Understanding child subjective well-being:
A call for more data, research and policymaking targeting children
Emerging field, concepts and metrics

For more than 30 years, psychologists have been calling for a better understanding of how individuals experience fulfilment and contentment in their lives.

The need for additional research on well-being, moving away from the traditional focus on mental pathology and disorders, has helped create the positive psychology field; and to formalize concepts such as subjective well-being and life satisfaction.

Meanwhile, experts in other fields, such as economics and health, have started rigorously investigating the impact of well-being on other aspects of life.

It is useful to distinguish three concepts here:

- ‘Subjective well-being’ is the reported experience of positive emotions (such as optimism), negative emotions (such as sadness), satisfaction related to specific domains (such as work or relationships) and overall judgements of life satisfaction.

- ‘Life satisfaction’ is an element of subjective well-being and entails a general evaluation as to how individuals assess their lives encompassing a long time-horizon.

- ‘Happiness’, although not consistently defined, refers to a person’s present state and their feeling of positive emotions (and absence of negative emotions). It is therefore a narrower concept than subjective well-being and life satisfaction.
The increase in research on these topics has led to a proliferation of methodologies and scales, including the following that have been used widely with children:

- One of the most common scales used for life satisfaction, the Self-Anchoring Striving Scale, also known as Cantril’s Ladder, asks respondents to consider a ten-step ladder, with the top step representing the best life and the bottom step the worst life they could imagine. This scale is unique in that subjects define for themselves the descriptors at either end of the ladder (e.g., best–worst, good–bad, top–bottom). It is used in Gallup’s World Poll, the results of which are presented in the *World Happiness Report*, and in recent waves of UNICEF’s Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys. A similar scaling assessment is employed in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), targeting 15-year old students. The Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey (HBSC) includes a question using this scale and is applied in 50 countries and regions across Europe and North America every four years, with students aged 11, 13 and 15.
• **Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS)** is a seven-item self-reported scale intended for children. The SLSS was designed to measure global life satisfaction by using items that require children to assess the quality of their lives as a whole, independent of specific life domains, such as peers, family, living environment, or self. Young people are asked to respond to each item on a five-point scale from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’. It is designed for use with children as young as 8 years of age.

• **Personal Well-being Index (PWI)** is a generic measure of subjective well-being. It asks how satisfied people are with seven life domains. These include standard of living, personal health, achievement in life, personal relationships, personal safety, community-connectedness and future security. These domains are intended to aggregate to ‘life-as-a-whole’, and are sufficiently broad to apply to all populations. Some experts believe that domain-based measures can be problematic because they make assumptions about which aspects of life are important.

Although these methodologies measure different aspects of well-being, the scales are closely correlated and their results tend to demonstrate similar trends. Some methods have already been tested across cultures, demonstrating their potential application globally. Studies on the comparability of measures across countries show that it is possible to construct multi-item subjective well-being scales for use with children that have good psychometric properties and can identify differences in well-being by gender or socio-economic factors across countries. Multiple-item scales are considered more stable than single-item scales. Single-item scales, such as Cantril’s Ladder, have been used with children as young as 8.
What do we know about subjective well-being among children?

As interest in subjective well-being has expanded, so has recognition of its relevance and application to children. Although there are significant differences in what leads to well-being between societies, some conclusions can be drawn from the existing research.

First, well-being among adults or families does not correlate strongly with well-being of children. For instance, Figure 1 below shows average life satisfaction scores for adults and for adolescents aged 15 years old in 64 countries with matching data drawn from 2017 to 2019. Some countries (such as Costa Rica) have high life satisfaction among both groups; while some countries (such as Turkey) have low life satisfaction among both. But the United Kingdom (UK) has high adult life satisfaction and low adolescent life satisfaction; meanwhile, in Albania, the opposite is evident.

Second, in many countries and contexts, life satisfaction declines during late childhood and early adolescence. This age-related pattern also often applies to satisfaction with particular domains of life.

