



The  
Children's  
Society

# Whoever has ears, let them hear

Theology on listening to young people  
explain life in all its fullness

October 2016

*Loving God,  
we know every child matters to you.*

*May children for whom family life is hard,  
know your loving presence.*

*May children living in poverty,  
know your abundant provision.*

*May children who are struggling with mental health problems,  
know your healing power.*

*May children with concerns about their appearance,  
know your unconditional love.*

*May children who feel unsafe in their local area,  
know your safe refuge for them.*

*May children who are unhappy at school,  
know your inclusive community.*

*May we all listen to the voices of your children,  
hear their need and respond,*

*so that all may flourish and enjoy a good childhood.*

*Amen*

# Foreword

*by Rt Revd Stephen Conway, Bishop of Ely*

It is with great pleasure that I commend these papers to you. The publishing of The Children's Society's Good Childhood Report 2016 serves as a timely reminder of the need to see and hear children and young people in our communities.

The Church of England Vision for Education, Deeply Christian, Serving the Common Good<sup>1</sup>, published in July 2016, reminds us that the Church of England's 'role as the established Church is for the common good of the whole human community and its environment, whether national, regional or local'. The Church is dedicated to 'education for life together' because we share the conviction 'that we are created and sustained by God for living together in families and communities'. The vision also reminds us that the Church should be 'hospitable to diversity, respect freedom of religion and belief, and encourage others to contribute from the depths of their own traditions and understandings.'

So many of our children and young people feel their voices are unheard, silenced before they have spoken, or ignored in the clamour of a society where power and might shout loudest. If we are to create, sustain and uphold Christian communities in our parishes, schools and families then the centrality of relationships, lived in Christ, has to be championed and enabled.

In John 10.10, Jesus states that he 'came to give life in all its fullness', a mission taken up by the Church 'irrespective of their response, children and young people should see and experience love, welcome, hope, forgiveness and the possibility of new beginnings', and implemented in the work of The Children's Society.

If you have not yet read the Good Childhood Report 2016 then it is worth spending time doing so. Larissa Pople's piece provides an excellent summary of the report, or you can access the full report at [childrenssociety.org.uk/goodchildhood](http://childrenssociety.org.uk/goodchildhood)

As you go on to read these theological reflections you might ponder your own childhood. Was it more Famous Five or Tracy Beaker? Mallory Towers or Grange Hill? These stories share a common theme of reflecting children's reactions to the way they are treated. How does your experience impact on the way you treat children and young people today?

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<sup>1</sup>[www.churchofengland.org/media/2532839/gs\\_2039\\_our\\_vision\\_for\\_education.pdf](http://www.churchofengland.org/media/2532839/gs_2039_our_vision_for_education.pdf)

# We need to listen...

*'...to children's experiences of where they live, and tackle the growing gender gap in happiness' by Larissa Pople*

Our Good Childhood Report is the fifth in our renowned series of annual reviews of young people's well-being. The research is crucial for understanding the quality of life for children in this country and acting to improve their lives.

In this year's report, we combine a measure of subjective well-being with a measure of psychological well-being to assess how many children could be said to be 'flourishing'. Using this approach, we found that 82% of children were 'flourishing', 10% could be said to be 'languishing', and around 8% fall between these two groups.

## Relationship between measures of subjective well-being and psychological well-being

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

It is reassuring to know that most children are faring well, but worrying that on average three children in every classroom feel both unhappy with their lives and that their life lacks meaning and purpose.

Since 2010, the Government has been bringing together data on children and adults' well-being. However, there is no firm commitment to children's well-being over the longer term. With a new Government in place, now is the time to reaffirm this commitment, and ensure it is a priority for the future.

Another key finding to highlight in The Good Childhood Report 2016 is the increasing gender gap that has emerged in recent years for some aspects of well-being.

