



The Good Childhood Report 2023

**The
Children's
Society**



*"Always
believe
in yourself."*

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Foreword



Every day, I am amazed by the creativity, passion, and spirit of the children and young people that support and drive our work at The Children's Society. But many of the young people that we work with are also facing huge challenges. No two children are the same, and it's vital that every one of them gets the right support.

Time and time again, when we ask children what needs to change to improve their lives, they tell us simply that they want to feel supported and listened to. This is not too much to ask. Children and young people need a cohesive, responsive, and compassionate system of support around them which aims to prevent their wellbeing from declining, alongside a co-designed and fully funded national strategy for a good childhood.

Since the Understanding Society survey began in 2009, children's wellbeing has declined – and it is simply unacceptable. From this, our twelfth Good Childhood Report, we gain a vital understanding of the experiences of children who are unhappy with their lives. In 2023, 10% of the 2,001 children who completed our annual survey had low wellbeing, and almost a third were unhappy with at least one specific area of their lives.

For most of us, the past few years have been difficult – we have been pulled from crisis to crisis, both nationally and internationally, and children are far from immune to these challenges. As this year's report indicates, children care deeply about and are affected by a wide range of issues, from rising prices to the environment.

While almost three quarters of the children who completed our survey in 2023 feel positive about their own futures, sadly less than four in ten feel optimistic about the future of the country and the world. This must be a wake up call for politicians across the UK. Young people need to feel secure, in their lives now and about their futures, to feel well in themselves. As a starting point, we need a cabinet

minister for children – someone who can share children's views at the highest levels and champion their voices. For too long, decisions about children have been made without their input. It is past time for them to be consulted, in a meaningful way, about the choices that are impacting their lives.

Finally, we cannot ignore the impacts of the rising cost of living and money worries seen throughout this year's report. Our analysis highlights the importance of good family relationships for young people's wellbeing – but the cost of living crisis is putting these at risk. A majority (82%) of parents and carers who completed our annual survey continued to be concerned about the impacts of the cost of living crisis over the next year, with 58% either finding it difficult or just about getting by financially at the start of 2023. Rising costs were also the top concern among the societal issues we asked children about in this year's survey. This is deeply concerning.

We need our government to do more to support families and enable children to thrive, not just survive. At The Children's Society, our mission is to reverse the current decline in children's wellbeing by 2030. It's an ambitious goal, but this year's Good Childhood Report shows just how vital our mission is. We will not rest until we have built a society that works for all children.

A handwritten signature in white ink on a dark blue background. The signature is stylized and appears to read 'Mark Russell'.

Mark Russell
Chief Executive
The Children's Society

Introduction

The Good Childhood Report 2023 is the twelfth in The Children’s Society’s series of annual reports on the wellbeing of children in the UK. This year’s report presents the most recent trends in children’s subjective wellbeing. It takes a closer look at those children who score low on these measures, and the characteristics and experiences which may account for their responses. In view of the broad range of social issues currently affecting life in the UK, the report further explores children’s feelings about the future and their sense of safety in different settings and situations.

The current generation of children and young people is growing up at a time of unprecedented turbulence and uncertainty.¹ Since the last edition of this report, the cost of living crisis has deepened, with a particularly steep increase in the costs of food, energy, and housing – all while we continue to try to recover from the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. There have also been numerous domestic and global crises, notably pay disputes and strike actions in several sectors of the UK and the war in Ukraine. And the climate emergency is also a concern for many young people.² Such topics are often reported on in a highly polarised way by some traditional media, as well as by social media users, which may feel alarming or cause anxiety.

Previous Good Childhood Reports have explored the importance of children’s feelings about the future for their overall wellbeing.³ The Good Childhood Report 2023 provides further evidence on this theme by looking into how the current state of the world relates to children and young people’s wellbeing, exploring the links between their feelings and worries about their own future, as well as those of the country and the world, and their overall wellbeing.

In last year’s Good Childhood Report, we highlighted the opportunity that the Department of Health and Social Care’s (DHSC) 10-year mental health and wellbeing plan could create for vital cross-government action and accountability for children’s wellbeing. However, in January 2023, the Government announced that the plan would be unfortunately replaced by a broader ‘major conditions’ strategy.⁴ While we welcome the commitment that mental health issues will be tackled urgently alongside conditions like cancer, we are concerned that this new strategy will be insufficient in meeting the level of change and support that children and young people need for their mental health and wellbeing. The Online Safety Bill, which should offer children and young people increased protection from harmful content, is nearing completion and, at the time of writing, is at committee stage in the House of Lords.⁵

Since the last Good Childhood Report was published, research has been published that furthers our understanding of children’s wellbeing. For example, the Department for Education (DfE)

¹ The report mainly uses the wording ‘children’ to refer to the 10 to 15 age range, and ‘children and young people’ when talking about children aged up to 17 years old. However, at times the word ‘children’ has been used to cover the broader 10 to 17 age range.

² BBC. COP27: Climate anxiety is rising - it might be a good thing [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: [bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-63516055](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/science-environment-63516055); BBC. Climate change: Young people very worried – survey [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: [bbc.co.uk/news/world-58549373](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-58549373); Woodland Trust. Young people’s climate anxiety is soaring due to lack of access to green space [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: [woodlandtrust.org.uk/press-centre/2023/03/young-people-climate-anxiety-green-space-access/](https://www.woodlandtrust.org.uk/press-centre/2023/03/young-people-climate-anxiety-green-space-access/); YouGov. YouGov / Woodland Trust Survey Results [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: docs.cdn.yougov.com/f8u8jctgnu/WoodlandTrust_ClimateChange_230210_w.pdf; Save the Children. Survey reveals scale of climate anxiety among British children on eve of COP27 [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: [savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/survey-reveals-scale-of-climate-anxiety-among-british-children#:~:text=Survey%20reveals%20scale%20of%20climate%20anxiety%20among%20British%20children&text=Climate%20anxiety%20is%20rising%20in,up%20to%20COP27%20this%20weekend](https://www.savethechildren.org.uk/news/media-centre/press-releases/survey-reveals-scale-of-climate-anxiety-among-british-children#:~:text=Survey%20reveals%20scale%20of%20climate%20anxiety%20among%20British%20children&text=Climate%20anxiety%20is%20rising%20in,up%20to%20COP27%20this%20weekend).

³ See, for example, The Children’s Society. The Good Childhood Report 2012 [Internet]. 2012 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: [childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202012.pdf](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202012.pdf); see also: The Children’s Society. The Good Childhood Report 2019 [Internet]. 2019 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: [childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202019.pdf](https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202019.pdf).

⁴ UK Parliament. Government Action on Major Conditions and Diseases [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 12]. Available from: [questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-01-24/hcws514](https://www.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2023-01-24/hcws514).

⁵ UK Parliament. Online Safety Bill [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jun 22]. Available from: bills.parliament.uk/bills/3137.

has produced its fourth State of the Nation report on children's wellbeing,⁶ suggesting that children and young people's wellbeing and mental health seemed to have, on average, declined during the pandemic, but that their subjective wellbeing showed signs of recovery in 2021. NHS Digital released the results of its wave three follow-up study on the mental health of children and young people in England, which showed that in 2022, 18% of children aged 7 to 16 and 22% of young people aged 17 to 24 had a probable mental disorder.⁷ The What Works Centre for Wellbeing has also shared key findings on loneliness and wellbeing in young people, most importantly around evidence that loneliness in young people is strongly associated with poor wellbeing and mental health.⁸ The HeadStart national evaluation report was published, assessing the role of the HeadStart programme in supporting the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people.⁹ Its findings (most relevant to children's wellbeing) indicate that the programme provided new insight into young people's experiences, including for those who are most at risk of mental health challenges. It reiterates the importance of trusted relationships in helping young people manage challenges to their mental health and wellbeing, and highlights the need for early intervention to be prioritised. In addition, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) is currently in the process of updating its child wellbeing indicators, with a new dataset expected to be published later in 2023.

There have also been more targeted publications that have relevance for children's wellbeing, for example the Children's Commissioner's Independent Family Review reports,¹⁰ which discuss family in modern Britain and its protective effects for children against life's challenges, and its Big Ask survey, produced in collaboration with Coram, on the experiences of children in care.¹¹ The Youth Sports Trust published its annual report on PE and school sport, which discusses the importance of physical exercise for children and young people's wellbeing.¹²

What is wellbeing?

The What Works Centre for Wellbeing defines wellbeing as follows:

"Wellbeing is how we're doing as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future."¹³

The Good Childhood Report focuses on children's own views of how their lives are going, which is called their subjective wellbeing.

Figure 1 summarises the different aspects of subjective wellbeing,¹⁴ which include:

- people's **thoughts** about the quality of their lives overall, how their life is going, and how happy they are with certain aspects of their lives (**cognitive wellbeing**)
- people's positive and negative **feelings** and emotions – or how happy, sad, angry, etc. they may feel (**affective wellbeing**)
- people's sense of **meaning**, purpose, autonomy and control (**eudaimonic wellbeing**).

⁶ Department for Education. State of the nation 2022: children and young people's wellbeing [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jun13]. Available from: [gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2022-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2022-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing).

⁷ NHS Digital. Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 - wave 3 follow up to the 2017 survey [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2022-follow-up-to-the-2017-survey.

⁸ What Works Centre for Wellbeing. Key insights into loneliness and wellbeing in young people [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/key-insights-into-loneliness-and-wellbeing-in-young-people/.

⁹ Anna Freud. HeadStart national evaluation final report [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: annafreud.org/media/18506/headstart-master-220523.pdf.

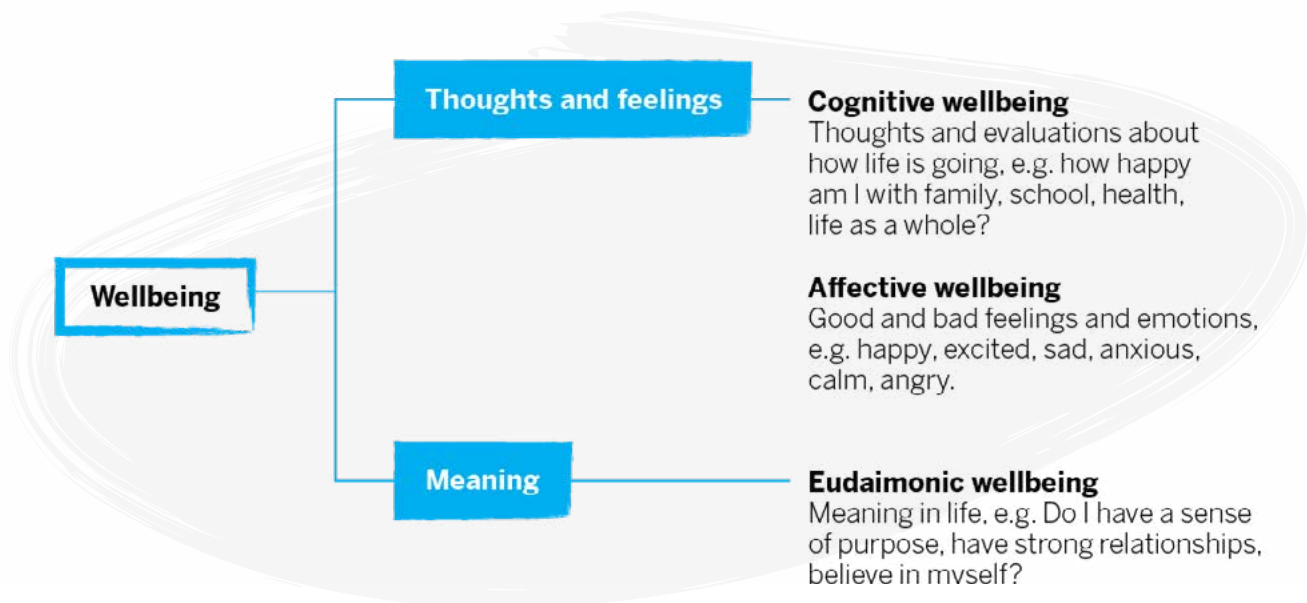
¹⁰ Children's Commissioner. Family and its protective effect: Part 1 of the Independent Family Review [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/family-and-its-protective-effect-part-1-of-the-independent-family-review/; see also Children's Commissioner. A positive approach to parenting: Part 2 of the Independent Family Review [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-positive-approach-to-parenting-part-2-of-the-independent-family-review/.

¹¹ Children's Commissioner. Findings from The Big Ask: Children in care. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: assets.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wpuploads/2023/01/CCo-Coram-report-final.pdf.

¹² Youth Sport Trust. PE & School Sport: The Annual Report 2023. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: youthsporttrust.org/news-insight/research/pe-school-sport-the-annual-report-2023.

¹³ What Works Centre for Wellbeing. What is Wellbeing? [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: whatworkswellbeing.org/about-wellbeing/what-is-wellbeing.

¹⁴ For further discussion on the different components of wellbeing, see for example: The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2022 [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2022.

Figure 1: Components of self-reported wellbeing.

Source: based on Soffia M and Turner A. Measuring Children and Young People's Subjective Wellbeing [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available at: whatworkswellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/MCYPSPW-Conceptual-framework-2.pdf. See page 10.

Measuring children's wellbeing

The importance of asking children themselves how they feel about their own lives, so that adults can understand and respond meaningfully to what children tell us, is now well-established. However, we are yet to see comprehensive, regular, national measurement of children's subjective wellbeing, equivalent to what is in place for adults. Indeed, **The Children's Society has been calling for such measurement to be put in place for several years.**¹⁵

In the absence of a more comprehensive and regular national measure of children's wellbeing, our Good Childhood Reports draw on the most recent data sources on children's wellbeing. The **Understanding Society survey**, which asks children in the UK how they feel about different aspects of their lives, is a key source for the report.¹⁶ Together with its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey, since 1994 it has been asking children aged 10 to 15 about their happiness with their life as a whole, their family, their friends, their appearance, their schoolwork, and,

from 2003, the school that they go to.¹⁷ Analysing children's responses to these questions allows us to present trends in children's wellbeing and to track changes over time.

As part of its Good Childhood research programme, launched in 2005, in 2010 The Children's Society developed **The Good Childhood Index** (see appendix A). The index consists of a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction,¹⁸ and 10 single-item domain measures which ask children about their happiness with different aspects of their lives¹⁹ (see figures 9 and 10). These questions are included in **The Children's Society's annual household survey** of children (aged 10 to 17) and their parent or carer. Twenty-two online surveys have been conducted to date, including almost 46,000 children. Findings from these surveys have been a key source for the ONS Wellbeing Measurement Framework, as well as for the DfE's State of the Nation report on children's wellbeing.

¹⁵ The Children's Society. Case for children's wellbeing measurement [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: childrensociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/the-case-for-national-measurement-of-childrens-well-being.

¹⁶ Data from the Understanding Society survey, as well as its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey, are available through the UK data service, ukdataservice.ac.uk.

¹⁷ Understanding Society. The UK household longitudinal study [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: understandingsociety.ac.uk/.

¹⁸ This is the first table in appendix A.

¹⁹ The second table in appendix A.

Children's involvement in The Good Childhood Report

Listening to and amplifying children and young people's voices and involving them in decisions made about them is at the core of The Children's Society's strategy.

Children and young people have been involved in a variety of activities related to this year's Good Childhood Report. These have included:

- **cognitive testing of new and revised household survey questions**, conducted with a small number of children and young people in primary, secondary, and further education settings
- **a small pilot of the whole household survey** with children and their parent or carer to check that the questions worked before the full survey was conducted

- **2,001 UK children and their parents or carers completing The Children's Society's 2023 household survey**

- children and young people participating in a variety of **consultation activities**, where they **shared what the findings mean to them** and helped to **develop policy recommendations** for this year's report

- for the first time this year, **asking children and young people** who took part in the above activities **for their feedback on which themes should be prioritised** in future Good Childhood Reports.

The Children's Society is always looking for additional ways to involve children and young people in The Good Childhood Reports, and further opportunities will continue to be developed in future years.



Data sources and methods used for new analysis in this report

The Children's Society's household surveys

The Children's Society has conducted its own online household surveys with parents, carers, and children since 2010 (see appendix B for further details of our wellbeing research programme). These surveys collect data on children's wellbeing, their household, and other characteristics. A different module of extra questions is also included each year to look at topical issues that are important to children.

The most recent survey was undertaken between May and June 2023, and collected responses from a sample of just over 2,000 children (aged 10 to 17) from across the UK and their parent or carer. Children were selected to closely match the demographic (age and gender), socio-economic, and geographic make-up of the wider population.²⁰

The survey has been carried out by a new provider since 2020, which may have affected the ability to compare findings with those from previous survey years.

UK Longitudinal Household Survey (known as Understanding Society)²¹

Understanding Society is a longitudinal study which covers a large, representative sample of 40,000 households in the UK. Adults and a cross-sectional sample of children aged 10 to 15 are interviewed annually. Fieldwork runs over a period of 24 months, with each household

interviewed at roughly the same time each year. The youth questionnaire contains routine questions on subjective wellbeing, as well as modules on other aspects of children's lives, which vary between years.

The latest data available, from wave 12 of the Understanding Society survey, are from 2020-21, and include the first full year of data collected during Covid-19-related restrictions. In 2020-21, the youth survey was completed by 1,663 children aged 10 and 15.²² This is a smaller sample size than in previous years, which appears to be due to changes in survey methodology needed during the Covid-19 pandemic.²³

There was some overlap between the first wave of Understanding Society and the final wave of the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS).²⁴ This means that the coverage of the first wave differs slightly from subsequent surveys (that is, wave two onwards), which also include interviews with BHPS participants.

To improve representation, an Immigration and Ethnic Minority booster (IEMB) sample was added to the survey, which has included the youth sample from 2016-17 (wave 7) onwards. For the first time this year, all data presented from wave 7 onwards include this sample (that is, using the largest possible sample size for analysis in each year).²⁵

²⁰ Using mid-2021 population estimates as a guide. See: Office for National Statistics. United Kingdom population mid-year estimate [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 26]. Available from: ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/timeseries/ukpop/pop.

²¹ For further details, see: Understanding Society. The UK household longitudinal study [Internet]. n.d. [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: understandingsociety.ac.uk/.

²² As noted later in the report, there are a very small number of participants in some waves who are aged 9 and 16, but most of the sample are aged between 10 to 15.

²³ See: Kantar. UK Household Longitudinal Study Wave 12 technical report [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/6614/mrdoc/pdf/6614_wave12_technical_report.pdf. More detail, including on the impact of a smaller sample size, can be found in chapter 1 of The Good Childhood Report 2023.

²⁴ The term 'wave' is used to refer to data collected in specific time periods covered by the survey, which use the same questionnaires (question modules vary between waves). Understanding Society is a continuous survey and people are surveyed every year (or in each wave).

²⁵ Previous Good Childhood Reports have reported findings excluding this sample in the main body of the report to allow for comparability with previous years, and findings including the additional IEMB sample have been presented as an appendix.

Scope for subgroup and intersectionality analysis

The Good Childhood Report's ability to look at the experiences of minority groups and to provide an intersectional lens on findings depends on the sources available.

In both The Children's Society's annual household survey and Understanding Society, **the ability to conduct further analysis for different demographic groups and to look at the intersections between subgroups is unfortunately limited by small sample sizes.**

To be able to look at **differences between ethnic groups**, some analysis has been presented in the report which compares children from a white ethnic background with children from all other ethnic groups combined. This is because the number of respondents from specific ethnic groups is too small to conduct statistical analysis by single ethnic group. Aggregating all ethnic groups from the global majority may, however, conceal important differences between specific groups.

In an effort to further explore potential differences between groups, in chapter 1 data from Understanding Society have been combined across waves to produce increased sample sizes and enable further analysis of the experiences of children from specific ethnic groups.

Both sources also only allow for **binary gender analysis**. Understanding Society asks children if they are male or female, and The Children's Society's survey asks children if they are male or female or whether they prefer not to say, which means that it is not clear how children who identify as trans, non-binary, or with other gender non-conforming identities might answer this question. Unfortunately, even if further options were added to these surveys, sample sizes are too small to allow for analysis of findings for those young people who do not respond male or female. We recognise that the approach taken by both sources is problematic given evolving understanding of gender and increased awareness of different gender identities.

Unfortunately, as both surveys are completed at home, they also do not capture the experiences of all groups of children, notably **children who live in residential care or secure units.**

The Children's Society acknowledges these limitations and will continue to explore how we can better represent the experiences of different subgroups of children in future reports. **These considerations echo our call for larger scale measurement of children's wellbeing**, to allow for better understanding of the experiences of groups who are not well represented in existing sources or for whom meaningful analysis is restricted by smaller sample sizes.

Statistical testing

A range of appropriate statistical tests has been conducted to support the findings presented in this report, using a 99% confidence level to test statistical significance (unless otherwise stated).

Weighted datasets have been used for analysis of Understanding Society and The Children's Society's household survey.²⁶

Chapter 1 includes further statistical analysis of wellbeing domain data from Understanding Society. For that section, the youth weighting variables were applied after being scaled for different combinations of waves. Listwise deletion was used to deal with missing data, which means that for analysis using multiple variables (known as multivariate analysis)

responses were not included if there were missing data on any of the variables included in the regressions. It is worth noting, however, that there are very few missing data for any of the variables included in this analysis.

Elsewhere, some basic explanatory information on the treatment of missing data and statistical analysis has been included in the notes and footnotes. However, every effort has been made to ensure that the main body of this report is non-technical and accessible to a range of audiences.

Further technical details of the research are available from The Children's Society's Research team, whose contact details are provided at the end of the report.

²⁶ The Children's Society household data are weighted in line with the most recent available mid-year population estimates (ONS, 2022c).

Chapter 1:

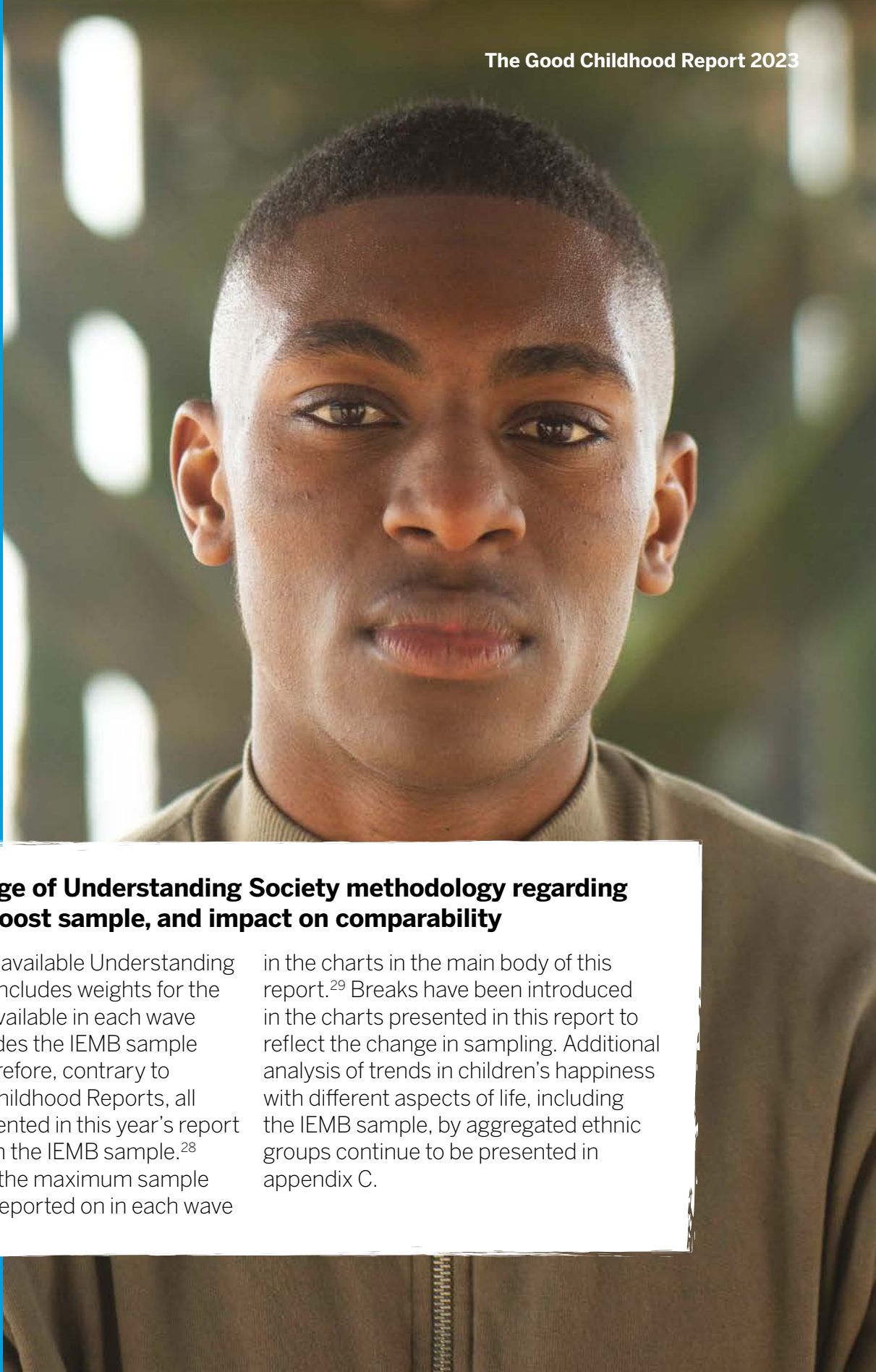
Overview, variations and trends in children's subjective wellbeing from Understanding Society

Analysing national data from the annual Understanding Society survey is important in allowing us to track trends in children's wellbeing over time. It also enables us to identify variations between different groups of children, for example based on their demographic or socioeconomic characteristics. Such information is essential in identifying areas of children's lives, or indeed groups of children, which would benefit from further attention or support.

It is important to note that data collection for the most recent wave took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, when life was affected by restrictions.²⁷ While this context must be kept in mind when interpreting the findings presented in this chapter, it is difficult to assess whether, or to what extent, changes or patterns are attributable to the pandemic and its effects.

Response rates to the Understanding Society youth survey were lower than usual for this latest wave (with 1,663 children taking part). The Understanding Society team attributes this to changes in survey methodology necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic (detailed in footnote 27). Therefore, some caution is needed when undertaking analysis and drawing conclusions.

²⁷ The way in which fieldwork was conducted had to change from March 2020 onwards in line with Covid-19 restrictions, with the vast majority of wave 12 being completed when interviewers were not able to visit households and so questionnaires had to be posted to households instead. More information is available on the Understanding Society website ([understandingsociety.ac.uk](https://www.understandingsociety.ac.uk)) as well as in the technical report for wave 12, available on the UK data service website at doc.ukdataservice.ac.uk/doc/6614/mrdoc/pdf/6614_wave12_technical_report.pdf.



Note on change of Understanding Society methodology regarding inclusion of boost sample, and impact on comparability

The most recent available Understanding Society dataset includes weights for the largest sample available in each wave only, which includes the IEMB sample from wave 7; therefore, contrary to previous Good Childhood Reports, all trends data presented in this year's report include data from the IEMB sample.²⁸ This means that the maximum sample available is now reported on in each wave

in the charts in the main body of this report.²⁹ Breaks have been introduced in the charts presented in this report to reflect the change in sampling. Additional analysis of trends in children's happiness with different aspects of life, including the IEMB sample, by aggregated ethnic groups continue to be presented in appendix C.

²⁸ In previous Good Childhood Reports, findings presented in the main body of the report excluded this sample to allow for comparability with earlier waves (with findings including the additional IEMB sample presented as an appendix).

²⁹ Due to this as well as to updates to the dataset made by the Understanding Society team, the mean scores and proportions of children scoring below the midpoint presented in this report will differ slightly to those published in previous Good Childhood Reports.

Trends over time

Understanding Society asks 10- to 15-year-olds how they feel about their 'life as a whole', as well as about five specific aspects of their life: 'your schoolwork', 'your appearance', 'your family', 'your friends', and 'the school you go to.' Children are presented with faces expressing various types of feelings, together with a numeric response scale from 'completely happy' to 'not at all happy'.³⁰

Each year, The Good Childhood Report presents overall trends in children's wellbeing based on their responses to these six questions.³¹ Figure 2 shows the most recent mean happiness scores for these six measures, across all 12 waves of the survey.³² The data points and solid line show the mean scores, while the dotted lines above and below show the 99% confidence intervals.

In line with what was reported in previous Good Childhood Reports,³³ **children's happiness with their life as a whole was significantly lower in 2020-21 than when the Understanding Society survey started in 2009-10.**³⁴ In 2020-21, their mean score for this measure was 7.62. **Children's mean happiness scores with their friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork were also all significantly lower than when the survey began** in 2009-10. There was no significant difference for children's happiness with their family since the start of the survey.

The order of children's mean scores for the five aspects of life that Understanding Society asks about is unchanged from previous years, with **children being on average most happy with their family (8.89), and least happy with their appearance (6.76).**



³⁰ A small number of 9- and 16-year-olds were also included in some waves and are also captured in the analysis presented in this report (unless otherwise stated).