Third, a wide range of individual characteristics, including gender, race and immigrant background, seems to have a modest role in children and adolescent’s self-reported life satisfaction. There is also some evidence that dissatisfaction with their own body is more closely linked to lower life satisfaction for girls than for boys. Much stronger predictors of higher life satisfaction among children of all ages are good familial and parental relationships, and relationships that protect children from violence. Children who are frequently bullied have lower satisfaction with life.
Fourth, material deprivation is a modest predictor of subjective well-being among children, but the story here is complicated. While quantitative studies indicate that higher subjective well-being is only moderately associated with poverty, qualitative research points to deep stress and stigma resulting from being poor. In addition, child-centric measures of deprivation have been shown to demonstrate a stronger link with low levels of subjective well-being than traditional household measures such as family income. Inequality more broadly in society also tends to lower child subjective well-being.

Fifth, common sense seems to indicate that higher life satisfaction is the result of improved objective well-being, or the absence of material deprivations. Yet, research indicates that the cause–effect relationship can go in both directions (i.e., the feeling of well-being and

FIGURE 1: COMPARISON OF ADULT AND ADOLESCENT LIFE SATISFACTION


Note: We use data from the Gallup World Survey 2017 to 2019, which also featured in the World Happiness Report 2020, to match the timing of data collection with that of children’s surveys.
fulfilment can lead to positive personal, behavioural, psychological and social outcomes). Some studies have found that high levels of life satisfaction can have reciprocal relationships with academic achievement. Several analyses also reveal an interaction between life satisfaction and stressful life events. After such events, youth with low levels of life satisfaction often demonstrate physical aggression, verbal bullying, relational aggression, defiance, or engage in activities such as theft, and vandalism. This supports the idea that higher life satisfaction could act as a buffer or moderator against these types of negative behaviours.
Subjective well-being in policy making

In the 1970s Bhutan was the first country in the world to announce it would pursue ‘happiness’ in its path towards development, rather than measuring progress merely through growth in income. In the 2000s, it introduced a Gross National Happiness Index (GNHI). Today, a Gross National Happiness Commission ensures that all policies in the country pass a test to assess how they contribute to the GNHI. The Commission also provides specific recommendations should adjustments be needed.

Several other countries have been inspired by Bhutan’s example and have explored how happiness, or subjective measures of well-being, can contribute to policy making. The UK, Israel and Thailand monitor happiness and life satisfaction at the national level. Countries such as Colombia, Ecuador, Paraguay and Slovenia have introduced well-being frameworks and indicators into their strategic development planning. The OECD, through its Better Life Index, has developed a framework for measuring well-being in 38 industrialized nations.
Several cities around the world have developed ‘smart’ approaches to measuring and tracking daily happiness. The Smart Dubai Office launched its Smart Happiness Index in 2018, which promises to assess the performance of city managers based on happiness gains per funds spent.

While some of these initiatives focus only on measuring the well-being of adults, others provide good examples of incorporating children.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development’s (OECD) Child Well-being Portal provides a platform for policy-oriented research on children. It includes subjective well-being indicators and analyses. For the past seven years, the UK monitored a set of objective and subjective well-being measures specifically for children, and another for young people (aged 16 to 24).
After consistent low ranks in student life satisfaction, South Korea introduced measures to increase student happiness, such as a semester free of exams, allowing children to pursue “their dreams and aptitudes”. After participating in the Children’s Worlds project, the government of Indonesia, with support from UNICEF, is considering the creation of a ‘Child Well-being Index’, which could guide policy making by integrating objective as well as subjective well-being indicators. UNICEF Bhutan’s vision for children, in support of the government, includes among its goals ensuring well-being and happiness.