Over the five-year period between 2009/10 and 2013/14, girls became increasingly unhappy with their life as a whole and with their appearance, while boys' happiness with these things remained unchanged. These new trends should be considered in the context of international findings that were presented in The Good Childhood Report 2015, in which England ranked towards the bottom of the

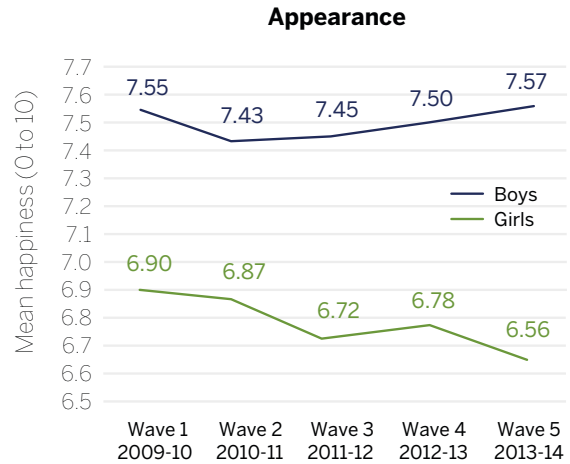
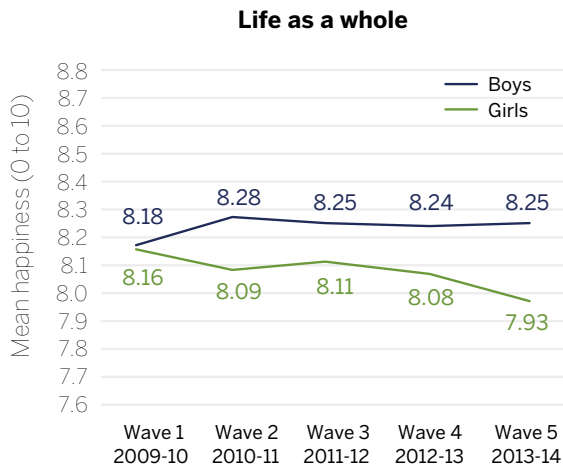
table for happiness with life as a whole and for happiness with their appearance, and had the most pronounced gender differences of all participating countries. We can't ignore this evidence, which suggests things are getting worse for girls.

The Good Childhood Report 2016 also explores how different aspects of well-being and different types of mental health problems relate to each other. As they get older, girls become less happy than boys with their appearance and life as a whole, and more likely to experience emotional health problems such as anxiety and depression. An important new

finding is that emotional problems are associated with happiness with appearance and life as a whole, and these links are strongest for girls.

For boys, there is a different picture. It is younger boys that are more likely than girls to be unhappy with their school work and to have conduct and hyperactivity or inattention problems, and these gender differences disappear from age 12 onwards. These mental health problems are associated with happiness with school work, and the links are strongest for boys.

## Trends in children's subjective well-being by gender, UK, 2009 to 2014



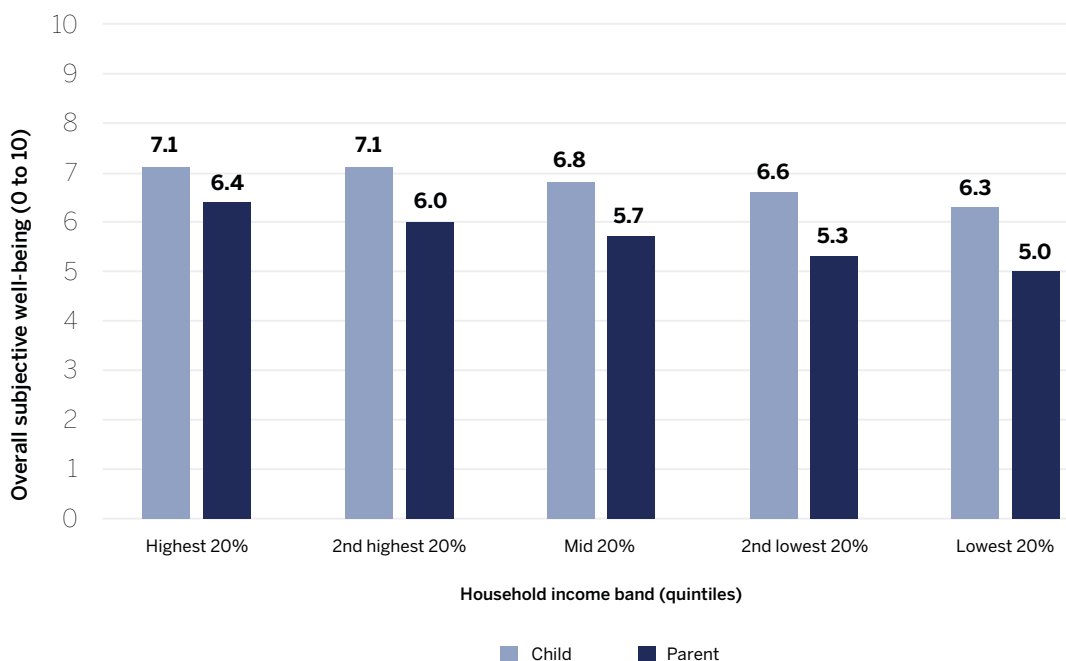
We are calling on the Government to introduce a legally binding entitlement for children and young people to be able to access mental health and well-being support in educational settings in England and Wales. This must include sufficient funding.

