



Department  
of Health

## DEVELOPING WELL – 6-11 YEARS

- *Children and parent reports of child wellbeing share some common predictors but differ on important points*
- *Health and poverty indicators predict parent ratings of their child's wellbeing, but not the child's own ratings*
- *Children's ratings of their wellbeing appear to be most strongly influenced by relationships, with family members and with their peers*
- *Children's diet appears to have no link with wellbeing, but physical activity and screen time have some positive associations*

### 1. Wellbeing in Middle Childhood

- Before the age of 11, children struggle with some of the cognitive skills necessary to complete the more abstract adult measures of wellbeing, such as life satisfaction scales. Therefore, children's wellbeing at this stage is assessed by **simpler questions** (how much of the time are you happy/sad/worried?) and by **parental ratings** (how true is it that your child is often unhappy, downhearted or upset?).
- **There are no national or cross-national measurement initiatives which investigate wellbeing of children under 11:** the Office for National Statistics and Health Behaviours of School-Aged Children survey collect data from 11 years onwards. Thus we are dependent on large-scale research, predominantly the Millennium Cohort Study, which has followed a large, nationally representative, UK sample since they were born in 2000.

*Unless referenced otherwise, findings in this factsheet refer to secondary analysis of the Millennium Cohort Study by NatCen, commissioned by the Department of Health<sup>1</sup>.*

- 36% of seven-year-olds in this study said they felt happy all the time, while 32% of children said they never worried. 89% of parents said that the statement "my child is often downhearted, unhappy or upset" was certainly not true for their child. 2% of parents said that the statement was certainly true.
- Average scores on a measure of **emotional problems increase by 15%** between the ages of five and seven<sup>2</sup>. **Children's individual scores on this measure are relatively stable**, and scores at age 3 and 5 were associated with scores at age seven – differences in children's emotional difficulties from age five explain just under 50% of the variation in scores at age seven<sup>2</sup>.
- **Seven -year-old girls are more likely to report being happy all the time than boys**, but parents are more likely to report that their daughters are often unhappy than their sons. Boys are more likely to report never worrying than girls.

- **No differences were found between white children and children from ethnic minorities in how happy seven-year-olds report themselves to be**, once other factors are taken into account. However, **ethnic minority children were less likely than white children report never worrying**, even accounting for these socioeconomic factors.

## 2. Health and Health Behaviours

- **Parents' perceptions of their own health and of their children's health was associated with how unhappy they believe their seven-year-old children to be**, but not how happy or worried the children themselves report being. Children whose health is rated as fair or poor by their parent are more likely to be viewed as unhappy by their parents than children whose health is 'excellent', and parents with poor self-reported health are more likely to view their child as unhappy than parents with excellent health.
- **Health behaviours have mixed effects on children and parents' perceptions of wellbeing.** Seven-year-olds' happiness and worry, and parent reports of unhappiness are not associated with any of the following dietary behaviours: eating 5-a-day of fruit and vegetables, having unhealthy/sugary snacks between meals, drinking sugary drinks between meals. Active travel to school is not associated with child or parent reports of seven-year-olds' wellbeing, and the amount of time spent viewing television is not associated with seven-year-olds' self-reported happiness or worry.
- Although screentime did not appear to be associated with seven-year-olds' ratings of wellbeing, **particularly high levels of screen time appear to be linked to lower levels of wellbeing**, from parent ratings in the younger children and from self-report in older children. Parents are more likely to view their seven-year-old as unhappy if they watch **five or more hours** of television on weekdays and 10-11 year olds are more likely to experience emotional problems if they engage in **more than 4 hours** of screen time activity, such as television viewing and playing computer games, on weekdays<sup>3</sup>.
- **Certain types of screen entertainment appear to be particularly negative for girls' level of wellbeing:** the use of **social networking sites** and **online games** is linked to lower levels of wellbeing among 10-11 year-old girls, but not among boys<sup>4</sup>.
- Physical activity and participation in sport may have positive associations with levels of wellbeing, but there are also some negative associations. Participation in sports clubs is associated with lower parent perceptions of unhappiness at age seven compared to those who do not participate in sports clubs, and enjoying PE was associated with child reported happiness. For 10-11 year-olds, physical activity is associated with lower levels of emotional difficulties<sup>3</sup>.
- Parents whose children attend sports clubs were less likely to view their child as unhappy compared with parents whose children did not attend. However, children who attended sports clubs were associated with an increased likelihood of worrying. One potential explanation of

this is that sports clubs play a 'childcare role' for some parents, and it is this association that is problematic.

