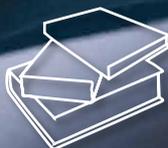


# The Good Childhood Report 2012

A summary of our findings



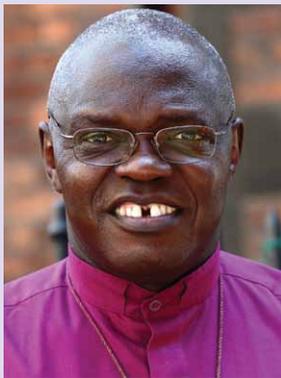
The  
Children's  
Society



# Foreword

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

John 10:10



Most people would agree with the sentiment of Jesus' words that what we hope for, for ourselves and for others, is an abundant life. We also know that for human life to flourish it needs more than physical sustenance – it needs spiritual fulfilment.

If we wish to build a society where we nurture this abundant life, what are the practical tools we can use to help us know if we succeed? Can we move beyond narrow measures of human success such as health and financial security to ask harder questions about personal fulfilment or what is known as subjective well-being – in other words people's contentment with their life as a whole?

There is a challenge here. If, as is often stated, the moral test of a society is how it treats its most vulnerable, including its children, then we have to measure not just adult well-being, but children's too. Their inclusion in our measure of human flourishing is not just a practical problem but a question of morality.

That is why this report and the research behind it are so important for any national debate about how we are faring as a society. An analysis of the subjective well-being of children is not simply a question of how well our children are doing, but an acid test for our society.

And there is mixed news. The fact that, at any one time, half a million children between the ages of eight and 15 suffer from low subjective well-being should be a wake-up call to us all.

However, alongside the challenges these pages present are opportunities. Policy makers and public alike will find clear information about what causes our children to be unhappy with their lives, and with such understanding comes the opportunity to make changes.

How we as a society, within our churches or through Her Majesty's Government policy, respond to these challenges will determine whether we, as a society, pass our moral test.

In that light we should see this report not as simply an interesting piece of research but an urgent clarion call to action.

**+Sentamu Ebor:**

# The Good Childhood Report 2012

In 2012 we launch our very first edition of The Good Childhood Report. It is the product of an ongoing research programme we began in 2005, in collaboration with the University of York, to help us understand what affects our children's well-being. We have already undertaken several waves of surveys and consultation with 30,000 children aged eight to 16 and we plan to continue to build on this knowledge and to publish similar reports each year. In this summary we will look at the overall findings from the 2012 report and suggest six priorities for policy-makers to help improve the situation for our children and young people.

## Overall well-being

While most children are happy with their lives as a whole, around one in 11 (9%) is not. This amounts to half a million children in the UK aged eight to 15 who have low well-being at any given time.

In many ways, children's well-being does not vary that much according to their individual or family characteristics although it does decline with age: around 4% of children aged eight have low well-being, compared to 14% of those aged 15. There are some differences in well-being for boys and girls, and for children living in different types of households. But overall, these factors do not go very far in explaining the wide variations which exist in well-being between individual children.

Our research therefore explores a number of other factors which can help us to understand why some children experience much lower well-being than others at particular points in their childhood.

## The Good Childhood Index

In October 2010, we published The Good Childhood Index which included a measure of overall well-being and questions about happiness in 10 key areas:

1. Family
2. Home
3. Money and possessions
4. Friendships
5. School
6. Health
7. Appearance
8. Time use
9. Choice and autonomy
10. The future

We chose these aspects of life because they have been identified as important by children themselves, and because our research shows that they are all strongly associated with children's overall well-being.

Whilst all of these aspects are important, some seem to be more important than others. Moreover, children are much happier with some of aspects of their lives than with others. The next section goes through each of the key areas and shows how they affect children's well-being in more detail.



## Family

Family is the most important component of well-being for most children. Our research shows that the quality of children's relationships with their families is far more important than the particular structure of the family that they live in.

For example, levels of family harmony or conflict are strongly associated with children's overall well-being, irrespective of the type of family structure. Also, children who feel more listened to and involved in making decisions within the family have significantly higher levels of well-being.

Stability is another key factor for children. We found that children who had experienced a change of family structure were almost twice as likely as other children to have low well-being.

