

# How happy are our children:

measuring children's well-being  
and exploring economic factors



# Summary

Following the Prime Minister's commitment to look at the nation's well-being, this report outlines what we know about the quality of children's lives – as rated by children themselves – and makes the case for a long-standing commitment to the exploration and measurement of children's subjective well-being. It draws on a programme of research that The Children's Society has been engaged in for the last six years, which has led to the development of valuable knowledge and experience on the subject.

Exploring what children think and feel about their lives and scrutinising how well society is doing for its youngest members is an important endeavour at any time. But during times of

economic austerity, it becomes even more important to establish what is known about the links between economic factors and children's well-being.

For this reason, in addition to setting out the evidence about children's subjective well-being, this report summarises initial findings from our research programme regarding the links between traditional measures of a family's economic circumstances, for example, household income, employment and social grade, and children's well-being. It will be followed later in the year by the publication of detailed analysis of more child-centred measures of deprivation, which The Children's Society has been developing in partnership with the University of York.

## Introduction

In November 2010, David Cameron gave a speech at the Treasury outlining his government's plans to invest in a large-scale programme of research to measure the well-being of the nation.

In the column inches that were generated by the Prime Minister's announcement, and the many and varied opinions that were expressed on the subject, few seemed to disagree with the suggestion that the quality of people's lives is a matter of great importance.

The dissenting voices were more concerned with the question of whether people's self-reported well-being is something that the government could, and should, measure.

The Children's Society firmly believes that it is possible to do this for children. For the last six years, we have been engaged in a pioneering programme of research to explore well-being from the perspective of children themselves. This work has culminated in a set of self-reported measures that can be used to monitor differences and changes in children's well-being over time. We have found that it is feasible and meaningful to measure children's subjective well-being, and there are a good many reasons why we should.

### Key findings

- Exploring well-being from the perspective of children themselves shows that there is great value in measuring children's subjective well-being at both the local and national level.
- Most young people are satisfied with their lives, but a significant minority is not.
- There is a strong case for incorporating data on children's subjective well-being into government policy making. The Good Childhood Index, a self-report measure of children's well-being that can be used to monitor variations in well-being and trends over time, could be useful for that purpose.
- In the current economic climate of spending cuts, it is vital to understand how financial circumstances affect children's well-being. Our research shows that family income, changes to that income, social class, parental employment and concerns about the economy are all related to children's subjective well-being, but this is most noticeable amongst children that report low well-being.

*'From April next year, we will start measuring our progress as a country, not just by how our economy is growing, but by how our lives are improving; not just by our standard of living, but by our quality of life.'*

**David Cameron,  
25 November 2010**

# Subjective and objective well-being

There are two common approaches to measuring well-being. One is to evaluate the social and economic 'objective realities' that are felt to contribute to people's well-being, such as levels of poverty, health and educational attainment. For indicators such as these, there is data in abundance. See, for example, the box on UNICEF's analysis of child well-being in rich countries, which draws mainly on objective measures.

The second approach to measuring well-being relates to how satisfied people are with their lives. The Children's Society believes that there is value and merit in measuring both objective and subjective aspects of well-being. However, it is the latter – children's own assessments of how their lives are going – on which we have developed a programme of research.

*'Research has shown that it is possible to collect meaningful and reliable data on subjective as well as objective well-being.'*

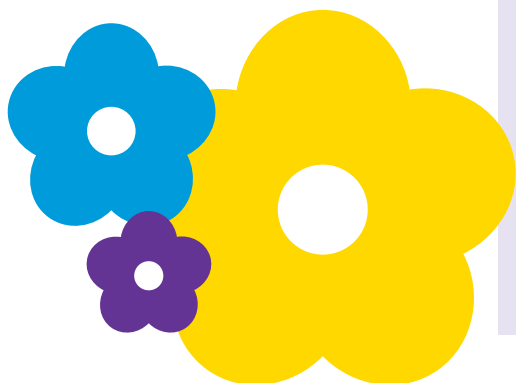
**OECD Stiglitz Commission (2009)**



## 'Child well-being in rich countries', UNICEF<sup>1</sup>

In 2007, UNICEF researchers assembled internationally comparable data for 21 industrialised countries to assess six dimensions of children's lives through 40 separate indicators. The majority of these indicators related to existing social, economic and health measures, such as the percentage of children who live in poverty, are born with low birth weight, or are in post-compulsory education. A smaller number drew on 'self-reported' data from children themselves to determine levels of smoking, drinking and drug use, for example, or how often they eat their meals together as a family. A handful of the self-report measures asked children to rate the quality of their lives (ie subjective well-being).