### 3. Family

- **Family structure** appears to have little effect on children's feelings of wellbeing, but may influence their parents' views. Living with one or two parents does not influence the self-reported wellbeing of seven-year-olds, controlling for other variables; however, lone parents are more likely to view their seven-year-old child as frequently unhappy than parents in two parent households.
- **Seven-year-olds whose family situation is classified as 'other' in the Millennium Cohort Study were found to have very low odds of reporting being happy all the time** – these are children who do not live with either of their parents, or possibly with parent figures at all, and includes children in care.
- **While family structure generally does not have an effect on wellbeing, changes in family structure can do.** Changing from living with two parents to living with only one is associated with an increased risk of developing an emotional disorder for children aged 5-16, as are other stressful life events<sup>5</sup>.
- **Family relationships** are an important predictor of children's wellbeing. **Having fun together as a family** at weekends is important for seven-year-olds' self-reported wellbeing, although children's reports of having fun with their family at the weekend was not found to influence parent views of unhappiness.
- **Sibling relationships can be important for children's wellbeing** – getting on well with siblings all the time predicts higher levels of wellbeing, in both seven-year-old's own reports of wellbeing and those of their parents. **Relationships with their parents are also found to be very important** for children and young people's wellbeing. **Parental reports of smacking or shouting can predict child-reported wellbeing and parent perceptions of unhappiness for seven-year-olds.** In contrast, children who feel that their parents are warm towards them reported having higher levels of wellbeing<sup>6</sup>.

### 4. Employment and Deprivation

- Parental employment and family deprivation have mixed associations with children's wellbeing, and often have different effects for parent and child ratings of children's wellbeing.
- **Parents who are not in work are more likely to rate their child as unhappy**, but these children are not less likely to report that they are happy or more likely to report worrying than children whose parents are in work. **Parent social class has been found to predict children's reports of wellbeing** but not parent ratings of children's wellbeing. Children whose parents have

managerial or supervisory jobs are less likely to be happy and more likely to worry than children whose parents have intermediate, or routine jobs.

- Whether a child receives free school meals at age seven (a proxy for family income poverty) does not predict their self-reported happiness or level of worry, or parent reports of their unhappiness. **Parents who cannot afford to take their children on holiday are more likely to report that their seven-year-olds are unhappy – but their children are no less likely to report low levels of happiness and high levels of worry.**
- Among seven year olds, the presence of damp in children’s houses does not predict children’s reports of wellbeing but may affect parent reports: parents whose houses have problems with damp are more likely to rate their children as unhappy. Housing tenure was found to have no impact on wellbeing among seven-year-olds, either in parent or child ratings.
- Area level deprivation is strongly associated with the wellbeing of seven-year-olds, whether rated by themselves or by their parents. **Children living in the poorest half of all areas have lower levels of wellbeing than children living in the richest 10% of areas** (see Figure 1).

