The Children's Society

The Good Childhood Report 2016

Summary

Executive summary

This is the fifth in a series of annual Good Childhood Reports that The Children's Society has produced in partnership with the University of York as part of a groundbreaking research programme into children's well-being.

This series refreshes our understanding of how good life is for our youngest citizens, from the viewpoint of children themselves. It provides the latest national statistics, trends and insights into the quality of children's lives overall and the aspects of life that matter the most to them.

This edition reviews the latest trends over time, along with the gender patterns that have emerged in recent years for some aspects of well-being. It also examines the links between specific aspects of children's well-being and different types of mental health issues. Finally, it presents new analysis of local area differences in children's well-being.

Summary of findings

Gender patterns in trends over time

- A gender gap in some aspects of well-being has opened up in recent years, with girls becoming increasingly unhappy with their lives overall and with their appearance.[1]

- Girls are less happy than they used to be, with 1 in 7 (14%) 10 to 15 year old girls unhappy with their lives as a whole – up from 11% over a five year period. By contrast, the proportion of boys of the same age who are unhappy with their lives as a whole has remained stable at 11%.

- This means the estimated number of girls in the UK who are unhappy with their lives has risen by 21% from 234,300 to 283,200 between 2009/10 and 2013/14.[2]

- The difference is even starker when it comes to how children feel about the way they look. More than one third (34%) of girls are unhappy with their appearance – up from 30% over five years. By contrast, the proportion of boys of the same age who are unhappy with their appearance has remained stable at around 20%.

- This means the estimated number of girls in the UK who are unhappy with their appearance has risen by 8% from 647,400 to 699,700 between 2009/10 and 2013/14.

- This new trend builds on important findings from last year's Good Childhood Report, in which England ranked last out of 15 countries for happiness with appearance and also had the most pronounced gender differences of all participating countries.

Flourishing

- In this report, we combine measures of subjective well-being with a new measure of psychological well-being to assess the extent to which children are 'flourishing' in England today.

- Although more than 8 out of 10 children (82%) are 'flourishing', 10% are 'languishing' – having low scores for both subjective well-being and psychological well-being.

Mental health and well-being

- As girls get older, they are more likely than boys to experience emotional problems such as anxiety and depression. Emotional problems are associated with happiness with appearance and life as a whole, and these links are stronger for girls than boys.

- Younger boys are more likely than girls to be unhappy with their school work and more likely to have conduct and hyperactivity/inattention problems. These problems are associated with happiness with school work, and these links are stronger for boys than girls.

- These insights help to explain the finding that boys are more likely than girls to have a mental health problem at age 10 when all types are considered together – but by age 14 the situation is reversed.

Local area differences

- In our analysis of geographical differences in children's well-being, we found no solid evidence of regional differences or links to area-level deprivation (ie the Index of Multiple Deprivation), although there is a link for adults.

- However, children's perceptions of their local area – including the quality of local facilities, how safe they feel, how much freedom they perceive they have and their experiences of local problems – are clearly linked to their well-being. The top two local problems with the strongest links to well-being were 'noisy neighbours' and 'people drinking or taking drugs'.

- This adds to evidence we have accumulated over time which shows that children's direct experiences are much more important for their well-being than factors more removed from them, and also that factors known to be related to adults' well-being are not necessarily linked to children's well-being.

- Our local well-being research highlights the important findings that bullying is most likely to take place at school, and emotional bullying – such as name-calling, which girls are more likely to experience – is twice as commonplace as physical bullying, which boys are more likely to experience.

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[1] When we refer to children that are 'unhappy' using the Understanding Society data, we mean those that selected on or above the midpoint of a scale from 1–7 on which 1 is 'completely happy' and 7 is 'not at all happy'.

[2] Figures on the estimated number of children who are unhappy are calculated by combining the percentages from the Understanding Society data that are presented in this report with the ONS mid-year population estimates for the relevant age group (ie 10–15 year olds) and relevant years (ie 2009/10 and 2013/14): http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/pop-estimate/population-estimates-for-uk--england-and-wales--scotland-and-northern-ireland/mid-2014/index.html (Reference table MYE2)

Recommendations for change:

Policy recommendations

1. The Government should introduce a legally binding entitlement for children and young people to be able to access mental health and well-being support in educational settings in England and Wales. This must include sufficient funding.

2. The Government must commit to understanding and acting on children's well-being. At the moment there is no firm commitment from the Government that children's well-being will continue to be measured. With a new Government in place, now is the time to reaffirm the commitment to monitoring well-being – and particularly children's well-being – across the UK.

