The Good Childhood Report 2020

Summary
‘Well-being’ is used to refer to a range of things in everyday life, such as being happy, not being ill, feeling fulfilled and being financially secure.

To quote the What Works Centre for Well-being definition, which is based on the work of ONS:

‘Well-being, put simply, is about ‘how we are doing’ as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable this is for the future.’

There is debate about what constitutes individuals’ well-being, and, as a result, there are a range of different definitions. Broadly speaking, two different types of measures are used:

‘Objective’ measures, which use social indicators on people’s lives, such as physical health, education and material resources.

‘Subjective’ measures, which focus on people’s own views about how their life is going.

The Good Childhood Reports focus primarily on children’s own views of their lives – or the subjective well-being of children.
What is well-being?

Subjective well-being

Different aspects of self-reported well-being are defined as:

- Affective well-being (emotional well-being): This includes positive and negative emotions or how happy people feel.
- Cognitive well-being: The quality of people’s lives overall or certain aspects of their lives, including measures of life satisfaction.
- Eudaimonic or Psychological well-being: This looks at whether people are functioning well, and their personal development and growth. This relates to the meaning and purpose people feel in their lives.

Research has shown that children’s life satisfaction is similar on different days of the week, although their happiness varies, and is generally higher at the weekend. As The Good Childhood Report is concerned with understanding changes in children’s well-being over the longer term, it has primarily focused on more stable measures of life satisfaction. Children’s differing responses to questions about their happiness, life satisfaction and psychological well-being (see, for example, Figure 4), highlight the benefits of measuring different aspects of their well-being.

![Diagram of well-being categories](image-url)
The current state of children’s well-being

In the full Good Childhood Report, we report on a number of different measures of children’s subjective well-being. These include the trends for six areas of life from the Understanding Society survey, and three measures reported by the ONS and our own Good Childhood Index from The Children’s Society’s annual household survey.

This year’s annual household panel survey was conducted between April and June 2020 with just over 2,000 young people aged 10 to 17 across the UK, and their parent or carer. It provides the most up-to-date picture of children’s well-being.

The Children’s Society’s annual household panel survey was conducted during the Government-imposed lockdown for Coronavirus. While this, together with changes to survey methodology, is likely to have affected the findings, it was important to capture how children were feeling at such an important time in their childhood.

The Good Childhood Index

In 2020, as in previous years, children are most happy on average with their relationships with their family. However, in contrast with previous years where the largest proportion were unhappy with the school that they go to, in 2020 a higher proportion of children were unhappy with the choice they have in life.

As children were in lockdown as part of measures to manage the Coronavirus pandemic, the higher proportion unhappy with choice may therefore be related to the restrictions on social contact and other aspects of life that were in place at this time.

Figure 2: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family</th>
<th>Average score</th>
<th>% with low scores</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time use</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Things</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>11.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>6.7</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>11.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appearance</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>19.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choice</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>12.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Children’s Society’s household survey, Wave 16 April-June 2020, 10 to 17 year olds, United Kingdom. Weighted data

*The Children’s Society’s annual household panel survey was conducted during the Government-imposed lockdown for Coronavirus. While this, together with changes to survey methodology, is likely to have affected the findings, it was important to capture how children were feeling at such an important time in their childhood.
In our 2020 survey, 18% of children scored below the midpoint on a multi-item measure of life satisfaction and, for the purposes of this report, are deemed to have low well-being.

As noted in our recent report Life on Hold, this reflects a larger proportion scoring below the midpoint than in the last five household surveys, when the proportion ranged between 10% and 13%.

Office for National Statistics well-being measures

We regularly ask children about three measures of overall well-being that are a key source for the ONS Children’s Well-being Measures compendium for children aged 10 to 15.

While the proportions aged 10 to 17 scoring below the midpoint are slightly higher in 2020 than in recent years, they are more in line with what might be expected based on natural fluctuations.

Figure 3: Latest figures for children’s overall life satisfaction

Figure 4: Latest ONS measures of overall well-being
Since 2013, we have presented trends in children’s well-being over time based on the most up-to-date findings from Understanding Society. The latest available data for this survey are for 2017-18, and reflect children’s (aged 10 to 15) well-being before the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic.

A 7 point scale is employed in Understanding Society (where 1 is ‘completely happy’ and 7 ‘not at all happy’). This scale is reversed and converted to an 11-point scale (0 to 10) for our Good Childhood Reports to ease interpretation and comparisons with the other measures presented. Data for all waves, except Wave 1, have been weighted using the BHPS and UKHLS cross-sectional youth weight.

