

# CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING FROM THEIR OWN POINT OF VIEW

WHAT AFFECTS THE CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING IN THE FIRST  
YEAR OF COMPULSORY SECONDARY EDUCATION IN SPAIN?

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This publication is based on the study "Quality of Life and Children's Subjective Well-Being in Spain. What impacts the first year of Compulsory Secondary Education students' well-being?" (Casas and Bello. coord., 2012) conducted by UNICEF and the University of Girona (ERIDIQV research group).

A special thanks to all the children who participated in the study. They are the true protagonists, the motivating force behind this study and behind the work that we do every day. We want to dedicate this publication to them. We also thank the more than 140 schools and their professionals who have opened their doors and joined us in this experience, showing a genuine interest in learning about and improving the well-being of their students.

# INTRODUCTION

This document has been drawn from the study on “Quality of Life and Children’s Subjective Well-Being in Spain” (Casas and Bello, Coord., 2012), the main objective of which was to determine and analyze the opinions and perceptions of children attending first year of Compulsory Secondary Education (most of them 12 years old) about different areas of their lives, as well as their levels of satisfaction with them. In other words, we wanted to measure the level of children’s well-being from their own point of view, asking them directly what they think, how they feel and if they are satisfied or not both with different aspects of their lives as well as with their lives in general. In this way, we aim to:

- **Give voice to children**, applying one of the fundamental rights enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), i.e. the right of every child to be heard, to express his or her views on what affects him or her and to have this information taken properly into account by policy-makers and others involved either directly or indirectly in children’s lives.
- **Generate new data** on children’s well-being, proposing a new and robust synthetic instrument, the General Index of Children’s Subjective Well-Being (GICSWB).
- **Raise awareness** of the need to hear the views of children and take them properly into account; that is, to promote discussion regarding the situation of children and their well-being from different points of view, not only from the “adult” point of view.
- **Promote an evidence-based decision making**, process which includes children and their opinion when developing public policies that affect them directly or indirectly.

## QUALITY OF LIFE AND CHILDREN’S SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN SPAIN

What affects the well-being of children in the first year of secondary education?



This was a study conducted between 2011 and 2012 by UNICEF Spain together with the Research Team in Childhood, Adolescents, Children’s Rights and Quality of Life (ERÍDIQV) of the University of Girona. The research is based on a survey of approximately

6,000 children in their first year of secondary school in Spain. The study took place in 143 different centers (see Annex I for details).

The study received funding from the Ministry of Health, Social Policy and Equality (now the Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality) and the support of the “la Caixa” Foundation.

The full study report is available on the website of UNICEF Spain:

<http://www.unicef.es/actualidad-documentacion/publicaciones/calidad-de-vida-y-bienestar-infantil-subjetivo-en-espana>

## MAIN CONCLUSIONS...

- Children are good informants if we know how to listen.
- In Spain, children in the first form of Compulsory Secondary Education are mostly satisfied with their life, but at the same time there is a part of the child population that remain “on the sidelines” of these high levels of well-being.
- The well-being levels vary significantly depending on the life domain that is analyzed and the personal characteristics and socio-economic environment of the child.

## ... AND RECOMENDATIONS

- Children’s voice should be incorporated in the process of policy making and the impacts of the measures to be adopted on children’s subjective well-being should be evaluated.
- It is necessary to adopt measures to help maximize well-being levels for all the children in our country, with special attention to those areas and groups who express lower levels of well-being.



**"Childhood has its own  
ways of seeing, thinking and  
feeling and nothing is more  
foolish than to try to  
substitute ours for theirs"**

**JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU**





# CHILDREN'S SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

## WHAT IS IT?

Subjective well-being is understood as the set of perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of people (in this case, children) about their own lives and living conditions.

Although not exactly the same, we can relate subjective well-being with concepts like happiness, quality of life, life satisfaction or personal well-being, terms that may be more familiar to readers.

In any case, reporting on subjective well-being and quality of life involve:

- Accepting that subjective measurements of certain social realities can be as useful as objective measurements when it comes to evaluation and decision-making. For example, knowing the percentages of satisfied versus dissatisfied hospital patients can be just as useful as having quantitative measurements of technological efficiency at the same hospital.
- Measuring material aspects (which are obviously important) together with non-material aspects of life such as happiness or satisfaction.
- Talking about well-being in the present and about the child as a citizen and subject of right here and now, and not only as a future adult. Many approaches to improving children's well-being, have done so considering future well-being primarily: <<that they reach a certain well-being, when they become adults>>. An "adult-centered" perspective has meant that, too often, children are not considered valuable for what they are in the present, but rather for what they will become in the future.

**Children's subjective well-being is understood as the set of perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of children regarding their own lives.**

## WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on November 20, 1989, marked a turning point in treatment of childhood. As opposed to viewing the child as a passive object of the law, dependent upon the decisions of adults and unable to participate and comment directly upon the society around him or her, the CRC sees the child as an active subject of rights, with the right to free expression of opinion, as well as the right to have those opinions taken into account by policy-makers. (Art. 12).

### Art 12. Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC)

**"Los Estados Partes garantizarán al niño que esté en condiciones de formarse un juicio propio el derecho de expresar su opinión libremente en todos los asuntos que afectan al niño, teniéndose debidamente en cuenta las opiniones del niño, en función de la edad y madurez del niño"**

Above all, to be heard is a universal right of every child and it is our obligation to enforce it.

Secondly, and following the maxim "to improve something, first measure it" (UNICEF, 2007), we start from the conviction that thorough knowledge of the situation of children in Spain and their well-being, is essential for an evidence-based decision making process and the development of coherent and effective policies. It is essential to consider the perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of children and adolescents and not just what adults supposedly know about the lives of the youngest.

That is, children can and should be key informants when analyzing their well-being and the general well-being of the population, and when developing policies, plans and programs to improve their quality of life. While this may

## CHILDREN'S PERSPECTIVE

Traditionally there has been significant resistance from social researchers and/or policy makers, to accept the answers or statements of the children as reliable. In many studies on children's quality of life the children themselves are asked nothing and what is really studied are the perceptions and opinions of adults about their lives.

Instead, this study is based on data collection from the perspective of children: children themselves have reported on their activities,

perceptions, evaluations and aspirations. This means that reading the answers given by children can't be done only from the logical thinking of an adult.

Surely in many cases, we can not be certain that the children and adults understand a question in the same way and sometimes children don't really understand adult logic. In other cases, they simply express themselves in a different language (sometimes less accurate to adult eyes) than adults expect. However, sometimes children

take into account possibilities of reality that adults don't think about.

The less "adult-centered" reading is the one that gives credibility to the responses of the children, trying to understand the reasons for their answers from their point of view.

Ultimately, many questions that arise from this research may not be clear until development of a qualitative study in which children will explain, in a language comprehensible for adults, what it is they mean to say.

seem obvious and indisputable for adults, is still far from reality for children in Spain.

Thirdly, subjective well-being indicators provide a positive vision to the extent that they relate to situations, behaviors and relationships that positively influence children's well-being, complementing the analysis of negative aspects of the child's life, such as poverty and material deprivation. Focusing attention on what makes them happy allows us to think of real policies to promote children's well-being. This becomes even more important in a historical moment like the present, in

which deep economic and social crisis is not only worsening the material conditions of many children's lives, but also compromising their subjective well-being and their positive and optimistic perceptions of their own existence.

Finally, this study begins by noting that "quality data" is often nonexistent and that data generated in a regular and systematic way is needed. This paper aims to take a step in that direction, proposing and testing a reliable new instrument for measuring the subjective well-being of children in Spain.

**To be listened to and have their opinions** taken into account represents a universal right of every child and it is absolutely necessary to develop and implement consistent and effective policies that promote the well-being of our children here and now, not only as future adults.

# OVERALL RESULTS: CHILDREN'S SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING IN SPAIN

This study measures the children's well-being from two main perspectives. On the one hand it analyzes the overall levels of children's well-being through the new General Index of Children's Subjective Well-Being (hereinafter General Index). On the other hand, it measures the specific levels of well-being in different children's life domains (for more details see Annex I).

The most visible result of the study is that children's subjective well-being in Spain (General Index) is on average very high. The Spanish average of subjective well-being for the study population stands at almost 87 points out of 100, above the expected average in western adult populations (between 70 and 80 points)<sup>1</sup>.



## Overall results: children's subjective well-being in Spain

In general, high percentages of subjective well-being are expected in any population due to the so-called life optimism bias. This phenomenon is also observed in adults, although the study suggests that it is more evident among children.

These high levels of children's subjective well-being, should not lead to the mistake of thinking that the goal of maximizing children's well-being has been satisfied, or that every single child in Spain has the same high level of subjective well-being, as we will see throughout this document.

