

# Measuring happiness

A consultation with children from care and children living in residential and boarding schools

Reported by the Children's Rights Director for England



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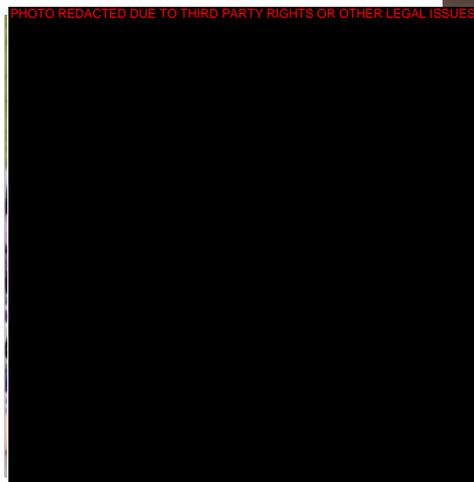
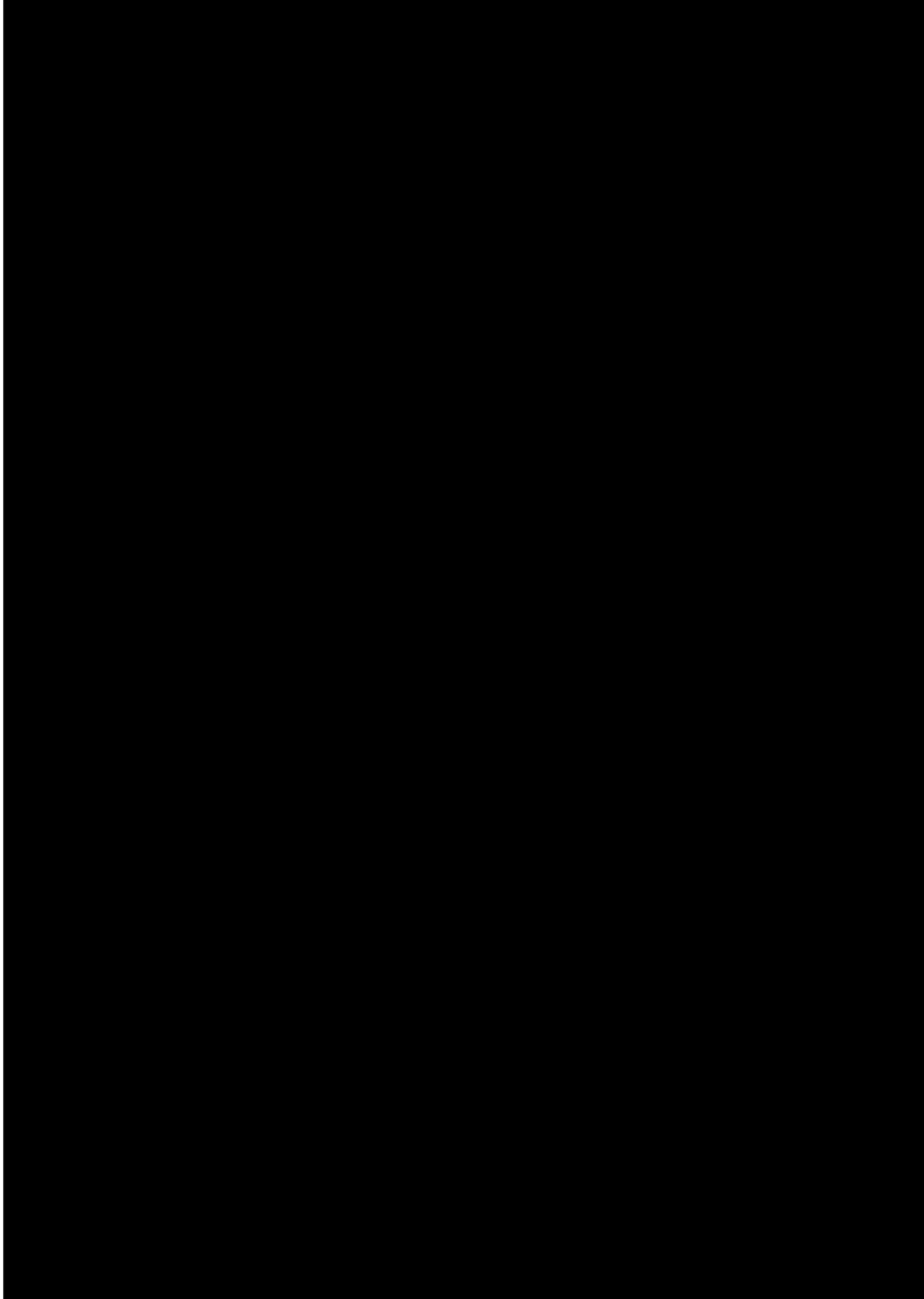


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# Introduction



Roger Morgan, Children's Rights Director for England

As Children's Rights Director for England, I have a legal duty to consult children to find out and report their views. I have this duty for children in care or looked after by local authorities, those living away from home in boarding or residential schools and colleges, those who are placed for adoption, those living in residential family centres, and for children getting any sort of help from children's social care services.