## Home

The home environment is also important for children's well-being, most notably safety. Over 70% of the small minority of children (around 3%) who said that they did not feel safe at home had low well-being.

The amount of privacy children have at home, especially for those in secondary school, is important. There was a link here with sharing a bedroom, which in turn was associated with household poverty.

As with family structure, stability at home is important, and those children who have experienced more than one change of home in the past year are more than twice as likely than average to have low well-being.

## Money and possessions

Children living in the poorest 20% of households have much lower well-being than average, but above that level there is relatively little difference in levels of well-being for children – although we found that changes in household income can have a discernible link to children's well-being.

More important appears to be children's direct experience of poverty or prosperity. We have developed a new child-centred measure of material well-being<sup>1</sup> which includes items and experiences that children have told us are important to them. This measure is much more strongly linked to children's well-being than household income is.

We also found that having a similar amount of money to spend as one's friends is linked to higher well-being, and that children who have a lot more or less than their peers feel less happy with their lives as a whole.

## Friends and peers

Children identify the quality of their friendships as very important to them, although our research suggests that this is not as influential a factor as the quality of their family relationships.

Children's satisfaction with the number of friends they have is also important. Around 6% of the children we surveyed felt that they did not have enough friends and this factor was linked to much lower than average well-being.

Finally, children who have experienced regular recent bullying by peers are six times as likely to have low well-being than children who have not been bullied at all.



1. Main G, Pople L (2011), *Missing Out*. London: The Children's Society

## School<sup>2</sup>

School and education are key factors influencing children's current and future well-being. A higher proportion of children tends to feel unhappy with these areas of their lives. More than three-quarters (80%) said that it was very important for them to do well in their school work.

This is another area of life where safety is an important issue. Around 7% of children do not feel safe at school and three-fifths of these children are unhappy with their school life as a whole.

## Health

Children told us that they are concerned about physical and mental health issues and recognise the links between health-related behaviours and well-being.

Most children (over two-thirds) in our surveys rate their health as 'very good' or 'good'. Almost half of children who rate their health as 'very bad' are unhappy with their lives as a whole. These children are more likely than those who were happy with their health to be living in poor households.

## Appearance

How children feel about their appearance varies significantly with age and gender. At age 10, only a quarter of children often worry about their appearance and there is no difference between boys and girls. By the age of 15, this has risen to around a third (32%) of boys and well over half of girls (56%).

There is no significant link here with household income but there is a link with our child-centred measure of material well-being. Children who have less access to important items and experiences also tend to feel worse about their appearance.

Children who are unhappy with their appearance are also much more likely than average to experience frequent bullying.

## Time use

A healthy balance of time use has been shown to be important for adults' well-being and our research shows that this is also true for children.

In particular, we found that children who feel they spend too little time with family and friends also tend to have low well-being. In addition, spending too much time with family and too little time with friends is connected with low well-being.

## Choice and autonomy

Choice, freedom and autonomy have emerged through our research programme as fundamentally important issues for children's quality of life.

A substantial minority of children feel that they have relatively little autonomy and this proportion increases with age. This suggests an increasing mismatch between children's wishes and expectations in this respect, and the amount of autonomy they actually experience as they get older.

Factors such as low material well-being (using our child-centred index) and events like changes in family structure seem to be linked to children's satisfaction with the amount of choice they have in life.

## The future

Encouragingly, most children said that they always feel positive about their future, but around 10% do not. Girls are less likely to feel positive about this aspect of their lives than boys, and children tend to feel less positive as they grow older.

Around half (52%) of the children aged 10 to 15 in our surveys hope to go to university after leaving school. But the proportion is significantly lower (40%) amongst children living in poor households, suggesting a link between poverty and expectations / aspirations.

2. We have developed a short index of children's school well-being, including questions on safety, school work, relationships with teachers and with peers, and feelings of being listened to at school. This may be a useful tool for school's wishing to monitor levels of pupil well-being – email [well-being@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:well-being@childrenssociety.org.uk) for more information.

## Local area

In our surveys, more than a quarter of children expressed dissatisfaction with their local facilities. Dissatisfaction increases sharply with age. Children living in more rural areas are less happy with this aspect of their local area.