It is important to note that the analyses that are made below have to be interpreted from a relative perspective. This means that when we speak of the "worse" results we are not referring to low levels of well-being in absolute

terms, but to lower than average levels. With this high "standard" and concentration of responses at the high end of the table, relative differences, although they may seem small, are significant and can provide valuable information. If we analyze the distribution of the respondents according to their levels of general well-being (Figure 1), we see that, while there are 52.7% of respondents with very high levels (over 90 points), there are almost 13% showing relatively low levels of well-being (between 50 and 74), and 1.8% of the surveyed present levels of subjective well-being that are well below average (less than 50 points).

This percentage, fortunately very low, tells us about a part of the child population that remains "on the sidelines" of the high levels of subjective well-being that characterizes the rest of their peers.

### THE LIFE OPTIMISM BIAS

The so-called life optimism bias makes any human population tend to answer any questions about satisfaction with aspects or areas of their lives with much higher percentage of satisfied than dissatisfied.

In population studies on subjective well-being it has been found that the responses to the different scales do not follow a normal statistical curve (Gaus Curve), but most people tend to respond well above the "neutral point" regardless of their socio-demographic attributes.

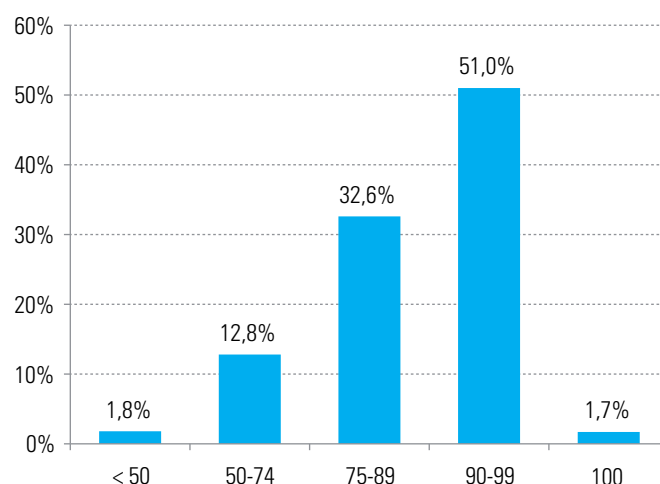
There is evidence of the existence of this phenomenon in all cultures, but it has also been observed that it is frequently different between cultures.

The present study suggests that in children and adolescent populations this optimism even intensifies, and is consistent with other studies that show that it decreases with the increase in the age of the surveyed.

**Subjective well-being** of child population in the first year of Compulsory Secondary Education in Spain is, on average, very high. Still, there is a small part of the population that has much lower levels of well-being.

**FIGURE 1. General Index of Children's Subjective Well-being**

(distribution of the population according to the level of well-being)







## WHAT INFLUENCES CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING?

In general, the study has shown how well-being levels vary greatly, depending on many factors related to personal circumstances and environment. Besides the geographic and gender variable, which will be the object of a specified reflection later on, we can identify at least three categories of factors that clearly influence levels of well-being.

**1. Context conditions and use of time.** Context conditions include socioeconomic and cultural factors, such as the educational level of the parents or guardians, cultural and material possessions or the fact that household members have a paid job or not.

**2. Population characteristics,** such as age, place of birth, type of household or the type of school the respondents attend.

**3. Perceptions and concerns** that each child expresses about the things he/she has or some elements of his /her life, both in and outside the home.

The results of the study show that, depending on these factors, we can clearly identify two profiles of well-being: the “happiest” children, i.e. those with higher levels of well-being; and children who remain “on the sidelines” or “excluded” from high levels of well-being.

To summarize, and without the order of writing having any relevance, the main factors contributing to these two profiles are summarized below.

In the full study report (pp 107-123) on children's subjective well-being these and other personal and contextual variables are entered into in fuller detail. We invite the reader interested in more details to access the full document on the UNICEF website above.

# THE "HAPPIEST"

## Context conditions and use of time

- ☺ Parents have higher levels of education.
- ☺ Report having a space of their own at home.
- ☺ Report having enough spaces to play and enjoy themselves in the area they live in.
- ☺ Have more material and cultural belongings at home<sup>2</sup>.
- ☺ Report 2 adults in paid employment living at home.
- ☺ In the last year had at least 1 week of holiday away from the home.
- ☺ Receive regular pocket money from their parents.
- ☺ Do physical exercise or sport every day.
- ☺ Report daily activities together with their family.
- ☺ Attend state-run school<sup>3</sup>.

## Population characteristics

- ☺ Live in a single family home, with both parents.
- ☺ Have experienced fewer recent significant changes in their life<sup>4</sup>.
- ☺ Attend school in semi-urban populations, between 2,000 and 20,000 inhabitants.

## Perceptions and concerns

- ☺ Feel safe at home, in their city, and in their school.
- ☺ Feel listened to and taken into account by parents, city council members and teachers.
- ☺ Consider that other people treat them well, including parents, friends, classmates and teachers.
- ☺ Have been spoken to about child rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.
- ☺ Aspire to relational values such as kindness or personality over materialistic values.
- ☺ Never worry about money.
- ☺ Feel their time is well organized.
- ☺ Report they are well treated when going to the doctor.







# THOSE WHO REMAIN “ON THE SIDELINES”

## Context conditions and use of time

- ⊗ Do not receive any kind of pocket money.
- ⊗ Have parents who did not finish primary education.
- ⊗ Report that no adult at home is in paid employment.
- ⊗ Do not have access to ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) when needed.

## Population characteristics

- ⊗ Are in care, in the public child protection system.
- ⊗ Where not born in Spain.
- ⊗ Have changed parents or schools during the last year.
- ⊗ Repeat a school year.

## Perceptions and concerns

- ⊗ Feel they cannot participate in decisions made at home.
- ⊗ Do not feel safe, particularly at home or at school.
- ⊗ Perceive their family as being less or much less wealthy than other families.

# WELL-BEING BY LIFE DOMAINS

The results discussed in the previous section were arrived at by summing the scores of 8 different life domains<sup>5</sup>. Analyzing the levels of well-being in each of these domains helps us to understand what areas or aspects are critical and/or of priority when designing and implementing policies to promote children's well-being in general.

The questionnaire administered included, among others, 26 questions on children satisfaction regarding specific aspects within 8 life domains (Table 1).

The respective rates of well-being by domain were calculated from this group of 26 items, which, as shown in the Figure, draw a far more varied panorama than appeared in the general shot.

It is clear that in some domains children experience much lower levels of satisfaction than average (Figure 2).

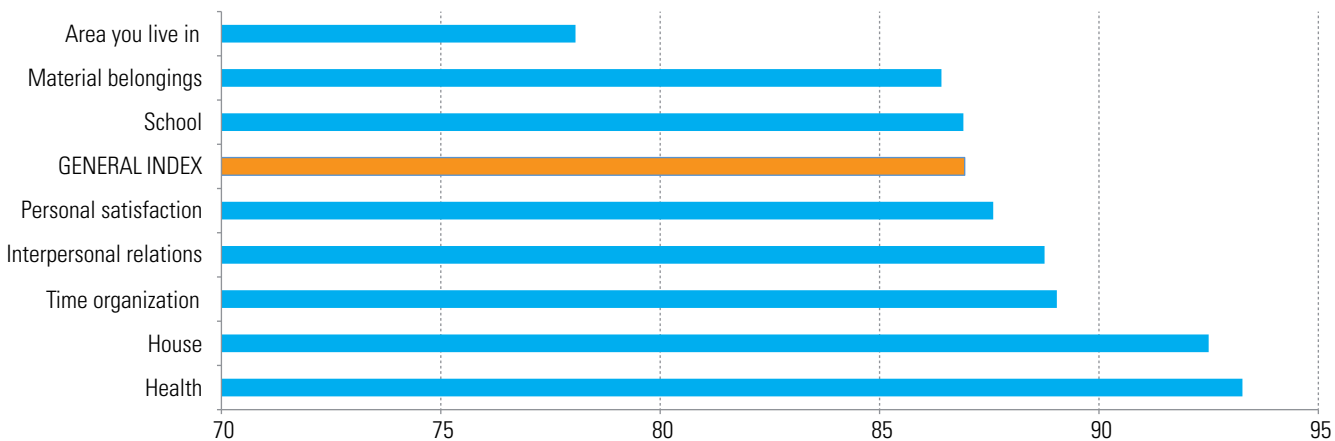
The highest average corresponds to the index of satisfaction with health, followed by the index of satisfaction with home, and the level of satisfaction with the organization of time.