We do our best to report what children tell us, as faithfully and fully as we can. We do not add our own thoughts or comments, and we do not leave out things that we or people we send our reports to may disagree with. Our reports of children's views go to the government, people in parliament, all local councils in England, and Ofsted. We put all our reports on the children's rights website [www.rights4me.org](http://www.rights4me.org), and anyone can read them or download a copy there.

As well as consulting children, I and my team give advice on children's rights and welfare, and we do casework to advise and help individual children who contact us over issues to do with their rights or welfare.

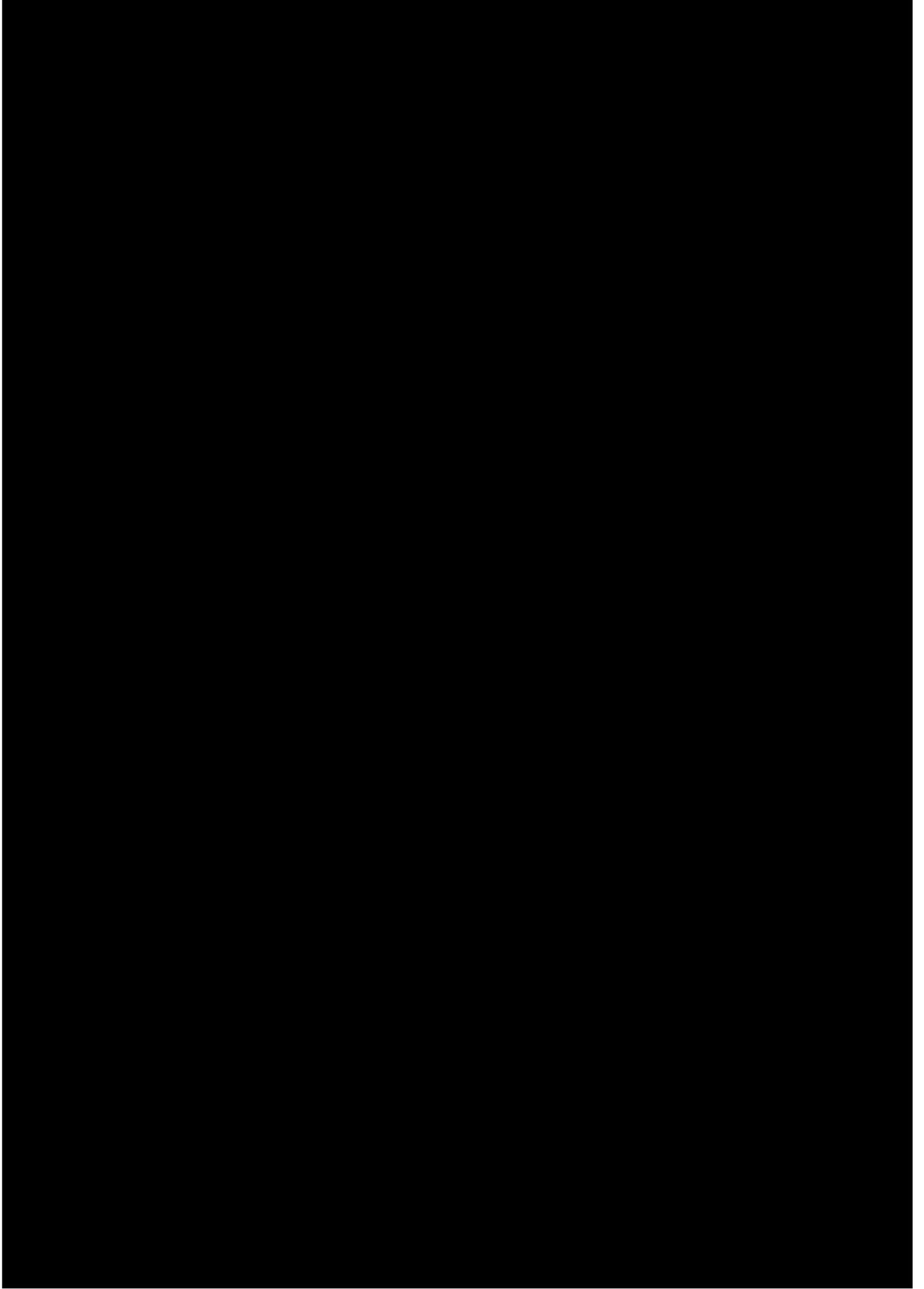
Many people these days talk about whether children in this country are happier or unhappier than children in other countries, and whether they are getting happier or unhappier. Many people in universities, government departments and voluntary organisations, are doing research to find out what is meant by 'happiness', and what makes children happy or unhappy. They are also doing research on how to measure 'happiness', or how to measure 'wellbeing'.

