

How Has Children's Wellbeing Changed?

Reviewing the Evidence
from the Good Childhood
Research Programme

**The
Children's
Society**

Contents

Executive summary	3
Introduction	7
Chapter 1. Decline in children's wellbeing	8
Chapter 2. Children and young people experiencing low wellbeing	11
Chapter 3. Children and young people's digital lives and social media	17
Chapter 4. Gender differences and concerns about females' wellbeing	23
Chapter 5. Unhappiness with appearance	26
Chapter 6. Unhappiness with school	29
Conclusion	36
Technical appendix	37
References	39
Acknowledgements	42

Executive summary

The Good Childhood Reports routinely present trends which show changes in children's wellbeing over time, as well as thematic analyses focusing on aspects of life that are important for children and young people's wellbeing.

The current report brings together the most recent figures on six key themes:

- decline in children's wellbeing
- low wellbeing
- digital lives and social media
- gender differences and concerns about females' wellbeing
- unhappiness with appearance
- unhappiness with school.

These figures are supplemented by evidence from previous Good Childhood publications and learning from consultations with young people and professionals related to these themes.

Key findings

Decline in children's wellbeing:

- **Children's average subjective wellbeing scores were significantly lower** in 2022/23 than when the Understanding Society survey started in 2009/10.
- This is not a new observation: **each annual Good Childhood Report since 2017** (drawing on 2014/15 data) **has outlined a significant decline in children's happiness** with their life as a whole compared to the start of the Understanding Society study.
- Findings from consultations suggest that this decline in children and young people's wellbeing could relate to aspects like the **multiple pressures that young people and their families encounter, against a background of decline in community mentality.**

Low wellbeing:

- While a majority of children and young people seem to lead relatively happy lives overall, **there is an important proportion of children and young people who have low subjective wellbeing** (or low life satisfaction).
- Evidence suggests that some characteristics and experiences are associated with low subjective wellbeing, notably: experiences of **financial struggles, feeling unsupported by family, having no friends, or having been bullied at school.** These findings resonated with what young people and professionals shared in consultations.

- Importantly, **young people shared in consultation that, when they do need help with their wellbeing, they do not always get the support that they need**, which was echoed by professionals. Young people and professionals both highlighted the importance of **having an adult that they trust to turn to** when they do experience low wellbeing.

Children's digital lives and their use of social media:

- Social media is often mentioned when discussing issues related to children's wellbeing, yet research evidence shows that, while children's use of **social media** does seem to have some explanatory power, it is **not the main factor in predicting changes in children's life satisfaction**.
- Instead, it is **high intensity use of social media** which **seems to have a detrimental effect on children's wellbeing**, with further research in this area remaining a priority.
- The harmful effects of heavy use appear **stronger for females**, especially when it comes to how happy they feel about their appearance. However, significant gender differences in children's subjective wellbeing remain even after their social media use is taken into account, and so **social media use in itself does not explain differences in wellbeing between males and females** – it is only one factor among many.
- **In consultations, young people had an overall balanced view of social media.** They recognised its potential and benefits, and at the same time were concerned about the negative impact of the content that they are exposed to and lack of opportunities for more in-person socialisation.

Gender differences and concerns about females' wellbeing:

- In the 2021/22 and 2022/23 Understanding Society survey waves, **females aged 10 to 15 were significantly less happy than males with their life as a whole, appearance, family, and school.**
- There were also more females than males unhappy with each of the six measures included in Understanding Society in 2022/23. This was particularly marked for appearance, with **over double the proportion of females than males unhappy with the way they look.**
- Young people echoed this concern in consultations, where they reflected that girls and boys¹ are impacted differently by different types of content. They shared that **girls are particularly affected by problematic standards and expectations regarding the way that they look, while harmful content on gender roles might negatively influence boys in the way that they behave towards girls.**
- International comparisons based on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 showed that **gender differences in life satisfaction**

¹ While the rest of the report uses the words 'females' and 'males', during consultations, young people used the words 'girls' and 'boys'. In an effort to reflect the language used by young people, when presenting their direct insights, we are using 'boys' and 'girls' instead of 'males' and 'females'.

are not limited to the UK, but that **UK 15-year-old females were less happy than their European peers.**

Happiness with appearance:

- **Appearance is the aspect of life that children aged 10 to 15 are most commonly unhappy with in the Understanding Society surveys.** In 2022/23, over one in seven children were unhappy with this measure.
- There are significant gender differences regarding this aspect of life, with **females significantly less happy than males with their appearance** across all Understanding Society survey waves, and over double the proportion of females unhappy with this aspect of life compared to males in 2022/23.
- Longer-term time trends presented in The Good Childhood Report 2018 found that the gender gap in children's happiness with their appearance was similar in magnitude in 2015/16 to what it had been in the mid-1990s. This provides further evidence that **social media is unlikely be the driving factor for females' comparatively lower happiness with their appearance.**
- In consultations, **young people identified unhappiness with their appearance as an issue particularly affecting girls.** They felt that the content that children and young people are exposed to contributes to this issue by setting **unrealistic standards of what young people, and girls in particular, should look like, leading them to a sense of comparison that could affect their wellbeing** if they don't feel like they meet those expectations.

Happiness with school:

- **School has persistently been the most common area of life that children and young people are unhappy with in The Children's Society's annual household surveys.** In 2025, one in nine 10- to 17-year-olds were unhappy with school.
- Understanding Society data showed a **steep decline in children's average happiness with their school and schoolwork**, not only comparing data from 2022/23 to the start of the study in 2009/10, but also between 2021/22 and 2022/23. Over one in seven 10- to 15-year-olds were unhappy with both their schoolwork and school in the 2022/23 dataset.
- Previous research highlighted specific aspects of the school experience as areas of interest. Our household survey 2022 showed that **children were least happy with how much they were listened to at school.** Analysis from our household surveys 2022 and 2023 found that **children in their first year of secondary school had lower life satisfaction and happiness with school than children in their last year of primary education.** International comparisons based on PISA 2022 also identified that **the UK fared poorly** compared with countries across Europe **on school belonging, school safety, and long-term school absences.**
- In 2025, when asked about their own future, **for the first time children and young people who took part in our household survey were most commonly worried about getting good grades** at school or college. This finding echoed insights from

young people and professionals who shared in consultations that **children and young people feel a lot of pressure linked to expectations of academic achievement.**

- Young people also expressed in consultations that **the school environment itself could be stressful**, with workload, peer pressures and bullying all contributing factors.
- Young people and professionals both spoke in consultations about the role that schools can have to support children and young people and equip them for their current and future life. Both groups noted that **not enough focus was placed on learning skills for life** at school, and both outlined the **positive difference that school staff have the opportunity to make for young people when they need support with their wellbeing.**

Policy recommendations

Based on these insights, we continue to campaign for a **national wellbeing measurement programme** to further our understanding, at scale, of the factors shaping children and young people's subjective wellbeing. A national wellbeing measurement will enable detailed analyses of the experiences of different groups of children, for example, with specific characteristics or in different localities. It will also enable sharing of local and national data to inform policymaking and practice while supporting rigorous monitoring of progress and improvements.

Introduction

This report presents evidence from The Children's Society's Good Childhood research programme on key trends and themes in children and young people's subjective wellbeing, together with insights shared by young people and professionals in consultations conducted in 2025.

The Good Childhood Report 2025² included consultations with a group of Young Advisors and with professionals working with children and young people; the Young Advisors also conducted peer consultations with other young people. To prepare for these consultations, we reviewed the evidence from previous Good Childhood research in order to identify the main areas that represent recurrent, or emerging, challenges for children and young people's wellbeing. Reviewing this research also highlighted where hearing from young people and professionals would bring the most benefit, providing direct insight into the trends we see in survey data.

While The Good Childhood Report 2025 summarises some key findings from this evidence review,³ this publication explores these themes further. It brings together the most recent figures on these key themes, supplemented by evidence from previous Good Childhood publications, and outlines learning from consultations with young people and professionals related to these topics.⁴

Our series of Good Childhood Reports have evidenced that the wellbeing of UK children is in decline. This represents a central theme in itself and provides crucial context for the other main themes emerging from the Good Childhood research programme. While the majority of children and young people seem to be leading relatively happy lives, too many are unhappy, and we know that some groups of children are more likely to experience low life satisfaction than others. In particular, in recent years, the data have revealed a concerning picture for females' wellbeing. In addition, school and appearance are the aspects of life that children and young people are most commonly unhappy with. Children and young people's online lives and their use of social media are often perceived as being linked to low wellbeing, even though the evidence does not indicate that digital engagement is a significant factor in their overall life satisfaction.

Understanding what is happening in children and young people's lives and how this affects their wellbeing is vital. The Good Childhood research programme shows how wellbeing can be measured by asking children and young people directly how they feel about their own lives, making a compelling case for doing this on a national level. Without this understanding, we will not be able to overcome the many challenges affecting their wellbeing, nor overturn the damaging decline in wellbeing evidenced through The Good Childhood Reports.

² The Children's Society, 2025b.

³ Ibid, pages 36 to 37.

⁴ For more detail about the data sources used in this report, see the technical appendix.

Chapter 1: Decline in children's wellbeing

Defining wellbeing

According to the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, “wellbeing is how we're doing as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future.”⁵

The Good Childhood research programme focuses on children and young people's **subjective wellbeing**, which is **their own views and evaluations** of how their lives are going.

In The Good Childhood Report 2025, young people involved as Young Advisors defined wellbeing as **how they feel about themselves and about their lives**.

The Good Childhood Reports routinely present trends in children's wellbeing based on data from the Understanding Society survey,⁶ which show changes in children's wellbeing over time. Understanding Society asks children aged 10 to 15 how happy they feel about their life as a whole, and their family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork.

The Children's Society started tracking trends in children's wellbeing over time in the second Good Childhood Report, in 2013. Focusing first on children's **average happiness with their life as a whole**, in broad terms the picture has been one of **decline**.⁷

Since The Good Childhood Report 2017 (reporting on data from 2014/15), each of our annual reports has reported a decline in children's wellbeing compared to when the Understanding Society survey began.

This remains the case in the 2022/23 dataset,⁸ with children's mean happiness with their life as a whole being significantly lower than when the survey started. The mean score for happiness with life as a whole was also the lowest recorded to date, with a score of 7.43 out of 10, as shown in Figure 1.

