OpenLearn

The Open University

Children's wellbeing and creativity



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Introduction

This short course is designed to introduce you to creativity and its link to children and young people's wellbeing. It explores children and young people's engagement with creative activities that contribute to and promote their wellbeing. You will look at a number of ways in which children and young people's wellbeing can be enhanced and supported through their engagement with convivial, community and creative activities – promoting wellbeing can be fun! You will be introduced to a further couple of models of wellbeing with a view to helping you piece together the concept of wellbeing.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course KE207 *Supporting children and young people's wellbeing*.

Learning outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- analyse what is meant by children and young people’s wellbeing
- analyse the relationship between creativity and wellbeing
- evaluate different types of creative activities and how these can help support wellbeing.

1 What is wellbeing?

Wellbeing is a commonly used term which also connects to ideas about feeling well and unwell, feeling happy and feeling sad. This might appear obvious, however, ideas and understandings about wellbeing are not straightforward. Closer inspection reveals wellbeing to be a complex and often contested term.



In this section, you will first reflect on your own understanding of wellbeing before listening to the views of children, young people, practitioners and those with caring responsibilities for children and young people, as well as looking at formal definitions.

Activity 1 What is Wellbeing?

Allow 30 minutes for this activity

Spend some time thinking about what the term ‘wellbeing’ means to you. Don’t overthink this – just go with your initial thoughts and write down five words which define wellbeing.

1)
2)
3)
4)
5)

Feedback

There are a number of words you may have chosen to describe wellbeing, including happiness, contentment, healthy, resilient, safe, strong, robust, secure and balanced.

Now spend a few minutes reflecting on your responses. Why do you think you chose these particular words to define wellbeing?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

You may have chosen words which describe the physical or mental aspects of wellbeing or how wellbeing connects to feelings of safety and security. Or you may have chosen a whole host of other words not included here to define wellbeing and what this means to you. Wellbeing is a subjective concept and how you describe it reflects your own values and experiences.

Discussions about wellbeing have a long history and can be traced back to Ancient Greek philosophy, in particular, the work of Aristotle, who wrote extensively using the term *eudaimonia* to describe human happiness, contentment and feelings of wellbeing. More contemporary discussions about wellbeing cross over many academic disciplines, spanning philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology. The psychologist Ed Diener (1984) proposed a model of subjective wellbeing which described how individuals think about and evaluate their life satisfaction based on positive and negative life experiences. His work reminds us that although genetics may play a role people's subjective wellbeing can also be influenced by the relationships, environments and activities in which our lives are embedded.

2 Definitions of wellbeing

In the next activity, you will look at different formal definitions of wellbeing.
Take a look at the following definitions of wellbeing that come from various sources.

> How we feel, how well we're coping with daily life or what feels possible at the moment. Good mental wellbeing doesn't mean that you're always happy.
>
> (Mind, 2023)

> The state of being comfortable, healthy and happy.
>
> (Oxford English Dictionary)

> Wellbeing can be understood as how people feel and how they function, both on a personal and social level, and how they evaluate their lives as a whole.
>
> (New Economics Foundation 2012)

> Wellbeing is not just the absence of ill health. It includes the way that people feel about themselves and their lives.
>
> (NHS England 2022)

Activity 2 Definitions of wellbeing

Allow 30 mins for this activity

Having read the definitions, answer the following questions.

1 What are the common themes that cut across these definitions? Make a note of at least two.

Provide your answer...

2 What are the differences between the definitions? Make a note of at least two.

Provide your answer...

Feedback

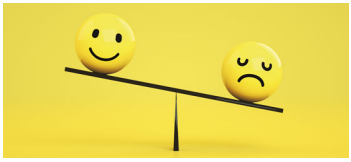
You may have noted that three of the definitions include a reference to how people *feel,* emphasising the subjective quality of wellbeing. Although *happiness* is mentioned in a few of the definitions, so is the cautionary note that wellbeing does not necessarily mean you are happy all the time. It is important to note that wellbeing is fluid and quite changeable and can be thought of as a feeling, or as one definition describes, a *state*.

A few of the definitions also focus on *health,* connecting to ideas about how wellbeing encompasses both physical and mental health. One of the definitions also draws out the *social* aspect of wellbeing, while another focuses on the connection between wellbeing and *coping* with life.

> An important learning point from this activity is that definitions of wellbeing are not straightforward. There are many ways of defining wellbeing and people differ in their ideas. Despite this, there are common themes that run through the definitions suggesting that wellbeing, although not a concrete, definitive concept- does have some shared understandings about its nature. And more generally supporting wellbeing is often held up as a goal by people working with or providing services to children. As you will see later when we focus specifically on supporting children's wellbeing it is possible to identify many different benefits from participation in creative activities.