This report gives some of the answers children themselves have given us on these questions, and about one very simple way we have been working on to ask children to fill in a questionnaire to rate how happy (or unhappy) they are.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Roger Morgan'.

Dr Roger Morgan OBE  
Children's Rights Director for England

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# What main emotions might children and young people often feel?

Before we started looking at happiness and how to measure it, we asked children and young people on our BeHeard mobile text and email consultation panel to tell us what emotions they thought children and young people most often felt, in addition to feeling happy, sad and angry. Apart from those three, we did not suggest any others.

Our panel members told us that the most usual emotions, as well as feeling happy, sad or angry, were (in order, with the one that was most often suggested first): excited, upset, frustrated, lonely, shy, anxious, afraid, embarrassed, guilty, joyful and annoyed.

‘Happiness depends on themselves, depends on your life, parents, teachers – it could be a million things’

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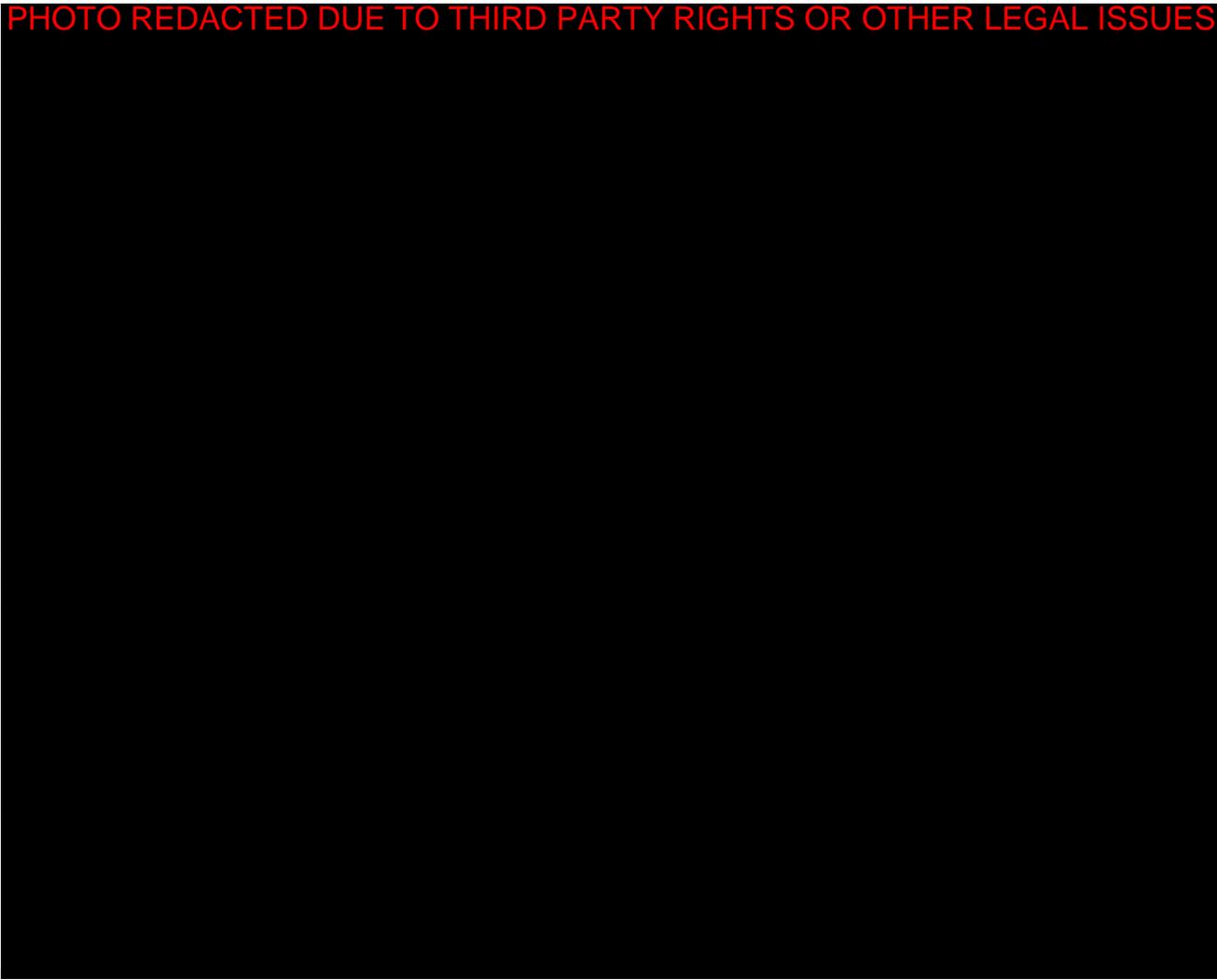


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# What is happiness?

