

a good childhood



The
Children's
Society



The Good Childhood Inquiry: what children told us

Foreword

At The Children's Society, we always try to look at the world through children's eyes, and listen when they tell us what matters to them most. When we launched The Good Childhood Inquiry to explore what makes for a good childhood in the UK today, children's views were at the heart of what we did and how we did it.

Before the inquiry was up and running, 8,000 young people took part in a survey that influenced the planning and development of the inquiry. Once the inquiry was underway, a further 10,000 children and young people contributed their views. We used a combination of methods designed to involve as many children as possible alongside focused work with particular groups.

Children's responses were rich and varied, expressed orally and in writing, in words and in pictures. Given the variety of ages and backgrounds of those that took part, we were surprised by the common ground in what children told us. However, there were also important differences in emphasis and perspective. This summary focuses on the views and experiences expressed most often by children, and it also highlights interesting departures from the general view.

It is our responsibility to understand the good childhood described by children. In no uncertain terms, children tell us that friends and family are at the centre of their worlds. And so we must ask how we can better nurture and support these precious relationships in order to achieve a good childhood for all.

Bob Reitemeier
Chief Executive, The Children's Society



Introduction

In September 2006, The Children's Society launched *The Good Childhood Inquiry* with a 'call for evidence' to adults and children, and a commitment to actively seek and listen to the views and experiences of children¹ throughout the course of the inquiry. From February 2007 onwards, thousands of children from all over the UK filled in 'my life' postcards or contributed their views online thanks to a partnership with *BBC Newsround*. More than 50 focus groups were carried out to explore particular themes with diverse groups of children and young people who otherwise may not have had the opportunity to take part.

These methods, along with a national survey of young people in 2005, made it possible for us to hear from over 18,000 children and young people living in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales (more details opposite). We asked them both open, exploratory questions about what constitutes a good life for children and young people, as well as specific questions relating to the six themes of the inquiry – friends, family, learning, lifestyle, health and values.



¹ We know that children and young people relate to the concept of childhood in different ways, and that teenagers generally do not consider themselves to be children. However, for reasons of space and simplicity, and because the boundaries between 'childhood' and 'young personhood' are blurred, when we are talking about children and young people of different ages as a group we will refer to them as 'children'.

Sources of evidence

Children's contributions came in a variety of different forms, namely:

- **8,000 participants in The Children's Society's national survey in 2005 (age range 14–16 years)**
- **5,337 'my life' postcards (age range 5–17 years)**
- **3,642 online responses to theme-related questions posed on the BBC Newsround and 'my life' websites (age range 5–17 years)**
- **742 written responses to the inquiry's call for evidence (age range 5–17 years)**
- **51 focus groups involving 407 children and young people (age range 3–21 years)**

The national survey involved a representative sample of young people aged 14 to 16, so we can say with some confidence that these young people's views reflect those of their age group in general.

The 'my life' postcards were a hugely popular resource that were ordered by thousands of schools and projects around the country. Even though the children that filled in these postcards are not a representative sample, their sheer numbers provide us with a valuable insight into younger children's views in particular (the mean age was 10 years).

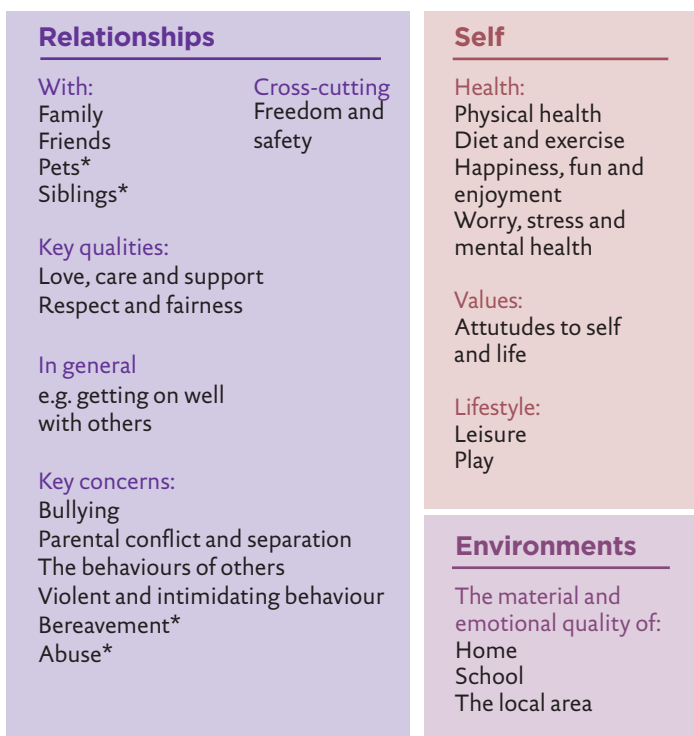
The questions that we posed on each theme of the inquiry got an enthusiastic response from *BBC Newsround* viewers, once again giving us the perspectives of a younger age group (we do not have precise age information for all of these children).

