

Chapter 14 – Young children’s wellbeing: Considering the complexity of conceptualising, assessing and supporting wellbeing

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Learning Outcomes

By actively reading this chapter and engaging with the material you will be able to:

- Recognise that there are different factors that influence children’s wellbeing
- Describe different ways of supporting young children’s wellbeing
- Critically evaluate the complexity of children’s wellbeing and the way it is assessed in early childhood
- Identify barriers within Early Childhood Education and Care policy and practice that impact on children’s wellbeing.

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Introduction

The wellbeing of children, professionals and parents matters and relates to both the individual person’s life experiences, their communities and society as a whole. Wellbeing is a highly complex concept that can be understood in different ways, based on life experiences within families and communities as well as theoretical and disciplinary viewpoints. This chapter begins with an exploration of multi-disciplinary approaches to understanding wellbeing. It then explores some of the most influential theories and concepts around wellbeing, which are largely located within positive psychology, before focusing on the importance of promoting and supporting young children’s wellbeing in an Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) context. To exemplify some of the ways that wellbeing theories can be used to inform practice, the chapter will draw on findings from a case study focusing on teachers’

assessment of young children's wellbeing and learning in transition into school in England. In so doing, the chapter explores the links between wellbeing and learning and the importance of providing environments that acknowledge and support young children's wellbeing. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the overall place of wellbeing in early years policy, research and practice.

The complexity in defining and assessing wellbeing: multi-disciplinary approaches

Wellbeing should be a central concern for those who work with young children. However, this is no simple matter as wellbeing cannot be reduced to an individual responsibility. It is complex and multi-faceted, often used interchangeably with other concepts such as happiness and life quality, and needs to be understood within the diverse context of children's experiences. Considering wellbeing theories and research from different disciplines can enable early years practitioners/professionals to recognize that different factors can promote or challenge the wellbeing of children and families. This knowledge and understanding can enable practitioners to act more reflectively and provide stronger arguments for the promotion of young children's wellbeing. A distinct attribute of the wellbeing research put forward in this chapter is that it embraces and bridges several disciplines and fields; psychology, philosophy, sociology, economics, education, health and pedagogy.

Sociology, philosophy, and psychology, in particular, are often considered foundation disciplines in relation to education and early childhood research, although there are different branches within each (see Ingleby, 2013 for further discussion of disciplines). Sociology is the study of human behavior, focusing on social structures, phenomena and interactions on a large or small scale. Wellbeing research, in the context of sociological traditions, predominantly considers contextual factors such as material status, housing and environment. (see further discussion of determinants of health in chapter 11). These contextual features link

to economic wellbeing on a national and global scale, which has then specific impacts on the context of education and pedagogy (for further reading on positioning wellbeing as a goal for public policy, see Layard 2005, 2011).

The United Nations (UN) World Happiness Report (Helliwell et al. 2017) provides an example of using multi-dimensional measures such as Nation's **Gross Domestic Product (GDP)** per capita, social support, healthy life expectancy, social freedom, generosity and absence of corruption. Sociological approaches can also include conceptions of social wellbeing which are linked to philosophical and psychological approaches. Philosophy is particularly concerned with meaning making and values, which are crucial to the way that wellbeing is conceptualised (White 2007). Philosophical understandings of wellbeing are also an important part of psychological thinking about wellbeing as both focus on mind and behaviour. Recent wellbeing research extends on this multi-disciplinary focus, combining measures relating to sociology and positive psychology, as can be observed in the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) Index of Children's Wellbeing, where measures include scores on six domains; material wellbeing, educational wellbeing, health and safety, family and peer relationship, behaviour and risk and subjective wellbeing (UNICEF 2016).