3. Local authorities across the UK should develop a process to make sure that children have a voice in decision-making about their local areas, including:

    a) Developing a process to allow children and young people to debate the issues affecting their lives and to assist in decision-making over setting priorities for the year ahead.

    b) Bringing people together at a neighbourhood level to improve children's access to, and their perception of safety in, their local environment – including local parks and open spaces.

    c) Producing an annual children and young people's local profile that brings together the range of data that is available on children's lives in the area.

Background to our well-being research

When we set up our research programme in 2005, we felt that children should be involved in the process of determining which aspects of life are included in assessments of their well-being, and be the main protagonists in those assessments. We took this 'child-centred' approach for two main reasons: firstly, we were conscious that too often children's voices get lost in discussions about their lives. Secondly, from a practical perspective, we were also aware that data on children's well-being that is rooted in their own accounts was lacking. This research set out to fill that gap.

For this reason, our well-being research programme started by asking children to tell us – in their own words and unprompted – what is most important in their lives. This was the first of many qualitative research projects that we have undertaken over the last 11 years to explore concepts of well-being with children themselves. Analysis of children's responses to open-ended questions was a crucial first step in our research, and provided the framework for our subsequent quantitative research.

Our research programme on subjective well-being

Over the last decade, we have carried out four nationally representative, schools-based well-being surveys in England – in 2008, 2010/11, 2012 and 2013/14 – which have together included over 18,000 different children aged 8 to 15. Additionally, in 2010 we set up a regular household survey to monitor children's well-being over time, and have now completed 15 waves of this survey, involving 30,000 children aged 8 to 17. These surveys, combined with pilot and other surveys that have included questions on well-being, mean that well over 60,000 children have taken part in national surveys that ask about their well-being.

Over this time, we also developed The Good Childhood Index, a measure of children's well-being that comprises indicators of overall well-being and happiness with 10 aspects of children's lives. The latest figures for The Good Childhood Index are shown in Figure 1 on the next page.

What is children's subjective well-being?

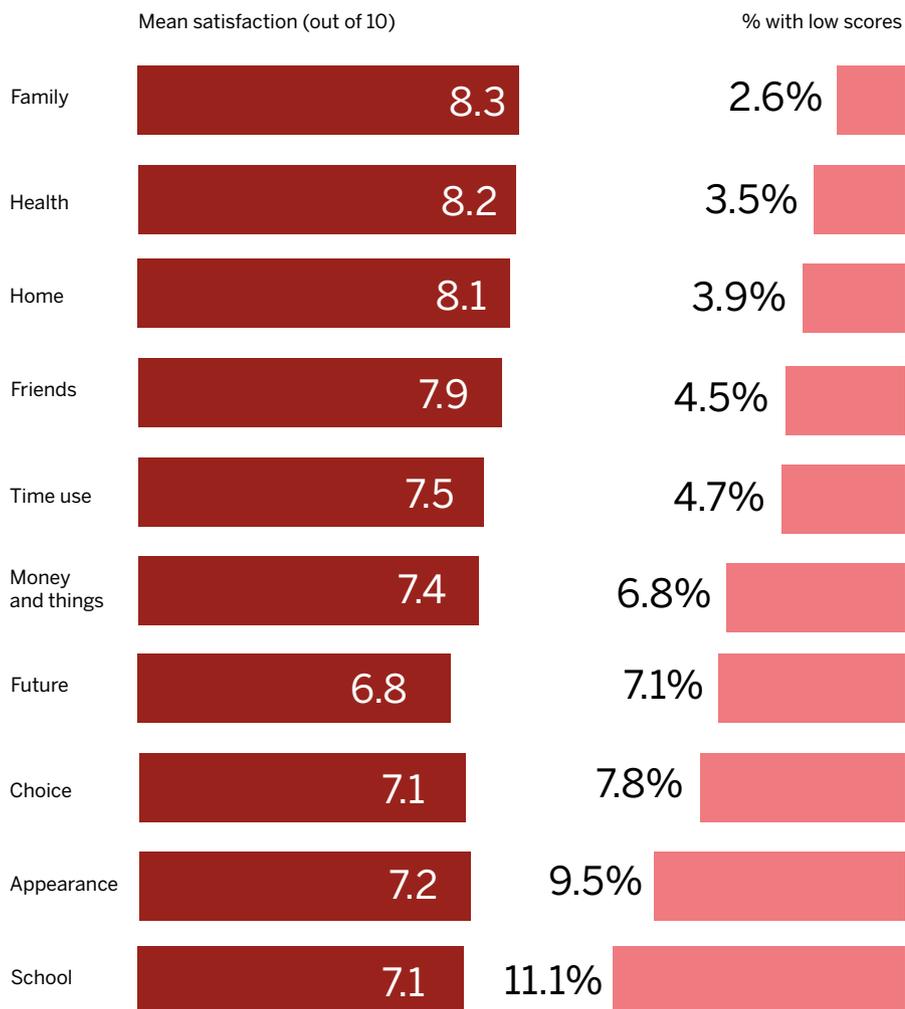Subjective well-being is about children's own assessments of how their lives are going.

