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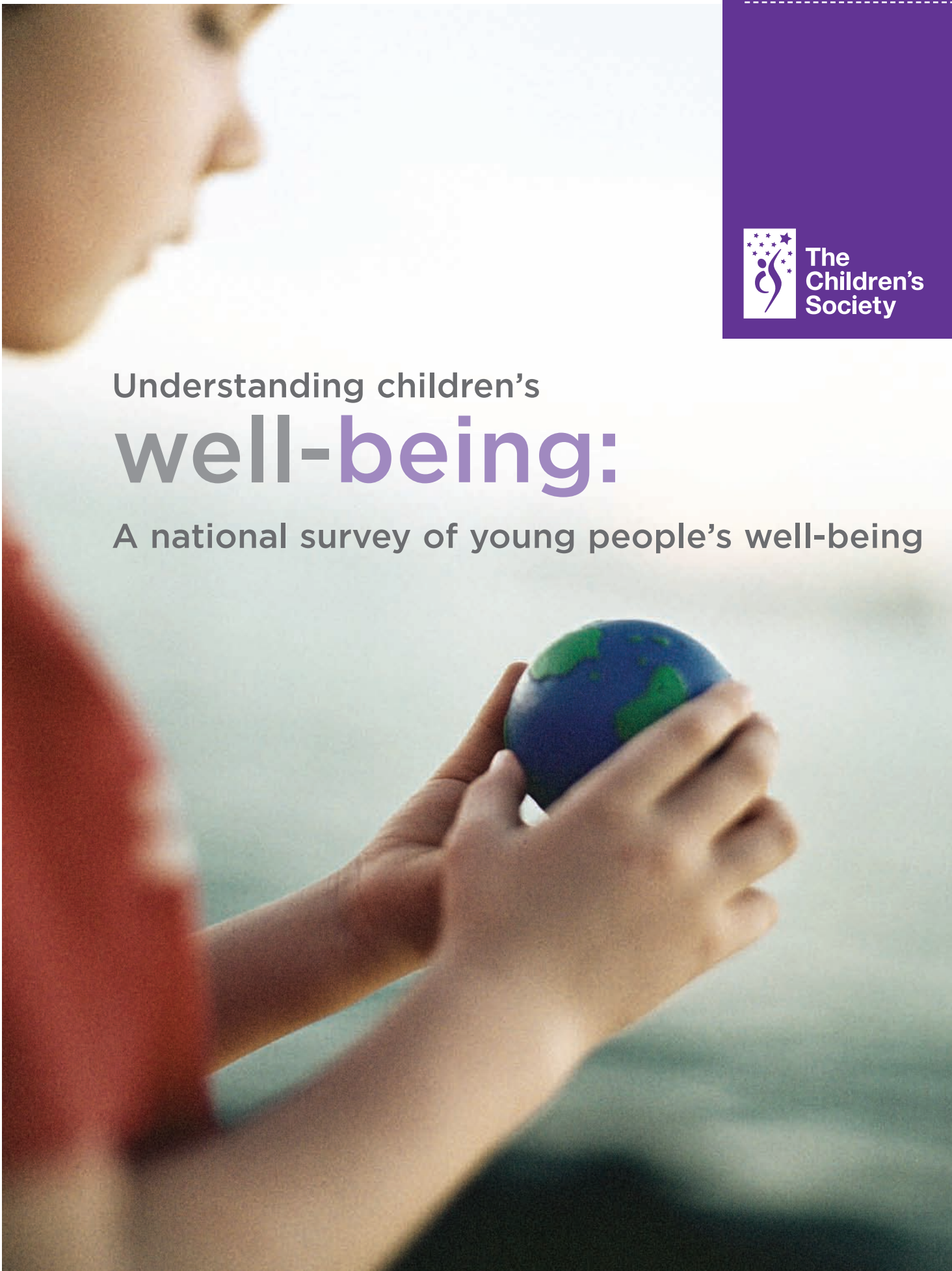
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The  
Children's  
Society

Understanding children's  
**well-being:**

A national survey of young people's well-being



## **Understanding Children's Well-being:**

A national survey of young people's well-being

Gwyther Rees, Jonathan Bradshaw, Haridhan Goswami and Antonia Keung

## **Acknowledgements**

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The views presented in this report are the authors' and do not necessarily reflect those of The Children's Society or the University of York.

## **Further information**

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Further information about this research programme is available at:

[www.childrenssociety.org.uk/wellbeing](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/wellbeing)

If you have any queries about this report or about the research programme in general, please e-mail: [research@childrenssociety.org.uk](mailto:research@childrenssociety.org.uk)

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# 1

## Introduction

The well-being of children and young people is a highly topical issue nationally and internationally. Several recent comparative international reports (UNICEF, 2007; Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009; Chapple & Richardson, 2009) have suggested that children in the UK are faring significantly less well than their counterparts in many other countries.

Last year The Children's Society published the final report (Layard & Dunn, 2009) of The Good Childhood Inquiry – the first independent inquiry into childhood in the UK – which was the culmination of several years work by a panel of experts.

Running parallel to this process, The Children's Society, in collaboration with the University of York, has also been developing a programme of research into young people's well-being – with a strong focus on gathering views and information from young people themselves. The first phase of this project involved gathering views from young people about the factors which they felt affected their well-being (The Children's Society, 2006). This information was analysed and used to inform the second phase of the project – a survey of a sample of just under 7,000 young people aged 10 to 15 in England in 2008 – administered on behalf of The Children's Society by Ipsos MORI<sup>1</sup>. This is the first national survey in England to take such a broad and comprehensive view of young people's subjective well-being.

This report presents the first findings from the above survey. The aim of this report is to provide a brief and accessible introduction and exploration of some of the broad areas of subjective well-being covered by the survey. It will be followed by a series of further reports exploring aspects of the data in more

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<sup>1</sup> Ipsos MORI were responsible for the conduct of the survey and also contributing to the piloting and testing of questionnaires as described in more detail in Chapter 2. All analysis, interpretation and reporting of data was conducted by researchers at The Children's Society and the University of York.



detail. An overview of plans for future publications is provided in the concluding chapter.

The structure of the report is as follows:

In the remainder of this introductory chapter we provide an overview of the concept of well-being and the ways in which it has specifically been applied to children and young people. We also provide a brief introduction to the research programme as a whole.

Chapter 2 provides a description of the methodology of the survey on which the report is based, including the design and development stages, the content of the final questionnaires, the data-cleaning and analysis process, and details of the survey sample.

Chapter 3 is the first of three chapters which present research findings. It focuses on the measures of overall subjective well-being which were used in the survey, and considers evidence of the extent to which overall well-being varies according to socio-demographic factors.

Chapter 4 presents data on 21 different potential aspects of young people's well-being, covering different areas of their lives such as family, health, local area, and so on. It also considers the extent to which well-being in these specific areas varies by socio-demographic factors.

Chapter 5 addresses the key question as to which aspects of young people's lives have the most significant impact on their overall subjective well-being. It examines the extent to which the framework of young people's well-being presented in Chapter 2 is useful in explaining variations in overall well-being.

Chapter 6 concludes the report with a summary of key findings, a discussion of some of the implications of these findings, and details of plans for the next stages of this research programme.

## **The concept of well-being**

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There is no agreed definition of the term 'well-being' but it is generally used within the research literature as an over-arching concept regarding the quality of people's lives. It is also '*best thought of as a dynamic process, emerging from the way in which people interact with the world around them*' (Michaelson et al, 2009).

There is a vast and ever-growing body of literature on well-being and this report is not the place to attempt to review this literature. However, we wish to draw attention to two important distinctions within this field.

First, well-being can be measured through the use of social indicators and/or through self-report measures. As discussed in more detail later, there has been substantial activity in both these respects in relation to the measurement of the well-being of children and young people.

Second, within the field of well-being there is a common distinction (e.g. Samman, 2007) between:

- Subjective well-being (hedonic) – including happiness, life satisfaction, positive and negative affect
- Psychological well-being (eudaimonic) – including sense of purpose or meaning, personal growth and so on.

The next sections provide some basic description of these different concepts.

## **Subjective well-being**

Although definitions differ, subjective well-being is typically defined (e.g. Diener, 1984) as consisting of cognitive and affective components as follows.

### *Life satisfaction*

The cognitive component is often referred to as life satisfaction and involves assessments or judgements about one's life either in general and/or within particular domains and sets of domains. Global assessments have been measured both by a single question and by multi-item scales. We made use of single and multi-item measures in our survey and provide further details of these in Chapter 3.

As well as overall subjective ratings of life satisfaction, an enormous amount of research activity has been devoted to identifying relevant domains of well-being or life satisfaction both in general and more specifically in relation to young people. We provide some examples and discuss this issue further in Chapters 4 and 5 of this report

### *Positive and negative affect*

The affective component of subjective well-being can be divided into positive and negative components (Diener, 1984) and focuses on the experience of positive and negative emotions. The balance of positive and negative affect is seen as making a significant contribution to subjective well-being. An example of a measure used for affect is the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS) (Watson, Clark & Tellegen, 1988).

We did not include questions on this affective component in the current wave of the survey but intend to explore this further in later phases of the research programme.

## **Psychological well-being**

The field of psychological well-being has a more complex structure than that of subjective well-being, but there are a number of recurring concepts.

One significant conceptualisation is Ryff's six-dimension model (Ryff, 1989) consisting of self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. Ryff also sought to distinguish the six above concepts from other aspects of well-being to which a lot of attention has been devoted such as 'self-esteem' 'locus of control' and 'depression'.

Similar concepts have also been represented in other literature. For example self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) focuses on three concepts aligned to some of the dimensions of Ryff's model – competence, autonomy and relatedness.

We included a number of questions in our survey to measure some of the above components of psychological well-being and will be publishing findings in the near future (see Chapter 6).

## **The relevance of well-being**

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There are a number of reasons why the study of well-being is important and valuable.

At a principled level it has been argued that the promotion of the well-being of the population should be a fundamental goal of any society. This point of view, closely linked to the positive psychology movement, emphasises that experiencing a good life is more than the absence of negative indicators and that the level and distribution of positive well-being are useful indicators of the functioning of a society.

Over and above this general consideration there are a number of other significant indications of the relevance of well-being.

First, well-being has been shown to vary substantially between nations. In relation specifically to young people's well-being, for example, Bradshaw and Richardson (2009) report substantial differences in the well-being of children across 29 European countries. Netherlands had the highest overall well-being index (across seven domains combining social indicator and self-report measures) and also the highest level of subjective well-being. The UK was 24<sup>th</sup> of the 29 countries in terms of overall well-being. We need to know more about the factors which contribute to this variation.

Second, well-being has been shown to vary considerably over time within specific locations. For example, in the US a Child and Youth Well-Being Index has shown significant variation during the period from 1975 to 2004 (Land et al, 2007). This includes a marked decline in overall well-being from 1982 to 1993 and, more recently, a rise which returned the overall well-being index to its 1975 level and above by the early 2000s. The index also demonstrates systematic trends in specific domains such as family economic well-being.

Third, subjective well-being can be an important indicator of underlying issues. For example, amongst a sample of over 4,000 young people aged 13 to 18 in the US, perceived life satisfaction was found to be significantly related to poor mental health, suicide ideation and suicide behaviours (Valois et al, 2004).

Finally, the study of well-being can provide important indications of what matters in people's lives. For example, a qualitative study by Fattore et al (2007) with children in Australia highlighted agency and control in everyday life and decisions as an important dimension of children's well-being, and this issue was also highlighted in the first phase of our research (see below).

## **Measuring children's well-being**

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There has been growing interest, internationally, in the concept and measurement of child well-being over the last two decades. There have been three different strands to this development.

First, there has been a focus – stemming from the wider social indicators movement – on measurement and trends in child well-being primarily using available indicators such as child poverty rates.

Second, there has been a growing interest in measuring the constructs of children's subjective well-being and psychological well-being, and in particular the former, through self-report surveys.

Third, there has been a move to develop concepts of child well-being taking into account the perspectives of children and young people themselves.

### **Indexes of child well-being**

We will first discuss the development of child well-being indexes, which have primarily<sup>2</sup> focused on the collation of existing social indicator data on topics such as child injuries, educational attainment, children living in poverty, and so on.

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<sup>2</sup> Note that most of the indexes referred to in this section have included some measures of subjective well-being, but are primarily based on social indicator data.

In an important early contribution to this area, Qvortrup (1990) drew attention to the fact that children were often invisible as individual entities in national social statistics, generally being subsumed within statistics about parents, families and households. He proposed that:

*If we seriously mean to improve life conditions for children we must as a minimum precondition, establish reporting systems in which they are heard themselves as well as reported on by others*

Qvortrup, 1990

There have been huge advances since then both in the UK and internationally.

One of the key early developments was the establishment of the Multi-National Project for Monitoring and Measuring Child Well-Being in 1996. The project involved experts from 28 countries and the first phase led to the agreement of a set of around 60 indicators organised under five domains – safety and physical status, personal life, civic life, children’s economic resources and contribution and children’s activities.

One of the longest established initiatives to measure and track children’s well-being is the Child and Youth Well-Being Index in the United States (Land et al, 2001). The index consists of 28 indicators (primarily gathered from existing administrative data) organised into seven domains – family economic well-being, health, safety/behaviour, educational attainment, community connectedness, social relationships, and emotional/spiritual well-being. The index was developed at the beginning of this decade but relevant data was subsequently collated stretching back to 1975. Annual update reports of the index are produced.

Similar initiatives have more recently been undertaken in other countries. In the first half of the decade the Irish government developed a National Set of Child Well-Being Indicators (Hanafin & Brooks, 2005). Two State of the Nation’s Children reports based on this index have been published in 2006 and 2008. These reports cover socio-demographics; children’s relationships; children’s outcomes (education, health and social, emotional and behavioural); and formal and informal supports.

In the UK, the Welsh Assembly Government published the first Well-Being Monitor for Wales in 2008, focused around seven core aims for children and young people which relate to a good start in life; education, training and learning; physical and mental health; play and leisure; rights and respect; safe home and community; and economic well-being.

In England, the *Every Child Matters* framework includes a set of national indicators – organised under the five themes of the framework, most of which are derived from a larger set of 198 indicators developed by the Department for

Communities and Local Government as the basis of the performance framework for local authorities and local authorities' partnerships in England.

Additionally in England, the Department for Communities and Local Government recently published a Local Index of Child Well-Being (Bradshaw et al, 2009) which provided indicators of well-being (drawn from existing data sets) at small area level.

Work has also been done to compare both well-being across countries including the UK (Bradshaw, Hoelscher & Richardson, 2007; Bradshaw & Richardson, 2009). The OECD recently published a comparison of child well-being indicators in six domains – material well-being, housing and environment, educational well-being, health and safety, risk behaviours, quality of school life – across its 30 member countries (Chapple & Richardson, 2009).

### **Self-reported well-being**

The second key strand of development in the field of children's well-being relates to the measurement of self-reported well-being. A number of instruments have been developed over the last decade to measure young people's own assessments of their lives. One of the most widely used is Huebner's Multi-Dimensional Student Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1994) which measures well-being in five domains – family, friends, school, living environment and self. Another shorter index, proposed by Cummins and Lau (2005) is a modified version of a Personal Well-Being Index for adults which has been used for survey work in Australia to assess the well-being of the adult population over the last decade.

Despite these developments, to date, there have been relatively few initiatives that attempt to measure the self-reported subjective and psychological well-being of children across all relevant domains at a national level, although a number of surveys internationally and in the UK have incorporated well-being indicators in selected domains.

The international Health Behaviour in School-aged Children survey covers a number of key areas of young people's health and well-being. It has developed from an initial survey in five countries (including England) in 1983/4 to over 40 countries involved in the latest wave of the survey in 2005/6.

In the UK, several waves of the Tellus survey (Ofsted/DCSF) have surveyed young people about their well-being and views under the five themes of the *Every Child Matters* framework - Be Healthy, Stay Safe, Enjoy and Achieve, Make a Positive Contribution and Achieve Economic Well-being. The survey questionnaire included some questions about happiness and about relationships with family and friends.

In addition, some large social surveys have begun to incorporate self-report instruments for young people. The British Household Panel Survey youth questionnaire has asked young people aged 11 to 15 about their happiness, feeling troubled and self-esteem. Several waves of the Families and Children study, undertaken by NatCen for the Department for Work and Pensions, included short self-report surveys for young people which contained some questions on subjective well-being.

However, none of these surveys has taken a holistic approach to the concept of child well-being. An interesting local attempt to do this in the UK was the study by New Economics Foundation which involved a survey of children's well-being in Nottingham (Marks et al, 2004).

### **Children's perspectives on well-being**

Whilst the second strand of development described above focused on self-reported well-being, the concepts and domains of well-being used in this work were developed primarily from concepts which originated from the study of adult well-being. These concepts may not be directly transferable to the measurement of the well-being of children and young people:

*The potential of subjective well-being measures to take into account children's own experiences and the complexities of their lives has not yet been realised. The inability of current measures of subjective well-being to perform in this way is limited by the fact that they are not substantively based on individual children's personal values, views and assessments of their life circumstances. Rather, measures are based on standardised measures of satisfaction identified as important to (adult) researchers, to which individual children are asked to respond.*

*Ultimately we do not really know whether the domains and measures identified by adult researchers are meaningful to children. Measuring children's competencies in adultcentric ways, against those of the normative group of adults, incorporates assumptions about children as becoming adults. Where this means adjusting adult scales for use by children, researchers are continuing to construct children's competencies as lesser than, rather than, say, different from, adults.*

*Fattore et al, 2007: 12*

Hence, the third key strand in the development of the study of children's well-being has focused on developing concepts and frameworks which incorporate children's perspectives. This strand is still at a relatively early stage, but there are a small number of examples of attempts to develop well-being frameworks from children's perspectives.

The development of the national indicator set in Ireland mentioned above included a consultation exercise with children and young people (Gabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005; Hanafin et al, 2007). Researchers in Australia have also

undertaken studies with young people regarding concepts of well-being (Fattore et al, 2007). Both these studies have highlighted important differences in children's ideas about well-being.