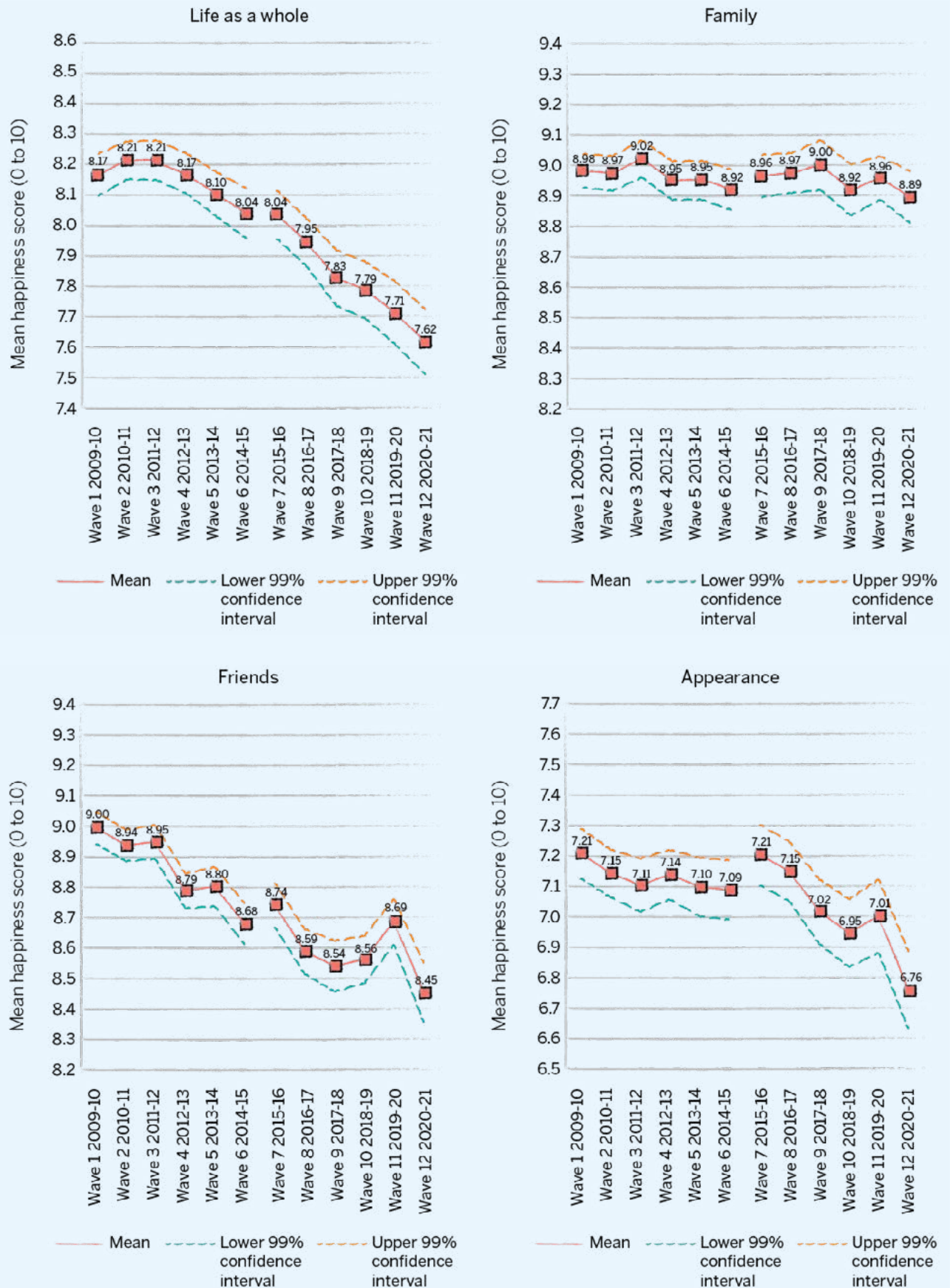
³¹ The dataset used for conducting this analysis was: UK Data Service. Understanding Society: Waves 1-12, 2009-2021 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009 [data collection]. 17th edition. SN: 6614, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-18.

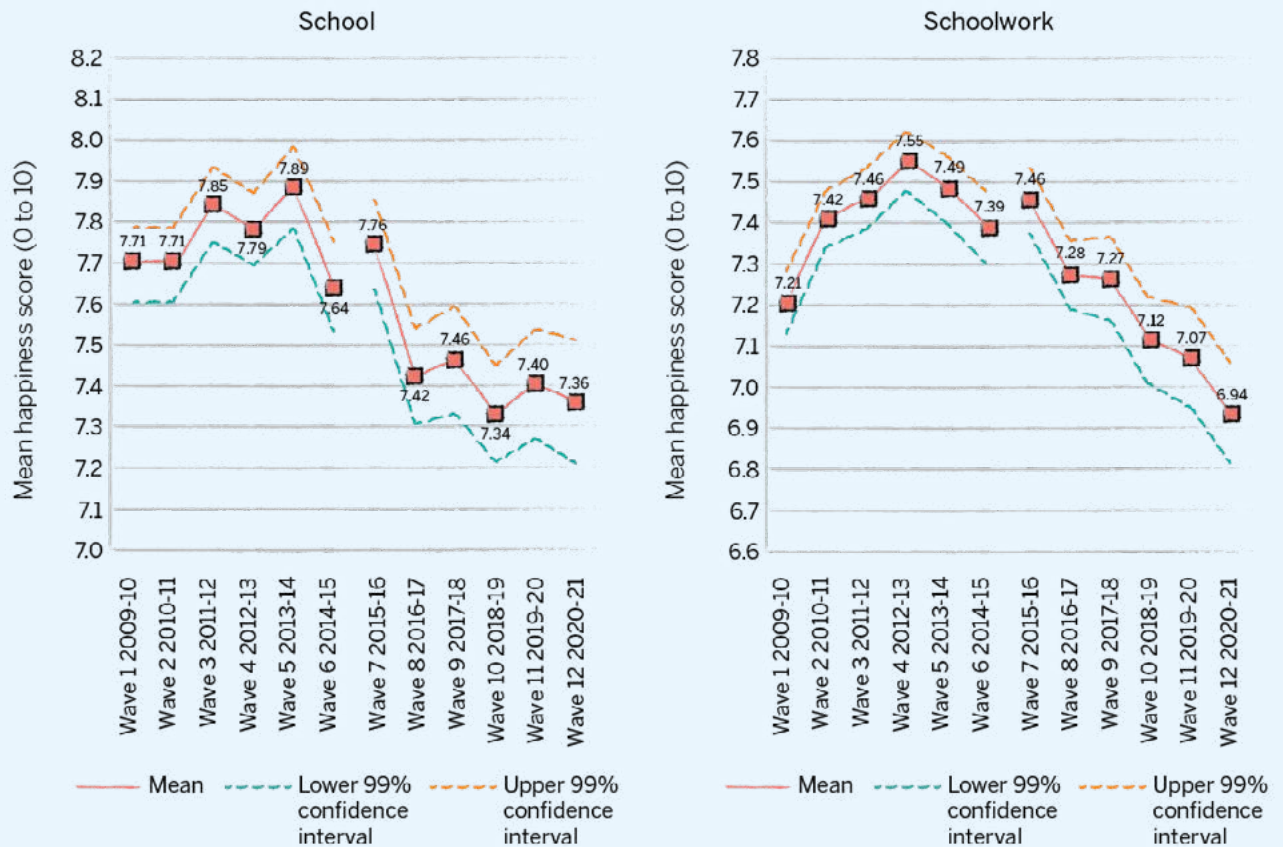
³² The seven-point scale (1 to 7) used for these questions in Understanding Society (where 1 is 'completely happy' and 7 'not at all happy') has been reversed and converted to an 11-point scale (0 to 10) for the purposes of this report, to ease interpretation and comparison with the other measures presented. All figures have been produced using the most recent dataset for each wave. Weights for waves 2 to 11 were revised in the most recent dataset (latest release: May 2023), resulting in some differences between mean scores and proportions presented here and in previous Good Childhood Reports. Data for waves 1 were weighted using the GPS and EMB cross-sectional youth weight (-ythscus-xw); data for waves 2 to 6 have been weighted using the BHPS and UKHLS cross-sectional youth interview weight (-ythscub-xw); and data for waves 7 to 12 have been weighted using the BHPS and UKHLS cross-sectional youth interview weight (-ythscui-xw). The change in weights between waves 6 and 7 is represented by a gap between waves 6 and 7 across charts. Weights for waves 2 to 11 were revised in the most recent dataset (latest release: May 2023), resulting in some differences between mean scores and proportions presented here and in previous Good Childhood Reports. In addition, an error was identified with the published weight released in the most recent dataset for wave 6, which will be corrected in the next Understanding Society data release in November 2023; as a result, data from the November 2021 release (also presented in The Good Childhood Report 2022) have been used for wave 6 in this report.

³³ See most recently: The Good Childhood Report 2022.

³⁴ The change in samples detailed above inevitably has some impact on the comparability between waves 1 to 6 and 7 to 12. Due to the change in weights, means in this year's report will also differ from those presented in previous Good Childhood Reports. Here means are being compared at face value, to allow for trends over time to continue to be presented.

Figure 2. Trends in children’s (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life, UK, 2009-10 to 2020-21.





Source: University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2023). UK Data Service. Understanding Society: Waves 1-12, 2009-2021 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009 [data collection]. 17th edition. SN: 6614, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-18.

Presentational note: All graphs use the same size range of values (1.2) so that they can be visually compared. Data are weighted (confidence intervals take account of design effects).

Although the majority of children scored above the midpoint for each of the six measures of subjective wellbeing, a small proportion of children did not, indicating that they were unhappy with these aspects of life. As reported in previous years, appearance was the aspect of life for which the largest proportion of children scored below the midpoint.³⁵



³⁵ See most recently: The Good Childhood Report 2022.

Table 1. Proportion of children (aged 10 to 15) with happiness score below midpoint (0 to 4 out of 10) for life as a whole and five different aspects of life, 2020-21.

	Wave 12 2020-21
Appearance	15.4%
Schoolwork	11.4%
School	10.1%
Life as a whole	7.5%
Friends	3.4%
Family	1.8%

Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.



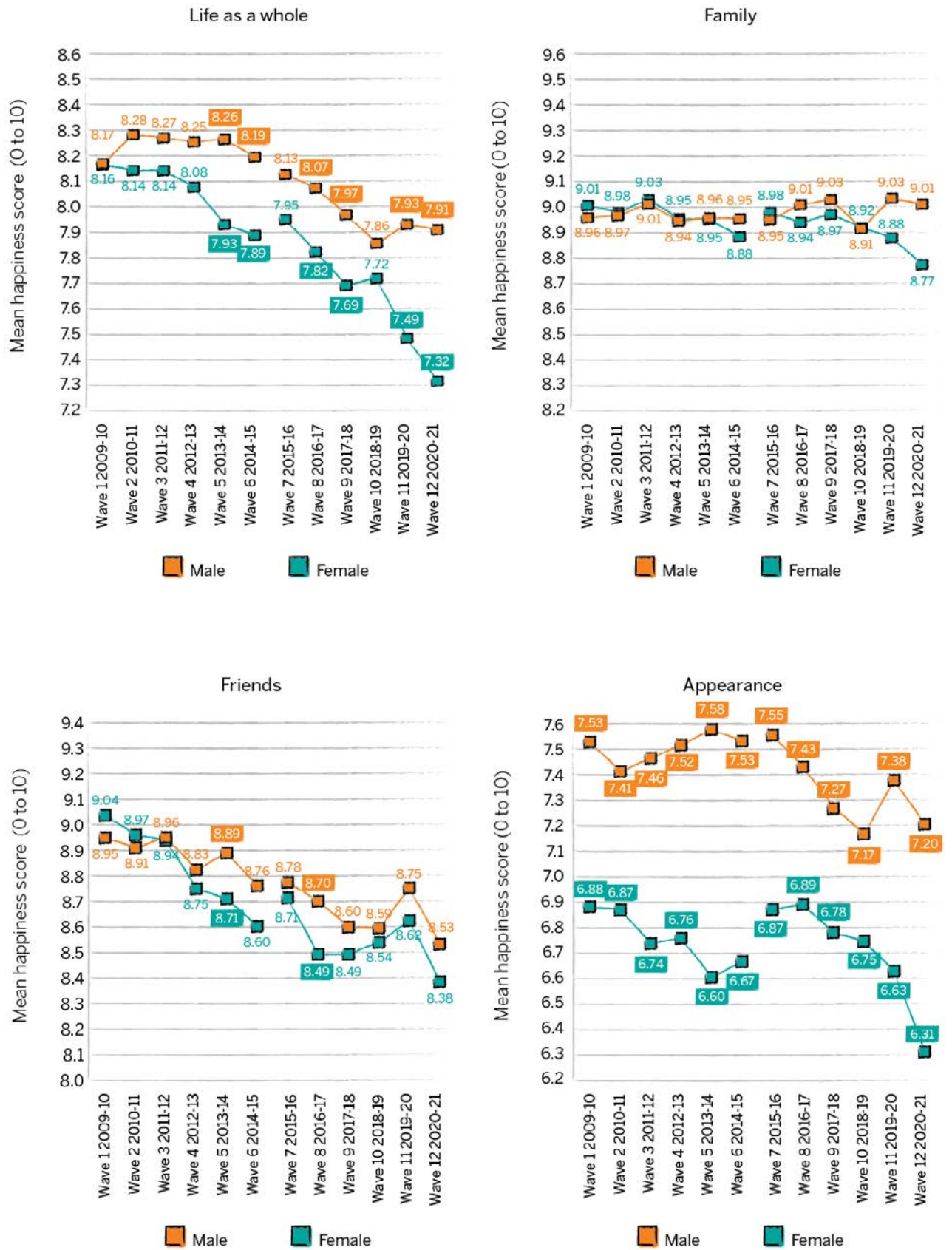
Figure 3 presents the differences in mean happiness scores between males and females for life as whole, as well as for the five different aspects of life that children were asked about.

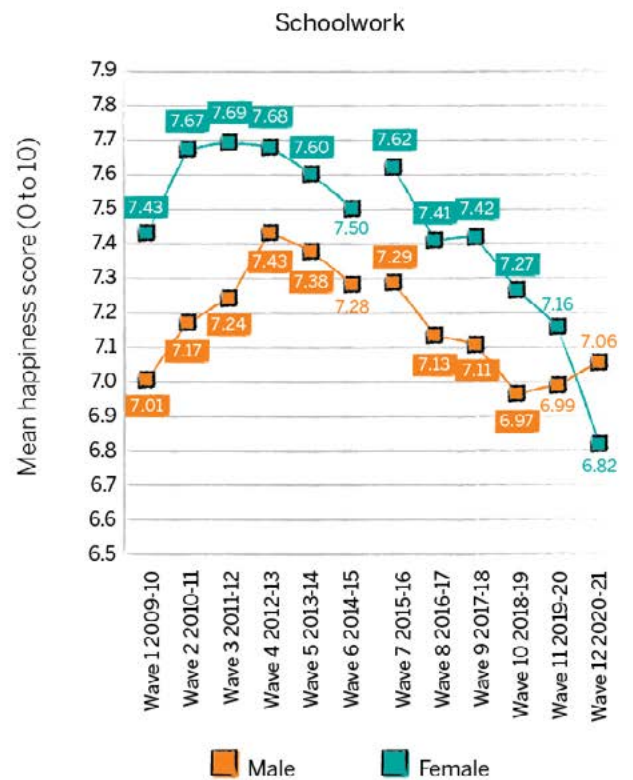
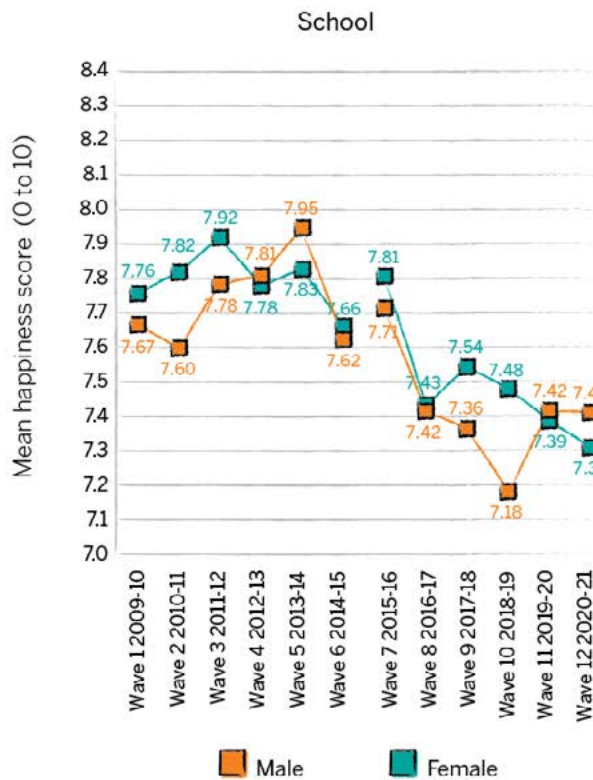
- **In 2020-21, females’ mean scores for happiness with their life as a whole were significantly lower than for males.**
We will continue to monitor this going forward, as this has now been the case in four of the last five survey waves.
- As reported in previous years, **females’ mean scores for happiness with their appearance were significantly lower than males’.**
- **In 2020-21, there was no significant difference between males’ and females’ mean scores for happiness with schoolwork** (although there were significant differences in all but three waves, with females being on average happier with this aspect than males). This seems to be due to a slight upturn in mean scores for males in 2020-21, which will be monitored going forward.

There were also some striking patterns for males and females.

- **For all six measures, females’ mean happiness scores were significantly lower in 2020-21 than when the survey started in 2009-10.** We will continue to monitor females’ mean scores going forward to establish whether this pattern continues or represents a change for one wave only.
- In comparison, **males’ mean happiness scores were significantly lower for three of the six measures in 2020-21 than when the survey started:** life as a whole, friends, and appearance.

Figure 3. Trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life by gender, UK, 2009-10 to 2020-21.





Source: Understanding Society survey, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data (confidence intervals take account of design effect).

Presentational notes: All graphs use the same size range of values (1.4) so that they can be visually compared. Mean scores are displayed in boxes in those waves where there were significant differences by gender based on non-overlapping confidence intervals (at 99% level).

Trends in children’s happiness with different aspects of life, including the IEMB sample, by aggregated ethnic groups are presented in appendix C. There are some significant differences between the white group and the other ethnic groups combined (see the report’s introduction for a discussion of the necessity for, and limitations of, the aggregation of ethnic groups).

- In all survey waves since the IEMB sample was introduced in the youth questionnaire (waves 7 to 12, that is 2015-16 to 2020-21), **children from all other ethnic groups combined have been, on average, consistently happier with their appearance than white children.**
- **In the latest wave of the survey, children from all other ethnic groups combined were significantly happier with their schoolwork** than children from white ethnic groups. This was also the case in waves 7, 8, and 9.



Further analysis of Understanding Society data on children's low subjective wellbeing

Much of the work of The Children's Society is focused on young people who are facing difficulties in their lives. Therefore, as well as exploring what children and young people across the UK think of their lives as a whole, our Good Childhood Reports always consider the minority who are unhappy with one or more aspects of their lives. Previous Good Childhood Reports have considered a range of factors that could explain differences in children's average subjective wellbeing, including gender and age,³⁶ ethnicity,³⁷ sexual orientation,³⁸ socioeconomic circumstances,³⁹ family relationships,⁴⁰ experiences of bullying,⁴¹ local neighbourhoods,⁴² social media use,⁴³ physical health and activity,⁴⁴ and leisure activities.⁴⁵

This section revisits some of this analysis with a focus on those factors that might explain children's being unhappy with life as a whole or with specific aspects of their lives, drawing on data from 10- to 15-year-olds from Understanding Society.⁴⁶ Doing further statistical analysis across Understanding Society survey waves enables us to find out more about who the children and young people who have low wellbeing are,⁴⁷ and whether they face problems in multiple aspects of their lives. This allows us to learn more about the factors in their lives that could explain their low subjective wellbeing.

An advantage of using Understanding Society for research into children's subjective wellbeing is that it is possible to match children's responses to questions about their wellbeing, relationships with family and friends, and views on their neighbourhoods and things they own with information about their family's circumstances, provided by the adults they live with. These are all aspects of life that have been shown in previous research to be related to children's wellbeing.⁴⁸

Most of the analysis in this section draws on data from the 12 waves of Understanding Society.⁴⁹ As Understanding Society is representative of the UK population, the findings of this analysis are generalisable to the UK population of children. In addition, by pooling 12 waves of data, the sample is large enough to consider differences between subgroups of children, which is not feasible when using smaller samples. For example, it is possible to distinguish between children with white, black Caribbean, black African, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, mixed, or other ethnic backgrounds. This is important, because prior research has reached conflicting findings about the subjective wellbeing of children from different ethnic groups.⁵⁰

³⁶ For example: The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2016 [Internet]. 2016 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202016.pdf.

³⁷ The Good Childhood Report 2012; The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2018 [Internet]. 2018 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202018.pdf.

³⁸ The Good Childhood Report 2018.

³⁹ The Good Childhood Report 2014 [Internet]. 2014 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202014.pdf.

⁴⁰ The Good Childhood Report 2018.

⁴¹ The Good Childhood Report 2014; The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2015 [Internet]. 2015 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202015.pdf.

⁴² The Good Childhood Report 2016.

⁴³ The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2017 [Internet]. 2017 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/GCR%202017.pdf; The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2020 [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/2020-11/Good-Childhood-Report-2020.pdf.

⁴⁴ The Good Childhood Report 2015; The Good Childhood Report 2018.

⁴⁵ The Good Childhood Report 2014.

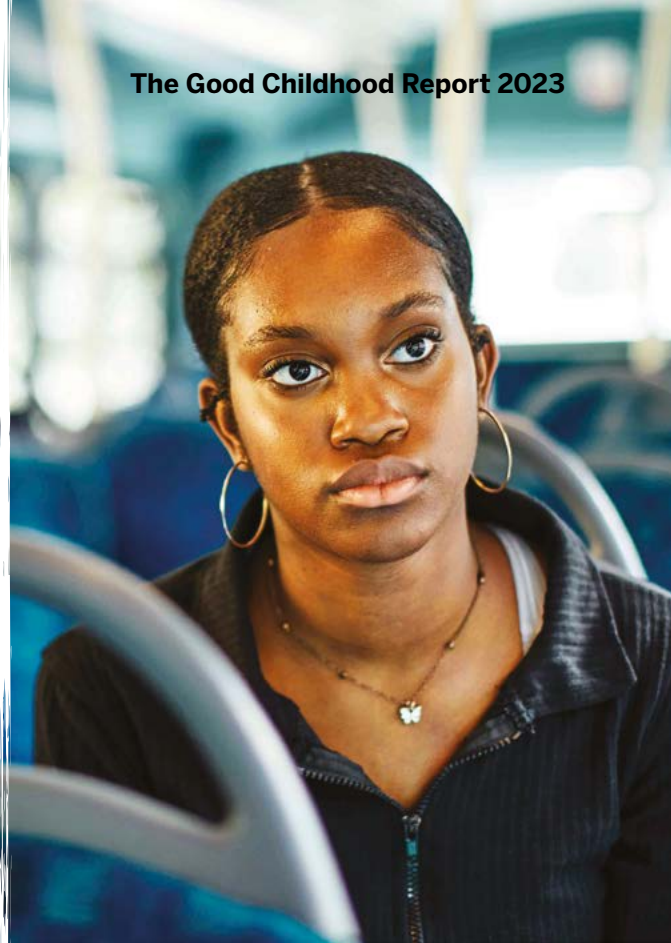
⁴⁶ A small number of 9- and 16-year-olds responded to the Understanding Society youth survey, but these are not included in this analysis.

⁴⁷ In Understanding Society, the subjective wellbeing response scales are presented as running from 1 to 7 with 1 indicating 'very happy' and 7 indicating 'very unhappy'. This scale has been reversed and re-scaled from 0 to 6 so that 0 = very unhappy and 6 = very happy. Low wellbeing is defined as those scoring lower than the midpoint of the revised scale, specifically 0, 1, or 2.

⁴⁸ See, for example, The Good Childhood Reports 2014, 2015, 2016, 2018, and 2019.

⁴⁹ The dataset used for conducting this analysis was UK Data Service. Understanding Society: Waves 1-12, 2009-2021 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009 [data collection]. 17th edition. SN: 6614, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-18. As the UKHLS has a multi-stage sampling design, it was necessary to take account of the stratification and clustering of households, as well as the non-response and attrition of respondents. For these reasons, in this analysis, the svyset suite of commands in Stata were used. This generates unbiased standard error estimates to account for clustering at the primary sampling unit (PSU) level, which additionally accounts for clustering at the household level (for example, if more than one child from a household takes part) and at the child level (for example, when a child has taken part in more than one wave of the survey).

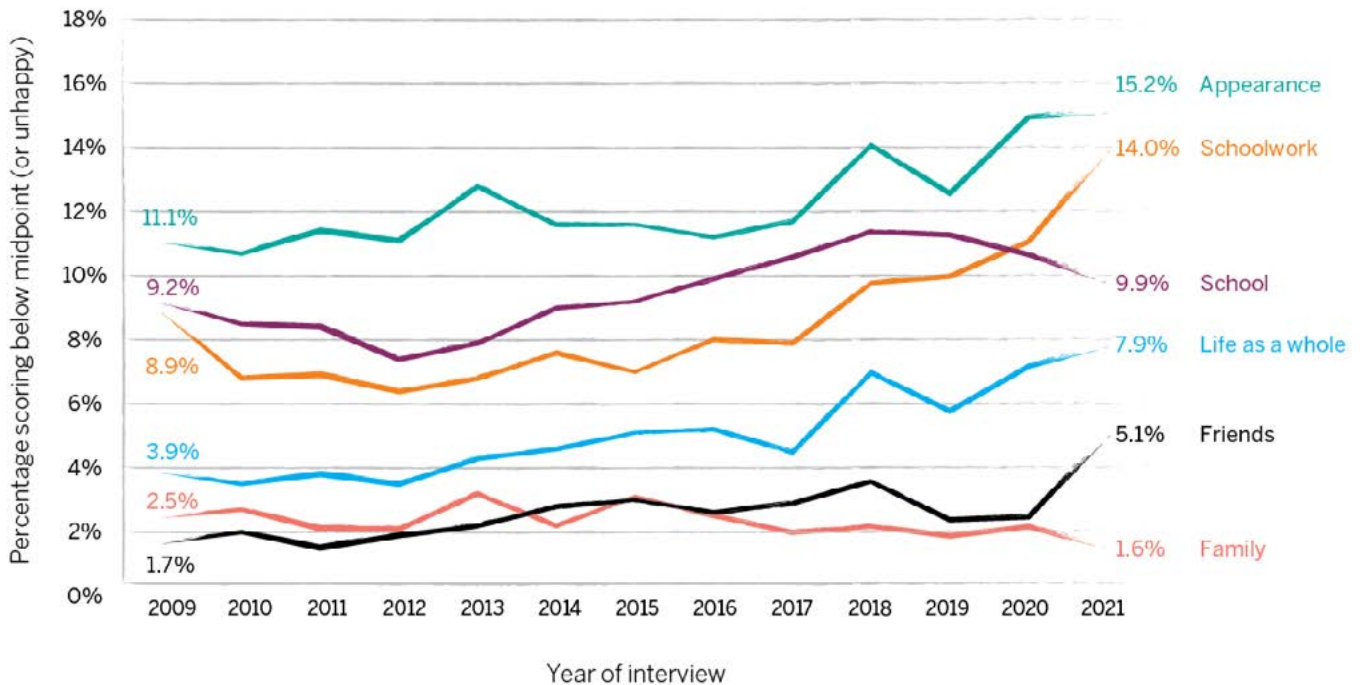
⁵⁰ See: Rees G, Bradshaw J. Exploring Low Subjective Well-being Among Children Aged 11 in the UK: an Analysis Using Data Reported by Parents and by Children. *Child Indicators Research*. 2018; 11: 27-56. See also: Patalay P, Fitzsimons E. Correlates of mental illness and wellbeing in children: are they the same? Results from the UK Millennium Cohort Study. *Journal of the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry*. 2016; 55:9: 771-783.



Time trends in low subjective wellbeing

Figure 4 shows the proportion of children aged 10 to 15 who score low (meaning below the midpoint) on different measures of subjective wellbeing, indicating that they were unhappy with these aspects of their lives, by year of Understanding Society survey interview.⁵¹ In the latest two years for which data are available – 2020 and 2021, which represent the two years in which there were Covid-19-related lockdowns in the UK – there was an increase in the proportions of children who were unhappy with their appearance, schoolwork, friendships, and life as a whole. There was a drop in the proportion of children who were unhappy with school during these two years, when most children were not at school as much as usual.

