with personal relationships. Through the research programme we have aimed to identify the most important aspects of children’s lives in terms of their well-being. Based on our work so far we propose the following list of ten areas (not ranked in order of importance):

1. Family
2. Friends
3. Health
4. Appearance
5. Time use
6. The future
7. Home
8. Money and possessions
9. School
10. Amount of choice

In our short index, young people are asked to rate their happiness with each of these aspects of their lives on a scale from zero to ten.³

Table 1 shows the average scores and the percentage of young people who were unhappy (score of less than five out of 10) for each question.

- **Young people were happiest in relation to their family and friends, their health and safety, the home that they lived in and the way they used their time. For all these domains only around 4% to 6% of young people could be described as unhappy.**

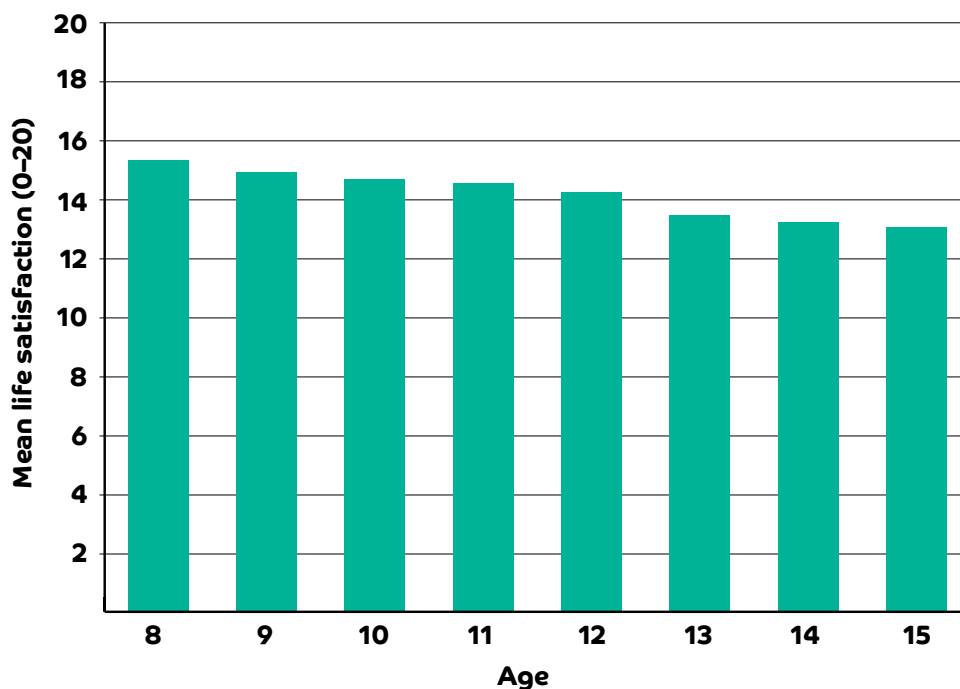


Figure 2: Age patterns in overall well-being

Happiness with...	Mean score	% unhappy
Family	8.5	4%
Health	8.2	5%
Friends	8.1	4%
Home	8.0	6%
Time use	7.4	6%
Money and possessions	7.3	10%
School	7.0	14%
Appearance	7.0	13%
Choice	6.9	13%
The future	6.8	10%

Table 1: 10 aspects of young people’s well-being

- There were some areas where young people tended to be less happy, and in particular there were three areas – school, appearance and the amount of choice they have – where more than one in eight young people scored less than five out of 10 and could be described as unhappy.

There are some significant differences in happiness with these aspects for females and males:

- Females are less happy than males in relation to their appearance and how they use their time. In particular, twice as many



females (17%) as males (8%) were unhappy with their appearance.

- However, females were significantly more happy with school than males.

There are also some noticeable age differences, as shown in Figure 3, which divides the survey sample into two groups roughly corresponding to primary school (8 to 11) and secondary school (12 to 15). As can be seen, in most domains, the younger age group were happier than the older age group although there was no difference for ‘home’ and ‘friends’.

