

# The Good Childhood Report 2020

**The  
Children's  
Society**



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# Foreword

**We publish our ninth Good Childhood Report as young people prepare for a school year like no other. For many, this will be their first time back, regularly, in the classroom for six months. Imagine how the young people in your own life must be feeling.**

Earlier in the summer we reported on the cost of the Coronavirus crisis. We saw a marked increase in the numbers of children reporting low well-being, and 50% of parents told us they felt the Coronavirus would continue to have a negative impact on their children's well-being in the year ahead.

I never fail to be amazed at young people's resilience. In my conversations with the young people we support, many have told me they are nervous about what lies ahead. In spite of the challenges, I am confident that with our help the UK's children and young people will navigate these tricky waters with grace, optimism and energy. They usually do.

But we should not just be relying on the optimism of our young to see this year through. Society must do more to support them. The cost of failure, even for one child, is too high.

The truth is that we have all been letting down our children for far too long. Since 2009, children's happiness with their lives has been in decline. I am sad to say that the first Good Childhood Report of this new decade does not find this appalling trend has halted.

For The Good Childhood Report 2020, our research team have looked abroad to shed further light on how we are doing and the challenges we face. Compared to 23 European countries, by age 15 our young people are the least satisfied

with their lives. They ranked lowest for having a sense of purpose in life. They have the second highest levels of sadness. What have we done that's created a society in which 15 year olds feel this way? We should be ashamed. And we should be galvanised to change.

How can we ensure that The Good Childhood Report 2030 has a different story to tell? This report provides some clear priorities. We need to support our young people to build stronger friendships, to be less afraid of failure, and to feel comfortable in their own skin. Fundamentally though, society needs to change. High levels of inequality in the country and in our education system both seem to be contributing to our children's comparatively poor well-being.

To turn things around, we must start listening to children and taking what they have to say seriously. Too often our society writes off young people. To do so is wrong. It also fails to engage with the challenges of modern childhood and put them right.

I can make you a promise. Over the next 10 years, The Children's Society will be doing everything it can to listen to young people and turn these trends around. These trends make us angry. They make us determined. They are the reason we all get out of bed in the morning. Please join us in rising to this challenge – supporter, campaigner, volunteer – we need you and your voice. Together we can and we must create a society built for all children.

**Mark Russell**  
Chief Executive, The Children's Society



Chapter 1:  
**Introduction**

The Good Childhood Report 2020 is our ninth annual report on the well-being of children in the UK. It marks the 15th anniversary of The Children's Society's substantive programme of research to better understand how children feel about their lives, and the tenth year of our own measure of well-being – The Good Childhood Index. Successive reports have looked at how the well-being of children in the UK compares over time and with that of children in other countries. Given The Children's Society's history of working with some of the most disadvantaged children, we are particularly concerned about improving well-being for those children who are experiencing difficulty. As well as presenting the predominant trends in well-being, our reports have a strong focus on understanding the experiences of children who have low well-being, and upon identifying factors which enhance and hinder children's happiness. We have made every effort to reflect children's own views in the reports, working with children to identify and focus on topics that they tell us are important, in addition to being guided by the available evidence.

There have been a number of key developments since the last edition of this report, including the publication by the Department for Education (DfE) of the first State of the Nation Report on the well-being of children and young people in England,<sup>i</sup> which is a much welcomed addition to the literature. New international data on well-being have been published in the OECD's (2019) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA),<sup>ii</sup> together with the third edition of Children's Worlds, the International Survey of Children's Well-being,<sup>iii</sup> and the fifth set of data from the cross-national study: Health Behaviour in

School-aged Children (HBSC).<sup>iv</sup> There have also been advances in policy making in this area, along with a growing interest in using children's own reports of their well-being in guiding policy making. In the last year, working with partners like the Office for National Statistics (ONS), Public Health England (PHE) and the DfE, we have made progress identifying key gaps and building a case for comprehensive measurement of children's well-being. Such a dataset will be crucial if national and local policy making is to be more effective in bringing about real improvements in children's lives.

This annual report has been produced at a time of great adversity, with the worldwide outbreak of Coronavirus raising a variety of concerns about issues central to the work of The Children's Society, including the short and long-term impact on the well-being of children. Although we have recently published separate findings on the well-being of children during the Coronavirus pandemic,<sup>v</sup> we cannot ignore the likely impact that this crisis will have had on the findings of this year's household survey (reported in Chapter 2) which was conducted during the government-imposed lockdown, and on children's well-being in the years to come. All other quantitative data sources drawn upon in this report provide an overview of children's well-being before the pandemic. Its impact will therefore be reflected in these sources when data for 2020 are released.

This report draws together a variety of national and international sources that examine children's self-reported well-being, and includes:

- An overview of the latest statistics and trends in subjective well-being in the UK, including variations by gender.
- Analysis of the latest international data sources on children's subjective well-being, including measures of the well-being of children in different countries in the UK.
- A closer examination of patterns in children's happiness with their friends.

## What is well-being?

'Well-being' is used to refer to a range of things in everyday life, such as being happy, not being ill, feeling fulfilled and being financially secure. To quote the What Works Centre for Well-being definition, which is based on the work of ONS:<sup>vi</sup>

'Well-being, put simply, is about "how we are doing" as individuals, communities and as a nation and how sustainable this is for the future.'<sup>vii</sup>

There is continued debate about what constitutes individuals' well-being in the research community, and, as a result, there are an array of different definitions. Broadly speaking, two different types of measures are employed:

1. 'Objective' measures which use social indicators on people's lives, such as physical health and education.
2. 'Subjective' measures which focus on people's own views about how their life is going.

A mix of so-called objective and subjective measures is also commonly used. The ONS, for example, has combined data on health, personal finances and education with self-reported information on personal well-being in its Children's Well-being dataset.<sup>viii</sup>

The Good Childhood Reports focus primarily on children's own views of their lives – the subjective well-being of children.

## What is subjective well-being?

Subjective well-being is an individual's own assessment of how their life is going.

Figure 1 summarises the different aspects of self-reported well-being reflected in the research literature. It differentiates between:

- **Affective well-being:** Positive and negative emotions or how happy people feel (eg the ONS question 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?').
- **Cognitive well-being:** The quality of people's lives overall or certain aspects of their lives, including measures of life satisfaction (eg the ONS question 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?').
- **Eudaimonic or Psychological well-being:** Which looks at whether people are functioning well, and their personal development and growth (eg the ONS question 'Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?').<sup>ix</sup>

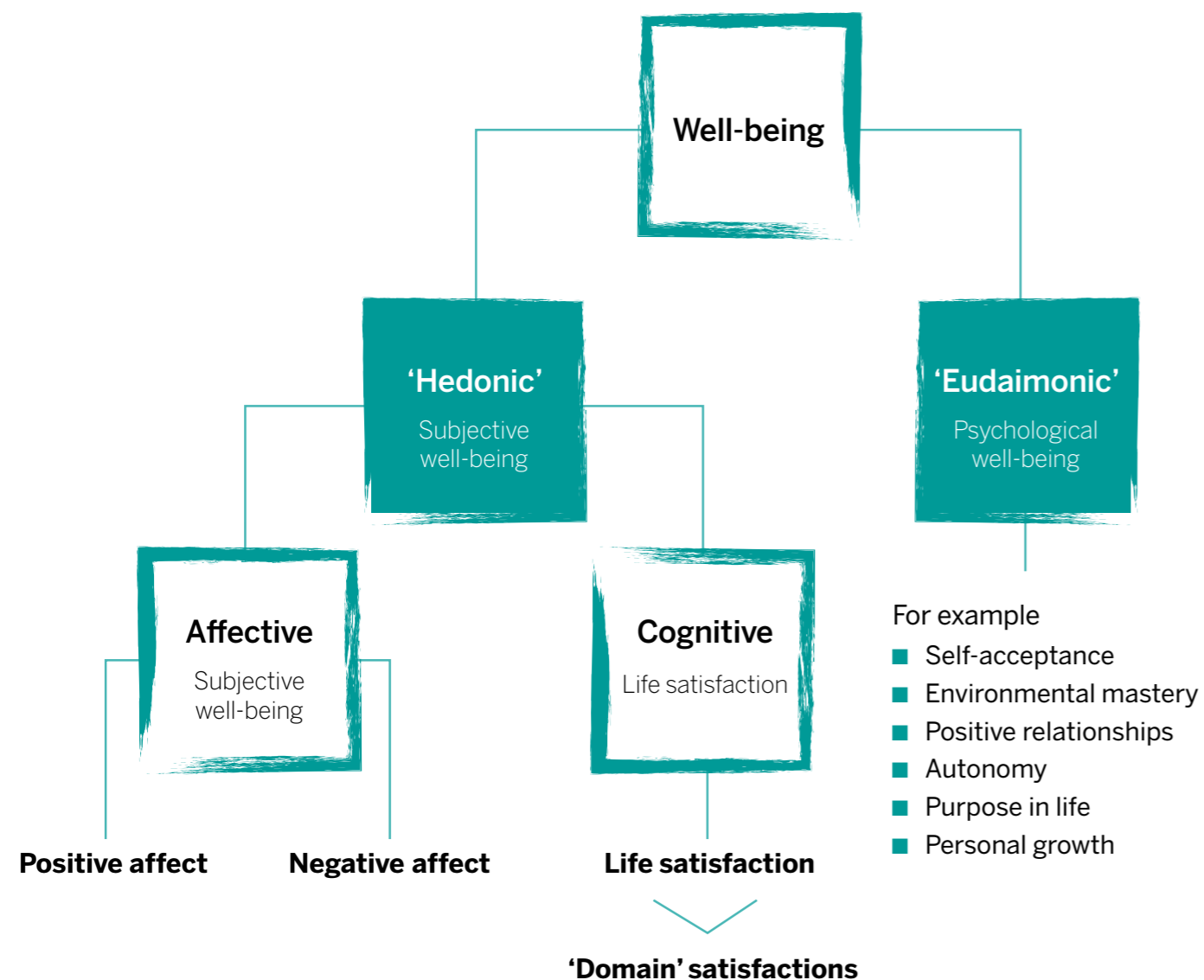
Research has shown that children's life satisfaction is similar on different days of the week, although their happiness varies, and is generally higher at the weekend.<sup>x</sup>

As The Good Childhood Report is concerned with understanding changes in children's well-being over the longer term, it has primarily focused on more stable measures of life satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> Children's differing responses to questions about their happiness, life satisfaction and psychological well-being (see, for example, Figure 4) highlight the benefits of measuring different aspects of their well-being.

<sup>1</sup> See Tinkler and Hicks (2011) for further information on the ONS four questions on personal well-being.

<sup>2</sup> For example, as reported in The Good Childhood Report 2017, the multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction shown in Figure 32 (Appendix A) has good internal consistency overall (a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.84) and for males, females, 8 to 11 year olds and 12 to 15 year olds (a Cronbach's Alpha > 0.80 in all cases). A test-retest shows that it also has good reliability, with an intra-class correlation coefficient of 0.84 (p<0.001). See pages 11 to 13 of The Good Childhood Report 2017 for further detail.

Figure 1: Components of self-reported well-being



Measuring children's subjective well-being

Research has shown that children's and adult's responses to the same set of questions may differ.<sup>3xi</sup> As a result, there has been a move away from the use of adult-based (eg parent or teacher) assessments of children's lives, and children's own self-reported well-being is now commonly accepted as the gold standard of measurement in this area.

There are robust longitudinal studies in the UK that ask children themselves about their life satisfaction. Since 1994, the British Household Panel Survey (succeeded by Understanding Society) has included a short set of questions for children about their happiness with life as a whole, their family, friends, appearance, schoolwork and (from 2003) the school they go to. The Millennium Cohort Study has also asked these questions (at age 11, 14 and 17) of a cohort of children born in 2000–2001. These studies provide imperative information on national trends, and also allow us to track changes in the well-being of the same group of children, which is essential to determining those factors that contribute to and hamper children's well-being. Indeed, these sources are heavily drawn upon in The Good Childhood Report. Emerging trends from the Understanding Society survey are, for example, presented in Chapter 2 of this report, and recent findings on changes in children's happiness with their friends are at the heart of Chapter 4.

As these studies cover a wider range of issues (rather than well-being specifically) there are necessarily some gaps in the information provided. Both Understanding Society and the Millennium Cohort Study employ single rather than multi-item measures (the research has found the latter to be more reliable);<sup>xii</sup> and do not measure some domains of well-being – such as time use → which are known to be important.

In 2010, The Children's Society developed The Good Childhood Index to fill gaps in the available evidence in this area (see Appendix A). The index contains a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction (see Figure 3) and 10 single-item domain measures of happiness with different aspects of life (see Figure 2), which children told us were important to them.<sup>xiii</sup>

As it is now a decade since it was developed, The Children's Society is currently in the process of revisiting The Good Childhood Index to check that it continues to reflect those aspects of life that are most important to children. A separate report will be published, outlining the findings from the first stage of this work and looking at the relative importance of children's digital lives in relation to the single-item domain measures currently captured by the index.

<sup>3</sup> Goodman, Lamping & Ploubidis (2010) report 'low to moderate' correlations between child and parent reports of the sub-scales of the Strengths & Difficulties Questionnaire. The Good Childhood Report 2018 also found that a single measure of subjective well-being completed by a cohort of children aged around 14 years was a stronger predictor of self-harm than a 20-item measure of emotional and behavioural difficulties completed by a parent.



### Why is subjective well-being important?

Children's well-being matters in and of itself. Children have the right to enjoy a good childhood, and for it to equip them with the tools to grow and transition into a good adulthood.

Research has shown that there are variations in the subjective well-being of differing groups of children, and among children with different life experiences in the UK. Previous Good Childhood Reports have, for example, highlighted a number of risk factors for low well-being – such as difficult family relationships,<sup>xiv</sup> being bullied,<sup>xv</sup> being in a family that is under financial strain,<sup>xvi</sup> and experiencing a combination of social, familial and material disadvantages.<sup>xvii</sup> The literature has also highlighted important demographic differences. Data from Understanding Society (reported in Figure 7) have shown that girls are consistently unhappier with their appearance than boys, and that boys are unhappier with their schoolwork. Analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study showed that children (aged around 14 years old) who said that they were attracted to the same gender, or to both males and females, had significantly lower subjective well-being than children who did not, and that children of Indian ethnicity had significantly higher subjective well-being than children of White and Mixed ethnicity.<sup>xviii</sup>

International studies such as Children's Worlds<sup>xix</sup> and PISA<sup>xx</sup> help put the experiences of children in the UK in a wider context, and enable us to learn about the pressures and benefits that other cultures and education systems place on children's well-being. Local data (see, for example, Appendices C and D) enable children's experiences to be assessed at a lower level, highlighting pressures that might require attention in particular communities.

Understanding children's experiences and the challenges they face at a local level and across the UK as a whole – and how this compares with that of children internationally – enables professionals and policy makers to prioritise specific areas and groups of children in need of support, and to take action to improve their lives.

### Well-being and mental ill-health

Research suggests that, while there is a relationship between well-being and mental ill-health, they are not simply the opposite of each other. The Good Childhood Report 2018 found that of those children who reported low life satisfaction in Wave 6 of the Millennium Cohort Study (aged 14), nearly half identified high depressive symptoms and vice versa. However the overlap between those who reported low life satisfaction and who had a high emotional and behavioural difficulties score, based on parental assessment, was lower (at less than 1 in 5).<sup>4xxi</sup> Children may thus have low subjective well-being without symptoms of mental illness, and high subjective well-being despite a diagnosis of mental illness. As the outcomes can be equally poor for those with low subjective well-being and those with mental ill-health<sup>xxii</sup> and the needs of these children are likely to differ, it is important that we measure both comprehensively in order to ensure that those who are vulnerable are not overlooked.

<sup>4</sup> A study of the relationship between mental illness and emotional well-being using data from wave 5 of the Millennium Cohort Study also reported a low correlation between children's self-reported well-being and their parents' assessment of their child's mental health (see Patalay and Fitzsimons, 2016).

# Data sources used in this report

This report makes use of the most robust and timely data sources on children's subjective well-being. It presents measures from our own research programme, and other key sources on the well-being of children in the UK, such as Understanding Society, PISA and Children's Worlds.

## The Children's Society household surveys

Since 2010, The Children's Society has conducted household surveys with parents and children from age 8 to 17 years. The surveys collect data on children's well-being, their household, and other characteristics. Each annual survey also examines additional issues that children have told us are important to them. In 2018 the survey looked at gender stereotypes and in 2019 it examined children's thoughts about the future.

The 2020 survey was completed by a new provider in April-June 2020. For the first time, it covered just over 2,000 children (aged 10 to 17) and their parent/carer from all four nations in the UK. These children were selected to closely match the demographic and socio-economic make-up of the wider population, and were also spread across geographic regions. The data have also been weighted to match the wider population on key characteristics.

In 2020, the impact of COVID-19 together with the move to a new provider may have affected the results obtained and their comparability with previous years.

## The Children's Society Consultation with Children

The Children's Society consulted with over 150 young people (aged 8 to 19) from schools, youth groups and The Children's Society's services in the UK, to find out what they thought were the positive and negative aspects of friendships.

These consultations were undertaken during lockdown for Coronavirus and were therefore done digitally. The material collected was reviewed and organised into a single thematic framework.

## UK Longitudinal Household Survey (known as 'Understanding Society')

(See [understandingsociety.ac.uk/about](https://understandingsociety.ac.uk/about) for further details)

Understanding Society is a longitudinal study covering 40,000 households in the UK (England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland). A representative, random sample of households is interviewed annually, with questions completed by adults and children aged 10 to 15 (fieldwork runs over a period of 24 months, with each household interviewed at roughly the same time each year). The youth questionnaire contains questions on subjective well-being and other aspects of children's lives, and, in 2017-18, achieved a sample of over 2,800 10 to 15 year olds. There was some overlap between the first wave of Understanding Society and the final wave of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS). The coverage of the first wave therefore differs slightly from subsequent surveys (ie Wave 2 onwards), which also include interviews with BHPS participants.

## PISA – Programme for International Student Assessment

(See [oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2018-results.htm](https://oecd.org/pisa/publications/pisa-2018-results.htm) for further details)

The OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) started in 2000 and collects a range of academic data on 15 year olds, together with their subjective well-being. The seventh wave of PISA was conducted in 2018 and achieved a sample of around 600,000 15-year olds from 79 countries and economies.

Most PISA samples are based on a two-stage stratified sampling approach: 1) schools are selected using probabilities proportional to the estimated size of their eligible population of 15 year olds; and 2) students are sampled within these schools. The UK was one of five countries and economies who did not meet all sampling requirements in 2018, but was included in the sample as the data were largely comparable with other countries/economies. Over 13,500 children were assessed in the UK.

## Children's Worlds, International Survey of Children's Well-being

(See [iscweb.org](https://iscweb.org) for further information)

Children's Worlds is an International Survey of children's lives and subjective well-being. Three waves of the survey have been completed since the project began in 2009. Wave 3 is drawn upon in this report, and asked children aged 8, 10 and 12 about a range of aspects of their lives, including (but not limited to) their family, friends, school, health and appearance. The survey was completed in 2016–2019, with 35 countries contributing to the final collated sample of over 128,000 children.

The overall design and analysis of the England survey was undertaken by researchers at the University of York, and data collection carried out jointly by The Children's Society and The University of York. The survey for this country

sought to achieve a representative sample of 1,000 Year 6 children in mainstream schools. A full list of schools was obtained and divided into five strata based on eligibility for free school meals. Samples of schools were drawn from each stratum with probabilities proportional to size. Children completed an online questionnaire developed for their age group, with a final dataset of over 700 Year 6 pupils.

## What About Youth (WAY) Study

(See [digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/areas-of-interest/public-health/what-about-youth-study](https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/areas-of-interest/public-health/what-about-youth-study) for more detail)

The What About Youth (WAY) survey was developed for the Department of Health. The survey, conducted in 2014, included questions on a range of health and well-being topics for a random sample of 15 year olds in England, and was intended to produce local level data. Fieldwork for this survey took place between September 2014 and January 2015.

The What About Youth survey included questions from the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being scale and the ONS well-being questions, which ask about young people's feelings in relation to four different aspects of their life. The proportions deemed to have low, medium, high and very high life satisfaction were included in the original publication. See Table 3.24 at the following link: [digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-and-wellbeing-of-15-year-olds-in-england/main-findings---2014](https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-and-wellbeing-of-15-year-olds-in-england/main-findings---2014)

Appendix C presents children's mean well-being scores by local authority.

### **Active Lives Survey**

(See [sportengland.org/know-your-audience/data/active-lives](https://sportengland.org/know-your-audience/data/active-lives) for further information)

Sports England run separate Active Lives surveys with adults and children. Two Active Lives Children and Young People surveys have been published to date. The most recent findings are for the academic year 2018-19 and cover over 100,000 children in Years 1 to 11 (ages 5 to 16).

Active Lives Children and Young People includes three of the well-being questions developed by ONS. Appendix D presents mean scores by local authority (where available/feasible based on sample sizes) for each of these measures for children in Years 7 to 11 (ages 11 to 16).

### **British Household Panel Survey (known as 'Living in Britain')**

(See [iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps/about](https://iser.essex.ac.uk/bhps/about) for further information)

The British Household Panel Survey was an annual survey of adults (aged 16+) from a nationally representative sample of over 5,000 households. The same individuals were re-interviewed in successive waves of the survey. From Wave 4 onwards, a special survey of 11 to 15 year olds in these households was also undertaken. The Young Person's survey was conducted annually until 2009, and included questions on health, well-being, aspirations and social networks. The final wave of BHPS achieved 1,222 youth interviews.

Mean well-being scores for the six aspects of life covered by the survey are presented in Appendix E.

### **Data sources and overview of methods by chapter**

The data sources and methodology for The Good Childhood Report 2020 are as follows:

Chapter 2 presents the latest weighted data from The Children's Society's annual household survey of children aged 10 to 17 for the Good Childhood Index (including the multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction detailed in Appendix A), and the ONS measures of well-being. The chapter concludes with the most up to date trends for the six well-being measures included in Understanding Society, which focuses on children aged 10 to 15.

Chapter 3 presents international data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Children's Worlds study. PISA measures of life satisfaction, happiness, sadness, sense of purpose and flourishing for 15 year olds in the UK are compared with those of children of the same age in 23 other European countries.

Responses to questions from the Children's Worlds survey on 10 different aspects of life (or domains of well-being) are examined for Year 6 pupils in the UK (England and Wales, specifically) and 14 other European countries (or regions of countries) who participated in the study.

Chapter 4 further explores the reductions in children's happiness with their friends from the Understanding Society survey, which were identified in Chapter 2. Patterns in children's responses to this question are examined in more detail, together with responses to other questions in the survey, with a view to further understanding why children might be less happy.

The chapter ends with an analysis of qualitative information from our online consultations with children about their friendships, which were conducted by The Children's Society in May-June 2020.

Today is a  
new day,  
tomorrow is  
my future

Appendix A presents the 16 items which comprise The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index.

Appendix B provides details of the substantive programme of research conducted by The Children's Society, initiated through a partnership with the University of York, to better understand children's well-being, and what enables them to have a good childhood.

Appendix C contains children's (age 15 years) mean well-being scores for the ONS three measures by local authority from the 2014 What About Youth survey.

Appendix D presents children's (Academic Years 7 to 11) mean well-being scores for the ONS three measures by local authority from the 2018-19 Active Lives Children and Young People Survey.

Appendix E provides children's mean happiness scores with six different aspects of life from all waves of the British Household Panel Survey and Understanding Society, stretching back to 1995.

### **Statistical testing**

A range of appropriate statistical tests have been conducted to support the findings presented in this report, using a 99% confidence level to test statistical significance (unless otherwise stated).

Weighted data sets have been used for analysis of the Understanding Society survey, the Children's Society's household survey, PISA, Children's Worlds, the British Household Panel Survey, What About Youth and the Active Lives Children and Young People Survey.

While some basic explanatory information on statistical analysis is included in footnotes, every effort has been made to ensure that the main body of this report is non-technical and accessible to a range of audiences. Further specific details on the technical aspects of the research are available from The Children's Society's Research Team.