With our interest and direct experience of working with children who are unlikely to take part in activities such as those described above or whose participation requires special time and resources, we carried out a series of focus groups to hear their views. In this way, we involved groups of children and young people that are (or have been) in trouble with the law, refugees, Gypsy, Roma or Travellers, disabled, under the age of 5, in the care of the state, living in poverty or other disadvantaged circumstances, excluded from school, affected by domestic violence, or living in single-parent families. Most of these children were born in the UK, but some came from countries as far and wide as Burma, Afghanistan, Jamaica, Rwanda and Romania.

Analysis

Children's responses to *The Good Childhood Inquiry* were rich and varied, covering a whole range of topics that do not correspond neatly to the themes of the inquiry. For the most part, children discussed the **relationships** that are most important to them, above all their family and friends. However, they also talked about their sense of **self** and who they are as an individual, with comments about their health, learning, interests and values. Some of their comments were general, while others were related to the key **environments** in which they live their lives, namely their home, school and local area.

In this summary, we have presented children's evidence in relation to these three key areas: Relationships, Self and Environments. The diagram shows how the main topics that children raised fit into this framework.



*Mentioned by younger children in particular

Relationships

Relationships were at the heart of children's evidence. Mostly children talked about family and friends, the quality of these relationships, and the things they like to do together. Siblings and pets were a topic of discussion for younger children in particular.

Children commented on the positive aspects of these relationships, such as the importance of **getting on well** with others and avoiding arguments. Children of all ages mentioned **love, care** and **support**, while **fairness** and **respect** were key themes for older age groups.

On the negative side, the **behaviour of others**, especially when it is violent and intimidating, generated a lot of comments, with **bullying** singled out as a key factor preventing children from having a good life. A surprising number of children expressed **concern for others** less fortunate than themselves.

Family

Children clearly considered the family to be central to their lives, this being the topic they talked about most. Just having a family was felt to be hugely important, and they had lots to say about their own families, usually in warm and appreciative tones.

[What do all children and young people need for a good life?]

'a family to love and care about them and to help them with their problems.' (13-year-old boy)

Children described a good family as one that is loving, caring, supportive, kind and understanding. They should 'always be there for you' and 'look after you'. Mutual respect, togetherness and good communication were also felt to contribute to a good home life.

[What makes a good family life?]

'You're there for each other.'

'Respect your family.'

'When trouble comes, you've got to work things out together.' (Focus group with boys aged 15 to 17 years)

However, not all children were so upbeat. Some made critical or wistful comments about their own families, revealing a fear of being rejected, abandoned and unwanted.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'my family.' (13-year-old girl)

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'the home being rubbish and people that harm you with their words and actions.' (13-year-old girl)

In general, though, children clearly enjoy spending time with their family, playing and having fun together.

[What makes a happy family?]

'lots of family things, lots of playdates, people visit you, you visit people, everyone together on weekends.' (9-year-old girl)

However, a few were critical of parents who do not make time for these things.

[What stops children and young people from having a good home life?]

'let their children fend for themselves.' (14-year-old girl)

A distinct message emerging from the focus groups with young offenders was that influences outside of the home sometimes clash with those within the family. Some of these young people associated their offending with the influence of their peers.

[What stops children and young people from having a good family life?]

'Bad friends you know? You get dragged into it. You want to stay out late at night at certain times and it's hard. You get kicked out of the house sometimes.'

'If I'd stayed at home I wouldn't be in this mess.' (Focus group with boys aged 15 to 17)

Children also commented on particular styles of parenting, expressing dislike for overly strict or protective parents.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'Being always told by your parents what to do all the time.' (11-year-old boy)

However, while children had clear ideas of what a parent should be and do, they were not entirely convinced that parenting could be taught.

[Do you think that parents should have lessons to learn how to be better parents?]

'I don't think it [lessons] work.'

'You can't tell people how to be a parent.'

'Just love them.'

(Focus group with boys aged 15 to 17)



I feel that my parents care about me

93% agree
5% are not sure
2% disagree

The Children's Society's National Survey, 2005

I feel that my parents understand me

63% agree
22% are not sure
15% disagree

The Children's Society's National Survey, 2005

Friends

Children left no doubt as to the significance of friends in their lives. Having friends, spending time with them, doing things together and just 'hanging out' are all things that matter to them.

[What could be changed to make life better for children and young people?]

'Everyone should have a friend.' (11-year-old girl)

Children talked about why particular friends are important to them and what they look for in a friend: someone you can trust, talk to, and who will always be there for you. Having fun together was another vital ingredient of friendship.

[What is one of the things that you really like about your friend?]

'My mate Chrissie makes me laugh and she is really fun to be with]...' (Focus group with girls and boys aged 14 to 17)

Younger children – in particular a group of children under 5 – felt that friends could be of any age, members of your family, siblings or pets.

On the other hand, *not* having friends and *not* feeling included was also a source of anxiety, notably for a group of young people that have lived in the care system.

[Do you need to belong?]

'If you are in with the popular group you like going to school if you are out you don't like going...'

'I wanted to be accepted but I wasn't and it felt like shit – so I don't go to school.' (Young people with girls and boys aged 15 to 21)

Children had plenty to say about the potential for upset and pain, such as when friends are 'mean' to them, when they 'break up' with them or betray them.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'I would change my life because me and my freinds are forever falling out and I really dont like it.' (11-year-old girl)

Children were highly critical of friends that 'tell your secrets', are 'two-faced' or 'back-stabbing'.