The success of these initiatives in driving social progress is still to be determined. Bhutan, for instance, is nowhere near the top of world rankings in life satisfaction.
However, experts agree that the value of subjective measures of well-being in policy making does not lie in replacing or ignoring other metrics. Rather, the unique policy value of well-being measures rests in identifying which factors individuals, including children and adolescents, consider as valuable for a dignified and satisfying life. Shedding light on the drivers of happiness means having a more comprehensive view on factors that would otherwise escape attention, such as connectedness with peers, physical activity or spirituality, and adapting policies to integrate these elements accordingly.

What has UNICEF done in this field?

**Multiple Indicator Cluster Surveys (MICS):** Since the fourth wave of MICS (MICS4), UNICEF has included a module on life satisfaction. The questions were revised in MICS5, but both MICS4 and MICS5 integrated items on the assessment of satisfaction with different life domains as well as a general question about happiness. In the current wave, MICS6, the questions were further refined to include the Cantril Ladder, as well as a question about general happiness on a 5-point scale (from ‘very happy’ to ‘very unhappy’), and two questions about future and past perceptions of improvement or deterioration in life. The questionnaire is used with children from 15 years of age and adults and has been used in around 60 countries.

**Children’s World:** Children’s Worlds is a global research survey on children’s subjective well-being, aiming to improve children’s lives and to inform policy makers about action on improving childhood. It is an international, inter-cultural and multi-linguistic survey studying children’s worlds in 40 countries. Each participating country surveys a representative sample of at least 1,000 children in each of three school year groups – around the ages of 8, 10 and 12. The project uses the Cantril Ladder as well as several other questions measuring agreement, frequency and perception about different life domains (school, family, relationships, material well-being, self-perception, etc).

UNICEF Indonesia supported the roll out of the survey with 25,000 children in West Java. There is strong buy-in from the national government and, as a result of the survey, the government is considering the creation of a ‘Child Well-being Index’, integrating objective as well as subjective measures of well-being.

**Innocenti Report Card series:** This annual report analyses and ranks the well-being of children in high-income countries. Report Cards 7, 11, 13 and 16 have all presented indicators of children’s life satisfaction using single-item measures drawn from international surveys such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Survey (HBSC).
The Convention on the Rights of the Child states in its preamble that children “should grow up (...) in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding”. This suggests that the drafters expected children to enjoy more than a life in which the normative rights listed in the Convention are fulfilled. Monitoring children’s own perceptions of their well-being and crafting policies that are responsive to those measures offers a practical approach to deliver on this aspiration to help children thrive. The science and measurement of subjective well-being is sufficiently mature to make this possible for the first time. UNICEF proposes the following steps to further this agenda:

**Data**

In data, promoting the collection of measurement on child well-being, drawing attention to their results including how children feel about their lives and which factors matter more for their well-being.

While cross-national comparisons of mean life satisfaction must be done with care, there are many ways in which life satisfaction measures can provide important insights into variations in how children feel about their lives within countries, and to what extent these factors might vary across countries.

A global survey, expanding the list of countries covered by Children’s World and potentially using a simplified questionnaire, could be an option to explore this further. Similar to Indonesia’s approach using a Child Well-being Index, the questionnaire could be combined with objective measures of well-being to expose links and gaps between the two types of measurements.
Improving policy making that takes into account the interests and views of children is also critical in the field of subjective well-being.

**Research**

In *research*, supporting *longitudinal and qualitative research* to better understand how life satisfaction influences achievement of other desired social outcomes, and the connection between objective and subjective measurements of well-being.

In addition, given the wealth of research in this field and the divergence of findings on many issues (such as the relationship between income and life satisfaction), a thorough synthesis of the existing literature and the broader application of its findings would be valuable.

**Policy**

In *policy*, showcasing how child well-being measures can be incorporated into the policy process, and ensuring that children are not excluded from efforts to measure and account for subjective well-being.

Improved policy making that takes into account the interests and views of children should be prioritized as the overarching goal of the field of subjective well-being. This can be combined with broader steps towards promoting children’s voice. Additional case studies could demonstrate how subjective measures of child well-being can be built into institutional tools and processes. More analyses could also investigate policy domains that might be most usefully informed by these measures.
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