



A participatory animation project about the first 1001 days of the second decade

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Early adolescence (ages 10-12) is a time of development, change and challenge. Identity and independence emerge at this age and many health behaviours are being established that can have long term effects, both positive and negative. It is an age where prevention and support can make a real difference for young people. Focusing specifically on the needs of early adolescents, we wanted to hear directly from them about what they thought could make this life stage better.

Some important challenges at this age¹:

- The move from primary to secondary school and an increase in school stress
- Changes in the relationship to parents and family including seeking more independence
- A decrease in life satisfaction after 11 which is more pronounced in girls
- Disabilities and long term conditions start to impact on school attendance
- Being bullied is reported at a higher rate compared to older adolescents
- Increased access to technology with the potential for both positive and negative impacts
- Gender stereotyping increases in relation to sport and talking about emotions
- The start of puberty, sexual awareness and gender identity although some young people experience this earlier.

Using animation and science fiction with young people

In order to identify the key messages that young people want to send about helping with these and other challenges, we used science fiction and animation as a means to imagine a better world for 10-12 year olds. We supported young people to develop characters from a world where the wellbeing of 10-12 year olds is prioritised. Through these characters, they explored what wellbeing, support and prevention at this age would look like. Using fictional characters in an imagined world allowed participants to explore sensitive issues in a safer, depersonalised way.

Our process

The Association for Young People's Health (AYPH) facilitated this project with a Woodcraft Folk group in Bromley, South London. It was a mixed gender group of 15-20 young people aged 10-13. We ran two sessions with them. In the first session, we explored concepts and found out how young people imagined a world that encouraged their wellbeing. We developed the following three part working definition of wellbeing for the project:

- 1. Feeling physically and mentally well**
- 2. Feeling prepared for and supported through difficult changes in life**
- 3. Feeling fully included in society and having a sense of belonging**

Using this definition as a springboard, we supported three small groups of participants to develop alien creatures and the world they inhabit. We asked them to imagine their characters' home life, relationship to family, friendship group and schooling as well as their hobbies and how they have fun. There was also a small group tasked with imagining what the visitor from Earth would think about these characters and what questions they would ask. These formed the basis of the interviews in the film.

In the second session, the groups created their characters from colourful paper and were asked to imagine how these characters would answer the explorer's questions. We then filmed their answers to get a deeper impression of their characters' lives. The interviews and footage of the characters were edited together to create a short animation. Some aspects of the characters' identities and lives did not make it into the film as there was limited filming time. For this reason, we have incorporated the written and verbal feedback from both workshops into this report.

¹ Brooks, F., Magnusson, J., Klemnera, E., Chester, K., Spencer, N., and Smeeton, N. (2015) HBSC England National Report 2014. University of Hertfordshire; Hatfield, UK.

What we found out

When we asked the young people to think individually about an ideal world for 10-12 years olds, they came up with an array of responses. The things they told us would improve their wellbeing can be grouped into five main themes:

- **greater emotional support** - lots of support from friends, family, schools and therapists, teachers more like friends, someone to cross the road with;
- **a better balance between work and leisure time** - art and creativity everywhere, more time to play, work two days and rest five days every week, holidays every month, getting out in the country;
- **decreased inequality and discrimination** - young people have a say on who they live with/who cares for them and other things that affect them, everyone can afford the things they need, no branded clothes, less technology, no beauty standards, support for disabled people, no bullying, no cruelty;
- **improved leadership and physical environment** - no pollution, no nuclear weapons, peace, happiness, no global warming
- **and pure fantasy** - unicorns and flying pig robots to do all your chores.

When the young people worked together in groups, they expanded on these ideas through the characters they developed. A theme that came up in more than one group was the idea of education being flexible and tailored to young people's individual needs and abilities. One of the alien characters had autism and was able to learn through technology and in experiential ways rather than attending school every day. They all emphasised that the characters were treated better by teachers and schools than young people on Earth.

One of the characters talked about access to swimming pools – they were everywhere on their planet – and key to wellbeing. Another character also talked at length about riding around on bees and their friendship with these bees as a source of happiness. The final group of characters emphasised the importance of outdoor play and spending time with friends. All the groups presented a world where young people were included in decision making, from being consulted about issues that affected them to voting rights. Essential to this was the fact that in this world, nobody told anyone else what to do or got 'told off' for behaving like young people. Gender constraints and expectations were also non-existent on their planet and two out of three of the alien characters the participants created were transgender or non-binary.

