# Good Childhood Report 2017

**The
Children's
Society**

# Contents

# Foreword

**For over 130 years, The Children's Society has been committed to understanding the complexity of children's lives and working hard to make their lives better. We know that it's only possible to make the biggest difference we can by listening to children and helping them to have a say in shaping the services there to support them.**

Over more than a decade, we've asked over 60,000 children how their lives are going. Every year, our Good Childhood Report provides a unique annual update on children's subjective well-being. It tells us, from children's own perspectives, how happy they are across many different aspects of their lives.

Our 2017 report, the sixth in-depth study so far, analyses the latest data on trends in children's well-being over time. Worryingly, children and young people's happiness is in decline.

We investigate, for the first time, how a range of serious problems are affecting children's well-being up and down the country.

Living in fear of crime in their neighbourhood. Families struggling to pay the bills. Going without the right emotional support at home. These are just some of the many pressures children told us they are struggling with.

Just under a million have none of the serious problems we asked about in their lives. But this is the minority of children. A more widespread experience, affecting more than half of children, is having three or more serious problems to grapple with.

One million children and young people have seven or more serious problems to deal with. These young people are ten times more likely to feel unhappy than those with no problems.

It's clear that some children in this country are under tremendous pressure, dealing with difficulties in many aspects of their lives. The evidence clearly points to a damaging impact on their well-being.

At a time when the Government is cutting funding for children's services, this gives us deep cause for concern.

We're extremely proud that our groundbreaking research into children's well-being, in partnership with the University of York, continues to shine a light on children's well-being and the complexity of their lives. What remains unchanged is that when children share their opinions with us, this will not be ignored.

The findings in this year's report are of great significance for those responsible for resourcing the services that exist across the country to support children. Together, it's our job to make sure they listen to children and act without delay.

**Matthew Reed**
Chief Executive,
The Children's Society

# Chapter 1

The current state of children's subjective well-being:
overview, variations and trends over time

## Introduction

The Good Childhood Report 2017 is the sixth in a series of annual reports about how children in the UK feel about their lives. Based on an ongoing collaboration between The Children's Society and the University of York, it summarises the latest data on children's subjective well-being and presents new insights from the most extensive national programme of research on this topic in the world.

This edition of the report:

- Summarises the latest national statistics and trends.

- Explores explanations for gender patterns in subjective well-being.

- Presents new insights into how multiple experiences of disadvantage are linked to children's subjective well-being.

Research with children in different contexts and countries around the world confirms that children want to be listened to and are keen to be asked for their views on topics that matter to them.[1]

In this report we listen to children's collective voices – gathered through large-scale surveys that ask them how they feel about their lives – as well as to their individual voices, which we heard during in-depth interviews that allowed them to present their distinctive views and experiences to us.

# What is well-being?

Although definitions vary – and some feel that well-being is hard to define – there is broad agreement that it refers to the quality of people's lives. It is about how well we are, and how our lives are going.

Sometimes well-being is measured from the outside, using social indicators that try to capture the quality of people's lives by considering factors such as health, education and the absence of poverty/deprivation. This approach – also known as objective well-being – usually comprises 'baskets' of indicators relating to different aspects of life that together give an indication of overall well-being. UNICEF has taken this approach to measuring children's well-being in different countries with a series of 'report cards' that consider different aspects of their lives,[2,3] although they have also incorporated subjective measures into this work.

There is also growing interest in people's own assessments of the quality of their lives. Objective indicators can be a useful way of piecing together information about different aspects of people's lives, but regardless of how things appear to others, only the person who is experiencing them knows how they feel. Subjective measures of well-being are precisely that – people's own assessments of how life is going.

'[Subjective] measures are arguably the most democratic of wellbeing measures, since they reflect not what experts or governments think should define a good life, but instead represent a direct personal judgment.'

**The World Happiness Report[4]**

Until recently, there has been much less attention given to children's subjective well-being. To fill this gap in our knowledge, in 2005 The Children's Society collaborated with the University of York and set up a programme of research.

Thirty years ago, some researchers doubted whether it was possible to ask children to give their own answers to questions about their well-being. But now we have accumulated good evidence from around the world to show that children's responses to subjective well-being questions are reliable, valid and capture concepts that are important

to them. Proxy reporting – whereby a parent or teacher responds on behalf of a child – is no longer considered adequate if children can be interviewed themselves.[5]

## What is subjective well-being?

Since 2005, The Children's Society and the University of York have been working in partnership to measure children's self-reported well-being and to explore reasons for differences between children, and variations over time.

This research programme follows the adult well-being literature in distinguishing between subjective or 'hedonic' well-being and psychological or 'eudaimonic' well-being.[6]

Within subjective well-being, we also differentiate cognitive judgements about how life is going (also known as life satisfaction) from emotions such as happiness, sadness, calmness and anxiety (also known as positive and negative affect).[7]

We have asked children about all aspects of their self-reported well-being in our research programme, although we have tended to focus on children's life satisfaction, which is known to be a more stable concept than affect. Analysis of children's responses on different days of the week shows that there is greater day-to-day variation for positive affect or 'happiness' – with higher scores at the weekend – than there is for life satisfaction and finding life worthwhile, which hardly vary at all by the day of the week.
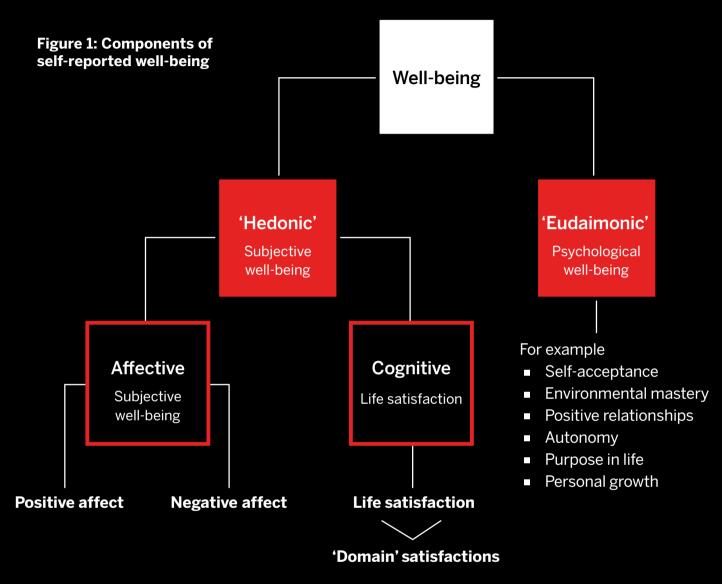
Statistical tests reveal that the associations between different measures of self-reported well-being are not particularly strong,[8] supporting the idea that the different concepts are distinct. Other analysis also supports the distinction between these concepts.

## Measuring subjective well-being

### Types of measures

Generally speaking, measures of the cognitive component of subjective well-being can be of two types. First there are measures of satisfaction with life as a whole, which are also referred to as 'context-free' indicators. Second, there are measures of satisfaction with particular aspects of life or 'domains'.

Context-free indicators that capture children's feelings about their lives as a whole are invaluable in giving form and measurement to what we mean by having 'a good life' and what our aspirations for children are. However, they can seem quite abstract, and more specific measures of children's satisfaction with different aspects of their lives can also be valuable in building up a more detailed understanding of their subjective well-being. Our theoretical understanding of overall well-being is that people's judgements about how life is going overall are influenced in a summative

**Figure 1: Components of self-reported well-being**

```
                                    Well-being
                                        |
              +-------------------------+-------------------------+
              |                                                   |
          'Hedonic'                                         'Eudaimonic'
          Subjective                                        Psychological
          well-being                                        well-being
              |                                                   |
      +-------+-------+                                    For example
      |               |                                    ■ Self-acceptance
  Affective       Cognitive                                ■ Environmental mastery
  Subjective      Life satisfaction                        ■ Positive relationships
  well-being                                               ■ Autonomy
      |               |                                    ■ Purpose in life
+-----+-----+         |                                    ■ Personal growth
|           |         |
Positive  Negative  Life satisfaction
affect    affect       |
                       V
              'Domain' satisfactions
```

Reproduced from The Good Childhood Report 2013

way by how they feel about different aspects of their lives. So, for example, we expect positive feelings about family, friends and school to combine to bring about positive feelings about life overall, and negative feelings about one or more domains to lower overall well-being.

In the UK, we are fortunate to have a number of excellent panel and cohort studies – such as the Millennium Cohort Study and Understanding Society – which contain context-free as well as domain measures of well-being. We report the latest statistics on these in each edition of The Good Childhood Report. However, because these questions are contained within multi-purpose surveys and the space in these surveys is very restricted, there are also limitations to them. For this reason The Children's Society developed a more comprehensive set of indicators of children's subjective well-being called The Good Childhood Index. Below we briefly describe the measures available in the UK panel and cohort studies, and also the more extensive set of measures in The Good Childhood Index.

## Measures in UK surveys

Since the mid-1990s, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) – now called Understanding Society – has been measuring children's happiness with life as a whole every year. As a time series, this dataset is a valuable source of information on how children's overall well-being has changed in recent decades. This question has also been asked of children in the last two sweeps (age 11 and 14) of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS). This measure has been used for a number of pieces of analysis of children's subjective well-being. However it does have some limitations. First, it uses a seven-point scale; and research indicates that scales with a larger number of response options, such as 11-point scales, are preferable for this type of measure.[9] Piloting and cognitive testing we have carried out shows that children are comfortable with and able to answer questions using these longer formats. Second, it is well established in research that multi-item scales are more reliable than single-item measures[10] and we found evidence in support of this in our early research with children.[11]

Understanding Society and the MCS also ask children about their happiness with five aspects of life: family, friends, appearance, school and schoolwork. We make use of this data to examine time trends in children's subjective well-being in these areas. However we know that other aspects of life such as health, material items and feelings about autonomy, time use and the future are also important components of children's subjective well-being.

Thus whilst this data from these existing large-scale surveys is important and provides valuable insights, it does also have limitations. In view of this, through our research programme we developed a more comprehensive set of measures of children's cognitive subjective well-being called The Good Childhood Index.

# The Good Childhood index

### What is the Good Childhood Index?

The Good Childhood Index consists of context-free measures of satisfaction with life as a whole and a set of questions about different domains. It consists of a short questionnaire, which can be completed by children themselves, and used to measure well-being overall and in relation to 10 aspects of life. All except one of the questions in The Good Childhood Index are positively framed. The index can be administered in schools within lesson time and does not require staff to have specialist knowledge. It is free to use.

We include a multi-item measure of life satisfaction consisting of five items derived from a scale originally developed in the US by Scott Huebner.[12] The index also includes a single-item measure of happiness with life as a whole which mirrors the life satisfaction measure of personal well-being in the ONS Measuring National Well-being Programme[13] (for which The Children's Society provides the data for children).[14]

In terms of domains, in our research programme we have prioritised the aspects of life – or domains of well-being – that were (a) identified as most important by children and young people, and (b) appear to be most strongly linked to overall well-being. The index includes a set of 10 domains, which emerged from qualitative research with 8,000 children aged 14 to 15,[15] and statistical analysis of a nationally representative survey of 8 to 15 year olds. We found that happiness with these 10 domains – which are set out on page 14 – explained over half of the variation in children's overall well-being.[16] Some of these items are taken from lists proposed by other researchers[17] and some have been developed and tested through our research programme. This index works well for boys and girls and for children of different ages in the UK.

### Who is the index for?

The questions have been validated for use with children aged eight and above. There is no upper age limit for the index, although the questions about school assume that they are still at school (and can be omitted for young people who have left school). The index assumes a reading age of about eight.

### How was it developed?

The questions are all based on existing measures that have been validated with children in different parts of the world, primarily in the US and Australia. We tested a number of well-being measures and selected the ones that worked the best with children in the UK. As part of this process, we refined wordings when questions were not easily understood by children, added domains that we had found in qualitative and statistical research to be important for well-being, and refined multi-item measures into shorter scales where possible. We know from asking children that they enjoy being asked these questions and feel that they relate to topics that are important to them.

### Confidentiality/anonymity

If the index is being used for research or evaluation purposes, it is essential that children are assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

## Scoring the questionnaire

The single-item measures are simply scored on a 0 to 10 scale.

