

September 2008



Action for Children briefing

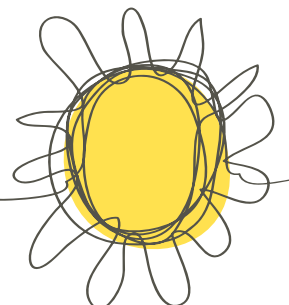
Emotional wellbeing and social mobility – a new urgency to the debate

Key findings

- ▶ Emotional wellbeing means having empathy, confidence and self-awareness. People who are emotionally well can manage their feelings, are motivated and have good social skills.
- ▶ New research from Action for Children shows that the importance of emotional wellbeing in determining social mobility is rising rapidly – our research shows that emotional wellbeing became four and a half times more important as a factor that determined social mobility for those born in 1970 compared to those born in 1958. Every indicator suggests that it will be even more important for children born now.
- ▶ These findings are supported by the public's view that emotional wellbeing is more important than IQ, physical health, family income, where a person lives, and more than twice as important as social class.
- ▶ The emotional wellbeing of children and young people in the UK seems to be deteriorating – children's personal interactions are declining, drug and alcohol misuse is rising, mental health is deteriorating, and anti-social behaviour and conduct disorder are on the increase.
- ▶ Action for Children's **Growing Strong** campaign offers real policy solutions and raises awareness and understanding among policy-makers, the general public and, above all, children and young people.

growing
strong

as long as it takes



New evidence of emotional wellbeing's role in social mobility

Action for Children research has found that emotional wellbeing is a key factor in determining social mobility.

Education and the family have always been seen as key in explaining a person's life chances and ability to move social class. However research commissioned by Action for Children¹ reveals that the development of children's emotional wellbeing is the hidden policy key in unlocking life chances. This is because emotional wellbeing has a major impact on both the emotional and social skills that enable a

child or young person to gain a good education, qualifications and employment.

Our research shows that emotional wellbeing became four and half times more important in determining the relative life chances of children born in 1970 compared with similar children born in 1958.

These findings suggest that emotional wellbeing is becoming increasingly important in deciding young people's life chances and that there is a growing urgency in the need to tackle emotional wellbeing.

One of the lessons from the early stages of our research clearly indicates that if we want to give all individuals an equal chance to achieve their potential, and ensure the emotional and mental health of the next generation, public attention and policy should now explicitly focus on developing the emotional wellbeing of children and young people.

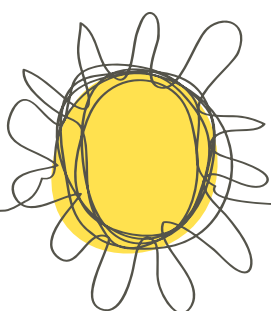
What is emotional wellbeing?

An emotionally well child or young person has empathy and self-awareness. They are able to manage their feelings, are motivated and have good social skills. A child or young person who is Growing Strong is one who works well, plays well, loves well and expects to achieve their full potential.

Growing Strong

Action for Children believes that it is becoming increasingly important for children to be growing stronger not just physically, but emotionally, mentally and spiritually. Action for Children's Growing Strong campaign aims to show why the emotional wellbeing of every child and young person is becoming more and more important in the world today, and

offers solutions as to how, together, we can make sure this – and future – generations grow stronger. As part of our campaign, Action for Children will be promoting further why emotional wellbeing is important, raising awareness of emotional wellbeing and evaluating different UK-based services so that we can offer proven positive solutions.



‘Emotional wellbeing an important priority’, say public²

In order to test and compare our research findings with the experiences and views of the general public, Action for Children commissioned a survey of over 2,000 adults from across the UK. **Emotional wellbeing was considered to be the third most important factor** in explaining people’s own achievements (only 1% behind family stability and 8% behind education). Indeed almost 6 out of every 10 people said emotional wellbeing was important or very important in deciding what they had achieved in life. It was a more important factor than IQ, physical health, family income, where a person lives, and more than twice as important as social class.

The survey also found that older people have a greater appreciation of the importance emotional wellbeing plays in a person’s

life. While 1 in 4 people aged 18 to 24 think emotional wellbeing is very important in determining a person’s life chances, this rises by over half as many again to **38 per cent for 45 to 54 year olds**.

In fact, only 1 out of 10 people stated that emotional wellbeing was unimportant in determining whether a person was able to move up or down social classes.

Taken together, these findings show that emotional wellbeing is a real priority for the public. While we know a great deal about the role of education or the family in shaping a person’s life chances, this survey underpins Action for Children’s research in establishing emotional wellbeing as a key factor in understanding people’s achievement later in life.