In this year's report, we have also examined whether children's feelings about their lives vary in different parts of the country. We looked at regional differences in children's well-being as well as differences on the basis of area-level deprivation, which we measured using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD). Somewhat unexpectedly, we found no solid evidence of differences for either of these, although we did find a link between the IMD and parents' well-being.

At first, the absence of a link between children's well-being and the IMD may seem a little surprising. However, on reflection this fits with a pattern of findings that we have been building up through our research programme over a number of years, whereby factors that are more removed from children have a weaker link to their well-being than indicators that are closer to them.

In contrast, when we asked children for their views and experiences of their local area – eg their feelings about local facilities, local adults and their safety and freedom – there were clear links to well-being even after controlling for key socio-demographic factors. This has important implications for local area assessments of well-being.

## Household and child and adult subjective well-being



## Mean life satisfaction scores for children according to their ratings of their local area



We are calling on local authorities across the UK to develop a process to make sure that children have a voice in decision making about their local areas. This might include:

- a.** Developing a process to allow children and young people to debate the issues affecting their lives and to assist in decision making.
- b.** Bringing people together at a neighbourhood level to improve children's access to, and their perception of safety in, their local environment.
- c.** Producing an annual children and young people's local profile, bringing together the range of data that is available on children's lives in the area.

As you read the rest of this paper, please think about how you could play a part in listening to the concerns of young people in your local area. And don't lose hope. The international findings show us that the difference between genders isn't inevitable, but this year's report highlights how crucial it is that we join together to change the narrative around gender, appearance, local areas, education and well-being.

# Not now, Bernard

*'The need to listen is as pertinent now as it ever was.'* by Jim Davis MBE

One of the pleasures of becoming a grandad is going up into the loft and digging out boxes of toys and books that we stashed away as our children grew up. One of my favourites is a book by David McKee called 'Not Now, Bernard'. It is the tale of a small boy who tries to get the attention of his busy parents who repeat the refrain 'not now, Bernard'.

Bernard eventually gives up and goes into the garden and meets a monster. I won't spoil the story but suffice to say that it is the monster that ends up being tucked up in bed by Bernard's parents, who fail to notice the difference.

Sadly we know that too many young people experience the frustration of not being heard. We know through our research and direct work with young people that too often their concerns are either ignored or not heard by adults who could make a difference, and that this can result in real trauma in their lives. This is particularly true for teenagers who can be perceived as challenging, rather than challenged, and dismissed as just being grumpy teenagers.

## ***How we listen to children***

At The Children's Society we have a unique and valuable way of understanding what is happening to young people, how they feel and how we can better support them. For the last 11 years we have been exploring children's well-being through our groundbreaking research programme.

Our annual Good Childhood Report reveals what we have learned by listening to young people. This accrued understanding of young people's lives is leading us to better appreciate the challenges many of them face.

## ***The importance of well-being***

Well-being is more than being happy with life. It is about how equipped you are to cope with life and how resilient you are in responding to difficulties and trauma. When young people are faced with a traumatic experience or a series of events that threaten their stability and safety, they have to draw on their own well-being and capacity to cope, as well as support from others. Starting out with low well-being does not give them a firm foundation to work from. I have seen and heard this for myself as we are invited by local authorities, schools and churches around the country to explore the well-being of local children. Many young people are doing well and enjoying life, but a significant minority are struggling with their self-worth and well-being. They are growing into their adolescence without the support and attention they need from adults. We are starting to recognise that some young people's well-being and mental health is not what we would hope it would be, making them vulnerable to becoming seriously ill.

## ***Putting knowledge into practice***

Through better understanding, we can provide better services and support. One inspiring example of this is our Pause project in Birmingham, which offers young people a drop-in service where they can talk about their well-being and mental health concerns in a safe environment where they will be listened to and offered support.