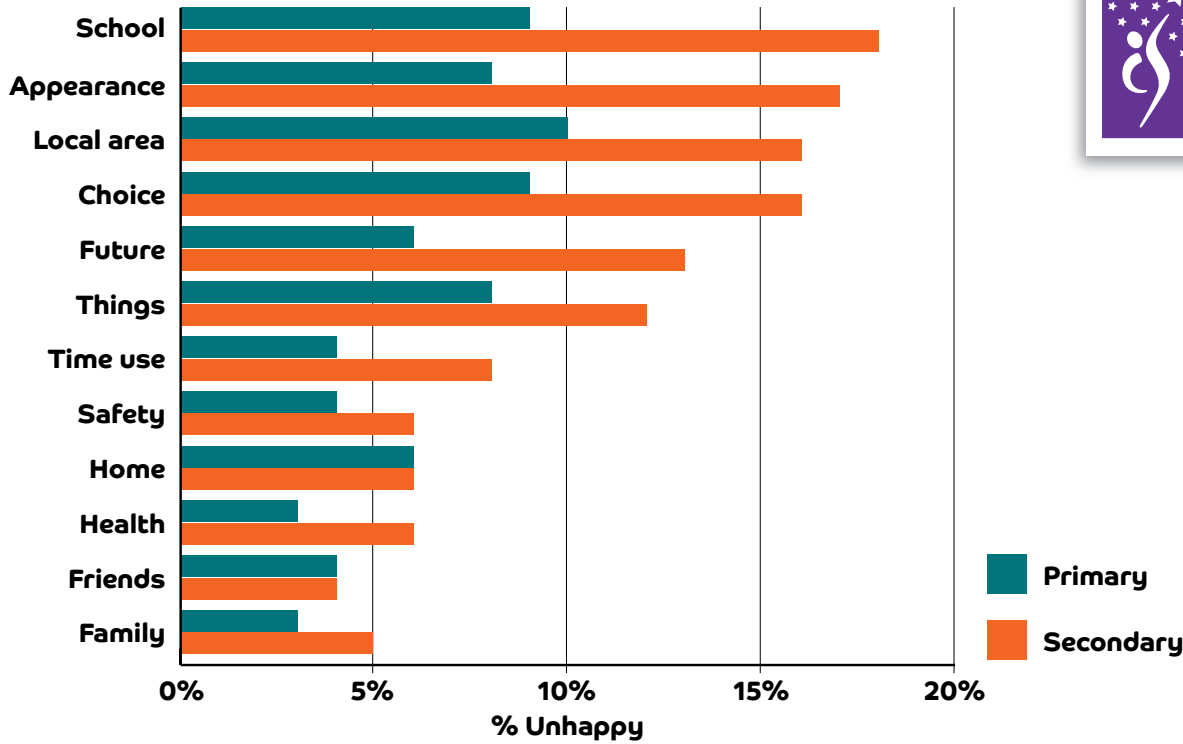


Figure 3: Well-being in different aspects by age group

Which aspects of life are most important in terms of well-being?

We can also use the above list of aspects of children's lives to explore which areas have the strongest association with their overall well-being. Analysis presented in the report shows that all ten aspects were linked to overall well-being, but that six aspects in particular had the strongest links. These were – choice, family, appearance, money/possessions, time use and health. These six aspects explained over half of the variation in overall well-being.

Using the index

This short index has been developed to fill a gap in the measurement of subjective well-being in England. The Children's Society plans to use the index as a means of regularly monitoring children's subjective well-being. This will be an important step forward

in understanding children's well-being in England.

This short index may have a range of other uses. In particular it could be used with particular populations of young people. For example, it would be possible to undertake a representative survey of young people within a local area and then compare the results with the national picture.

Next steps

In addition to using the short index as a monitor of children's well-being, we are also developing a longer version of the index, which will contain more detailed questions about different aspects of children's lives. So for example, in addition to asking how happy children are at school, there will also be more detailed questions about particular aspects of their lives at school such as feeling safe at school, their classmates, their teachers, and so on.

This more detailed version of the index could also be useful to monitor well-being and measure change in specific areas of young people's lives.

Further information

Further information about the index and about the well-being research programme is available on our website at: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/wellbeing

Notes

1. Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale
2. Young people are asked to respond on a five-point scale from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'.
3. Where zero means 'Very unhappy' and 10 means 'Very happy'.