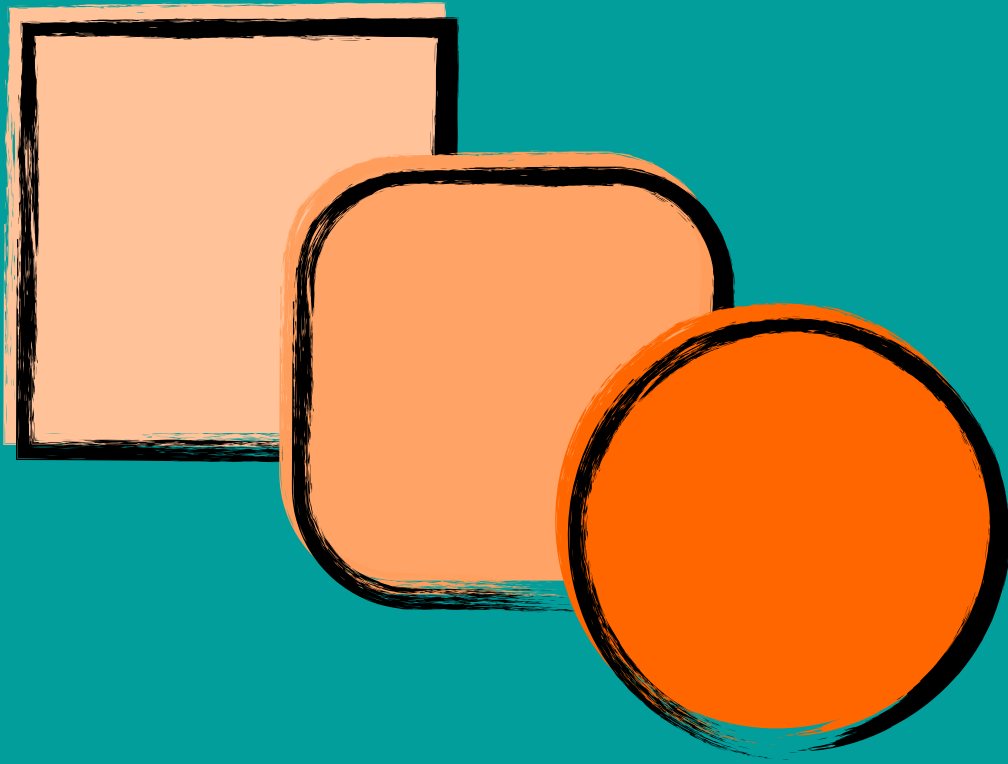


One small step?



Exploring the links between educational transitions and young people's wellbeing.

**The
Children's
Society**

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Executive summary

This report draws on children's and young people's responses to The Children's Society's annual Household Surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023. It focuses on comparisons of wellbeing scores between children and young people in England and Wales in school years 6 and 7, 9 and 10, and 11 and 12 which correspond to transitions between educational key stages. This includes transitions i) from primary to secondary education, ii) to studying for GCSEs (or equivalent qualifications); and iii) from secondary to further education (or equivalent).

The findings highlight associations between educational transitions (at key stages) and children and young people's subjective wellbeing. For some of the measures considered, young people in year 7 have lower subjective wellbeing on average (based on mean scores for all children and young people in each year group) than their counterparts in year 6. This raises concerns about the potential effect of the transition from primary to secondary education on young people's wellbeing.

Key findings

The following findings are based on analysis of a combined dataset consisting of responses to The Children's Society's 2022 and 2023 Household Surveys from young people in England and Wales.

- **Year 6 to 7 transition:** Young people's mean happiness with school (on a scale of 0 to 10) is lower for young people in year 7 than for those in year 6 (at 7.1 and 7.6 respectively). Mean life satisfaction (based on our preferred multi-item measure of life satisfaction) is also noticeably lower among young people in year 7 (6.9 compared to 7.3 for those in year 6).
- **Year 9 to 10 transition:** There is little difference between young people's mean scores in years 9 and 10 across most of the wellbeing measures considered, including happiness with school and life satisfaction. However, a larger percentage of young people in year 10 score below the midpoint for life satisfaction than in other school years (the figure is 10.2% for young people in year 9 and 15.3% among those in year 10). This finding is consistent with that from the most recent Good Childhood Report which indicated that a higher percentage of 15-year-olds were unhappy with a number of aspects of their lives than at any of the other ages considered.¹
- **Year 11 to 12 transition:** There are only small variations in wellbeing measures between young people in years 11 and 12. Those in year 12 score higher than their peers in year 11 for two measures of happiness with different aspects of school life (facilities and how much they are listened to).

¹ The Good Childhood Report 2023 found that a higher percentage of 15-year-olds (who would typically be in school years 10 or 11) were unhappy with aspects of life including time use, appearance, school and what may happen in the future than any other age group. The Good Childhood Report 2023, pp.39-40.

- **Males and females** show different patterns in wellbeing during educational transitions. Females in year 7 have lower average life satisfaction (6.7 versus 7.3) and happiness with school than females in year 6 (6.9 and 7.8). While males in year 7 also have lower mean life satisfaction than those in year 6, the difference is more modest and would not be statistically significant (at 7.1 and 7.4 respectively).

There are also some gender differences in young people's wellbeing in transitional years. For example, females in year 9 score lower on average than males for life satisfaction and for happiness with school, friends, time use and future. Females in year 12 score lower on average than males across wellbeing measures (life satisfaction and happiness with school, friends, time use, choice and future) and females in year 11 for life satisfaction and happiness with friends.

Policy considerations

This report's findings come at a time where schools and colleges are facing increasingly difficult circumstances, including continuing to navigate the educational and social recovery from the pandemic. It is therefore essential that efforts to improve the experiences and wellbeing of children and young people in moments of educational transition take this into account, with suitable resource and support provided to settings.

It is the responsibility of national Government to pave the way for addressing the findings highlighted in this report. Specifically, this should focus on improving support for the transition from primary to secondary school, understanding and improving the experiences of young people in year 10, and resolving the widening wellbeing gap between girls and boys in school, and then onto sixth form.

Introduction

Educational transitions (that is the transition between educational key stages) represent important steps for children and young people in terms of education and broader development. Existing academic literature suggests a link between poor transitions and lower wellbeing.² This report explores the association between educational transitions and young people's subjective wellbeing, drawing on findings from The Children's Society's annual Household Surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023. It compares the responses of children and young people in England and Wales in school years 6 and 7, 9 and 10, and 11 and 12 which correspond to transitions between educational key stages.