In 2005, The Children's Society undertook a national survey of 11,000 young people aged 14 to 16, which included open-ended questions asking about views on well-being and the factors which hindered it. Findings from an initial analysis of the responses (The Children's Society, 2006) were published to coincide with the launch of The Good Childhood Inquiry.

## **The research programme**

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The intention of this research programme was to contribute to the growing strand of international research on young people's well-being as described above, with a particular emphasis on gathering the views of young people at all stages of the research process.

### **Aims**

Thus the overall aims of this research programme are:

- To develop a better understanding of the concept of well-being as it relates to young people, taking full account of the perspectives of young people themselves.
- To establish self-report measures of young people's well-being and use these to identify the reasons for variations in well-being and to monitor changes in well-being over time.

### **Principles**

In undertaking this research programme, the intention is:

- To ensure that young people's ideas about well-being are incorporated into the development of the framework
- To adopt a holistic approach to the concept of well-being rather than only focusing on specific domains
- To develop a framework which takes account of diversity and is inclusive in its content and scope
- To measure well-being in the present as well as measuring factors related to future well-being (or 'well-becoming') of the young person



- To adopt a positive approach, choosing positive indicators of well-being in preference to negative indicators of problems wherever possible

These principles have been influenced by the work of the Multi-National Project for Monitoring and Measuring Children's Well-Being. This initiative is a response to the tendency for knowledge about children to be

*deficit-based, emphasizing children's problems rather than strengths [and to] regard children as human "becomings" rather than human beings.*

*(Bowers & Ben-Arieh, 1999)*

A goal of the Multi-National Project is

*To re-examine "old" measurements and indicators of children's well-being and compose a new set of them that will:*

- *Use the child as a unit of observation*
- *Accept the concepts of children's rights and childhood*
- *Be based on a variety of sources of information*
- *Include positive indicators*
- *Be policy oriented.*

*Source: <http://multinational-indicators.chapinhall.org>*

## **Phase 1, 2005 - 2006**

As a first phase of this programme, young people participating in a large-scale representative survey in 2005 were asked two open-ended questions as follows:

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

These questions were placed at the end of a fairly long questionnaire. However, over 8,000 young people (around four-fifths of the sample) provided responses. We undertook thematic and content-based analyses of these responses, and identified ten key topics. These were, roughly in order of their frequency of occurrence in the responses:

1. Family
2. Friends
3. Leisure
4. School, education and learning
5. Behaviour
6. The local environment
7. Community
8. Money

## 9. Attitudes

## 10. Health

In addition, several cross-cutting themes emerged:

- Many young people made comments about the quality of their relationships with others. Within these comments there was a strong focus on four topics – love/care, support, fair treatment and respect.
- The other key cross-cutting themes related to safety and stability and to a sense of freedom or autonomy. Sometimes these two aspects of quality of life were in tension with one another.

These themes were sometimes mentioned specifically in relation to one of the above key topics (e.g. support from parents, safety within the local environment). At other times they were mentioned in a broader over-arching sense.

Further information about the above analysis is available in an online report (The Children's Society, 2006).

This network of cross-cutting and intercepting concepts and topics was a key factor which we took into account in taking forward the next stages of the project. The next chapter of the report describes the development of the second phase of the research programme which entailed a self-report survey of young people's well-being.

# 2

## Survey design and methodology

The current phase of the research programme involved undertaking a survey of a representative sample of young people aged 10 to 15 in England, using a range of well-being measures, in order to contribute to the overall aims of the programme and specifically to:

- Establish a self-reported index of young people's well-being
- Establish a baseline for future repeat surveys which will measure trends in young people's well-being.

This is seen as a starting point which will be followed by further qualitative and quantitative research to develop and refine a framework to measure children's well-being. In the longer term the plan is to repeat the survey at two year intervals.

This chapter provides an overview of the survey. It covers questionnaire development and design; survey administration; and data processing and analysis. It also provides a brief description of the characteristics of the survey sample of young people. More information will be made available on the web pages for this research programme (please see front pages of report for details).

### Questionnaire development, design and content

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#### Organising framework

Through consideration of the views and ideas we gathered from young people and also a review of the literature on well-being we sought to identify a framework which could be used to develop an initial version of a self-report questionnaire for young people about their well-being. The one we found most

applicable – taking into account the material gathered from young people – is a three domain framework

1. **Self** (originally ‘Personal’) – young people’s relationship with themselves
2. **Relationships** (originally ‘Communal’) – young people’s inter-personal relationships
3. **Environment** – young people’s relationships to their environment

This framework was derived from a similar four domain framework proposed by Fisher et al (2000) as a representation of spiritual well-being, which was used as the basis for an earlier research report produced jointly by The Children’s Society and the University of Wales, Bangor for the Commission on Urban Life and Faith (Rees et al, 2005). Fisher’s framework also included a ‘transcendental’ domain focusing on young people’s relationships to things beyond the human level. Similar three domain frameworks have also recently been developed and utilised by others – for example subjective, material and relational (White, 2009).

As noted earlier, one of the challenges for any framework of well-being is the complex matrix of different topics which need to be taken into consideration. Many of young people’s responses identified themes such as ‘safety’ which cut across young people’s relationships and environments. In order to attempt to deal with this complexity, we have therefore also borne in mind the cross-cutting themes (suggested by young people’s views) which may be applicable to a range of areas, particularly within the relationship and environmental domains.

These concepts are:

1. Safety and stability
2. Freedom
3. Love, care and support
4. Fairness, respect and participation

We have tried to construct a set of items which capture young people’s well-being within specific relationships and environments, whilst at the same time taking into account the above cross-cutting concepts where relevant.

The framework described above was seen very much as ‘work in progress’ and we constructed the questionnaire in such a way that the results from the survey itself will assist in further refining the framework and the particular domains within it.

## **Identification and development of suitable questions**

Due to the resources available and time scales set for this project it did not seem practical to develop, test and validate the numerous sets of items which were required to adequately cover the range of topics identified in the framework as above. We therefore decided, where possible, to make use of existing available and validated items and scales. To this end, we undertook a search of existing relevant surveys and measures. Through this process we were able to identify suitable questions to cover most of the topics we wanted to include in the questionnaire. We then constructed and tested additional questions to cover the remaining topics.

## **Piloting and testing**

An early draft of the secondary schools questionnaire was tested by the research team with young people aged 10 to 15 through group discussion in November 2007.

This led to a revised version which was then piloted by Ipsos MORI<sup>3</sup> with just under 100 young people aged 12 to 13 in secondary schools in December 2007. Statistical analysis of this data set indicated that most aspects of the questionnaire were working well. Feedback from young people about the questionnaire was also positive.

Further modifications were made to the questionnaire and Ipsos MORI piloted the revised version with a further sample of 570 young people aged 12 to 15 in secondary schools in February 2008.

A shortened version of the questionnaire for the primary schools sample was then developed. Ipsos MORI undertook cognitive testing of this questionnaire with children aged 10 to 11 in April 2008.

## **Final questionnaire content**

The final versions of the secondary and primary school questionnaires contained approximately 140 and 100 items respectively. Here we provide a brief overview of the final set of topics covered in the questionnaires.

This report only focuses on a sub-set of these items and further details on each item used are provided at the relevant point in the report.

### *Overall well-being*

We incorporated several measures of self-reported overall well-being in the survey – a global life satisfaction measure; a life satisfaction scale; and a global

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<sup>3</sup> Ipsos MORI were commissioned by The Children's Society to assist with piloting and to undertake the administration of the survey

measure of happiness. Further information about these measures is presented in Chapter 3.

#### *Domain specific well-being*

We also incorporated single-item measures within specific domains of well-being (e.g. family). These measures and their origins are described in Chapter 4.

#### *More detailed questions on subjective and psychological well-being*

The questionnaire also included more detailed questions on specific domains and topics under the following three broad headings of subjective well-being:

- Self: physical health, emotional health, time use
- Relationships: family, friends, people in the local area
- Environments: material well-being, home, school, local area, national and global issues

and in addition the following aspects of psychological well-being and related issues:

- Psychological well-being: a sense of purpose, autonomy, competence, relatedness
- Other related issues: locus of control, self-esteem, self-image, optimism, aspirations for the future.

#### *Socio-demographic data*

In addition to the well-being data described in the previous sections we also gathered some basic demographic data about young people. This data is described and presented later in this chapter.

## **Undertaking the survey**

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The survey administration was undertaken by Ipsos MORI during the period from March to July 2008.

### **Ethics**

In developing and undertaking the survey, close attention was paid to ethical issues including risks of harm to young people and researchers. For example, all Ipsos MORI staff involved in fieldwork and initial data handling had received an enhanced CRB check. The project received ethical approval from an ethics committee at the University of York.

## **Sampling**

The intention of the survey was to include a representative sample of a total of at least 9,000 children and young people in three school years in mainstream schools in England. These were Year 6 – the last year in primary school – which generally consists of young people aged 10 and 11; and Years 8 and 10 in secondary school – consisting of age bands 12 to 13 and 14 to 15 respectively. The reason for choosing age bands two years apart was that the intention is to repeat the survey at two year intervals in the future. The upper age limit of the survey was determined by practical administrative considerations – due to the time of year that the survey was conducted it would not have been possible to gain a representative sample of young people in Years 11 and above. The lower limit was determined to expand the research of the survey to a younger age band than in the previous phase of the survey in 2005, with a view to undertaking surveys with younger age groups in future waves.

The sampling strategy was a two-stage cluster design as follows. The secondary sample consisted of all maintained and independent secondary and middle-deemed secondary schools in England, excluding all other types of school. The primary sample consisted of all maintained and independent primary and middle deemed primary schools in England, excluding all other types of school (including infant schools). Both samples were stratified by government office region and within each stratum; schools were selected proportionate to their size, thus producing a nationally representative sample of secondary and primary schools. The sample of schools approached comprised 325 primary schools and 785 middle and secondary schools. All schools were approached by Ipsos MORI to invite participation in the survey, initially by letter and then by follow-up telephone calls.

Within each participating school a random class group in the relevant years was selected<sup>4</sup> by the survey administration team. Wherever possible all groups were mixed gender and mixed ability.

## **Survey administration**

The self-completion sessions were conducted with the whole class in one classroom period by trained Ipsos MORI interviewers with previous relevant experience of this type of research. Interviewers were briefed and provided with full written instructions – including guidance for resolving problems and queries that might arise. Teachers were present in the room during survey administration but their active involvement in the administration process was minimal.

The interviewer began the session with a short introduction, explaining the purpose and importance of the survey, answering any questions, and reassuring

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<sup>4</sup> Most secondary schools agreed to the participation of a class in both Years 8 and Year 10.

young people of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. They also talked through how to complete the questionnaire and explained any particularly difficult questions, and then collected completed questionnaires at the end of the session. Where more than 10% of pupils were absent on the day the survey was undertaken, follow-up work was undertaken to boost response rates.

A total of 287 class groups of young people participated in the survey. The final achieved sample consisted of 6,744 young people across the three age groups – 2,071 in Year 6; 2,619 in Year 8 and 2,054 in Year 10. This equates to an average class size of 23.5 pupils. There was also an additional test-retest sample of 109 young people in Year 10 (see Chapter 3).

## **Data processing and analysis**

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### **Data processing and cleaning**

Initial data processing was undertaken by Ipsos MORI. Data input was achieved by electronic scanning of questionnaires, and the resulting data was then checked and validated online before being finalised. Ipsos MORI then provided an initial version of the complete data set to The Children's Society in SPSS format.

Initial data cleaning was then undertaken by a statistician within The Children's Society's Research Team and queries were resolved with Ipsos MORI, leading to a final checked and validated data set ready for analysis.

### **Analysis procedures**

After data cleaning, analysis was undertaken using SPSS. The material presented later in the report is based on a range of bivariate and multivariate analysis techniques, primarily the following:

- At a bivariate level, analysis of two categorical variables was conducted using Chi-square tests, utilising a continuity correction for two-by-two tables; analysis involving a scale or ordinal variable and a categorical variable was undertaken using non-parametric tests (Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis); and analysis of two scale variables utilised Pearson correlations.
- At a multivariate level linear regression analysis, including appropriate diagnostic tests, was used. We have also made some use of factor analysis and reliability analysis in Chapters 3 and 5.

All analysis was undertaken independently by two members of the research team to provide a verification of findings.



## **Presentation of statistics**

As the intention of this report is to provide a brief and accessible introduction to some of the key survey findings, technical details of statistical procedures have been kept to a minimum. Further details of the analysis will be made available online (see front pages of report for details).

Unless otherwise specified a finding noted as 'significant' indicates a p-value of less than 0.01 – i.e. a confidence level of at least 99%.

All results presented in this report are based on an unweighted sample.

## **Characteristics of the sample**

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In this final part of the chapter we describe the basic characteristics of the young people included in the study. All percentages in this section exclude missing data and footnotes are provided where levels of missing data were above 10%. More detailed information will be made available in technical reports.

### **Young people's characteristics**

#### *Gender*

Females (51.5%) and males (48.5%) were represented roughly equally within the sample.

#### *Age.*

The survey included young people in year 6 at primary school and years 8 and 10 at secondary school. With a small number of exceptions this meant that the age bands of the survey were 10 to 11 (Year 6); 12 to 13 (Year 8); and 14 to 15 (Year 10). Due to the time of school year when the survey was conducted most young people were towards the upper end of these age bands.

#### *Disability*

Young people were asked whether they would define themselves as disabled. A total of 118 young people (just under 2% of the sample) responded 'Yes' to this question. In addition, in a separate question, they were asked whether they had any long standing illness or disability – 13% of young people responded 'Yes' to this question<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Eleven percent of young people responded 'not sure' to this question, and a further 2% did not answer. The percentage answering 'yes' for the whole sample, including missing cases was 11%.

### *Difficulties with learning*

One in ten (10.2%) young people defined themselves as having difficulties with learning<sup>6</sup>.

### *Ethnicity*

The young people were asked to classify their ethnic origin using classification categories based on those in the 2001 Census. Over three quarters were White British (76%). There was a broad representation of minority ethnic groups including 7.3% of Indian, Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin; 3.4% of Black African or African-Caribbean origin; and 4.6% of mixed ethnic origin.

### *Country of birth*

Around one in fifteen (6.6%) of young people were born outside the UK and a relatively small minority (less than one in ten) of these young people had lived in Britain for less than a year.

### *Religious affiliation*

Young people in the primary and secondary school samples were asked '*What would you say your religion is?*'.

43% of young people indicated that they did not have a religious affiliation. 41.9% said they were Christian. The next largest religious group were Muslim (7.3 %) followed by Hindu (1.5%), Jewish (1.0%), Sikh (1.2%) and Buddhist (0.8%) . The proportion giving any religious affiliation was lower for the secondary school sample than the primary school sample<sup>7</sup>.

## **Young people's families**

### *Family composition (adults)*

Young people were asked to identify which adults they lived with and from this information it was possible to construct categories of family composition. Young people were able to provide two sets of information if they lived in two different homes.

In terms of the first or only home in which the young person was living – 66% were living with both parents; 22% were living in a lone parent family; 11% were living in a step family; just under 1% were living with a grandparent or other adult (without a parent); and a small proportion (0.3%) were living in foster care or a children's home.

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<sup>6</sup> Seven percent of young people responded 'not sure' to this question, and a further 8% did not answer. The percentage answering 'yes' for the whole sample, including missing cases was 9.4%.

<sup>7</sup> 5.4% of young people responded 'not sure' and a further 7.6% did not answer this question.

Around a quarter of the young people in the sample said that they also lived in a second home.

### *Siblings*

About eight in nine young people (88%) lived with a sibling in their first home. In addition, where young people also lived in a second home, the proportion living with a sibling in that home was 64%. This included some young people who did not live with a sibling in their first home.

### *Family economic background*

There is no completely reliable way of asking young people about their family living standards. In this survey we asked all young people the number of adults they lived with who had a paid job. We also asked young people in the secondary sample whether they received free school meals<sup>8</sup>.

In only 5.3% of the combined sample were young people living in households without anyone in a paid job. This indicates a very high risk of poverty. Another 27% of young people only had one adult in employment<sup>9</sup>. The percentage having no one in employment was higher for households headed by a lone parent 13%. Of young people living with both parents, 23% had one adult in employment. Families with three or more children were also significantly more likely to have no one in employment than families with one or two children.

Of the secondary sample 10.8% said that they were receiving free school meals. Recipients of free school meals were, as expected, much more likely to have no one in employment – 31.2% had no one in employment.

## **Stability and change**

The preparatory research with young people for the survey as outlined in Chapter 1, identified that stability was seen by young people as an important ingredient of well-being. As discussed later in the report, this is backed up by a range of previous research which has identified changes and life events as key explanatory factors for variations in well-being.

We therefore included questions on the secondary school questionnaire about changes which young people may have experienced in the last 12 months, in terms of family structure (adults lived with); home, school and local area. Unfortunately, due to limitations on the length of the primary school questionnaire, we were not able to ask the above questions for this younger age group, so the statistics in this section related to the secondary school sample (years 8 and 10) only.

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<sup>8</sup> Pilot testing suggested that it was not feasible to ask this question on the primary school questionnaire

<sup>9</sup> This proportion includes young people living in lone parent families where there may have only been one adult in the household.

### *Family structure*

Of the young people in the secondary sample around 10% said that there had been some changes in the adults they were living with in the last 12 months. This was most likely to have happened for young people now living with a father and step parent (39%) but 23% of those living with lone mothers and 23% of those living with lone fathers had also experienced a change.

### *Moving home*

In total 17% had moved home, including 4% who had moved more than one time.

### *Moving local area*

Just under a tenth (9%) of the sample had moved local area in the last year, so clearly just under half those above who had moved home had stayed in the same local area.

### *Changing school*

Given the school year groups which young people were in, young people would not usually be expected to have moved school in the last year whether their local area had a primary and secondary school model, or a primary, middle and high school model. In the secondary school sample, 8.8% had moved school in the last year.

