

# A guide to measuring children's well-being



**nef** is an independent think-and-do tank that inspires and demonstrates real economic well-being.

We aim to improve quality of life by promoting innovative solutions that challenge mainstream thinking on economic, environmental and social issues. We work in partnership and put people and the planet first.

Action for Children is one of the UK's leading children's charities. We are committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

This guide is a supplement to a larger report, *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*. It is the culmination of a programme of research carried out by **nef** (the new economics foundation) with the support of Action for Children.

This guide has been produced by **nef** in collaboration with a number of different stakeholders including Action for Children. However, the overall contents of the guide reflect the views of its authors.

# Why this guide? Why now?

This guide is a supplement to a larger report, *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*, which is the culmination of a programme of research carried out by **nef** (the new economics foundation) and Action for Children.

*Backing the Future* demonstrates the economic and social case for preventing social problems from emerging in the first place, rather than fixing them after they have already occurred. It also shows the need for early intervention if and when problems do arise to stop them from becoming entrenched. By making the transition to a more preventative system, the UK will improve child well-being, create a better and more just society, and support our economy by being less wasteful economically and making far better use of our shared but increasingly scarce public resources.

*Backing the Future* argues that a key element of shifting to a preventative system requires our policy and services to nurture the full range of factors positively affecting children's lives. As well as the structural conditions affecting the circumstances of children's lives (e.g., poverty, inequality), the psychological and social aspects of children's well-being are also vital for improving outcomes. In order to effectively track the difference our services are making and the wider community benefits that they are generating, *Backing the Future* argues that more meaningful measures

of progress need to be developed at national level, at local level and at the service or project level.

This guide looks specifically at the scope of subjective indicators (e.g., life satisfaction, optimism about the future) to complement objective indicators of well-being (e.g., child obesity, numeracy and literacy, household income) in informing us about how children experience their lives – from their own perspectives. It covers some of the practical approaches to measuring child well-being that have been implemented and it discusses some of the considerations that need to be made when designing a well-being measurement tool for children, which includes subjective indicators.

## Who should use this guide?

We have written this guide to assist policy-makers, commissioners of children's services and practitioners thinking about how to implement subjective well-being measurement in their delivery context. The guide gives a quick overview of the benefits and the scope of subjective well-being indicators to shape and improve measurement tools for the future.

## What is well-being?

In the main report, **nef** suggests that it is helpful to think of children's well-being as a *dynamic process*, in which a child's external circumstances (e.g., their socioeconomic background, family circumstances, physical

## Focus Box 1: Well-being and current policy

Interest in the conceptualisation and measurement of well-being has recently become a prominent theme across many spheres of policy. The term 'well-being' has featured in recent initiatives across a number of departments. To give just a few examples:

- *Every Child Matters (ECM)*, a national framework for coordinating and orienting the provision of children's services aimed at improving the well-being of children.<sup>1</sup>
- *Getting it Right for Every Child in Scotland*, a new approach to working in children's services that has developed *My World Triangle* as part of an integrated assessment framework (IAF), which places the child at the centre and describes factors influencing well-being from the child's perspective.<sup>2</sup>
- *The Local Government Act (2000)*, requiring each local authority in England and Wales to prepare a Community Strategy, outlining how it would promote economic, social and environmental well-being.<sup>3</sup>
- *Opportunity Age*, a national strategy for improving the well-being of older people.<sup>4</sup>

surroundings) are constantly interacting with their individual characteristics (e.g., their personality, cognitive ability and so on) to satisfy – to a greater or lesser extent – their needs and thus build psychological resources, capabilities and positive interactions with the world around them. Well-being has been gaining ground across a range of policy fields in recent years (Focus Box 1).

### Why measure well-being?

Our research suggests that there are a number of benefits to measuring well-being which are directly applicable to policy-makers, commissioners

and practitioners seeking to shape the transition to a more preventative system of children's services and improve future outcomes for children. Well-being measurement has the potential to inform children's professionals in three key ways:

#### The early identification of problems

Our research indicates that improvements in the way children feel and function is an important step towards better policy outcomes. The ability to track changes to well-being scores will enable policies and services to be far more responsive to the early identification of problems and the level of support required by

the target group or individual child. This will enable commissioners and services to be more effective with their resources. Once difficulties manifest themselves in outcome measures at the behavioural level – for example, offending rates – the costs to communities are unacceptably high and the intervention much more costly.