What young people think would improve early adolescence

Much of what the young people told us speaks to the essential conflict that occurs at this age between seeking more independence and coping with the resulting stress and responsibility. The young people expressed a longing to play, have fun and relax more. Their ideal planet was free from the sources of anxiety that affect them, from interpersonal issues like bullying to more societal concerns such as inequality and climate change. They demonstrated ambiguity towards technology with some touching on the benefits it could provide and others feeling wary about how it can negatively affect young people's lives.

Feeling included and having a sense of belonging were important to all the participants and their characters reflected this. They told us that an increase in support and inclusion through family, friends and institutions such as school and government was vital to wellbeing. The issues highlighted by the participants on this project echo those identified by young people in a recent study conducted by UNICEF Canada after Canada achieved only a middle ranking in child wellbeing out of 21 wealthy nations (the UK has been ranked similarly)². It demonstrated that where health professionals are most concerned about behaviours of this age group such as substance use, diet and exercise, young people are most concerned about 'a sense of belonging, equity and opportunities to engage in the world around them'³. Solely focusing on individual health behaviours overlooks a whole host of external factors that can affect young people's wellbeing.

² Adamson, Peter (2013). Child Well-being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview, *Innocenti Report Card* no. 11

³ UNICEF Canada and Students Commission of Canada (2017). *My Cat Makes Me Happy: What children and youth say about measuring their well-being*. Toronto, ON: UNICEF Canada.

Taking young people's concerns seriously

The young people we worked with are aware of complex social problems but are rarely included in discussions about them or opportunities to create solutions. The issues they highlighted mirror the top three concerns of 18-24 year olds from around the world – climate change/destruction of nature, large scale conflict/war and inequality (income, discrimination)⁴. Although the participants in our project were considerably younger, it was obvious that these global issues were already a source of worry for them too.

We offered young people the freedom to create an ideal world for 10-12 year olds with no limitations but what they came up with was mostly realistic and achievable - see right hand box for how one suggestion is backed by research⁵ and data⁶ in another wealthy nation. The world they created was one in which adults and young people worked together, supported each other and shared power, not one where young people ruled and dominated everyone else. They demonstrated compassion, empathy and self-awareness. After the young people finished describing their world on camera, one adult Woodcraft Folk volunteer asked, 'Can I go live on that planet?' This is in stark contrast to how the young people told us they feel about living in the world adults have created for them.

Access to swimming pools:

Researchers in Iceland are looking into how affordable and widespread access to geothermal swimming pools may be one of the key factors to the population's contentedness (#2 on the children's life satisfaction league table and #1 for child health and safety). Icelandic people view access to pools and thermal baths as a civic right that exists in nearly every city and small town.

Changing rooms at these pools are seen as an important source of exposure to and acceptance of a diversity of body shapes and sizes. They are also considered a leveller of class and status in Icelandic society with politicians and public figures regularly using pools side by side with citizens.

Key messages for professionals working with young people

Every time we ask young people to share their hopes and fears about the world, they should be able to trust that adults will learn from them and take action. Here's what adults and professionals can do to advance the wellbeing of 10-12 year olds:

1. **Initiate conversations about young people's personal concerns as well as important societal issues** – it's possible both are affecting their wellbeing.
2. **Recognise that seeking independence does not mean young people want to stop playing and having fun** – there is no set age at which childhood ends and adulthood begins.
3. **Acknowledge and encourage different methods of learning and self-expression** – access to the creativity and leisure encouraged in childhood is still very important as they go through the physical and emotional changes of adolescence.
4. **Support young people to feel included and find a sense of belonging** – this may come through meaningful individual work, work with peers or involvement in more formal structures alongside adults.
5. **Validate young people's desire for and ideas about how to create a better, fairer world** – improving the wellbeing of future young people should not be relegated to the realm of science fiction.

Many thanks to **Bromley Woodcraft Folk** for supporting this project and especially the young people for sharing their hopes, fears and imaginations with us.

Visit ayph.org.uk/1001-days to watch the animated film they produced.

⁴ World Economic Forum (2017). Global Shapers Annual Survey 2017.

⁵ Kois, Dan. "Iceland's Water Cure". New York Times. 19th April 2016.

⁶ Adamson, Peter (2013). Child Well-being in Rich Countries: A comparative overview, *Innocenti Report Card* no. 11