In the next section, you will listen to children, young people, parents, carers and practitioners from a range of children's services talk about wellbeing and what this term means to them.

3 Views about wellbeing



Listen to Audio 1 which covers a range of perspectives on wellbeing. Consider what this term means to them.

Audio content is not available in this format.

Audio 1 Perspectives on wellbeing

The audio interviews illustrate the different ways in which wellbeing is understood by different people. You heard parents/ carers and practitioners talk about how wellbeing can be considered as both physical and emotional, and how it also connects to much broader ideas about safety, having fun and being creative as well as feeling included, being respected by others and that you belong. Furthermore, the audio introduces the idea of thriving and reaching ones potential, which is core foundation for a child and young persons wellbeing. A few of the practitioners also talk about how the concept of wellbeing aligns with ideas about happiness and contentment- reflecting how a person feels.

You can see that the concept of wellbeing is highly subjective and changeable and may be influenced by a variety of social, economic, psychological and physical factors.

In the next activity, you will generate your own ideas about these factors which influence a child or young person's wellbeing

Activity 3 What different factors influence wellbeing?

Allow approximately 45 minutes for this activity.

What different factors do you think influence a child or young person's wellbeing? Spend some time adding your own ideas to the interactive below. It focuses on four factors which potentially influence a child or young person's wellbeing (psychological, economic, social and physical factors).

Interactive content is not available in this format.

Feedback

Psychological factors: a child or young person's sense of self, their identities and their self-esteem can contribute to their wellbeing.

Physiological factors: a child or young person's health, as well as their abilities and disabilities, can also shape how they feel and their wellbeing.

Social factors: including family and peer relationships, domestic circumstances and local communities can influence a child or young person's wellbeing.

Economic factors: access to secure housing, amenities and health care, for example, can impact a child or young person's wellbeing.

4 Creativity and wellbeing

In this section, you are invited to explore how involvement in creative activities can directly benefit children and young people's wellbeing. For example, some creative activities offer opportunities for learning or provide a place or space where identity, interests and passions can develop that may positively influence mental health and self-esteem. There is further potential for practitioners to use creative activities as a vehicle to offer support to children and young people that might positively impact their individual needs, circumstances and wellbeing. For example, considered and clearly planned ideas for learning activities which engage children and young people in discussing lived experiences, personal feelings or current world or societal issues.



Although opportunities for creativity can take place at various points in everyday life, it is interesting to see how they can be portrayed and considered in a policy context. One example is the large scoping study (which is a review of current literature) published by the World Health Organization (WHO), which shows the importance of the arts for health and wellbeing for people of all ages (Fancourt and Finn, 2019). Although creativity can be broader than just the arts, this study is useful to consider. First, it signals an increasing interest in policy, practice and research in the broad area of wellbeing. Second, some of the findings can be applied usefully to the demographic group of children and young people. WHO present the results from this scoping study under two broad themes, presented in the table below, which show how the arts can benefit health at different stages of life.

Table 1

Prevention and promotion of mental and physical health	Management and treatment of mental and physical health
Affect the social determinants of health	Help people experiencing mental illness
Support child development	Support care for people with acute conditions
Encourage health-promoting behaviours	Help to support people with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders
Help to prevent ill health	Support with the management of noncommunicable diseases
Support caregiving	Support end-of-life care

(Fancourt and Finn, 2019, pp. vii–viii)

Broadly, the table illustrates how engagement in the arts might be used at various life stages to benefit the health of individuals. The possible ways for this to take place are outlined at the start of the report.

In relation to health research, engagement with the arts has been proposed as consisting of five broad categories (Fancourt and Finn, 2019, p. 1):

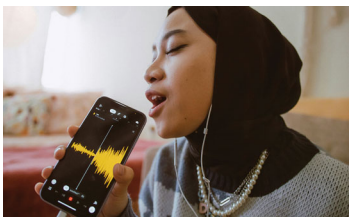
- performing arts (e.g. activities in the genre of music, dance, theatre, singing and film)
- visual arts, design and craft (e.g. crafts, design, painting, photography, sculpture and textiles)
- literature (e.g. writing, reading and attending literary festivals)
- culture (e.g. going to museums, galleries, art exhibitions, concerts, the theatre, community events, cultural festivals and fairs)
- online, digital and electronic arts (e.g. animations, film-making and computer graphics).

These categories provide a good starting point for considering opportunities for children and young people to engage in creative opportunities. Importantly, the WHO's study notes that positive engagement in creative activities can trigger psychological, physiological, social and/or behavioural responses that can be beneficial to wellbeing. They note the following possible components that may be integral to the link between the arts and wellbeing: aesthetic engagement, involvement of the imagination, sensory activation, evocation of emotion, cognitive stimulation, social interaction, physical activity, engagement with themes of health and interaction with healthcare settings (Fancourt and Finn, 2019, p. 3).