Figure 5: Trends in children’s happiness with Life as a whole, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18

- **Trend – Average scores**: The average score for happiness with life as a whole was significantly lower in 2017-18 than when the survey began.
- **Trend - Low well-being**: The proportion of children unhappy with their life as a whole was also significantly higher in 2017-18 (5.9% compared to 3.8% in 2009-10).
- **Trend - Gender**: There was no significant difference between the mean score for boys and the mean score for girls in 2017-18.

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* A 7 point scale is employed in Understanding Society (where 1 is ‘completely happy’ and 7 ‘not at all happy’). This scale is reversed and converted to an 11-point scale (0 to 10) for our Good Childhood Reports to ease interpretation and comparisons with the other measures presented. Data for all waves, except Wave 1, have been weighted using the BHPS and UKHLS cross-sectional youth weight.
Time trends in children’s well-being

**Trend – Average scores**

The average score for happiness with appearance was significantly lower in 2017-18 than when the survey began.

**Trend – Low well-being**

The proportion of children unhappy with their appearance was significantly higher in 2017-18 (13.9% compared to 11.2% in 2009-10).

However, the changes in both the mean score and proportion of children unhappy with their appearance relate only to the latest wave, and need to be monitored in future to see if they are a one-off occurrence/ start of a longer-term trend.

**Trend – Gender**

The mean score for boys has been significantly higher than for girls since the survey began, although the gender gap has reduced in more recent waves.

**Figure 6: Trends in children’s happiness with Appearance, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**

**Figure 7: Trends in children’s happiness with School, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**

**Trend – Average scores**

The average score for happiness with school was significantly lower in 2017-18 than when the survey began (with a similar mean score to that reported last year).

**Trend – Low well-being**

The proportion of children unhappy with their school was also significantly higher in 2017-18 (11.1% compared to 8.9% in 2009-10).

**Trend – Gender**

There was no significant difference between girls and boys mean scores for happiness with school in 2017-18.
Time trends in children’s well-being

**Trend – Average scores**
There is no significant difference between children’s average scores for happiness with schoolwork in 2017-18 compared with 2009-10.

**Trend - Low well-being**
The proportion of children unhappy with their schoolwork in 2017-18 is comparable to levels in 2009-10 (8.8% compared to 8.0% in 2009-10).

**Trend - Gender**
Girls had significantly higher mean scores than boys for happiness with their schoolwork across all survey waves.

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**Figure 8: Trends in children’s happiness with Schoolwork, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**

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**Trend – Average scores**
There is no significant difference between children’s average scores for happiness with family in 2017-18 compared with 2009-10.

**Trend - Low well-being**
The proportion of children unhappy with their family was the lowest of all domains at 2% in 2017-18.

**Trend - Gender**
There is also no significant difference between the mean scores for boys and girls in 2017-18.

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**Figure 9: Trends in children’s happiness with Family, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**
Trend – Average scores

The average score for happiness with friends was significantly lower in 2017-18 than when the survey began.

Further trends for this domain are explored later in the report.
The data from Understanding Society shows that there has been a decline in happiness with life as a whole among children (aged 10 to 15) in the UK. However, national data does not tell us whether this pattern is repeated for children elsewhere or if it is a pattern unique to this country. It can be useful therefore to compare subjective well-being in different countries – indeed, it is now common to do this for adults, such as in the World Happiness Report. There are a number of reasons that children’s well-being may differ between countries, which need to be borne in mind when interpreting findings in this section of the report.

As well as potential differences in the way that people in different nations respond to subjective questions, economic and cultural variations between countries may also be influential.

This year, we looked at some of the latest international comparative statistics, in order to try to put the subjective well-being of children in the UK into a broader context and help us to understand what differences exist between countries. We analysed data, collected in 2018, from the seventh wave of The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which is mainly focused on children’s academic achievement, but increasingly also asks about their subjective experiences of life as a whole.

PISA 2018 includes questions about children’s (aged 15 years) life satisfaction, happiness, sadness and sense of purpose in life. It thus covers all three main components of subjective well-being and a measure of psychological well-being.

