

# **Exploring Eleven Year Old Children's Understanding of Well-Being Using Well-Being Maps: Commonalities and Divergences Across Areas of Varying Levels of Deprivation and Ethnic Diversity in an English Qualitative Study**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to explore eleven year old children's understanding of well-being through their completion of Well-Being Maps and subsequent interviews on their content. The children were asked to describe the people, places and things which they viewed as important to their sense of well-being. The subsequent interviews explored their rationalisations for their choices. Ninety-two eleven year old children attending four schools with varying levels of deprivation and ethnic diversity took part in the study. This is the first section of an English study which is a part of the Multi-National Children's Understanding of Well-Being Study involving 26 countries which aims to explore how children conceptualise and experience well-being from a comparative and global perspective.

Commonalities and divergences in the English children's responses were explored. Across the entire sample of 92 children, there were clear commonalities. Relationships with family, predominantly parents, were viewed as very important. The reasons provided were consistent love and affection; constant support, encouragement and protection; fun to be with. The duration of this quality of parent-child interaction appeared to be the key. Trust and a sense of security were the result. Relationships with friends were deemed important by over two thirds of the children. The qualities of these relationships mirrored those with the parents with a sense of trust and security being present. Where places and activities were included on their maps, they were often linked to important relationships. Activities appeared to be important in acknowledging the relationship but also maintaining it. Activities were also valued by the children for skill development. There were some differences across the sample with relationships with friends and grandparents being more reported as important in the two areas of high deprivation, irrespective of ethnic diversity. The level of material possessions and holidays abroad were much more frequently reported in the school serving the low deprivation area. At times, the explanations for differences appeared to be an interplay of socio-economic factors and religious and cultural traditions. Suggestions for further research on children's perspectives on factors important to their well-being are made.

# **Exploring Eleven Year Old Children's Understanding of Well-Being Using Well-Being Maps: Commonalities and Divergences Across Areas of Varying Levels of Deprivation and Ethnic Diversity in an English Qualitative Study**

## **Introduction**

Child well-being as a concept has been the subject of increasing interest and usage over the past three decades (McAuley and Rose 2010). A popular concept, often referred to in government policy, its wide usage led to criticisms about uncertainty and instability in its definition (Pollard and Lee 2003); Ereaut and Whiting 2008).

Interest developed rapidly in the field of measuring and monitoring child well-being known as the Child Indicators movement. Normative changes and methodological advances had acted as driving forces (Ben-Arieh 2005). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) emphasised the right of children to have a voice in matters affecting them. The emergence of the Sociology of Childhood introduced the notion of children as social actors interacting and actively contributing to their own environments. At the same time, there was widespread acceptance of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development which emphasised the need to consider all aspects of a child's development and in the context of family, community and wider environment. This model proposes that children constantly interact with their environment by balancing factors, using resources and responding to stress (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998).

On the methodological side, it became clear that objective measures needed to be complemented by subjective perspectives of childhood (Casas 2011). As a result, the child indicator movement sought child centred indicators. As the child became the unit of observation, new domains became the subject of interest. Interest arose in children's experience of the here and now and consequently their daily lives, relationships and views and feelings became the foci.

Ben-Arieh (2008) has argued that incorporating children's subjective well-being became both a prerequisite and a consequence of the new field of measuring and monitoring well-being. Whilst concerns were initially raised about the reliability and validity of children's accounts (Casas 2011), it is now well accepted that to develop our understanding of child well-being, we need to ask children directly (Ben-Arieh 2010). Moreover, to understand their social and emotional relationships, the views of children are crucial (Ben-Arieh 2008).

Researchers' interest in children's subjective well-being is relatively recent but rapidly increasing (see McAuley 2012 *Child Indicators Research* Special Issue 5; 419-421). Understandably, it has garnered interest from both qualitative and quantitative researchers and the international research community. Of particular interest is the recent development of two global research initiatives: the *Children's World Survey* and the *Children's Understanding of Well-Being Multi-National Study*.

*Children's Worlds*, the International Survey of Children's Well-Being (see [www.isciweb.org](http://www.isciweb.org)), is a worldwide research survey on children's subjective well-being. It aims to understand children's subjective well-being and how they experience daily activities within their families, neighbourhoods and at school, using a quantitative survey of children across 24 nations. Results of the first two waves have been published (see Dinisman, T, Main, G and Fernandes, L. *Child Indicators Research* 8 (1), 1-4 2015; Ben-Arieh, A; Dinisman, T. and Rees, G. *Children and Youth Services Review* Vol 80 September 2017).

