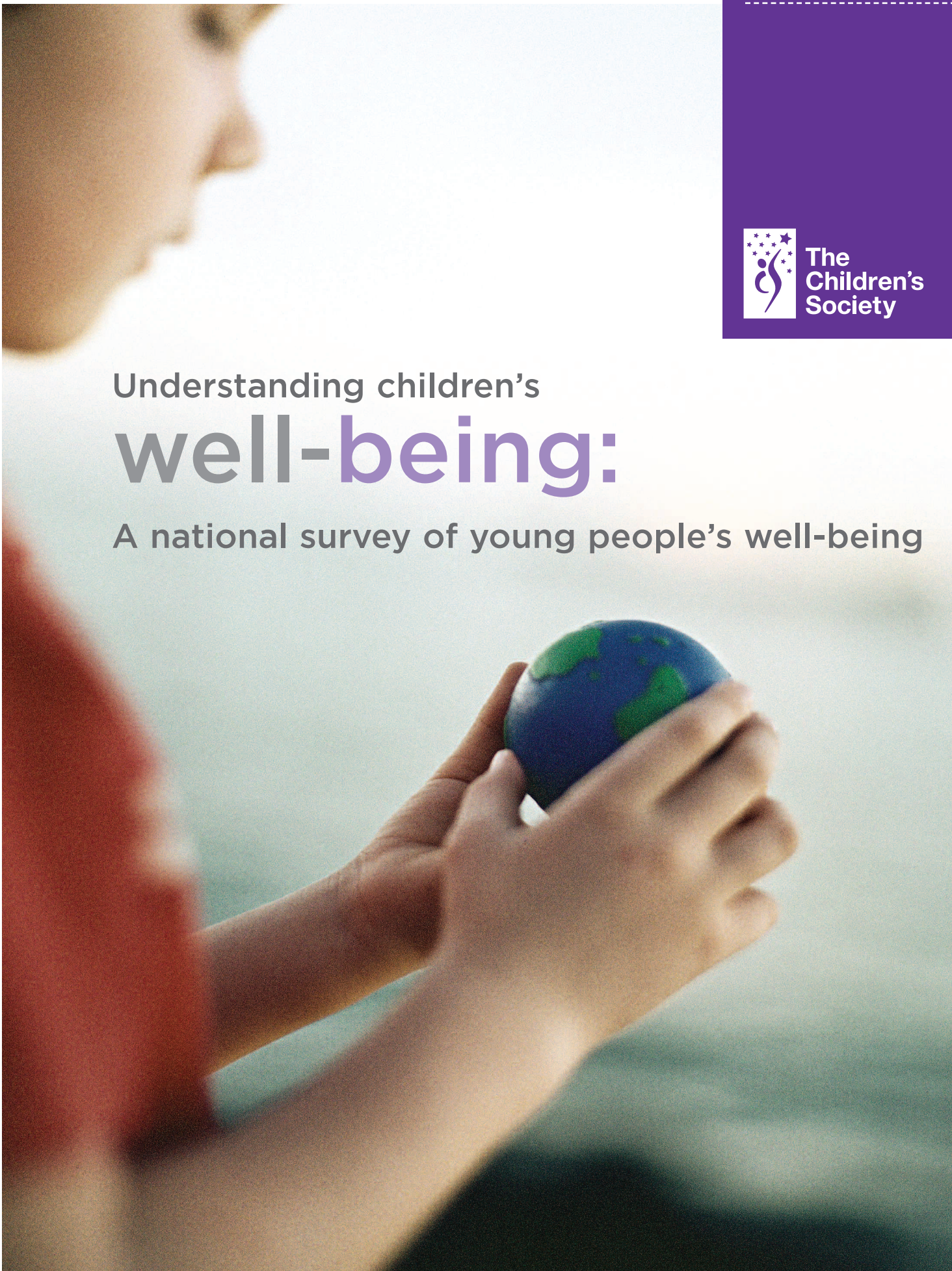


Understanding children's

well-being:

A national survey of young people's well-being



Understanding children's well-being

The Children's Society, in collaboration with the University of York, has published the first report on a major survey of young people's well-being in England. The survey, which included a representative sample of just under 7,000 young people aged 10 to 15, is the most comprehensive study of its kind to be undertaken in this country.

This study is part of an ongoing research programme which will make a significant contribution to understanding what affects young people's well-being, and will also monitor changes in well-being over time. The initial report provides a short introduction to some of the main topics covered by the survey. It will be followed by a series of more detailed reports over the next year.