The UNICEF assessment placed the UK at the bottom of the league table. For every dimension except 'health and safety', the UK was in the bottom third of the table. For 'family and peer relationships', 'behaviours and risks' and subjective well-being', the UK came last.



1. UNICEF (2007) *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries*, Innocenti Report Card 7, Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre.

# Why does subjective well-being matter?



Subjective well-being is important for a number of reasons.

First, people's satisfaction with their lives is a fundamental concern for any society. Few would disagree with the contention that policies to promote economic stability and growth, or high quality healthcare, should form part of the business of government. But underlying this commitment to the pursuit of greater prosperity and the good health of the nation is the unspoken assumption that 'more wealth and health' will buy us 'greater quality of life'.

However, more wealth does not necessarily equate to greater quality of life. Research evidence confirms that average subjective well-being tends to be lower in very poor countries, but above a certain level of national prosperity, increases in wealth do not appear to be matched by people's greater satisfaction with their lives.<sup>2</sup> Yet, there are substantial variations in subjective well-being between nations.<sup>3</sup> There is a need to understand why this is.

Second, the study of subjective well-being can be useful in illuminating the factors that are most important in people's lives. For example, in The Good Childhood Index, The Children's Society has identified the ten key aspects of life with the greatest influence on children and young people's subjective well-being (see The Good Childhood Index on page 8). We are also building up our knowledge of the personal, social and economic factors that are most clearly linked to high or

low subjective well-being. This can help guide both central and local government towards clear policy conclusions.

Third, there is evidence that low subjective well-being may be a precursor to other issues and problems in people's lives such as poor mental health.<sup>4</sup> A greater understanding of links such as these would facilitate the provision of early support to those that need it. This is another example of how a greater understanding of people's subjective well-being has direct policy relevance. It also links to the government's current emphasis on early intervention to prevent problems from taking hold.<sup>5</sup>

Fourth, some argue that subjective well-being does not change and, thus, cannot be influenced by changes in policy,<sup>6</sup> but research evidence shows otherwise. For example, a large longitudinal survey of adults in Germany found that a period of unemployment altered people's average life satisfaction, even in the long-term.<sup>7</sup> This is one of many influences on subjective well-being that has been found that might be affected by a changing policy environment. If we can develop an understanding of the factors that explain differences in children's subjective well-being between countries, and the factors that explain low or high well-being within a country, then we will be able to identify messages for policy that can be used to enhance children and young people's lives.

2. Diener E (2000) 'Subjective well-being: The science of happiness and a proposal for a national index' *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 34-43

3. Diener E (2000) op cit; UNICEF (2007) op cit.

4. For example, amongst a sample of over 4,000 young people aged 13 to 18 in the US, perceived life satisfaction was found to be significantly related to poor mental health, suicide ideation and suicide behaviours (Valois et al, 2004).

5. Frank Field and Graham Allen both emphasised early intervention in their reviews

6. OECD (2009) *Doing Better for Children*. Paris: OECD. See also Lucas, R.E., Dyrenforth, P.S. and Diener, E. (2008) 'Four Myths about Subjective Well-being', *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 2/5, pp. 2001-2015 for a description of and a response to the suggestion that people's happiness cannot change.

7. Lucas RE, Clark AE, Georgellis Y & Diener E (2004) 'Unemployment alters the set point for life satisfaction' *Psychological Science*, 15(1): 8-13

# A child-centred approach to subjective well-being

Until recently, decisions about which aspects of well-being to ask children about have often been made according to what researchers believe to be important, or what is known to be important for adults. This can lead to an overemphasis on factors related to 'becoming an adult' and a neglect of children's quality of life in the here and now.