### *Multiple changes*

As would be expected some young people had experienced more than one of the above four changes over the last 12 months. Table 1 shows the breakdown of the number of changes for the secondary school sample. Over a quarter (26%) of the sample had experienced at least one change in their lives, and around 1% had experienced changes in all four areas – family structure, home, local area and school.

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**Table 1:** Number of changes experienced in the last 12 months (%)

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Number of changes	% of secondary school sample
None	74%
One	16%
Two	6%
Three	3%
Four	1%

N = 3,870

# 3

## Overall subjective well-being

In this chapter we describe the measures we used to assess young people's overall subjective well-being. We present summary statistics for these measures and then describe how we obtained a composite measure of overall subjective well-being. We then describe the key findings from an analysis of differences in overall subjective well-being for young people with different characteristics and backgrounds.

### Overview

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We chose to include three different measures of overall subjective well-being in the survey questionnaire. One of these asked about happiness with life as a whole. The other two were measures of overall life satisfaction.

#### Happiness with life as a whole

An overall question regarding happiness with life as a whole (from Cummins & Lau, 2005) was asked as part of a series of 22 questions – all measured on an 11-point scale where a score of zero was labelled '*very unhappy*', a score of 10 was labelled '*very happy*', and the mid-point score of 5 was labelled '*not happy or unhappy*'. The other 21 questions related to young people's happiness with specific aspects of their lives and are described in chapter 4.

A summary of scores for the whole sample is shown in Figure 1.

Young people tend to be happy - the mean score on this scale was around 8.1. Around 7% of the sample scored below the mid-point on this scale – i.e. around one in 14 young people were more unhappy than happy.

**Figure 1: Happiness with 'life as a whole'**



N = 6,718

We assessed the reliability of all the subjective well-being measures using the technique of test-retest in a sample of 109 young people in five different year 10 tutor groups. Young people were asked to complete the questionnaire on two occasions, seventeen days apart (see Goswami, 2009 for further details).

The intraclass correlation for 'happiness with life as a whole' was 0.63 ( $p < .001$ ) indicating substantial reliability according to Landis and Koch (1977).

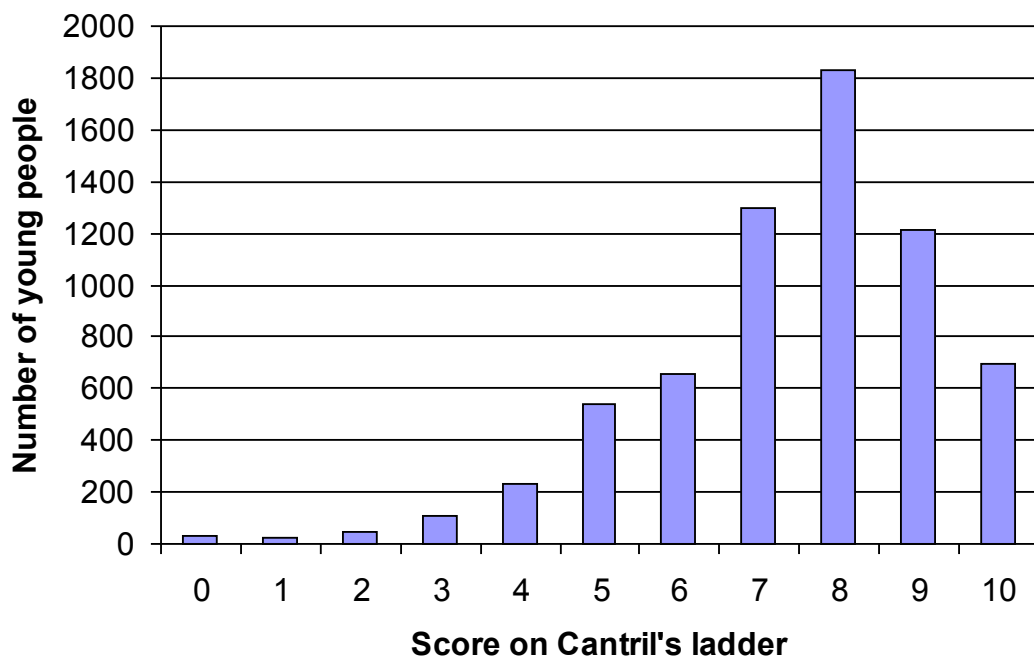
### Cantril's ladder

Cantril's ladder is an 11 point scale which is commonly used to assess subjective well-being (Cantril, 1965). The young people were told

*Here is a ladder. The top of the ladder '10' is the best possible life for you and the bottom '0' is the worst possible life for you. In general, where on the ladder do you feel you stand at the moment? Tick the box next to the number that best describes where you stand.*

A summary of scores for the whole sample is shown in Figure 2. Again young people tended to be positive. The mean score on the ladder was 7.4. A relatively small proportion (6.5%) of young people rated themselves below the mid-point on this scale – including 33 who selected a score of zero – 'the worst possible life'.

**Figure 2: Cantril's ladder**



N = 6,669

The test-retest gave an intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.59 ( $p < .001$ ) which indicates moderate reliability.

### **Huebner's life satisfaction scale**

The third measure of overall well-being which we used – Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction scale (Huebner, 1991) – takes a slightly different format. Young people were asked to respond to each of seven statements on a five-point scale from 'Strongly agree' to 'Strongly disagree'. The statements are overall evaluations of the young person's life, for example: '*My life is going well*' and '*I wish I had a different kind of life*'. The overall score then consists of the sum of scores on each of the seven items.

As part of checking the reliability of this measure, factor analysis was carried out first to examine whether these items measure a single underlying construct or not. A principal component analysis with orthogonal (varimax) rotation extracted one factor (total initial eigenvalue 3.75) explaining 53.6% of the total variance. This suggests that the seven items measure a single construct.

Cronbach's alpha was calculated to check the internal consistency of the scale and the value of 0.84 indicates very good reliability. Further exploratory testing indicated that two of the seven items could be eliminated from the scale without

any effect on Cronbach's alpha. Using the test-retest sample these two items were also shown to have the lowest levels of stability.

Thus it seemed possible to construct a life satisfaction score using five of the seven items from the Students' Life Satisfaction scale as follows:

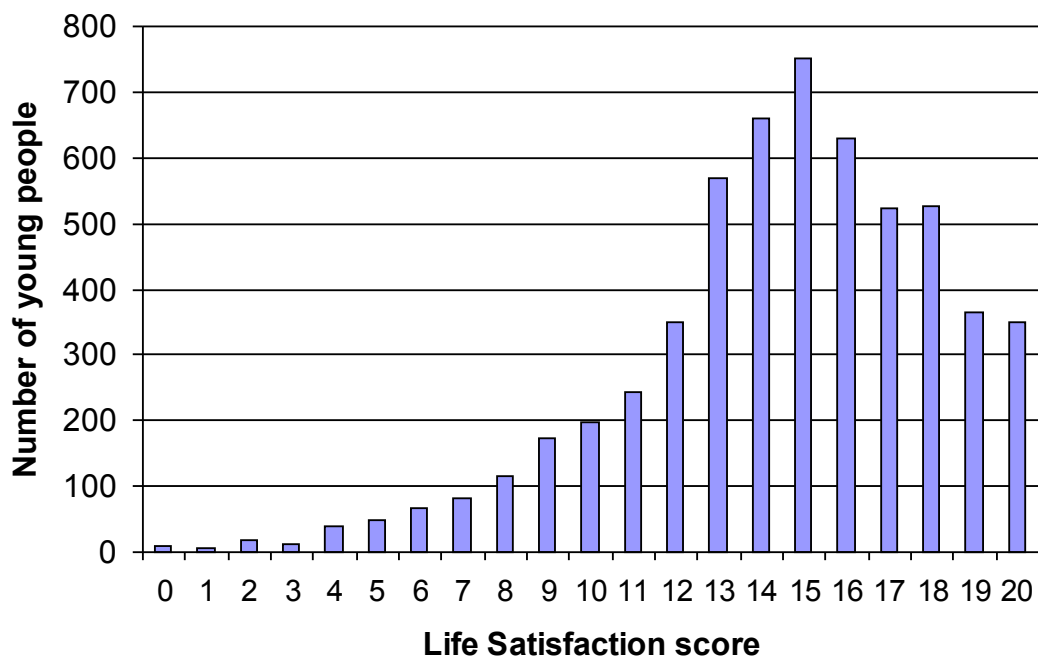
- My life is going well
- My life is just right
- I wish I had a different kind of life
- I have a good life
- I have what I want in life

Eliminating two items also has the advantage of reducing the overall level of missing data. As this scale is different from Huebner's original we call this a Life Satisfaction scale. This score can range from 0 to 20. The distribution of scores in the sample is shown in Figure 3. Again the life satisfaction of the young people was generally positive. The mean score on this scale was around 14.5. Around 10% of young people in the sample scored below the mid-point of 10 on this scale.

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**Figure 3: Life Satisfaction scores**

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N = 5,738



The test-retest on life satisfaction gave an intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.84 for five items and 0.83 ( $p < .001$  in both cases) for all items which indicates a high level of reliability.

### Relationships between the above three measures

We explored the extent to which the three measures described above were measuring the same aspects of young people's overall well-being.

Table 2 below shows the correlations between the three items. It can be seen that the strongest correlation is between the Life Satisfaction and Cantril's ladder scores, and the weakest correlation is between Cantril's ladder and happiness with life as a whole. This pattern provides some support for the idea that these three measures might be measuring slightly different aspects of young people's overall well-being.

However, when we came to analyse variations in well-being using the different scales, we found that the results were very similar, and it would be repetitive to report them for all three measures. Yet it was also very difficult to decide which of the three scales to chose, especially if they are measuring slightly different dimensions of overall subjective well-being. It was therefore decided for the purposes of this report to combine the scales into a single composite measure of subjective well-being. This was achieved by standardising each of the three measures using z scores and then adding the z scores. It can be seen in Table 2 that the correlations between the individual scales and the composite is very high, as would be expected given that they contribute to it.

**Table 2: Correlations between overall measures of well-being**

	Cantril's ladder	Happiness with life as a whole	Life satisfaction	Composite
Cantril's ladder	1	.57 **	.70 **	.87**
Happiness with life as a whole		1	.66 **	.86**
Life satisfaction			1	.90**
Composite				1

\*\*=significant at the  $<0.01$  level

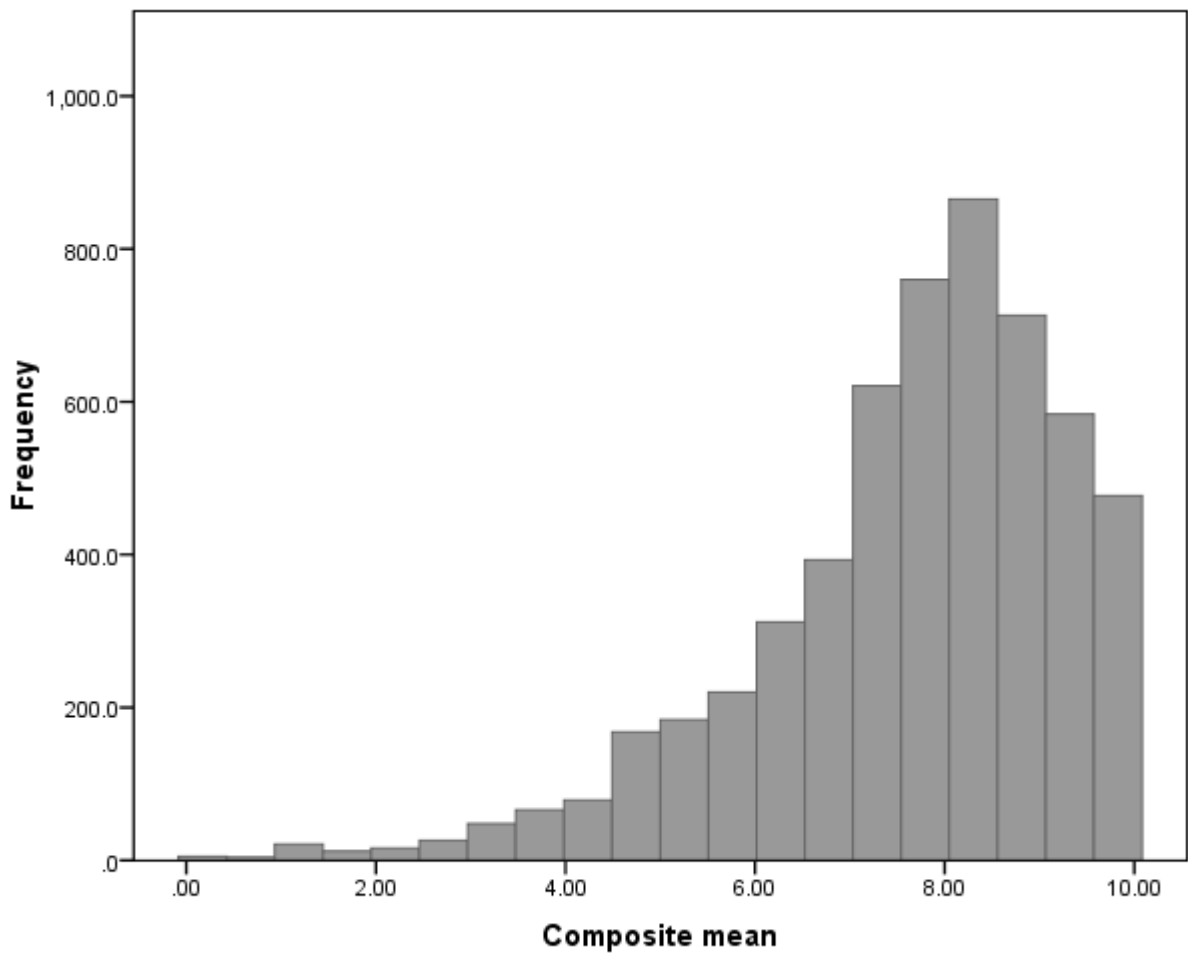
The test-retest on the composite gave an intraclass correlation coefficient of 0.81 ( $p < .001$ ) which indicates high reliability.

To provide a more accessible version of this composite measure for presentational purposes we also calculated the average mean for the three measures making up the composite (the Life Satisfaction score was first divided by two in order to convert it to a 0 to 10 scale in common with the other measures). We have used the z score measure for all statistical analysis presented in this report, but have on occasions used the composite mean in the charts and text. Figure 4 shows the distribution of the composite mean. It can be seen that, as with each of the measures individually, it is heavily skewed towards the positive end of the distribution – most young people are happy but there is tail of young people with quite low subjective wellbeing. Around one in 14 (7.1%) of young people scored below the mean on this composite measure.

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**Figure 4: Distribution of composite subjective well-being**

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N = 5,574

In the remainder of this chapter we will focus on evidence of variation in this composite overall subjective well-being measure for young people with different characteristics and backgrounds.

## Overall well-being, characteristics and backgrounds

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As outlined in Chapter 3 we included a range of socio-demographic questions in the survey questionnaire. These broadly divide into two groups – individual characteristics<sup>10</sup> and family factors.

In this section we will first summarise an analysis of the association between each of these factors individually and overall subjective well-being. We will then go on to look at the relative influence of each factor when considered in combination. This section therefore explores the question: To what extent can variations in overall subjective well-being be explained by young people's differing characteristics and backgrounds?

### Individual factors

The table below presents the results of an analysis of the association of each individual factor and overall subjective well-being.

In this table, the third column shows the mean rank - the higher the rank the better the composite subjective well-being score for each group. The fourth and fifth columns show the significance and effect size for each comparison using non-parametric tests based on rank (Mann-Whitney for two-way comparisons and Kruskal-Wallis for multi-way comparisons). The final column shows the effect size for each comparison – as a rough rule-of-thumb effect sizes between 0.1 and 0.3 may be considered 'small' and effect sizes below 0.1 may not be considered substantive.

In Table 3, it can be seen that within the survey sample:

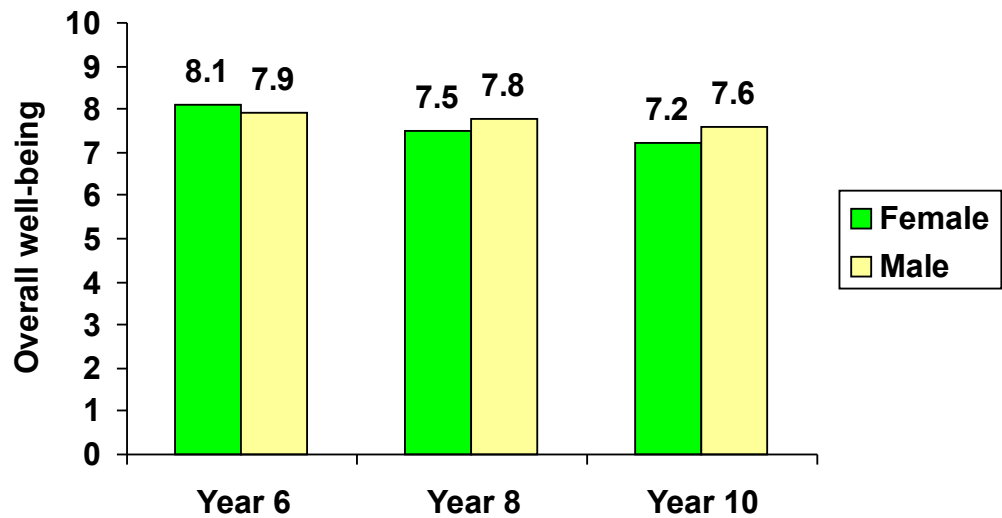
- Overall subjective well-being declined with age and the effect was reasonably substantial – the mean composite well-being score for year 6 pupils was 8.0 out of 10 compared to 7.8 for year 8 pupils and 7.6 for year 10 pupils
- Females had significantly lower well-being than males but the size of the difference was relatively small.
- Looking at the above two factors together, in year 6 females had slightly higher average overall subjective well-being (8.1 out of 10) than males (7.9). However by year 10, females (7.2) had significantly lower well-being than males (7.6).