Following directly from that, the Children's Understanding of Well-Being-Global and Local Contexts (CUWB) Study (see [www.cuwb.org](http://www.cuwb.org)) has been developed. It is a multi-national qualitative study into how children conceptualise and experience well-being from a comparative and global perspective (Fattore, Fegter and Hunnell 2014). This multi-national study has dual overarching aims: (i) to increase our knowledge of how children understand dimensions of well-being in a locally oriented but multinational comparative manner and (ii) to critically analyse the challenges, processes and mechanisms involved in conducting multi-national qualitative research with children.

This paper is based upon the findings of the CUWB qualitative study which has recently been completed in England. Each country is addressing the following research questions:

- i. What are the key concepts and definitions of well-being from children's perspectives?
- ii. What concepts are most important for children and can we identify different domains of well-being that are important to children's overall well-being?
- iii. How do these concepts relate to the everyday experiences of children?

The English study also addressed the additional question:

- iv. Do these results differ if children live in areas with varying levels of deprivation and varying levels of ethnic diversity?

The latter question was added due to the fact that little is yet known about the factors that contribute to subjective well-being, particularly in relation to socio-demographic characteristics (Dinisman and Ben-Arieh 2016; McAuley and Layte 2012)).

## **Eleven Year Old Children's Conceptualisations of Well-Being: The English Study**

### **Methodology**

#### ***Sample***

Snowball sampling was used to gather a sample of Year 6 (11 year old) children from four schools in the North of England. The four schools were drawn from a high deprivation mixed-ethnic area (School 1); a low deprivation White English area (School 2); a high deprivation White English area (School 3) and a medium deprivation mixed-ethnic area (School 4). A total of 92 children in Year 6 (11 year olds) were drawn fairly evenly from the four schools who participated in the study (22; 22; 21 and 27 respectively) although the sample was somewhat larger and with a predominance of females in the fourth school.

Overall, there were 50 females and 42 males, with 50 being of White British origin and 39 being described by their schools as of South Asian, British Indonesia, Caribbean and Arab origins. The majority (34) of the latter group were from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

More specifically, School 1 participants of 12 male and 10 females were entirely from ethnic minorities; School 2 participants of 11 males and 11 females were White British apart from 1 child from an ethnic minority; School 3 participants of 10 females and 11 males were White British apart from 2 children from ethnic minorities; School 4 participants of 9 males and 18 females were fairly evenly drawn from White British (13) and minority ethnic (14) origins.

The sample mix reflected a variety of factors including the gender mix in the respective schools, the children and parents who consented to participation as well as availability on the interview days. Both the consent of the parents and the assent of the children was obtained in respect of each child participant.

### ***Method***

Child-centred participatory techniques were employed, including the use of task-oriented methods such as drawing, cutting out pictures and pasting on their maps, focus group debates, interviewing each other and creating short films to share with children in other countries. A broad Three Stage Interview Protocol was designed for use across the countries to permit comparisons (Fattore, Fegter and Hunner-Kreisel 2015) which permitted flexibility in the specific designs in each country. The English study adhered to the Protocol but introduced some methodological innovations in relation to the third stage interviews (to be detailed in a further publication).

Stage one focused on children's everyday experiences of well-being. Stage two explored children's understanding of specific well-being concepts. Stage three was designed to engage the children in communicating with children of similar age across the multi-national project.

In the first stage children were seen in small workshops of 8 or less and were asked to produce their own Well-Being Map of all the people, places and things in their life that were, in their view, important to their well-being and then indicate the most significant of these. They were then interviewed individually about the content of their maps and asked to:

- i. explain why these people, places and things were important/most significant to them
- ii. share what they would change to be even better, if they had a magic wand.
- iii. These interviews were recorded with the children's consent.

This paper focuses only on the results of the first stage interviews with the children about their everyday experiences of well-being as elicited from their Well-Being Maps and interviews about the content.

### **Findings regarding approach**

#### ***Participatory approach with the children***

Firstly, it is important to say something about the method and whether it was effective and well received. All of the children responded enthusiastically to the participatory approach. They eagerly took up the request to complete a large colourful map of the important people, places and things in their everyday lives and exercised considerable agency in how they chose to complete the task.