The Children's Society's Good Childhood Report provides an annual picture of the wellbeing of children and young people in the United Kingdom. Drawing on data from The Children's Society's own annual Household Surveys, the most recent Good Childhood Report found that school was the aspect of life that more young people (aged 10 to 17) were unhappy with.³ It also highlighted that low wellbeing across a number of measures peaked among 15 year olds completing the survey (i.e. among young people in the latter stages of secondary education).⁴ However, little analysis has previously been conducted examining findings from The Good Childhood Report based on school year.⁵ This report fills this knowledge gap by exploring the association between educational transitions (examining patterns between particular school years) and young people's wellbeing.

In addition to looking at patterns by school year, this report also explores variations related to gender.⁶ Differences among males and females in relation to subjective wellbeing are well documented in previous Good Childhood Reports. The 2022 Good Childhood Report found, for example, that girls had lower mean happiness scores for school than boys, with considerably more girls also scoring below the midpoint on this measure.⁷

² Demkowicz et al. 2023

³ In the most recent wave of the Household Survey, 14.5% of young people reported a happiness score below the midpoint for school, the highest for any aspect of life examined. The Children's Society 2023, p.37.

⁴ The areas of wellbeing highlighted were time use, school, future and appearance. These variables displayed similar patterns in terms of the percentage of young people scoring below the midpoint largely increasing up to age 15, then declining afterwards. See the Good Childhood Report 2023, Figure 12, p.40.

⁵ The Good Childhood Report 2022 did include a themed module exploring different aspects of school life. However, the analysis of these data focused on age group and educational key stage and, as such, did not explore the transitions between specific school years. See The Good Childhood Report 2022, pp.28-44.

⁶ Findings are presented for males and females. Reporting on other gender identities is beyond the scope of this report due to sample sizes.

⁷ The mean happiness score (on a scale of 0 to 10) was 7.4 for males and 6.9 for females. 16.2% of females scored below the midpoint (0 to 4) for this measure compared to 11.9% of males. The Good Childhood Report 2022 p.37.

With this context in mind, this report will answer the following research questions drawing on data from The Children's Society's annual Household surveys conducted in 2022 and 2023:

1. What is the association, if any, between educational transitions and young people's wellbeing? Are there notable variations in wellbeing between young people in school years 6 and 7, 9 and 10, and 11 and 12 (i.e. which correspond to educational transitions)?
2. Do males and females show different patterns in wellbeing at educational transitions?

The Household Survey includes a wide range of questions to assess subjective wellbeing among children and young people, which are drawn upon in this report. These include global measures of wellbeing, such as a multi-item measure of life satisfaction,⁸ together with measures that explore wellbeing in relation to specific aspects of young people's lives (e.g. happiness with school, relationships with friends, the amount of choice in life, time use and what may happen to respondents in the future).⁹ These specific aspects of life were selected for focus in this report as they were expected to have a link with educational transitions or experiences at school.

Young people's relationships with friends have, for example, been found to provide stability and support during educational transitions.¹⁰ Additionally, the critical moments of educational transitions have been found to affect the narrative that young people construct concerning the degree of choice in their lives.¹¹ As young people spend a considerable amount of time within educational settings, this is expected to affect how young people feel in relation to the way they use their time. Finally, experiences at school may inform how young people feel about what may happen to them in the future as the education system is designed to provide young people with skills needed in later life.

The findings presented in this report illustrate an ongoing crisis for children's wellbeing. Whilst they are based on experiences in 2022 and 2023, a lack of concentrated action to address these challenges would suggest that the patterns outlined are yet to be addressed. The new Parliament offers an opportune moment to reinvigorate a focus on educational transitions, with a renewed priority on

⁸ This multi-item measure is based on Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale; see Huebner ES. Initial development of the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale. *School Psychology International*. 1991; 12: 231-40. Children and young people are asked to respond to the following five statements on a strongly agree-strongly disagree scale; 'My life is going well', 'My life is just right', 'I wish I had a different kind of life', 'I have a good life' and 'I have what I want in life'. Only scores from those children who answer all 5 items are included in the overall measure.

⁹ Each of these five specific aspects of wellbeing are part of the 10 item Good Childhood Index. See The Good Childhood Report 2023, p.37 for the latest findings for each of these measures.

¹⁰ See Ng-Knight et al. 2019, Benner et al. 2017.

¹¹ Thomson et al. 2002.

children's wellbeing. These challenges persist at a time where the education system remains under significant pressure with expectations rising and resources dwindling.

The report concludes by offering solutions and next steps across policy and practice that are informed by the findings. We urge decision-makers to consider these carefully and take the necessary action to support children and young people's wellbeing during these pivotal moments in their educational journey.

Methodology

Sample and data collection

This report draws on responses from two online Household Surveys conducted annually by The Children's Society as part of their long running Good Childhood research programme. The first survey was conducted between May and June 2022; the second between May and June 2023. Each survey received responses from a sample of over 2,000 parents or carers, and a child within their household aged between 10 to 17, from across the United Kingdom. The findings presented in this report are for England and Wales only (see below).

A combined dataset consisting of responses to these two surveys has been used for all analysis in this report, except for the section 'Educational transitions and different aspects of school life' which examines a themed module included only in the 2022 Household Survey. All wellbeing measures presented are based on children and young people's responses to questions, assessed on an 11-point scale from 0 to 10. Those scoring below the midpoint on these measures (i.e. a score of 0 to 4 on a 0 to 10 scale) are considered to have low wellbeing.

Analysis was conducted for each measure of wellbeing included in this report within each of the 2022 and 2023 Household Survey datasets to ensure consistency in findings prior to conducting combined analysis among the larger sample of children and young people.

Children taking part in the survey were purposively selected to closely match the demographic (age and gender) and geographic make-up of the wider UK population of 10- to 17-year-olds.¹² Households were also selected to match the socio-economic make-up of the wider population.

¹² See The Good Childhood Report 2023.

Due to differences in ages that children enter different year groups between the four nations, and, as education is a devolved power, the analysis presented in this report focuses on responses from children and young people (aged 10 to 17) in England and Wales only.¹³ For consistency, all analysis is presented weighted in line with The Good Childhood Report 2022 and 2023.