To understand these components better, we are introducing you to three specific examples of creative activities that include the views of children and young people who take part in them.

5 Dance and wellbeing

Dance and drama provide opportunities for children and young people to use their imagination, develop individual skills and work together with peers to create shows, productions or performances. While engagement in dance and drama might be a personal process, with individuals each benefiting from different aspects, there is an evidenced connection between dance and wellbeing. Dr Anna Duberg delivers a powerful TEDx Talk entitled ‘How we can dance our way to better mental health’. She developed Dance for Health, a dance initiative to improve youth mental health and reduce stress through dancing, which is now widely implemented across Sweden as a cost-effective complement to school healthcare and has touched the lives of thousands of young people (TEDx Talks, 2023).



There is a risk that certain forms of dance can be stereotypically portrayed for particular groups of people. For example, it is only fairly recently that ballet pointe shoes have been created in a range of skin tones (Freed of London, no date), and it tends to be female dancers who dance en pointe. Yet the opportunity to move to music in different ways is something that can be made available to most children and young people. In some cultures, dance is a key part of family and community celebrations. Whereas for others, it might take place in extracurricular activities or leisure time pursuits.

In the next activity, you have the opportunity to hear the experiences of some young people who enjoy and benefit from participating in dance.

Activity 4 Theatre and dance

Allow approximately 30 minutes for this activity.

Watch Video 1 of a young disabled woman, Saida, who has been a participant and now volunteers at Chickenshed in London, a theatre company designed to include everyone.

Then, watch Video 2 which captures reflections by a range of children and young people about why they love to dance.

Use Table 2 below to record any key quotes, that you believe support the view that dance has positive impact on wellbeing.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 1 I am Saida



Video content is not available in this format.
Video 2 Why do you love to dance?



Table 2

Quote	Impact on wellbeing
Example: 'I was quite a shy person when I was younger. I still kind of am, but I feel like I could never talk. I could never speak in front of 100 people, but I feel like I could dance in front of 100 people. It just makes me so confident.'	Positive impact on self-confidence, linking to mental health
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*

Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*
Provide your answer...	*Provide your answer...*

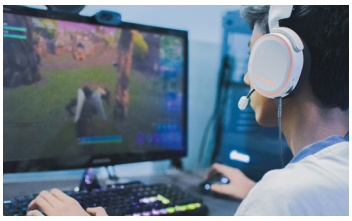
Feedback

Saida and the other young people highlight a wide range of positive experiences as a result of their participation in drama and dance. These range from individual experiences where they feel able to be themselves, whatever their personality, age, gender, sexuality, body shape or ability.

Some of them convey a sense of freedom and enjoyment of both expression and physical movement. For others, they appreciate the opportunity to have fun with friends and support each other, while also learning new skills. The links to wellbeing are multiple and connections can be seen regarding physical and mental health, as well as opportunities for community, care and creativity.

6 Online gaming

For many years, there has been concern about young people's time spent online, particularly playing video games.



There is some research evidence that shows violent video games can impact on children's development (Wei, Liu and Chen, 2022; Erwin and Morton, 2008), but there are many factors that are involved in how children become aggressive, of which only one may be playing violent video games. Many young people take part in online communities or participate in and watch online sports (eSports).

eSports can be defined as:

> a form of sports where the primary aspects of the sport are facilitated by electronic systems; the input of players and teams as well as the output of the eSports system are mediated by human-computer interfaces.
>
> (Hamari and Sjöblom, 2017, p. 213)

eSports can involve individuals or teams taking part competitively in online games, or viewers watching a competitive game being played by others online, e.g. the online football game, *FIFA*. Viewers can watch in person at an event.

The Children's Commissioner for England's report (2024) 'Digital playgrounds: children's views on video gaming', children and young people shared their own reflections about playing online games. They report finding playing online games to be fun and good for wellbeing, allowing them to develop digital skills and enabling them to remotely connect with friends.

In the next activity, you will meet a young person who created an idea and a solution to a problem he uncovered with regards to how board games have historically been developed, but which didn't specifically meet his wishes and needs. He explains his positive experiences of online gaming and how he feels it benefits other young people.

Activity 5 Gaming and safe spaces

Allow approximately 30 minutes for this activity.

Read the articleAutism and Gaming: Benefits, Risks, and Healthy Boundaries.

1. What are the general benefits and positive impacts of video games for individuals on the autism spectrum?

Provide your answer...

2. What are the risks that need to be managed when an autistic individual engages in online gaming?

Provide your answer...

