

# REFLECTIONS ON THREE YEARS OF NPC'S WELL-BEING MEASURE

**Taken from *Mind the gap: Collected essays on the development of character, non-cognitive skills, mindfulness and well-being*, SSAT, November 2014**

## What is the NPC Well-being Measure?

Researchers generally agree that young people's well-being is linked to their school achievement<sup>1</sup> and it is a key assumption of many in the education system that improving well-being is worthwhile and has a positive impact on academic success and long-term prospects.

Given the importance of well-being we ought to have a reliable way to measure it. Unfortunately, and despite attempts by organisations like the Children's Society, progress towards a national well-being measure for children and young people has moved in fits and starts. Ofsted have periodically considered it,<sup>2</sup> but against a backdrop of increasing public and political focus on well-being, have downgraded their interest since 2011, focusing on "academic excellence" rather than "peripherals"<sup>3</sup>. Meanwhile, while the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has started regularly measuring adult well-being, it is still only scoping how it can be applied to children and young people.<sup>4</sup>

NPC is a charity consultancy and think tank which aims to help other charities to be as effective as possible. We promote the importance of research and impact measurement to the charity sector and have been interested in young people's well-being for many years. Being free of political and institutional constraints, we have pressed ahead with developing our own Well-being Measure. This was launched in 2011 after three years of development and piloting, with funding from a variety of charitable funders .

The Measure is an online questionnaire for 11-16 year olds that includes 40 carefully designed and validated questions covering eight aspects of well-being (self-esteem, resilience, emotional well-being, friends, family, community, school and overall life satisfaction ). It takes an entirely subjective approach, so young people are asked to record how *they* rate aspects of their lives. Charities and schools typically use it to measure well-being before and after an intervention so as to get some sense of impact. In contrast, ONS's proposals are to focus on mostly objective measures like sports participation and health. There's merit to both objective and subjective methods, and ideally we would combine them, but it is worth noting that there has been increasing recognition of the value of subjective approaches in recent years.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/197650/DFE-RB253.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/197650/DFE-RB253.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/surveys-and-good-practice/m/Measuring%20happiness.pdf>

[http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/filedownloading/?file=documents/consultations/i/Indicators%20of%20a%20school's%20contribution%20to%20well-being\\_0.pdf&refer=0](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/filedownloading/?file=documents/consultations/i/Indicators%20of%20a%20school's%20contribution%20to%20well-being_0.pdf&refer=0)

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/education/2012/jan/16/children-well-being-schools-ofsted>

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776\\_355140.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171776_355140.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/user-guidance/well-being/publications/measuring-subjective-well-being-in-the-uk.pdf>

Crucially, our Well-being Measure has allowed us to collect national baseline data so organisations can see how their young people compare to the average. To date, the findings have provided evidence to help organisations improve their services and demonstrate impact to funders. It has been used by organisations like the Outward Bound Trust, Toynbee Hall and Save the Children, as well as by a number of schools.

## Findings

Over the first three years of the Well-being Measure we have built up a database of c. 7,000 questionnaires completed by young people in the UK, which means we can start to look in detail at the findings.

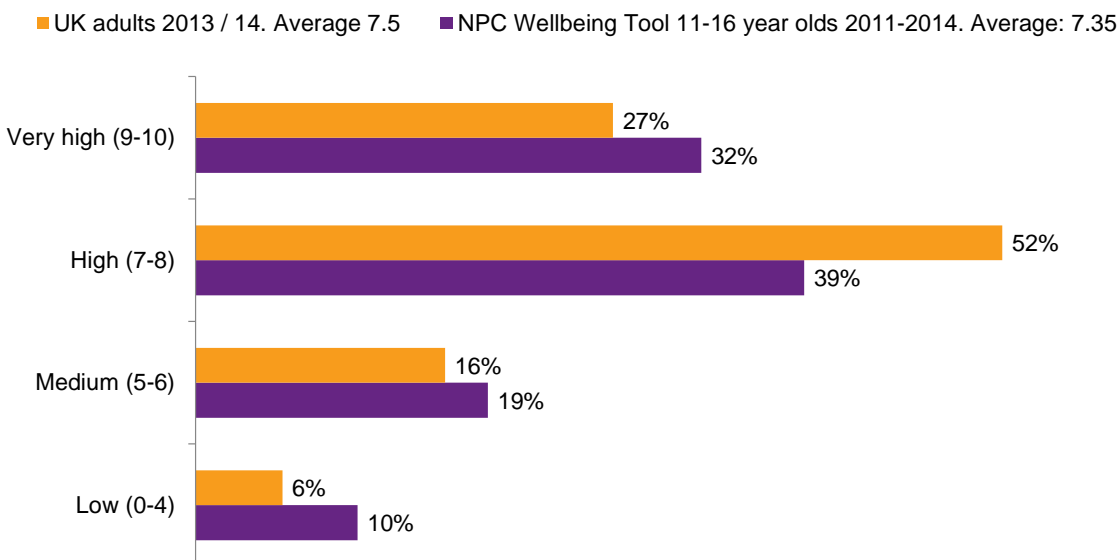
Of course this sample is not representative of all young people. Rather it has been determined by the organisations we have worked with and the young people that have used their services. Nonetheless, the patterns in the data are interesting and give us insights into the factors associated with well-being and how it varies between young people.