### Knowing what works and understanding why

There is a widespread recognition that if we had better evidence of the effectiveness of services, we would be able to more successfully propel children's policy in the direction of what works. Our research indicates that regular and systematic measurement of well-being and associated behavioural changes in children would more reliably capture the key steps to achieving and sustaining improved outcomes.

This would better enable practitioners and policy-makers to evolve their understanding of the main features of a service that are successful in bringing about positive change for children. More accurate assessments about how replicable a service is in other situations or localities could then be made. Better measurement would also enable accurate tracking and learning about what works to prove and improve the effectiveness of the same service over time. This process would be essential to preventative services, which are more likely to deliver a return on investment over the longer term.

### Provide recognition for preventative work

The inclusion of well-being indicators will bring the importance of child well-being for determining longer-term outcomes to the fore. This will incentivise and recognise the preventative work practitioners do to promote positive feelings, experiences and activities and avert problems happening – efforts that currently tend to remain invisible on evaluation and performance management forms.

### How can well-being be measured?

Conventionally, concepts such as 'quality of life' and 'well-being' have been measured indirectly, using proxies: household income, life expectancy and so on. Typically, these kinds of proxies are *objective*, in that they are based on observable things in the world that can be easily counted (e.g., salaries and debt levels, mortality rates).

However, recent discussions about well-being have focused on the use of *subjective* indicators – that is, indicators based on individuals' self-reports of whether they feel happy, satisfied, content and fulfilled in their day-to-day lives. Although there has been a certain degree of caution expressed about these kinds of measures, it is now increasingly accepted that they can play an important role when carefully applied and interpreted.<sup>5</sup>

In particular, subjective indicators provide the kind of direct measure of outcomes that is increasingly seen as a desirable way to evaluate and

determine policy. This is because, for many policy areas, increasing people's experienced well-being is the intended outcome.

Subjective indicators can be used in a variety of different ways:

- They can give an overall picture of how a population or a group within the population are faring, perhaps in relation to socioeconomic events (e.g., during a recession).
- They can be used diagnostically to highlight groups and individuals who are experiencing low well-being, and thus inform decisions about service delivery and priorities.
- They can also be used as 'distance travelled' measures as a means of evaluating the impact of policy or service-level decisions.

In short, subjective indicators are an extremely useful addition to the policy 'toolkit' and an important complement to existing objective measures.<sup>6</sup>

## Subjective indicators and children's well-being

Outcomes frameworks, like ECM, emphasise the need to place the well-being of children at the heart of service delivery, focusing on the needs of each child as a whole person. In particular, they aim to focus on aspects of well-being that are important to children themselves, not just to the professionals who are involved in children's services.

With this shift towards more child-centred policy, it follows that children

will often be most directly affected by policy interventions. Subjective indicators of well-being are a natural fit for this agenda, since they are:

- based on self-report, and thus a direct reflection of what children think and feel; and
- they are often intrinsically holistic, in that they ask children to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about life overall.

Without capturing how children and young people experience their lives from their own perspectives, there is little opportunity to truly assess the benefits of preventative policy and service initiatives.

### Can we reliably capture children's sense of their own well-being?

The use of subjective indicators with children and young people has sometimes been regarded as problematic, for at least two reasons.

First, and rather paternalistically, it has been assumed that adults know better than children what is good for them and therefore that there is no need to canvas children's own views. Clearly it is true that all adults were children once, and thus have first-hand knowledge of what childhood is like and how the views and preferences expressed by children might change in adulthood. However, this fails to take account of the way that society itself has changed. Today's childhood experience is in many ways radically different to how it was even 10 years ago, let alone 30 or 40 when many current policy-makers

and professionals were growing up. Initiatives such as the Children's Society's *Good Childhood Inquiry* have shown that asking children directly about what contributes to their well-being can lead to findings that might not otherwise have been discovered.<sup>7</sup> At the same time, of course, it is vital to recognise that subjective reports will always be connected to individual frames of reference, circumstances and experiences. For instance, whilst all children have a basic desire to feel loved and wanted, this might manifest itself differently for children who live in secure and stable families as for those in chaotic and unstable homes. Reflecting on the factors underpinning subjective responses rather than taking them at face value is an important part of the analysis process.