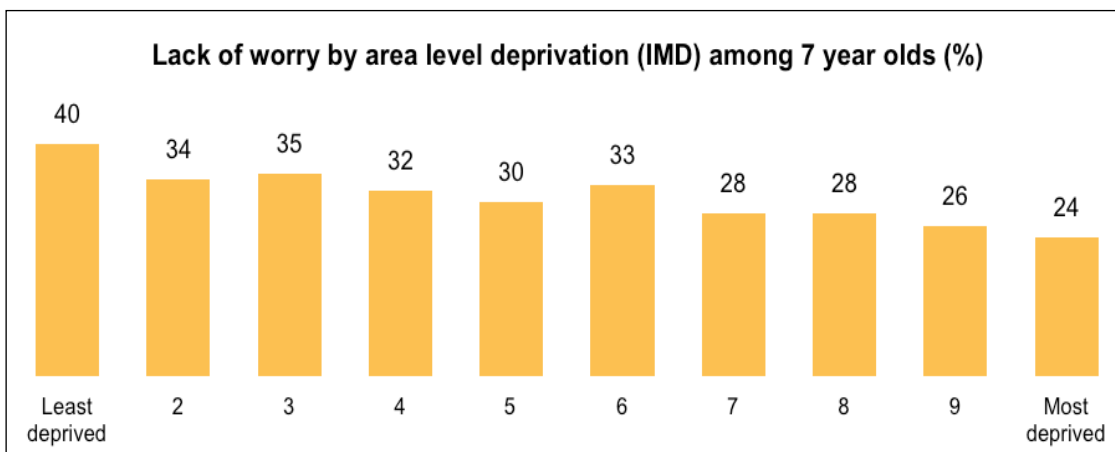


Figure 1: Percentage of children who never worry by area level deprivation (Source: Millennium Cohort Study, Wave 4. From NatCen’s “Predicting Wellbeing” Report. Respondents aged 7)

## 5. Friends and school

- **Levels of wellbeing are higher among children who report having lots of friends**, compared with children who say they have ‘some’ or ‘not many’ friends at age seven, in both child and parent reports. The vast majority of children have positive peer relationships, and these positive relationships with peers are associated with better wellbeing<sup>7</sup>.
- Bullying at school is a strong predictor of wellbeing across children’s development. Seven-year-olds who say they are **horrible to other children are less likely to say that they are happy** – but parent reports of these children’s wellbeing are unaffected. In contrast, **being bullied at school is associated with lower levels of wellbeing** in both child reports and parent reports – this suggests that parents may be more able to recognise whether their child is being bullied than

whether their child is a bully. **Being bullied between the ages of eight and ten has a strong association with children's emotional wellbeing in their early teenage years (age 11-14)**<sup>8</sup>.

- A study of over 3500 10-11 year olds in Northern Ireland found that one in eight of these children have been subjected to cyberbullying (bullying via the internet) and that **children who have experienced cyberbullying have considerably lower levels of wellbeing** than children who have not<sup>4</sup>.

## Health Improvement Analytical Team

### Department of Health

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<sup>1</sup> Chanfraeu, J., Lloyd, C., Byron, C., Roberts, C., Craig, R., De Feo, D., McManus, S (2013). *Predicting Wellbeing*. Prepared by NatCen Social Research for the Department of Health <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/205352/predictors-of-wellbeing.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Hansen, K., et al. 2010. Millennium Cohort Study fourth survey: A user's guide to initial findings. *Centre for Longitudinal Studies, Institute of Education, University of London*.

<sup>3</sup> Page, A. S., et al. 2010. Children's screen viewing is related to psychological difficulties irrespective of physical activity. *Pediatrics*. 125:5, e1011-e1017.

<sup>4</sup> Devine, P. & Lloyd, K. Internet use and psychological well-being among 10-year-old and 11-year-old children. *Child Care in Practice*. 18:1, p5-22.

<sup>5</sup> Clements, A., Fletcher, D., & Parry-Langdon, N. 2008. Three years on: Survey of the development and emotional wellbeing of children and young people. *Office of National Statistics*.

<sup>6</sup> Khaleque, A. 2013. Perceived parental warmth, and children's psychological adjustment, and personality dispositions: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. 22, p292-306.

<sup>7</sup> Gutman, L. M. & Brown, J. 2008. The importance of social worlds: An investigation of peer relations. *Department for Children, Schools & Families*.

<sup>8</sup> Zwierzyńska, K., Wolke, D., & Lereya, T. S. 2013. Peer victimization in childhood and internalizing problems in adolescence: A prospective longitudinal study. *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*. 41, p309-323.