

Hong Kong In Brief: Children's subjective well-being

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Background

Children's Worlds (ISCWeB, funded by the Jacobs Foundation), completed the third wave of their international survey, asking over 128,000 children in 35 societies worldwide about their lives.

For Hong Kong, 1,525 randomly-selected children aged between 9 and 14 years participated in the third wave. Probability sampling was used to gain responses from children from 17 primary and 16 secondary schools from September 2018 to July 2019.

Questions ranged from general life satisfaction and well-being, to specific living conditions, internet access and feeling safe in their environments, among many other aspects.

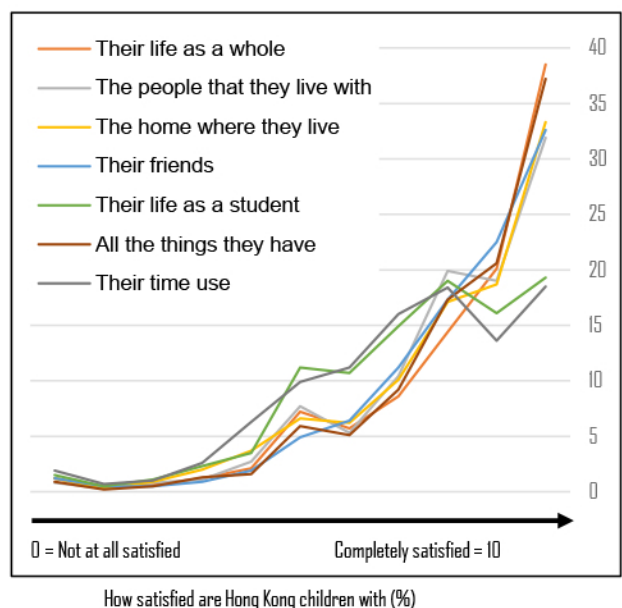
Key policy issues

In order to improve overall Hong Kong children's well-being and to reduce the gaps between the most advantaged and disadvantaged, the Hong Kong government ought to invest further into:

1. Protecting the incomes of Hong Kong families with the poorest incomes;
2. Promoting and supporting Hong Kong children's healthy lifestyles including more equitable time use;
3. Taking children's subjective well-being more seriously; and
4. Better monitoring and measuring child well-being.

Overview:

1. Hong Kong children identified time use as the least positive aspect of their lives.
2. Concerns over material possessions and bullying at school continue to play a significant role for sizeable share of children in Hong Kong.
3. Hong Kong children tended to become less satisfied with various aspects of their lives as they grew older.



Hong Kong children excel in certain areas

There were some areas where Hong Kong children excelled, including their relationships with friends and classmates. The surveyed Hong Kong children also, on the whole, felt safer at school and in their communities than their peers in other East Asian societies such as South Korea and Taiwan. Most surveyed children reported that they have fun in their families and that the teachers in school care for them. Although most children reported that they have to share a room where they sleep, most had an adequate place to study at home. The overall satisfaction of surveyed children in Hong Kong with their lives as a whole, the people they live with, the home where they live, their friends, their life as a student, the area where they live, all the things they have, and their time use was high with median scores of 8 out of 10 or above. The majority of surveyed children reported to be ‘happy’ and ‘full of energy’.

Concerns over material possessions and bullying at school continue to affect a sizeable share of children in Hong Kong. Children in Hong Kong are more stressed and dissatisfied with how they use their time than their international peers. Overall, children in Hong Kong show concerning results on the negative affect scale, while 12-year olds are generally less satisfied with their lives and well-being compared to 10-year olds.

Hong Kong children are stressed and dissatisfied with how they use their time

The proportion of Hong Kong children who rated their overall satisfaction with how they use their time outside of school as very low stood at 12%. This figure is higher compared to other East Asian societies such as Taiwan (10%) and South Korea (8%), and particularly high compared to most Western nations.