[What are some bad things about friends?]

'When they break promises.'

'When they don't keep secrets.'

'When they lie to me.'

(Focus group with boys and girls aged 5 to 16)

Pets

Some topics were particular sources of discussion for younger children. Pets and siblings are two such examples.

Younger children often saw their pets as family members and friends.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'My cat, my dog, my goldfish, my horse, animals, rabbits, more pets, snakes, my puppy, my hamster, my fish, my kittens.'

They also acknowledged the emotional benefits of having a pet that will 'love them' and 'always listen'.

[What do children and young people need for a good life?]

'Mabye a pet of some sort so they can talk to them when something gets you down.' (11-year-old girl)

However, a few mentioned the downside of having a pet such as having to look after them, or when they die.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'My rabbit died.' (11-year-old girl)



Siblings

Younger children also mentioned siblings regularly, giving both favourable and disparaging accounts of their own brothers and sisters. Sometimes they expressed affection and exasperation for them at the same time:

[What are the best things about your life?]

'My little brother.'

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'When I have a fight with my brothers. And when my mum and dad dose not belive me.' (10-year-old girl)

On the positive side, children described how much they enjoyed playing with, chatting to or spending time with their siblings. Some wished for another brother or sister, or wished they had a sibling at all. Others made wistful comments about seeing siblings that do not live with them.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'that I am me a twin...' (11-year-old girl)

However, some talked about their brothers and sisters in a more negative light, especially when they are 'beaten up', 'left out' or 'hit' by them. A few were averse to being the oldest, youngest or middle sibling, having to share a room, and parental favouritism.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'Get a new sister and new fish.' (8-year-old boy)

'I could change from being a nasty sister in to a kind sister.'



Other children were more conciliatory, wishing that they could get on better and fight less.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'I wish me and my siter could share.' (9-year-old girl)

Love

Love, care and support were topics that cut across children's evidence when they described the qualities that they most value in their relationships with family, friends and others.

When we asked children what makes for a good life, love was a favourite response.

[What makes for a good life for children and young people?]

'it is important for me that childhood is sealed with a kiss – it must be full & bursting of love!'

Sometimes they talked about love in a general sense but most of the time it was in relation to their family or parents.

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'I wish could make all childrens parents love them.' (11-year-old boy)

A good parent was felt to be a loving, caring and supportive one.

[What makes a good parent?]

'It doesn't have to be a natural mother or father, anyone can make you feel loved and special.' (13-year-old girl)

Some emphasised the value of love by contrasting it with other things such as time, practical support and money.

[What makes a good parent?]

'A loving parent who cares for and respects their child. They may not earn a lot or they may not be able to be around much, but if they love their child and they let them know that then, in my opinion, they are a good parent.' (16-year-old-girl)

Care

Care was another emotional 'good'. Here children's comments tended to fall into two categories: being cared for and being cared about. Most of the time they seemed to mean the latter, evoking familiar themes such as the importance of feeling loved, valued and wanted, or being encouraged and praised.

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'For all children to have a home and parents who really really care. Not parents who didn't want children and ended up with them and decided to keep them. People who look after children properly.'
(11-year-old girl)

When children talked about being cared for they conveyed the idea of being looked after in the physical sense, and having simple things such as a home, food and water. This was a strong thread in children's comments.

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'People to have someone to care for them.' (8-year-old boy)

Support

Some children discussed support in the affirmative sense, such as being supported in their lives and choices.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'my family supports me in what ever I want to do in my life.'
(11-year-old boy)

However, support was more commonly seen as a counterweight to problems and difficult times. Children emphasised the importance of having someone who 'will always be there for you', 'to talk to', 'to turn to' or 'to confide in'.

[What do all children and young people need for a good life?]

'Someone to talk to when they feel they have noone.'
(13-year-old girl)

Sometimes children talked explicitly about a specific source of support, which was usually their family or friends, but they also discussed it more generally or in relation to a more anonymous person, like a counsellor or ChildLine.

They also highlighted their own role in seeking support, urging children to speak up if they needed to talk, and to help others with their problems.

[What do all children and young people need for a good life?]

'They cant let things worry them they need to tell someone.'
(14-year-old boy)

Their comments acknowledged that there are connections and tensions between the different qualities that they value in a family.

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

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

Respect

Respect was a key thread running through the responses of older age groups in particular. Young people mentioned respect alongside fairness, kindness, politeness and good manners as important elements of how people should treat each other.

[Can you think of one way that you should treat people?]

'Treat others the way you would like to be treated.'

'Respect.'

'Yeah, respect is important.'

'Be polite'

'Forgiveness.' (Focus group with boys and girls aged 14 and 15)

Closely linked to respect was the question of being listened to, which was felt to be crucially important.

[What makes a happy family?]

'talk to ur children like an adult with respect.' (10-year-old boy)

[What's important about how you treat people?]

'if you treat someone else with respect they are more likely to treat you with respect.'

I often long for someone to turn to for advice

29% agree

26% are not sure

45% disagree

The Children's Society's National Survey, 2005

Some felt that young people's behaviour would improve if adults were more respectful towards them.