A second concern is that children may not be able to report reliably on their inner feelings. Clearly, for pre-school-aged children, reliability is likely to be a problem. However, recent research suggests that slightly older children may be well able to be introspective about their own experiences and reflect this perfectly well in self-reports. For instance, Norwood found that junior-school-aged children (e.g., 7–11-year-olds) were able to satisfactorily complete the self-report version of a widely used diagnostic measure, the *Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire* (SDQ), and that the underlying structure of their responses followed expected patterns.<sup>8</sup>

## How to embed subjective well-being indicators into your measurement tool

A number of approaches to measuring child well-being which make use of subjective measures have recently been put forward or are in development.<sup>9</sup> It might be useful to review some of these in the development of your own measurement framework (Focus Box 2).

## Focus Box 2: Measurement tools using subjective indicators

- UNICEF's 2008 report *Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries* presents a new index of childhood well-being, constructed around six domains, one of which was subjective well-being (defined in terms of self-reported satisfaction with health, school and life overall).<sup>10</sup>
- The TellUs survey, developed and conducted by OfSted, is an extensive self-report survey based around the five core dimensions of the ECM framework. It includes a question on happiness.<sup>11</sup>
- New Philanthropy Capital is developing a new tool to measure subjective child well-being aimed specifically for use in the charity sector. This is a multidimensional questionnaire developed for use with 11–16-year-olds. It is intended to be a distance-travelled tool, and therefore be used to demonstrate the well-being impacts of interventions. Seven core aspects of subjective well-being are covered: self-esteem, resilience, emotional well-being, peer relationships, family relationships, satisfaction with school environment, and satisfaction with local community environment.<sup>12,13</sup>
- The Children's Society has been working with Professor Jonathan Bradshaw to develop a new survey measure of children's well-being. Early reports suggest that this will incorporate overall measures of life satisfaction and happiness, along with a number of domain-satisfaction measures. A technical report is due to be released in August 2009, with the initial presentation of results appearing in the autumn and further topic-specific reports to follow in 2010.
- The Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS) is a 14-item instrument that was developed for NHS Health Scotland and (from 2008) is included in the core module of the annual Scottish Health Survey. Research is currently underway to validate the WEMWBS with 13- and 15-year-old children – this is expected to be completed by October 2009.<sup>14</sup>



In thinking about incorporating subjective measures into your own tool for measuring child well-being, we also recommend that you consider the following points:

### Ask questions that cover a range of subjective dimensions

Well-being measures that focus mainly on happiness and satisfaction fail to capture the multifaceted nature of well-being. Well-being emerges as the consequence of a dynamic interaction of different factors. It is necessary, therefore, to ask questions that cover a range of subjective dimensions that go beyond just good feeling to good *functioning*. For instance, the extent to which children function well in their day-to-day lives rather than just ‘getting by’ has been described by some

researchers as the difference between *flourishing* and *languishing*.<sup>15</sup>

Table 1 lists a number of example questions that explore different facets of well-being. They have been taken from the module on personal and social well-being that was part of the European Social Survey in 2006 and from which **nef**’s *National Accounts of Well-being* were constructed.

These questions were developed for use with adults and young people aged between 16 and 24 years of age. There are a number of factors that must be considered when surveys are used with children. However, they give an indication of the kinds of issues that could be explored so as to gain a richer picture of how well-being is

**Table 1: Sample questions exploring different facets of well-being**

<i>Well-being dimension</i>	<i>Example question</i>
Positive feelings	How much of the time during the past week were you happy?
Negative feelings	How much of the time during the past week have you felt sad?
Life satisfaction	How satisfied are you with how your life has turned out so far?
Vitality	How much of the time during the past week have you had a lot of energy?
Optimism	I’m always optimistic about my future (agree – disagree)
Resilience	When things go wrong in my life, it generally takes me a long time to get back to normal (agree – disagree)
Autonomy	I feel I am free to decide how to live my life (agree – disagree)
Meaning and purpose	I generally feel that what I do in my life is valuable and worthwhile (agree – disagree)
Relationships	There are people in my life who really care about me (agree – disagree)

experienced by children and young people.

