

# State of the Nation 2022: Children and Young People's Wellbeing

## Introduction and background

This is the department's fourth state of the nation report, which brings together a range of evidence to build an understanding of children and young people's wellbeing (aged 5-24) over the past year. This year's report focuses on trends in mental health and wellbeing over the 2021-22 academic year. It examines wellbeing within 6 domains – personal wellbeing, mental and physical health, education and skills, relationships, what we do (activities and free time), and self, society, and the future.

Key sources of data in the report include the DfE's Parent and Pupil Learner Panel, the DfE's National Behaviour Survey, the Mental Health of Children and Young People Survey from NHS Digital, and the Good Childhood Report from the Children's Society.

## Key findings

### Personal wellbeing

- The last 3 Children's Society reports indicate that children and young people's subjective wellbeing, measured annually, appears to have dipped in 2020 and recovered close to pre-pandemic levels by 2021, remaining at similar levels in 2022.
- According to the DfE's Parent, Pupil, and Learner Panel (PPLP), wellbeing on most measures remained consistent, but anxiousness among both primary and secondary-age pupils appears to have increased and is higher than in 2020-21.
- Considering differences in wellbeing trends by subgroup, secondary-age boys reported better wellbeing than girls throughout the 2021-22 academic year on all measures; this was consistent with State of the Nation reports in previous years.
- Within secondary-aged pupils, older pupils consistently reported poorer wellbeing than younger pupils. Secondary-age pupils with SEN were more likely to report low wellbeing on some time points and in some measures than those without SEN in 2021-22, though there was no consistent pattern.
- Secondary-age white pupils reported greater anxiousness than those from an ethnic minority background throughout the 2021-22 academic year. This contrasts with the 2020-21 academic year, when no differences in anxiousness were detected by ethnicity.
- percentage increased to one in 4 in 2022, up from 1 in 6 in 2021. Rates of eating problems and self-harm were higher in older age groups.
- Primary aged boys were more likely to have a probable mental disorder than primary aged girls, whereas older young women were more likely to have a probable mental disorder than older young men. There was no difference by sex among secondary-aged children and young people for the likelihood of a probable mental disorder.
- At primary level, children in year 6 have consistently been more likely to be obese than those of reception age. Rates of obesity among year 6 remain higher than before the pandemic.
- In 2022, those who regularly struggled with sleep were more likely to have a mental disorder. Sleep problems were more prevalent in older children and young people, specifically young women.
- While these results point to a heightened risk for health problems in older ages, those aged 17- to 23-years-old were less likely than those aged 7- to 16-years-old to have sought help for a mental health concern in 2022. Reasons for this may include being unable to recognise symptoms of mental health disorders in themselves; perceived social stigma of mental health problems; and losing access to school support once leaving school.

### Mental and physical health

- According to the annual Children's Society reports, the percentage of children and young people reporting low happiness with their health appears to have increased in recent years.
- The 2022 NHS Digital report revealed several significant findings related to physical and mental health as outlined below.
- Rates of probable mental disorders and eating problems remain at elevated levels compared to before the COVID-19 pandemic.
- While rates of probable mental disorder among younger age groups have remained consistent in recent years, amongst 17- to 19-year-olds, the

### Education and skills

- Results from the PPLP show that in June 2022, most secondary-age children and young people reported being motivated to learn, were managing to concentrate in class, felt safe at school, enjoyed being at school, and felt that they belonged at school.
- The annual Children's Society reports show that although children and young people's happiness with school has remained at a similar level to previous years on average, the percentage of those reporting low happiness with school appears to have increased.
- The DfE's National Behaviour Survey indicates that boys continue to score higher on measures related to their experience of school, including happiness with



school, enjoying coming to school, feeling safe in school, motivation, concentration, and school belonging. However, pupils who were eligible for free school meals were less likely to report being motivated to learn, being able to concentrate in class, feeling safe in school, and having a strong sense of belonging at school, compared to those not eligible for free school meals.