## Chapter 2:

# **The current state of children's subjective well-being:**

Overview, variations  
and trends over time

National data provides us with vital information on children's well-being, allowing us to identify important changes over time and variations between different groups of children (based on location, demographic or other characteristics). This chapter presents the most up to date figures from our own annual household panel survey – which provides a recent snapshot of children's responses to our Good Childhood Index in 2020 – together with the most recent data (for 2017-18) from the ongoing annual Understanding Society survey, which allows us to track trends in children's well-being.

As noted in Chapter 1, The Children's Society's annual household panel survey was conducted during the government-imposed lockdown for Coronavirus. While this, together with changes to survey methodology, is likely to have affected the findings, it was important to capture how children were feeling at such an important time in their childhood.

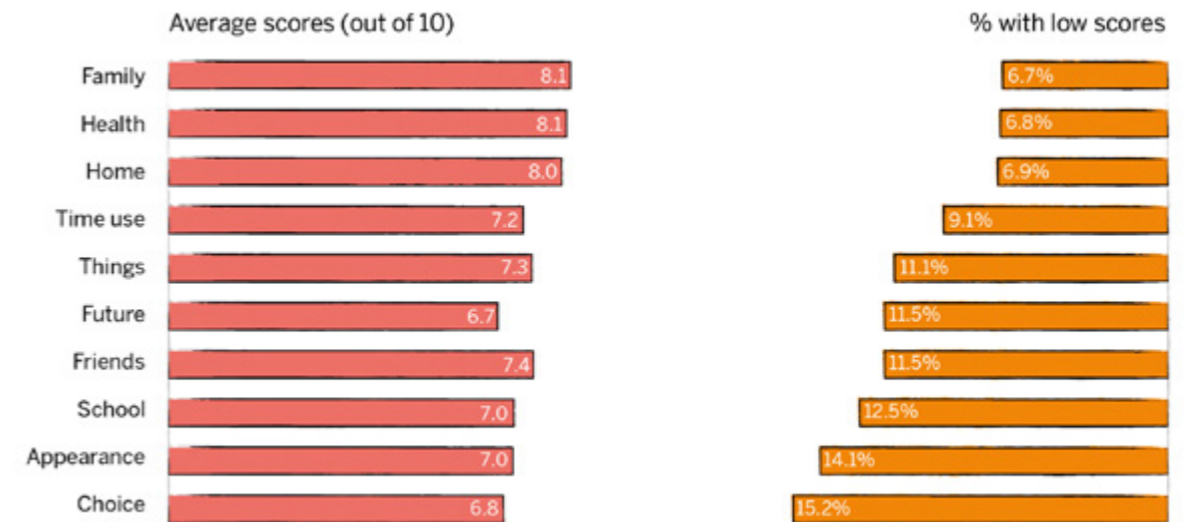
### The Good Childhood Index

Figures 2 and 3 present the latest figures for The Good Childhood Index (see Appendix A for further details) from The Children's Society's survey of just over 2,000 children conducted in April-June 2020.

Figure 2 shows the average scores and the proportion of children who score below the midpoint of the scale (who we describe as having 'low well-being') for each of the 10 aspects of life (or well-being domains). In 2020, as in previous years, children are most happy on average with their relationships with their family. However, in contrast with previous years – where the largest proportion were unhappy with the school that they go to – in 2020, a higher proportion of children were unhappy with the choice they have in life. As noted previously, children were in lockdown as part of measures to manage the Coronavirus pandemic, and the higher proportion unhappy with choice may therefore be related to the restrictions on social contact and other aspects of life that were in place at this time.



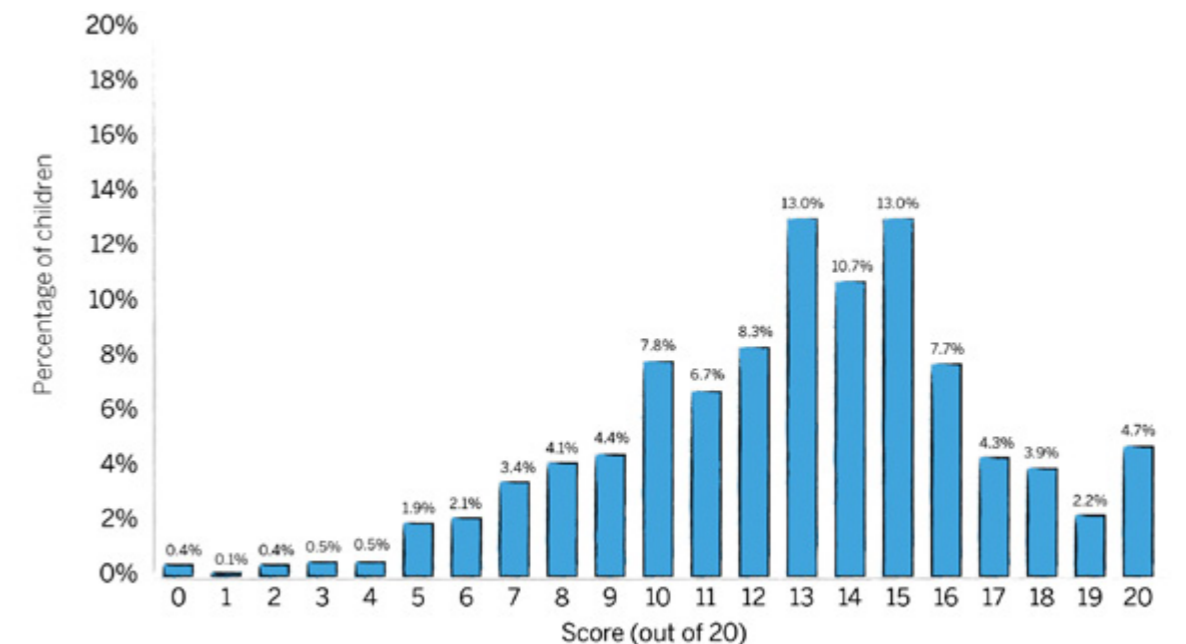
Figure 2: Latest figures for The Good Childhood Index



The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 19, April-June 2020, 10 to 17 year olds, United Kingdom. Weighted data.

Figure 3 shows the distribution of scores for the multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction, which was based on Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale.<sup>xxiii</sup> The majority of children score on or above the midpoint of the scale (10 out of 20). In our 2020 survey, 18% of children score below the midpoint and are deemed to have low well-being. As noted in our recent report on COVID-19,<sup>xxiv</sup> this reflects a larger proportion scoring below the midpoint than in the last five household surveys, when the proportion ranged between 10% and 13%.

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



The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 19, April-June 2020, 10 to 17 year olds, United Kingdom. Weighted data.

The graph below shows responses to the three ONS questions for those aged 10 to 17 in April-June 2020. These items are a key source for the ONS Children's Well-being Measures compendium for children aged 10 to 15.<sup>xv</sup> While the proportions scoring below the midpoint are slightly higher in 2020 than in recent years, they are more in line with what might be expected based on natural fluctuations.

Figure 4: Latest ONS measures of overall well-being



The Children's Society's household survey, Wave 19, April-June 2020, 10 to 17 year olds, United Kingdom. Weighted data.

There has been a significant decrease in happiness with life as a whole

### Time trends



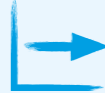

Since 2013, we have presented trends in children's well-being over time based on the most up to date findings from Understanding Society. The latest available data for this survey are for 2017-18, and so are from before the 2020 Coronavirus pandemic.

The Understanding Society survey has included questions for 10 to 15 year olds<sup>5</sup> asking how they feel about their life as a whole and five different aspects of their life ('your family', 'your friends', 'your appearance', 'the school you go to' and 'your school work') each year since 2009. Children are presented with a numeric scale (from completely happy to not at all happy) accompanied by faces expressing 'various types of feelings.' Examining changes in these six key measures allows us to identify areas in children's lives where they may be less happy and require our support. It also highlights areas for further exploration/research.

Figure 5 shows the most recent mean happiness scores for the six measures, across all nine waves of the survey.<sup>6</sup> The solid line reflects the mean scores and the dotted lines above and below are the 99% confidence intervals.

In the latest wave of the survey (2017-18), family (8.95) had the highest mean happiness score (of the five specific domains of life examined), followed by friends (8.53), school (7.39), schoolwork (7.20) and appearance (7.00). While the gap between some mean scores has changed, the order of these domains has remained the same since Wave 2 of the survey.

Comparisons between 2009-10 and 2017-18,<sup>7</sup> show that, as in last year's report, there has been:

-  A significant decrease in happiness with life as a whole and with friends.
  -  A sustained dip in happiness with school (the mean score was similar to that reported last year).
  -  No significant change for happiness with family or schoolwork.
- Also, in the most recent wave of the survey:
-  Happiness with appearance was significantly lower than when the survey began.

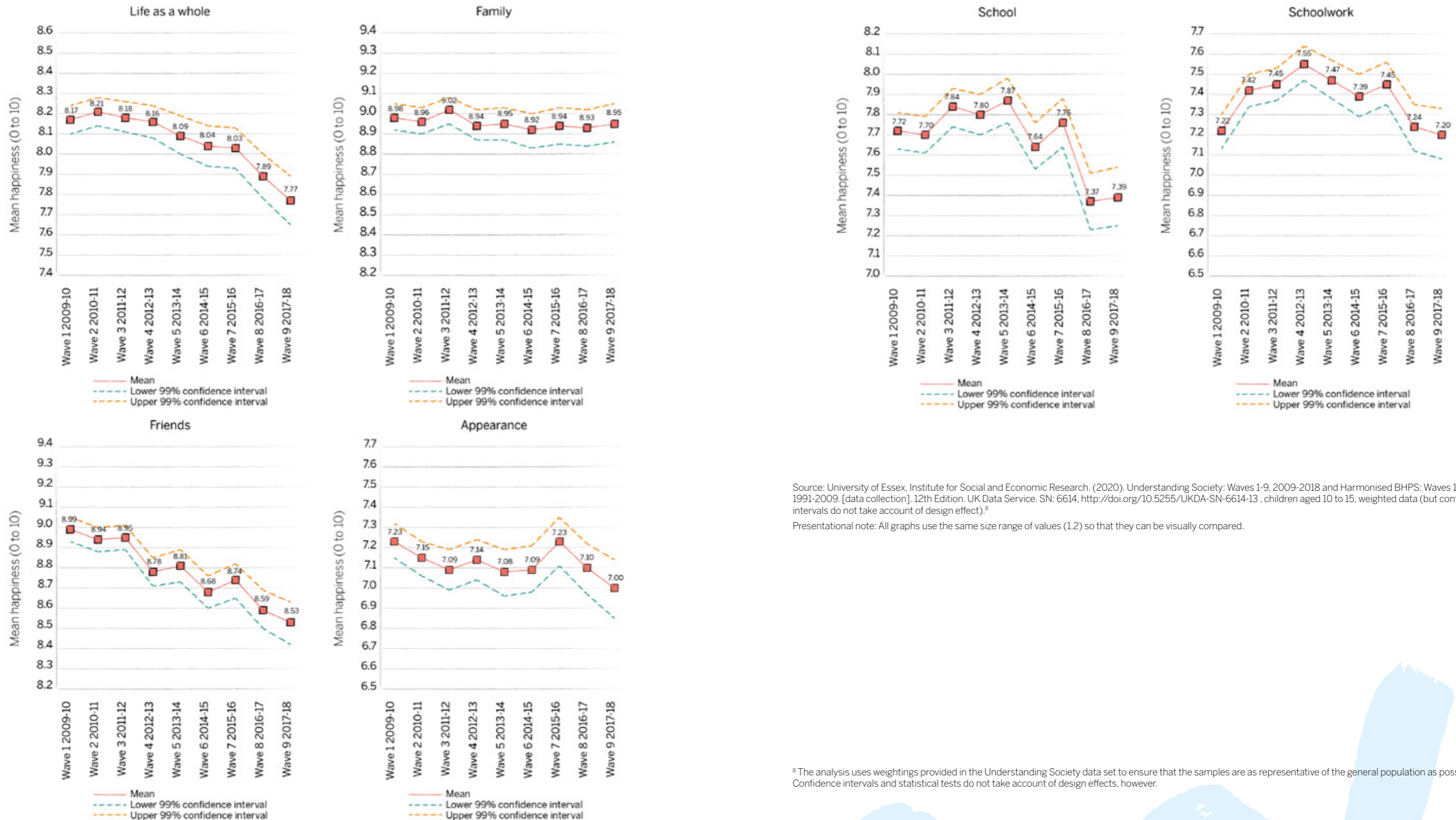
A longer-term time series showing children's happiness with these aspects of their lives across all waves of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and Understanding Society, from 1994-5 onwards, can be found in Appendix E.

<sup>5</sup> A small number of 16 year olds were included in Waves 4, 7, and 9 who are also captured in the analysis presented in this report (unless otherwise stated).

<sup>6</sup> The seven point scale (1-7) used to measure well-being in Understanding Society, where 1 is 'completely happy' and 7 'not at all happy', has been reversed and converted to an 11 point scale (0 to 10) for the purposes of this report to ease interpretation and comparison with the other measures presented. All figures have been produced using the most recent dataset for each Wave. Data for all waves, except Wave 1, have been weighted using the BHPS and UKHLS cross-sectional youth interview weight (-ythscub-xw). As a result, there are some small differences between mean scores presented here and in previous Good Childhood Reports. From Wave 7, an Immigration and Ethnic Minority Boost (IEMB) sample (with a differing weight variable) was added to the survey. This sample is not included in the analysis presented, ensuring maximum comparability between waves.

<sup>7</sup> Independent sample t-tests were used to assess whether differences in mean scores between 2009-10 and 2017-18 were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. These differences were also replicated using non-parametric tests.

Figure 5: Trends in children's happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18



Source: University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2020). Understanding Society: Waves 1-9, 2009-2018 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009. [data collection]. 12th Edition. UK Data Service. SN: 6614. <http://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-13>. children aged 10 to 15, weighted data (but confidence intervals do not take account of design effect).<sup>8</sup>

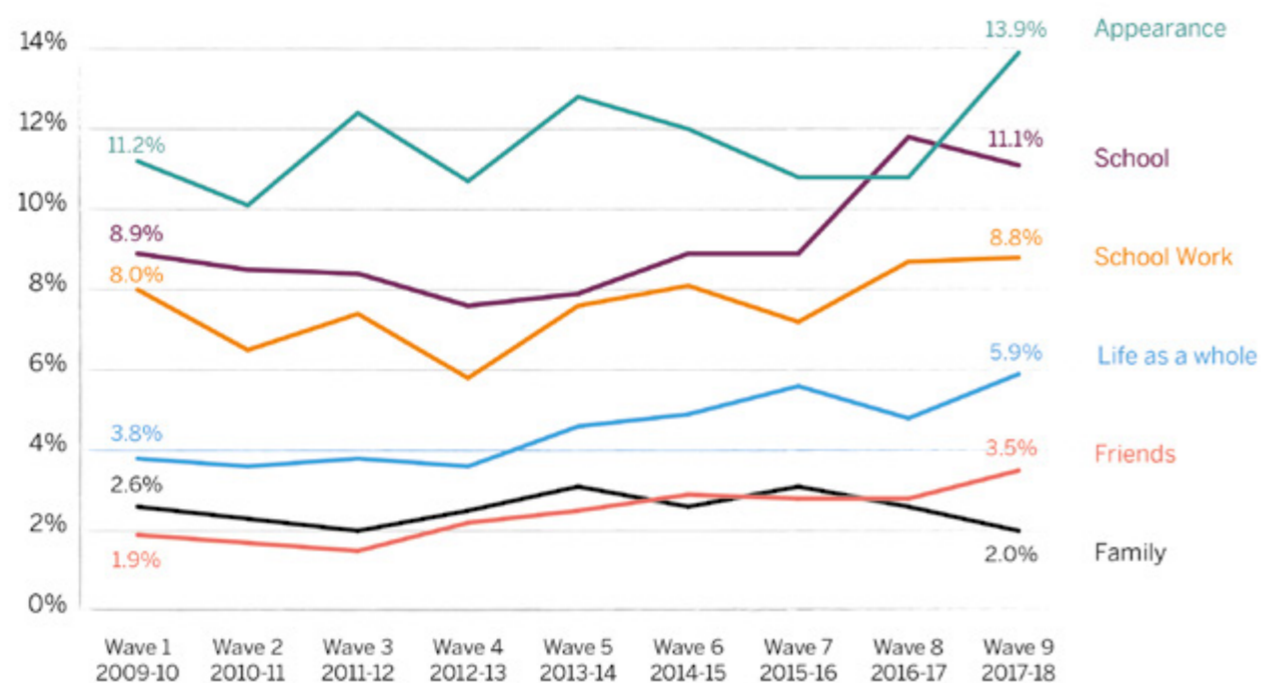
Presentational note: All graphs use the same size range of values (1.2) so that they can be visually compared.

<sup>8</sup> The analysis uses weightings provided in the Understanding Society data set to ensure that the samples are as representative of the general population as possible. Confidence intervals and statistical tests do not take account of design effects, however.

The recent Department of Education report acknowledged that focusing solely on average well-being can mask differences in levels of well-being between children from different backgrounds.<sup>xxvi</sup> Reassuringly, the findings from Understanding Society have consistently shown that the vast majority of children score above the midpoint for all six measures of happiness. However there are a small proportion of children who score below the midpoint, indicating that they are unhappy, and we are concerned to improve the well-being of these children.

Figure 6 shows the proportion of children scoring below the midpoint for life as a whole and the five specific aspects of life examined. Across all nine waves, more children reported being unhappy with their appearance and school than with any other area. Family has taken over from friends in recent years as the aspect of life where least children say they are unhappy.

**Figure 6: Proportion of children with happiness score below midpoint (0 to 4 out of 10) for life as a whole and five different aspects of life, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**



Source: Understanding Society survey, children age 10 to 15, weighted data.

Comparing the proportions unhappy in the latest wave with the first year of the survey suggests that:



The proportion of children unhappy with their life as a whole was significantly higher in 2017-18 (5.9% versus 3.8% in Wave 1).



While the proportion of children reporting they are unhappy with friends is low compared to other domains, it is significantly higher in 2017-18 than when the survey began.



The proportion of children unhappy with their appearance and the school they go to was also significantly higher in 2017-18 than when the survey began. As the increase in the proportion unhappy with their appearance does not reflect a consistent upward trend (eg the proportion in 2016-17 was lower than when the survey began), it will be important to monitor this area in future waves to see if it is a one-off occurrence.

Figure 7 presents the mean happiness scores obtained in each wave of the survey for girls compared to boys. It shows that, in Wave 9, boys' highest mean happiness score was for family, followed by friends, school, appearance and schoolwork. While girls' highest mean score was also for family followed by friends and school, their lowest score was for appearance (rather than schoolwork).

Comparisons between boys mean scores versus girls mean scores<sup>9</sup> show consistent gender differences for:

- Appearance: The mean happiness score for boys has been significantly higher than for girls across survey years, although the gender gap has reduced in the last three waves.
- Schoolwork: Girls were significantly happier (ie had higher mean scores) than boys across all waves.

Comparisons between girls' scores over time and boys' scores over time (ie patterns within each gender)<sup>10</sup> indicate:



Significant decreases in happiness with life as a whole, happiness with friends and happiness with school in the most recent wave (compared to the first wave) for both boys and girls.

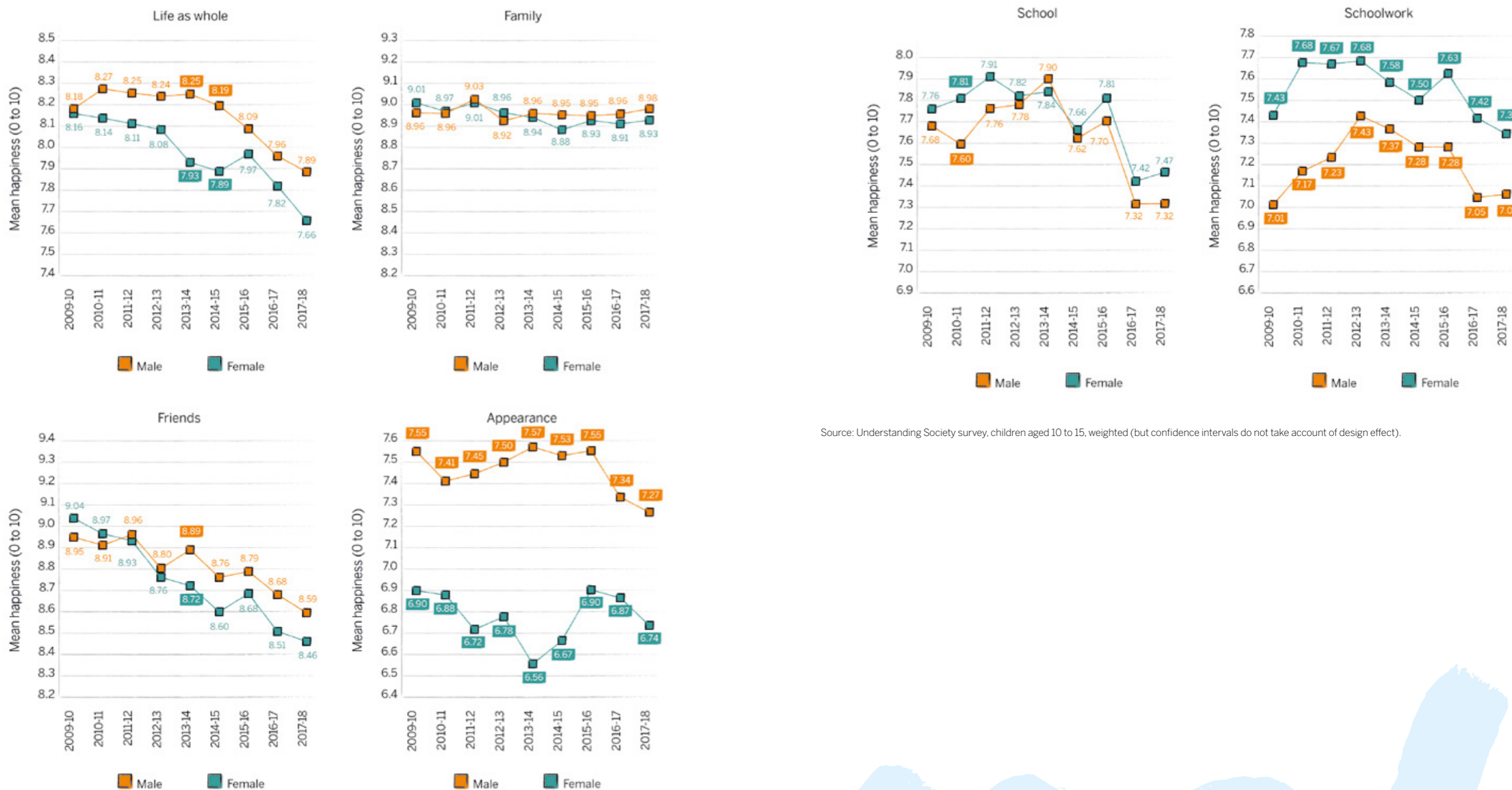


A significant decrease in happiness with appearance for boys only (again comparing Wave 9 with Wave 1).

<sup>9</sup> Independent sample t-tests were used to assess whether differences in mean scores for boys and girls were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The Understanding Society variable ypssex was used to conduct the analyses by gender.

<sup>10</sup> Independent sample t-tests were used to assess whether differences in means scores between the first and latest wave of the survey within each gender were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The Understanding Society variable ypssex was used to differentiate between boys and girls.

Figure 7: Trends in children's happiness with different aspects of life by gender, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted (but confidence intervals do not take account of design effect).

More children reported being **unhappy with their appearance and school** than with other areas of life.

Girls are **significantly happier with schoolwork** than boys.

Figure 8 presents the proportions of boys and girls that were unhappy (ie scored below the midpoint) for life as a whole and with the five specific aspects of life measured in Understanding Society. It shows that more girls have consistently been unhappy with their appearance. More boys have been unhappy with school in recent years than with any other measure – although, in the most recent wave, this was followed very closely by appearance.