**TABLE 1. Life domains and specific items analyzed**

LIFE DOMAIN	"TO WHAT EXTENT ARE YOU SATISFIED WITH...?"
<b>House</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The house or flat where you live</li> <li>- The people who live with you</li> <li>- All the other people in your family</li> </ul>
<b>Material belongings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- All the things you have</li> <li>- The pocket money you get</li> <li>- The personal space you have for yourself at home</li> </ul>
<b>Interpersonal relations</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Your friends</li> <li>- The people who live in your area</li> <li>- Your relationships with people in general</li> </ul>
<b>Area you live in</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The local police in your area</li> <li>- The area you live in, in general</li> <li>- The libraries in your area</li> <li>- The public transport in your area</li> </ul>
<b>Health</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How you are dealt with when you go to the doctors</li> <li>- Your health</li> </ul>
<b>Time organization</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- How you use your time</li> <li>- What you do in your free time</li> </ul>
<b>School</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The school you go to</li> <li>- Your schoolmates</li> <li>- Your school marks</li> </ul>
<b>Personal satisfaction</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The freedom you have</li> <li>- The way that you look</li> <li>- Yourself</li> <li>- How you are listened to</li> <li>- Your self confidence</li> <li>- The amount of choice you have in life</li> </ul>



FIGURE 2. **Children’s Subjective Well-being: Satisfaction with life domains**



The lowest average satisfaction index corresponds to the area in which they live followed by the index of material satisfaction.

If we increase the level of detail and look at the specific aspects (items) that make up the domains, the same scenario is largely confirmed (See Figure II.1 in Annex).

The items with higher average satisfaction levels are overall health and people living at home, and those with the lowest levels are libraries<sup>6</sup> and city police in the area, followed by pocket money (both those with regular pocket money and without it have been asked, so some of the respondents have answered about their satisfaction/dissatisfaction with the fact that they don’t get pocket money).

Comparing these rates with some of the personal and contextual characteristics discussed in the previous chapter, we observe that:

- Students from state-run schools tend to be more satisfied with their interpersonal relationships, their

health, the organization of their time and personal aspects (freedom, appearance, etc.) than those from mixed funding and private schools. On the other hand students from mixed funding schools are significantly more satisfied with their home than those from other types of schools. There is almost no difference by type of school in terms of satisfaction with the area in which they live in and the school they attend.

- Students attending school in semi-urban environments show significantly higher scores than those from other types of schools in all domains, except in health satisfaction, where those from urban environments score only moderately higher.
- Boys and girls born in Spain show significantly higher satisfaction with all life domains except in satisfaction with the area in which they live in.
- There is a significant decrease in satisfaction with age, and a clear break between the ages of 11-12 and 13-14; remember that the latter, in our sample, are mostly repeaters.

**In some aspects and domains of life children experience much lower levels of satisfaction than average.**

### THE MOST IMPORTANT DOMAINS

What is important for children? What things have more influence on their well-being? What makes them happy?

Not all domains or aspects of a child's life influence him or her in the same way or have the same bearing on his or her overall well-being. Therefore, in addition to knowing the level of well-being by domain, it is very interesting and useful to analyze to what extent each of them contributes to the overall well-being of children.

We can say that the life domain that contributes the most to overall subjective well-being is the personal satisfaction, and within this field the satisfaction with the opportunities they have in life, with themselves, with self confidence and how they are listened to. These are followed by material satisfaction and satisfaction with their school domains.

At the other hand, the area in which they live, is the life domain that received the lowest scores generally, but it also contributes the least to the general well-being<sup>7</sup>.

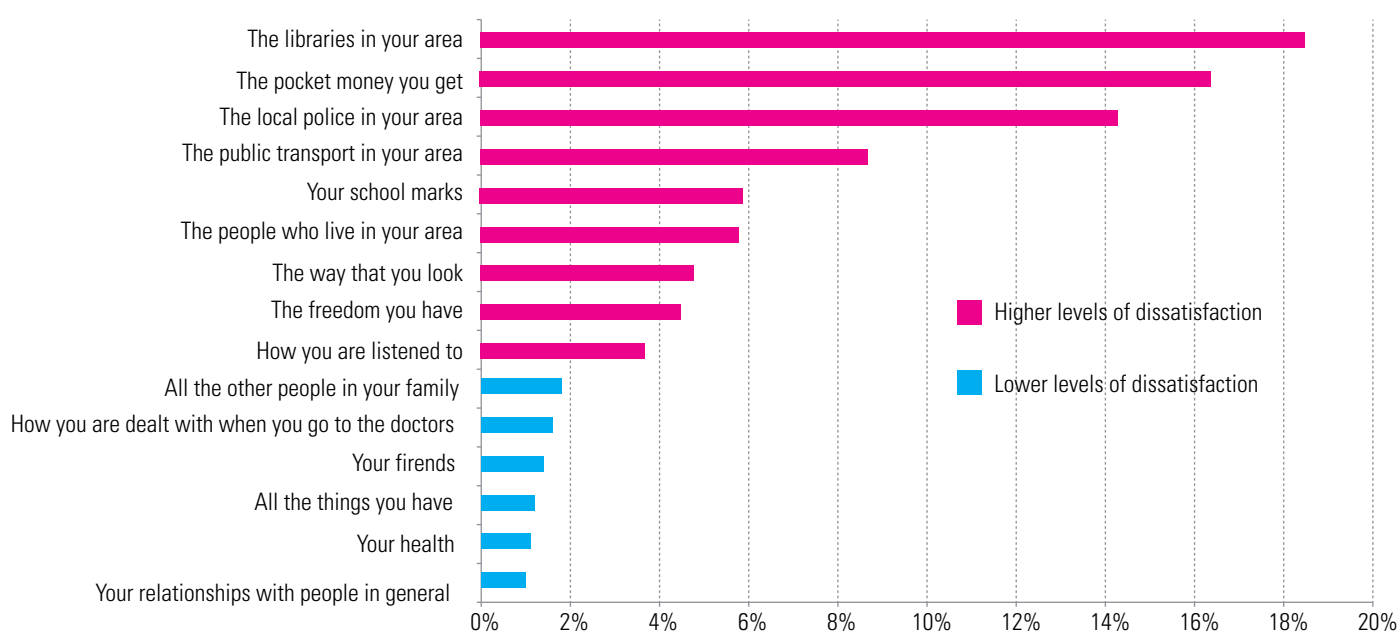
### THE LESS SATISFACTORY FIELDS

We have observed how a small group of the population remains "excluded" from the high overall rates of well-being, and have analyzed some of the personal or contextual characteristics that best explain these differences. Furthermore, we have seen that in some aspects of life, such as those related to services in the area in which the child lives, far fewer children are satisfied.

Another way to organize the results so as to bring attention to those who remain "on the sideline" is to focus not only on the average levels of satisfaction, but also on the extreme values and see where the most dissatisfied children are concentrated.

In Figure 3 we have ordered some of the 26 specific aspects of children's lives in terms of percentage of dissatisfied, selecting on the one hand those who have higher levels of dissatisfaction and on the other those with the lowest level of dissatisfaction.

**FIGURE 3. "Dissatisfaction" of children with some aspects of life (% of dissatisfied)**



*Note: From the 26 items included in this study, this Figure shows the 9 items with the highest percentages of dissatisfied children and the 6 items with smallest percentages. Those who assigned these items between 0 and 4 points out of 10 were considered dissatisfied. from 10.*



**The percentage of children** dissatisfied with some domain or aspects of their lives is far greater than the overall dissatisfied according to the general well-being index.



Those who assigned aspects between 0 and 4 points out of 10 were considered dissatisfied.

We observe that these results largely coincide with the General Index discussed above, i.e. some areas and items with lower levels of well-being are also those that were considered most dissatisfactory and, conversely, those with better overall results have the lowest percentage of dissatisfied.

However, when analyzing outliers it's obvious that the percentage of very dissatisfied children with some aspect or area of their life is far greater than the overall dissatisfied according to the general well-being index, i.e. with their life in general. This is because the high levels of well-being in some aspects and domains (such as home or health) compensate for the significantly lower values of others.

Confirming what we have just said, it is noted that:

- *Pocket money received* registers the highest percentage

of dissatisfied respondents, at 16% (note that this includes both those who receive regular *pocket money* and those who don't).

- Among the 9 items with highest levels of dissatisfaction are those that pertain to the category the *area in which you live*<sup>8</sup>. More than 14% of children are very dissatisfied with *local police* and almost 9% with public transport in the area where they live.
- Also in the top 9 are 3 items of personal satisfaction. In this case, about 5% are very dissatisfied with their appearance and the freedom they have, while 4% are dissatisfied *with how they are listened to*.
- At the other end, aspects with lower percentages of dissatisfied children are related to interpersonal relationships (*relationships with people in general* with a 1% dissatisfied, and friends with 1.4% dissatisfied), health (1.1%), along with the things they have in general (1.2%) or people in their family (1.8%).

# TERRITORIAL DIFFERENCES

## GENERAL WELL-BEING

Even though all Spanish regions (17 Self-governing Communities and 2 Self-governing Cities) show high scores of well-being, significant<sup>9</sup> territorial variability is observed.