[How do you think young people see adults and adults see young people?]

'Adults look down on them, they group them together, give them no respect. Then it's the same in reverse, young people don't respect authority.'

'Because we're not respected... If more people were polite we might do it.' (Focus group with boys aged 15 to 17)

Fairness

A related theme was fairness and fair treatment. Young people identified various forms of prejudice and discrimination that stopped them from having a good life:

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

'Being treated fairly.'

[What stops young people from having a good life?]

'Being picked on because of their colour or religion.'

Getting on well with others

Harmonious relationships and 'getting on well' with others were major aspirations for children, while arguments were one of their primary concerns.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'My mum and I fight/have an argument everyday when I get in after school about either my homework or my attitude.'
(13-year-old girl)

Falling out with friends was a common but upsetting experience for many. Their comments revealed that the feelings roused by these disputes run deep.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'If there family or friends or some one they know has fallen out and they have know onen to turn to.' (10-year-old girl)

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'When my friends get angry with me and break up with me.'
(10-year-old boy)

Unsurprisingly perhaps, children wished for fewer arguments.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'That no one augus agen.' (7-year-old, gender unknown)

Bullying

Bullying was a major source of anxiety for children. It was not always apparent whether they were speaking from personal experience or not, but their words clearly came from the heart.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'The worst thing in my life is the bullies.' (10-year-old boy)

Children wished that more could be done to address bullying.

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'I would try and stop ALL bullying!!!' (11-year-old girl)

In addition to talking about bullying from the perspective of the victim, some of the focus group participants reflected on the issue from the bully's point of view. Some even admitted to having bullied themselves.

[Anyone got any thoughts on bullying?]

'Don't think its right to bully people.'

'I don't think its right but I think everyone in time will actually bully people because if they've been bullied then they'll probably end up bullying people.'

'Everyone experiences it at some point.'
(Focus group with boys and girls aged 16 and 17)



Parental conflict and separation

Children also talked about parental arguments, separation and issues arising from not living with both parents. Conveying strong feelings on the subject, it was clear that many were speaking from personal experience.

Some regretted their parents splitting up, and wished they would get back together.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'There parents might split up and the children might want them to get back together.' (8-year-old girl)

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'Stop my mum and dad from gettind divorced when I was so young.' (16-year-old boy)

In comments about parents that are still together as well as those that have separated, children expressed strong dislike for parental arguments.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'What I would change is that my parents would never argue and always get along with each other.' (10-year-old boy)

Children felt that an environment characterised by conflict could cause problems in the present and future.

[In what ways is it bad, do you think, when children see their parents fighting?]

'Get depressed and all that, you might turn into a bully or something because it releases anger on someone else.'

'It would probably turn the little ones into big bullies.'
(Focus group with boys and girls aged 10 to 14)

Some wished that they could see more of one or other parent (usually their dad) or wished they had a dad at all.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'I don't think I would wish for anything really because I love my life. But if I really had to I would wish for a dad.' (9-year-old boy)

Children also mentioned other unwelcome consequences of parental separation.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'my mum and dad are split up and my brother is always angry.'
(12-year-old boy)

'Going from my mum and dad like a tennis ball.' (13-year-old boy)



Some gave negative appraisals of their parents' new relationships.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'my dad has a new girlfriend and loves her more than me and my brothers.' (11-year-old girl)

There were mixed views in the focus groups about whether parents should stay together for the sake of the children.

[So, do you think parents should stay together for the sake of the kids?]

'No, because then they would be miserable and argue all the time and make the kids lives miserable too.'

'But they should try to stop arguing and try to remember what they love about each other.'

(Focus group with young people aged 14 to 25)

The behaviour of others

Younger children in particular disliked the unkind things that people say and do to each other, and were highly critical of people being nasty, unkind or mean, and doing or saying 'horrible things'. They also objected to shouting, screaming and swearing.

[What things do stop children and young people from having a good life?]

'No one being meen. People loving each other.'

Being teased and ostracised was another common complaint, especially being 'called names', 'made fun of' and 'left out'.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'That people take the mikey and all u cand do is stand their.'
(13-year-old boy)

Although there were fewer comments about people being kind, friendly and nice, it was clear that children wished this were the norm.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'Everybody's kind, friendly and nice we have kind mums, kind dads, kind brothers or sisters.'

Violent and intimidating behaviour

Children made a whole host of comments about violent and intimidating behaviour, ranging from more minor incidents like fighting to violent crimes such as murder. Common to these was a sense of fear about their own and others' safety.

Fighting and stealing dominated the less violent end of the spectrum.

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'Less fitting becose eveyone wil get hut.' (7-year-old boy)

Gangs and intimidating groups were also mentioned.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'Intimidating people who hang about large social areas.' (15-year-old girl)

'I am scared of drunk men, and teenagers who shout and swear in the street.'

At the violent end of the spectrum, children revealed their fear of killers, muggers, kidnappers and paedophiles.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'peverts, RAPISTIST, bombers, pedofiles.' (12-year-old boy)

These comments conveyed a fear of being attacked or killed themselves.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'That they are scared of going out on the street and being mugged or something when they have done nothing to deserve it.'