Statistical tests comparing data from 2009-10 and 2017-18 suggest that:

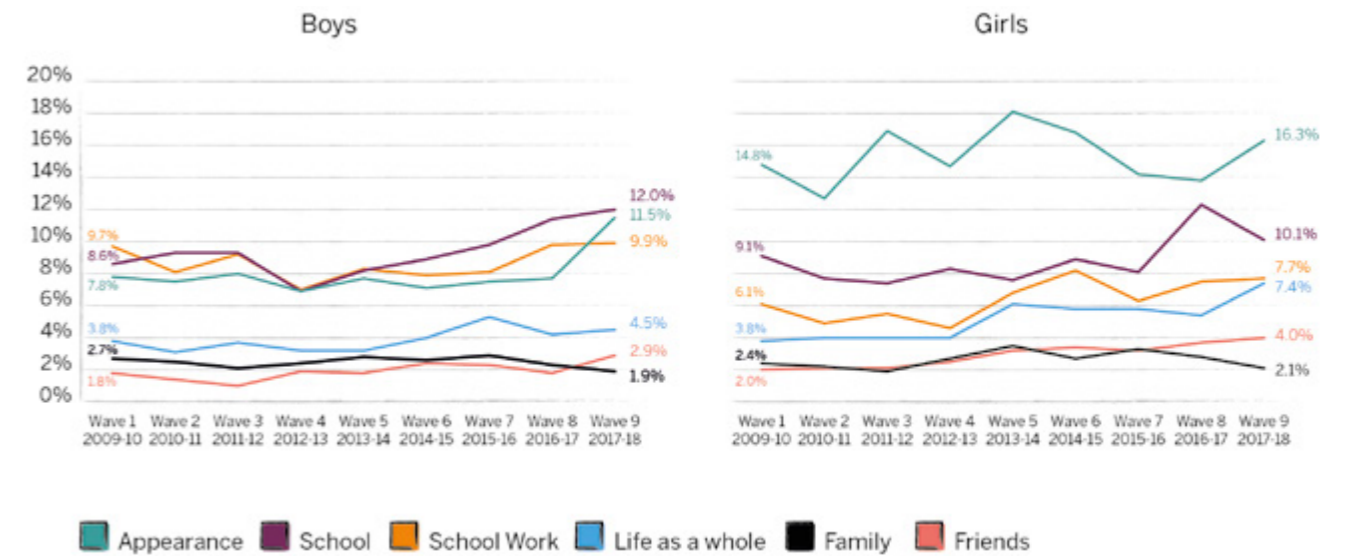


There was a significant increase in the proportion of boys unhappy with their appearance and their school (while the rise for appearance is only seen in the most recent survey year, the rise for school appears to be part of a consistent upward trend).



There was a significant increase in the proportion of girls unhappy with their life as a whole and their friends (although again the proportion of girls unhappy with their friends is low in relation to other measures).

**Figure 8: Proportion of boys and girls with happiness score below midpoint (0 to 4 out of 10) for life as a whole and different aspects of life, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**



Source: Understanding Society survey, children age 10 to 15, weighted data.



Keep  
FIGHTING  
no matter how  
dark things seem

### Summary

Over the last 10 years, The Children's Society's commitment to measuring the well-being of children and asking them directly about their experiences, has highlighted particular areas of life children are finding difficult, and specific groups of children in need of support.

Understanding Society shows that, in 2017-18, children's highest mean happiness score was for family and their lowest mean happiness score was for appearance. The latest trends from this survey for children aged 10 to 15 indicate that between 2009-10 and 2017-18 there was:

- A significant decrease in happiness with life as a whole and friends. The dip in happiness with school reported in last year's report was also sustained.
- No significant change in happiness with family, or schoolwork.
- In the latest wave of the survey, there was also a significant decrease in happiness with appearance (compared to when the survey first began), which needs to be monitored in future waves.

Reassuringly, most children say that they are happy with their life as a whole and the five specific aspects of life measured in Understanding Society. However, there are a small proportion of children who indicate that they are unhappy. The aspect of life that children most frequently said they were unhappy with in 2017-18 was their appearance. There have also been significant increases (comparing the most recent and first survey waves) in the proportion of children unhappy with their life as a whole, their friends, and their school. Repeating this analysis in future years will allow us to assess whether these reflect ongoing trends or a one-off spike in the data.

Understanding Society highlights some interesting differences between boys and girls aged 10 to 15 years:

- Boys have consistently been happier with their appearance than girls, although the trend for boys is changing.
- Girls have repeatedly been happier with schoolwork than boys.

Since the survey commenced in 2009, there has been a decline in both boys' and girls' mean happiness scores for life as a whole, friends and school. There have also been sustained rises in the proportion of boys who are unhappy with school, and the proportion of girls who are unhappy with their friends. Although the proportion of girls unhappy with their friends is low in comparison with other aspects of life, this may help with understanding the recent reduction in mean happiness with friends identified in the survey, which is explored further in Chapter 4 of this report.



## Chapter 3:

# Comparing children's well-being in the UK with other European countries

The previous chapter shows there has been a decline in happiness with life as a whole among children in the UK. National data does not tell us whether this pattern is repeated for children elsewhere or something that is unique to this country. It can be useful therefore to compare subjective well-being in different countries – indeed it is now common to do this for adults (eg the World Happiness Report).<sup>xxvii</sup> In this chapter, we look at some of the latest international comparative statistics in order to try to put the subjective well-being of children in the UK into a broader context, helping us to understand what differences exist between countries. We also present analysis of potential explanations for the differences identified. When reading the findings in this chapter, it should be borne in mind that there are challenges in making international comparisons on children's well-being. As well as potential differences in the way people in different nations respond to subjective questions, economic and cultural variations between countries may also be influential.

A recent study<sup>xxviii</sup> of children's health in 45 countries (in Europe plus Canada) found that children in the UK fared poorly for subjective well-being. For children aged 15, England, Wales and Scotland ranked 36th, 37th and 40th respectively. Scotland and Wales fared a little better at younger ages – ranking 18th and 22nd at 11 years old, with England in 43rd. Children in these three UK countries (Northern Ireland was not included in the study) also had high levels of emotional complaints such as feeling low and having difficulties sleeping.

This chapter summarises findings from two other recent international studies that enable us to look in more depth at how children in the UK feel about their lives compared to other countries:

- The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is mainly focused on children's academic achievement. But it increasingly also asks them about their subjective experiences of life as a whole. The most recent data for the seventh wave was collected in 2018.
- The Children's Worlds study is focused on children's views and experiences across a wider range of dimensions of their lives and well-being. The third wave, drawn upon in this chapter, was conducted between 2016 and 2019.<sup>xxix</sup>

Detail of the coverage and methodology for both of these studies can be found in Chapter 1.

Our analysis in this chapter compares the UK with other European countries – 23 in the case of PISA<sup>11</sup> and 14 in the case of Children's Worlds. Both surveys also enable some comparisons within the UK – PISA for all four nations/jurisdictions, and Children's Worlds for England and Wales.

This chapter starts with analysis of measures of overall well-being based on data from PISA, which asks children aged 15 years old about their overall subjective well-being and also about some aspects of school life. It then moves on to consider specific areas of children's life based on analysis of data from the Children's Worlds survey, which asks children aged 8, 10 and 12 about a range of aspects of their lives – including a survey in England focused on 10 year olds only. We therefore have insights about children's well-being towards the end of primary and compulsory secondary school.

<sup>11</sup> PISA countries in Europe were included if they were in the EU and/or OECD and had asked all four questions covered in this section. Bulgaria, Germany and the Netherlands were excluded because of levels of missing data of more than 10% for more than one of the four questions.

### Overall well-being

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

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

We created four simpler variables showing whether or not the young person (aged 15 years):

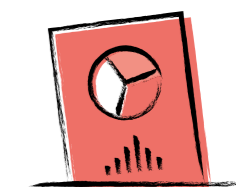
- Had high life satisfaction (score of above 5 out of 10).
- Had high happiness (responding 'sometimes' or 'always').
- Had low sadness ('rarely' or 'never').
- Had a positive sense of purpose ('agree' or 'strongly agree').

The percentages of children with positive scores on each of these four measures are shown in Figures 9 to 12:

- The UK ranked lowest of 24 European countries for the proportion with high life satisfaction (it also ranked lowest based on mean scores for life satisfaction).
- It ranked 9th for the proportion with high happiness.
- However it ranked 23rd for low sadness (ie it had the second highest level of sadness).
- It ranked lowest for purpose in life.

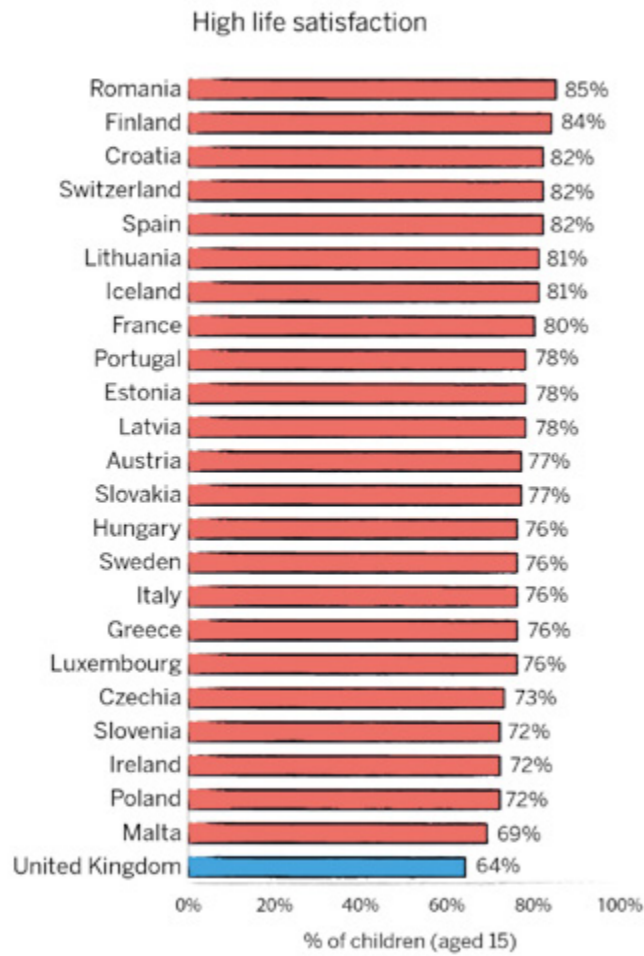


UK children (aged 15) ranked **lowest** for purpose in life.



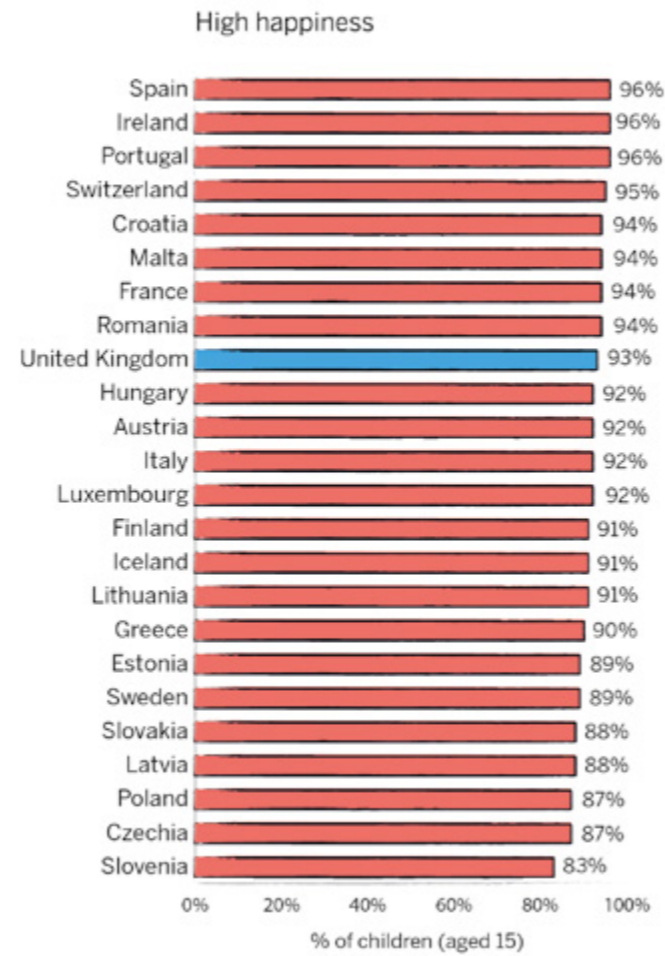
The UK ranked **lowest of 24 European countries** for the proportion of children with high life satisfaction.

Figure 9



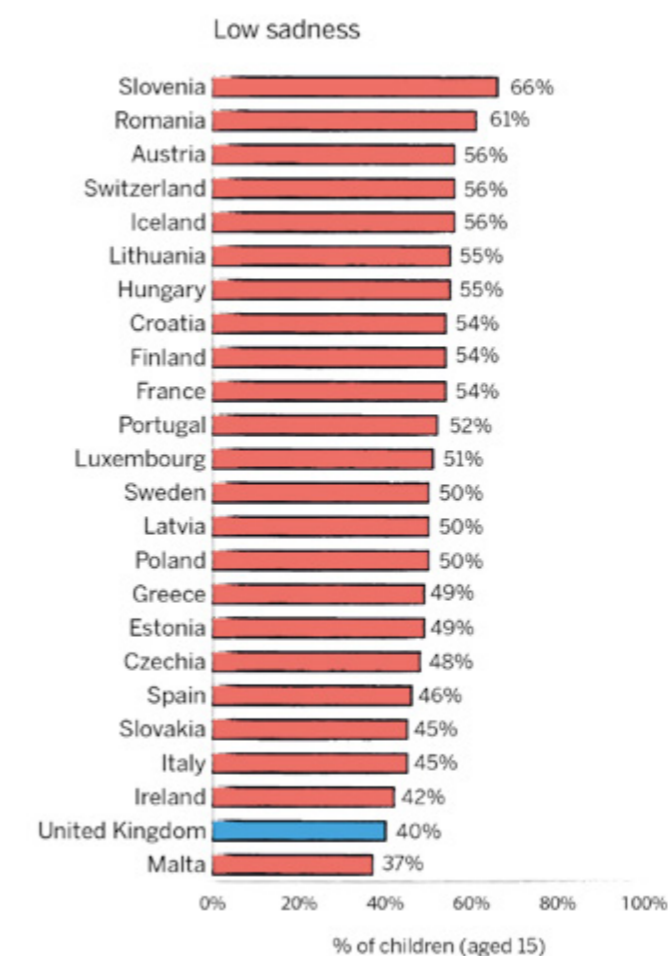
Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data. 'High life satisfaction' is defined as a score greater than five out of 10 on a 0 to 10 scale.

Figure 10



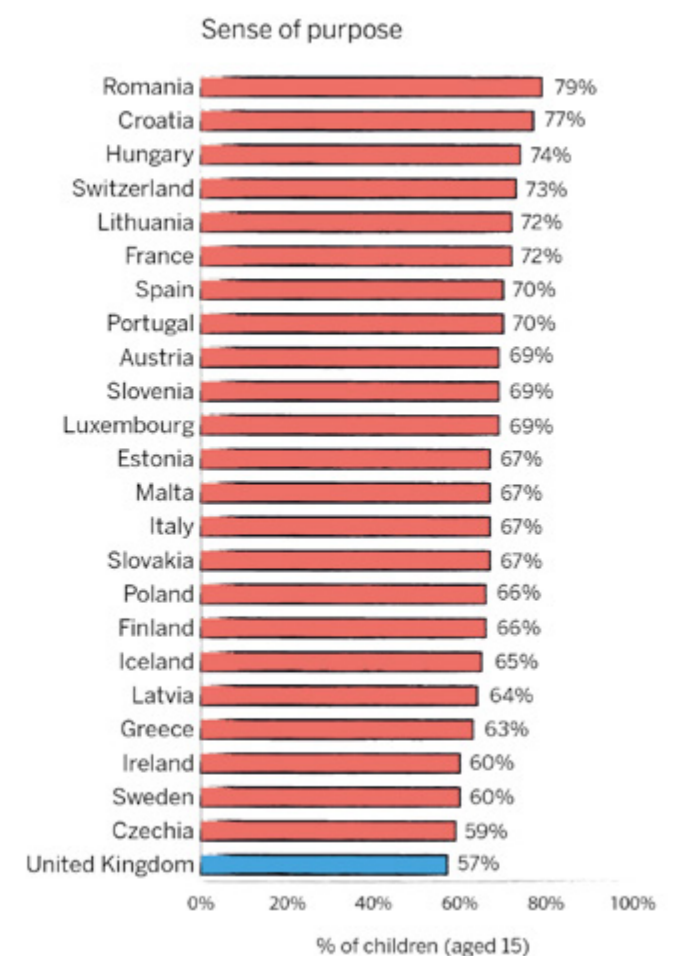
Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data. 'High happiness' is defined as feeling 'always' or 'sometimes' happy.

Figure 11



Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data. 'Low sadness' is defined as feeling 'never' or 'rarely' sad.

Figure 12



Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data. The percentages refer to children who agreed or strongly agreed that they had a sense of purpose.



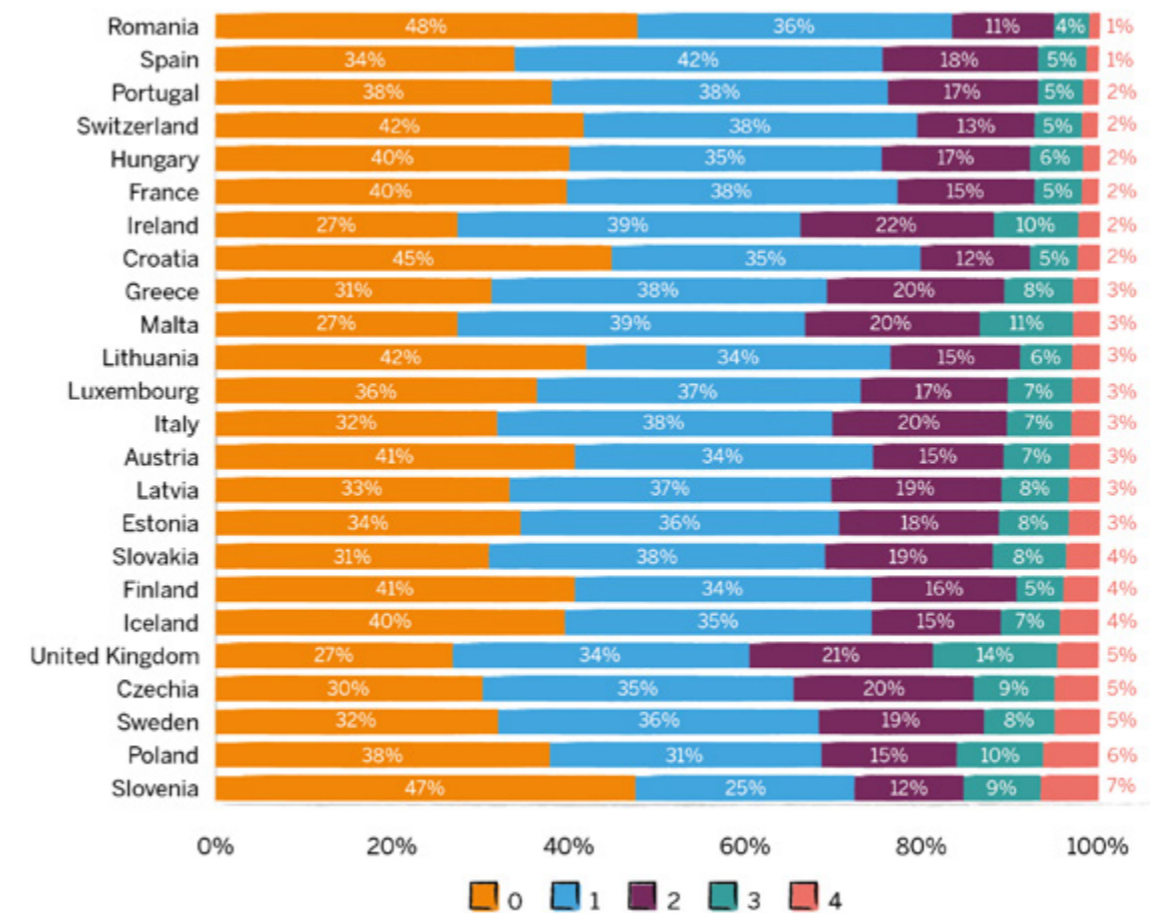
As a summary of the above, we calculated the percentage of children in each country who had low well-being and might be defined as 'struggling' across the four measures. We created a score based on the number of these questions for which each child had a low score. Low was defined as:

- Below the mid-point of 5 out of 10 for life satisfaction.
- Feeling 'rarely' or 'never' happy.

- Feeling 'sometimes' or 'always' sad.
- Disagreeing or strongly disagreeing with having a sense of purpose.

The UK had the fifth highest proportion of children (around 5%) struggling on all four measures; the highest proportion struggling on at least three; and the lowest proportion (27%) not having a low score for any of the four measures (Figure 13).

**Figure 13: Number of measures for which children had low well-being**



Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data.

### Why do children in the UK have such low subjective well-being compared to other European countries?

Analysis of the findings indicates that, at 15 years old, children in the UK have relatively low subjective well-being compared to the other European countries included in this comparison. The obvious question is why? As noted previously, differences in the way that people respond to questions between countries and expectations based on economic and cultural context may be influential.

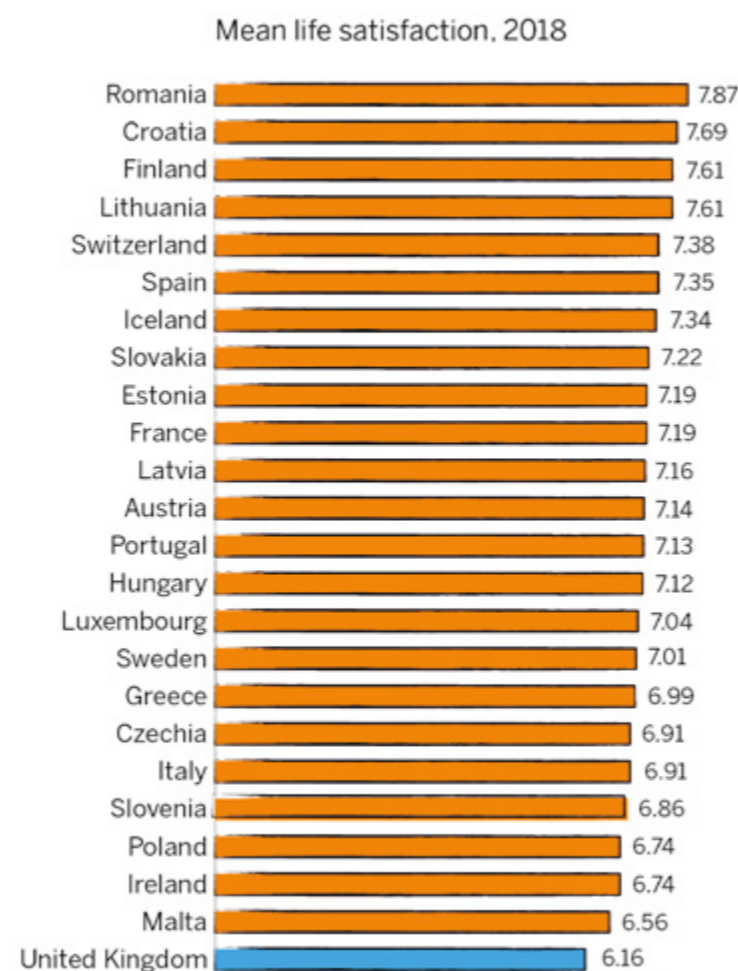
We considered three different hypotheses that might help to explain these patterns:

1. Variations in use of digital technology.
2. Variations in fear of failure.
3. Variations in child poverty.

Here, we examine these hypotheses in relation to the question about life satisfaction – because this question was also included in the 2015 PISA survey and thus enables us to gain a perspective on how children are doing over time.