Galicia appears as the region with the highest average subjective well-being (88.9), followed by the Basque Country (88.7) and Navarra (88.6). The lowest values are observed in Catalonia (85.3), Castilla y León (85.7) and Madrid (85.9).

The first fact that jumps out is that although there are differences, in general they aren't high. Again, we can say that Spanish children in the first year of Compulsory Secondary Education across all autonomous communities and cities are mostly very satisfied with their life.

## WELL-BEING BY LIFE DOMAINS

**The differences observed between regions are higher when analyzing the levels of satisfaction by life domain.**

Before analyzing this data in more detail, we recall that the data separated by regions and also by domains should be taken with caution because of the size of the respective samples.

The table in Annex (Table II.1) shows the General Index values and indexes of well-being by life domain in all regions, and allows us to make many comparative analyses. The regions are arranged in descending order depending on the General Index and the colors define the higher (light blue) and lower (dark blue) levels of well-being, such as in the map in Figure 4.

Here, we have tried to summarize some conclusions that seem relevant:

- **The differences between regions are higher in some domains than those observed in the General Index.** For example, regions with a very similar level of general well-being, as Castilla La Mancha and Cantabria, register different

values of satisfaction with the *area where in which you live* (78,6 and 84,4 respectively).

- The opposite is at times also true. That is, **regions on the edges of the general well-being ranking significantly reduce their differences in some specific areas.** This applies, for example, to the Basque Country and Catalonia (respectively second and last in ranking), which have almost the same levels of satisfaction with *health* (92,6 and 92,4).

- **No single region registered the lowest results in all areas or, by the same token, the highest results in all areas.** The **highest levels of satisfaction** are registered in the Basque Country (marked in green on the chart), with *interpersonal relationships* and *material things*; in Extremadura with the *organization of time*; in Cantabria with *health*, *home* and *area in which you live*; in Ceuta with *personal satisfaction* and in Melilla<sup>10</sup> with the *school you attend*. Furthermore, Navarra has the **lowest levels of satisfaction** (marked in red) with *health*; Canarias with *interpersonal relationships*, *personal satisfaction*, *material things* and the *area in which you live*; Castilla y León with *school*; and Catalonia with *home* and *organization of time*.

- **Regions situated in the lower ranking of general well-being can present relatively high levels in specific life domains and vice versa.** This applies, for example, to Castilla y León and Madrid, last and second last on the general list, whose levels of well-being specifically in *material things* and *area where you live in*, among others, are relatively high. Contrariwise, Navarra, the region with the third highest levels of general well-being, registers the lowest level of satisfaction with *health* and one of the lowest in *school*.

**Differences between regions are more evident when analyzing the levels of children's subjective well-being in specific life domains.**

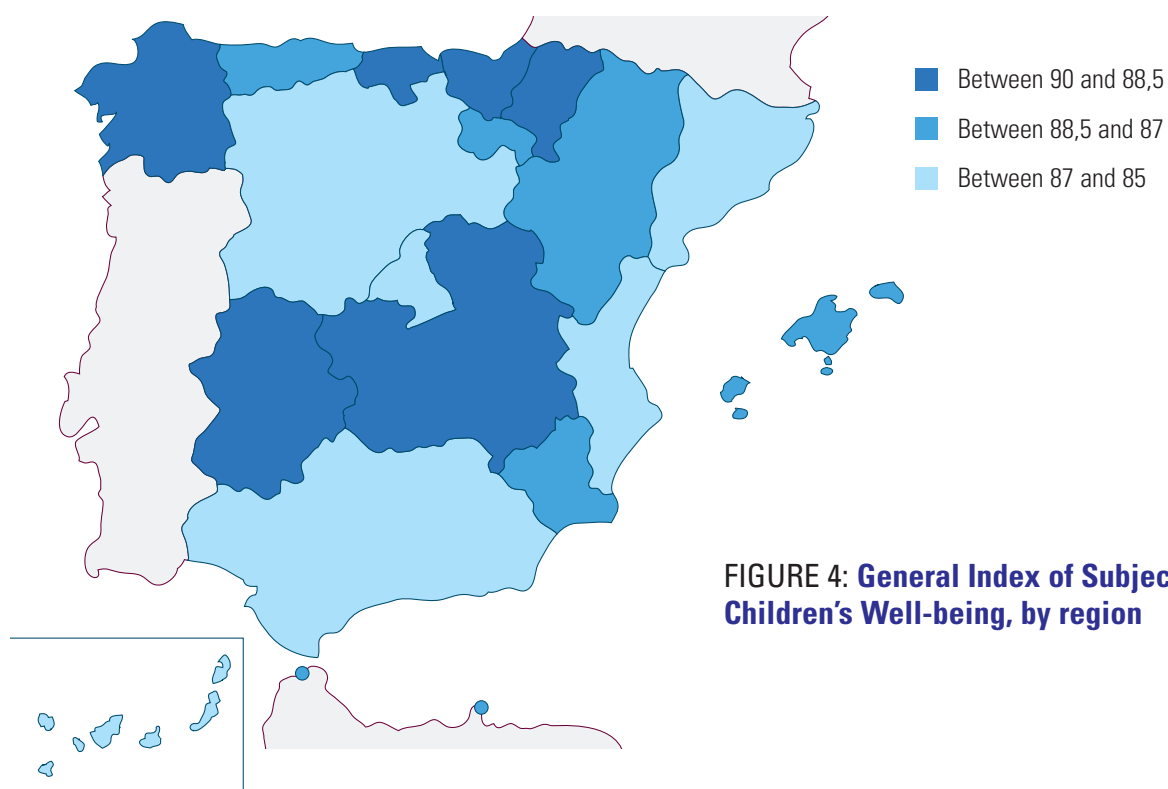


FIGURE 4: **General Index of Subjective Children's Well-being, by region**

● **The internal structure of well-being varies in each region**, i.e. life domains that at the national level seem to be the best, may not be the best within certain regions and vice versa. Take for example the case of *satisfaction with material things*, which nationwide is almost

the worst ranked domain, followed only by *area where you live in*. At the same time, in 10 regions it ranks in a better position and is even between the 4 best rated areas in Asturias, Castilla y León, Navarra and Basque Country.





# GENDER DIFFERENCES

Gender differences in children's subjective well-being studies have often been a topic of controversy, with even contradictory results in scientific publications. In analyzing the results of this study, we can say that, although the gender differences are not significant<sup>11</sup> at the level of general children's well-being (General Index), they are significant in different life domains (Figure 5).

For example, girls show higher scores than boys in satisfaction with home, material possessions, relationships, area in which they live, and the school they attend. Instead, boys show slightly higher values in terms of personal satisfaction and the organization of their time.

If we consider the specific items that we used to evaluate the overall satisfaction, it appears that girls scored more than boys in most of them.

If we select only the cases where these differences are most evident (Figure 6), we see that, for example, girls are significantly more satisfied than boys with some services in the areas in which they live (libraries, transport, municipal police), with school or with pocket money they get. On the other hand, boys show slightly more satisfaction with themselves, their freedom or their appearance.

These and other results suggest that both sexes have a tendency towards a very high level of satisfaction, which is reflected in different aspects or areas depending on gender, and overall they "compensate" so that in the end there are no significant differences.

In any case, it seems clear that gender differences can be highly influenced by environmental or geographical and socio-cultural factors, being that in some domains there are no differences between regions, while in others the differences are remarkable and statistically significant<sup>12</sup>.



**Gender differences** are not significant in the overall children's well-being, but they are in different areas and components.

