

Growing up in Scotland: Family and school influences on children's social and emotional well-being

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June 2014

Defining social and emotional well-being

National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence, 2013

- happy and confident
- autonomous
- problem-solve
- manage emotions
- experience empathy
- resilient
- attentive
- good relationships with others
- not anxious or depressed
- no behavioural problems such as being disruptive, violent or a bully

Background - policy

SG Policy focus on **overall child well-being**

- *Getting it Right for Every Child* indicators of overall well-being: safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included
- Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014
- Early Years Framework and Equally Well

SG policies specifically targeted at **child social and emotional well-being**

- Child and adolescent mental health “key change area”, Mental Health Strategy for Scotland
- Curriculum for Excellence

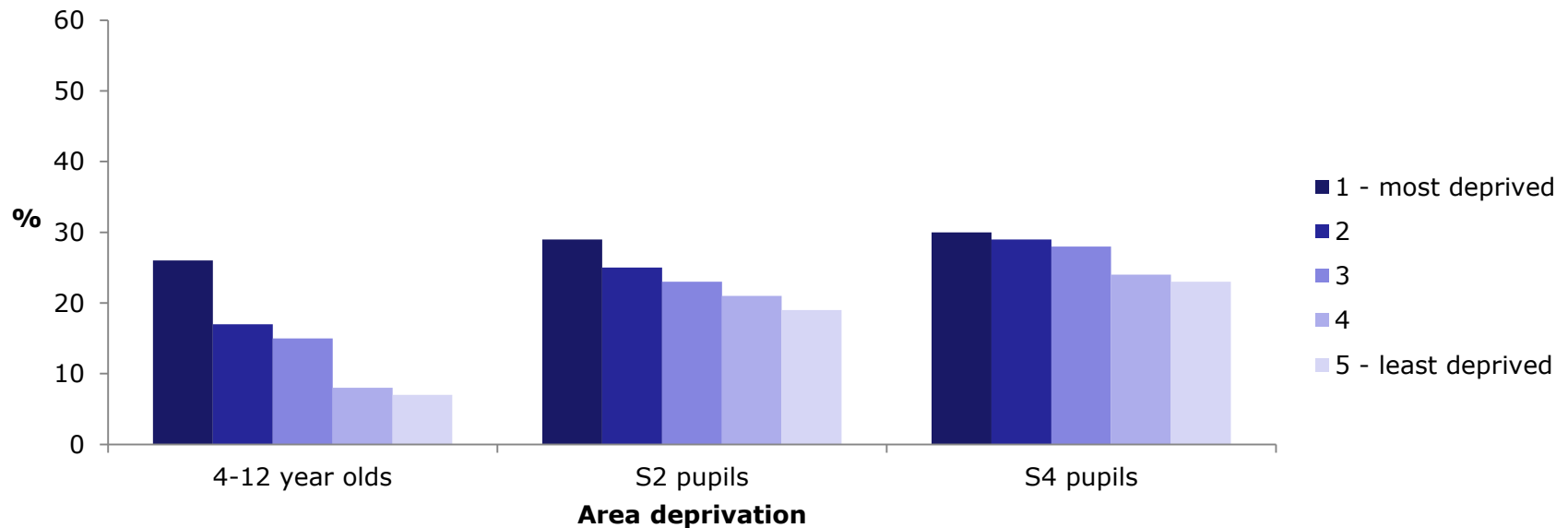
Background – Scottish indicators of social and emotional well-being (1)

- **Subjective well-being**
 - Life satisfaction (Cantril ladder, WEMWBS)
 - Mainly secondary school age (some P7 data)
- **Behavioural/emotional problems**
 - Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)
 - Primary and secondary school age

Background – Scottish indicators of social and emotional well-being (2)

- Overall – stability/small improvements in recent years
- Inequalities
 - Gender and age differences
 - Socio-economic differences