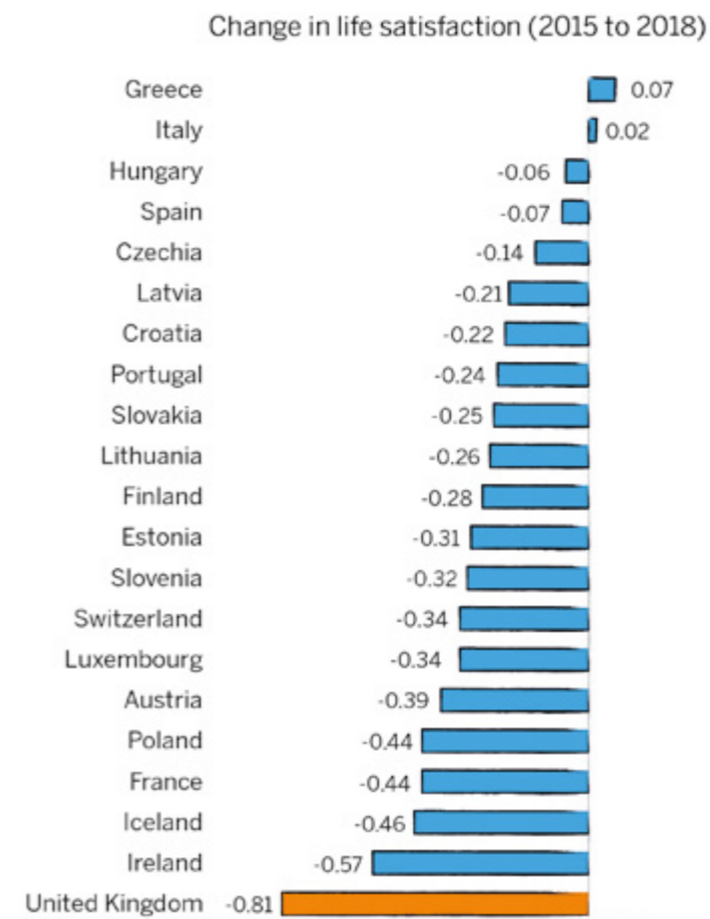
Figure 14 shows mean life satisfaction scores (out of 10) in 2018. The UK had the lowest mean score. Figure 15 shows the change in mean life satisfaction scores between 2015 and 2018 for 21 countries that had data at both time points. The UK had the largest drop in mean life satisfaction between 2015 and 2018. It was already 19th out of these 21 countries in 2015 with a mean score of 6.98, just above Italy (6.89) and Greece (6.91). While life satisfaction stayed roughly steady (slight increase) in these two other countries over this three-year period, in the UK it fell substantially.

Figure 14



Source: PISA, 2015 and 2018. Weighted data.

Figure 15



Source: PISA, 2015 and 2018. Weighted data.

Source: PISA, 2015 and 2018. Weighted data.

### Digital technology

Concerns are regularly expressed about whether children's technology use might affect their well-being. Research findings on this topic are actually rather mixed<sup>xxx</sup> and the strength of the link between technology use and mental well-being amongst children in the UK appears to be very weak.<sup>xxxi</sup> Nevertheless, as this is an ongoing debate, we decided it would be relevant to explore whether countries where children used digital technology more extensively were also ones that had lower child well-being. The influence of children's use of online technology is also further explored in Chapter 4 which looks specifically at how, if at all, it relates to young people's happiness with friends.

We estimated the number of hours that children spent on the internet outside school based on two questions in the PISA survey about weekday and weekend internet use. The UK did have the second highest mean number of hours (around 30). This compares with a cross-country average of around 27.6 hours per week ranging from around 23 hours in Slovenia to around 32 hours in Sweden. However, there was no clear relationship<sup>12</sup> between the average number of internet hours spent by children in a country and their average life satisfaction scores. For example, Croatia, which had the highest life satisfaction score of 7.69 out of 10 in this comparison (as data on internet use wasn't available for Romania), had mean internet use of 27.9 hours, close to the average.

We also explored whether the drop in life satisfaction in the UK could be due to a greater growth in internet use than in other countries. In fact, the opposite was the case. Average hours per week on the internet only grew by about 0.4 hours in the UK, while the average across all countries analysed grew by 2.5 hours.

<sup>12</sup> Pearson correlation coefficient was not significant at p<0.05

### Fear of failure

The HBSC survey findings published earlier in the year indicated that England, Wales and Scotland were among the six countries (out of 45) with the highest levels of school work pressure among 15 year olds.

The PISA survey does not have a direct measure of children's feelings of pressure at school. But it does include a measure of fear of failure based on three questions:

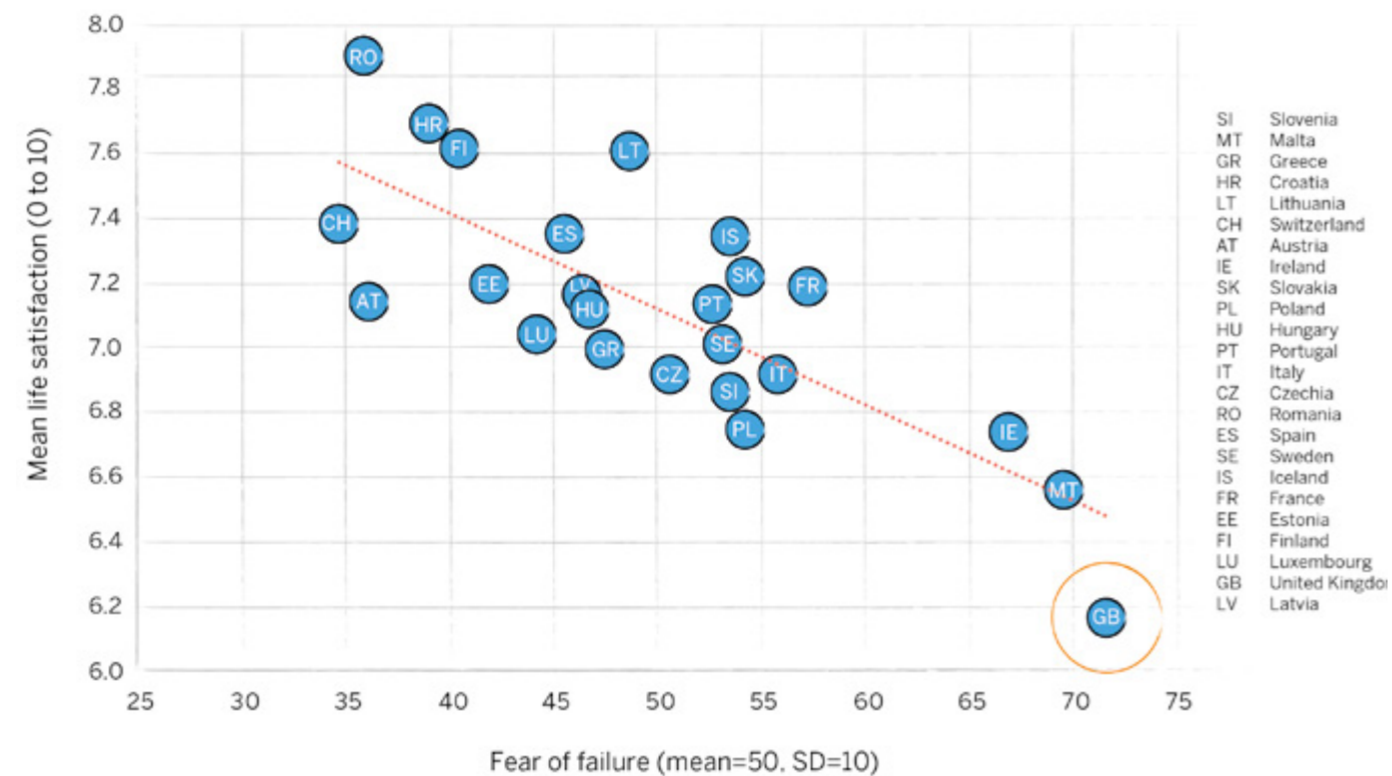
- When I am failing, I worry what others think of me.
- When I am failing, I am afraid that I might not have enough talent.

- When I am failing, this makes me doubt my plans for the future.

Children could respond to each question on a four-point scale from 'Strongly disagree' to 'Strongly agree'. As the PISA survey primarily focuses on academic testing, fear of failure (or possibly academic failure) is likely to affect how children feel about school.

Figure 16 shows the mean life satisfaction and mean fear of failure<sup>13</sup> in 24 European countries. There was a strong correlation<sup>14</sup> between the two measures. Countries in which children tended to have a greater fear of failure also tended to have lower life satisfaction. Children in the UK (shown as GB below) had the greatest fear of failure and the lowest life satisfaction.

Figure 16: Life satisfaction and fear of failure



<sup>13</sup> The PISA team created a 'fear of failure' score with a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1. We have transformed this so that it has a mean of 50 and a standard deviation of 10 for ease of interpretation.

<sup>14</sup> Pearson  $r = -0.79$



The UK had the largest increase in relative child poverty



Unfortunately, the measure of fear of failure was not included in the 2015 survey so it was not possible to look at changes in this measure over time and whether they are linked with changes in life satisfaction over time.

### Child poverty

There is little evidence in high-income countries that children's subjective well-being and relative child poverty rates are connected. Indeed, the mean life satisfaction scores from PISA were not significantly correlated with relative child poverty rates in 2018 in the 24 countries we included in these analyses.

Yet it is possible that changes in child poverty over time may explain changes in life satisfaction. As children make comparisons with their peers, increases in inequality could lead to drops in children's life satisfaction. While this could particularly affect poorer children, it can affect all children to some extent. For example, we showed in The Good Childhood Report 2016 that children who had 'about the same' amount of money as their friends were likely to have the highest life satisfaction.

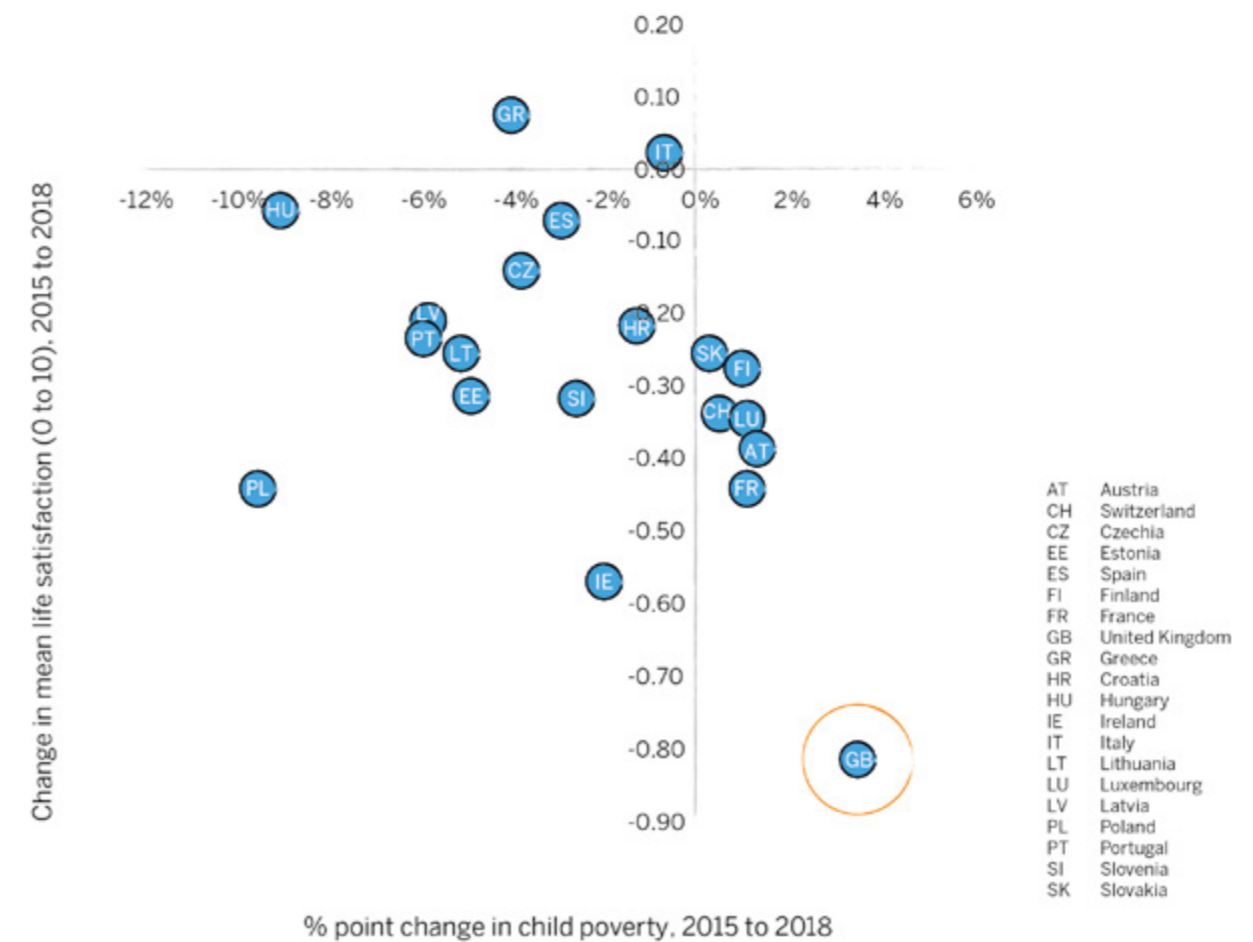
We tested the hypothesis that changes in poverty rates could be linked to changes in life satisfaction, making use of data on life satisfaction from PISA 2015. The results are shown in Figure 17.

The UK had the largest increase in relative child poverty (around 4 percentage points) between 2015 and 2018, while on average across the 20 countries compared child poverty reduced by around 2 percentage points. The UK also had the largest drop in life satisfaction as already shown in Figure 15. As a visual inspection of the chart suggests, there was a moderate negative correlation<sup>15</sup> between changes in life satisfaction and changes in child poverty over this three-year period. This evidence is only correlational and not conclusive, but it does raise questions about whether increasing levels of child poverty in the UK may be having a detrimental effect on children's subjective well-being.

<sup>15</sup> Pearson  $r = -0.40$ . The correlation excluding the UK was  $-0.39$  and excluding Poland was  $-0.54$ .

The UK had the second largest socio-economic inequality

Figure 17: Changes in life satisfaction and child poverty, 2015 to 2018



Further analysis using a measure of family socio-economic status included in the PISA survey indicates that the UK had the second largest socio-economic inequality (after Latvia) in life satisfaction among 24 countries in 2018. Children in the quarter with the highest socio-economic status had a mean life satisfaction score of 6.55 – compared to 5.76 for children in the lowest quarter. This pattern supports the idea that there is relatively high socio-economic inequality in life satisfaction in the UK compared to other European countries.

In summary, in response to our three hypotheses:

1. There is **no firm evidence** of a connection across countries between levels of use of digital technology and children's life satisfaction.
2. There is **strong evidence** of a connection across countries between fear of failure and life satisfaction.
3. There is **some evidence** of a link over time between changes in child poverty within countries and changes in life satisfaction – although more work is needed to verify this and understand the mechanisms through which this might happen.

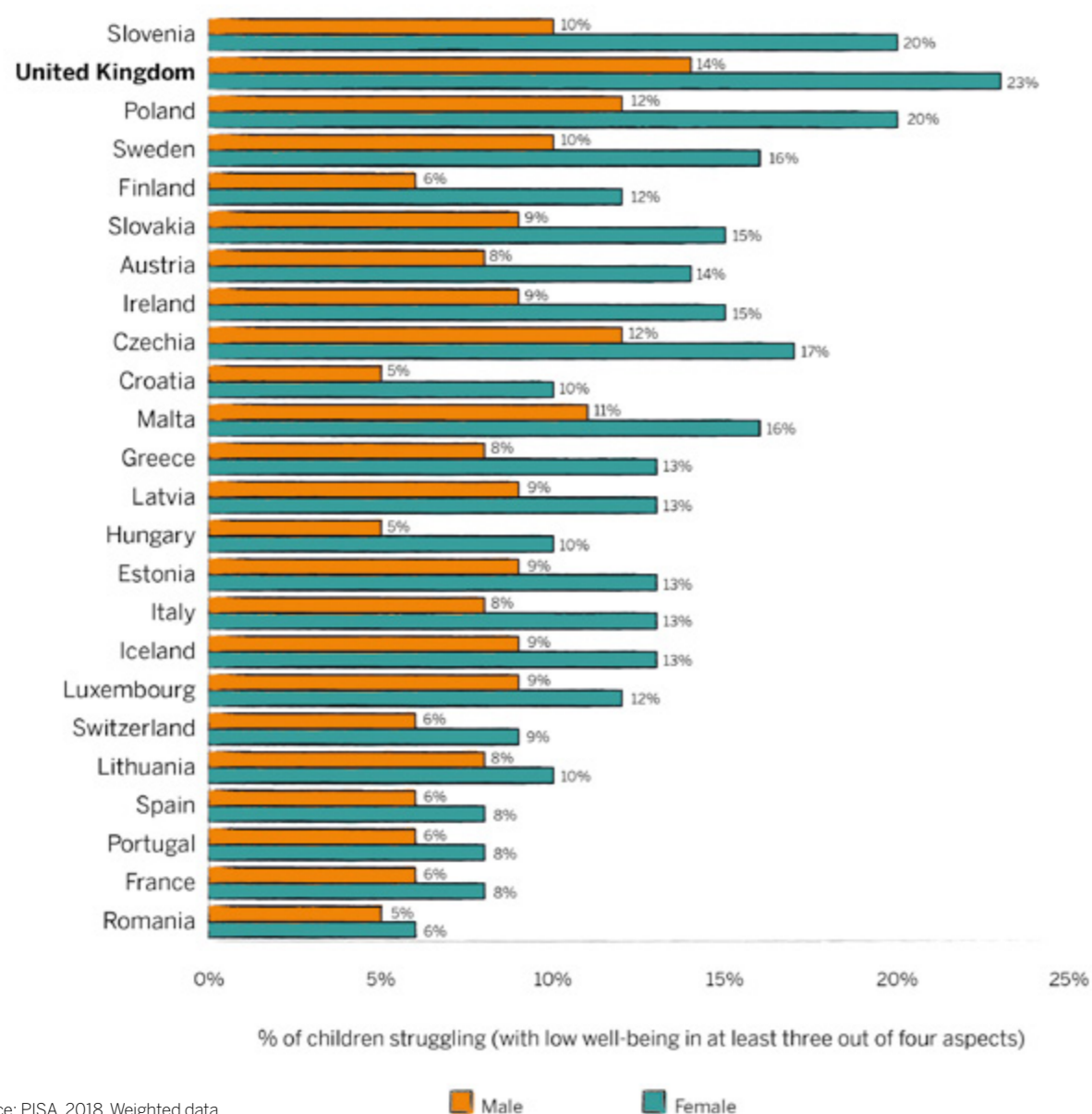
These findings are at a very simple level and more research, considering a range of different factors in combination, is needed to understand why children's life satisfaction varies across countries.

### Gender differences

There are some substantial gender differences in the subjective well-being of children aged 15

years old throughout Europe, including in the UK. Almost a quarter (23%) of girls in the UK had low well-being on at least three out of four measures (life satisfaction, happiness, sadness and sense of purpose) compared to 14% of boys. This was the second biggest gender gap (after Slovenia) in 24 European countries (Figure 18).

**Figure 18: Girls and boys with low well-being on three or four measures of well-being**



Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data.

### Variations within the UK

PISA also enables comparisons between the four jurisdictions of the UK (Table 1):

- Northern Ireland ranks highest for life satisfaction, followed by Wales, Scotland and England. Northern Ireland and Wales had significantly<sup>16</sup> higher scores than England. Northern Ireland also had a significantly higher score than Scotland.
- Rates of high happiness are very similar across all four jurisdictions.
- Wales and Northern Ireland have the lowest rates of children feeling sometimes or always sad. These rates were significantly lower than for Scotland.
- Northern Ireland and Wales have the highest proportions of children agreeing that they have a sense of purpose in life, although for this measure none of the differences between countries were statistically significant.

Overall, Wales and Northern Ireland (30% and 29% respectively) have the largest proportions of children not struggling on any measure, and England has the highest proportion struggling on three or four measures (19% - see Figure 19).

Within the UK the gender gap in the proportion of children struggling on at least three measures was relatively similar across the four nations - around 9 percentage points in England, 8 percentage points in Northern Ireland, and 7 in Scotland and Wales.

**Table 1: Proportion of children in UK jurisdictions with positive well-being scores**

	High life satisfaction	High happiness	Low sadness	Purpose in life
England	63.2%	92.8%	40.2%	56.9%
N Ireland	70.3%	93.5%	42.4%	60.1%
Scotland	65.9%	93.2%	36.8%	56.5%
Wales	66.7%	92.8%	43.1%	59.5%

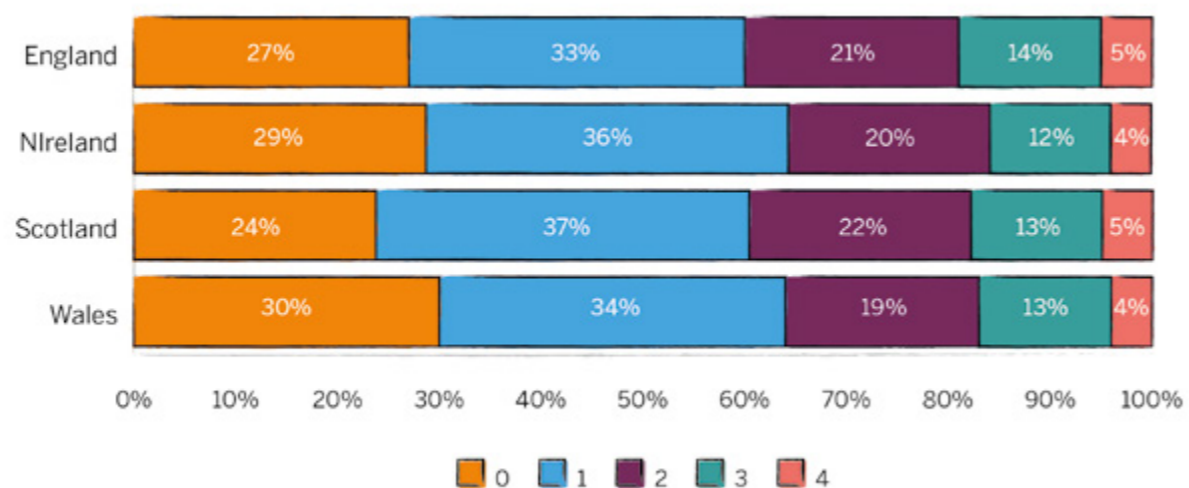
Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data.

Note: The percentages in this table are for those participants who have a score for all four measures only.

<sup>16</sup> Significance testing between the four UK nations was undertaken at the 0.05 level with a Bonferroni correction.



Figure 19: Number of measures for which children in UK jurisdictions had low well-being



Source: PISA, 2018. Weighted data.  
Note: The percentages shown are for those participants who have a score for all four measures only.

**Satisfaction with different aspects of life**

We now turn to findings from The Children's Worlds survey, which included questions asking children to rate their satisfaction with 10 aspects of their lives that are similar to those in The Good Childhood Index (see Chapter 2).<sup>17</sup> In Figure 20 we compare mean scores on these 10 aspects of life for children aged around 10 years old in England and Wales, with 14 other European countries (or regions of countries): Belgium (Flanders), Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy (Liguria), Malta, Norway, Poland, Romania, Spain (Catalonia) and Switzerland.