Subjective well-being consists of two key elements:

- Life satisfaction – this relates to the evaluations that children make about their lives at a cognitive level, and comprises judgements about life as a whole, as well as judgements about different aspects of life (eg happiness with family relationships).

- The experience of positive and negative emotions at a particular point in time.

A related approach is psychological well-being, which is concerned with children's sense of meaning, purpose and engagement.

Children might be considered to be 'flourishing' if they score highly on measures of both subjective and psychological well-being.
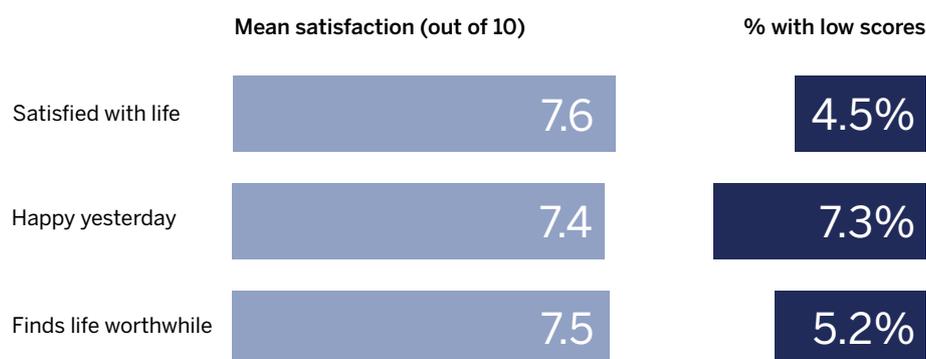
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Figure 1: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index

Mean satisfaction (out of 10)   % with low scores

Category	Mean satisfaction	% with low scores
Family	8.3	2.6%
Health	8.2	3.5%
Home	8.1	3.9%
Friends	7.9	4.5%
Time use	7.5	4.7%
Money and things	7.4	6.8%
Future	6.8	7.1%
Choice	7.1	7.8%
Appearance	7.2	9.5%
School	7.1	11.1%

Household Survey Wave 15, April/May 2016, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain.
Equally weighted by age and gender.

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 Well-being programme: satisfaction with life as a whole, happiness yesterday, and feeling life is worthwhile. The latest figures for these measures are shown in Figure 2 opposite.

Figure 2: Latest ONS measures of overall well-being

	Mean satisfaction (out of 10)	% with low scores
Satisfied with life	7.6	4.5%
Happy yesterday	7.4	7.3%
Finds life worthwhile	7.5	5.2%

Household Survey Wave 15, April/May 2016, 10 to 17 year olds, Great Britain.
Equally weighted by age and gender.

Trends in well-being over time

For every Good Childhood Report we have published since the series began in 2012, we have drawn on available data from the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and its successor the Understanding Society survey, to present trends in children's well-being over time. In this report, we focus on trends in five waves of data from the Understanding Society survey and the gender differences that are emerging for different aspects of well-being. The measures contained within Understanding Society are limited to single measures of happiness with life as a whole, friends, family, appearance, school and schoolwork, but they have the advantage of a time series that stretches back to 2009.

Analysis of these measures shows that between Wave 1 (2009) and Wave 5 (2014) there has been:
- A decrease in happiness with life as a whole for girls
- A decrease in happiness with appearance for girls
- A decrease in happiness with friends for both boys and girls
- An increase in happiness with schoolwork for both boys and girls
- An increase in happiness with school for boys
- No significant change in happiness with family

Thus there have been different trends for girls and boys over this five-year period.

The widening gender gap in happiness with appearance and life as a whole is particularly striking. To give an illustration of what these trends show in terms of the proportions of children that are unhappy with different aspects of their lives:
- In 2009/10, 11% of girls were unhappy with life as a whole, but by 2013/14 this had risen to 14%. By contrast, the proportion of boys unhappy with life as a whole remained unchanged at 11%.
- In 2009/10, 30% of girls were unhappy with their appearance, but by 2013/14 this had risen to 34%. The proportion of boys unhappy with their appearance remained unchanged at 20%.

It is worth considering these findings in the context of findings from our international survey, which were highlighted in the 2015 Good Childhood Report. For example, despite England ranking in the bottom third of countries in the international survey for several aspects of school, these time trends suggest that children's evaluations of school have slightly improved in recent years. In contrast, for happiness with life as a whole and appearance (for which children in England ranked towards the bottom of the international league table, especially for girls) things appear to be getting worse.