The above discussion highlights the variety of factors that contribute to wellbeing and to understandings of wellbeing and it is important for early childhood students and professionals to recognise these features. However, ECEC professionals may expect to have less influence over some of these domains such as the material and societal parameters in particular. Therefore, from this point, the chapter focuses on psychological features and the more philosophical values-based principles of wellbeing that relate to children's rights and agency

in order to support young children's wellbeing in practice. Specifically, the field of positive psychology is considered in more depth below because research evidence from this particular branch of psychology has considerably raised the profile of wellbeing internationally.

Wellbeing and the traditions of positive psychology

Traditionally psychology has been dominated by a deficit approach, where the role of psychology has been to address the problems that arise in people's lives (Seligman 2011).

Positive psychology introduced a different approach by focussing on the importance of wellbeing, health, and people's quality of life, collating evidence and developing frameworks for promoting wellbeing (See Seligman 2011, Diener et al 2010 & Csikszentmihalyi 1992).

There is a considerable body of research in this area, which draws on philosophical discussions of subjective wellbeing and two general approaches or foci: the **hedonic** focus (presence of positive feelings and absence of negative) and the **eudaimonic** focus (meaning and purpose of life) (Ryan & Deci 2001). Recent developments in positive psychology have incorporated both the hedonic and eudaimonic approaches and, in so doing, this research highlights the importance of social aspects such as relationships, trust and belonging (Seligman 2011, Diener et al 2010, McLellan & Steward 2014).

Different theorists have developed different dimensions of psychological wellbeing, at times building on each other's work, which contribute to perceptions of the importance and complexity of this construct. The table below has been developed to present an overview of a number of predominant theories of wellbeing, with specific attention to the discipline of positive psychology. However, it is important to note that the concepts presented have been simplified and this table should be considered as a starting point for further reading.

Insert Table 14.1 here

[Begin Action Point]

1. With this indicative overview of well-being in mind, find examples of key similarities and differences in the different approaches to wellbeing.

[End Action Point]

Identifying features of wellbeing in early childhood practice and research

The above theories present significant concepts to aid understandings of wellbeing in the field of early childhood. However, differences in the conceptualization of psychological and/or subjective wellbeing have also led to the development of different measurement tools (McLelland & Steward, 2015). The model developed by Mayr and Ulich (1999, 2009) is an important example to discuss in more detail. They initially included 11 dimensions of wellbeing specific to the context of early childhood: (1) Empathic, prosocial behaviour, (2) Social initiative and vitality, (3) Self-assertiveness, openness, (4) Pleasure in exploring, (5) Coping with stress, (6) Positive self –defence, (7) Pleasure in sensory experiences, (8) Persistence/robustness (9) A sense of humour (10) Positive attitude towards warmth and closeness, (11) Ability to rest and relax. In an attempt to develop an empirical based instrument for practitioners, Mayr and Ulich (2009) have re-conceptualised these 11 dimensions into six dimensions of social-emotional wellbeing (PERIK, translated to English as ‘Positive development and resilience in Kindergarten). This raises important issues about the complexity of not only conceptualising wellbeing, but also how it can be measured.

The development of valid ways to capture and measure young children’s experiences of wellbeing have received significantly less attention than the development of tools for older populations (Mayr & Ulich 1999; UNICEF 2016). The lack of attention to young children’s

perspectives has been justified by challenges in developing valid measures for young children (Ben-Arieh 2005) but also by the misconception that young children's responses may not be reliable and therefore less "credible". This belief has often led to a reliance on using parents/carers and practitioners to report on children's experiences of wellbeing including tools that focus on observable behaviours with varying degrees of structure (Masford- Scott et al., 2012, Mayr & Ulich 2009; Marbina et al. 2015).