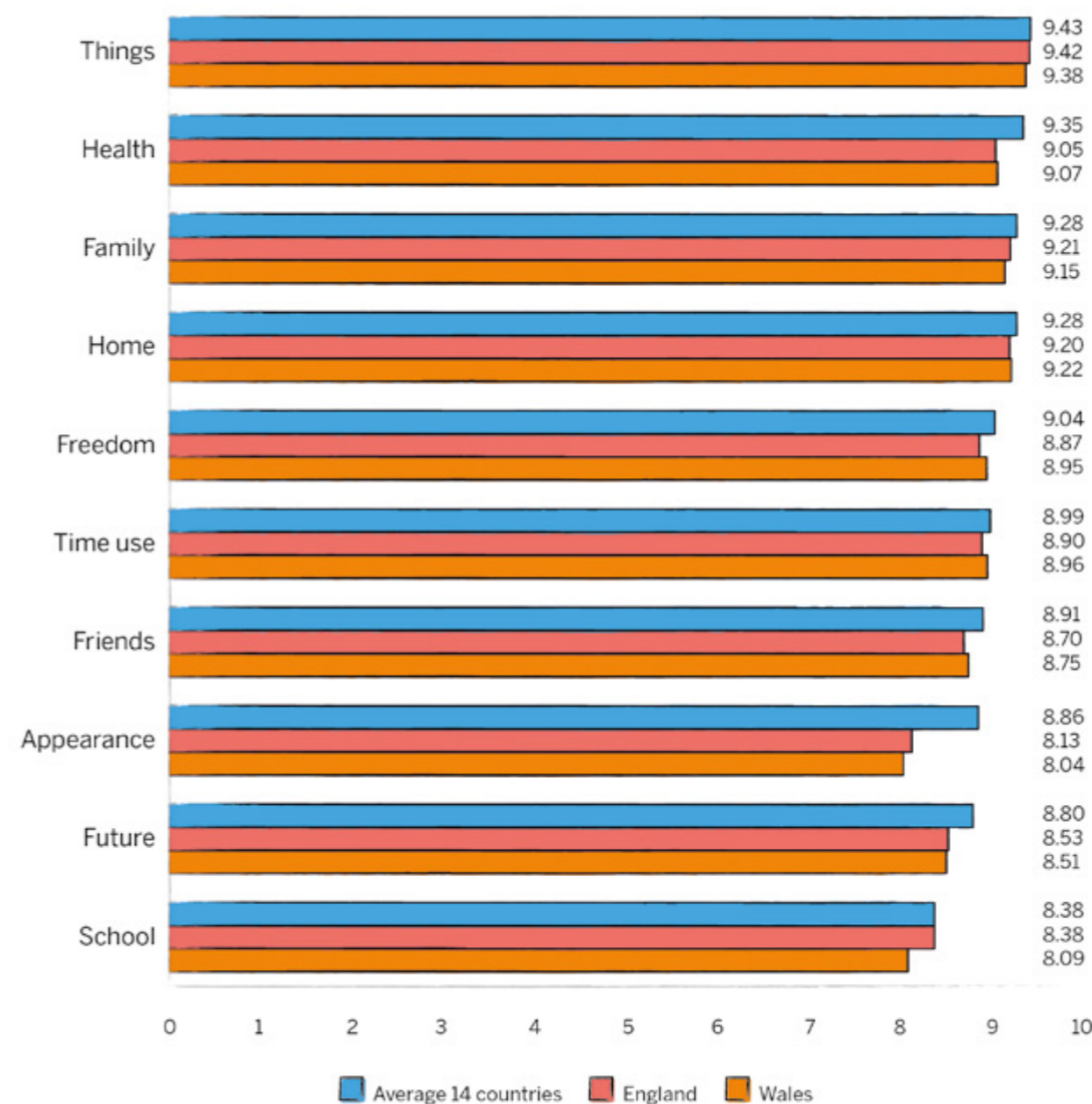
There were five aspects where children aged around 10 in England and/or Wales were below average and fared significantly worse than many countries.

- England (but not Wales) was significantly<sup>18</sup> below the average of the 14 comparator countries for satisfaction with friends.
- Wales (but not England) was significantly below the average for satisfaction with life at school.
- Both England and Wales were significantly below the average of the other countries for satisfaction with health, appearance and what might happen in the future.
- The largest difference was for satisfaction with appearance. Mean scores were 8.13 for England and 8.04 for Wales, compared to an average across the other 14 countries of 8.86. In fact, Wales and England occupied the two lowest positions in the rankings for this aspect of life and had significantly lower scores than 12 out of the 14 countries.

<sup>17</sup>Note that the response scale for the Children's Worlds study was different – with 0 signifying 'Not at all satisfied' (rather than 'very unhappy') and 10 signifying 'Totally satisfied' (rather than 'very happy').

<sup>18</sup>A 95% confidence level was used to test for statistical significance for the Children's Worlds data.

Figure 20: Children's (aged 10 years old) mean satisfaction with different aspects of life



Source: Children's Worlds Survey, 2020. Weighted data.

NOW I  
 KNOW I'M  
 MORE  
 THAN THAT

### Summary

Examining the international data in this chapter has provided us with important information on how the well-being of children in the UK compares to that of children in other countries. It suggests that children in the UK may be faring less well than their counterparts in other European countries on key measures of well-being and some specific aspects of life.

- Data on 15 year olds from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows the UK ranking lowest of 24 European countries for the proportion of children with high life satisfaction, 9th for the proportion with high happiness, 23rd for low sadness and 24th for having a positive sense of purpose in life.
- The UK had the fifth highest proportion of children (aged 15) with a low score on all four measures (life satisfaction, happiness, sadness and purpose in life); the highest with low scores on three, and the lowest proportion (27%) without a low score on any measure.
- There were also substantial gender differences in the subjective well-being of 15 year olds across Europe – including in the UK, which had the second largest gender gap after Slovenia. Almost a quarter of girls in the UK (23%) had low scores on at least three of the four measures outlined above (life satisfaction, happiness, sadness and purpose) compared to 14% of boys.
- Three possible explanations were explored for the low scores for life satisfaction found for children (aged 15) in the UK: variations in digital use, fear of failure, and child poverty. While no firm evidence was found for a connection across countries between digital use and life satisfaction, some evidence was found for a link over time with changes in child poverty within countries, and there was strong evidence of a connection across countries between fear of failure and life satisfaction.
- With regard to 10 specific aspects of life, data on children aged 10 from the Children's Worlds survey suggest that, compared with 14 other European countries, there were 5 out of 10 areas where England and/or Wales scored below the average and fared significantly worse than many other countries. These were health, appearance and feelings about the future in both England and Wales; friends in England only; and schools in Wales only.



## Chapter 4:

# Children's happiness with friends

Chapter 2 shows children's mean happiness with friends has decreased, continuing a trend that we have reported in every Good Childhood Report since 2015. These findings echo patterns recently reported in the international report on 'Health behaviours in school-aged children' (HBSC), discussed in Chapter 3,<sup>xxxii</sup> which presents data for England, Scotland and Wales in relation to other European countries and Canada.<sup>19</sup>

The HBSC report compares children's self-reported perception of high peer support between 2014 and 2018, using the Peer Support subscale (from the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support).<sup>20</sup> It shows that, between 2014 and 2018, there was a significant drop in the proportion of children in England (at ages 11, 13 and 15) and in Scotland (at ages 13 and 15) reporting high peer support.<sup>21</sup> While figures for 2018 were lower in each age group in Wales than in 2014, these decreases were not statistically significant. Across the participating countries, gender differences were reported, with girls found to be more likely to report high levels of peer support than boys in England, Scotland and Wales. The report authors noted that there had been a decline in peer support across ages and gender in up to a third of participating countries/regions, so the downward trend is not exclusive to countries in the UK.

The downward trend in peer support is concerning, as friend and peer relationships are an integral part of child development during adolescence. Peer relationships help children to discover and form their identities, to develop autonomy and to gain independence.<sup>xxxiii</sup> International research has found that peer support has a positive impact on children's mental health and can be a protective factor.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Research has also shown children's subjective well-being is impacted by their social relationships, with positive friendship experiences having been found to have a positive effect on overall well-being, and negative friendships and peer relationships, such as bullying, having a negative impact on children's well-being.<sup>xxxv</sup>

While it is clear when talking to children about their well-being that friendships are fundamentally important to them, analysis during the development of our Good Childhood Index found that happiness with relationships with friends did not explain variations in children's overall well-being as well as other domains, such as family.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Yet children's happiness with their family has remained relatively consistent over time, which is not the case for their happiness with their friends.

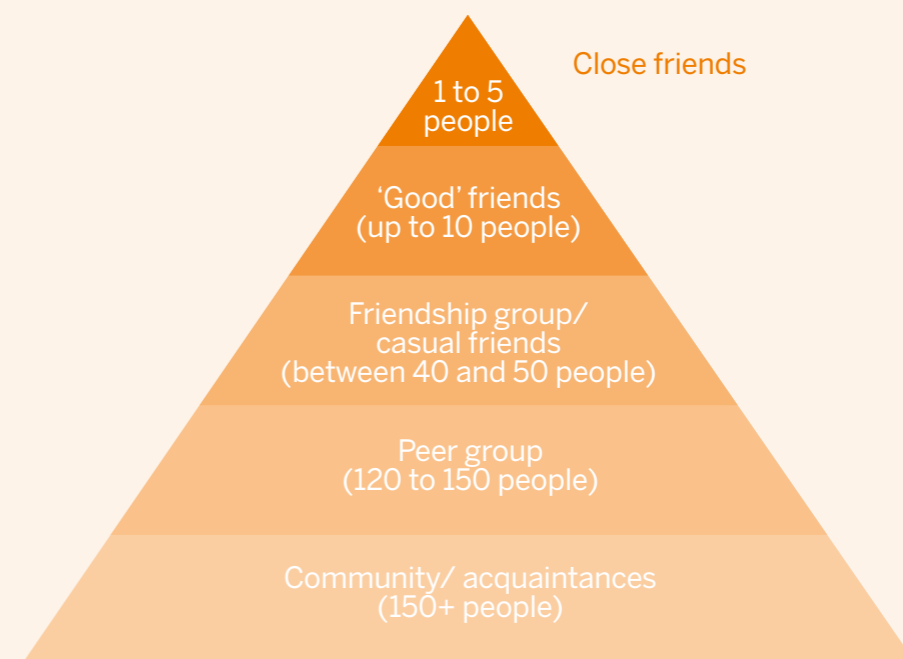
There is clearly something that is currently affecting how children and young people in the UK (and in England in particular) feel about their friends and their social relationships. So much so that we felt that it warranted further exploration in this year's report.

### How do you define a friend?

The term friend can be applied in a broad way to describe a range of different relationships, distinguished by the varying degrees of closeness and intimacy within those relationships.

Figure 21 describes an adaption of Dunbar's Number, a theory that categorises the different levels of relationship often found under the term 'friend'. Dunbar's Number provides a framework in which social/peer relationships can be understood based on number of people and the quality of relationship associated with each level.

Figure 21: Adapted representation of Dunbar's Number<sup>xxxvii</sup>



- At the top we have our close friends, the people who provide us with the greatest level of support. This group can include family members, romantic partners (boyfriends or girlfriends) and non-kin best friends.
- The next level are our 'good friends', the people who we spend most of our time communicating and engaging with (outside of the close friend category).
- This is then followed by a broader category of casual friends that often includes members of a wider friendship group and friends of friends.
- The peer group and community levels represent the relationships often found within school and in educational environments as well as more broadly in our communities.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

<sup>19</sup> 45 countries are included in the 2020 report, however four countries did not take part in 2014-15.

<sup>20</sup> Young people were asked if they perceive that their friends really try to help them, that they can count on them when things go wrong, if they had friends with whom they can share their sorrows and joys, and if they can talk to them about their problems. Response options ranged from very strongly disagree to very strongly agree (see Inchley et al, 2020).

<sup>21</sup> The proportions reporting an average score of 5.5 or more (high social support) for the devolved nations of England, Scotland and Wales by gender and family affluence status (FAS).



# Both boys' and girls' happiness with friends has decreased significantly since 2009-10

Dunbar (2010) states that there is a finite number of social relationships we can maintain, and that these relationships are characterised by the decreasing orders of closeness, as described above.<sup>xxxvii</sup> The limitation on the number of friends each person can maintain depends on their individual cognitive and temporal constraints – i.e. how much information they can hold about someone and how much time they can spend with them. This is true across the spectrum of friendships and affects children's, adolescents' and adult friendships. Thus, it is our active investment in a select number of 'close friends' that limits our own ability and potential openness to new friendships – an issue that children often face when their own friendships break down or when moving schools.

Yet friendship is not a static state. As Hall (2018) points out, there are a number of factors that can foster the development of new relationships,

with proximity and time spent together being key factors.<sup>xxxviii</sup> While friendships in childhood are often formed within school environments, research shows that proximity alone does not result in a friendship, or reflect the quality of friendship some may desire.

When exploring the concept of friends and friendship in this chapter we further explore the 'happiness with friends' measure to look at how children's responses have changed and if/how this differs by demographic characteristics. We then explore in more detail measures and factors related to friendship and peer relationships – including the number of close friends children have, experiences of bullying, and online technology – with a view to further understanding the recent reductions. Finally, we end this chapter discussing young people's own descriptions of the difficulties they face in their relationships, and the qualities they say make a good friend.

## What has changed in children's happiness with friends?

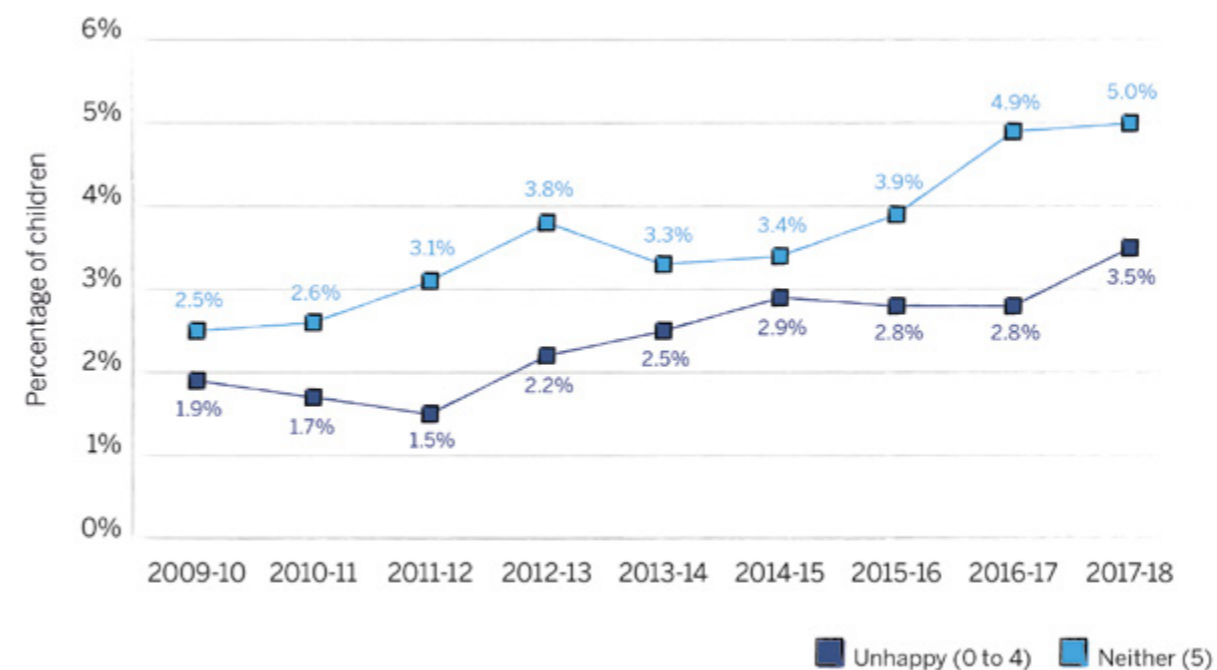
In order to understand the changes to children's happiness with friends, it is important to look at the measure children are presented with. In the Understanding Society survey, children are asked to rate happiness with 'your friends' on a scale of completely happy to not happy at all, with a neutral mid-point that indicates that they are neither happy nor unhappy.<sup>22</sup>

Chapter 2 shows that there has been a significant decrease in children's mean score for happiness

with friends since the survey began, from 8.99 in 2009-10 to 8.53 in 2017-18. While these mean scores are useful for tracking overall trends, focusing solely on average well-being can mask differences in levels of well-being.

Figure 22 shows the proportions of children scoring below the mid-point (also reflected in Chapter 2) and on the mid-point for happiness with friends, for each wave of Understanding Society.

**Figure 22: Proportions of children who are unhappy and neither happy nor unhappy with friends, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

While the proportion of children reporting being unhappy with their friends has increased over time, so too has the proportion of children scoring in the middle of the scale (ie who are neither happy nor unhappy with their friends). This suggests that the decrease in the mean is not solely driven by children who are unhappy, but also by those who are ambivalent with their friendships.

<sup>22</sup> As reported in Chapter 2, the 7-point scale (1–7) used to measure well-being in Understanding Society has been reversed and converted to an 11-point scale (0 to 10) for the purposes of this report to ease interpretation and comparison with the other measures presented.

### Exploring differences in children's happiness with friends

#### Demographic characteristics

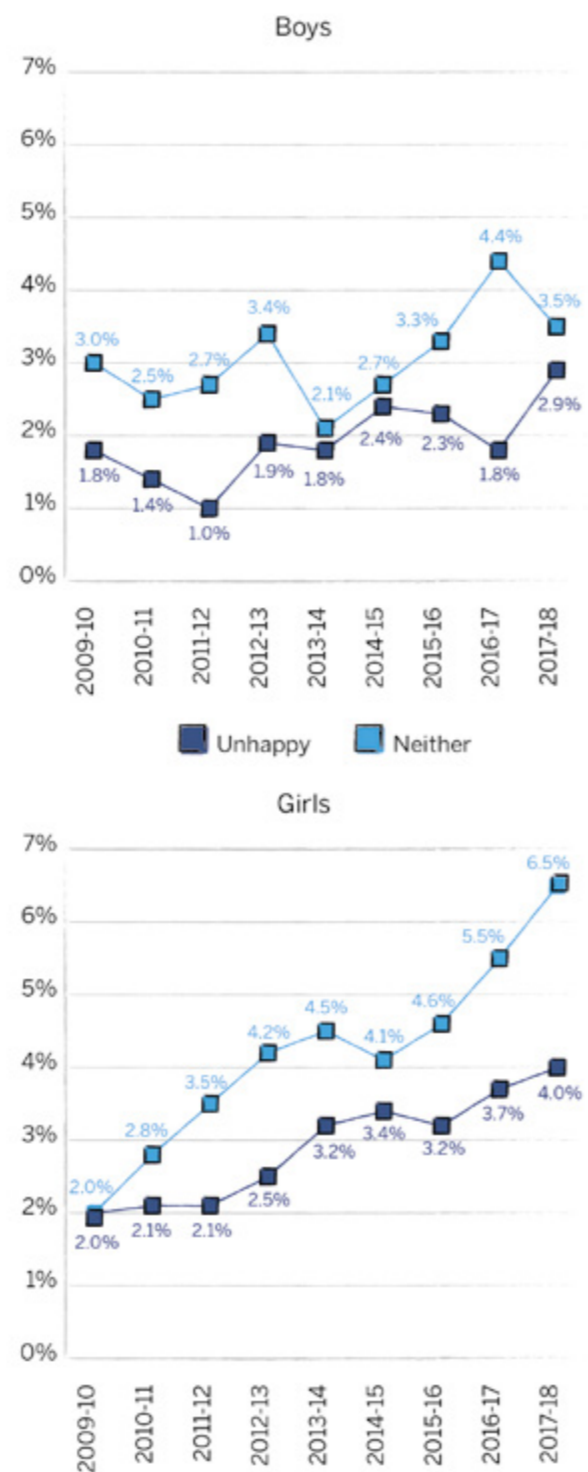
To further explore the trend in children's happiness with friends, we look at how their responses differ by gender, age and ethnicity.

#### Gender

Both boys and girls mean happiness with friends has decreased significantly since 2009-10. Comparing the proportion of children who score below and at the midpoint for happiness with friends, by gender, between 2009-10 and 2017-18,<sup>23</sup> shows:

- A significant increase in the proportion of girls who are unhappy with their friends, with twice the proportion of girls unhappy with their friends in 2017-18 than when the survey began in 2009-10.
- Over three times the proportion of girls neither happy nor unhappy in 2017-18 than in 2009-10.
- Though there were also increases in proportions of boys for both groups, these were not significant, which suggests that girls' scores may have had a greater influence on changes to the mean score over time.

Figure 23: Proportions of children who are unhappy and neither happy nor unhappy with friends, by gender, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18

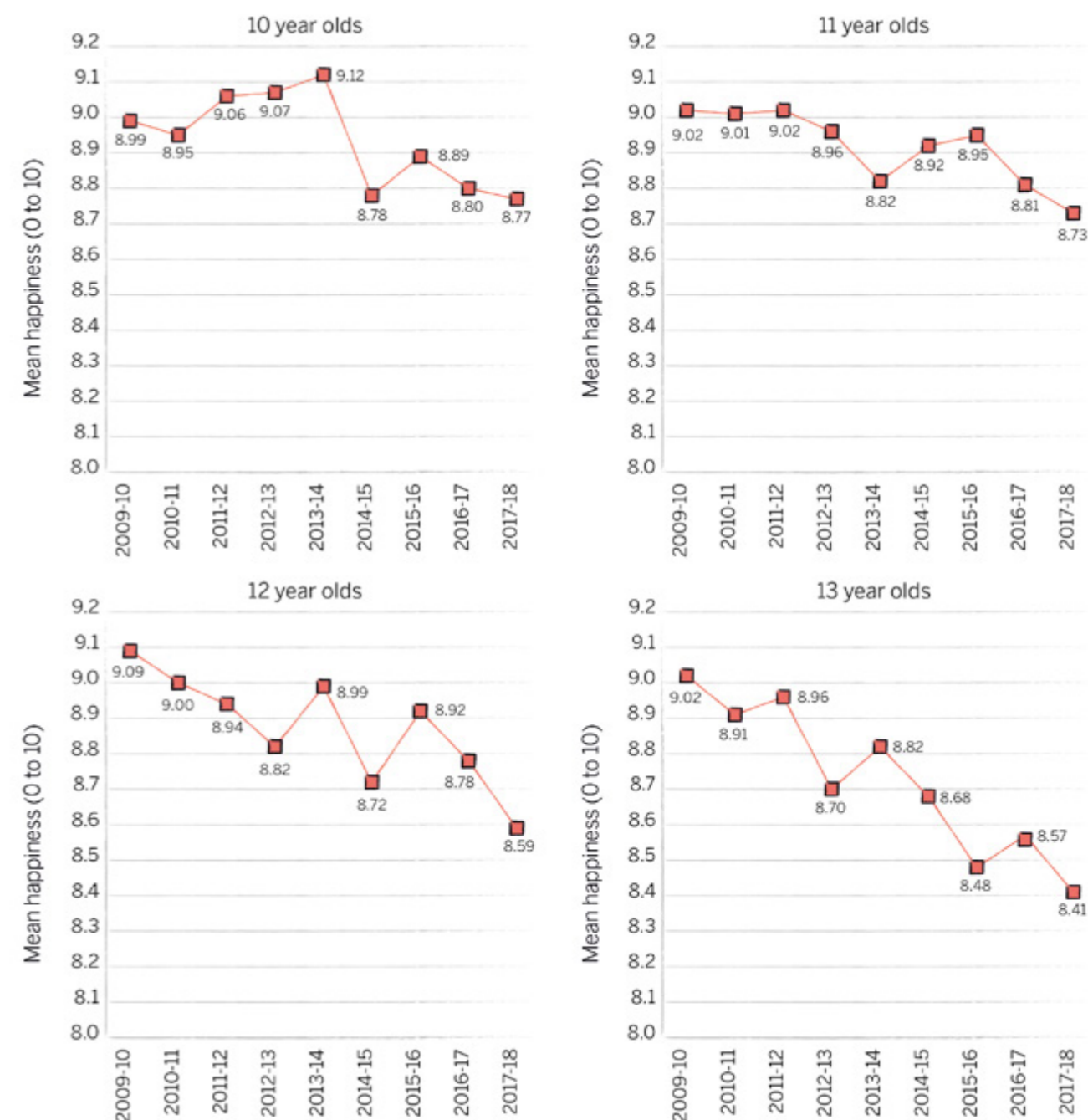


Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

#### Age

Figure 24 presents the mean scores for happiness with friends obtained in each wave of Understanding Society for each of the individual ages (10 to 15) covered. It shows that for all ages, except for 10 years old, the mean score for happiness with friends was significantly lower in 2017-18 than in 2009-10.<sup>24</sup> The largest reduction was for those aged 15.