'Not now' will never be our response to young people seeking support and a chance to say how they feel.

If you want a good book to get stuck into that will inspire and challenge, then have a read of the full Good Childhood Report. It doesn't have any monsters in the garden, but it will challenge us to stop what we are doing and listen to what young people are trying to tell us.



# Nothing about us without us

*'Why children's voices matter' by Angus Ritchie*

Christians believe God's disclosure is personal. He meets humanity face-to-face. In Jesus of Nazareth, God became flesh, at a particular point of history, and in a particular social group. Too often in theology, we focus entirely on what Jesus and his disciples taught, without noticing this extraordinary fact about who and where they actually were. How the world looks depends where you are standing. Jesus stood with, among – not merely for – the poorest of his age. Where he stood is part of what he reveals.

Jesus' own teaching emphasises the importance of this perspective. In Matthew 18, we read:

*'At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" He called a child, whom he put among them, and said, "Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me."*

This is not just an invitation to value or care for children, but to learn from their perspective and to see the world from their point of view.

Indeed, Jesus went even further than this. He suggests that if we are to speak of God – to do theology, as it were – we must adopt their perspective.

In Matthew 11, he prays:

*'I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent, and revealed them to infants.'*

This is why Christian theology must pay particular attention to the perspective of children and young people, and indeed of all who are on the margins of society. The phrase 'Nothing about us without us' echoes a central theme of the Bible, that God does not merely act on behalf of the poorest and powerless, he speaks and acts through them. And Jesus is clear that this means children are at the very heart of God's Kingdom.

It is also why The Children's Society seeks to place children's own voices at the centre of policy discussions. In its annual Good Childhood Report, The Children's Society focuses on children's own assessments of how their lives are going ('subjective well-being'). As this year's report explains:

*'When we set up our research programme, we felt that children should be involved in the process of determining which aspects of life should be included in assessments of their well-being, as well as the main protagonists in those assessments. This principle applies to adults as well, but children's position in society is different to that of adults because they are not otherwise involved in the democratic process.'*



This began in 2005, when The Children's Society asked 8,000 young people aged 14 and 15 open-ended questions about what constitutes a good life for children. In the following 11 years, 'in their own words and unprompted by us,' many more children have been surveyed, and there has been a particular focus on groups who would otherwise be overlooked.

## **Testimony**

The end of the school year is always a hectic time, especially for primary schools. In Forest Gate, east London, the excitement is reaching fever pitch as a group of 10 and 11 year olds at Antony's Primary School put their final touches to letters addressed to Newham Council's Planning Officer. They are preparing for a housing march to the West Ham football ground on Tuesday 14 July. They are chatty and playful as they summarise their thoughts on paper, but don't let their age or size fool you. These pint-sized citizens can pack a punch when it comes to expressing their opinions.

So far, only adults have voiced their objections to the Boleyn Ground planning application which currently has 0% social housing. Only 51 shared ownership units (6%) of the proposed 838 units will be affordable. This falls way short of the council's own target of 35–50% on developments of this size.

Reading a sample of their hand-written letters, one gets the feeling that the children are passionate about their community and that they feel it is being torn apart by rising house prices. It is evident that the children are also concerned about the impact of rising housing costs on their own education. Several families from their school have already been relocated outside the borough due to the housing benefit cap. Unselfishly, the children worry about disruption to children's education in the school right next to the stadium during construction. In short, they are not happy about what they see as a big injustice when it comes to housing for them and their families and friends in Newham.

Ten year old Heidi's\* letter is punctuated with a sense of indignation over the treatment of three groups of vulnerable people she feels have been badly let down by the situation on the Boleyn development: immigrants, single parents and parents with lots of children. She makes a strong argument for affordable housing and cheekily admonishes the council, saying:

'I hope you have listened to my wise words and consider my statements. Please make hundreds of lives better by making houses affordable for all.'

Eleven year old Sam worries about the ability of families to make ends meet:

'Many in Newham cannot be paying bills and then also looking after children, buying them important things such as school uniform, stationery, books, and many, many more. Therefore, how could they ever be able to afford an expensive house and be able to pay bills for different reasons?'

11 year-old Ella's letter displays a clear and mature understanding of what is at stake:

'Avaricious landlords will predictably purchase those properties and rent them for a ridiculously large price!' She also asks some searching questions: 'Will I be able to live there? Will it be too expensive for my family? Will I have to move out of Newham and be forced to find a whole new life somewhere I've never been to?'