Sometimes adult assumptions about the important influences on children's well-being hold true. But this is not always the case. Furthermore, an adult-centric approach runs the risk of overlooking key areas that might not have occurred to adults, such as 'choice' and 'autonomy' (discussed below).

For this reason, a major focus of our research at The Children's Society has been to explore the perspectives of children and young people themselves. In 2005, we included two key questions on well-being in a national survey of 14 to 16 year olds in England. These questions enabled 8,000 young people to tell us in their own words what they think makes for, and what prevents, a good life for young people.

We used these ideas as an organising framework when we developed our first ever survey of children and young people's subjective well-being in partnership with the University of York. This survey was carried out in 2008 with a representative sample of 7,000 10 to 15 year olds in England. (See the next section for the key findings).

Since then, we have had ongoing conversations with children and young people to explore their ideas about well-being. For example, in the autumn of 2010 we conducted a series of focus groups with 8 to 11 year olds to deepen our understanding of younger children's well-being.

Our interest in the views and experiences of children and young people has heralded some interesting discoveries along the way. For example, one of the things that children emphasise time and again in qualitative research is the importance of being allowed to make choices in their lives and be trusted with a certain level of autonomy. For this reason, we included questions about freedom and choice in our 2008 well-being survey and, as expected, the amount of choice that children have in life emerged as a key factor explaining differences in their well-being.

Models of children's well-being that have not benefited from the insights of children and young people are unlikely to establish what matters most to them in their lives.

In 2005, The Children's Society asked 8,000 young people aged 14 to 16 the following two questions:

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

Young people's comments mostly related to the quality of their relationships – the importance of love, support, fairness, respect, safety and freedom – and a list of ten key topics:

1. **Family**
2. **Friends**
3. **Leisure**
4. **School, education and learning**
5. **Behaviour (ie their own behaviour)**
6. **Local environment**
7. **Community**
8. **Money**
9. **Attitudes (ie their own attitudes)**
10. **Health (physical and mental)**



# Who is measuring children's subjective well-being?

There have been very few attempts to measure the subjective well-being of children in the UK, although international surveys such as the World Health Organization's 'Health Behaviour in School-aged Children' (HBSC), and UK-specific surveys such as the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the Families and Children Study (FACS) all contain questions on subjective well-being.

The BHPS is the most useful source of information on time trends in subjective well-being in the UK. Since 1994, it has been asking a sample of 11 to 15 year olds how they feel about their life as a whole and about five aspects of their lives – their family, friends, appearance, schoolwork and, since 2002, school. Analysis of this data indicates that there have been significant increases in young people's satisfaction with friends and schoolwork.<sup>8</sup> The BHPS has now been incorporated into the large-scale longitudinal household study Understanding Society. The first wave of the Understanding Society survey recently found, in respect of young people, that not being able to do things like get together with friends socially is closer to the experience of deprivation than lack of money alone.<sup>9</sup>

Until now, the BHPS has provided the best evidence on trends in young people's subjective well-being in the UK. However, the BHPS data is limited to just six questions and does not encapsulate the full range of factors that are important for children's well-being, including for example their health and material well-being. Furthermore, the BHPS items are measured on a seven-point scale but research suggests that longer scales are preferable for subjective well-being since most people score themselves above the mid-point of the scale.<sup>10</sup>

For these reasons, The Children's Society's programme of research has built on and extended the approach used in the BHPS. As mentioned above, this led us in 2008 to develop our first ever survey of children and young people's subjective well-being in partnership with the University of York. Our survey asked children and young people a series of general and detailed questions about their overall well-being and particular areas of their lives.

The Children's Society's 2008 survey comprised a primary and a secondary school questionnaire containing approximately 100 and 140 items respectively.

The questionnaires incorporated several measures of *overall subjective well-being* including a life satisfaction scale and a global measure of happiness.<sup>11</sup>

There were also single-item measures of happiness with specific domains (eg family, friends etc), as well as more detailed questions on these topics under the following three broad headings:

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

In addition we asked about psychological well-being and other related issues including: a sense of purpose, autonomy, competence, relatedness, locus of control, self-esteem, self-image, optimism, and aspirations for the future.



