



# Supporting children and young people's wellbeing



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## Introduction

This free course, *Supporting children and young people's wellbeing*, introduces different ways of understanding wellbeing as well as related concepts such as resilience. There is a wide a variety of practices and services that provide support for children and young people's wellbeing and this course also explores how they can make a difference to children and young people's lives. Finally, the course considers how those working with children and young people can know whether they are making a difference or not – what are the ways in which this can be evaluated?

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [KE206 Making a difference: working with children and young people](#).

## Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand some of the principles, purposes and responsibilities affecting those working with children and young people
- critically engage with some of the social issues that affect children and young people's wellbeing
- interpret and evaluate information and literature relevant to children and young people
- find and use information from a range of sources, making effective use of digital practices, appropriate information and communication technologies.

# 1 Wellbeing in today's society

During the last decade a number of media reports, newspaper articles and debates on social media have shared alarming statistics, which suggest that children and young people in the United Kingdom are increasingly unhappy and that their wellbeing is potentially at risk. An article published in *The Guardian* (Weaver, 2019) suggested that children and young people in the UK are some of the unhappiest in the industrialised world.

## Activity 1 Is the wellbeing of children and young people in the UK in crisis?

 Allow about 45 minutes

Read the article

[‘Children in the UK the least happy they have been in a decade says report’](#) (Weaver, 2019), bearing in mind the following questions:

1. In what ways does this article define or discuss wellbeing?
2. Do you think wellbeing is different from happiness?
3. Do you feel this article provides an accurate representation of children and young people's lives today?

Provide your answer...

### Discussion

The newspaper article uses the terms ‘wellbeing’ and ‘happiness’ interchangeably to describe children and young people's experiences in the UK during the twenty-first century – you will consider the differences between these two terms in a later activity. It draws on longitudinal research so provides an insight into changes across time. These and alternative measures of wellbeing will be discussed further in this course.


Whether you felt this was a fair representation of the UK might depend on your own experiences and those of young people you know. There are frequent media reports claiming the mental or physical health of children and young people today is getting worse and their wellbeing is in crisis but they are not always well-substantiated. We can also look at international comparisons which are periodically published by UNICEF (see for example [this report](#) where the UK appears in 27th place in a league table of child wellbeing outcomes).

This article was of course written just before the COVID-19 health pandemic which will also have had an effect on some young people's mental health.

## 2 What do children and young people think?

While the term 'wellbeing' is in common use, it is not necessarily one that children or young people use when talking about their own lives. What do they say? This issue is explored in the next activity.

### Activity 2 A good childhood?

 Allow about 1 hour

#### Task 1

[The Good Childhood Report](#) (Children's Society, 2019) is an extensive survey of the wellbeing of children and young people in the UK. The survey has been developed and repeated, so has built up a detailed picture over time. The whole of the report is relevant to this course, and it is a useful resource to draw on. Here, though, you just need to read from pages 8–27. You'll be asked to answer a series of questions in the next task, so you might want to bear them in mind as you read.

Please note that a new version of this report is published annually. The 2019 version is being used for the tasks in this activity for consistency, but the report is a useful resource to draw on for your work on this course. The most recent version can be found on the [Children's Society website](#) and the subsequent versions give more insights into the short- and long-term impacts of the COVID-19 health pandemic, children's anxieties about the cost of living, and concerns about the future (Children's Society 2023).

#### Task 2

Now write your responses to the following questions. Try to answer each question as fully as possible before reading the discussion.

1. Why did the Children's Society develop the good childhood index?

Provide your answer...

2. How did the research team ascertain the initial ideas from children and young people? And how were their ideas used to help create the wellbeing survey?

Provide your answer...

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#### Discussion

1. The Children's Society argue that in the past parents or teachers were asked to assess wellbeing on behalf of children but that 'research has shown that children's and parents' responses to the same sets of questions about emotional and behavioural difficulties are not the same'. Therefore, they believed it was important to work with young people to develop their own index of measures of wellbeing.
2. Rather than use the term 'wellbeing', the researchers asked open-ended questions about what makes a 'good life' for young people and what the



barriers to a good life are. The ideas were initially generated (see p. 14) with eight thousand 14- and 15-year-olds, and then piloted and expanded so the survey now covers the 8–17 age range.

The kinds of measures used in this report are usually described as ‘subjective’ (data drawn from our own perspective). Another way of trying to gauge the wellbeing of children and young people is to use those commonly described as ‘objective’, such as levels of poverty and measures of health or education, housing conditions or the quality of the environment. Both ways of ‘measuring’ are valid but it is important to think about the strengths and weaknesses of each.

