

What do children and young people tell us about what supports their wellbeing?

Evidence from existing research

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Background

Wellbeing is a subjective construct, usually involving judgements of life satisfaction and ratings of feelings¹. Understanding what wellbeing means for any individual means asking them directly. In order to learn how to help children and young people to improve their sense of wellbeing we need to ask them what matters to them.

The [Government's Green paper on Children and Young People's \(CYP\) Mental Health](#), which builds on [Future in Mind](#), set out proposals to improve Children and Young People's mental health and wellbeing². The Green paper proposed that Public Health England convene a special interest group bringing together academics and professionals to identify key evidence for prevention and the relevance of such evidence to practice, and to highlight gaps in knowledge.

To support this work Public Health England (PHE) wants to better understand children and young people's perspectives on what keeps them mentally well. To enable this work PHE, NHS England and the Department for Health and Social Care have funded a number of organisations, led by the Young People's Health Partnership (YPHP) from within the [Health and Wellbeing Alliance](#) to gather children and young people's views about what supports their wellbeing. We will do this by reviewing the results of existing work and by running a series of focus groups. These findings will be presented to the special interest group so that its work is informed by what matters to children and young people.

This paper sets out a summary of what we already know from children and young people themselves about their wellbeing – what are the things that they find most helpful and what do they value about the services or approaches which support them?

Methods

Relevant papers and reports were identified through on-line searches, assessment of previously accumulated information on the topic, and consultations with colleagues working in the field. The focus of the review was on young people aged 8-24, but there were no

Box 1: Definitions

Children and young people: For this briefing paper we have reviewed evidence from children and young people aged 8 – 24 years. The World Health Organisation defines young people as age 10-24 with adolescence lasting from 10-19 and youth from 16-24.

Wellbeing: Wellbeing reflects what people think and feel about their lives, such as the quality of their relationships, their positive emotions and resilience, the realisation of their potential, or their overall satisfaction with life. It is closely related to happiness, positive mental health and quality of life.

restrictions on the type of wellbeing considered. The main messages were synthesised in order to extract common themes and useful pointers for further work by the special interest group. Box 1 sets out the central definitions used for this work.

Research in this area has tended to fall into two camps; larger scale self-report surveys, and smaller, more qualitative work with groups or individuals.

It is important to note that the largest source of data in this area is the ONS wellbeing programme which publishes a [dataset of wellbeing measures for children and young people each year](#). This includes 31 measures, covering 7 domains. These are a mixture of self-report, and some 'objective' measures such as GCSE achievement. The categories are:

- Life satisfaction & happiness
- Relationships (parents, friends, bullying)
- Health (happiness with health, plus some objective measures)
- Sport, art and culture, including an interesting measure of happiness with time use
- Local neighbourhood (crime, safety, natural environment, income deprivation)
- Educational achievements (early years, GCSEs, university attendance)

Developmental and external changes as a context for wellbeing

When we look at what children and young people tell us about what supports their wellbeing it is important to recognise the significant developmental changes that they experience and the fact that development does not happen at the same rate for all young people.

Children and young people experience huge physical, psychological and behavioural changes as they mature from children to adults. The adolescent years (usually taken to be 10-19

years) are the second most rapid in terms of young people's development after age 2. The brain undergoes a huge reorganisation in the adolescent years including important changes to the 'social brain', the part of the brain driving understanding and interacting with others³. Emotional and social development are key tasks of adolescence and although families remain very significant young people also seek more independence and responsibility⁴. We found some evidence that young people at different stages of development felt different about their wellbeing. In a project undertaken in Suffolk, younger participants (10-14) were far more positive about their mental health status and future life chances compared to older participants in the same study⁵. At the other end of the spectrum the impact on young adults of loneliness has been particularly highlighted recently^{6 7}. It is therefore important we maintain this developmental lens when considering these issues.

Alongside developmental changes we need to remember that young people experience huge external changes moving schools, new social settings, peers being more important, starting romantic relationships, moving away from home etc. All these external changes alongside their physical and emotional development will have an impact on their perceptions of what keeps them well.

What have children and young people told us?

Previous research has uncovered a wide range of elements that make up wellbeing for children and young people⁸. Research generally suggests that children and young people share with adults many of the perceptions of what promotes wellbeing, although their emphasis on certain elements may be different.

A previous review on the topic of children and young people's voices on their wellbeing concluded that the domains of most important were quality of relationships (including parents, friends, local people, pets), quality of the environment (including home, school, local, global), and health and freedom issues (including food, lifestyle, achievement, values, identity)⁹.