8. Bradshaw J & Keung A (2010) *Trends in Child Subjective Well-being in the United Kingdom* (Paper for the Social Policy Association Conference 2010).

9. McFall, S. L. & Garrington, C. (Eds.). (2011). *Early findings from the first wave of the UK's household longitudinal study*. Colchester: Institute for Social and Economic Research, University of Essex.

10. Kroh M (2006) *An Experimental Evaluation of Popular Well-Being Measures*. Berlin: German Institute for Economic Research.

11. These were derived from ones developed by Scott Huebner in the US and Robert Cummins in Australia. See Huebner ES (1991) 'Initial development of the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale', *School Psychology International* 12: 231-40; and Cummins R & Lau A (2005) *Personal Wellbeing Index - School Children (Third Edition)*. Melbourne: School of Psychology, Deakin University

# What do we know about children's subjective well-being?

A key finding from our 2008 survey is that most young people are satisfied with their lives. Only seven to ten per cent, depending on what measure is used, could be said to be 'unhappy' or to have 'low subjective well-being' ie they scored themselves below the midpoint of the scale.

Age is the most significant socio-demographic factor associated with young people's well-being. The youngest age group in our 2008 survey (year 6) reported the highest well-being (an average score of 8.0 out of 10) while the oldest age group (year 10) reported the lowest well-being (7.6 out of 10). This difference in well-being

with age was particularly evident for females. Overall, girls had only slightly lower well-being than boys but the gap between them widened with age.

Young people who defined themselves as 'disabled' or 'having difficulties with learning' had lower well-being than those who did not define themselves in this way. The same was true of young people who had experienced a recent change in the adults with whom they live, those living with a lone parent, and those living in a family with no adult in paid employment (see section on economic circumstances on page 9). The group with the lowest well-being,

however, was young people who did not live with either parent (eg with extended family or in care).

One of our original objectives was to establish a self-report measure of children and young people's well-being that could be used to monitor changes in well-being over time. An interesting finding emerging from analysis of the 2008 survey was that happiness in ten key areas of children's lives explained over half of the variation in their overall well-being. For this reason, in October 2010, we put forward a new index of children's subjective well-being - The Good Childhood Index - which covers these ten key areas.



# The Good Childhood Index

The Good Childhood Index includes a five-item measure of life satisfaction, a single-item measure of happiness with life as a whole, and a series of questions about well-being in ten key areas of children's lives.

Children were happiest in relation to relationships with their family and friends, their health, the home that they lived in and the way they used their time. They were least happy with their school, appearance and the amount of choice that they have in life. In respect of these three areas, more than one in eight children scored less than five out of ten and could be described as unhappy.

	% unhappy with
Family	4%
Friends	4%
Health	5%
Home	6%
Time use	6%
Money and possessions	10%
The future	10%
Appearance	13%
Choice	13%
School	14%



## The Good Childhood Index comprises the following questions:

*Please say how much you agree or disagree with each of the sentences:*

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<sup>12</sup>

**How happy are you with your life as a whole?<sup>13</sup>**  
(0-10 scale where 0 = 'very unhappy' and 10 = 'very happy')

**How happy are you with your 'relationships with your family', 'your relationships with your friends', 'your health' and so on for the remaining domains.**  
(0-10 scale where 0 = 'very unhappy' and 10 = 'very happy')

The longer version of the index also includes multi-item measures for all 10 domains. Below is an example set of questions for the 'family' domain.

*Please say how much you agree or disagree with each of the sentences:*

1. I enjoy being at home with my family
2. My parents treat me fairly
3. My family get along well together
4. My parents and I do fun things together
5. My parents listen to my views and take me seriously

## The Good Childhood Index can be used in two broad ways.

The short index has been designed to measure trends and variations in children's subjective well-being at the national level. It was tested with a representative sample of 8 to 15 year olds in July and October 2010, and shows good stability and validity. We are using the index to monitor children and young people's well-being on an ongoing basis with a quarterly survey of 2,000 8 to 15 year olds. There is also potential for the short index to be used to measure change in overall well-being for smaller samples of children and young people, for example, at the school or local authority level.

