

Healthy and Happy: children's wellbeing in the 2020s

Wendy Ellyatt 2017



The most important and valuable learning happens in the early years of life. The experiences that we have then shape our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing and how we think about our selves and others. Healthy, happy and caring societies are built upon healthy, happy and connected children.



*How can the
bird that is born
for joy, sit in a
cage and sing?*

William Blake



As I was thinking how to respond to the invitation to be involved in a series of roundtables on the future of childhood, I was reflecting on how strange it is that a country that always prided itself on being a global leader in education has allowed the importance of child rights and wellbeing to be so definitively sidelined. My own feeling is that there is a significant opportunity for a political party to take the lead on championing child wellbeing as something that is essential for the wellbeing of society – and that such a move would attract substantial support from both parents and teachers. My personal interest is in the period of life that for later health and wellbeing is the most important of all i.e. conception to eight. What happens during this period sets the foundation for all that is to come. What are the key points that I would like to make?

Children in the modern world are being exposed to a set of environmental pressures that are unique in human history – and this seems to be having a profoundly negative impact on their health and wellbeing. Please see the appendix for the statistics.

Flourishing is our birthright – young children are citizens with biological and developmental rights and every child deserves to be provided with an environment that nurtures his or her unique skills, capacities and potential.

The Early Years is the single most important period of our lifespan – our early environments and experiences profoundly influence brain development and the conditions and later mindsets necessary for healthy physical, mental and emotional growth.

The Early Years starts at conception – the health and wellbeing of mothers is essential for the healthy development of the child. Stressed-out and unhappy mothers can create negative epigenetic markers that predispose their children to weaker developmental outcomes.¹

Relational wellbeing lies at the core of human thriving – we are social beings and the love, affection and consistency of our early caregivers is essential for our development.

Those seeking to reduce deficits and strengthen the economy should make significant investment in early childhood and relational wellbeing - child abuse and neglect is the single most costly cause of mental illness, the single most common cause of drug and alcohol abuse, and a significant contributor to leading causes of death such as diabetes, heart disease, cancer, stroke, and suicide.²

Childhood behaviour is increasingly being medicalised – the interaction between social context, poverty and psychological wellbeing is well established, yet is frequently ignored when considering interventions

Early Years Policymaking should be based upon the new Science of Human Learning and Development – given what we now know it is inexcusable for any government to implement policies that ignore global evidence, are potentially damaging to human flourishing and threaten the health, wealth and sustainability of their populations

We need to protect and nurture the spirit of the child – children are naturally curious, playful, joyful and full of love. We need to ensure that adult-led systems recognise the whole child by nurturing the spirit, inspiring the mind and engaging the heart.



Flourishing is our birthright

Human beings are amazing creatures. We are fine-tuned and biologically wired to learn, grow and develop in diverse ways that lead us to fulfill our individual sense of purpose and potential. We are designed to flourish.

Unfortunately, in many countries around the world we are seeing unacceptably high levels of mental and physical distress in children as they struggle with increasingly restricted and unnatural environments that inhibit this process. Young children today are struggling with pressures that were completely unknown to previous generations. The changing nature of family and community life, the rise in technology, the increasing influence of the media, the lack of contact with nature, the pressures of the schooling system and the demands of having to constantly look right, achieve and be subject to the incessant judgment of others, have all steadily eroded the environments and experiences children need in order to refine their senses and develop into happy, confident learners, in touch with themselves and the wider world. They are also living in increasingly risk-averse cultures with stressed and time-sparse adults and are subject to the constant intrusion of the commercial and digital worlds. As identified by Dr Jean Twenge in her recently published book 'I-Gen', depression, anxiety, and loneliness have shot upward since 2012, with happiness declining.

*"There is compelling evidence that the devices we've placed in young people's hands are having profound effects on their lives—and making them seriously unhappy."*³

The downward pressures of the schooling system are also taking their toll with school 'readiness' being used by governments to justify interventions that lack an appropriate understanding or balance. As stated in the 2012 UNICEF Report, school 'readiness' means *"Ready children, ready schools and ready families"*, rather than simply what children can and can't do before they start school.⁴

In their recently published book 'Becoming Brilliant' Professor Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and Dr Roberta Golinkoff state that *"Society thrives when we craft environments, in and out of school, that support happy, healthy, thinking, caring and social children who become collaborative, creative, competent and responsible citizens tomorrow"*.⁵ And it is this focus not only on who children are today, but also on the kind of adults they will become in the future, that is now so badly needed.

Young children are citizens with developmental rights

As global citizens all young children have the right to be defended from systems that compromise their natural biological development - and particularly so when there are clear bodies of evidence showing the damage that is likely to take place. Political decision-makers therefore have a legal and human responsibility to protect the generations of the future and we need to develop systems of accountability that require such decision-makers to fully justify the likely impact of their decisions.