At the start of our work on ‘happiness’, we wanted to get an idea of what children themselves thought ‘happiness’ was. To help us do this, we held two separate focus discussion groups with children to discuss the subject of happiness, and what they thought it meant. As well as this, young people in mental health ‘Sounding Board’ groups in Oxfordshire discussed this for us and sent us in their thoughts on the subject. In this part of the report we have summarised what all these groups of children and young people told us.

Twenty-nine children and young people took part in our own two discussion groups, 18 in one group and 11 in the other. All those in our groups were young people that as Children’s Rights Director I must by law be concerned with – those in care, getting a social care service of some sort, or living away from home in boarding schools. We discussed happiness with each group without their own school staff or parents there, so they were more likely to feel able to talk to us freely. Each group was run by a member of the Office of the Children’s Rights Director, and we took notes of what the children told us to use in writing this report. We asked each group some questions (which we have set out in this report) to get discussion going, but we did not suggest any answers to any of the questions. What the children told us was entirely their own thoughts, without any suggestion or prompting from us.

Another 20 children and young people took part in four meetings of the Oxfordshire Sounding Boards.

We started by telling each of our two discussion groups that our dictionary says that ‘happiness’ means ‘feeling pleasure or contentment’, and we asked if the children thought that for them, happiness meant anything more or different from that. Both groups thought the dictionary had got it right, but wanted to say more than the dictionary did. They added extra words to describe happiness, like ‘joy’, ‘achievement’ and being ‘cool, calm and collected’. They thought that happiness also had a lot to do with being satisfied with how things are for you – being ‘satisfied with

themselves and their environment’, ‘being comfortable in their own skin’. It was also to do with being with people you want to be with: ‘being with people you love and you want to be with’.

One group said happiness wasn’t one thing, but could depend on lots of different things for different people: ‘Happiness depends on themselves, depends on your life, parents, teachers – it could be a million things.’

The Oxfordshire Sounding Board discussions also said that happiness is a lot to do with being stable, keeping learning and keeping yourself active to avoid getting depressed: ‘able to keep your feet on the ground and your head in the clouds’; ‘learning is to be happy’; ‘when you haven’t got anything to do, that’s why you get depressed because your brain has got to be occupied with something and then it goes over the things you shouldn’t be thinking about’. Members of those groups also said that for some people, happiness might be being by yourself, even though for many it has to do with doing things with other people, and that it can also be to do with many other different things, from sex to laughing a lot. If you can laugh about things, that is a sign of happiness.

We then went on to discuss with our two groups a number of questions to do with happiness.

‘Can’t be born happy,  
but can be born into  
happiness’

# Discussing happiness

## Do you think people are born to be happy or unhappy sorts of people – or is it things that happen that make people happy or unhappy?

Both our discussion groups thought that people are not born happy or unhappy sorts of people, but are made happy or unhappy by what happens to them. Having said that, though, because of their background and circumstances, some people are always going to have either chances or bad luck in life that are likely to make them happy or unhappy. As one person summed this up for everyone else, ‘Can’t be born happy, but can be born into happiness.’

Our groups told us that your surroundings, the people you are with and what happens to you are what makes you happy or unhappy. What happens around you changes your emotions: ‘Some people are lucky, they have a full family and money. Some people may just have one parent.’ For very young children, small things can make a difference between happiness and unhappiness – ‘something like a friend or just a teddy’. However, you can make yourself happier or unhappier by your own actions: ‘it’s what they make out of life’; ‘something they achieve in their own life’.

## How important is money to happiness?

We heard that money in itself doesn’t make you happy, but having enough money for a house to live in and decent food to eat can make all the difference. Those in one group told us that things that have a sentimental value are more important than things that need a lot of money to buy, and that being treated equally and fairly is more important than how much money you have got.

One group told us that family is more important than money. They said that money – and what it can buy to make you happy – can only make you happy to an extent, and that you don’t need a lot of money to make you happy. Money can certainly show you have achieved in your life and can give you power over your life, and you need enough money to avoid money worries that can certainly make you unhappy – but

the group concluded that ‘money can contribute to happiness, but not genuinely make you happy’.

## What are the most important things in making sure that a child or young person is happy?

Our groups told us that being safe and well looked after, having all the basic things you needed, being treated fairly and with respect, being able to make your own decisions and do things you wanted to do, stability, and having support from family and friends, all helped to make children and young people happy. Some more particular things that could make someone happy were exciting events, good news, having a good education, people around you being in a good mood, and simply luck.

## What are the main things that often make children and young people unhappy?

The things our groups told us could make a child unhappy included lack of trust, being bullied, people being prejudiced against you, being treated unfairly, losing somebody who matters to you, not being cared for properly, being abused, not being listened to, being excluded from things, not being told things you needed to know, and being let down by people who should be supporting you.