Figure 4. Time trends in proportion of children (aged 10 to 15) unhappy with different aspects of life, by year of interview.



Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1 to 12, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

⁵¹ This is a different way of showing time trends in wellbeing and therefore differs from those shown on pages 15 to 16. The Good Childhood Reports usually show time trends with respect to the wave of the survey, as this ensures that children who were interviewed twice in the same year are not counted twice (which is a rare occurrence). As the fieldwork period for each wave of Understanding Society spans more than one year, it can also be useful to consider the year of interview, especially when exploring how happy or unhappy children were with different aspects of their lives during the years relating to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Determining which children have low wellbeing: bivariate analysis (looking at variables individually)

The first step in the analysis was to examine whether individual factors were linked to children's being unhappy with the six different measures shown above – family, friends, school, schoolwork, appearance, and life as a whole – when no other factors were considered.⁵² This bivariate analysis was undertaken to inform the logistic regressions presented later in this chapter, since variables showing an association with low wellbeing could be analysed further in the multivariate analysis, and those showing no association could be excluded.⁵³

To identify which characteristics and circumstances are important to take into account when trying to understand why some children are unhappy with their lives, this bivariate analysis explored:

- **Children's demographic characteristics:** their age; gender; ethnicity; whether they have a long-term illness or disability.
- **Children's family and socioeconomic circumstances:** where they live; their economic situation; their family structure; and their parents' mental health and wellbeing.
- **Children's relationships with their family and friends and at school:** how much children talk to their mothers and fathers about things that matter to them, how much they argue with them, whether they feel supported by their family, and whether they would turn

to a family member if they were worried or upset; number of friends; and experiences of bullying at school (physical bullying and other types of bullying).^{54,55}

In terms of demographic characteristics, there were significant differences by age, gender, and whether children have a long-term illness or disability. Despite its significance in this stage of the analysis,⁵⁶ whether children have a disability or long-term illness was not included in the next step of the analysis (multivariate) as it was only asked in waves 9, 10, 11 and 12. **Children's ethnicity only showed a weak association with low subjective wellbeing on some measures.**⁵⁷ However, ethnicity has been retained as a factor in the multivariate analysis because it may be an influencing factor.⁵⁸

Similarly, household income did not have particularly strong links with children's subjective wellbeing but was retained in the next step of the analysis because of its potential influence on other factors.⁵⁹ In comparison, **whether a child's main parent or carer was finding it difficult financially was more strongly associated with their subjective wellbeing.**⁶⁰

In relation to parents' mental health and wellbeing, there was a stronger association on some measures between children's subjective wellbeing and whether their mothers had mental

⁵² This is called bivariate analysis. Such analysis uses simple crosstabulations to compare the proportions of children in different groups that are unhappy with different aspects of their lives, using chi-square tests of association to identify whether differences are statistically significant or not. The full results are shown in appendix D in table A1. It is important to note that an association does not imply causation, and that associations could be linked to other factors not examined.

⁵³ It is important to note that, as it aggregates data across waves, the bivariate analysis will conceal any differences between waves of the survey.

⁵⁴ The relationship between the adult respondent and the child respondent is defined by the main adult respondent who fills in the Understanding Society household questionnaire. Some of the youth questions include the words 'mother' and 'father' specifically, with response options 'don't have a mother'/'don't have a father'. The variable 'would turn to a family member if upset/worried' is based on the following question: 'Suppose you felt upset or worried about something and you wanted to talk about it. Who would you turn to first within your family?' (Response options cover a detailed breakdown of parents, step-parents, siblings, other relatives or no one within the family). The two 'experiences of bullying' variables are based on the following response options: Never; Not much (1-3 times in the last 6 months); Quite a lot (more than 4 times in the last 6 months); A lot (a few times every week).

⁵⁵ To note, there are other factors that are important to children's subjective wellbeing that are not discussed here, for example, children's views on their neighbourhood and relationships with their siblings (for those who have them).

⁵⁶ In particular, children who are 'limited a lot' by their disability or long-term illness are almost four times as likely to be unhappy with life as a whole (19.4%) as children who do not have a disability or illness (5.3%).

⁵⁷ Disparities in low wellbeing were clearest with respect to children's feelings about how they look: twice as many children of white (13.0%) and mixed (10.9%) ethnicity are unhappy with their appearance compared to children of Bangladeshi ethnicity (5.8%).

⁵⁸ Or, in technical terms, a confounder.

⁵⁹ Household income was equalised using an equalisation factor of 1 for the first adult and a factor of 0.5 for all subsequent adults and children and split into five quintiles to allow for a non-linear relationship between income and subjective wellbeing. For a discussion of different approaches to equalisation, see Pople L. Children's socioeconomic circumstances, family relationships and subjective well-being: Evidence from Understanding Society, the UK Household Longitudinal Study. Colchester: University of Essex; 2023.

⁶⁰ As opposed to 'getting by or living comfortably'.

health problems or low subjective wellbeing than if their fathers did.⁶¹ This is perhaps not surprising as children spend more time on average being looked after by their mothers, with mothers generally taking on more of the caring responsibilities than fathers. For example, despite an increase in recent years in the time spent on caring for children by working fathers, this is still less than two thirds (64.7%) of the time spent on childcare by working mothers.⁶² The connection between children's and their parents' mental health and wellbeing is supported by research highlighting the empathic reactions of children to the wellbeing of their parents.⁶³ Due to the stronger association with maternal mental health and wellbeing, the multivariate analysis only focused on maternal mental health and maternal low subjective wellbeing.

Other factors that were explored (for example, the region or country of the UK in which children live and their parents' or carers' education or employment) were also left out of the next step of the analysis because they were not clearly associated with low subjective wellbeing in this first, bivariate level of analysis.

In terms of relationships, **the quality of children's relationships with their family and friends and their experiences of bullying at school were all strongly linked to all measures of subjective wellbeing.**⁶⁴

Analysing factors together to understand how they relate to children's low wellbeing: multivariate analysis

A limitation of the bivariate analysis discussed above is that it may give the impression that certain factors (for example, relationship problems, the quality of children's neighbourhoods) are causing low wellbeing, when in fact these factors are being influenced by something else (for example, socioeconomic disadvantage). This section builds on the previous analysis by presenting analysis that takes account of more than one factor at the same time (multivariate analysis). Such analysis can increase confidence in conclusions drawn about the relationship between different factors and low subjective wellbeing. It also enables us to identify and discount those factors that may be explained by others.⁶⁵



⁶¹ Parental mental health is measured using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ), a commonly used assessment of mental health difficulties that is routinely used in both clinical and community populations.

⁶² Office for National Statistics. Families and the Labour Market, UK: 2021 [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/familiesandthelabourmarketengland/2021. See also: Office for National Statistics. Estimates for time spent by employed parents carrying out their daily tasks, UK: 22 July 2022 [dataset] [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 25]. Available from: ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/timeuse.

⁶³ See, for example, Powdthavee N and Vignoles A. Mental health of parents and life satisfaction of children: A within-family analysis of intergenerational transmission of well-being. *Social Indicators Research*. 2008; 88(3): 397-422; or Pople, 2023.

⁶⁴ Here, 'relationship quality' refers to having positive relationships, for example children talking to mum/dad about things that matter to them, not arguing with them often, feeling supported by family, having one or more friends, and so on.

⁶⁵ Or, in technical terms, confounded.

Logistic regression

When we are interested in an outcome (also known as a dependent variable) that is measured on a continuous scale⁶⁶ and how factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, or socioeconomic circumstances relate to it, we can use **linear regression** to quantify these relationships. However, when we are interested in a dependent variable that has only two categories – for example, 'low subjective wellbeing' and 'high subjective wellbeing' – we use a similar technique called **logistic regression**. This reflects the fact that we are interested in the probability of the outcome either occurring or not occurring. This is shown by a range of possible values between 1 (occurring) and 0 (not occurring).

The results of a logistic regression are often described in terms of odds ratios, which tell us the odds of the outcome occurring or not occurring (in this case, a child having or not having low subjective wellbeing). Another way of describing the results of a logistic regression is to show the **predicted probability of the outcome occurring** – in this case the probability of a child having low subjective wellbeing if they have the characteristic or experienced the factor of interest (for example, if they are female, have been bullied, and so on), while taking into account all of the other variables in the regression. It is these predicted probabilities that are presented here.

Figure 5 shows the results of a series of six logistic regressions (see the above box for an explanation) to explore how children being unhappy with the six aspects of life examined in Understanding Society is related to their individual characteristics and family circumstances when other factors are held constant.^{67,68} It shows the predicted probability (or predicted percentage) of children being unhappy with these different aspects of life, according to the range of factors explored. The factors considered here are included in every wave of Understanding Society, giving a pooled sample of 35,177 observations from 13,068 children from waves 1 to 12 of the survey.

In line with previous Good Childhood Reports and findings from the bivariate analysis,⁶⁹ **a larger proportion of females than males was unhappy with their friendships, appearance,**

and life as a whole, while a larger proportion of males than females was unhappy with schoolwork. Gender differences were most striking with respect to appearance: females were almost twice as likely to be unhappy with the way they look (15.9%) as males (8.5%), even after controlling for a range of other factors. The results for differences in wellbeing according to children's age were also hardly changed by the inclusion of other variables. Figure 5 shows that children in older age groups had a higher probability of being unhappy with every aspect of life except for their friendships.

Two measures of children's economic circumstances were included in the analysis, as explained above: household income quintiles, and their parents' self-reported financial difficulties. These two measures were only

⁶⁶ For example, children's scores on the subjective wellbeing measures of life as a whole, family, friends, school, schoolwork, and appearance that are shown in the time trends section of the report.

⁶⁷ This means that children who share one characteristic are compared with respect to other factors where they differ. For example, girls who are aged 10 are compared to girls who are aged 15 to see if age is associated with low subjective wellbeing once gender is 'held constant'.

⁶⁸ The full list of independent variables included in these regressions is: age, gender, ethnicity of the child, family structure, income quintiles, whether the main parent/carer perceives the household to have financial difficulties, whether the mother has low subjective wellbeing or mental health difficulties (using the GHQ described earlier), and wave of the survey. In order to ensure that comparisons were 'like for like', the sample size was held constant across these six regressions.

⁶⁹ See, for example, The Good Childhood Report 2022, The Good Childhood Report 2020, The Good Childhood Report 2018, and The Good Childhood Report 2016.

associated with children's happiness with life as a whole and with school, with greater disadvantage related to low subjective wellbeing. The most striking difference related to children's feelings about school: children in the second lowest income quintile were more likely to be unhappy with school (10.8%) as children in the highest income quintile (7.3%), even after controlling for a range of other factors.

As explained above, due to the large sample size generated by pooling waves 1 to 12 of the Understanding Society survey, in this analysis it was possible to draw comparisons between children in seven different ethnic groups.

The small number of children whose ethnicity was different from these seven categories was included in an 'other ethnicity' category (alongside children whose ethnicity was missing from the data).⁷⁰ **The patterns of low subjective wellbeing for ethnicity that had appeared at the bivariate stage of the analysis remained when factors such as household income were included.**⁷¹

Differences were most striking for appearance: as can be seen in figure 5, children of white ethnicity were twice as likely to be unhappy with their appearance (12.9%) as children of Indian (6.3%), black African (6.4%), and black Caribbean (6.2%) ethnicities after controlling for a range of other factors.⁷²

Comparison of children's low subjective wellbeing in bivariate (see table A1 in appendix D) and multivariate (see figure 5) analysis shows how

our understanding of low wellbeing can be enriched by considering more than one factor at a time. While some of the figures for low wellbeing remained the same across the analyses, others decreased or increased when other factors were taken into account.⁷³ For example, the proportion of black Caribbean children who were unhappy with school reduced from 13.2% to 10.8% when other factors, including household income, were taken into account. This fits with other evidence highlighting disparities in educational outcomes by socioeconomic circumstances.⁷⁴ There was a similar picture in relation to family structure.⁷⁵ Although a higher proportion of children living in single-parent families were unhappy with school and schoolwork, these figures reduced when other factors, including economic circumstances, were considered at the same time.⁷⁶ These examples show that **part of the explanation for the link between particular characteristics and low subjective wellbeing is likely to relate to children's economic circumstances and family structures, which are themselves interlinked.**

Finally, children's subjective wellbeing was found to be related to their mother's mental health and wellbeing on all measures (except for friendships, for mothers' mental health).⁷⁷ For example, children were more likely to be unhappy with their life as a whole (6.2%) if their mother had mental health problems than children whose mothers did not have mental health problems (for whom the equivalent figure was 3.9%).

⁷⁰ This is due to the sample size for these ethnic groups being too small to carry out statistical analysis. This 'other ethnicity' category was not used as an analytical category as the ethnic groups that are covered by this group are not a meaningful grouping. However, assigning children to this category if they were not in any of the other ethnic groups or if they had missing ethnicity information means that they could be included in all of the analysis presented in this chapter, including the multivariate analysis presented later on.

⁷¹ See disparities highlighted in footnote 57; full results are presented in table A1 in appendix D.

⁷² This echoes the trends analysis presented in appendix C and reported on earlier in chapter 1, as well as observations from previous Good Childhood Reports (see most recently The Good Childhood Report 2022). Similar findings were also observed in other research; see, for example, in an US context, Davis DS, Sbrocco T, Williams J. Understanding body image in African American and Caucasian first-graders: a partnership with the YMCA. *Prog Community Health Partners*. 2009; 3(4): 277-86.

⁷³ Here the proportions of low subjective wellbeing are compared to the predicted probabilities of having low subjective wellbeing generated by the logistic regression.

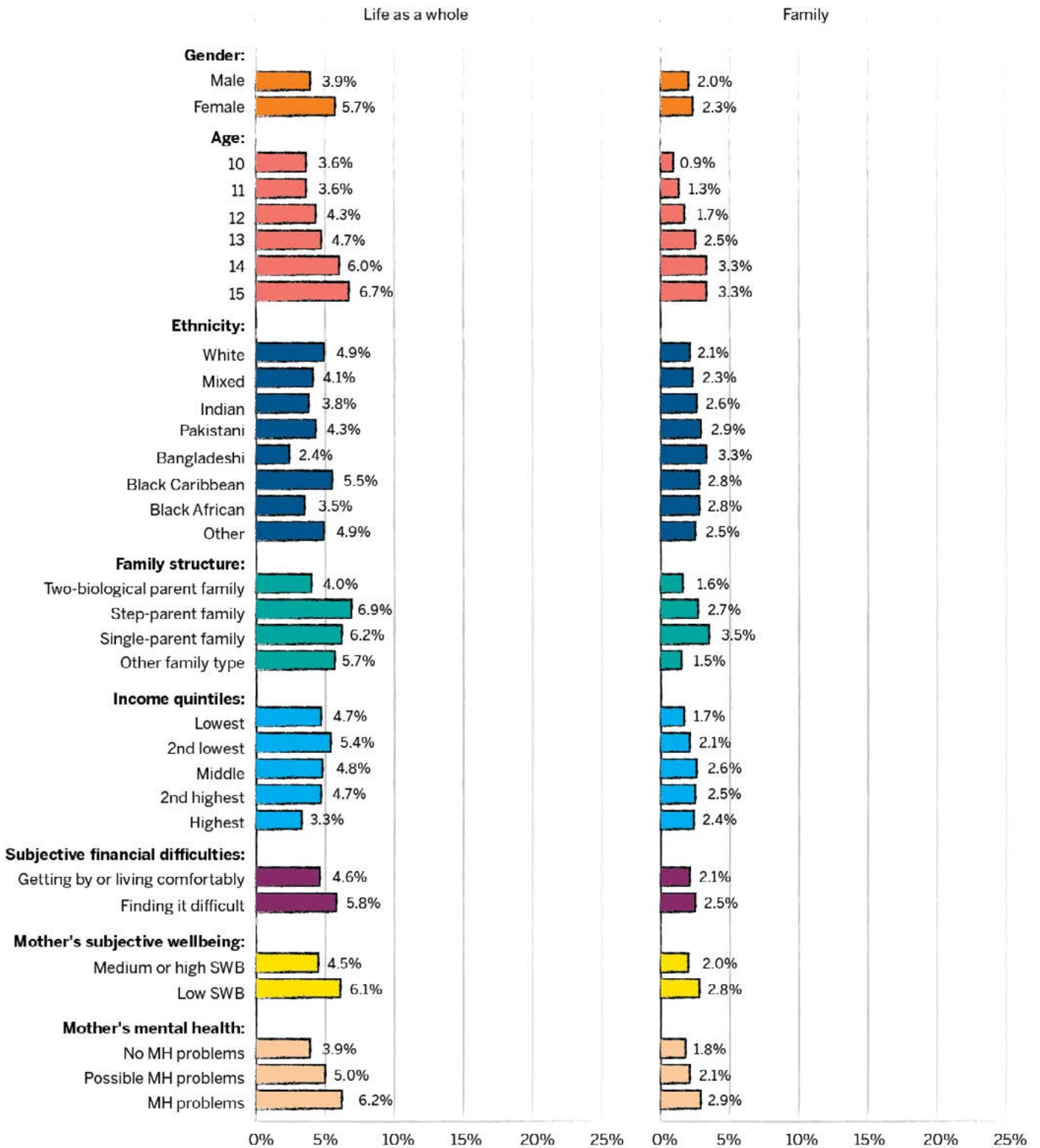
⁷⁴ See, for example, Gregg P, Propper C, and Washbrook E. Understanding the relationship between parental income and multiple child outcomes: a decomposition analysis. London: Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics; 2007. See also: Heckman JJ. Skill Formation and the Economics of Investing in Disadvantaged Children. *Science*. 2006; 312(5782): 1900-1902.

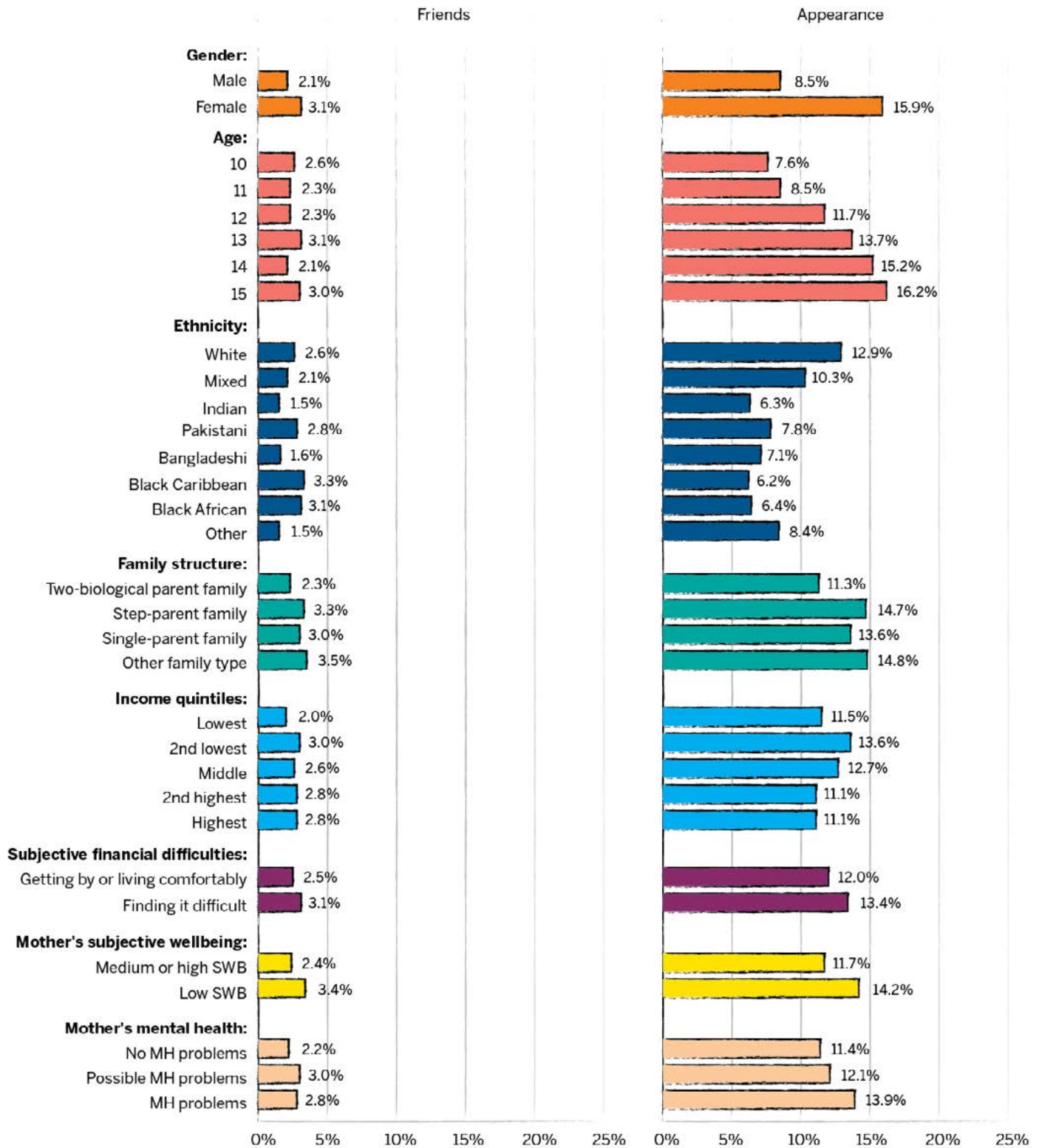
⁷⁵ Family structure is constructed as follows: two-biological parent family relates to children who live with both biological parents; step-parent family relates to children who live with a biological parent and a step-parent or adopted parent, or with a biological parent who has a partner in the household; single-parent family relates to children who live with a single parent and no other adults in household, or other adults who are not parents of the child/the single-parent's partner (NB: this will include single parents living with extended family members and single parents who have a boyfriend or girlfriend who they have not declared as a partner); other family type relates to children who have no biological parents in the household (included children who live with two adopted parents). There are only a small number of children living with same-sex parents in the dataset, and these are categorised according to how the main respondent defined the parental relationships, mostly as one biological parent and one adoptive or step-parent (which means they would be categorised as step-parent families), sometimes as a two-biological parent family, and in a few cases as an 'other' family type.

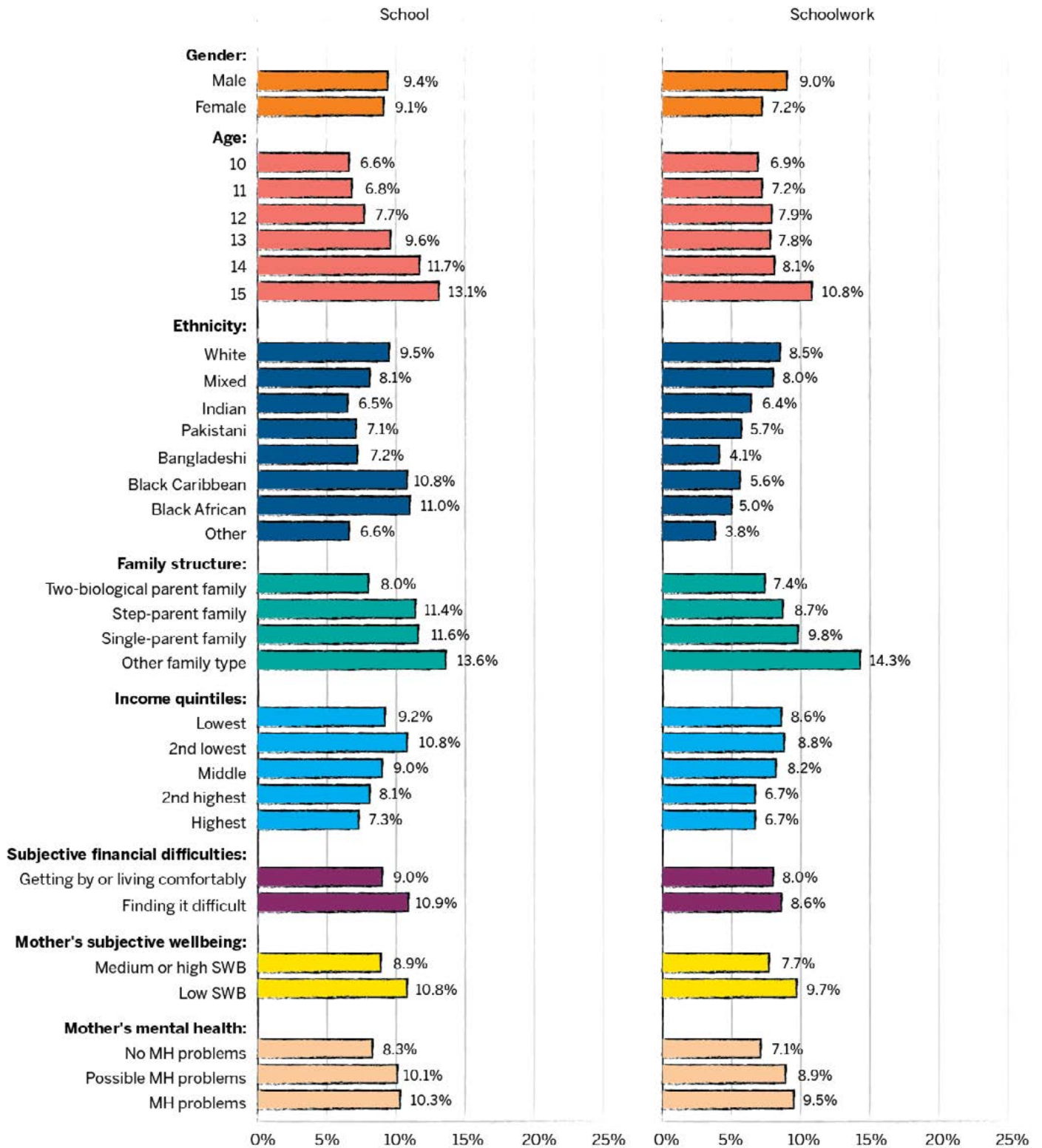
⁷⁶ There was also a higher proportion of children in single-parent families who were unhappy with life as a whole and their family relationships, and a higher proportion of children living in step-parent families who were unhappy with life as a whole, family, school and appearance; however, see the next section for how these findings changed once family relationship quality was taken into account.

⁷⁷ As per footnote 61 above, parental mental health is measured using the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ). A GHQ score of 4 or more out of 12 indicates probable mental health problems, while a score of 0 indicates an absence of mental health problems.

Figure 5. Predicted probability of children (aged 10 to 15) being unhappy (scoring below the midpoint) with different aspects of life, by a range of socio-demographic factors.







Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1 to 12, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of low subjective wellbeing from a logistic regression that includes all the independent variables shown as well as wave of the survey.

"I needed support."

Children's relationships with family and peers

The next step was to consider those factors that emerged as important in the bivariate analysis that were not included in every wave of Understanding Society: namely, children's relationships with their family and others their age.⁷⁸ The sample size for these results (shown in figure 6) is approximately half that of those shown in figure 5. Most of the variables included in figure 5 are also included in figure 6 (that is, gender, age, ethnicity, family structure, and income quintiles/financial difficulties), but they are not all shown again to avoid confusion. Figure 6 presents the predicted probability of children being unhappy with their life as a whole; the predicted probability of them being unhappy with the five other measures is presented in appendix D (figure 6a).

This analysis shows that **children's relationships had an important link to their wellbeing. Every measure of family or peer relationship quality was associated with at least one of the measures of low subjective wellbeing**, after controlling for children's individual characteristics, family or economic circumstances, and the other relationship measures.

In terms of family relationships:

- Higher proportions of children had low scores on some measures if they rarely talked to their mothers about things that matter to them, frequently argued with them, felt unsupported by their family, and would not turn to a family member if they felt upset or worried.
- However, it was the measures of family support that had the clearest relationship to low wellbeing. **Children who did not feel supported by their family were more than six times more likely to feel unhappy with life as a whole (17.7%) as children who felt supported in most things (2.8%).**

In relation to their peer relationships:

- Children who had been bullied in non-physical ways at school (either 'a lot' or 'quite a lot') were more likely to be unhappy with every aspect of their life, except for their family relationships and schoolwork.
- Children who had been bullied physically at school were most likely to be unhappy with their family relationships and their life as a whole.
- Children with no friends were more likely to be unhappy with their life as a whole and, unsurprisingly, friendships.