The language used by children was often reminiscent of fears expressed by the media and by adults in general.

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'STOP GUN CRIME AND STOP SHOOTING.' (12-year-old girl)

Bereavement

A surprising number of children expressed sorrow about a bereavement or fear about a loved one dying. For those that had lost someone, it was usually a grandparent, although some described their pain at losing a sibling or a parent.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'For all the people in my family to be alive again.'

Children were also fearful of losing someone they care about.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'That my mum, dad and family can't live forever and I don't know when they will die.' (12-year-old girl)

Abuse

Younger children in particular identified child abuse as something that hinders a good life. Occasionally they described a direct experience of abuse, but for the most part abuse was discussed in the third person so it was hard to know what had given rise to their comments.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'being sexuaily assaulted.'

'I don't like nasty parents who abuse their children, people who bully others, rasism, and other nasty things.' (12-year-old girl)

The young men participating in a focus group at a Young Offenders' Institution had an interesting exchange about the role of external agencies when home is an unsafe or difficult environment. Intervention in family life was felt to be helpful by some, and unhelpful by others.

[What should be done to help children that are affected by abuse or neglect?]

'They should get counselling or advice. Don't take the child away from the parents.'

'I think there should be more people going around checking out people's houses, seeing if they're ok to live in and stuff.'

'No, there shouldn't be coming in and checking. I'd get pissed at the social services man if he came to the door and was like, you're doing stuff wrong, to my mum.' (Focus group with boys aged 15 to 17)

Freedom and safety

Freedom was a key issue for children and young people.

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

'To have freedom in what they think, say and do.'

'let them enjoy their lives and make their own decisions, let them make their own mistakes so they can learn from them.'

A key theme was being allowed to do things in and around the local area. A common complaint for younger children was not being allowed to play outside with their friends, while older children wished their parents would let them go out for longer, later and more often.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'When I am not aloud to play out' (8-year-old girl)

Children were aware of the tension between having a safe environment and a growing amount of self-determination, and acknowledged that there should be limits to their freedom.

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

'freedom with certain restrictions.'

Some young people made the link between freedom and friendship, stressing that adults need to allow children to do things together.

[How do adults/parents help you make friends?]

'If your parents let you do things.'

(Focus group with boys and girls aged 5 to 16)

'You don't make as many friends if they are too over protective.'

(Focus group with boys and girls aged 14 to 17)

Self

Physical health

Children often mentioned being healthy or having a healthy lifestyle within a list of other things that they felt were necessary for a good life.

They also commented on ill-health, especially getting ill and hurting themselves.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'The worst things about my life is when I get ill. When I trip over.'
(9-year-old girl)

'That I have to go for ops every year.' (9-year-old girl)

In addition, a surprising number of children talked about getting enough or more sleep. Having to get up early for school was deeply unpopular.

[What are the best ways to stay healthy?]

'getting 8-10 hours of sleep AT LEAST every night.' (11-year-old girl)

Diet and exercise

Children were in agreement that it is important to eat a balanced diet with plenty of fruit and vegetables and not too much junk food.

In the focus groups, young people gave a number of explanations for having an unhealthy diet, including the expense of healthy food, the absence of skills and knowledge, and the lure of comfort-eating. Many also admitted that they liked to eat junk food themselves.

[Do you think most children in the UK have a healthy diet?]

'Lots of people eat junk food and they have no time to do exercise to burn it off.'

'People buy cheaper food which isn't as good for you.'

'People don't cook proper food.'

(Focus group with boys and girls aged 10)

[Why don't young people eat healthily?]

'People eat because other think they are fat, they carry on eating because it makes them feel better.'

'Too much pressure makes me go for sugar.'

(Focus group with girls aged 12 to 16)

Some groups discussed whether girls and boys have different attitudes to diet and appearance.

[Generally would you say that Traveller young people are very active?]

'it's mostly boys that are active.'

'they go to the gym and keep fit.'

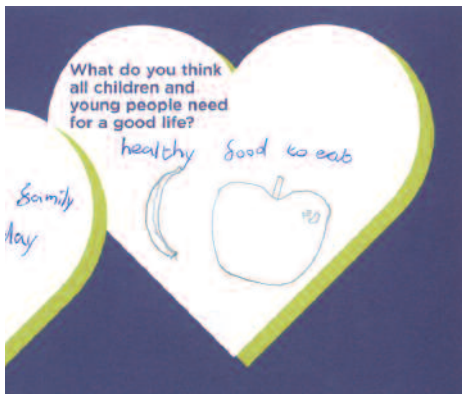
(Focus group with girls aged 12 to 14)

[Is it important what other people think (about being healthy)?]

'It's more important to girls, they care more about their appearance.'

'I disagree, boys want to stay healthy too or they get bullied. You have to stay fit if you're boxing to fight. Guys want to look good.'

(Focus group with boys aged 15 to 17)



There was general agreement that good eating habits need to be established from a young age so that 'you get used to eating healthy food'. The parental role in this was emphasised.

[Is it mostly the job of parents, school or the government (to get young kids to eat healthily)?]

'It's up to your ma and dad.'

'They are supposed to rear you.'