## What things are important to the happiness of children and young people of different ages?

We asked our groups whether there were some different things that mattered to the happiness of young children or older teenagers. They thought that for very young children, being looked after well and given good support were most important, along with being able to explore and try out new things, being able to have some responsibility, being given attention, and having toys and plenty of things to do.

The groups thought that older teenagers were more likely to remember things that had happened to them and to be thinking about their future, which makes a lot of difference to how happy or unhappy they feel. For older teenagers, a lot of happiness depends on having freedom and not being too restricted, being respected, being able to develop independently from their parents or carers and make their own friendships and social life, and being taken seriously as an individual rather than being seen as a stereotyped 'teenager'. One group told us how examinations, stresses and pressures can make a teenager unhappy.

### **Are there big differences between what makes adults happy and what makes young people happy?**

Both our groups discussed this. They thought there were always some things that could make you happy or unhappy, whatever age you were, such as how you got on with other people socially. Both groups thought that there were two big differences between what makes adults happy and what makes children and young people happy. The first was that adults are much more concerned about how successful they are in what they do, especially in their work. The second was that adults are often as concerned about how other people are doing, especially their own children if they have children, as they are about their own lives: 'Adults want to provide happiness for their family.'

### **What are the best ways of cheering someone up if they are unhappy?**

The top way of helping somebody who is unhappy to cheer up was to be there for them and offer them your support: 'letting them know you care and are listening'; 'give advice and support'; 'talk to them and see if you can help'; 'sharing a problem'; and 'generally being there for them'. Some other suggestions about this were smiling, telling a joke, giving them something they like, sharing your own happiness, giving a truthful opinion, giving them 'a

good old cuddle', helping them forget something that is making them unhappy, and not keeping on asking someone if they are OK, but waiting for them to feel ready to talk to you.

### **What can children and young people do to help make other people happier?**

One of our groups discussed this in some depth. The biggest single thing was the way you act towards other people: being helpful, nice and kind; not being mean or judgemental; listening to people; and giving advice. The group also talked of helping to make parents, teachers and carers happier by trying to do well, making them feel proud of you and spending time with them.

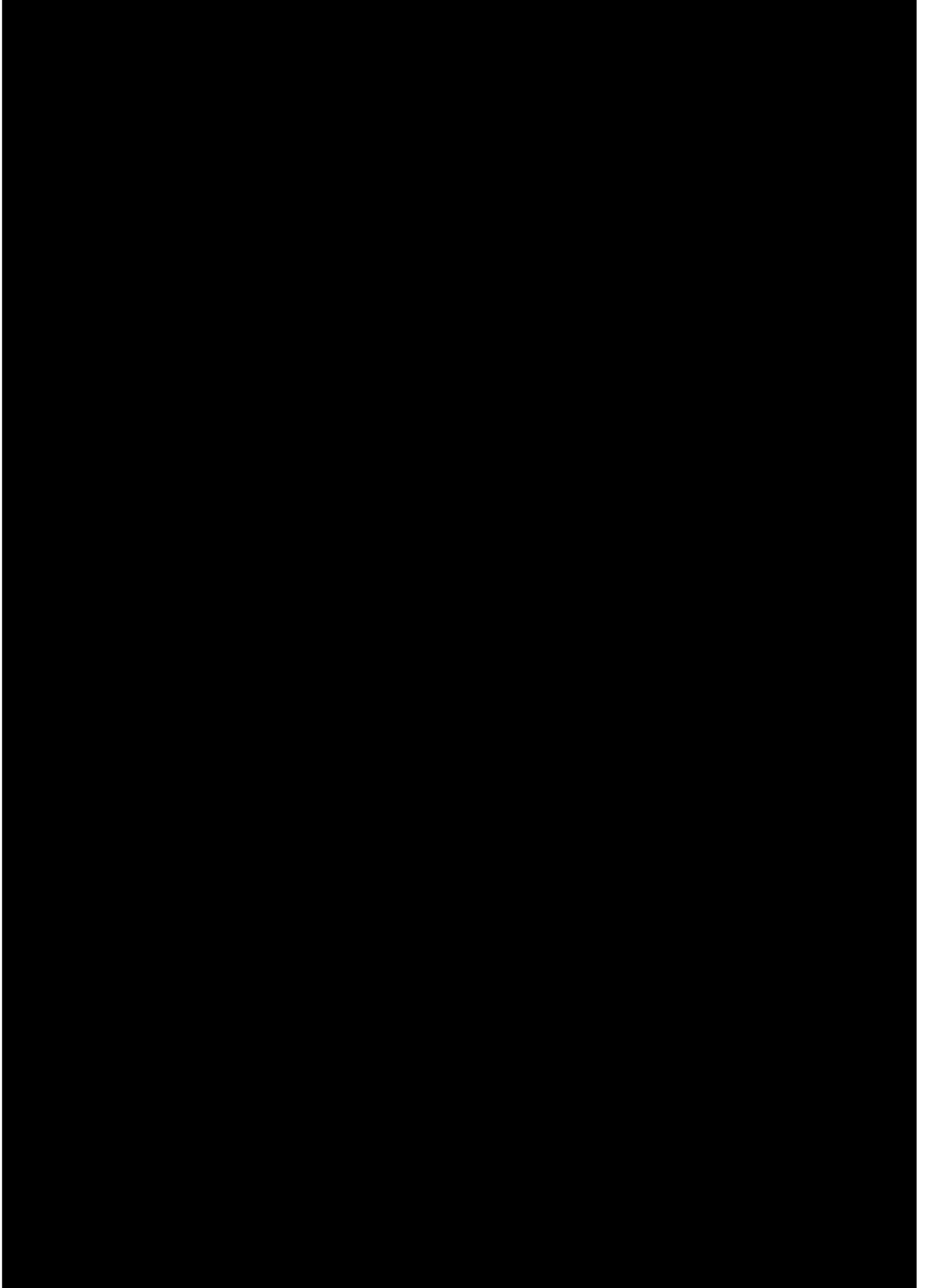
Two quotes from this group summarise the importance of friendship, and even small kindnesses done for other people: 'just be a friend'; 'small gestures of kindness can really improve others' lives even though you don't know it'.