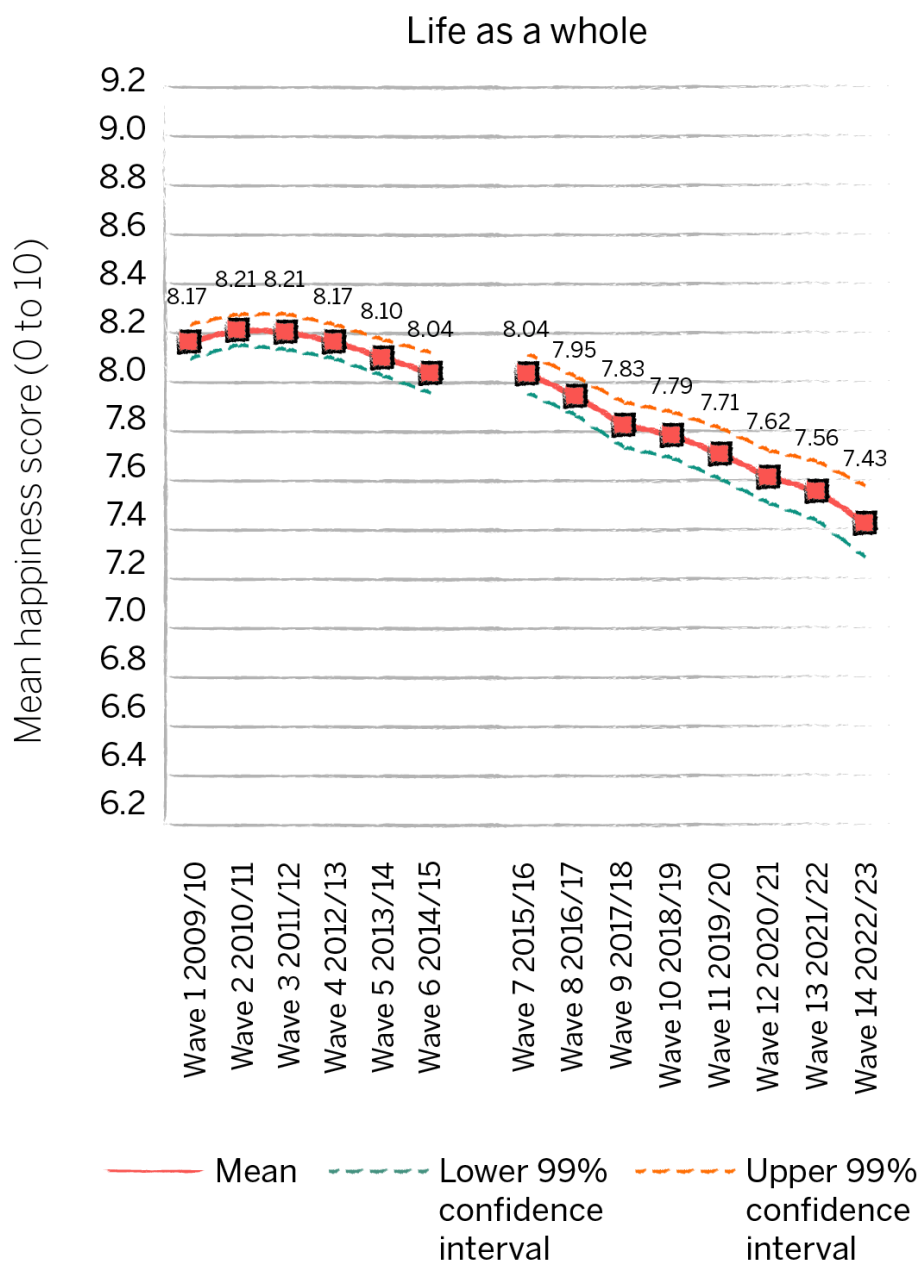
⁵ What Works Centre for Wellbeing, n.d.

⁶ See the technical appendix for more information about Understanding Society.

⁷ Data analysed in early Good Childhood Reports suggested that children's subjective wellbeing stopped increasing from 2008; see The Good Childhood Report 2014. The Good Childhood Reports 2015 and 2016 then reported that, in 2012/13 and 2013/14, there had been no significant change in happiness with life as a whole compared to when Understanding Society began in 2009/10; see The Good Childhood Report 2015 and The Good Childhood Report 2016.

⁸ The 2022/23 dataset, wave 14, was the most recent dataset available at the time of The Good Childhood Report 2025 publication. Analysis from the wave 15 dataset (2023/24) will be presented in The Good Childhood Report 2026, due for publication in the autumn.

Figure 1. 10- to 15-year-olds' happiness with life as a whole, UK, 2009/10 to 2022/23.



Source: University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2025). Understanding Society: Waves 1-14, 2009-2023 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009. [data collection]. 19th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6614, DOI: doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-20. Data are weighted (confidence intervals take account of design effects).

In the 2022/23 dataset, children’s average happiness was also significantly lower than when the survey began **on all five aspects of life that they were asked about: their family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork**. Happiness with family had previously been the only aspect of life that had not been significantly lower than when the survey started. It will be important to monitor whether this decline continues in future survey waves.

What did young people and professionals say about the decline in children's wellbeing in consultations?

Young people who took part in consultations for The Good Childhood Report 2025 were generally not surprised by the trends showing a decline in UK children's wellbeing over time. They felt that, overall, young people growing up in the UK today have so much to worry about, with different sources of pressure across different areas of their lives at times leading them to feeling overwhelmed.

Young people also highlighted that this decline is in contrast with what they should be able to expect of the world in which they are growing up:

“As societies we should be improving.” Young person

Professionals working with children and young people who we consulted for The Good Childhood Report 2025 highlighted that **the trend of decline in children's wellbeing aligns with what they observe in their practice**. They felt that **increased pressure on the household and family unit underpins this decline**, and they identified increasing levels of poverty, poor housing, and decreased access to holistic support, including for parents and carers, as key contributors to the overall decline in children's wellbeing.

Crucially, they felt that this is interlinked with another trend that they identified: **the erosion in community mentality and, with it, a loss of collective responsibility for children and young people's wellbeing**.

Young people and professionals both discussed a range of solutions that they felt would help improve children's wellbeing across different areas of their lives. These are presented in The Good Childhood Report 2025⁹ and in our separate policy publication, Reclaiming Hope in a Changing World.¹⁰ Specific solutions related to the themes discussed in this report are highlighted in the following chapters.

⁹ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapters 3 and 4.

¹⁰ The Children's Society, 2025a.

Chapter 2: Children and young people experiencing low wellbeing

Over the years, The Good Childhood Reports have presented the proportion of children and young people who can be identified as having **low wellbeing** – that is, they score below the midpoint of the scale for the relevant measure.¹¹ The first sections of this chapter focus on measures of low overall wellbeing and low happiness with specific aspects of life. Previous Good Childhood Reports have included further analysis to understand more about the characteristics and experiences of those children who have low wellbeing; an overview of some of these factors is provided in later sections.

Overall wellbeing or life satisfaction

In the latest data (2025), 9% of children and young people aged 10 to 17 who took part in our annual household survey in spring 2025 scored below the midpoint on The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index (GCI) measure of overall life satisfaction, meaning that **they can be considered to have low life satisfaction or low overall wellbeing.**¹²

Other sources reviewed for the Good Childhood research programme also report on life satisfaction:

- Understanding Society asks children aged 10 to 15 **how happy** they feel about their life as a whole.

In the 2022/23 data, **8.8% of children scored below the midpoint** on this measure.

- The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)¹³ also included a question in its 2022 survey that asked 15-year-olds **how satisfied** they were with their life as a whole.

In the UK, one in four (25.2%) 15-year-olds who took part in PISA 2022 had low life satisfaction. This was the **highest proportion** of 15-year-olds reporting low life satisfaction **across 27 European countries.**

¹¹ This is also referred to as having low life satisfaction, or being unhappy, depending on the measure used, throughout the report.

¹² For further detail of how overall life satisfaction is measured, see the technical appendix.

¹³ The OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) measures 15-year-olds' ability to use their reading, mathematics and science knowledge and skills to meet real-life challenges. As part of this, it collects data on their subjective wellbeing, experiences and contextual factors. The latest PISA data are from 2022 and were collected across 81 countries and economies from the OECD and wider. In the UK, just under 13,000 students took part. To note, the UK did not meet all sampling requirements for PISA 2022, which means that the data need to be treated with some caution. For more detail, see The Good Childhood Report 2024.

What did young people and professionals say about low wellbeing in consultations?

Young people shared in consultations¹⁴ that **many different sources of pressure contribute to low wellbeing** for children and young people. They felt that **societal expectations and perceived standards**, together with negative experiences like **peer pressure and bullying**, across their school lives and related to the **content that they are exposed** to digitally and in the media, affect how they feel and can lead to low wellbeing. They highlighted how this could be linked to a **sense of isolation**, at home, at school or in their wider community, and shared that **adults do not always understand** young people and what they are going through.

Young people called for better support from adults so that young people can be listened to, heard, and helped when they need wellbeing support. They highlighted the importance of **having an adult that they know and trust** – and who shows that they care – that they can turn to.

Professionals we consulted outlined **specific issues that they felt contribute to, or sustain, low wellbeing**.¹⁵ They felt that these spread across children's **education**, which, like young people, they identified as an aspect of life that can cause overwhelming pressures for children and young people; **social media**; experiences of **poverty and deprivation**; and **young people's outlook on the future**. They also highlighted that **a lack of universal and early support services** and **a lack of safe spaces** for children and young people contribute to low wellbeing, sustain it, and lead to missed opportunities for improving wellbeing.

In professionals' views, this links to the concept of the phrase **'it takes a village to raise a child'**: they expressed the need for a return to **more holistic, community-focused approaches** to underpin the support needed for children's wellbeing across the different areas of their lives.

¹⁴ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 3.

¹⁵ Ibid, Chapter 4.

Happiness with specific aspects of life

The Good Childhood Report 2023 presented further statistical analysis exploring children's experiences of low wellbeing based on The Children's Society's own survey data and on data from the Understanding Society survey.¹⁶ This deep-dive analysis enabled a more detailed exploration of the relationships between low subjective wellbeing and different contextual factors in children's lives.¹⁷ It also allowed us to investigate the interplay between different contextual factors and assess which may potentially influence others.

