

# THAT AWKWARD AGE: CHILDREN, WELL-BEING AND CHARITIES

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## Introduction

This report looks at new data on children's well-being acquired through the application of [NPC's Well-being Measure](#) (see page 2). Building on our previous NPC work, it confirms [trends we have identified in the past](#): that young people's well-being falls as they grow older and move towards adulthood, and that girls' well-being falls more sharply than boys'.<sup>1</sup> This paper also digs deeply into this new data to reveal fresh insights, with analysis of well-being at key moments in children's lives.

We have found that a small but worrying minority of girls face substantial problems with their overall happiness if they fall out with their friends; that boys are keener to keep their emotions under wraps; and that children's resilience—their ability to bounce back when things go wrong—becomes more and more important for their overall well-being as they grow older.

The happiness of young people is, naturally, at the forefront of the minds of parents and carers. Occasionally, and generally in association with bad news stories, the same sort of questions have a national prominence: when trying to identify [the motivation of young rioters](#) during disturbances across the UK in 2011,<sup>2</sup> for example, or when listening to some of the [dire warnings](#) when charities helping young people hit funding trouble or even go out of business.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, and especially since the formation of the coalition government in 2010, policy-makers have started to think more seriously about measuring personal well-being, as a precondition for understanding and improving it.<sup>4</sup> This work complements ongoing measures of the nation's economic health—happiness has taken a place alongside GDP (gross domestic product), even if it remains a very junior partner.

The same shift has been seen elsewhere in policy work, especially among think tanks. The [new economics foundation \(nef\)](#) has a detailed, [ten-year project](#) dedicated to promoting well-being as 'an alternative measure of progress' for the nation.<sup>5</sup> [Nesta take an interest](#) too,<sup>6</sup> and there is now a [What Works Centre for Wellbeing](#).<sup>7</sup> At NPC we have developed an approach to help charities measure the well-being of the children with whom they work, so that the most effective projects can be identified and developed further.<sup>8</sup> Our previous research report, [Measure what you treasure](#), which examined a smaller sample and was published in April 2014, is discussed in more detail on page two.

*That awkward age* looks at the well-being of young people aged between 10 and 17: how happiness changes with age; which factors are most strongly linked with overall well-being; and what this means for the charities who have collected the data—who may also have a central role in designing projects and interventions to address problems.

Much of our work at NPC is designed to increase shared approaches to evaluation, including our [JET framework](#) for young people's employability<sup>9</sup> and our [Data Labs project](#) to open up government administration data<sup>10</sup>, which has resulted in a [permanent service](#)<sup>11</sup> at the Ministry of Justice. Publication of this data and analysis is part of the same drive to share relevant information across the charity sector, and to encourage others to do the same.

## Methodology

In 2011, NPC developed a [Well-being Measure](#) for young people that allows charities to record levels of happiness among the children with whom they work. This enables charities to measure changes in the well-being of their young beneficiaries, and so to develop their interventions to ensure a greater impact on their lives.

The Well-being Measure was designed for use primarily with 11–16 year olds. However, the latest data gathered here includes information on 10 year olds and 17 years olds.\* We are confident that our findings can be extended to include children of these ages, and therefore provide insight into more young people at key moments in their lives.

While individual charities and schools use the well-being measure for their own purposes, the data is aggregated to produce an overall baseline to which they can compare themselves. This also allows NPC to conduct data analysis on a large sample. This is not a nationally representative sample, but it allows us to look in more details at a number of factors in the well-being of the children involved.

Aggregating the data collected over 2011–2015 provides us with more anonymous data than we have ever had before. It draws on data on the well-being of over 8,000 children, collected by over 100 schools and charities. This information covers children between 10 and 17 years-old, which means we can look in detail at children's happiness at some of the most formative moments of their lives, including the transition from primary to secondary education, and as they head towards the end of their teenage years and into adulthood.

The measure asks children to grade how much they agree with a series of questions relating to eight key aspects of well-being:

- Self-esteem
- Emotional well-being
- Resilience
- Satisfaction with school
- Relationships with family
- Relationships with friends
- Satisfaction with community
- Overall well-being.

The children are asked to respond to various statements under each of these headings in a survey. A full list of those statements is on page three.

Our 2014 report [Measure what you treasure](#) analysed a smaller sample of just under 7,000 children on a narrower age range (between 11 and 16), collected by over 50 UK charities.<sup>12</sup> In that paper, and in this one, we were not able to obtain longitudinal data, but rather tracked changes across a group of children of different ages. Reflecting other research into children's well-being,<sup>13</sup> we identified what we called a well-being 'crisis'. We found that well-being fell for all children as they grew older, with girls' happiness falling faster than boys'.

*That awkward age* looks at broad emerging trends from the expanded data, and breaks it down further by age and gender. In doing this, it expands on the analysis published 18 months ago, and looks in more granular detail at our findings.

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\* The sample sizes for both 10 year-olds and 17 year-olds are still relatively small (around 200 children for each group), and as a result should be treated with some caution. We will be able to build up a more robust picture over time as we collect more data for these age groups.

With new data from 2015 and from the new age groups added to our sample, the broad findings on overall well-being have not changed significantly from our previous analysis in May 2014. This would suggest that the current sample presents a relatively stable and reliable picture of the current state of children's well-being.