Wellbeing is a broad concept which spans a wide range of physical and mental health as well as emotional and social factors.

## 3 The concept of resilience

You will now start to explore how children and young people's wellbeing can be supported. In particular, you will look at the concept of resilience and what this means for childhood and youth services.

### Activity 3 Examining the term 'resilience'

 Allow about 30 minutes

#### Task 1

What does the term 'resilience' mean to you? If you were asked to describe a 'resilient young person', what qualities, behaviours and skills might you refer to? Spend about 15 minutes reflecting on these questions and making notes below.

*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

You may have referred to some of the following terms:

- the ability to cope
- self confidence
- inner resolve
- self-esteem
- grit.

These are just a few of the terms that are commonly used when talking about resilience and, of course, you will have ideas of your own, and these may be based on your own experiences. You may have included terms such as self-confidence and inner resolve, for instance, as behaviours that can develop throughout life or be strengthened.

What you may have found when doing this activity is that the concept of resilience is actually quite difficult to put into words; it is not definitively one thing or another but a complex interplay of behaviours, skills and qualities. The concept rose to prominence through the work of developmental psychologists such as Emmy Wener (1990) and Michael Rutter (1985). But why do you think developing these skills and qualities are considered so important?

#### Task 2

Write down some key points below on why you think developing resilience is so important for children and young people.

*Provide your answer...*

#### Discussion

In describing resilience, Mind – a UK charity committed to improving the emotional wellbeing and mental health of children and young people – suggests that avoiding

life's challenges completely isn't possible, but developing the skills to deal with them effectively when they arise will help to guard against potentially catastrophic consequences. Mind suggests that 'resilience is something that can change over time' and furthermore, 'can be taught, and learned' (Mind, 2017). One might consider resilience as an important life skill linked to wellbeing. Resilient behaviours and qualities can act as buffers that protect children and young people from further stress and anxiety.

The concept of resilience is very broad and includes a number of skills, qualities and behaviours.

Daniel and Wassell (2002) have proposed a wide range of factors from individual characteristics (such as empathy and problem solving skills) to family factors (such as a close bond to at least one person), through to those that are community wide (such as good a school experience and extended network of support).

## 4 Resilience and wellbeing

What, then, are the implications for children and young people's everyday lives, and how can practices and practitioners support and perhaps even enhance wellbeing?

### Activity 4 Understanding resilience and wellbeing

 Allow about 30 minutes

Considering Mind's description of resilience from the Activity 3 feedback, plus your own ideas generated in response to previous activities, spend some time now reflecting on your understanding of the concept of wellbeing. Consider too the links between resilience and wellbeing. Use the following questions to help structure your note taking.

1. What does it mean to be 'well'?

Provide your answer...

2. Describe some of the everyday challenges and influences that children and young people face and that might impact on their wellbeing.

Provide your answer...

3. What do you think are the connections between resilience and wellbeing?

Provide your answer...

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### Discussion

1. The term 'wellbeing' is used to capture a broad understanding of what it means to be 'well' and includes physical, emotional, psychological, and social factors that affect children and young people. Understanding wellbeing cannot therefore be seen in isolation from social contexts. This might include the nature of children and young people's relationships in families and care contexts. It might also reflect where children and young people live as well as economic and domestic circumstances. The term can also be used generally to denote quality of life experiences.
2. Children and young people's wellbeing may be influenced in a positive way by good physical health or material wealth, for example, yet undermined by poor social relationships; similarly, while relationships may be very positive, physical health can be undermined by living in conditions of poverty. The variety of factors that influence wellbeing across the lives of children, young people and families highlights the many points of contact there are with practitioners and the potential for them to play a role in supporting and enhancing wellbeing.
3. Many children and young people face challenges and potential threats to their wellbeing, which they may find very difficult to cope with. These may include dealing with a family health crisis, and can also include relationship issues at

home, such as divorce and changing family circumstances, as well as difficulties experienced in school, such as bullying and friendship issues.

Resilient behaviours, such as the ability to endure and adapt to stressful life experiences, are clearly important qualities and they are associated with self-confidence, emotional intelligence and social competence. Yet there are clear differences in how children react to stressful situations, and psychologists question why it is that some children appear more able to bounce back from life's challenges and show fewer signs of anxiety than others. Even children raised in the same family can demonstrate startling differences in how they react to and cope with stressful events.