Analysis of all Understanding Society data survey waves available at the time of writing The Good Childhood Report 2023¹⁸ showed that, while the majority of children (aged 10 to 15) did not have low subjective wellbeing, **about a quarter of children were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life.**¹⁹ Looking at unhappiness with more than one aspect of life, analysis found that almost **one in 10 children were unhappy with two of more aspects of life.**

Similar analysis was conducted which explored the results of The Children's Society's own annual household survey 2023. Again, although the majority of children and young people (aged 10 to 17) did not have low wellbeing on any of the ten measures of subjective wellbeing included in the Good Childhood Index, **almost a third were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life.** Strikingly, **almost one in ten children and young people were unhappy with four or more of the ten aspects of life** they were asked about.²⁰

Further analysis based on the household survey 2023 found notable differences in low wellbeing for some groups of children. For example, **15-year-olds were more likely to score low on the measures of happiness with their school, appearance, future, and time use,** compared with both older and younger survey participants. Children aged 12, when most are in Year 7 and have made the transition to secondary school, also showed higher rates of unhappiness with school. **Children and young people with special educational needs (SEN) were more likely than those without SEN to score low on happiness with their health and their friends.**

This analysis found that **children's relationships with their family and friends were particularly important for their wellbeing,** which echoes previous research by The Children's Society and others.²¹ Experiencing **feeling unsupported by their family,**

¹⁶ See The Good Childhood Report 2023, pages 20 to 33 (Understanding Society data) and 39 to 44 (data from The Children's Society's household survey).

¹⁷ In the Understanding Society analysis, we looked at a range of factors including children's gender, age, ethnicity, whether they have an illness or disability, experiences related to family relationships, experiences related to peer relationships, and their family and socio-economic circumstances like family structure, income quintiles, subjective financial difficulties, parental subjective wellbeing, and parental mental health. In the analysis of The Children's Society's household survey 2023 data, we looked at children and young people's gender, age, SEN status, and a child-reported measure of economic circumstances.

¹⁸ Waves 1 to 12, 2009/10 to 2020/21.

¹⁹ As detailed above, the six subjective wellbeing measures included in Understanding Society are happiness with: life as a whole, family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork.

²⁰ The Good Childhood Index asks children how happy they are with their family, their home, how much choice they have in life, their friends, the money and things they have, their health, their appearance, the future, their school, and the way they use their time.

²¹ See, for example: Rees et al., 2010; The Good Childhood Report 2016; Children's Commissioner, 2022.

having no friends, or having been bullied at school was associated with one or more of the measures of low subjective wellbeing.

What did young people and professionals say in consultations about specific aspects of life affecting their wellbeing?

In consultations, young people outlined that their relationships are very important for their overall sense of wellbeing.²² **What young people shared closely echoes the findings above**, with issues in their **peer relationships**, and in particular experiences of **bullying**, identified as a common contributor to low wellbeing. They called for solutions supporting **bullying being recognised** when it happens **and eradicated**: targeted interventions with clear and consistent consequences. They also wanted to see more emphasis on creating **more opportunities for young people to connect with each other**, fostering social mixing to help overcome peer pressure dynamics.

Young people also mentioned the **importance of their relationships with the adults around them**, outlining elements that they felt are crucial for these relationships to be positive: **trust** and **feeling understood and valued** are central for them feeling supported.

Professionals also reflected on the role of **peer group pressures and bullying**, and on the **need for trusted adults** that children and young people can turn to.²³ They noted that young people at times experience a lack of access to adults with whom they can foster a relationship of trust, which leads to further isolation and missed opportunities for support to be provided.

The findings concerning unhappiness across multiple aspects of life were echoed by the sense of **constant, overwhelming pressure coming from all angles** that young people expressed.²⁴

²² See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 3.

²³ Ibid, Chapter 4.

²⁴ Insights related to school are presented in Chapter 6 below.

Financial strain and worries about money

The Good Childhood Report 2024 presented further statistical analysis that explored the experiences of children aged 10 to 17 whose households had been in financial strain.²⁵ Analysis found that **17% of children and young people in households in financial strain had low life satisfaction**. In comparison, this was 9% for children and young people who lived in households that were not in financial strain.

Children and young people who took part in our 2024 survey were also asked how often they worried about how much money their family had. Overall, 18% of children and young people worried 'often' or 'always' about how much money their family had.²⁶ **Of the children and young people who said that they 'often' or 'always' worried about how much money their family had, 23% had low life satisfaction**. This compared with 8% of children who did not 'often' or 'always' worry about how much money their family had.²⁷

This echoes a striking finding from analysis presented in The Good Childhood Report 2023 exploring our 2023 survey data, which found that **children and young people who worried about how much money their family had were more likely to be unhappy than those without financial worries across every one of the ten measures of subjective wellbeing** that are included in the Good Childhood Index.²⁸ This was particularly the case regarding their home, their money and possessions, and the amount of choice that they had.²⁹

As wider context, our household surveys include a question that assesses the extent of children and young people's worry about a range of nine societal issues.³⁰ 'Rising prices' was added as an item to this question in 2023; ever since, it has been children and young people's top worry in our annual surveys.³¹ In 2025, 40% of children and young people were 'very' or 'quite' worried about rising prices.

International data also allowed for insightful comparisons regarding the socio-economic context in the UK: analysis from PISA 2022 data presented in The Good Childhood Report 2024 showed that **the UK was the European country with the largest gap in average life satisfaction between the least and most disadvantaged 15-year-olds**.³²

²⁵ This was measured by asking parents and carers in our 2024 survey how well their household had managed financially between January and March 2024. Those who said that they had found it 'quite' or 'very' difficult to manage financially were identified as being in financial strain. Overall, 23% of parents and carers who took part in our survey responded in that way, and their households were therefore considered to be in financial strain. See The Good Childhood Report 2024, pages 28 to 37.

²⁶ In detail, 12% worried 'often' and 7% 'always'. In addition, 50% worried 'sometimes', and 26% 'never'; 5% of children and young people responded 'don't know', and less than 1% 'prefer not to say'.

²⁷ The other response options were 'never' and 'sometimes'. Children also had the option to respond 'don't know' or 'prefer not to say', however these responses were not included in this analysis.

²⁸ The domains, or aspects of life, included in the Good Childhood Index are detailed in footnote 20 above.

²⁹ See The Good Childhood Report 2023, page 42.

³⁰ The issues included in this question are: the environment; levels of unemployment; the amount of crime; online safety; homelessness; inequality; new illnesses / pandemics; refugee and migrant crisis; rising prices.

³¹ See The Good Childhood Report 2023, The Good Childhood Report 2024 and The Good Childhood Report 2025.

³² See The Good Childhood Report 2024, pages 48 to 49.

What did young people and professionals say about financial issues in consultations?

Young people expressed in consultations that **money matters should not be a worry for children and young people** – that it should be something that adults are concerned with.³³ They also spoke about the impact on children and young people whose households experience financial difficulties, notably in terms of **missing out on opportunities and how this can further impact wellbeing**:

“It also means they’ll miss out on opportunities, and will feel left out [...]. The more a person socialises the better they feel, and they can share their feelings, but if they haven’t got that opportunity because they can’t afford it ...” Young person

As mentioned above, **professionals identified rising levels of poverty as a key issue affecting children’s wellbeing**, including by increasing pressure on the wider household.³⁴

³³ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 3.

³⁴ Ibid, Chapter 4.

Chapter 3: Children and young people's digital lives and social media

In recent years, discussions about low wellbeing have increasingly included considerations of children and young people's use of social media (and/or smartphones³⁵), and the impact that this may have on children and young people's wellbeing has been a recurrent topic of debate in the media. This topic was also very frequently mentioned, often unprompted, in the consultations with children and young people and with professionals conducted for The Good Childhood Report 2025.³⁶ However, **the research evidence is not as clear-cut as assumptions might suggest**, with findings on this topic tending to be rather mixed.³⁷ It must however be acknowledged that, to date, **research evidence into the impact of the use of social media on children remains limited**. This lack of conclusive evidence was recently highlighted by the Government when, in March 2025, the then Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology Peter Kyle and the Secretary of State for Education Bridget Phillipson made changes to the draft Safer Phones Bill to include a new proposal **committing the government to researching the impact of the use of social media on children further**, rather than the immediate changes related to government intervention that had been drafted in the original bill.³⁸

Recognising the pressing need to understand more about how children and young people's lives online may interact with their wellbeing, The Children's Society has regularly explored this topic in its research. It is important to acknowledge that most of the evidence presented here refers to data collected prior to, or at the start of, the Covid-19 pandemic, and that some of the data is now a little over a decade old. However, these findings can go some way towards informing our understanding of how children's digital lives and their use of social media can interact with their life satisfaction.

Most recently, The Children's Society produced a report titled **Net Gains? Young People's Digital Lives and Wellbeing**, published in January 2022.³⁹ The report was informed by a scoping review of research literature as well as exploratory findings from analysis based on data from The Children's Society's household survey 2020. It is important to bear in mind that data collection for this survey took place in April to June 2020, which coincided with the first Covid-19 lockdown. The Net Gains? report tested hypotheses on how young people might view internet use and links between their subjective wellbeing and different aspects of their digital lives, like attitudes, experiences online, and parental support.

Importantly, **the report emphasises the relative absence of young people's voices in research on this topic**. It also highlights a fundamental difficulty in conducting robust research in this sphere, in that the **rapidly shifting and changing nature of the digital**

³⁵ Previous research presented in The Good Childhood Report 2017 showed that, for many children, having a smartphone and using social media were synonymous. See The Good Childhood Report 2017, page 22.

³⁶ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapters 3 and 4.

³⁷ See, for example, Kardefelt-Winther, 2017.

³⁸ See Elgot, 2025, and Boyd & Rhodes, 2025.

³⁹ See The Children's Society, 2022a.

ecosystem (with ever-evolving devices, apps, or language that young people use) can frustrate research efforts to understand the complexity of young people's digital lives. Key findings from the report related to children and young people's wellbeing were as follows:

The **'use of the internet serves to amplify the disadvantages and vulnerabilities that a young person experiences in their offline life'**.⁴⁰ While online harm and negative impacts from some online activities are real concerns, they **mostly affect young people who are vulnerable due to risks often linked to challenges they already face in their offline lives**.⁴¹ A young person's social and developmental context strongly shapes their online experiences – both good and bad. However, we still know little about who is most at risk of serious online harm and why.