FIGURE 5: **Well-Being by Areas, depending on gender.**

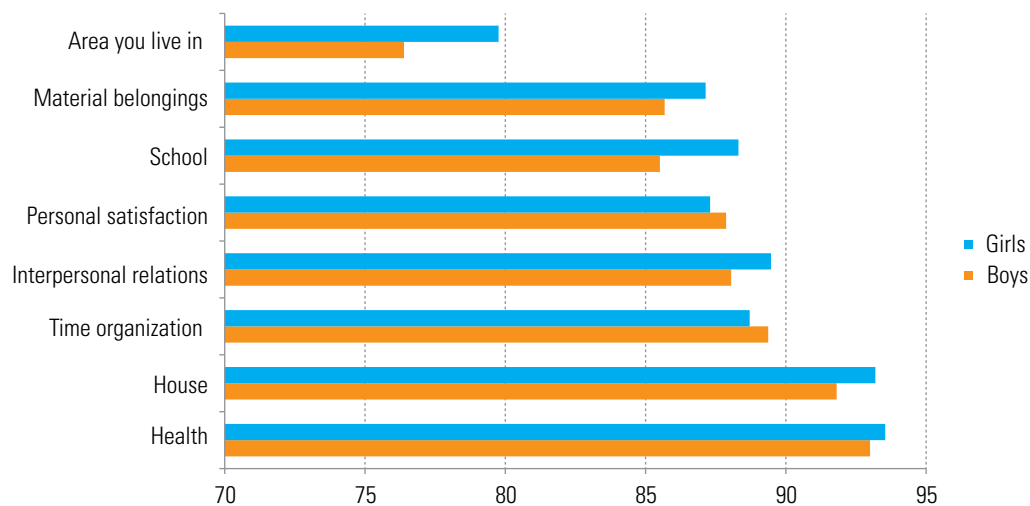
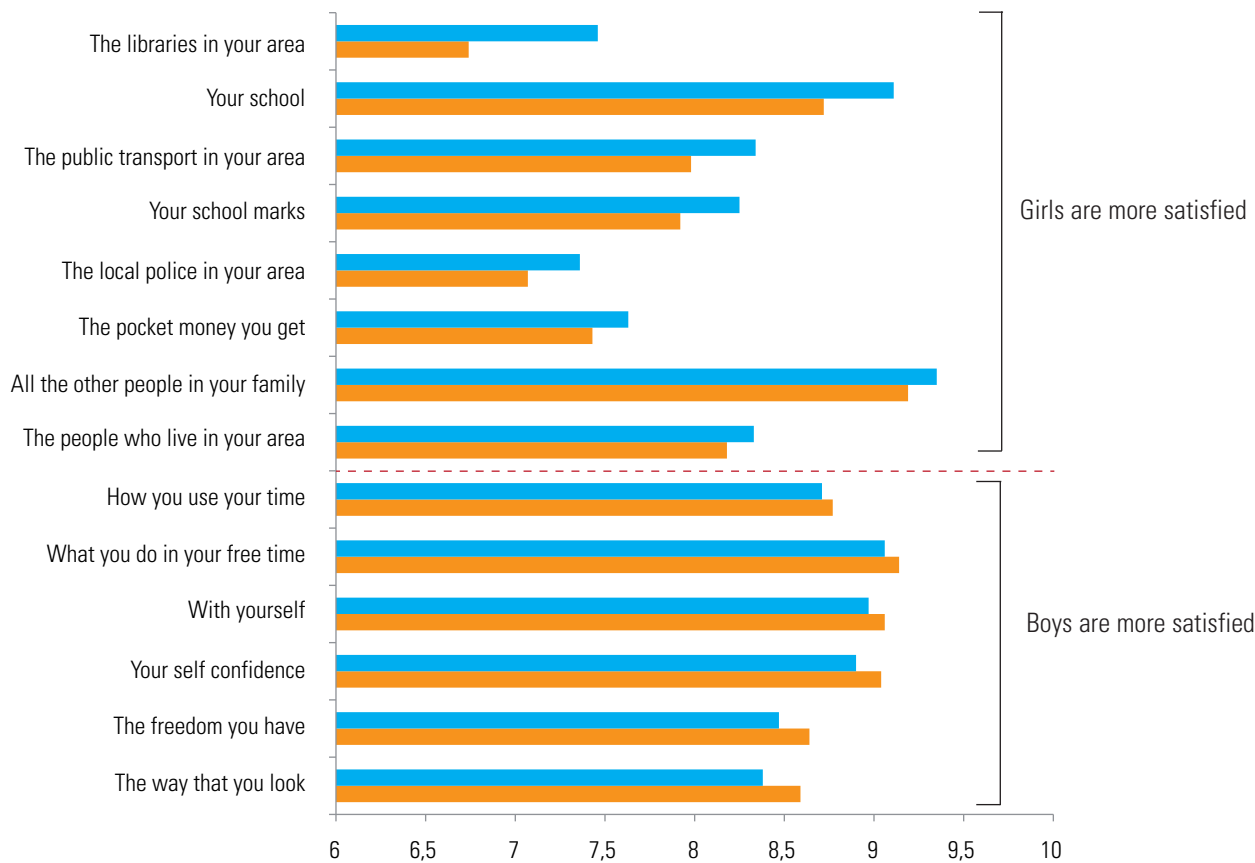


FIGURE 6: **Level of satisfaction with some aspects of children's life (from 0 to 10), depending on gender.**



Note: The Figure shows the levels of satisfaction of the 8 items with a higher difference "in favor" of girls and the 6 items with a higher difference of well-being in favor of boys.

# OTHER ISSUES TO REFLECT ON

In addition to asking satisfaction levels in general and with specific aspects of life, the questionnaire also included questions on descriptive elements of children's life: the things they do, what their hobbies are, their values or aspirations, the opportunities they have to participate and express their opinion, etc.

What children say (which we have grouped here in three sections) suggests a specific point of reflection because it demonstrates that many of our stereotypes are incorrect and because it highlights shortcomings in the application of fundamental rights of children as the right to participate.

## USE OF TIME, VALUES AND ASPIRATIONS OF CHILDREN: UNEXPECTED RESULTS?

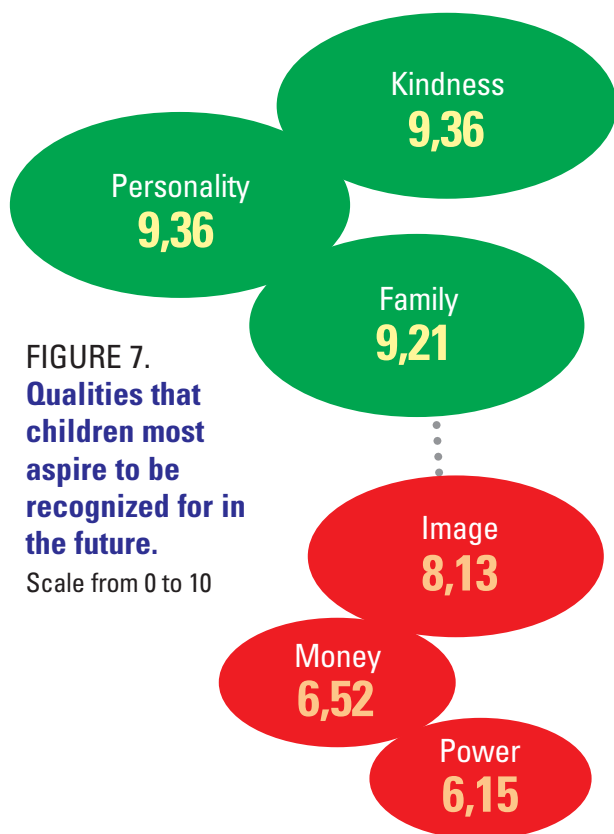


FIGURE 7.  
**Qualities that children most aspire to be recognized for in the future.**  
Scale from 0 to 10

The study confirms many "expected" results, i.e. they more or less coincide with the "common" perceptions. However, other results, although already known by social researches, may seem "unexpected" for much of society. This makes us wonder if we really know our children and teenagers and invites us to critically reflect on adult stereotypes and beliefs, especially regarding children's values and aspirations.