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### Figure 5: Age and gender variations in overall subjective well-being

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<sup>10</sup> Although it should be acknowledged that 'individual' characteristics such as ethnicity and religion cannot be regarded as entirely independent of family background.



N = 5,428

- Young people who defined themselves as ‘disabled’ had significantly lower well-being (6.7 out of 10 for composite mean compared to 7.7 for the whole sample). Again the effect size was small, but there were a small number of young people in this particular sub-group within the sample.
- Young people who defined themselves as having difficulties with learning had significantly lower well-being (6.9) than others.
- There were some small but significant differences in subjective well-being according to ethnic group. Black young people and young people of ‘Other’ ethnic origin had lower well-being than White young people. However the size of these differences were very small.
- Similarly young people born outside the UK had significantly lower well-being than young people born in the UK, but again this difference was very small.
- There were some significant but small differences in well-being by religious affiliation – young people who defined themselves as Christian had slightly higher well-being than young people with no religious affiliation.

**Table 3: Individual factors and overall subjective well-being**

Variable (base for comparison)	N	Mean rank	Sig, two-tailed <sup>11</sup>	Effect size, r
<b>Year group<sup>12</sup> (10)</b>			0.000	
6	1673	3171	0.000	-0.22
8	2115	2754	0.000	-0.09
10	1786	2468		
<b>Gender</b>			0.000	-0.05
Female	2851	2678		
Male	2673	2852		
<b>Disability</b>			0.000	-0.06
No	4898	2509		
Yes	94	1832		
<b>Difficulty with learning</b>			0.000	-0.14
No	4354	2479		
Yes	474	1824		
<b>Ethnicity<sup>13</sup> (White)</b>			0.001	
Black	182	2339	0.003	-0.04
Pakistani/Bangladeshi	242	2617	0.517	-0.01
Indian	136	2776	0.495	-0.01
Mixed	245	2535	0.142	-0.02
Other	153	2306	0.003	-0.04
White	4349	2684		
<b>Country of origin</b>			0.005	-0.04
UK born	4969	2667		
Non UK born	333	2424		
<b>Religious affiliation<sup>14</sup> (None)</b>			0.000	
Christian	2098	2578	0.000	-0.08
Muslim	341	2478	0.185	-0.03
Other	391	2299	0.387	-0.02
None	2085	2363		

Family-related factors presents the findings for family-related factors.

<sup>11</sup> Using Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests.

<sup>12</sup> Bonferroni correction was applied. P values less than  $(0.05/2) = 0.03$  were regarded as significant

<sup>13</sup> Bonferroni correction was applied. P values less than  $(0.05/5) = 0.01$  were regarded as significant

<sup>14</sup> Bonferroni correction was applied. P values less than  $(0.05/3) = 0.02$  were regarded as significant

- Young people living with both parents in the same house had the highest well-being. Young people living with a lone parent in their first or only home had significantly lower well-being.
- There was no difference in well-being according to whether young people lived with siblings or not.
- Those young people living in a family where no adult in had a paid had lower well-being.

**Table 4: Family-related factors and overall subjective well-being**

Variable (base for comparison)	N	Mean rank	Sig, two-tailed <sup>15</sup>	Effect size, r
<b>Family structure<sup>16</sup> (both parents)</b>			0.000	
Both parents	3662	2869		
Lone parents	1180	2364	0.000	-.14
Step family	601	2524	0.000	-.08
<b>Living with siblings [1<sup>st</sup> home only]</b>			0.962	.00
No	666	2725		
Yes	4790	2728		
<b>Living with siblings [including 2<sup>nd</sup> home]</b>			0.776	.00
No	577	2746		
Yes	4879	2726		
<b>Number of adults in paid work<sup>17</sup> (None)</b>			0.000	
None	255	2342		
One	1427	2549	0.049	-.05
Two	2960	2792	0.000	-.08
More than two	712	2574	0.037	-.07

## Overall associations

The findings presented in the previous section suggest a number of significant differences in well-being for young people with different characteristics, backgrounds and circumstances. However none of these differences individually was particularly large. They also overlap.

<sup>15</sup> Using Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests.

<sup>16</sup> Bonferroni correction was applied. P values less than  $(0.05/2) = 0.03$  were regarded as significant.

<sup>17</sup> Bonferroni correction was applied. P values less than  $(0.05/3) = 0.02$  were regarded as significant.

We therefore explored the extent to which these factors in combination might be associated with variations in overall subjective well-being, and also in which factors were most strongly associated with lower well-being.

Table 5 shows a regression analysis of young people's socio-demographic characteristics on overall subjective well-being for the whole sample.

The six factors which emerge from this analysis as being significantly associated ( $p \leq 0.005$ ) with well-being are: age (year group), gender, self-defining as disabled, self-defining as having difficulties with learning, single parent and no adults in paid work. However the combined effect of all the factors considered in this analysis only explained around 7% of the total variation in overall subjective well-being. Ethnicity, country of birth and living with siblings were not significant.

This finding that socio-demographic factors have relatively little power in explaining variations in overall subjective well-being is consistent with previous research studies with adults and with young people (see Diener et al, 1999 and Huebner, 2004 for brief overviews).

**Table 5: Multiple regression of young people's socio-demographic characteristics on overall subjective well-being**

Socio-demographic characteristics	$\beta$	t	Sig.
<b>Year group</b> (base 10)			
6	.190	10.341	.000
8	.077	4.221	.000
<b>Gender</b> (base male)			
Female	-.055	-3.452	.001
<b>Disability</b> (base no)			
Yes	-.046	-2.834	.005
<b>Difficulty with learning</b> (base no)			
Yes	-.105	-6.486	.000
<b>Ethnicity</b> (base White)			
Black	-.024	-1.472	.141
Pakistani/Bangladeshi	-.049	-1.865	.062
Indian	-.003	-.168	.867
Mixed	-.027	-1.679	.093
Other	-.037	-2.185	.029
<b>Country of origin</b> (base UK born)			
Non UK born	-.015	-.884	.377
<b>Religious affiliation</b> (base none)			
Christian	.046	2.696	.007
Muslim	.044	1.608	.108
Other	.000	-.023	.982
<b>Family structure</b> (base both parents)			
Step parents	-.021	-1.126	.260
Single parent	-.073	-3.520	.000
Other			
<b>Living with siblings, 1<sup>st</sup> home only</b> (base yes)			
No	-.049	-2.403	.016
<b>Adults in paid job</b> (base two or more)			
None	-.050	-3.017	.003
One	-.046	-2.805	.005

Adjusted R squared = .067, F = 14.724, p = .000, N = 3809



## Environmental experiences and overall well-being

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Given this lack of variation in overall subjective well-being by socio-demographic factors, the field of well-being research has come to look for alternative explanations for variations in well-being. One of these explanations has focused on the role of environmental experiences such as life events in affecting well-being.

A number of studies of the impact of life events on subjective well-being have suggested that the effect may be relatively short-lived. For example Suh and Diener (1996) found that, in a longitudinal study with a sample of 115 students, it was events within the last three months that had by far the biggest association with current well-being. On the other hand, some studies have shown that life events can have a more lasting impact on levels of subjective well-being. For example, Lucas et al (2004) found that, based on a large longitudinal survey of adults in Germany, experience of a period of unemployment did alter people's average life satisfaction, even in the long-term.

One explanation which has been proposed for the limited impact of life events is the theory of dynamic equilibrium or homeostasis. Cummins (2009) argues that subjective well-being is an innate personal characteristic - managed by a system of psychological devices which have evolved to ensure a Homeostatically Protected Mood (HPMood). Cummins explains:

*We experience HPMood as a combination of contentment, happiness and positive arousal thus giving us a normally positive view of ourselves. It is further proposed that when homeostasis fails, due to the overwhelming nature of a negative challenge, people lose contact with HPMood and experience the dominance of negative rather than positive affect. When this condition is chronic, people experience depression*

*(Cummins 2009, p.17).*

So if this is true we do not pick up variation associated with socio-demographic differences or life events because they have been mitigated by the automatic processes of adaptation and habituation. Cummins argues that homeostasis does involve external and internal buffers. Thus external factors like wealth or relationships can help to protect against homeostatic failure. Also internal buffers such as a sense of control or self esteem can assist adaptation.

In addition to maintaining a relatively stable level of subjective well-being in the face of some level of adversity, this theory also suggests that in response to greater levels of adversity subjective well-being will initially drop substantially but that in most circumstances will then recover over time. However *'if the negative challenge is chronic and strong, recovery may not take place'* (Cummins 2009)

In this section we look at several indicators of such experiences which were included in the survey questionnaires – stability and change in young people's

lives, and aspects of young people's relationships with peers and family – and the strength of associations between these indicators and overall well-being.

### **Stability and change**

We had already identified stability as a potentially key determinant of well-being through the comments and ideas we gathered from young people in the 2005 survey. Consequently we had included four questions on stability and change in the secondary school questionnaire, as described in Chapter 2.

Table 6 here shows the association between well-being scores and recent changes in young people's lives in terms of family structure, home, school and local area. We were interested in exploring the extent to which such changes over the last 12 months might be associated with lower levels of well-being.

There were some significant associations between change and well-being here. In particular:

- young people who had, in the last 12 months, experienced a change in relation to the adults with whom they lived had significantly lower well-being than young people who had not.
- The other changes in home, school and local area, were all significantly associated with lower well-being, although the differences were not as substantial as for change in family structure.

All in all, these findings suggest a small but significant association between recent changes in young people's lives and their well-being.

**Table 6: Change and overall subjective well-being**

Variable (base for comparison)	N	Mean rank	Sig, two-tailed <sup>18</sup>	Effect size, r
<b>Change in family structure</b>			.000	-.13
No	3435	1948		
Yes	366	1455		
<b>Moving house<sup>19</sup> (No)</b>			.000	
No	3137	1904		
Yes, once	481	1781	.011	-.04
Yes, more than once	123	1375	.000	-.09
<b>Change school<sup>20</sup> (No)</b>			.000	
No	3408	1875		
Yes, once	237	1579	.000	-.07
Yes, more than once	59	1613	.061	-.03
<b>Change in local area</b>			.000	-.09
No	3222	1792		
Yes	306	1464		

We made use of the sum of changes experienced by each young person (see also Chapter 2) to calculate a correlation between the number of changes and overall well-being. The Pearson correlation was -0.15, which indicates a small association. This correlation was statistically significant. As an indication of the magnitude of this association, average overall well-being for young people who had experienced no changes over the last 12 months was 7.8 out of 10, whereas average overall well-being for those young people who had experienced at least three of the changes shown in the above table was 6.8 out of 10. In conclusion, this evidence suggests that recent change has a small but significant effect on young people's overall well-being and that the strongest association is with changes relating to the adults with whom young people live.

We also undertook a combined regression analysis for the secondary school sample, incorporating change factors into the analysis of the influence of socio-demographic factors discussed earlier. There was a relatively small increase in explanatory power, attributable to the impact of change in family structure, but notably this addition did also lessen the significance of different family

<sup>18</sup> Using Kruskal-Wallis and Mann-Whitney tests.

<sup>19</sup> Bonferroni correction was applied. P values less than  $(0.05/2) = 0.03$  were regarded as significant

<sup>20</sup> Bonferroni correction was applied. P values less than  $(0.05/2) = 0.03$  were regarded as significant

structures. This latter finding suggests that at least some of the observed small associations between lone parent families and step families and lower well-being may<sup>21</sup> be explained by young people in these family forms being more likely to have experienced a recent change in family structure.

## **Experiences of bullying**

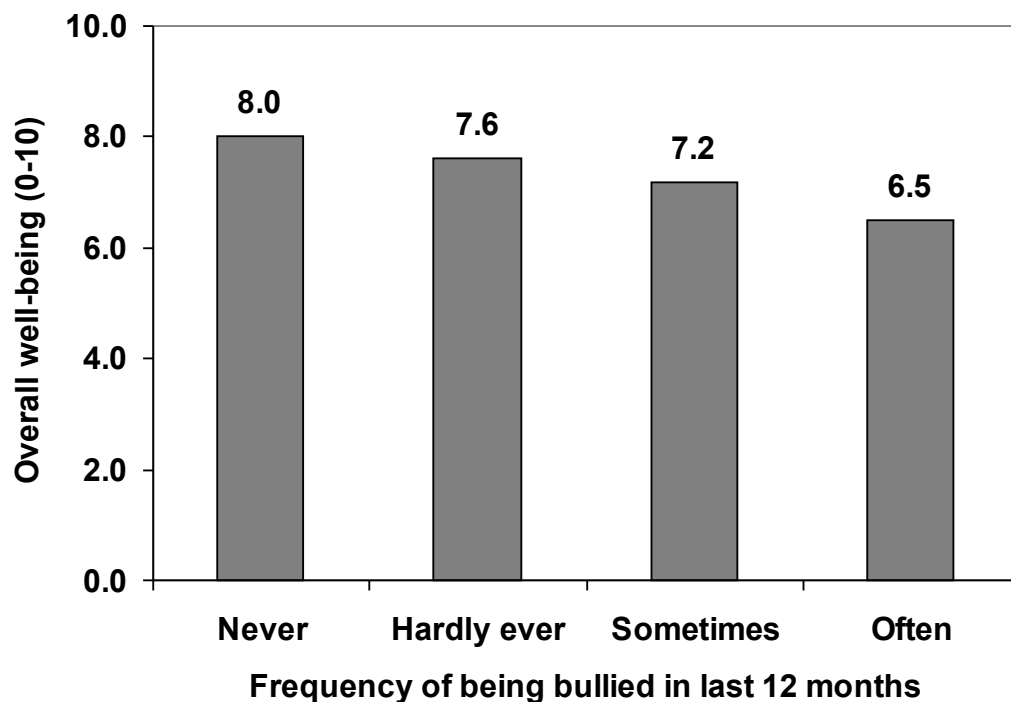
Another key issue highlighted by young people in the 2005 survey was the negative impact of bullying on their well-being. Hence we asked young people in the 2008 survey about recent experiences (in the last 12 months) of being bullied. Responses were on a four point scale – ‘Often’, ‘Sometimes’, ‘Hardly ever’ and ‘Never’. Overall, 23% of young people said that they had been bullied ‘often’ or ‘sometimes’ in the last 12 months. In line with previous research the rate of bullying declined significantly with age (28%, 24% and 17% in years 6, 8 and 10 respectively).

This variable had a statistically significant correlation (Pearson correlation = -0.26) with overall well-being in that more frequent experiences of being bullied were associated with lower levels of well-being (see Figure 6). The strength of this association with overall well-being is comparable with that of all the socio-demographic factors combined.

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<sup>21</sup> Given the design of the survey we cannot be sure about directions of causality between different variables

**Figure 6: Recent experiences of being bullied and overall well-being**



N = 5,243

### **Family relationships**

Finally, a third area highlighted by young people in the 2005 survey was the impact of the general quality of family relationships on their well-being. This is an area which has also been explored in some recent research on young people's well-being. Huebner (2004) cites a study by McCullough et al, 2000 which '*found that ongoing daily positive and negative experiences (e.g.. chronic family discord) correlated 0.39 and -0.34 respectively with global life satisfaction in a sample of high school students*'.

The next two chapters of the report will demonstrate that quality of family relationships in a general sense is one of the most fundamental aspects of young people's well-being. Here we provide a brief illustrative analysis using specific questions on quality of family relationships with the more specific aim of exploring the relative strength of association with overall well-being of aspects of the quality of family relationships and socio-demographic factors such as family structure.

We have already seen in a previous section that there were significant differences in young people's overall well-being according to the family structure they lived in, but that the size of these differences was relatively small. To

provide an indication of these differences, a regression analysis indicates that family structure only explains around 2% of the variation in overall subjective well-being. We have also seen that there were similar small but significant variations in well-being according to whether young people had experienced a change in the adults they lived with over the 12 months prior to the survey. There has been a substantial amount of research on links between family structure and outcomes for children and young people – much of it focusing on the short- and long-term impacts of parental divorce and separation. The broad picture that has emerged from this research is that, consistent with our findings above, there is a small but significant difference in ‘outcomes’ for children who experience parental divorce or separation compared to those children who grow up with both birth parents (The Children’s Society, 2009; Mooney et al, 2009). Some of these differences are primarily evident during the initial ‘crisis period’ after separation and diminish over time, whilst others persist. The finding presented above from the current survey that taking recent change into account somewhat reduces the differences in well-being for young people living in different family structures is also consistent with these earlier findings.

The research has also thrown light on the broader context of these patterns and some of the mechanisms involved. First, it has been demonstrated through retrospective research that children (and particularly boys) who experience divorce were already more likely to have behaviour and academic problems some years before their parents separated (Cherlin et al 1991 cited in The Children’s Society, 2009). This finding points to the need to view family change as an ongoing process rather than an event. Second, and linked to the above, aspects of the quality of general family relationships – such as family conflict – before, during and after separation has been found to play a key role in explaining variations in outcomes. To reinforce this point some studies (see Mooney et al, 2009) have shown that children living with both parents in a high conflict environment fare worse than children whose families have separated. Bearing these points in mind, Mooney et al’s (2009) research review for DCSF summarises that *‘Research in this area clearly shows that family functioning has a greater impact on outcomes than family structure.’*

The research on this topic referred to above has used a variety of indicators of well-being and/ or outcomes. Many of these studies have focused on specific problem issues such as educational attainment, mental health and risky behaviours. Relatively few have utilised measures of overall well-being. Our survey offers an opportunity to explore these issues making use of such a measure.