Self-report measures of subjective wellbeing have mainly been developed for children from the age of 8 years (see previous references to UNICEF 2016). One example is the Stirling Children's Wellbeing Scales that were developed for children aged 8 to 15 (Liddle & Carter, 2015). Other examples include scales developed to consider wellbeing specifically in the school context: "How I feel about myself and School" (McLelland and Steward, 2015). Self-report measures have, however, only sporadically been extended to younger children. One such example is the Personal Wellbeing Index: Preschool aged children (PWI:PS) developed by Cummins and Lau (2005) in Australia and now translated into different languages. This instrument is an 11-point scale where respondents "who cannot use the 11-point scale...[use]...a simplified format...consisting of outline faces, from very sad to happy" (Cummins & Lau 2005: 6). It was adapted from an instrument developed for people with learning difficulties, which may be problematic when considering children as a distinct sector of society (McLelland & Steward 2015).

Developing valid measures that try to capture how young children experience their lives from their perspectives should therefore be a priority in early childhood practice, research and policy development (UNICEF 2016, Guimaraes et al. 2016). It requires practitioners, researchers and policy makers to first recognize young children's agency and their ability to

express their experiences about their wellbeing in multiple ways. Alongside the focus on individual factors, there is a need to recognise the impact of environments on children's individual and collective wellbeing. The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (Laevers, 2011), has been developed specifically for assessing and developing environments that support young children's wellbeing.

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Spotlight on Research

The Leuven Involvement Scale for Young Children (Laevers, 2011) is a widely used observation based tool to assess environments in order to support wellbeing and learning. This scale requires a close consideration of important indicators of children's wellbeing and involvement in the context of an early childhood setting. For Laevers (1993), *involvement* is a necessary condition for development. It is when we are involved and absorbed in what we are doing that we experience the deepest form of learning, allowing us to experience *flow*; a key component of wellbeing as identified by Csikszentmihalyi (2002, 1992, see table 14.1). Laevers (2000) argues that adults should focus on helping the children to feel confident and at ease and provide continuous opportunities for spontaneity. Accordingly, adults should create environments that respond to children's need for tenderness and affection, relaxation, inner peace, enjoyment, openness, safety and clarity and social recognition. This requires professionals and parents to be in tune with children's feelings and emotions in order to recognize their agency. Some of the characteristics of deep level learning are more directly observable, such as concentration and persistence, whilst the affective and emotional aspects are more fluid (Laevers 1993). However, Laevers also highlights the challenges of maintaining focus on children's intrinsic motivation, exploration and curiosity in ECEC:

'An exploratory attitude, defined by openness for, and alertness to, the wide variety of stimuli that form our surroundings, makes a person accessible, lowers the threshold for getting into the state of 'arousal' that brings a person into the most intense forms of concentration and involvement. That person will never stop developing. The challenge for education is not only to keep this intrinsic source of motivation alive, but also to make it encompass all domains that belong to reality'. (Laevers 2000: 21)

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The case study below reports on teachers' assessment of children's wellbeing using the Leuven Scales as part of an on-entry to school assessment. It focuses on teachers' assessment and perspectives of children's wellbeing in the context of their transition to school. From the perspective of positive psychology, Ryff (2014) has made a particular association between wellbeing and the impact of transitions on people's lives. Brooker, (2008) further emphasizes the impact that early educational transitions can have on wellbeing. The process of transition is demanding and involves negotiating relationships, understanding expectations, and roles in a new and challenging environment. A positive transition, where children are supported in developing relationships and managing their learning tends to promote positive wellbeing, whereas too great a challenge can impact negatively on wellbeing (Brooker 2008). For young children, one of the most significant transitions is when they begin school.

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Case Study: the assessment of young children's wellbeing on transition to school

The research involved interviews with 12 teachers' and 5 head teachers' discussing their experiences of piloting an assessment of 4 to 5-year olds, upon entry to school in England (Guimaraes et al 2016, Howe et al 2017). This was an observation-led baseline assessment scheme: the Early Excellence Baseline Assessment for Reception (EExBA-R; Early Excellence, 2015). The EExBA-R included two separate parts. The first was a screening of 4-5 year old children's levels of wellbeing and involvement using the Leuven scales in order 'to ensure that children are assessed at the optimum time within these 6 weeks'. The second part assessed attainment according to the English government criteria for language, literacy and numeracy outcomes in early years curriculum (The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) DfE 2014) as well as the *Characteristics of Effective Learning (CEL)* also found in the EYFS.