(Focus group with girls and boys aged 13 to 15)

Some children saw sport as a way to stay healthy, with a clear understanding of the positive mental and physical benefits of exercise.

[What do all children and young people need for a good life?]

'I thing what all children need for a good life is lots of sport to keep them fit and well.' (9-year-old boy)

Children also pointed out that they often exercise without realising it, or enjoy physical activity so much that they do not think of it as something that is necessary.

[What are the best ways to stay healthy?]

'I think you shouldn't try too hard to get fit. All you need to do is go for walks every so often and get out on your bike and play with your mates. That's what I do.' (12-year-old girl)

Happiness, fun and enjoyment

Children and young people talked a lot about the need for fun and laughter in their lives, with 'fun' appearing in the top ten keywords of the national survey responses. Making learning enjoyable, 'having a laugh' with friends and family, and doing fun things together were all common responses. Some implied that more could be done to this end.

[What do all children and young people need for a good life?]

'Try to make life fun for them.' (8-year-old girl)

[What makes learning enjoyable?]

'Make it fun.' (Focus group with young men and women aged 15 to 21)

Children also felt that a good life was a happy one.

[What do all children and young people need for a good life?]

'Happiness and helath.' (10-year-old girl)

Worry, stress and mental health

Older age groups in particular emphasised stress, worry and anxiety as key factors preventing them from having a good life.

Over a quarter (27%) of young people agreed with the statement 'I often feel depressed.'

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

'Less stress, less pressure.'

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'Having worries they can't see a way out of [...] having a worry they can't talk to anyone about.' (13-year old girl)

Others rued the unhappiness, sadness and pain in their lives, or the lives of others.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'I would change in my life my sadness.' (9-year-old girl)

Sometimes young people made an explicit link between stress and school. However, it was clear that they experience pressure from a number of different sources, including feeling that they have to look and behave in certain ways.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'Too much pressure about what you look like and what you wear. Too much pressure about what you read. Too much pressure from friends who want you to be just like them. Too much pressure from family wanting you to do certain things.' (11-year-old girl)

Depression was one mental health problem that young people recognised, although their discussions revealed the stigma still attached to it.

'It's not a sickness, I don't class it as a sickness.'

'I disagree, you have to take medication for it.'

'It's a mental state, you just have to snap out of it.'

'There's things in your life you can't control. Say a person close to you died, you take drugs... you have to do something about it to stop, get out of the house. When it happened to me, I took it out on other people and got into crime. After a while I calmed down.'

(Focus group with boys aged 15 to 17)

Attitudes to self and life

A lot of children made comments that did not easily fit into any category except one that we called 'attitudes to self and life'. These comments were characterised by self-reflection and analysis.

The topic that drew most comments here was 'being good' and behaving well towards others. Younger children in particular reflected on past 'naughty' behaviour, and aspired to be better behaved in the future.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'Be a better person.' (11-year-old boy)

Some expressed regret about the way they had treated people in the past.

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'If I could go back in time I would change the way I treated my parent's, friends, and other people who gave me support.' (20-year-old girl)

'I would of not been mean to my friend.' (8-year-old girl)

Children also pondered what they would change about themselves if they could, ranging from aspects of their personality or appearance, things they wished they were better at, or unyielding things such as their age!

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'I wouldnt be so shy.' (10-year-old boy)

'My persanalty.' (8-year-old girl)

'I would be popular at school. I would also be older.' (10-year-old girl)

Sometimes these comments evoked a poignant picture of low self-esteem.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'Sometimes they blame themselves for something they haven't done and they wen't fergive them-selves.' (10-year-old girl)

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'I sometimes feel that noone wants me or likes me.' (11-year-old girl)

However, many children took a more positive view of themselves, talking with pride about their things that they are good at.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'I love miy selff.' (7-year-old girl)

'Bike riding and Math becasue I am extremely good at it.' (10-year-old boy)

In comments that were self-affirming, children emphasised the importance of believing in themselves, making the most of life and overcoming fears.

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'Have a postive attitude.' (8-year-old girl)

[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'do things im scared of.' (12-year-old boy)

Some just expressed gratitude for what they had.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'I do not think there is anything about my life that is bad, it is not perfect, but compared to some people I am very lucky to have the sort of life that I do and I am very grateful for that.' (11-year-old girl)

Leisure

Leisure was felt to be a vital ingredient of a good life. Children talked about the wide range of leisure activities that they enjoy, especially sports and physical activities such as football, swimming, cycling, dancing, horse-riding and trampolining.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'Playing for my footy team, running for skool. I like all sports.' (12-year-old boy)

'Playing sport with my family and friends.' (10-year-old boy)

Younger children also liked playing outside in ways that are active. Their comments showed that they consider physical activity to be compatible with indoor pursuits, with the weather influencing their choice of activity.

[What do you like to do in your spare time?]

'In my spare time I like playing football or cricket. After that I might go on the web or play on my PS2. Also, if it's a cloudy or rainy day or my friends don't want to play I just play inside.' (11-year-old boy)

By the same token, a lack of local facilities was a common complaint. Children linked getting into trouble with having nowhere to go and the ensuing boredom.