The secondary school questionnaire included the items from the ‘family’ domain of Huebner’s Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale. The family sub-scale consists of seven items exploring young people’s views about general quality of family life (e.g. *‘I enjoy being at home with my family’*) and also about

relationships with parents or carers specifically (e.g. *'My parents treat me fairly'*). In our survey sample, this family sub-scale showed high levels of reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.896). Exploratory factor analysis suggests that these seven items measure a single concept. We constructed a family score by summing the responses to the seven questions. This overall score had a strong significant association (Pearson correlation = 0.60) with our composite measure of overall well-being.

Given the previous findings cited above on issues of family conflict and harmony, we were interested in exploring the association of this particular aspect of family functioning with well-being. We did not have a specific question on family conflict, but the set of items described above included several statements on closely related topics. We use the responses to one of these of statements *'My family gets along well together'* as an illustrative example.

Responses to this single statement on a five point scale (from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree') showed a strong association with overall well-being (Pearson correlation = 0.479). Young people who agreed or strongly agreed with this statement had an average well-being score of around 8.0 out of 10, compared to around 5.9 out of 10 for those who disagreed or strongly disagreed.

We can use this example to illustrate the relative strength of association of family structure, family change and family functioning on overall well-being. Table 7 shows the results of a regression analysis of the above. The total explanatory power of this model was around 23%. It can be seen that the question on families 'getting on well together' is by far the most powerful explanatory factor. This factor alone explained over 20% of the variation in overall subjective well-being. Even when taking this into account a recent change in family structure remains a significant predictor of overall well-being although its influence is relatively small. The influence of family structure is even more limited. Living in a lone parent family is also significant although its influence is small, and living in a step family has no significant impact on overall well-being when the other variables are taken into account.

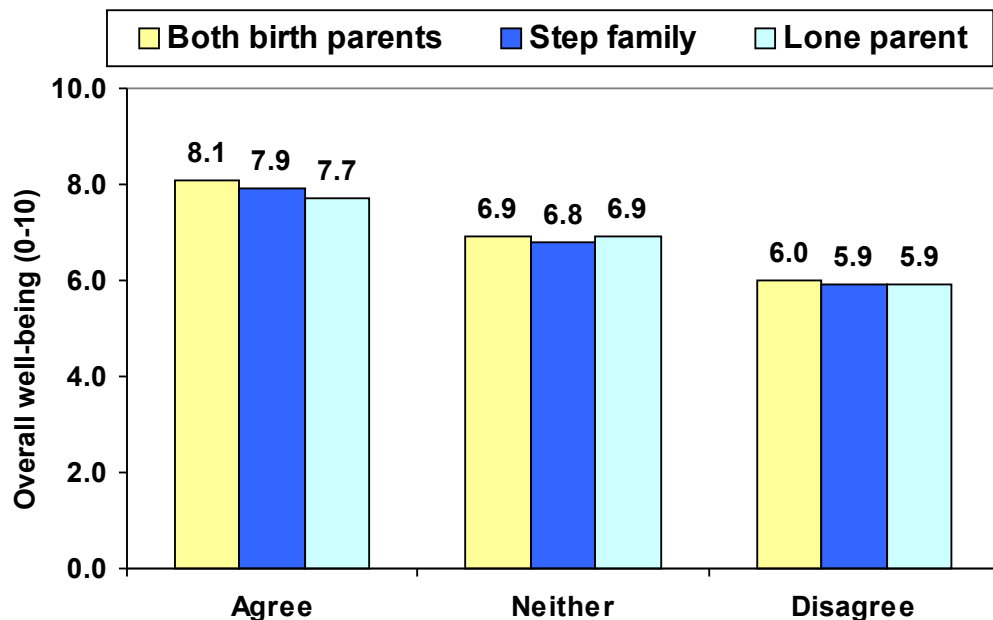
**Table 7: Regression of family structure, change and conflict onto overall well-being**

	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
My family gets along well together	.459	30.810	.000
Change in family structure Yes (Ref = No)	-.049	-3.172	.002
Lone parents (Ref = Both parents)	-.047	-2.958	.003
Step family (Ref = Both parents)	-.015	-.990	.322

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.23, F = 270.435. p = .000, N = 3,615.

An illustration of this analysis is provided in Figure 7. It can be seen that young people living in families that got along well together had much higher average levels of well-being than those living in families that did not, irrespective of the family structure they lived in.

**Figure 7: 'My family gets along well together'<sup>22</sup>**



<sup>22</sup> Question asked in secondary school questionnaire only. For simplicity of presentation the 'agree' category above is a combination of 'agree' and 'strongly agree' responses and the 'disagree' category is a combination of 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' responses.



All in all, then, this analysis confirms previous findings from research in other countries that, at a broad level, family functioning has a much stronger association with young people's well-being than does family structure.

## Summary

In summary, the analysis presented in this section suggests a small but significant impact of environmental experiences such as life events and key relationships on overall well-being. Furthermore there are reasons to think that a more extensive set of questions might demonstrate a more substantial impact of life events. First, we were only able to include a small selection of the potentially significant life events that might affect young people's well-being. Previous research has generated a large number of potential items for exploration. Second, as discussed earlier research with adult populations has suggested that the impact of many life events may often be relatively short-lived. Thus the time scales of 12 months we used for the change and events measures described earlier may have served to underplay the impact of recent events. We plan to explore this topic more extensively in future waves of the survey.

## Cumulative disadvantage and well-being?

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Finally we undertook some analysis to explore the potential cumulative effect of a number of socio-demographic factors on overall subjective well-being. We were interested in this topic because previous research studies have demonstrated that the cumulative effects of a number of disadvantages can have a significant impact on young people's lives (e.g. HM Treasury, 2007).

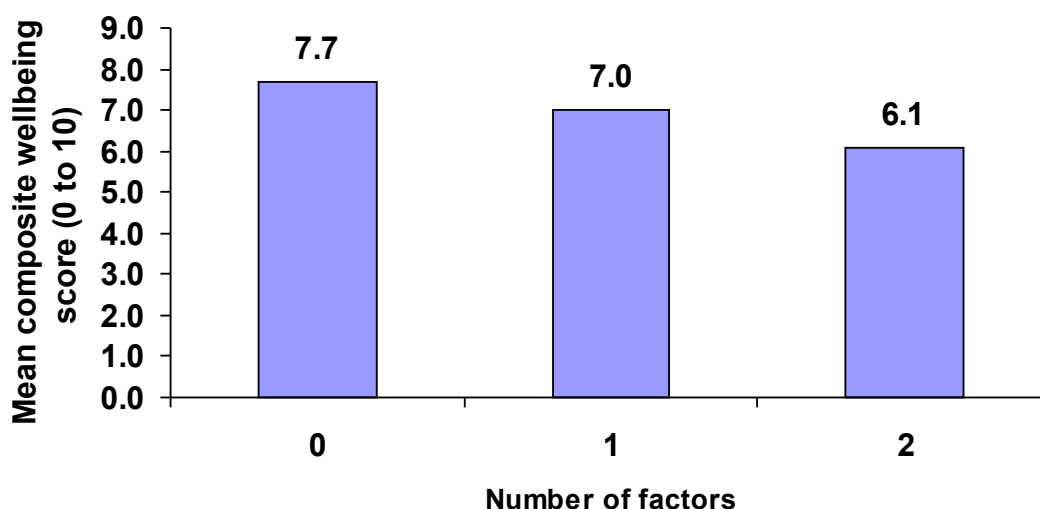
To test this we constructed a score where one point was allotted for each of the following three factors – living in a household where no adult had paid job, change in family structure in the last 12 months and a young person defining themselves as disabled. Around 14% of the secondary school sample reported at least one of these factors although only one young person reported all three factors.

The chart below shows the mean overall subjective well-being for young people with different numbers of factors (the single case of the young person who had all three factors can not be represented in the chart).

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**Figure 8: Overall subjective well-being and cumulative disadvantage**

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N = 3,250

It can be seen from Figure 8 that there is a decline in overall subjective well-being as the number of factors increases. The correlation (Spearman's rho) between these two variables was -0.15 ( $p < .001$ ).

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## Summary and discussion

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### Key points

In the first part of this chapter we presented the basic findings from the survey for three measures of overall well-being. All three measures suggest that most young people surveyed were faring well. For example, the large majority (at least 90%) reported themselves to be at or above the mid-point on a measure of happiness with life as a whole and, therefore, were relatively happy with their lives.

The chapter then moved on to look at the extent to which socio-demographic factors, such as age, ethnicity and family economic status, were associated with higher or lower subjective well-being. The overall picture here is one of significant but relatively small associations:

- A number of factors – including ethnicity, religious affiliation, number of siblings and country of birth – did not appear to be associated with levels of well-being to any significant extent.

- Other factors – including age, gender, difficulties with learning, lone parent family and workless adults – were significantly associated with well-being, but in no case were these associations particularly strong. Overall the combined influence of these factors only explained around 7% of the total variation in well-being.
- The incidence of recent change in young people’s lives – in family structure, home, school and local area – also had a small but significant association with lower well-being.
- Other aspects of young people’s experiences such as being bullied and quality of family relationships had a stronger association with overall well-being and demonstrate that environmental experiences have a much greater bearing on well-being than socio-demographic factors.
- In addition there was some evidence that the accumulation of a number of factors can be associated with substantially lower levels of subjective well-being.

## **Discussion**

The fact that most young people are faring well is reassuring in the light of the kinds of concerns about young people’s well-being highlighted in the review in Chapter 1. Given this positive overall picture, attention naturally turns to seeking to identify the factors associated with the lower well-being experienced by around 7% to 10% of young people.

At first sight it might seem surprising that socio-demographic factors appeared to have such limited explanatory power in terms of variations in well-being. However, this finding is not particularly out of line with other well-being research. For example, a comprehensive international literature review recently published by the OECD showed that there was a strongly consistent picture of a relatively small association between living in a lone parent family and child well-being (Chapple, 2009). In addition, at a more general level, it has been suggested that human beings have an in-built tendency to positive subjective well-being within a relatively restricted range. This tendency has been termed ‘homeostasis’ (Cummins, 2009).

Nevertheless some caution is needed in concluding that socio-demographic and environmental factors are unimportant in understanding variations in young people’s well-being.

First, the evidence on cumulative negative factors discussed earlier suggests that some young people may be at particular risk of low well-being. This possibility is not inconsistent with the theory of homeostasis mentioned above. We were only able to measure a relatively small number of such factors in the current survey. It is therefore possible that a more sophisticated approach –

perhaps taking into account such factors as young people who have caring responsibilities and young people in additional groups which suffer prejudice and discrimination – would be able to explain a greater proportion of the observed variation in overall well-being.

Second, some of the evidence presented above on the impact of family change suggests that dynamic factors of this kind might be important in understanding variations in well-being. Again this is not inconsistent with the theory of homeostasis in that well-being may dip for a time during and after particular negative life events. We plan to incorporate further work on the impact of life events into future stages of the research programme.

Third, some of the socio-demographic measures we used may not have been sufficiently comprehensive to capture the intended factor. In particular, the reliance on the number of adults in the household in paid work and free school meal entitlements are not entirely satisfactory proxy measures for family economic status. There is a need to identify or develop more sophisticated self-report measures in this area, which can offer a more reliable means of exploring the association between poverty and well-being.

The above points highlight the need for further more detailed exploration of the potential links between socio-demographic factors, life events and well-being. We hope to pursue this exploration in the future stages of this research programme.

# 4

## Components of well-being

In this chapter we look at a set of 21 questions on both survey questionnaires which asked about young people's happiness in various areas of their lives, such as their health, their friendships and their school work. Some of these areas were suggested by previous research, particularly Cummins' work to develop a Personal Well-Being Index for adults in Australia, which has been extended also to ask school-aged children about their well-being (Cummins & Lau, 2005). We were also influenced by the work of Casas et al (2007) in Spain, which explored a larger number of dimensions. In selecting our topics we took into account the above work and also the key issues identified by young people in earlier survey work described in Chapter 2. The final set consisted of 21 items. Seven of these were the items from Cummins' PWI-SC index; several additional items were taken from the list constructed by Casas; and the remainder were ones chosen specifically for this survey.

As with the overall subjective well-being score presented in the previous chapter, for each item young people were asked to select a response on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 was labelled '*very unhappy*', 10 was labelled '*very happy*', and 5 was labelled '*not happy or unhappy*'.<sup>23</sup>

This chapter focuses mainly on young people's responses to these 21 questions. It:

- Provides an overview of young people's happiness in each area
- Presents an analysis of associations between socio-demographic factors and happiness in each area.

Due to space restrictions and issues with question wording, we were not able to include an item in this list for every aspect of the well-being framework

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<sup>23</sup> Note: These items were presented on two pages of the questionnaire. We have excluded from the analysis presented in this chapter those young people (just under 7%) who responded to every question on either page with the same response.

highlighted earlier. In particular there were no items relating to people in the local community or to the national or global domains. We did however ask some specific questions about these topics in other sections of the questionnaire and will be publishing findings on these areas in the future.

## Overview

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Table 8 summarises the overall picture of young people's happiness across these 21 aspects of their lives. Looking first at the mean scores in the second column, which are presented in descending order, it can be seen that, whilst young people are predominantly happy in all areas, on average they tend to be happier with some aspects of their lives than others:

- The highest three domains are Home, Family and Friends respectively, all with average happiness scores above 8.5 out of 10
- The lowest three domains are Appearance, School work and Confidence, with average happiness scores between 6.8 and 7.1.

The third column shows the percentage of young people who rated their happiness below the mid-point ('not happy or unhappy') for each aspect. The ordering of these aspects broadly follows the same pattern. Most young people are relatively happy with all these aspects of their lives, and:

- The lowest levels of unhappiness are with Home and Friends (both below 5%)
- The highest levels of unhappiness are with Appearance and Confidence (both above 15%).

**Table 8: Happiness in 21 different areas of well-being**

How happy are you ...	Mean	% unhappy
about the home you live in	8.7	4.9%
with your friends	8.6	4.6%
with your family	8.6	5.7%
about the groups of people you belong to	8.2	5.1%
about getting on with the people you know	8.2	4.9%
about how you enjoy yourself	8.2	5.2%
about the things you have	8.1	5.7%
with your health	8.0	7.7%
about doing things away from your home	8.0	7.2%
with the things you want to be good at	7.8	7.5%
about communicating with people	7.8	7.6%
about the amount of freedom you have	7.8	10.5%
about how safe you feel	7.6	8.6%
about the amount of choice you have in life	7.6	10.6%
about how you spend your time	7.6	8.9%
about what may happen to you later on in your life	7.4	10.4%
about the school that you go to	7.3	13.2%
with your local area	7.2	13.8%
with your confidence	7.0	16.0%
about your school work	6.9	11.9%
with your appearance	6.8	17.5%

N = 6,145 to 6,321

We now go on to provide a little more information about the above findings and consider the extent to which socio-demographic factors, when considered in combination, can explain variations in well-being in specific domains.

For brevity we organise the material according to the three domains and additional cross-cutting themes identified in the well-being framework on which the questionnaire was based, as outlined in Chapter 1.

For each aspect of well-being we first consider factors which were significantly and substantively associated with this aspect, then also make brief mention of other factors for which the association was statistically significant.

## Relationships

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Four of the 21 happiness measures presented above related to young people's relationships with others:

- your family
- your friends
- the groups of people you belong to
- getting on with the people you know

As can be seen from Table 8, these domains made up four out of the five domains in which young people were most happy.

Further analysis of the correlations between young people's scores on these four domains (see next chapter) suggests that, in fact, the last three listed above are quite closely related and may not be measuring separate aspects of young people's lives. Thus in this section we look at family and friends as two distinct areas.

### Family

The three factors most substantively associated with lower happiness with family were:

- Being older
- Living in a lone parent or step family
- Changes in family structure

There were also small but significant associations with gender (females being less happy with this aspect) and having difficulties with learning.

Happiness with family was not significantly related to other socio-demographic variables including ethnicity and, notably, family economic status as measured by adults in a paid job or free school meal entitlement.

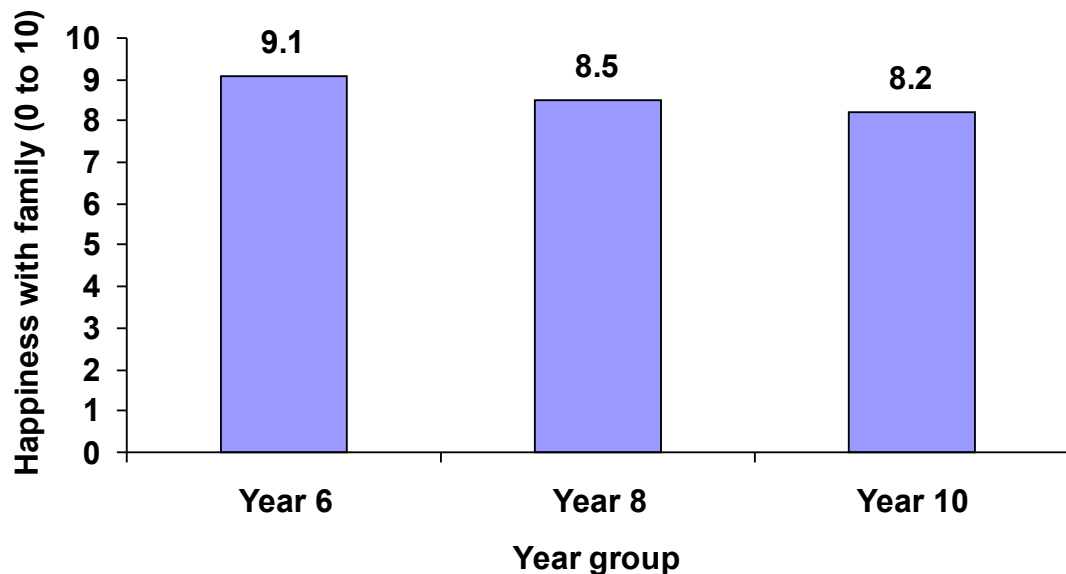
This was one of the areas of young people's lives where the age effect was most apparent, as shown in Figure 9.