For example, **low happiness with life as a whole was much higher amongst children who had experienced 'a lot' of non-physical bullying at school (9.5%) or had no friends (9.8%)** compared to children who had never experienced non-physical bullying (2.8%) or had three or more friends (3.8%).⁷⁹

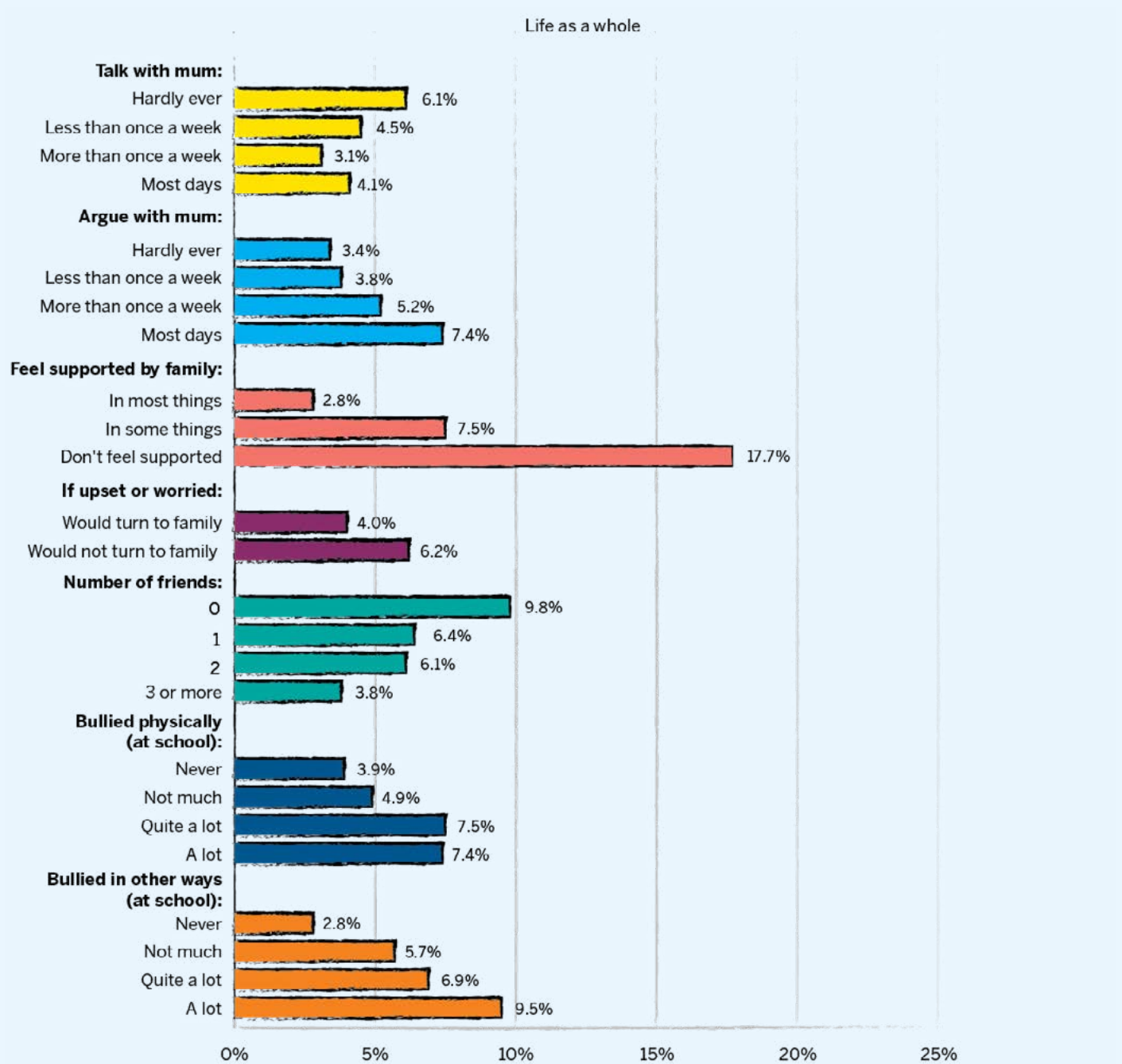
Analysis for figure 6 indicated that it is the quality of children's relationships – rather than their family structures and household incomes – that are most important in understanding their low happiness with different aspects of life. Although figure 5 shows that children were more likely to score low on at least one measure of subjective wellbeing if they lived in a step- or single-parent family, in a household in a lower income quintile, or if their household faced financial difficulties, some of these findings lost significance when relationship variables were included in the analysis. Only the findings for single-parent families (in relation to low happiness with school and family relationships) and those who were struggling financially (in relation to school) remained significant once the relationship variables were included. This aligns with previous research that highlights that **it is the quality of relationships within a family that is related to the biggest differences in children's wellbeing**, rather than the family structure itself.⁸⁰

⁷⁸ They were included in waves 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11.

⁷⁹ These figures are lower than the comparable figures in table A1 (in appendix D), in part because the measures of relationship quality hang together: a child who rarely talks to their mother about things that matter to them is also more likely to have more frequent arguments and feel unsupported by family. Equally, a child who has no friends is more likely to report being bullied than a child with many friends. Nonetheless, controlling for all of the other measures of relationship quality included in the analysis, each individual measure remains a significant predictor of low wellbeing in its own right.

⁸⁰ See: Rees G, Bradshaw J, Goswami H, and Keung A. Understanding Children's Well-being: A national survey of young people's well-being. The Children's Society: London; 2010. See also: The Good Childhood Report 2016; see also: Children's Commissioner, 2022a.

Figure 6. Predicted probability of children (aged 10 to 15) being unhappy with their life as a whole, by relationship quality.



Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 (when these variables were included in the survey), children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

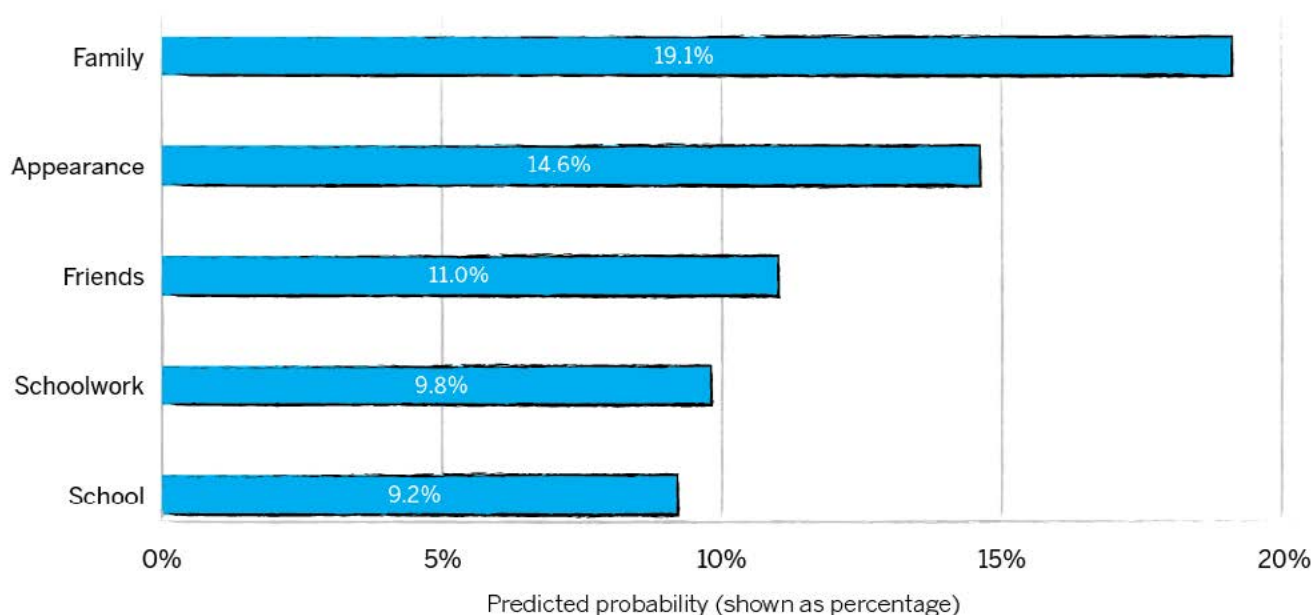
Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of low subjective wellbeing from a logistic regression that includes all the independent variables shown as well as wave of the survey, age, gender, and ethnicity of the child, family structure, income quintile of the household, and subjective financial difficulties.

Which aspects of life predict overall low wellbeing?

The next step in the analysis was to see whether children being unhappy with the five different aspects of life – family, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork – predicted their low happiness with life as a whole, when controlling for age, gender, ethnicity, and wave of the survey.

This showed that approximately 31.9% of the variation in low overall subjective wellbeing was explained by the five domain measures of low wellbeing alongside the demographic variables.⁸¹ As can be seen in figure 7, being unhappy with their **family**, appearance, and friends was most strongly related to children's low happiness with their lives as a whole, while schoolwork and school were less strongly associated.

Figure 7. Predicted probability of children (aged 10 to 15) being unhappy with their life as a whole, if unhappy with different aspects of life.



Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1 to 12, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of low subjective wellbeing from a logistic regression that includes all the measures of low subjective wellbeing shown as well as age, gender, and ethnicity of the child, and wave of the survey.

⁸¹ This equates to a pseudo R^2 of 31.9%, which can be interpreted in a similar way to R^2 in a linear regression, although it is not calculated in the same way. To generate a pseudo R^2 , the survey settings are turned off.

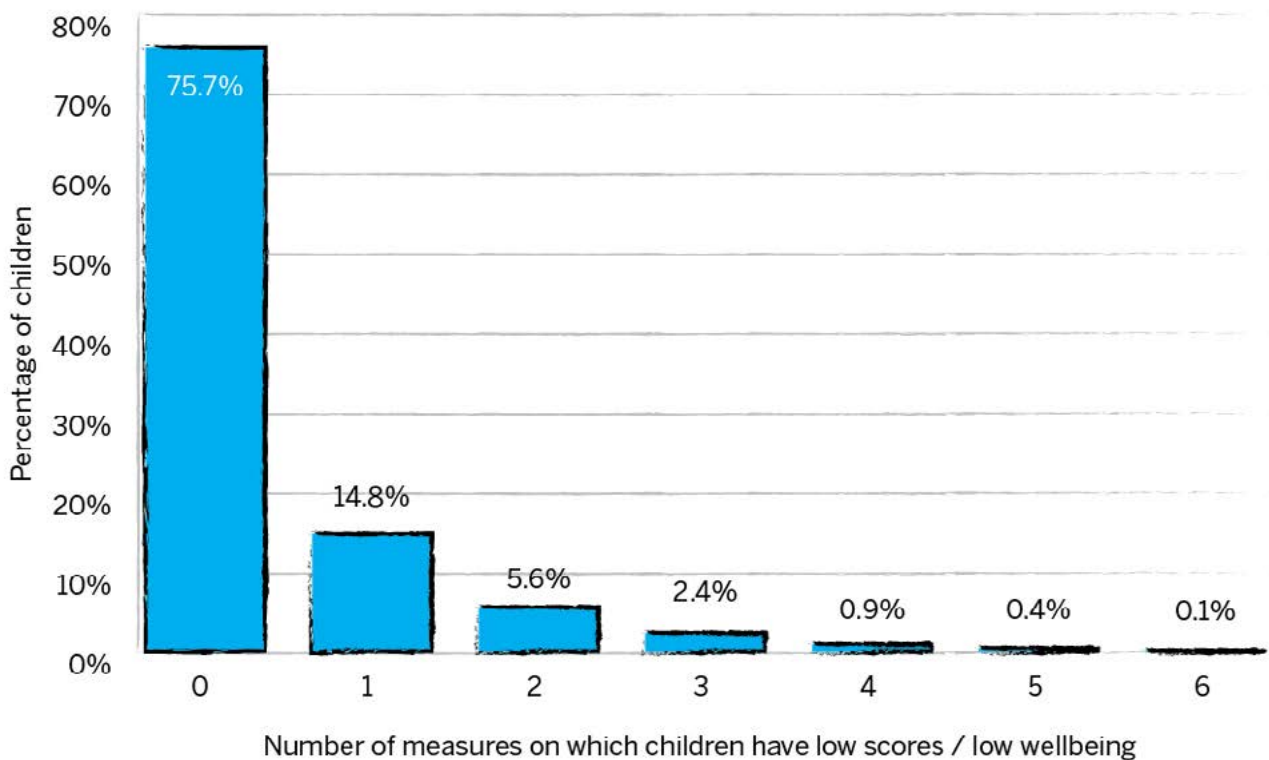


Do children have low wellbeing across multiple aspects of life?

Finally, the analysis explored whether the same children were unhappy with multiple aspects of their life. In order to consider all six measures of subjective wellbeing from Understanding Society, a 'low subjective wellbeing score' was created (with scores from 0 to 6).⁸² Figure 8 shows that about three quarters (75.7%) of children did not have low wellbeing (meaning that they did not score below the midpoint) for any measure, while 14.8% were

unhappy with a single aspect of their life. Around one in twenty (5.6%) were unhappy with two aspects of life, and 3.8% of children with three or more. Although the proportion of children unhappy with several aspects of their life was small, it is notable that **almost a quarter (24.3%) of children were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life.**

Figure 8. Proportion of children (aged 10 to 15) unhappy with multiple aspects of life across survey waves.



Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1 to 12, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

⁸² This 'low wellbeing score' runs from 0 to 6, with 0 indicating low subjective wellbeing for no domains and 6 indicating low subjective wellbeing across all six domains.

Summary

The Understanding Society survey is an important source for monitoring trends and changes in children's wellbeing over time. This in turn allows us to identify issues and groups of children who may benefit from further attention.

The latest data (2020-21) for children aged 10 to 15 in the UK show that:

- **Children's happiness with their life as a whole, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork was significantly lower than when the survey began in 2009-10.**
- **Females' mean happiness scores were significantly lower in 2020-21 than when the survey started in 2009-10 for each of the six measures.**
- In addition, **females remained significantly less happy with their appearance than males**, which has been the case ever since Understanding Society started reporting in 2009-10.
- **There is also a difference in happiness with appearance by aggregated ethnic groups**, with children from all other ethnic groups combined being consistently happier with this aspect of life than white children (across waves 7 to 12, since the introduction of the IEMB sample for the youth survey).
- When only demographic characteristics were considered, there were some differences in the likelihood of low wellbeing linked to children's characteristics or circumstances. Notably, **females were more likely to be unhappy with their appearance, friendships, and life as whole.**
- **Children's relationships with their family and friends were important for their wellbeing.** Feeling unsupported by family, having no friends, or having been bullied at school were associated with one or more of the measures of low subjective wellbeing.
- **Adding family relationship variables to the analysis again highlighted their importance for children's wellbeing**, as some of the other factors explored previously lost their significance once family relationship variables were included.

The analysis on low subjective wellbeing conducted by pooling together data from Understanding Society survey waves has shown that:

- While the majority of children did not have low subjective wellbeing for any of the six measures, **about a quarter of children were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life.** Almost one in ten were unhappy with two of more aspects of life.



Chapter 2:

Latest figures on children's subjective wellbeing from The Children's Society's annual household survey

This chapter presents findings from The Children's Society's annual household survey,⁸³ undertaken in May and June 2023, and includes responses from just over 2,000 children and young people. The survey provides a very recent snapshot of how children and young people feel about their lives as a whole and different aspects of their lives. The chapter also looks further at the experiences of children and young people completing this survey who score low across measures of subjective wellbeing.

In 2023, 2,001 children and young people responded to The Children's Society's annual household survey,⁸³ alongside their parent or carer. In addition to our routine questions such as the Good Childhood Index (GCI), other questions around subjective wellbeing, some demographic questions, and questions about the household, the 2023 survey, like the last three previous ones, included some questions about experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. Brief results on this and responses to new questions on rises in the cost of living are presented in this chapter.

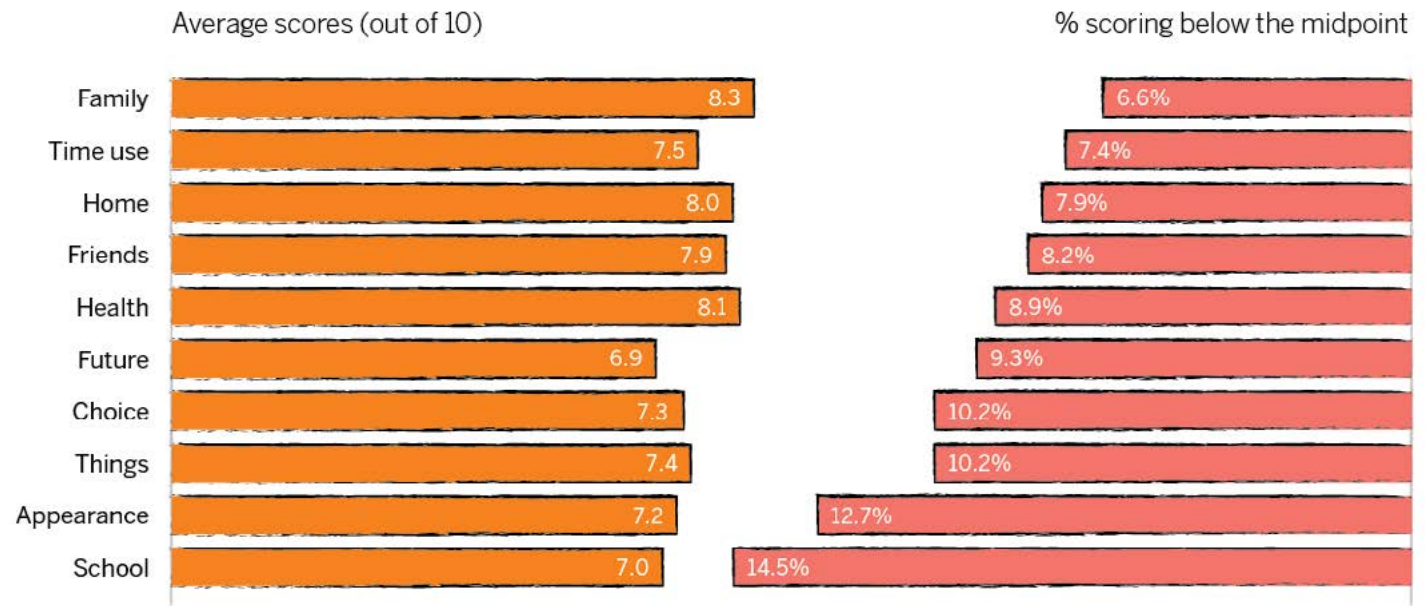
⁸³ The sample included 1,996 children and young people who identified as male or female, with a further five who responded 'prefer not to say.'

The Good Childhood Index

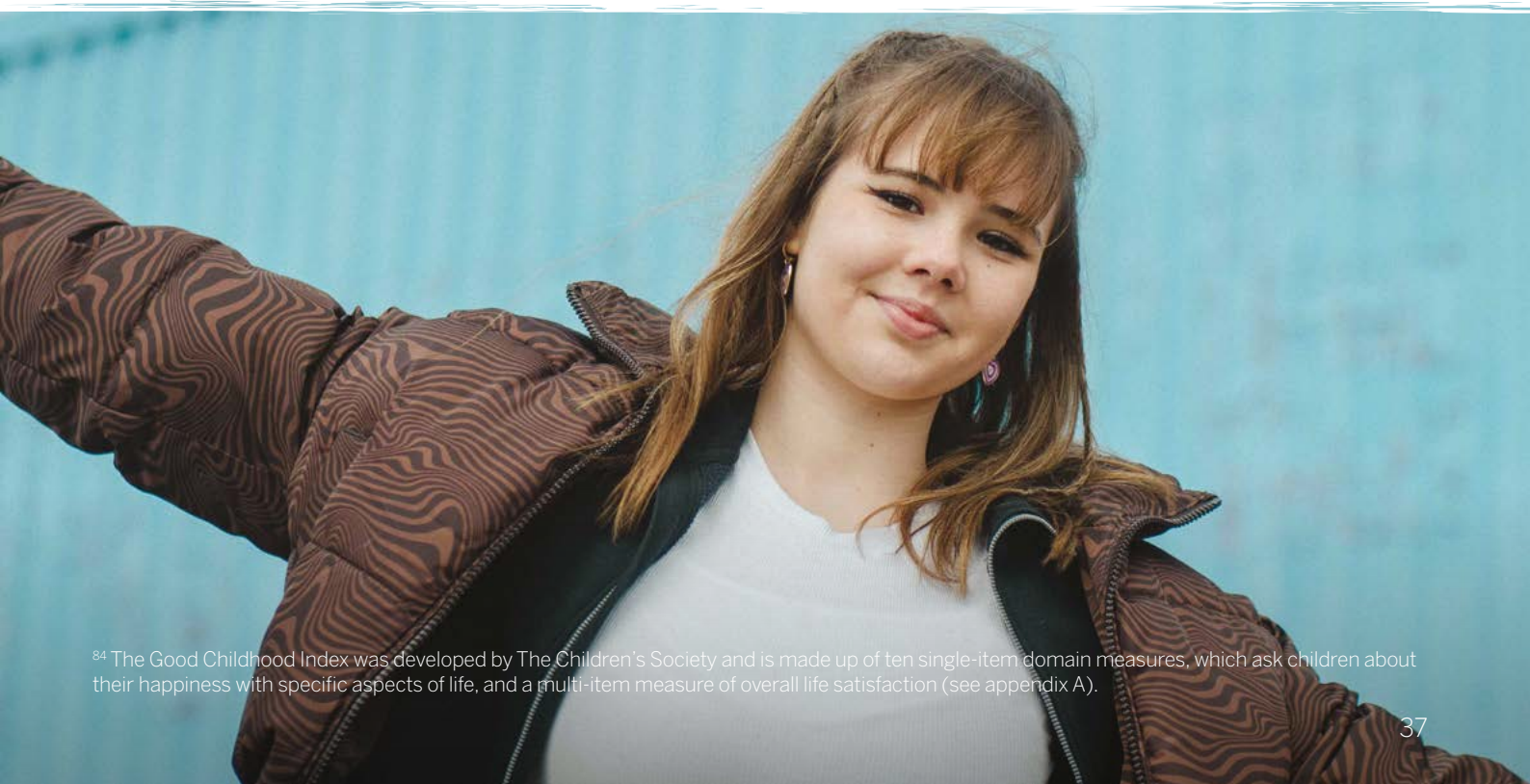
The latest figures on children and young people's responses to the GCI questions are presented in figures 9 and 10 (see appendix A for details of the GCI).⁸⁴ Figure 9 shows the average happiness scores and the proportion of children and young

people who scored low (below the midpoint on the 0 to 10 scale) on each of these ten measures. Those scoring below the midpoint are the children and young people who would be considered to have low wellbeing for these aspects of life.

Figure 9. Latest figures from the Good Childhood Index for children (aged 10 to 17).



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data. Excludes missing responses (including 'prefer not to say').



⁸⁴ The Good Childhood Index was developed by The Children's Society and is made up of ten single-item domain measures, which ask children about their happiness with specific aspects of life, and a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction (see appendix A).

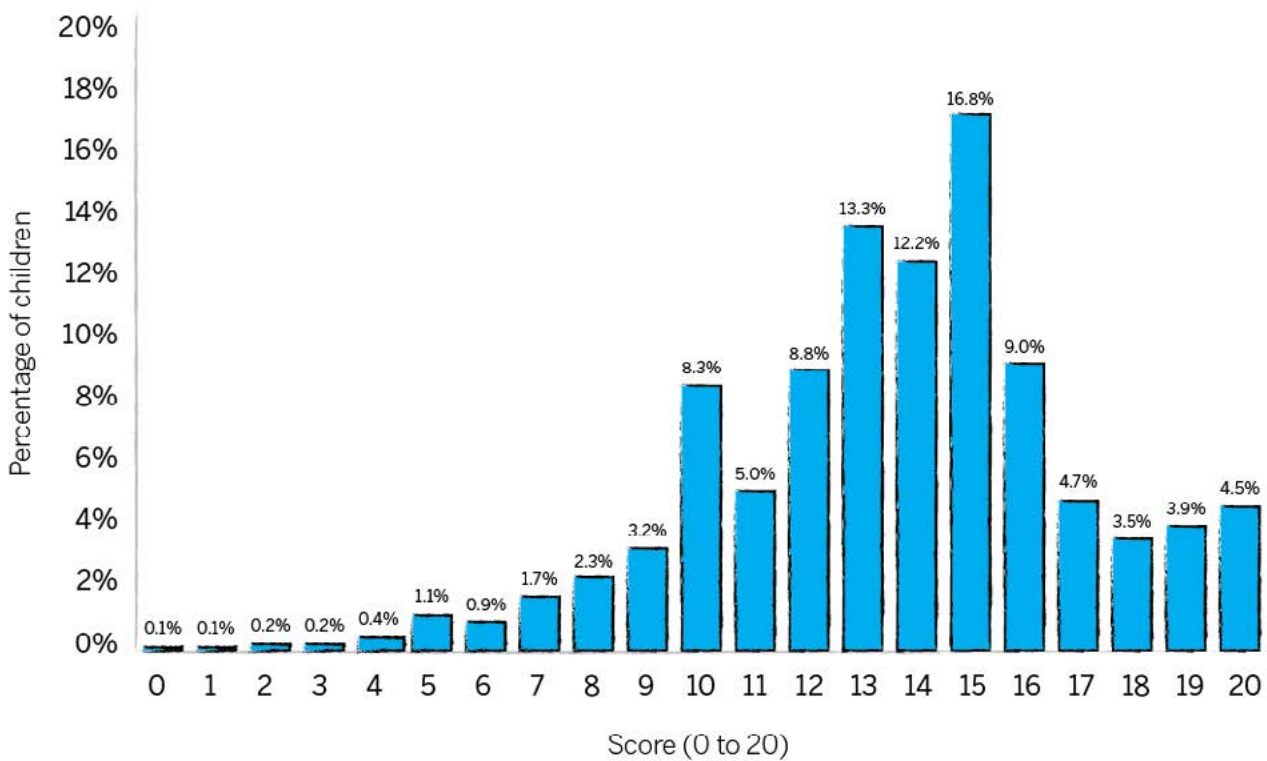
In 2023, children and young people were, on average, most happy with their family, followed by their health and their home. A larger proportion of children and young people had low happiness with school than with any other aspect of life, followed by appearance.

The GCI also includes a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction.⁸⁵ Figure 10 shows the distribution of scores in this year's survey.

In 2023, 10% of children and young people scored below the midpoint on this measure, and can therefore be considered to have low overall wellbeing.



Figure 10. Latest figures for overall life satisfaction for children (aged 10 to 17).



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Note: Only includes responses from children who provided a score for each of the five items that make up the measure.

⁸⁵ This multi-item measure is based on Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale; see Huebner ES. Initial development of the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale. School Psychology International. 1991; 12: 231-40.

Other measures of children’s wellbeing: Office for National Statistics indicators

The Children’s Society’s household survey includes three ONS questions on children’s personal wellbeing,⁸⁶ which are reported on in figure 11.

Figure 11. Latest ONS measures of overall wellbeing for children aged 10 to 17.



Source: The Children’s Society’s household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Further analysis to explore the characteristics and experiences of children and young people who score low across GCI indicators

The Children’s Society’s household survey has a much smaller sample size (n=2,001) than the pooled analysis of Understanding Society survey waves presented in chapter 1. Therefore, it has less power to detect differences between children by factors such as ethnicity or single age groups.⁸⁷ However, the household survey does have a number of advantages over the Understanding Society survey. It has greater coverage of different aspects of life that are relevant for overall wellbeing, including the ten GCI domains, as well as a measure of special educational needs

(SEN) and a child-reported measure of economic circumstances. It also includes young people up to the age of 17. The following analysis focuses on what can be learned about low subjective wellbeing from these aspects of the survey.

Which children have low subjective wellbeing on GCI domains?

Analysis of whether there are differences in low wellbeing according to the age and gender of the child or young person indicated that **a higher proportion of females than males was unhappy**

⁸⁶ See Office for National Statistics. Children’s well-being measures [Internet]. 2018 [cited 2023 Jul 26]. Available from: ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/datasets/childrenswellbeingmeasures.

⁸⁷ In addition, the categories of ethnicity are limited to white, mixed, Asian, and black. For this reason, although ethnicity is included as a control variable, the findings are not discussed in the text. The ethnicity of children taking part in The Children’s Society’s household survey is reported by their parent or carer, on a voluntary basis.