Young children are the value holders of our future societies and all political decisions that affect their lives should therefore reflect this question. The youngest children need the most protection, as they are unable to

share with us their own experiences and are the most vulnerable to the impact of unnatural and damaging environments. What would a six month-old baby tell us about being suddenly left in daycare? Or a four-year-old year old tell us about being valued through whether he knows his letters and numbers? What is it like to be with stressed-out parents who have no time to play with you, to be subject to online bullying, or to not be allowed out and left for hours on end sitting in front of a TV screen? What is happening to children's brains, to their natural risk-taking, curiosity and creativity? And, more importantly, to their playful spirits?

The UK has been accused of employing "inadequate" provision for child rights protection after it fell dramatically in global rankings for child rights within a year, from 11th to 156th. According to the KidsRights Index 2017 it now ranks among the bottom 10 global performers in the arena of improving rights of the child, after it achieved the lowest-possible score across all six available indicators in the domain of Child Rights Environment (CRE), according to the KidsRights Index 2017⁶. In UNICEF's Report Card 13 'Fairness for Children', the UK had the largest difference among all the countries studied in the levels of healthy eating (consumption of fruit and vegetables) between children from low and high socio-economic status. This was accompanied by one of the largest gaps in the levels of physical activity. Inequality in education was also flagged up, with the UK being ranked 25th out of the 37 countries – behind Slovenia, Poland and Romania.²

Wellbeing matters

It has become clear that, for healthy and sustainable development, political and economic priorities need to balance economic growth with the wellbeing and sustainability of society and we are seeing increasing global interest in the development of child wellbeing 'indicators' that measure exactly how happy and healthy young children are. Examples of these include:

- UNICEF 40 Indicators (6 aspects) of Child Wellbeing
- ONS 2011 Report on Measuring National Wellbeing
- Children's Society Annual Good Childhood Wellbeing Reports
- Scotland Eight Indicators Wellbeing Wheel
- Wales Children and Young People Wellbeing Monitor
- Jonathan Bradshaw – an index of Child Wellbeing in the European Union
- Hong Kong – Gross National Realisation Measurement

Increasingly GDP is seen as a very limited measure of societal performance⁸⁹ – and one that is perpetuating many of the systems that are potentially harmful to the wellbeing of children.

As far back as 1968 Robert Kennedy acknowledged:
"The Gross National Product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education, or the joy of their play. It does not include the beauty of our poetry or the strength of our marriages, the intelligence of our public debate or the integrity of our public officials. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country; it measures everything, in short, except that which is worthwhile"

The Early Years (conception to 8) is the single most important period of human life

It is easier and cheaper to create strong, happy and resilient children than it is to mend struggling, unhappy and broken adults

Across the world there is recognition that the early years is the single most important developmental phase of the lifespan and that during this period there is extremely rapid development and consolidation of the brain and other key biological systems¹⁰. The new science of human learning and development has made it quite clear that what happens during the early years has lifelong effects – and this includes the period from conception to birth. Research in both animals and humans shows that some epigenetic changes that occur in the fetus during pregnancy can be passed on to later generations, affecting the health and welfare of children, grandchildren and their descendants. For example grandparents that experienced famine may set epigenetic markers that predispose their grandchildren to diabetes and obesity¹¹. What is important to know is that positive and nurturing relationships in early childhood can inhibit the development of these tendencies.

It is during this earliest phase of life that we grow our physical and mental structures and capacities, shape our sense of self and steadily adopt the external values of the adult world. Most of our limiting or self-sabotaging beliefs are formed in early childhood. Depending on whether the systems that we experience support or compromise our natural, healthy development we will grow up into happy, confident problem-solvers and risk-takers or more anxious, passive or possibly aggressive individuals – and the way that we are made to feel as children can impact how we feel about ourselves for the rest of our lives. Enormous amounts of money are spent by social care and health systems around the world trying to mend the biological and psychological damage created in adults during this vital period.



We are built for Nurture and Relationships

Over the past 50 years, science has made striking discoveries about the importance of early relationships for human health and happiness. The past decade has witnessed international calls for this information to be incorporated into governmental policy and professional practice guidelines, as well as parenting advice. The experiences that we have through the interactions with our parents and early caregivers literally shape our biology.

Although the quality of all our early relationships matters, we know that the most critical one of all is that which we initially have with our mothers, and yet in the USA and UK the vitally important process of mothering has become increasingly undermined and devalued¹². Throughout human history mothers have been at the core of the family and indeed society itself, with the mother's physical and emotional presence during the early period of a child's life having a significant impact on the child's long-term emotional and mental health^{13,14,15}. Children become attached to whoever is their primary caregiver. But the nature of that attachment – whether it is secure or insecure – makes a huge difference over the course of a child's life. By far the most important predictor of how well adults cope with adversity is the level of security established with their primary caregiver during the first two years of life¹⁶.

“Our interactions with our caregivers convey what is safe and what is dangerous: whom we can count on and who will let us down; what we need to do to get our needs met. This

information is embodied in the warp and woof of our brain circuitry and forms the template of how we think about our-selves and the world around us. These inner maps are remarkable stable across time”.