In a recent study The Children's Society undertook a large survey and series of focus groups with 8-15 year olds focusing on the New Economics Foundation's 'Five ways to wellbeing' framework¹⁰. This was in part to find out whether the five ways of wellbeing identified for adults had relevance for children and young people and also to identify whether there were any other issues which children and

Box 2: Five or six ways to wellbeing?

The Children's Society project on what the 5 ways to wellbeing meant for 8-15 years olds showed:

Strong unprompted support among children age 8-15 for the value of three of the five ways to wellbeing

- Connecting with people
- Being active
- Learning

Children also endorsed the relevance of the other two ways to wellbeing

- Taking notice
- Giving

In addition to the five ways children drew attention to the benefits of activities suggesting that those that children choose to engage in can have an impact on their sense of wellbeing:

- Creativity, imagination & play

S Abdallah et al (2014) Ways to Well-being, The Children's Society

young people felt were pertinent to their wellbeing. The findings, which are highlighted in Box 2, showed that children and young people offered unprompted support for the three ways to wellbeing - *connecting with people, being active, learning* - and identified an additional way to wellbeing - *creative activities/play*. When prompted, they also said that the other two ways to wellbeing – *taking notice* and *giving* - were also relevant, suggesting these were not quite as salient for them.

An evaluation of the first year of the Big Lottery Funded Headstart initiative, which focused on improving the mental health and wellbeing of 10 – 16 years olds, showed that young people identified many ways in which they coped with difficult feelings and situations¹¹.

These were grouped into several themes:

- Engaging in positive thinking and activities
- Disengaging from problems – ignoring or forgetting them, being distracted and accepting or getting used to difficult situations
- Getting comfort, advice distraction and support from parents, friends, school staff
- Hiding their feelings or problems – to not worry others or prevent the situation being blown out of proportion.

***“...my mates cheer me up a bunch, ‘cause we’re, we’re all idiots, like we all do stupid things to make people laugh”
(Headstart Year 1 evaluation)***

***“Sometimes if I get in trouble in school I don’t necessarily want to tell my mum because then it’ll just make it a big thing”
(Headstart Year 1 Evaluation)***

Whilst these themes are clearly linked with those from the Children’s Society work, particularly highlighting the importance of *connecting with people, being active* and *engaging in activities*, they also highlight young people’s understanding about the need to accept difficult situations and how to do that. They also suggest a concern about not worrying others. The potential for young people hiding problems for a range of reasons should not be forgotten. These themes also link to the findings from a creative project run by AYPH with a group of 10-12 year olds who identified support from friends, family and schools as essential together with more time for play and creativity¹².

We must also recognise the specific experience of particular groups. For example young Travellers identified the best way to deal with a worry was “Not to think about it” and to focus instead on distracting attention from the issues. Many young Travellers said that talking to someone was important but they agreed that this would not happen in reality other than in a social context to help to forget troubles. Young Travellers also focused on physical aspects of life including image and style as ways that they feel good about themselves¹³. Young carers identified a number of things which support their wellbeing including a professional who takes a whole family approach, counsellors, emotional support and understanding from a teacher in school or college, emotional and practical support from a young carers worker and peer support¹⁴. LGB&T young people stress the link between their wellbeing and support from family and significant others. They also speak

about their reluctance to access services including CAHMS and support in schools as they feel uncomfortable or have a negative experience when disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. Schools were identified as one of the places (after religious places of worship and sport) that young people feel the most pressure to hide their sexual orientation/gender identity 'most or all of the time'. Young LGB&T people were most likely to access informal sources of support with friends, LGB&T individuals and youth groups being the most common sources of support¹⁵.

Finally we know children and young people find a sense of place really important to their wellbeing. This includes their home, school and the area or community they live in.

“Maybe that they need some more, like, places set up around the school. They’ve got one for breaktime and lunch, but I mean like...they just need like more places around where there will be some teachers that can help a bit, like a lot”

(Headstart Year 1 evaluation)

Research with children and young people has shown that place, identity and wellbeing are often closely connected¹⁶. Community spaces including parks, swimming pools, youth centres and other places to play outdoors have also been identified by young people as important to their wellbeing¹⁷. In some respects young people’s wellbeing in relation to place seems to be linked to how safe they feel. With concerns about youth violence increasing this is a particular concern for young people in some communities. Good transport links and safe routes to

school and college are vitally important to young people and can impact on stress levels and wellbeing. Young people have also highlighted the importance of safe spaces like youth centres to have time with friends and be safe after school before their parents get home from work¹⁸. Whilst place is not identified in the 5 ways to wellbeing at the very least it enables children and young people to have the spaces they need to connect with people, be active and play.