## Statements from NPC's Well-being Measure questionnaire

### Self-esteem

- A lot of things about me are good
- I can't do anything right
- In general I like being the way I am
- I do a lot of important things
- Overall I have a lot to be proud of
- I can do things as well as most other people
- Overall I am no good
- Other people think I am a good person
- I am as good as most other people
- When I do something, I do it well

### Emotional well-being

- I cry a lot
- I am too fearful or anxious
- I am nervous or tense
- I am unhappy, sad or depressed
- I worry a lot

### Resilience

- I usually manage one way of another
- I keep interested in things
- My life has a sense of purpose
- I find life really worth living
- My life has meaning

### School

- I like being in school
- I wish I didn't have to go to school
- I feel safe at school
- I enjoy school activities
- School is interesting

### Family

- I enjoy being at home with my family
- I like spending time with my parents/carers
- My parents/carers and I do fun things together
- My parents/carers treat me fairly
- My family gets along well together

### Friends

- My friends treat me well
- I have a lot of fun with my friends
- My friends are great
- My friends will help me if I need it

### Community

- Adults in my area treat young people fairly
- I wish I lived somewhere else
- I like where I live
- There are lots of fun things to do where I live

### Overall well-being

The young person is asked to tick a rung on a ladder to represent where they stand at the moment, where the bottom rung '0' is 'the worst possible life for you' and the top rung 10 is 'the best possible life for you'.

## Well-being at a glance

**Most children report high or very high levels of well-being.** 74% of boys and 65% of girls aged 10–17 score 7 or more out of 10 on the level of satisfaction with their lives, as shown in Figure 1.

The average score for all children in NPC's data is 7.6, which is consistent with both our previous findings and with the findings of the Children's Society in 2012<sup>14</sup> (whose own well-being study reported an average score of 7.8 on a similar 10-point scale on happiness with life). Treating scores of 7–8 as 'high' and 9–10 as 'very high' is consistent with the analysis of ONS and NPC well-being measures which we published in 2014.<sup>15</sup>

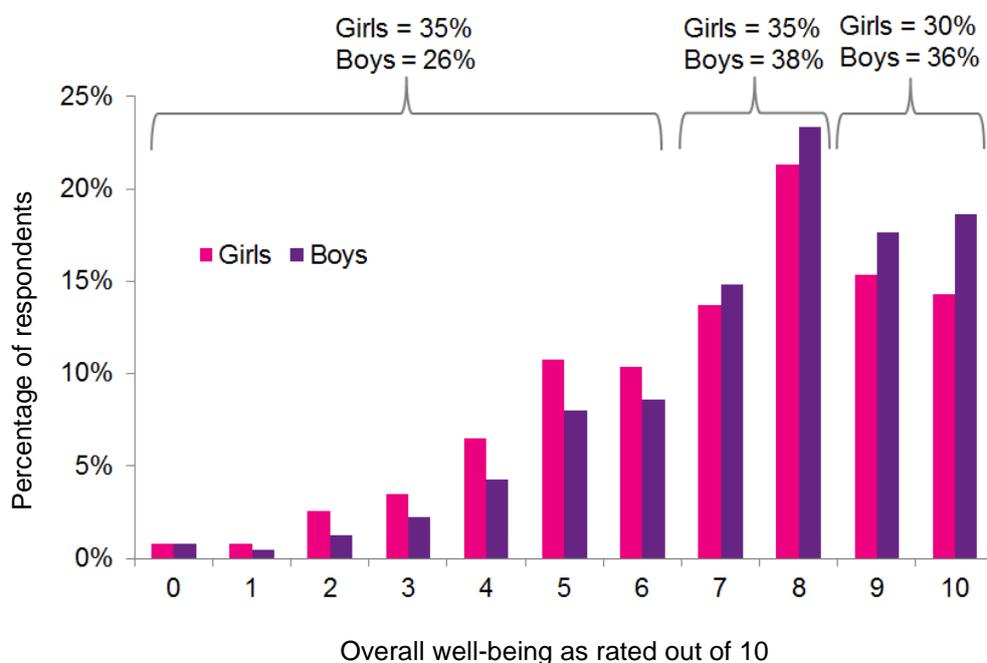
**However, a quarter of boys and a third of girls report levels of well-being which are average or lower.** 26% of boys and 35% girls score 6 or below on the level of satisfaction with their lives.

Scores of 6 or below are considered to be 'low' as a measure of self-reported well-being. This approach is consistent with other 10-point scales, including net promoter scores used in customer satisfaction surveys where a score of 6 or below signifies unhappiness with a product or service.

**More girls than boys report levels of well-being which are average or lower.** There is a nine percentage point gap between boys who score 6 or below compared with girls.

Figure 1: Overall well-being by gender, ages 10 to 17

*Question: The top of the ladder '10' is the best possible life for you and the bottom '0' is the worst possible life for you. In general, where on the ladder do you feel you stand at the moment?*



## Well-being during teenage years

**Children’s well-being falls as they get older.** Well-being falls with age. As shown in Figure 2, the decline is markedly steeper for girls than boys.

**Girls are happier than boys at age 10, but after that their happiness drops below that of boys.** 10 year-old girls report higher average life satisfaction than boys. In all other age groups this is reversed, with girls’ overall well-being falling below boys’.