To calculate the score for the multi-item life satisfaction scale, the positively worded statements are scored from 0 to 4 such that 0 = strongly disagree and 4 = strongly agree, and the negatively worded statement is reverse scored. The items can be added together to produce a score ranging from 0 to 20, which can then be divided by two for comparison with 0 to 10 scales.

## Technical details

As we do not sum together the single items, the technical details below relate to the multi-item scale of overall life satisfaction.

### Internal consistency

In our initial report on children's well-being, we reported that the multi-item life satisfaction scale based on Huebner has a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84, indicating good internal consistency.[18] The scale also has good reliability for males, females, 8 to 11 year olds and 12 to 15 year olds, with a Cronbach's alpha greater than 0.80 in all cases.[19]

## Missing values

The scale also yields a very high level of response. For each of the five statements individually, less than 1.5% of young people selected the 'Don't know' option; and overall there were complete responses to all five statements for just under 98% of the sample.

### Reliability

A test-retest[20] shows good reliability for the multi-item measure of overall well-being. The intra-class correlation coefficient was 0.84 (p<.001).

## The questionnaire

The short Good Childhood Index contains the following 16 items:

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

- 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

Please tick one of the boxes to say how happy you feel with things in your life.**

How happy are you with…

- your life as a whole?
- your relationships with your family?
- the home that you live in?
- how much choice you have in life?
- your relationships with your friends
- the things that you have (like money and the things you own)?
- your health?
- your appearance (the way that you look)?
- what may happen to you later in your life (in the future)?
- the school that you go to?
- the way that you use your time?

* Response options are on a 5-point scale from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'.
** Scale from 0 to 10. 0 means 'very unhappy'; 10 means 'very happy'.

## Distributions

The distributions for all of these measures are highly negatively skewed, and tend to peak near or at the top of the scale.

## Construct validity

Principal component analysis with orthogonal (varimax) rotation extracted one factor (total initial eigenvalue 3.75) explaining 53.6% of the total variance. This suggests that the original seven items measure a single construct. We also tested the five-item measure of life satisfaction using Confirmatory Factor Analysis. The data was from our schools-based survey in 2010 with over 4,000 children in Years 6, 8 and 10. Analysis was conducted using the lavaan package in R, with full information maximum likelihood estimation and robust Huber-White estimators and standard errors. The results indicate that the fit of the overall model was very good (CFI = 0.996; RMSEA = 0.035). Testing also suggests that there was metric and scalar invariance in multi-group models for gender and age group, meaning that the measure can be used to compare means between these sub-groups.

## Policy relevance of different measures

Context-free measures can be thought of as barometers of well-being that are useful for determining how well children are at the individual, subgroup, local or national level. Measuring children's overall well-being is an essential first step in presenting a view of wellness in a given area, as well as which subgroups of children and which factors affecting well-being should be the greatest priority.

However, global measures may seem a little abstract and unspecific for the purposes of influencing decisions about policy and resource allocation. In comparison, domain-specific measures that are concrete and provide more detail about different aspects of children's lives are potentially of greater use to policy and practice.

To give an example, schools may justifiably feel that it is beyond their sphere of influence to bring about significant improvements to individual children's overall well-being in cases where low well-being is being driven by family relationships and circumstances over which

they may hold little sway. However, schools self-evidently have much greater potential to change levels of well-being at school, which will be directly influenced by children's experiences within the school gates. The same is true of other domains of well-being such as family (eg for practitioners working with families), money/possessions (eg for policies to alleviate child poverty), local area (for local government planning) etc. Of course, most domains of well-being are likely to benefit from multi-disciplinary collaboration across different agencies, and some domains of well-being – like happiness with appearance – do not fit neatly with any single department or agency. Nevertheless, domain-specific measures are extremely useful for focusing attention on particular actions that could be taken to improve children's well-being in specific aspects of their lives.

# The research programme

**2005**

We run a national consultation of over 8,000 young people aged 14 and 15. 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 a review of existing international work on children's well-being, takes place.

**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.

**2009**

We run further consultations with younger children aged eight and nine years old and we also test additional questions on topics not covered in 2008.
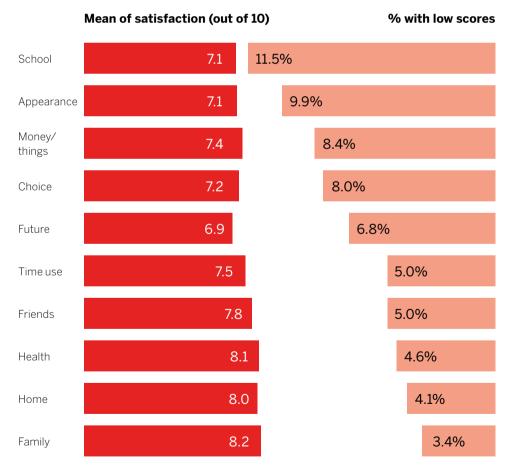
**2010**

The second well-being survey begins. This includes a representative sample of just under 6,000 children aged 8 to 15 in mainstream schools in England. We also begin our quarterly Good Childhood Index surveys which sample 2,000 children aged 8 to 15.

## The Good Childhood Index

As mentioned earlier, our Good Childhood Index includes single-item measures of 10 aspects of children's lives. These 10 domains have been highlighted in qualitative research to be important to children, while statistical analysis shows that together they explain over half of the variation in children's overall well-being.

Figure 2 shows the latest figures for The Good Childhood Index – the average scores and the proportion scoring below the midpoint, who we have described as having 'low well-being'. As can be seen in Figure 2, children are most happy with their relationships with family and least happy with school and their appearance.

**Figure 2: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index**

| | Mean of satisfaction (out of 10) | % with low scores |
|---|---|---|
| School | 7.1 | 11.5% |
| Appearance | 7.1 | 9.9% |
| Money/things | 7.4 | 8.4% |
| Choice | 7.2 | 8.0% |
| Future | 6.9 | 6.8% |
| Time use | 7.5 | 5.0% |
| Friends | 7.8 | 5.0% |
| Health | 8.1 | 4.6% |
| Home | 8.0 | 4.1% |
| Family | 8.2 | 3.4% |

Household Survey Wave 16, May/June 2017, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain
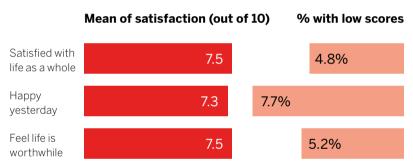Equally weighted by age and gender

## 2011

The second well-being survey ends. We carry out supplementary surveys of children and pupil referral units, to represent the views of children who are not covered in mainstream schools surveys.

## 2012

Participation in piloting of international Children's Worlds survey including, in England, qualitative work with children and a survey of over 1,100 children aged 12 to 13 takes place.

## 2013–14

The third schools-based well-being survey is undertaken with over 4,000 children in Years 4, 6, 8 and 10. This includes participation in the Children's Worlds survey for the three younger age groups.

## 2017

The latest (and 16th) wave of our online Good Childhood Index survey is undertaken. These surveys have now included over 30,000 children and young people aged 8 to 17.

We also regularly ask children about three of the measures of overall well-being that were developed by the ONS as part of their Measuring National Wellbeing Programme (and are the ONS data source for these for 10 to 15 year olds).

### Figure 3: Latest ONS measures of overall well-being

| | Mean of satisfaction (out of 10) | % with low scores |
|---|---|---|
| Satisfied with life as a whole | 7.5 | 4.8% |
| Happy yesterday | 7.3 | 7.7% |
| Feel life is worthwhile | 7.5 | 5.2% |

Household Survey Wave 16, May/June 2017, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain
Equally weighted by age and gender

### Data sources used in this report

The report makes use of the best and most up to date evidence available on children's subjective well-being. Much of this data comes from our own research programme, which is described in the timeline above. However, we also make use of available data from other sources such as Understanding Society.

### Understanding Society

(See understandingsociety. ac.uk/about for further details)

Understanding Society is a longitudinal study covering 40,000 households. It includes a questionnaire for children aged 10 to 15, which contains some questions on subjective well-being.

### The Children's Society household surveys

Since 2010 The Children's Society has conducted household surveys in Great Britain with parents and children aged 8 to 17. The surveys offer a chance to collect data on children's well-being together with data on the household, such as income and occupation

of the parents or carers. The survey usually covers 2,000 households in England, Scotland and Wales, and is socio-economically representative of these countries. However, the latest wave of this survey – conducted in May/June 2017 – included a larger sample of 3,000 households to enable analysis of children's experiences of multiple disadvantages.

### Understanding Childhoods

Between 2015 and 2017, The Children's Society also conducted a three year qualitative, longitudinal

study of childhood poverty with Professor Tess Ridge at the University of Bath. This involved three waves of annual, semi-structured interviews with 60 participants – 20 each in three locations in England (a rural town, a small city and a large city). Through primary and secondary schools in each location we recruited a cohort of children in Year 5 (ages 9 and 10) and a cohort in Year 7 (ages 11 and 12). At the beginning of the study all participants were living in low-income households, measured using eligibility for Free School Meals (FSM).[21]

## Time trends

In previous Good Childhood Reports, we have drawn on available data from the Understanding Society survey to present trends in children's well-being over time. If there are time trends in overall well-being – or in relation to particular domains – then there are implications for policy and practice, as it means that it must be possible to make changes to improve children's lives.

In The Good Childhood Report 2016, for example, we highlighted a decrease in satisfaction with friendships between 2009 and 2014, and an increase in satisfaction with schoolwork over the same period.

In the current report, we have added the most recent wave of Understanding Society data to this analysis to explore the latest time trends in children's well-being.

Figure 4 shows trends in each of the six subjective well-being variables that are contained in Understanding Society, across six waves of the survey. The dotted lines above and below the main line show 99% confidence intervals.

Statistical tests indicate that:
- There was a significant decrease in happiness with friends and life as a whole between 2009–10 and 2014–15 as well as a marginal decrease in happiness with appearance for the same period.
- There was also a significant increase in happiness with schoolwork over the six-year period, despite a downward trend between 2012–13 and 2014–15 that is also significant.
- There was no significant change in happiness with family and school.[22]

Figure 5 shows the trends separately for girls and boys. Comparing girls and boys at each wave:
- School work: Girls were significantly happier than boys in all waves.
- Appearance: Boys were significantly happier than girls in all waves.
- Family: There were no significant gender differences in any wave.
- School: There were no significant gender differences in any wave.
- Friends: Girls were significantly happier than boys in Waves 1 and 2, but by Wave 6 this had reversed and boys were marginally happier than girls.
- Life as a whole: Boys were significantly happier than girls in Waves 5 and 6. Thus the gender difference for happiness with life as a whole that was observed for the first time in last year's Good Childhood Report continues and has not narrowed in the latest wave of data.