They were very clear about what they wished to depict and used the resources available to do so. Sometimes they chose to draw figures, sometimes they searched magazines for images to

paste on to aid the illustration and other times they selected materials such as coloured floral tissue paper or glittery paper to create items to include. Always, they added notes to ensure their selections were clearly understood. The researchers' role was to facilitate but not to influence any of the content of the map. The children put considerable thought into their creations. On average, they were completed in around 30 minutes and they demonstrated pride in their personal Well-Being Maps.

When asked to share with the researcher about who and what was included as important in their maps, they explained in considerable detail. Again, their reasoning for why they were important (or indeed why they were particularly significant) was clearly explained. The interviews were recorded and posed no difficulties once the children were given the opportunity in advance to try out and play back their voices on the recorders.

Working separately but in small groups initially to create their respective maps was a well-received approach, allowing the children to engage with the researchers in a non-directive way and in the company of their peers. Offering choice as to the content and how they depicted what was important to them allowed them to express agency. Asking them individually for their reasoning as to why the selected people, places and things were important elicited detailed and considered responses. They were clearly very engaged in this process and holding these interviews first established a strong rapport between the researchers and children which underpinned their engagement in the later stages of the research.

## **Findings regarding children's responses**

In terms of findings across the four schools, there were many commonalities in the children's responses but also some striking divergences. All children were asked about the people, places and things that were important to them. Interestingly, all of the children chose to include activities as making important contributions to their sense of well-being.

### **1. Important people and why**

#### **a. Family**

All of the children (92/92) indicated how important their family was to them. This was the one core area identified by all children as significant to their sense of well-being. Predominantly, they were referring to their parents and the immediate family unit. Their common rationale for choosing family in general as significant to their well-being can be summarised under the broad headings of consistent love and affection; constant support, encouragement and protection; fun to be with. Specific details were often offered on the role of grandparents and this will be addressed in the next section.

#### ***Consistent love and affection***

There was a strong sense of the children feeling loved by their parents and family and reciprocating this. It was associated with feeling cared for and looked after.

*I love my mum and dad...because they love me and they would do anything for me and I would do anything for them. I love my family...my brother and two sisters. I love my grandma-I see her every day.*

*well my sister, my dad and my mum are important to me because they take care of me, no matter what happens...*

Children often referred to the fact that they were always there for them, conveying a sense of trust in their parents which was long established whilst also constantly renewed through daily lived experiences.

*I love them (my family) very much cos they make me happy and they're a big part of my life...and they're always there for me...*

*My family because they look after me and they've always been by my side...they've always been there whenever I've needed help and they help me learn for school*

### ***Constant support, encouragement and protection***

More specifically, they valued the support they received when upset and going through hard times. They often stated that they could trust them and rely on them to make them feel better and to help them with problems. Many stated that when they have had a bad day, they always have family to turn to:

*always there for me and can trust them*

*comfort when sad or ill*

*make you forget the bad stuff*

*protect from bullying*

Several children spoke of feeling safe when with their families. Some children described their families as always sticking up for them. Most of the children spoke of the many things their parents do to support them e.g. driving them to see friends or to attend clubs. Some children acknowledged the many practical tasks parents do to support them such as making food and washing clothes. A few children mentioned the role of parents in teaching them about right and wrong. One child likened her family to a team sharing experiences together.

*mum and dad make me feel safe*

*they encourage me in everything*

*we're like one team and...we do lots of things together*

### ***Fun to be with***

They frequently stated that they enjoyed spending time with their family, often describing their enjoyment of playing together or of going on outings as a family and on holidays. It was clear from listening to the children that the important element was the lived experiences with their family rather than the places themselves.

*I love it when I go out with my family*

*I like playing with my family*

*I like spending time with family*

*I love...shopping with my mum*

*I love to watch and play rugby with my dad*

*Without my family, nothing would be exciting*

*My family are more important than the places*

### **Grandparents**

Grandparents were the third most frequently mentioned significant people. Over half (47/92) of the children mentioned them. They were mentioned across all the schools, although to different extents. The variations will be discussed below.

In common was the children's sense of affection, love and encouragement from their grandparents. Frequently they described the enjoyment of spending time with them, either visiting them or doing something together. Often they had learnt some life skills from their grandparents whilst visiting them.