- Bessel Van der Kolk, M.D. The Body Keeps the Score

Before pressurising young mothers to work, governments should, therefore, be extremely careful about the likely impact of this on child wellbeing, better value their contribution to creating healthy societies and create tax systems that encourage and support both parents' need for a healthy work/life balance. Good and consistent parenting is key to a child's early development, promoting self-regulation, increasing independence and the crucial acquisition of language and communication skills. Parents in the UK are, however, currently struggling with the loss of extended family, eroded community life and, due to austerity measures, steadily diminishing support from the state, including the loss of many popular children's centres¹⁷. The inevitable consequence is that many children and young people are experiencing problems that are largely avoidable, and which blight their lives – and those of their parents and families – often escalating into more serious situations that may then require expensive intervention.

The three emotional conditions absolutely essential to optimal human brain development are nutrition, physical security and consistent emotional nurturing... The third one, emotional nurturance, is the one most likely to be disrupted in Western society. - Gabor Mate, In the Realm of Hungry Ghosts, 2010

We know that, especially for the most disadvantaged children, universal childcare only works when it is of the highest possible quality.

*As we grow up we gradually learn to take care of ourselves, physically and emotionally, but we get our first lessons in self-care from the way that we were cared for. Mastering the skill of self-regulation depends to a large degree on how harmonious our interactions with our caregivers are.*¹⁸ Trauma specialist Bessel Van der Kolk M.D says in his book 'The Body Keeps the Score'

Rushing through inadequately financed solutions, with poorly paid staff and no guarantee of quality is highly dangerous for the emotional wellbeing of children and instead we need to develop long-term strategies that are carefully thought-through and appropriately funded. When looking at the issue of inequality I agree with Sir Michael Marmot that, given the current situation, what we need is to explore the concept of 'proportional universality'¹⁹, which aims to achieve greater equity in the early years and the flattening of the child development gradient – improving outcomes for all children. The UK has a very high level of income inequality compared to other developed countries²⁰ and we know that there is a direct correlation between inequality and levels of wellbeing²¹.

"Reducing health inequalities is a matter of social justice – where inequality is avoidable by policy means it is unfair and unjust. There is a social gradient in health. In order to reduce the steepness of the gradient actions must be taken which are universal but with a scale and intensity proportionate to the level of disadvantage." -

Michael Marmot

But most of all we need to ensure that all children have access to environments where they have affectionate, loving care and support. How sad it is that in the UK we now have to even explore concepts of 'Professional Love' to safeguard and justify the nature of loving relationships between practitioners and children²². Not many years ago I was working as a consultant on a primary educational project in Italy and it was striking just how much more openly playful, caring and affectionate both male and female members of staff were towards the children. I fully understand the need for safeguarding, but we really need to look at what kind of society we are creating when professional adults have to think twice (or consult a policy manual) before offering a hug to a young child.

Early stress and trauma has lifelong implications:

Although there is a temptation to cut back on investment in early intervention in tough financial periods, the experience of countries like Finland in the 1990s suggests that governments often regret,



with hindsight, the long-term costs of making such short-term savings. The challenge being grappled with in the best systems around the world is not, therefore, deciding whether to maintain spending on prevention, but working out how to get better value out of the money already being invested. - Power in People's Hands: Learning from the World's Best Public Services, Cabinet Office, July 2009

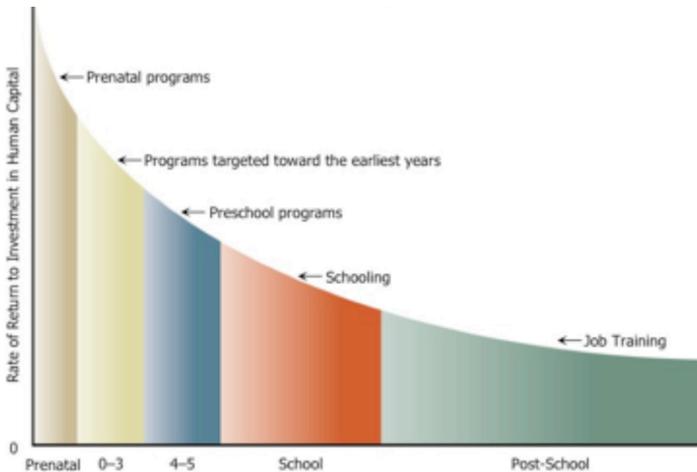
Investing in early childhood is therefore the most important thing that any society can do. From an economic perspective such investment brings enormous benefits later on. For example in the USA Professor Heckman's analysis of the Perry Preschool program showed a 7% to 10% per year return on investment based on increased school and career achievement as well as reduced costs in remedial education, health and criminal justice system expenditures²³. Britain was recently reported as spending £6 billion a year on the medical costs of conditions related to obesity and a further £10 billion on diabetes²⁴.