A range of appropriate indicative statistical tests have been conducted to support the findings presented in this report, using a 99% confidence level to test statistical significance.¹⁴

Limitations

As data used in this report comes from a survey completed by young people aged between 10 and 17 years old, analysis of educational transitions which fall outside of this age range (e.g. the transition from key stage 1 to key stage 2 and the transition from further education to higher education) is beyond the scope of this report.

Furthermore, the findings are based on a cross-sectional as opposed to a longitudinal dataset. As such, they compare responses between different groups of children and young people (i.e. in different school years) at the same point in time, rather than comparing responses for the same children and young people as they progress through different school years, which can be used to more effectively measure change.

Finally, the ability to conduct further analysis for different demographic groups where data is collected (for example, by ethnicity or other protected characteristics) has been limited by small sample sizes. One demographic for whom educational transitions are known to be particularly challenging is young people with special educational needs.¹⁵ However, it has not been possible to provide insights for this group of children and young people in relation to school year due to small sample sizes.¹⁶ The Children's Society acknowledges these limitations and will continue to explore how we can better represent the experiences of different subgroups of children and young people in future reports.

¹³ Educational years differ in Scotland and Northern Ireland and so responses from children from these nations were excluded from analysis in this report (unweighted n=391).

¹⁴ Weighted datasets have been used for analysis of The Children's Society's Household Survey. The cross-sectional weights from each year were used. The data are weighted in line with the most recent available mid-year population estimates. Listwise deletion was used to deal with missing data, which means that, for analysis using multiple variables (known as multivariate analysis), responses were not included if there were missing data on any of the variables included in the analysis. Some basic explanatory information on the treatment of missing data and statistical analysis has been included in the notes and footnotes. However, every effort has been made to ensure that the main body of this report is non-technical and accessible to a range of audiences.

¹⁵ Fayette & Bond 2018, White 2020.

¹⁶ Analysis was conducted for young people with special educational needs, but even when combining the 2022 and 2023 waves of Household Survey data, sample sizes were too small to draw meaningful conclusions.

Findings

Educational transitions and young people's wellbeing

Young people completing The Children's Society's annual surveys in 2022 and 2023 were asked a range of questions concerning their wellbeing. They were also asked what school year they were in when completing the survey. This section presents key findings exploring the association between young people's subjective wellbeing and their school year combining data from these two surveys.

The prevalence of low wellbeing

Figures 1 and 2 present headline findings on the percentage of young people (aged 10 to 17) in England and Wales scoring below the midpoint for life satisfaction and young people's mean life satisfaction scores by school year. These figures are both calculated using The Children's Society's preferred multi-item measure of life satisfaction.^{17 18}

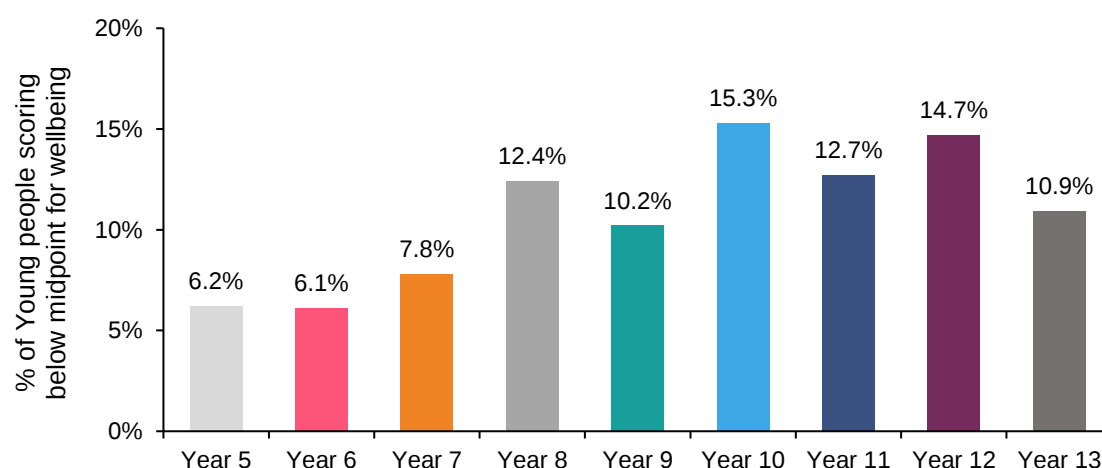
Figure 1 shows that a smaller percentage of young people score below the midpoint/have low life satisfaction in year 6 before the transition to secondary school than in subsequent years. While slightly greater percentages of young people score below the midpoint/ have low life satisfaction in each school year following a transition (when comparing young people in year 6 to those in year 7, year 9 to 10, and 11 to 12), further analysis suggests these differences would not be statistically significant. Overall, year 10 is the school year in which the greatest percentage of young people score below the midpoint for this measure (15.3%).¹⁹

¹⁷ This multi-item measure is based on Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale; see Huebner ES. Initial development of the Students' Life Satisfaction Scale. *School Psychology International*. 1991; 12: 231-40. Children and young people are asked to respond to the following five statements on a strongly agree-strongly disagree scale; 'My life is going well', 'My life is just right', 'I wish I had a different kind of life', 'I have a good life' and 'I have what I want in life'. Only scores from those children who answer all 5 items are included in the overall measure.

¹⁸ For each figure included in this report indicative significance testing was undertaken at 99% level using t-tests/ANOVAs for average scores and chi-squares for the proportions low.

¹⁹ Comparisons (2x9) were made between year groups with those who did/did not have low scores on our multi-item measure of life satisfaction using a chi-square test. Some differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) were identified with more of those in year 10 and less of those in year 6 having low scores than would be expected.