Factors that determine social mobility, ranked in order of importance to the general public

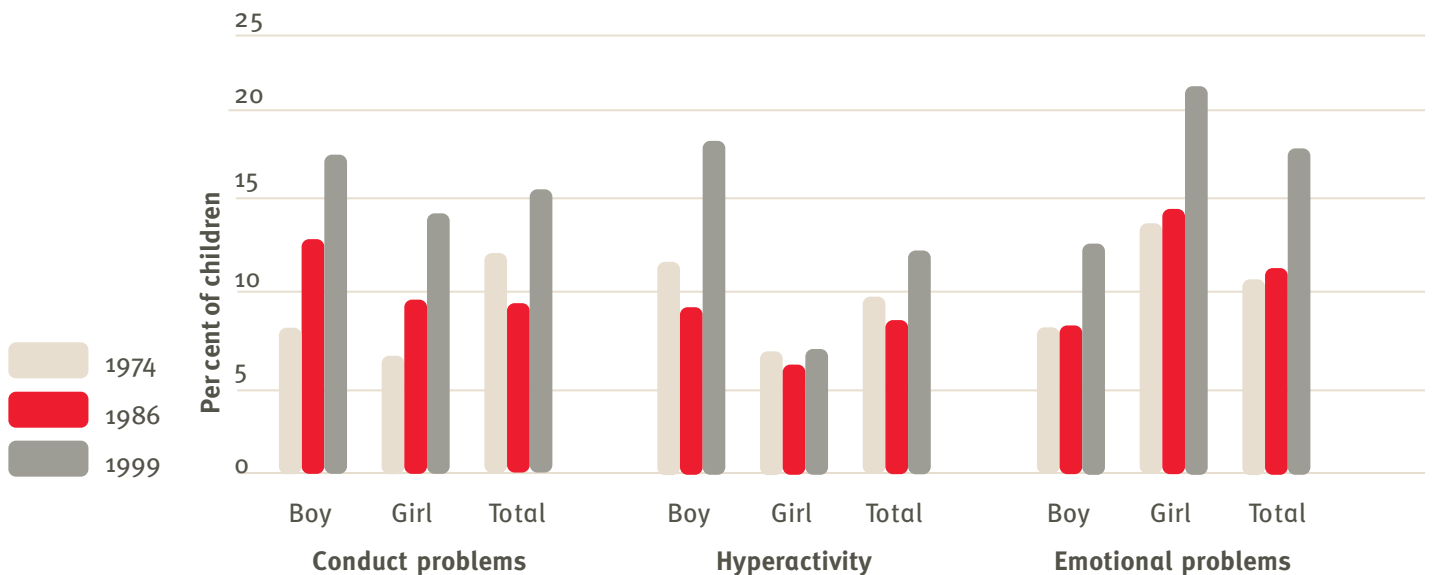
	Responses to a general question about social mobility ³	The respondents’ responses in light of their own life experiences ⁴
1st	Family income	Education
2nd	Education	Stability of family structure
3rd	Emotional wellbeing	Emotional wellbeing
4th	Where you live	IQ
5th	Physical health	Physical health
6th	Stability of family structure	Family income
7th	IQ	Where you live
8th	Social class	Social class
9th	Physical attractiveness	Physical attractiveness
10th	Experience of discrimination	Experience of discrimination

² All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 2,049 adults. Fieldwork was undertaken between 8–11 June 2007. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all GB adults (aged 18+).

³ The survey asked: ‘On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is ‘not at all important’ and 5 is ‘very important’) how important are each of the following factors in determining a person’s social mobility?’ Ranking reflects percentage of people who scored the factor 4 or 5.

⁴ The survey asked: ‘On a scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 is ‘not at all important’ and 5 is ‘very important’) how important were the following factors for you in determining what you have achieved since childhood?’ Ranking reflects percentage of people who scored the factor 4 or 5.

Time trends in adolescent mental health



Source: Stephan Collishaw, Barbara Maughan, Robert Goodman, Andrew Pickles (2004) 'Time trends in adolescent mental health', *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 45 (98), 1,350–62

What is happening to children and young people's emotional wellbeing?

A child who is Growing Strong can cope with uncertainty and adversity, and can recover more successfully from traumatic events or episodes. Making sure every child is Growing Strong is important because social and emotional skills and attainment are mutually reinforcing. For example, 'the ability of children to manage their emotions directly impacts on their capacity to learn: some negative emotions (such as sadness and anger) can block learning, while other positive feelings (such as a sense of wellbeing, feeling safe and valued) promote learning'.⁵

Many policy makers are now concerned that when emotional wellbeing deteriorates unchecked, the result is often the onset of mental health problems. However, Action for Children is also troubled by the impact on an individual's physical health and the social impact on our communities.

We are committed to building up real emotional wellbeing, but recognise that too many children and young people in the UK today are not Growing Strong.