The story has a happy ending. In March 2016 Newham Council secured a deal with the developers to increase the number of affordable housing units to 25% of the overall development, and made an additional investment of £18 million to provide another 10% of affordable homes that can be offered at fair rents. It is an inspiring example of what happens when children are given a voice in the shaping of their future.

**We are grateful to Citizens UK for allowing us to share this story.<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>2</sup> Tom Henderson for CitizenUK July 2015: [www.citizensuk.org/david\\_and\\_goliath\\_newham\\_school\\_children\\_voice\\_concerns\\_over\\_boleyn\\_development](http://www.citizensuk.org/david_and_goliath_newham_school_children_voice_concerns_over_boleyn_development)

\*The names of these children have been changed.



# Solid joys and lasting treasures

*'What are children telling us?' by Angus Ritchie*

Jesus' Sermon on the Mount begins with the Beatitudes and ends with the parable of the wise and foolish builders. Both passages address central questions for every human being:

- What are human beings made for?
- Where do we find true satisfaction?
- What are the foundations on which we build our lives – as individuals, families and communities?

Although we live in challenging economic times, Britons live in one of the most prosperous countries in the world – at a time when technology has enabled us to enjoy opportunities unimaginable only a few decades ago.

How good are we at turning this level of external plenty into genuine well-being?

In Matthew's Gospel, the Greek word *makarios* is translated as 'blessed' or 'happy' in each of the Beatitudes. The word is applied to the provision of God, and the statement tells us what brings us ultimate satisfaction – because we only find true happiness when we are living the kind of life God created us to live. That is the source of true blessedness. It has both a subjective and objective quality: it is not just a feeling but it does have an emotional aspect. As human beings we spend a great deal of our lives pursuing things that will not give us ultimate satisfaction. If we seek satisfaction from money alone, we will never be truly satisfied – there will always be the belief that real happiness is round the corner if only we have a little more. The same is true of the other 'idols' we construct – external success, praise and honour. Although each of these things has its place, those who invest in them too heavily seem to be perpetually dissatisfied.

The message of the Bible is that human beings were created for relationship. The purpose of the material creation is to enable us to embody generosity, faithfulness and love. The world around us is sacramental: by loving our neighbour in practical ways, we share the love of the God we cannot see. In his book *Divine Economy: theology and the market*<sup>3</sup>, Stephen Long gives us a set of questions Christians should ask of any economic relationships:

'Do our exchanges point us to our true source?...All Christian[s]... cannot be faithful if they fail to ask and answer this question: How do our daily exchanges promote that charity which is a participation in the life of God – that mutual love which both mirrors and shares the life of the Trinity?'

As Christians, the way we interact with others in the workplace and the marketplace must be forming us more and more into human beings who can love. Our daily exchanges – in the school and in the home, in the call centre and in the boardroom – shape who we are, for good or for ill.

Economic systems which encourage us to objectify and instrumentalise each other are found wanting by this Christian standard – as are systems which force parents to choose between having the time or the money to care for their children.

<sup>3</sup> Long, S. *Divine Economy: theology and the market*. 2000. Routledge, Abingdon.

Former Archbishop Rowan Williams<sup>4</sup> has warned that our current attitudes to wealth are shaping children in damaging ways. We are preoccupied by increasing material income, and forgetful of the ultimate goods in life:

‘In a setting where relentless productivity is overvalued, we forget what is needed to produce functioning human beings. We can become abusers of our children by default when we ignore the choices we can make to secure their stability, their sense of being seen and being listened to; do you remember that wonderful The Children's Society poster a few years ago showing the face of a child obviously in distress, with the slogan “What I need is a good listening to?” The result, when we ignore this, seems to be to produce people who themselves cannot properly look or listen. And that's not a matter of pop psychology, but a serious insight from those who have studied neurological development in human beings. To speak of conversation, social interaction – intelligent, understood social interaction as part of the educational process – is simply to recognise not only that citizens are not born but made, but in one important sense, persons are not born but made.’