Figure 1: Percentage of young people scoring below the midpoint for life satisfaction by school year

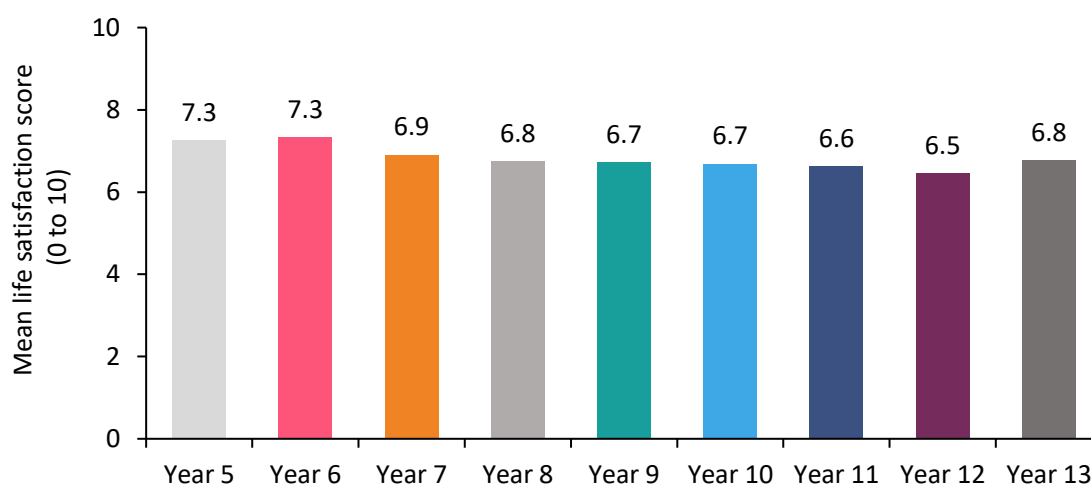


Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,418).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts for completeness but are shown in different shades of grey and not considered in the commentary.

Mean life satisfaction scores, shown in Figure 2 below, are lower among children and young people in year 7 than those in year 6 (6.9 and 7.3 respectively) and remain low throughout secondary school.²⁰

Figure 2: Young people's mean life satisfaction scores by school year



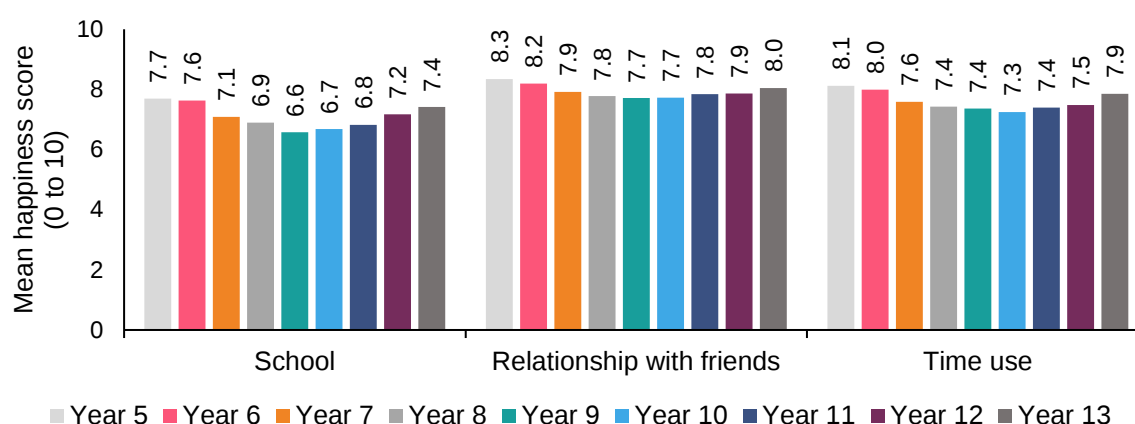
Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,418).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts in different shades of grey for completeness but are not considered in the commentary.

²⁰ Independent t-tests were conducted comparing the mean scores between years 6 and 7, years 9 and 10, and years 11 and 12. A significant difference (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) in the mean life satisfaction score was only identified between years 6 and 7.

Figures 3 and 4 present findings from wellbeing indicators concerned with examining happiness with specific aspects of children and young people's lives from the Good Childhood Index.²¹ For happiness with school and time use, mean scores are lower among young people in year 7 than year 6 with the greatest difference for happiness with school (7.1 and 7.6 respectively on a scale of 0 to 10). While happiness with friends follows a similar pattern, the differences between year 7 and year 6 are smaller (and would not be statistically significant). There is also little difference in scores across these three measures between young people in years 9 and 10 and years 11 and 12.²²

Figure 3: Young people's happiness with different aspects of life by school year



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,513 (school), 3,521 (relationships with friends), 3,517 (time use)).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts in different shades of grey for completeness but are not considered in the commentary.

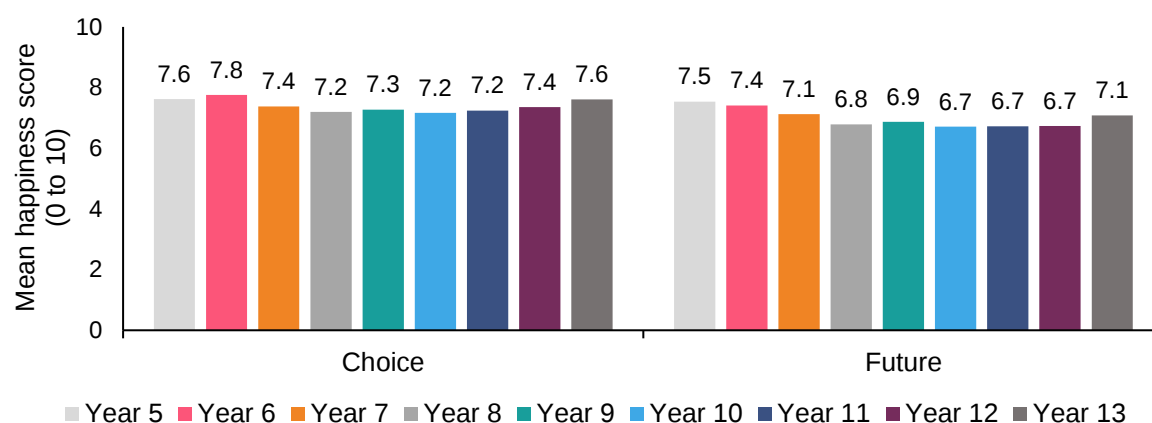
Figure 4 presents findings from additional wellbeing indicators concerned with happiness with the amount of choice in life and what may happen in the future. Again, young people in year 7 report lower mean happiness for choice than those in year 6.²³ While happiness with what may happen in future follows a similar pattern, the difference between young people in year 7 and year 6 is more modest (and would not be statistically significant).