Spending a lot of time online is usually a sign of low wellbeing or mental health issues, rather than the cause. Even when young people spend what is considered 'excessive' time on digital devices, the impact on mental health is minimal.⁴²

Parents and carers cannot completely prevent negative online experiences, just like they cannot remove all risks in other parts of teenage life. Instead, their role is to **help young people gradually build 'online resilience' to mitigate risks of harm and help them cope with challenges**.⁴³

Prior to this report dedicated to young people's digital lives, several Good Childhood Reports had examined aspects of children and young people's online lives. The Good Childhood Report 2021 explored associations between life satisfaction and a number of contextual factors at age 14, using data from the **Millennium Cohort Study's sixth sweep (MCS6, 2015/16)**.⁴⁴ One of the factors examined was the hours that children aged 14 spent on social networking sites per week. Analysis showed that, after controlling for individual characteristics and circumstances, **hours spent on social networking sites were a relatively weak predictor of life satisfaction**. Notably, having family and friends who helped them feel safe, secure and happy was the strongest predictor of children's life satisfaction, with frequency of being bullied the next strongest predictor.⁴⁵

Previously, The Good Childhood Report 2020 presented analysis drawing on **PISA 2018** data to explore whether countries where children aged 15 used digital technology more

⁴⁰ The Children's Society, 2022b, page 3.

⁴¹ See The Children's Society, 2022a, page 28.

⁴² Ibid, pages 18 to 20.

⁴³ Ibid, pages 42 to 43.

⁴⁴ See The Good Childhood Report 2021, pages 33 to 34. The Millennium Cohort Study is a UK-wide, large, nationally representative birth cohort study following the lives of around 19,000 cohort members since their infancy. The study has, to date, run for seven sweeps, at ages nine months, and three, five, seven, 11, 14 and 17 years; data from the age 23 sweep is due to be released soon. The sixth sweep, MSC6, that was used for The Good Childhood Report 2021 analysis, focused on age 14 and achieved a sample of almost 12,000 14-year-olds.

⁴⁵ Hours spent on social networking sites had an explanatory power of 1.6%. In terms of other factors identified as stronger predictors of life satisfaction for children at age 14, having family and friends who helped them feel safe, secure and happy had the largest explanatory power, at 11.1%; the frequency of being bullied had an explanatory power of 6.6%, feeling close to someone 6.1%, and having someone to trust if the young person had problems 5.9%.

extensively were also ones that had lower child wellbeing at age 15.⁴⁶ The UK had the second highest mean number of hours per week (around 30, compared with a cross-country average of around 27.6 hours);⁴⁷ however, **there was no clear relationship between the average number of internet hours spent by children in a country and their average life satisfaction scores.**

The Good Childhood Report 2020 also explored the influence of children's use of online technology, looking specifically at how, if at all, it related to children's happiness with their friends. This analysis, using data from **Understanding Society 2017/2018**, acknowledged that being online and using digital technology can be used to **facilitate aspects of friendship that include connection, companionship, inclusion, and engagement in mutual activities** (for example gaming). Looking specially at use of social media, having a social media account did not mean that children reported significantly lower levels of happiness with their friends, nor were they more likely to score at or below the midpoint in happiness with friends.⁴⁸

Similarly, as time spent engaging and communicating with friends has been found to facilitate friendship,⁴⁹ The Good Childhood Report 2020 also investigated how many hours children spent chatting and interacting with their friends through social websites on weekdays. It found that **females and older children** (within the 10 to 15 age range) **spent significantly more time chatting with their friends online, compared to males and to younger children.** Looking at children's happiness with their friends, **children who spent more than four hours chatting online had significantly lower mean scores for happiness with friends** compared to children who spent less than one hour online. This may in part be linked to the more superficial nature of communication that can be achieved online, and to an inability to foster the kind of intimacy and engagement that good friendships need; or it may be that children who are finding challenges with their in-person friendships turn to social media.⁵⁰ However, **patterns in social media use across Understanding Society survey waves did not appear to explain changes in happiness with friends:** when examined over time, the proportion of children spending more than four hours online had increased, but data from only one other survey wave showed a statistically significant difference in happiness with friends by time spent on social media (this was for 2013/14).⁵¹

The Good Childhood Report 2017 presented extensive analyses exploring social media use and children's life satisfaction, based on data from wave 5 of the **Understanding Society survey (2013/2014).**⁵² Overall, these analyses found that **social media use was a relatively weak predictor of variations in children's life satisfaction.**

⁴⁶ See The Good Childhood Report 2020, page 43.

⁴⁷ The number of hours that children spent on the internet outside school were estimated based on two questions in the PISA 2018 survey about weekday and weekend internet use.

⁴⁸ See The Good Childhood Report 2020, page 70.

⁴⁹ See Hall, 2018.

⁵⁰ See The Good Childhood Report 2020, page 70.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² See The Good Childhood Report 2017, pages 21 to 22, 24, 28 to 36, and 59.

Key findings were:

High intensity use of social media (four or more hours per day) **was associated with lower satisfaction with life as a whole, family, appearance, school and schoolwork.**⁵³

There were clear indications that family support and social media use were linked, with **children who felt that they had low family support more likely to be high intensity social media users**, compared to children who felt that they had a high level of family support.

Females were twice as likely (12.6%) **to be high intensity users than males** (6.0%), with males also less likely to belong to social media than females.

Social media use was more strongly linked with happiness with appearance for females than for males: **there was evidence that high intensity social media use had more of an impact on females' happiness with their appearance than males'.**

Differences in social media use between males and females do not fully explain why females report lower wellbeing.⁵⁴ If social media use was the main reason, then accounting for it in analysis would remove the gender gap – but it did not.⁵⁵ The analyses show that, even after considering social media use, significant gender differences in subjective wellbeing remain. This means social media may play a role, but it is not the whole story.

The analyses also tested whether being on social media may be linked with 14- and 15-year-olds feeling happier with their friends, since not being on social media might lead to feeling left out. The findings support this idea: **teens who were not on social media were significantly less happy with their friendships**, and those with the highest satisfaction were moderate social media users.⁵⁶

⁵³ No association was found between high intensity social media use and happiness with friends. There was no difference in the subjective wellbeing of children who used social media up to an hour per day (classified as low intensity users) compared to those who did not belong to social media. For children who used social media one to three hours per day (medium intensity users), an association was found with lower satisfaction with schoolwork only. See The Good Childhood Report 2017, page 28.

⁵⁴ For more detail on gender differences and concerns about females' wellbeing, see Chapter 4 below, and The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 1.

⁵⁵ See The Good Childhood Report 2017, Figure 13, page 31.

⁵⁶ See The Good Childhood Report 2017, page 30.

While the analysis from previous Good Childhood research presented here offered some important evidence which was further explored in our consultations with, and by, children and young people, and with professionals, further research into the impact of social media on children and young people's wellbeing is critically needed.

What did young people and professionals say about life online and social media in consultations?

In consultations, **the digital world and social media were often mentioned by young people as an integral part of their lives** – and an aspect of life that can have an impact on their wellbeing.⁵⁷

Young people explained that **social media can have a negative influence on peer group dynamics** and facilitate online bullying. More generally, they highlighted that **the content that they are exposed to can affect the way they feel about themselves**. They felt that this was particularly relevant in terms of their appearance, in the context of unrealistic standards and expectations, which they shared was especially prevalent for girls.⁵⁸

“Some people go on the internet, and they find someone that they think looks good and then they feel bad about the way they look, and it can make them sad and depressed.” Young person

However, young people were clear that **negative messaging that impacts young people's wellbeing is not limited to social media or the digital world**. They felt that the wider mainstream media has a role to play by constantly exposing young people to **negative messaging, including about young people themselves**.

Young people also had a nuanced view of social media, highlighting the benefits that digital connection can bring:

“Social media can be a positive, it can facilitate connection to people with similar interests which may not be possible in real life.” Young person

Importantly, they alluded to the sense of a 'vicious circle' between **increased reliance on digital interactions in search of a sense of belonging**, and a **decrease in opportunities and spaces for them to socialise in person** in their community. They felt that these two interlinked aspects amplify each other and contribute to an increased sense of isolation for young people.

Young people were clear about the solutions that are needed to allow them to make the most of their digital lives: **they wanted digital spaces to be made safe,**

⁵⁷ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 3.

⁵⁸ As mentioned above, during consultations young people used the words 'girls' and 'boys', and so in an effort to reflect the language they used we are using 'boys' and 'girls' instead of 'males' and 'females' when presenting their direct insights.

and they wanted **adults to be knowledgeable and open about the risks and benefits** of digital connections. They also called **for improved opportunities for them to socialise and connect with others in their community** to balance the time spent on devices.

When we spoke with **professionals**,⁵⁹ they too discussed **the interconnection between fewer opportunities for young people to access physical spaces and an increased access to online spaces**; they felt that a lack of physical spaces exacerbates the risk of young people being driven to online spaces where they might be at risk of harmful content.

Additionally, like young people, professionals also mentioned **the prevalence of negative, fear-based narratives about young people themselves** that affect how young people feel about themselves, other young people, and their sense of safety and belonging in their wider communities. More widely, professionals echoed young people's view that **children and young people experience increasingly constant access to distressing information** which can affect their outlook on the future of the world.

Professionals **echoed the concerns raised by young people about the role that social media can have in peer group issues** and bullying. They also felt that adults often lacking understanding and/or being negative about young people's online lives can further impact young people.

⁵⁹ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 4.

Chapter 4: Gender differences and concerns about females' wellbeing

Data from Understanding Society and PISA show a worrying trend for females' wellbeing. Both surveys reveal that **females' happiness has declined over time** and that, on average, **females are less happy than males**. PISA also found that 15-year-old females in the UK are less happy than their peers in Europe, with the drop in their life satisfaction between 2015 and 2022 being greater in the UK than on average across Europe.⁶⁰ While males' wellbeing is also a concern,⁶¹ females' unhappiness needs closer attention and action to understand and address it.⁶²

As outlined in The Good Childhood Report 2025,⁶³ the last few Understanding Society survey waves have highlighted concerning gender differences for 10- to 15-year-olds:

In the 2022/23 dataset, like in the previous one (2021/22), **females were on average significantly less happy than males with their life as a whole, their family, their appearance, and school.**⁶⁴

Females' average happiness scores in 2022/23 were significantly lower than in 2009/10 across all six areas – life as a whole, family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork. This has now been seen in the last three survey waves.⁶⁵

Patterns in changes to happiness over time are not as clear for males. In 2022/23, males' mean happiness scores were significantly lower than when the survey started for five of the six measures (life as a whole, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork).⁶⁶ However, in the 2021/22 dataset, there were no significant differences compared to the first wave.⁶⁷ This suggests males' scores may fluctuate more between survey waves, so it is important to keep monitoring these patterns in future.