Figure 3: Trends in children's subjective well-being by gender, UK, 2009 to 2014
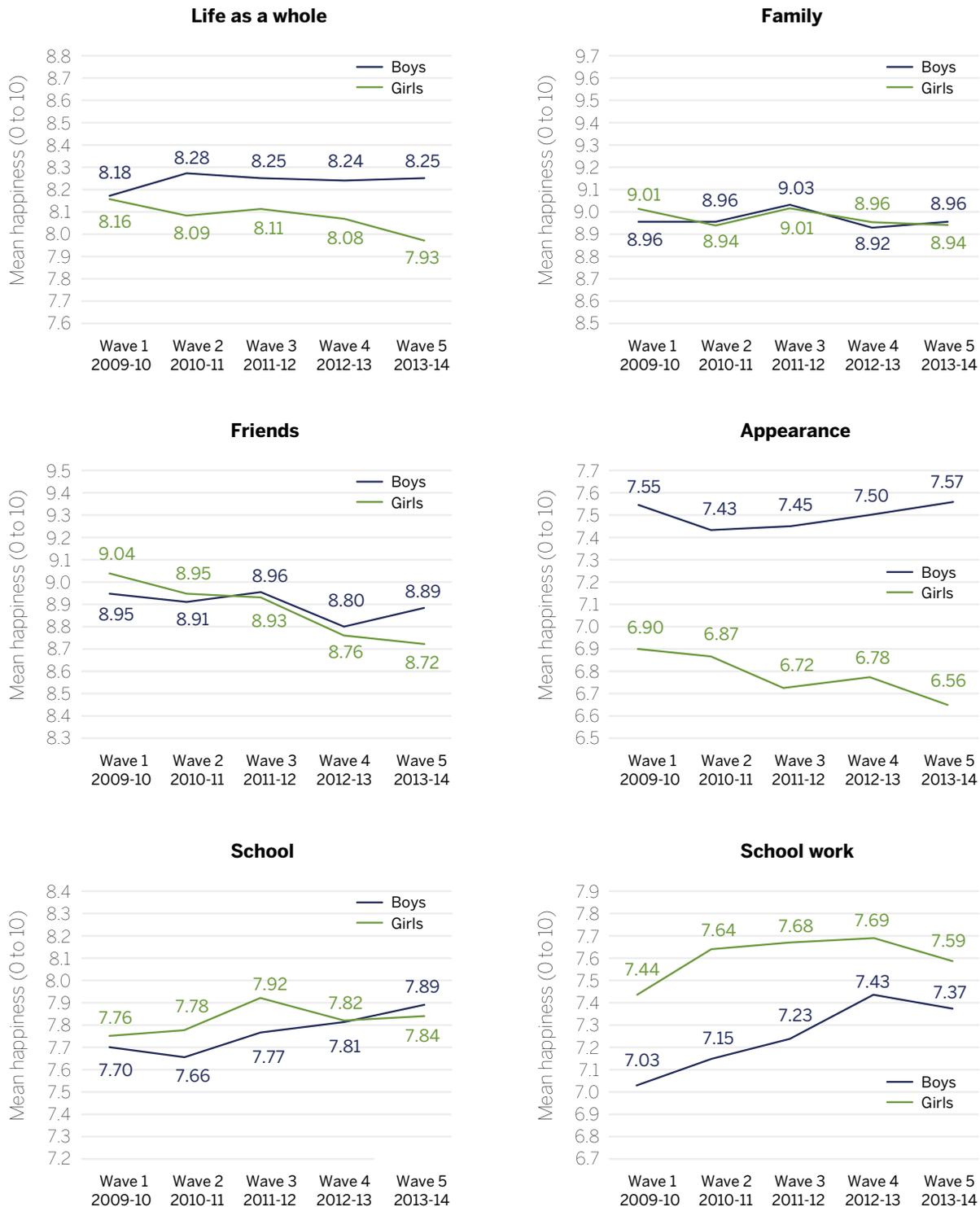
Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted.

Our research does not offer explanations for these trends, but other studies – including ONS trends showing a rise in social media usage amongst teenage girls but not teenage boys, and research highlighting an association between mental health issues and social media usage – suggest that future research needs to consider the role that social media plays in the lives of girls in particular.

Flourishing

As explained earlier (in the box on page five), there are two distinctive approaches to understanding children's well-being: a subjective or 'hedonic' approach, and a psychological or 'eudaimonic' approach. There is value in considering different approaches to well-being because, although related, they capture distinctive concepts and, importantly, have different associations with other key factors such as bullying. Thus, by combining measures of subjective and psychological well-being, we are able to understand not only whether children feel happy with their lives, but also whether their lives have meaning and purpose. We can think of this as 'flourishing'.