Introduction

The report focuses on young people's subjective well-being. There is a growing interest internationally in measuring subjective well-being, both for the general population and more specifically for children and young people.

What is subjective well-being?

Subjective well-being relates to people's own evaluations of their quality of life. It includes assessments of:

- overall well-being – e.g. satisfaction with life as a whole
- well-being in particular areas of life or domains – e.g. family, local area, etc.

The survey gathered information at both these levels.

Why does subjective well-being matter?

The recent growth of interest in subjective well-being is partly due to a recognition that existing social and economic indicators do not fully capture what matters for the quality of people's lives. Beyond a certain level, ongoing economic progress in Western nations has not been matched by corresponding increases in the well-being of the population. Measures of subjective well-being can be a valuable complement to these other indicators and help to provide a fuller picture of individual and societal well-being. Recent research has also shown, for example, that young people's subjective well-being can be linked with difficulties such as depression and behavioural problems at a later point in time.

So, research on well-being can provide us with important insights into what matters in people's lives. It can help to identify groups who are faring relatively well or poorly, and can track trends in well-being over time.

About the research programme

The research programme has two broad aims:

1. To develop a better understanding of the concept of young people's well-being, taking account of the perspectives of young people themselves.
2. To establish measures of young people's well-being and use these to identify the reasons for variations in well-being and to monitor changes in well-being over time.

Some of the underlying principles of the research programme reflect trends in international research on young people's well-being:

- It measures well-being in the present as well as factors which affect future well-being (or 'well-becoming').
- It focuses on positive indicators of well-being related to young people's assessments of their lives.
- It includes young people's views and ideas in the research process.

The first stage of the programme involved gathering views from young people about what contributed to their well-being. This work was done as part of a survey of young people in 2005¹.

This report is the second stage of the programme. It involved developing a questionnaire based on the ideas gathered from young people and on previous international research. We then used this information to conduct the research. The survey was carried out for The Children's Society by Ipsos MORI in April to July 2008, and involved 6,853 young people in Year 6 in primary school and Years 8 and 10 in secondary school.

The questionnaires included over 100 questions about a wide range of aspects of young people's lives, from their relationships with other people to their feelings about the world they lived in. This initial report focuses on a sub-set of these questions in order to provide an introduction to the research.

Key findings

Overall subjective well-being

The survey asked young people a series of questions about their overall well-being. These questions covered how happy they were with their lives as a whole and how they felt their lives were going.

The general picture is that most young people surveyed were faring well – the average well-being score was 7.7 on a scale from 0 to 10. But a minority – in the region of 7% to 10% – could be said to be 'unhappy' or to have 'low well-being'.

We were interested in the extent to which well-being might vary according to young people's individual characteristics and their family characteristics.

In terms of individual characteristics:

- Age was the most important factor, with subjective well-being declining with age. This was particularly true for females – there was a widening well-being gap between females and males with age.

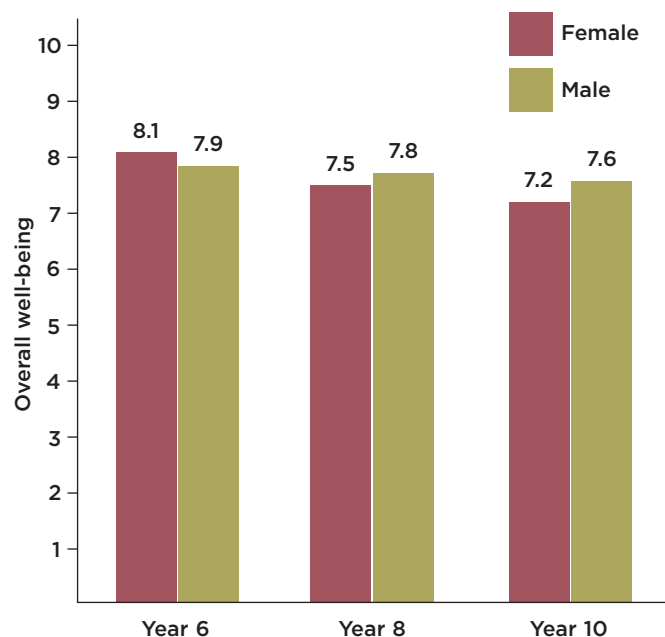


Figure 1 Age and gender differences in overall well-being

¹ www.childrenssociety.org.uk/resources/documents/good%20childhood/Good_Childhood_Inquiry_launch_report_5830_full.pdf



Taken together, all of the individual characteristics and family factors which we included in the survey questionnaire explained less than 7% of the variation in young people’s well-being.

