

Innocenti Report Card 16

Worlds of Influence

Understanding What Shapes Child
Well-being in Rich Countries

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The *Innocenti Report Card* series is designed to monitor and compare the performance of economically advanced countries in securing the rights of their children.

In 1988, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) established a research centre to support its advocacy for children worldwide and to identify and research current and future areas of UNICEF work. The prime objectives of the UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti are to improve international understanding of issues relating to children's rights, to help facilitate full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and to support advocacy worldwide. The Office aims to set out a comprehensive framework for research and knowledge within the organization, in support of its global policies and programmes. Through strengthening research partnerships with leading academic institutions and development networks in both the North and the South, UNICEF Innocenti seeks to leverage additional resources and influence in support of efforts towards policy reform, in favour of children.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A new look at children from the world's richest countries offers a mixed picture of their health, skills and happiness. For far too many, issues such as poverty, exclusion and pollution threaten their mental well-being, physical health and opportunities to develop skills. Even countries with good social, economic and environmental conditions are a long way from meeting the targets set in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Focused and accelerated action is needed if these goals are to be met.

The evidence from 41 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and European Union (EU) countries tells its own story: from children's chances of survival, growth and protection, to whether they are learning and feel listened to, to whether their parents have the support and resources to give their children the best chance for a healthy, happy childhood. This report reveals children's experiences against the backdrop of their country's policies and social, educational, economic and environmental contexts.

What makes a good childhood?

Good mental well-being

Feeling positive and being in good mental health are key aspects of quality of life. However, a striking number of children in rich countries do not have good mental well-being:

- In 12 of 41 countries, less than 75 per cent of children aged 15 have high life satisfaction.
- There are no reliable, comparable data on children's mental health across this set of rich countries. But suicide is one of the most common causes of death for adolescents aged 15 to 19.

Good physical health

Health indicators also highlight areas of concern:

- 1 in 15 infants in rich countries is born with low weight – a key risk to survival.
- In 10 countries, more than one in three children is overweight or obese. The number of obese children (aged 5–19) worldwide is expected to grow from 158 million to 250 million by 2030.

Skills for life

Many also lack basic academic and social skills by the age of 15:

- Two in five children (on average) do not acquire basic reading and mathematics skills by age 15. In seven countries, the number drops to less than one in two.
- For an equally important skill set – feeling confident in developing interpersonal relationships – most children agree that they make friends easily. But in 18 countries more than one in four children disagree.

Why do all children in rich countries not have a good childhood?

Poor-quality relationships

- Children view good relationships as crucial. Those with more supportive families have better mental well-being.
- Many children feel that they lack opportunities to participate in decisions at home and at school.

- Bullying by peers remains a serious problem; it has a lasting negative impact on relationships and health. Children who are frequently bullied have lower mean life satisfaction.
- In some countries, at least 1 in 10 parents report no family or friends they can count on for help with looking after their children.

Lack of resources

- In almost half of rich countries, more than one in five children live in poverty. In many countries, the poorest children are at greater risk of depression, obesity and low academic achievement.
- Children without books at home to help with school work suffer academically.
- More time playing outside is linked to much higher levels of happiness. Yet many children say that good play and leisure facilities are not available in their neighbourhoods.

Gaps in services

- Measles immunization rates have dropped in 14 out of 35 countries with available time-series data.
- Public provision of high-quality childcare provides a stimulating social and learning environment – and helps to reduce socio-economic disadvantage. And yet, on average, across 29 European countries, one in seven parents with a child under 3 has unmet childcare needs.

- Adolescents disengaged from education and the labour market face a difficult start to adult life. In five rich countries, more than 10 per cent of young people aged 15 to 19 are not in education, training or work.

Gaps in family policy

- In five rich countries, parental leave is less than 10 weeks (full-pay equivalent). Leave reserved for fathers makes up only one tenth of all parental leave.
- Expectations to prioritize work can lead to long hours and stress that reduce the time and energy parents have for their children. On average, two out of five employees in Europe found it difficult to fulfil family responsibilities at least several times per month.

The broader context

- Unemployment – which affects family relationships and child well-being – has still not dropped below its pre-Great Recession levels in some countries.
- In 11 of 41 countries, at least 5 per cent of households do not have safely managed water.
- High levels of air pollution still threaten the physical and mental health of children – who suffer the greatest harms.

What needs to be done?

For every child to enjoy a good childhood, UNICEF calls on high-income countries to act on three fronts:

- **Consult children.** They see things from a different viewpoint and express serious concern for the future of the environment, how much they value relationships and participating in decisions.
- **Connect policies.** Carefully integrated policies that complement and strengthen one another are key to improving child well-being.
- **Create strong foundations.** The Sustainable Development Goals provide a roadmap to ensuring child well-being now and for the future. Governments should intensify and accelerate their efforts to meet these goals, including:
 1. Reduce poverty, and ensure that all children have access to the resources they need.
 2. Improve access to affordable and high-quality early years childcare for all children.
 3. Improve mental health services for children and adolescents.
 4. Implement and expand family-friendly policies related to the workplace.
 5. Reduce the stubbornly high levels of air pollution.
 6. Strengthen efforts to immunize children against preventable diseases.

SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis that has engulfed the world during 2020 presents new threats to child well-being. Even before the crisis, in the world's richest countries, the daily lives of millions of children fell far short of what anyone would call a good childhood. They suffered stress, anxiety and depression, lagged behind their peers at school, and were physically unwell. Living in a wealthy country did not bring them happiness. Nor did it guarantee them better health or education.

For the last 20 years, the *Innocenti Report Card* series has led the way in comparing children's well-being across rich countries. *Report Card 16* develops this further through a multi-level approach to show that children's well-being is influenced by children's own actions and relationships, by the networks and resources of their caregivers, and by public policies and the national context. This approach is aligned with the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, in that it recognizes the

responsibilities of governments, families and communities to help realize children's rights and promote their well-being.

This report finds that many of the wealthiest countries do not manage to convert good economic and social conditions into consistently high child well-being outcomes. It shows that no country is a leader on all fronts, and that all 41 countries have significant room for improvement. Such improvement is urgently needed if the world's most affluent nations are to meet the commitments they made five years ago when they endorsed the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals. Yet there are worrying signs of back-sliding on aspects such as immunization, learning and mental health.

The COVID-19 crisis adds to these challenges. What started as a health crisis will spread to touch all aspects of economies and societies. Children will not suffer the worse direct health effects of

the virus. But, as we know from previous crises, they will be a group that experiences the longer-term negative impacts most acutely. In this report, we present a baseline picture of children's well-being in rich countries at the start of the current crisis. In a companion paper, we look ahead to how the crisis may affect child well-being over the coming years.

The time is right for countries to step up efforts to realize the rights of all children. A multi-level approach to child well-being can support this goal because it delivers a realistic picture. It clarifies the links between the outcomes of individual children, the people and communities around them, and the nation in which they live. Many countries have all the requisites – wealth, a clean environment and generous social policies – to support high levels of child well-being. Yet too many children in these countries still do not experience a good childhood.

Our framework

We view a good childhood as one in which children have a positive experience of childhood and the prospect of a good future.¹ We develop a multi-level approach to well-being and adapt it for international comparisons. Our model of concentric spheres of influence is similar to the one developed by American psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner to explain how children interact with their environment and how this influences their development (see Figure 1).²

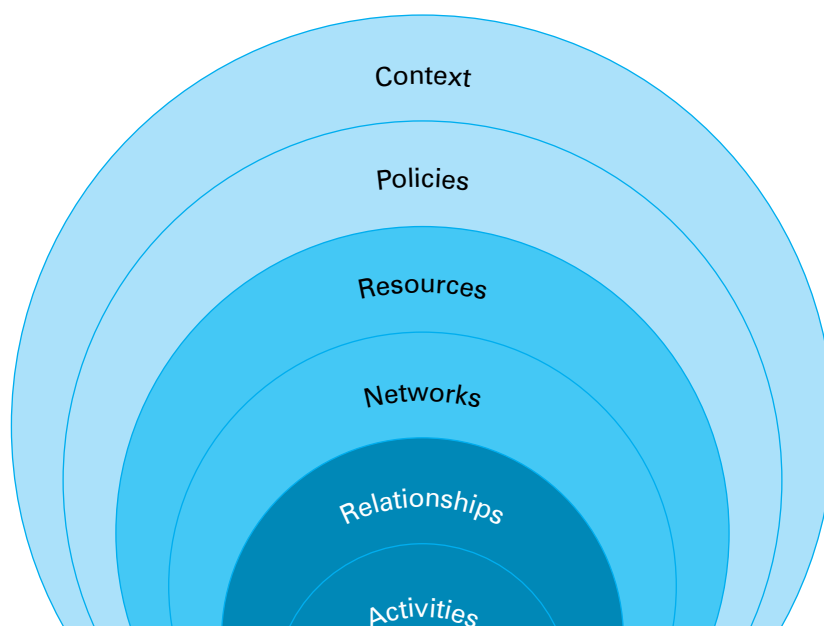
The child stands at the heart of the framework. Child well-being outcomes can be objective, such as child mortality or educational achievement. They can also be subjective and expressed from the child's point of view, for example whether they are satisfied with life or feel they can make friends easily.

Outcomes are influenced by the world of the child, the world around the child and the world at large. The world of the child (in dark blue) represents factors experienced directly by a child: the child's Activities and Relationships, such as those with family and peers. The world around the child (in medium

The world at large entails Policies and Context (the two outer circles in light blue). Policies refer to national programmes of direct relevance to the child, including social policy, education and health. Context includes broader

economic, social and environmental factors that influence child well-being either directly or indirectly. Policies and Context are national conditions for well-being that potentially explain variations in child well-being *between* countries.

Figure 1: A multi-level framework of child well-being



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