While some children may appear more naturally predisposed to displaying resilient behaviours from a young age, there are ways in which resilience can be supported and developed. Close bonds and positive school experiences as suggested by Daniels and Wassell (2002) are things which can be developed and there are a number of practices, and professional roles that can provide sources for support – a topic you will explore in the next activity.

## 5 Supporting children, young people and families

Children and young people may encounter stressful events and face challenges at different points in their lives. This might include complex and challenging domestic circumstances, economic difficulties, mental health issues as well as problems at school or in education. There are many roles and responsibilities that are important in influencing children and young people's capacity to develop resilient behaviours. At this point you are going to focus on one particular type of service as an example: family centres.

### 5.1 Family centres

Family centres are community contexts that provide local support to parents, carers and children. Hedgerows Family Centre ('Hedgerows') supports a local community in Milton Keynes designated as one of the most deprived areas in the UK. Hedgerows offers a range of targeted services spanning health, parenting, childcare and community learning to support diverse family needs. In the next activity you will listen to the manager from Hedgerows talking about resilience and how they as a centre work with families.

#### Activity 5 Hedgerows

 Allow about 30 minutes

##### Task 1

Watch the following video. Tina, the manager from Hedgerows, talks about her understanding of the term 'resilience' and how this concept is central to the work of the family centre. In the next task you'll be asked a series of questions, so you might want to bear these in mind as you watch the video.

Video content is not available in this format.

Tina Price talks about resilience



## Task 2

Based on what you have just watched, make notes using the following questions.

1. How does Tina describe adults from Hedgerows becoming resilient; what markers does she use to gauge this?

*Provide your answer...*

2. What behaviours, qualities and skills does Tina refer to when defining a resilient child?

*Provide your answer...*

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## Discussion

1. Tina describes 'resilience' as being at the heart of the work at Hedgerows. She explains how important it is for parents to learn how to draw on their own strengths in facing and solving life's problems. Tina suggests that, for some parents, this might mean seeking employment, returning to work, taking an educational course or coming off medication such as antidepressants.
2. Tina describes 'a resilient child' as one who is engaged and fulfilled but also able to share emotions. In a similar way to describing resilience for adults, she also suggests that a resilient child is able to face everyday challenges and issues rather than try to avoid them or be defined by them.

## 6 Multi-agency practice

The work of family centres builds on the premise that targeting early support for families facing difficulties provides opportunities for parents and carers to deal with life's challenges. In the next activity you will explore in more detail the range of services that are available at family centres such as Hedgerows and the range of professionals involved in delivering them.

### Activity 6 Services working together

 Allow about 45 minutes

#### Task 1

Watch the following video, 'Hedgerows Family Centre', which introduces the broader work of the centre. As you watch, try to identify the different services available for children, families and young people that Hedgerows provide, as you'll be asked to make a note of them for the next task.

**Note:** the 'EYFS' mentioned in the video refers to the 'Early Years Foundation Stage', which is a statutory framework in England.

Video content is not available in this format.  
Hedgerows Family Centre



#### Task 2

Use the following table to record the different services available for children, families and young people at Hedgerows.



**Table 1 Services available at Hedgerows**

Service users	Services
Families	Provide your answer...
Children	Provide your answer...
Young people	Provide your answer...

### Discussion

Many of the services and professionals available for children, young people and families at Hedgerows are summed up in the completed table below (you may have identified others).

**Table 1 Services available at Hedgerows (completed)**


Service users	Services
Families	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health visitors</li> <li>• Parenting sessions</li> <li>• Midwives – baby clinics</li> <li>• Employment counsellors</li> <li>• Citizens Advice Bureau</li> <li>• Domestic violence counsellors</li> <li>• Community debt counsellors</li> <li>• Art therapy</li> <li>• Mental health practitioners and organisations such as Mind</li> </ul>
Children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Early years professionals</li> <li>• Play therapy</li> <li>• Parent and toddler sessions</li> </ul>
Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Youth partners</li> <li>• Community practitioners</li> <li>• Leaving care group</li> <li>• Group for unaccompanied minors</li> </ul>

The focus on multi-agency practice is an important theme. As a family centre, Hedgerows is a multi-agency setting that works with different service providers spanning health, education, care and legal services. This provides for infants, children, young people and their families (even grandparents). Furthermore, Hedgerows provides support for children and young people in care as well as unaccompanied minors seeking refuge in the UK.

## 7 Making a difference

This course considers the kinds of practice that might make a difference to children and young people's wellbeing but also how we can evaluate whether any difference has been made. In this next activity you will look at the ways in which practices can be evaluated.