**There are particularly sharp falls in well-being for both boys and girls between ages 13–14 and 16–17.** As shown in Figure 2, there may be several explanations for this.

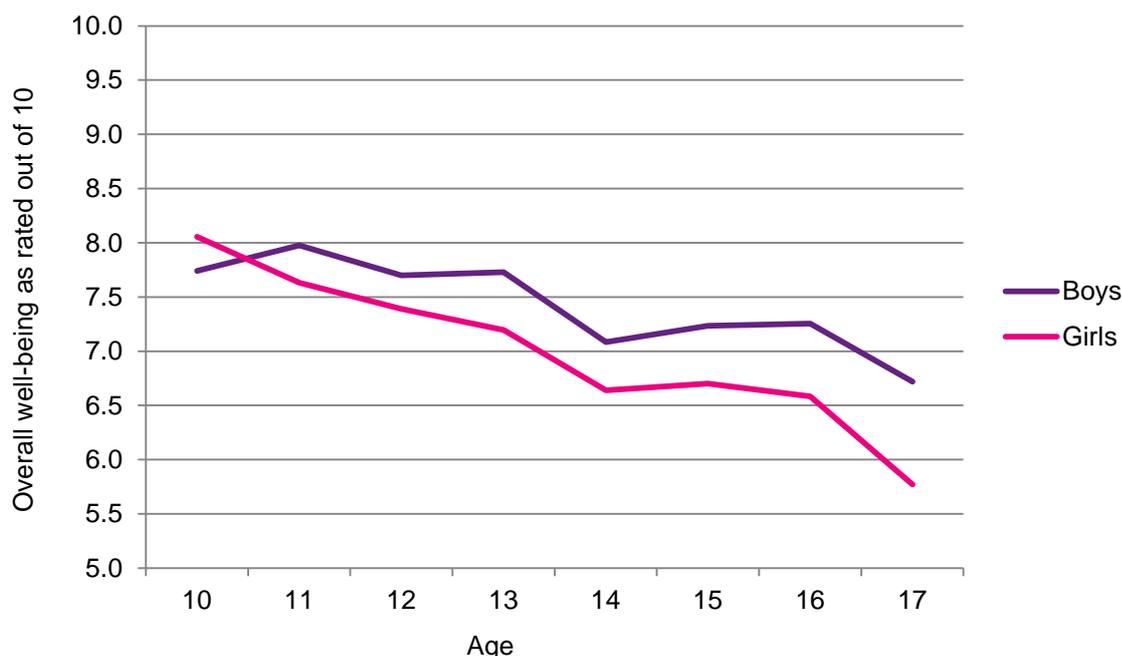
In [Measure what you treasure](#), for example, we suggested that the pressures new technology places on young girls in particular can affect their well-being in early teenage years:

*‘Our findings could also reflect recent concerns about the insidiousness of sexism to which girls are now subject: the profusion of sexualised imagery in everyday life; readier access to pornography; and, again, new technology, and specifically the ease with which images and videos can be shared among peers’.*

*Measure what you treasure, page 8<sup>1</sup>*

In addition, the fall in well-being in later years suggests that the transition out of education and towards adulthood can have significantly negative effects on levels of life satisfaction overall. Our work developing the [JET framework](#) to measure the factors that contribute to young people’s employability also identifies ‘emotional capabilities’ as one of the barriers facing young people seeking work.<sup>9</sup> ‘Emotional capabilities’ covers issues such as self-esteem, autonomy, empathy, and creativity.

Figure 2: Overall well-being by age and gender



## The factors that most affect overall well-being

The data not only allows us to look at overall levels of well-being, but allows us to consider which aspects of a young person's life are the most important determinants of their overall well-being. This makes for some important insights into the way that family, friends, school and other factors influence children's happiness, and provides some clues for how charities might use this data to make their services as effective as possible. The box below explains how we have set out the data discussed in the next few pages.

**Interpreting the graphs**

Figures 3, 4, 5, 7 and 8 plot well-being across two dimensions: on the Y axis, children's reported satisfaction with each aspect of well-being; and on the X axis, the strength of the correlation between each aspect and overall well-being (Pearson correlation).

Those factors appearing furthest right on the graphs are the most strongly associated with overall well-being, while those placed towards the top of the chart are those that young people are most satisfied with. The most concerning findings are those factors which appear nearest the bottom right, indicating that children are both unhappy with these areas of their lives and that this has a strong link to their overall well-being.

Figure 3: Individual well-being statements, by satisfaction level and strength of association with overall well-being



### **Family and self-esteem are central to children's sense of well-being**

Figure 3 shows that children are broadly happy with their friendship groups (represented by the red dots clustered in the top left of the graph), but less so with aspects of their local community or schools (the grey and burgundy clusters in the bottom left). Overall well-being continues to be linked predominantly to family, self-esteem, and certain aspects of resilience (purple, orange, and magenta dots respectively).

We should note the way in which the wording of the statements may influence how they are rated by the young people completing the surveys, although we have tried to allow for this in our analysis. It may be that statements which are phrased negatively ('I wish I didn't have to go to school', for example) are more likely to elicit a negative response, hence its position in the bottom left of Figure 3. Equally, statements which include positive phrasing (like 'My friends are great') may invite more positive responses.