SDQ – abnormal/borderline total difficulties



Background – previous GUS research on behavioural and emotional problems

- Problems associated with:
 - **Child characteristics** – poorer health, language difficulties
 - **Family disadvantage** – poverty, poor maternal mental health
 - **Parenting** - smacking, low warmth, high conflict
- Importance of early life factors
- Importance of persistent disadvantage

Background – subjective well-being

- Research emphasis on mental health problems
- More difficult to research happiness?
 - Feelings transitory
 - May not reflect circumstances
- Research on secondary school age children
 - Importance of family relationships
 - Mixed/inconclusive for economic factors
 - Few comprehensive models

Research gaps

- Few “comprehensive” models of child subjective well-being
- Little known about subjective well-being in young children (<10 years)
- Little known about similarities/differences between factors affecting mental health problems AND subjective well-being

Current study – research aims

- What influences young children's social and emotional well-being?
- Do influences on mental health problems also affect subjective well-being (and vice-versa)?

Study sample and design

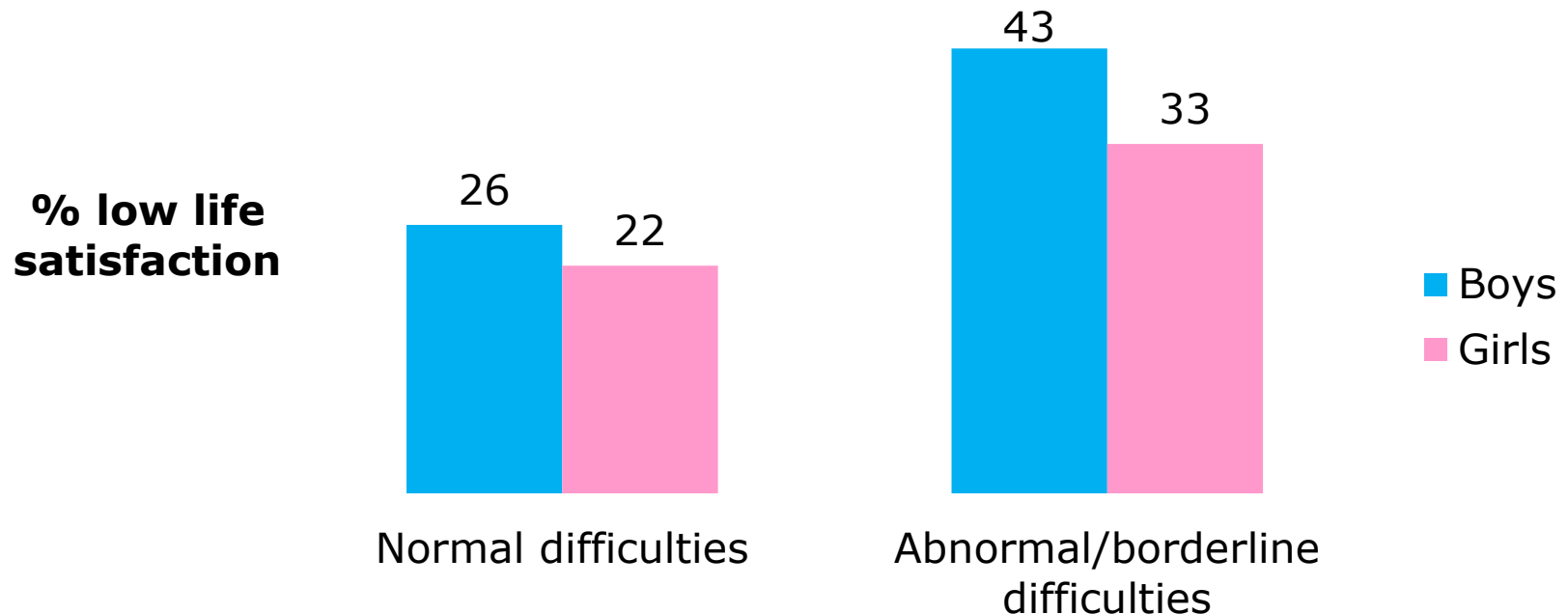
- Growing up in Scotland Birth Cohort 1 - around 5,000 children born 2004/5
- Families interviewed in 2012/13 ($N \approx 3200$)
 - information from child AND natural mother
 - weights to compensate for loss of families over time
- Cross-sectional design – all information measured at same time point