The longer Good Childhood Index, which includes multi-item measures for the ten key areas mentioned above, will be useful for organisations that want to evaluate their work and measure change in the well-being of children and young people at an individual level. Parts of the longer index are validated and already being used by The Children's Society's programmes for the purposes of evaluation. We will launch the index in its entirety later this year.

12. As mentioned earlier, this was derived from a measure developed by Scott Huebner in the US. See Huebner ES (1991) 'Initial development of the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale', *School Psychology International* 12: 231-40.

13. Similarly, this was derived from a measure developed by Robert Cummins in Australia. See Cummins R & Lau A (2005) *Personal Wellbeing Index - School Children (Third Edition)*. Melbourne: School of Psychology, Deakin University

# The links between a family's economic circumstances and children's subjective well-being

With budget cuts pending and the economic landscape changing, it is important and timely to evaluate what is known about the links between children's economic circumstances and their subjective well-being.

The Children's Society's 2008 well-being survey found a number of associations that are significant. For example, young people that were living in a household with no adult in paid employment had lower overall well-being than the average. In addition, both parental unemployment and receipt of free school meals were associated with lower well-being in respect of material possessions, home, school and schoolwork. However, in each case the differences were small and, overall, poverty measures accounted for only a small proportion of variations in well-being. This may be because the measures used were not sensitive enough to capture the range of experiences of poverty that children and young people face. For this reason, we have been developing more child-centred measures of poverty and we will be publishing detailed analysis of these later in 2011.

In October 2010 and February 2011, we carried out two surveys of a total of 4,000 children in the UK aged 8 to 15 and their parents to further explore the associations between a family's economic circumstances and children's subjective well-being. We found that family income, employment and social class were all significantly related to children's subjective well-being. Overall, these associations were small, but they were quite noticeable at the lower end amongst children with low well-being (ie those who scored below the mid-point of 10 out of 20).

For example, one in six children (16%) living in a household with no adult in full-time employment reported low well-being, compared to one in ten (10%) children living in a household with at least one adult in full-time employment.

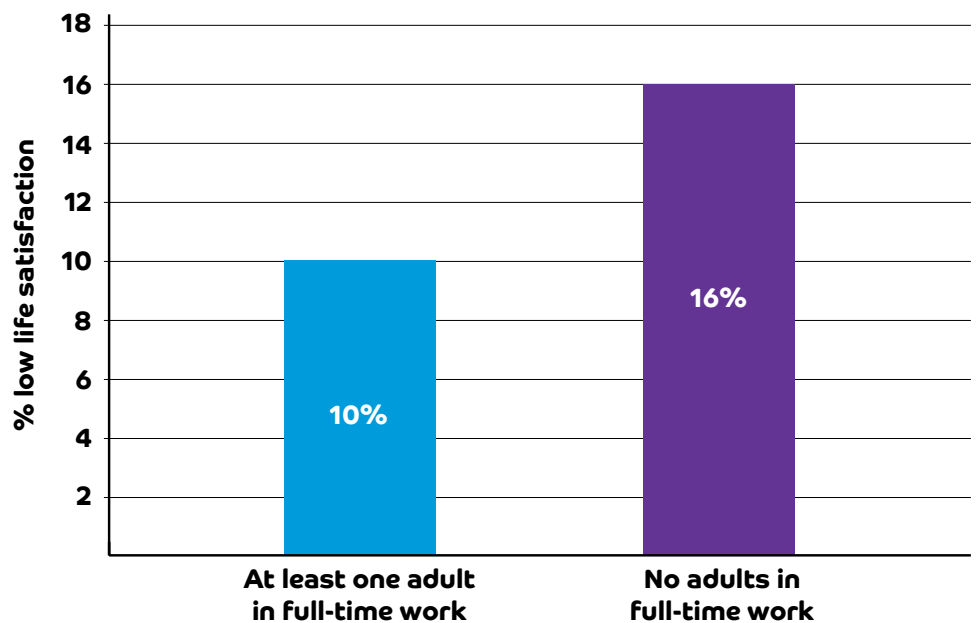


Figure 1: Well-being by adult employment status

Children's well-being was also related to their social class. Low well-being was reported by almost twice as many children in social class E (18%) as compared to the average (10%), and three times as many as in social class A (6%).