### USO DEL TIEMPO

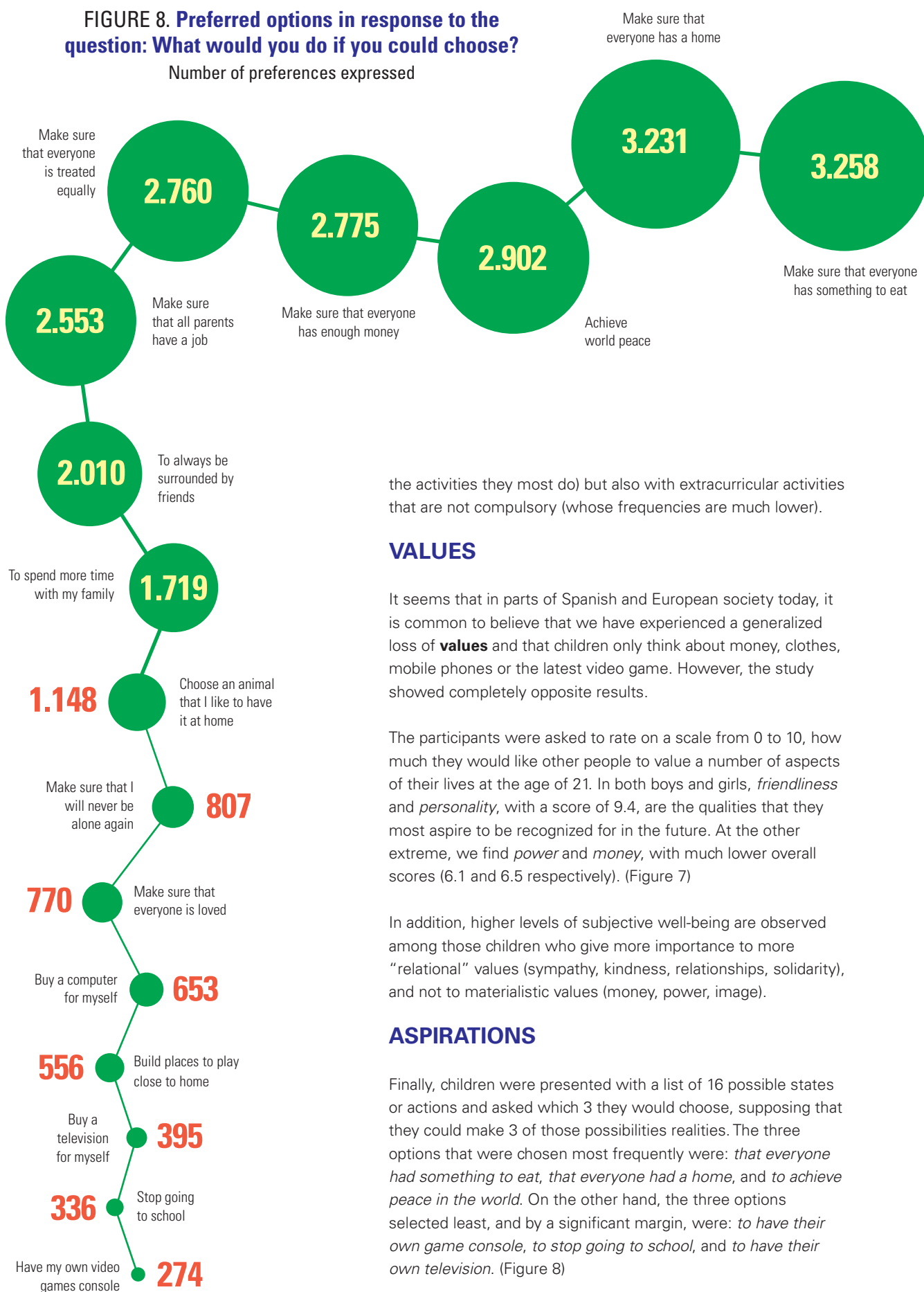
*Doing homework* is the activity they carry out most frequently (91% do so "every day or almost every day"), followed by *watching TV, movies or listening to music* (74%), *sports or physical exercise* (58%) and *helping with house chores* (53%).

On the other hand, *extracurricular activities that they have chosen* and *reading for pleasure* are, among the analyzed activities, the tasks performed less frequently (respectively, 29% and 24% do so "less often or never"). These activities also affect their well-being since, for example, high levels of well-being are related to how often they play sports or engage in physical activity (which is one of



**FIGURE 8. Preferred options in response to the question: What would you do if you could choose?**

Number of preferences expressed



the activities they most do) but also with extracurricular activities that are not compulsory (whose frequencies are much lower).

## VALUES

It seems that in parts of Spanish and European society today, it is common to believe that we have experienced a generalized loss of **values** and that children only think about money, clothes, mobile phones or the latest video game. However, the study showed completely opposite results.

The participants were asked to rate on a scale from 0 to 10, how much they would like other people to value a number of aspects of their lives at the age of 21. In both boys and girls, *friendliness* and *personality*, with a score of 9.4, are the qualities that they most aspire to be recognized for in the future. At the other extreme, we find *power* and *money*, with much lower overall scores (6.1 and 6.5 respectively). (Figure 7)

In addition, higher levels of subjective well-being are observed among those children who give more importance to more “relational” values (sympathy, kindness, relationships, solidarity), and not to materialistic values (money, power, image).

## ASPIRATIONS

Finally, children were presented with a list of 16 possible states or actions and asked which 3 they would choose, supposing that they could make 3 of those possibilities realities. The three options that were chosen most frequently were: *that everyone had something to eat*, *that everyone had a home*, and *to achieve peace in the world*. On the other hand, the three options selected least, and by a significant margin, were: *to have their own game console*, *to stop going to school*, and *to have their own television*. (Figure 8)



## CHILD PARTICIPATION

The study shows that children who report higher levels of participation score significantly higher in subjective well-being. However, percentages of children answering very much agree to any of the items concerning participation, are rather low, and particularly in relation to their municipalities.

Moreover, what is most striking and worrying are the relatively low levels of perceived participation by children in all areas. Among questions that have recorded the lowest levels of “agreement” (compared to rates observed in all other survey questions), we found those about: whether they

participate in the decisions made at home; if the city council (Ayuntamiento) asks their opinion on issues that matter to them; and if teachers listen to them and take them into account.

This disagreement is especially evident in the case of decisions made at home and actions promoted by the city council.

Finally, it is noteworthy that the children feel that their opinions are taken into account at school more than at home.

**TABLE 2. Participation in family and social life. Percentages**

	Very much agree	Agree	Neither disagree nor agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree
I can participate in decisions taken at home	36	35	22	4	2
The City council asks the opinion of the children for issues that matter to them	31	26	20	9	14
My teachers listen to me and take me into count	50	38	10	2	1



# CHILDREN AND THEIR RIGHTS

Over half of the children surveyed have not heard about the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) or answer that they don't know, so promoting knowledge and awareness of these topics is a continuing challenge.

The vast majority of respondents (71%) say they strongly agree with the statement that *all children and adolescents have rights*, against a very small part (3%) who disagree or strongly disagree. However, not even half (42%) of the children have heard about the Convention.

The place where they have been told about these rights in most cases is the *school* (53%), followed by *family* (43%) and *others* (30%).

The study also revealed a partly unexpected result, one that opens an interesting field of study. Children who report that they have been told about children's rights, whether in the family, at school or by others, show higher levels of subjective well-being.

Finally, respondents who have heard of the CRC also show higher subjective well-being levels than those who have not, or those who can't answer.





# CONCLUSIONS >>>

In assessing children's well-being we can't put aside the voices and opinions of the children themselves. That is, we can't limit our understanding to what we, as adults, think we know about them.

Children have the universal right to be heard and have their views taken into account in all matters affecting them. If we want to act to ensure this right and improve the well-being of children, we need to subject it to serious analysis which must include the child's own point of view.

Therefore, we wanted to listen to the children, to ask them about their perceptions, evaluations and aspirations for their own lives.

Children's well-being is a complex and multidimensional issue that needs to be studied in depth from multiple points of view. In this regard, this study is a first step and there are many more to take, both in research and in its implementation in public policies.

From the results of this study, we can draw some interesting conclusions about the subjective well-being of children in their first year of secondary school in Spain:

■ **Children are good informers... if we know how to listen to them.** They understand the questions and are capable to discriminate between answers, although possibly in different ways than adults would do. The results reinforce the credibility and reliability of their answers, and compel us to strive to understand them and make them understand us better.

■ **Children in the first year of secondary school in Spain are mostly very satisfied with their lives.** The Spanish average of subjective well-being of this population is 87 points out of 100, above the expected average in adult populations.

■ **However, there is a part of the child population that remains "on the sidelines" of these high levels of well-being.** About 2% of the respondents present general well-being levels far below the average and another 13% present relatively low levels.

■ **There are specific domains or aspects of their lives in which children experience satisfaction levels that are well below average.** Among them is satisfaction with different aspects of the area in which you live in, and satisfaction with material possessions.





■ **In general, children are very satisfied with their life in all regions (Comunidades y Ciudades Autónomas) although there are some differences.** Galicia is the region with highest subjective well-being (88.9) while the lowest level recorded corresponds to Catalonia (85.3).

■ **Scores vary widely across territories and sometimes the variation increases when examining specific domains.** One of many examples is the case of Navarra which, despite being the community with the third highest levels of overall subjective well-being, registers the worst result in terms of satisfaction with health. On the other hand, Madrid, third last in the overall ranking, has high levels of satisfaction with the area where you live in.

■ **While gender differences are not significant in overall well-being, they are significant in different life domains and factors.**

> Girls show higher scores of satisfaction with home, material possessions, relationships, the area in which you live and school, while boys show higher levels of satisfaction with personal satisfaction and organization of time.

> High levels of subjective well-being are directly related to higher levels of education attained by parents or guardians, a larger number of material and cultural possessions at home or the fact that two adults in the household have a paid job.

> Children who are more satisfied with their lives were commonly born in Spain; attend schools in semi-urban areas; live in a home with both parents with whom they

perform activities daily; attend public schools; hadn't repeat school years and frequently practice exercise.

The most satisfied children are also those who feel more confident, listened to, well treated by people inside and outside their homes. They also express that they feel their time is well organized and that they don't worry about the economic situation of their families.

■ **Children in the first year of secondary school in Spain aspire to relational values much more than to material ones.** The most important values for children those qualities they aspire to, are kindness and personality, while materialistic values as power and money are the least appreciated. These results, unexpected to some, force us to think critically about the stereotypes and beliefs we have as adults.

■ **Increasing knowledge and awareness of their own rights still appear to be continuing challenges.** It is observed that children who say they have been told about child rights show higher levels of subjective well-being. At the same time, over half of the children surveyed have not heard of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) or didn't answer.

