

i) Choice and autonomy

'When parents force a way of life on children which they do not want to take. When parents do not give children the freedom of choice. When parents do not give their children independence to go out and have fun with friends.'

[Response to: What things do you think stop young people from having a good life?]

Our research has shown that issues of choice, and related concepts such as freedom and autonomy, are fundamental to children's well-being in our society. In fact, among the 10 aspects of life covered in The Good Childhood Index, children's happiness with the amount of choice they have in life tends to be the most strongly associated with their overall well-being. The importance of choice and autonomy has also been identified in other research on children's well-being (Fattore et al, 2007). There may be many similarities in the links between choice and well-being for children and adults, but there are also likely to be differences. Due to their legal status, children's choice and autonomy are much more dependent on the willingness of others to grant them these things. Thus it is important to explore this issue from a child-centred perspective. It is also important to recognise that a growing sense of autonomy is important for children as they develop towards adulthood and that opportunities to make decisions with support can help children with this process.

What children told us

Choice was identified as an important concept in our initial consultation with children in 2005 and was often talked about in connection with other ideas such as freedom (as in the quote above), fairness and respect:

'Treated fairly. Respected. Allowed to make own choices.'

Many of children's comments about choice in this initial consultation were of quite a general nature like the ones above, but some comments highlighted specific aspects of their lives where choice was important to them:

'Having the freedom to go out and have a social life, feeling independent and trusted to make your own choices.'

More recently, in preparation for the 2010 survey we undertook some focus groups with children and we asked about the topic of 'choice' in relation to different aspects of children's lives – home, school, friendships and the future. Children's comments indicate the range of issues that may be encapsulated by the idea of 'choice'. The following are some quotes entered by children aged 12 to 15 as part of an online focus group:

'food choices/meals.'

'Which classes they take, like if they like one more than the other, they do it more often.'

'how much u go out and wot u do.'

'social networking, my parents disapprove of me using it.'

'be friends with who u want.'

What we have asked in our surveys

In addition to the question about happiness with the amount of choice in life which forms part of The Good Childhood Index, we have also asked a similar question about happiness with freedom. We found an association between children's happiness and these two aspects of their lives that is strong enough to mean that it is probably unnecessary to ask both.

We have also asked children a set of five questions on the concept of 'autonomy' which is often viewed to be an important aspect of people's psychological well-being. Most of these questions have been adapted from a set of questions for adults originally developed by Deci & Ryan based on self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Responses to these questions in the 2010 survey are shown in the table below. Overall, most children gave relatively positive responses, but clearly a significant minority of children feel that they do not have enough autonomy.

Children's responses to the above items can be added together to create an overall score of their sense of autonomy. This set of questions worked well together and had good statistical properties.¹⁷

Perhaps surprisingly, whilst it would be expected that the amount of autonomy that children have will increase with age, children's satisfaction with this aspect of their lives reduces as they get older. This suggests, perhaps, an increasing mismatch between children's expectations in this regard and the reality which they experience.

There were no significant differences in responses to the above set of questions according to gender or measures of household poverty.

There was a significant and strong association between children's responses to the above questions and their overall well-being.¹⁸

The links between choice, autonomy and well-being

So, we have strong evidence of links between children's happiness about the amount of choice they have in life, their sense of autonomy and their overall well-being. What is not clear at this stage is exactly how these things are linked together and how they relate to the other aspects of life covered in this report.

It is possible that concepts like choice and autonomy are not components of well-being in the same way as many of the other aspects of life included in The Good Childhood Index such as happiness with particular relationships, environments or aspects of one's self. Issues of choice and autonomy cut across many of these other aspects – for example, how much autonomy children are granted by their parents, how much choice they feel they have in school, and so on.

A number of our research findings have highlighted significant associations between children's happiness with choice and other events and issues in their lives

- We have already seen in an earlier section that one of the aspects of life which varies most strongly in relation to changes in household income is children's sense of choice.