Looking at self-esteem, it is worrying to see that statements closely associated with a sense of overall well-being—including 'I have a lot to be proud of' and 'A lot of things about me are good'—don't elicit a higher level of satisfaction. With young people's self-esteem being often fraught, those caring for and working with children will want to keep an eye on this.

### **Implications for charities**

Charities, in common with other organisations, may wish to focus their resources when working with young people on areas where the link to overall well-being is strongest. The importance of resilience to children's well-being is covered in more detail later in this report, but family and self-esteem are also influential factors in children's life satisfaction.

The data may also help charities target specific interventions more effectively. We can see that children's attitudes to different areas of their lives change over time, sometimes quite dramatically, so the most impactful project with an 11 year-old might not deliver the same results when working with children just one or two years older.

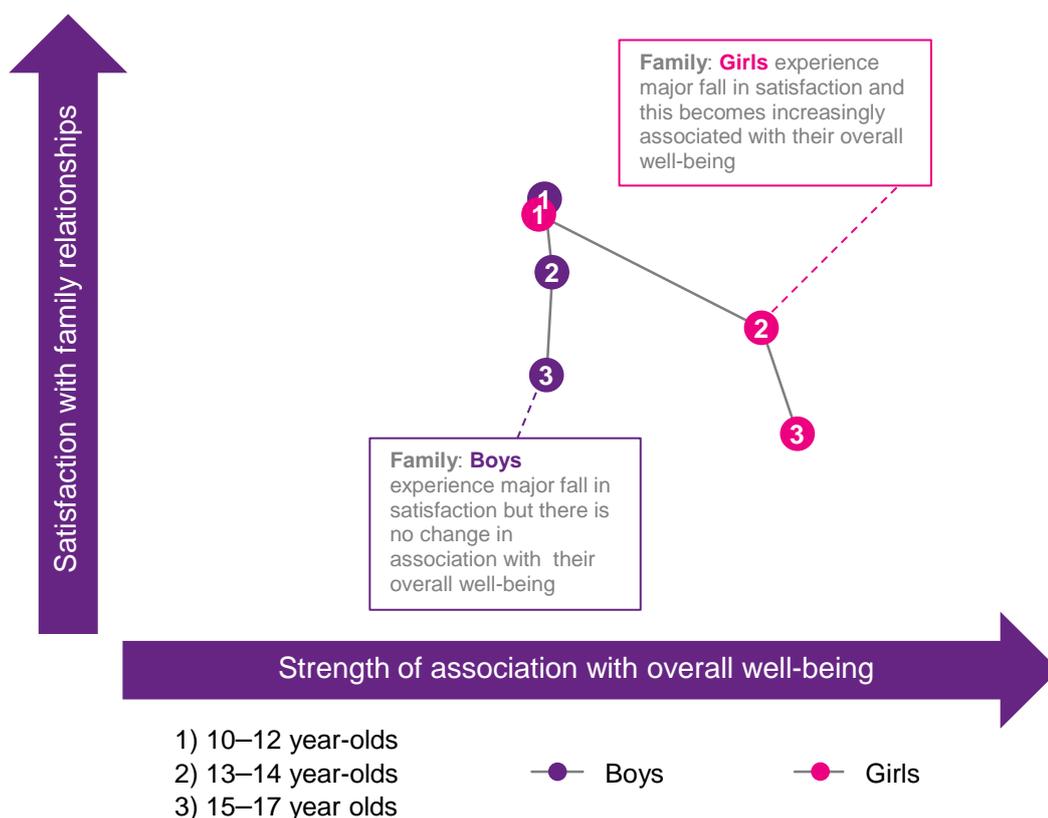
## How relationships impact well-being

### Family

As girls grow older, their well-being becomes more closely linked with the state of their family life. As shown in Figure 4, girls' satisfaction with their family life falls significantly from ages 10–12 (when 86% agree they are happy at home) to 15–17 (when this drops to 69%). From age 15, family life is one of the factors most closely linked to girls' sense of overall well-being.

By contrast, the link between family and well-being changes little for boys as they grow older. Boys also experience a reduction in happiness with family life as they get older (albeit by a slightly smaller extent than for girls). But unlike their female classmates, the link between family relationships and overall well-being changes little and has less of an impact over their overall happiness.

Figure 4: Satisfaction with family relationships and how this relates to overall well-being by age and gender.



## Friends

**By age 15, friendship is more closely linked to happiness for boys than for girls.** On average, boys and girls report similar levels of happiness with their friends up to age 12 (90% of girls and 89% of boys agree that they are happy with their friends) as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Satisfaction with friendships and how this relates to overall well-being by age and gender



However, by age 15 we found a stronger link between friendship and overall well-being for boys than for girls. This finding seemed counter-intuitive. A wealth of research over many years, as well as the experience of parents and carers, would suggest that girls' well-being is extremely closely connected to how well they get on with their friends. So we looked into this data in more detail, where we found something very interesting.