3. What else did you learn from reading this article?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Children and young people are often encouraged to engage in leisure activities that take place in large groups. However, since the increase in widespread use of the worldwide internet, and particularly since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a huge increase in the use of technology, with more adults and children exploring ways of connecting with others online.

7 Arts and crafts

The beauty of creative arts and activities is the flexible and diverse way in which they can be engaged with. Arts and crafts are often something that children are introduced to at an early age – sticking, gluing and painting in early years settings, often progressing to making cards at school for key celebrations.



There can be a satisfaction in creating something anew, or upcycling and recycling items for a different purpose, and often arts and crafts activities can enable this creative process. Craft can be an activity that enables children to share ideas and have a voice, which in its own way can promote their own and others wellbeing. It can be used to vocalise collective ideas and views that demonstrate children and young people's political activism and concerns about the world around them. The term craftism as explored in the following activity has been coined to represent this type of involvement in arts and crafts.

Activity 6 Craft as activism

Allow approximately 50 minutes for this activity.

This activity explores the idea of using a craft as activism in different ways. Use the text boxes and prompts to record what you learn from watching the two videos and/or reading the article.

Video 3 is a BBC *Newsround* clip showing students at a boarding school being introduced to the concept of craftivism. You are welcome to watch the whole video, but the key part this activity requires you to watch is from 09:05 minutes in, start at: 'During this term, some of the girls have been quietly learning a new skill,' and end at 11:12 minutes; 'It's just trying to provoke people to think and look more into the issue.' Video 3 Craftivism: Our Boarding School: 19. Prom Planners

Alternatively, you can read about the project:
Craftivist collective: Introducing our 'Gentle Protest' Craftivism on Children's BBC.

Video 4 is a recording of a project in London with a powerful initiative to re-purpose knives to create community equipment to positively benefit young people.

Video content is not available in this format.
Video 4 Steel Warriors



1. What do the students highlight regarding what they have learned about craftivism?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

The students at the boarding school share their learning and how their preconceptions of the use of embroidery skills, such as cross-stitch, have been challenged by realising that craftivism can have a quiet but powerful impact. They particularly note that they have learned that activism does not need to be violent, but that important points can quietly be made with the use of crafts, for example, displaying a message or offering a handmade handkerchief with an inspirational quote. Sarah is able to adapt her art form to raise awareness of a variety of issues, for example, the low pay of overseas garment workers.

2. What message are Steel Warriors trying to convey through their actions?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Steel Warriors have one clear message – to turn steel that might have been used to harm others, into a means of helping others with the provision of new equipment in local communities. While producing fantastic outdoor equipment, their story serves to raise awareness of the dangers of knife crime and publicise alternative opportunities to become strong in healthier, positive ways.

3. How do you feel having learned about two very different examples of craftivism?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

You may have had different reactions to the information shared and hopefully it demonstrates how arts and crafts can combine effectively to create opportunities for activism.

Conclusion

You have been provided with an insight to wellbeing and a variety of topics, resources and projects linked to creativity which can help promote it indifferent ways. Unlike completing a jigsaw, when often we look for the final piece to complete the picture, the hope is that you will continue piecing together your own understanding of wellbeing.



It is worth remembering that creative activities are a fundamental right as stated in Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC):

> All children to have rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their age and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.
>
> (UNICEF, 1990)

A key theme of this course is that as practitioners, we can make a difference to children and young people's lives. It can be easy to lose sight of this when it is so clear that there are challenges, barriers and inequalities faced by many children and their families. To finish, it is helpful to remember this short story.

> A child finds a beach covered in starfish that have washed up on the shoreline and begins to throw them back into the water. A man walking along the beach comments that it is a thankless task because there is no way all the starfish can be saved. The child picks up one starfish, throws it back into the water and notes, 'Well, I saved that one'. This is a timely reminder that if each of us considers the small actions we can take, together we can make a difference to the experiences and wellbeing of children and young people.
>
> (Straube, 2011)

To conclude, here are the key points to take away from this course.

- There is no one agreed-upon way of understanding wellbeing. There are many different models that can help you think about how to support children and young people's wellbeing.
- Creative activities can be supportive for children and young people's wellbeing, and can include crafting, visual arts, digital gaming and more.
- Wellbeing is an important consideration not just for children and young people themselves; it's also a vital aspect of practice, professional standards for working with children and young people, and for us all.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course KE207 *Supporting children and young people's wellbeing*.

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Audio 1: Perspectives on wellbeing: The Open University

Video 1: I am Saida | We Are Chickenshed: Chickenshed; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UjiIir3ftDA

Video 2: Why do you love to dance?: Jade Lavinia Rumens; https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RFPATiWEw_Q

Video 4: Steel Warriors: Steel Warriors / https://www.steelwarriors.co.uk/

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