This finding may seem surprising but it is very much in line with research on the well-being of adults and young people in other countries, which has shown that such factors have a relatively small association with overall well-being.

To put this in perspective, the report presents analysis which follows previous research in exploring the relative impact of family structure, structural change and quality of family relationships on young people’s well-being. The current survey confirms previous findings that well-being is much more strongly associated with the quality of young people’s relationships – such as levels of family conflict – than with family structure. Thus, for example, young people who felt that their family got along well together had much higher average levels of well-being than those who did not, irrespective of the family structure they lived in – see Figure 2.

- Disabled children had lower than average well-being (6.7 compared to 7.7), as did young people who defined themselves as having difficulties with learning (6.9).
- However, overall the most striking finding was that relatively little (around 5%) of the variation in overall well-being could be explained by individual characteristics, and much of this variation was attributable to age.

We also looked at family characteristics. Again there were some small differences:

- Family poverty and family structure were associated with lower well-being, but the contribution was only marginal – between them these factors only explained around 2% of the variation in well-being.
- However, the small group of young people who did not live with either parent (e.g. with extended family or in public care) had notably lower well-being (average 6.2).

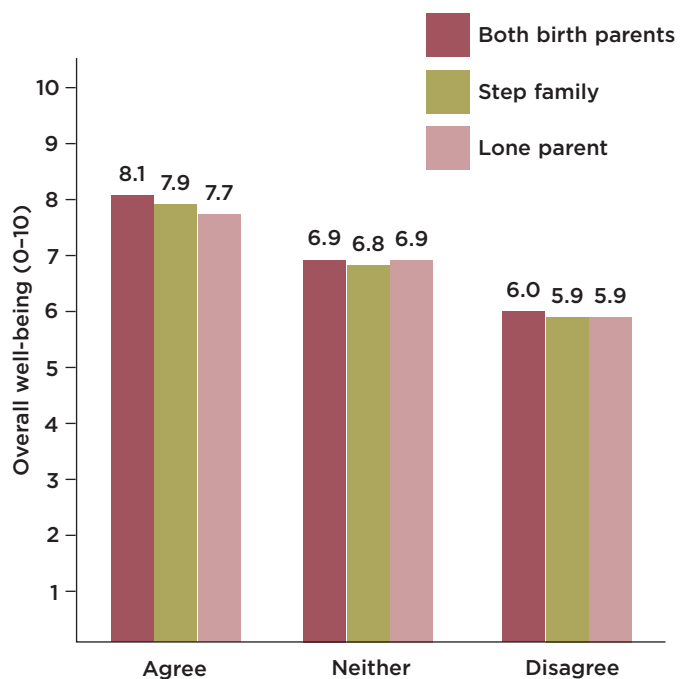


Figure 2 ‘My family gets along well together’ (secondary school sample only)

Answers to this question explain well over 20% of the variation in overall well-being. In comparison, family structure explains less than 2% of this variation.

The research also suggests that life events and experiences may have a significant impact on well-being:

- Recent changes in family structure had a small but significant association with lower well-being. Some of the above differences in relation to family structure were also attributable to recent change. The average well-being of young people who had experienced a change in the adults with whom they lived over the last year² was 6.8 out of 10.
- Recent experiences of bullying by other young people and being treated unfairly by adults had a strong association with lower well-being. For example, the average well-being score for young people who had ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ been bullied in the last year was 7.0 out of 10,

compared to 7.9 for those who had ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ been bullied.

All in all, then, the survey confirms previous findings from research in other countries that, at a broad level:

- individual and family characteristics explain relatively little of the variations in overall well-being
- factors such as life events and the quality of relationships play a bigger part in explaining these variations.

Nevertheless, some small sub-groups within the survey such as disabled children and young people not living with parents had substantially lower than average levels of well-being. The report also shows that the cumulative effect of multiple disadvantage can have a significant impact on well-being.

Happiness with different aspects of life

As well as asking young people about their overall well-being, the survey asked questions about how happy young people were with 21 aspects of their lives. These aspects were derived from previous international research and from young people’s views from the 2005 survey.

