

Child wellbeing

Initial findings from the Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 survey



MCS Age 11 survey

The Millennium Cohort Study's (MCS) survey of 11-year-olds took place between January 2012 and February 2013. Trained fieldworkers conducted 13,287 interviews with the children and their parents/guardians. Data from this survey and previous MCS surveys are available to download from the UK Data Service.

Introduction

A much-cited 2007 report by UNICEF¹ pushed the issue of child wellbeing high up the UK Government's policy agenda. It found that the nation's children had a lower quality of life than their peers in the 20 other developed countries surveyed. The follow-up UNICEF study published in 2013 indicated that although there had been significant improvement in the wellbeing of UK children in more recent years, the country was still lagging behind many of its European neighbours.

The Age 11 survey of the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS) should help policymakers and researchers with the ongoing task of analysing the factors

behind these disappointing league table ratings. The MCS collected data from cohort members' parents on family income, children's physical development and behaviour, and family structure and stability. Questionnaires were also completed by 13,160 children – on topics such as school life, friendships, how safe they felt in their local area, and how happy they were with their families and life in general.

The information that they and their parents provided offers valuable insights into current levels of happiness and wellbeing among the children of the new century – and points to ways in which they might possibly be improved.

Key findings

- **Poverty**²: One in six Millennium Cohort Study children (17%) were persistently poor during their first 11 years. Children in such families were less happy with their lives than other cohort members.
- **Divorce and separation**: Four in ten 11-year-olds experienced some family disruption by age 11 compared with only one in ten in 1969. Nevertheless, three quarters of children were completely happy with their families.
- **School**: Although most MCS children were facing the stresses of primary to secondary school transition, only 6 per cent said they did not like school.
- **Safety**: Almost nine in ten felt their home area was 'safe' or 'very safe'.
- **Bullying**: Just over half of the 11-year-olds said they were hurt or picked on by other children.
- **Weight**: At age 11, 20 per cent of children were obese and 15 per cent were overweight.
- **Drinking/smoking**: Only 3 per cent of 11-year-olds had smoked a cigarette, while 13 per cent had tried an alcoholic drink.

¹ UNICEF. Child poverty in perspective: An overview of child well-being in rich countries. *Innocenti Report Card 7*, 2007. UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence.

² The MCS uses a standard indicator of 'poverty' – income (adjusted for household size) that is below 60 per cent of the national median

Findings



Poverty

While nearly half of the MCS children were not living in poverty at any of the five surveys conducted to date – at age 9 months, 3, 5, 7 and 11 years – over half have been classified as poor at least once. One in six (17%) was persistently poor. Children from all ethnic minority groups were at greater risk of being persistently poor than White children, but Mixed-ethnicity and Indian children³ were no more likely to be poor at 11 than White children.

Whatever their family's financial situation, most MCS children said they were happy, with an average of just over six on a seven-point scale. Over half put themselves at the top of the scale as 'completely happy', while a quarter selected the second highest happiness level. However, a small percentage of children were 'not at all happy' (3%). Children facing recurrent or persistent poverty recorded the lowest average happiness scores, and those who had never been poor had the highest. This does not mean there is a causal relationship between income poverty and child wellbeing. However, it suggests that circumstances that are more common in poor families, including material deprivation, are also those that tend to make children less happy.



'Whatever their family's financial situation, most MCS children said they were happy.'



Family structure and stability

Previous research using earlier MCS survey data indicates that child wellbeing is not determined by parents' marital status. Even so, children can suffer emotional and behavioural problems if parents divorce or separate. Partnership breakdown can lead to parental distress and inattention, financial difficulties and a move to an unfamiliar area and school. By age 11, four in ten MCS children had experienced some family disruption compared with one in ten in 1969⁴. Only half of the MCS 11-year-olds

were living with two natural parents who were married. More than one in four (26%) was living with a lone parent, while 12 per cent were in families that included a step-parent.

MCS surveys confirm that families that have always included two natural parents are more likely to have older mothers and more educated parents. Eleven-year-olds in these families are less likely to present behaviour problems than those being brought up in other types of family, judging by parent reports. Nevertheless, there are only small differences between family types in the proportions of children reporting they were 'completely happy' with their families. The children of two natural parents were most likely to say this (77%), while those with a formerly partnered lone parent were the least likely (65%).

Schooling and friendships

School: Despite being at a potentially stressful transition stage – transfer to secondary school was imminent for most children – the majority enjoyed going to school. When asked how happy they were at school, on a scale of one to seven, over half (52%) chose the highest category: 'completely happy'. Indeed, well over 80 per cent of children selected one of the top three categories, with only 10 per cent in the bottom three. Parents also felt their children were happy at school. Just over half of them (52%) said they thought their child always enjoyed school, and a further 39 per cent believed they usually enjoyed it. Only 8 per cent said their child only sometimes enjoyed school, while 1 per cent thought they never did.