Safety and freedom, again, are important issues here. Girls tend to feel less safe than boys. Children in rural areas are, on average, a little happier with their local areas in this respect.

Most children (67%) like their neighbours but a substantial minority (23%) are unhappy with the extent to which adults in their local area listen to their views. Children's feelings about local adults appear to worsen considerably as they get older.



## Conclusions

The conclusion of our report identifies six key themes in our research findings so far, which link to recent work done by the Office for National Statistics:

- 1. The quality of children's relationships and in particular achieving the balance between nurturing aspects of relationships - care, support and safety - and aspects relating to autonomy, respect and choice.**
- 2. Children's feelings about themselves, including their physical and mental health, and how they feel about the way that they look.**
- 3. Children's time use - and achieving the right balance of time between school work and leisure, and spending enough time in key social relationships with friends and family.**
- 4. Where children live - including issues of safety at home, at school and in the local area, the facilities available to them and the relationship with adults in their community.**
- 5. Having enough but not too much money and possessions, and the particular importance for children of having items and experiences which put them on a par with their peers.**
- 6. Learning and development, and the close link between children's well-being in the present and their hopes and aspirations for the future.**

Cutting across these six key themes, our research has highlighted the significance of stability in children's lives and the ways in which adverse life events may have a substantial impact on children's well-being. These findings emphasise the importance of providing the right kind of support to children during times of crisis and critical transitions in their lives.

## Promoting positive well-being – six policy priorities

Using the evidence on the six key themes for well-being for children, we have developed some practical steps for decision-makers in parliament, central government and local areas so that they can support the well-being of children in the UK.

Figure 1 shows the simple checklist that we have designed to help decision-makers understand the potential impact that their policy may have on children’s well-being. The checklist sets out six priority areas, and for each one, the top three key factors that determine improvements for well-being in that area of a child’s life. A policy may also affect more than one priority so decision-makers should use the whole tool to assess any given policy.

This framework applies to all children, but can be easily adapted to focus on specific groups. For example, to ensure a disabled child has a safe and suitable place to live (priority five), the key driver on living arrangements should expand to include appropriate adaptations to their home.

Promoting positive well-being requires a fundamentally new approach using the six priorities, to make decisions which work for children. This will help ensure that the UK is the best place in the world for children to grow up, with every child experiencing a good childhood and a positive outlook for their adult lives.

The full report on this framework, *Promoting positive well-being for children*, and the supporting evidence for it can be found at [www.childrensociety.org.uk/well-being](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/well-being)

What do children need?	How can they get it?	Policy effect Positive/Neutral/Negative
1) The conditions to learn and develop	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have opportunities for free play</li> <li>• Get high quality and appropriate education and care</li> <li>• Have positive relationships with teachers</li> </ul>	
2) A positive view of themselves and an identity that is respected	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be comfortable with their appearance</li> <li>• Be physically and mentally healthy</li> <li>• Are respected and valued for who they are</li> </ul>	
3) Enough of what matters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have the items and experiences that matter</li> <li>• Have some financial autonomy through pocket money</li> <li>• Live in a household which is economically stable</li> </ul>	
4) Positive relationships with their family and friends	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be active participants in decisions that affect them</li> <li>• Have caring, loving relationships</li> <li>• Spend time with their family and with friends</li> </ul>	
5) A safe and suitable home environment and local area	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be, and feel, safe at home and in their local area</li> <li>• Live in good quality housing</li> <li>• Have space at home that is theirs for privacy</li> </ul>	
6) Opportunity to take part in positive activities to thrive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have a say in how they use their time</li> <li>• Have affordable activities in their local area</li> <li>• Have access to outdoor spaces for play</li> </ul>	

Figure 1: Understanding the impact of decisions on children’s well-being

## Further information

For more information on our programme, and the full version of The Good Childhood Report 2012, please visit our website at: [www.childrenssociety.org.uk/well-being](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/well-being) or email [research@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:research@childrenssociety.org.uk)

For more information about the six priorities for decision makers in our well-being framework, please contact our policy team at: [policy@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:policy@childrenssociety.org.uk)