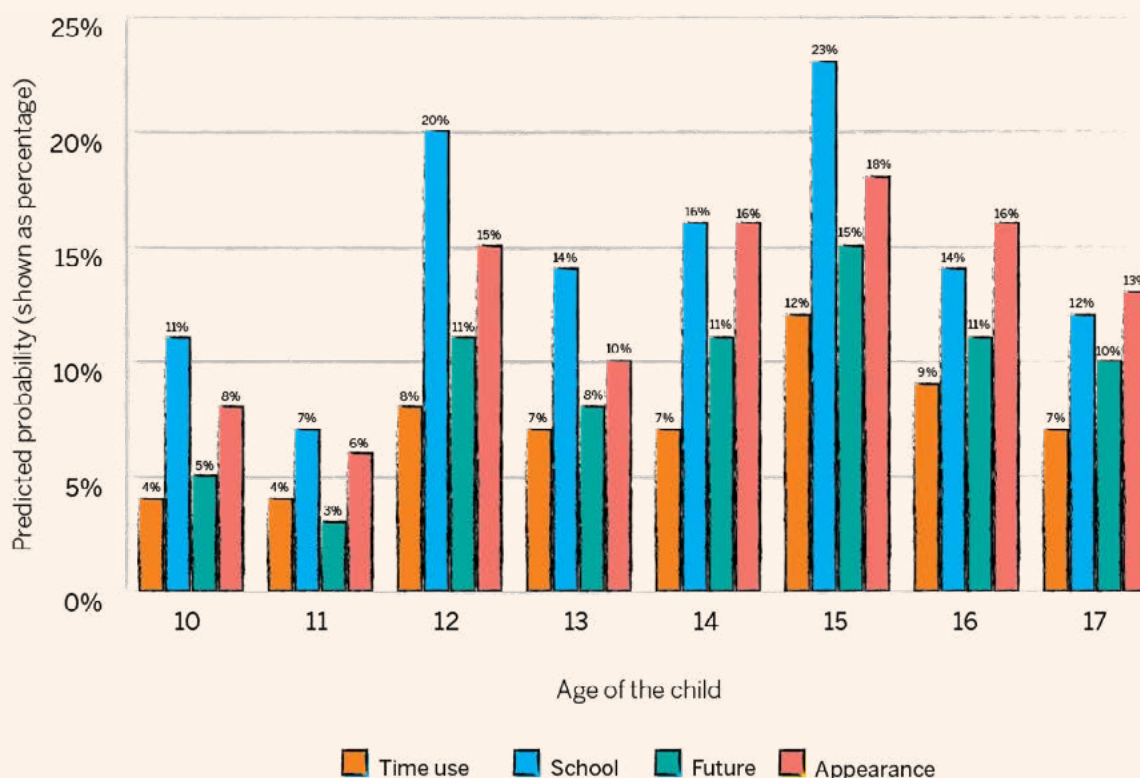
with their appearance, and a higher proportion of 15-year-olds was unhappy with their time use, appearance, school and the future.⁸⁸

The inclusion of 16- and 17-year-olds in the household survey adds an interesting dimension to the analysis. Rather than older age being associated with low wellbeing in a 'linear' way up to the age of 17, the age distributions had more of an 'inverse U' shape. In figure 12, which shows the domains with significant associations with age, low subjective wellbeing was highest at age 15, with both younger and older children and young people less likely to have low wellbeing. This makes intuitive sense, as these four domains of life are likely to be difficult to navigate for children in their mid-teenage years, compared to ages 16 and 17 when young people are approaching adulthood and may have increasing autonomy over their lives and identities.

Figure 12 also shows an interesting second peak in children with low scores for happiness with school at age 12, which is the age that most children will have made the transition to secondary school.⁸⁹ Other research indicates that year 7 can be a difficult time for children as they forge friendships, and sometimes new identities, in a different social context.⁹⁰

Another question included in The Children's Society's household survey is whether children have SEN. As can be seen in figure 13, which shows the two domains that are associated with this measure, children with SEN were about twice as likely to be unhappy with their friends (16%) and health (14%) compared to those without SEN (7% and 8% respectively).

Figure 12. Predicted probabilities of children (aged 10 to 17) being unhappy with time use, school, appearance, and the future, by age.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

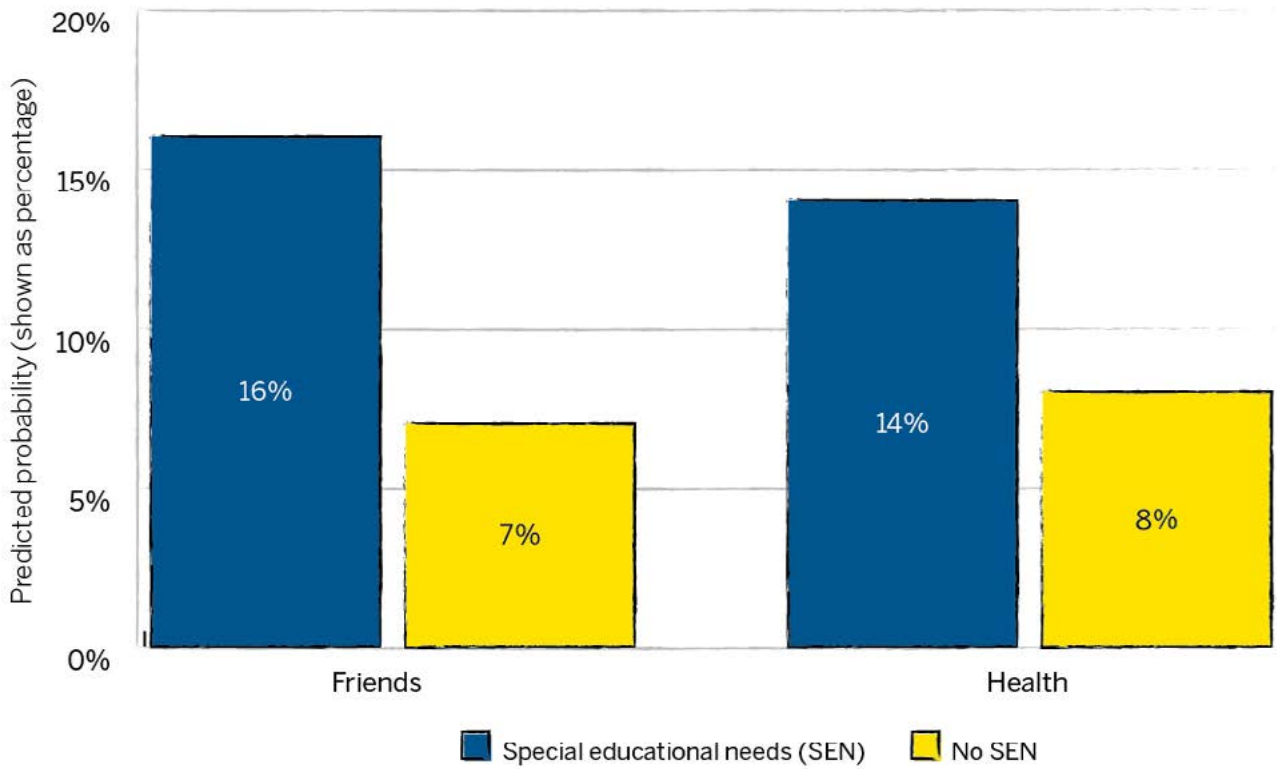
Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of being unhappy with time use, school, appearance and the future from logistic regressions that include age, gender, ethnicity, whether the child has SEN, and whether the child worries about money.

⁸⁸ These findings come from a series of ten logistic regressions with happiness with family, friends, school, money, home, health, appearance, future, choice and time use as the dependent variables, and age, gender, ethnicity, whether the child has SEN, and whether the child worries about money as the independent variables. In order to ensure that comparisons were 'like for like', the sample size was held constant across these regressions.

⁸⁹ The survey was carried out in May to June 2023, when the majority of 12-year-olds were in year 7.

⁹⁰ Pople L. What Stops a Good Life for Children? An Exploration of Bullying, Poverty and Gender. In: Tiliouine H, Benatui D, and Lau MKW (editors). Handbook of Children's Risk, Vulnerability and Quality of Life. Springer; Cham; 2022. 213-234.

Figure 13. Predicted probabilities of children (aged 10 to 17) being unhappy with their friends and health, by special educational needs.

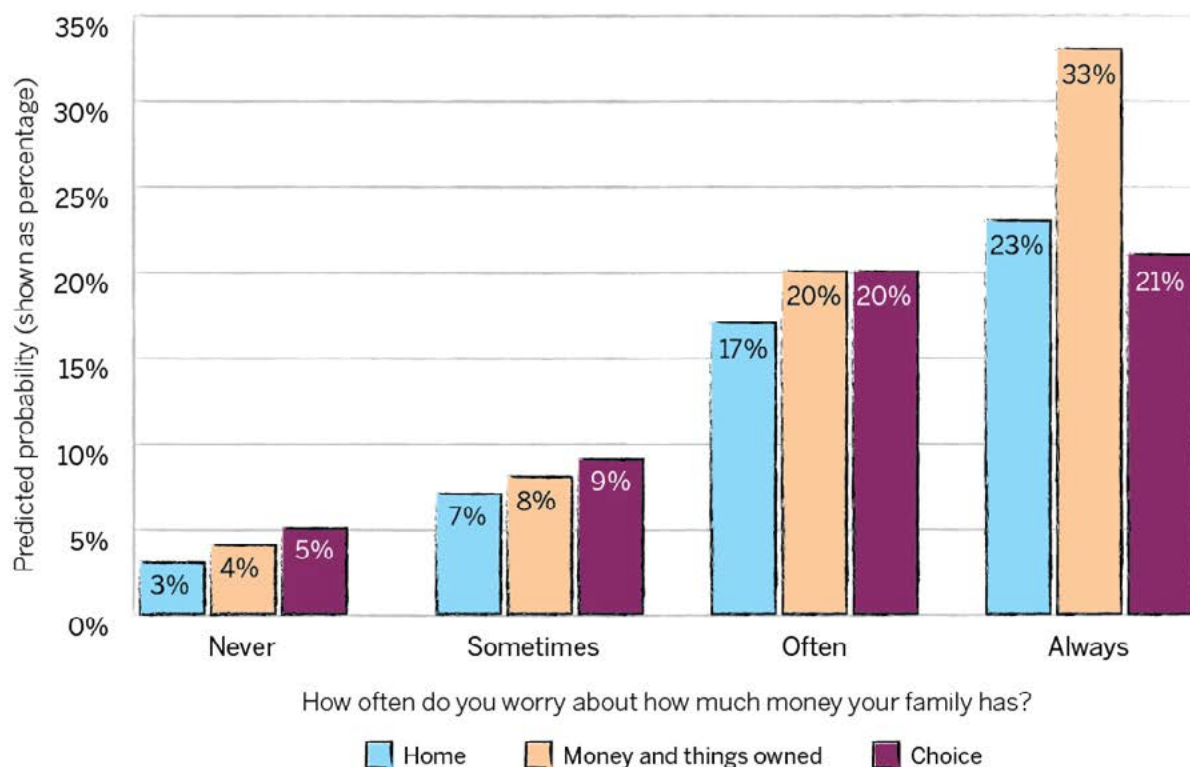


Source: The Children’s Society’s household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of being unhappy with friends and health from logistic regressions that include age, gender, ethnicity, whether the child has SEN, and whether the child worries about money.



Figure 14. Predicted probabilities of children (aged 10 to 17) being unhappy with their home, money and things they own, and choice, by self-reported worry about how much money their family has.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of being unhappy with home, money and choice from logistic regressions that include age, gender, ethnicity, whether the child has SEN, and whether the child worries about how much money their family has.

Children and young people worrying, particularly 'often' or 'always', about how much money their family has was associated with being unhappy with every measure of subjective wellbeing. Figure 14 shows the three domains with the clearest associations with worries about money. Children who always worried about money were several times more likely to be unhappy – not just with their money and possessions (33%), which is to be expected, but also with the amount of choice that they had in life (21%) and with the home that they lived in (23%), compared to children who never worried about their family's money (4%, 5% and 3% respectively).

Which domains of low subjective wellbeing predict overall low wellbeing?

The next step in the analysis was to see whether being unhappy with the ten GCI domains shown in figure 15 was associated with being unhappy with life as a whole, when controlling for age, gender, and ethnicity.⁹¹ This replicates the analysis conducted by Rees and colleagues in 2010,⁹² which looked at whether children's mean happiness scores on these measures can explain their happiness with life as a whole – but here, the focus was looking at those with low scores on this measure.⁹³

⁹¹ The variable used to define 'being unhappy with life as a whole' is the GCI question 'How happy are you with your life as a whole?'. This differs from the measure of overall life satisfaction used elsewhere in the report, which is based on the multi-item measure presented in the first table of appendix A.

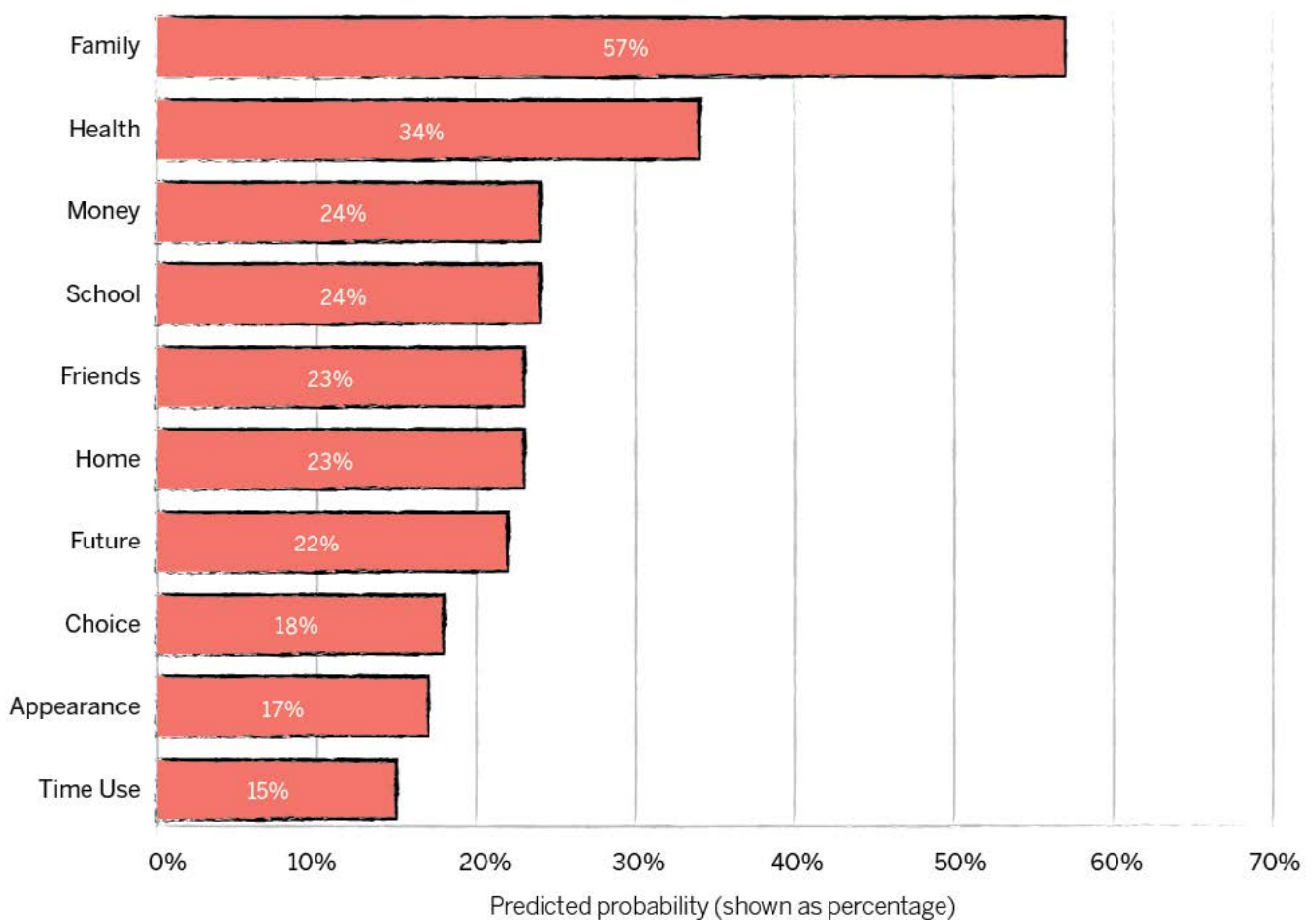
⁹² Rees et al., 2010.

⁹³ Although this analysis is directly comparable with Rees et al., 2010 because all 10 GCI domains are included, the results presented here may be sample-specific, as there are relatively few children with low subjective wellbeing for each of these domains.

Approximately 26.1% of the variation in low happiness with life as a whole can be explained by low wellbeing on the GCI domains, plus the demographic variables.⁹⁴ As can be seen in figure 15, children and young people being unhappy with their **family** and with their **health** had the strongest associations with being unhappy with their lives as a whole. For example, 57% of children who were unhappy with their family relationships were predicted to be unhappy with their lives as a whole. These findings are similar to those that were presented in the previous analysis of mean wellbeing scores by Rees et al.: family came at the top of both analyses, and some domains consistently appeared in the top half (health) or towards the middle (friends).

However, there were also some differences, notably that children and young people being unhappy with school had one of the strongest associations with them being unhappy with life as a whole in the analysis of this year's household survey data, while school was at the bottom of Rees and colleagues' analysis. Conversely, the bar at the bottom of figure 15 shows that only 15% of children who were unhappy with their time use were predicted to be unhappy with their lives as a whole, whereas time use was in the top half of the table in Rees et al.'s findings.

Figure 15. Predicted probability of children (aged to 10 to 17) being unhappy with their life as a whole, if unhappy with different aspects of life.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of being unhappy with home, money and choice from logistic regressions that include age, gender, ethnicity, whether the child has SEN, and whether the child worries about how much money their family has.

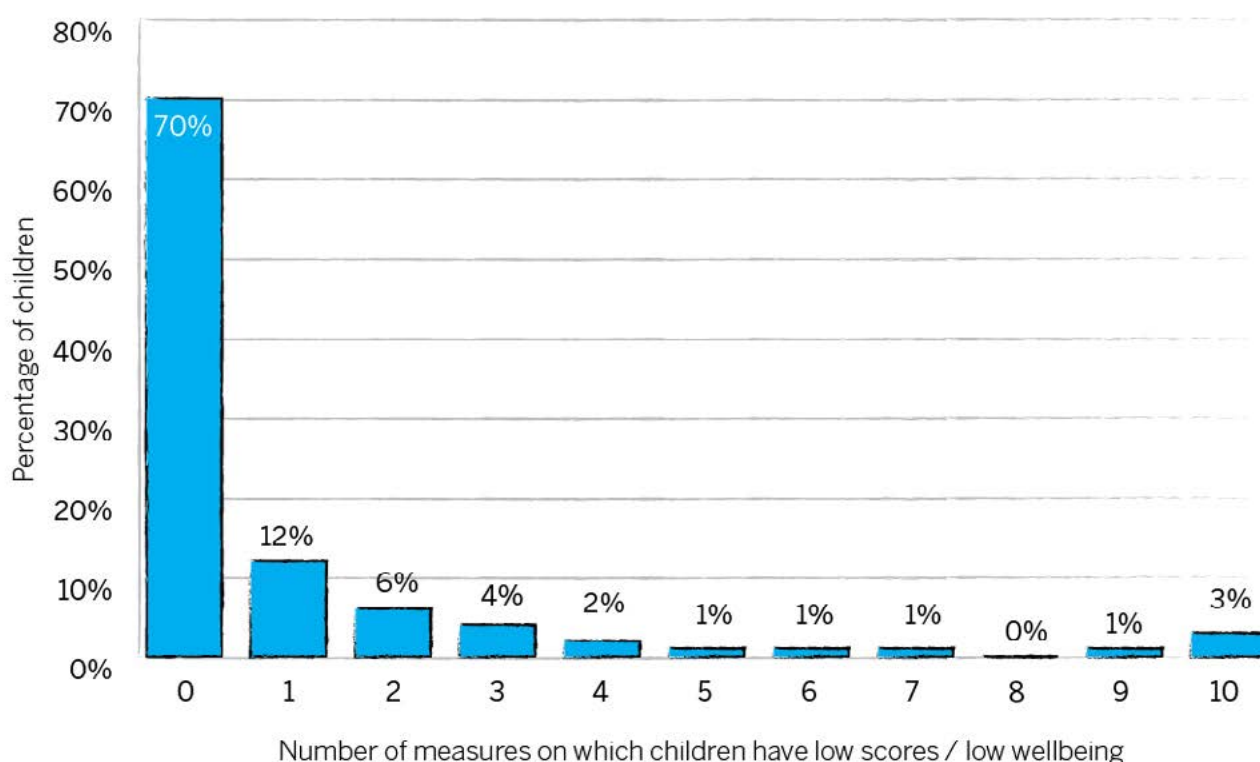
⁹⁴ This equates to a pseudo R² of 26.1%, which can be interpreted in a similar way to R² in a linear regression, although it is not calculated in the same way.

Low subjective wellbeing across multiple aspects of life

Finally, in order to consider low subjective wellbeing across all ten domains of the GCI, a 'low subjective wellbeing score' was created.⁹⁵ Figure 16 shows that more than two thirds (70%) of children did not have low wellbeing for any of the measures, 12% were unhappy with just one aspect of life, about one in twenty were unhappy with two (6%) or three (4%) aspects of life, and about one in fifty with four (2%) measures. 4% of children were unhappy

with five to nine of the measures, and about one in forty (3%) were unhappy with all ten measures. Although the proportions of children unhappy with multiple aspects of their life might seem small, it is notable that **about a fifth of children and young people (19%) were unhappy with at least two aspects of their life, and almost one in ten (9%) were unhappy with four or more.**

Figure 16. Proportion of children (aged 10 to 17) unhappy with multiple aspects of life.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

⁹⁵ This 'low wellbeing score' runs from 0 to 10, with 0 indicating low subjective wellbeing for no domains and 10 indicating low subjective wellbeing across all 10 domains.

Topical issues

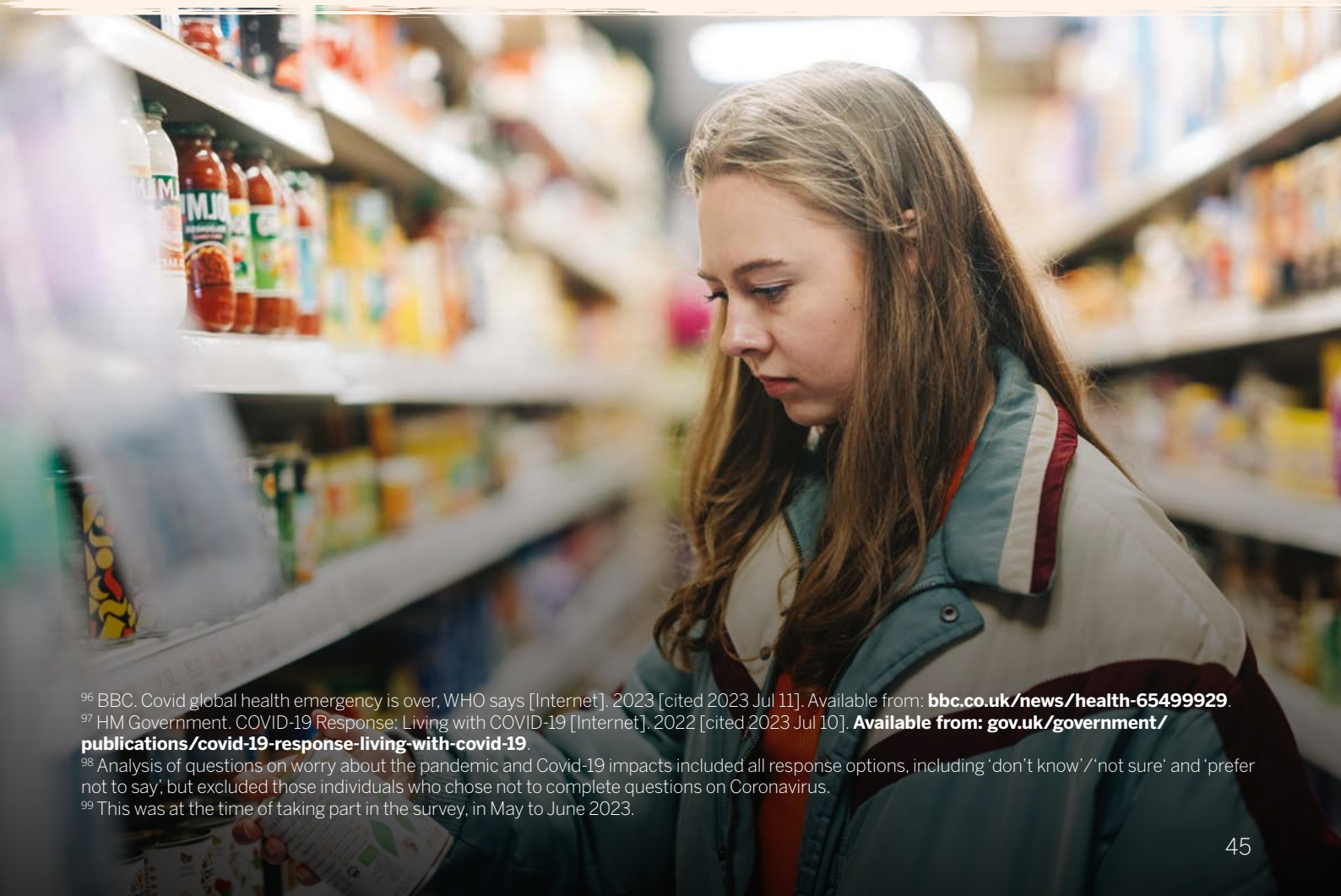
Parents', carers', and children's views on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

As in previous years, a set of questions was included in The Children's Society's household survey 2023 that asked parents, carers, and children about their experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. To reflect the situation at the time of running the survey, with lower levels of the virus in circulation, the World Health Organization having declared that Covid-19 no longer represented a 'global health emergency',⁹⁶ and the UK Government having set out its strategy for 'living with Covid-19',⁹⁷ fewer questions were included this year. These focused on the impact that the pandemic has had and continues to have.

In 2023, **just over half (55%) of parents or carers indicated that they were worried to some extent** ('extremely', 'very', 'somewhat', or 'slightly') **about Coronavirus**, which is lower than in previous surveys (for example, 72% of parents or carers were worried about Coronavirus in 2022). As in 2022, the most common impacts

on families reported by parents or carers since the pandemic began were adults and/or children in their household having had Coronavirus (74% and 65% respectively).⁹⁸

Parents and carers were asked to indicate what impact, if any, the pandemic had had since it began in 2020, on themselves, their family, and their child. As shown in figure 17, similar proportions of parents and carers reported a 'neither positive nor negative' impact or a negative (either 'quite' or 'very' negative) impact on each. When asked about the impact that the pandemic has now,⁹⁹ the most common answer provided by parents and carers across questions was 'neither positive nor negative'. Interestingly, for each of the categories (impact since the start of the pandemic, and impact now), on average parents and carers gave very similar responses for the impact on themselves, on their family, and on their child.



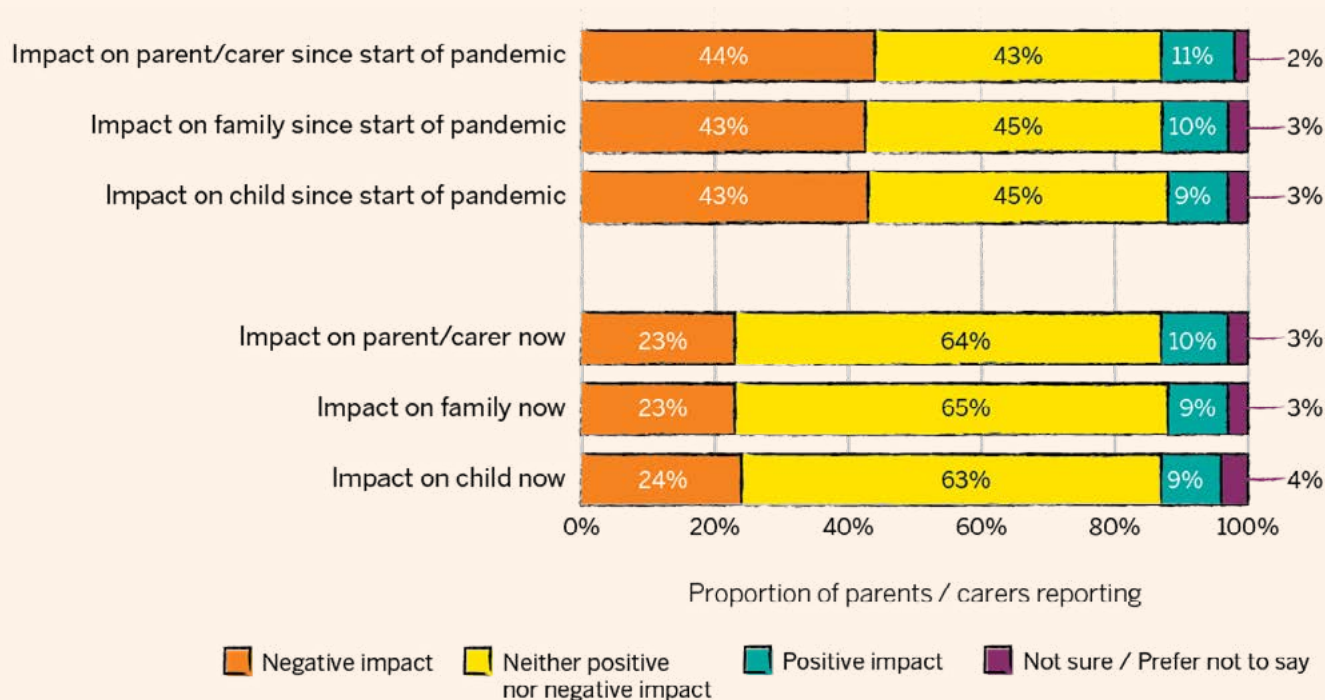
⁹⁶ BBC. Covid global health emergency is over, WHO says [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 11]. Available from: [bbc.co.uk/news/health-65499929](https://www.bbc.com/news/health-65499929).