Friends: A lack of friendships in childhood is associated with not only loneliness but anxiety. Fortunately, very few MCS 11-year-olds said they didn't have any friends. Most reported having a mixture of friends, in terms of sex and ethnicity. Over half the children (54%) had both boys and girls as friends and over 70 per cent had friends from different ethnic groups. Children also had a mix of friends in and out of school – including 'virtual friends' they only had contact with online. However, school remained the main source of friendships.

³ In this briefing paper we employ Census categories, e.g. White, Mixed, Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi used by the Office for National Statistics. Black Caribbean and Black African are included in a single category, Black groups.

⁴ The comparison is with members of the National Child Development Study born in 1958.

'At age 11 only six in ten children were living with both natural parents.'

Real and perceived threats

Bullying: It is generally acknowledged that bullying can be extremely damaging for children's wellbeing. At age 11, MCS children were therefore asked about their experience of bullying as both victim and perpetrator. More than half reported that they were hurt or picked on by other children (boys, 60%; girls, 56%). Nine per cent of children reported being bullied at least every week and a further 7 per cent on 'most days'. Indian children were least likely to experience bullying on most days (3%), and Black Caribbeans were the most likely (8%). Boys were more likely than girls (36% to 24%) to say they had picked on or hurt other children. However, the survey confirmed that 11-year-olds are far more likely to experience and perpetrate bullying with siblings than with other children.

Feeling safe: Although bullying was a problem for many children, most 11-year-olds felt safe in their home area, with almost nine in ten (89%) saying it was 'safe' or 'very safe'. Girls were slightly less likely than boys to say it was 'very safe'. Just 9 per cent of children said their home area was 'not very safe', and 1 per cent 'not at all safe'. Pakistani and Bangladeshi children were the most likely to consider their area 'not very' or 'not at all' safe.

Health

Obesity: Twenty per cent of MCS children were obese at age 11 and a further 15 per cent were overweight. The proportion of overweight and obese children has therefore increased by 10 percentage points (from 25% to 35%) since age 7. The Age 11 survey also confirmed that obesity is associated with lower levels of happiness and self-esteem. Obese children were less likely to be 'completely happy' with the way they look than those who were not obese. They were also slightly more likely to say they were 'not happy at all' with their

appearance. Fewer normal-weight children (7%) had low self-esteem compared to those who were overweight (9%) or obese (10%). In line with previous research, overweight and obese MCS children were at a more advanced stage of pubertal development at age 11, according to their parents, than normal-weight children. This is significant as relatively early or advanced puberty for their age can also be a negative experience for children.

Drinking and smoking: As almost all MCS 11-year-olds (96%) were still at primary school, they had probably spent relatively little time in the presence of teenagers who smoke or drink. Just 4 per cent of MCS boys and 2 per cent of girls had tried a cigarette. Children whose parents were not working were the most likely to have tried smoking by age 11 (6% compared to 1% of those with parents in professional or managerial jobs). More children had tried an alcoholic drink than had smoked (15% of boys and 11% of girls). But only 2 per cent of boys and less than 1 per cent of girls reported ever having had enough alcohol to feel drunk.

► **Table 1: Self-esteem and weight status at age 11**

	Not overweight %	Overweight %	Obese %	Total %
Normal range self-esteem	93.1	91.2	89.7	92.1
Low self-esteem	6.9	8.8	10.3	7.9
Total %	100	100	100	100





Conclusions

As this briefing paper demonstrates, there are a number of reasons to be optimistic about the MCS children's wellbeing at age 11. Most are happy with their lives and enjoy going to school. They have a good mix of friends and very few have experimented with drinking and smoking.

Too many have been living in poverty, however, and nearly four in ten have experienced some family disruption during their first 11 years. It is true that the majority of children being brought up in difficult circumstances also seem happy in themselves and happier still with their families. Nevertheless, the high levels of bullying and obesity among this age group are causes for concern. Unless these problems are addressed, they may continue to impair the lives of the children of the new century long into the future.

Future research

The information on child wellbeing gathered by the Age 11 survey offers almost limitless opportunities for further investigation. For example, researchers could use the data on family structure to investigate the contributions (in the form of cash and care) of non-resident parents, and they could study the health (especially mental) of children and parents. They could also explore children's expectations about the future and other child outcomes at age 11 that had not been analysed by the time this briefing paper was published.

About the Millennium Cohort Study

The Millennium Cohort Study is following around 19,000 children born in the UK between September 2000 and January 2002. The study is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and government departments, and is managed by the Centre for Longitudinal Studies at the Institute of Education, London.

The five surveys of cohort members conducted so far – at ages 9 months and 3, 5, 7 and 11 years – have built up a uniquely detailed portrait of the children of the new century. The study has collected information on diverse aspects of their lives, including behaviour, cognitive development, health, schooling, housing and parents' employment and education.

The MCS has had a significant impact on UK policy, in areas such as breastfeeding, immunisation and child poverty. It will continue to provide a vital source of evidence for policymakers addressing social challenges for many years to come.

Further information

The material in this briefing has been drawn from Platt, L. (ed) *Millennium Cohort Study Age 11 Survey Initial Findings*. London: Centre for Longitudinal Studies.

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