How happy are you...	Mean	% unhappy
about the home you live in	8.7	4.9%
with your friends	8.6	4.6%
with your family	8.6	5.7%
about the groups of people you belong to	8.2	5.1%
about getting on with the people you know	8.2	4.9%
about how you enjoy yourself	8.2	5.2%
about the things you have	8.1	5.7%
with your health	8.0	7.7%
about doing things away from your home	8.0	7.2%
with the things you want to be good at	7.8	7.5%
about communicating with people	7.8	7.6%
about the amount of freedom you have	7.8	10.5%
about how safe you feel	7.6	8.6%
about the amount of choice you have in life	7.6	10.6%
about how you spend your time	7.6	8.9%
about what may happen to you later on in your life	7.4	10.4%
about the school that you go to	7.3	13.2%
with your local area	7.2	13.8%
with your confidence	7.0	16.0%
about your school work	6.9	11.9%
with your appearance	6.8	17.5%

Table 1 Happiness with different aspects of life

² This question was only asked in the secondary school survey. The average overall well-being score in the secondary school was 7.5 out of 10.

The results in Table 1 show that young people are much happier with some aspects than others:

- Overall, young people were happiest with the home they lived in and with their relationships with friends, family and others. Only around one in 20 (5%) of young people were unhappy with these aspects of their lives.
- Young people tended to be least happy with things about themselves (appearance and confidence), things to do with school and school work, and their local area. The proportion of young people who were unhappy with these aspects ranged from around 12% (school work) to over 17% (appearance).
- There were three other aspects with which more than 10% of young people were unhappy – these were freedom, choice and expectations of the future.

As with overall well-being, in many cases young people’s happiness with particular aspects of their lives did not vary that much according to individual characteristics and family factors. However, there were some exceptions:

- Age was one of the most important factors. Young people’s happiness with many aspects of their lives declined as they got older, although this was not the case for happiness with friends, which stayed fairly stable across the different age groups in the survey. Family and school were key aspects where well-being dropped significantly as young people grew older.
- There were some significant gender and ethnic differences in happiness with appearance. Over one in five (21%) females were unhappy with their appearance compared to 13% of males. The difference is even larger in the oldest age group (14- to 15-year-olds) where 28% of females were unhappy with this aspect of their lives (see Figure 4) – twice the proportion of males (14%).
- In addition, young people of Black African/ Caribbean and of Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin were significantly happier with this aspect of their lives than White young people.
- Young people who described themselves as having difficulties with learning were less happy with all aspects of their lives.