*Having a sleepover in my nana's makes me feel happy because she takes us places and takes us out for dinner or tea....in the morning when we have breakfast, sometimes she lets us have crisp biscuits or sweets and that's even nicer.*

*I love to bake with my grandma...because my grandma has been baking all her life and I've just, kind of, grown up with her. There is one picture on the wall where we made a chocolate cake and I'm eating out of the bowl and I've got chocolate everywhere.*

Where they lived nearby, the children saw them almost daily. Often grandparents provided care after school until the parents returned from work. They experienced a great deal of support from them, as did their parents too in difficult times.

*When I get back from school, no-one is there to take me, so I go to my grandparents' house and my grandma cooks me food.*

*They help me with all sorts...they also help my mum and dad when they need it...my granddad a couple of days ago offered to paint the fence. My nana will look after me if my mum and dad go out and stuff.*

*My grandma and my grandfather are really supportive especially during hard times...when my mum was having the boys, they took her and me because I was the only child and my dad had left...and also when I was born because they thought I had Down's Syndrome.*

In some cases, where the grandparents lived many miles away, great efforts were made by both sides to travel and keep in contact. Often the children depicted the houses or gardens of their grandparents which they associated with happy experiences.

*It's usually on holidays...me and my brother go down with our parents and so then I see my nanna and my granddad...but my other grandparents I see usually every two weeks because they come up every two weeks.*

*What's important to me is nanna and grandpa's house and the seaside because I don't get to see them a lot because they live at the seaside. And I go there every year for six weeks' holiday.*

### **Divergences**

However, there was considerable variation in the extent to which grandparents were mentioned as important across the four schools. Notably, the highest number of children who mentioned them were

in the School 1 (15/22; 68.2%) and School 3 (13/21; 61.9%) , both in areas of high deprivation with the former being entirely children from ethnic minority groups and the latter being largely White British child participants. Both schools served different parts of the same urban area. School 4 also had the third highest numbers (15/27; 55.6%) of children mentioning their grandparents. It served the mid deprivation area and had mixed ethnic children. However, in contrast, very few children (4/22-18.2%) in School 3 mentioned their grandparents. This school served the low deprivation area with White English child participants.

## **b. Friends**

Overall, friends were the second (62 out of 92) most frequently mentioned significant factor in the children's well-being maps.

Where mentioned, friends were associated always with positive things such as making them laugh and playing with them. Predominantly they were friends from school but occasionally they were from other activities, commitments or neighbourhood.

*My friends are special because they're funny... silly sometimes... They're also nice and can be helpful... I have some at home on my street but most of my friends are mainly in school....*

Sometimes the friendships had developed over several years.

*My best friend is important. My best friend has been my friend since nursery and he's always been there for me... He makes me feel happy and when I'm feeling sad, he makes me feel happier.*

Some children thought that their friends had supported their development.

*My friends because they can make me enjoy myself and they sometimes give me ideas and they make me learn more stuff sometimes.*

*Well, my friends are important in my life because I was a negative person at first and they believed in me and, and now I've entered many things like the dance competition and the choir.*

Supporting them when they are in trouble or sad was repeatedly mentioned.

*My friends are also some of the most important people in my life and they will encourage me to go further in my life and without them, I don't know what I would do... and... whenever I'm in trouble they'll stick up for me... when I'm sad they will help me with my problems.*

*Besties because... my friends are always there from me... whenever I'm down, they and are always there to cheer me up and where I'm... stuck with something they're always there to help me.*

Characteristics of friends identified were being able to trust them, the fact that they were always there for them and that they were caring and protective. Being with them was associated with feeling safe. Some compared them to their parents/family.

*My best friend A is important to me because... she tells me a lot of her secrets and I can trust her... because I tell her a lot and she does keep them.*

*My friends are important to me because if someone bullies me, they would say "Why are you bullying her?" B and C are my best friends. They always be with me and help me with my work.*

*My best friends are always there so if I'm not too well or if I'm sad, they just cheer me up and they're... like my parents.*

Several reflected on the importance of having friends to play with at school break times and to have fun with as well as what life would be like without them.

*I like being around my friends and having fun. They're important because without friends you feel really lonely.*

*Because nothing would be as fun if I didn't have friends to play with.*

### **Divergences**

However, there was considerable variation in the extent to which friends were mentioned as important across the four schools. Notably, by far the highest number of children mentioning friends were in the School 1 (18/22; 81.8%) and School 3 (17/21; 80.95%), both in areas of high deprivation with the former being entirely children from ethnic minority groups and the latter being largely White British child participants. Both schools served different parts of the same large urban area.