Overall research highlights the importance of understanding children and young people’s particular perspectives on wellbeing in order that we can best identify, share and meet their changing needs.

Gender differences

The results from the Headstart evaluation suggested that there was a need to understand the different needs of young people of different genders. This has also been a theme in other work with young people, and some studies have reported higher levels of wellbeing in males than females¹⁹. This is not surprising given what information we do have about the different prevalence rates of mental health problems for young men and young women, as wellbeing is related to (although not synonymous with) mental health. It has also been suggested that girls’ subjective wellbeing may be more

“Whether you are male or female you are expected to moderate your behaviour to your environment from a young age”

(Just getting on, NCB)

driven by relational factors, while boys' is more affected by perceived academic achievement²⁰. However these data are often from large scale surveys rather than specifically hearing about young people's own perceptions.

More detailed work was undertaken by the National Children's Bureau on gender, emotional wellbeing and mental health²¹ with young people age 12-24, which found that whilst some healthy ways of managing stress were widely acceptable to both young men and young women (e.g. having fun and exercising) there were gender differences. Young people were very aware of the expectation on young men to appear strong and not show emotion. Sharing problems seemed more widely acceptable among young women but not as much as common stereotypes might suggest. Some young women described feeling that their difficulties were belittled by adults when they tried to seek support, with girls particularly feeling that their distress is felt by adults to be due to over emotional reactions to minor issues. The Girl Guides attitudes survey in 2018²² identified a fall in the number of girls who reported feeling very happy from 41% in 2009 to 25% in 2018. However it also highlighted that young women were talking about their mental health more freely.

Boys age 11-19 taking part in work on mental health and wellbeing in Suffolk felt that their perceptions towards mental health and wellbeing were disregarded and 'oppressed' when compared to girls²³. It is not clear whether they felt their mental health was not taken seriously or their opinions about their mental health and wellbeing. They also talked about the increased stigma for boys talking about these issues. However, boys involved in this 2015 survey in Suffolk were found to be more likely than girls to answer positively when asked how they feel about their lives and their futures.

For some communities such as young Travellers there are more stark gender differences which impact how young people have engaged with work about wellbeing and their responses. Work with LGB&T young people also highlights that this is not a homogeneous group and the different issues for young bisexual people, young trans people and young people with a lesbian/gay identity should be explored.

These reflections would suggest that whilst connecting with people or having someone to talk to remains one of the most important things for young people, many young men and young women experience these conversations in very different ways and have different barriers which can prevent them from talking about worries or problems.

Young adults

At the beginning of this paper we highlighted the need to look at these issues with a developmental lens. In some respect young adults have been less of a focus in relation to discussions about improving children and young people's mental health and promoting wellbeing. However, with significant social change (e.g. young people staying in education and at home for longer) and a challenging external context (e.g. collapsing youth labour market) there is a particular need to understand young adult perceptions on their wellbeing.

The first report from the Health Foundation’s Young People’s future health inquiry²⁴ sets out the findings of their engagement work with young people aged 22 – 26. Whilst this work was not focused solely on wellbeing the main findings provide an important insight into what young adults feel supports them in their transition to adulthood. Young people identified four key assets that helped them – appropriate skills and qualifications, personal connections, financial and practical support and emotional support. In relation to emotional support young adults said that this came mostly from parents or carers and partners but in some cases from other family members, mentors or friends.

Friends were particularly important when young people had fractured relationships with their parents or carers. Young people placed significant importance on being able to speak openly and honestly about their future.

The importance of relationships and social interactions at this stage of life is further highlighted by the fact that young adults are the most likely age group to be affected by loneliness with nearly a third of 16-24 year olds reporting feeling lonely often or all of the time²⁵. The Girl Guides attitudes survey showed that young women were socialising face to face less than 10 years ago and are more afraid to go out of the house on their own. As we highlighted earlier in the paper there is some evidence of a link between young people’s perception of their neighbourhood and their mental health²⁶. A UK Youth survey of 1,000 18-25 years olds found that 67% have had times when they had no one to lean on for help and 68% found it difficult to share problems²⁷. As we noted previously safe spaces to connect with friends and get support are important for young people and remain important for young adults as well as for younger age groups.