In its 2012 'Grasping the Mettle Report' The Centre for Excellence in Outcomes for Children and Young People (C4EO) said: *"Early intervention is nothing new. What has changed is that our knowledge and understanding of human development, especially in childhood, has grown to the point that we can now identify many more problems earlier; some we can even anticipate, or clearly predict a risk factor...Such developments are continual, but we appear to have reached a tipping point where our knowledge and practice have progressed sufficiently to make the policy question not whether we should invest in early intervention, but how can we not do so?"*

And in 2015 the All Party Parliamentary Group for Conception to Age Two shared their own conclusion that tackling the problems associated with early life should be no less a priority for politicians and health and social care professionals than that of national defence²⁵.

Early Child Development is a smart investment

The earlier the investment, the greater the return



Source: James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics

More importantly, investing in early childhood is about **nurturing the kind of people and citizens we want young children to become.**

For example in Finland the stated aim of their pre-primary education is to: *promote children's growth into humane individuals and ethically responsible members of society by guiding them towards responsible action and compliance with generally accepted rules and towards appreciation for other people.* It is interesting to compare this with England's *The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) promotes teaching and learning to ensure children's 'school readiness' and gives children the broad range of knowledge and skills that provide the right foundation for good future progress through school and life.* One is focused on social values and relationship and the other on acquiring knowledge and skills.

Economic growth is not the most important measure of our country's success. The fair distribution of health, well-being and sustainability are important social goals.

- Marmot Review, 2010

The significance of positive individual and relational wellbeing (i.e. human and social capital) for maximising life chances is now recognised by the OECD as a key resource for sustainable development²⁶. The relationships that underpin wellbeing are created both formally and informally, in early years settings, in schools, in workplaces, in local communities and within families.

We now know that early stress literally changes brain development and reduces the mental bandwidth accessible to children for effective learning. All children cannot therefore be treated and measured as though they had the same capabilities and many need significantly more sensitivity and support than others. What matters is that every child feels loved and is helped and encouraged to be the best version of his or her self. Governments need to be actively aware of these pressures and have a duty of responsibility to protect the rights and freedoms of their children as young citizens and the adults of the future.

The health and well being of today's children and those children when they become adults depend on us having the courage and imagination to do things differently, to put sustainability before a narrow focus on economic growth and to bring about a more equal and fair society.' - Michael Marmot, *British Medical Journal*, Feb 2010

Childhood is increasingly being medicalised

Over the past decade there has been growing professional concern about the numbers of young children being diagnosed with a range of mental health problems and prescribed medication. Children living in adversity and those with learning disabilities are over represented in this group. Children as young as three are now regularly being prescribed medication to manage their behaviour. In 2001 the Maudsley Debate noted the prescription of Ritalin increased from 183,000 in 1991 to 1.58 million in 1995. More recently figures estimate that 650,000 children aged between eight and 13 are taking psychotropic drugs, up from just 9,000 two decades ago²⁷. According to data obtained by Education Guardian in 2012 under the Freedom of Information Act there had been a 65% increase in spending on drugs to treat ADHD over the last four years.

Ultimately the concern is that in labelling worrying or challenging behaviours as 'illnesses' the context of the problem and the social factors that underpin these behaviours is denied and the problem is ultimately located within the child. This has profound implications for the appropriateness of the treatment of the child and the prognosis. The interaction between social context, poverty and psychological wellbeing is well established yet largely ignored when: organising and providing services, or making a diagnosis and considering interventions

Policymaking needs to reflect the new Science of Human Learning and Development

It has been very reassuring to see the high level of cross-party support for the 1001 Days Manifesto, which looks at conception to age two²⁸, and it is important that this focus is now extended to the ages two to seven.

Over the last twenty years the increased involvement of the state in English early years provision has resulted in the undermining of the more child-centred and developmentally sensitive approaches to learning in favour of the knowledge and skills needed to achieve school 'readiness'. This increased emphasis upon school-based practices, pedagogy and expectations has been termed the 'schoolification' of the early years²⁹ and recent assessment changes are said to have led to an intensification of this process³⁰. The rights of the child have been noticeably absent in all related policy documents and the substantial concerns raised by experts in the field have been consistently dismissed and ignored³¹. The situation in Scotland and Wales is less serious in that both are more clearly invested in the rights and wellbeing of the young children in their care. For example, as recommended by UNICEF, their Children's Commissioners are effectively independent of government, whereas the English Commissioner currently reports to the DfE.

Probably most striking about early years policymaking during the past five years was what it revealed about the Coalition's attitude towards early childhood education and care, and, crucially, towards young children and their families. Young children's rights and interests appear to have been subjugated to the perceived interest of the economy and the government's deficit-reduction. The absence of a consideration of children's rights to quality early years provision and of early childhood as a legitimate phase of life, more than as preparation for later educational outcomes, raises serious concerns about the future direction of early years policymaking under the new Conservative Government. - Eva Lloyd, London Review of Education, Volume 13, Sept 2015