What is most striking about the information in successive Good Childhood Reports is that children themselves echo Williams' message. What affects their subjective well-being most of all is the quality of their relationships. Economic factors are less directly significant than they are for adults, but they have an impact – precisely through the way they affect relationships:

- Relative equality matters – as children's well-being is negatively affected both by having significantly less, and by having significantly more than their peer group.
- Children value healthy relationships in the home – which may be put under pressure when parents or carers are holding down several insecure, part-time jobs on low wages.
- Girls are increasingly anxious and unhappy about their appearance – a change which may well be linked to their depiction in advertising and on social media.
- There is an urgent need for increased investment in mental health support, especially for adolescent girls. There is an association between emotional problems and unhappiness about appearance, and about life as a whole.

Interestingly, children's perceptions of their local area, including on the quality of local facilities, how safe they feel, how much freedom they perceive they have and their experiences of local problems, are clearly linked to their well-being. The top two local problems with the strongest links to well-being were 'noisy neighbours' and 'people drinking or taking drugs'. This creates important opportunities for local, practical responses – for these issues are much more open to the kind of community action (of the kind described in the testimony from Antony's Primary School) than some of the larger issues of economic injustice.

## Testimony

School is important for children academically but also socially. It is within the school environment that children meet with a wider and more diverse group of their peers than they would in their home and neighbourhoods. But children's accounts of their school lives indicate that they experience considerable disadvantage within their schools, with many reporting feeling bullied, isolated and left out of activities and opportunities at school. Their fears about being seen as different and being left out are made worse by the knowledge that other children are doing more and having more, creating insecurity and uncertainty for some children.

'They go into town and go swimming and that, and they play football and they go to other places and I can't go...because some of them cost money and that.' **Martin**

Children like Martin tend to exclude themselves from school activities. Disillusioned with the process, they do not take home the letters which ask for money for school trips and other activities because they know their parents would not be able to afford them. Other factors within schools also act to compound the economic and social disadvantages that children experience. Economic barriers, such as fees for school trips and the costs of academic materials, are made worse by institutional processes: demanding examination criteria, an insistence on school uniforms, deadlines for payments towards extracurricular school trips and activities that give little leeway for parents who cannot pay on time. There are also meetings after school with no transport home, and stigmatising bureaucratic processes in the qualification and delivery of welfare support such as free school meals. So what low-income children identify – when we listen to them – are not the dangers of being excluded from school but rather the dangers of being excluded within school.

In talking about their lives at home and in their communities, children often highlight their inner worries and their fears of social difference and stigma. Their experiences of poverty affect their self-esteem, confidence and personal security. These are difficult areas for children to reflect on, as difficulties with friendships and worries about social acceptance can be particularly hard for children to articulate. However, children are keenly aware of the impact of poverty on their lives and on the lives of their parents.

'I worry about my mum and if she's like unhappy and stuff like that. Sometimes I worry about if we haven't got enough money, I worry about that.' **Carrie**

Children's fears of social detachment and social difference are very real, and they are often acutely sensitive to the dangers of being excluded from the activities of their friends and social groups. They are also uncertain and fearful about their futures, and these are difficult burdens to carry in childhood.

'I worry about what life will be like when I'm older because I'm kind of scared of growing older, but if you know what is in front of you then it's a bit better, but I don't know.' **Kim**

Children are clearly struggling to protect their parents from the realities of the social and emotional costs of childhood poverty on their lives. This can take many forms: self-denial of needs and wants, moderation of demands and self-exclusion from social activities, school trips and activities. In some cases parents may be aware of their children's strategies and reluctantly accept them in the face of severely constrained alternatives. In others, children are regulating their needs more covertly.

**This testimony first appeared in 'Poverty and the experience of children' by Professor Tess Ridge in *The Heart of the Kingdom: Christian theology and children who live in poverty*.<sup>5</sup>**

<sup>5</sup> Professor Tess Ridge, <http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-you-can-do/your-church/study/theology-and-poverty>





# From the inside out in an upside down world

*by Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester*

The recent Good Childhood Report 2016 produced by The Children's Society has highlighted that 1 in 7 girls aged 10 to 15 are unhappy with their lives, and that more than one third of girls are unhappy with their appearance. This was identified as an underlying cause of low self-esteem and poor mental health. One girl summed up a key preoccupation of her generation by saying, 'we have to be perfect, like Barbie'.

It is questionable whether any human being actually looks like Barbie, but the implication is that perfection is defined not by internal character but instead by external, physical appearance.

Psalms 139.14 presents us with the beautiful truth that each individual is unique and 'wonderfully made'. The creation narrative in Genesis 1 tells of human beings made in the 'image' of God (v26). Image is not about external appearance. It is about having the potential to reflect God's character.