Mention of friends was lower in School 2 and much lower in School 4. Children from Schools 2 and 4 were in low and mid deprivation level areas respectively. Child participants in School 2 were almost entirely White English whilst those in School 4 were well balanced between children from White English and from minority ethnic groups. In School 2, 15 out of the 22 (68.18%) children mentioned friends whilst in School 4, only 12 out of 27 (44.44%) children did so. As noted earlier, the gender mix in Schools 1, 2 and 3 was well balanced. However, in School 4, there were twice as many females as males. Other possible contextual reasons for the variation will be explored in the next section.

### **Divergences in children's responses regarding the importance of grandparents and friends**

We have seen that a much higher percentage of children in the schools in the two high deprivation areas (Schools 1 and 3), irrespective of ethnic background, identified friendships as important to their well-being. Possible contextual reasons were the proximity of the children to their friends in school and in the local neighbourhoods served by the schools. The children in both areas predominantly lived near their respective schools.

Again, a much higher percentage of children in the same two schools in the two high deprivation areas, irrespective of ethnic background, identified grandparents as important. Often the grandparents and wider family lived nearby or in the same house and offered support to the parents. The most frequent pattern was of grandparents minding the children after school until the parents returned from work. So children often had daily contact with their grandparents who took a significant role in caring for them and teaching them skills such as baking.

Whilst not so high as the above two schools, over two thirds of the children who attended School 2 did mention friends as important. They predominantly lived in the area close to the school so availability in and out of school was certainly possible. This was also the school where very few children (4/22-18.2%) mentioned grandparents. Often the grandparents did not live nearby. Whilst strenuous efforts to maintain contact were detailed by some, there was no mention of contact by the others. Overall, there was a fairly strong feeling conveyed of very self-contained nuclear families who had moved countries on several occasions.

Whilst over half of the children (15/27-55.6%) in School 4 mentioned grandparents as important, less (12/27-44%) included friends. School staff indicated that some children travelled quite a distance to school each day which may have restricted opportunities for contact between children outside school.

Whatever the reasons, there were considerable differences in the extent to which the children in the four schools saw their relationships with friends and grandparents as important to their well-being. Contextual factors such as availability, frequency of contact and family dialogue and family self-containment may well have played an important part in this. However, the apparent association

between socio-economic factors and the children's varying emphasis on the importance of relationships with friends and grandparents needs further exploration.

### **Important places and why**

Places were almost always related to significant people in their lives or their family's lives, values, culture, religion or lineage. The exception being places where the children chose to spend time alone. Mostly this was in their bedrooms but for those children who liked nature and flowers, sometimes it was in the garden.

There were commonalities in the places chosen as important by the children in the four schools. There were also considerable variations. All or the majority of children referred to places either on their map or their explanations of their choices on the map (School 1-18/22; School 2-20/22; School 3-21/21; School 4-27/27). There was a considerable range in the number of places named collectively in each school with the most limited being in School 1 and the greatest number being in School 4 (School 1-22; School 2-37; School 3-37; School 4-68). Children's responses in Schools 2, 3 and 4 differed from those in School 1 due to the much more limited mentions of places outside of home, school and mosque. Children in School 4 frequently mentioned places in other parts of the UK and outside the UK, often related to their countries of origin. They frequently visited family living in countries of origin. The main difference between ethnic minority children in Schools 1 and 4 was the socio-economic context which is likely to have limited opportunities for travel.

In all of the schools, the children's homes and/or bedrooms, their grandparents' houses and family holidays featured as important places in responses. A common description of their homes was the place where they felt safe where no-one would harm them. Their bedrooms were described as their private place offering space from the outside pressures and the opportunity to relax and pursue their own interests. Their grandparents' houses were always associated with positive, nurturing and often special relationships with their grandparents. Frequently, this was the place they went to after school to be minded until their parents returned from work or the place for family visits or holidays. Often, they described the enjoyment of learning new skills such as baking with their grandmothers. Overall, though, the children were very clear that it was the relationships and not the place that was of primary importance to them:

*My family are more important than the places*

Returning to the children's responses across the sample, there were some striking variations too. As a place, schools featured as important places in the responses by 50% of the children (11/22) in School 1. In contrast, no children (0/22) included schools in School 2, 3/21 children (%) in School 3 and 7/27 children (%) in School 4. Where noted as important, schools were associated with learning new things, seeing friends and gaining the knowledge to get good jobs in the future. The latter was a particularly frequent response in School 1 and appeared to echo family values.