⁹⁷ HM Government. COVID-19 Response: Living with COVID-19 [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 10]. Available from: [gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-living-with-covid-19](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-response-living-with-covid-19).

⁹⁸ Analysis of questions on worry about the pandemic and Covid-19 impacts included all response options, including 'don't know'/'not sure' and 'prefer not to say', but excluded those individuals who chose not to complete questions on Coronavirus.

⁹⁹ This was at the time of taking part in the survey, in May to June 2023.

Figure 17. Reported impact of Covid-19 pandemic on parents or carers, their family, and their child (aged 10 to 17) since the start of the pandemic, and now.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Children and young people were also asked what impact, if any, the Coronavirus pandemic had had on their life since it began in 2020, and the impact it has now. 45% reported a negative impact since the start of the pandemic (either 'quite' or 'very' negative), 40% a 'neither positive nor negative' impact, and 10% a positive impact (either 'very' or 'quite' positive).¹⁰⁰ About two thirds of children (65%) said that it was now having a 'neither positive nor negative' impact, 18% a negative impact (either 'quite' or 'very' negative), and 10% a positive impact ('very' or 'quite').¹⁰¹

As was the case for parents and carers, **a lower proportion of children and young people (49%) indicated that they were worried** to some extent ('extremely', 'very', 'somewhat' or 'slightly') **about Coronavirus than in previous surveys.**¹⁰²

Increases to the cost of living

As in 2022, parents and carers were asked how concerned, if at all, they were about the impact of cost-of-living increases on their family/ household over the next 12 months. Overall, **82% of parents and carers indicated that they were 'very' or 'quite' concerned**, which is similar to the proportion in 2022 (85%).¹⁰³

Parents and carers were also asked how well their household had managed financially between January and March 2023. 23% responded that they found it 'quite difficult' or 'very difficult', 35% were 'just about getting by', and 41% that they were either 'living comfortably' or 'doing alright'.¹⁰⁴ To reflect the current increases to the cost of living, further questions were included about parents' or carers' financial situation, which will be examined in a separate report due to be published in autumn 2023.

¹⁰⁰ 6% were 'not sure', and less than 0.5% preferred not to say.

¹⁰¹ 7% indicated they were 'not sure', and less than 0.5% preferred not to say.

¹⁰² Of those remaining, 46% responded that they were 'not at all worried' and under 5% replied 'not sure' or 'prefer not to say'.

¹⁰³ 14% were 'not very concerned', 3% 'not at all concerned', and less than 2% responded 'not sure'/'prefer not to say'.

¹⁰⁴ Just under 1% responded 'not sure'/'prefer not to say'.

Summary

The Children's Society's annual household survey, conducted in May and June 2023, provides us with a very recent snapshot of how children and young people aged 10 to 17 were feeling about different aspects of their lives. It also allows experiences of recent events, for instance the impact of increases to the cost of living and the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, to be explored.

The results of the 2023 survey suggested:

- **10% of children and young people aged 10 to 17 scored below the midpoint on the overall life satisfaction measure**, which indicates that they have low wellbeing overall.
- **Children and young people were, on average, most happy with their family. A larger proportion of children and young people scored below the midpoint (indicating that they were unhappy) for school than for any other aspect of life, followed by appearance.**
- Although the majority of children and young people did not have low wellbeing on any of the ten measures of subjective wellbeing included in the GCI, almost a third were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life. Strikingly, **almost one in ten were unhappy with four of more of the ten aspects of life they were asked about.**
- There were notable differences for some groups of children. For instance, **15-year-olds were more likely to score low on the measures of happiness with their school, appearance, future, and time use, compared to both older and younger children and young people.** There was also a second peak in low scores for happiness with school at age 12, when most children are in year 7 and have made the transition to secondary school.
- **Children and young people with SEN were more likely than those without SEN to score low on their happiness with their health and their friends.**
- With particular relevance during the current cost of living crisis, **children and young people who worried about the amount of money that their family had were more likely to be unhappy than those without financial worries across every one of the ten measures of subjective wellbeing** (and particularly with their home, their money and possessions, and the amount of choice that they have).

Chapter 3:

Children and young people's views about the future, current societal issues and their safety

The Children's Society's annual household survey includes a topical module of questions each year and, in 2023, all children and young people taking part were asked a series of questions about the future and wider societal issues. Older children were also asked about their sense of safety in different settings and situations. Asking children such questions can provide a sense of what matters most to them, now and for their future, and how this relates to their wellbeing – which, in turn, can inform how adults respond to children and young people's needs and priorities.

Children and young people’s views about the future and current societal issues

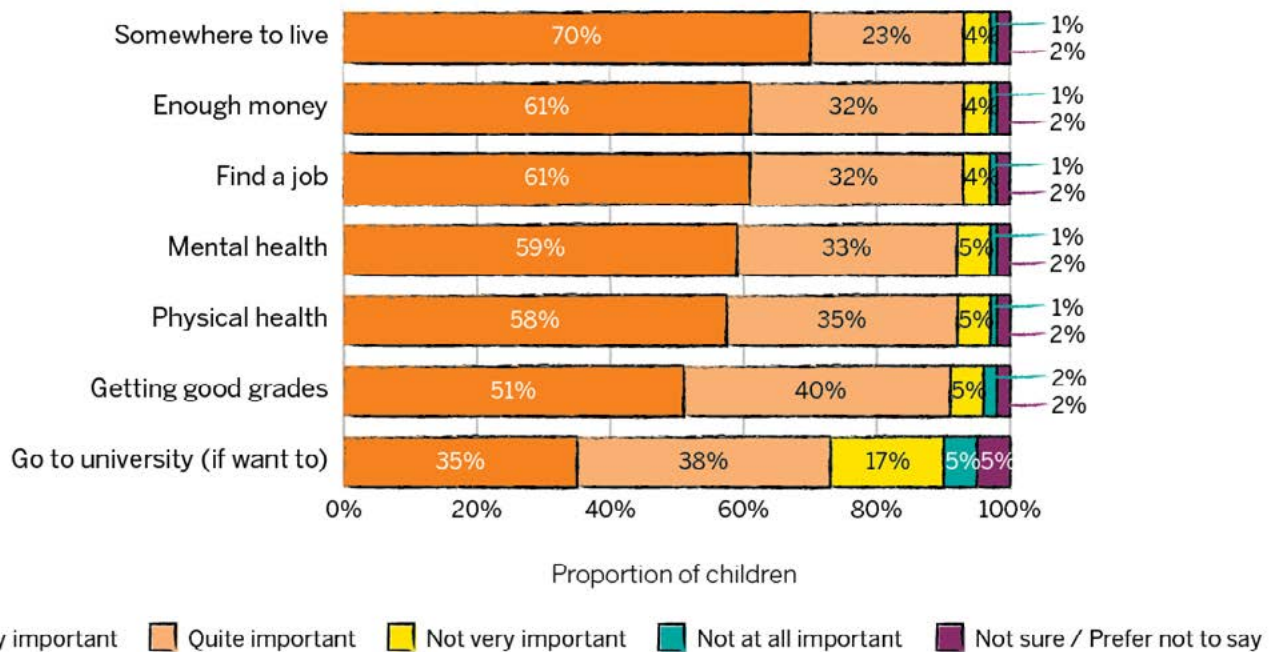
Children and young people’s views about aspects of life important for their own future

As in 2019 and 2021, we asked children and young people how important they thought a set of issues were for their own future: getting good grades at school/college, being able to go to university if they want to, being able to find a job, having enough money, having somewhere to live, their mental health, and their physical health.

As shown in figure 18, **the item that children and young people rated as most important in 2023 was again having somewhere to live.** This was followed by having enough money (which ranked fourth in 2021), being able to find a job, mental health, and physical health. Except for the move of having enough money, the remaining order was the same as in 2021, with going to university again rated as least important.

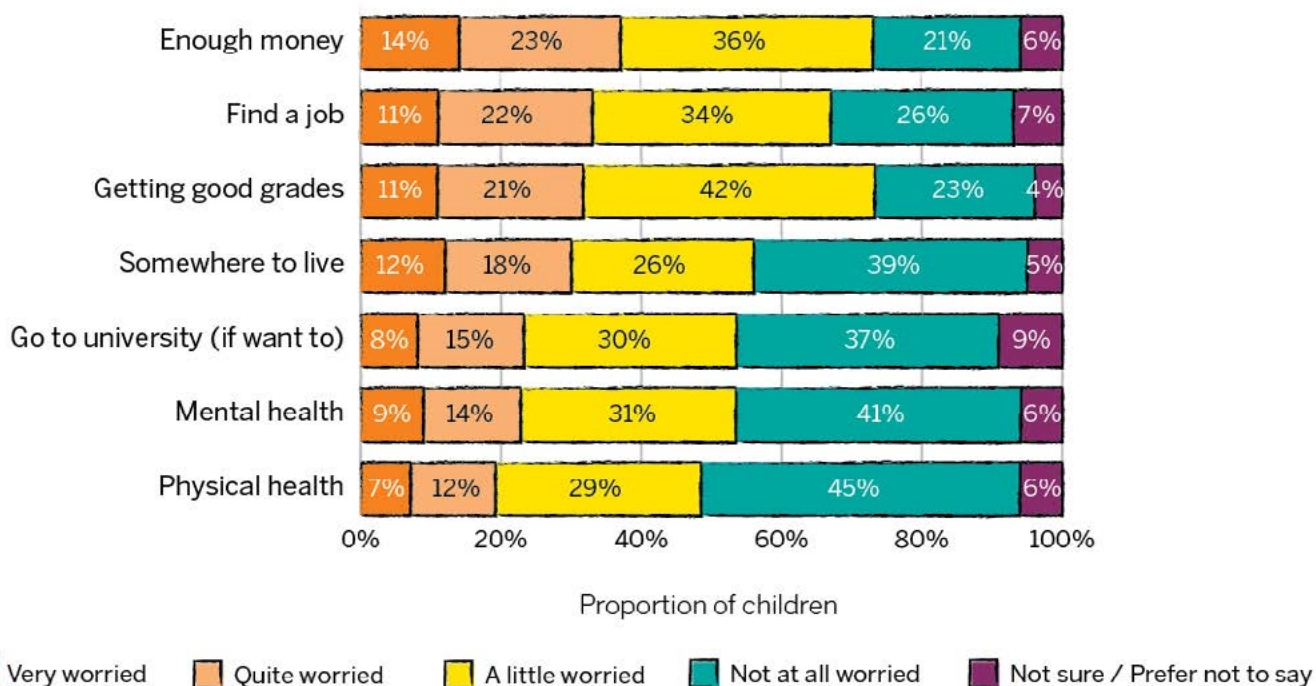
We then asked children and young people how much they worried about these same issues. As presented in figure 19, in 2023, as in 2021, **more children were worried (‘very’ or ‘quite’) about having enough money, being able to find a job, and getting good grades.** As in previous years, the item where the highest proportion of children responded that they were ‘not sure’ was about being able to go to university.

Figure 18. Children’s (aged 10 to 17) ratings of the importance of different things for their own future.



Source: The Children’s Society’s household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Figure 19. Extent of children's (aged 10 to 17) worry about their own future.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Analysis by gender and age group showed very similar patterns to those reported previously.¹⁰⁵

- A larger proportion of females were 'very' or 'quite' worried about getting good grades, going to university, and about their mental and physical health than males.
- A larger proportion of children aged 14 to 17 (compared to those aged 10 to 13) were 'very' or 'quite' worried about being able to go to university, get a job, having enough money, and having somewhere to live.¹⁰⁶

This year's analysis also considered the relationship with children's perception of their family's wealth, which suggested that a higher proportion of children who thought that their family was not well off ('not very well off' or 'not well off at all') were 'very' or 'quite' worried about all seven aspects of their own life that they were asked about.¹⁰⁷

As previously noted,¹⁰⁸ **a significantly higher proportion of children with low wellbeing were worried about all aspects of their own life**, which is perhaps to be expected.¹⁰⁹ However, we cannot assume a causal link in either direction between wellbeing (or, indeed, any of the other characteristics examined in this chapter) and being worried.

¹⁰⁵ See The Good Childhood Report 2019.

¹⁰⁶ Comparisons (2x2) were made between those who were 'very' or 'quite' worried and those who were not 'very'/'quite' worried on each item by gender and by age group using chi-square tests. Only associations that would be significant in a random sample (p<0.01) are reported. Analysis was also conducted to explore any associations with aggregated ethnic groups (excluding those who responded 'prefer not to say'), however, there were no findings that would be considered statistically significant in a random sample (at p<0.01).

¹⁰⁷ Comparisons (2x5) were made between those who did and did not respond 'very'/'quite' worried on each item and those children who said their family was 'very well off', 'quite well off', 'average', 'not very well off' and 'not very well off at all' using chi-square tests. Only findings that would be significant in a random sample (at p<0.01) are reported.

¹⁰⁸ See: The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2021 [Internet]. 2021 [cited 2023 Aug 1]. Available from: childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources/good-childhood-report-2021.

¹⁰⁹ Comparisons (2x2) were made between those children who were 'very'/'quite' worried and not 'very'/'quite' worried on each item and those who did/did not have low scores on our multi-item measure of life satisfaction using chi-square tests. Only findings that would be significant in a random sample (at p<0.01) are reported.

Broader societal issues

As in previous Good Childhood Reports,¹¹⁰ children and young people were again asked about how much they worried about **broader societal issues**. This year, nine were considered: the environment; levels of unemployment; the amount of crime; online safety; homelessness; inequality; new illnesses/pandemics; refugee and migrant crisis; and rising prices.¹¹¹

As shown in figure 20, in 2023, **more children were worried ('quite' or 'very' worried) about rising prices, followed by the environment** (which had topped the chart in 2022), and crime. Fewer were worried about the refugee and migrant crises.

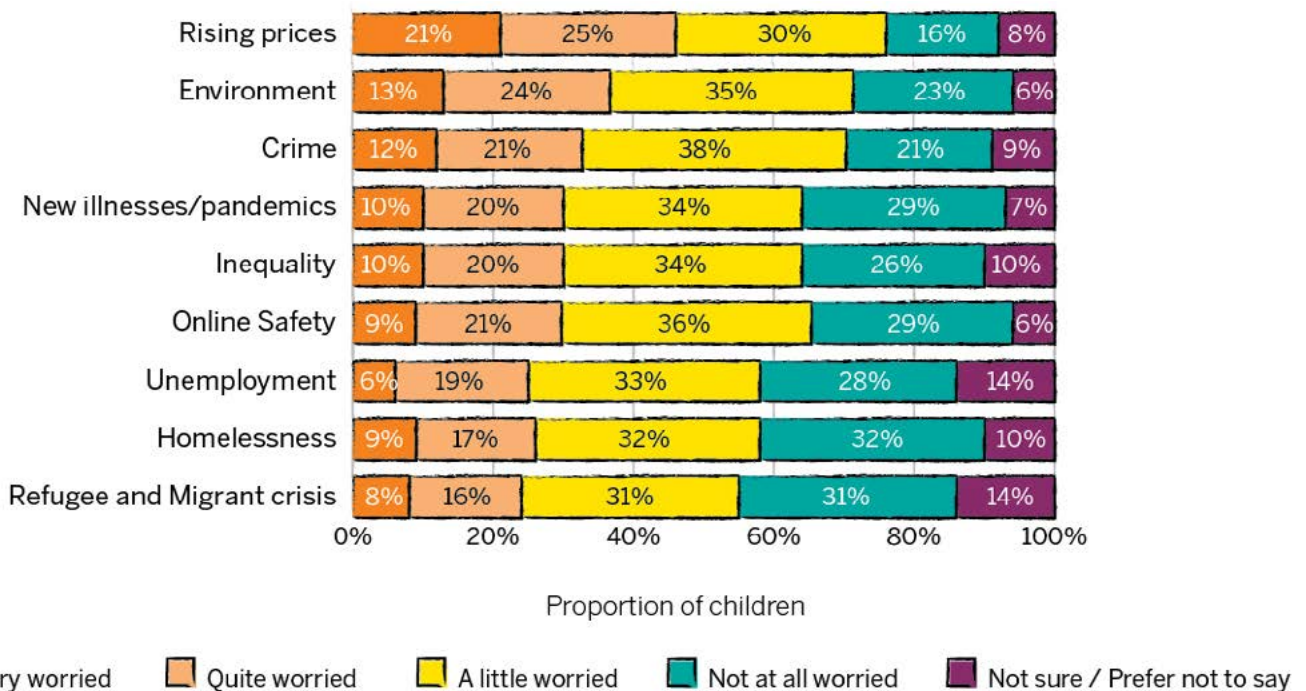
It is important to bear in mind that some of the items have high levels of 'not sure' and 'prefer not to say' responses. These responses are important in providing a sense of children's knowledge and

understanding of these broader social and/or political issues, but they also mean that these data should be treated with some caution.

Responses to these questions did not vary consistently by gender, age group, or children's perception of their family's wealth.^{112, 113}

However, when looking at the responses by aggregated ethnic groups,¹¹⁴ there were significant associations for seven of the nine societal issues (apart from the environment and unemployment). **A lower proportion of white children and young people were worried than children and young people from all other ethnic groups combined. Understandably, a larger proportion of children from all other ethnic groups combined worried about inequality than their white counterparts** (43% and 27% respectively).¹¹⁵

Figure 20. Extent of children's (aged 10 to 17) worry about broader issues.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

¹¹⁰ See The Good Childhood Report 2022, The Good Childhood Report 2021, and The Good Childhood Report 2019.

¹¹¹ Items included in this question are reviewed each year to reflect current circumstances and issues that are important to children and young people. 'Rising prices (of food, energy etc)' was added to the list for the 2023 survey to reflect the current cost-of-living crisis.

¹¹² Notable patterns were: larger proportions of females were worried about online safety and inequality; children in the older age group were worried about unemployment and rising costs; and children who perceived their family to be not well off were worried about unemployment and rising costs.

¹¹³ Comparisons were again made by gender, age group and perception of wealth for those who did and did not respond 'very'/'quite worried' for each item using chi-square tests. For perception of wealth, higher proportions than expected in both the 'not very well off' and 'not well off at all' categories responded 'very'/'quite' worried for the items indicated.

¹¹⁴ Comparing responses from white children and young people to responses from children and young people from all other ethnic groups combined (excluding those who responded 'prefer not to say'); see page 10 for further discussion of the rationale and limitations of such analysis.

¹¹⁵ A larger proportion of children from all other ethnic groups combined were also more worried about crime (40%, compared to 31% of white children), rising costs (55%, compared to 44% of white children), homelessness (35% compared to 24%), online safety (39% compared to 28%), new illnesses/pandemics (41% compared to 28%), and refugee and migrant crisis (34% compared to 22%) than their white peers.

Children and young people's feelings about their own future, the future of the country and that of the world

In this year's survey, children and young people were asked, reflecting on the societal issues presented above, to think about how they felt about their own future, the future of the country and the future of the world. It is important to note that these three questions had higher than usual levels of 'not sure' / 'prefer not to say' responses (11%, 19%, and 19% respectively). Again, this gives us a helpful sense of children and young people's knowledge and opinions, and means that these findings should be treated with some caution.

In general, **more children indicated that they were 'very' or 'quite' positive about their own future (74%) than the future of the country (38%) or that of the world (36%).** It is striking that **over four out of 10 children did not feel positive ('not very positive' or 'not at all positive') about the future of the country (43%) or the future of the world (45%).**

Further analysis was undertaken to explore whether the same children and young people who did not feel positive about the future of the country also did not feel positive about the future of the world. It showed that almost four in five (78%) children and young people gave the same answer across the two questions, with responses between the two questions highly correlated (a correlation of 0.83).¹¹⁶ Almost one in five children and young people (17%) responded 'not sure' or 'prefer not to say' to both questions, suggesting that they may have found these questions more difficult to answer. In addition, greater proportions of children who responded negatively to both questions also reported being 'very' or 'quite' worried about all the societal issues discussed above.

A larger proportion of children and young people in the older age group (14 to 17) indicated that they did not feel positive ('not very' or 'not at all' positive) in their responses to both questions. The same was true, but to an even greater extent, for children and young people who have low wellbeing based on our multi-item measure of life satisfaction.^{117,118}

In 2020, the ONS conducted qualitative analysis of children's perspectives on their wellbeing and what makes a happy life for children, which provides further insights into what children deemed important for their future.¹¹⁹ The ONS reported that both optimism and pessimism were expressed by children (aged 10 to 15) in the group discussions. The main areas for consideration in relation to children's future happiness and wellbeing that were raised by children taking part in those discussions were: the preservation of the natural environment and addressing climate change; the importance of living in a country at peace, with a government that is responsive to children's needs; and empowering children to express themselves and have a say in decisions that affect their lives. Children who took part in the discussions also felt that adults in power should have an obligation to protect children's futures.¹²⁰

¹¹⁶ Based on a Spearman's correlation ($p=0.000$).

¹¹⁷ The Huebner-based multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction is presented in the first table in appendix A. See also reported proportions in figure 10.

¹¹⁸ Comparisons were made between those who responded 'not very' / 'not at all' positive to both questions by age group and for those with/without low wellbeing using chi-square tests. Only findings that would be statistically significant in a random sample (at $p<0.01$) are reported. Analysis was also conducted to explore patterns by gender and aggregated ethnic groups, however, there were no findings that would be statistically significant in a random sample (at $p<0.01$).

¹¹⁹ The findings are based on 10 UK-wide focus groups with children and young people aged 10 to 15, including a total of 48 children, which took place between September 2019 and February 2020 (which means that they predate the Covid-19 pandemic and the current cost-of-living crisis). See: Office for National Statistics. Children's views on well-being and what makes a happy life, UK: 2020 [Internet]. 2020 [cited 2023 Jul 12]. Available from: ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/childrensviewsonwellbeingandwhatmakesahappylifeuk2020/2020-10-02.

¹²⁰ These findings also echo those presented in The Good Childhood Report 2019.

Children and young people's feelings of safety in different settings and situations

As The Children's Society's household survey is completed within the home, it does not include questions about children and young people's safety within their home.¹²¹ Looking at concerns around safety outside of the home, previous Good Childhood Reports have found links between children being concerned about being a victim of crime and neighbourhood problems and their wellbeing.¹²² Children and young people were asked relevant questions about these issues in the most recent wave of the Understanding Society survey, which suggested that 7.9% of those aged 10 to 15 did not like living in their neighbourhood; just under half (46.7%) worried about being a victim of crime;¹²³ and 48.9% would feel unsafe ('a bit' or 'very' unsafe) walking alone in their area after dark.¹²⁴ The NHS's Mental Health of Children and Young People in England 2022 survey¹²⁵ also asked children aged 11 to 16 about their feelings towards their neighbourhood and local area. 7.7% of children disagreed ('a lot' or 'a little') that they felt safe in their neighbourhood/local area, with a further 8.5% neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

In this year's household survey, children and young people in year 7 (or equivalent) and above were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with a range of statements on safety in seven different settings or situations, presented in figure 21.¹²⁶

- Over 8 in 10 agreed ('a lot' or 'a little') that they felt safe in all but two situations: when out in their local area at night, and outside of their local area. 63% agreed ('a lot' or 'a little') that they felt safe when outside of their local area. **'I feel safe when I am out in my local area at night' was the only statement with which less than half of children and young people (47%) agreed ('a lot' or 'a little').**
- 22% of children in this age range disagreed ('a lot' or 'a little') with the statement 'I feel safe when out in my local area at night', and 14% with the statement 'I feel safe when I am outside my local area.'
- It is important to bear in mind that a higher proportion (more than one in 10, or 12%) responded 'not applicable' to the statement 'I feel safe when I am out in my local area at night' than to any other statements.

¹²¹ This is because, although adult respondents are asked to let their child respond to the survey questions independently, this cannot be guaranteed. Experiences of risks and harms were also out of scope due to the same ethical and safeguarding considerations.

¹²² See, for example, The Good Childhood Report 2017 and The Good Childhood Report 2019.

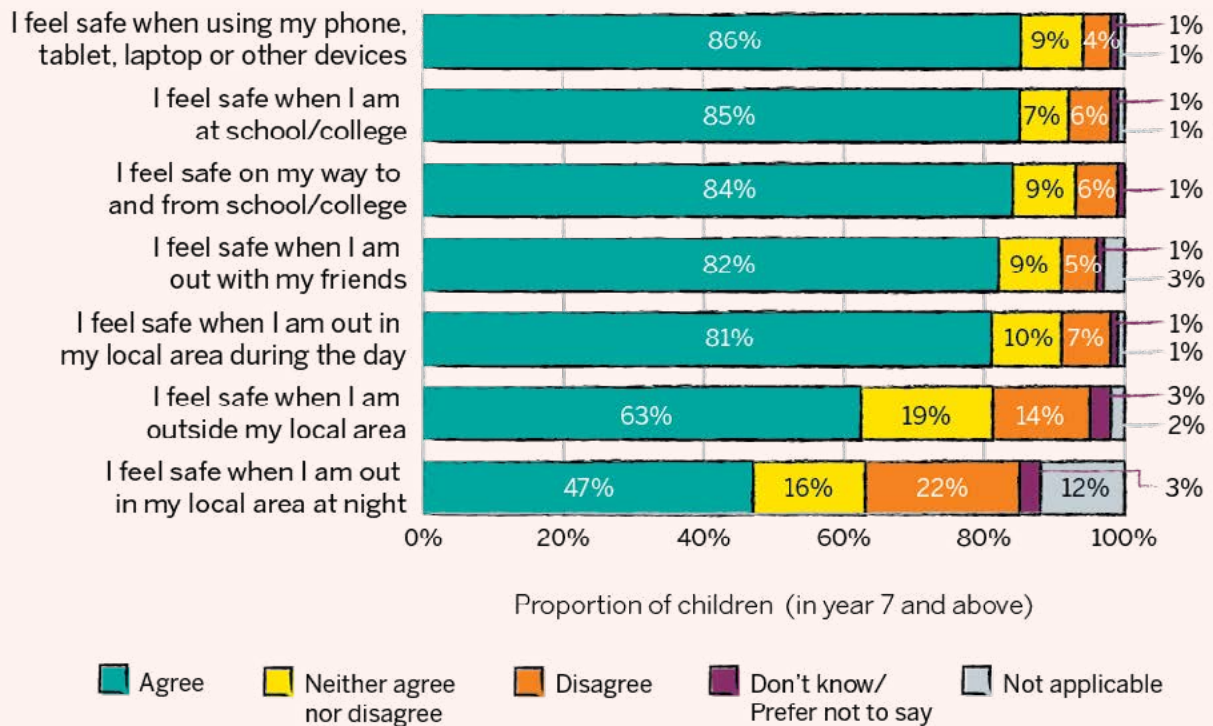
¹²³ These are combined responses for children who said it was 'a big worry', 'a bit of a worry', or 'an occasional doubt'.

¹²⁴ The most recent wave of Understanding Society was conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and answers to these questions may have been affected by young people's changed social situation. However, findings from wave 9 of Understanding Society (which date from 2017-18, the most recent wave prior to 2020-21 including these questions) for two of the questions were relatively consistent, with 8.9% not liking living in their neighbourhood, and 46.9% worrying about being a victim of crime. A slightly lower proportion said they would feel unsafe walking alone in their area after dark (42.0%) in 2017-18.

¹²⁵ NHS Digital, 2022.

¹²⁶ The sentence 'I feel safe when using my phone, tablet, laptop or other devices' included extra information in the survey, detailing '(for messaging, browsing, gaming etc)'.

Figure 21. Extent of children and young people (in year 7 and above) agreeing with seven statements about safety.



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 22, May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, UK, weighted data.

Note: 'Agree' shows combined responses from children and young people who 'agreed a lot' and 'agreed a little'; 'disagree' shows combined responses from those who 'disagreed a lot' and 'disagreed a little'.



There were some statistically significant associations between groups of children and young people for whether they felt safe in their local area at night. **A greater proportion of females disagreed ('a lot' or 'a little') that they felt safe in their local area at night than males. Higher proportions of children with low wellbeing and those who perceived their family not to be well off ('not very well off' or 'not well off at all') also disagreed with this statement, as well as with the statement 'I feel safe when I am outside of my local area'.**¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Comparisons were made between those who agreed 'a little'/'a lot'; neither agreed nor disagreed; and who disagreed 'a little'/'a lot' for the two statements 'I feel safe in my local area at night' and 'I feel safe when I am outside my local area', by gender, perceptions of family wealth and whether or not the child had low wellbeing on our multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction using chi-square tests. Only findings that would be statistically significant in a random sample (at $p < 0.01$) are reported. Analysis was also conducted to explore patterns by aggregated ethnic groups for these two items; however, there were none that would be statistically significant in a random sample (at $p < 0.01$).



*"It's hard
when you're
struggling."*

Summary

Children and young people completing The Children's Society's annual household survey 2023 were asked questions about a range of societal issues; their own future, that of the country and that of the world; and their feelings of safety in different situations. Their answers provide us with valuable information on what matters to them now and their concerns for the future, and how this might differ for specific groups of children.