Given what we now know about the importance of early nurture and the impact of developmentally unnatural environments, it is interesting to reflect on some of the policies that have been introduced in the English system. For example the 30 hours 'free' childcare policy that is predicated on both parents having to work (despite the evidence showing that parents are increasingly stressed trying to maintain a work/life balance and many would prefer for one partner to stay at home³²⁻³³); the substantial lack of investment in the quality of early provision (despite the fact that we know the worse thing you can do for the

most disadvantaged children is to provide poor quality care³⁴⁻³⁵); the implication that most children are better off though being in early provision (despite the fact that we know that this is reliant on high quality and that in the earliest phase of life children benefit most from the consistent loving care, attention and engagement of their parents and close family members); the continuing low status and pay of early years practitioners (despite the fact that we know that the youngest children really need to spend time with the most knowledgeable and emotionally mature people); the early start to formal schooling (despite the fact that there is no evidence to show that this is beneficial and in the current system is more likely to be detrimental³⁶); the recent intention to reintroduce Baseline Assessment (despite the fact that it has failed twice before, is easy to 'game', is statistically invalid and runs the risk of making children as young as four being labelled and feel that they are in some way failing³⁷); and the new Preschool PISA (IELS) being proposed by the OECD that has been refused by every other country except the US and England on the basis that it is inappropriate and potentially harmful to children³⁸.

Research shows us that deliberate manipulation of the environment to achieve teaching targets or 'desirable outcomes' can reduce the amount that children learn about the area of study because the teaching tends to inhibit them from exploring the object themselves and thereby prevents them from learning any more about it than what the teacher had pointed out³⁹. Such limiting of children's capacities and potentials is a true tragedy and a betrayal of childhood, and especially so when we have such clear examples of best practice happening in other countries⁴⁰. **For many early years educators in other parts of the world, especially given what we now know about early child development, the current English approaches are bordering on child abuse.**

The dominant systems of education are based on three principles that are exactly opposite to how human lives are actually lived. First, they promote standardization and a narrow view of intelligence when human talents are diverse and personal. Second, they promote compliance when cultural progress and achievement depend on the cultivation of imagination and creativity. Third, they are linear and rigid when the course of each human life, including yours, is organic and largely unpredictable. Ken Robinson, Huffington Post, 2012

There are great differences in the way children are viewed around the world and it is important that decision-makers are reflective about their own cultural conditioning and prejudices. Is our predominant cultural image of the young child in the UK a 19th century one that sees the child as weak, fragile, needing constant adult input and guidance to shape and master skills? Or, instead, that every child is a strong, capable, powerful and resilient natural learner - merely needing us to provide the right environment to flourish. How much do we actually trust children as learners?

In 2007 John Bennett created this table as part of the Starting Strong initiative and it seems that much of it is still relevant to the issues that we face today.

Characteristics	Nordic approach	Pre-school approach
Central or de-central approach	A broad central guideline stressing inclusion and democratic values, with local development of the curriculum by the teachers and the parents	Centralised development of the curriculum, stressing autonomy of the child and competition between the children.
Focus of the work	Focus on broad developmental goals and living together in a learning community of educators and peers: the competent child	A focus on learning standards, teachers, classroom environment, preparation for school. Children can or cannot read
Pedagogical strategy	Broad orientations rather than prescribed outcomes: play, music, arts, project work, interaction with peers and nature. The own learning strategies of the child are respected.	Often prescriptive: clear targets and outcomes, detailed competencies
Educational goals	Individual goals for each child are set with unobtrusive, developmental assessment	Assessments and sometimes testing required
Learning focus	Culturally valued 'topics of learning' privileged, taking into account the interest of the child. A holistic development of the child, which includes aspects like physical, arts, social etc.; attention to social values.	Teaching subjects privileged
Focus on the child versus focus on pre-set standards	A growing focus on individual language and oral competence... and much 'play' reading and writing.	Focus on competence in the national language, oral, phonemic... with some formal skills in writing and reading

Centres of excellence, such as Reggio Emilia in Italy, along with the work of wellbeing innovators such as Sir Ken Robinson and Martin Seligman, have clearly shown that new approaches exist and are possible and the UK is in danger of remaining mired in the old 19th century factory models of human achievement, rather than addressing the needs of the future. The Harvard Centre on the Developing Child, the Centre for the Economics of Human Development and Canada's Human Early Learning Partnership (HELP) are all committed to sharing this new view of understanding the child only in relationship with others. The skills and capacities that young people need in the future are going to be significantly skewed towards creativity, resilience, competence, social cooperation and the ability to cope with constant change and they will be increasingly competing on a global stage. Ironically the youngest children demonstrate all the key skills that are needed, but all too often these are then eroded by the systems that they find themselves having to adapt to.

In the UK and USA education has been seen primarily as the route to academic achievement and economic success, whereas in the Netherlands it is seen as the route to a child's wellbeing and their development as socially caring and adept individuals. A defining feature of modern-day parents in the UK and USA is currently 'aspirational anxiety' with children given very clear messages about the nature of their worth as learners.

The emotional wellbeing of children has all too often been sacrificed on the altar of academic achievement as the epidemic of mental health problems in the UK all too clearly demonstrates. We have even seen situations where countries that prioritise additional tutoring and 'enrichment classes' as a norm have been held up as 'the Gold standard' ⁴¹.