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**Figure 9: Happiness with family by year group**

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N = 6,198

## Friends

Happiness with friendships was generally not strongly associated with socio-demographic factors at all. Notably, it was one of the few areas where there was little evidence of an age effect. Mean happiness scores were almost the same for young people in Year 6 (8.5), Year 8 (8.4) and Year 10 (8.5).

## Environments

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The set of happiness questions included the following four items directly related to the environmental domain within our well-being framework:

- the things you have
- the home you live in
- the school that you go to
- your local area

The pattern of associations with socio-demographic variables was similar across these four areas.

Here again there was a significant and substantive age effect with young people becoming less happy in this respect as they grew older.

As would be expected there was also a link between family economic status and happiness here, but this was not particularly strong – again perhaps suggesting that the variables used to measure this are not adequate. In addition, even taking into account family economic status, there were some small significant associations between family structure and happiness in these four domains, with young people living in lone parent families tending to fare slightly worse than average. In two domains ('home' and 'school') these differences were substantive. However once again, the combination effect of all these factors only explained a relatively small amount of the variation in well-being in these four areas.

Young people who had difficulties with learning were significantly less happy in all four areas – and particularly in relation to happiness with the school that they go to.

There was little evidence of any notable associations with other demographic variables such as gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation or disability.

## Self

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As outlined in the explanation of the framework of well-being described in Chapter 1, we wished to make a distinction, in the 'Self' domain between two dimensions – one focused more on well-being in the present and the other more developmental and future-oriented.

### **Personal well-being related to the present**

Looking first at happiness with health, although there were a number of small significant associations here only the general downward trend with age was substantive.

There were more interesting patterns in relation to two happiness items related to sense of self – namely, appearance and confidence.

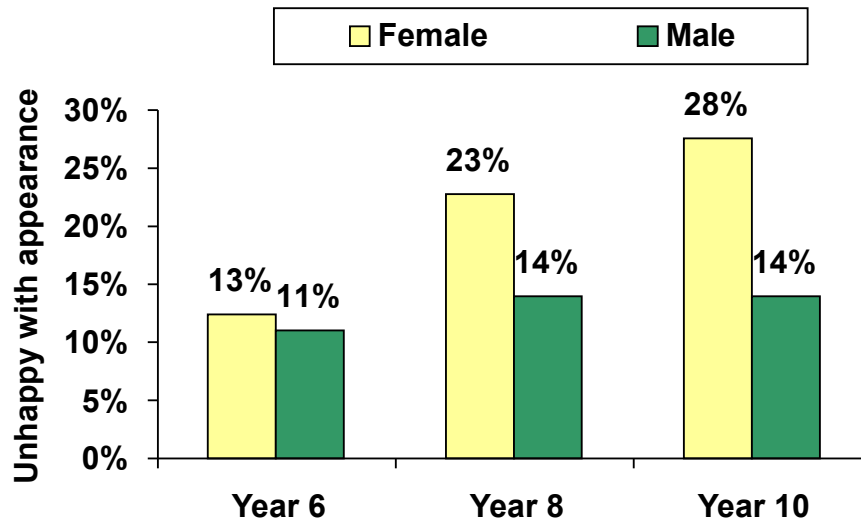
#### *Appearance*

Happiness with appearance was significantly and substantively associated with age and gender:

- Young people were less happy with their appearance as they got older
- Females were less happy with their appearance than males

These differences in happiness with appearance by gender and age group were quite striking and are illustrated in Figure 10:

**Figure 10: Unhappiness with appearance by gender and year group**



N = 6,030

There were also some differences across different ethnic groups. White young people were the least happy with their appearance of all the ethnic groups. Young people of Black – African/Caribbean and of Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin were the happiest with this aspect of their lives.

There were also smaller but still significant associations between disability and difficulties with learning and lower happiness with appearance.

Finally there was a relatively small association with family structure and no discernible association with family economic status.

#### *Confidence*

A similar pattern was evidence for happiness with confidence with the key variables being age and gender. Again the combined effect of age and gender was notable with happiness with confidence falling much more steeply with age for females (7.5 in year 6 to 6.1 in year 10) than for males (7.9 in year 6 to 7.1 in year 10).

#### *Leisure*

Two items on the list of 21 asked about leisure:

- How you enjoy yourself

- How- you spend your time

The only substantive association here was the usual decline of happiness with age. There were small but significant associations for difficulties with learning, with young people who defined themselves in this category having lower levels of happiness for these two aspects.

### **Personal well-being related to development and the future**

This area of the framework was covered by three questions relation to happiness with '*school work*', '*things you want to be good at*', and '*what may happen to you later in life*'.

#### *School work*

Older young people tended to be less happy with their school work than those in the younger age groups. There were a number of smaller significant associations of lower happiness here linked to living in a lone parent or step family, experience of family change, and living in a household where no adult had a paid job.

#### *Competence*

Happiness with '*things you want to be good at*' potentially captures more general feelings of competence. Lower happiness in this area was substantively associated with being older and being female.

Young people who defined themselves as having difficulties with learning were also significantly less happy in both the above areas but this would be expected based on self-definition.

#### *The future*

Finally, in terms of a longer-term view, happiness with '*what may happen to you later in life*' was substantively lower for older young people and young people who had difficulties with learning. There were also some smaller differences relating to gender, family structure and experience of family change.

## **Freedom, choice and safety**

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### **Safety**

Young people felt less happy with their safety as they grew older – with the mean falling from around 7.8 in year 6 to between 7.1 and 7.2 in the secondary school age groups.

The other two factors that were significantly associated with lower happiness in this topic area were being female and having difficulties with learning.

### **Freedom and choice**

There were few notable associations between freedom and socio-demographic factors. Again the only substantive factors was age. The other significant associations were with difficulties with learning and gender.

In relation to happiness about amount of choice, in addition to substantive associations with age and difficulties with learning, family structure and experiencing a change in family structure in the last year were associated with lower happiness in this area.

## **Summary and discussion**

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### **Key points**

This chapter has introduced 21 questions about young people's happiness with various aspects of their lives, which were asked in both the primary and secondary questionnaires.

In general, as with overall well-being, most young people were happy with their lives in each of these areas. There were, however, some areas, where young people were faring better than others. In particular, on average, young people were most likely to be happy with their home, their family and their friends. They were least likely to be happy with their school work, their appearance and their confidence. In the last two areas over 15% of young people were unhappy to a greater or less extent.

The chapter then moved on to look at differences in well-being in each of these 21 areas according to socio-demographic factors. There is a substantial amount of detail in the findings in this section of the report, which it is difficult to summarise neatly here, but we draw attention to the following over-arching points:

- Happiness with most aspects of life declines with age. The key exception is happiness with friendships which appears to remain constant across all three age groups.
- Females are less happy than males in some key areas, most notably with their appearance and their confidence.
- Young people who define themselves as having difficulties with learning are less happy than others in virtually every area.

- Disabled young people are also less happy in some key areas – particularly with their health and with their school work.
- There were relatively few significant differences according to ethnicity, but Black and minority ethnic young people were more likely to be happy with their appearance than White young people. The same applies to young people born outside the UK.
- Religious affiliation did not generally appear to be a significant factor, when considered in combination with the other factors discussed here.
- The family structure within which young people lived appeared to have some bearing on their happiness in a number of areas, with family and home being the most prominent. Recent experience of a change in family structure also appeared to be important here.
- The poverty measures we used were significantly associated with happiness in several areas including material possessions, home, school and school work although the differences were not large.

## **Discussion**

Many of the conclusions we can draw from the above findings echo those identified in the previous chapter on overall well-being. Again, perhaps, the first point to make is that most young people are faring relatively well and that the proportion who tend to be unhappy is a minority, ranging from around 5% to 15% across the 21 aspects measured.

The analysis of socio-demographic factors also tends to present the same picture as in Chapter 3. Relatively speaking, these factors, whilst sometimes significant, do not tend to have a high level of explanatory power.

Age seems to be one of the most important factors and the finding that it was not associated with happiness with friendships confirms that older young people were not simply automatically responding to these questions at a lower level than the younger age groups.

Young people who defined themselves as having difficulties with learning tended to be less happy in all areas of their lives and this should be cause for concern.

Other socio-demographic associations tended mostly to reflect logical associations such as that between changes in family structure and happiness with family; and that between poverty and happiness with material possessions and the home environment.

# 5

## The structure of well-being

In the previous chapter we have explored the responses to 21 questions that cover different elements of well-being. In this final chapter of findings we explore how these elements contribute to the measure of overall subjective well-being introduced in Chapter 3.

### Theories of the structure of well-being

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The analysis in this chapter is based on the idea that overall life satisfaction is made up of satisfaction in various domains – such as the family or the local area. According to this approach to well-being, individuals make a summative judgement of their life satisfaction, based on their level of satisfaction in particular domains (possibly weighted by the importance they attach to each domain). This approach – which is often termed a ‘bottom up’ theory – might seem ‘common sense’ but it is by no means universally accepted and, in fact, has been the subject of significant challenge for some considerable time (see for example Diener, 1984).

One of the initial reasons for the ‘bottom up’ theory being questioned was the lack of evidence of the influence of socio-demographic factors in explaining variations in subjective well-being. As discussed in Chapter 3, factors such as age, gender, and socio-economic status have repeatedly been found to explain only a small proportion of the variation in well-being. The analysis presented in that chapter confirms that this is also the case in terms of the present study of the well-being of young people in England.

An opposing view is represented by ‘top down’ theories of the structure of well-being. These theories take the view that overall life satisfaction determines satisfaction in specific domains rather than the other way round. Support for this theoretical approach comes from evidence from numerous studies over several

decades of a relationship between personality and overall life satisfaction (see Diener & Lucas, 1998) – although there is an ongoing debate about the nature, strength and stability of this relationship (see for example Gomez et al, 2009 and also reference to Cummins, 2009 in previous chapter).

There is also evidence which undermines the case for a simple ‘top down’ theory. In particular, as Schimack (2007) notes, if the primary causal link is from overall life satisfaction to domain satisfaction then one would expect high correlations between satisfaction in different domains, whereas typically it has been found that these correlations are of low to medium magnitude. However, Schimack also describes a more complex top-down theory which can explain this pattern by introducing consideration of the relative importance of different domains.

It is beyond the scope of this report to consider in more depth the relative arguments for and against the two different approaches described above. Suffice it to say that, more recently, emphasis has switched to approaches which combine ‘bottom up’ and ‘top down’ theories (e.g. Schimack et al, 2002; Heller et al, 2004). These combined approaches take the view that there is an interaction between overall life satisfaction and satisfaction in particular domains. In addition, on the one hand, internal factors such as personality may influence life satisfaction which then influences domain satisfaction; on the other hand, external life events can influence satisfaction in one or more domains which can impact on overall life satisfaction.

The body of research referred to above has primarily involved studies on the well-being of adults. There are reasons to consider this issue more specifically in relation to young people. For example, ‘top down’ approaches rely on an assumption about the relative stability of personality types over time. Many studies have broadly supported this assumption with adult populations although there is also evidence of some ongoing change (Roberts et al, 2006). There are suggestions from the theoretical literature that personality may be more fluid during childhood and adolescence (Klimstra et al, 2009).

As we discuss in the concluding chapter of this report, we see this as a critical area for future exploration as part of the current research programme. However, in this particular report we focus on a ‘bottom up’ approach to the structure of well-being. We will first present the analysis we have undertaken using this approach, and then will make the case in the concluding part of the chapter for the value of this approach.

Our analytical approach, the findings of which are presented in the next sections of this chapter, was as follows. First, we explored individual relationships between each of the 21 domains of well-being discussed in the previous chapter, and between these domains and overall well-being. We then move on to explore the explanatory power of different models (sets of domains) on overall



well-being. This includes consideration of two models which have been developed through previous research, and also two alternative models which we have generated through new analysis as part of this project.

## **Associations between domains and with overall well-being**

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### **Associations between domains**

We explored the associations between domains by calculation correlations between each pair. The following is a brief summary of the key patterns.

The range of correlations was from +0.22 to +0.640. The mean of all bivariate correlations was +0.37. This is not high enough to provide unequivocal support for a 'top down' approach to the structure of well-being as discussed above.

There were some notably high correlations within the matrix:

- There were strong associations between some of the items pertaining to relationships. The correlation between 'getting on with people you know' and 'friends' was 0.+63; and the correlation between 'friends' and 'groups of people that you belong to' was +0.54. On the other hand it is noteworthy that the correlation between 'getting on with people you know' and 'family' was only +0.39 which is barely above the average correlation across the whole matrix. This combination of associations suggests that young people may interpret the item about 'getting on with people you know' as mainly concerned with friendships and peer relationships rather than with family relationships.
- There was a strong association (+0.58) between 'the amount of choice you have in life' and 'what may happen to you later in life' which may be indicative of a perceived lack of opportunity.
- There was also a reasonably strong association between satisfaction with 'appearance' and 'confidence'.
- Finally there was a network of strong correlations between 'how you spend your time', 'enjoying yourself' and 'communicating with other people'. The latter variable was also strongly correlated with 'confidence'.

At the other end of the range there were 34 correlations below +0.30. The variables most commonly involved in these weaker correlations were:

- 'The school that you go to' (8 pairs of correlations)
- School work (8 pairs of correlations)
- 'Doing things away from your home' (8 pairs of correlations)

- Safety (4 pairs of correlations)

### **Associations of domains with overall well-being**

Table 9 shows bivariate correlations between each of the domain measures discussed in the previous chapter and our composite variable of overall well-being introduced in Chapter 3.

Correlations have been ranked in descending order, so it can be seen that the 'family' domain is the most strongly associated with overall well-being, and 'doing things away from your home' is the most weakly correlated. However all correlations were statistically significant and of medium to high strength.

We now go on to look at what part the different domains play in explaining variations in overall well-being when looked at in combination.

**Table 9: Correlations between domains and overall well-being**

Happiness ...	Correlation with overall well-being <sup>24</sup>
with your family	.59
about the amount of choice you have in life	.55
about the things you have	.52
about what may happen to you later on in your life	.51
about the home you live in	.51
about how you enjoy yourself	.48
about the amount of freedom you have	.48
about how you spend your time	.48
about the groups of people you belong to	.47
with your appearance	.47
with your health	.45
about communicating with people	.45
about how safe you feel	.44
with the things you want to be good at	.42
about getting on with the people you know	.41
with your confidence	.41
about the school that you go to	.41
about your school work	.41
with your friends	.40
with your local area	.39
about doing things away from your home	.31

N = 5,053 to 5,186

## Domain models of well-being

### Cummins' Personal Well-Being Index

The first model we consider is the young people's version (PWI-SC) of Cummins' Personal Well-Being Index (PWI).

<sup>24</sup> Bivariate Pearson correlation between each domain and the composite overall well-being measure.

The PWI is a seven item index which was initially developed to measure the well-being of adults in Australia (Cummins & Lau, 2006). The index covers seven domains – standard of living, personal health, achievement in life, personal relationships, personal safety, feeling part of the community, and future security. Some of the thinking behind this selection of domains is described in Cummins (1996). The PWI has been shown to have good construct validity, convergent validity, reliability and sensitivity (Cummins & Lau, 2006). Time series data for the general public is available in Australia from 2001 onwards (see website) and data is also available for a number of other countries.

Several other versions of the index have also been developed of which one (the PWI-SC) is for school-aged children (Cummins & Lau, 2005). The seven items of the PWI-SC refer to the same domains but some of the wordings differ from the adult versions.

We included these seven items amongst the 21 items discussed in the previous chapter. The results of a regression analysis of the seven PWI-SC items against our composite overall well-being variable are shown in Table 10.

**Table 10: Regression of PWI-SC items against overall well-being**

Model	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
Happiness: about how safe you feel	.139	11.577	.000
Happiness: about getting on with the people you know	.133	11.136	.000
Happiness: about the things you have	.250	20.339	.000
Happiness: with your health	.136	11.150	.000
Happiness: about what may happen to you later on in your life	.226	17.462	.000
Happiness: with the things you want to be good at	.110	8.727	.000
Happiness: about doing things away from your home	.003	.263	.792

Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.47$ ,  $F = 604.06$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $N = 4,842$

The adjusted  $R^2$  for this model is 0.47, which means that, treating the composite well-being measure as a dependent variable, the seven items in combination explain around 47% of the variation in this variable.

It should be noted that one item – ‘doing things away from your home’ – did not contribute significantly to the model. The explanatory power of the model was the same (0.47) without this item. This item was intended to capture a sense of feeling part of your community and it may be that, for young people in the UK, an alternative wording is required. We tested substituting another item – ‘the groups of people that you belong to’ – for this variable, as this seemed potentially to tap into a similar concept. This substitute item made a significant contribution to the model, but the overall explanatory power of the model only increased by about 1%. However note that as indicated earlier there was a relatively high correlation between this variable and the item relating to ‘getting on with the people you know’.

## Huebner's domains of life satisfaction

We were also interested to explore alternative domain models of well-being which have been proposed in the literature. One such model which has been extensively tested and utilised is a five domain structure developed by Huebner consisting of satisfaction with family, friends, self, school and living environment. Two different measures have been developed to reflect this five domain model. One is the Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner, 1994) which is a 40 item scale with between seven and nine items per domain. We included a number of these sets of items in the survey questionnaire and will be presenting the findings from these in future research reports. The second measure is the Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (Huebner et al, 2006) which consists of a single item for each of the above five domains with responses on a seven point scale from 'terrible' to 'delighted'. We were not able to utilise this scale directly in our questionnaire as there would have been substantial overlap with other question formats, but we were interested to test out the broad domain structure proposed by Huebner.

In order to do this, we undertake two regression analyses. The first utilised the five items from our list of 21 which we felt most closely matched the five domains. These were happiness with family, friends, home (to represent 'living environment'), school and appearance (to represent 'self').

The results of this analysis are shown in Table 11. The adjusted  $R^2$  for this model was 0.49 and as can be seen all five items made a significant contribution to the model.