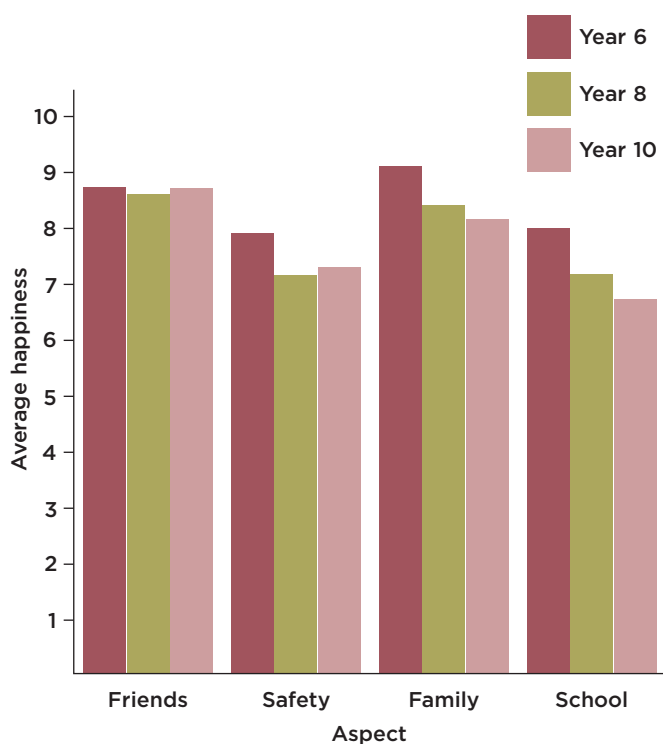


Figure 3 Age differences for happiness with different aspects of life

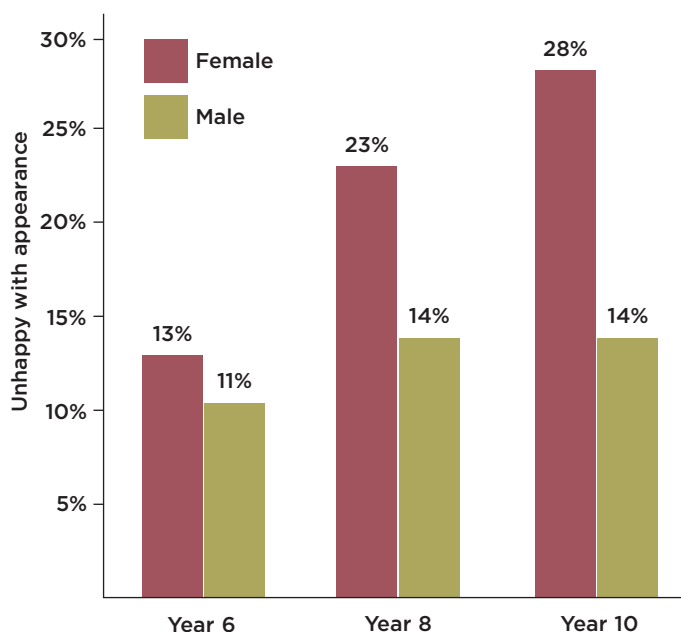


Figure 4 Age and gender differences in happiness with appearance

The structure of well-being

The report goes on to look at which of the above aspects are most strongly associated with overall well-being. All 21 aspects had a significant link with overall well-being; however, some were more strongly linked than others:

- Happiness with family was the aspect most strongly associated with overall well-being.
- Happiness with the amount of choice in life had the second strongest association.
- Other important aspects were material possessions, expectations about the future, and the home environment.
- The aspects which were least strongly associated with overall well-being were related to confidence, school and school work, the local area and friendships. This last finding was surprising as the earlier research with young people had suggested that friendships were one of the most important aspects of well-being.

One of the key objectives of this phase of the research is to develop an index of young people's well-being which can be used to track changes over time.

The report considers two indexes of young people's well-being developed in Australia and in the US. It also presents an alternative index based on ideas from young people gathered for the current research programme. This covers nine aspects of young people's lives – family, choice, material possessions, safety, health, school work, leisure, friendships and local area.

Some examples of the potential uses of such indexes to further our understanding of young people's well-being are provided. For example, we looked at the above nine aspects for young people who had experienced a recent change in family structure. This analysis showed that, as well as the expected impact on family well-being, these young people were significantly less happy about the amount of choice they have in life. This finding demonstrates some of the ways in which life events can have a significant impact on young people's well-being.

Learning and next steps

Key learning points

The analysis presented in the report is just a first step in exploring an extensive set of survey data on young people's well-being across a wide range of aspects of their lives. However, this initial work has already yielded some important learning in terms of understanding young people's well-being in England today in terms of concepts, measures and variations.

First, in terms of the concept of well-being, the research shows the primary importance of relationships, particularly with family, for young people's well-being. It also highlights the significance of a sense of freedom, choice and autonomy for young people. This is an area which young people emphasised in the early stages of the research but has been less well explored in previous research on young people's well-being. This demonstrates the value of incorporating young people's own ideas in developing concepts of their well-being. The models of well-being presented in the report appeared to work slightly less well for younger age groups. This raises



questions about other topics that may be important for understanding the key components of the well-being of primary school children. This finding also suggests that it would be worth exploring different models of well-being for other sub-groups of young people.

Second, the research has already confirmed the potential of measuring young people's subjective well-being through self-report surveys. The measures of overall well-being and the indexes presented in the report, gathered from a large representative sample of young people, provide a valuable baseline which can be used to explore variations in well-being and to track trends over time.

Finally, the research confirms previous studies in other countries which show that individual and family characteristics have only a small association with overall well-being. The research literature suggests that other factors such as life events are much more significant in understanding variations in well-being.

Next steps

The Children's Society will be publishing a series of reports on additional findings from the 2008 survey over the coming year. This will include:

- further exploration of family factors and well-being
- an analysis of psychological aspects of well-being, including autonomy
- findings on links between young people's experiences of their local area, their views on national and global issues, and their well-being.

The next stages of the research programme will include:

- developing a better understanding of the concept of well-being for disadvantaged groups of young people
- exploring the links between personality, life events and well-being
- undertaking the next wave of the survey in 2010, which will be the first step in beginning to identify trends in young people's well-being in England over time.

Understanding Children's Well-being is the first major report from The Children's Society since the publication of *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* in 2009. This earlier independent report concluded that excessive individualism is causing a range of problems for children. These include high family break-up, bullying, commercial pressures towards premature sexualisation, unprincipled advertising, too much competition in education and the acceptance of income inequality.

Following on from these findings, *Understanding Children's Well-being* is the first step in trying to determine what factors have the greatest impact on a child's well-being. Identifying these factors is essential to our understanding of what makes a good childhood.

Most importantly, at the centre of both these pieces of work lies our commitment to representing the views of children and young people. In everything we do, The Children's Society remains dedicated to ensuring that the voices of all children are heard on the issues that affect their lives.

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