



## Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies

July 2021

### MEASURING WHAT MATTERS FOR CHILD WELL-BEING: THE WAY FORWARD

Despite progress in recent decades, strong efforts are still needed to improve child data at both national and cross-national levels. To design, implement and monitor effective child well-being policies, policy-makers need data that better capture what is going on in children's lives, that measure what is important to them, and that can detect emerging problems and vulnerabilities early on.

*Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies* lays the groundwork for improvements in child well-being measurement and for building better data to inform the development of better child well-being policies. It outlines a new “aspirational” conceptual framework for child well-being measurement, setting out which aspects of children's lives should be measured, and how, in order to best monitor child well-being. It also outlines priorities for child data development and identifies key data gaps, with a view to motivating improvements in child data infrastructures.

The report identifies key actions that could be undertaken by countries to improve the quality of their data on children for policy monitoring purposes. These include:

- Increasing the regularity and/or timeliness of data collection, and ensuring consistency in questionnaire and variable definitions across waves.
- Reporting on a core set of data and indicators defined by what OECD countries can commit to updating at regular intervals. However, many data gaps have their roots in the fundamental scope, coverage, and design of existing child data collections. Novel and alternative data collections may be needed.
- Increasing the reach of data linking and techniques for combining data from multiple sources – including administrative- and register-based data, as well as survey data – has the potential to widen the breadth and depth of child data.
- Strengthening the capacity of data infrastructure to collect data on the well-being of vulnerable groups of children, including disabled children, children in homeless families and in residential care, victims of domestic violence, etc.

Further improvement of cross-national child data infrastructures will require significant investment as well as co-ordinated action from governments, international organisations, and the wider international statistical and policy communities. The synchronisation of efforts is key. Collecting comparable data requires either widespread support for international data collections, or a strong degree of co-operation to promote the harmonisation of national surveys and datasets. Countries and the wider community can also assist one another through knowledge sharing and the exchange of good and innovative child data collection practices.

## 1. WHY MEASURING WHAT MATTERS FOR CHILD WELL-BEING IS IMPORTANT?

Children have a right to well-being. Just like everyone else, their current quality of life is an important end in itself. Children need to feel valued and cared for, and supported to develop positive expectations about themselves and what they can get out of life. But because children are only at the beginning of their lives, child well-being policies must also be future orientated and focus on creating the right conditions in childhood to allow children to thrive both today and later in life. During childhood, individuals develop many of the skills and abilities needed for well-being throughout life. To capture child well-being, one needs to know not just how children are doing, but also how they're developing.

A childhood lasts a lifetime. Overwhelming evidence attests to the importance of children's well-being in shaping who they are, how they behave and what they do when they grow up. Childhood living conditions and the ways children develop physically, emotionally, socially and cognitively leave deep impressions; child well-being manifests itself in adults' health, job opportunities, family life and relationships. Having good data on children's well-being at different ages and stages of development is key for designing better policies to enhance children's well-being – and to generate lifelong impact – especially for children in the most vulnerable positions.

Good child well-being policy needs good data. It also requires that countries have the data infrastructure fit for policy monitoring purposes. Developing policies aimed at promoting children's well-being requires a solid information base on the **multiple domains of children's well-being**, including physical and mental health, socio-emotional outcomes, learning and educational outcomes and material well-being. Considering these multiple domains simultaneously gives a better understanding of effective child well-being interventions. This makes it possible to consider policies in each domain with their respective effects on life outcomes, and to take advantage of the complementarities that may exist across domains.

Child well-being monitoring also requires collecting **information on risk and protective factors** in children's behaviours and life environments, including their family, school and the neighbourhood where they live. **Collecting data on children at regular intervals** is also crucially important. Without doing so, it is not possible to track the evolution of child well-being over time nor identify emerging challenges and guide policies to enhance child well-being.

The *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies* report aims to push forward the child data agenda. Building on the OECD's lengthy experiences with well-being and child well-being data, it develops a new child well-being measurement framework, identifies key gaps in child data, and outlines priorities for child data development, all with a view to laying the groundwork for improving child data infrastructures. The ultimate objective is to build better and more useful data to inform the development of better child well-being policies.

The report outlines a new “aspirational” framework for child well-being measurement derived from an in-depth review of research evidence on child well-being at different stages of childhood and its association with later life outcomes. This framework sets out which aspects of children's lives should be measured in order to best monitor child well-being, and in what way (Box 1). It is “aspirational” in the sense that it is not guided by immediate data availability considerations, but instead by research findings on the key aspects of well-being that matter for children and for supporting their full development. Using an in-depth review of the current state and availability of cross-national data on child well-being, the framework also provides a data “roadmap” that can be used both to improve the use of existing child data and, in the longer term, to guide better data collection and motivate improvements in child data infrastructures.