**Table 11: Regression of items similar to Huebner's five domain model of life satisfaction against overall well-being**

Model	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
Happiness: with your family	.334	26.943	.000
Happiness: with your friends	.113	10.000	.000
Happiness: about the home you live in	.178	14.383	.000
Happiness: about the school that you go to	.157	14.013	.000
Happiness: with your appearance	.208	18.321	.000

Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.49$ ,  $F = 971.49$ ,  $p = .000$ ,  $N = 4,975$

We also tested an alternative model of the five domains which involved taking the mean of two items ('the school you go to' and 'school work') to represent the 'school' domain; two items ('home' and 'local area') to represent the 'living environment' domain; and the mean of another two items ('appearance' and 'things you want to be good at') to represent the 'self' domain as we felt that these might better capture the domains. However this only marginally increased the explanatory power to 50%.

### **Alternative model**

We were also interested to test out a set of domains which could be derived from the qualitative survey research we undertook with young people in 2005 as described in Chapter 2.

Of the 10 key topics identified in that research, seven topics were clearly covered within the 21 items discussed in Chapter 4. These were family, friends, leisure ('enjoying yourself'), education ('school work'), the local environment ('local area'), money ('the things you have ..'), and health.

Of the remaining three topics, two (behaviour and attitudes) did not directly translate into domains, and the third (community) we had not included amongst the 21 items (although this topic has been covered in other questions within the survey for which findings will be made available in the future).

A regression analysis based on the seven domains identified above is shown in Table 12. All seven items made a significant contribution to the overall model, which explained just over 51% of the variation in the overall well-being measure.

**Table 12: Alternative seven domain model of well-being**

Model	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
Happiness: with your family	.314	25.890	.000
Happiness: about the things you have	.182	15.037	.000
Happiness: about how you enjoy yourself	.142	11.666	.000
Happiness: about your school work	.123	10.971	.000
Happiness: with your health	.119	10.185	.000
Happiness: with your local area	.099	8.739	.000
Happiness: with your friends	.064	5.523	.000

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.51, F = 735.98, p = .000, N = 4,885

Finally we also introduced into the model two further items related to the cross-cutting themes of freedom and safety identified in the 2005 survey analysis as described in Chapter 2. The resulting regression analysis is shown in Table 13

All nine items made a significant contribution, although the contribution of 'local area' was more marginal than in the previous model, and the model explained 54% of the variation in overall well-being.

It is notable that, as in the bivariate correlations presented earlier in the chapter, the item relating to 'amount of choice you have in life' features quite prominently in this model. We also calculated a similar model using the 'freedom' item instead, which produced very similar results. Clearly the issues of freedom, autonomy and control are an important aspect of young people's well-being as highlighted in the initial qualitative phase of this research programme. However it should also be noted that there are some conceptual questions about whether items relating to freedom and autonomy can be included in lists of domains of this kind (Cummins & Lau, 2006). This is an area that requires further consideration.



**Table 13: Alternative nine domain model of well-being**

Model	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	Beta		
Happiness: with your family	.275	22.468	.000
Happiness: about the amount of choice you have in life	.150	11.110	.000
Happiness: about the things you have	.149	12.258	.000
Happiness: about how safe you feel	.106	9.266	.000
Happiness: with your health	.099	8.520	.000
Happiness: about your school work	.098	8.737	.000
Happiness: about how you enjoy yourself	.097	7.704	.000
Happiness: with your friends	.063	5.484	.000
Happiness: with your local area	.040	3.447	.001

Adjusted R<sup>2</sup> = 0.54, F = 622.26, p = .000, N = 4,832

### **A comparison of the different models**

We also conducted some other statistical tests of the five different models discussed above.

First we undertook factor analyses of each set of domains using varimax rotation. In each case this analysis extracted a single factor. These single factors accounted for between 42% and 50% of the variance.

Second we undertook a reliability analysis for each set of domains. In all cases Cronbach's alpha was above 0.7. In one case (the nine domain model presented above it was above 0.8).

Thus there was statistical evidence of the potential validity and reliability of each of the models presented in this section, although clearly further testing is needed of the two alternative models proposed.

### **The potential value of well-being domains**

The analysis presented so far in this chapter has illustrated the potential to construct a brief index of young people's well-being which can explain a substantial amount of the variance in the measure of overall subjective well-being used in this report.

Such indexes have several significant advantages in comparison with single measures of overall well-being described in Chapter 3, as succinctly summarised in Michaelson et al (2009):

*One key consideration is the recognition that a single question conceptually cannot capture the multifaceted nature of the concept of well-being. Two equally motivating reasons relate to findings from the science of psychological measurement about the lack of accuracy in single-item measures, and to the low sensitivity of life satisfaction measures to the impact of policy decisions on well-being*

*Michaelson et al, 2009: 55*

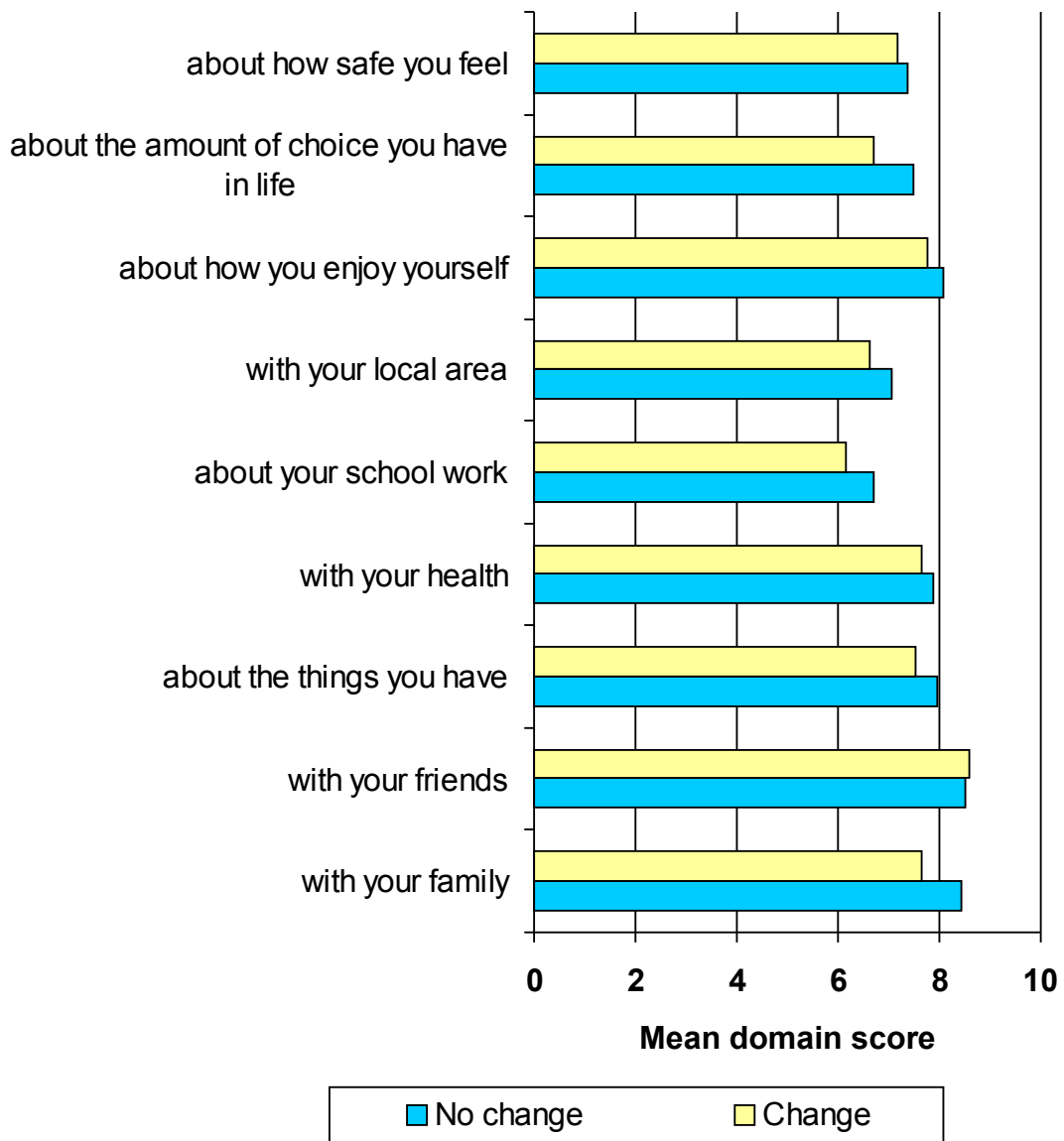
Thus multi-item measures have the potential to be more meaningful, more accurate and more sensitive to change.

To conclude the presentation of findings in this chapter we provide two illustrations of the potential application of a multi-domain model to developing an understanding of the nature and structure of young people's well-being.

First, we have seen in Chapter 3 that recent changes in family structure can explain a small but significant amount of the variation in overall well-being. Information on variations across different domains can help to elucidate the processes involved here.

Figure 11 shows the mean values of the nine domains included in the second alternative model described earlier. This information is for the secondary school sample only.

**Figure 11: Variations in domain satisfaction by recent experience of change in family structure**



N = 4,139 to 4,274

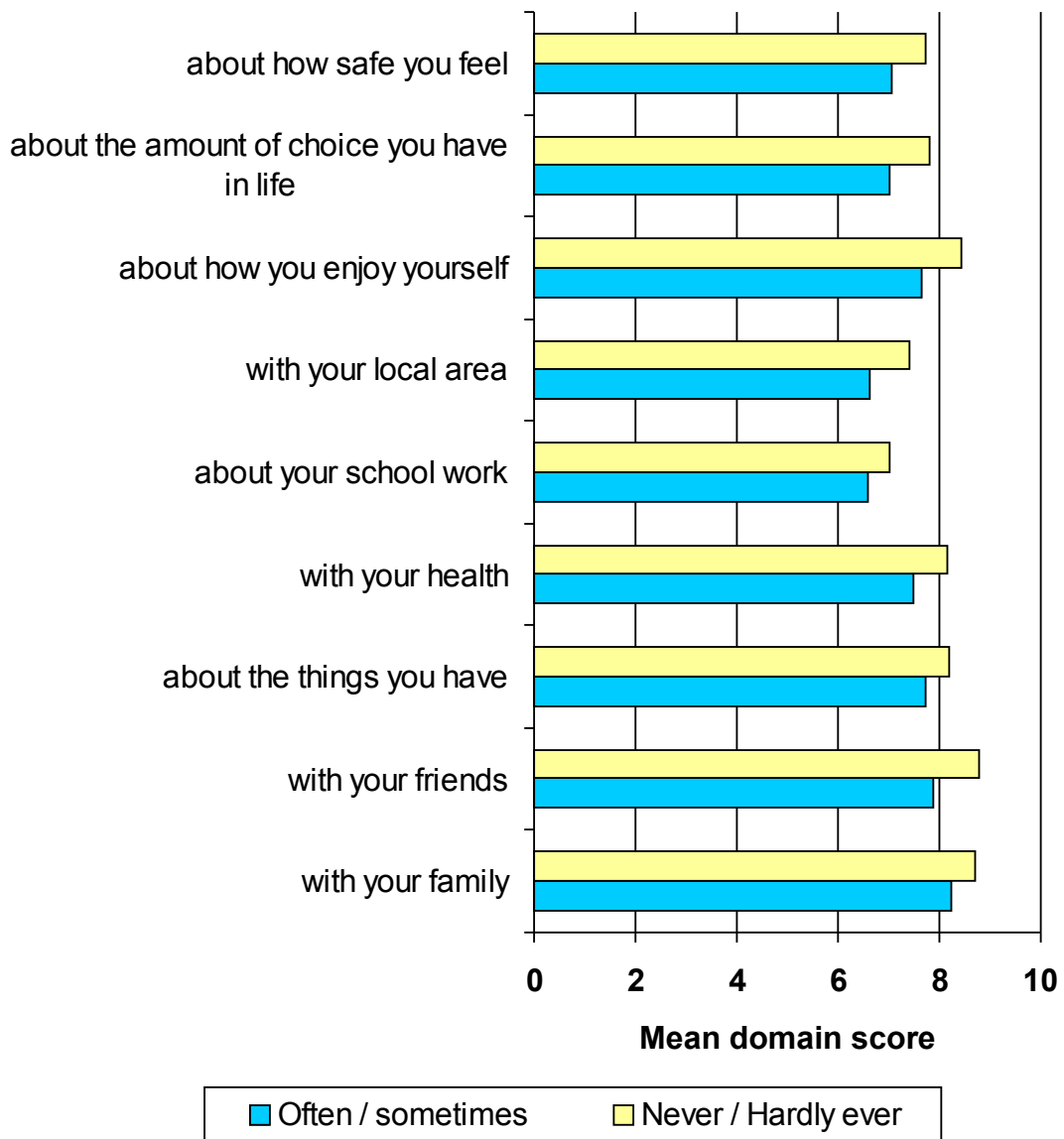
It can be seen from the chart that there is some variation in the level of difference in mean domain scores between young people who had recently experienced family change and those who had not across the nine domains.

Statistical analysis indicates that the differences were strongest for 'family' and 'amount of choice you have in life'; slightly less strong but still significant for 'the things you have', 'how you enjoy yourself', 'local area' and 'school work'; and not significant for 'safety' and 'friends'. Clearly family change does not show equally strong associations across all domains. We are not able to infer a causal relationship here between family change over the last 12 months and current

well-being – this would require a longitudinal study. However this analysis tentatively suggests that, as well as having the expected impact on young people’s sense of family well-being it may also have a significant impact on young people’s feelings of choice or control about their lives. It could further be hypothesised that the impact of family change on well-being might be mitigated if young people are involved and given some choice in the change process.

A similar analysis provides some insights into the ways in which being bullied is associated with young people’s well-being in different domains (Figure 12).

**Figure 12: Variations in domain satisfaction by experiences of being bullied in last 12 months**



N = 5,806 to 5,882

It can be seen that young people who have been bullied 'often' or 'sometimes' in the last 12 months had lower mean well-being scores across all nine domains than those who had been bullied 'hardly ever' or 'never'. In this case the differences were statistically significant for all nine domains which may indicate the pervasive effect which bullying can have on young people's lives. However, statistical analysis indicates that these differences were strongest<sup>25</sup> for the following domains – 'friends', 'enjoying yourself', 'choice', 'safety', 'health' and 'local area'. The differences was least strong for the 'school work' domain. Again this type of analysis, using longitudinal data, might provide interesting pointers to the ways in which the impact of being bullied might be connected to young people's overall well-being.

The above examples are presented as tentative illustrations with the intention of demonstrating the potential value of multi-domain indexes of well-being, and do not represent definite findings on the topics in question.

## Summary and discussion

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### Key points

In this chapter we have explored how the 21 components of well-being presented in Chapter 4 are linked with the composite measure of overall well-being in Chapter 3.

- The chapter began with an acknowledgement that the structure of well-being and the nature of the causal relationships between overall well-being and well-being within particular domains is highly contested. It seems likely that there are bi-directional influences at play between these two levels of well-being. The analysis presented in this chapter looks at causal influences in one of these two directions – from domains to overall well-being.
- The analysis demonstrates that there are strong correlations between some of the 21 components of Chapter 4 which suggest that some of these concepts might be quite closely related.
- A simple analysis is also presented of the relative associations of each of the 21 components with overall well-being when considered independently. This analysis shows that the highest associations relate to family, choice, material possessions, the future, home and leisure.
- The chapter then goes on to consider four different sets of domains and the extent to which, in combination, well-being in these domains can

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<sup>25</sup> Effect sizes above 0.1 using a Mann-Whitney test

explain the variation in overall well-being. Two of these models are based on previous research, and two are new models derived from the views which young people contributed to the 2005 survey. Statistical tests suggest that all four models had good explanatory power, statistical validity and reliability. A choice between these different models would need to be made on conceptual rather than statistical grounds.

- Finally, the potential value of multi-domain models of well-being is discussed and some exploratory examples of applications are provided in terms of developing a more detailed insight into the mechanisms involved in determining young people's well-being.

## **Discussion**

The material presented in this chapter provides considerable support for two domain-based models of young people's well-being previously developed by researchers in Australia and the US. In general it would seem that either of these models would be applicable to the context of young people in England. The analysis also suggests that it may be possible to derive a domain-based model which takes into account young people's ideas about well-being from the previous wave of the current research programme as described in Chapter 1.

All the domain models presented in this chapter have the potential to form the basis of a short and easily administered index of well-being for children and young people in England. Further statistical and conceptual work is required to determine the exact specification of such an index, but the examples of applications of the nine domain index presented in the latter part of the chapter demonstrate that there is potential value to these types of indexes in developing a better understanding of the nature of young people's well-being.

# 6

## Conclusions

This report is the first in a series of publications based on a new survey of young people's well-being in England conducted with a representative sample of just under 7,000 young people in mainstream schools in England. The survey covered year 6 in primary school and years 8 and 10 in secondary school and therefore spans the 10- to 15-year-old age range. The survey is the first of its kind in England to take a comprehensive view of well-being, based on young people's own perspectives.

The intention of the survey was three-fold – conceptual, methodological and practical. At a conceptual level, the content of the survey provides an opportunity to explore different models and ideas about young people's well-being and to develop a greater understanding of the concept of well-being in relation to young people. In terms of methods, the intention of the survey was to test out different measures of young people's well-being and to establish a baseline which can be used to measure trends in young people's well-being over time. Finally at a practical level, the survey offers the potential to explore the connections between different aspects of young people's lives and to identify and explain variations in well-being.

This report covers a sub-set of the questions covered by the survey. It focuses on measures of overall well-being, on single measures of young people's happiness with various aspects of their lives, and on demographic characteristics. The survey questionnaires also contained a range of more detailed questions about each key aspect of young people's well-being. This data is still being processed and analysed and further findings will be presented over the next year.

Whilst this report contains the first practical findings from this research programme, its aim is primarily conceptual – to make use of some of the data gathered through the surveys to begin to develop a greater understanding of the concept of well-being in relation to young people.