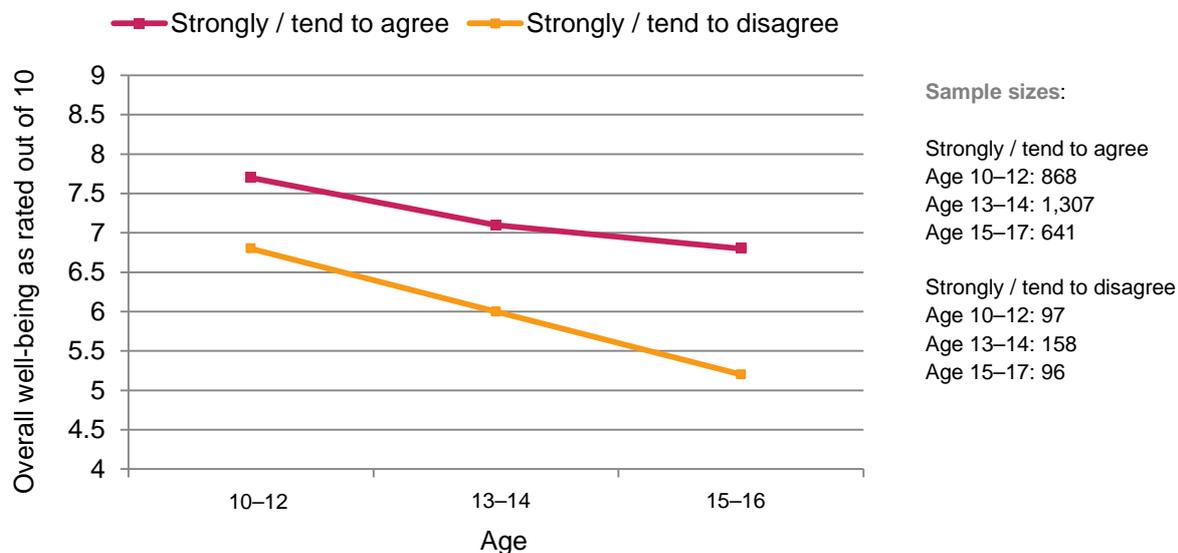
### Some girls are 'left behind'

Overall, as we have already seen, girls' satisfaction with their friends falls as they get older. Friendship also becomes more important to their overall well-being, but for a large majority this change is only slight. These girls move from feeling 'very satisfied' with their friends to 'fairly satisfied', and the link with overall well-being only falls a small amount.

For a small proportion of girls, though, the change is much more pronounced. For this group of older girls, aged 15–17, unhappiness with friends is associated with low levels of overall well-being. As shown in Figure 6, the 12% of girls who disagree that 'my friends treat me well' at this age also express much lower overall satisfaction with their lives.

These girls are less happy than their contemporaries who have better relations with friends, and are less happy than younger girls who also struggle with friendships. They have been left behind.

Figure 6: Girls' responses to statement 'My friends treat me well', by age and overall well-being



### Implications for charities

When policy-makers, influencers and charities think about well-being, they should consider carefully why friendship has such a powerful, negative impact on the lives of this minority of girls, and what is needed to address it.

For charities working with girls, interventions which help support children at home may be among the most effective at supporting well-being. At the very least, the influence of home and family life will loom large over other interventions, and charities will need to be aware of this. For boys, the most effective projects may look at family and friends in tandem.

## Looking at unhappiness

Ages 10 to 17 can be an emotional roller-coaster. Two questions in particular, on how much young people cry and how they report their own unhappiness, provide more details.

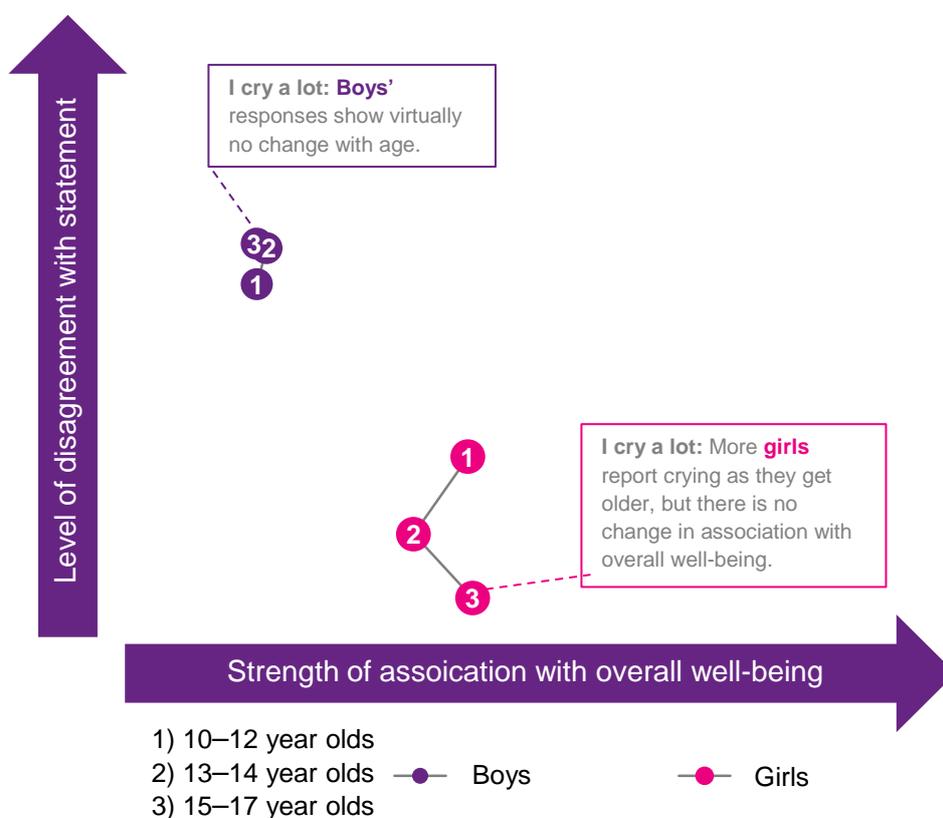
**Boys are no more likely to cry at 12 as they are at 17.** 40% all girls aged 10 to 17 say that they cry a lot, compared to just 15% boys.

