good childhood?

a question for our times
Foreword

There can be no doubt that the childhood experienced by today’s children is significantly different from that of previous generations. While incomes in the United Kingdom have doubled in the last 50 years, research shows that the well-being of children in the UK is rated among the worst in Europe.

Our children and young people suffer from higher incidences of mental and physical ill-health than their European contemporaries. As a society we share a damaging ambivalence towards children: preoccupied with protecting our own children from harm, we often fail to reach out to those who need our attention most. And all the while our young people are continually subjected to pressure to achieve, behave and even consume like adults at an ever earlier age.

This year The Children’s Society celebrates 125 years of working with disadvantaged children. As we reflect on our own experiences with children, it seems appropriate that we should invite society as a whole to do the same, to gain a clearer idea of what makes for a good childhood. The Good Childhood Inquiry is the UK’s first independent national inquiry into the conditions that lead to a good childhood. We seek to open an inclusive debate about the nature of childhood today, with an inquiry that will help shape future policy and inspire all our relationships with children.

Last year, we asked thousands of young people what they think makes for a good childhood. Their answers, which were both direct and challenging, are the subject of this report. Over the next two years The Good Childhood Inquiry will broaden the scope of the inquiry yet further, asking more questions to an even greater number of children and young people, parents, experts and the wider public. We will combine their views and experiences with the findings of academic research, opening up a discussion about childhood that will be both ground-breaking and provocative.

We very much hope that you will take part in this debate.

Bob Reitemeier
Chief Executive, The Children’s Society
September 2006
Childhood in the UK today

The state of childhood is one of the recurring topics of our times. Today’s children and young people live in an era of rapid change, which poses particular challenges for their growth and development. In this climate, there is growing concern about the health and well-being of our children. Politicians, academia and the media alike ponder how best to bring up the nation’s children.

Yet for all our concern, the way in which we view and value our children and young people is beset with contradictions and uncertainty. On the one hand we see children and young people as vulnerable and in need of protection. On the other hand we see them as a threat to society.

Childhood has changed significantly from that experienced by previous generations. New technology runs apace, while demographic changes mean that society today is increasingly diverse.

Today’s children and young people are highly technologically literate. Some 64% of children aged 8-15 have access to the internet at home, while 65% have their own mobile phone. With a sophisticated understanding of communication technology, children and young people interact directly with others in a virtual world that has few boundaries. Parents find it increasingly difficult to mediate this interaction.

That childhood has changed, there seems little doubt. Authors and commentators declare that childhood is ‘under threat’, ‘toxic’ or ‘disappearing’. The Children’s Society agrees that childhood is changing. But The Good Childhood Inquiry will focus on change only insofar as it impacts upon the quality and experience of childhood today. And to understand how childhood is experienced we must look to research, policy and what children and young people tell us.

An important source of information about how childhood is experienced lies in the literature on children’s well-being, a concept that has attracted growing interest in recent years. Well-being focuses on measuring multiple dimensions of a child’s life.

According to important new comparative research on children’s well-being in the European Union, the UK is faring exceptionally badly in the well-being of its children. In comparison with 25 European states, using more than 50 different indicators, the UK ranked in 21st place, above the Slovak Republic, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.

Although high in the league for educational attainment and housing quality, the UK scores poorly for the quality of children’s relationships with their parents and peers, for child health, relative poverty and deprivation, for risky behaviour (cigarette smoking, drunkenness, the use of cannabis and inhalants, teenage pregnancy, under-age and unsafe sexual intercourse) and for subjective well-being (children’s own evaluation of how happy and healthy they are). Amongst the rich, Western member states the UK ranked lowest.

This and other research suggests that our wealth has not bought us the kind of childhood we want for our children. While average incomes in the United Kingdom have doubled in the last 50 years, people are no happier today, on average, than people were fifty years ago. In fact, for young people in particular, there is evidence to suggest that the opposite is true: that improved economic conditions seem to be associated with increasing levels of emotional problems. Depression and anxiety have increased for both boys and girls aged 15-16 since the mid-1980s, as have what are called ‘non-aggressive conduct problems’ such as lying, stealing and disobedience.