We also feel confident because at the top line our findings are consistent with previous research. For example, our approach to measuring overall well-being is to use a scale from 0 – 10 (represented as a ladder<sup>6</sup>). This is similar to the approach used by ONS with adults and to that recommended by the Children's Society in their 2012 report.<sup>7</sup> As the chart below shows, the mean score for the young people we have surveyed is 7.35 which is broadly consistent with the Children's Society result of 7.8 and the average for adults (7.5 in 2014).

## OVERALL WELL-BEING RATING

**NPC 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?*

**ONS question:** *Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Please answer on a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is 'not at all' and 10 is 'completely'*



Base: 6,768 NPC Wellbeing Measure questionnaires completed (2011-2014), 165,000 ONS wellbeing questionnaires (2013 -14)

<sup>6</sup> Taken from the work of Professor Hadley Cantril, a psychologist at Princeton University in the 1950s <http://www.well-beingmeasure.com/acknowledgements>

<sup>7</sup> [http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research\\_docs/Developing%20an%20Index%20of%20Children's%20Subjective%20Well-being%20in%20England.pdf](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research_docs/Developing%20an%20Index%20of%20Children's%20Subjective%20Well-being%20in%20England.pdf)

Looking at the chart we can see that as well as having slightly lower than average well-being, the young people in our sample are more polarised; there are more young people than adults who rate their lives as both 9-10 and below 6 out of 10.

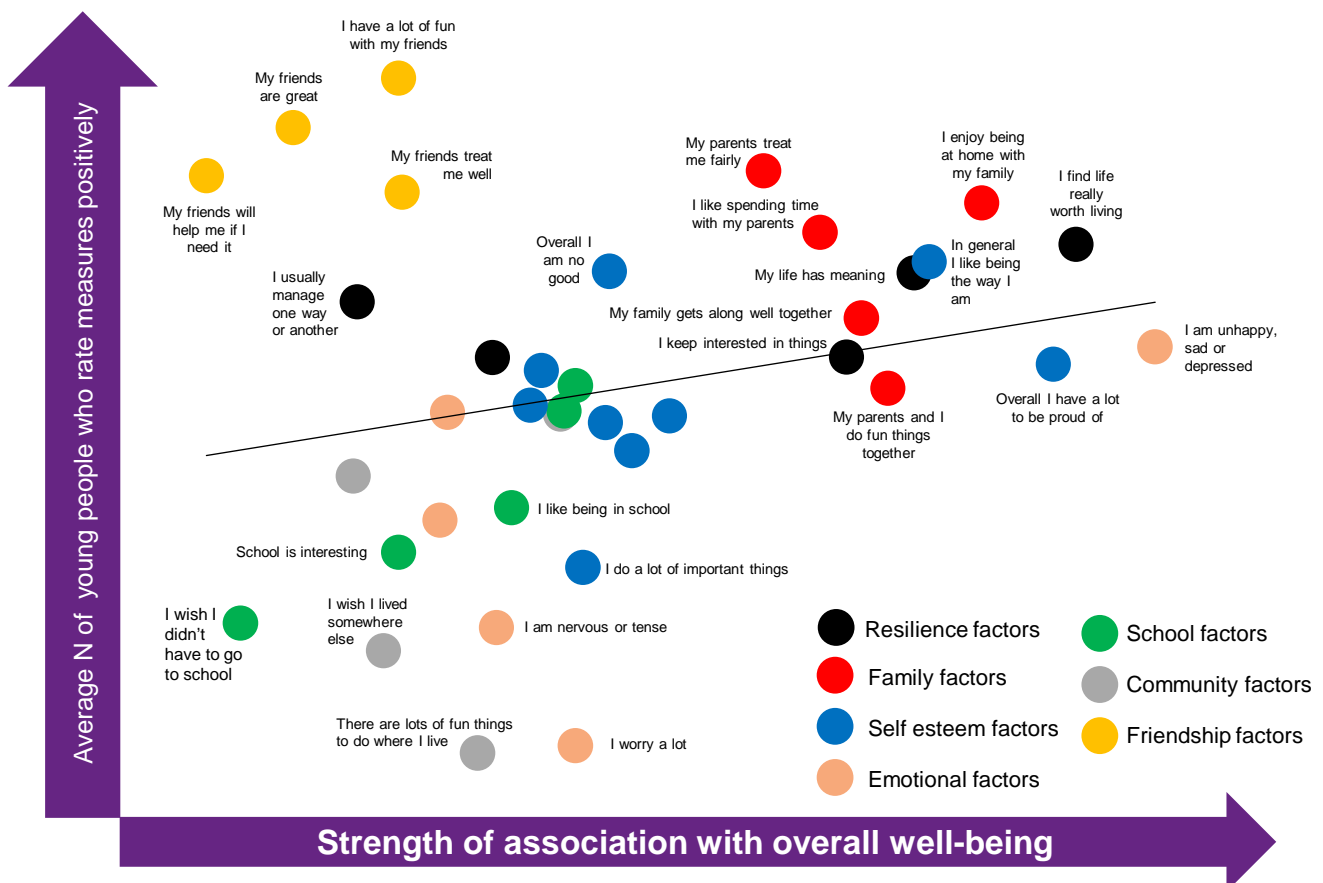
The data also enables us to look in more detail at which aspects of their lives young people are most and least happy with. At the top it is friends and family. Across all 40 questions the highest scores are found for 'I have a lot of fun with my friends' (93% answer positively) and 'my friends are great' (90%), followed closely by 'my parents treat me fairly' (86%) and 'I enjoy being at home with my family' (84%). At the bottom it is dissatisfaction with their local community and feeling anxious; only 48% of young people agreed 'there are lots of fun things to do where I live', 35% said they 'worried a lot', and 24% agreed 'I am nervous or tense'.