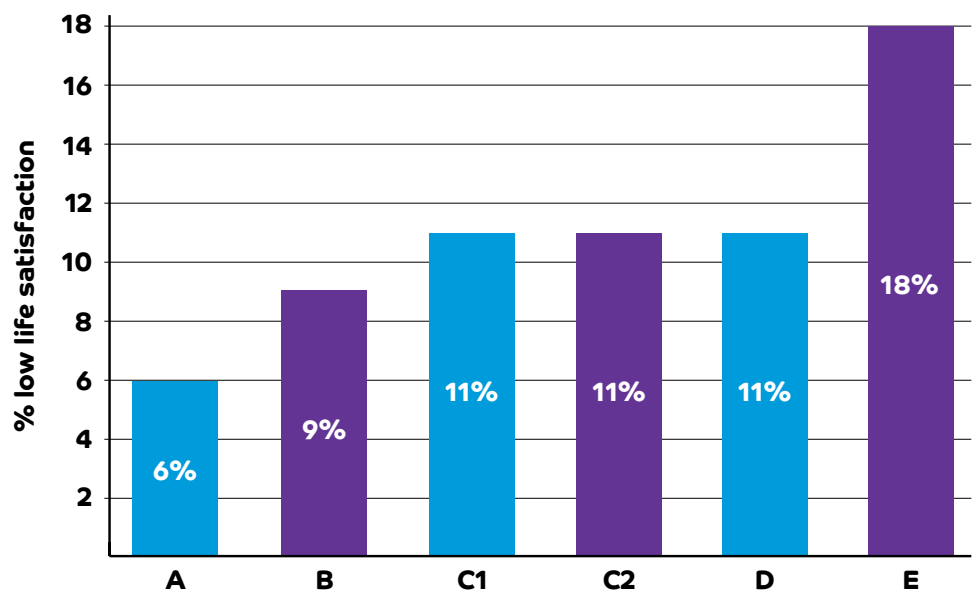


Figure 2: Well-being by social grade

We also looked at equivalised household income ie total household income adjusted to take into account the number of people living in the household. When we divided this measure of household income into five groups (quintiles), we found significantly lower well-being for children in lower income groups. Low well-being was reported by more than twice as many children in the bottom income quintile (17%) as the top income quintile (8%).

Another key finding from our research relates to the dynamic nature of well-being. We asked parents whether their household income had changed over the previous year. Children in households that had experienced a fall in household income (15%) were more than twice as likely to report low well-being as children in households that had experienced a rise in income (7%).

Finally, we asked parents how concerned they were about the impact of the current economic situation on their family. Thirteen per cent of children whose parents were 'very concerned' about the impact of the economic situation reported low well-being, compared to 8% of children whose parents were 'not very' or 'not at all' concerned.

More detail regarding the links between household economic factors and children's subjective well-being can be found in the research paper that accompanies this report, *Understanding Children's Well-Being: Links between family economic factors and children's well-being: Initial findings from Wave 2 and Wave 3 quarterly surveys*, which is available on the research publications page of our website at: [www.childrengsociety.org.uk/wellbeing](http://www.childrengsociety.org.uk/wellbeing)

