

Four ways children say their well-being can be improved

13 November 2018



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Good emotional health as a child lays the foundation for good [life satisfaction in adulthood](#). However, in the UK children and young people's happiness with their life is now [at its lowest since 2010](#).

Our research team, [HAPPEN](#) (Health and Attainment of Pupils in a Primary Education Network) has been investigating how we can improve child health and well-being. But instead of looking solely at data and statistics, and asking adult experts what they think is best, we've been asking the [children](#) themselves. We spoke to 2,000 children aged nine to 11 from our primary school network across South Wales, and asked them what they would change in their area to make themselves, their friends and their family healthier and happier.

So, what do children want? The following recommendations are the most common ideas that the youngsters put forward when we asked.

1. Give us more places to play

"...kids in my street run round the car park and road every day."

Just under 20% of children wanted more parks or green space, or for existing parks to be improved. But many UK parks [are at crisis point](#), with declining resources available to manage them. While some funding may be available for larger parks, we can't ignore the importance that children attach to smaller, local neighbourhood areas. These act as key places where they can meet up with their friends, play and be active.

2. Create local facilities where we can be active

"Do a gym for kids. Open more sports clubs in the area."

Again, just under 20% of answers were from children who wanted sports facilities that they can walk to, and are suitable for their age group. This ranged from wanting more specific sport clubs, such as basketball and football, to requests for more unstructured activity venues such as skate parks.

The provision of more unstructured activities has also been raised by teenagers taking part in Swansea's ACTIVE project. Providing more local facilities could not only help improve the declining activity levels of children, but [improve overall well-being](#) too.

3. Clean up the streets

"To stop my neighbours leaving drugs and drinking bottles out in the [street](#). It would be better if there wasn't litter and poo everywhere."

A [2018 survey](#) conducted by environmental charity Keep Wales Tidy showed that smoking related litter was found on 80% of Welsh streets, drinks litter on 43% of Welsh streets, and dog mess on 9% of Welsh streets. And our survey has highlighted how

much of a problem this is for [young people](#), with 20% of our responses coming from children requesting cleaner environments – particularly wanting litter and dog mess to be cleaned up – as well as requests for less pollution and more trees. The young participants felt this was important to provide them with a safe environment for play. And that's without the consideration of serious health issues that come into play when hazardous litter is left on the streets.

4. Make the roads safer

"Railings so children can play safely without being hit by a car."

Nearly 10% of responses were around road safety. The children regularly commented on the need for safer roads around their schools and homes. This included requests for fewer cars on the road, speed limits, zebra crossings and more school crossing officers. There are initiatives in the UK focusing on making streets more friendly places to play, such as [DIY streets](#) and [playing out](#). However, these are just small groups, and action at policy level is ideally needed to make roads safer for children.

Looking through the responses, we found a common thread: children simply want safe spaces to play and be active. What they ask for are not huge challenges. If real action is taken to address these needs, a better environment for everyone in society will be created, as well as giving children places to play and be with friends.

Children are under a huge amount of pressure to [achieve literacy and numeracy targets](#), and live in a world focused upon test after test. This means that play is becoming deprioritised, particularly at the latter stages of primary school – despite it being vital for learning a range of well-being skills [that cannot be taught](#).

By acting on the childrens' suggestions, we can begin to reverse the trend of declining life satisfaction. However, for real inroads to be made in addressing this issue, the way we, as a society, construct and value childhood needs addressing too. We need to place higher value on child well-being, listen more closely to children, and look

beyond the current measurements on which young people are so narrowly judged.

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Provided by The Conversation

APA citation: Four ways children say their well-being can be improved (2018, November 13) retrieved 7 December 2021 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2018-11-ways-children-well-being.html>

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