⁶⁰ See The Good Childhood Report 2024, pages 46 to 47, 53, and 55 to 56.

⁶¹ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 1, and Chapter 1 (Decline in children's wellbeing) above, for more detail on the decline in children's wellbeing at overall population level. The spring of 2025, in particular, has seen public debate often focusing on a 'crisis facing boys' in light of Netflix's drama *Adolescence*; for a discussion of how this focus might overshadow challenges faced by females, see Topping, 2025.

⁶² The limitations of only being able to report on binary gender analysis, as well as a short discussion regarding the experiences of those children and young people who identify differently to male or female, is included in the technical appendix.

⁶³ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 1.

⁶⁴ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 1, and The Good Childhood Report 2024, Chapter 1.

⁶⁵ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 1; The Good Childhood Report 2024, Chapter 1; and The Good Childhood Report 2023, Chapter 1.

⁶⁶ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 1.

⁶⁷ See The Good Childhood Report 2024, Chapter 1.

In terms of proportions being identified as unhappy, **in 2022/23 there was a larger proportion of females than males being unhappy with each of the six measures** included in Understanding Society. **The difference is particularly noticeable for appearance, with over double the proportion of females being unhappy than males** with this aspect of their life.⁶⁸

International comparisons presented in The Good Childhood Report 2024 provide an opportunity to place the subjective wellbeing of UK children within the broader European context.⁶⁹ The latest Programme for International Student Assessment, PISA 2022, revealed gender differences for 15-year-olds:

There were differences in life satisfaction between 15-year-old females and males both in the UK and on average across Europe. In the UK, one in five (19.8%) males and almost one in three (30.9%) females aged 15 had low life satisfaction in 2022. In comparison, this was one in eight (12.2%) males and just over one in five (21.4%) females on average across Europe.

Overall, in the 2015 to 2022 period, **both the decline in life satisfaction and the increase in the proportion of 15-year-olds with low satisfaction were larger for females than for males**, both on average across Europe and in the UK.

Comparing the UK with countries across Europe also showed that **15-year-old females in the UK were less happy than their peers in Europe**, with the decline in their life satisfaction between 2015 and 2022 larger in the UK than on average across Europe.

These findings suggest that females and males may experience different types of challenges related to their wellbeing. They may also **approach, understand, and conceptualise subjective wellbeing questions in different ways**, which would in turn mean that they might then respond to these questions differently. This is an important area that requires further exploration.

The Young Advisors to The Good Childhood Report 2025 felt that this was a possibility, with groups of girls more likely to discuss these issues than groups of boys:

“I think that might be a thing as boys don’t really talk about those things so maybe this can account for the difference.” Young person

⁶⁸ The proportions of children unhappy with their appearance were 21.2% for females and 9.3% for males. Differences in the proportions of females and males unhappy with measures related to appearance and school are further discussed in the following chapters.

⁶⁹ See The Good Childhood Report 2024, Chapter 3.

One professional we spoke to for The Good Childhood Report 2025 also suggested that males may need different types of communication and support to help them open up about their wellbeing.⁷⁰

What did young people and professionals say about gender differences in consultations?

In consultations, young people shared that girls and boys can be affected by different things impacting their sense of wellbeing.⁷¹ For example, they felt **that girls are more prone to being affected by unrealistic beauty standards, while boys might be more affected by content focusing on harmful visions of masculinity and gender roles**, like incel content. They felt that, despite the differences, **both can affect young people's self-esteem as well as have an impact on how they behave towards each other**. This in turn can affect other young people's wellbeing, for example through poor peer relationships or bullying.

Young people highlighted that pressures about their appearance reinforced by content that they are exposed to, especially on social media, can affect all young people.⁷² However, they overwhelmingly said that this particularly impacts girls, with **constant pressure and expectations of how girls should look** leading them to compare themselves to perceived standards and feel bad about themselves:

“Social media [is] setting unnecessary standards for girls' appearance and behaviour leading to girls wanting to grow up.” Young person

This point connects to something young people raised in consultations: they felt that **girls are expected to be more mature than boys**.

Consultations with professionals provided an additional dimension that could contribute to differences in wellbeing between genders: **professionals felt that the lack of safe spaces could, at times, be felt more strongly by those who identify as females, with some spaces like multi-use games facilities not necessarily feeling accessible to them.**⁷³

⁷⁰ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 4, page 67, footnote 72.

⁷¹ Ibid, Chapter 3.

⁷² Insights related to young people's happiness with their appearance are presented in Chapter 5 below.

⁷³ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 4.

Chapter 5: Unhappiness with appearance

As outlined in previous chapters, appearance is an aspect of life that children and young people are usually most commonly unhappy about across sources. In The Children's Society's own annual household surveys, aside from one year, **appearance has always been the second most common aspect of life that children and young people (aged 10 to 17) have been unhappy with.**⁷⁴ Prior to our household surveys becoming annual, appearance had been the aspect of life that children and young people were most commonly unhappy with.⁷⁵

Looking at the proportions of children unhappy with the different aspects of life asked about in Understanding Society, ever since the survey started in 2009/10, **appearance has almost consistently been the aspect that children (aged 10 to 15) have been most commonly unhappy with**, in all but one survey wave.⁷⁶ **In 2022/23, over one in seven (15.1%) children were unhappy with their appearance.** However, it is important to note that data suggest this is mostly driven by females' unhappiness with their appearance.⁷⁷ **In every survey wave since the start of Understanding Society, females have been significantly less happy than males with their appearance.** The data identifies **appearance as the most prevalent area of concern for females**, with it being the measure that females have been most commonly unhappy with across all waves of the survey since it started in 2009/10.⁷⁸

Analysis conducted in previous Good Childhood Reports can shed additional light on changes over time, as well as gender differences, in children's happiness with their appearance. In The Good Childhood Report 2018, we explored the longer-term trends over time in gender differences for children aged 11 to 15 from 1994/95 to 2015/16.⁷⁹ These analyses show that, for about a decade from the mid-1990s onwards, the gender gap in happiness with appearance had narrowed substantially, but that since about the mid-2000s it had been opening up again. As a result, as can be seen in Figure 2, **by 2015/16, the gender gap in happiness with appearance was similar in magnitude to 20 years previously.**

⁷⁴ The only exception was in 2019 when it came third, after school and the money and things that children and young people owned.

⁷⁵ Based on the pooled average of 8,000 responses from four household survey waves from 2013 to 2015; see The Good Childhood Report 2015.

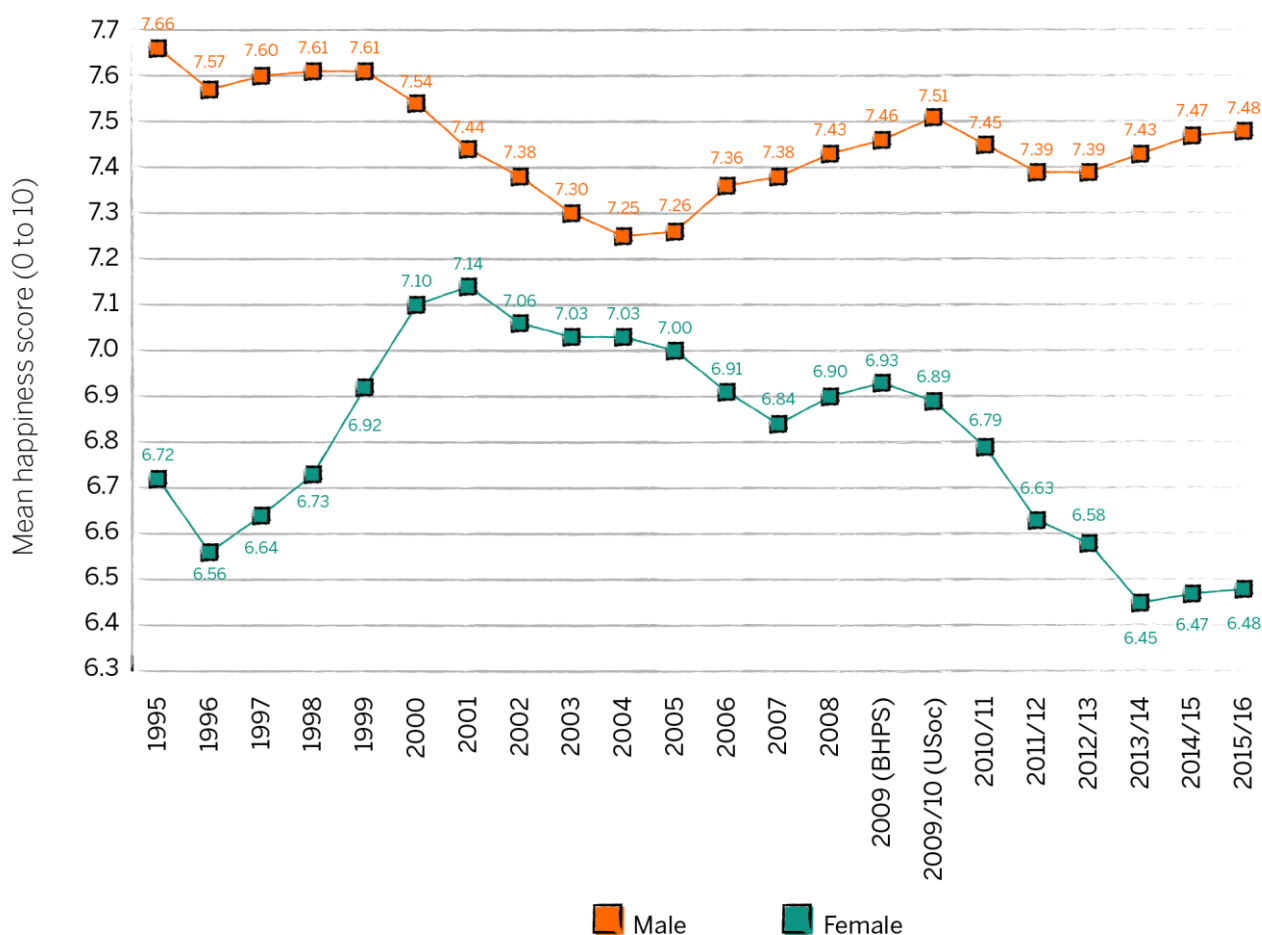
⁷⁶ The exception was in 2016/17, when this was school.

⁷⁷ See Chapter 4 above for more detail on gender differences in children's happiness with their appearance.