## Figure 4: Trends in children's happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 2009 to 2015[23]
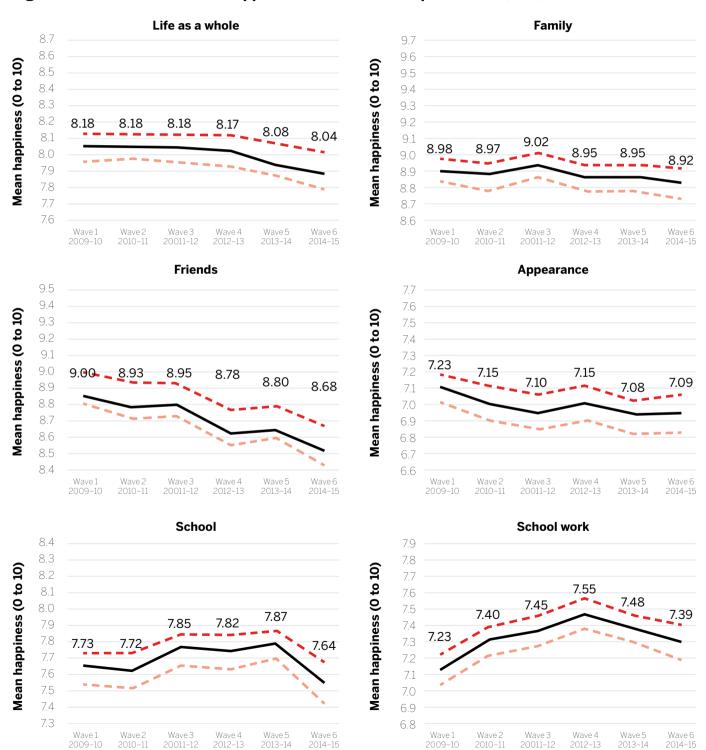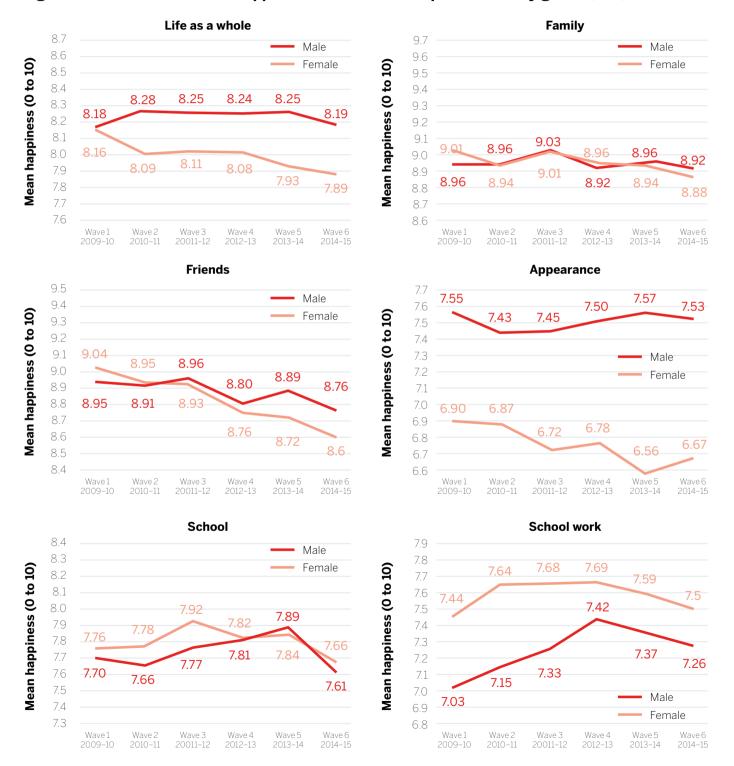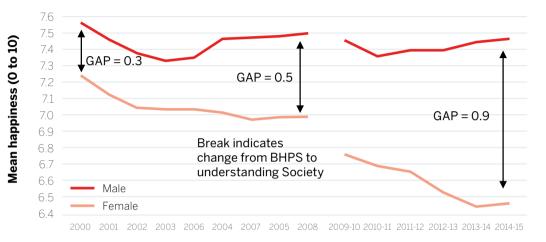


Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted (but confidence intervals do not take account of design effect)

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# Figure 5: Trends in children's happiness with different aspects of life by gender, UK, 2009 to 2015



### Life as a whole

Male: 8.18, 8.28, 8.25, 8.24, 8.25, 8.19
Female: 8.16, 8.09, 8.11, 8.08, 7.93, 7.89

### Family

Male: 8.96, 8.96, 9.03, 8.92, 8.96, 8.92
Female: 9.01, 8.94, 9.01, 8.96, 8.94, 8.88

### Friends

Male: 8.95, 8.91, 8.93, 8.80, 8.89, 8.76
Female: 9.04, 8.95, 8.96, 8.76, 8.72, 8.6

### Appearance

Male: 7.55, 7.43, 7.45, 7.50, 7.57, 7.53
Female: 6.90, 6.87, 6.72, 6.78, 6.56, 6.67

### School

Male: 7.70, 7.66, 7.77, 7.81, 7.89, 7.61
Female: 7.76, 7.78, 7.92, 7.82, 7.84, 7.66

### School work

Male: 7.03, 7.15, 7.33, 7.42, 7.37, 7.26
Female: 7.44, 7.64, 7.68, 7.69, 7.59, 7.5

Waves: Wave 1 2009–10, Wave 2 2010–11, Wave 3 20011–12, Wave 4 2012–13, Wave 5 2013–14, Wave 6 2014–15

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The gender gap in happiness with appearance highlighted in last year's Good Childhood Report appears to have narrowed a little in the latest wave of data. Despite this, appearance is still the domain of well-being for which there is by far the greatest gender difference, with girls' happiness with this aspect of life almost a whole point (out of ten) lower than boys'. This follows a longstanding gender difference in feelings about appearance that has existed since the British Household Panel Survey started measuring this in 1994, and which has been widening from 2002 onwards.

**Figure 6: Gender differences in satisfaction with appearance, 2000 to 2015**



British Household Panel Survey, 2000 to 2008, weighted data, three-year smoothed moving average. Understanding Society, 2009–10 to 2014–15, weighted data, three-year smoothed moving average from 2011-12

NB This data relates to 11–15 year olds only, as the BHPS only covered this age group, so the figures for Understanding Society are different from those on page 18

**Summary**

- Most children aged 10 to 17 have high levels of subjective well-being, with between 3% and 12% unhappy with their lives overall or aspects of their lives depending on the domain of life being asked about. Children are most happy with their family relationships and least happy with the school that they go to and their appearance. These findings are consistent with previous Good Childhood Reports.

- The latest available evidence on trends over time shows that between 2009 and 2015, there was a decrease in happiness with friends and life as a whole and, marginally, for appearance. There was an increase in happiness with schoolwork over the same period. These continue trends seen in previous Good Childhood Reports.

- In terms of gender differences in time trends, girls continue to be less happy than boys with their friendships, appearance and life as a whole, while boys continue to be less happy than girls with their schoolwork. There is a long-standing and growing gender difference in feelings about appearance.

# Chapter 2

Explaining gender differences in children's subjective well-being

**As discussed in the previous chapter, and in previous editions of The Good Childhood Report, there are some notable gender differences in patterns of children's subjective well-being. Girls are significantly less happy than boys with their lives as a whole. They are also less happy with their appearance.**

There are also some important age patterns (Figure 7). In particular, the gender gap in happiness with life as a whole and appearance widens as children get older, while the gap in happiness with school work narrows. In fact, in terms of happiness with life as a whole, there is no strong age pattern for boys at all – they have roughly the same level of average happiness between the ages of 10 and 15. Over the same age range, girls' average happiness with life as a whole decreases substantially, starting at a higher point than boys at 10 years old and ending at a lower point than boys at 15 years old. So far, there is relatively little insight into the reasons for these different gender patterns. The aim of this chapter is to shed some light on this issue.

**Figure 7: Girls' and boys' satisfaction with different aspects of life at different ages**



Children aged 10 to 15 in the UK, total original sample size = 3659. Source: Understanding Society, Wave 5.

We look at two explanations that have been proposed for these patterns:

**1. The impact of social media usage on children's well-being.**
This reflects a widespread concern that the growing use of social media and related technologies has detrimental effects on people's lives. We know that social media usage has grown amongst young people in recent years, and that teenage girls are much more likely than boys and pre-teen girls to use social media heavily.[24] It may be that girls and boys use social media differently or that it affects them in different ways. If either or both of these are the case then this could explain gender variations in subjective well-being.

**2. The impact of bullying.**
Our previous research has shown that there is quite a strong link between experiences of being bullied and lower well-being. There is also evidence of gender differences in experiences of being bullied. We know, for example, that girls are more likely to be involved in relational types of bullying, while boys tend to be involved in physical bullying.[25] If different types of bullying are associated with different impacts, it is possible that this factor can explain some of the different gender patterns discussed above.

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# Social media

**Our Understanding Childhoods study[26] provides a useful context to how children experience social media. Although we did not specifically ask about social media in the study, we did ask about possessions such as mobile phones and other electronic items, and this often led us into discussions of children's usage of social media. For many of the secondary school children, having a smart phone and using social media were synonymous:**

**Q. What do you do on your phone?**

'YouTube, that's my life, Snapchat, that's my life too, sometimes Skype.'

By the second wave of our study, when children in the older cohort were aged 12/13, there was a sense that social media usage was ubiquitous. At this age, children felt that not having a phone or a social media account would be socially excluding:

'[Not having a phone would be the] worst thing because I really like playing on my phone, like going on Facebook and that. I usually go on Facebook every day.'

One of the common, positive comments that children made about social media was its potential for enabling communication between friends and family with whom otherwise they might not so easily stayed connected. Children talked about keeping up with friends who have moved school, and talking to family in other countries or other parts of the country.

'I had to leave [my friends] at that school but we are still friends like, we write on Facebook and stuff...'

Children also pointed to the equalising effect of social media as they don't need credit to call or send a message. If they have access to the internet, they can connect with friends and family through messaging apps.

'Say they have no internet at home, they'll go to McDonald's and then when it's time to go home, they'll just go home and do without internet until the next day.'

However, there was also recognition of the negative consequences of social media such as of a fear of missing out on the latest 'gossip', as well as the arguments and bullying that can take place.

'I just go on Facebook for the gossip. [There's] a lot of arguing on Facebook.'

# Bullying

**In our Understanding Childhoods study we asked children about their experiences of bullying, and it was clear from their comments that bullying is a major factor affecting their quality of life.**

## 'Someone said "Go kill yourself. No one wants you in this world."'

There was evidence in our study of incidents of all of the main types of bullying: name-calling, spreading rumours, social exclusion, taking belongings and physical bullying. Most of the bullying took place in person – either at school, on the way to or from school, or in the local area – but there was also discussion of bullying online.

There was a tendency for girls to talk more about relational bullying, and for boys to talk about having belongings taken and physical bullying. Both boys and girls talked about name-calling.

'One of my friends is expecting me to not be friends with the other one, and then the other one expects me not to be friends with the other one, so I am sort of in the middle of all that.'

'My friend got hurt. He got like pushed over really badly.'

However, for girls there was some evidence of physical aggression being symptomatic of a pattern of severe and widespread bullying affecting many of their peer relationships.

'[This girl] tried to throw me down the stairs in the school and she kept on kicking me and she punched me in my face…And then there are these other people saying that – people in my tutor group saying that I'm annoying and I'm stupid.'

'They'll follow me home and then they all like throw stuff at me and say rude things.'

Several of the children in our study described bullying being directed towards children because of their physical appearance, or 'good looks' being protective against bullying.

'[They say] that I've got crooked teeth and chipmunk teeth and things like that.'

'[I haven't been bullied at school]. People call me cute, so…'

It was clear from children's comments that bullying could have a major impact on their lives.

'The first school that I went to I got bullied. [The school] saw them do it to me. But they didn't really do anything about it, so I had to leave that school and go to another primary school.'

There are two different mechanisms through which these kinds of factors might explain gender differences in subjective well-being:

- One is about gender differences in experiences. For example, it is possible that (a) girls use social media more than boys; and (b) high social media use has a detrimental impact on subjective well-being (in a similar way for girls and boys).
- An alternative relates to gender differences in impacts. In this case, for example, (a) there may be no difference between girls and boys in the extent of their use of social media, but (b) social media use could have a different impact on the subjective well-being of girls and boys.

We will consider the evidence for both of these explanatory mechanisms. It is possible that both are at work – ie that there is a gender difference in frequency of social media use (differential experiences) and that there is a gender difference in how social media use impacts on well-being (differential impact). Additionally there is the possibility that these patterns and relationships differ according to age. Later in the chapter we will look at this by focusing on the age groups where the differences are largest: 14 and 15 years of age for satisfaction with life and with appearance; 10 and 11 years old for satisfaction with school work.

For each of the possible explanatory factors identified previously – bullying and social media use – we will consider the following questions:

1. Do each of these factors predict variations in subjective well-being?

2. Are there gender differences in children's experiences?

3. If so, do these differences explain some or all of the gender differences in subjective well-being?

4. Irrespective of the answers to (1) and (2), are there gender differences in the strength of association between the factor and subjective well-being?

5. Are the differences covered above stronger at the ages where there are the widest gender gaps in subjective well-being?

We will consider these questions separately for satisfaction with life as a whole, with appearance, and with school work, for which there are significant gender and age differences.