### Activity 7 Evaluating practice: why and how?

 Allow about 1 hour and 30 minutes

#### Task 1

At this point, think about what to evaluate and how by answering the following two questions.

1. Why might it be important to know whether practice is having an impact on children and young people's wellbeing? Try to think of at least two different examples.

Provide your answer...

2. Taking the example of a family centre such as Hedgerows, what would you try to evaluate and how? Again, try to think of at least two different examples.

Provide your answer...

#### Discussion

It might seem obvious that we want to know if practice is having an impact on children and young people's wellbeing, but there are several perspectives on this, including to:

- improve practice (some approaches could be dropped and others enhanced if it was apparent which ones were effective in their impact)
- demonstrate that services are fulfilling their main purpose
- demonstrate that a service is providing value for money – whoever is providing the money may want evidence of what impact it is really having.

Hopefully you came up with some ideas about what a family centre might do to evaluate practice. The next short video will highlight some of the things they do at Hedgerows – see how they compare to your own ideas.

#### Task 2

Listen to Tina talking about evaluating services, and note what she says about the need for the centre to demonstrate its effectiveness. As you watch, focus on the different measures they use at Hedgerows to evaluate impact.

Video content is not available in this format.

Tina Price talks about evaluating practice



## Discussion

The completed table below shows some examples, although you may have identified others:

**Table 2 Impact measures at Hedgerows (completed)**

What is Hedgerows trying to evaluate?	How is Hedgerows measuring this?
The impact of the services at Hedgerows on the local community	Numbers using the centre and accessing different sessions Levels of engagement with 'priority' groups
Whether it is helping achieve change with individual families	Using an assessment tool ('Family Star') and individual action plan
Whether Hedgerows is helping children prepare for the transition to school effectively (school readiness)	Data from schools about success at end of foundation year
Whether it is making a difference to children's health	Health data, including dental decay and obesity measures Enhanced healthy eating and lifestyle
Whether it is improving the ability of adult family members to secure employment	Numbers securing employment
Whether it is enabling adults to engage with educational opportunities	Numbers signed up to courses

Tina mentions many different types of measures here including more anecdotal examples of making a difference – such as social networks helping with a mental health issue - which she sees as important in enhancing the wellbeing of the whole family but which are more difficult to demonstrate explicitly.

## 8 Test your knowledge

During this course you have learned about the different and interconnecting features of children and young people's wellbeing and the significance of practices and services. Check your learning now by completing the following quiz.

### Activity 8 Quiz on the key issues and concepts in this course

 Allow about 15 minutes

Try to answer each of the following questions by indicating which answers are correct. Some questions have multiple correct answers. When you have completed this quiz you can check how many questions you have answered correctly.

1. Although objective and subjective measures of wellbeing may overlap, generally speaking what are two subjective measures of children and young people's wellbeing? (Select two answers)
  - a. How well children do at school in their exams
  - b. Children's physical health
  - c. Personal wellbeing
  - d. Where children and young people live
  - e. Quality of relationships
  - f. Economic circumstances
2. What are some of the factors that children and young people refer to as preventing a good life?
  - a. Lack of leisure time.
  - b. A small and crowded home.
  - c. Bullying.
  - d. Not having pets.
3. What does the term 'resilience' mean? (Select one answer)
  - a. The ability to do well
  - b. Personal success
  - c. The capacity to deal with life's challenges
  - d. Endurance
4. What are the strengths of multi-agency practice for supporting children and young people?
  - a. Practitioners sharing the same professional setting.
  - b. Different practitioners and services from different professional areas working together to provide support holistic support for children and young people.
  - c. Practitioners having the opportunity to talk to other practitioners.
  - d. Practitioners sharing the same ethical codes of conduct.
5. Why is it important that children and young people's services are evaluated?
  - a. To provide information for service users and funders.

- b. To look at practitioner performance.
- c. Use feedback and evidence to improve practices and services.
- d. To find ways of reducing practice and service costs.

## Conclusion

This free course, *Supporting children and young people's wellbeing*, has looked at children and young people's wellbeing as well as some of the services and practices that can support children and young people. The range of activities have allowed you to explore the links between wellbeing, happiness and resilience. Drawing on examples of holistic practice you have reflected on the value of multi-agency services which can support children and young people in diverse ways. Finally you considered why it might be important to evaluate such services and how settings try and find different ways in which they can show they are being effective and making a difference to the wellbeing of children, young people, and the families they live in.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [KE206 \*Making a difference: working with children and young people\*](#).



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