⁷⁸ For males, appearance was the measure they were most commonly unhappy with in one survey wave only (wave 12, 2020/21). Males have usually been most commonly unhappy with either their school or schoolwork; see following chapter.

⁷⁹ Data sources were Understanding Society and its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). To note, the longer-term time trends are for 11- to 15-year-olds (rather than for 10- to 15-year-olds) as this is the age group covered by the BHPS.

Figure 2. Trends in children's (aged 11 to 15) happiness with appearance by gender, UK, 1995 to 2015/16.



Source: British Household Panel Survey, 1995 to 2009, children aged 11 to 15, weighted data; Understanding Society, 2009/10 to 2015/16, children aged 11 to 15, weighted data. Three-year smoothed moving average from 1997 onwards. Originally presented in The Good Childhood Report 2018, page 56.

The fact that there was a similar gender gap in happiness with appearance in the mid-1990s provides additional evidence that **social media and the digital world are unlikely to be the main explanation for females' unhappiness with their appearance.** Instead, this indicates that multiple factors are likely to have a bearing on how both females and males feel about this aspect of their lives.

What did young people say about happiness with appearance in consultations?

In consultations, **young people recognised unhappiness with appearance as a prevalent issue for children and young people, and expressed that it is a particularly problematic aspect for girls** – echoing the findings from survey data presented above.⁸⁰

They felt that **unrealistic expectations of what young people should look like, and in particular problematic beauty standards focusing on girls' appearance**, are pushing young people to compare their looks to others or to perceived expectations, and feel bad about themselves as a result:

“There is a standard being pushed of what everyone should look like and that plays a big role with satisfaction if you don't feel like you meet that.”

Young person

They shared that **the content that they consume and are exposed to – including, but not limited to, on social media – is contributing to these issues.**

Additionally, many young people felt that it is **common for young people to be bullied for their appearance.**

Overall, young people felt that they should be better protected from pressures about the way they look, and that each young person should be able to feel valued for who they are.

Professionals also noted happiness with appearance within the context of wider pressures faced by children and young people in the modern world.

⁸⁰ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 3.

Chapter 6: Unhappiness with school

Together with appearance, school is almost consistently either the first or second aspect of life that children and young people are most commonly unhappy about across different sources.

In The Children's Society's own Good Childhood Index, **every year since 2016, school has almost invariably been the aspect of life with the largest proportion of children and young people (aged 10 to 17) identified as unhappy.**⁸¹ Ever since The Good Childhood Report 2015,⁸² every year there has been at least 11% (or one in nine) children and young people who reported low happiness with school, rising to as high as 14.5% (one in seven) in 2023.

In recognition of the important role that school plays in children's lives, The Good Childhood Report 2022 included a thematic chapter focusing on further exploring children's happiness with school.⁸³ To capture further information about children's experiences of school, our household survey 2022 included The Children's Society's School Index set of questions. Key findings were:

Children and young people were, on average, most happy with how safe they felt in school and least happy with how much they were listened to at school.

Over one in eight (13.1%) children and young people were **unhappy with how much they were listened to at school.** This was the most common aspect on which children scored below the midpoint.

Further analysis also showed that **children and young people's happiness with how much they were listened to at school was most strongly related to their happiness with school** in general.

Additionally, a new set of questions was included in our household survey that year, to cover a range of different issues not captured by our earlier School Index (first developed in 2012). These statements looked at further features of children's school experiences, like support within school, expectations, fairness, development of wider skills, and access to extracurricular activities. **Nearly 1 in 5 (18%) children and young people in 2022 did not**

⁸¹ The only exception was in 2020, when choice was the aspect of life that the largest proportion of children and young people were unhappy with, followed by appearance and then school. To note, data collection for the household survey 2020 took place during the government-imposed lockdown in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, which led to restrictions on freedom and sense of choice, and when the majority of children and young people were either not in school or attended school much less frequently than usual.

⁸² Previously to 2015, The Good Childhood Reports were not reporting on proportions scoring below the midpoint on items from our own household surveys in the way that we have done since 2015 onwards. The Good Childhood Report 2015 was also different to The Good Childhood Reports from 2016 onwards as it reported on four pooled survey waves from 2013 to 2015 (before the move to annual surveys).

⁸³ See The Good Childhood Report 2022, Chapter 2.

think they had a say in decisions that are important to them at school, again echoing the theme of the importance of their voices being listened to.

In August 2024, The Children's Society published a report called **One Small Step? Exploring the links between educational transitions and young people's wellbeing**.⁸⁴ Comparisons were conducted between Years 6 and 7 (transition from primary to secondary education), Years 9 and 10 (transition to studying for GCSEs or equivalent), and Years 11 and 12 (transition from secondary to further education or equivalent).

Our analysis found **lower overall wellbeing and happiness with school among children, and females in particular, in Year 7 compared to Year 6:**

- Children's mean happiness with school was lower for children in Year 7 than for those in Year 6.
- Mean life satisfaction⁸⁵ was also noticeably lower among children in Year 7.

There was little difference between young people's mean scores in Years 9 and 10 across most of the wellbeing measures considered, including happiness with school and life satisfaction. However, more young people in Year 10 were **identified as having low life satisfaction than in Year 9 and in other school years**.⁸⁶

There were only small variations in wellbeing measures between young people in Years 11 and 12. Interestingly, those in Year 12 scored higher than their peers in Year 11 for happiness with two aspects of school life (facilities, and how much they were listened to at school).

The Good Childhood Report 2025 revealed insightful results in terms of the **pressure that children and young people can feel to achieve academically**. When asked about the importance of different aspects of life for their own future, 49% of children and young people in the household survey rated getting good grades at school or college as 'very important'. When asked to rate how much they worried about these same aspects of life, getting good grades at school or college was their top worry in 2025. As shown in Figure 3, 43% of children and young people were 'very' or 'quite' worried about this.⁸⁷

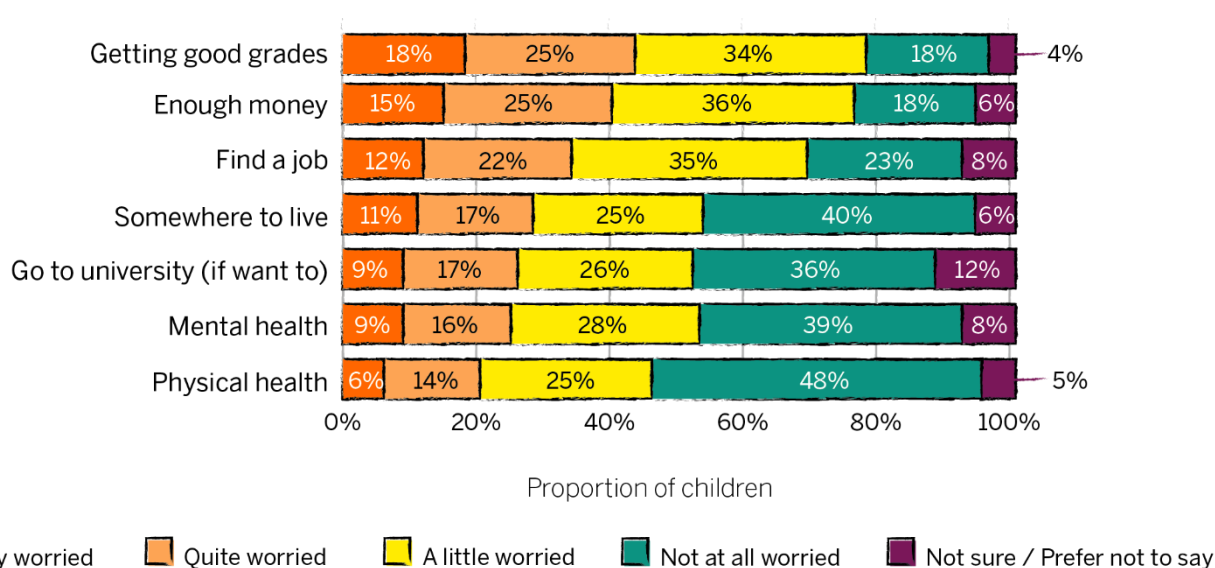
⁸⁴ The Children's Society, 2024a. This report used data from our household surveys from 2022 and 2023. Due to differing educational years in Scotland and Northern Ireland, only data from England and Wales were included in this report.

⁸⁵ Based on the multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction included in the Good Childhood Index.

⁸⁶ This finding is consistent with analysis presented in The Good Childhood Report 2023, which indicated that a higher percentage of 15-year-olds was unhappy with a number of aspects of their lives than at any of the other ages considered (this was for time use, appearance, school, and the future); see The Good Childhood Report 2023, page 40.

⁸⁷ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, page 29.

Figure 3. Extent of children and young people's (aged 10 to 17) worry about their own future.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 24, April to June 2025, children and young people aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Note: Percentages for each item may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

The 2025 survey was the first time that children and young people's top worry for their own future was getting good grades at school or college. In 2023, 2021 and 2019, getting good grades had been children and young people's third most prevalent worry.⁸⁸ **The proportions of children and young people 'very' or 'quite' worried about getting good grades at school or college grew slightly larger (by 2 percentage points) in each survey between 2019 and 2023, before a considerably larger increase of 11 percentage points in 2025:**

- in 2019, 28% of children and young people were 'very' or 'quite' worried about getting good grades at school or college
- in 2021, this was 30%
- in 2023, this was 32%
- and in 2025, this was 43%, and it became children and young people's top worry for their own future.⁸⁹

Looking at the Understanding Society survey as a source, the youth questionnaire contains two measures of subjective wellbeing related to school life, asking children aged 10 to 15 how they feel about the school they go to, and their schoolwork. As presented in The Good Childhood Report 2025:

⁸⁸ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, page 29; The Good Childhood Report 2023, pages 49 to 50; The Good Childhood Report 2021, page 48; and The Good Childhood Report 2019, page 63.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

Children's mean scores for their happiness with their school and schoolwork were significantly lower in the 2022/23 Understanding Society dataset than when the survey started in 2009/10.⁹⁰

As shown in Figure 4, children's mean scores for their happiness with school and schoolwork were also significantly lower in this dataset than in the previous survey wave.