Findings

The analysis of the interview data suggests that a focus on wellbeing was central to supporting children in transition. One teacher, for example told the research team *'I think the children's wellbeing is so important that we needed to make sure that they were happy and settled before we did any sort of lessons'*. For many of the teachers involved in the research, the use of the Leuven Scales and **CEL** to evaluate observations of children, gave them permission to focus on the importance of helping children to be happy and settled, rather than being overly focused on the curriculum at the beginning of the school year. *'I think it's definitely helped the focus, [previously] you focused too much on the curriculum, [...]. It's clearly practice you want to do, it brings the **CEL** and the wellbeing to the forefront, it's great practice,'* (Head teacher 1). The time spent on observations of children in self-initiated activities in the first few weeks of term allowed the teachers to get to know all of the children

really well. One teacher commented on how the process led them to spend equal amounts of time with each child and so the quiet children became more visible due to the process.

Furthermore, evaluating observations of children engaged in self-initiated activities provided practitioners with evidence to suggest that the children's levels of wellbeing and involvement were dependent on the activity they were undertaking. These observations provided important opportunities for closer collaboration with colleagues within the school and the child's previous setting. The strengthened attention to involvement and wellbeing also offered constructive starting points for supportive dialogue with parents about their children's learning and that they had '*a shared vocabulary*', focusing on the child's involvement in activities. The focus on wellbeing prompted teachers to articulate an understanding of the demands placed on the children in the transition to school and even changing their practice.

'In the past I probably would have done the children that were with low wellbeing first, because I would have thought that would have been a good idea for them to come and sit with me. In reflection that's probably not the best thing to do, to pummel them with work before they've even settled into a place.' Moreover, engaging with the Leuven scales with children at the beginning of school was experienced as so valuable that it prompted one head teacher to introduce it throughout the whole school.

In the case study children's wellbeing was taken into account when enabling children to explore what they were curious about, have space and time to become involved in activities, to be creative and spontaneous. The focus on wellbeing enabled children to settle into the environment and to develop relationships with peers and with their teachers. Such practice requires continued reflection by professionals evaluating their role in ensuring children are supported in their wellbeing both in transitions to and throughout ECEC and school.

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Young children's voice and wellbeing

As discussed, a clear gap remains in the knowledge of younger children's wellbeing. The lack of representation of young children's voice is recognized nationally and internationally. The UNICEF Office of Research (2016:41) draws attention to the voice of the children, arguing: *'Children need to be able to shape the questions asked in surveys of their own lives and well-being'*. Similarly the Good Childhood Report, (The Children's Society 2005-16) representing the voice of 60000 children aged 8- 15 recommended that: *'Much more needs to be done to intervene early to improve children's subjective well-being'* (The Children's Society 2016:15).

However international research into young children's perspectives on their lives is growing. Different methods are being considered to gather younger children's perspectives, including visual methods such as drawings, photographs, mapping. These methods offer researchers and ECEC professionals valid ways of gaining children's experiences of their environment and wellbeing (Clark & Moss 2001, Koch 2017, Estola et al 2014, Krag-Muller & Isbell 2017, Ron et al 2007, Koushodt 2006, Koch 2017). Using children's photographs as starting points for individual and group conversations, for example, Koch (2017) gathered 5-year-olds' subjective perspectives on wellbeing. Koch (2017) draws on Diener's work (described in table 14.1) and identifies how children link their experience of wellbeing to involvement and the opportunity to feel in control of their actions. In this research study children also acknowledge the need for social relations with both peers and adults (Koch 2017), thereby emphasizing the challenge of balancing social recognition, rules and environmental mastery, concepts key in wellbeing theories (see table 14.1). Similarly Nightingale (2015) worked with

40 children between the ages of three and eight years, using visual and verbal means to elicit young children's interpretation and understanding of wellbeing. The findings from this study exemplify young children's ability to conceptualise, categorise, and report on their wellbeing and highlight the importance of multiple relationships, sense of self and the outdoors to young children.