Figure 24: Trends in children's happiness with friends by age, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18



<sup>24</sup>Independent sample t-tests were used to assess whether differences in mean scores between the first and latest wave for each age were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The Understanding Society variable dvage was used to conduct the analyses by age.



For all ages, except for 10 years old, happiness with friends is significantly lower

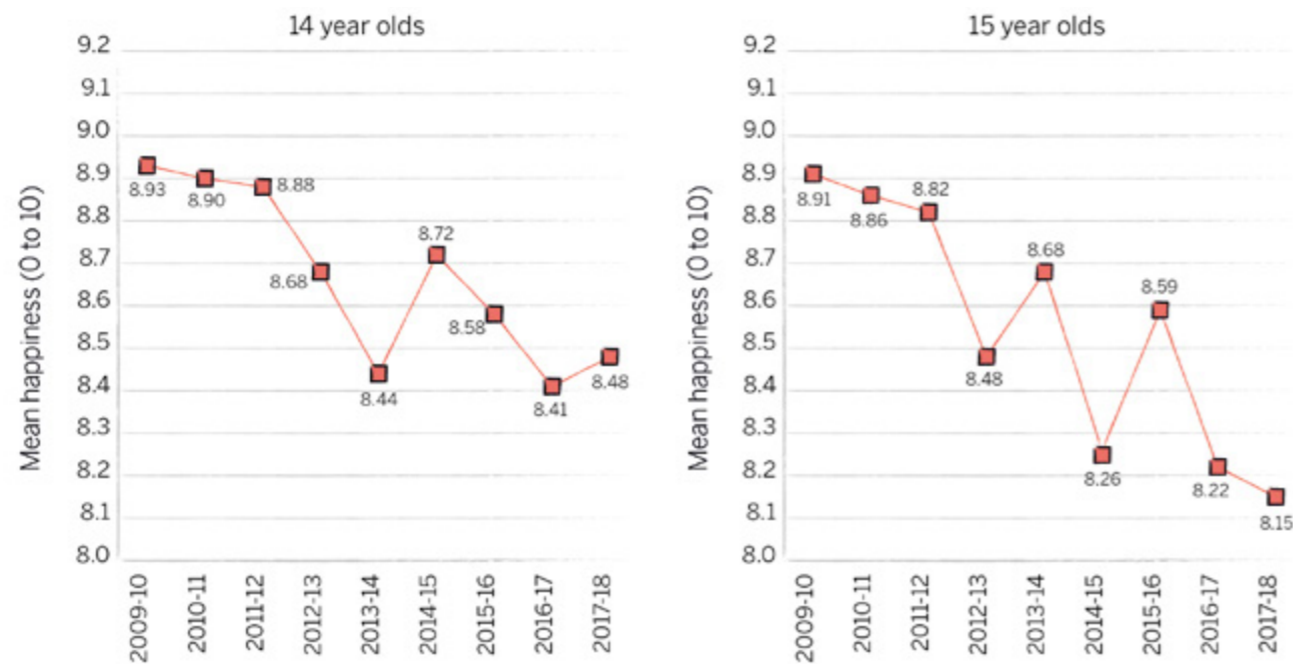
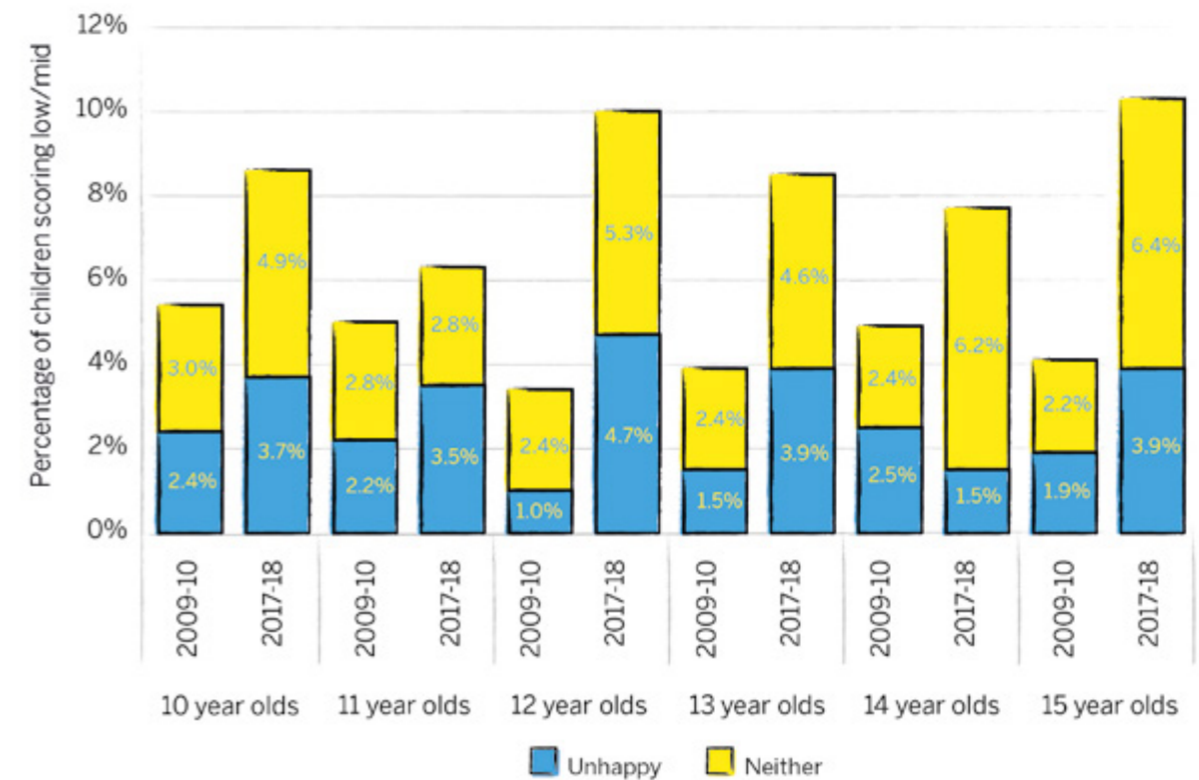


Figure 25: Proportions of children scoring low/mid for happiness with friends, by age, UK, 2009-10 and 2017-18



Statistically significant differences were also found in the proportions of children scoring low and/or at the mid-point for ages 12 to 15 in 2017-18 (compared to 2009-10).<sup>25</sup> While not statistically significant for 10 and 11 year olds, there was an increase in the overall proportions of children scoring at or below the midpoint for every age (see Figure 25).

Not surprisingly, given the changes found across several ages, only a weak correlation was found between age and happiness with friends.<sup>26</sup>

Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

<sup>25</sup> 2x3 Chi square tests were used to assess whether differences in proportions between the first and latest wave of the survey within each age group were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

<sup>26</sup> Spearman's correlation of -0.153.

**Ethnicity**

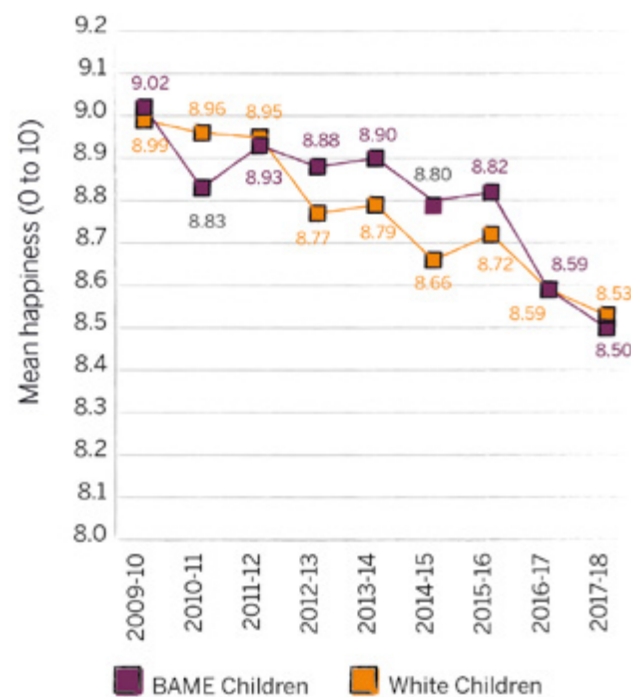
In order to explore children's happiness with friends by ethnicity, we present comparisons for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) children in relation to their White peers with the full acknowledgment of the limitations of using these groupings.<sup>27</sup> We will be exploring other approaches in our future Good Childhood work, and are committed to improving the representation of underrepresented groups.

Figure 26 presents the mean scores for happiness with friends obtained in each wave of the survey

for BAME children and White children. Statistical tests<sup>28</sup> comparing the scores by ethnicity show no statistically significant difference in either the mean or the proportions of children scoring at or below the midpoint for happiness with friends.

Comparing children's responses by demographic factors revealed an increase over time in the proportion of girls scoring on or below the midpoint for happiness with friends. Mean scores had also decreased for almost all age groups, with the greatest reduction between the first and latest wave of the survey for those aged 15.

**Figure 26: Trends in children's happiness with friends by Ethnicity, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

<sup>27</sup>As noted in Chapter 2, analysis for the Good Childhood Report has traditionally been based on the BHPS and UKHLS cross sectional youth weight (-ythsclub.xw), which does not incorporate the more recent Immigration and Ethnic Minority boost sample. Sample sizes for individual ethnicities in this dataset are more limited and do not facilitate more detailed comparisons. For this analysis a dichotomous variable was created using the [ethn\_dv] variable.

<sup>28</sup>Anova tests were used to assess whether differences in mean scores by ethnicity were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. The Understanding Society variable ethn\_dv was aggregated to create a dichotomous variable for BAME and White children.

**Relationship to other measures of peer relationships eg number of friends, bullying**

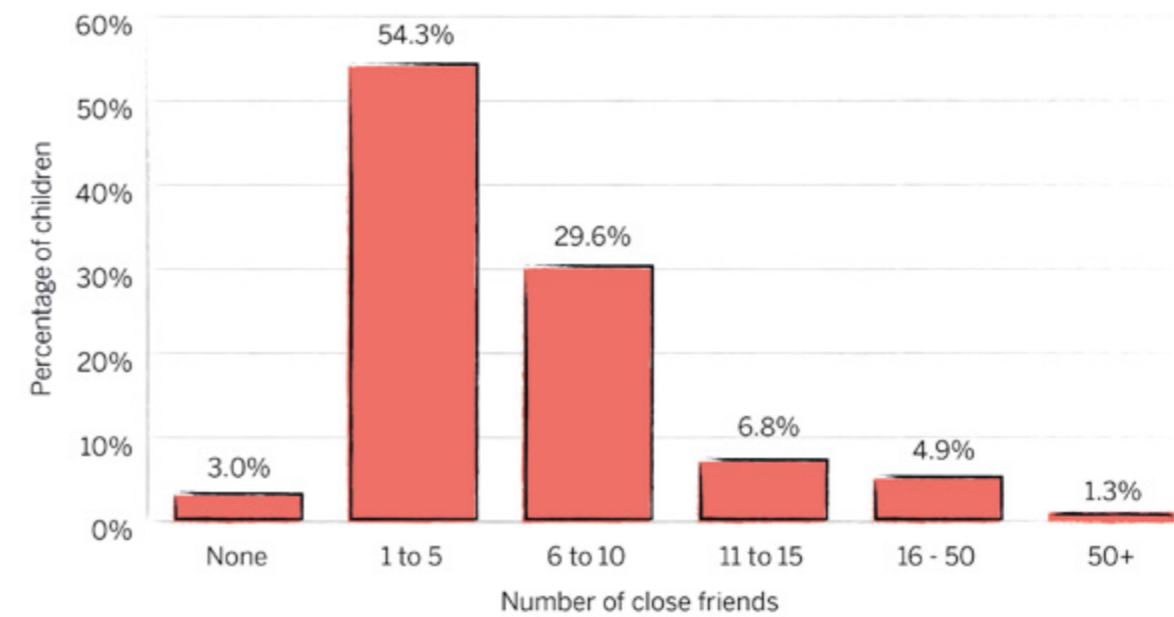
**How many close friends do children have?**

As posited at the start of the chapter, Dunbar's number theorises that there is a potential limit to the number of close relationships we can maintain. To explore this we looked at data available in Understanding Society on the number of close friends children have and its relationship with how happy they are with their friends. Children are routinely asked:

'How many close friends do you have – friends you could talk to if you were in some kind of trouble?'

The question in the survey is an open text box that allows children to report their own number.<sup>29</sup> The average number of friends reported was seven<sup>30</sup> while the median and mode were five friends. Figure 27 displays the distribution of responses for the most recent wave.<sup>31</sup>

**Figure 27: Distribution of number of close friends reported by children**



Source: Understanding Society survey, wave 9 (2017-2018), children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

<sup>29</sup> The range for this question was between 0 up to 99.

<sup>30</sup> The mean is 7.45 but has been rounded down as you can't have a decimal point of a friend.

<sup>31</sup> As the data have a large range and a long tail they have been truncated after 50 friends.

Over half of children reported having between one and five close friends (54%), reflecting the numbers hypothesised by Dunbar, and 91% reported between 1 and 15 friends, encompassing Dunbar's close and good friend categorisations. Worryingly, 3% of children reported that they had no close friends who they could talk to if they were in trouble.

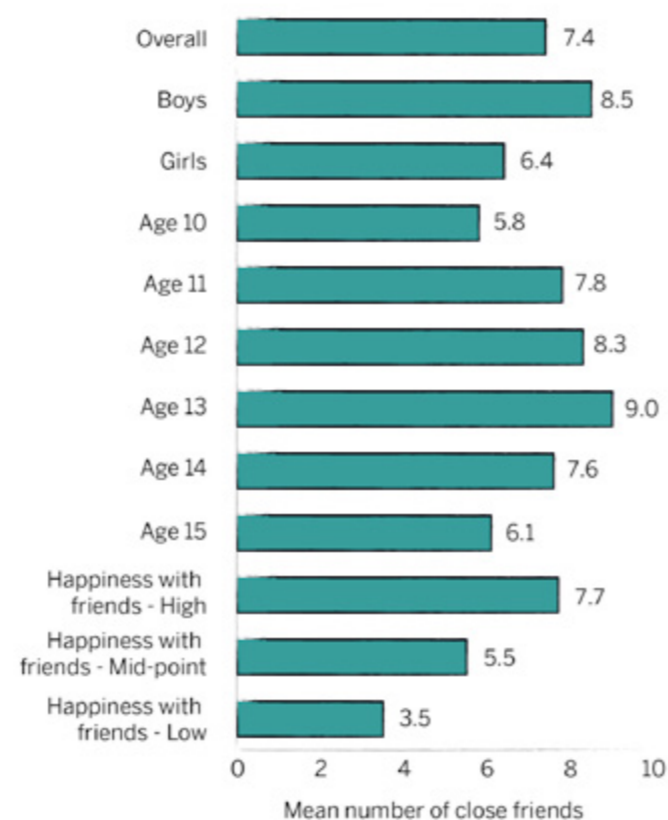
While there were no significant differences by age, gender or ethnicity in the number of children who said that they had no close friends, there was a statistically significant difference between the average number of friends reported by boys and girls – with boys reporting an average of nine close friends, compared to six for girls.<sup>32</sup> This may be due to higher expectations girls have for what constitute close friendships.<sup>xxxix</sup>

There was also a statistically significant difference in the number of close friends by age, with the youngest and oldest children reporting the lowest mean number of close friends, and 13 year old children the highest. This may reflect the impact of transitioning from primary schools into secondary. Within age groups, girls consistently reported a lower number of close friends than boys. There was no significant difference in the average number of friends by child's ethnicity.

When we compared number of close friends by how children rated their happiness with their friends, children who were unhappy with their friends had significantly fewer close friends who they could turn to if they were in trouble.

However, a correlation coefficient looking at number of friends and the full scale for happiness with friends suggested only a weak positive association between the two variables.<sup>33</sup>

**Figure 28: Mean number of close friends by gender, age and happiness with friends score**

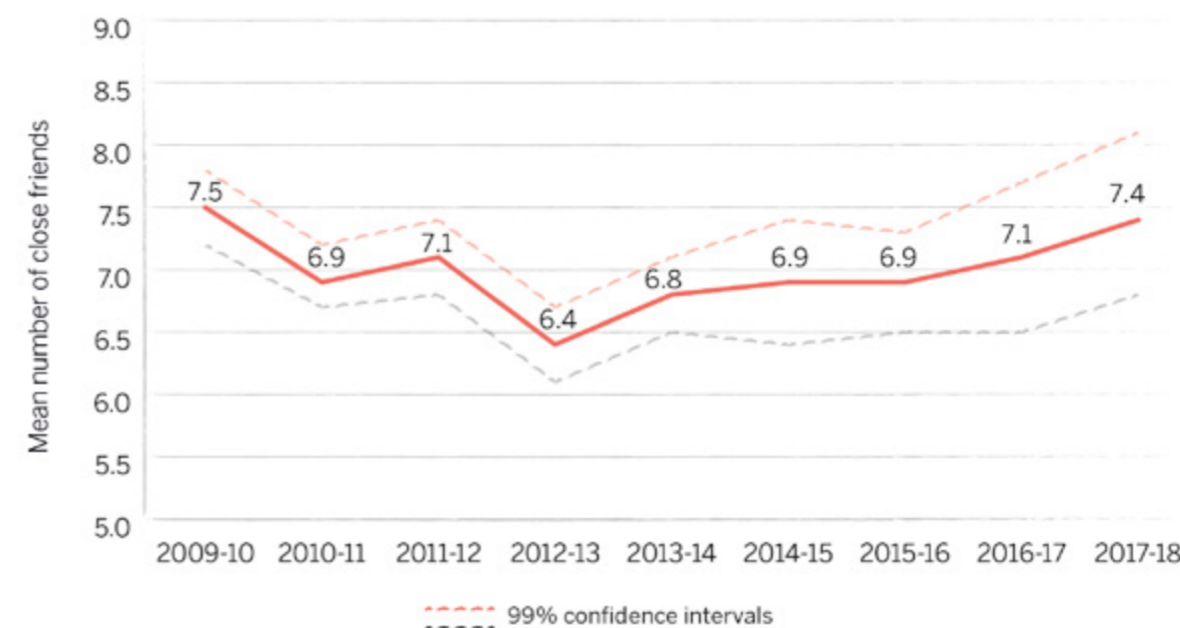


Source: Understanding Society survey, wave 9 (2017-2018), children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

**Number of friends over time**

While there has been a drop in children's happiness with friends over time, this trend is not repeated for the average number of close friends (see Figure 29). Following a decrease between Waves 1 and 4, the average number of friends has increased in recent waves, returning to a similar level to 2009-10 (whereas average happiness with friends has declined).

**Figure 29: Trends in number of close friends among children aged 10 to 15, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

When we compare average number of friends over time by gender (see Figure 30), there are significant differences for the majority of years, the exceptions being 2009-10, 2011-12 and 2015-16. For all waves, boys have reported more close friends compared to girls. While there was no significant difference between the first and last wave for boys, there was a statistically significant difference for girls.<sup>34</sup>

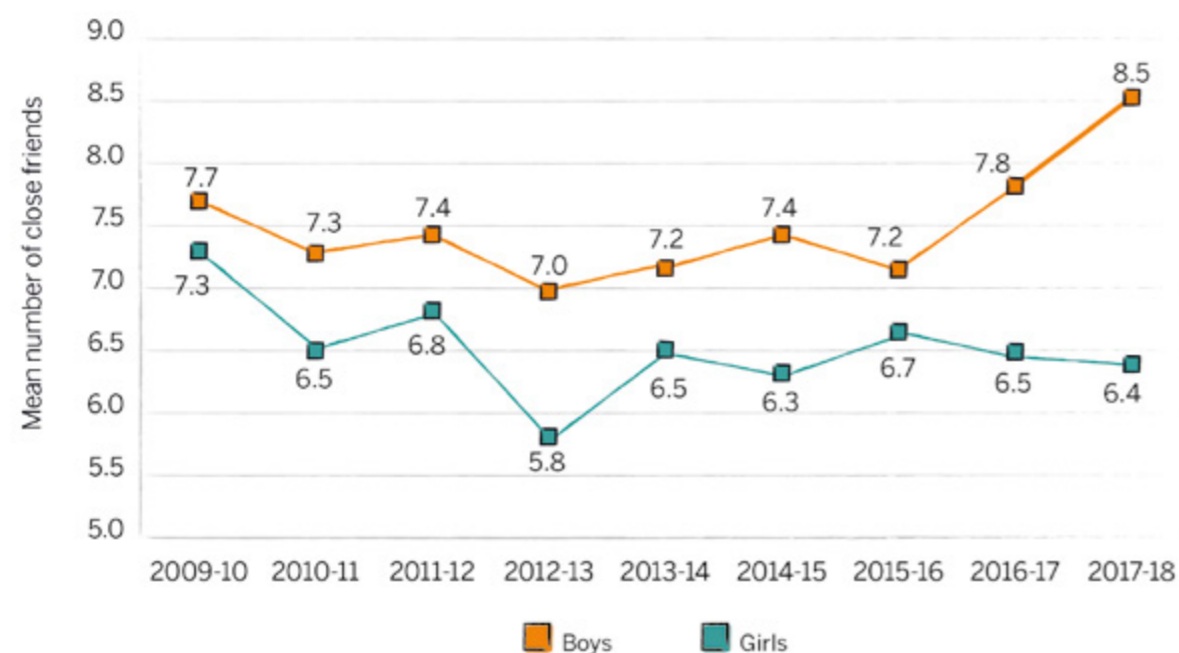
There was no clear trend in the number of close friends by age over time.

<sup>32</sup> Sig = <0.01.

<sup>33</sup> Correlation coefficient = 0.288.

<sup>34</sup> Independent sample t-tests were used to assess whether differences in mean scores by gender were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level.

**Figure 30: Trends in children's number of close friends by gender, UK, 2009-10 to 2017-18**



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted data.

Overall, these findings suggest that the decline in happiness with friends is not simply related to a decline in the number of close friends children have. In fact, the average number of friends has increased in recent waves of Understanding Society. One potential explanation could be that although children have comparable numbers of friends, the qualities of their friendships may not be meeting their expectations. This is a hypothesis we explore further in our consultations with young people presented at the end of the chapter.

**Bullying**

As discussed at the start of this chapter, friendships exist across a continuum and can include peer group relationships. Bullying is an example of negative peer group relationships, which has been shown to have a significant impact on children's subjective well-being.<sup>35</sup> But how does it relate to children's happiness with their friends?

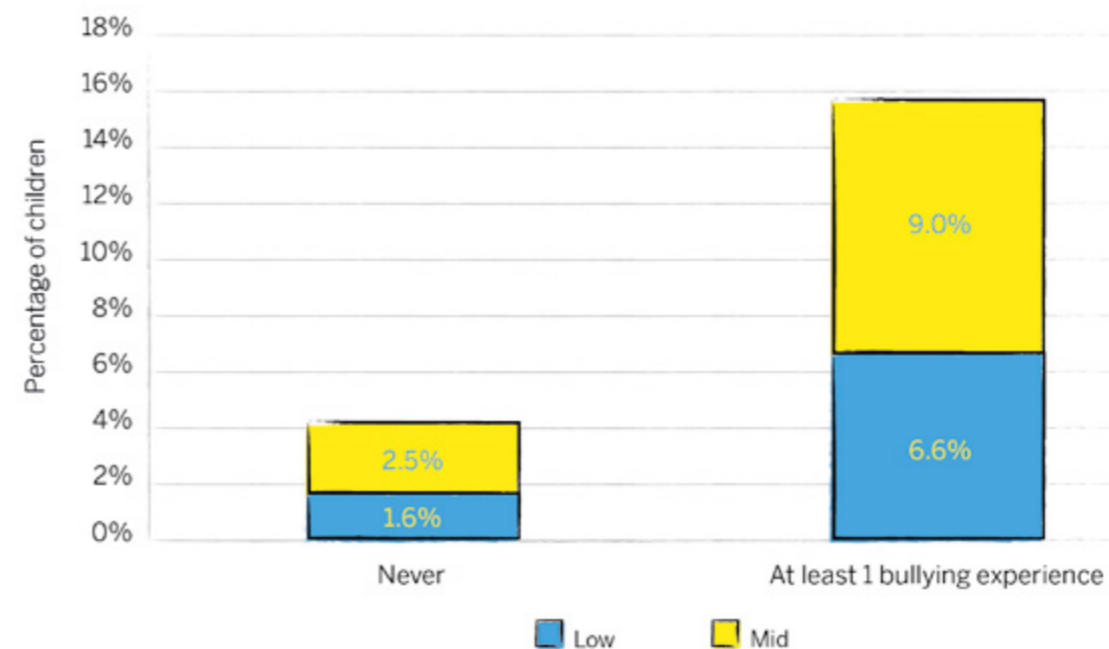
Children are asked two questions in Understanding Society:

1. Whether they had experienced physical bullying at school (for example getting hit, pushed around or threatened, or having their belongings stolen).
2. Whether they had experienced other forms of bullying at school (getting called names, getting left out of games, or having nasty stories spread about them on purpose).