It is important to recognise that all of these questions contain an important assumption about the direction of the causal link between each factor and subjective well-being. For example, it is assumed that frequency of social media use causes variations in subjective well-being – perhaps that children who use social media more intensively will therefore have lower well-being. However it is possible that the causal link is in the opposite direction – for example, children who feel less satisfied with life could be more likely to turn to social media. Similar arguments can be applied to the link between being bullied and subjective well-being. Experiences of being bullied could cause lower subjective well-being; but it is also plausible that children with lower subjective well-being may be more vulnerable to being bullied. We are not able to explore the direction of linkages between these factors with the data currently available. So this chapter is based on the theory that social media and bullying affect subjective well-being, rather than vice versa.
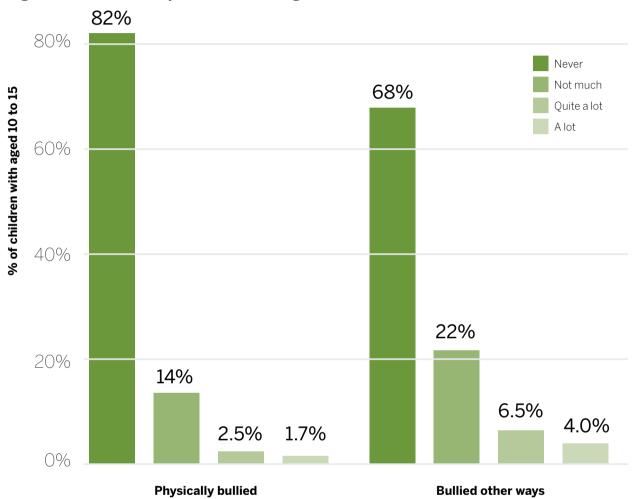
**Figure 8: Children's experiences of being bullied at school**



Figure legend: Never / Not much / Quite a lot / A lot

(Y-axis: % of children with aged 10 to 15)

Physically bullied: 82%, 14%, 2.5%, 1.7%
Bullied other ways: 68%, 22%, 6.5%, 4.0%

## Experiences of being bullied at school

The Understanding Society survey asked two questions about children's experiences of being bullied at school[27]:

- How often do you get physically bullied at school, for example getting hit, pushed around or threatened, or having belongings stolen?

- How often do you get bullied in other ways at school, such as getting called names, getting left out of games, or having nasty stories spread about you on purpose?

Response options for both questions were: never; not much (one to three times in the last six months); quite a lot (more than four times in the last six months); and a lot (a few times every week).

The large majority of children did not experience bullying in each of these ways (Figure 8) and high frequency bullying was relatively rare (and as will be seen later, also became more rare as children got older). So, for the purposes of analysis, the variables were simplified so that they just related to whether the child had experienced each form of bullying or not.

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### Is bullying associated with variations in subjective well-being?

There is substantial previous evidence of a strong association between experiences of being bullied and lower subjective well-being and this was reflected also in the current data (as shown in Figure 9). This figure shows differences in subjective well-being for children who had and had not experienced each form of bullying, controlling for age and gender and considering both forms of bullying together. Children who had been bullied had significantly lower satisfaction with life, appearance and school work.[28] In general the differences in satisfaction according to 'other' bullying were a little larger than for physical bullying.

### Are there gender differences in rates of being bullied?

There were significant gender differences in rates of physical bullying – 23% of boys had been physically bullied compared to 13% of girls. Rates of other bullying were very similar for girls (33%) and boys (31%).
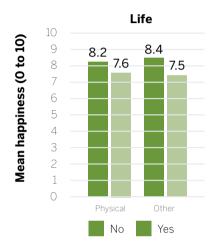
### Do gender differences in bullying rates explain gender differences in subjective well-being?
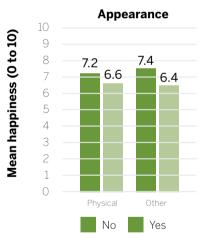
It is possible that the different rates of physical bullying for boys and girls might explain gender differences in subjective well-being. Because this type of bullying was higher among boys it might be expected in particular to explain some of the difference in satisfaction with school work, because this was an aspect of life with which boys were less satisfied than girls. Our tests indicate that taking differences in rates of bullying into account did reduce the size of differences between girls' and boys' satisfaction with school work. Thus there is some evidence that higher rates of physical bullying might be a factor that is associated with boys' lower satisfaction with school work – although this would require more detailed exploration.
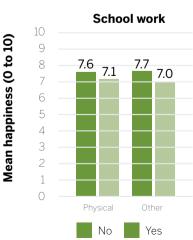
### Does bullying have a differential impact on girls' and boys' subjective well-being?[26]

It is also possible that bullying has a differential impact on girls' and boys' subjective well-being. However the tests we carried out do not suggest that this is the case. Neither physical nor other forms of

**Figure 9: Children's satisfaction with different aspects of life according to bullying**



Life

Mean happiness (0 to 10)

Physical: 8.2 (No), 7.6 (Yes)
Other: 8.4 (No), 7.5 (Yes)

No / Yes

Appearance

Mean happiness (0 to 10)

Physical: 7.2 (No), 6.6 (Yes)
Other: 7.4 (No), 6.4 (Yes)

No / Yes

School work

Mean happiness (0 to 10)

Physical: 7.6 (No), 7.1 (Yes)
Other: 7.7 (No), 7.0 (Yes)

No / Yes

bullying appeared to have a stronger impact either for girls or for boys on any of the six measures of subjective well-being.[29]

### Are the gender patterns stronger at the ages where there are the widest gender gaps in subjective well-being?

Finally, we tested whether bullying had a differential impact on subjective well-being for girls and boys at the ages when the gender gaps in subjective well-being were strongest – ie in the 14 to 15 years age group for satisfaction with life as a whole and with appearance, and in the 10 to 11 years age group for satisfaction with school work. There was evidence of a differential impact in one respect only: girls' life satisfaction was more affected by physical bullying than boys' life satisfaction in the 14 to 15 years old age range. It should be borne in mind that at this age physical bullying is a relatively unusual experience, particularly for girls – only 12% of girls aged 14 years old and 4% of those aged 15 years old had been physically bullied recently.

**Summary**

Experiences of being bullied are known to be strongly associated with variations in children's subjective well-being, and this general pattern is supported by the analysis here. It has been proposed that bullying may be one of the factors that also explain gender differences in children's subjective well-being. In this section we have explored two possible reasons why this might be so:

- Different rates of bullying for girls and boys.
- A different impact of bullying on subjective well-being for boys and girls.

In answer to these two possibilities:

- There was some evidence that higher rates of physical bullying among boys were linked with their lower satisfaction with school work. There was no evidence that different experiences of bullying could explain gender differences in satisfaction with appearance or life as a whole.

- There was also no evidence of a differential impact of being bullied on girls and boys that could explain the observed gender differences in children's subjective well-being overall. However there was some evidence that physical bullying may have a differential gender impact among the 14 to 15 year old age group when differences in children's subjective well-being are largest.

Overall, based on the questions, the evidence does not suggest that bullying plays an important role in explaining differences in subjective well-being between girls and boys. There are limitations to the questions about bullying in the Understanding Society survey. There is no separate question specifically on relational bullying such as being socially excluded. This is covered in the same question as verbal bullying. Our earlier research found important gender differences for relational bullying. So it is possible that future research may still find that some aspects of bullying do explain gender differences in children's subjective well-being.
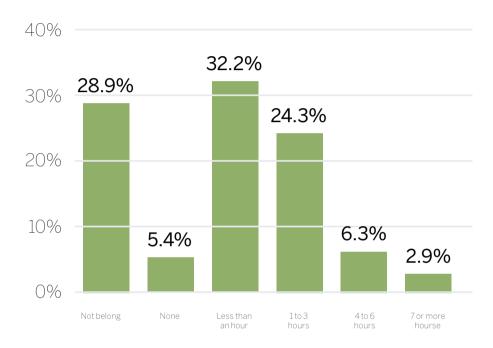
# Social media use

In the Understanding Society survey, children's use of social media is assessed by two questions:

- Do you belong to a social website such as Bebo, Facebook or MySpace?[30]
- How many hours do you spend chatting or interacting with friends through a social website like that on a normal school day?

Children's responses to the two questions can be combined, and the distribution of responses in Wave 5 of Understanding Society is shown in Figure 10. More than a quarter of children said that they did not belong to a social website. The most common pattern (32%) was for children to belong to a site and to spend less than an hour a day chatting or interacting with friends using social media.

For the purposes of statistical analysis, because there are quite small proportions of children in some of the above categories, we have used a simplified variable with four categories: not a member (does not belong to a social website); low intensity (no daily use or less than an hour); medium intensity (one to three

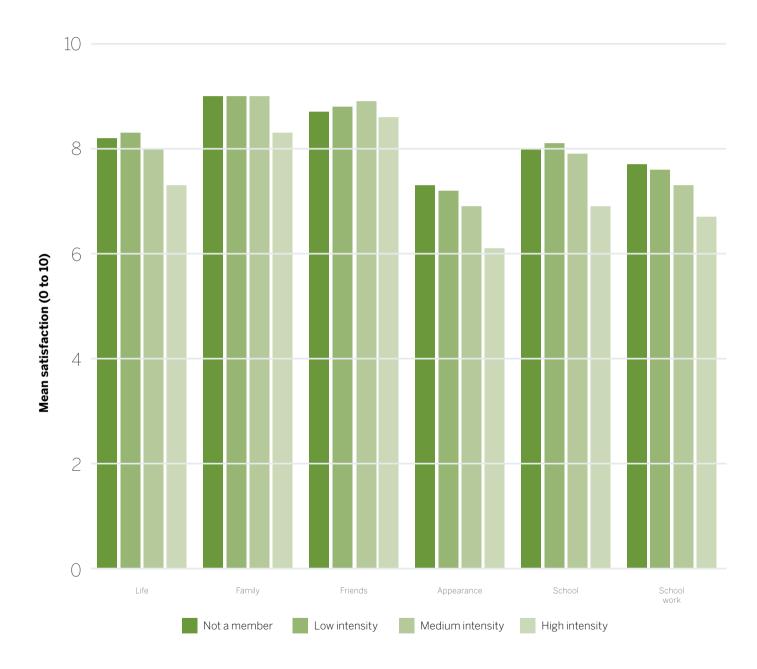**Figure 10: Frequency of children's social media use on a normal school day**



hours); high intensity (four hours or more). We chose to include the 'none' category in the same group as those children who used social media for less than an hour on a school day because it is possible that the former group still use social media on some occasions (eg at weekends).

## Is social media use associated with variations in subjective well-being?

To explore this question we assessed the extent to which children's social media use predicted their subjective well-being, controlling for age and gender variations. The results

for each of the six subjective well-being variables are shown in Figure 11. This initial analysis suggests that there is no difference in subjective well-being between children who do not belong to social media and those who are low intensity users (up to an hour). Medium intensity use is only associated with lower satisfaction with school work. There is no difference for other aspects of life. High intensity use (four or hours or more per day) is associated with lower life satisfaction and satisfaction with family, appearance, school and school work, but not friends.

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**Figure 11: Children's satisfaction with different aspects of life according to social media use**



Mean satisfaction (0 to 10)

Life  Family  Friends  Appearance  School  School work

Not a member    Low intensity    Medium intensity    High intensity

### Are there gender differences in children's social media use?

Given that there is evidence of an association between social media use and subjective well-being, the next stage of the analysis was to see if there were significant gender differences in children's social media use: as shown in Figure 12, the results suggest that there are. Boys were less likely to belong to social media than girls; and girls were twice as likely (12.6%) to be high intensity users than boys (6.0%).

### Do gender differences in children's social media use explain gender differences in subjective well-being?

If gender differences in children's social media use completely explained gender differences in subjective well-being then, when social media use was taken into account, there would no longer be any gender difference in subjective well-being, which, as can be seen in Figure 13, was not the case. This means that a child with a certain level of social media use would have the same level of subjective well-being whether they were a boy or a girl. This is particularly relevant to satisfaction with life,

appearance and school work where there are known to be significant gender differences. Our analysis to test this idea suggests that social media use may have some explanatory power in this respect, but that significant gender differences in subjective well-being still remain after taking social media use into account. Gender differences in satisfaction with school work became a little stronger when social media usage was taken into account. Overall, differences in girls' and boys' levels of social media use can explain some of the observed differences in girls' and boys' satisfaction, particularly with life and school work. Gender differences in intensity of social media use may be one of a number of factors that can, in combination, explain gender differences in children's subjective well-being.