On average boys' responses to the question 'I cry a lot' are almost identical across age groups, both in terms of their happiness and the correlation to their overall well-being. The overwhelming majority disagree or strongly disagree with this statement (80% for ages 10–12, 86% for 15–17).

**Crying has little correlation with boys' overall well-being.** There may be two explanations for this. Even if boys are not feeling happy with their lives, they may either be unlikely to express their emotions through crying, or are unlikely to admit to it.

**Girls are more likely to say they cry as they get older.** 39% of girls agree that 'I cry a lot' at age 10–12, rising to 53% at age 15–17. This is quite a large rise, and is especially significant in putting into sharp relief the unchanging responses of boys over time—although for neither boys nor girls does the relationship with overall well-being change over time.

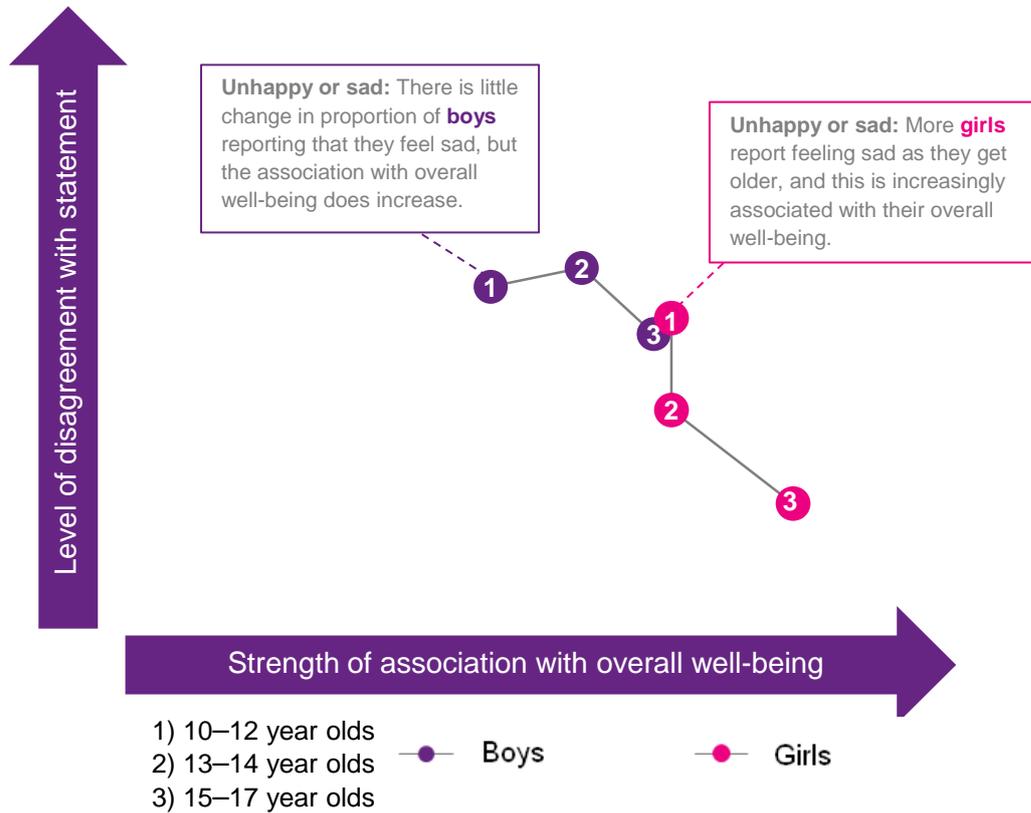
Figure 7: How level of disagreement with the statement 'I cry a lot' links to overall well-being by age and gender



**As girls get older they are much more likely than boys to report being ‘unhappy, sad or depressed’.**

Across all ages and genders (with the one exception of boys aged 10–12) this is, unsurprisingly, the statement most strongly correlated with overall happiness. 22% of younger boys agree that they are ‘unhappy, sad or depressed’, rising to 26% for those aged 15 or over. For girls the increase is far more substantial, rising from 26% to 44%.