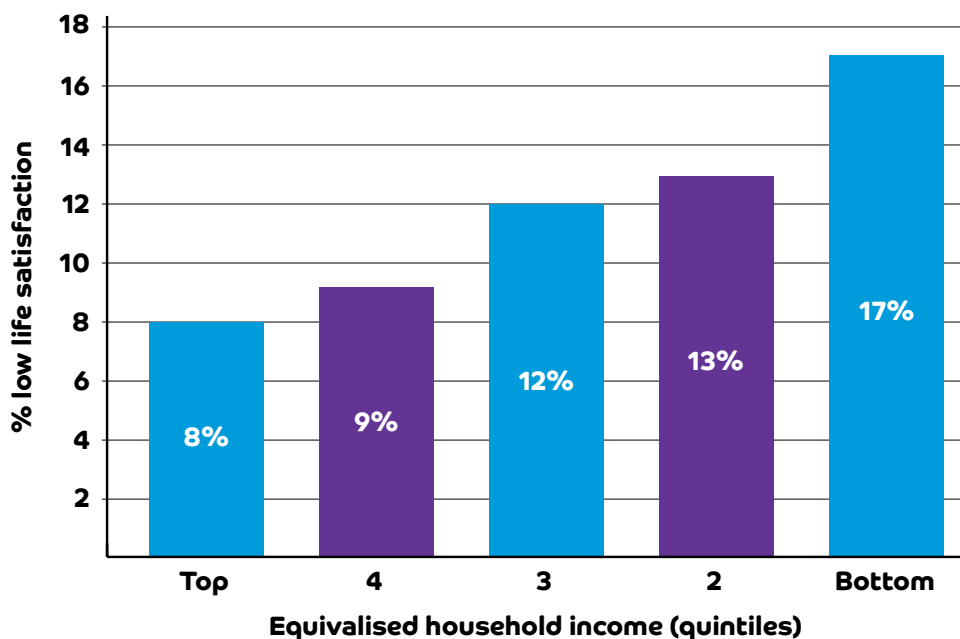


Figure 3: Well-being by household income

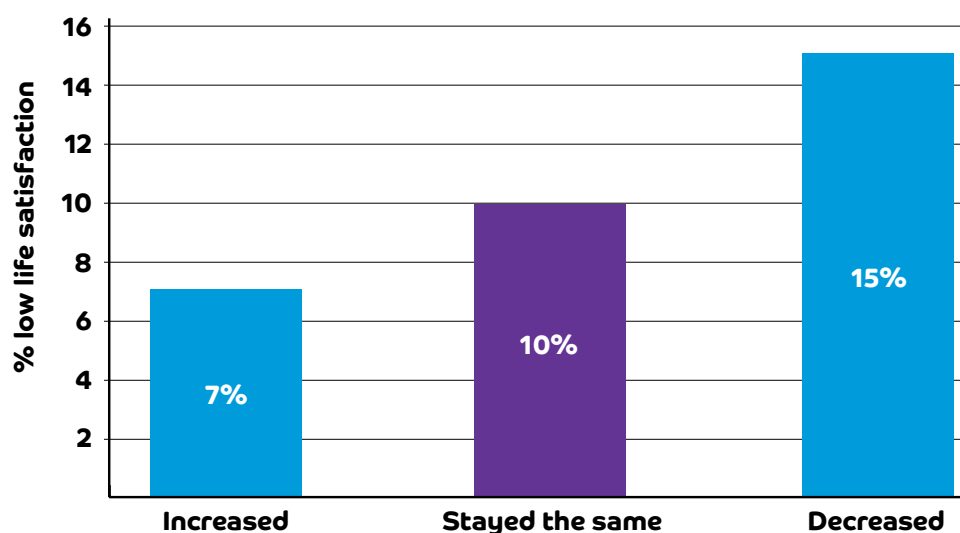


Figure 4: Well-being by change in household income

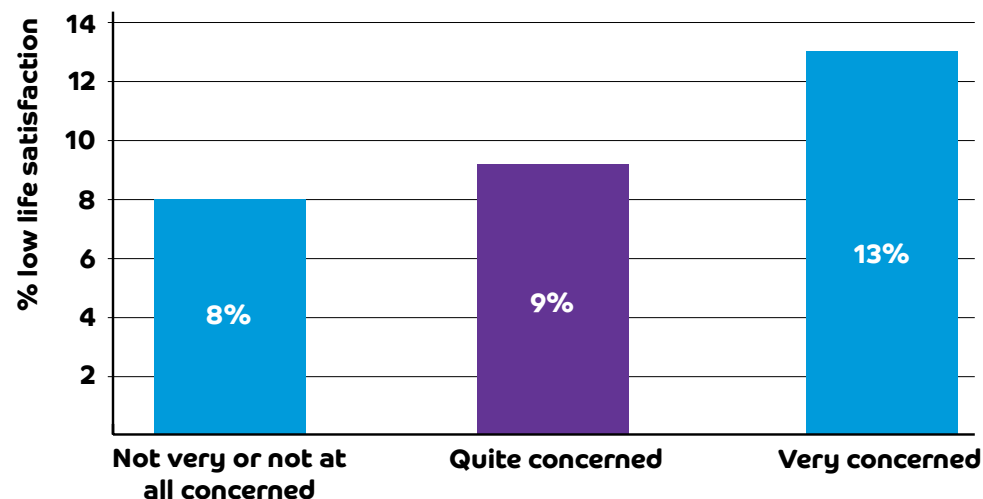


Figure 5: Well-being by parental concern about the economic situation

# Conclusions

The Government's interest and investment in a programme of research to measure well-being in the UK, and the national debate that it has sparked on the subject, are all positive developments that are long overdue. The Office for National Statistics (ONS), which has been tasked with taking the work forward, will be including subjective measures of well-being in a large-scale quarterly survey of adults from April 2011. We understand that the ONS are intending to look at how they can measure children's subjective well-being as part of their future plans.

Our extensive experience of exploring well-being from the perspective of children themselves shows that it is meaningful, worthwhile and important to measure children's subjective well-being at the national and local level. There is a strong case for integrating data on children's subjective well-being into government decision making. For these reasons, we urge the Government to include children in their 'measuring national well-being' programme as soon as is practicable, and consider the possibility of adopting the instruments that The Children's Society has developed for this purpose.

Across the Treasury and government departments, as recommended in a recent report by the New Economics Foundation,<sup>14</sup> greater consideration should be given to assessing the impact of all economic and social policy not only on adult well-being but also children's well-being. There is also a case for government to consider how it can encourage local authorities, schools and others to explore the well-being of the children and young people that they work with at the local level.

Given the current economic climate and the cuts in government expenditure, it is critically important to understand how decisions taken today will affect the well-being of our future generation. It is not necessarily surprising that our research has found that children in the lowest income households where parents are out of work are most affected by the economic difficulties facing the country. But it does suggest that children's well-being may already be adversely affected.

This indicates how important it is to not only have income measures of poverty in place, as set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010, but also to look at developing more child-centred measures that start from the perspectives of children and young people themselves.

