

**Written evidence submitted by *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study,
University of Essex (CYP0023)**

Key points

- *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a world-leading longitudinal survey of continuity and change in UK life.
- Most 10-15-year-olds are happy with life as a whole, but on a scale of 0-10, happiness with life as a whole fell from 8.17 to 7.77 between 2009-10 and 2017-18.
- The number of children scoring between 0 and 4 has increased significantly – from 3.8% in 2009-10 to 5.9% in 2017-18.
- There are gender differences. Girls' happiness with life as a whole has fallen further than that of boys. Boys' happiness with their appearance has been higher than that of girls in every wave of the Study, but in recent years, this particular gender gap has reduced.
- 15-year-olds in the UK fare less well than those elsewhere in Europe, and with a greater gender gap. There are potential links between life satisfaction among this age group in the UK and fear of failure, and changes in levels of child poverty.
- These links "relate to areas where there have been changes in UK policy, such as rising child poverty as a result of austerity, and changes to schooling, in the last 10 years". These are "concrete areas for policy attention".
- Children's life satisfaction is linked to material deprivation.
- The wellbeing of parents and their adolescent children is interrelated, but it is mother and daughter connections that count.
- The family should be thought of as a dynamic system, for instance when planning clinical interventions. This is particularly pertinent in families with an adolescent daughter.
- Screens and social media use are unlikely to bear major responsibility for youth suicide trends.

1. Introduction

1.1. *Understanding Society*, the UK Household Longitudinal Study, is a world-leading longitudinal survey of continuity and change in UK life. From an initial sample of around 40,000 households, the same people are invited to participate in annual surveys. Together with its predecessor, the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), the data now span more than 25 years. *Understanding Society* is based at the Institute for Social and Economic Research at the University of Essex.

1.2. *Understanding Society* is primarily funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), part of UK Research and Innovation, and has received funding from a number of Government departments, devolved administrations and agencies. Anonymised data from the surveys are made available to registered researchers to use in their own research projects.

1.3 *Understanding Society* covers everyone in a household, so we ask questions about children and young people, as well as the adults. All young people aged 10-15 complete their own questionnaire and adults are asked about the children in their care.

2. The Good Childhood Report – research using *Understanding Society*

2.1 The Children's Society's *Good Childhood Report* uses *Understanding Society* as one of its main data sources. The ninth of these annual overviews was published in 2020.

2.2 Most 10-15-year-olds are happy with life as a whole and five other aspects of their life (family, friends, appearance, school and school work), but on a scale of 0-10, happiness with life as a whole fell from 8.17 to 7.77 between 2009-10 and 2017-18.

2.3 The Report defines unhappiness as scoring below the midpoint (0-4). The vast majority of children score above the midpoint for all six measures of happiness, but the number scoring below the midpoint for life as a whole has increased significantly – from 3.8% in 2009-10 to 5.9% in 2017-18.

2.4 13.9% are unhappy with their appearance, compared to 11.2% in 2009-10. More children report being unhappy with their appearance and school than with any other category across all nine waves of Understanding Society.

2.5 Girls' happiness with life as a whole has fallen further than that of boys. Boys' happiness with their appearance has been higher than that of girls in every wave of the Study, but in recent years, this particular gender gap has reduced. Girls have consistently been happier with schoolwork.

2.6 The proportion of children reporting they are unhappy with their friends in 2017-18 is low compared to other categories, at 3.5%, but significantly higher than the 1.9% it stood at in 2009-10. This rise has brought it higher than family, which is now the aspect of life which the smallest proportion of children say they are unhappy with.

2.7 Only 2% are unhappy with their family (and this is down from 2.6% in the first wave, 2009-10), but

2.8 The report also uses international data which suggest that 15-year-olds in the UK fare less well than those elsewhere in Europe, and with a greater gender gap. It identifies potential links between life satisfaction among this age group in the UK and fear of failure, and changes in levels of child poverty.

2.9 The report states that these links "relate to areas where there have been changes in UK policy (e.g., rising child poverty as a result of austerity measures and changes to schooling, including the new curriculum, exam changes, and the development of academies), specifically, in the last 10 years" and that these are "concrete areas for policy attention".

3. Family wellbeing matters to individual wellbeing – research using *Understanding Society*

3.1 The wellbeing of parents and their adolescent children is interrelated, but it is mother and daughter connections that count.

3.2 A mother's and a father's mental health will influence each other's over time, only the mother's mental health appears important for their children's wellbeing.

3.3 Both adolescent boys and girls have similar levels of unhappiness about different aspects of their lives, but for boys, parental distress doesn't seem to increase their own mental distress.

3.4 The family should be thought of as a dynamic system, for instance when planning clinical interventions. This is particularly pertinent in families with an adolescent daughter.

4. Social media and mental health – research using *Understanding Society*

4.1 There have been concerns that increased suicide rates among teenagers and preteens can be attributed to increased social media use. Research shows that screens and social media use are unlikely to bear major responsibility for youth suicide trends.

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References

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