■ **Children perceive to have little opportunity to participate in decisions that affect their lives and are quite unhappy with this.** The study shows that the higher the level of participation, the higher the level of subjective well-being manifested by the respondents. At the same time, particularly striking and worrying are the low levels of perceived participation regarding City Council decisions and, in part, decisions made at home.



# SOME PROPOSALS FOR ACTION >>>

In the speeches of the governments at all levels, and the academia, there is a growing emphasis in the importance of listening to children and incorporating what we learn from them into policy decisions. On the other hand it is undoubtedly necessary to promote the effective implementation and enforcement of children active child participation. There are still few, very sporadic and isolated investigations that include data provided by children and subjective indicators of their well-being and quality of life, and those available are rarely used when developing and adopting policies that affect children. It is important to increase awareness among the public and political representatives so that subjective data is considered a significant element in the design and evaluation of public policy.

In light of these considerations, we propose several measures, all of which involve, in one way or another, academia, public administrations at all levels, third sector organizations specializing in childhood, and families.

■ **Promote and encourage regular, systematic collection of quality data** (by governments and specialized centers). This includes:

- > Ensuring regular and systematic collection of such information and ensuring that indicators of children's subjective well-being are included in **official statistics**.
- > Promoting **quality research** on children's subjective well-being in universities and research centers.
- > Complementing quantitative studies with **qualitative analyses** to better understand the results of the first, and to know more about what children understand by well-being and how they interpret many of the concepts that they are asked about.

■ Apply this knowledge to decision-making, i.e. giving due consideration to the views of children in the development,

implementation and monitoring of public policies that directly or indirectly affect the lives of children. That is:

> Develop **universal policies promoting children's well-being, focusing on positive aspects of their lives, not only on negative ones**. Adopt policies aimed at defending and promoting subjective well-being and quality of life, and continuing their positive and optimistic perceptions of their own existence.

> Include the opinions, perceptions and evaluations of children, not just those of adults, in measuring the **general well-being of the population**.

> **Assess** the potential (ex ante) and real (ex post) **impacts** on children's subjective well-being of policies and measures.

■ **Pay special attention to those elements that most impact children's subjective well-being, as well as those population groups and life domains that show lower scores of subjective well-being.**

> **Specific groups** with lower levels of subjective well-being, such as those born outside Spain, those who have repeated a school year, and children in care, deserve special attention and the development of specific measures to improve their subjective well-being.

> It is critical to understand why there are **certain areas in children's lives** that received lower scores and how those specific areas can be improved. We are referring, for example, to low satisfaction with some services and infrastructures in the area in which children live (library or municipal police), or some aspects of their life such as the degree of participation they may have in their home, school or local governments' decisions.

> It is essential to investigate the **life domains that most affect** children's levels of well-being, to



understand what is most important for children, and where to focus our attention and efforts. In this regard, one of the things that most positively affects children's well-being is their satisfaction with interpersonal relationships, inside and outside the home, more so than other aspects such as material possessions.

> The clear need to analyze territorial differences in children's subjective well-being is a challenge for public administrations at all levels.

■ Encourage **active child participation** in the design and implementation of public policies and in all areas of life inside and outside the home. This includes the challenge for researchers to increase the level of children's participation in research not only as key informers, but also as actors in all phases of the investigations.

■ Finally, as recommended by the Committee on the Rights of the Child (2010), it is necessary to continue and redouble efforts to raise **awareness and training on children's rights**, since knowledge of their rights would have a positive impact on children's well-being. In this sense, the action should focus on two areas:

> Within the sphere of education, raising children's awareness of their own rights and the CRC, defending and strengthening the role of the school as principal promoter of this knowledge (through greater presence of child rights in the curriculum and school culture). At the same time, involving families in collaboration with educational institutions.

> Raise awareness of children's rights and the factors underlying children's well-being, among families, professionals working with children and decision-makers at all levels.







# ANNEX I:

# THE SURVEY

## THE SAMPLE<sup>14</sup>

This study is based on data from a questionnaire which was administered to a representative sample of nearly 6,000 children in their first year of secondary school<sup>15</sup> in Spain. In total, data was collected in 143 schools (public, subsidized and non-subsidized) and in various different environments (urban, semi-urban and rural). The sample was composed almost evenly of girls and boys and 11.2% of students surveyed were not born in Spain.

It should be noted that although the sample is representative at state level, it would not be representative within each region. Therefore, the specific results of each region shown in this document must be considered as indicative of the differences in each territory and should be treated with caution.

We must be more cautious yet when analyzing data from the self-governing cities of Ceuta and Melilla, which have a comparatively lower population size and small number of schools with very different characteristics in terms of children profiles.

## THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaire<sup>16</sup> consisted of 42 groups of questions organized into:

- An initial block, which includes data on the school, the child and the household composition.
- A core group of questions about different areas of well-being (family, friends, school, neighborhood, money/possessions, feelings, values, etc.)

- Questions about the socioeconomic and cultural context of the respondents (parents' education level and work status, possessions in the home)

- Finally, questions about the questionnaire administered: whether it seemed long, easy to answer, boring and whether they believed that they had been asked things that are important to them.

The respondents were assured total confidentiality throughout the research process. The children were informed that they were free to not answer any questions, that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could quit at any time.

Since the main objective of the study was to learn more about the well-being of children from their own point of view the questionnaire itself was very carefully designed to that end. For over two years it was the subject of consultations, discussions in focus groups and pilot testing with children.

## THE GENERAL INDEX OF CHILDREN'S SUBJECTIVE WELL-BEING

The answers obtained from the questionnaires have allowed us to analyze child well-being according to some of the most commonly used scientific indexes of subjective well-being worldwide. These indexes are very solid and useful, particularly for comparisons between countries.

However, they tend to have relatively different results depending on the context and the specific area measured. Therefore, we decided to calculate a new General Index of Children's Subjective Well-Being<sup>17</sup>, which measures the level of satisfaction of children on a scale of 0 to 100 points. In addition, eight well-being indexes were calculated by specific children's life domains.

## ANNEX II:

# ADDITIONAL FIGURES AND TABLES

FIGURE II.1: **Satisfaction with different aspects of children's lives (from 0 to 10).**