²¹ The Good Childhood Index consists of a multi-item measure of overall life satisfaction, and 10 single-item domain measures (including the five depicted in Figures 3 and 4) which ask children and young people about their happiness with different aspects of their lives. For more detail about the Good Childhood Index, see the Good Childhood Report 2023, p.7, and p.37 for the most recent findings.

²² Independent t-tests were conducted comparing the mean scores between years 6 and 7, years 9 and 10, and years 11 and 12 for happiness with school, friends and time use. Differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) in mean scores were only identified between years 6 and 7 for happiness with school and time use.

²³ Independent t-tests comparing the mean scores between years 6 and 7, years 9 and 10, and years 11 and 12 for happiness with choice and future showed a difference (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) between years 6 and 7 for choice only.

Figure 4: Young people's happiness with amount of choice in life and what may happen in the future by school year



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,518 (choice), 3,482 (future)).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts in different shades of grey for completeness but are not considered in the commentary.

Educational transitions and different aspects of school life

The 2022 Household Survey included additional questions which asked young people about their happiness in relation to seven different aspects of school life. The 2022 Good Childhood Report presented findings related to these measures grouped by key stage.²⁴ This report found that, among these seven measures, young people were on average most happy with how safe they felt in school and least happy with how much they felt listened to. Figure 5 builds on these findings by presenting mean happiness scores for each aspect of school life by school year.²⁵

Further analysis shows that mean happiness is higher among young people in year 6 than for those young people in year 7 for three of the seven measures (relationship with teachers, learning in lessons and how much they were listened to).²⁶ There are also differences for happiness with facilities and being listened to between years 11 and 12, with the latter scoring higher than their younger peers on these measures.²⁷

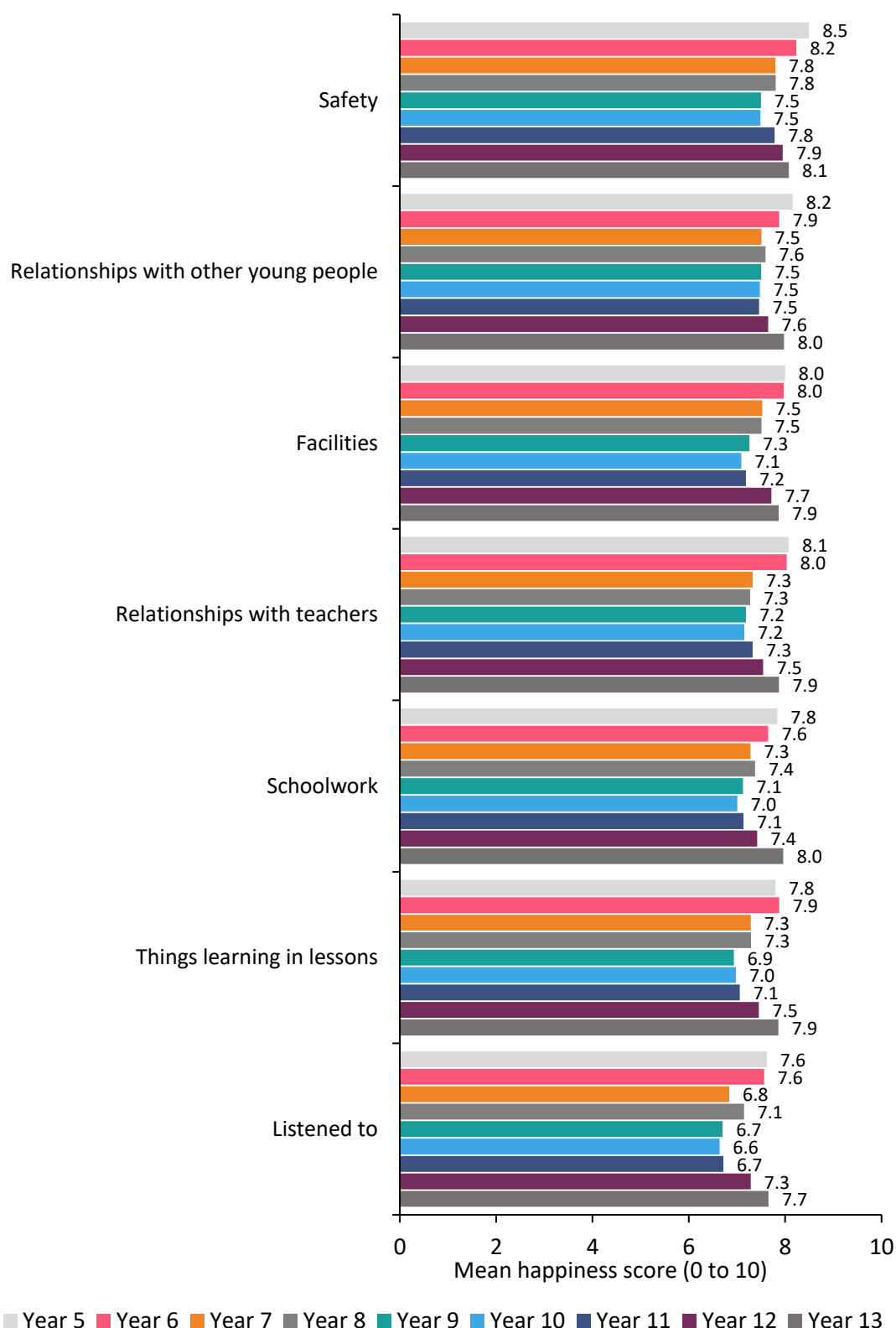
²⁴ The Good Childhood Report 2022, p.39

²⁵ These themed questions were specific to this iteration of the Household Survey.

²⁶ Independent t-tests comparing mean scores between years 6 and 7 showed differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) for relationships with teachers, things learned in lessons and being listened to. There were no such differences for safety, facilities, schoolwork or relationship with peers.

²⁷ Independent t-tests comparing the mean scores between years 9 and 10 and between 11 and 12 for the seven measures of happiness with school, showed differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) in mean scores for feeling listened to and facilities between year 11 and 12.

Figure 5: Young people's happiness with different aspects of school life by school year



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, wave 21, May to June 2022, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 1,727- 1,732).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts in different shades of grey for completeness but are not considered in the commentary.