For now, if the coalition government is committed to not only ensuring the nation's finances are sound so the economy grows, but also to ensuring that the nation's quality of life is improving, as the Prime Minister clearly stated at the end of last year, then it can ill afford to ignore the relationship between household income and children's well-being.



## Our recommendations

- The ONS should include a headline index of children and young people's well-being in their well-being framework, which would include subjective as well as objective measures. The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index could be useful for that purpose.
- Local authorities and schools should also be encouraged by government to measure children's subjective well-being at the local level to inform their strategic plans for children and young people.
- The Treasury Green Book and other policy guidance documents should be amended so that policy analysis and decision-making that impacts on children is informed by subjective well-being data.
- Officials across government departments should be encouraged to use children's subjective well-being data to inform policy-making in the future.
- In developing its future plans for measuring and defining poverty the government should consider developing more child-centred measures of poverty that start from the perspectives of children and young people themselves. These should be developed in addition to the current income-based measures set out in the Child Poverty Act 2010, which should be retained as the primary indicators.

The Children's Society wants to create a society where children can be children, childhood is respected and all children are valued for who they are. Our approach is driven by our Christian values and by the voices of children and young people, who are at the heart of all we do.

In 2009 The Children's Society published The Good Childhood Inquiry, the UK's first independent national inquiry into childhood. Its aims were to renew society's understanding of modern childhood and to inform, improve and inspire all our relationships with children. The Children's Society is continuing to improve this understanding of issues affecting children through all of its ongoing work.

To find out more about The Children's Society and our prestigious programmes of research please visit our website at [www.childrensociety.org.uk](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk). To find out more about our work on well-being please visit the site, email [wellbeing@childrensociety.org.uk](mailto:wellbeing@childrensociety.org.uk), or call the Research Unit on **0113 246 5131**.

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