Children’s Understandings of Well-being

1. What is the study’s background?
This study was funded by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (now the Department of Children and Youth Affairs) under the National Children’s Research Programme. The study was undertaken by Dr. Saoirse Nic Gabhainn and Dr. Jane Sixsmith of the Health Promotion Research Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway. The report was independently peer-reviewed and published in 2005.

2. What is the study’s purpose?
This study was designed to contribute children’s perspectives, through exploration of their understandings of well-being, to the development of a national set of child well-being indicators. The development of these indicators was set out as a key action under the National Children’s Strategy. The specific research objectives were:

» to explore children’s understandings of well-being;
» to give children a voice in the development of child well-being indicators;
» to be coherent throughout the research process with the overall goals and conceptual perspective of the National Children’s Strategy.

There were three main components to the study:

» The first involved class groups of children being shown how to use a disposable camera and then being asked to take photographs of things, people or places that make them well or keep them well. In total, 5,534 photographs representing well-being were taken. Once developed, the photographs were returned to the children who had taken them and they were asked to annotate them.

» The second stage involved groups of children looking at the developed photographs and dividing them into groups of mutually exclusive categories, which they named and labeled.

» The third stage comprised further groups of children reconstructing the category groups into patterns by developing schematic representations of well-being. These schema were first developed by single gender groups, then by mixed gender groups.

3. How was the study undertaken?
The methods employed were designed to achieve the above objectives. The development of the design of this study was informed by conceptual perspectives within the National Children’s Strategy, specifically that children have a voice in the development of well-being indicators and in doing so, data are generated that enable children’s lives to be better understood. A participatory research process was developed. The process incorporated individual-level data collection, 3 sets of group-level data analysis and feedback, with a final group-level integration process.

Participating children were accessed through randomly selected schools in a rural area and an urban area. Older youth participating in the final integration were accessed through a youth café. Active parental consent was sought and obtained for all participants and in total, 33 groups of children and young people, aged 8-19 years, were included in the study.

* The views expressed in this report are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
A final integration of schema developed by a group of older youth was designed to provide a comprehensive representation of well-being relevant to Irish children. In this way, children were actively involved as co-researchers through data collection, data analysis and data presentation.

4. What are the key findings?

4.1 Children’s understandings of well-being

The level of complexity with which children deconstructed and reconstructed their understandings of well-being, illustrated through the schema, demonstrated their inclusive view of their own lives and their well-being within it. The results show, through the multiple categories and often integrated hierarchy developed, the broadly positive and holistic perspectives they hold. A repeated core constituent of their well-being was identified as their relationships with family and friends (including school friends); another central contributing factor was the value of activities or things to do. These categories and their position in the schema as developed could, to some extent, be anticipated based on previous research. However, the categories of pets/animals and environment/places, consistently identified and included in the schema, were far less predictable. They illustrate the extent to which children interact with the natural world around them, as well as the interpersonal environment in which they are located. The relative lack of biomedical health-related photographs is in and of itself revealing.

During all phases, children discussed how aspects of the various categories made them feel: how relationships (with people and animals) and the activities within or context of those relationships gave them a sense of belonging, being safe, loved, valued and cared for.

4.2 Participation in the research process

Actively including children as co-researchers through data collection, data analysis and data presentation demonstrated children’s constructive, sophisticated contribution to the research process, which gave children a voice that has been heard in relation to the development of the national set of child well-being indicators.

5. What are the conclusions?

The study reached the following overall conclusions:

1. Children’s understandings of well-being are sophisticated and illustrate complex interrelationships of multiple concepts.

2. Factors emerged from the study that are of particular interest in the development of the national set of child well-being indicators. Specific areas to be considered in the development are the importance of interpersonal relationships with family and friends, and the value placed on activities or things to do. Also identified as contributing to children’s well-being were pets/animals and environment/places.

3. With active inclusion of children through participation in the research process, children’s voices are heard and can inform a better understanding of their lives, embodying key principles of the National Children’s Strategy.

6. What are the recommendations?

The key recommendation arising from the research is:

The inclusion of children’s perspectives in the development of the national set of child well-being indicators

It is recommended that children’s understandings of well-being be used to inform the development of the national set of child well-being indicators.
7. **What are the benefits of the study?**

The benefits of this study are multiple. The approach used demonstrates that children can be enabled to actively participate as co-researchers in aspects of the research process through data collection, data analysis and data presentation. The level of participation has facilitated the illumination of children’s own understandings of their well-being, which can be used to inform the development of the national set of child well-being indicators.

This approach is coherent with the principles of the National Children’s Strategy and the study’s findings endorse the ‘whole child’ perspective taken in the strategy. While some of the findings, through the children’s development of categories and schema, reinforce and validate what is highlighted in the literature (e.g. the place of family in children’s well-being), other aspects provide new insights (e.g. the role of pets/animals and environment/places).
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Check out [www.dcy.ie](http://www.dcy.ie) for full report of study.