### **Do you think children and young people in the UK are getting generally happier or more unhappy?**

This question was discussed by the 18 children and young people in one of our groups. Out of the 18, 16 told us they thought children and young people are generally getting unhappier. Only one thought they were getting happier. That one person thought there was less bullying nowadays and that people, and especially parents, are generally treating children better these days.

The reasons the great majority in the group gave for children becoming unhappier were life becoming more competitive, higher expectations of children and young people, increasing pressure and examinations at school, and worries about the economy and recession.

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# How we worked out our Happiness Scale

Many people have tried many different ways of measuring how happy children are. Often they have talked about measuring 'subjective wellbeing' – which means ways of asking children themselves how comfortable, healthy and happy they are. (Being comfortable, healthy and happy is what the Oxford dictionary says 'wellbeing' means.)

For this report, we have made up our own way of measuring how happy children say they are. First, we made a list of 100 different things that children might say about themselves. We wrote things that we thought would mean they were very happy indeed, things we thought would mean they were very unhappy indeed, and things in the middle.

Some of the things on our list were about the sort of person someone is, like 'I am a happy sort of person' or 'I am a quiet sort of person'. Some were about how someone might feel, like 'I worry a lot', or 'I like myself just the way I am'. Others were about other things we thought might make a child happy or unhappy – like 'I am treated fairly' or 'I get bullied'.

We got ideas for what to put on our list by asking children themselves for ideas (for example, through our 'BeHeard' mobile text consultation panel), and from the sorts of things that other people doing research into happiness and 'wellbeing' had written were important to how happy children feel. We have written the full list at the end of this report, so you can see what we ended up putting on it..

Next, we invited some children and young people to help us choose which were the best items on our list to put into a short questionnaire. We wanted to end up with a questionnaire we could use in the future for children to fill in when we wanted to find out how happy or unhappy they were. The children and young people we invited were to be our 'judges' of all the items on our list. We invited children in care or looked after by their local social care authorities, care leavers, children getting help from social care services, and children living away from home in ordinary boarding

schools, residential special schools or residential further education colleges. These are the groups of children and young people that my team was set up to work for.

In the end, 147 children and young people joined us in a cinema in Oxford on the evening of 18 January 2012. We put each of the 100 things on our list up on the cinema screen in turn (a young person helped by reading each item out for us all when it came up on the screen). We asked our 147 'judges' to give each item in turn a score using an electronic voting pad we had given out to each person. We asked them to press the button for 1 if they thought a child saying what we had put on the screen would be 'not at all happy', to press 2 if they thought someone saying that would be 'a bit happy', 3 if they would be 'quite happy', 4 if they would be 'very happy', and to press 5 if they thought someone saying that would be 'extremely happy'. We explained that they were judging how happy or unhappy they thought a child saying each thing would be – not whether any of the items on the list was right about themselves.

After about an hour (plus an ice cream break!) we ended up with every item on our list being given a score by our judges. (Not every judge managed to decide on a score and press the button for every single item. The smallest number of judges giving a score to any one item was 124.) After showing each item on the screen, we showed the results of the scoring for that item – how many of the judges had scored it 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5, so everybody could see how things were going, and how much agreement there was about each item on the list.