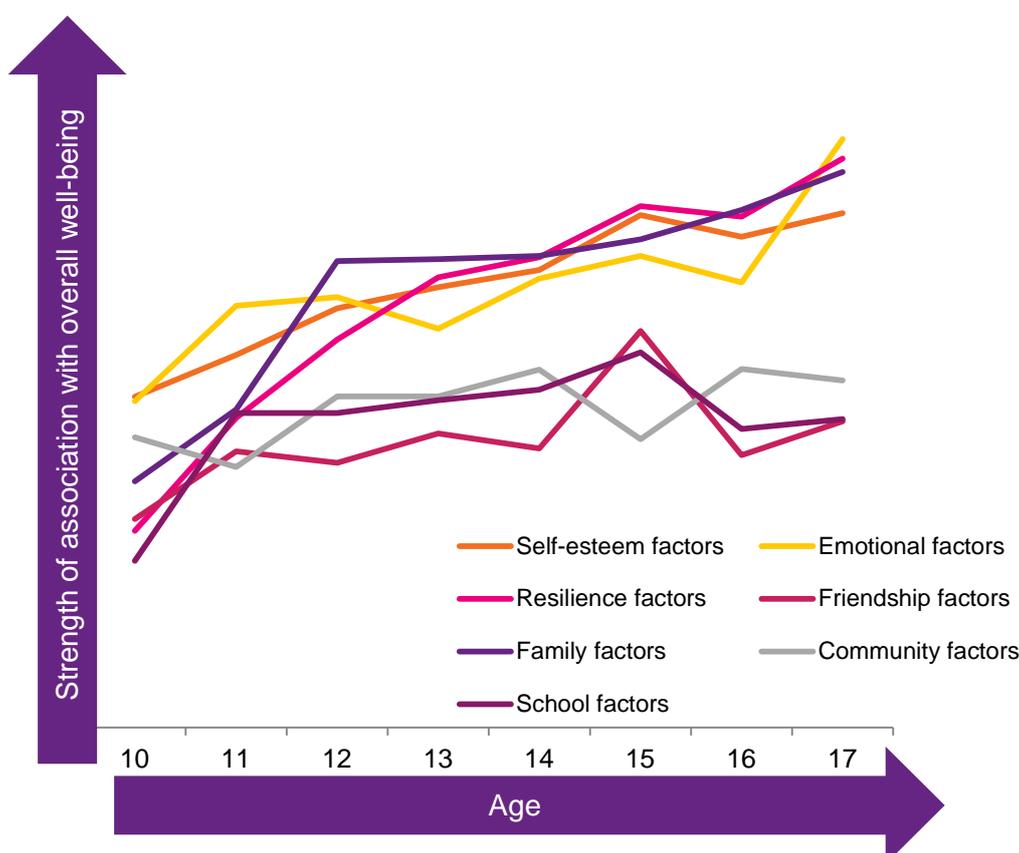
**Figure 8: How level of disagreement with the statement ‘I am unhappy, sad, or depressed’ relates to overall well-being by age and gender**



## Resilience becomes more significant as children grow up

This final section will focus on how each factor links with overall well-being. Every one of the aspects—self-esteem, emotional well-being, resilience, friendship, family, community and school—becomes more significantly linked to overall well-being as children get older. To put this another way, all of these categories become more important to how children judge their satisfaction with life as a whole.

Figure 9: How different well-being factors link to overall happiness, by age



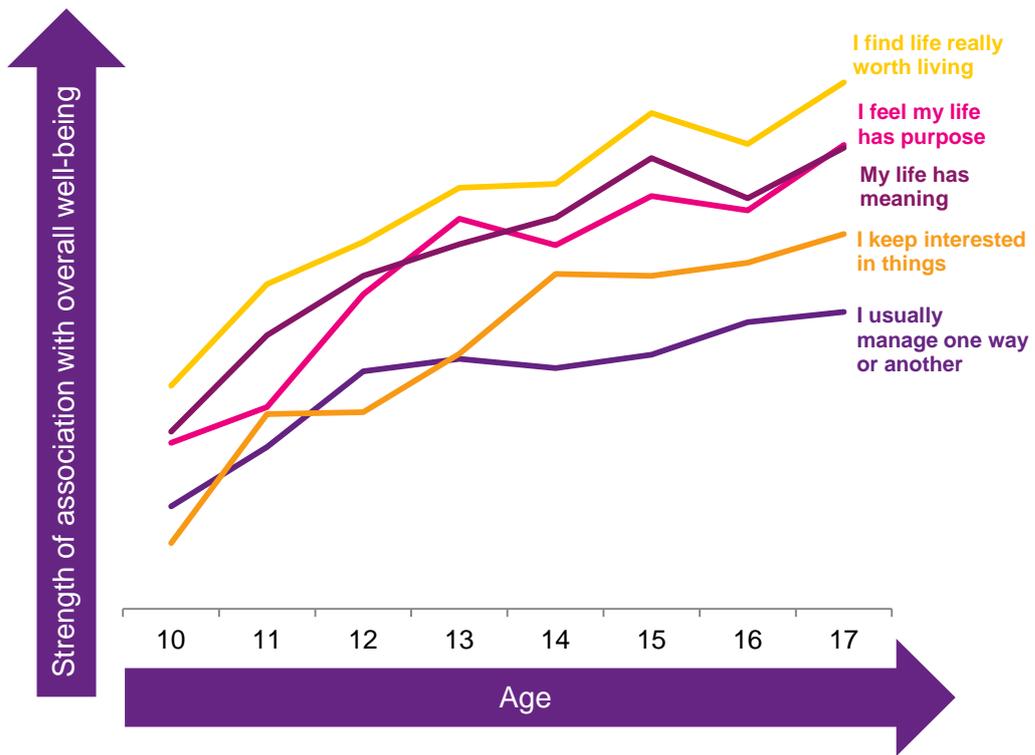
While all of these factors increase in significance with age, there is some divergence in the *rate* of change. As shown in Figure 9, self-esteem, resilience, emotional well-being and family relationships become much more closely correlated with overall well-being as children grow up. Conversely, friendship, school and community show a shallower increase in significance.