Again there were variations with regard to holidays being included by the children. In School 1, no children referred to holidays but some mentioned family living in Pakistan. In contrast, holidays predominantly abroad, were mentioned by half (11/22) of the children in School 2 and viewed predominantly as an important time for family to have some time together. In School 3, only 6/22 referred to holidays which were predominantly visits to family or places nearby. In School 4, there was a greater mix with over half (16/27) referring to holidays or visiting family abroad. Six of these referred to visits to family still living in countries from which they had migrated such as India, Pakistan, Iraq and Jamaica. A further six referred to holidays to places in the UK to see family. One mentioned a holiday in Europe, another spoke of holidays in general whilst two further talked about places where their families came from or where they were born. It could well be argued that the socio-economic circumstances are likely to have influenced children's lived experiences of holidays.

In all cases where places were mentioned, it was in relation to activities.

### **Important activities and why**

Activities were chosen as important to their sense of well-being by all of the children in all schools. This was even though they were not prompted about this. They were associated with a sense of enjoyment, achievement and companionship. Activities were often with others in the family, friends/peers or other adults but children also described solitary activities. As indicated earlier, the bedroom was the predominant chosen place where children might be involved in more solitary activities such as reading, art or listening to music. They often described this as a space where they could relax and do what they wanted including rest and sleep. Sometimes they also chose to engage in activities with friends through texting or gaming with them whilst there.

The activities broadly fell into five categories in all of the schools: family-related activities; activities on their own; activities with friends; sports activities; activities related to pets. Family-related activities were high in all of the schools (School 1-18/22; School 2-19/22; School 3-21/21; School 4-27/27). Lone activities were also often mentioned (School 1-18/22; School 2-19/22; school 3-17/21; School 4-16/27). Friend activities were lower but nonetheless important for many of the children (School 1-10/22; School 2-15/22; School 3-16/21; School 4- 16/27). Sports activities varied (School 1-10/22; School 2-19/22; School 3-14/21; School 4-14/27). Finally pet-related activities, though not mentioned so frequently, were clearly important for some children across the four schools (School 1-7/22; School 2-11/22; School 3-13/21; School 4-9/27). Often children referred to their pets as part of their family and of their companionship.

Of interest is the seeming disparity between friends being often named as important in School 1 and much less so in School 2 yet friend-related activities were mentioned less often in School 1 than 2. Two factors may be relevant here. The children in School 1 described attendance at mosque each day after school which may have limited time for other activities with friends. Another point which will be picked up in the later discussion of findings was the more limited English vocabulary and written detail on the maps in School 1. This may mean that not all activities were included.

### **Important things and why**

Overall, a significant number (64/92) of the children included things on their maps or referred to them in their explanations of their maps. What came across was that they were often not important in themselves but rather in relation to activities and relationships. Their explanations were associated with how they chose to use their own time, how they could communicate easily with friends and family both at home and abroad and enjoyment.

Children in all four schools (School 1-14/22 (64%); School 2-18/22 (82%) ; School 3- 15/21 (71%); School 4- 17/27 (63%) included things on their maps or in their explanations. The predominant response could be broadly defined under 'technical items' (School 1-9/22 (41%); School 2-16/22 (73%); School 3-10/21(48%) ; School 4-12/27(44%)) These included iPads, iPhones, computers, TVs, DVDs, videos, PS3s, games consoles and iPods. Books and make up were mentioned by a few children in all of the schools. Musical instruments featured in some responses from Schools 2 and 4 only. Other items reflected the interests of individual children and included sketch books, football shoes, clothes, toys, a skateboard, photography items, ballet shoes, a motorbike, a knitting machine, campervan, a cycle and a trampoline.

Children in School 2 mentioned things much more often than in the other schools 1, 3 and 4. Obviously this could be linked to socio-economic status. However, it could also be linked to the fact that some of the children in School 2 appeared to spend quite a lot of time on their own as they had no or few siblings or wider family nearby. Children in Schools 1 and 3 (the higher deprivation areas) made fewer mentions of things but not substantially so. Certainly in School 1, there was evidence of the wider family (grandparents, aunts, uncles) providing items. Given the involvement of wider family with children in School 3 also, this may have also been the case.