### Are the gender patterns stronger at the ages where there are the widest gender gaps in subjective well-being?[31]

As with bullying, we also tested whether social media use had a differential impact on subjective well-being for girls and boys at the ages when the gender gaps in subjective well-
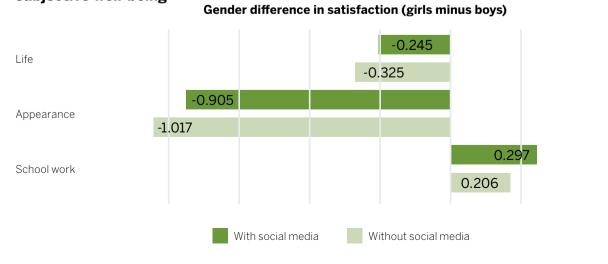
being were strongest – that is, in the 14 to 15 years age group for satisfaction with life as a whole and with appearance, and in the 10 to 11 years age group for satisfaction with school work. The patterns for these age groups were broadly the same as those already reported. There was evidence that high intensity social media use had more of an impact on girls' satisfaction with appearance than boys'. There was no evidence of differential gender impacts on satisfaction with life as a whole or school work.

We also tested the hypothesis that, among the older age group, social media may have a beneficial association with satisfaction with friends due to the potential for social exclusion of children who did not belong to social websites. We found some evidence of this. Children aged 14 and 15 who did not belong to social websites had significantly lower satisfaction with friends than those who did, and the group with the highest satisfaction with friends were medium intensity users. Low and high intensity users also had higher (non-significant) satisfaction with friends than those who did not belong to social websites.

## Figure 12: Intensity of children's daily social media use by gender



Girls | Boys

- Not a member
- Low intensity
- Medium intensity
- High intensity

## Figure 13: Effects of gender differences in social media use on gender differences in subjective well-being

**Gender difference in satisfaction (girls minus boys)**



- With social media
- Without social media

**Summary**

High intensity social media use (more than four hours per day) is linked to lower subjective well-being in relation to family, appearance, school, school work and life as a whole. There is no evidence that low and medium intensity usage is linked to lower subjective well-being (except for lower satisfaction with school work among medium-intensity social media users).

Just under 1 in 10 children have this high intensity pattern of usage – but girls are twice as likely as boys to have high intensity use.

Gender differences in patterns of social media usage do not adequately explain gender differences in subjective well-being, although they may have some part to play.

Social media use is more strongly linked with life satisfaction and satisfaction with appearance for girls rather than boys.

## Discussion

There are some important gender differences in children's subjective well-being. Girls tend to be happier than boys with their schoolwork but less happy with their appearance and with their life as a whole. This chapter has looked at two possible factors that have been proposed to explain these gender differences: bullying and social media use. For each factor it has examined the evidence that (a) gender differences in children's experiences and/or (b) gender differences in the impact of these experiences – may explain gender differences in their subjective well-being. We report that there is very little evidence to support the idea that different experiences or impacts of bullying can explain gender differences in children's subjective well-being. On the other hand we do find some evidence that both gender differences in intensity of social media use and gender differences in the impact of social media use on children's subjective well-being can explain some (but not all) of the gender gaps in children's subjective well-being.

It is very important to be clear that here we have only been focusing on explaining differences in subjective well-being between girls and boys. This is only one aspect of overall variations in subjective well-being. To illustrate this point we have looked at the different levels of explanatory power of different factors in terms of explaining overall variations in children subjective well-being. This is illustrated in Figure 15 which shows, first, that age and gender explain around 3.5% of the variation in children's life satisfaction. This is attributable to the decrease in life satisfaction with age between 10 and 15 years old and the gender difference noted earlier. The other bars in the chart show the increased explanatory power from introducing different variables. Household income only explains a very small additional amount (0.2%) after taking gender and age into account.[32] Social media use explains around 1.9% of the variation in children's life satisfaction. This is much less than the 8.3% for experiences of being bullied and 14.1% for a simple question about experiences of family support (which will

be discussed in more detail later). Thus social media use is a relatively weak predictor of variations in children's life satisfaction.

Similar patterns, although not quite as pronounced, were seen for satisfaction with appearance and with school work. In both cases, social media use explained less than 2% of the variation in satisfaction after taking age and gender into account. Bullying and family support both explained over 4% of the variation in satisfaction with school work and around 6% of the variation in satisfaction with appearance

Overall, what we can say from this is that while experiences of being bullied are fairly strongly related with children's subjective well-being, social media use appears to be less so. Nevertheless, given the widespread concerns about the impact of social media use on children's well-being, it is important to acknowledge that our analysis does indicate that high intensity social media use may be having some detrimental effect on children's subjective well-being – and that the effects appear to be stronger for girls than for boys.

Given this evidence, it is logical to try to understand why some children and young people use social media so intensively. This is important in terms of beginning to think about how high intensity social media use might be moderated. One hypothesis that we were interested in exploring was whether children who lacked supportive relationships were more likely to use social media intensively. To pursue this idea, we made use of a question in the Understanding Society survey which asked children 'Do you feel supported by your family, that is the people who live with you?' There were three response options to the question referring to feeling supported: in most or all of the things I do; in some of the things I do; and not feeling supported. Around 80% of children chose the first option, just under 19% the second option and around 1% the third option. For this reason the latter two options have been combined for analysis so we are comparing children with 'high support' and 'low support'.

We examined whether family support and social media use were linked. There were clear indications that they were. As

shown in Figure 16, 17% of children who felt that they had low family support were high intensity social media users compared to 7% of children who felt they had a high level of family support. This is an important finding and suggests that further research could be done on the factors associated with high levels of social media usage. This might, in turn, indicate potential interventions for children with high intensity usage.

**Figure 15: Comparison of the statistical power of different factors in explaining variations in children's life satisfaction**
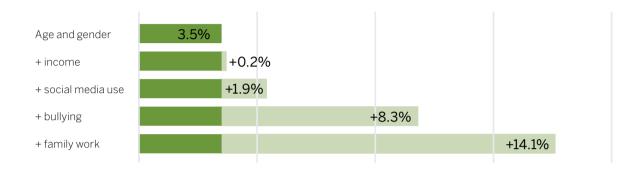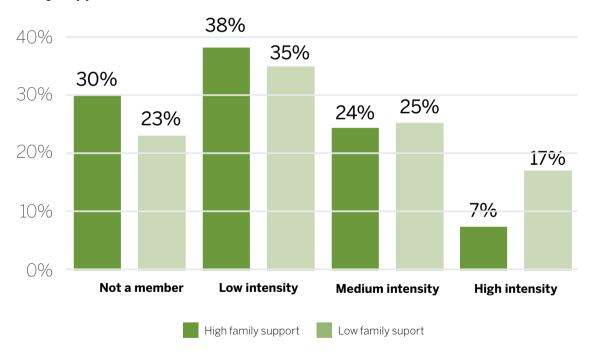


**Figure 16: Frequency of social media use by children according to level of perceived family support**

# Family support

We know from qualitative research with children that family support is of fundamental importance to children. In our nationally representative survey of 8,000 14 and 15 year olds (mentioned on page 14) which asked children to say in their own words what makes for a good life for young people, feeling supported by family was one of the key themes to emerge in children's responses.

## 'Supportive family that cares but gives you some freedom and trusts you...'

Furthermore, in relation to specific themes such as bullying, children in our Understanding Childhoods study emphasise the role of family members – usually their mother – as a first port of call for support if they are experiencing bullying.

'Because like [my mum] gave birth to me, and like she's the one that's mostly been there for me. Like my sisters, when I got bullied, they were always there for me, but like my mum was more there for me, if you know what I mean.'

In our Understanding Childhoods study, children also talked about family involvement in their social media usage

primarily in terms of supervision – which surprisingly, was not always unwelcome – but also in terms of support. A related topic was that parents are often familiar with platforms that they themselves use like Facebook and WhatsApp, but other platforms that have a similar functionality may be less well understood and potentially a 'blind spot' for them. Children's comments highlighted that it is possible for all social media platforms to be used in negative as well as positive ways, including those that parents may not think of in that way:

'And they also bully him online. So they might bully him on texting sites, like WhatsApp. They make fun of him and call him stuff like buckhead and slaphead.'

'If you like do want to have like a go at someone [on Snapchat] they do it privately, they won't do it over a story because it is just like everyone will think it's aimed at them but it is not.'

Similar themes have emerged from other qualitative research. For example in a Canadian study of children's online safety, young people themselves said that they felt that they could be better supported by parents controlling or limiting their technology use, and also increasing their own knowledge of technology so that they are better informed about the issues that children face online.[33]

# Overall summary

**It is already well established that there is a strong association between experiences of being bullied and lower subjective well-being. That is confirmed by the analysis presented here.**

There are also some gender differences in likelihood of being bullied. However there is limited evidence that these gender differences explain gender variations in subjective well-being.

There is also little evidence that differential impacts of bullying according to gender can explain gender variations in subjective well-being – although there are some indications that girls' life satisfaction may be more affected by physical bullying than boys (for the 14 to 15 years old age group in particular).

There are limitations to the questions about bullying being analysed here, and so future analysis with more detailed questions about different types of bullying may shed further light on whether bullying is a factor that can explain gender differences in children's subjective well-being.

There is some evidence that high intensity social media usage (more than three hours on a normal school day) is associated with lower subjective well-being, particularly for girls. In this sense, to some extent the fact that girls tend to use social media more intensively than boys can explain some of the gender difference in satisfaction with life and appearance.

However differences in social media usage do not explain very substantial amounts of the variation in children's subjective well-being and seem to be much less important than other factors such as family support and experiences of being bullied at school.

More research is needed to understand why some children become high intensity social media users, but one factor identified in the current analysis is that they are more likely to be children who do not feel well supported by their family.

Low intensity (less than an hour on a normal school day) social media usage does not seem to be associated with lower subjective well-being compared to not belonging to social media at all. It may have some benefits in terms of satisfaction with friendships, particular at older ages when exclusion from social media may also be an issue.

There is also very slim evidence that moderate intensity (one to three hours on a normal school day) social media usage has detrimental impacts although it is linked with lower satisfaction with school work.

None of the above can confirm directions of causality. It is possible that where associations do exist it could be that low subjective well-being leads to higher social media use rather than vice versa.

# Chapter 3

Children's experiences of multiple disadvantage

**It is well established that children who encounter adverse experiences or disadvantages in their lives are likely to have worse outcomes than other children, and this includes lower subjective well-being. For example, adolescents who experience neglect have poorer mental health, poorer education engagement and attainment, and are more likely to become involved in risky behaviours.[34]**

Successive Good Childhood Reports have highlighted disadvantages that are associated with lower subjective well-being, including deprivation,[35] feeling unsafe at home,[36] being bullied,[37] and feeling unsafe in neighbourhoods.[38] Most recently, our Troubled Teens report on adolescent neglect has demonstrated that children experiencing emotional, supervisory, physical or educational neglect have markedly lower well-being than other children.[39]

Individual disadvantages are clearly important for children's well-being. So what about when multiple experiences of disadvantage accumulate?

Various research studies have examined how the accumulation of disadvantage in childhood affects outcomes in adolescence and adulthood. Broadly-speaking, the more disadvantages experienced by children, the worse their subsequent outcomes. In one study, children aged 13 to 14 years experiencing five or more problems within the family environment – such as parental mental ill-health, physical disability, substance misuse, domestic violence, financial stress and poor housing conditions – were found to be 36 times more likely to be excluded from school than children with none of these problems.[40]

Thus there is evidence that multiple disadvantage affects children's well-becoming in terms of behavioural indicators and later outcomes in adulthood. What is less clear is whether, and how, multiple experiences of disadvantage relate to children's well-being in the here and now.