A steep decline is observed between 2021/22 and 2022/23 **for both school-related questions.**

2022/23 was the first time that **schoolwork was the aspect of life that children were on average least happy with.**⁹¹

Over one in seven (14.9%) children were unhappy with both their schoolwork and the school they go to.⁹²

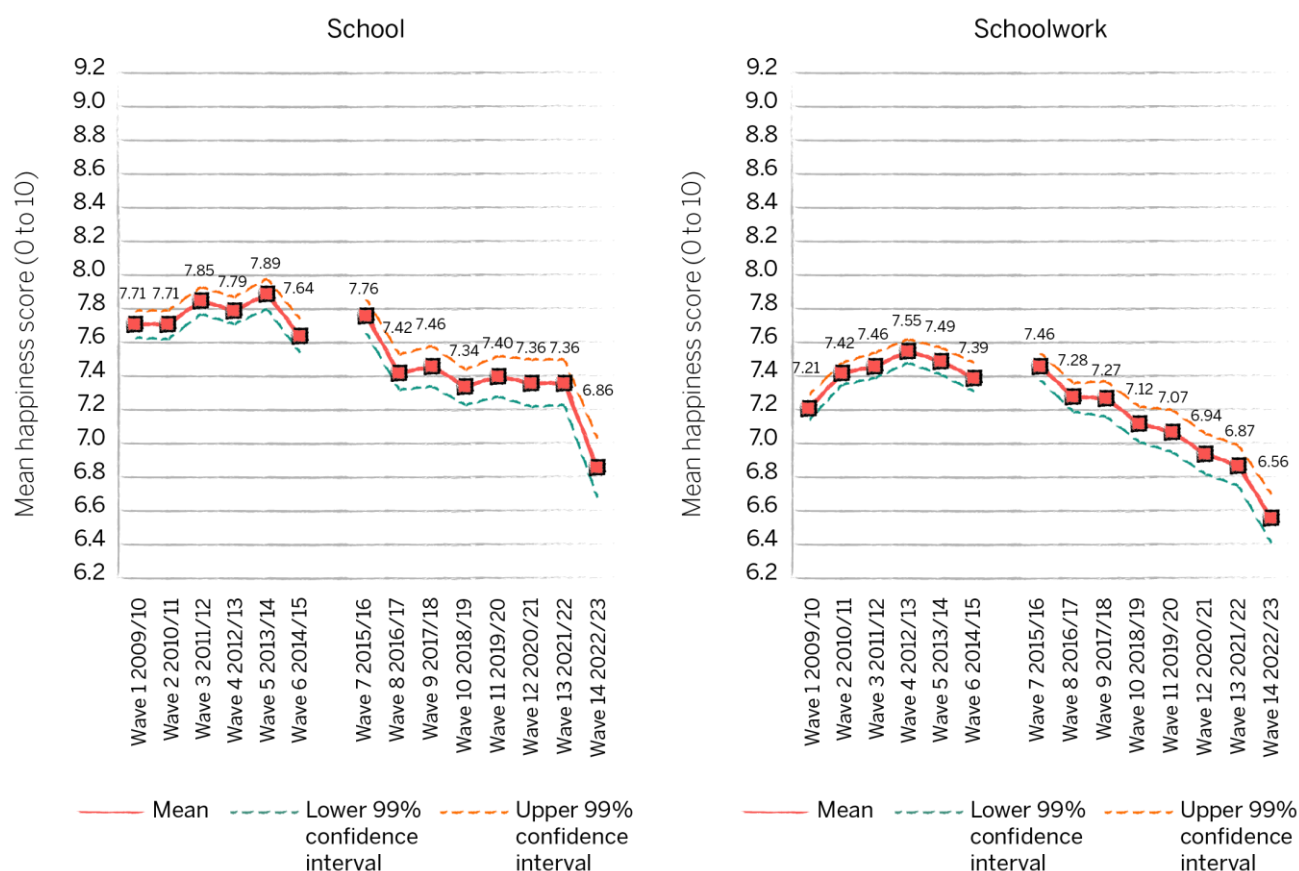
Schoolwork and school were the aspects of life that males were most unhappy with (at 13.2% and 12.7% respectively). However, an even larger proportion of females were unhappy with both these aspects of their lives (16.7% and 17.2%, respectively). These trends have been consistent across Understanding Society survey waves.

⁹⁰ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapter 1. This was also the case for children's happiness with all four other measures of subjective wellbeing (life as a whole, family, friends and appearance).

⁹¹ Ibid. This is usually appearance; see Chapter 5 above.

⁹² Ibid. The aspect of life that the largest proportion of children were unhappy with was their appearance, with a very marginally higher proportion of children scoring below the midpoint for that measure (15.1%).

Figure 4. Trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with their school and schoolwork, UK, 2009/10 to 2022/23.



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

Presentational note: Both graphs use the same size range of values (3.0) so that they can be visually compared. Data are weighted (confidence intervals take account of design effects).

Looking at the latest PISA dataset from 2022 in The Good Childhood Report 2024 enabled us to benchmark how the UK compared with other countries across Europe on a range of school-related measures.⁹³ PISA 2022 data showed that, for 15-year-olds, the UK performed less well than other countries across Europe on:

School belonging: the UK ranked fifth from the bottom (out of 27 countries) in terms of pupils' sense of belonging at school, a measure which includes pupils' feelings of loneliness at school.

School safety: the UK ranked low in terms of school safety measures. In particular, **the UK had the second highest level of bullying in Europe** (out of 27 countries). It was also the country with the second highest proportion of students reporting three or more safety risks (out of 23 countries), and it had the sixth highest proportion of students feeling unsafe attending school (out of 24 countries).

⁹³ See The Good Childhood Report 2024, pages 50 to 52.

School attendance: **the UK had the third highest rate of long-term school absences** of more than three consecutive months (out of 23 countries).

In contrast, the PISA data indicated that the UK fared better compared to other countries across Europe on one measure related to school:

- Students' preferences for ICT regulations in school: **the UK ranked sixth overall when pupils were asked whether they agreed with various statements about the regulation of digital devices' use at school** (out of 24 countries).

There were some other measures related to school where the UK ranked in an average position in the European PISA ranking, for example, in terms of teacher support (average score from a range of statements; the UK ranked 11th out of 27 countries).

What did young people and professionals say about happiness with school in consultations?

As outlined above, in consultations, **young people and professionals both outlined how the school environment itself can be a real source of pressure for young people**, whose wellbeing can be impacted by expectations around academic achievement as well as issues around receiving support at school when they need it.⁹⁴

They shared that **the school workload, together with the pressure to achieve academically, can be overwhelming**. Some felt that academic achievement is the only type of achievement that is recognised at school:

“If you're not seen as achieving... you're not belonging.” Young person

They felt that **the transition between primary and secondary school can be a particularly hard time for young people**. Some added that **the school environment itself can feel “too much”**, without the right spaces for children and young people to be alone and calm down when they need to.

As mentioned earlier, young people also explained that issues related to **peer pressure and bullying can impact their wellbeing and their sense of belonging at school**:

“Hierarchy in school and popularity can make a big difference to whether you feel like you fit in or not.” Young person

They also shared that **their relationships with school staff are crucial for their wellbeing at school**, and that while this can be either negative or positive,

⁹⁴ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, Chapters 3 and 4.

supportive staff members who know the pupils well and have fostered relationships of trust with them can be instrumental in making a difference for young people.

Overall, young people were keen for the school environment to shift towards a place where their exam results do not define them or how successful or valued they are. They also wanted the curriculum to be rebalanced towards **more opportunities to prepare for adulthood and learn relevant life skills**.

Professionals echoed young people's insights, with education and schooling identified by professionals we consulted as a key area of concern for children and young people's wellbeing.

Professionals, too, raised that **educational pressures and expectations to achieve academically contribute to low wellbeing, particularly around exams**. They shared that this creates an expectation that academic attainment is the "only path to success":

"Children and young people are told there is only one path to success – higher education – and [they're] not given access to a range of opportunities that would allow them to define what success means to them." Professional

Professionals highlighted that **this focus on attainment is at times at the detriment of creative and physical education and of developing skills needed for daily life and adulthood** – a point echoed by young people.

In addition, **many professionals were also concerned about the educational system becoming increasingly behaviour-focused**, with a strong focus on compliance with punitive behavioural policies. Some felt that these approaches "placed importance on the wrong things" and that, instead of supporting the development of young people's skills, they limit their ability to learn to self-manage. Some professionals shared that this focus on behaviour is also **a barrier to understanding the complex context in which many children and young people are living**, for example with experiences of trauma or poverty; they worried that it is also a barrier to schools being a place (and sometimes the *only* place) where children can get the support that they need for their wellbeing.

Like young people, professionals felt that it is important for **school to be a place where young people can feel valued, supported and learn the skills they will need** as they grow up and transition to adulthood – and that, crucially, **young people themselves can define what it means for them to be successful and thrive**.

Conclusion

This report presents analysis of six key themes that have emerged over the course of the Good Childhood research programme. As outlined: children's wellbeing is in decline; too many children experience low wellbeing; there are concerns for females' wellbeing in particular; and school and appearance are problematic aspects of life for many children. Children and young people's online lives and social media are often blamed for those concerns, but both research evidence and young people's insights in consultations were a lot more nuanced than might be expected.

The exploration of the six topics presented in this report outlines the breadth and depth of what can be learnt when children and young people's subjective wellbeing is measured and the results investigated via robust analyses as well as qualitative insights. It shows how a greater understanding can be developed about how children and young people feel about their lives, what affects their wellbeing, what aspects of life are most problematic for them, and, when methodological considerations like sample sizes allow, an indication of what groups of young people are more likely to require further attention and support. Importantly, qualitative methods then allow for an investigation of the reasons *why* that is.

Such research can, in turn, support the development of solutions to overcome the identified challenges. In *The Good Childhood Report 2025* and in *Reclaiming Hope in a Changing World*,⁹⁵ we present how **vital** it is that **children and young people are involved in every step of these solutions, from design through to implementation and next steps.** The consultations that were carried out for *The Good Childhood Report 2025* provide examples of insights collated from young people and professionals to develop a better understanding of the reasons why we observe these concerning trends in children's subjective wellbeing, together with an exploration of the solutions that are needed to reverse those trends and improve children's wellbeing.

These insights make a compelling case for our campaign for a **national wellbeing measurement programme.** Only by consistently and regularly listening to what young people tell us can national and local government begin to understand their experiences, act on the issues that young people recognise as important for their wellbeing, and implement targeted solutions to overcome barriers and ensure all young people get the opportunities they deserve.

⁹⁵ See The Children's Society, 2025a.

