

**“The 11 MILLION children  
and young people in  
England have a voice”**

Children's Commissioner  
for England, Professor  
Sir Albert Aynsley-Green.



**MILLION**

# Happy + Healthy

Summary of children and young people's  
views on what makes them happy and healthy

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**11 MILLION** has been investigating what makes children and young people in England happy and healthy. We are trying to understand why our children, according to research such as UNICEF's, are less happy than those in other countries in the developed world.

The Government has said in the Children's Plan that England will be one of the best places to live as a child. We wanted to find out what supports children's well-being through the often difficult transition periods in their lives, such as the transition from primary to secondary education. We have worked with children and young people, aged two to 18, to enable them to become decision-makers: making their own recommendations on how to support all children and young people to make positive and informed decisions about their physical health and mental well-being and to lead happier and healthier lives. The project has led to improvements in participants' lives and significant changes in the way in which professionals have engaged with them and their families.

**We want our findings to benefit other children and to support their achievement of the *Every Child Matters* outcomes.**

**Thanks to these groups for helping with *Happy + Healthy*:**  
Cruddas Park Early Years Centre, Newcastle; East Marsh Children's Centre, Grimsby; Sure Start Children's Centre, Glascoate, Tamworth; Mexborough Children's Centre After School Club, Mexborough; Oakhill School, Tamworth; Sandcill Wood School, Doncaster; Cruddas Park Transitions Group, Newcastle; The McGuinness Unit, Manchester.





We found that children and young people know what makes them happy and healthy. From the early years, they recognise the importance of family and friends as key to their happiness, and as the people who provide for their material needs. Attachment theory tells us of the fundamental importance of these early relationships and the major impact they have on the developing infant brain. As babies and toddlers begin to develop into children and young people, they also respond to positive relationships with professionals, who listen to them and understand their needs – from nursery nurses to teachers and health professionals. These relationships can have a significant impact on a child's health and happiness, particularly when the people concerned support and sustain them through periods of change and transition – for example, when moving schools or changing carers. Relationships with professionals they see regularly often assume an even more critical importance when family relationships break down or a nurturing relationship fails to materialise, leaving the child without the protective factors or the emotional resilience that will be needed in later life.

**The UNICEF *Innocenti* survey of the world's 21 most developed countries ranked the UK overall as the worst performer against a number of different well-being criteria.<sup>1</sup>**



*It's Kelly*

Children and young people respond to positive relationships with people who listen and understand their needs

**It is estimated that one in 10 children aged five to 16 has a clinically recognised mental disorder.<sup>2</sup>**



As children and young people develop and explore their world through play and learning, they become acutely aware of both the positives and negatives in their life. We found that, from primary school age onwards, children and young people use increasingly critical and negative language to describe their world and community. Children in these age groups will quickly point out the bad aspects of their situation, such as having 'nothing to do, nowhere to go'. This impacts on their self-image and limits their aspirations as they rarely feel able to change their circumstances. Many children and young people feel further isolated by feelings of loneliness that are brought on by poor relationships with their families, peers, and the professionals and service providers in their lives.

**In one survey in England, two-thirds of children said they liked to play outside daily, mostly to meet friends. However, 80% have been told off for playing outdoors and 50% say they have been shouted at for playing outside.<sup>3</sup>**

Children and young people have told us they feel they cannot change anything and that no-one listens to what they have to say. They can often feel their lives have been pre-determined, that as teenagers they will drink, smoke, and engage in risky behaviour simply because this is what teenagers 'do'. They feel unprotected from the influence of confusing and conflicting media messages that undermine their health and happiness. *Happy+Healthy* has shown that children and young people, even from as young as two, understand health messages, and yet the popularity and currency of junk food combined with peer pressure undermines their ability to make positive health choices.

**71% of media stories about young people are negative and one third of articles about young people are about crime.<sup>4</sup>**



Ultimately, it is only through truly understanding the needs of children and young people that we can respond with the right services, at the right time, and deliver them in a way that positively impacts on their health and happiness. The benefits of such an approach are felt by children, young people and adults. The response from the professionals and parents, with whom we have worked on *Happy+Healthy*, demonstrates that creating a listening and participative culture delivers real benefits both in services they use and at home, creating a dialogue where views and opinions are valued.

**Smoking, drinking and problematic drug use are all more pronounced among children and young people from poorer backgrounds.<sup>5</sup>**

**Children and young people want adults to support them, to listen and then to act on what they say. It requires time and commitment. We have the opportunity to ensure all children and young people can be happy and healthy – let's listen to their views!**

**Key Questions:  
Use the key questions to address how you can improve children's health and happiness.**



*This is the drugs park*

Children at Mexborough Children's Centre use everyday objects to map their local park

1. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, *Child Poverty in Perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries, Report Card Seven* (2007).
2. Office for National Statistics, *Survey of the mental health of children and young people in Great Britain* (2004).
3. Children's Play Council and The Children's Society, *National Playday Survey* (2003).
4. Mori/Young People Now, *Young people and the media* (2005).
5. British Medical Association Board of Science and Education, *Adolescent health* (2003).