Drawing on data from a schools survey of 12 year olds that we conducted as part of the Children's Worlds international project, we looked at the relationship between subjective well-being – specifically, life satisfaction[3] – and psychological well-being.[4] Using this approach, we found that 82% of children could be said to be 'flourishing' – having reasonably high scores on both measures; 10% could be said to be 'languishing' – having low scores on both measures; and around 8% fall in between these two groups – having a high score on one measure and a low score on the other.

In future research, we would also like to include measures of positive and negative affect in a measure of flourishing, as these day-to-day emotions capture a different aspect of children's well-being and have different associations with important factors like bullying.[5]

Figure 4: Relationship between measures of subjective well-being and psychological well-being

	Low psychological well-being	High psychological well-being
Low subjective well-being	10% Languishing	4% Unhappy but functioning well
High subjective well-being	4% Happy but not functioning well	82% Flourishing

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[3] The measure of life satisfaction was based on four items derived from Huebner (1994), which have been validated in an international research project as statistically useful (Casas, 2016).

[4] The measure of psychological well-being was based on six items that relate to the six components identified by Ryff (1985): self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relations with others, autonomy, personal growth, and purpose in life.

[5] Recent experiences of being bullied are more strongly associated with children's feelings of sadness than with their feelings of happiness or their life satisfaction.

Mental health

In previous editions of The Good Childhood Report we have discussed the relationship between an overall measure of subjective well-being and a combined measure of mental health issues, highlighting that low well-being and mental ill-health are related concepts, but not synonymous. An important illustration of their distinctiveness is that each is linked to other variables in different ways. For example, low subjective well-being is more strongly related to aspects of children's relationships, such as feeling supported by family and frequency of talking to parents about things that matter, while mental ill-health is more strongly associated with children's behaviours, such as drinking alcohol and truanting (The Children's Society, 2013).

In this report we explore how different aspects of well-being and different types of mental health problems relate to each other, and to factors such as age and gender. Our analysis draws on data from the Understanding Society survey, which contains data on subjective well-being, as well as the child version of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). This is a widely validated measure of mental health issues in children, which covers four types of mental ill-health: emotional symptoms, peer relationship problems, conduct problems and hyperactivity/inattention problems.
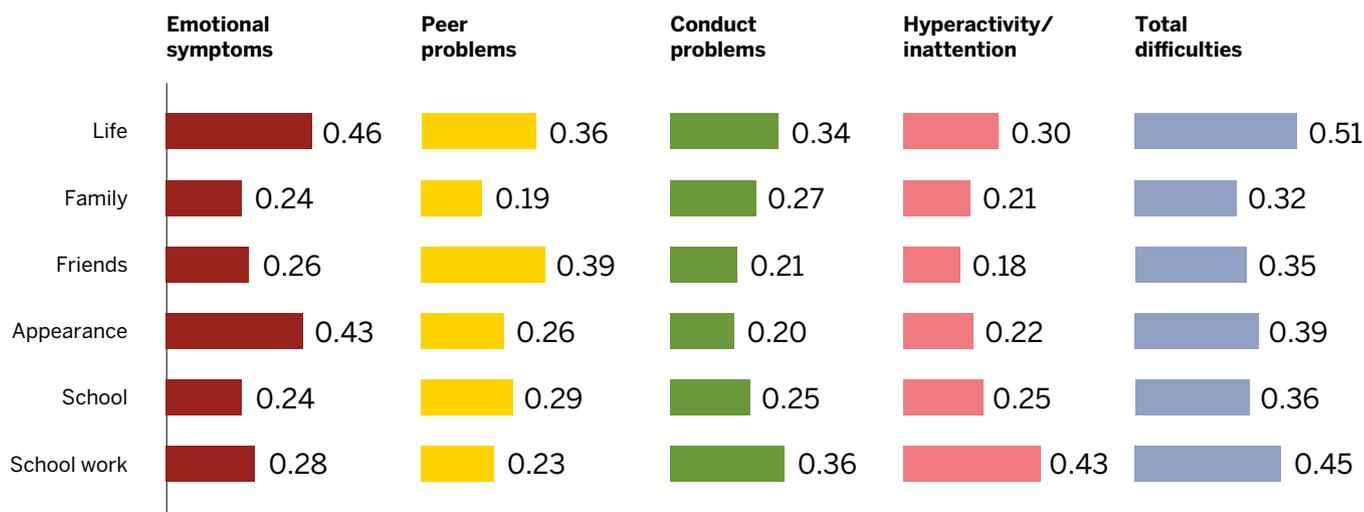
A consistent finding from our research programme is that as girls get older they become increasingly unhappy with their appearance, while this is not the case for boys. We also know from analysis of trends over time (shown on page 7) that in recent years, girls appear to be growing less happy with their lives as a whole. Analysis of different types of mental health issues gives us important insights into these trends. We discover that, in addition to being unhappy with their appearance and life as a whole, older girls are more likely than boys to experience emotional health problems such as anxiety and depression. Moreover, there is an association between emotional problems and both happiness with appearance and life as a whole, which is strongest for girls.