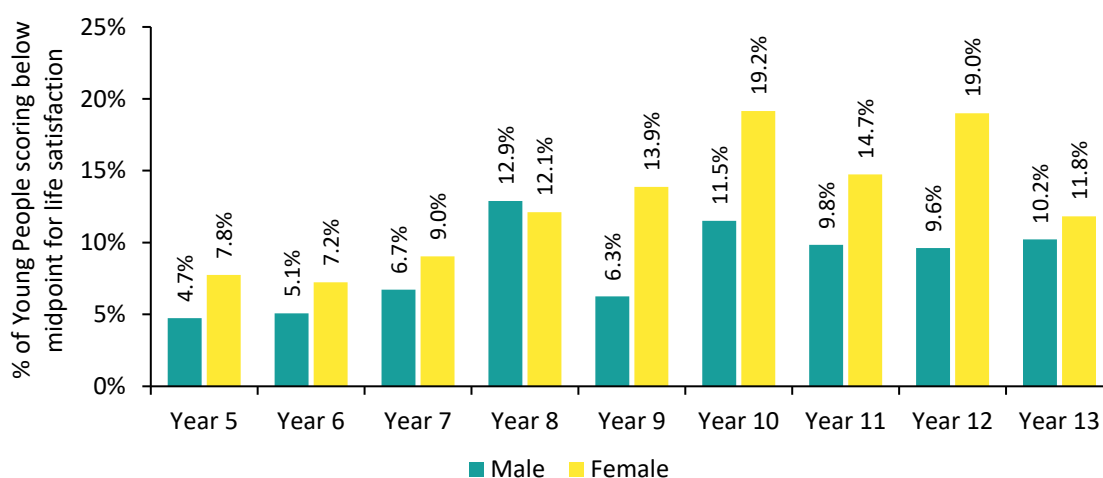
Gender and educational transitions

This section explores the association between gender and educational transitions combining data for 2022 and 2023. Differences in subjective wellbeing between males and females are well documented in previous Good Childhood Reports, with females frequently reporting lower mean scores than males across a range of measures.²⁸

Responses to the multi-item measure of life satisfaction used in The Good Childhood Report (see Figure 6) show that, for the years of interest, a larger proportion of females than males score below the midpoint (0 to 4 on a scale of 0 to 10), although the only difference that would be statistically significant is in year 12.²⁹

There are also some variations in the proportions of young people with low life satisfaction between school years for the same gender. A larger proportion of females scored below the midpoint in years 10 and 12 than would be expected and fewer of those in years 6. There were no such differences between years for males, however.³⁰

Figure 6: Percentage of young people scoring below the midpoint for life satisfaction by school year and gender



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,405).

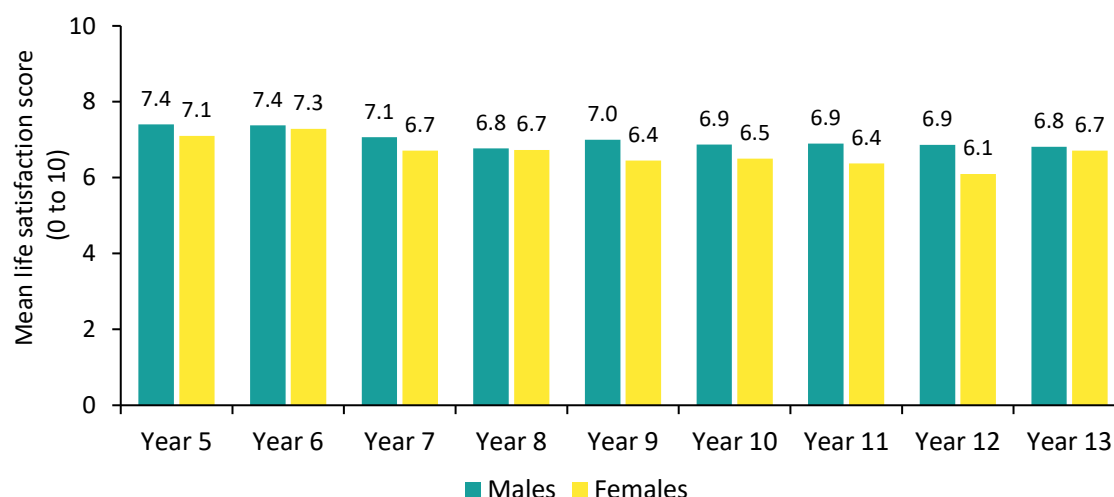
²⁸ See The Good Childhood Reports 2022 and 2023 for insights from the two most recent editions.

²⁹ Comparisons using (2x2) chi square tests within each year group associated with a transition between males and females showed a difference (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) in year 12 only.

³⁰ Chi square tests (2x9) within each gender comparing year groups by proportion with low life satisfaction showed significant differences for females but not males (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)). There were no differences for either gender when comparing only transition years in 2x2 chi square tests.

Females have lower mean life satisfaction scores than males across several school years associated with transitions (see Figure 7), with years 9, 11 and 12 most notable.³¹ When looking across years for the same gender, the most striking difference is between females in year 7 (who had a mean life satisfaction score of 6.7) and those in year 6 (with a mean score of 7.3).³²

Figure 7: Young people's mean life satisfaction score by school year and gender



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,405).

Figures 8, 9 and 10 look at males and females means scores across school years for key measures from the Good Childhood Index. For happiness with school, females in year 7 have a lower mean score (6.9) than females in year 6 (7.8). While there are similar patterns for males in these years, the differences are smaller and would not be statistically significant (7.2 in year 7 and 7.5 in year 6).³³ When comparing mean scores for happiness with school between genders, females in transition years 9 and 12 score lower than their male peers.³⁴