God is love, and relationship is central to our Trinitarian God. It is from relationship and love that God's attributes, such as justice, mercy, goodness, creativity and wisdom, emerge.

Sadly, in our brokenness we have marred God's image in us and failed to love God, our neighbour and ourselves (Matthew 22.37-39). Yet just as our imperfection begins deep within us, so does our redemption and our flourishing. Dying and rising with Christ begins with our hearts and not our external appearance.

All of this is at odds with the disturbing fact that for many girls their sense of self-worth is located in the way they view their appearance.

There is a powerful story in the Old Testament in which the prophet Samuel is sent to Bethlehem to identify and anoint a new king. Samuel visits Jesse and his sons and looks at their appearance in order to identify the right man.

'But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him; for the Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.'"

1 Samuel 16.7

This message is very different from the one piggybacking the images and stories children are bombarded with. Models strut catwalks wearing clothes labelled size zero. Fashion is equated with beauty and the message is therefore that to be beautiful you have to look a certain way.

Magazines and social media bombard girls with messages about hair, makeup and clothes. In themselves these things are not inherently evil, but the implicit message is all too often that certain products bring happiness. Words like 'perfect' and 'flawless' frequently appear in messages about makeup; and hashtags such as #wokeuplikethis #beautifulgirl and #fotd (face of the day) are all about appearance.

Girls are affirmed or discouraged by how many 'likes' their photos receive, whilst female celebrities are often presented as successful, desirable and worthy of intimate relationship because of their outward appearance.

Alongside all of this, we also live in a society where so many children suffer from obesity. Whilst we know obesity leads to greater health risks, the way we talk about obesity is more often focused on external appearance rather than health and flourishing. When children are chastised for eating too much, they are usually warned that 'it will make you fat'. The message becomes focused on body shape when the real issue is health. The reason for not eating the second doughnut is not because it will make you fat and therefore ugly, but because it is not positively contributing to your health.





Our messages about eating and exercise need to focus much more on well-being and loving one's self rather than one's appearance.

Every child, made in God's image, naturally wants to be loved and to give love. It is imperative that none of us collude with any message that says perfect love is bound up with outward appearance.

Distressingly, children come face to face with messages about outward appearance from a young age.

Many traditional children's stories are full of princesses who are sought by princes, and who are deserving of love. Princesses' goodness seems to be reflected in their physical appearance. Despite the blockbuster children's movie 'Frozen' challenging many of the traditional 'princess' stereotypes through the great strength of character displayed by Anna and Elsa, their positive attributes were by no means decoupled from their external appearance. These acclaimed princesses still have waspish waists and long flowing hair. Girls' desire to be like Anna and Elsa has resulted in extraordinary sales of lookalike costumes and replica dolls. Once again, the focus is on the external.

As an ever-clearer body of evidence points to girls' self-esteem being bound up with their physical appearance, there is undoubtedly a need to speak out strongly against this message – not least when it appears in children's stories.

Yet we also live in a society with a strong blame culture. To break this we need to recognise our own culpability and social responsibility, whilst recognising that the only thing we have ultimate power to change is ourselves. Acknowledgement of this painful truth gives rise to the question of how every one of us can play a part in changing the statistics revealed in The Good Childhood Report 2016.

We know that listening to young people is important. Being serious about listening is about providing opportunities for young people to say what is important to them, what they are thinking and feeling, and how they see themselves in the world around them. Yet, if we are going to pay attention and listen, then we also need to pay attention to what we say. What messages are we giving in the words we say to children and young people? So often we unwittingly collude with an over-emphasis

on appearance.

External appearance is often part of those introductory sentences in social encounters between adults and girls. How often have you heard or used sentences such as the following: 'You look great', 'That's a gorgeous dress', 'Who did your hair for you? It looks lovely'.

The intention is usually one of wanting to affirm and value the child. Yet the value affirmed is their external appearance. There is a lack of validation of internal character. It is interesting that with boys, there is often a greater emphasis on internal attributes: 'You're strong', 'That's brave', 'You're cheeky'.

The challenge for each of us is to ensure our language and our words validate every child as a whole person. How are we speaking to their inner being? Their character? This is about our encouragement and challenge of children, focusing on the heart of who they are so that they can continue to grow and flourish in becoming who God calls them to be. Such a journey does not begin with external appearance.