For boys, there is a different picture. The time trends on page 8 show that boys are more likely than girls to be unhappy with their school work. However, this is only the case for younger boys – specifically, when they are aged 10 and 11 – and these gender differences disappear from age 12 onwards. There is a similar pattern for conduct and hyperactivity/inattention problems, with boys more likely than girls to experience these problems at ages 10, 11 and 12, but with the gender differences disappearing at age 13. We also find an association between conduct and hyperactivity/inattention problems and happiness with school work, which is strongest for boys.

These findings help us to understand another key finding from our analysis: at age 10 boys are more likely than girls to have a mental health problem when all types are considered together, but by age 14 the situation is reversed.

Figure 5: Correlations between subjective well-being and mental health issues

	Emotional symptoms	Peer problems	Conduct problems	Hyperactivity/ inattention	Total difficulties
Life	0.46	0.36	0.34	0.30	0.51
Family	0.24	0.19	0.27	0.21	0.32
Friends	0.26	0.39	0.21	0.18	0.35
Appearance	0.43	0.26	0.20	0.22	0.39
School	0.24	0.29	0.25	0.25	0.36
School work	0.28	0.23	0.36	0.43	0.45

Analysis of the relationship between subjective well-being and mental health issues at two points in time (approximately two years apart) also reveal that the odds of having mental health issues at the second time point are 13.5 times higher for children with low well-being at both time points than for children with high well-being at both time points. This provides an additional justification for being concerned about, measuring, and acting to improve children's well-being.

Local well-being

Some of the clearest illustrations of the policy relevance of data on children's well-being are geographical comparisons, whether within countries or between countries. In The Good Childhood Report 2015, we focused on the latter through an international study of children's well-being, which showed striking differences in patterns of well-being from country to country. In this year's report, we turn our attention to the extent to which there are within-country geographical variations in children's well-being.

Somewhat unexpectedly, we found no solid evidence of regional differences in children's well-being, or differences on the basis of area-level deprivation, which was measured using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), although we did find a link between the IMD and parents' well-being, as can be seen in Figure 6.

In contrast, when we asked children about their views and experiences of their local area – eg their feelings about local facilities, local adults and their safety and freedom – there were clear links to well-being even after controlling for key socio-demographic factors. To provide an example of the associations, gender, age and household income explained around 5% of the variation in subjective well-being, but by including children's scores for local facilities, safety/freedom and local adults it was possible to explain an additional 21% of the variation. This has important implications for local area assessments of well-being.