“My friends have an important role in my life, when I have problems they help me through and help me solve them ... when we have a break, as in nights out, they’re the best to make your night fun and create good memories.”

(Listening to our future, Health Foundation).

What more could be done to promote children and young people’s wellbeing?

In engagement work conducted by Young Minds²⁸ to support *Future in Mind*, children, young people and families focused on the need for better education around wellbeing. As well as curriculum changes and campaigns there was a focus on the use of role models. They also highlighted the importance of focusing on positive wellbeing rather than negative illness. This was reiterated by young people in Suffolk²⁹ who felt there were positive inferences associated with ‘wellbeing’ and it eliminated associated stigma and focused on the young person as a whole. These are familiar messages from engagement work with young people in a range of different settings.

Ensuring empowerment and a feeling of agency are also frequent themes. For example, work undertaken by PHE highlighted the importance of involving students in decisions that

impact on them, which can benefit their wellbeing by making them feel part of the organisation or community and providing a greater sense of control over their lives³⁰.

The Youth Access Altogether Better charter³¹ created by young people for person centred mental health and wellbeing services also highlights the importance that young people place on being involved in decision making. The seven areas young people identify provide an important insight into the ways service providers can support young people's wellbeing.

1. Treat us with respect
2. Make access easy
3. Have all the help in one place or show us where we can get help
4. A welcoming and age appropriate setting
5. Give support up to age 25
6. Skilled workers who take us seriously
7. Involve us in decision making

Feeling included and having a sense of belonging were important to all the participants from a creative project undertaken by AYPH for Public Health England with young people age 10-12. This younger group also highlighted the importance of being involved in decision making and spoke about how wider global issues such as climate change affect and worry them. The issues highlighted by the participants echo those identified by young people in a 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)³². It demonstrated that where health professionals were most concerned about behaviours of this age group such as substance use, diet and exercise, young people were most concerned about 'a sense of belonging, equity and opportunities to engage in the world around them'³³. These themes would suggest a clear link to the *taking notice* way to wellbeing with children and young people from an early age being aware, concerned and affected by equity or a lack of it in their own communities and the wider world.

In addition, the Headstart evaluation identified a number of implications for practice, reiterating similar themes:

- Importance of young people having someone to talk to about their problems when they need to
- Parents, friends, siblings and school staff are really important sources of support and formal provision could draw on these. Provision of an opportunity for young people to share their self-care strategies with their peers could also be helpful.
- Importance of time out during the school day for young people to engage in activities which relax them
- Young men and young women may need different support

The recent MH2K youth recommendations on mental health and emotional wellbeing³⁴ reiterate many of these messages including the need for young people to be respected and listened to as well a focus on improving communication with young people in all the places that they are. The CQC report³⁵ on children and young people's mental health services also

stresses the need for services to listen to them as an essential part of improving services and promoting wellbeing within health settings and beyond.

It is also clear that consideration of the different support needs of particular groups of young people is essential. We have highlighted young carers, young Travellers and young LGB&T people in this report. Young people from groups who are most likely to be adversely affected by poor mental health or who are most likely to struggle when accessing support need specific consideration. This includes for example, young people from different ethnic groups, young people with disabilities, looked after young people and young people who have experienced abuse or been affected by child sexual exploitation.

Conclusions

Some writers in this area have drawn attention to the need to ensure that the methods used in this kind of research are in tune with the way in which children and young people think and talk about these issues, rather than imposing a framework derived from adult's perceptions of wellbeing³⁶. The studies reviewed suggest this is indeed important, as children and young people sometimes mention areas of wellbeing that are less prominent in research on adults, relating to their particular developmental stage.

This might include, for example, the kinds of activities after school that are available to children and young people, the importance of siblings and family pets, and relationships in the school setting. For older young people, this includes their need for positive, asset focused conversations. Another of the themes to emerge very clearly from participation work with children and young people is their need to feel a sense of belonging, equity and agency. Including children and young people's own perspectives on their wellbeing ensures that we tap into what is particularly important to them.

About the organisations undertaking this work

This review is part of the work programme of the [Health and Wellbeing Alliance](#), a group of 21 organisations that have been brought together to bring the voluntary sector's voice and expertise into national policy making. Together with the [Young People's Health Partnership](#) the project is being delivered by the following members of the Alliance:

- Carers Trust
- Friends, Families and Travellers
- The National LGBT Partnership
- Association of Mental Health Providers
- Nacro
- NAVCA
- The Men's Health Forum

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