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

'Things to do in your area so you don't get into trouble because you're bored.'

There are places for young people to go in my area

33% agree
18% are not sure
49% disagree

The Children's Society's National Survey, 2005

Play

Play was an important topic for younger children. Especially popular was being able to play outside in parks, playgrounds and in the street.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'I can play and have fun.' (5-year-old boy)

'My best thing in my life is playing football or sometime cricket or going out to play or go out side for anything.' (9-year-old girl)

Children disliked having their play restricted by adults, and not having enough time or space to play.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

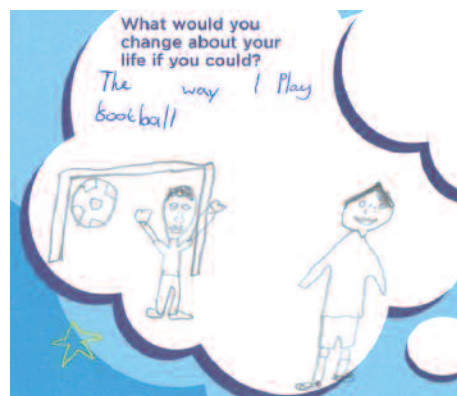
'not enough time after school just to play.' (4-year-old girl)

'Some parentas dont let kids go outsdie and play whith their friends.' (8-year-old boy)

Comments about not having anyone to play with or being left out when other children play are yet another example of the significance of friendship.

[What are the worst things about your life?]

'When people don't play with me.' (5-year-old girl)



Environments

A common thread running through children's comments about their home, school and local area, was the equal weight that they gave to both emotional and physical aspects of these environments. Their remarks about the emotional aspects of these environments interlink with many of the topics raised earlier in the 'Relationships' section, such as the importance of love, care, support, respect and a sense of belonging. Thus we are reminded again that children's relationships are at the heart of how they think and feel about their homes, schools and neighbourhoods.

Home

One of the most striking things about children's evidence is how frequently they talked about their material needs. In the thousands of 'my life' postcards that children filled in, the third most popular topic after family and friends was the importance of having a home, a bed, clothes, warmth, food and water. Interestingly, far more children talked about needs such as these than mentioned their 'wants', such as money and possessions.

[What are the best things about your life?]

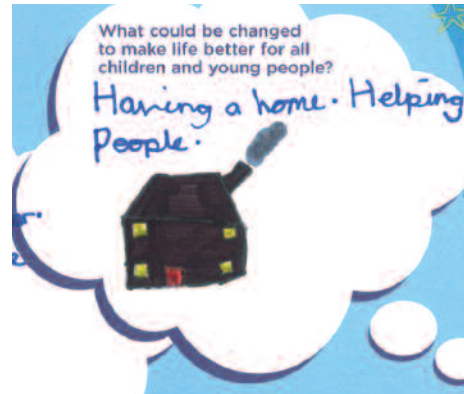
'Having a house to live and money for food.' (11-year-old boy)

[What do all children and young people need for a good life?]

'I think all children and young people need shelter, food, drink, first aid and friends.' (8-year-old girl)

In the national survey, 'money' emerged as the eighth most common topic but interestingly, young people emphasised having 'enough' money more than being rich.

Children also showed concern about others less fortunate than themselves, commenting on the need to help 'poor' and 'homeless' children.



[What would you change about your life if you could?]

'Helping poor children.' (9-year-old girl)

Some of these comments were general and not specific to children.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'I think poverty is one of the main reasons because it effects many children around the world, even in England where children and young people need our help.' (11-year-old girl)

Children were especially concerned about those that are deprived of emotional care or treated badly by their family. 'Being abandoned', 'having no family' or 'going into care' were things that children feared.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'When people go in foster care and have no family.' (9-year-old girl)

[What could be changed to make life better for all children and young people?]

'get all children that are being treated badly by parents into a good home.' (11-year-old boy)

We carried out a number of focus groups with young people who currently live, or at some point have lived, in the care system. These young people were critical of the care system for presenting barriers to the formation and maintenance of friendships, which often appeared to be the fault of bureaucracy.

[Do carers help you to make friends?]

'No! They do the opposite.'

'You can't do things in care – like sleep-overs and surfing the internet.'

'You can't have friends round in children's homes – if you are going to call it a home it should be treated like a home and you should be able to invite friends... there are different rules for different children's homes in the same area.'

(Focus group with young people aged 15 to 21)

A particular source of discussion for the young people that have lived in care was that it is often easier to be friends with people 'like me'.

[So, who are 'friends' – for example do they need to be the same age?]

'In care you need to have other friends who are in care.'

'Some parents don't like their children to have friends who are in care.' (Focus group with young people aged 15 to 21)

One young man with ADHD who had lived in care described the particular challenges he faced in making friends:

[How important are friends?]

'Because I have ADHD some can't accept me for who I am – I only had 1 friend [in secondary school] until I mixed with people in care and older people.' (Focus group with young people aged 15 to 21)

School

Children spontaneously mentioned 'school' and 'education' when we asked them about the ingredients of a good life. Not having the opportunity to go to school was something that they felt keenly.

[What are the best things about your life?]

'They best thing about my life is when am going to school.'