Figure 6: Child and parent subjective well-being by Index of Multiple Deprivation quintile
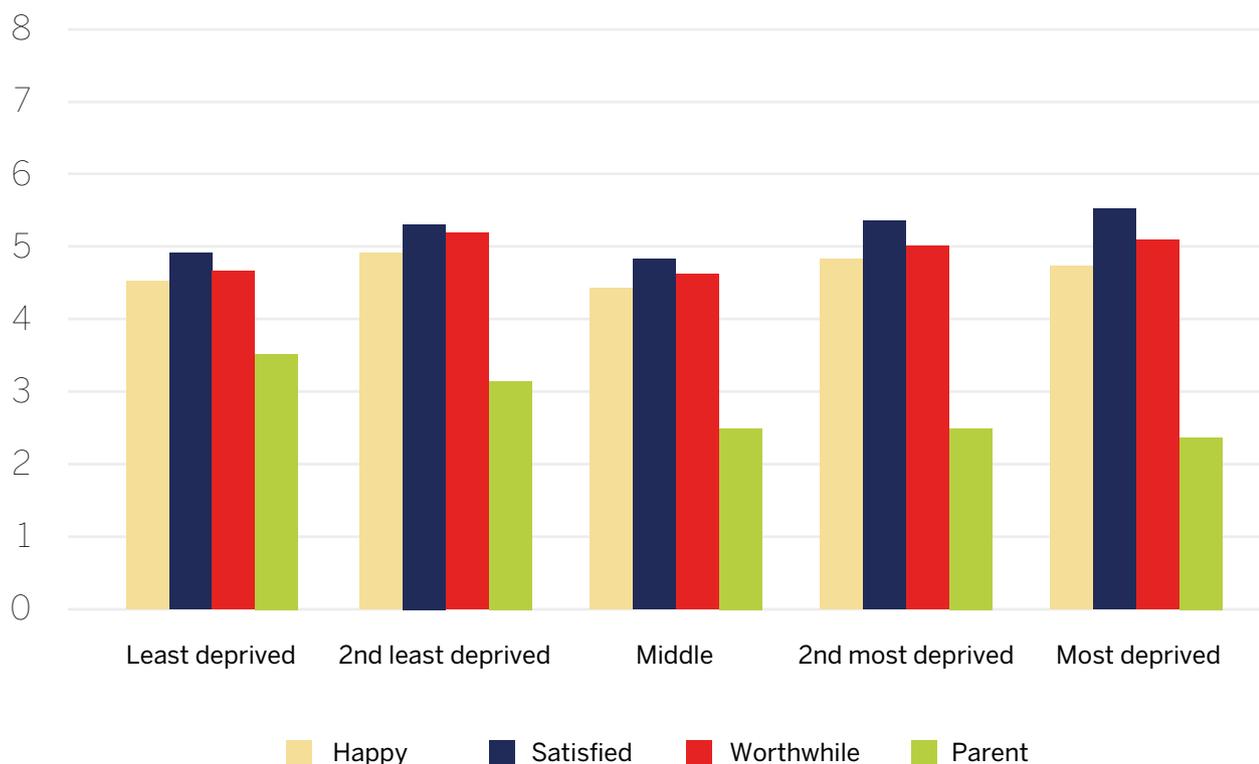
Although, at first, the absence of a link between children's well-being and objective measures of area-level deprivation may seem a little surprising, on reflection this fits with a pattern of findings we have been building through our research programme over a number of years. We have found that indicators that are objective or removed from children – such as family structure and household income – have a much weaker link to children's well-being than indicators that are subjective or closer to them, such as the quality of family relationships and a child-centred measure of deprivation.

In a similar vein, the finding that different factors appear to be important for children's and adults' well-being fits with other analysis that we have done of country-level differences within Europe. For example, whereas for adults there is a clear relationship between adult subjective well-being and national wealth in European countries, this relationship is much less clear for children.

Figure 7: Mean subjective well-being scores for children according to their ratings of their local area
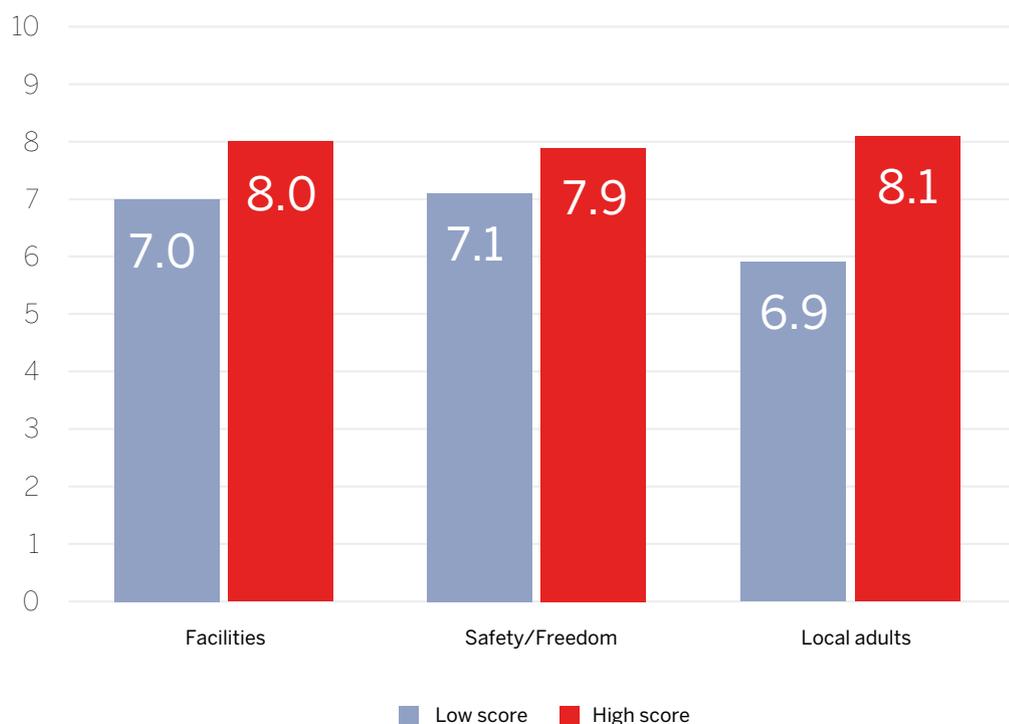
Discussion

In this edition of The Good Childhood Report, we have found striking age and gender differences in relation to time trends in subjective well-being and for different types of mental health issues. In particular, we have seen that as children get older there is a marked divergence for boys and girls in levels of happiness with appearance and life as a whole – with girls increasingly unhappy with these aspects of life, and increasingly likely to experience emotional problems.