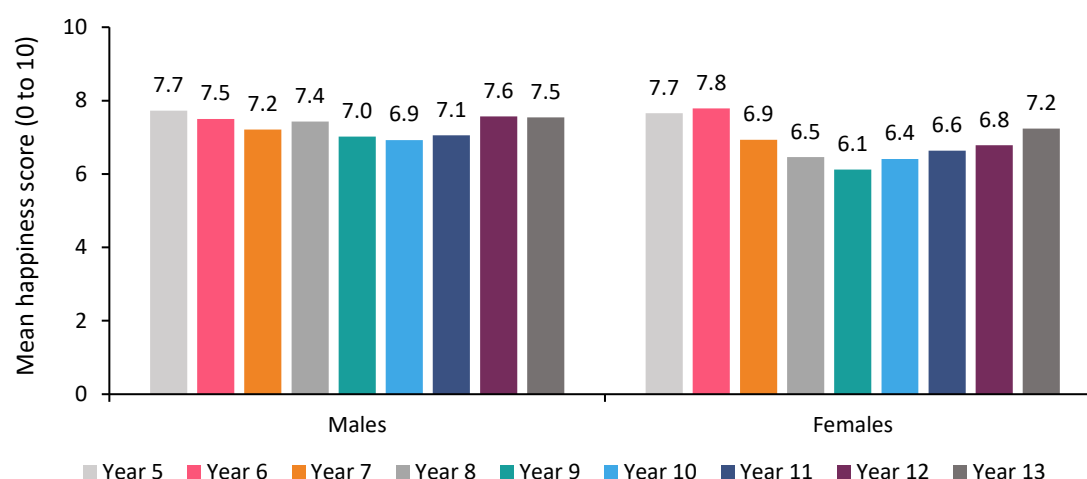
³¹ Independent t-tests comparing mean life satisfaction scores for each year group by gender found significant differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) for years 9, 11 and 12, with males scoring higher than females in each of these years.

³² Independent t-tests comparing mean life satisfaction scores for each gender between the transition years showed a difference (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) between year 6 and year 7 for females.

³³ Independent t-tests comparing mean scores between females in years 6 and 7 for happiness with school showed a difference (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)). There were no differences that would be significant for females in years 9 and 10 or 11 and 12. There were also no differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) for males in any of the years associated with transitions.

³⁴ Independent t-tests comparing the mean scores between males and females for happiness school found differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) in transition years 9 and 12.

Figure 8: Young people's mean happiness with school by school year and gender



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,500).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts in different shades of grey for completeness but are not considered in the commentary.

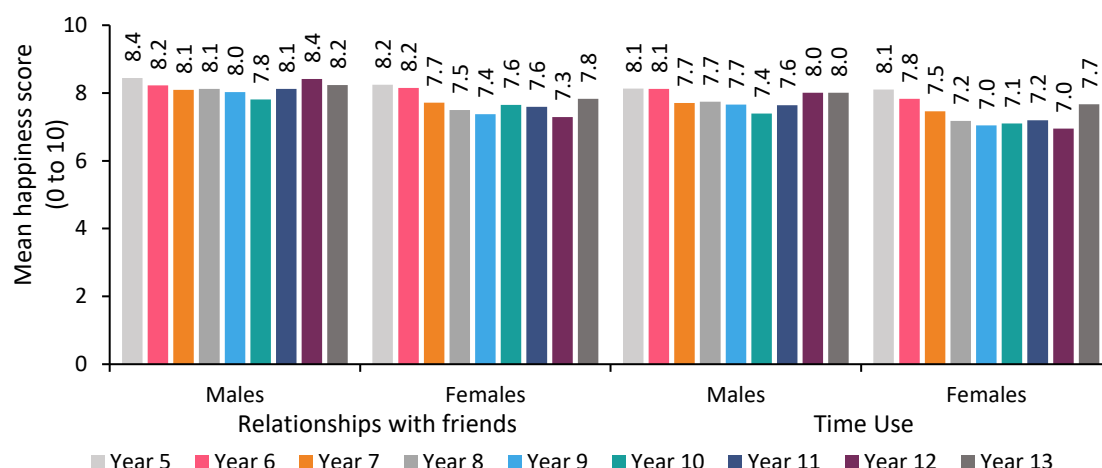
For happiness with relationships with friends, there are no substantial differences between transition year groups for either males or females. For time use, the only difference is for males in year 6 who have a higher mean happiness score than those in year 7 (8.1 and 7.7 respectively).³⁵

Again, there are some variations within transition years by gender. Females in years 9, 11 and 12 have lower average scores for happiness with friends than males in these years, and females in years 9 and 12 score lower on average than their male peers for happiness with time use.³⁶

³⁵ Independent t-tests comparing mean scores in years 6 and 7 for happiness with time use found a difference (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)) for males but not females.

³⁶ Independent t-tests comparing the mean scores between males and females in transition years 9, 11 and 12 for happiness with relationships with friends showed differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)). For happiness with time use, this was the case in years 9 and 12.

Figure 9: Young people's mean happiness with relationships with friends and time use by school year and gender

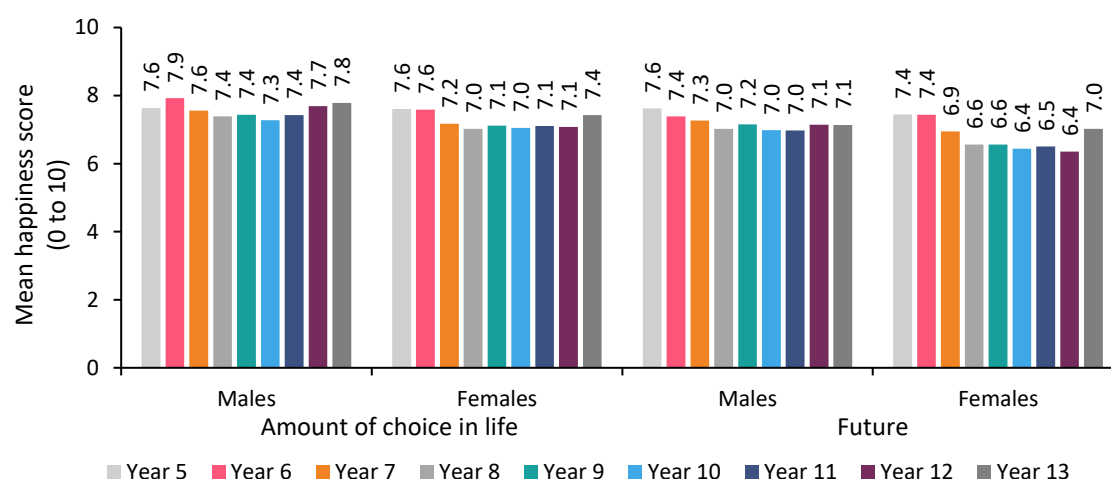


Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,508 (relationships with friends), 3,505 (time use)).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts in different shades of grey for completeness but are not considered in the commentary.

Males in years 9 and 12 have higher average scores for happiness with future than their female counterparts, and, in year 12 only, for happiness with choice.³⁷ There are no differences when comparing mean scores in transitional years for each gender, however.