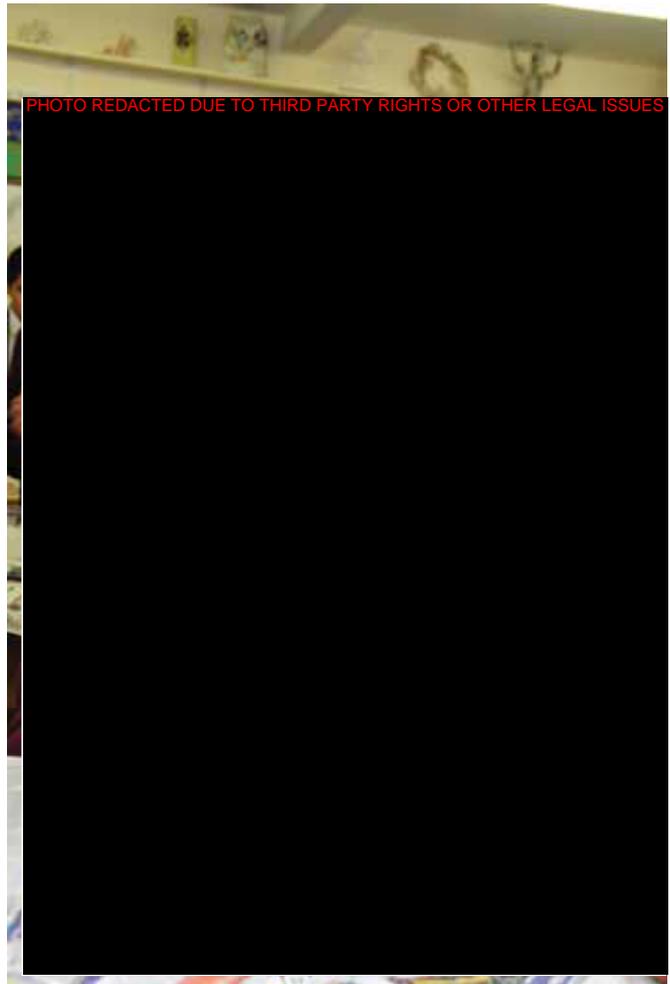
After the cinema session, we analysed the scores the judges had given each item on our list. For each of the 100 items on our list, we worked out two separate numbers. The first was the average score the judges gave to that item. To work that out, we added all their scores for that item together and divided the total by the number of judges who had managed to give us a score for it.

The second figure we worked out for each of our 100 list items was a number that told us how much our judges had agreed or disagreed about what score to give that item. To do this, we worked out what percentage of our judges had given that item a different, or a very different, score from the one we had just worked out as the average for everyone. The bigger this percentage was, the more disagreement we could see there had been among the judges about what score to give this item on the list.

Lastly, we chose 20 of the items from the list to make up our final 'children's happiness questionnaire' to use in the future. We picked items that the judges agreed most about when they scored how happy or unhappy they thought someone would be who said that item was right for them, and which were well spread out from the ones the judges thought showed most unhappiness through to the ones the judges thought showed most happiness.

On the next page is our final questionnaire, made up of the 20 best items, according to our 147 child judges, for telling whether a child is happy or unhappy. Next to each item is its average 'happiness score' from all the judges at our cinema session. We chose the order to put the 20 questions in by simply picking the 20 items out of a hat, so the order they come in is random, rather than something like putting the happiest-sounding items first.

For a child or young person to use the questionnaire to rate how happy they are, the child needs to read each of the 20 items, and tick each one they think says something right about them. They leave blank the box next to any item they think is not right about them. Then they add up all the scores next to all the items they have ticked, and divide that total by the number of items they have ticked to give their 'happiness score'.



The higher the score, the more happy they are (according to how all our judges rated the items on the questionnaire). The highest (happiest) possible score is 4.25. The 'midway' score is 2.88. The lowest possible score (unless someone doesn't tick any of the items in the questionnaire at all!) is 1.68. After the questionnaire is a sheet for working out the child's own happiness score for the day they filled in the questionnaire.

# Children's Happiness Scale

Office of the Children's Rights Director for England



Here are 20 things children or young people might say about themselves. Just read each of them and tick all the ones that are right about you. Leave the others blank.

Life is good for me at the moment	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.64
I am treated fairly	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.13
I know what is happening next in my life	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.15
I have big problems but am dealing with them	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.55
I am quite proud of myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.65
I am trying to change some things about myself	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.57
I don't have any big problems at the moment	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.22
I have lots of friends	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.01
I get confused about what is going on	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.43
I never feel safe	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.74
I often get anxious	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.32
I get lonely	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.68
People are prejudiced against me	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.77
I learn from my mistakes	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.18
I am a shy person	<input type="checkbox"/>	2.63
I get bullied	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.68
I am good at learning new things	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.70
I am getting all the help I need	<input type="checkbox"/>	3.38
I have lots of fun	<input type="checkbox"/>	4.25
I am easily depressed	<input type="checkbox"/>	1.75

## To find out your 'happiness score' on this questionnaire:

1. Add up the numbers next to all the items you have ticked

2. Next, write how many items you ticked

3. Now divide the number you wrote against (1) by the number you have just written against (2) and write the answer in the box

**That is your happiness score for today on this questionnaire!**

## Some last thoughts on the Happiness Scale

In doing the maths to work out which items from our list of 100 we should choose for our final questionnaire, we noticed that our judges seemed to have agreed more about the items they thought showed a child was less happy, and to have agreed less about the items they thought showed a child was more happy. It seemed as if it was easier to say what made children unhappy than what made children happy. We had not expected this.