## **Discussion of overall findings**

The overall aim of this part of the study was to examine how 11 year old children experience well-being in their everyday lives and whether varying levels of socio-economic status or ethnic diversity might influence this.

### ***The epistemological position and methodological approach***

The epistemological position and methodological approach adopted in this study have been influenced by the sociology of childhood tradition which sees children as social actors with agency (James, Jencks and Prout, 1998), as well as Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child which emphasises the child's right to be heard, particularly on matters affecting their lives. The underlying assumption then adopted in this study is that children are experts in their own lives with the competence and skill to share the knowledge they uniquely have from their standpoint (Alenen 2005). According to Standpoint theory, children's views will necessarily be different from those of adults due to their different location in the social order (Fraser, 2004; Fattore, Mason and Watson 2009).

In this study, when asking the children to develop their Well-Being Maps, the only prompts the children were given by the researchers were that we were interested in the people, places and things that they thought were important to their sense of well-being. This was to avoid the imposition of adult definitions of well-being, a criticism often levelled at quantitative surveys into children's well-being. Rather, the intention was to allow the children to choose their responses and, importantly, their rationalisations for these choices. In other words, the aim was to not only to have a better understanding of what is important to their sense of well-being but also why they thought they were important. The children showed considerable agency in how they created their very individual Well-Being Maps and, more generally, in adding in activities as important to their well-being.

### ***Children's everyday lived experiences of well-being***

According to Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development, the child is surrounded by a network of interactions both within and external to the family (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The Children's Understanding of Well-Being studies attempt to gain children's perspectives on their everyday experience of well-being. The children's Well-Being Maps provided us with a wealth of information about their family, school and community lives. The 92 children of different genders came from families of different sizes, attended four different schools serving areas with varying levels of deprivation and ethnic mix. Each child was unique and their well-being maps clearly demonstrated that. However, there were strong common findings across the sample about what was important in their everyday lived experiences of well-being. They were very clear about who, what and where was important to their individual well-being and confidently depicted these on their well-being maps. Their rationalisations as to why were particularly illuminating, some confirming earlier research and others adding new or further enlightenment. The analysis attempted to both document the key facts but also highlight the emergent themes. Here we focus on the overarching findings.

### ***Relationships as central to children's sense of well-being***

Across the sample it was apparent that relationships were central to their well-being. Their relationships with family, especially parents, were clearly very important to all of them. They emphasised the consistency of their love and affection, the constancy of their support, encouragement and protection and the fact that they were fun to be with. These elements of the relationship seemed critical to their estimation of the level of importance. Frequently the children spoke of the trust and sense of security which they felt as a result. They were 'always there for them' when they needed them. The duration of this quality of parent-child interaction appeared to be key. This would fit with Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development and, in particular, his more recent writings on the particular importance of proximal figures and their everyday interactions with children (Bronfenbrenner 2006). This model allows for children influencing and being influenced by those around them in their environment. In other words, children expressing their own agency. There were multiple illustrations of the love and support they received from their parents as well as their

reciprocal love and commitment. There were also indications of the children needing protection to 'forget bad stuff', have 'comfort when sad or ill' or have parents 'protect from bullying'. Where grandparents were mentioned, they were also associated with care, support, encouragement and fun. Sometimes that support was for their parents as well as themselves 'during hard times'. Again there was clear evidence of the children's positive interactions with grandparents e.g. around baking and the quality of their relationship. The sense was of these children being surrounded by caring, protective adults with whom they experienced trust and a sense of security to deal with life's ups and downs.

Relationships with friends were deemed important by over two-thirds of the children. These relationships were associated with playing with them, making them laugh, supporting them when 'in trouble' or 'sad'. Characteristics included 'always being there for them', being caring and protective, being able to trust them. They described feeling safe when with them. In many ways, these relationships mirrored those with their families. Support, encouragement and protection and fun were key elements providing the children with a sense of trust and sense of security. Not all children indicated that friends were important, though, suggesting that they did not all have this quality of friendships.

These relationships of trust which provided a sense of security in the home and school domains appeared to provide the children with the confidence for self-development and learning new skills. Regular activities with family and friends seemed to be both a mutual acknowledgement of those relations and making a vital contribution to their maintenance.