**Positive relationships with parents, friends and professionals are the most important factors in creating a sense of health and happiness for children and young people.**

- A parent, sibling or other close family member is most often cited by children and young people as the most important person in their lives.
- Relationships with staff and professionals that are sustained over periods of change within children or young people's lives, particularly during periods of transition, create a positive sense of well-being and continuity, particularly when family relationships are unable to fully support a child's needs.
- Relationships with their peers provide children and young people with a sense of belonging and help them define their place in the world.
- Time spent away from their siblings is important for children and young people who need to feel special and valued.

"In my 16 years I have been very privileged because I feel that all of my needs have been met by the people in my life. I have a great family who will do anything for me." M, 16

**Key Question 1:  
How can you support the relationships that make me feel happy and healthy?**



**When relationships with family, friends and key adults in their lives are poor, children and young people feel unhappy and unhealthy.**

- Children and young people tell us that they cannot feel 'healthy' when they are bullied, and the majority of children and young people tell us they have experienced bullying at school or elsewhere.
- Children and young people who experience family breakdown or bereavement find it hard to understand what has happened and are often not given an opportunity to discuss how it impacts on them, leading to anger.
- Children and young people feel that, when relationships at home or with friends are bad, there is no-one to talk to – leading to isolation and longer term problems.
- Children and young people want their parents to be supported through difficult times.

"I ran away from home one day because me mam wouldn't let me go to me Nan's...She wanted me to look after my brother. I was really upset and angry and kicked off...that's (at Nan's) the only time I get to feel special 'cause it's just me and Nan." M, 13

**"If people feel rubbish about themselves...then they are more likely to cause trouble or get angry with themselves and others."** M, 11

**Key Question 2:  
How do I stay happy and healthy when my relationships go wrong?**



"It's Andre – he's running!" F, 3

"That's why people get into trouble, they're bored and just roaming the streets." M, 12



Key Question 3:  
**Why can't it be safe to play outside?**



**Exploring their local environment and community with safety and a degree of independence is essential for children and young people to lead happy and healthy lives.**

- The natural world offers a positive, unstructured opportunity to learn and explore, particularly for young children.
- When given the opportunity to be outside, all young children will run, jump and play.
- Children and young people need a variety of activities, both in and outside of school, to explore new and different life options, meet different people, and to develop self-confidence.
- Parks need to be spaces where children feel safe. Vandalism and graffiti strongly influence a child or young person's perception of safety. Children and young people are aware of the difference between graffiti (tags, etc) and art.



"It's humiliating when they call young children obese." F, 15



**Healthy eating messages are recognised by even the youngest children, and yet we fail to give them the critical skills with which they can make positive choices when faced with commercial messages that push them towards 'junk food'.**

- We need to support children and young people, by recognising their role as both current and future consumers, who begin to understand and be influenced by the commercial world from a very young age.
- At a critical stage in the development of their own self-image, children and young people are faced with confusing and conflicting media messages – i.e. healthy eating vs. celebrity culture and the pressure to achieve size 'zero'.
- Children and young people's preferences are towards things that make them feel 'good', and for the very young, this is far removed from the language of 'healthy' eating.



Key Question 4:  
**How can you help me make positive health choices?**

**≡** The dominant negative portrayal of young people as “thugs” and “yobs” and a group to be feared directly impacts on children and young people, and contributes to making them feel unhappy and unhealthy. They told us that they feel their lives as teenagers are pre-determined by stereotypes such as risk-taking binge drinkers with no positive alternatives.

- Children feel that adults have made their mind up about who they will become, and that they are destined to become the teenagers they 'don't want to be' regardless of their current behaviour and aspirations.
- There is a sense of anxiety for younger children about adolescent behaviour; they accept unquestioningly the norms of seeing teenagers as 'bad' and 'unhealthy' and feel anxious about interacting with teenagers, limiting the places where they feel comfortable and safe to play.

“The police are always stopping and searching us and they accused me of settling alright someone’s flat but I was at home asleep at the time...I get accused of everything.” M, 13

Key Question 5:  
**What can you do to promote a more accurate image of teenagers?**



**)))** To feel happy and healthy, children and young people want their voices listened to, to be valued as individuals, and their views acted on!

- We need to create the space and the time to listen to children and young people.
- Services create a dialogue between children, young people and adults, but too often the information goes nowhere.
- Nothing can replace one-on-one communication...

“My life involves lots of different agencies who tell me they will ‘listen’... they book time to ‘listen’ to me, and then cancel! They ‘listen’ to me...and then nothing happens.” M, 18

Key Question 6:  
**How will you listen, and then act on what I have to say?**

“I won’t make the right choices all the time, but if I’m not allowed to make a mistake, I’ll never learn!” E, 14

“Just because they were teenagers they were being viewed as causing anti-social problems which was unfair.” M, 12



Visit [www.11MILLION.org.uk](http://www.11MILLION.org.uk) to find out more about the *Happy + Healthy* project, download resources for use with children and young people and what you can do to ensure children's views are listened to and acted upon. *Happy + Healthy* is one of 11 MILLION's key Spotlight areas in 2008/09 and the Children's Commissioner for England will be pushing for change and highlighting concerns over the year.

**Happy+**  
**Healthy**

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