Our experience of running local services that work directly with disadvantaged children and young people is that they rarely face single problems in isolation; instead, they are often contending with multiple disadvantages in different parts of their lives. This is something that we have also observed in our research. In our Understanding Childhoods[41] qualitative, longitudinal study of a cohort of 60 children growing up in poverty, we found important differences within our sample. Although all of the children in our sample were experiencing financial hardship to a greater or lesser extent, there were notable and large differences in the quality of life of individual children within the sample. These differences can often be explained by other, non-financial disadvantages present in their lives. Some children were facing a whole range of challenges in different parts of their lives. Parental illness or disability, bereavement, a family member in prison, experiencing frequent or forced house moves, living in temporary accommodation, and being a young carer were just some of the issues that children in our study were experiencing in addition to financial disadvantages.

# Mia's story

**Mia is 11 years old and in her first year at secondary school. She lives with her mum and two younger brothers in a flat where she has lived for the past year. She spends alternate weekends with her dad who lives in a neighbouring town. Mia's dad is no longer able to work due to health problems, and her mum is currently a full time mum. Poverty structures many aspects of Mia's everyday life – where she can go, what she can do and whether she gets to go on holiday.**

Drugs, alcohol and mental health problems have featured powerfully in the lives of some of Mia's closest relatives and family friends. She has witnessed the devastating effects of interpersonal violence and the ways in which it can tear lives apart.

Many of the adversities that we tend to think of in relation to multiple disadvantage – poverty, violence, substance misuse, mental health problems and homelessness – are present in Mia's life. But in Mia's case it is the experience of these, in addition to other less obvious hardships, that are also important.

She has moved seven times in the last nine years. This has affected the way she approaches neighbourhood friendships – never getting too close to other children in a new area – and it has prevented her from putting down roots in a place she can call home. One of the things that really bothers Mia is the way her neighbours shout and scream all the time, race their noisy motorbikes up and down the road and bang their front door open and shut 24 hours a day, creating an environment of stress and heightened insecurity.

If Mia could help her family in any way she would give them more money. Not a lot more, but just a 'normal' amount – enough for her mum to stop worrying all the time and maybe even treat herself every now and then without feeling guilty. And if Mia could change anything in her own life she would create a future for herself free from sadness and anger, where she would be happy and remain so for the rest of her life.

Some of the children in our study had more than one disadvantage present in their lives, but these coincided with enough protective factors to tip the balance away from an accumulation of disadvantage. Close and supportive relationships with immediate families and wider networks of extended family, friends and others emerged as a key factors protecting children from the harshest effects of poverty, both financial and psychological.

# Samantha's story

**Samantha is 13 years old and in her third year of secondary school. She lives with her mum in a two bed flat. She has older siblings but they have all left home. The family are close-knit. They look out for each other and are protective of Samantha. Her brother, who she is closest to, is in prison. He came out for a brief time around the time of our second interview, but by the third wave of the study he was back in prison again. She really misses him.**

Samantha has experienced a considerable amount of residential transience – including multiple and forced moves. Before we met her, she had already been to three different primary schools. In the first wave of our study, Samantha was living in temporary accommodation that was miles away from school and her daily commute took over two hours. By the second interview she had moved into a more permanent home, which she liked better, but she found the area intimidating and unsafe.

Her mum is in paid employment, but the hours that she works vary from week to week, so she never knows how much money she will have, and she often worries about money. Working can sometimes be a mixed blessing because it excludes Samantha from financial benefits at school like help towards the cost of her school uniform, which she received in the past when her mum was unemployed.

But what tips the balance for Samantha is her experience of bullying. When she was in her first and second year of secondary school, Samantha was bullied by a group of children who would follow her home, call her names and throw things at her. The bullying got so bad at one point that she stopped coming to school, but then she thought 'Why should I miss out on my education when they're not?' Her mum and older siblings supported her as best they could – and most importantly, perhaps, in terms of dealing with the bullying itself – her teacher spoke to the bullies and set up a meeting, after which things improved. By the last wave of the study, Samantha was feeling really positive about school, and had made some good friends who she felt she could rely on.

These stories show us some of the ways in which multiple disadvantages can combine to affect children's everyday lives. They counsel against adults making assumptions about which factors will have the greatest impact on children, and indicate that less obvious hardships – particularly ones that concern children's relationships – are just as important to consider.

# Survey methodology

**We used the latest wave of our household survey of 3,000 children aged 10 to 17 and their parents – which was conducted in May/June 2017 – to ask about a list of 27 types of disadvantage that the family might have faced in the last five years.**

This list was chosen because it fulfilled a number of criteria:

- There is research evidence demonstrating that these items can be 'disadvantages' for children per se. For this reason, we did not include items that are not clearly associated with worse outcomes for children eg living in a single/step family. We reviewed a range of evidence to show that all of the factors in our list are associated with negative outcomes.

- We felt that it was ethically acceptable to ask either parents or children in a household survey whether they were currently experiencing – or had recently experienced – these factors in their lives. For this reason, we did not include a number of items that appear on other similar lists of adverse childhood experiences, such as whether children have experienced abuse, and whether parents are using drugs.

- We wanted to include a spread of items covering experiences that are comparatively rare (eg someone in the household being in prison) and those that affect a sizeable proportion of the population (eg the household is struggling to pay bills).

- As described in more detail later, we wanted to include a balance of items affecting children directly (eg neglect) as well as indirectly through the material or family environment in which they live (eg living in a household where there is debt).

Some of these disadvantages (9) were asked of children, but the majority (18) were asked of parents.

We were interested in disadvantages in different domains of children's lives, including interactions within the immediate family that we would expect to exert a direct influence on children's well-being (eg neglect), other features of the family context that we might expect to have a more indirect influence (eg parental drinking), and aspects of the material environment that provide a wider context of disadvantage (eg debt, low household income, overcrowding etc). We draw on ideas from Brofenbrenner's ecological systems model[42] to understand the interactions between children, the people around them and their environments.

## Table 1: Types of disadvantage included

| Type of disadvantage | Disadvantage reported by child or adult |
|---|---|
| **Parent-child relationships – 3 items** | |
| Emotional neglect: Child has experienced emotional neglect | Child-report |
| Supervisory neglect: Child has experienced supervisory neglect | Child-report |
| Young carer: Child is a young carer | Child-report |
| **Family/household factors – 11 items** | |
| Domestic violence: (Responding) parent has experienced domestic violence | Adult-report |
| Alcohol: (Responding) parent has had problematic alcohol use | Adult-report |
| Parental mental health: (Responding) parent has had a mental health problem | Adult-report |
| Prison: Someone in the household has been in prison | Adult-report |
| Parental illness/disability: (Any) parent/carer has had a long-standing illness or disability | Adult-report |
| Child illness/disability: (Any) child has had a long-standing illness or disability | Adult-report |
| Bereavement: Someone in the household has died | Adult-report |
| Residential transience: Family has moved house multiple times | Adult-report |
| Forced move: Family has experienced a forced house move | Adult-report |
| Maternal education: Mother left school without qualifications | Adult-report |
| Paternal education: Father left school without qualifications | Adult-report |
| **Material factors – 9 items** | |
| Overcrowding: Child shares room | Child-report |
| Overcrowding: Child shares a bed or doesn't have a bed | Child-report |
| Debt: Household has problem debt | Adult-report |
| Struggling: Household has struggled to pay bills | Adult-report |
| Child poverty: Equivalised income is less than 60% of median household income | Adult-report |
| Unemployment: Main income earner is unemployed | Adult-report |
| Free school meals: Child receives free school meals | Child-report |
| Destitution: Family has used a food bank | Adult-report |
| Homelessness: Family has been homeless | Adult-report |
| Risk of homelessness: Family has been at risk of homelessness | Adult-report |
| **Neighbourhood factors – 3 items** | |
| Safety of neighbourhood – Experienced two or more neighbourhood problems | Child-report |
| Safety of neighbourhood – Worried about two or more crimes/antisocial behaviour happening | Child-report |
| Safety of neighbourhood – Experienced crime/anti social behaviour | Child-report |

## Prevalence of different types of disadvantage

In terms of prevalence, and in keeping with our expectations, we found some types of disadvantage to be more widespread than others. As can be seen in Figure 17, a large minority of children were worried about crime happening (38%) or were living in families who reported struggling to pay bills (36%), while only a small minority of children did not have their own bed (2%) or lived in a household where the main income earner was unemployed (2%).

## Population estimates

Using the Office of National Statistics mid-year population estimates for 2016, we estimated the prevalence of different types of disadvantage for the UK as a whole and the number of children aged 10 to 17 who are likely to be experiencing each disadvantage. In total there were estimated to be just over 5.8 million children in this age group in the UK. Using this approach, we estimate that approximately 2.2 million 10 to 17 year olds across the UK are worried about crime in their local area, and 2.1 million are living in households that are struggling with their bills. At the other end of the spectrum, we estimate that approximately 100,000 10 to 17 year olds are living in households where the main income earner is unemployed, and a similar number do not have their own bed.

## Multiple experiences of disadvantage

We counted up the number of disadvantages present in children's lives to explore children's multiple experiences of disadvantage. This allows us to identify proportions of children facing different numbers of disadvantage asked about in our survey, and to estimate the number of 10 to 17 year olds in the population that this is likely to affect.

Table 3 demonstrates that just under a million children aged 10 to 17 are not facing any disadvantages, but that this is a minority of children. A more common experience – affecting half of the population – is for one, two, three or four of the disadvantages that we asked about to be present in children's lives. At the top end, we estimate that more than a million children are facing seven or more disadvantages.

There were no significant age or gender differences in terms of experiencing multiple disadvantage, but there were differences according to ethnicity. As can be seen in Figure 18, white children were more likely to have experienced none or one of the disadvantages that we asked about, whilst BME children were more likely than white children to have experienced two or more disadvantages.

In addition to looking at all 27 items in the scale together, we also separated the items into four sub-scales relating to the sub-headings include in Table 2:

- Children's family relationships: 3 items, all child-report
- Family factors: 11 items, all adult-report
- Economic factors: 10 items, a mixture of child and adult-report
- Neighbourhood factors: 3 items, all child-report

Again, we did not find age or gender differences for the sub-scales, but we did find differences according to ethnicity for economic factors and children's family relationships, as can be seen in Figures 19 and 20, with white children experiencing fewer disadvantages than BME children in relation to economic factors and in their family relationships.

## Figure 17: Prevalence of various types of disadvantage

| Type of disadvantage | Percentage |
|---|---|
| Child worried about 2+ crimes | 37.8% |
| Household struggling with bills | 36.1% |
| Child experienced 2+ neighbourhood problems | 32.5% |
| Household debt | 29.9% |
| Parental depression | 28.4% |
| Parental illness/disability | 22.2% |
| Moved 3 items | 20.5% |
| Child experienced crime | 17% |
| Low household income | 15.1% |
| Forced to move | 13.7% |
| Free school meals | 13.3% |
| Domestic violence | 13.3% |
| Child illness/disability | 13.1% |
| Parental alcohol problem | 12.4% |
| Child shares a room | 10.4% |
| Young carer | 9.3% |
| Risk of homelessness | 8.9% |
| Food bank | 8.5% |
| Bereavement | 7.4% |
| Homelessness | 6.9% |
| Father no qualifications | 6.3% |
| Mother no qualifications | 5.2% |
| Child experienced supervisory neglect | 4.5% |
| Child experienced emotional neglect | 4.1% |
| Prison | 3.9% |
| Child shares/doesn't have a bed | 2.1% |
| Unemployment | 2.1% |

**Table 2: Population estimates for various types of disadvantage**

| Type of disadvantage | % of children | Estimated population of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK |
|---|---|---|
| **Parent-child relationships** | | |
| Emotional neglect: Child has experienced emotional neglect | 4.1% | 200,000 |
| Supervisory neglect: Child has experienced supervisory neglect | 4.5% | 250,000 |
| Young carer: Child is a young carer | 9.3% | 500,000 |
| **Family/household factors** | | |
| Domestic violence: (Responding) parent has experienced domestic violence | 13.3% | 750,000 |
| Alcohol: (Responding) parent has had problematic alcohol use | 12.4% | 700,000 |
| Parental mental health: (Responding) parent has had a mental health problem | 28.4% | 1,650,000 |
| Prison: Someone in the household has been in prison | 3.9% | 200,000 |
| Parental illness/disability: (Any) parent/carer has had a long-standing illness or disability | 22.2% | 1,250,000 |
| Child illness/disability: (Any) child has had a long-standing illness or disability | 13.1% | 750,000 |
| Bereavement: Someone in the household has died | 7.4% | 400,000 |
| Residential transience: Family has moved house multiple times | 20.5% | 1,150,000 |
| Forced move: Family has experienced a forced house move | 13.7% | 750,000 |
| Maternal education: Mother left school without qualifications | 5.2% | 300,000 |
| Paternal education: Father left school without qualifications | 6.3% | 350,000 |