- The same survey showed that pupils from an ethnic minority background were more likely to report being motivated to learn, managing to concentrate in class, and enjoying coming to school than white pupils. Pupils with SEN were more likely to report low happiness with school and more difficulty concentrating in class, compared to those without.
- According to this year's NHS Digital report, those who feel safe in school, enjoy coming to school, and feel that they belong in school were less likely to have a mental disorder. Although not causal, these relationships highlight the importance of a supportive school environment. in the mental health and wellbeing of many children and young people.

## Relationships

- The Children's Society Annual Reports reveal that the percentage of those reporting low happiness with their family and friends remains at elevated levels compared to before the pandemic. Within-year data from the PPLP survey suggests increases in rates of loneliness through the 2021-22 academic year. Those who reported often feeling lonely were more likely to have a probable mental disorder.
- In the Children's Society Survey, around 7 in 10 children and young people agreed or strongly agreed that adults at their school were interested in their wellbeing, that there was at least one adult at their school who they could talk to about how they were feeling, and that young people in their school got on well together.
- However, the PPLP found that around a quarter of primary-aged children (parent-report) and around a fifth of secondary-aged (self-report) children reported having been bullied in the previous 12 months. Both primary-age (parent-report) and secondary-age children with SEND were more likely than those without SEND to report having been a victim of bullying in the previous 12 months. Rates of bullying were also higher for those eligible for free school meals. Secondary-age white pupils were more likely to report having been a victim of bullying than pupils from an ethnic minority, though no difference was found for primary pupils (parent-report).
- In the Children's Society survey, boys reported greater happiness with peer and teacher relationships, were more likely to report that young people in their school got on well together and were less likely to report often feeling lonely throughout 2021-22.

## 'What we do'

- Findings in this section draw largely on Sport England's 2022 *Active Lives Children and Young People Survey* and *The Children's People and Nature Survey for England* from Natural England.
- The Children's Society surveys revealed that overall, children and young people's happiness with their time use dropped between 2019 and 2020 during the height of the pandemic but appears to have since recovered

and remains at a similar level in 2022. According to Sport England, rates of participation in extracurricular and physical activity have also increased since the 2020-21 academic year with nearly half of children and young people being physically active for at least 60 minutes per day.

- The PPLP survey reported that 8 in 10 children and young people reported having engaged in at least one type of extra-curricular activity in the summer term of 2022.
- Most children and young people reported spending time outside most days of the week, and 4 in 10 having a high connection to nature (Natural England, 2022). Regular physical activity (Sport England, 2022) and regular experiences in the natural environment were associated with greater wellbeing (Natural England, 2022).
- There are inequalities in participation in activities and access to outdoor spaces. Female respondents were more likely than males to report having not attended any extra-curricular activities in the summer term of 2022. Younger children aged 8- to 11-years-old were more likely than those aged 12- to 15-years-old to have regularly spent time outside in school in the previous week and to indicate high connection to nature (Natural England, 2022).
- Children and young people in families whose annual household income was greater than £50,000 were more likely than those in families whose annual household income was less than £15,000 to have regularly spent time outside in school in the previous week and indicate high connection to nature (Natural England, 2022). They were also more likely to be physically active than those with low family affluence (Sport England, 2022).
- Finally, white children and young people were more likely than those from an ethnic minority background to have regularly spent time outside of school in the previous week; this difference was also observed between those without a disability compared to those with a disability (Natural England, 2022).

## Self, society, and the future

- According to the Children's Society Survey, children and young people's happiness with their choice in life and what may happen to them later in their lives appear to have increased between 2020 and 2022, after having dipped during the height of the pandemic.
- According to NHS Digital, most children and young people reported that they felt safe in and like living in their neighbourhood. Most also reported that they felt they could trust people and that there were enough places to play in their neighbourhood.
- The Children's Society Survey found that one-third of parents and carers had struggled with school costs this year. In the NHS Digital survey, around one in 5 7- to 16-year-olds and one in 10 17- to 22-year-olds reported that their household had experienced a reduction in income in the previous 12 months.
- NHS Digital found evidence that a considerable minority of children and young people have had negative experiences with social media, with around one in eight 11- to 16-year-olds and one in 7 17- to 24-year-olds reporting that they have been bullied online. This was more likely to happen to young women than young men.

**The full documents can be downloaded from:**

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/state-of-the-nation-2022-children-and-young-peoples-wellbeing>