This has led to some worrying trends that we must address.

Deteriorating mental health

- ▶ A study by the Institute of Psychiatry shows a 100 per cent increase in the prevalence of emotional problems and conduct disorders among young people since the early 1990s.⁶
- ▶ A survey of almost 8,000 children and adolescents in Great Britain showed that around 1 in 10 children have a mental health disorder to clinically significant levels,⁷ but an even more recent study of children aged 18 months in Copenhagen reported that 16–18 per cent had diagnosable issues.⁸

Physical health is getting worse

- ▶ The parents of children with an emotional disorder were more than four times as likely as other parents to say that their child's general health was fair or bad (23% compared with 5%) and a higher proportion reported that their child had a specific physical or developmental problem (72% compared with 53%).⁹

⁵ Quote from *Aiming high for children: supporting families*, based on the work of Greenhalgh, P (1994) *Emotional Growth and Learning* (HM Treasury/DFES, March 2007)

⁶ Hagell, A (2004) *Are adolescent mental health problems on the rise in the UK?* (Nuffield Foundation, www.nuffieldfoundation.org)

⁷ Green et al (2005) *Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain* (ONS)

⁸ Reference quoted in The Bridge's literature review of emotional harm

⁹ Green et al (2005)

- ▶ There is a strong link between mental and emotional health and rates of smoking, drinking and cannabis use among children aged 11–15: over 40 per cent of those who smoked regularly, almost a quarter of those who drank regularly, and almost half of those who took cannabis at least once a month had an emotional or mental disorder.¹⁰

Rising social concerns

- ▶ ‘Having good peer relationships at age 10 is protective against teen motherhood for girls’,¹¹ but a little more than 40 per cent of the UK’s 11, 13 and 15 year olds find their peers ‘kind and helpful’ – this was the worst score of all the developed countries in a recent international report.¹²

- ▶ 84 per cent of young men in remand and 88 per cent of those sentenced and then interviewed in research had some kind of personality disorder.¹³ The number of 15 to 17 year olds in custody is said to have doubled in the last 10 years and there are now 2,320¹⁴ 15 to 17 year olds in custody.¹⁵

Over two-fifths (44%) of children with an emotional disorder were behind in their intellectual development, with 23 per cent being two or more years behind, compared with 24 per cent and 9 per cent, respectively, of other children.¹⁶

‘The lack of emotional wellbeing among our children and young people is undermining the foundations of any social policy to combat social exclusion, deprivation or lack of social mobility. We urge the prime minister to commit to tackling this hidden and fast-growing problem. The emphasis must change from social class to social skills, self-esteem and resilience if we are to give the next generation the chance they deserve.’

‘This is why we need to investigate this issue further and invest in services that really do work. The aim of Action for Children’s work and campaigning is to improve children and young people’s emotional wellbeing now and for the next generation.’

Clare Tickell, Action for Children Chief Executive

¹⁰ Maughan, Barbara, Brock, Anita and Ladva, Gita (2004) *The Health of Children and Young People*, Chapter 12 ‘Mental health’ (ONS)

¹¹ HM Treasury/DfES (2007) *Aiming high for children: supporting families*

¹² Innocenti Research Centre (2007), *An overview of child wellbeing in rich countries* (UNICEF) A comprehensive assessment of the lives and wellbeing of children and adolescents in the economically advanced nations

¹³ Lader, Deborah (2000), *Psychiatric morbidity among young offenders in England and Wales* (Department of Health)

¹⁴ Prison Population and Accommodation Briefing Apr 2006

¹⁵ Offender Management Caseload Statistics 2003

¹⁶ Green et al (2005)

Action for Children

Action for Children is one of the UK's leading children's charities. We work passionately through our services and campaigning to bring hope into the lives of the children and young people who need it most.

We aim to meet the emotional and physical needs of all 178,000 children, young people and their families that we work with.

We are committed to ensuring that each child and young person has an equal chance of realising their full potential by enabling them to cope with uncertainty and adversity, and recover more successfully from traumatic events or episodes.

What is Action for Children doing?

Action for Children's Growing Strong campaign aims to:

- ▶ raise awareness of why this is such an important issue and understand what the long-term consequences are of not tackling this issue
- ▶ provide UK research into what services make a positive difference in young people's lives
- ▶ ensure that we all work together so that Growing Strong becomes a reality for every child in the UK today

We are not always able to protect a young person from adversity, and it may not be possible to provide an ideal environment for every child, but we can make sure that we help every child grow stronger and enhance the likelihood that they fulfil their potential and enjoy a better life.

For more information about our Growing Strong campaign, please contact the Action for Children Public Affairs team on **020 7704 7132** or at **publicaffairs@actionforchildren.org.uk**