Of course, this is not about denying the body. We are created as bodily beings and the way we appear says something about us. And that's the key. Our bodies and appearance are 'something about us' rather than our identity. We mustn't perpetuate any idea that goodness and perfection are associated with a particular sort of appearance.

At this point it is worth underlining that none of this is about promoting a message that appearance doesn't matter, or worst still, that any attention to appearance is somehow ungodly. Such messages can also be very damaging. Sadly it is not uncommon in some faith contexts for girls to be chastised for paying attention to clothes, jewellery or make up. This is wrongly labelled as 'vanity' because vanity is not about external appearance, but rather is a quality of the heart and motivated by pride.

In our intent to increase girls' happiness and self-esteem there should be no desire to discourage them from enjoying expressing who they are. Clothes, jewellery, nails and hair can surely be celebrated when they are expressing something about the individual's delight in their identity; as they go on discovering what it means to live life to the full in relationship with others and with God.

Our interaction with young people needs to be intentional about nurturing and validating their identity at the core of their being. God's love for us is such that God desires to fashion our hearts (Psalm 33.15). The shape of who we are becoming begins within us. Yet so much of our society's nuanced messaging to girls and young women has created an environment where too great an emphasis on outer appearance is hampering their formation and damaging their inner sense of well-being.

Perhaps the message for all of us is that in a society where so many people's lives are continually being turned upside down, we need to ensure that things are ordered inside out.

# Discussion material

**Read the reflection and testimony from the chapter 'Nothing about us without us – Why children's voices matter'. Then discuss the following questions:**

1. When do you come across children, at work, home or at church? How do you seek to listen to children?
2. What input do they have in this process?
3. What groups of children are most likely to be overlooked? How might they be better included?
4. More generally, how might children be enabled – in their own words and unprompted by adults – to say what matters to them, how they are feeling, and what (for them) would count as positive change in their own lives and in their wider context?

**Read the reflection and testimony from the chapter 'Solid joy and lasting treasures – What are children telling us?' Then discuss the following questions:**

1. Consider the way you, your family, church or workplace spend its money. What does that say about the things you really value?
2. Do the voices of children – as expressed in this research – challenge those priorities in any way?
3. Are there other ways in which this reflection and testimony could inspire you to act with and for the children in your neighbourhood?

**Read 'From the inside out in an upside down world.' Then discuss the following questions:**

1. Can you remember any particularly powerful compliments that you were given as a child?
2. Think about the words you use in encounters with children and young people. How might you do more to focus on the positive attributes and character of a child?
3. How can we encourage children and young people to affirm what they value in each other such as kindness, care, friendship etc?

# Biographies

*Stephen Conway is Bishop of Ely and was previously Archdeacon of Durham. He chaired the board of a mental health charity for some years, is a keen walker and enjoys watching rugby and cricket, as well as seeing the connection between faith and film.*

*Larissa Pople is a Senior Researcher leading on The Children's Society's well-being research programme, which is well known for its annual Good Childhood Reports and local area explorations of well-being.*

*Jim Davis has worked for The Children's Society for 29 years in community work, youth work and social work. His areas of expertise include The Good Childhood Inquiry, children in rural communities, and travellers and nomads. For many years Jim has listened to and championed the voices of this country's most vulnerable children.*

*Angus Ritchie is the Executive Director of the Centre for Theology and Community (theology-centre.org). He has served in east London parishes since 1998, playing a leading role in community organising campaigns for the Living Wage and against exploitative lending. He is an Honorary Canon of Worcester Cathedral.*

*Rachel Treweek is the Bishop of Gloucester and the first female diocesan bishop in the Church of England. She was previously the Archdeacon of Hackney. Before that, Rachel worked as a paediatric speech and language therapist and served on the Child Development team at the Royal Free Hospital.*

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

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

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

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

We are proud of our close partnership with the Church, who play a vital role in our work. We want to work with every church in the country so that, together, we can change the lives of many, many more children.

**The  
Children's  
Society**

For more information please contact:

Mo Baldwin,  
Head of Church Partnerships,  
Edward Rudolf House,  
Margery Street,  
London WC1X 0JL  
e: [church@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:church@childrenssociety.org.uk)  
t: 020 7841 4400

**[childrenssociety.org.uk](http://childrenssociety.org.uk)**

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