Measuring social and emotional well-being: two outcomes

- **Behavioural and emotional difficulties** – reported by mothers using Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)
 - “total difficulties” score includes
 - emotional symptoms
 - conduct problems
 - hyperactivity/inattention
 - peer relationship problems
- **Life satisfaction**- reported by children using abbreviated Huebner’s Student Life Satisfaction Scale: Do you...
 - feel that your life is going well?
 - wish your life was different?
 - feel that your life is just right?
 - feel you have what you want in life?
 - feel you have a good life?

Prevalence of low social and emotional well-being

- **Total difficulties score** – recommended cut-off for abnormal/borderline (“high”) difficulties
 - 11% of GUS 7 year-olds had high difficulties score
- **Life satisfaction** – no standard cut-off point
 - Bottom 25% of scores defined as “low life satisfaction”



Modelling social and emotional well-being

- Possible influences considered
 - Child characteristics
 - Maternal characteristics
 - Household characteristics
 - Life events
 - Parenting
 - School
 - Leisure activities
 - Friendships
 - Materialistic attitudes
- Source of information varied – most from mothers, some from mother AND child, some ONLY from child
- Two stages to models
 - Univariate associations
 - Multivariable models

(1) Factors associated with low life satisfaction AND behavioural/emotional problems

- **Parenting**
 - high mother-child conflict
 - low parental knowledge
- **School**
 - disliking school
 - difficulty with school work
 - concern over reading/writing ability
- **Friends**
 - poor friendship quality

(2) Factors associated with low life satisfaction

- Death, illness or accident in family
- Parenting
 - less “positive parenting” (positive reinforcement of good behaviour, involvement with child)

(3) Factors associated with behavioural/emotional problems

- **Child characteristics**
 - poorer general health
 - broken sleep
 - developmental concerns
- **Maternal and family characteristics**
 - poorer maternal general health
 - low maternal education
 - family mental health/substance use problems
- **Parenting**
 - low mother-child warmth
- **Materialism**
 - prefer children with expensive things

Study limitations and strengths

- Cross-sectional design – causation unknown
 - omitted factors – eg genetic, early life
 - bidirectional effects/reverse causation possible
- Source of information varies, and may affect strength of association (“shared method variance”)
- No information directly from fathers
- Not all aspects of social and emotional well-being covered

- Large sample from national cohort
- Rare data on young children’s subjective well-being
- Comprehensive model - many possible influences
- Measures from mother AND child – similar findings

Conclusions (1)

- **Relationships (family, school, friends)** important for both aspects of social and emotional well-being in GUS 7 year-olds
- Some factors not important
 - Child gender
 - Economic factors – income, material deprivation
 - Family structure, parental relationships
 - Leisure activities – informal play, screen time, organised activities

Conclusions (2)

- **Behavioural and emotional problems linked to family stressors associated with deprivation**
 - Poorer health (child, mother, family)
 - Lower cognitive ability (child)
 - Low education (mother)
 - Low mother-child attachment
- **Low life satisfaction linked to experiencing negative affect, or lack of positive affect**
 - Death/illness/accident in family
 - Less positive parenting

Policy Implications

- **Holistic approach to social and emotional well-being** – different components of well-being may be influenced by overlapping, but also distinct, sets of factors
- **Family and school settings** for interventions
- **Family** – parenting programmes, advice and support
 - Barriers to participation among targeted groups
 - Need to address wider issues eg parental mental health
- **School** – whole school and targeted approaches
 - Adjustment to social and learning environment
 - Teacher training, resources for additional support
 - Involve parents, access specialist help
 - SEED (Social and Emotional Education and Development) randomised control trial of Scottish primary schools
 - Social environment – involve family and community too