Children and young people's views about aspects of life important for their future

- Of the seven issues they were asked about, children rated **having somewhere to live** as most important in 2023, followed by **having enough money, and being able to find a job**. The two latter items were also top of children and young people's worries about their own futures.
- Greater proportions of **children who had low wellbeing, and children who thought that their family was not well off, were worried about all seven aspects of life**.

Extent of children and young people's worries about broader societal issues

- Children were asked how much they worried about a set of nine societal issues. **In 2023, rising prices was the top worry for children**, followed by the environment.
- **A larger proportion of children from all other ethnic groups combined who completed the survey were worried about seven of the nine broader societal issues** (excluding the environment and unemployment).

Children and young people's views about their future, that of the country and that of the world

- When asked how positive they felt about their own future, that of the country and that of the world, **about three quarters (74%) of children and young people felt positive about their own future, but less than four in 10 felt positive about the future of the country (38%) and the world (36%)**.

Children and young people's feelings of safety in a range of situations

- Children and young people of secondary school age and above were asked whether they agreed with sentences exploring whether they felt safe in seven different settings and situations. **The majority felt safe in all these situations, apart from being out in their local area at night**, where just under half of respondents (47%) reported feeling safe.
- Perhaps unsurprisingly, **a larger proportion of females than males disagreed when asked if they felt safe in their local area at night**, as did those with **low wellbeing** and those who **perceived their family not to be well off**.



CASE STUDY

The Children's Society's ASSIST emotional health and wellbeing service

The Children's Society's ASSIST emotional health and wellbeing service carries out sessions with children who need support with their emotional health and wellbeing. A central part of the work is to help them open up about their feelings and emotions and to build their confidence.

Within the sessions, work focuses on exploring **children's thoughts and feelings**; understanding their **hopes, dreams and wishes**; and exploring and putting in place **strategies to help them to effectively manage their emotions**. This includes supporting them with any specific issues that they may have experienced.

In one recent example, ASSIST supported a sibling group by providing them with a safe and confidential space to explore their experiences of a difficult home situation which was affecting their wellbeing. The sessions enabled the children to share their thoughts, feelings, and concerns, while also focusing on their own emotional health and wellbeing needs. This supported positive changes and enabled appropriate support to be put into place to meet their needs.



Discussion

Overview, variations and trends in children's subjective wellbeing from Understanding Society

Chapter 1 presents trends over time for the subjective wellbeing of UK children aged 10 to 15, drawing on data from the Understanding Society survey. In 2020-21, when the survey wave took place almost entirely during Covid-19 restrictions for the first time, children's means scores for happiness with their life as a whole, friends, appearance, school, and schoolwork were all significantly lower than when the survey began in 2009-10. Children's means scores for happiness with family remained relatively stable.

The 2020-21 data seem to paint a concerning picture for females particularly, with their mean happiness scores significantly lower than when the survey started in 2009-10 for each of the six measures. This is a new observation, and therefore something that The Children's Society will continue to monitor in future. As previously reported, females also remained significantly less happy with their appearance (on average) than males – a finding that is replicated across all waves of the survey.

Further analysis of Understanding Society data on children with low wellbeing

Chapter 1 also presents further analysis on those children with low subjective wellbeing (that is, children who scored below the midpoint on the measures of subjective wellbeing included in the survey). Data were aggregated across all available Understanding Society survey waves to explore whether the same children score low across the six indicators of subjective wellbeing, and to find out more about the characteristics and circumstances of children with low scores.

The analysis highlighted some differences in the likelihood of low wellbeing linked to children's characteristics or circumstances. For example, when considering only demographic characteristics, females, older children, and children living in households that are struggling financially were found to be more likely to score low across some measures of subjective wellbeing.

When responses to questions on relationships were considered, children who said they felt unsupported by their family, had no friends, or had been bullied at school were much more likely than other children to be unhappy with their life as a whole.

When we looked at how the domain measures relate to happiness with life as a whole, the analysis showed that out of the five specific aspects of life that the survey asked about, family was the domain that was most strongly related to children's overall wellbeing, echoing previous research.

When exploring whether the same children score low across measures of subjective wellbeing, findings indicated that, while the majority of children aged 10 to 15 did not score low on any of the six measures, about a quarter were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life, and almost one in ten with two or more aspects of life.

Latest figures from The Children's Society's annual household survey

Chapter 2 presents findings from The Children's Society's annual household survey, which was conducted in May and June 2023, and included responses from just over 2,000 children and young people aged 10 to 17.

In 2023, a larger proportion of children and young people scored below the midpoint for school (14.5%) than for the other nine aspects of life included in The Children's Society's Good Childhood Index, indicating that that is the aspect of life that more children are unhappy about.

As can be expected now that Covid-19 is no longer a global health emergency, a smaller proportion of parents, carers, and children and young people felt worried about Coronavirus in 2023 than they did in previous years (55% and 49% respectively).

In light of the current domestic situation, parents and carers were asked again in 2023 how concerned, if at all, they were about the impact of cost of living increases on their family/ household over the next 12 months. The concerns here were much greater, with over four in five (82%) indicating that they were either 'very' or 'quite' concerned.

Further analysis of The Children's Society's annual household survey data on children with low wellbeing

In chapter 2, similar analysis was undertaken to that presented in chapter 1 to find out more about children and young people who have low wellbeing (score low) on the 10 aspects of life covered in the GCI in 2023 (using findings from The Children's Society's annual survey). Again, most children and young people (aged 10 to 17) did not score low on any of these measures, yet almost a third were unhappy with at least one aspect of their life, and nearly one in ten with four of more.

The analysis highlighted notable differences for some groups of children. For instance, 15-year-olds were more likely to have low scores for happiness with their school, appearance, future, and time use than children at other ages, and children with SEN were more likely than those without SEN to score low on happiness with their health and their friends. In a finding that has particular relevance during the current cost of living crisis, children who worried about the amount of money that their family had and those who perceived their families as not being well off were more likely to be unhappy than those without financial worries across every measure of subjective wellbeing.





Children and young people's views about the future and current societal issues

Children's wellbeing is intrinsically linked to their hopes and expectations about the future. As children and young people continue to face a number of domestic and international crises, chapter 3 considers their responses to a set of questions included in our annual household survey, asking them how they feel about specific aspects of the future, and a range of societal issues.

Of seven issues related to their own future, having enough money was the item that the largest proportion of children and young people worried about, followed by finding a job and getting good grades at school. Children's responses to these questions also seemed to vary according to their circumstances, with larger proportions of children with low wellbeing, and who thought that their family was not well off, responding that they were worried about all the aspects of life they were asked about.

Children and young people were also asked how much they worried about a set of nine societal issues. In 2023, rising prices was the top worry among children completing the survey, followed by the environment. It is perhaps not surprising, given the current economic context, that this year children are most worried about having enough money in the future, and about rising prices. Analysis looking into differences in responses for

specific groups of children showed that a larger proportion of children from all other ethnic groups combined was more worried than their white peers about seven of these nine issues (the exceptions being the environment and unemployment).

When asked how they felt about their own future, the future of the country, and the future of the world, children were more optimistic about their own future. While about three quarters (74%) indicated they were 'very' or 'quite' positive about their own future, less than four in 10 felt positive about the future of the country (38%) and that of the world (36%).

Children and young people's feelings of safety in a range of situations

Chapter 3 also examines the responses of older children and young people (that is, in year 7 and above) to questions about their safety in seven different settings and situations. Encouragingly, the majority of children and young people agreed with statements indicating they felt safe in all but one of these. The exception was 'being out in their local area at night', where just under half of respondents (47%) agreed 'a lot' or 'a little' that they felt safe. A larger proportion of females than males disagreed that they felt safe in their local area at night, as did those with low wellbeing and those who perceived their family not to be well off.

Overall comment

The overview of the latest, most up-to-date data about children's wellbeing presented in this report gives us – The Children's Society, but also wider society and, crucially, decision-makers – an opportunity to listen to how children and young people tell us they are feeling. It also highlights experiences and characteristics that might increase the likelihood that children will have low wellbeing.

Responses to our own household survey in 2023 suggest that, while the majority of children and young people lead relatively happy lives, a small, but not insignificant, proportion is struggling with their overall life satisfaction and/or low happiness with specific aspects of their lives. While it does not seem to be the same children scoring low across items, our analysis does show that those who worried about how much money their family had were overrepresented among those who were unhappy with their lives or with different aspects of their lives (and in particular with their home, money and possessions, and the amount of choice they have). This is a striking finding in the context of the current cost of living crisis.

Responses to The Children's Society's annual household survey highlighted school as an area for improvement in 2023 again, with more children and young people unhappy with school than with the other nine aspects of life that they were asked about.

Analysis of Understanding Society data shows that children's average wellbeing with all but one aspect of life (family) has declined since the start of the survey (comparing data from 2020-21 with 2009-10). The latest data also highlight the wellbeing of females in particular as a potential area for concern, with lower mean scores across items in 2020-21 than when the survey began. This will continue to be monitored in future years to establish if it is a one-off or a pattern of ongoing concern. As has been the case ever since Understanding Society started reporting, females remained significantly less happy with their appearance than males,

once again highlighting that this is an issue of importance to females.

Historical data on children's wellbeing across all waves of Understanding Society also indicate that it is not the same children who score low across the six measures included within this survey. Further analysis highlights the importance of family relationships, particularly of children and young people feeling supported by their family, and an increased likelihood of low wellbeing in relation to school among children in families who are struggling financially.

Over the last few years, children and young people growing up in the UK have done so against the backdrop of a global pandemic, followed by steep increases to the cost of living. This report looks at how young people feel about their lives and the future, with some clear areas for attention. While many remain optimistic about their own future, responses to The Children's Society's annual survey in 2023 suggested that they are less optimistic about the future of the country and of the world, and that they, as well as their parents or carers, are worried about the impact of rising costs.

These findings need to be acted upon. The next section covers The Children's Society's call for action, having developed a set of policy recommendations together with children and young people. These are presented in more detail in **The Good Childhood Report 2023: Summary and recommendations**.¹²⁸



¹²⁸ See The Children's Society. The Good Childhood Report 2023: Summary and Recommendations. The Children's Society: London; 2023.



Policy recommendations

Ambition for the future

The Children's Society's findings show that children's happiness with their lives has declined. Alongside this, over the past year several reports have highlighted a deterioration in children and young people's mental health, with waiting times and thresholds for accessing care increasing.¹²⁹ There are also reports of children's physical health declining as the increased cost of living forces children to go hungry and eat less nutritious food.¹³⁰

The children's sector is in agreement that more must be done to prevent such problems from arising in the first place. Prevention stops children from needing more intensive support later on, promotes good wellbeing in the short- and long-term, and reduces the pressures on services.

The National Audit Office published a report in 2023 assessing '**Progress in improving mental health services in England**', which found that despite government plans emphasising the importance of preventative services, limited NHS investment had been made and local authorities described a continued lack of funding for prevention.¹³¹

Similarly, the Government risks losing the opportunities offered by the 10-year mental health plan. Focusing primarily on mental illness in the major conditions strategy is unlikely to result in a long-term approach to prevention and early intervention for children across all government departments.

¹²⁹ NHS Digital, 202; Children's Commissioner. Children's Mental Health Services 2021-22 [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Aug 4]. Available from: childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/29751.

¹³⁰ SAPHNA. Press Release: Health Practitioners Survey - Child Hunger Leading To Deterioration In Children's Health [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: saphna.co/news/press-release-health-practitioners-survey-child-hunger-leading-to-deterioration-in-childrens-health/; Barnardo's. At what cost? The impact of the cost-of-living on children and young people [Internet]. 2022 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: barnardos.org.uk/get-involved/campaign-with-us/impact-of-cost-of-living.

¹³¹ National Audit Office. Progress in improving mental health services in England [Internet]. 2023 [cited 2023 Jul 24]. Available from: nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Progress-in-improving-mental-health-services-CS.pdf.

Recommendations

There can be no further delay in prioritising improvements in children's wellbeing and happiness with their lives. Families are facing unprecedented pressures. Many are at breaking point and urgently need a safety net.

Over 250 children and young people shared their ideas, experiences, and suggestions for what needs to change to improve children's wellbeing to help create this year's policy recommendations. Co-design with children and young people must be at the centre of all proposed reforms.

See **The Good Childhood Report: Summary and recommendations** for more detail and additional recommendations for each of the key themes.¹³²



The Children's Society's priority recommendations

Protecting children from the rising cost of living ...

by renewing investment in social security for children through an increase to child benefits. As a minimum, the Government should target increases for the families facing the brunt of price rises by uplifting the child element of Universal Credit and Child Tax Credit and removing the two-child limit.

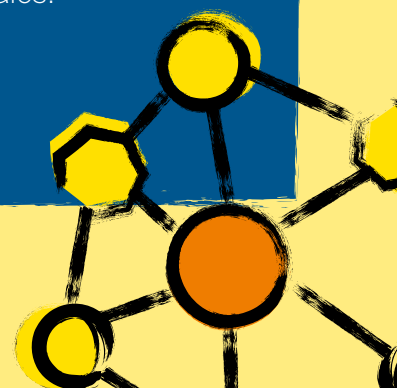
Standing up for children to build hope and security for their futures ...

by creating Cabinet-level posts of Minister for Children in both the UK and Welsh governments to share children's views at the highest level of political decision making and champion children's needs across all government departments.

Creating a system that starts with prevention ...

by understanding how children are doing. The Government should measure children's subjective wellbeing at least annually and on a much larger national scale across England and Wales.

¹³² The Children's Society, 2023.





Taking responsibility for girls' unhappiness ...


by commissioning research without further delay. The Government needs to understand why young people, and especially girls, are more unhappy with their appearance, so that effective action can be taken.

Enabling schools to support pupils' wellbeing ...

by expanding mental health support teams (MHSTs) to all schools with long-term funding. DHSC and DfE must make sure that no child in England goes without mental health and wellbeing support at school.

Responding to the needs of parents, carers, and families ...

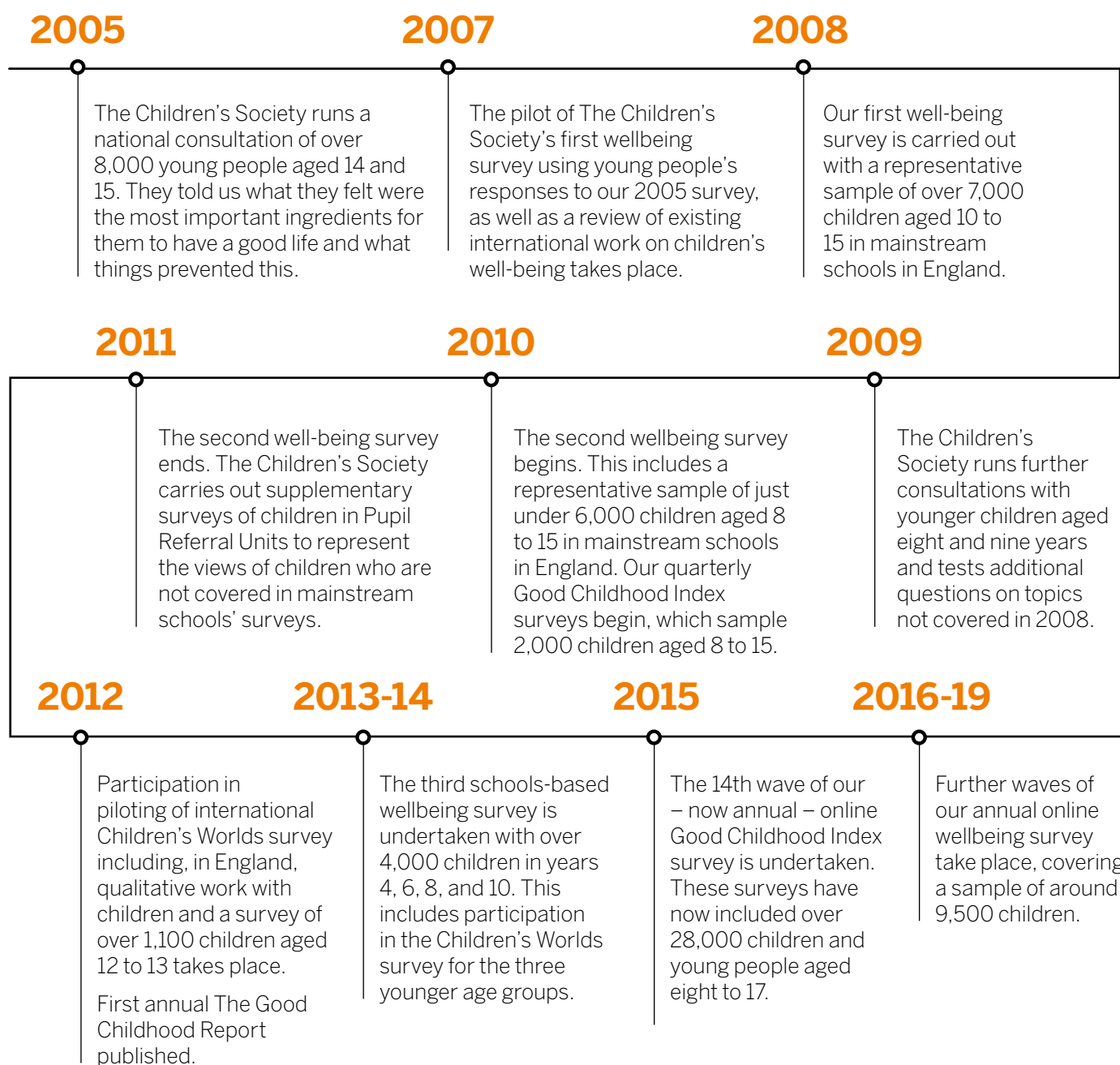
by working with the voluntary and community sector. DHSC should pilot innovative parent and carer mental health and wellbeing support offers. These could work in partnership with MHSTs and family hubs, once available in all areas.

A close-up photograph of a young girl with long, light brown hair. She is smiling broadly, showing her teeth, and covering her mouth with her right hand. She is wearing a light-colored, possibly white, top. The background is softly blurred, showing some greenery on the left. The overall mood is warm and positive.

*"I want to be
happy and
healthy."*

Appendix B

Figure 23: The research programme





2020

Our 19th Good Childhood Index survey is conducted during the first national lockdown in the Covid-19 pandemic. For the first time, children (aged 10 to 17) in all four nations are included.

Results for England from the third wave of the International Children's Worlds survey are published. Data collection for the England survey, which focused on children in year 6, was carried out jointly by The University of York and The Children's Society.

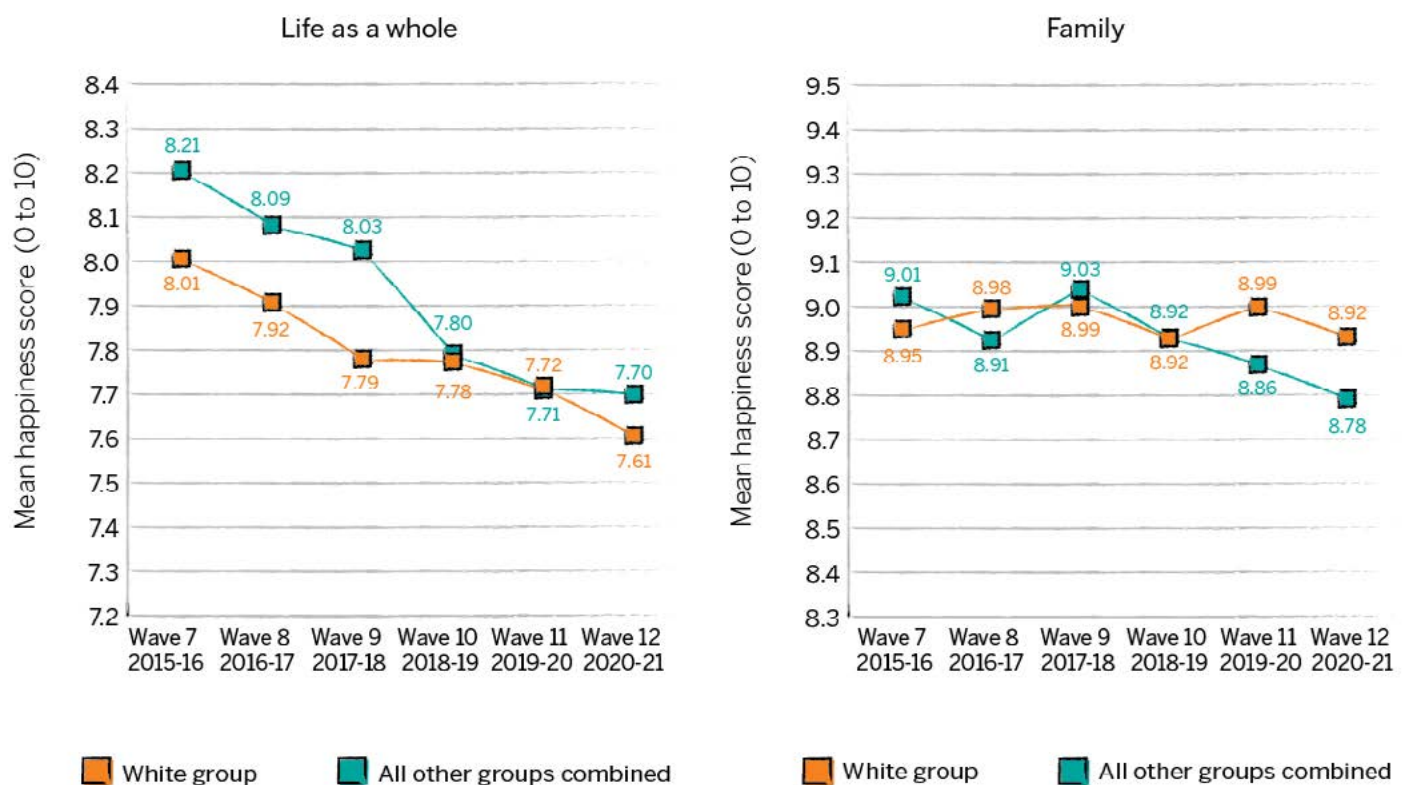
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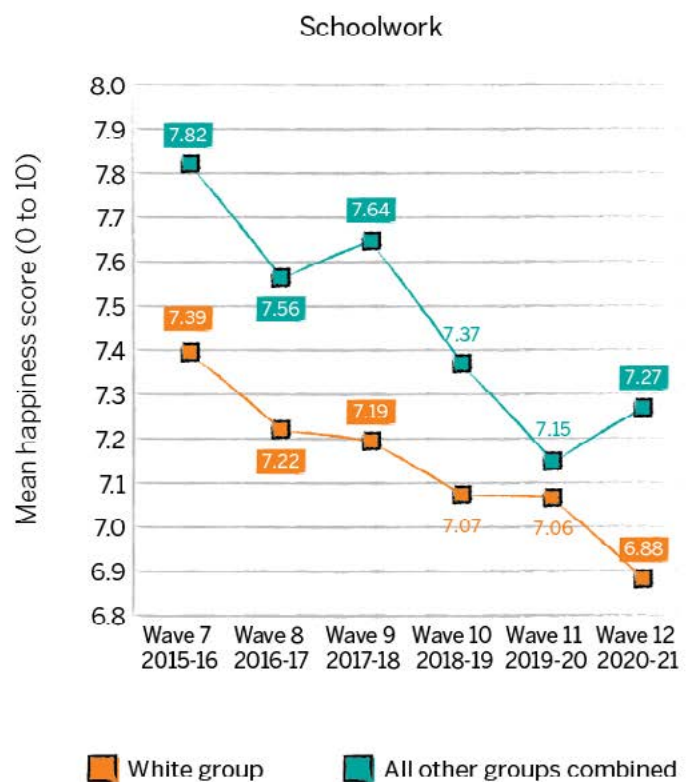
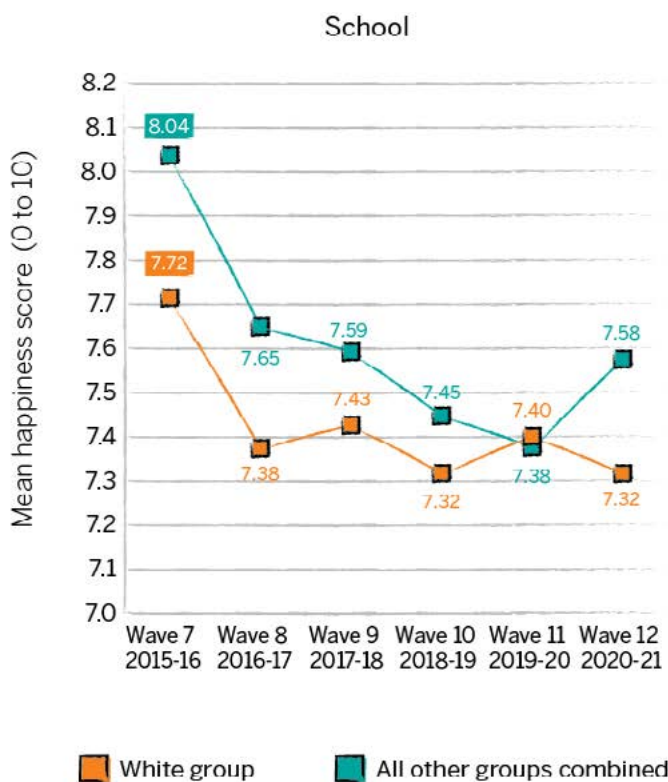
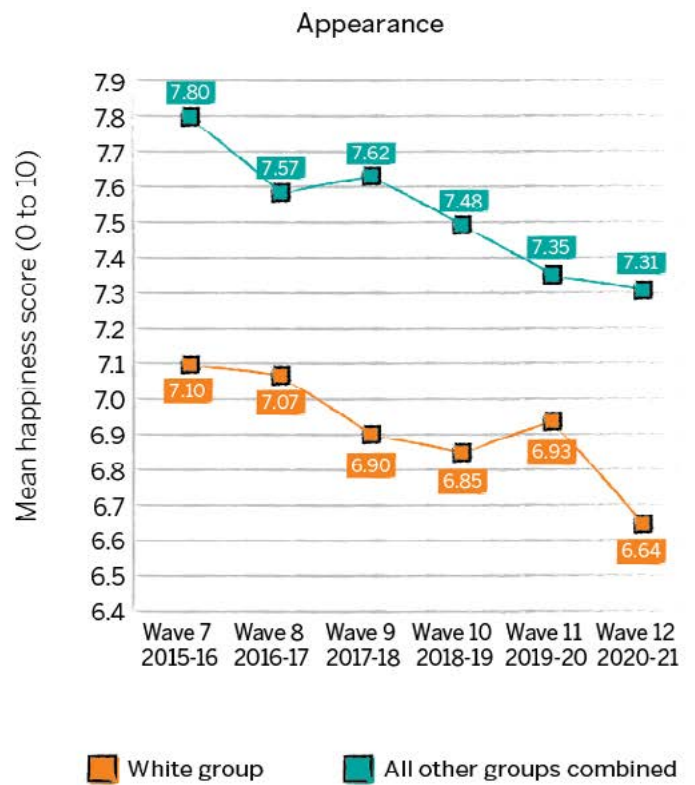
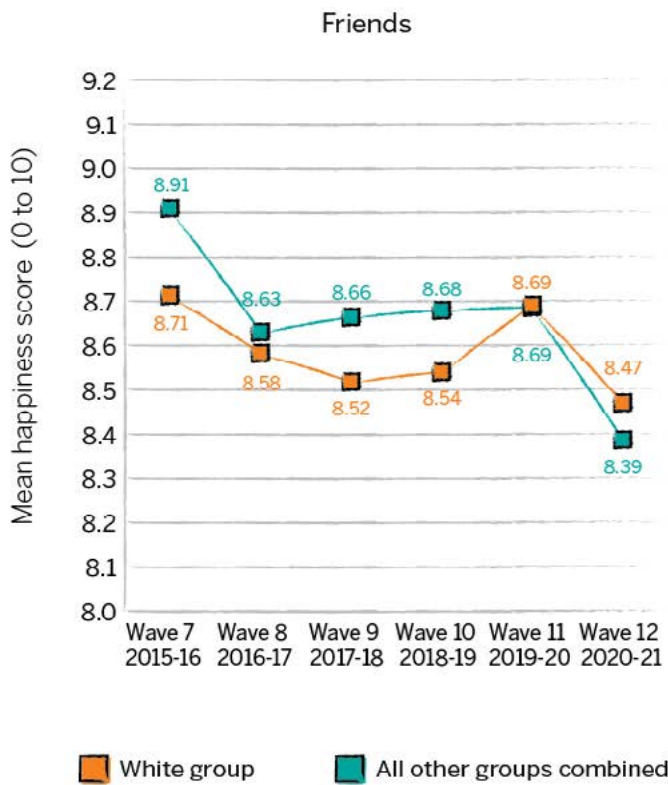
The latest (and 22nd) wave of The Children's Society's annual online wellbeing survey is completed. These surveys have now included almost 46,000 children.