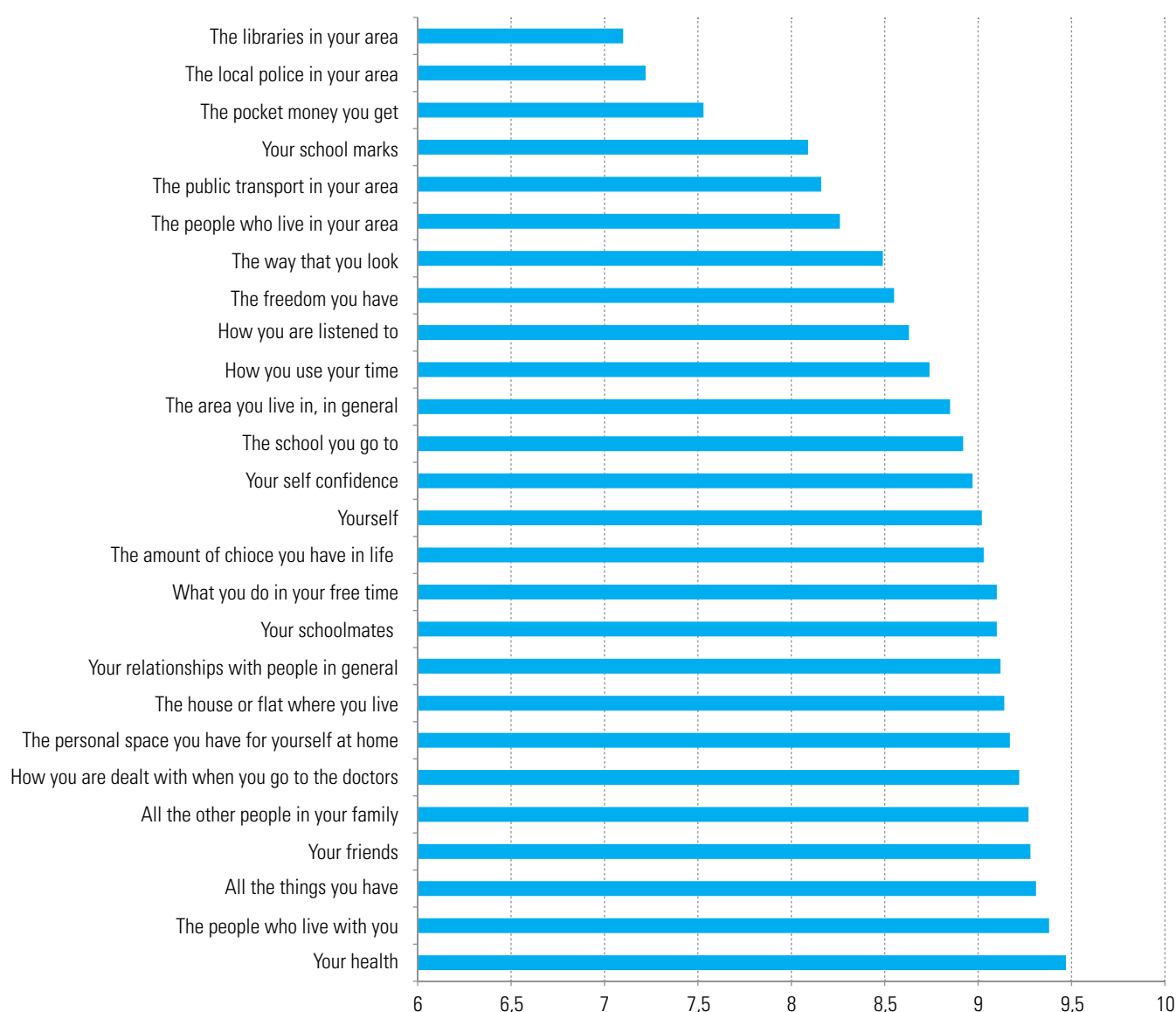




TABLE II.1: **General children's well-being and children's well-being by life domains. Distribution by regions.**

	Health	House	Time organization	Interpersonal relations	Personal satisfaction	School	Material belongings	Area you live in	GENERAL INDEX
Galicia	93,6	92,8	91,2	91,6	89,0	88,2	89,5	74,1	88,9
Basque Country	92,6	94,2	91,4	92,5	89,7	89,0	92,3	84,3	88,7
Navarra	91,8	93,1	90,1	90,3	89,8	86,8	92,1	82,9	88,6
Castilla-La Mancha	94,8	93,5	90,9	89,9	89,2	87,1	88,9	78,6	88,6
Extremadura	94,7	94,1	91,7	91,8	89,7	87,6	88,2	80,2	88,6
Cantabria	96,4	94,9	91,6	91,1	89,9	89,7	90,2	84,5	88,6
Ceuta	94,1	91,1	90,9	89,1	90,5	86,9	86,6	77,1	88,2
La Rioja	96,1	94,1	89,9	90,5	89,5	89,3	89,4	82,6	88,1
Murcia	92,9	92,8	90,8	89,0	88,9	87,2	85,4	75,0	87,8
Asturias	93,0	92,9	90,2	88,3	86,4	87,4	89,6	81,5	87,8
Melilla	95,8	92,0	90,4	87,9	89,1	90,2	86,0	76,7	87,3
Baleares	93,0	93,5	90,2	88,3	88,5	86,4	84,8	74,6	87,2
Aragón	93,8	93,6	89,2	90,0	86,2	87,0	88,1	76,4	87,2
Valencia	92,0	92,4	88,5	87,5	87,2	86,8	85,2	78,4	86,8
Andalucía	93,2	92,1	88,2	88,1	86,7	86,3	83,5	76,3	86,2
Canarias	93,2	91,3	87,6	86,2	85,7	86,8	82,9	72,1	86,1
Madrid	93,5	92,1	87,9	87,9	87,0	85,9	85,7	80,3	85,9
Castilla y León	92,3	91,9	87,8	87,7	86,5	85,4	88,5	79,7	85,7
Catalonia	92,4	90,8	86,7	87,3	86,3	86,3	83,2	76,4	85,3
Spain	93,3	92,5	89,0	88,8	87,6	86,9	86,4	78,1	86,9

Note: The three shades of blue define the level of welfare by column / domain, grouping regions into three groups, from the highest levels of wellbeing (darker blue) to the lowest (lighter blue). In addition, green indicates the maximum value in each column / domain, and red the minimum value in each column / domain.



# NOTES

1. Some international studies situate average subjective well-being for Western adult populations between 70 and 80 points out of 100 (Cummins and Cahil, 2000). At the same time, the second European Survey on Quality of Life set the average personal satisfaction and happiness of the adult Spanish population between 7 and 8 out of 10.

2. Material possessions are measured by the number of bathrooms in the house where you live in and the number of cars owned by the family, and cultural possessions by the number of books at home and how often a newspaper is bought at home.

3. The difference is most evident between state-run and private school, while the mixed-funding schools show very similar levels of well-being compared to state-run.

4. Big changes in the lives of children often put them at emotional risk, especially those that occur outside their own free choice. There is abundant research showing how subjective well-being decreases with significant or unexpected change. In this study, we have explored 5 changes: house you live in, city or town, school, country (for over a month), and one of the parents you live with.

5. As explained in note xvii the General Index of Children's Subjective Well-being includes the General Index on Domain Satisfaction (GIDS), which is calculated by the arithmetic average of 8 indexes of areas of life. However, as stated above, the calculation of the index also includes other components.

6. The results of the regression analysis applied to well-being rates (see note vi) have shown *that satisfaction with libraries in the area you live in* is the only item that doesn't appear to contribute significantly to the explanation of any of the indexes used in the study. Therefore, this item was not included in the calculation of General Index of Children's Subjective Well-being.

7. To analyze this explanatory capacity of the indexes by area, different regression models have been tested. They serve to explain or represent the dependency between an independent variable and one or more explanatory or dependent variables. In this case, the General Index of Children's Subjective Well-being is considered the independent variable and the 8 indexes by area the dependent variables.

8. The study has explored what items, from the 26 considered, and what life domain satisfaction indexes, from the 8 calculated, show greater explanatory capacity of Subjective Well-being. Only satisfaction with *libraries in the area where you live* doesn't seem to contribute significantly to the explanation of any of the indicators of subjective well-being used here, so it was decided to remove this item in later calculations.

9. We refer to the *statistically significant* differences, that is, those that cannot be attributed to chance. Put another way, the sample is sufficiently representative to say that the results are "real" and not a fortuity. In this regard, *no statistical significance* refers to the magnitude of the



difference. There may be large non-significant differences or small significant differences.

10. As explained in Appendix I of this document, we must be very cautious when analyzing the data from the different regions and especially in the case of the self-governing cities of Ceuta and Melilla, due to the small size of the sample analyzed.

11. Further details on gender differences by regions can be found in the full report (Casa, F. and Bello, A., 2012) in pages 104-107 and in Annex V.

12. See note ix.

13. As explained earlier in this document, we don't refer here to *low levels* of well-being in absolute terms, but to *lower than the average levels*.

14. Further details on the calculation of the sample and its characteristics can be found in the full report (Casa, F. and Bello, A., Coord., 2012) in pages 39 to 44, in Annex I (pp. 137-142) and in Annex V (pp. 177-180).

15. The sample includes children of four different ages at the time of administering the questionnaire: 15% of 11 year olds, which are those whose birthday is later in the year; a larger percentage, 65.5% of 12 year olds, most of them being presumably in the school year that corresponds; 15% of 13 year olds and 4.5% of 14 year olds, which in both cases are, presumably, repeating the school year.

16. The questionnaire can be found in the full report (Casas and Bello, coord., 2012) in the Annex IV (pp. 156-174). It is interesting to note here that this questionnaire mainly takes questions for ISCWEB, with only some minor changes and added items, to better adjust to the Spanish context and objectives of UNICEF Spain. One of the purposes of the application of this study was to contribute to this international project with a Spanish sample allowing future comparison of results with those of other countries. Further details on the international project are available at: <http://www.childrensworlds.org/>

17. The questionnaire administered included 3 psychometric scales often used in studies of subjective well-being: a single-item scale of *Overall Life Satisfaction (OLS)*, 5 items of *Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS5)* of Huebner (1991), and 8 items of satisfaction with aspects of life that are a variation of *Personal Well-Being Index* of Cummins, Eckersley, van Pallant, Vugt and Misajon (2003), which we call PWI8. A fourth indicator has also been used, General Index on Domain Satisfaction (GIDS), calculated as the average of the 8 indexes of areas of life, which include the PWI8 items. To calculate the General Index of Children's Subjective Well-being three of these scales have been used, the Overall Life Satisfaction (OLS), the SLSS5 and the General Index on Domain Satisfaction (GIDS). Once the scores of the three scales have been summed up, its value has been converted to a scale from 0 to 100 points for easy visual comparison.



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<http://www.unicef.es/actualidad-documentacion/publicaciones/calidad-de-vida-y-bienestar-infantil-subjetivo-en-espana>



**"Children are not only our future, they are our present and we need to start taking their voices very seriously. We must listen carefully to what young people have to say and give them every opportunity to speak. We must reach out to them and encourage them to participate in the decision-making processes that affect their lives."**

**CAROL BELLAMY**

*Executive Director of UNICEF (from 1995 to 2005)*

# CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING FROM THEIR OWN POINT OF VIEW

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