### Think about how to collect your data

Subjective well-being data can be gathered through one-on-one interviews or through self-reports. Often, subjective surveys with children are administered using an interview format, where the interviewer asks the question and then writes down the child's answer. This can help avoid comprehension problems; the interviewer can try explaining the question in a different way if necessary. However, because the interviewer will be an adult and probably someone unfamiliar to the child, this may influence how the child responds. To avoid this potential bias, where possible it is best to design a tool that children can use by themselves.

### Design your tool with children in mind

The length of the questionnaire, comprehension and reading age are all important factors that influence how effective your measurement tool will be. Children can find it difficult to concentrate for long periods; thus, long and complex surveys may be inappropriate. There is a trade-off to be considered between asking more questions and so potentially increasing the scope and reliability of the survey, yet keeping the overall length manageable.

Another issue is comprehension. If the questionnaires are to be filled-out by the children themselves (rather than being completed in an interview format) it is important to consider whether the language used in the

questionnaire is appropriate to the reading age and comprehension of the children who are being surveyed. For instance, some of the concepts that form part of the wider description of well-being described above are rather abstract in nature – that is, they are not grounded in 'real' things or experiences. Whereas it might be possible to ask adults about these things directly (e.g., do you feel you have autonomy?), for children it may be better to frame the question in more concrete terms (e.g., are you allowed to make up your own mind about things?).

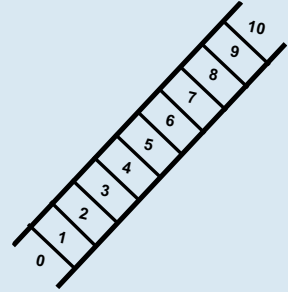
Generally speaking, it is wise to pilot any potential questionnaire with a sample of children of the target age, so as to identify in advance problems with the length, reading age or comprehensibility of the survey. Focus Box 3 gives examples of some child-specific well-being measures that were developed by **nef** as part of a recent project for the Big Lottery Fund.<sup>16</sup>

### Focus Box 3: Sample questions measuring children’s well-being

The following are some examples of questions about subjective well-being that have been developed specifically for use with primary school children.

#### Overall life satisfaction

Here is a picture of a ladder. The top of the ladder, 10, is the best possible life for you, and the bottom, 0, is the worst possible life for you. In general, where on the ladder do you feel you stand at the moment? *(Please circle one number only.)*



#### Overall happiness

Here is a picture of some faces. The two smiling faces, 5, is if you are really happy with life (including school, friends and at home). The two sad faces, 1, is if you are really not very happy with life. Circle the number that best fits how you feel at the moment.



#### Positive and negative feelings

How did you feel last week? Circle the number that fits how you felt.

	Never	On one day	On a few days	Most days	Every day
a) I felt happy	1	2	3	4	5
b) I felt sad	1	2	3	4	5
c) I enjoyed my school work	1	2	3	4	5
d) I had lots of energy	1	2	3	4	5
e) I had no-one to play with	1	2	3	4	5
f) I felt tired	1	2	3	4	5
g) I kept waking up in the night	1	2	3	4	5
h) I got on with my friends and family	1	2	3	4	5
i) I felt like I fit in at school	1	2	3	4	5
j) I felt good about myself	1	2	3	4	5

## Measure the distance travelled

Often, it is desirable to measure changes in well-being over time – perhaps, for instance, to assess the impact of a policy intervention or a change in circumstances. A general difficulty with using subjective indicators for this purpose is that people adapt to alterations in their circumstances which, in turn, can make the indicators appear to be fairly static, especially where they represent assessments of life overall. The problem can be ameliorated to some extent by using a range of measures of different dimensions of well-being and thus increasing the scope for showing change. Another option is to measure well-being at regular intervals so changes can be regularly and consistently tracked.