When considered in the context of international comparisons that reveal divergent age and gender patterns between countries, these findings add weight to the argument that the disparities in children's well-being which we have become used to seeing are not an unavoidable facet of being a specific age or gender. Importantly, it is possible to do something about them.

Our exploration of the links between mental health and well-being underlines the value of measuring children's well-being on its own merits, since low subjective well-being is something we should be concerned about in and of itself, and also because it is related to other important outcomes. A secondary advantage is that measuring subjective well-being may help identify children who are at risk of developing mental health issues in the future.

Analysis of local area factors leads us to the overall conclusion that children's levels of subjective well-being do not seem to be affected by the level of deprivation of the local area in which they live, but parent's subjective well-being does, at least to some extent. This adds to evidence we have accumulated over time which shows that different factors seem to affect children's and adults' well-being, and that children's direct experiences are much more important for their well-being than factors that are more removed from them.

Policy recommendations

This report addresses three key areas: trends in children's well-being over time, the links between low subjective well-being and mental ill health, and the impact of local environments on children's well-being.

Understanding and acting on children's well-being is a crucially important component in ensuring that children have the best childhood possible, and real opportunities to flourish as adults. However, much more needs to be done at both a national and a local level to improve children's well-being across the UK:

1. The Government should commit to monitoring children's well-being.

In 2010 the then Prime Minister made a firm commitment to monitoring and acting on well-being in the UK, saying:

'I reject the criticism that Government policy simply has no role in this area. To those who say that all this sounds like a distraction from the serious business of Government, I would say that finding out what will really improve lives and acting on it is actually the serious business of Government.'[4]

However, at the moment there is no firm assurance from the Government that children's well-being will continue to be measured. With a new Government in place, now is the time to reaffirm the commitment to monitoring well-being – and particularly children's well-being – across the UK.

2. The Government should introduce a legally binding entitlement for children and young people to be able to access evidence-based mental health and well-being support in educational settings (including both schools and further education colleges) across England and Wales.

As this year's report shows, there is a clear link between children's low well-being and mental ill-health. Much more needs to be done to intervene early to improve children's subjective well-being and to promote positive mental health. It is also important to deal with low well-being and mental health issues when they arise.

[6] https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-speech-on-well-being

With this in mind, the Government should create a statutory entitlement for children and young people to receive evidence-based mental-health and well-being interventions in schools and further education colleges.

This entitlement must be matched with sufficient funding for services. The Government has confirmed its intention to provide substantial additional investment (£1.25 billion) in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) services up to the year 2020. This additional investment should be ring-fenced for children and young people's mental health. Some of this funding can be used to secure provision in educational settings.

3. Local authorities across the UK should ensure that children have a voice in decision-making about their local areas.

Evidence from this year's report shows the major impact that children's experiences of their local environments can have on their lives – with children's experiences of safety in their local area, local facilities and local adults all having a significant impact on their well-being.

Local authorities can do a great deal to deliver change for children in respect of their environment, but our evidence shows that this must start from the perspective of listening to children's own voices about what matters to them about their local area.

For this reason, we recommend that local authorities look at how they can better embed children and young people's voices into local decision-making. Such action should include:[5]

a) Developing a process, co-designed and co-chaired with young people locally, to allow children and young people to debate the issues affecting their lives and to assist in decision-making over setting priorities for the year ahead.

b) Bringing people together at a neighbourhood level to improve children's access to, and their perception of safety in, their local environment – including local parks and open spaces.

c) Producing an annual children and young people's local profile that brings together the range of data that is available on children's lives in the area. This profile could be significantly enhanced by local work to measure children's well-being in order to better understand what the key issues are affecting children's lives, and what more could be done to address these issues.

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[7] Recommendations are based in part on the recommendations of the 2014 'Birmingham Commission for Children' supported by The Children's Society.

It is a painful fact that many children and young people in Britain today are still suffering extreme hardship, abuse and neglect. Too often their problems are ignored and their voices unheard. Now it is time to listen and to act.

The Children's Society is a national charity that runs local services, helping children and young people when they are at their most vulnerable, and have nowhere left to turn.

We also campaign for changes to laws affecting children and young people, to stop the mistakes of the past being repeated in the future.

Our supporters around the country fund our services and join our campaigns to show children and young people they are on their side.

The Children's Society

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