Alongside academic analysis of well-being there has been growing political interest in the UK and overseas in the concept and its application. The UK government, through its Every Child Matters agenda, is reframing responses to children in relation to their well-being. As part of its agenda for change, the Government has identified five outcomes for children’s well-being: to ‘stay safe’, ‘be healthy’, ‘enjoy and achieve’, ‘achieve economic well-being’ and ‘make a positive contribution’. This framework is becoming increasingly important in the way children’s well-being is conceptualised and services for children and young people are structured and delivered.

So how is childhood viewed and valued today? A brief scan of recent headlines in the UK press quickly illustrates our contradictory and dichotomous attitudes towards children and young people. The UK legal system reflects our ambivalence. At the age of ten, children are not deemed responsible enough to own a pet, and yet a ten-year-old will be held criminally responsible for his or her actions.

If our society and legal system demonstrates such confusion towards childhood, how can we hope for our responses to children and young people to be nurturing, consistent and in touch with their lives?
The Good Childhood Inquiry

The Good Childhood Inquiry, managed by The Children’s Society, is the UK’s first independent national inquiry into childhood. The Good Childhood Inquiry will live out its commitment to being child-centred through a unique methodology that combines the views of children, young people and adults, with rigorous analysis of academic research.

It will consider the following key questions:

- What are the conditions for a good childhood?
- What obstacles exist to those conditions?
- What changes could be made that would be likely to improve childhood?

At the end of the inquiry, the inquiry panel will produce an evidence-based report that will help improve the lives of children and young people in the UK today.

Young people’s views on a good childhood

The Children’s Society is committed to putting children at the centre of all its work. So, as we developed The Good Childhood Inquiry, we gathered views from children about the idea of a good childhood.

We did this through a survey of young people aged 14 to 16 years, which we undertook, in partnership with the University of York, in a representative sample of 16 areas of England. Over 11,000 young people in schools and other educational establishments took part.

The survey questionnaire included two open-ended questions which were developed in consultation with young people:

- What do you think are the most important things that make for a good life for young people?
- What things do you think stop young people from having a good life?

Over 8,000 young people chose to answer these two questions and we have analysed their comments. Here we present a summary of the initial outcomes of this analysis. We have also included some statistics about young people’s lives from other parts of the questionnaire.

We were able to group most of the young people’s comments into ten key topic areas which we will present below. However, some comments cut across these topic areas and these included the following three themes: the quality of young people’s relationships, safety and freedom.

We have presented young people’s views using verbatim quotes, the text of which is presented exactly as written by young people on the questionnaire.

The quality of young people’s relationships

Many of young people’s comments referred to qualities that they felt were important in their relationships with others, including love, support, fair treatment and respect:

- Love & care by the people they want to love & care for them.
- Same one to talk to and some one to lisene.
- Bullies, prejudice and other offensive [offences] committed to prevent a young person having a good life.
- People respect other people in each community, people respect other religions, equality.

Safety

Young people emphasised the fundamental importance of safety at home, at school and in the community.

Young people were particularly concerned about bullying, about crime, and about feeling safe in their local area.

Freedom

Young people identified freedom in a general sense as being a third aspect of a good childhood:

- To have freedom in what they think, say and do.
- To be safe, allowed to go out as long as they be careful.

Although there was also a recognition of the need for limits to this:

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- To be safe, allowed to go out as long as they be careful.

Young people identified rules, restrictions and feelings of being under pressure as key factors which prevented them having a good life.

The issue of freedom is likely to be particularly important for older children such as those surveyed.
As will be seen these cross-cutting themes are relevant to a number of the topics identified. We now go on to discuss these ten key topics:

1. Family
The family was clearly of paramount importance to young people, being the most common topic mentioned. Many of the comments focused on three of the above issues – relationships, safety and freedom. There is potentially some tension between providing these conditions.

Another set of issues identified by young people were the importance of stability and security:

Structured family life.
Two parents with clear values.