## Endnotes

- 1 DCSF, *Every Child Matters* website <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/> [5 August 2009].
- 2 The Scottish Government (2008) *A guide to getting it right for every child* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Parliament).
- 3 Office of Public Sector Information *Local Government Act 2000*. Available at [http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2000/ukpga\\_2000022\\_en\\_1](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/Acts/acts2000/ukpga_2000022_en_1) [5 August 2009].
- 4 DWP (2008) *Opportunity age* (London: DWP). Available at <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/ageing-society/strategy-and-publications/opportunity-age-first-report/> [5 August 2009].
- 5 Thompson S, Marks N (2008) *Measuring well-being in policy: Issues and applications* (London: nef). This report was commissioned for the Foresight Review on Mental Capital and Wellbeing.
- 6 Steuer N, Marks N (2008) *Local well-being: Can we measure it?* (London: nef).
- 7 Layard R, Dunn J (2009) *A good childhood* (London: Penguin).
- 8 Norwood S (2007) 'Validity of self-reports of psychopathology from children of 4–11 years of age' *Vulnerable Children and Youth Studies* **2**: 89–99.
- 9 Whilst there is not space to review all of these here, a good summary review of recent approaches to measuring children's well-being has been conducted by the Office of National Statistics. Thomas J (2009) *Working Paper: Current measures and the challenges of measuring Children's well-being*. Available at [http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_social/Measuring-childrens-wellbeing.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_social/Measuring-childrens-wellbeing.pdf) [5 August 2009].
- 10 UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre (2007) 'Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries' *Innocenti Report Card 7* (Florence: UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre).
- 11 Information on the most up-to-date survey is available at <http://www.tellussurvey.org.uk/Default.aspx> [3 August 2009].
- 12 Further information is available at [http://www.philanthropycapital.org/research/research\\_reports/Tools/wellbeing.aspx](http://www.philanthropycapital.org/research/research_reports/Tools/wellbeing.aspx) [3 August 2009].
- 13 Heady L, Oliveira A (2008) *On the bright side: Developing a questionnaire for charities to measure children's well-being* (London: NFC).
- 14 Updates available at <http://www.healthscotland.com/documents/3218.aspx> [3 August 2009].
- 15 Keyes CLM (2002) 'The mental health continuum: from languishing to flourishing in life' *Journal of Health and Social Research* **43**: 207–222.
- 16 Abdallah S, Steuer N, Marks N, Page N (2008) *Well-being evaluation tools: A research and development project for the Big Lottery Fund* (London: nef).



## Other reports related to this project include:

- **Full project report:**

- *Backing the Future: why investing in children is good for us all*

- **Practical 'how-to' documents:**

- *A guide to co-producing children's services*
- *A guide to commissioning children's services for better outcomes*

- **SROI Assessment Reports for three Action for Children services:**

- *The economic and social return of Action for Children's East Dunbartonshire Family Service*
- *The economic and social return of Action for Children's Family Intervention Team / 5+ Project, Caerphilly*
- *The economic and social return of Action for Children's Wheatley Sure Start Children's Centre, Doncaster*

- **Report on the citizens' juries, including information on the process and conclusions:**

- *How can government act to increase the well-being and happiness of children and young people in the UK? A report on two citizens' juries*

All available at [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org) and [www.actionforchildren.org.uk](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk)

**Written by:** Sam Thompson and Jody Aked

**Further contributions from:** Nicola Steuer

**Edited by:** Mary Murphy

**Design by:** the Argument by Design – [www.tabd.co.uk](http://www.tabd.co.uk)

**nef** (new economics foundation)  
3 Jonathan Street  
London SE11 5NH

t: 020 7820 6300  
e: [well-being@neweconomics.org](mailto:well-being@neweconomics.org)  
w: [www.neweconomics.org](http://www.neweconomics.org)

Registered charity number 1055254  
© 2009 **nef** (the new economics foundation)  
ISBN 978 1 904882 59 6