- The life satisfaction measure used response options from 0 (worst possible life) to 10 (best possible life).
- The measures of happiness and sadness used a four-point frequency scale about how children normally feel from ‘Never’ to ‘Always’.
- The psychological well-being question posed the statement ‘My life has clear meaning or purpose’ with four response options from ‘Strongly disagree’ to ‘Strongly agree’.

The percentages of children with positive scores on each of these four measures (see classification used to define ‘positive’ scores overleaf) and the comparable international ranks are shown in Table 1.
Table 1: International comparison of well-being measures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High Life (score of above 5 out of 10)</th>
<th>High Happiness ('sometimes' or 'always')</th>
<th>Low Sadness ('rarely' or 'never')</th>
<th>Positive sense of purpose ('agree' or 'strongly agree')</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Per cent</td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Per cent</td>
<td>Rank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania 85%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland 84%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Croatia 82%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Switzerland 82%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain 82%</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lithuania 81%</td>
<td>6</td>
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<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland 81%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France 80%</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal 78%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia 78%</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia 78%</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>21</td>
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<tr>
<td>Austria 77%</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Slovakia 77%</td>
<td>13</td>
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<td>20</td>
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<td>Hungary 76%</td>
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<td>Italy 75%</td>
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<td>Sweden 75%</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Greece 75%</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Luxembourg 74%</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>13</td>
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<tr>
<td>Czechia 73%</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>23</td>
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<td>Slovenia 72%</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ireland 72%</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>96%</td>
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<td>Poland 72%</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta 69%</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom 64%</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data.

We calculated the percentage of children in each country who had low well-being and might be defined as ‘struggling’ across the four measures. It showed that the UK had the fifth highest proportion of children (around 5%) struggling on all four measures; the highest proportion struggling on at least three; and the lowest proportion (27%) not having a low score for any of the four measures.

Figure 11: Number of measures for which children had low well-being

Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data.
The UK also had the largest drop in mean life satisfaction between 2015 and 2018 of the 21 comparable countries with data at both time points.

The above analysis indicates that at 15 years old, children in the UK have relatively low subjective well-being compared to the other European countries included in this comparison. The obvious question is why?

We considered three different hypotheses that might help to explain these patterns:

1. Variations in fear of failure.
2. Variations in child poverty.

Analysis showed that the UK had the largest increase in relative child poverty (around 4 percentage points) between 2015 and 2018, while on average across the 20 countries compared child poverty reduced by around 2 percentage points.

Our analysis showed strong evidence of a connection across countries between fear of failure and life satisfaction; some evidence of a link over time between changes in child poverty within countries and changes in life satisfaction (although more work is needed to verify this and understand the mechanisms through which it might happen); and no firm evidence of a connection across countries between levels of digital technology use and children’s life satisfaction.

In the full Good Childhood Report 2020, we also examine other international data on children’s well-being, including ‘Children’s World’s’ which compares satisfaction with different aspects of life for 10 year olds across a wide range of other European countries.
Happiness with Friends – Why is it in decline?

This year, children’s mean happiness with friends has again decreased, continuing a trend that we have reported in every Good Childhood Report since 2015. This downward trend is concerning, as friendships are an integral part of child development during adolescence.

To understand this trend in more detail we explored:

- The ‘happiness with friends’ measure over time, to look at how children’s responses have changed and if/how this differs by demographic characteristics.
- Factors related to friendship and peer relationships, including the number of close friends children have, experiences of bullying at school, and online technology.
- Young people’s own descriptions of the difficulties they face in their relationships, and the qualities they say make a good friend.

Changes in children’s ‘happiness with friends’ over time

As noted above, there has been a significant decrease in children’s mean score for happiness with friends since the Understanding Society survey began, from 8.99 in 2009-10 to 8.53 in 2017-18. Mean scores for this domain were significantly lower in 2017-18 than in 2009-10 for both boys and girls and for all ages, except for those aged 10 years.
Happiness with Friends - Why is it in decline?

Children with low or neutral scores for happiness with friends

In order to understand changes in the mean score for happiness with friends, it is important to look at the measure children are presented with, and how their responses to this question have changed over time. In Understanding Society, children are asked to rate happiness with ‘your friends’ on a scale from completely happy to not at all happy, which includes a neutral midpoint that indicates being neither happy nor unhappy.
Chapter 3: Comparing children’s well-being in the UK with other European countries

Factors related to children’s happiness with friends

Our analysis indicates that something has changed with how children feel about their friendships. As with the international comparisons, we were interested to explore why this may be.