Technical appendix

A note on data sources

The evidence presented in this report draws on The Good Childhood Reports as well as associated publications from our Good Childhood research programme. It also includes insights from consultations conducted in 2025 with young people and a range of professionals working with children and young people.⁹⁶ In terms of survey data, key sources are:

■ The Children's Society's household surveys

Our household surveys are annual surveys collecting insights from a minimum of 2,000 children and young people aged 10 to 17, as well as a parent or carer for each. They take place around the same time every year, and children and young people are selected to closely match the make-up of the wider population in terms of their age, gender, socio-economic background, and UK nations and regions. The latest household survey took place from April to June 2025 and gathered responses from 2,007 children and young people.⁹⁷

■ Understanding Society

Understanding Society (the UK Longitudinal Household Survey) is a UK-wide longitudinal study that started in 2009. Its youth questionnaire collects responses from children aged 10 to 15. The latest wave available at the time of drafting this report was wave 14 (2022/23), when 1,623 children took part.⁹⁸ Each Good Childhood Report considers the latest Understanding Society data, and compares children's average happiness scores in the latest dataset to the average happiness scores when the survey started in 2009/10. This allows us to determine whether children's mean happiness for each measure has significantly increased, remained broadly the same, or significantly decreased compared to when the survey began.

Other surveys have been drawn on at specific points in this report, like the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Millenium Cohort Study (MCS), or the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). Those are introduced in footnotes when first referred to.

⁹⁶ For more detail regarding these qualitative approaches, see The Good Childhood Report 2025, Appendix A, pages 87 to 89.

⁹⁷ Further detail is presented in The Good Childhood Report 2025, Appendix A, page 87.

⁹⁸ For more detail, see The Good Childhood Report 2025, Appendix A, page 86.

Measuring overall life satisfaction

Subjective wellbeing overall, or overall life satisfaction, discussed in Chapter 2, is something that can be measured in a few different ways. Some sources include a single question that asks children how happy or how satisfied they are, or how they feel with their life as a whole; the exact wording tends to differ according to the data source. However, there is evidence that a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction is a more reliable measure than a single question on happiness with life as a whole,⁹⁹ and so, The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index includes a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction. This is a measure made up of five statements to which children can respond whether they 'strongly disagree', 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree', 'strongly agree' or 'don't know'. If they have provided a response for each of the five statements, an overall score is calculated that indicates their overall life satisfaction.

Scope for gender analysis, and experiences of children and young people who identify differently to male or female

It is important to note that the sources used in The Good Childhood Reports only allow for analysis based on binary genders.¹⁰⁰ This means that the analyses presented in this report are unable to explore the experiences of those children and young people who identify differently to male or female. It is known from external sources that there are concerns around the wellbeing of children and young people who identify as trans, non-binary, or with other gender non-conforming identities, for example in terms of loneliness.¹⁰¹ There are also serious concerns for the mental health of these groups of children and young people (notably regarding the likelihood of trans children to experience depression, to self-harm, or to have suicidal thoughts),¹⁰² and there is evidence that suggests that LGBTQ+ children and young people may be at increased risk of some forms of harm, like bullying, online abuse, and child sexual exploitation.¹⁰³ It will be important for future research to further investigate these issues, which will require larger survey samples and more targeted recruitment.

⁹⁹ See The Good Childhood Report 2022, which explains that 'a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction [...] is considered to be more reliable than a single measure', quoting Diener et al., 2013, and Rees et al., 2010.

¹⁰⁰ See The Good Childhood Report 2025, page 12, and The Good Childhood Report 2024, page 12.

¹⁰¹ NSPCC Learning, 2025.

¹⁰² Public Health England & Royal College of Nursing, 2015; Nodin et al, 2015.

¹⁰³ NSPCC Learning, 2025.

References

- Boyd A, Rhodes H. Plan to Make Phone Use Safer for Teens Watered Down [Internet]. BBC News: London; 2025 [accessed 2025 March 25]. Available from: [bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq8y7dvw9ddo](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cq8y7dvw9ddo).
- Children's Commissioner. Family and its Protective Effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review [Internet]. Children's Commissioner: London; 2022 [accessed 2025 March 7]. Available from: childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/family-and-its-protective-effect-part-1-of-the-independent-family-review/.
- Diener E, Ingelhart R, Tay L. Theory and Validity of Life Satisfaction Scales. *Social Indicators Research*. 2013; 112(3): 497-527.
- Elgot J. Safer Phones Bill Aimed at Young Teens Watered down after Minister Opposition [Internet]. The Guardian: London; 2025 [accessed 2025 March 25]. Available from: [theguardian.com/media/2025/mar/05/safer-phones-bill-aimed-at-young-teens-watered-down-after-minister-opposition](https://www.theguardian.com/media/2025/mar/05/safer-phones-bill-aimed-at-young-teens-watered-down-after-minister-opposition).
- Hall J. How Many Hours Does it Take to Make a Friend? *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. 2018; 36(4): 1278-96.
- Kardefelt-Winther D. How Does the Time Children Spend Using Digital Technology Impact their Mental Well-being, Social Relationships and Physical Activity?: An Evidence-Focused Literature Review. *Innocenti Discussion Papers*. 2017; 02.
- Nodin N, Rivers I, Peel E, and Tyler A. The RaRE Research Report: LGB&T Mental Health - Risk and Resilience Explored [Internet]. PACE: London; 2015 [accessed 2025 June 13]. Available from: openresearch.lsbu.ac.uk/item/87649.
- NSPCC Learning. Safeguarding LGBTQ+ Children and Young People [Internet]. NSPCC: London; 2025 [accessed 2025 June 13]. Available from: learning.nspcc.org.uk/safeguarding-child-protection/lgbtq-children-young-people.
- Public Health England, Royal College of Nursing. Preventing Suicide among Trans Young People: A Toolkit for Nurses [Internet]. Public Health England: London; 2025 [accessed 2025 June 13]. Available from: assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/417707/Trans_suicide_Prevention_Toolkit_Final_26032015.pdf.
- Rees G, Bradshaw J, Goswami H, and Keung A. Understanding Children's Well-being: A National Survey of Young People's Well-Being. London: The Children's Society; 2010.
- The Children's Society. Net Gains? Young People's Digital Lives and Wellbeing [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2022 [accessed 2025 December 3]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/young-peoples-digital-lives-and-well-being.

The Children's Society. Net Gains? Young People's Digital Lives and Wellbeing: A Research Review and New Findings – Summary and Key Points [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2022 [accessed 2025 December 4]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2022-01/digital_lives_report_summary.pdf.

The Children's Society. One Small Step? Exploring the Links Between Educational Transitions and Young People's Wellbeing [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2024. [accessed 2025 June 13]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2024-08/One%20Small%20Step.Final_.pdf.

The Children's Society. Reclaiming Hope in a Changing World. From Evidence to Impact: The Good Childhood Report 2025 Policy Recommendations [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2025 [accessed 2025 September 2]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2025-10/GCR2025%20Policy%20Briefing.pdf.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2014 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2014 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2014.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2015 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2015 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2015.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2016 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2016 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2016.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2017 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2017 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2017.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2018 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2018 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2018.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2019 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2019 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2019.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2020 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2020 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2020.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2021 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2021 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2021.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2022 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2022 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from:

childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2022.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2023 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2023 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2023.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2024 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2024 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2024.

The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2025 [Internet]. The Children's Society: London; 2025 [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2025.

Topping A. 'We Can't Pit Boys against Girls': Headlines Overshadow Struggles of a Generation of Girls [Internet]. The Guardian: London; 2025 [accessed 2025 May 29]. Available from: theguardian.com/society/2025/apr/12/we-cant-pit-boys-against-girls-headlines-overshadow-struggles-of-a-generation-of-girls.

Understanding Society. The UK Household Longitudinal Study [Internet]. Economic and Social Research Council: Swindon, University of Essex: Colchester; n.d. [accessed 2025 April 22]. Available from: understandingsociety.ac.uk/.

What Works Centre for Wellbeing. What Is Wellbeing? [Internet]. What Works Centre for Wellbeing: London; n.d. [accessed 2025 November 27]. Available from: whatworkswellbeing.org/about-wellbeing/what-is-wellbeing/.

Acknowledgements

The Children's Society wishes to thank:

- the Young Advisors to The Good Childhood Report 2025: Dorothy, Ffion, Kyra, Marcin, Sofia, Sonny, Subhaan, Theo, Vanessa and Yusuf
- the young people who took part in the peer consultations for The Good Childhood Report 2025 and via a separate consultation event, Have Your Say – Cheltenham Young People
- the professionals who took part in the consultations for The Good Childhood Report 2025
- the institutions that supported the Young Advisors to carry out their peer consultations: Countesthorpe Academy, Towers Junior School, Seven Kings School, Bolton College, Bilborough Sixth Form College, and Oasis Academy Hadley
- Leaders Unlocked, who partnered with The Children's Society in establishing the group of Young Advisors and expertly supporting them
- the young people, and their parents and carers, who took part in The Children's Society's household surveys
- the UK Data Service for making data from Understanding Society and the Millenium Cohort Study available; with thanks to the University of Essex for Understanding Society, and to the Centre for Longitudinal Studies, University College London (UCL), for the Millenium Cohort Study
- the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) for making PISA data available for use¹⁰⁴
- Dr. Hayley Leonard for her contribution to editing the content of this report.

¹⁰⁴ To note, the UK Data Service, the University of Essex, UCL and the OECD bear no responsibility for the analysis and interpretation of the data presented in this report.

Teenager's needs are being ignored, with those who face abuse, exploitation or neglect only receiving help at crisis point.

We reach teenagers where they are to tackle the struggles they face today, providing complete support that's specific to them, and challenging the government to deliver policies that will continue to protect them. Because a future of hope and happiness belongs to every young person.

Together, we can set a path to a good childhood.



Scan here to download and view The Good Childhood Report 2025 publications.

Email: **researchteam@childrenssociety.org.uk**.

BlueSky: **@tcspolicypractice.bsky.social**

X: **@ChildSocPol**

Tel: **0300 303 7000**

From the Good Childhood Research Programme

Report Author: Delphine Chollet.

Citation: Chollet D. How Has Children's Wellbeing Changed? Reviewing the Evidence from the Good Childhood Research Programme. London: The Children's Society; 2026.

© The Children's Society 2026. The copyright of all material appearing in this publication belongs to The Children's Society. It may not be reproduced, duplicated or copied by any means without our prior written consent.

Charity Registration No. 221124. 2025630/0126.

**The
Children's
Society**