We constructed a dichotomous variable based on their responses, consisting of children who had never experienced bullying at school and those that had.<sup>35</sup> In total, 38.2% of children reported having experienced at least one type of bullying at school within the previous six months. There was no difference by age or gender in the profile of children who reported experiencing bullying.<sup>36</sup>

Children who had never experienced bullying at school had a higher mean score for happiness with friends (8.93) than their peers who had been bullied (7.87).<sup>37</sup> Fewer children who had never been bullied at school also scored on or below the midpoint of the scale than their peers (see Figure 31). This suggests that children's experiences of bullying at school influence their happiness with friends.

**Figure 31: Proportions of children scoring low/mid for happiness with friends, by bullying, 2017-18**



Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, weighted data

When looking across the nine waves of the survey, the proportion of children experiencing bullying at school has remained relatively consistent. This suggests that, while bullying seems to be related to some extent with happiness with friends, it does not account for the changes in this measure over time.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> For the purpose of this analysis, we included children who provided responses to both questions (variables yprpbulli and yprfobulli).  
<sup>36</sup> There was a significant difference by ethnicity with more white children reporting experiences, though the sample of BAME children who answered this question was less than 300.  
<sup>37</sup> An Anova test was used to assess whether differences in mean scores by bullying in 2017-18 were statistically significant at the 99% confidence level. A difference in mean happiness with friends for those who reported bullying versus those who did not was also found across waves.  
<sup>38</sup> Bullying questions are asked in alternate waves of Understanding Society.

## Social Media

Children are increasingly spending more time online (not even taking the impact of the global pandemic into account). As stated in Chapter 3, the evidence around the relationship between well-being and children's online activity and social media use provides a conflicted picture.<sup>xii</sup> However, as being online and using digital technology is now a central part of modern life, it is often used to facilitate aspects of friendship including connection, companionship, inclusion and engagement in mutual activities (such as gaming).

Firstly, we looked at use of social media and found that, while there were differences by age and gender in the proportion of children who had a social media profile (ie more girls had a profile than boys and more older children than younger children), there were no significant differences in mean scores or the proportion who scored low/on the midpoint for happiness with friends based on whether or not children had a social media account.

As discussed at the start of the chapter, time spent engaging and communicating with friends has been found to facilitate friendship, so we also looked at how many hours children spent chatting and interacting with their friends through social websites on weekdays.<sup>39</sup>

- Girls and older children spent significantly more time chatting with their friends online compared to boys and younger children.

Children who spent more than four hours chatting online had significantly lower mean scores for happiness with friends (8.26) compared to children who spent less than one hour online (8.63).<sup>40</sup> This may in part reflect the superficial nature of communication that can be achieved online and an inability to foster the kind of intimacy and engagement that good friendships need. Alternatively, it may be that children who are finding challenges with their friendships turn to social media. Once again, patterns in social media use across waves did not appear to explain changes in happiness with friends.<sup>41</sup>

It should be acknowledged that these findings reflect a time period before the impact of the recent global pandemic, which has radically changed how all of us are interacting and living our daily lives. It will be interesting to see if and how social media use changes in future years.

## What do children say about their friendships?

Many of the factors that make our friendships so important to us are based on qualities that can be difficult to measure. Research has defined these qualities into four broad themes, based on what people say are key factors for their 'ideal' friendship.<sup>xliii</sup>

1. Symmetrical reciprocity relates to feelings of equal investment in the friendship, with key features being trust, loyalty, genuineness and commitment to the friendship.
2. Intimacy relates to how close we feel to our friends and is fostered through communication, empathy, emotional availability and our own self-disclosure.
3. Solidarity within friendship reflects our need to feel included, to seek companionship through mutual interest, as well as the time spent together engaging in activities.
4. Agency reflects the resources that our friendships can provide, including status and popularity but also co-operation and independence.

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

## Key issues in children's friendships

We were keen to explore what may be happening for children who report low happiness with their friends, and asked young people why they thought someone would choose to score a **4 out of 10**. Children's comments reflected a number of issues that children and young people face in navigating the complexities of friendships. The prevailing issue revolved around conflicts within friendships and peer groups.

Interpersonal conflict within friendships can have a big impact on children and young people's well-being. The comments we received emphasised the impact of 'falling out with friends', with arguments and fights being given as key reasons why someone may rate their friendships as a 'four'.

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

*'With our friends, it is usually an argument over a game, or a sport or whether there is teamwork failing.'*

Bullying was frequently mentioned, both within friendships and also as a consequence of the breakdown of a previous friendship.

*'They may have chosen a 4 because they feel like the outcast in the group or maybe there is some bullying going on.'*

*'Well sometimes people get bullied your old friend makes friends with the bullies then they bully you.'*

Children identified the toxic nature of these relationships, with older children reflecting on the difficulties experienced in identifying unhealthy relationship behaviours when they were younger. They also commented on the difference in the closeness of friendships and the number of friendships children are expected to have nowadays. This was not as simple as having 'enough' friends, however – reflective of the findings earlier in the chapter.

<sup>39</sup> Using the variable 'ypnetcht' which is only asked of children who said they have a social media profile.

<sup>40</sup> At 0.01 level. The eta-squared score and spearman's correlation suggest only a weak relationship, however (-0.079).

<sup>41</sup> When examined over time, while the proportion of children spending more than four hours online had increased, the only other wave where there was a statistically significant difference in happiness with friends by time on social media was in 2013-14.



*'What I experienced when I was a bit younger with friendships was like... most of them are very toxic nowadays. What you see, like people having really best friendships, also I just see less of them nowadays. I see more people have groups of friends and everyone's like...but you don't see two people who are really really close any more and I think that's what people idealise friendship to be, especially in media - everyone has like a best friend and I think maybe that creates an expectation that "I have to have that one person" but it doesn't happen and you end up with like a group of friends and you don't feel particularly connected to any one person. That would make sense to me why people would be marking low, like having really toxic friendships and not having a best friend.'*

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

*'Something toxic, like a frenemy, could be making things uncertain and confusing.'*

Another aspect that children felt played a big part in why children may be unhappy with their friendship was the fear of being left out. Inclusion, companionship and solidarity are important features of good friendships, so feeling like you are being left out or deliberately excluded will have a negative effect on that friendship and may lead to feelings of loneliness.

*'Because their friends had probably neglected them, made them feel alone and left out.'*

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

*'Loneliness. Possibly friends aren't reaching out or leaving them out yet still keeping them close by for their own personal needs.'*

*'A toxic friendship where the other person doesn't treat you equally. They use you and expect you to always support their decisions. They might continuously put you down and use you to feel better about themselves, dropping you when they please.'*

The last quote highlights another aspect of friendship that affects the quality of a friendship through its absence. As noted previously, symmetrical reciprocity describes the quality of friendship whereby both individuals feel equally invested and relates to the trust and genuineness of our friends. 'Fake friends' and lack of trust in others were features that children reported as possible causes of unhappiness with friends.

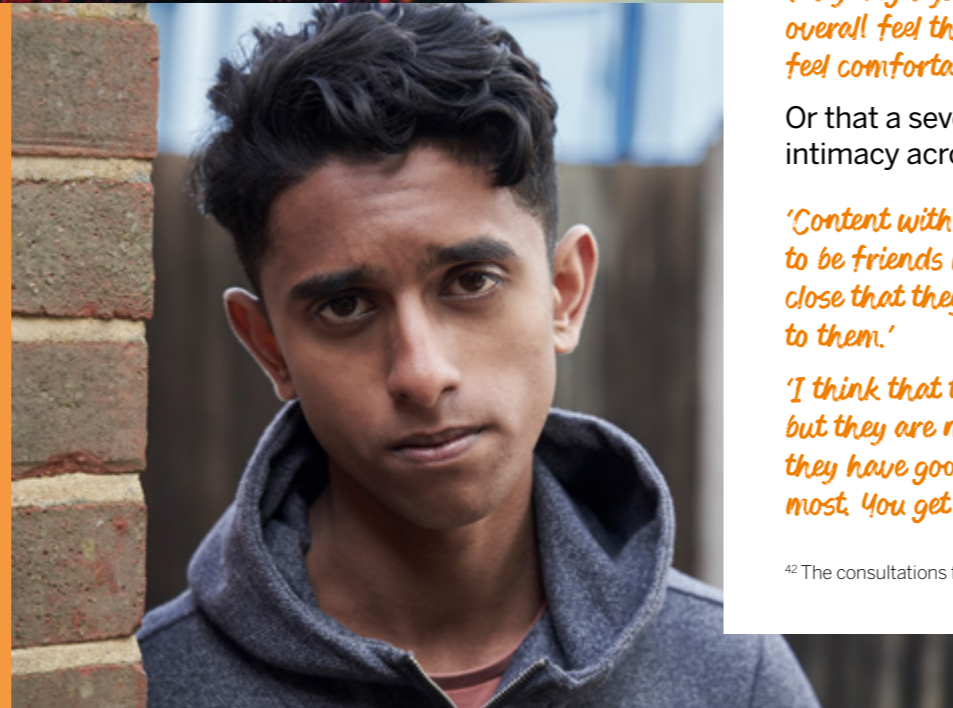
*'They may feel like they can't trust their friends, or be serious with them. Having fun, laughing, joking are all great parts of having friends but they're not nearly as important as having someone you can trust or knowing someone will be there for you no matter what.'*

#### **Friendships are complex**

Alongside understanding the potential reasons for low happiness with friendship, we also asked what young people thought a 'seven' looked like and why someone might say their friendships were a 7 out of 10. The responses we received to this question highlight the complexities children face.

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

Most young people felt seven represented an acceptable score, although it did not reflect a unanimously positive view of friendships. For some, this score implied that there had likely been conflict in the friendships, which were now recovering. It was the score given on the way to getting back to a higher score.



Girls reported significantly fewer close friends than boys

*'They had a fall out and it was really bad but they made up and they still are a bit cross at their friend.'*

*'It could be a 7 because some of your friends can't play with you. Also because you fall out and your friendship is a little weaker, if you say sorry it can rise back to a 10.'*

*'They could have had a minor disagreement – probably not very recently. Overall they will probably feel good with their friendships.'*

*'I think this would be a good score but again they could be in some kind of argument or not happy with what's going on.'*

Other children felt that someone might give a score of seven when at the start of a new friendship, unsure of their place in the group or how they are perceived by others.

*'If they choose a 7 they are probably getting to know their friends more as time passes by. They might of recently made new friends and now they are happy with the change.'*

*'They have good friends they can talk to and hang out with. They treat them well and they are happy. They might just feel a bit unsure in some things but overall feel they have good friendships where they feel comfortable to be themselves.'*

Or that a seven may reflect a lack of depth or intimacy across friendships.

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

*'I think that they are in a genuine friendship group but they are never the other people's first choice. Like they have good friends but no one favours them the most. You get me?'*

The responses we received referred to desires for deep and meaningful connections, and for support and loyalty within friendships – both when discussing what makes a good friendship and the impact that the absence of these qualities has.

In our recent briefing on children's experiences of Covid-19, not being able to see friends was highlighted as a key issue for children.<sup>xliii</sup> Unsurprisingly, the impact of not being able to see friends and the effect of social distancing were also reflected in the comments we received during these consultations.<sup>42</sup> With the challenges children and young people have faced as a result of the global pandemic, being able to stay in contact with their friends through digital technology was seen as a positive.

*'They may have chosen a 7 because they have been texting or messaging their friends on social media platforms such as Instagram, Snapchat and Facebook. They may have also been calling their friends everyday or every other day. They may have lots of siblings who they consider friends and they can play with. They may also have socially distanced seen their friends or seen them on Facetime. They may also do virtual classes or virtual dance which they can see their friends on.'*

*'They may be choosing a 7 because despite not being able to go out and socialise with their friends they can still text them and talk over facetime as they may not be a very sociable person.'*

*'They could choose a 7 because they might forget to stay in touch with their friends or they could gradually drift apart because they can't see each other. Some friendship groups could be changing because it is hard to stay in touch with all of your friends if you have a big friendship group.'*

<sup>42</sup> The consultations for both this report and 'Life on Hold' (The Children's Society, 2020) were completed concurrently.

### What does good look like?

So what does a good friendship look like? We asked young people for their advice on what makes a good friendship. The comments we received reflected the qualities of symmetrical reciprocity, intimacy and communication and solidarity, though the more superficial factors related to agency. Popularity status or numbers of friends did not feature (which is in line with our earlier findings of a weak correlation between number of friends and happiness with friends).

*'The key thing for me that I've noticed with the good friendships that I've had and the good friendships that I have now is honesty and being able to be open with that friend, and another thing that I know seems not that important but like, having the same sense of humour, but understanding all of each other's jokes.'*

*'I know my friends are there for me so that makes me happy. Being able to trust my friends. My friends are always willing to chat.'*

*'I think all the good friendships I have, I try to sustain by balancing out caring for them and them caring for me because I can easily put in too much and not let the person give back anything to me which isn't balanced, so I think it's a little bit about give and take. And also, I'm not the most talkative person or open person either... so the person has to kind of want to be my friend, to get me to open up. But I balance it out by being a good listener to their problems and so they feel like yeah, this person listening to me and they're interested in me. And once they're vulnerable and you're vulnerable, then it just clicks.'*

*'You need to remember that you have to put time and effort into your friendship, they are people too and they will also want it to last, but remember if they start saying negative things to you, and or anyone else to try to distance yourself or help them see what they are doing is wrong.'*

As we received such amazing insight and advice from the young people that we consulted with, we have created an advice guide booklet based on what they told us on how to be a good friend.



### Summary

Responses to the Understanding Society survey show that there has been a decline in children's (aged 10 to 15) mean happiness with friends in recent years. Further analysis of children's responses shows that the way they score this question is changing and, in recent waves, slightly more children have said they are unhappy/indifferent.

- Further comparisons by demographic characteristics reveal increased proportions of girls scoring on or below the midpoint for happiness with friends. There has been a decline in mean scores for most of the older ages. However, in the most recent wave, 15 year old children had the lowest mean score overall.
- While children who scored below the midpoint for happiness with friends reported having significantly fewer close friends that they could turn to if they were in trouble, we did not find there to be a simple correlation between the number of friends and happiness

with friends. In fact, the average number of friends children reported had returned to a level similar to 2009-10. Gender differences may play a part, however, with girls reporting significantly fewer close friends than boys (as well as reporting lower mean scores for happiness with friends).

- While mean scores for happiness with friends varied depending on the level of social media use in 2017-18 and experiences of bullying at school across waves, these experiences did not seem to account for changes in happiness with friends over time – suggesting other factors are also influential.

It seems likely, based on these findings and the results of our consultation with children, that there is something else not captured in the measures in the most recent Understanding Society survey that is influencing children's scores. It may, for example, be that the qualities of children's friendships may not be meeting their expectations, as suggested in the qualitative analysis of our consultations.



# Discussion

### Time trends in subjective well-being

Chapter 2 presented the latest trends in subjective well-being for children aged 10 to 15, based on data from Understanding Society. While the vast majority of children continue to be happy with the six aspects of life measured by the survey, there have been some changes in children's levels of happiness, which we need to further understand and address.

While children's happiness with their family and schoolwork were relatively stable between 2009-10 and 2017-18, their mean happiness scores for life as a whole and friends continued to decrease in 2017-18, and the dip in happiness with school reflected in last year's Good Childhood Report was also sustained. The mean score for appearance was significantly lower in 2017-18 than when the survey began, and will need to be monitored going forward to see if this is the start of a longer-term decline.

Gender differences for children aged 10 to 15 were consistent with those reported in previous Good Childhood Reports. Boys were happier with their appearance than girls, and girls were happier with schoolwork. There were no consistent differences between boys and girls for happiness with life as a whole, family, friends or school.

New analysis of the happiness of children of the same gender highlighted significant and sustained increases in the proportion of boys who are unhappy with their school, and girls who are unhappy with their friends.

### Comparing children's well-being in the UK with other European countries

Chapter 3 compares the well-being of children in the UK to that of children in other European countries. It indicates that children in the UK may be faring less well than their counterparts on key measures of well-being and some specific aspects of life.

Data on 15 year olds from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) shows the UK ranking lowest of 24 European countries for the proportion of children with high life satisfaction, 23rd for low sadness (ie the second highest proportion with high sadness), and lowest for having a positive sense of purpose in life. While the UK ranking of 9th out of 24 for happiness was more optimistic, the UK fared poorly across measures, with the lowest proportion of children of the 24 countries without a low score on any measure. The UK also had the second largest gender gap, with almost a quarter of girls in the UK (23%) scoring low on at least three out of four measures (life satisfaction, happiness, sadness and purpose) compared to 14% of boys.

Of three possible explanations explored for the low scores for life satisfaction among children in the UK – ie variations in digital use, fear of failure, and child poverty – some evidence was found for a link over time with changes in child poverty within countries, and there was strong evidence of a connection across countries between fear of failure and life satisfaction.

Survey findings for children (aged 10) from the Children's Worlds survey suggest that, compared with 14 other European countries, there were 5 out of 10 areas where England and/or Wales scored below the average and fared significantly worse than many other countries – both England and Wales for health, appearance and feelings about the future; England only for friends; and Wales only for schools.

### Children's happiness with friends

Further exploration of the recent reductions in children's mean scores for happiness with friends in the Understanding Society survey showed that the way that young people (aged 10 to 15) score this question has been changing. In recent waves, slightly more children have chosen values below or on the midpoint (suggesting they are unhappy; and neither happy nor unhappy) than in previous waves.

Analysis of responses by key demographic characteristics suggests that, while mean scores were decreasing for both boys and girls, there had been a greater reduction for girls. There had also been significant increases in the proportions of girls giving low and medium scores over time. The pattern was not so clear for age, although the mean score had reduced most dramatically among the older ages, and those aged 15 in particular. No relationship was found by ethnic group.

Links with a number of other factors were explored, including the number of close friends children have, experiences of bullying at school, and time spent on social media. Not surprisingly, there was some evidence that bullying may influence the responses of those who have experienced it (although it did not seem to account for the differences in happiness with friends over time).

Taken together, these findings suggest that something else may be influencing how children feel about their friends. It may be that the quality of children's friendships and children's expectations – as outlined in our consultation responses – may need to be examined more closely and go some way to explaining the changes in children's happiness with their friends.

### Overall comment

Most of the data drawn upon in this report reflects the well-being of UK children before the current Coronavirus pandemic. With continued reductions

in children's happiness with life as a whole and friends, and a sustained dip in happiness with school, there are a number of key areas for focus. While the long term impact of the pandemic will not be seen in sources (such as Understanding Society) until data for 2020 are released, the practical implications of the current situation may have further affected children's happiness in these aspects of life, which have been in decline now for a number of years and provide concrete areas for policy attention.

It is important that in responding to the pandemic, we do not lose sight of the changes that had already occurred in children's well-being. As difficult as it is, future research needs to try to unpick those fluctuations that are related to COVID-19 and those which reflect longer term patterns in children's well-being.

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

International data at age 15 show children in the UK fairing less well than their European counterparts, and that the gap between genders is much greater here than in other countries. Effort is needed to further understand why children in the UK feel this way, why girls in particular score lower on these measures, and what lessons can be learned from other jurisdictions where children are more satisfied with their lives. The potential links identified with changes in poverty levels and fear of failure require further exploration – although it is interesting that they relate to areas where there have been changes in UK policy (eg rising child poverty as a result of austerity measures and changes to schooling, including the new curriculum, exam changes, and the development of academies), specifically, in the last 10 years.

# Appendix A

**Figure 32: The Good Childhood Index**

The Good Childhood Index contains the following 16 items:

Please say how much you disagree or agree with each of the following statements						
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't know
1. My life is going well						
2. My life is just right						
3. I wish I had a different kind of life						
4. I have a good life						
5. I have what I want in life						

**Please tick one of the boxes to say how happy you feel with things in your life**

These questions use a scale from 0 to 10. On this scale:

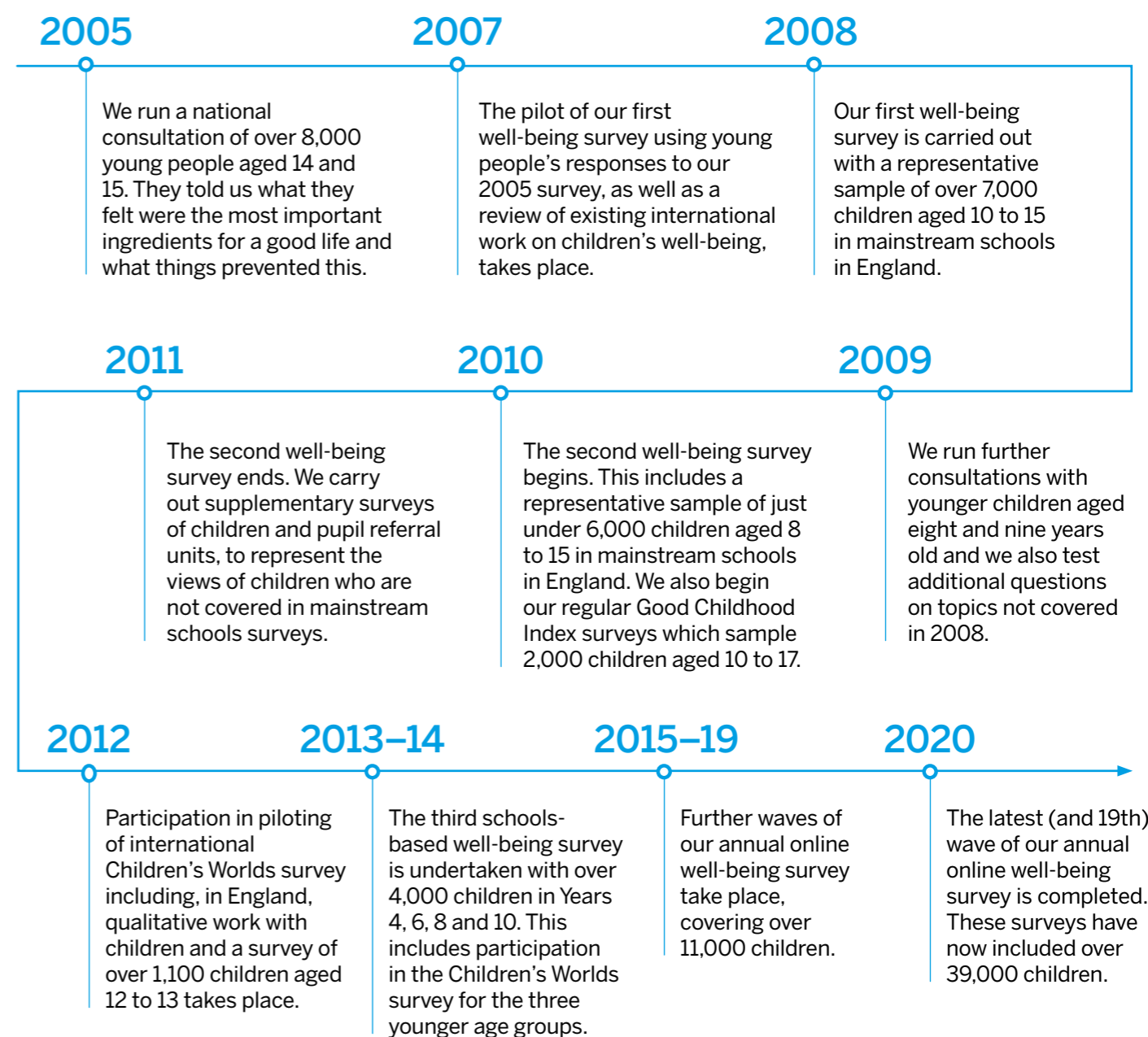
- 0 means 'very unhappy'
- 5 means 'not happy or unhappy'
- 10 means 'very happy'

How happy are you with...

