

Children's social and emotional wellbeing: Growing Up in Scotland study findings



Background

This briefing summarises findings from three papers using data from the Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) study to investigate children's wellbeing. GUS is a study of around 5,000 children (born in 2004/2005) and their families across Scotland.

Information on social and emotional wellbeing was first collected directly from children when they were approaching their 8th birthday, and then again when they were aged around 11. Children were asked about how they were getting on at school and how they felt about their life. Parents and carers have also been asked about their child's wellbeing and behavioural development at several points from early childhood.

These studies uncovered:

- The factors associated with low life satisfaction and socio-emotional and behavioural problems
- That a supportive social network can help protect children from some of the negative impacts of living in disadvantaged circumstances.
- The factors associated with a poorer father-child relationship, which is often linked to children's wellbeing.

Family and school influences on children's social and emotional wellbeing

This report¹ investigated the family and school influences on children's behavioural and emotional difficulties, and on their subjective wellbeing around their 8th birthday in 2012/13.

It found that 25% of children had low life satisfaction.



¹ Parkes, A, Sweeting, H and Wight, D. (2014) *Growing Up in Scotland: Family and school influences on children's social and emotional wellbeing*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government

Contributors to **low life satisfaction** were:



School: child disliking school, reporting difficulty with school work, and expressing concern over their reading/writing ability



Parenting: high levels of conflict between mother and child; low parental knowledge of the child's whereabouts, and less use of 'positive parenting' such as positive reinforcement of good behaviour



Friends: poor quality friendships



Life events: a death, illness or accident in the family

The report also found that 11% of the children had high levels of socio-emotional and behavioural problems.

Displaying **socio-emotional and behavioural problems** at this age was found to be associated with many of the same factors. However other factors were also at play, such as:

- **Child characteristics:** poor general health; broken sleep patterns; parent reporting concerns about child's development.
- **Materialism:** children with behavioural and emotional difficulties seemed to like other children more if they had expensive things.
- **Maternal and family characteristics:** poor maternal general health; mother having low levels of educational qualifications; mental health and/or substance use problems in close family.

These findings support the idea that social relationships, involving parents, teachers and friends, are of key importance for young children's social and emotional wellbeing. They indicate that further support for families and schools in developing children's social and emotional wellbeing could be beneficial.

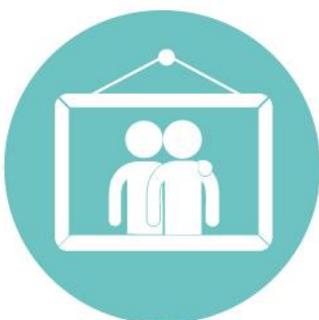
Social assets, low income and child social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing

This paper² aimed to understand the effect of social support on children's social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing. It considered how a mother's social network was associated with the child's wellbeing up to the age of 5, specifically amongst low income families.

Results showed that children from lower income households are more likely than children from more affluent households to experience behavioural and emotional problems. However, the findings suggest that a supportive social network can help protect children from some of the negative impacts of living in disadvantaged circumstances.

For example:

- Lone mothers who have **strong emotional links** with family and friends, no matter how economically disadvantaged they are, have children with fewer problems than the average for all families.
- The negative effects on children when their parents split up may be minimised if their mother has **close friends and relations** for support.
- Families experiencing persistently low income but **good social support** have children whose wellbeing is above the average for all children.



The paper suggests that the protective effect may have a range of explanations³. These include:

- support with financial strain
- positive maternal wellbeing (and a resultant positive parent-child relationship)
- the support provided to the mother from her social network extending to the child.

In conclusion, the research underlines the beneficial impact of social assets on children's social, emotional and behavioural wellbeing, particularly when they may prevent the development of poorer child outcomes. It suggests that the beneficial effects of social assets may help prevent against problems and that a lack of social assets may contribute to future problems. It posits that policies supporting the wellbeing and maintenance of relationships, such as those that facilitate living close to friends and family, may be of benefit, especially to low income families.

² Treanor, Morag C. (2015) "Social assets, low income and child social and emotional and behavioural wellbeing", *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 5:2, pp209-28

³ Though the article notes that the analysis does not allow the direction of the causal relationship to be determined.

Father-child relationships and child socio-emotional wellbeing

This study⁴ explored whether fathers' emotional supportiveness is associated with aspects of 10-year olds' socio-emotional wellbeing and aimed to understand what could help strengthen father-child relationships, including those where the 'father figure' was not the child's biological parent.

In particular, the report considered levels of 'supportiveness' in the father-child relationship, determined from answers given by the child (average age 10) about how emotionally supportive their father was. The report found that 84% of father-child relationships in couple families were classed as 'good' or 'excellent' in supportiveness. It also found that father-child relationships were rated higher in families where the father figure was the child's biological father. 14% of children reported a poor relationship with their biological father compared with 35% of those with a 'father figure'.

The report also found that a range of factors were associated with a poorer father-child relationship. These included:

- lower socio-economic status
- living in a remote location
- a less supportive relationship between the parents
- the child experiencing adverse family events such as bereavement.



It found that father-child relationship quality was independently associated with wellbeing measures including enjoyment of school, and relations with teachers and peers, as well as levels of behavioural and emotional problems and life satisfaction.

In conclusion, the research suggests that support for strengthening the quality of fathering may improve children's socio-emotional wellbeing, especially for families experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, family adversity, and the presence of a non-biological father figure.

GUS is a longitudinal research study following the lives of over 10,000 children and their families across Scotland, from birth throughout childhood and beyond. Its aim is to understand how the circumstances and experiences of children growing up are changing, and to provide new evidence about how early experiences affect later outcomes. The study started in 2005.

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⁴ Parkes, A; Riddell, J; Wight, D & Buston, K (2017) *Growing Up in Scotland: Father-child relationships and child socio-emotional wellbeing* Edinburgh: Scottish Government