Young children's wellbeing within a policy context

This chapter aims to draw attention to the crucial role of the adult in supporting young children's wellbeing. However it is important to recognize how the ECEC policy context can create challenges in prioritizing young children's wellbeing. In the context of our case study, assessment policy placed teachers in a conflict between focusing on children's wellbeing and the need to teach and assess academic skills. The impact of increasing assessment requirements on ECEC and the expectations in relation to 'school readiness' are causing pressure on young children, parents and professionals (see further discussion of this in, Brogaard-Clausen et al. 2015, Guimaraes et al. 2016, Howe et al. 2017). ECEC professionals need to be able to use evidence from research to counteract policy priorities that create diversions from focusing on young children's voice and wellbeing.

[Start Reflection Point]

- What are the challenges and dilemmas early childhood practitioners may face in supporting young children's wellbeing and learning?

To support your reflection you might also wish to draw on Brogaard-Clausen et al 2015, Guimaraes 2016 et al., Howe et al. 2017.

[End Reflection Point]

Summary

- When supporting young children's wellbeing and learning both environmental, social and personal factors need to be considered. Sociology offers a consideration of multiple contextual factors that contribute to or hinder young children's wellbeing. Combined with psychological, health and philosophical research these considerations need to be applied when supporting young children's wellbeing holistically.
- Supporting young children's wellbeing includes creating spaces for listening to children's views and feelings about their social and emotional wellbeing. Relationships to other children and adults are key for young children's wellbeing and it is important to observe how children engage in their environment, experience meaning, deep level learning and flow. The case study presented in this chapter highlights the importance teachers placed on wellbeing, not just in the transition to school and in the context of assessment, but as a contributing factor for young children to thrive, flourish and learn.
- The Children's Society (2015) and UNICEF (2016) advocate for children's voice and perspectives to be included when assessing their wellbeing. Perspectives from the teachers in the case study exemplified how collaboration with and between ECEC settings and parental engagement is an integral part of that process. However it is important to acknowledge the balance between the individual child's wellbeing and the whole group of children's experience of wellbeing in ECEC settings.
- Despite increased attention to young children's wellbeing, the requirement to track young children's attainments against externally set outcomes lead to pressure on teachers and consequently on young children and their families. In order to prevent barriers to children's wellbeing, development and learning, these interrelated areas should be considered holistically and contextually.

Further reading

Guimaraes, S., Howe, S., Brogaard Clausen, S. & Cottle, M. (2016) Assessment of what/for what? Teachers' and Head Teachers' views on using wellbeing as a screening for conducting baseline assessment on school entry in English Primary Schools *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17(2) pp. 248-254

This article offers further discussion to consider the opportunities and barriers in supporting young children's wellbeing in transition to school. Recommendations are made and current ECEC assessment policy context critically considered.

Howe, S., Guimaraes, S., Brogaard Clausen, S. & Cottle, M. (2017) Baseline assessment – a brief re-introduction/encounter in 2015/2016 in Urban, M. (ed) *Assessment in Early Childhood: A critical examination of approaches to assessment of young children in international contexts* Report to Educational International

This chapter provides a broader discussion of the baseline assessment study (case study). The full report examines approaches to assessment of young children in international contexts.

Marbina, L., Mashford-Scott, A., Church, A., and Tayler, C. (2015) *Assessment of Wellbeing in Early Childhood Education and Care: Literature Review, Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework*, Melbourne, Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority 2015

This review presents an overview of existing assessments of young children's wellbeing, whilst providing recommendations for further development of assessment tools and processes.

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