We need to protect and nurture the Spirit of the Child

Human beings are not robots. Instead we are highly complex learners with a deep need to achieve 'relational wellbeing' i.e. a meaningful connections to each other and the natural world. If given the right environments in which to grow we are constantly and playfully reaching out into novelty, each one of us with a different sense of who we are and what we need. It is not enough, therefore to only value children's capacities through a very limited lens. Instead we need to recognise the Whole Child by nurturing the spirit, inspiring the mind and engaging the heart. In other words we need to honour the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects that make us human.

How do we do that? By committing to better understand the foundations of human wellbeing and ensuring that we provide young children with natural, rather than unnatural environments in which to learn and grow.

The policy challenge is to rebuild the current systems so that they meet the crucial design features; provide high early quality education and care for all children; are integrated, attractive and affordable to all families regardless of social class or minority status; yet, are sensitive to differing educational needs, working in a child and family centred way and able to compensate for early educational disadvantages. -The impact of early education as a strategy in countering socio-economic disadvantage Research paper for Ofsted's 'Access and achievement in education 2013 review'

If we are serious about investing in the happiness and wellbeing of children we need to fully protect their human rights and seek to create systems that nurture all of their skills and capacities, rather than only some at the expense of others. Our political systems need to ensure that measures of attainment are balanced with those of human wellbeing and that every child feels valued and is supported in achieving his or her unique potential. As the OECD recommends:

Governments should continuously experiment with policies and programmes for children, rigorously evaluate them to see whether they enhance child well-being, and reallocate money

from programmes that don't work to those that do. This approach ensures resources allocated to children progressively enhance child wellbeing. - Doing Better for Children, OECD, 2009

In my own opinion what is needed to achieve this is to move from the short-termism and manipulation of party politics to a more thoughtful and long-term cross-party commitment to protect the human rights of the child and invest in the future wellbeing of society. I also believe that we need the transparency of a new, multi-disciplinary research body that can bring a balanced understanding of biological, neuro-physiological, psychological and spiritual development to bear on public decision and policy-making. The areas of focus would include:

Child Rights and Wellbeing

Early Environments and social epigenetics

Cognitive Neuroscience

Neurophysiological Psychology

Digital Lives

Values and Character

Playfulness and Creativity

Art and Aesthetics

Consciousness and Spirituality

Nurturing the whole child



The New Science of Human Learning and Development

- Human Ecology
- Family Systems Dynamics
- Cultural and Political Dynamics
- Developmental Parenting
- Family Centred Policymaking
- Integrated Care and Education Systems
- Wellbeing Tools and Assessments

Drawing on the best international thinking and research, and employing a rigorous and evidence-based approach, it would seek to identify how best to support young children's learning and development in a manner that enables every child to flourish. In doing so it would:

- provide a forum and global centre of excellence for scientists, scholars and leading thinkers to share knowledge and understanding
- highlight and promote the complementary relationships and moral responsibilities of parents, families, carers, schools, workplaces, local authorities, governments and wider society to defend and protect the rights and freedoms of children and to ensure that all civic policies have the best interests of the child at their heart
- analyse and integrate existing knowledge from multiple sources and to communicate complex material in ways that can reach the widest possible audience
- aim to bring credible and accurate knowledge to bear on public decision and policy-making that affects children's values, learning dispositions, achievement and social and emotional wellbeing
- aim to act as a core resource for global governments seeking to maximize children's wellbeing as the essential foundation for the underpinning of healthy, sustainable and fully productive societies
- aim to encourage a shift of emphasis from production-oriented measurement systems to those focused on the well-being of current and future generations, i.e. toward broader and more balanced measures of social progress
- develop new integrated models of learning and development, that explore the human need for balance and 'wholeness' and that fully encompass the physical, mental, emotional and spiritual aspects of what underpins good and meaningful lives and flourishing communities
- ensure that policymaking is always fully transparent, grounded in the latest evidence and protected from political bias

What would a 21st century Child Happiness and Wellbeing Manifesto look like?

1. Cross-party political commitment to promote equity in children's developmental outcomes and to help all children and families thrive
2. Full adoption of the UNCRC and acceptance that the young child has biological/developmental rights that need to be protected
3. Cross-party adoption of a new Children's Charter of Developmental Rights
4. The development of a Child Rights Indicator (CRI) and Child Rights Framework (CRF) to assist in meeting national obligations under the UNCRC
5. Political commitment to balance measures of child attainment with those of health and wellbeing
6. The creation of a new Cross-party Department for Children and Families
7. The creation of a new Cabinet-level Minister for Children
8. The creation of a new Independent Research Body focused on the Global Science of Human Learning and Development
9. The relocating of the Children's Commissioner from the DfE to the new Dept
10. The development of a Child Developmental Readiness Tool (CDRT) to measure neuro-motor and cognitive maturity prior to school entry and at key stages of the education process
11. The development of a Child Wellbeing Impact Assessment Tool (CWIAT) to measure the likely impact of all civic policymaking on child health and wellbeing



Can we move the UK from being seen as a nation that is in danger of undermining the wellbeing and potential of generations of children to one that is stepping up the challenge of becoming a future-focused leader in the field?