What they liked most about school is the opportunity to be with friends. School was associated with spending time with friends and the intimacy, support and pleasure derived from friendship.

[What do you like about your school?]

'I go to school just to see my friends.' (14-year-old boy)

A minority talked about the painful experience of not having friends at school.

[So if you could change something about your primary school...]

'I hated school! My experience, never had any friends, because nobody liked me! I used to get bullied at school.'

(Focus group with young people aged 15 to 21)

Children also attributed a positive experience of school to good teachers. Many sang the praises of supportive and kind teachers, those that are passionate about their subjects and those who make lessons interesting and fun.

[What do you like about your school?]

'Some teachers are awesome because you can actually have a laugh with them.' (15-year-old girl)



They valued interactive and fun teaching methods, being able to direct their own learning and learn by 'doing' rather than just 'listening'.

[If you could change one thing about your school, what would it be?]

'Instead of sitting down and listening to boring explanations, I would like to experience things and to do this we would need to go on fun and educational trips.' (11-year-old girl)

Many felt that a good education is important for their future, although this view was not always accompanied by a positive experience of school in the here and now.

[What stops children and young people from having a good life?]

'they have to go to school and they hate it because it wastes their time of playing but it is important for the future of their lives.' (13-year-old boy)

The quality of both the physical and emotional environment of school mattered to them. Some were enthusiastic about, or wanted to improve, the buildings, facilities and general state of repair of the school, while others were more concerned that the school environment should be supportive, respectful and friendly. A positive approach to bullying was one aspect of the school ethos that was highly valued.

[What do you like about your school?]

'My school helps people who are bullied and that's why I really enjoy going to school because the teachers and pupils are really nice and friendly.' (11-year-old girl)

A number of children were concerned about the disruptive behaviour of other pupils that distracts them from learning, and were critical of teachers that ignore or fail to address bad behaviour.

[If you could change one thing about your school, what would it be?]

'I don't learn as much as I used to because I get distracted. My grades have gone down and I blame the people at my school and the teachers for not punishing the pupils.' (13-year-old girl)

Many talked about anxiety related to exams and workload.

58% of young people said that they were worried about exams.

47% that they often worried about their schoolwork.

[What stops young people from having a good life?]

'teachers, school, rules, dumping worries, problems and stress on to you.'

I often worry about my school work

47% agree

22% are not sure

31% disagree

The Children's Society's National Survey, 2005

Children also talked about teachers who demand more of them than their best. They disliked being compared to high-achieving pupils and not being seen as an individual. Expectations such as these made them feel as if they are 'never quite good enough'.

[Do you feel under a lot of pressure at school?]

'And whenever you get like a B or and A in an exam or something you feel dead chuffed about it until the teacher tells you that you should have done better because you're in higher and blah blah blah...You feel like shit. [...] STOP BUGGING US, MAN!!!' (15-year-old girl)

In the focus groups, young people were especially positive about learning that is relevant to their lives. A group of young men in custody explained that the subjects that they 'switched off' in and caused them to be disruptive were those that had no meaning for them.

There was general support for vocational courses and practical 'hands-on' subjects they felt could help them in the future and teach them skills for the job market.

The local area

Children talked about the physical aspects of their local area, wishing for pleasant surroundings that are free from graffiti, vandalism and litter.

[Are there are lots of things to do in your area?]

'idiots keep on vandalising things, then they're taken away and not replaced!' (8-year-old boy)

'The park is dangerous, with glass everywhere.' (11-year-old girl)

These comments linked to a general awareness and concern for protecting the environment in general.

Young people that took part in the national survey made clear associations between the local environment and young people's quality of life.

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

'brought up in a safe and quiet area.'

Afterword

They were also concerned about some of the general attitudes of adults towards them. A link was made between the way that adults treat them within the community and their treatment at the hands of society. Some felt that the media contributed to negative attitudes.

[What makes for a good life for young people?]

'To socialise and not to be discriminated against because we are young. We all are not thugs or vandals.'

[What stops young people from having a good life?]

'People thinking we are all the same e.g. a teenager might have been rude to someone, elderly, person etc. So they think we are all like that and then be rude to other teenagers.'

Some young people mentioned the issues of anti-social behaviour and respect:

[What stops young people from having a good life?]

'The police are introducing more measures to tackle anti social behavior but often get the wrong people like with this football card thing where you get a penalty for being in a large group.'

Of all the evidence received by The Good Childhood Inquiry, some of the most valuable was that of children and young people themselves, for after all, they are the experts on what it is really like to be growing up in the UK today. Throughout the inquiry it was important for the panel to keep listening to what they said about their own lives. Sometimes children and young people's views confirmed those of the panel; at other times their experiences of childhood presented a real challenge to us. I'm pleased that we are able to present their views to you now, independently of the panel's own report, so that their voices can challenge us all to think again.

Professor Judy Dunn, Institute of Psychiatry
Chair, The Good Childhood Inquiry

The Good Childhood Inquiry

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The Most Revd and The Rt Hon. the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the young people who contributed their views to *The Good Childhood Inquiry*. Thanks are also due to Rachel Sharp and Catherine McCarthy who contributed to this piece of work. The author of this report is Larissa Pople.

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