We considered three different hypotheses that might help to explain these patterns:

1. Variations in number of close friends.
2. Experiences of bullying at school.
3. Variations in use of social media.

Analysis showed that while, in 2017-18, happiness with friends varied to some extent depending on the number of close friends children had, their level of social media use and experiencing bullying at school, none of these factors seemed to explain changes in children’s happiness with friends over time. More analysis, considering a range of different factors in combination, is needed to further understand the decline in children’s happiness with their friends.

What do children say about their friendships?

To better understand children’s views, we consulted with over 150 young people (aged 8 to 19 from schools, youth groups and The Children’s Society’s services in England) to find out their thoughts and feelings about the positive and negative aspects of friendship. The material was reviewed and organised into a single thematic framework. Key findings are presented in the following section.

Patterns by demographic characteristics

Gender: There were significant increases in the proportions of girls unhappy, and neither happy nor unhappy, with their friends in 2017-18 (compared to 2009-10).

Age: There were significant differences in the proportions of children scoring low and/or at the mid-point at ages 12 to 15 in 2017-18 (compared to 2009-10).
What do children think a 4 out of 10 for happiness with friends looks like?

In order to understand key factors to explain why children might be unhappy with their friends we asked young people to tell us in their own words why they thought a peer might score themselves as a 4 out of 10 when answering the question about happiness with friends.

The comments we received emphasised the impact of ‘falling out with friends’, with arguments/ fights being given as key reasons why someone may rate their friendships as a four. Children also identified the toxic nature of these relationships, and a fear of being left out.

‘Fighting, arguing – not getting along with each other, not comfortable with each other. Into something the other person does NOT agree with or like or is not interested in.’

‘They could be being bullied or don’t feel as though they are welcome among their friends. They could also get left out of activities the friends do together but can’t leave the group because they are too scared to be alone.’

‘They might be losing friends, or they might be very lonely during quarantine or just in general. It also could be that they have a toxic relationship that might be impacting their friendship group or their self-esteem negatively.’

Fake friends and lack of trust in others were also features that children reported as possible causes of unhappiness with friends.

What do children think a 7 out of 10 for happiness with friends looks like?

In order to understand key factors to explain why children might be happy with their friends, we asked young people to tell us in their own words why they thought a peer might score themselves as a 7 out of 10 when answering the question about happiness with friends.

The responses we received highlight the complexities children face. Most young people felt seven represented an acceptable score, although it did not reflect a unanimously positive view of friendships. For some, this score implied that there had likely been conflict in the friendships, which were now recovering.

‘They might be having a complicated relationship with only some of their friends, but my guess is that they still have others to rely on, and they are mostly happy.’

‘Content with their friendships. Possibly just happy to be friends with the people but may not be super close that they feel as though they can tell anything to them.’

‘They may feel like they can’t trust their friends, or be serious with them. Having fun, laughing, joking are all great parts of having friends but they’re not nearly as important as having someone you can trust or knowing someone will be there for you no matter what.’

‘It could be a seven because some of your friends can’t play with you. Also because you fell out and your friendship is a little weaker, if you say sorry it can rise back to a 10.’

Other children felt that someone might give a score of seven when at the start of a new friendship, unsure of their place in the group or how they are perceived by others, or that it may reflect a lack of depth or intimacy across friendships.

‘If they choose a seven they are probably getting to know their friends more as time passes by. They might have recently made new friends and now they are happy with the change.’
Most of the data drawn upon in this report reflects the well-being of UK children before the current Coronavirus pandemic. The continued reductions in children’s happiness with life as a whole and friends, and a sustained dip in happiness with school, suggest that even before we went into ‘lockdown’ there were already a number of key areas that required focus to improve children’s lives.

While the long-term impact of the pandemic will not be known for some years, our Life on Hold report earlier this summer explored some of the immediate challenges that lockdown posed to children’s well-being. Data from our annual household survey (also presented in this Good Childhood Report) highlights a potential increase in the proportion of young people with low life satisfaction, and provided important insight into how the pandemic may have affected children’s happiness with friends, and the amount of choice they have in life.

In future years, it is crucial that we work to understand how the effects of the pandemic interplay with the longer-term trends set out in this report. And as policymakers respond to the pandemic they must not lose sight of the changes that had already occurred in children’s well-being.