Resilience shows the greatest increase in its correlation to overall well-being as children grow up. Figure 10 looks at each of the five questions used to measure resilience (defined as ‘the capacity to cope with stress and difficulties’). For each one, their significance for children’s overall well-being increases significantly over time.

### Implications for charities

This finding could be significant for charities working with teenagers and young adults, highlighting the need to focus on building resilience as a route to supporting wider outcomes around well-being and life satisfaction.

Figure 10: How resilience links to overall well-being, by age



## Charities can help more by sharing more

With well over 60,000 charities working to help children in the UK<sup>†</sup>, from small local groups to national organisations, it is essential that the sector shares information about the most effective ways to help beneficiaries. If charities can do this, it becomes more likely that interventions have a positive impact on a larger number of people, and less likely that money will be wasted on projects which has been shown elsewhere not to work, or even to make things worse.

For charities working with young people, for example, the data may help them make decisions over where to target scarce resources. This is a tough call—does a charity commit to spread its time and expertise across all the children it works with, or is it a smarter use of resources to work intensively with the children most in need, such as those girls who either have no friends or are very distressed when friendships go wrong?

Voluntary organisations may wish to consider what our findings on families mean for the impact of their work. The success of interventions are likely to be deeply influenced by family lives in which, for the vast majority of cases, charities play no direct part. Or we may ask how charities working with the youngest boys and girls, for whom well-being levels are the same, might approach work differently from charities working with older children, where different levels of well-being have started to emerge.

NPC is committed to better and smarter ways to share data in the charity sector. Charities working with young people are confronted with complex questions, but good data can be part of the answer. It can help charities achieve the things they exist for: making a positive and lasting impact for the people they were set up to help.

For more information about NPC's Well-being Measure, visit [www.well-beingmeasure.com](http://www.well-beingmeasure.com).

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<sup>†</sup> This is based on data published in 2011, which states that there are 64,000 UK charities for whom children and young people 'were one of the beneficiary groups', commanding a combined income of £8.7bn. See National Children's Bureau (2011), [The ripple effect: The nature and impact of the children and young people's voluntary sector](#)

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> Van Vliet, A., Nichols, J., Finch, L., Hargrave, R. (2014) *Measure what you treasure*. New Philanthropy Capital
- <sup>2</sup> See for example The Children's Society (2011), *Behind the riots: Findings of a survey into children's and adults' views of the 2011 English riots*
- <sup>3</sup> See for example BBC News website: *'Youth services spending down by one third'* (March 2014)
- <sup>4</sup> See UK Prime Minister David Cameron's speech on well-being, delivered six months after being elected in 2010: Cameron, D., *PM speech on well-being*. 25 November 2010.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.neweconomics.org/issues/entry/well-being>
- <sup>6</sup> <http://www.nesta.org.uk/quantified-self-measuring-our-well-being>
- <sup>7</sup> <http://whatworkswellbeing.org/>
- <sup>8</sup> <http://www.well-beingmeasure.com/>
- <sup>9</sup> Kail, A., Plimmer, D., Ni Ogain, E., Harries, E., Copps, J. (2014) *The Journey to Employment (JET) framework*. New Philanthropy Capital.
- <sup>10</sup> <http://www.thinknpc.org/our-work/projects/data-labs/>
- <sup>11</sup> <http://www.thinknpc.org/our-work/projects/data-labs/justice-data-lab/>
- <sup>12</sup> Van Vliet, A., Nichols, J., Finch, L., Hargrave, R. (2014) *Measure what you treasure*. New Philanthropy Capital
- <sup>13</sup> See for example The Children's Society (2013), *The good childhood report 2013*.
- <sup>14</sup> The Children's Society (2012), *The good childhood report 2012*
- <sup>15</sup> NPC (2014), *Reflections on three years of NPC's well-being measure*.

## TRANSFORMING THE CHARITY SECTOR

NPC is a charity think tank and consultancy which occupies a unique position at the nexus between charities and funders, helping them achieve the greatest impact. We are driven by the values and mission of the charity sector, to which we bring the rigour, clarity and analysis needed to better achieve the outcomes we all seek. We also share the motivations and passion of funders, to which we bring our expertise, experience and track record of success.

**Increasing the impact of charities:** NPC exists to make charities and social enterprises more successful in achieving their missions. Through rigorous analysis, practical advice and innovative thinking, we make charities' money and energy go further, and help them to achieve the greatest impact.

**Increasing the impact of funders:** NPC's role is to make funders more successful too. We share the passion funders have for helping charities and changing people's lives. We understand their motivations and their objectives, and we know that giving is more rewarding if it achieves the greatest impact it can.

**Strengthening the partnership between charities and funders:** NPC's mission is also to bring the two sides of the funding equation together, improving understanding and enhancing their combined impact. We can help funders and those they fund to connect and transform the way they work together to achieve their vision.

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