Appendix C

Figure 24. Trends in children's (aged 10 to 15) happiness with different aspects of life, including Immigration and Ethnic Minority Boost (IEMB) sample, UK, by ethnic groups combined, 2015-16 to 2020-21.





Source: University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research. (2023). UK Data Service. Understanding Society: Waves 1-12, 2009-2021 and Harmonised BHPS: Waves 1-18, 1991-2009 [data collection]. 17th edition. SN: 6614, DOI: 10.5255/UKDA-SN-6614-18.¹³³

Presentational note: All but one of the graphs (appearance) use the same size range of values (1.2) so that they can be visually compared. Data are weighted (confidence intervals take account of design effects). Mean scores are displayed in boxes in those waves where there were significant differences by binary ethnic group based on non-overlapping confidence intervals (at 99% level).

¹³³ As mentioned in footnote 32, weights for waves 2 to 11 were revised in the most recent Understanding Society dataset (latest release: May 2023), resulting in some differences between mean scores and proportions presented here and in previous Good Childhood Reports.

Appendix D

Table A1. Bivariate associations between children's individual and family characteristics, socioeconomic factors, relationship quality, and low subjective wellbeing.

	Life as a whole	Family	Friends	School	Schoolwork	Appearance
Variables included in every wave from 1 to 12						
Gender	**	NS	**	NS	**	**
Male	4.1%	2.3%	2.1%	9.7%	9.1%	8.4%
Female	6.0%	2.5%	3.0%	9.3%	7.5%	16.0%
Age	**	**	NS	**	**	**
10	3.7%	1.1%	2.5%	6.9%	7.3%	7.5%
11	3.6%	1.2%	2.4%	6.7%	7.2%	8.4%
12	4.5%	1.9%	2.4%	8.0%	8.0%	11.7%
13	4.9%	2.7%	2.9%	10.0%	8.0%	13.6%
14	6.3%	3.5%	2.3%	11.8%	8.4%	15.2%
15	7.0%	3.7%	3.0%	13.4%	11.0%	16.6%
Ethnicity	NS	NS	NS	NS	*	**
White	5.1%	2.3%	2.6%	9.6%	8.6%	13.0%
Mixed	5.0%	2.5%	2.3%	8.9%	8.9%	10.9%
Indian	3.4%	2.0%	1.4%	7.4%	6.1%	6.6%
Pakistani	4.5%	2.5%	2.4%	7.3%	6.3%	7.1%
Bangladeshi	2.5%	2.2%	1.2%	5.8%	4.0%	5.8%
Black Caribbean	7.2%	4.9%	3.4%	13.2%	6.7%	7.2%
Black African	3.3%	2.6%	2.5%	10.9%	4.7%	6.6%
Other or missing ethnicity	5.2%	3.0%	1.6%	7.8%	5.2%	8.3%
Family structure	**	**	NS	**	**	**
Two biological parents	3.9%	1.7%	2.3%	7.7%	7.1%	11.0%
Step-parent	7.0%	3.1%	3.1%	11.8%	9.1%	15.8%
Single-parent	6.9%	3.8%	3.1%	13.1%	11.0%	14.1%
Other family type	10.5%	5.5%	2.9%	15.8%	13.3%	16.0%
Mother's mental health problems (MHP)	**	NS	NS	**	**	**
No MHPs	3.3%	1.5%	2.1%	7.0%	6.2%	10.3%
Possible MHPs	4.4%	1.7%	2.6%	9.4%	8.0%	11.5%
MHPs	6.7%	2.4%	2.9%	10.2%	9.8%	15.4%

Mother's subjective wellbeing (SWB)	**	**	NS	**	**	**
Mum: Medium or high SWB	3.9%	1.5%	2.2%	7.7%	6.9%	11.1%
Mum: Low SWB	6.2%	2.8%	3.5%	11.2%	10.1%	14.8%
Father's mental health problems (MHP)	*	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
No MHPs	3.7%	1.5%	2.1%	7.7%	6.9%	11.1%
Possible MHPs	4.8%	1.9%	3.0%	9.0%	7.6%	11.8%
MHPs	5.8%	2.1%	2.7%	9.2%	8.7%	13.7%
Father's subjective wellbeing (SWB)	**	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Dad: Medium or high SWB	3.8%	1.5%	2.3%	8.0%	7.1%	11.3%
Dad: Low SWB	6.7%	2.6%	2.9%	9.5%	9.0%	13.8%
Parental employment	**	NS	NS	**	**	NS
At least one adult in employment	4.7%	2.3%	2.5%	9.0%	7.8%	12.0%
No adults in employment	6.9%	3.1%	3.0%	12.8%	11.7%	13.4%
Parental education	NS	NS	NS	**	**	*
No parent has a degree	5.4%	2.4%	2.6%	10.7%	9.2%	12.8%
At least one parent has a degree	4.4%	2.3%	2.6%	7.4%	6.8%	11.1%
Subjective financial difficulties (parents)	**	**	*	**	**	*
Getting by or living comfortably	4.6%	2.1%	2.5%	8.9%	8.0%	11.9%
Finding it difficult	7.3%	3.7%	3.3%	13.0%	10.4%	14.2%
Equivalised household income quintile	**	NS	NS	**	**	**
Lowest income quintile	5.7%	2.4%	2.4%	10.3%	9.3%	12.0%
Second lowest income quintile	5.7%	2.5%	3.0%	11.3%	9.4%	14.2%
Middle income quintile	4.7%	2.5%	2.4%	8.9%	8.0%	12.3%
Second highest income quintile	4.3%	2.2%	2.4%	7.7%	6.3%	10.6%
Highest income quintile	2.9%	2.0%	2.4%	6.3%	6.1%	10.1%

Year of interview	**	NS	**	*	**	**
2009	3.9%	2.5%	1.7%	9.2%	8.9%	11.1%
2010	3.5%	2.7%	2.0%	8.5%	6.8%	10.7%
2011	3.8%	2.1%	1.5%	8.4%	6.9%	11.4%
2012	3.5%	2.1%	1.9%	7.4%	6.4%	11.1%
2013	4.3%	3.2%	2.2%	7.9%	6.8%	12.8%
2014	4.6%	2.2%	2.8%	9.0%	7.6%	11.6%
2015	5.1%	3.1%	3.0%	9.2%	7.0%	11.6%
2016	5.2%	2.5%	2.6%	9.9%	8.0%	11.2%
2017	4.5%	2.0%	2.9%	10.6%	7.9%	11.7%
2018	7.0%	2.2%	3.6%	11.4%	9.8%	14.1%
2019	5.8%	1.9%	2.4%	11.3%	10.0%	12.6%
2020	7.2%	2.2%	2.5%	10.7%	11.1%	15.0%
2021	7.9%	1.6%	5.1%	9.9%	14.0%	15.2%
Wave of the survey	**	NS	**	**	**	**
Wave 1	3.8%	2.6%	1.8%	8.9%	7.9%	11.4%
Wave 2	3.5%	2.3%	1.7%	8.5%	6.6%	10.1%
Wave 3	3.7%	2.0%	1.5%	8.2%	7.2%	12.1%
Wave 4	3.6%	2.4%	2.1%	7.6%	5.8%	10.7%
Wave 5	4.5%	3.1%	2.7%	7.6%	7.4%	12.5%
Wave 6	4.9%	2.5%	2.8%	9.3%	7.9%	12.2%
Wave 7	5.5%	2.9%	2.7%	9.0%	7.2%	11.3%
Wave 8	4.8%	2.5%	2.8%	11.4%	8.4%	10.9%
Wave 9	5.5%	1.8%	3.6%	10.5%	8.6%	13.3%
Wave 10	6.3%	2.4%	3.2%	11.3%	10.0%	13.5%
Wave 11	6.4%	1.9%	2.3%	11.4%	11.3%	13.3%
Wave 12	7.6%	1.8%	3.4%	10.1%	11.4%	15.3%
Region / country	NS	*	NS	NS	NS	**
North East England	5.0%	2.1%	2.4%	9.9%	10.6%	17.5%
North West England	5.3%	1.5%	2.6%	9.1%	9.1%	13.8%
Yorkshire and the Humber	5.8%	2.5%	3.2%	10.6%	8.7%	11.6%
East Midlands	5.8%	1.9%	2.8%	10.1%	7.9%	13.2%
West Midlands	4.4%	2.3%	1.9%	8.6%	7.4%	10.5%
East of England	5.1%	3.0%	2.6%	9.3%	8.2%	12.0%
London	4.5%	2.7%	2.5%	10.7%	6.6%	9.4%
South East England	5.1%	2.6%	2.5%	9.8%	8.3%	11.9%
South West England	6.3%	3.8%	3.6%	10.0%	10.0%	14.9%
Wales	2.9%	1.2%	2.6%	8.9%	7.8%	12.2%
Scotland	4.5%	1.7%	1.7%	8.0%	7.8%	11.7%
Northern Ireland	3.7%	2.0%	2.4%	6.1%	8.9%	10.7%

Number of friends	**	**	**	**	**	**
No friends	18.3%	8.1%	28.3%	24.1%	22.4%	28.0%
One friend	10.6%	3.8%	10.7%	16.0%	14.6%	18.6%
Two friends	7.8%	3.1%	4.1%	12.7%	12.2%	15.4%
Three or more friends	4.0%	2.0%	1.4%	8.4%	7.2%	11.2%
Variables included in waves 9, 10, 11, and 12 only						
Disability/long-term illness	**	NS	**	**	**	**
Limited a lot by disability/long-term illness	19.4%	5.1%	10.1%	21.1%	19.6%	17.9%
Limited a little by disability/long-term illness	12.0%	3.4%	4.6%	15.1%	17.6%	24.4%
No disability/long-term illness	5.3%	1.6%	2.7%	9.8%	9.0%	12.2%
Variables included in waves 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 only						
Talk to mum (about things that matter to you)	**	**	*	**	**	**
Hardly ever	10.6%	7.6%	3.4%	15.4%	13.8%	20.4%
Less than once a week	4.5%	2.3%	2.8%	10.0%	8.7%	12.9%
More than once a week	3.5%	1.4%	1.8%	7.5%	6.7%	11.0%
Most days	3.5%	0.8%	2.3%	7.6%	6.7%	9.6%
Argue with mum	**	**	**	**	**	**
Hardly ever	2.8%	1.1%	1.8%	7.0%	6.1%	9.2%
Less than once a week	4.4%	1.8%	2.4%	8.8%	7.9%	13.3%
More than once a week	7.0%	3.5%	3.1%	12.4%	11.2%	17.2%
Most days	12.7%	8.4%	4.7%	16.4%	14.9%	18.5%
Talk to dad (about things that matter to you)	**	**	**	**	**	**
Hardly ever	7.6%	4.4%	3.3%	12.9%	10.8%	17.3%
Less than once a week	4.0%	1.8%	1.8%	8.4%	7.5%	11.7%
More than once a week	2.5%	0.7%	1.9%	5.7%	5.3%	9.1%
Most days	2.6%	0.7%	2.1%	5.8%	5.9%	7.1%

The Children's Society

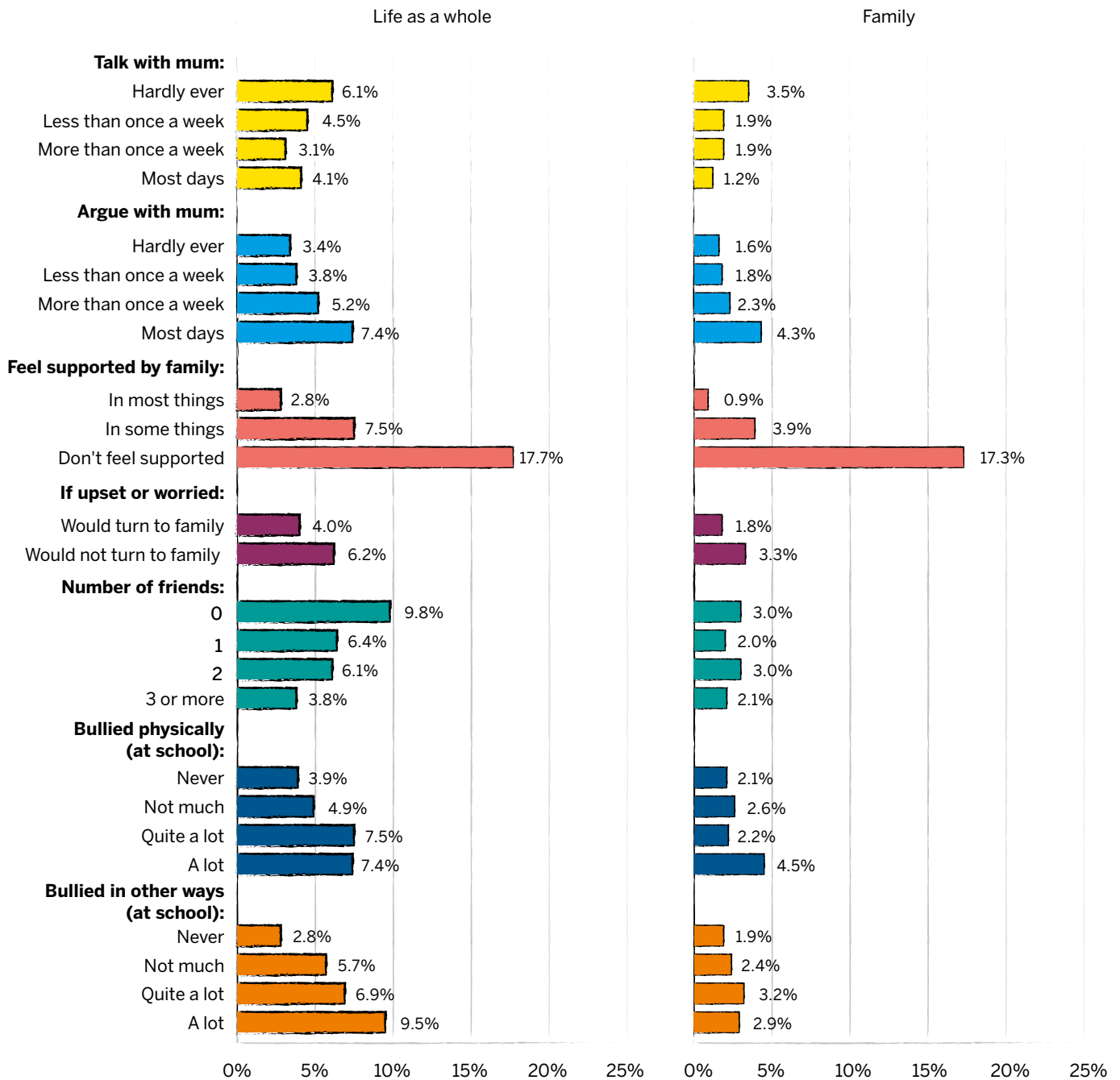
Argue with dad	**	**	**	**	**	**
Hardly ever	3.1%	1.4%	1.9%	7.5%	6.2%	10.2%
Less than once a week	4.8%	1.7%	2.2%	8.7%	8.4%	12.6%
More than once a week	6.7%	3.9%	3.5%	11.2%	10.8%	15.8%
Most days	12.6%	7.4%	5.7%	15.9%	15.0%	20.0%
Family support	**	**	**	**	**	**
Do not feel supported	43.3%	39.4%	11.6%	30.5%	29.3%	40.0%
Feel supported in some things	12.6%	7.1%	5.0%	17.6%	17.2%	23.7%
Feel supported in most things	2.5%	0.8%	1.8%	7.1%	5.9%	9.4%
Would turn to family if upset or worried	**	**	**	**	**	**
Someone not in family	16.4%	12.4%	5.1%	19.2%	16.7%	27.7%
Someone in family	3.7%	1.4%	2.2%	8.2%	7.4%	10.9%
Bullied physically (at school)	**	**	**	**	**	**
Never	3.5%	1.9%	1.7%	7.5%	7.1%	10.5%
Not much	8.4%	3.7%	4.0%	13.9%	11.9%	17.8%
Quite a lot	17.6%	6.7%	9.9%	25.9%	16.7%	30.1%
A lot	23.8%	7.1%	14.5%	30.3%	21.7%	31.4%
Bullied in other ways (at school)	**	**	**	**	**	**
Never	2.6%	1.7%	1.1%	6.4%	6.4%	8.1%
Not much	6.6%	2.6%	3.1%	10.3%	10.7%	15.9%
Quite a lot	12.7%	5.9%	7.5%	19.4%	12.3%	28.9%
A lot	22.2%	6.9%	13.4%	33.4%	17.5%	37.0%

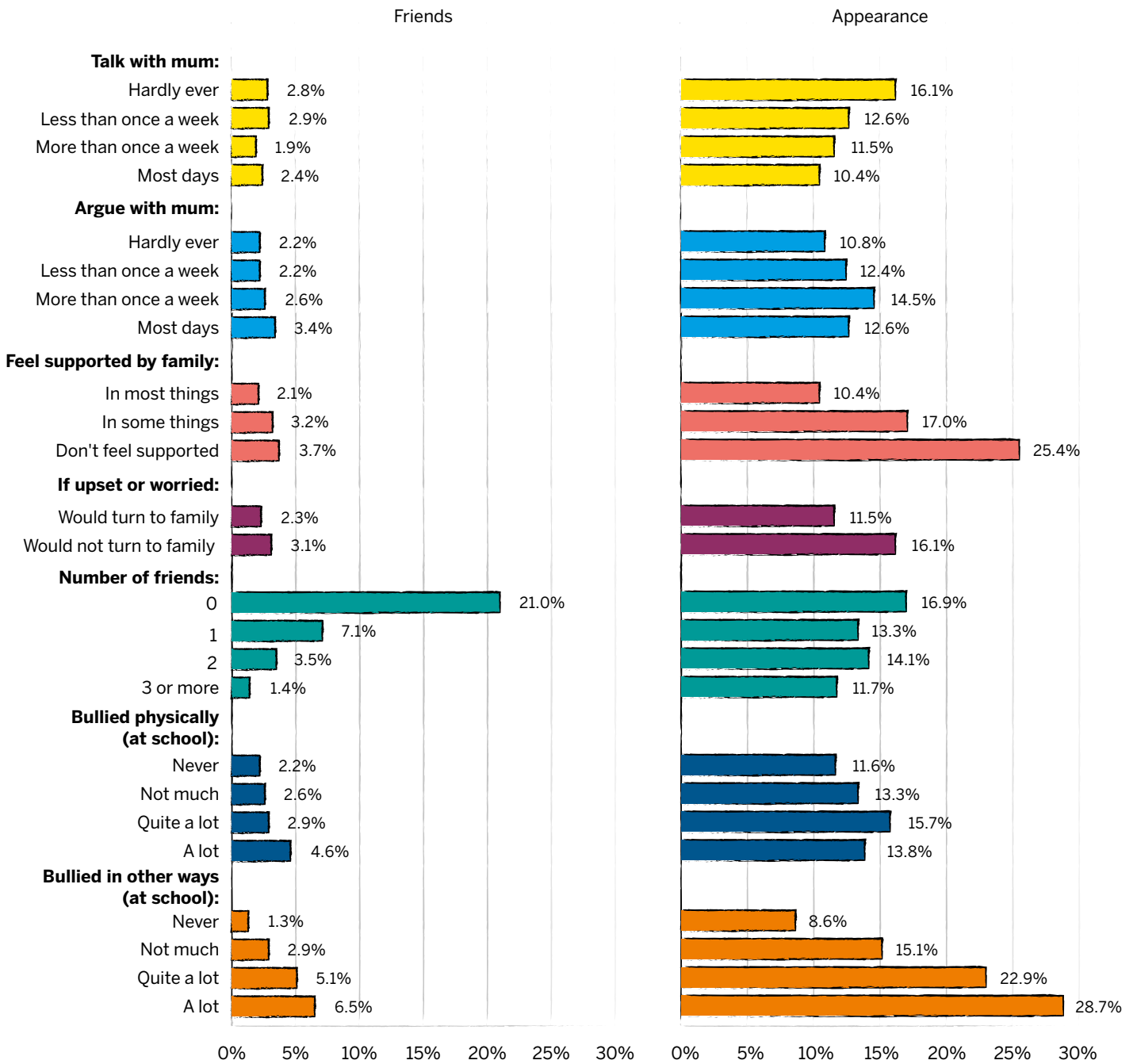
Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1 to 12, children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

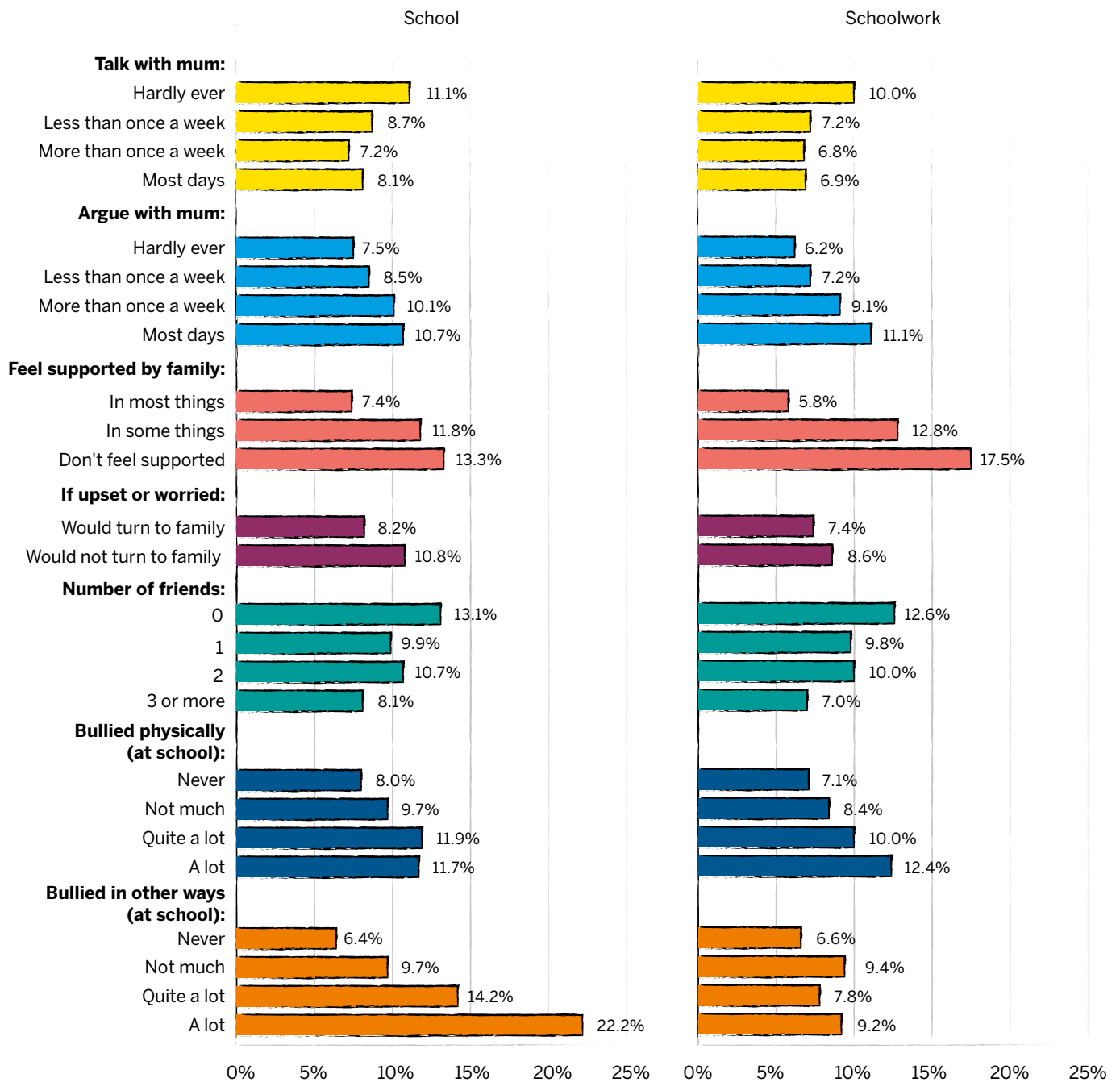
Note: The table presents the results (percentages and indication of statistical significance, shown by asterisks: ** <0.001, * <0.01) from bivariate associations between children's individual and family characteristics, socioeconomic factors, relationship quality and low subjective wellbeing, based on chi-square tests.



Figure 6a. Predicted probability of children (aged 10 to 15) being unhappy with life as a whole and five aspects of life, by relationship quality.

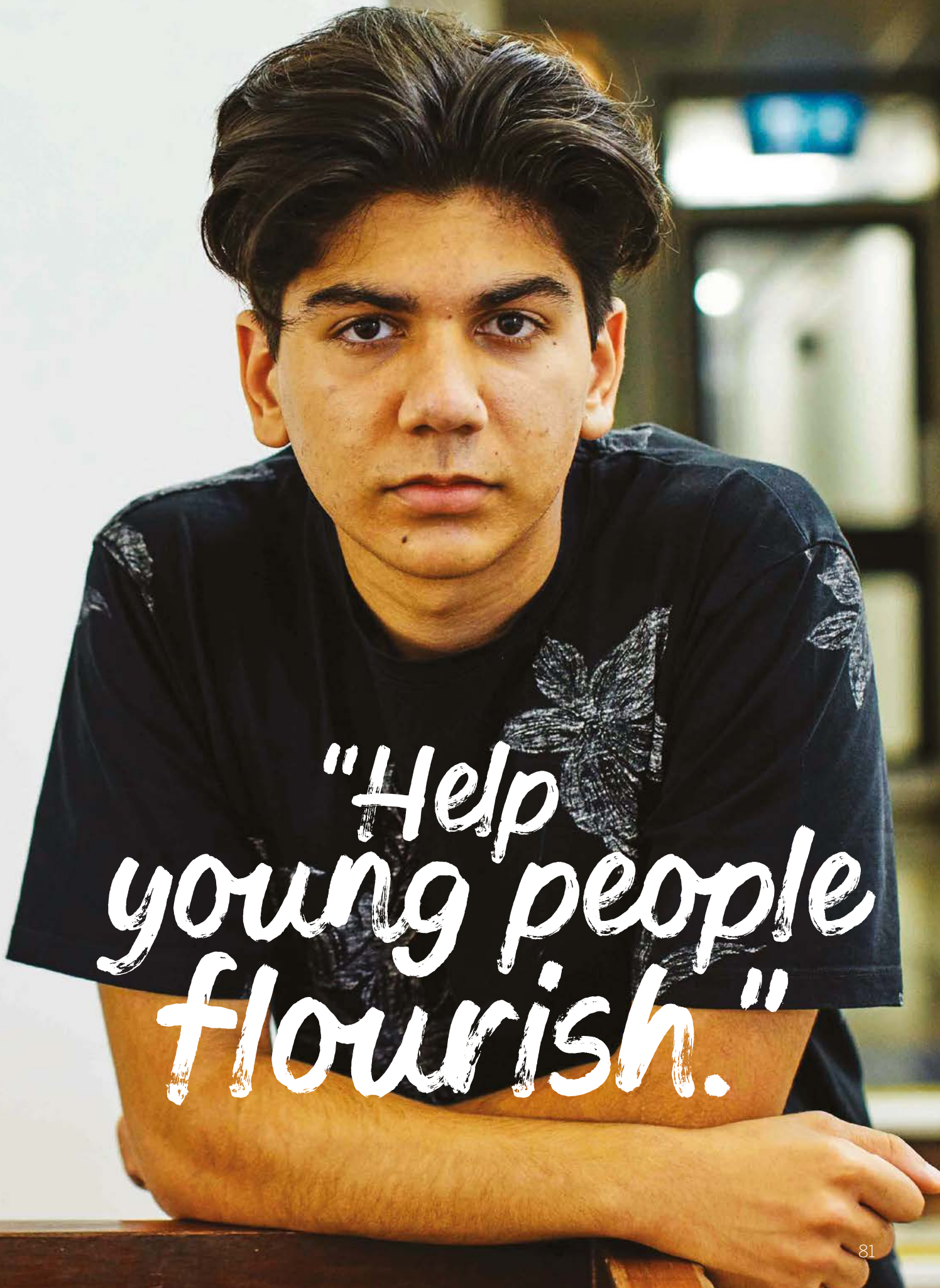






Source: Understanding Society survey, waves 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11 (when these variables were included in the survey), children aged 10 to 15, UK, weighted data.

Note: The scores presented are predicted probabilities of low subjective wellbeing from logistic regressions that include all the independent variables shown as well as wave of the survey, age, gender, and ethnicity of the child, family structure, income quintile of the household, and subjective financial difficulties.



"Help
young people
flourish."

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"Be kind
to all."



Every young person should have the right to a safe, happy childhood.

But right now, young people are facing huge risks. They urgently need our help. That's why our services exist to offer them vital support when they need it most. And we campaign alongside young people to bring about a society where all children can look forward to the future with hope.

Together, we can protect every childhood.



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