## Table 2 (continued)

| Type of disadvantage | % of children | Estimated population of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK |
|---|---|---|
| **Material factors** | | |
| Debt: Household has problem debt | 29.9% | 1,700,000 |
| Struggling: Household has struggled to pay bills | 36.1% | 2,100,000 |
| Child poverty: Equivalised income is less than 60% of median household income | 15.1% | 850,000 |
| Unemployment: Main income earner is unemployed | 2.1% | 100,000 |
| Free school meals: Child receives free school meals | 13.3% | 750,000 |
| Destitution: Family has used a food bank | 8.5% | 450,000 |
| Homelessness: Family has been homeless | 6.9% | 400,000 |
| Risk of homelessness: Family has been at risk of homelessness | 8.9% | 500,000 |
| Overcrowding: Child shares room | 10.4% | 600,000 |
| Overcrowding: Child shares a bed or doesn't have a bed | 2.1% | 100,000 |
| **Neighbourhood factors** | | |
| Safety of neighbourhood: Experienced two or more neighbourhood problems | 32.5% | 1,850,000 |
| Safety of neighbourhood: Worried about two or more crimes/anti social behaviour happening | 37.8% | 2,200,000 |
| Safety of neighbourhood: Experienced crime/anti social behaviour | 17.0% | 950,000 |

## Table 3: Proportions and numbers of children aged 10 to 17 experiencing multiple disadvantage

| Number of disadvantages experienced | % of children | Estimated number of 10 to 17 year olds experiencing disadvantage in the UK |
|---|---|---|
| 0 | 15.6 | 900,000 |
| 1 | 15.9 | 950,000 |
| 2 | 15.9 | 950,000 |
| 3 | 11.8 | 700,000 |
| 4 | 9.7 | 550,000 |
| 5 | 7.8 | 450,000 |
| 6 | 5.5 | 300,000 |
| 7 or more | 17.8 | 1,000,000 |
| **Total child population aged 10 to 17** | 100.0 | 5,800,000 |

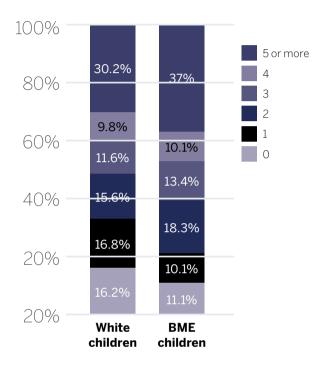## Figure 18: Experience of multiple disadvantage by ethnicity



**White children**
- 30.2%
- 9.8%
- 11.6%
- 15.6%
- 16.8%
- 16.2%

**BME children**
- 37%
- 10.1%
- 13.4%
- 18.3%
- 10.1%
- 11.1%

Legend:
- 5 or more
- 4
- 3
- 2
- 1
- 0

## Figure 19: Economic disadvantages by ethnicity



**White children**
- 10%
- 8.8%
- 14.4%
- 17.3%
- 49.5%

**BME children**
- 17.8%
- 10.9%
- 19.3%
- 20.8%
- 31.2%

Legend:
- 4 or more
- 3
- 2
- 1
- 0

## Figure 20: Family relationship disadvantages by ethnicity



**White children**
- 2.7%
- 10.4%
- 86.9%

**BME children**
- 5.2%
- 13.6%
- 81.2%

Legend:
- 2 or 3
- 1
- 0

## Multiple disadvantage and well-being

Our next step was to use our survey data to probe the relationship between children's exposure to multiple disadvantages and their well-being.

The measure of subjective well-being – specifically of life satisfaction – that we used was based on five items, derived from Huebner (described on page 12):

- 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

Children were asked to respond to each question on a five-point agree-disagree scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'. The measure was created by adding the responses to the five items and dividing by two to create a life satisfaction scale from 0 to 10.
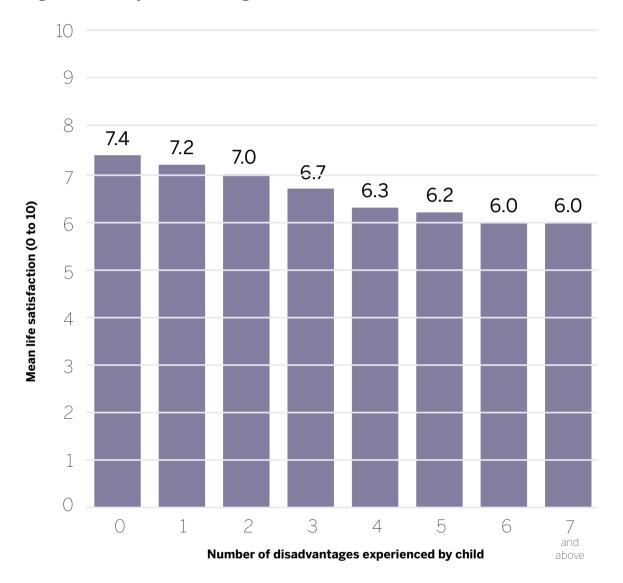
We then counted up the number of disadvantages present in a child's life to explore the relationship between multiple experiences of disadvantage and well-being.

As can be seen in Figures 21 and 22, multiple disadvantage has an almost linear relationship with well-being: the greater the number of disadvantages that children face, the lower their well-being. Whilst this may not be a surprising finding, it is also important to highlight. It is plausible that if children face an accumulation of disadvantage, they start to become 'immune' in the sense that each additional disadvantage does not have a similar size 'effect' on their well-being. If this were the case then we would see a curve showing 'diminishing returns' whereby higher numbers of disadvantage are not associated with similar size decreases in well-being. There is a levelling off for seven or more disadvantages, but this may be due to sample sizes.

The multiple disadvantage measure explained about 9% of the variation in children's life satisfaction, after taking account of age and gender variations.

In addition to average well-being, we also looked at how multiple disadvantage related to low well-being. As can be seen in Figure 22, the greater the number of disadvantages in children's lives, the more likely they are to experience low well-being. Only 3% of children with no disadvantages had low levels of well-being, but this rose to 29% for children with seven or more disadvantages.

**Figure 21: Multiple disadvantage and children's life satisfaction**
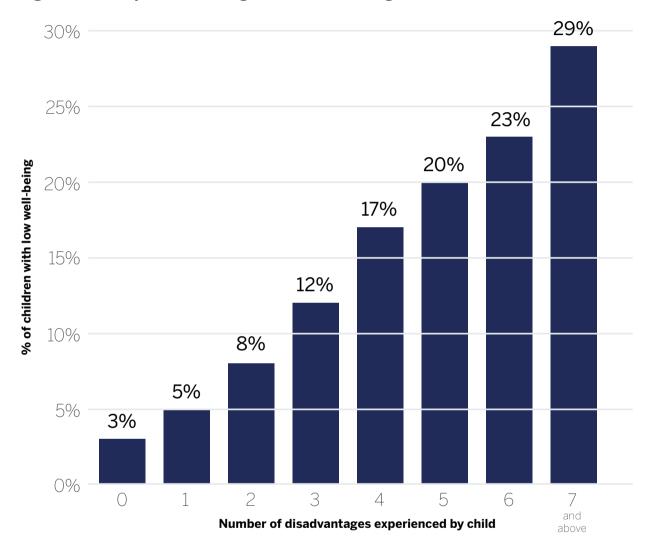


Mean life satisfaction (0 to 10)

| Number of disadvantages | Value |
|---|---|
| 0 | 7.4 |
| 1 | 7.2 |
| 2 | 7.0 |
| 3 | 6.7 |
| 4 | 6.3 |
| 5 | 6.2 |
| 6 | 6.0 |
| 7 and above | 6.0 |

Number of disadvantages experienced by child

**Figure 22: Multiple disadvantage and low well-being**



A similar relationship is found for the sub-scales, as can be seen in Figure 23. In a similar way to the overall measure that includes all 27 types of disadvantage, the sub-scales have an incremental relationship with well-being: the greater the number of disadvantages that children face, the lower their well-being. For all but the neighbourhood factors, we see a levelling off at the top end of the distribution.

**Figure 23: Children's life satisfaction and multiple disadvantages in family relationships, and for family/household, economic and neighbourhood factors**



**Children's family relationships**

Mean overall well-being (0 to 10)

6.8 | 6.3 | 5.6 | 5.6

**Number of disadvantages experienced by child**

**Family and household factors**

Mean overall well-being (0 to 10)

7.1 | 6.7 | 6.5 | 6.1 | 6.1

**Number of disadvantages experienced by child**

**Economic factors**

Mean overall well-being (0 to 10)

7.1 | 6.6 | 6.4 | 6.1 | 6.1

**Number of disadvantages experienced by child**

**Neighbourhood factors**

Mean overall well-being (0 to 10)

7 | 6.7 | 6.3 | 5.7
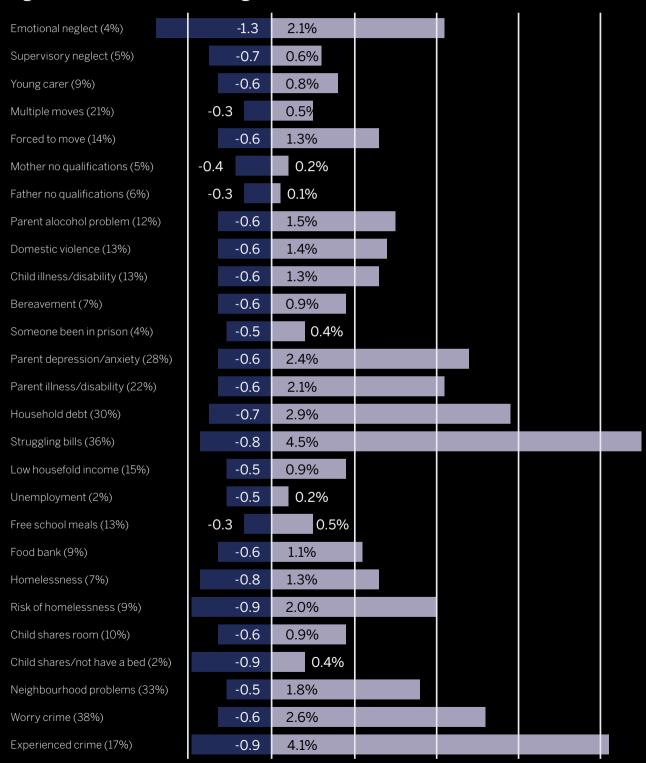
**Number of disadvantages experienced by child**

## Individual disadvantages and children's subjective well-being

We also looked at the effect of each disadvantage individually on children's subjective well-being. Almost all of the disadvantages were significantly associated with children's well-being (after taking account of age and gender variations). The main exception was a father having no educational qualifications, which was only marginally associated with lower well-being.

Figure 24 illustrates two ways of looking at the association between each disadvantage and children's well-being. The first is to look at how much explanatory power each disadvantage[43] has. The lighter blue bars on the right of the chart show the power of each disadvantage  (after taking into account age and gender). The figures can be thought of as a percentage. So living in a family that was struggling with bills had the largest explanatory power at 4.5%. It can be seen that having a father with no qualifications

had almost no explanatory power (0.1%). However this approach tends not to work as well for disadvantages that are quite rare. In these cases, the disadvantage could have a big effect on the small number of children who experience it, but nevertheless not make a big contribution to explaining variations in children's well-being in the population as a whole. So Figure 24 also shows in the dark blue bars the difference between a child having and not having the disadvantage.[44]  So for example although the explanatory power of the emotional neglect variable is only 2.1%, this disadvantage shows the largest gap (1.3 points on a scale from 0 to 10) in life satisfaction between children who experience it and children who do not. For reference purposes the percentages of children experiencing each disadvantage are shown along with the description of the disadvantage in the chart. The two sets of bars in the chart represent two different ways of looking at the link between disadvantages and children's well-being.