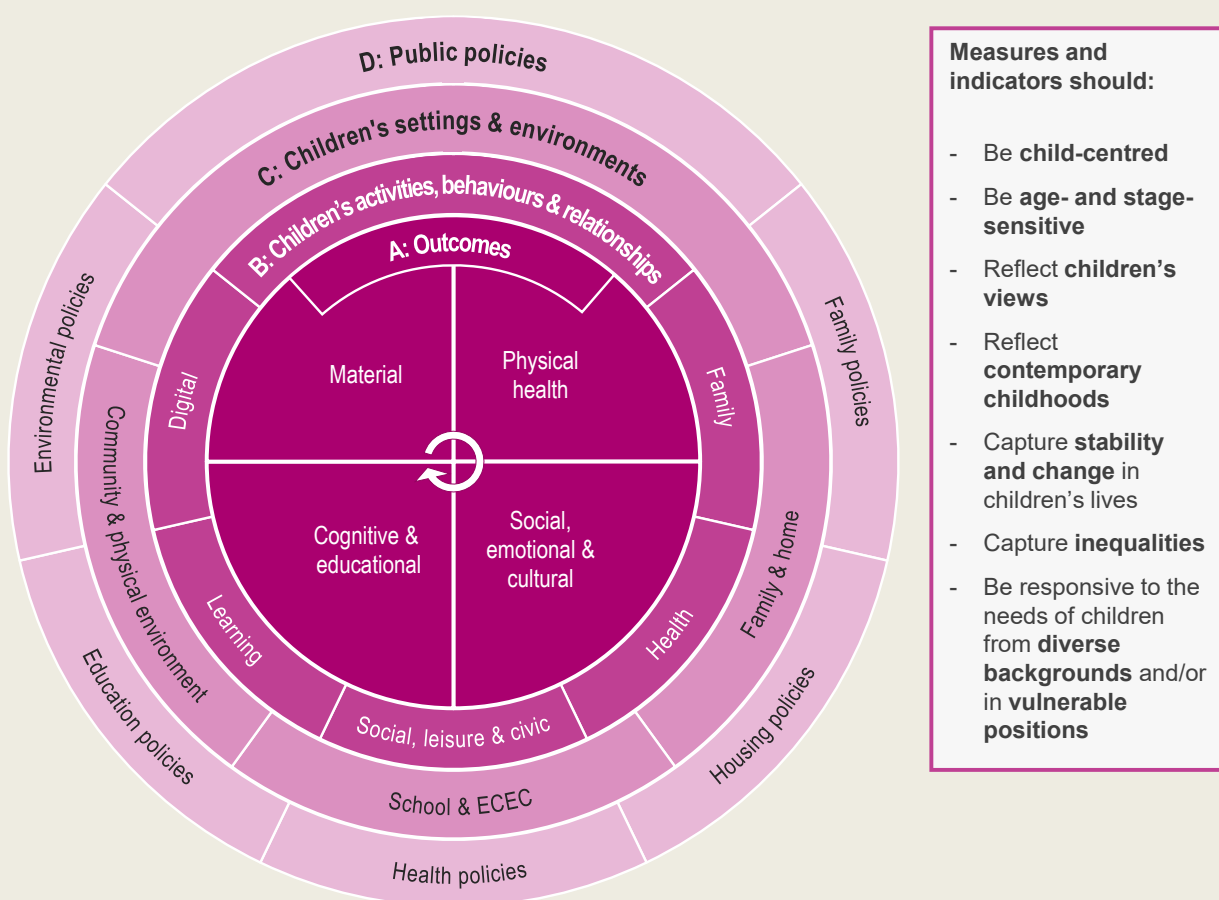
The framework has its roots in the understanding that children should be able to both enjoy a “good” positive childhood in the here and now, and have the opportunity to develop skills and abilities that allow them to prepare for the future. The framework is built on the following principles:

- **Well-being is multidimensional** and cannot be reduced to only one of its dimensions. All dimensions of child well-being depend on one another. The interactions between dimensions can lead to “developmental cascades”, where difficulties or strengths in one area can have a causal effect on another. For example, ample evidence highlights the positive association between emotional regulation in early childhood, children’s learning, and the quality of friendships and social skills developed in middle and late childhood.
- **Children’s well-being is tightly embedded in their environment.** Children grow and develop in the context of their family, school, community and neighbourhood environment. Their well-being is strongly determined by the quality of their family and school life, and of the community and the neighbourhood where they live. Child well-being outcomes are deeply shaped by relationships with parents and carers, and those with peers and other adults. Other physical and social aspects of their environment also matter, providing resources for child well-being or, conversely, putting child well-being at risk. In particular, when family well-being is high, parents can give children the support and stability needed to thrive.
- **The changing nature of what is fundamental for well-being** as children grow up requires that measures of child well-being be age-sensitive, i.e. appropriately reflect the specific needs, resources and well-being domains that are particularly crucial or sensitive at different stages of childhood. For example, research highlights the importance of good emotional regulation and early learning for early child development. Adolescence is also regarded as a sensitive period in the sense that young adolescents increasingly value social identity and act according to the behaviour and judgement of peers.
- **Well-being measures must include children’s views and perspectives**, for multiple reasons. First, it is important that the views of children be taken into account in matters that affect them, as stipulates the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children. Also, children’s perceptions and views matter for many aspects of their well-being, and often impact behaviours, sometimes with far-reaching effects. Policies may also play a role in influencing children’s perceptions and aspirations, or raise awareness regarding key challenges children and adolescents may face for their well-being now and in the future.

### A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR CHILD WELL-BEING MEASUREMENT

The framework presented in the report *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies* seeks to overcome a common shortcoming in child well-being measurement: treating the different dimensions of child well-being – material well-being, physical health, social, emotional and cultural well-being, and cognitive development and educational well-being – as if they are largely separate or independent from one another. Part of the reason is that most research into children’s lives and child well-being focuses on a specific outcome or aspect of well-being. While this approach makes it easier for researchers to produce detailed information on a particular topic and outcome, one downside is that it overlooks the richness of factors determining children’s well-being.

Figure 1. Child well-being in a nutshell



Source: (OECD, 2021<sup>[1]</sup>), *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/e82fdded1-en>.

The framework innovates on child well-being measurement in several ways. First, its multi-level structure helps clarify the importance of children’s environments, relationships, and other potential influences of child well-being, emphasising that these potential drivers are distinct from (though often have an important role to play in) children’s well-being outcomes. This structure recognises the large variety of forces at play in shaping child well-being, highlighting those which have the most immediate role or are more feasible to measure. A broader set of relevant economic and societal factors may also affect child well-being outcomes but are not represented here due to their more distant and loosely documented link

to child outcomes. Second, through the emphasis it places on age-sensitive concepts and measures, it pays greater attention to the ways that the things children need, want and should be able to do change through childhood. Finally, through the weight placed on children's views, it looks to reinforce efforts to integrate children's own thoughts, views and perspectives across all stages of child well-being measurement.

Taken together, all these features add up to a dynamic framework; a framework that seeks to highlight the drivers of children's well-being through the use of a life-course approach and a structure that acknowledges the importance of children's environments. Each chapter of the report applies this approach to a particular dimension of child well-being to review and identify the key mechanisms and specific factors that determine children's current and future outcomes. Each chapter explores what kind of data is needed to fully answer the key questions facing policy makers: Do children have the things they need?; Are children active and physically healthy?; Do children feel safe and secure, respected, included and happy?, and; Are children learning and achieving in education?.

This framework shares many characteristics with the OECD Well-Being Framework, which targets the entire population. Both focus on current well-being, by addressing living conditions here and now, as well as resources for future well-being, which considers protective, risk and resilience factors that shape well-being over time and for future generations. It also aims to capture not just average levels of well-being but also the distribution of well-being across children, including through measures that reflect inequalities and disparities across different groups of children (e.g. by sex, by living arrangement, and by migrant background). Wherever possible, measures should also be flexible and responsive to the needs and challenges faced by children in vulnerable positions.

## 2. KEY PRIORITIES AND BLIND SPOTS IN CHILD WELL-BEING DATA

Overall, the report finds that comparable cross-national data on child well-being is scant and limited in scope. While the availability of cross-national child data has improved considerably in recent decades, there are still many areas of children's lives that are not covered well or, in some cases, at all by existing data. Furthermore, age group and country coverage remains an issue, while some children, often those in the most vulnerable positions, are frequently missing or not easily identifiable in the data. There is, in general, a need for co-ordinated action from governments, international organisations, and the wider community to improve the availability of cross-national child data. This is a sizable task. It will require both significant investment and medium- to long-term commitment from all actors involved.