	Disagree	Neither	Agree
I feel pressured in my life	48%	25%	27%
I feel like I am free to decide for myself how to live my life	15%	22%	63%
I generally feel free to express my ideas and opinions	10%	16%	75%
I feel like I can pretty much be myself in my daily life	8%	13%	79%
I have enough choice about how I spend my time	9%	15%	76%

Table 10: Children's sense of autonomy

Source: 2010 survey, children aged 10 to 15, N = 4044 to 4097

- Children’s responses to our child-centred material well-being index are associated with their feelings about choice. Around 4% of children who lacked none of the items or experiences in our index were unhappy with the amount of choice they had in life, compared to almost a third (32%) of those children who lacked five or more of these items or experiences.
- There is also evidence of associations between choice and life events. Figure 27 summarises variations in The Good Childhood Index in relation to recent experience of changes in family structure (in terms of the adults with whom children lived). In this chart the aspects covered in The Good Childhood Index are ordered from left to right in terms of the size of the difference between children who had experienced a change in family structure over the last year. At the left of the chart, the aspect of life showing the biggest

difference is happiness with family (as might be expected). This is followed by choice which shows the second biggest difference. Towards the right side of the chart the difference are smaller and in relation to the last three aspects – health, appearance and friends – are not statistically significant.

This evidence does not necessarily indicate a causal link between family change and choice as there may be a range of other factors we have not measured which shed further light on the mechanisms at work in explaining these patterns.

In conclusion, children’s sense of choice and autonomy emerges as a key factor in understanding their well-being. Further exploration is needed of the ways in which this occurs and whether enhancing children’s sense of choice and autonomy might help to buffer the effects of adverse life circumstances on their overall well-being.

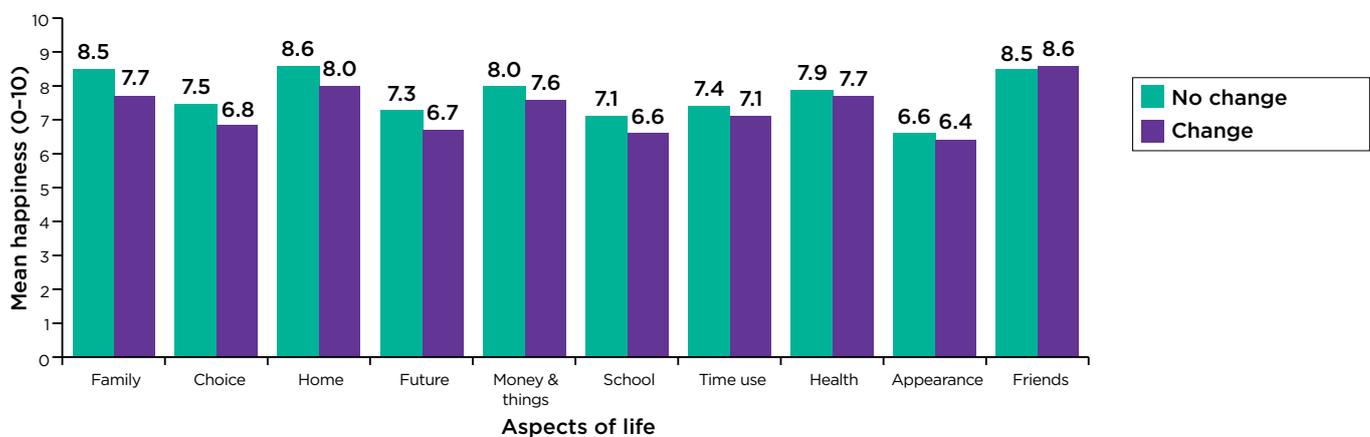


Figure 27: Changes in family structure and aspects of children’s well-being

Source: 2008 survey, age 12 to 15, N = 4386 to 4533

Summary

- Choice, autonomy and freedom are important aspects of children’s lives which are strongly connected to their overall sense of well-being.
- Children’s sense of autonomy and choice decreases as they get older.
- Our research also indicates strong links between choice and factors such as material well-being and adverse life events which need further exploration.