## Figure 24: Individual disadvantages and children's life satisfaction

| | Difference | Explanatory power |
|---|---|---|
| Emotional neglect (4%) | -1.3 | 2.1% |
| Supervisory neglect (5%) | -0.7 | 0.6% |
| Young carer (9%) | -0.6 | 0.8% |
| Multiple moves (21%) | -0.3 | 0.5% |
| Forced to move (14%) | -0.6 | 1.3% |
| Mother no qualifications (5%) | -0.4 | 0.2% |
| Father no qualifications (6%) | -0.3 | 0.1% |
| Parent alocohol problem (12%) | -0.6 | 1.5% |
| Domestic violence (13%) | -0.6 | 1.4% |
| Child illness/disability (13%) | -0.6 | 1.3% |
| Bereavement (7%) | -0.6 | 0.9% |
| Someone been in prison (4%) | -0.5 | 0.4% |
| Parent depression/anxiety (28%) | -0.6 | 2.4% |
| Parent illness/disability (22%) | -0.6 | 2.1% |
| Household debt (30%) | -0.7 | 2.9% |
| Struggling bills (36%) | -0.8 | 4.5% |
| Low housefold income (15%) | -0.5 | 0.9% |
| Unemployment (2%) | -0.5 | 0.2% |
| Free school meals (13%) | -0.3 | 0.5% |
| Food bank (9%) | -0.6 | 1.1% |
| Homelessness (7%) | -0.8 | 1.3% |
| Risk of homelessness (9%) | -0.9 | 2.0% |
| Child shares room (10%) | -0.6 | 0.9% |
| Child shares/not have a bed (2%) | -0.9 | 0.4% |
| Neighbourhood problems (33%) | -0.5 | 1.8% |
| Worry crime (38%) | -0.6 | 2.6% |
| Experienced crime (17%) | -0.9 | 4.1% |

■ Difference   ■ Explanatory power

## Combinations of disadvantages

Sabates and Dex[45] observe that simply counting up numbers of disadvantages present in children's lives does nothing to help us understand which combinations of disadvantage are most common, and which of the common combinations are the most important for children's outcomes. Therefore, following this approach, we explored different combinations of disadvantages to examine 1) which combinations children are most commonly exposed to and 2) which combinations appear to be associated with the lowest levels of well-being.

The full list of 27 disadvantages was too long to look at all possible combinations so we identified the seven disadvantages with the strongest relationship to children's well-being, looking first at those with the greatest explanatory power and then at those with the greatest difference in means:

We then explored the most common pairs of these disadvantages.

**Table 5: Disadvantages with strongest relationship to children's life satisfaction**

| Greatest explanatory power | Greatest differences in means |
|---|---|
| Struggling with bills | Emotional neglect |
| Child experienced crime | Child experienced crime |
| Debt | Child doesn't have own bed |
| Child worried about crime | Risk of homelessness |
| Parental depression | Struggling with bills |
| Emotional neglect | Supervisory neglect |
| Parental illness | Homelessness |

**Figure 25: Common pairs of disadvantages
and children's life satisfaction**



Looking first at disadvantages with the greatest explanatory power, the two most common pairs were for families to be in arrears whilst also struggling with bills, followed by children being both worried about crime and having experienced a crime. It is not surprising that these two pairs of disadvantages commonly coincide, as in each case they relate to similar themes. However, the third most likely pair was a combination across different aspects of life: parental depression coinciding with children being worried about crime.

Looking at disadvantages with the greatest difference in means, the most common pair was for families to be struggling with bills and children to have experienced a crime. This was followed by families struggling with bills to coincide with risk of homelessness. Again, these combinations cut across different aspects of life.

How then are these combinations of disadvantages associated with children's well-being? As can be seen from Figure 25 – which shows children's well-being alongside pairs of disadvantages –

children having experienced crime in families that are struggling with bills, and families struggling with bills while also having been at risk of homelessness were the two pairs associated with the lowest levels of well-being. Again, combinations of disadvantages that span different parts of children's lives are associated with lower well-being than disadvantages that are in the same domain.

## Summary points

- This chapter focuses on new data on experiences of a range of 27 disadvantages relating to parent-child relationships, family/ household circumstances, material and economic factors and neighbourhood experiences among children aged 10 to 17 years old in the UK.

- The large majority of children (84%) experienced at least one of the disadvantages and more than half (53%) experienced three or more. More than 1 in 6 children (18%) experienced seven or more disadvantages.

- Some of the disadvantages were relatively common while others were rarer. Around 36% of children were living in a household where their parents were struggling to pay the bills. On the other hand, only around 2% of children shared or did not have a bed. Nevertheless even that 2% of children is substantial in numerical terms. We estimate that over 100,000 children aged 10 to 17 in the UK do not have, or share, a bed, while over two million are living in households where parents are struggling to pay the bills.

- Experiencing almost any of these disadvantages is linked with lower children's well-being. The estimated gap in mean life satisfaction (on a scale from 0 to 10) ranges from around 0.3 for disadvantages such as experiencing multiple house moves to 0.9 for the 2% of children who do not have their own bed and 1.3 for the 4% of children who are experiencing emotional neglect.

- The disadvantages also have a cumulative effect. Experiencing any seven or more disadvantages is associated with mean life satisfaction of 6.0 out of ten, compared to 7.4 out of 10 for children who experiences no disadvantages.

- Looking at this in terms of low well-being, only 3% of children with no disadvantages had low well-being, but this rose to 29% for children with seven or more disadvantages.

- Overall experiences of individual and multiple disadvantages appear to have a substantial impact on children's subjective well-being.

# Discussion

### Time trends in subjective well-being

In Chapter 1 we presented data from the Understanding Society survey to show how children's subjective well-being has changed in recent years. This highlights decreases in happiness with friends and life as a whole between 2009 and 2015, which contrast with upward trends for both these measures between 2000 and 2008. On the other hand, we found an increase in happiness with schoolwork between 2009 and 2015 (despite a decrease in the last two years of data) that is also significant.

In terms of gender differences, girls continue to be less happy than boys with their friendships, appearance and life as a whole, while boys continue to be less happy than girls with their schoolwork. There is a long-standing and growing gender difference in feelings about appearance.

### Explanations for gender differences in well-being

In Chapter 2, we looked at whether bullying and social media usage could help to explain gender differences in children's subjective well-being.

It is well established that there is a strong association between experiences of being bullied and lower subjective well-being. There are also some gender differences in likelihood of being bullied, as well as some differential impacts according to gender. However there is limited evidence that these gender differences and differential impacts explain gender variations in subjective well-being.

There is some evidence that high intensity social media usage (more than three hours on a normal school day) is associated with lower subjective well-being, particularly for girls – and that this can explain some of the gender difference in satisfaction with life and appearance. Low intensity (less than an hour on a normal school day) social media usage does not seem to be associated with lower subjective well-being compared to not belonging to social media at all and may have some benefits in terms of satisfaction with friendships.

Furthermore, differences in social media usage are much less important than other factors – such as family support and experiences of being bullied at school – in explaining differences in subjective well-being. More research is needed to understand why some children become high intensity social media users, but one factor identified in the current analysis is that they are more likely to be children who do not feel well supported by their family.

### Multiple experiences of disadvantage

In Chapter 3, we explored a range of 27 disadvantages – relating to parent-child relationships, family/ household circumstances, economic factors and neighbourhood experiences – among children aged 10 to 17 years old in the UK. The large majority of children (84%) had experienced at least one of the disadvantages and more than half (53%) had experienced three or more. More than 1 in 6 children (18%) had experienced seven or more disadvantages.

Experiencing any of these disadvantages was linked with lower subjective well-being for children. However, importantly, the disadvantages have a cumulative effect. Children who had experienced seven or more disadvantages had average life satisfaction of 6.0 out of 10, compared to 7.4 out of 10 for children who had experienced no disadvantages.

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# Notes

[1] Eg See Fattore at al, 2009; Selwyn et al, 2017.

[2] UNICEF, 2007 and UNICEF Office of Research, 2013.

[3] UNICEF, 2007 and UNICEF Office of Research, 2013.

[4] Helliwell et al, 2012.

[5] De Leeuw, Borgers and Smits, 2004.

[6] Eg Samman, 2007.

[7] Eg Diener, 1984.

[8] Bivariate Pearson correlations for the three measures were 0.66 (happiness yesterday and life satisfaction); 0.58 (happiness yesterday and worthwhile) and 0.81 (life satisfaction and worthwhile).

[9] Cummins and Gullone, 2000; Leung, 2011.

[10] Diener et al, 2013.

[11] In the first report that we published on our well-being research, we tested a number of different indicators of overall well-being, including single-item measures such as Cantril's Ladder and happiness with life as a whole, as well as multi-item measures such as Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction scale. The multi-item measure was found to have the highest test-retest reliability of the three measures.

[12] Huebner, 1991.

[13] See: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/measuringnationalwellbeinglifesatisfaction

[14] See: https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/measuringnationalwellbeing/2014-10-08

[15] In 2005, The Children's Society asked a nationally representative sample of 8,000 14 and 15 year olds two open-ended questions about the ingredients of and barriers to a good life for children. The scope of this qualitative research was subsequently extended to cover a much wider age range and to include specific minority groups of children as part of The Good Childhood Inquiry.

[16] The Children's Society (2010) Developing an index of children's subjective well-being in England, London: The Children's Society.

[17] Eg Cummins and Lau, 2005 and Casas et al, 2007.

[18] Rees et al, 2010a.

[19] Rees et al, 2010b.

[20] A test-retest of 109 children aged 14/15 was undertaken 17 days apart (see Goswami, 2009 for further details).

[21] See The Children's Society, 2017 for more details.

[22] The drop in happiness with school between 2013–14 and 2014–15 does not constitute a trend as it corresponds to just two time points. We will look to see whether this pattern continues once Wave 7 data becomes available.

[23] Statistical note: The analysis uses weightings provided in the Understanding Society data set to ensure that the samples are as representative of the general population as possible. After applying weightings a check was undertaken for any differences in age or gender profiles over the five waves that might affect the comparisons being made. There were no significant differences in either respect.

Presentational note: All graphs use the same sized range of values (1.2) so that they can be visually compared. This is the minimum necessary range for the gender differences in appearance.

[24] https://whatworkswellbeing.org/2016/08/

[25] The Children's Society, 2015.

[26] See The Children's Society, 2017, to read more about this study, including for more details on the methodology and emerging findings.

[27] There were also questions about being bullied by siblings. However we decided not to use these because (a) some children do not have siblings and (b) even for children with siblings there are complexities to do with age and gender of siblings that would need to be taken into account to make proper sense of this data.

[28] Children who had been bullied also had lower mean satisfaction with family, friends and school, with the exception that there was no clear difference in family satisfaction according to whether a child had been physically bullied.

[29] For the analysis described in this section, because of the restricted age range, we pooled data from Waves 1,3 and 5 of Understanding Society to provide a larger sample for analysis.

[30] The first of these questions is rather outdated and does not mention some of the most widely used social media channels but presumably the wording has been retained for consistency across waves.

[31] For the analysis described in this section, because of the restricted age range, we pooled data from Waves 1, 3 and 5 of Understanding Society to provide a larger sample for analysis.

[32] The results here are across the whole age range from 10 to 15 years old. A much more detailed recent analysis of the relationship between household income and children's life satisfaction using the Understanding Society data by Knies (2017) finds that there is a different relationship between income and children's life satisfaction at different ages within this range – with significant effects of income from the age of 13 upwards. Knies, G. (2017). Income effects on children's life satisfaction: Longitudinal Evidence for England. Colchester, UK: Institute for Social and Economic Research.

[33] Smith et al, 2016

[34] Rees et al., 2011.

[35] The Children's Society, 2013.

[36] The Children's Society, 2012.

[37] Ibid.

[38] The Children's Society, 2016.

[39] Raws, 2016.

[40] Feinstein and Sabates, 2006.

[41] The Children's Society, 2017.

[42] Bronfenbrenner, 1979.

[43] Controlling for age and gender.

[44] Again after controlling for age and gender.

[45] Sabates and Dex, 2012.

# Too many children and young people in this country don't feel safe, loved or able to cope. Together we can change their lives.

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