International data at age 15 shows children in the UK fairing less well than their European counterparts. Effort is needed to further understand why children in the UK feel this way, and to learn lessons from other jurisdictions where children are more satisfied with their lives. The potential links identified with poverty levels and fear of failure require more exploration – although it is notable that they relate to areas where there have been changes in UK policy (e.g. rising child poverty as a result of austerity measures and changes to schooling – including the new curriculum, exam changes, and the development of academies), over the last 10 years.

While this report shows emerging patterns by demographic characteristics and other factors in children’s happiness with friends, more needs to be done to understand what is leading children to be less happy, given what we know about the importance of children’s relationships and the impact that the pandemic has had on our connection with others.
Policy recommendations

Data from Understanding Society suggests that for much of the past decade, children aged 10 to 15 have become steadily less happy with their lives as a whole based on mean scores. The PISA data we present this year shows that at age 15 children in the UK are less happy with their lives across a range of well-being measures when compared to other European countries. Furthermore our recent Life on Hold report makes tentative conclusions that the coronavirus pandemic has, at least temporarily, swelled the proportion of young people with low life satisfaction in this country. Taken together, these findings make it clear that children might support them in making decisions about improving community well-being.

Any strategy to turn these unwelcome trends around requires data. We must understand what is going on. In this country, we are particularly hampered by the poor quality of data available about children’s lives generally, and their well-being specifically.

Comprehensive data about our children’s well-being is not available in this country. The Government already understands the value of well-being data. The Office for National Statistics’ adult well-being measurement programme provides a wealth of information to support policymakers as they make decisions.6 As a result, not only have the positive and negative drivers of well-being been identified, but so have the common factors associated with interventions that work to improve well-being.7 Furthermore, data can be disaggregated to a local authority level to support local areas in making their own decisions about improving community well-being.

Comprehensively measuring children’s well-being would have similar benefits at both a local and national level. Data would provide an evidence base to demonstrate the efficacy of different interventions across a wide range of aspects of life including health, education, and social care. It would allow for the identification of new trends and pressures on well-being and provide a mechanism to target support to the most in need. Finally, it would allow us to track our progress to understand if we really are improving our children’s well-being.

In Appendices C and D of the Good Childhood Report 2020 we provide headline well-being data for local authorities in England based on the two best available sources – the 2014 ‘What about Youth Survey’ and the 2018 ‘Active Lives’ Survey from Sport England. We encourage local decision makers to consult these statistics and to consider the ways in which fuller well-being data about children might support them in making decisions about services and support for children and young people in their area.

There are many ways that such measurement could be achieved, but we argue that support is required from central government in order to reduce costs and improve data quality and comparability nationwide. We favour regular standardised assessment in schools for all children and young people aged 8 to 18. It is already standard practice in many English schools to conduct some sort of regular survey work to understand the lives of pupils, but this is carried out on an ad hoc basis, meaning data is not easily compared, generally not well-used, and often of very poor quality. Measuring well-being in schools is both beneficial in maximising coverage and in ensuring that there is a safe place for the survey to be completed.

However, collecting data is only the first step in turning the tide in improving children’s well-being. This data and insight needs to be used to build a long-term strategy for well-being. Our own research highlights key areas of children’s lives that a strategy of this kind should focus on, with metrics around happiness with school and friends being two of the most pressing concerns.

Well-being at the heart of education

Over recent years, the Government have been highly active in improving mental health and well-being support in schools through its introduction of designated senior mental health leads, the new RHSE curriculum, whole school approaches to well-being, and the pilots of the new school-based Mental Health Support Teams.8 These are all positive steps, but if we are to truly address and support children’s well-being we need to go further. Children and young people often tell us how bullying, disciplinary measures, exam stress, and little choice over the subjects they study, result in school not being an enjoyable place to be. Indeed, in recent years, children’s happiness with school has significantly declined, and this year’s Good Childhood Report highlights the relatively high levels of ‘fear of failure’ among 15 year olds in the UK compared to other countries. These findings highlight the need to reset the education system to promote both good attainment and well-being. Our children’s well-being and their education should not be seen as conflicting priorities, but instead as linked together.