This final chapter summarises the key findings presented in the report, and highlights some of the potential implications of the findings. It concludes with an outline of future plans for the research programme.

## Summary of key findings

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### Overall subjective well-being

The survey asked young people a series of questions about their overall well-being – these questions covered how happy they were with their lives as a whole and how they felt their lives were going.

The general picture is that most young people surveyed were faring well – the average well-being score was 7.7 on a scale from 0 to 10. But a minority – in the region of 7% to 10% could be said to be ‘unhappy’ or to have ‘low well-being’.

We were interested in the extent to which well-being might vary according to young people’s individual characteristics and their family characteristics.

In terms of individual characteristics:

- Age was the most important factor with subjective well-being declining with age. This was particularly true for females – there was a widening well-being gap between females and males with age.
- Disabled children (6.7) had lower than average (7.7) well-being as did young people who defined themselves as having difficulties with learning (6.9).
- However, overall the most striking finding was that very little (3% to 4%) of the variation in overall well-being could be explained by individual characteristics, and most of this variation was attributable to age.

We also looked at family characteristics and again there were some small differences:

- Family poverty and family structure were associated with lower well-being – but the contribution was only marginal – between them these factors only explained just over 2% of the variation in well-being.
- However, the small group of young people who did not live with either parent (e.g. with extended family or in public care) had notably lower well-being (average 6.2)



Taken together, all of the individual characteristics and family factors which we included in the survey questionnaire explained less than 7% of the variation in young people's well-being.

This finding may seem surprising but it is very much in line with research on the well-being of adults and young people in other countries which has shown that these types of factors have a relatively small association with overall well-being.

To put this in perspective, Chapter 3 presents analysis which follows previous research in exploring the relative impact of family structure, structural change and family relationships on young people's well-being. The current survey confirms previous findings that well-being is much more strongly associated with the quality of people's relationships – such as levels of family conflict – than with family structure. A simple measure of how families were getting on together was able to explain over 20% of the variation in overall well-being, whereas family structure could only explain less than 2% of this variation.

The research also suggests that life events may have a significant impact on well-being.

- Recent changes in family structure had a small but significant association with lower well-being and also showed that some of the above differences in relation to family structure were attributable to recent change.
- Recent experiences of bullying by other young people had a stronger association.

All in all, then, the survey confirms previous findings from research in other countries that, at a broad level, individual and family characteristics explain relatively little of the variations in overall well-being; and that factors such as life events and the quality of relationships play a bigger part in explaining these variations.

Nevertheless, some small sub-groups within the survey such as disabled children and young people not living with parents had substantially lower than average levels of well-being; and Chapter 3 also shows that the cumulative effect of multiple disadvantage can have a significant impact on well-being.

## **Happiness with different aspects of life**

As well as asking young people about their overall well-being the survey asked questions about how happy young people were with 21 different aspects of their lives. These aspects were derived from previous international research and from young people's views from the 2005 survey.

The results show that young people are much happier with some aspects than others:

- Overall young people were happiest with the home they lived in and with their relationships with friends, family and others. Only around one in 20 (5%) of young people were unhappy with these aspect of their lives
- Young people tended to be least happy with things about themselves (appearance and confidence), things to do with school and school work, and their local area. The proportion of young people who were unhappy in these aspects was from around 12% (school work) to over 17% (appearance).
- There were three other aspects with which more than ten percent of young people were unhappy – these were freedom, choice and expectations of the future.

As with overall well-being, in many cases young people’s happiness with particular aspects of their lives did not vary that much according to individual characteristics and family factors. However there were some exceptions:

- Age was one of the most important factors. Young people’s happiness with many aspects of their lives declined as they got older, although this was not the case for happiness with friends which stayed fairly stable across the different age groups in the survey. Family and school were key aspects where well-being dropped significantly as young people grew older.
- There were some significant gender and age differences in happiness with appearance. Over one in five (21%) of females were unhappy with their appearance compared to 13% of males. The difference is even larger in the oldest age group (14- to 15-year-olds) where 28% of females were unhappy with this aspect of their lives.
- In addition, young people of Black – African/Caribbean and of Pakistani/Bangladeshi origin were significantly happier with this aspect of their lives than White young people.
- Young people who described themselves as having difficulties with learning were less happy with all aspects of their lives.

### **The structure of well-being**

The report goes on to look at which of the above aspects of well-being are most strongly associated with overall well-being. All 21 aspects had a significant link with overall well-being, however some aspects were more strongly linked than others:

- Happiness with family was the aspect most strongly associated with overall well-being.

- Happiness with the amount of choice in life was the second strongest aspect.
- Other important aspects were material possessions, expectations about the future, and the home environment.
- The aspects which were least strongly associated with overall well-being were related to confidence, school and school work, the local area and friendships.
- This last finding was surprising as the earlier research with young people had suggested that friendships were one of the most important aspects of well-being.

One of the key objectives of this phase of the research is to develop an index of young people's well-being which can be used to track changes over time.

Chapter 5 considers two indexes of young people's well-being developed in Australia and in the US. It also presents an alternative index based on ideas from young people gathered for the current research programme which covers nine aspects of young people's lives – family, choice, material possessions, safety, health, school work, leisure, friendships and local area.

Some examples of the potential uses of such indexes to further our understanding of young people's well-being are provided. For example an analysis of the above nine aspects for young people experiencing recent change in family structure shows that, in addition to the expected impact on family well-being, this experience is associated with young people being significantly less happy about the amount of choice they have in life. This finding demonstrates some of the ways in which life events can have a significant impact on young people's well-being.

The analysis presented in the report is just a first step in exploring an extensive set of survey data on young people's well-being across a wide range of aspects of their lives. However this initial work has already yielded some important learning about young people's well-being in England today in terms of concepts, measures and variations. To conclude the report we now discuss some of the key learning points from the current report and some potential implications and future directions of enquiry.

## **Conceptualising young people's well-being**

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We hope, through this research programme, to make a significant contribution to the conceptualisation of young people's well-being in England. The programme began with the gathering of views from young people about this issue, as described in Chapter 2. We then sought to build a framework of well-being

which is based on these views and which also takes into account the previous research and literature on this topic. This is an ongoing aspect of the programme and the current report provides an opportunity to take stock of progress with this work.

### **The primary importance of relationships**

First in terms of the concept of well-being, the research shows the primary importance of relationships, particularly with family, for young people's well-being. The views and ideas provided by young people in the 2005 survey highlighted the centrality of the issue of the quality of relationships with family, friends and other significant people for young people's well-being. Broadly speaking this is confirmed by the statistical analysis we have so far conducted on the 2008 survey data set. Certainly, family relationships are very prominent. Of all the 21 aspects of young people's lives which we explored in Chapter 4, happiness with family showed the strongest association with overall well-being.

Interestingly the association between happiness with friends and overall well-being is much less clear. Our analysis suggests that the strength of this association is not as substantial as for many other aspects of young people's lives. This raises some important questions for future research. It may be that we have not managed to capture effectively the way young people feel about their friendships and therefore are under-estimating the importance of this aspect of young people's lives. Or it may be that relationships with friends are much more important to young people's sense of overall well-being on a day-to-day basis ('happiness') than they are for their assessments of life satisfaction taking a longer term view. This is an area for further exploration.

Given the importance of young people's relationships for their overall well-being, it is also important for future research to explore the significance for overall well-being of relationships with other people apart from immediate family and friends. Key examples might include the role of extended family, teachers, neighbours and broader relationships with adults within the local community.

### **The significance of autonomy**

Another key conceptual issue to emerge from the research so far is the importance of a sense of autonomy in young people's lives. This was identified as a key cross-cutting theme (along with safety / stability) in the analysis of young people's responses to the open-ended questions in the 2005 survey. It has also come through strongly in the statistical analysis of the 2008 survey. Of the 21 aspects we explored in Chapter 4, happiness with '*the amount of choice you have in life*' was the second (after family) most strongly associated with overall well-being and '*the amount of freedom you have*' was the seventh.

This is an aspect of well-being which has been emphasised in the general literature on psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989; Deci & Ryan, 2000) but has not always been prominent in frameworks of the well-being of children and young people in particular. The key issue here seems to be not so much about 'freedom' as about a balanced and age-appropriate amount of choice and control. As one young person contributing to the 2005 survey put it – *'Being able to be free in the choices they make and still have good discipline and feel safe and secure'*. A growing sense of autonomy is an important issue for young people as they move towards adulthood and our research suggests that conditions and experiences which hamper this also have a negative effect on well-being. The emergence of the importance of this issue in the current research demonstrates the value of incorporating young people's own ideas in developing concepts of their well-being.

### **The structure of well-being**

Chapter 5 focused on the structure of well-being. It tested a number of different domain models of well-being. The analysis presented towards the end of the chapter provided some illustrative examples of the value of conceptualising different domains of well-being in terms of shedding light on some of the mechanisms through which specific factors or experiences may impact on young people's sense of well-being.

There is also much more work needed to explore the distinction between subjective well-being and psychological well-being which is prominent within the theoretical and research literature. Broadly speaking the 2005 and 2008 surveys, in different ways, have generated material which is consistent with this distinction in terms of confirming the importance for young people both of a sense of well-being and well-becoming. The young people consulted in 2005 consistently identified the importance of developmental aspects of well-being such as gaining a good education. As discussed above, the analysis of the 2008 survey suggests the importance of autonomy – which is often viewed as a component of psychological well-being. The 2008 survey questionnaires contained a series of more detailed questions designed to tap into specific aspects of psychological well-being including autonomy, competence, relatedness and sense of purpose. We will be using these questions to explore the concept of psychological well-being in much more detail.

### **Diversity and well-being**

Finally, in terms of concepts, the models of well-being presented in the report appeared to work slightly less well for younger age groups. The conceptual framework we developed for this wave of the survey was derived primarily from the perspectives of young people aged 14 to 16. We have found that the aspects of well-being we have explored (such as 'family' and 'autonomy' above)

are more effective in explaining variations in overall well-being amongst secondary school aged young people than those in primary school. This raises important questions for future research on well-being with children and young people. What are we missing about the well-being of younger children?

This finding also suggests that it would be important to explore different models of well-being for sub-groups of young people with different characteristics and backgrounds. Our analysis so far has been at a population level. There may be important differences, for young people growing up in different contexts, in terms of the role of different aspects of life in contributing to their sense of overall well-being. There is a need to explore the issue of diversity in relation to well-being and the extent to which the components of well-being are universal or vary according to context.

## **Measuring well-being**

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In this phase of the research programme we aimed to identify, develop and test suitable self-report measures of young people's well-being. The findings presented in this report already confirm the potential, and potential value, of measuring young people's subjective well-being through the use of self-report surveys.

### **Measuring overall well-being**

We used three different measures of overall subjective well-being in the survey questionnaires – one asked about happiness with life as a whole whilst the other two focused on life satisfaction. The associations between these three measures, presented in Chapter 3, suggest that they may be measuring similar but distinct concepts.

Whilst there are likely to be some conceptual differences between the three measures, we found that in practice they produced similar results in terms of their relationships with socio-demographic factors. Thus, for this particular report, we constructed a composite overall well-being measure based on all three. However, we recognise that further analysis is needed of this composite measure and also of different implications of utilising different measures of overall well-being.

### **Measuring well-being in different domains**

The material presented in Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrates the potential uses of single measures of particular aspects of life or domains of well-being. Being based on a common scale, they provide a simple means of exploring the relative well-being of young people across a number of different aspects of their lives.

These single measures were also sufficiently sensitive to highlight some interesting variations in aspects of well-being for young people with different characteristics and backgrounds. The analysis presented in Chapter 5 shows that these single measures may also be helpful in exploring the relative contribution which different domains make to overall well-being; and that there may be some value in simple indexes made up of a relatively small number of single measures of this type.

On the other hand, in the same way as the multi-item measure of overall well-being appeared more stable than the two single item measures, we would expect that there will be limitations to the use of single items to measure specific aspects of well-being. Multi-item measures on specific aspects of well-being are likely to be more robust and also can provide the opportunity to develop a more detailed understanding of the concept of well-being, and so we would anticipate that for many practical purposes multi-item measures are likely to be preferred.

### **Future use of well-being indicators**

The measures of overall well-being and the indexes presented in the report, gathered from a large representative sample of young people, can provide a valuable base line which can be used to explore variations in well-being and to track trends over time.

A further area for exploration is the extent to which well-being measures might be practically useful in, for example, measuring the effectiveness of policy initiatives and practice-based interventions. There is currently a relative lack of studies which use well-being measures to measure change at a general population level, for specific populations or at the individual level.

For example, thinking about specific populations of young people, the views gathered from young people in 2005 suggested that aspects of the local area – including facilities and the quality of the environment – and relationships with local adults were important issues for young people which they felt affected their well-being. The analysis presented earlier in this report suggests that, whilst happiness with the local area does not have such a strong association with overall well-being as, for example, family relationships, the link is nevertheless significant. It follows that it may be helpful to measure initiatives to improve particular localities for young people in terms of young people's assessments of well-being in relation to the local area. Further, it would be pertinent to explore whether and to what extent improvements which were shown to have an impact on these assessments also filtered through into increases in young people's overall well-being.

At an individual level, there is a growing emphasis on evaluation of the interventions of projects set up to help young people with specific aspects of their lives. There is a need to test out whether well-being indicators which are

useful at the large sample level, as in the current report, are sensitive and reliable enough to be used as change measures in smaller samples of young people receiving project interventions

Exploration of the above areas is needed to throw more light on the practical application of well-being indicators as change measures.

## **Understanding variations in well-being**

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The third area which we have focused on in this initial report is an exploration of variations in well-being, particularly in relation to socio-demographic factors.

### **Socio-demographic factors and well-being**

The research has confirmed previous studies in other countries which have shown that individual and family characteristics have only a small association with overall well-being.

Amongst, the socio-demographic factors, age has emerged as a relatively important variable. The findings presented in Chapters 3 and 4 suggest a significant decline in overall well-being and in well-being in many domains as young people grow older within the age range of the survey. This is an important area for further exploration, particularly in connection with the potential to identify variations in the conceptualisation of well-being for different age groups as discussed earlier.

The findings on the relatively small association between two indicators of family economic status and well-being were less expected. As discussed earlier in the report we feel that the indicators we were able to use in this wave of the survey relating to the number of adults in paid employment and free school meal entitlement are not completely satisfactory. As a result we would conclude that further research with more detailed measures is needed in order to draw firm conclusions about the relationships between economic factors and well-being. We intend to make progress on this topic in the next wave of the survey.

Finally, whilst some of the other socio-demographic factors such as family structure and ethnicity did not explain significant amounts of the variation in overall well-being, there were indications that some particular groups including disabled young people and young people not living with parents are faring significantly worse than average. The research also provides evidence of the association between cumulative disadvantage and low well-being.

There is therefore still work to do to fully understand the relationships between socio-demographic factors and young people's well-being.



## **Environmental factors**

In contrast with socio-demographic factors, Chapter 3 provides evidence of a potentially stronger role for environmental factors in explaining variations in overall well-being.

First, there is some evidence that specific life events such as a change in family structure may have an impact on well-being for a period of time. Research in other countries using a larger set of life events measures has also suggested such a pattern, and this is another potential area for future research on young people's well-being in England.

Second, Chapter 3 also demonstrates that other environmental factors such as experiences of being bullied and the quality of family functioning have a much stronger association with well-being than socio-demographic factors. These two sets of findings, put together, confirm the idea that well-being is best understood as a dynamic concept whereby, at least to some extent, overall levels of well-being fluctuate over time in response to specific events and experiences.

## **Other areas for future research**

In addition to consideration of the role of socio-demographic factors and environmental factors in understanding variations in well-being, different strands of the well-being literature also emphasise the role of personality and temperament, and of processes such as homeostasis, in explaining both variations and stability in well-being. We aim to integrate these considerations into the next stages of the research process.

A limitation of the current wave of the survey is its cross-sectional nature. Whilst we have been able to explore associations between particular factors and overall well-being, we have not been able to draw definitive conclusions about causal linkages. The field of well-being research would benefit from more studies involving a longitudinal design. Such studies would help to elucidate the impact of particular factors, experiences and events at one point on young people's well-being at a later point in time. Longitudinal studies incorporating well-being measures would also offer the opportunity to explore associations between levels of well-being at one point in time and other issues at a later point. Some recent research with young people in the US has suggested that low life satisfaction may be an indicator of subsequent mental health and other problems. More studies of this kind are needed to assess the value of well-being measures in this context.

## **Future directions for the research programme**

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Our future plans for the research programme fall into two categories.

First we will be publishing further findings from the 2008 survey making use of the full range of questions asked. Initial priorities for the next 12 months include:

- an analysis of the concept of psychological well-being and its relationship to subjective well-being
- further exploration of family factors and well-being
- topic-specific reports on other areas such as young people's experiences of their local area
- a further analysis of inequalities in relation to specific aspects of well-being

Second we plan to pursue some of the key strands of research identified earlier in this chapter. The next stages of the research programme will include:

- developing a better understanding of the concept of well-being in relation to the diversity of young people.
- developing and implementing better measures of economic status in order to explore more fully the links between poverty and well-being
- exploring the links between personality, life events and well-being
- undertaking the next wave of the survey in 2010 which will be the first step in beginning to identify trends in young people's well-being in England over time.

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*Understanding Children's Well-being* is the first major report from The Children's Society since the publication of *A Good Childhood: Searching for Values in a Competitive Age* in 2009. This earlier independent report concluded that excessive individualism is causing a range of problems for children. These include high family break-up, bullying, commercial pressures towards premature sexualisation, unprincipled advertising, too much competition in education and the acceptance of income inequality.

Following on from these findings, *Understanding Children's Well-being* is the first step in trying to determine what factors have the greatest impact on a child's well-being. Identifying these factors is essential to our understanding of what makes a good childhood.

Most importantly, at the centre of both these pieces of work lies our commitment to representing the views of children and young people. In everything we do, The Children's Society remains dedicated to ensuring that the voices of all children are heard on the issues that affect their lives.

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