2. Friends
Friends was the second most important topic mentioned. Friends were seen as a key source of support:

Having friends to rely on to talk when they need to.

They were also commonly mentioned in conjunction with enjoying leisure time, socialising and having fun (see ‘Leisure’ below).

On the other hand, young people’s relationships with peers could also have negative aspects. Many young people highlighted the impact of bullying and peer pressure on their lives:

If there friends are bad, they might be forced or do something they don’t want to do, just to impress their friends.

3. Leisure
Leisure was seen as the third most important ‘quality of life’ ingredient.

"Around 5% of young people in the survey self-defined as having a problem with drugs, and 8% as having a problem with alcohol.”

Comments about having something to do or nothing to do were made by almost 1,000 of the young people, sometimes linked to lack of local facilities, money and getting into trouble:

More things to do that are cheap and accessible.

Things to do in your area so you don’t get into trouble because you’re bored.

In addition many young people emphasised the importance of having fun, socialising and of specific activities such as sports.

Finally the balance of leisure and work was raised by young people:

Doing well in school and having a good social life, getting the balance right.

4. School, education and learning
Whilst leisure and fun were clearly important to young people, the value of education was also recognised.

A good quality of education was cited by many as one of the key factors of a good childhood.

Young people also recognised the importance of their own commitment to working hard and achieving for their future well-being

To get good grades, to get a good job and get paid!

However, this generally positive picture was balanced by substantial comment about the negative impact of school pressure:

Exams – stress – too many exams.

There were both positive and negative comments about teachers. Positive comments emphasised support, help and understanding; negative comments tended to refer to pressure at school.

Finally there was comment about the importance of wider learning about life and the need for positive role models.

"Over half (58%) of young people surveyed were worried about their exams at school, and almost half (47%) said that they often worried about school work.”

58%

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"Around 5% of young people in the survey self-defined as having a problem with drugs, and 8% as having a problem with alcohol.”

5%
5. Behaviour
Young people recognised that their own behaviour made a major contribution to their experience of childhood. Most comments fitted into two categories.

First, substance use was a topic of considerable comment. Drugs and alcohol were mostly mentioned as stopping young people having a good life:

If they think smoking or doing Drugs is a good part of their life they should be stopped. and they should think about what they are doing.

But a minority of young people identified substance use as something which contributed to a good life:

Having loyal budz, having a good smoke.

The second broad category of comment about behaviour related to getting into trouble including involvement in crime:

Getting into trouble with police/family. Becoming addicted to substances.

Hanging around the streets with the bad people cause there's not enough leisure places around.

6. The local environment
Another one of the ten most important topics identified by young people was the quality of their local environment. There was significant comment about the shortage of local facilities and places to go.

A second key issue was the general quality of the local environment and its impact on quality of life:

Living in poor, depressing, bleak places.

7. Community
Young people also focused on their relationships and encounters with other people in their local community.

One key issue was the attitudes of specific adults towards young people:

Adults don't want you to play there – they are being unsocialable to us.

This was linked to a perception of wider negative societal attitudes towards young people:

Bullying and scared of crime which is exaggerated by media who overestimate the figures and levels of crime. Also young people in general are blamed for Britain's "rising crime" (according to media) this makes people scared and frightened of young people.

Young people also identified criminals, gangs and groups of other young people as having a negative impact on their feelings of safety within their neighbourhood:

Drugs (big guys frightening) little children. Feeling unsafe to go out.

8. Money
Money comes eighth on our descending list of topics. Apart from the general importance of money, there were three key themes.

First, young people focused on having 'enough money' rather than on being rich:

Having close friends – a loving family, a nice home, enough money for food and things wanted and good schoolwork.

Second, young people were concerned about the cost of activities:

Things to do. whatching a film costs around 8 quid for 1 person and that is the only money people get.

Finally, some young people valued the ability to earn one's own money:

Independence – able to earn own money.

9. Attitudes
As with 'Behaviour', many young people recognised the relevance of their own attitudes and approach to life.

To live life as if its your last day and to get along with others.

The above quotations are linked with younger people's attitudes towards themselves and their community overall.