There are some simple steps that can be taken to achieve this. This could include a focus on more activities linked to The Five Ways to Well-being for children and young people, which provides a framework of activities that people can do themselves to increase their well-being.9 This could include more opportunities to participate in sport, art and drama lessons. Schools should also review their policies to ensure these are inclusive and look at ways to reduce teacher workload to ensure that school culture is shifted from a singular focus on academic attainment to a more holistic culture that supports well-being.
Several initiatives have been developed to support schools to make well-being a focus. For example, the Well School Movement, developed by the Youth Sport Trust, supports schools to drive improvements in well-being for all teachers, senior leaders and young people by placing well-being at the heart of schools. Education policy can also be used to reduce economic inequality, or at least to mitigate some of its consequences. Poverty proofing the school day, reducing the cost of school uniforms, providing access to technology for low income families and expanding provision of free school meals could all be used to reduce inequality and improve child well-being. Importantly, young people’s voices need to be put at the centre of conversations about what can make school more enjoyable for them and how their well-being can be supported.

Services to support well-being

It is crucial that any strategy to improve well-being puts in place long-term and sustainable services and dedicated funding to support well-being. The findings in this year’s report indicate both a decline in children’s happiness with their life as a whole, and a decline in happiness with their friends. We see that there are two key ways we could support these aspects of well-being: through youth services, and through community emotional health and well-being services.

Youth services

Young people often link unhappiness with their friends with the challenges of modern life online. However, we know their concerns are broader than just social media. Research has found that the link between social media and low well-being is complicated, and evidence on this link is mixed.25 The analysis presented in this report suggests that social media use alone does not explain the decline in happiness with friends we have reported in each of our Good Childhood Reports since 2015. Children and young people do need the space and opportunity to make friends and be together outside of school, and whilst this can be done online, there is a crucial role for Youth Services in improving well-being and helping young people to form strong peer relationships.

Between 2010/11 and 2018/19 early intervention spending in children’s services, which includes spending on youth services, decreased by 46% as a result of cuts totaling £1.6 billion.26 Increased provision of these services is essential in providing a holistic approach to responding to children and young people’s needs. Any strategy to improve children’s well-being over the next 10 years must include youth services as a key lever for driving improvements in children’s quality of life.

Emotional health and well-being support services

Alongside youth services, more community support is needed to address low well-being. Currently, low-level emotional health and well-being needs are met through support in schools and the Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) in the community. Responsibility for these services is often shared between CCGs and the local authority. However, there is a lack of accountability and transparency across CCGs and local authorities as to who is responsible for provision. As a result, the provision of these services is patchy. This is further confused by a complicated funding environment which lacks a clear stream of funding to support emotional health and well-being.

In order to improve the well-being of children and young people, there need to be dedicated services in place to support this outcome in the community. We see that there is the role for the increased provision of open access, drop-in emotional health services within communities – for example, The Children’s Society runs a range of open access, drop-in mental health hubs for children and young people across the Midlands. These hubs aim to prevent the escalation of emotional health difficulties with timely support, whilst reducing the number of avoidable referrals to specialist mental health services. The drop-in nature of the hubs means there are no waiting lists, so young people are able to access the support on offer whenever they feel ready.

The lack of a dedicated funding stream for emotional health and well-being services hampers sustainable funding for the provision of support for those with low well-being. For a concerted effort to be effective, dedicated and sustainable funding services should be provided and distributed across health, schools, local authorities and the VCS. This funding should be brought together into single grants for local areas to provide services for children and young people with low level emotional health and well-being concerns that do not require NHS intervention.

Making the change

At age 15 children in the UK are sadder, less satisfied, and do not feel they are flourishing compared to their European peers. Over the past decade, childhood in this country appears to have taken a turn for the worse. We have seen an increase in inequality, with just over 4 million children now living in poverty. At the same time, we have seen cuts to children and young people’s services, with funding for these services falling by £2.2 billion between 2010/11 and 2018/19.27 Early intervention services are the worst affected, with spending on these services dropping by 46% in the same period.28

There have also been massive societal changes that all impact on children and young people. The Good Childhood Report 2019, for example, highlighted the worries young people have over the environment, crime and personal data being shared online. This year, the global coronavirus pandemic has wrought havoc on all our lives, and our own research highlights the possible consequences for children’s well-being.
Endnotes


2 What Works Centre for Well-Being. See https://whatworkswellbeing.org/about-wellbeing/what-is-wellbeing/ [Last accessed: 3rd August 2020].


7 What Works Centre for Well-Being. See https://whatworkswellbeing.org/. [Last accessed: 3rd August 2020]


14 Ibid.
Every young person should have the support they need in order to enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

That’s why we run services and campaigns that make children’s lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger.

The Children’s Society is bringing hope back to children’s lives.

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