Where it gets really interesting is when we look at the strength of association between these factors and overall well-being. Here we find three particularly important clusters.

- Firstly, there are what we call resilience factors, such as 'I find life really worth living' and 'my life has meaning'
- Secondly, self-esteem factors like 'Overall I have a lot to be proud of' and 'In general I like being the way I am'
- The third cluster are family factors, in particular 'I enjoy being at home with my family'

In the diagram below each circle represents a measure of well-being we asked about. Those placed towards the right of the chart are the most strongly associated with overall well-being, while those placed towards the top of the chart are those that young people rate most positively. To stop the chart being too cluttered we have only labelled the standout measures; however, the colour coding highlights the broad factor they all fall under.

## HOW DIFFERENT MEASURES AFFECT OVERALL WELL-BEING



Base: 6,768 NPC Wellbeing Measure questionnaires completed (2011-2014)

It shows that measures to do with friendships, their local area and school are generally less important to overall well-being (hence to the left of the chart). We also find that while many young people say 'they a worry a lot' it doesn't necessarily have a major impact on their overall well-being (it only had a medium level association). The policy implications are that if we really care about well-being then we should look to the right of the chart; self-esteem should be an important focus, along with efforts to give young people purpose/meaning and ensure that family lives are happy.

We have also been using the data to compare well-being by age group and gender. Our earlier report, *Measure what you treasure*<sup>8</sup>, described how well-being falls progressively from the ages of 11 through to 16, particularly among girls (whose emotional well-being and self-esteem shows a particularly marked fall). This clearly has major policy implications.

## Next steps

We are continuing to develop the Well-being Measure and apply it in new settings. In 2014 we have been working with the London Mayor's Fund to measure change among young people involved in their Be the Best you can Be! programme, and with the Tri-Borough London authorities to develop and adapt the measure so it can be used by children with special needs.

We also think it has potential for use by schools, perhaps as part of pupil monitoring systems that combine well-being with existing management information data. So far the main interest has come from the private schools sector, although a number of academy chains are showing interest. Perhaps state schools, chasing league table places, will show more interest if we can achieve the holy grail: linking measures of well-being to academic achievement data on a large enough scale to explore the relationship in detail and help design policies that focus on the most important variables and the young people with greatest needs.

This could also link with another area of NPC's work which is aimed at opening-up official data. We are talking to DfE about the prospect of a "Data Lab" that would enable charities and others to evaluate their interventions using longitudinal data on education and employment outcomes for young people they have worked with, and so allow them to secure a real measure of their impact—along the lines of the existing award-winning Justice Data Lab<sup>9</sup> run by the Ministry of Justice.

Few would deny that the increasingly sophisticated use of pupil data by schools and others over the last 10-15 years has delivered real benefits for the education system and pupils. In our view, approaches that focus on softer outcomes, like the Well-being Measure, along with better access to official data, will be the next stage of this journey.

If you would like to know more or want to get involved please contact NPC.

Dan Corry and James Noble

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.thinknpc.org/publications/measure-what-you-treasure/>

<sup>9</sup> The Justice Data Lab enables charities (and other providers) to compare the reoffending rates of their service users with those of a matched control group of 'similar' offenders to test how effective an intervention has been on reducing reoffending.