10. Health
Health is the most important topic for young people. Comments focused on the idea of stress, work and as things that contribute to health:

Less stress, less work.

Comments also identified there were a number of external behaviours or aspects of the impact of the environment on young people's quality of life:

Prejudices, discrimination.

So, to what extent does each of these topics contribute to children's well-being?

There was evidence that each constitutes an important aspect of the experience of childhood that young people identify as being a vital part of their present and future life. They were linked to leisure and education. Young people also identified the importance of 'being' a child in their broader thinking about and description of their lives.

Gathering children's opinions of the most important areas of their lives helps to inform other work on children's well-being.

The comments also confirmed that young people are very concerned with outcomes. So, it is important to ensure that when we continue to cut them off from the education and employment areas we identify important we ensure that much emphasis is put on children's voice and their comments. The importance of considering the experiences of young people in the ways in which they live is also an important consideration.
The above quote also illustrates a second issue – young people's attitudes towards others. This can be linked with young people's experience of adults' attitudes towards them, as discussed earlier.

10. Health
Health is the last on our list of key topics. Most of the comments focused on mental and emotional health. Stress, worry and anxiety were regularly mentioned as things that prevented young people having a good life:

Less stress, less pressure, more well respected, social life.

Comments about physical health were less common but there were a number of mentions of healthy behaviours (exercise and diet) and also a recognition of the impact that ill-health and disability can have on quality of life:

Prejudices, disabilities, bad homelife.

What young people’s views tell us

So, to what extent can the views of young people contribute to the wider debate about childhood and children’s well-being?

There was evidently a risk, in asking children what constitutes a ‘good life’, that they would answer purely in terms of their current happiness. But, in fact, it is clear that young people thought about this issue both in terms of their present and future well-being. Whilst friends and leisure were very important to them, so also was education. Young people’s views have indicated the importance of bearing in mind both the experiences of ‘being’ a child or young person and of ‘becoming’ an adult in thinking about a good childhood.

Gathering children’s views in this way can play an important role in both supporting and complementing other work on well-being.

The comments from young people in the survey mostly confirmed the importance of the five Every Child Matters outcomes. Safety was one of the most prominent cross-cutting themes highlighted by young people. Health, education and money were all amongst the ten key topic areas we identified. Young people did not appear to put so much emphasis on ‘making a positive contribution’ in their comments. This issue requires further consideration, particularly as the survey has highlighted ways in which young people do not feel included in their community and in society.
What happens next
The Good Childhood Inquiry will bring together an independent panel of twelve experts and influencers, and will include Lord Layard, Emeritus Professor of Economics at the London School of Economics, Professor Sir Albert Aynsley-Green, Children’s Commissioner for England, and Bishop Tim Stevens, Bishop of Leicester and Chair of The Children’s Society’s Board of Trustees. Dr Rowan Williams, the Archbishop of Canterbury, is Patron of the inquiry.

This briefing paper marks the beginning of a new phase of The Good Childhood Inquiry. With the publication of this paper we are issuing a national call for evidence and welcome all contributions from children, parents, professionals working with children or with specialist knowledge, and members of the general public.

We will be collating and processing all the evidence received. We will combine this evidence with information from the survey, and a review of research and other literature. The result will be a series of papers which will be made available to the inquiry panel. The inquiry panel will meet regularly to consider the written evidence, and to hear oral evidence.

The first inquiry panel meeting will take place in early 2007 and a final report with recommendations will be published at the end of the inquiry in 2008. Further information will be available as the inquiry progresses on our website (see below).

How you can have your say
Have your say on what makes for a good childhood by taking part in our national call for evidence, which will open in September 2006 this year and run for eight weeks. We encourage children and young people, parents, professionals and other adults to take part in the debate.

Please visit www.goodchildhood.org.uk to tell us what you think.

Further information
For further information about The Good Childhood Inquiry, please visit our website at www.goodchildhood.org.uk or write to us at:

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For further information about the work of The Children’s Society, please visit our website at www.childrenssociety.org.uk.

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This document can be made available in alternative formats.