We thought we had better check this by doing even more calculations, to test out how far our judges really had been agreeing more about the unhappy items on our list than they did about the happy ones – or whether what we had noticed was probably just a fluke.

We did some statistics calculations to compare the scores our judges gave to each item on the list of 100 with the numbers that showed how much they had agreed or disagreed over how to score each item. The answer surprised us. Overall, our judges did agree very much more about the items on the list they thought showed children were unhappy, and they disagreed much more about the items they thought showed children were happy. As well as this, our calculations showed that what we had noticed was very unlikely indeed to have happened just by chance, or to be a fluke. It turned out to be over 99% certain that the children and young people really did find it easier to say what things made children unhappy than to say what things made children happy.

(For people who understand these things, the calculation we did is called a 'Pearson product moment correlation', and the answer from this calculation was 0.70 out of 1.00 – which tells us that our judges really did find it very much easier to agree on what makes children unhappy than to agree on what makes children happy. Because we didn't know beforehand whether the judges would find it easier to agree on the unhappy items or the happy items on our list, we used the calculation we did to check both these possibilities. Statistics people call this doing a 'two-tailed test'. We looked our answer of 0.70 up in a table that told us how likely this answer was to be just a fluke, and the table told us that we could be 99% certain it wasn't just a fluke – the judges really did find it easier to agree on the more unhappy items. Statistics people would say that what we found is almost certain – though nothing is ever absolutely certain of course. In fact it is 'statistically significant', with less than a 1% chance of being a fluke.)

So, unexpectedly, we have found that children and young people themselves (or rather, the 147 children and young people who judged our list of items for us) did find it easier to agree about things that tell us a child is unhappy than about things that tell us a child is happy. The more unhappy something tells us a child is, the more agreement there was about it among the children.

We had meant to make a questionnaire to measure happiness. We are now wondering whether what we have learned from our 147 child judges is that we were really measuring unhappiness rather than happiness. We are even wondering whether our judges' voting suggests that they saw 'happiness' more as 'not being unhappy' than as something separate in itself.

# Appendix: All the statements we tried out for the Happiness Scale

I am the happiest person in the world

I am unhappy today

I am a happy sort of person

I often feel excited

I often get disappointed

I am a shy person

I often feel frightened

I often get anxious

I often feel guilty

I get confused about what is going on

I often get annoyed

I like lots of things

I am an impatient sort of person

I am easily bored

I don't always have enough food to eat

I lack confidence

Sometimes I feel a bit stupid

I am easily depressed

I am easily upset

I get lonely

I easily get frustrated with things

Life is good for me at the moment

Things are going right for me at the moment

Things aren't going well for me at the moment

I easily get sad

My faith helps me in my life

It takes a lot to make me happy

I want to be happier than I am at the moment

I get on well with other young people

I get on well with my family

I am being looked after well

I don't have any big problems at the moment

I have big problems but I am dealing with them

I am doing well in education or work

I am sure I will get a good job

I am worried about my future

I try hard to keep out of trouble

I get bullied

I am never bullied

Most people like me

I cope with any problems that come up

I enjoy lots of activities

Lots of things make me angry

I have enough money for the things I need

There is something I'd like to change about the way I look

I am getting the help I need

Next year will be a good year for me

I have lots of fun

I have lots of friends

I always feel safe

I never feel safe

People tease me

People take notice of my opinions

There are many things that need sorting out in my life

I have ambitions for the future

I learn from my mistakes

I find learning difficult sometimes

I try very hard to do well

I am looking forward to some good things ahead

I worry a lot

I am treated fairly  
I am treated unfairly  
Most people like me  
I am trying to change some things about myself  
Where I live is the right place for me  
I am in good health  
I am given plenty of choice about what happens to me  
I make the important decisions about my life for myself  
Other people decide what is best for me  
People are prejudiced against me  
I am good at learning new things  
My friends help me when I need it  
I am quite proud of myself  
I am under a lot of pressure at the moment  
There are more good things than bad things in my life at the moment  
I like myself just the way I am  
I know what is happening next in my life  
I know what is going on in the world around me  
I have got used to the way things are  
I expect I'll be living where I am for a long time  
My teachers taught me well  
The government runs the country well  
I am a shy sort of person  
I tell lots of jokes  
I have stolen something recently  
I do plenty of exercise  
I am saving up for something I want to buy  
I help other people  
I often volunteer to do things I don't have to

I usually eat healthy food  
I can easily get to sleep at night  
I'd like to try some new things  
I like shopping  
I play plenty of sports  
I like being on my own  
I am about the right weight for me  
I watch lots of TV  
I spend a lot of time on the computer  
I am a quiet sort of person

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