It will take courage and vision to make the necessary changes, but I believe that with the right commitment from decision-makers such a move is fully possible. Given what we now know about the impact of the early years, as a nation can we really afford not to?

Wendy Ellyatt is the Chief Executive of the Save Childhood Movement

Appendices

a) Alternative national indicators of welfare and well-being - Beyond GDP: Kubiszewski

Alternative national indicators of welfare and well-being		
Indicator	Explanation	Coverage
Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) & Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI) Type: GDP modification Unit: dollar	Personal consumption expenditures weighted by income distribution, with volunteer and household work added and environmental and social costs subtracted.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 17 countries, several states and regions • 1950 - various years
Genuine savings Type: Income accounts modification Unit: dollar	Level of saving after depreciation of produced capital, investments in human capital, depletion of minerals, energy, and forests, and damages from local and global air pollutants are accounted for.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 140 countries • 1970 - 2008
Inclusive Wealth Index Type: Capital accounts modification Unit: dollar	Asset wealth including built, human, and natural resources.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 countries • 1990-2008
Australian Unity Well-Being Index Type: Survey based index Unit: Index	Annual survey of various aspects of well-being and quality of life.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Australia • 2001-present
Gallup-Healthways Well-Being Index Type: Survey based index Unit: Index	Annual survey in taking into account five elements: purpose (employment, etc), social, financial, community and physical (health).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 50 states of the USA, expanded to 135 countries in 2013. • 2008-present
Gross National Happiness Type: Survey based index Unit: Index	Detailed in-person survey around nine domains: psychological well-being, standard of living, governance, health, education, community vitality, cultural diversity, time use, and ecological diversity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bhutan • 2010
Human Development Index Type: Composite index Unit: Index	Index of GDP per person, spending on health and education, and life expectancy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 177 countries • 1980 - present
Happy Planet Index Type: Composite index Unit: Index	A calculation based on subjective well being multiplied by life expectancy divided by ecological footprint.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 153 countries • 3 years
OECD Better Life Index Type: Composite index Unit: Index	Includes housing, income, jobs, community education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety, and work-life balance.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 36 OECD countries • 1 year

b) Current Child Wellbeing in the UK

- **In its first wellbeing study involving 540,000 15-year-olds across 72 countries, the UK ranked 38th out of the 48 countries that took part in the happiness study.** Pupils in the UK were among the most likely to be bullied, and spent the most time on the internet. They were also more anxious about testing than many of their international peers. (OECD, 2017).
- **One in four girls in the UK currently have depression by the time they are 14** (NCB and University of Liverpool, 2017).
- **The UK has the highest rate of child obesity in Western Europe, which is estimated to cost the NHS about £4.2bn a year** (Public Health England, 2009). One in three is now clinically obese (Young Minds, 2017).
- **Less than 1 in 10 children regularly play in wild spaces now, compared to 5 out of 10 a generation ago** (Natural Childhood Report, 2011).
- **Only 21% of children today play out in their streets and local neighbourhoods, compared to 71% of adults who were able to do so as children** (Playday Poll, 2007).
- **Play England's 2007 research found that 51 per cent of children have been told by adults to stop playing in the streets or area near their home.**
- **British children spend disproportionately large amounts of time in front of screens, compared to their counterparts in other Western European countries.** 'Higher levels of TV viewing are having a negative effect on children's well-being, including lower self-worth, lower self-esteem and lower levels of self-reported happiness.' (Children's Society, 2013).
- **By the time the average child is eighteen years old, they will have witnessed 200,000 acts of violence and 16,000 murders** (Facts and Figures About Our TV Habit. TV Turnoff Network).
- **One in ten children in the UK has a diagnosed mental health disorder** (Young Minds, 2017).
- **One in twelve adolescents deliberately self-harms** (Young Minds, 2017).
- **28% of children in the UK currently live in poverty** (Child Poverty Action Group 2017).
- **Approximately 25% of children live in a one-parent family, and 47% of children living in one-parent families currently experience relative poverty** (Gingerbread, 2017).
- **Nearly 80,000 children and young people currently suffer from severe depression, including 8,000 children aged under 10 years old** (Young Minds, 2017).
- **Admissions for psychiatric conditions, eating disorders and self-harm among young people are soaring** (Sunday Times Mental Health Campaign, 2017).

Children's Charter of Developmental Rights



Awareness

Children have the right to live in societies where policy-makers ensure that they are fully informed about the evidence supporting healthy human learning and development and take action to protect children's rights and freedoms based on this awareness.

Health and Wellbeing

National and local decision and policy-makers have the duty to seek to provide environments that maximise children's physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. In doing so they should recognise the vital importance of relationships, the primary importance of parents, families and local communities and the intrinsic human need for belonging and contribution.

New Technology

National and local decision and policy-makers have the duty to ensure that young children's development is safeguarded from the unintended developmental consequences of living in a digital world.

Learning and Development

Children have the right to be protected from any system that might inhibit their innate curiosity, creativity and love of learning.