6. ...your life as a whole?	
7. ...your relationships with your family?	
8. ...the home that you live in?	
9. ...how much choice you have in life?	
10. ...your relationships with your friends?	
11. ...the things that you have (like money and the things you own)?	
12. ...your health?	
13. ...your appearance (the way that you look)?	
14. ...what may happen to you later in your life (in the future)?	
15. ...the school that you go to?	
16. ...the way that you use your time?	

# Appendix B

**Figure 33: The research programme**



# Appendix C

**Figure 34\*\*\*: Children's (Age 15) mean well-being scores (on a scale of 0 to 10) and proportion with low scores (0 to 4) on three ONS measures, by Local Authority, England, 2014**

Local Authority	Life Satisfaction (0 to 10)	% low (0-4)	Happy yesterday (0 to 10)	% low (0-4)	Feel life is worthwhile (0 to 10)	% low (0-4)
England	6.9	14%	6.9	18%	6.9	14%
Weighted N	552,639		553,563		553,651	
Unweighted N	117,542		117,690		117,740	
Barking and Dagenham	6.8	15%	6.7	20%	6.9	14%
Barnet	6.8	15%	6.8	18%	6.9	14%
Barnsley	7.1	13%	7.0	19%	7.0	13%

Source: Health and Social Care Information Centre, What About Youth? Survey, 2014 [computer file]. 2nd Edition. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive [distributor], April 2016. SN: 7894. Children aged 15 years, weighted data.

Please note: Data are for the three ONS questions: Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?, Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?, and Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in life are worthwhile?

These analysis are based on the What About Youth dataset available from the UK Data Archive, which contains 120,115 cases representing individual young people who responded to the survey. The dataset is a perturbed version of the original file to ensure LA data were not disclosive. Findings of this archived dataset may differ slightly from those published in the original reports by the Health and Social Care Information Centre. See [digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-and-wellbeing-of-15-year-olds-in-england/main-findings---2014](https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/health-and-wellbeing-of-15-year-olds-in-england/main-findings---2014)

\*\*\*For the full table, please see accompanying excel file on The Good Childhood Report 2020 webpage.

# Appendix D

**Figure 35\*\*\*: Children's (aged 11 to 16) a mean well-being scores (on a scale of 0 to 10) by Local Authority, England, Academic year 2018-19**

		Life Satisfaction (0 to 10)	Happy yesterday (0 to 10)	Feel life is worthwhile (0 to 10)
Overall		6.5	6.4	6.6
	Weighted N	2,857,832	2,862,546	2,851,310
	Unweighted N	57,730	57,835	57,583
East				
	Bedford	6.3	6.0	6.3
	Cambridgeshire	6.9	6.8	7.0

Source: Sport England (2020) Active Lives Children and Young People Survey 2018-19 LA data set. Weighted data.

Notes:

a – Please note that there may not be full year group coverage in each LA.

b – The figure presented for happiness yesterday will differ to those in the main Active Lives Report as they are for School Years 7-11 only (the figures in the Active Lives Report are for Years 3-11).

^ indicates that the unweighted base is less than 150.

All data presented are estimates from the Active Lives Children and Young People Survey for pupils from year 7 to 11 (i.e. aged 11 to 16).

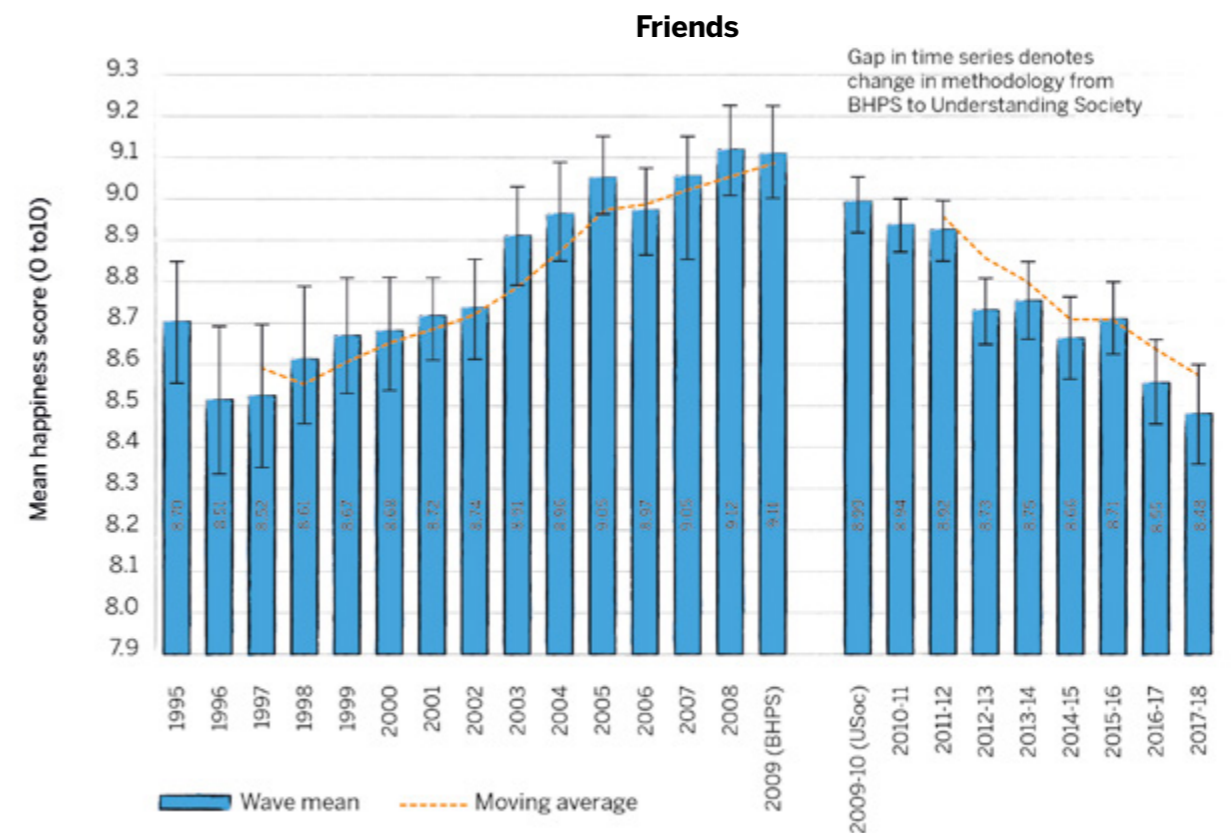
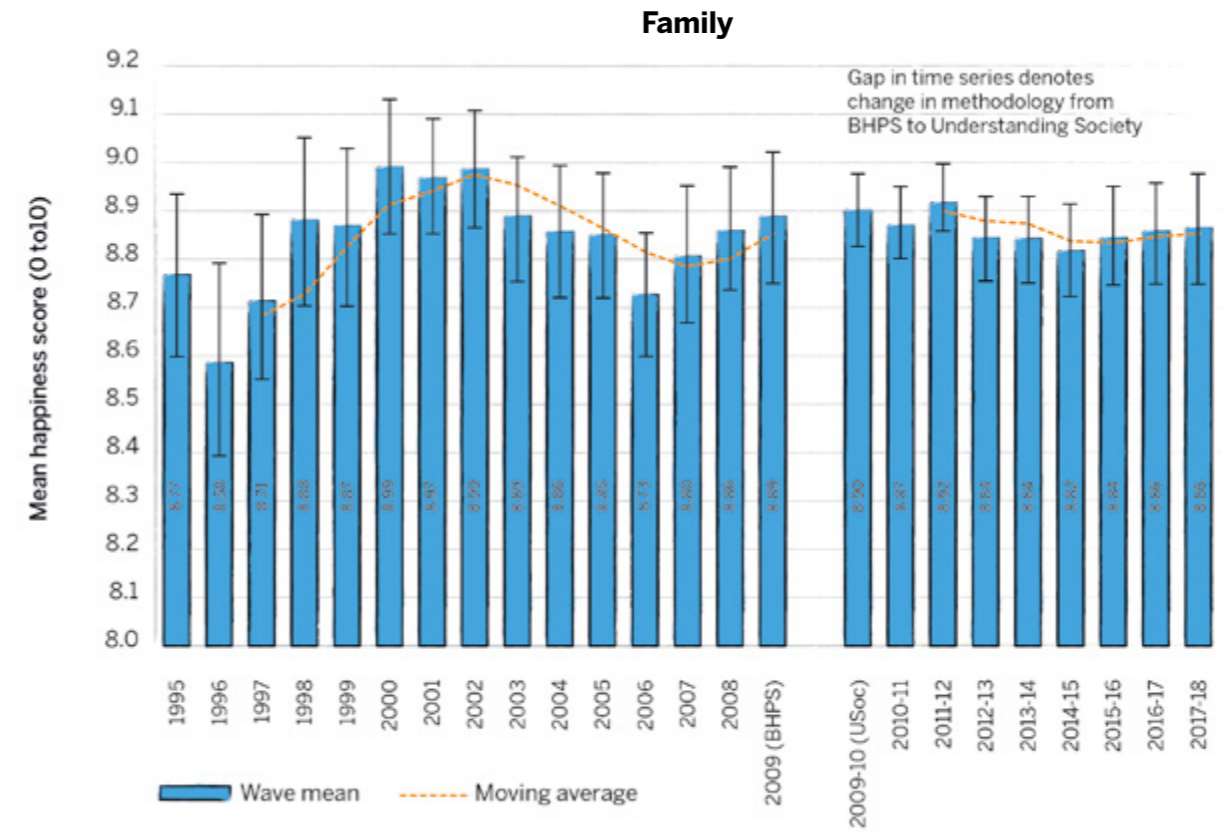
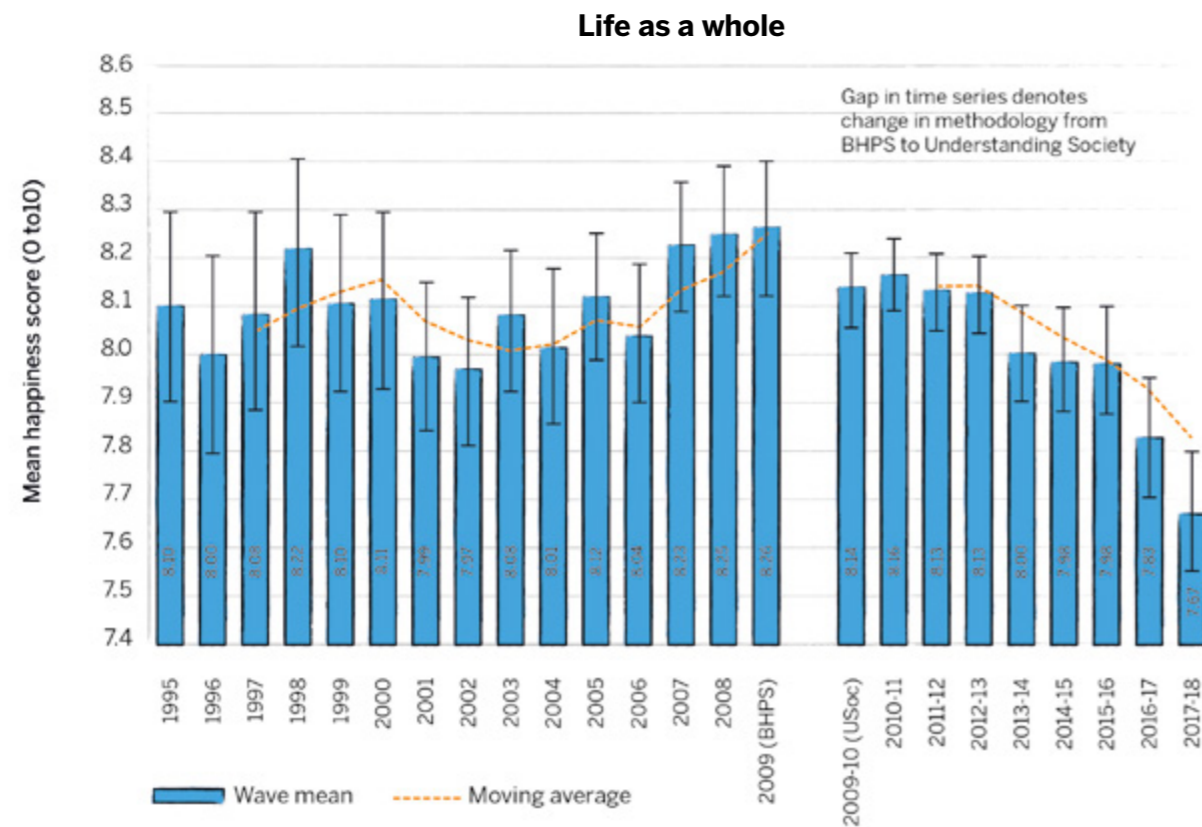
\*\*\*For the full table, please see accompanying excel file on The Good Childhood Report 2020 webpage.

# Appendix E

Figure 36 shows children's mean happiness scores stretching back to 1995, based on responses obtained in each wave of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the Understanding Society survey. The means presented are for 11 to 15 year olds only, as this was the age group covered by BHPS, and therefore differ to those shown for Understanding Society in Figure 5. A moving average based on the means for individual waves (and using an interval of three survey waves) is also shown above the chart to reflect the long term trend for each survey, while smoothing out short term fluctuations.<sup>45</sup>

Changes in the weighting variables<sup>46</sup> used in this analysis mean that there are some small differences between the mean scores and moving averages presented here and in previous Good Childhood Reports.

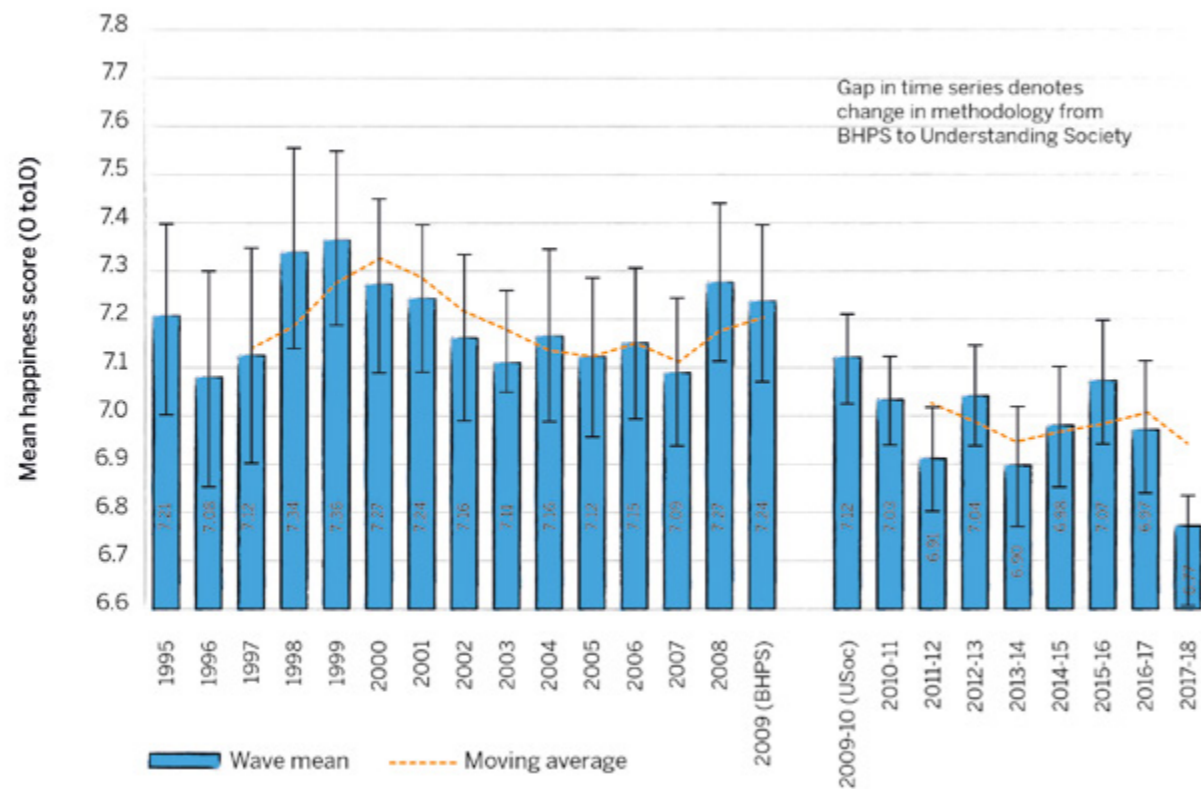
**Figure 36: Children's (aged 11 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 1995 to 2018**



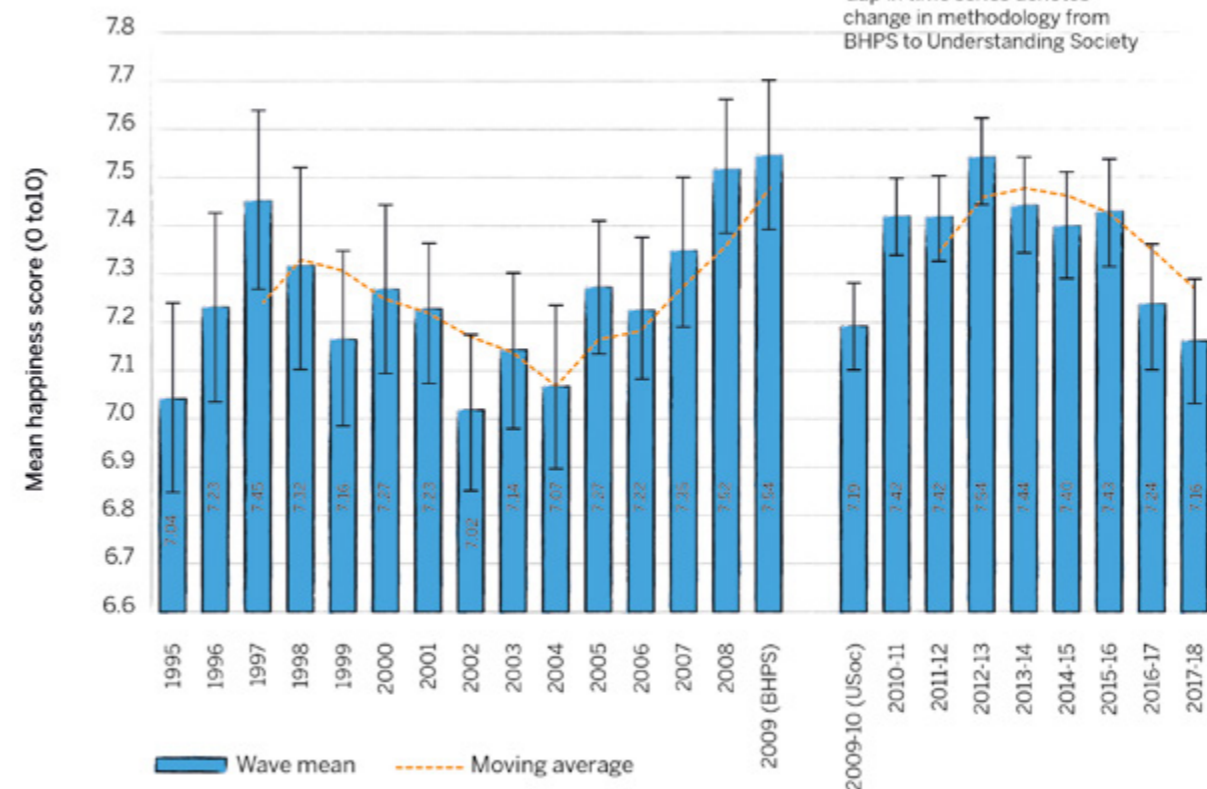
<sup>45</sup> Individual wave averages (rather than raw data) have been used so that survey waves are given equal weight in the calculations (regardless of sample size). While analysis of Understanding Society has been tailored to more closely match the age group for BHPS (those 11 to 15 were selected using the variable dvage), other differences, including fieldwork timeframes, affect the comparability of these surveys. Separate rolling averages and a split time series have been presented to reflect this.

<sup>46</sup> The most recent dataset has been used for each Wave and Understanding Society data, except for Wave 1, have been weighted using the BHPS and UKHLS cross-sectional youth interview weight (-ythscub-xw).

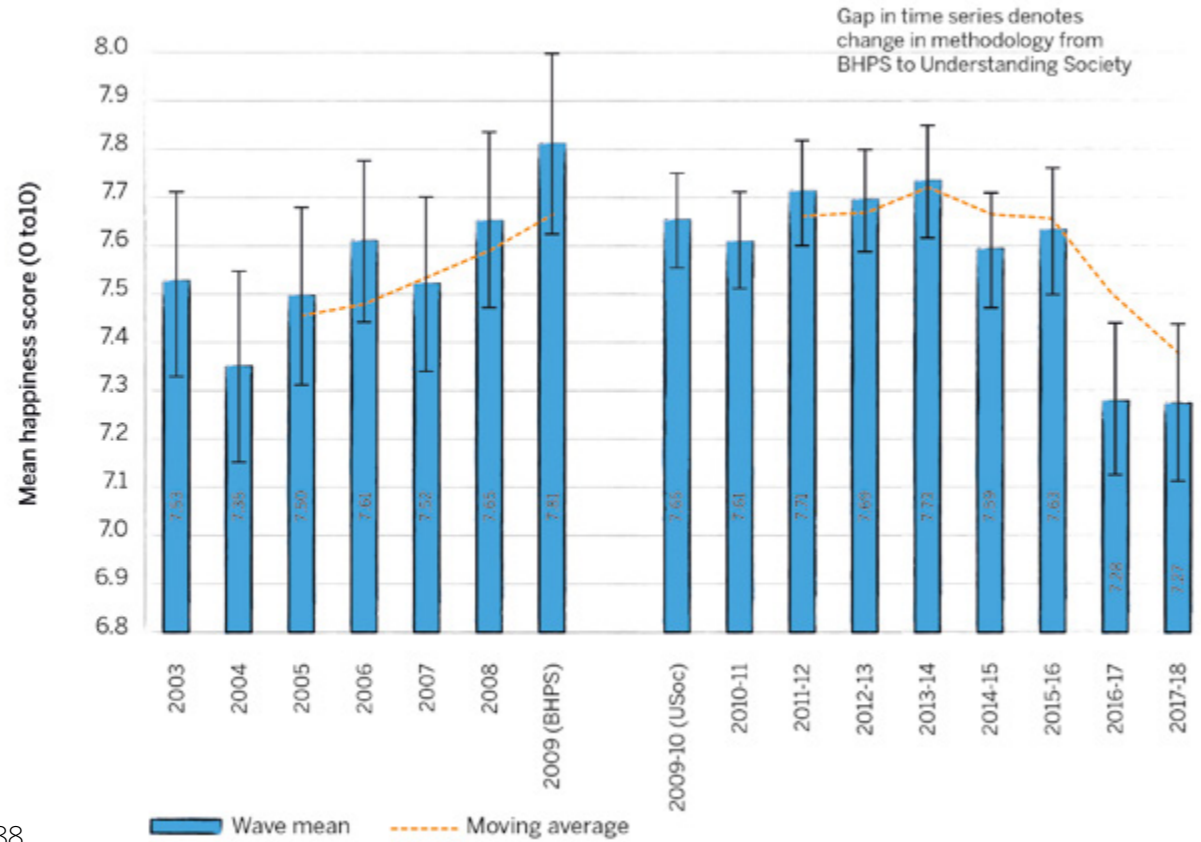
### Appearance



### Schoolwork



### School



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

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