#### ***Places, activities and relationships***

Important places were most often related to relationships, whether that be positive holiday experiences with grandparents or sad occasions visiting the gravestone of a deceased member of the family. Whilst school was seen as a place of learning, it was equally seen as a place to meet their friends. Generally the mosque was seen also as a place of learning but the relationship with the teacher was emphasised. Their homes were associated with feelings of security and protection by their parents. Their grandparents' houses were associated with support and care. Family holidays had different meanings to different children. Often it was excitement and the fun of new experiences and seeing extended family. For some whose parents were very busy, holidays were the opportunity for family to spend time and do things together. In general, were quite clear that places were not as important as relationships. Instead they facilitated shared experiences and strengthened relationships.

All of the children added activities as important. These broadly included activities with family, with friends activities on their own, sports and with pets. There was a strong sense that activities were the medium through which relationships developed or were sustained with family and friends as was found in previous research (McAuley, Mckeown and Merriman, 2012). With sports, the emphasis was on competence and competition in relation to peers. Activities with pets might be with other family members such as walking the dog or as companions in the absence of family or friends. The children also emphasised the need to pursue their own personal interests such as reading or hobbies and to have space and time away from others to reflect. Very often those reflections were about themselves in relation to friends or family.

As we have seen, the things most mentioned as important were of a technical nature. The children were quite clear, though, that they provided amusement and prevented them from being bored. However, often they used them to watch movies with family, to text their friends to invite them to some shared activity and to keep in touch with family at home or family abroad. What came across as important was their use in their own time in whatever way they chose. Again they emphasised that the items were not that important to them in themselves but rather in relation to activities and relationships.

#### ***Divergences related to varying levels of deprivation and ethnic diversity***

There did appear to be some factors which were mentioned by children in some areas and not others. Certainly friends were more frequently mentioned by children in both areas of high deprivation in the

same city. Again grandparents were noted as important more often in these two areas also. Both of these results were irrespective of ethnic mix. Places outside the home and school were much less frequently mentioned as important by children in School 1 in a high deprivation area with children of minority ethnic origin. The combination of socio-economic factors and cultural and religious practices are likely to have influenced this finding. This is more likely as School 3 in a deprived area had a much higher number of mentions. Also the importance given to school in School 1 is likely to reflect family values about school being an important route to employment. Friend and sports activities were comparatively lower in School 1. The huge commitment to Mosque teaching after school each week day is likely to limit the opportunity for children to participate in these activities. Overall, therefore, socio-economic factors are likely to be influencing children's experiences of everyday life and consequently what they view as important to their well-being. However, ethnic origin and related religious and cultural practices may also be influential factors. Again, it may be the interplay of both at times which is influential.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper set out to examine what eleven year old children thought were important people, places and things for their well-being. They all included activities in their responses. Whilst we have recognised the importance of identifying critical factors for child well-being, measurement has tended to be by proxy or by surveys with adult-led questions. The Multi-National Children's Understanding of Well-Being Study is a unique attempt to give younger children a voice about what matters to them and why it matters to them. In other words, it starts from the position that children are the experts in their own lives with knowledge unique to their standpoint (Mayall, 2002).

A qualitative, participatory approach was well received by the children who were eager to share the factors they felt important to their well-being and the rationalisations for their choices. From this small English study, we gained considerable insights from these children. In particular, we learnt of the overwhelming importance of their close family relationships especially with parents. We learnt also of the importance of relationships with friends for many of the children. Relationships with grandparents where available were also clearly valued. The sense of love, trust and feeling safe over time was central to the relationships with parents and family and reflected often in relationships with friends also. Places and activities were important often as a result of these relationships. The central importance of relationships to children's well-being echoes earlier findings (Fattore, Mason and Watson 2009). Activities were also valued for development of skills. Where divergences occurred across the sample, they appeared to be related to children's everyday experiences in their cultural and socioeconomic contexts.

This small qualitative study has obvious limitations. The sample was drawn from one area of North England only, with particular population mixes and exclusively with 11 year old children. Further research with larger samples in England and a wider range of ages would be important further developments. Again, the children were all seen on three occasions but further engagement over a longer period might have generated greater depth of understanding. When the Multi-National Study is completed, cross-national comparisons should provide much richer data on the importance of cultural and socio-economic context.

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