Figure 10: Young people's happiness with amount of choice in life, and what may happen in the future by school year and gender



Source: The Children's Society's household survey, waves 21 and 22, May to June 2022 and May to June 2023, children aged 10 to 17, England and Wales, weighted data. (weighted n = 3,505 (amount of choice in life), 3,469 (what may happen in the future)).

Note: School years not associated with transitions are presented in the charts in different shades of grey for completeness but are not considered in the commentary.

³⁷ Independent t-tests comparing mean scores for males and females in years 9 and 12 for happiness with future, and, in year 12, for choice showed differences (that would be significant in a random sample ($p < 0.01$)).

Discussion and Conclusions

For several of the wellbeing and school related measures considered in this report, young people in year 7 had lower scores than those in year 6, indicating that this transition between primary and secondary education may be challenging for many. This adds weight to prior research which has explored the link between wellbeing and educational transitions.³⁸ The largest difference across wellbeing measures was for happiness with school, with young people in year 7 having a mean score of 7.1 compared to 7.6 among young people in year 6 (on a scale of 0-10). Year 10 is the school year in which the highest percentage of young people score below the midpoint on the multi-item measure of life satisfaction. This finding is consistent with evidence from the Good Childhood Report 2023, which found that a higher percentage of 15-year-olds (who would typically be in school years 10 or 11) were unhappy with aspects of life including time use, appearance, school and what may happen in the future than at any other age.³⁹

Overall, the report highlights a broader trend, whereby the years young people are in secondary school education are associated with comparatively lower levels of wellbeing (than those years young people are in primary education). As such, there is little variation in most mean wellbeing scores when examining the transition between years 9 and 10, with wellbeing by each measure remaining low. The year 9 to 10 transition marks the stage where most young people begin studying for their GCSEs (or equivalent qualifications) and may thus represent a challenging time for many young people. There is also little variation in different measures of wellbeing when comparing years 11 and 12.

Females have lower mean wellbeing scores than males at some educational transitions (e.g. in years 9 and 12 for life satisfaction, and happiness with school, friends, future and time use). Mean happiness with school is also lower among females in year 7 (6.9 on a scale of 0 to 10) than those in year 6 (7.8); while for males in these school years, the difference in mean scores is more modest (7.2 in year 7 and 7.5 in year 6).

The findings from this report raise some concerns about the transition between primary and secondary education. Further exploring what can be done to protect and improve levels of subjective wellbeing during secondary education, the transition between primary and secondary education and the different experiences of boys and girls in the context of educational transitions are suggested as areas for future research.

³⁸ See for example Demkowicz et al. 2023.

³⁹ The Good Childhood Report 2023, pp.39-40.

Policy Considerations

This report has shown the importance of educational transitions for young people's wellbeing. Children's wellbeing both influences and is influenced by their school life. As the new Government looks to reset the relationship and approach to education, there is needed consideration on children's wellbeing and the role of educational transitions within this.

This is all happening at a time where schools and colleges are facing increasingly difficult circumstances, including continuing to navigate the educational and social recovery from the pandemic. It is therefore essential that efforts to improve the experiences and wellbeing of children and young people in moments of educational transition take this into account, with suitable resource and support provided to settings.

The new Government has a responsibility to prioritise the wellbeing of children and young people, and this report highlights that educational transitions can be important touchpoints to address the wider decline in children's wellbeing that has been documented in The Children's Society's Good Childhood Reports. By embedding support in these moments of a young person's journey through education, there is a real prospect to break down barriers to opportunity and provide support to young people during a time that can involve stress, uncertainty and unhappiness. Acknowledgment of the significance of this aspect of a young person's development can inform and support an education system that enables happier and healthier young people to thrive.

This report clearly demonstrates that closer attention must be paid to children's wellbeing as they transition through education. Within this, it must be appreciated that children and young people's lives are not silo-ed, and there is a need to think holistically about the support offered in all aspects of a young person's life when considering improvements for their wellbeing. Therefore, whilst the focus of this report is on uncovering specific trends in a young person's wellbeing during educational transitions, there remains an ongoing requirement for a whole-society, cross-governmental focus on reversing the decline in children's wellbeing.

Alarmingly, this report adds to the growing evidence that girls continue to experience low wellbeing. Specifically, year 7 and year 12 are moments in a young person's school journey wherein girls score particularly low for wellbeing (compared to other girls in year 6 and their male counterparts in year 12 respectively). This implies that a policy focus on these moments of transition may contribute to addressing the wider issue of girls' wellbeing.

At a national level, there needs to be more focus on embedding the wellbeing of children and young people across school guidance, legislation and requirements. This focus should be underpinned by a nationally consistent and universal measurement of children's wellbeing, surveying children about their wellbeing to inform policy and practice at a national and local level. Whilst it is incredibly welcome that initiatives such as Mental Health Support Teams and Senior Mental Health Lead training have enabled leadership and necessary resource to integrate wellbeing and mental health support, this must be universal and has to occur within a wider culture focused on children's wellbeing.

At a practice level, schools and school leaders must be supported (i.e. with necessary resource, guidance and capacity) to deliver a more wellbeing-integrated, transition-focused level of support. Moreover, there should be an ongoing appreciation and dedication to understand the experiences of children and young people within school. This is a time where they are experiencing substantial change, in their environment and with their own development, and effective support and preventative measures can only be in place when their experiences are properly understood and listened to.

Definitions

Educational transition: For the purpose of this report, educational transitions are defined as the transitions between key stages in education. The specific transitions of relevance to this report are between key stages 2 and 3 (i.e. primary and secondary education during school years 6 to 7), key stage 3 and 4 (i.e. the shift towards studying for GCSEs between year 9 and year 10) and key stage 4 and further education or training (between years 11 and 12).

Wellbeing: The Children's Society has adopted the following definition:

“Wellbeing is how we're doing as individuals, communities and as a nation, and how sustainable that is for the future.”

What Works Centre for Wellbeing ⁴⁰

As in The Good Childhood Report, this report focuses on subjective wellbeing, how children and young people think and feel about their lives.

While there is a relationship between mental health and wellbeing, they are not the same thing.⁴¹ This report focusses only on measures of subjective wellbeing.

⁴⁰ What Works Centre for Wellbeing, n.d.

⁴¹ See The Good Childhood Report 2018.

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