National and local decision and policy-makers have the duty to seek to provide environments that maximise children's innate capacities and learning potential. They should do so in ways that affirm to every child the value and importance of diversity and that nurture positive and self-affirming values, dispositions and mindsets. They also have a duty to ensure that external systems of monitoring, assessment and accountability never compromise or undermine children's natural curiosity and love of learning.

Adult Wellbeing

Adult wellbeing is essential for child wellbeing. Adults have the right to expect the cultural and social systems within which they live to acknowledge this and to respond in ways that seek to support their own learning and self development.

Children need the company of loving, responsive and attentive adults and have the right to be protected from any relationships that are uninformed or harmful to their health and wellbeing.

Pre-Birth

Every child has the right to expect to be protected from anything that might be detrimental to his or her healthy growth pre-birth. Local and national decision and policy-makers have a duty to ensure that parents are fully informed about the issues that might negatively impact on the development of their babies.

Birth

Children have the right to be welcomed into the world in as gentle, loving and caring ways as possible with mothers and babies having the right to be protected from all care that might compromise their healthy, natural perinatal and birth experiences.

Engagement and encouragement

Children have the right to be in the company of informed and encouraging adults who help to enhance the ways in which they can relate to and understand the world.

Physical Activity

Children have the right to be provided with environments that enable them to develop all of their senses and physical capacities.

Body Image

Children have the right to be protected from negative media and commercial influences that might undermine their confidence and self-worth.

Play

Children have the right to be provided with the time and space to explore their environments in unstructured ways that nurture their creativity, independence, self-confidence, self-expression, co-operation and emotional resilience.

Risk-Taking

Children have the right to learn from challenge, to experience failure as learning and to become confident and adventurous explorers of the environment. Safety concerns therefore need to be balanced with the child's need to experiment and grow.

Wonder and Awe

Children have the right to maintain a deep connection with the natural world that helps them feel part of something greater than themselves and that fosters compassion and empathy. They need to be able to learn with and from nature and not just about it.

Stewardship

Children have the right to be protected from systems that endanger their own future. They need to learn about plants, animals and ecosystems so that they understand the importance of balance and sustainability and can grow up as stewards of the environment.



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Foundations of Wellbeing

7 LEVELS

NATURAL GROWTH:

Positive mindsets and dispositions and the healthy development of the system as a whole

UNNATURAL GROWTH:

Potentially limiting mindsets and dispositions and the compromised development of the system as a whole

7	ONGOING LEARNING AND GROWTH Connection to the Whole	Passion, Purpose, Expansion, Vitality, Abundance, Wisdom, Sense of Wonder, Awe, Love	Disconnection, Flatness, Lack of Meaning, Lack of Purpose, Sense of Loss, Sadness, Yearning, Isolation, Loneliness, Diminishment, Stagnation, Anger
6	EXTERNAL COHESION Empathy and Co-operation	Feeling that you matter, Having a Voice, Sense of Connection, Collaboration, Caring for Others, Empathy, Openness, Inclusion, Trust, Compassion, Humility	Feeling no-one cares, Anger, Frustration, Self-interest, Self-focus, Lack of concern for others, Greed, Arrogance, Superiority, Contempt
5	INTERNAL COHESION Integration and Flow	Self Expression, Self Reflection, Personal Challenge, Thrill, Satisfaction, Authenticity, Integrity, Joy, Contentment	Boredom, Frustration, Lack of Interest, Apathy, Avoidance, Greed, Unhappiness, Discontentment, Depression
4	PATTERN AND MEANING-MAKING Exploring what is possible	Concentration, Purpose, Play, Flow, Risk-taking, Problem-Solving, Excitement, Creativity, Curiosity, Desire to Explore, Desire to Learn, Resilience, Optimism	External Control, Rigidity, Predictability, Anxiety, Caution, Comfort with the Known, Addiction, Measurability, External Motivation, Need for Rewards, Pessimism
3	SELF ESTEEM Independence	Self Mastery, Self Regulation, Internal Discipline, Physical Achievement, Positive Body Image, Intrinsic Motivation, Confidence, Challenge as Learning, Knowledge	Reliance on Others, External Discipline, Duty, Impatience, Passivity, Confusion, Self-Doubt, Negative Body Image, Fear of Failure, Inferiority, Value linked to things, Challenge as Threat, Lack
2	RELATIONSHIP Contact with Others	Nurturing, Care, Affection, Attention, Feedback, Support, Validation, Patience, Respect, Satisfaction, Emotional Fulfilment, Humour, Laughter	Neglect, Lack of Attention, Lack of Connection, Isolation, Abuse, Exclusion, Distrust, Control, Undermining, Disrespect, Dislike, Dissatisfaction, Sadness
1	SURVIVAL Feeling Safe	Safety, Positive Contact with Environment, Health, Positive Physical Growth, Positive Neurological Growth, Familiarity, Comfort	Threat, Insecurity, Negative contact with Environment, Fear, Disassociation, Vulnerability, Compromised Physical Growth, Compromised Neurological Growth

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