The report highlights a number of topic-specific gaps in particular child well-being areas (Box 2). A few broader cross-cutting issues are also pointed out, including:

- **The limited information on the well-being of very young children** in comparison to older age-groups. This is partly related to measurement challenges involved with studying young children, although it's partly also due to national statistical offices, international organisations and academic researchers not having been creative and ambitious enough in this area.
- **A lack of data on the well-being of highly vulnerable groups of children** (e.g. those exposed to maltreatment or violence, homelessness, or living in residential care). Again, this is partly related to the limits of traditional data collection methods. Children in many vulnerable groups are hard to identify and not covered in general population surveys. Greater efforts are required to better document well-being outcomes, needs and resources of marginalised populations of children, whose well-being is also often most vulnerable to shortfalls in material and emotional resources that are needed for children to reach their full potential.

- **A lack of data on children’s own views on several important areas of their lives**, including their own material and socio-emotional well-being, their knowledge of and attitudes towards well-being now and its future development.
- **A lack of data on children and adolescents’ “social capital”**, including on perceptions and confidence in their social and cultural identities, their participation in group activities, their trust in institutions, and their knowledge of global and societal issues.
- **The “siloed” approach to producing child data** – with different surveys concentrating on different specific issues – makes it difficult to track the many linkages across areas of child well-being and examine how outcomes in areas (e.g. physical health) affect well-being in others (e.g. cognitive and socio-emotional well-being).

## KEY PRIORITIES FOR DATA COLLECTION ON CHILD WELL-BEING

*Measuring What Matters for Measuring Child Well-being and Policies* identifies key priorities for data collection under each of the different well-being domains to help policy makers in the task of designing and monitoring child well-being policies, including:

**Do children have the things they need?** The report highlights the importance of collecting “child-centred” information on material well-being, including on child income poverty and persistence in this situation, children’s access to basic necessities, and on housing quality and stability. Further efforts could be done to harmonise information being collected especially on food and nutrition, on resources for education and leisure, and on increasing deprivation issues such as girls’ inability to afford sanitary wear. In addition, the COVID-19 crisis has shown that the financial situation of children’s families can change rapidly, underlining the need to better capture families’ capacities to resist unexpected drops in earnings and protect children from poverty.

The economic and material situation of children in non-nuclear family living arrangements is often poorly assessed. One way of overcoming this would be to collect good quality information on the resources available to children in all the households in which they reside, particularly when they are in alternating custody arrangements, and to have more information about any transfers and/or sharing of resources across households.

**Are children active and physically healthy?** Better tracking of child health inequalities is needed, from pregnancy and the first years of life, and throughout childhood and adolescence. Much of the data and indicators currently available on child health status and use of medical services provide information on the average situation; few provide information on disparities by income or other socio-demographic characteristics. Information on the social gradient of disease prevalence would be advantageous in determining whether universal policies are successful in reaching all children, and whether governments need to expand their efforts to better reach certain groups of children.

**Do children feel safe and secure, respected, included and happy?** There is a data gap on children’s socio-emotional well-being during early- and middle-childhood. Bridging this gap would require generating cross-national comparable data. But first, a broad consensus needs to be built on a number of matters, such as which dimensions of social and emotional well-being should be assessed at a particular age, and how these should be measured. Such a consensus is difficult to achieve.

**Are children learning and achieving in education?** Better data are required of children’s educational aspirations from middle-childhood onwards. Children’s educational aspirations are an important factor linked to educational outcomes and educational achievement. Because these

aspirations are highly influenced by children's perceptions of the opportunities and barriers they face throughout their school-life, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds tend to have lower aspirations. Most children hold high aspirations early in their academic trajectory, but they drop considerably by the time children finish their compulsory schooling. Policy would benefit from a better understanding of the factors driving these changes.

In light of the probable limits on available resources, the development of new and better child data to help policy-makers make fully informed decisions on child policies will be gradual. On one side, there are, in general, relatively few simple solutions to filling the child data gaps. But on the other, there are a growing number of innovative data production methods available to countries and others looking to improve child data infrastructures, such as data linking and techniques for combining data from multiple sources. Priorities and preferences will have to be set. To help in this endeavour, the areas and gaps highlighted in *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies* can be seen as a working guide, to be developed further in line with countries' and the community's own priorities. The OECD stands ready to help countries in this work.

## Further reading

OECD (2021), *Measuring What Matters for Child Well-being and Policies*, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://dx.doi.org/10.1787/e82fded1-en>. [1]

## Resources

OECD Child Well-Being Portal: [www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being).

OECD Child Well-Being Data Portal: [www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being/data](http://www.oecd.org/social/family/child-well-being/data).

## Contacts

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**OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE)**

[www.oecd.org/wise](http://www.oecd.org/wise)

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