	Never	Less than once a week	Once or twice a week	3 or 4 days a week	5 or 6 days a week	Every day
(1). Helping out around the house	11	19	34	19	6	11
(2). Taking care of brothers or sisters or other family members	32	10	17	11	7	23
(3). Doing extra class / tuition when not at school	35	8	24	12	12	9
(4). Doing homework & studying	2	3	9	12	20	53
(5). Watching TV	8	7	16	16	11	43
(6). Playing sports / doing exercise	6	12	29	22	10	22
(7). Relaxing, talking / having fun with family	8	13	23	17	12	26
(8). Playing / spending time outside	7	17	32	19	8	17
(9). Using social media	6	6	11	14	12	51
(10). Playing electronic games	11	10	16	15	11	37
(11). Doing nothing / resting	9	12	21	16	8	34

Time spent doing things when Hong Kong children are not at school (%)

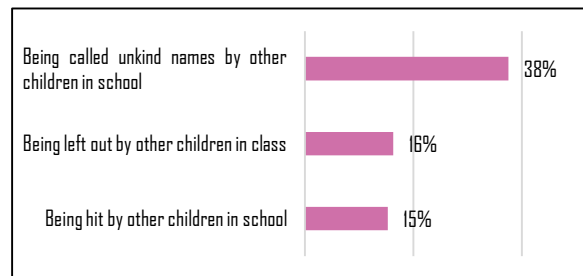
In Finland, for example, only 2% of surveyed children rated their satisfaction with how they use their time as very low. While half of all 10-year-olds in Finland stated that they are ‘totally satisfied’ with how they use their time (50%), the corresponding figure in Hong Kong stood merely at one-in-four (25%).

More than one-in-two Hong Kong children reported that they spent time doing homework or studying (53%) and using social media (51%) every day when they are not at school. A majority of Hong Kong children also stated that they watch TV (43%) or play electronic video games (37%) every day. Compared to these figures, around one-in-three (34%) Hong Kong children reported that they have time to rest, while around one-in-four (26%) said that they spend time relaxing, talking or having fun with their family every day. A majority of Hong Kong children further reported that they spend their time helping around the house (34%), playing or spending time outside (32%), playing sports or doing exercise (29%), or doing extra classes or tuition when not at school (24%) much less frequently (‘only once or twice a week’). Most importantly, less than one-in-four children fully agreed that they have enough choice about how they spend their time (23%).

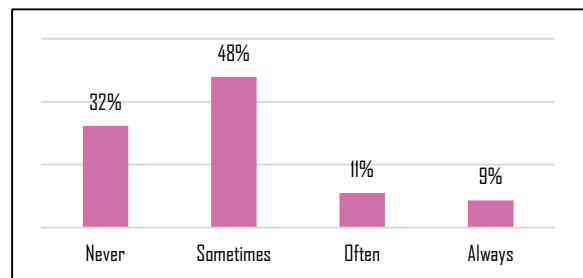
Concerns over material possessions and bullying at school continue to play a significant role for Hong Kong children

One-in-five Hong Kong children reported that they worried about how much money their families had either “often” or “always” (20%), while almost one-in-two reported that they worry about how much money their family has “sometimes” (48%). More than one-in-ten Hong Kong children reported that they “never” or only “sometimes” have enough food to eat (12%).

Bullying at school remains a significant issue in Hong Kong. More Hong Kong children reported that they experienced being called unkind names by other children in school at least once (38%), compared to 16% and 15% reporting that they were being left out by other children in class or being hit by other children, respectively.



Hong Kong children experiencing bullying at school at least once (%)



Hong Kong children worrying about how much money their family has (%)

Children in Hong Kong struggle to successfully have their voices heard

In their families, more than one-in-three Hong Kong children did not agree that their parents make decisions about their life together with them (36%) and that their parents listen to them and take what they have to say into account (37%). At school, around one-in-three Hong Kong children did not agree that their teachers listen to them and take what they have to say into account (32%) and that they have opportunities to make decisions about things that are important to them (33%).

In their local area where they live, more than one-in-two of Hong Kong children disagreed that adults take them seriously (52%) and that they have opportunities to participate in decisions about things that are important to them (58%). When asked about their views about living in Hong Kong, half of all surveyed children did not agree that adults in Hong Kong care about children (50%). Around half of all surveyed children did not agree that in Hong Kong adults respect children’s rights (45%), whereas two-out-of-five did not agree that in Hong Kong children are allowed to make choices about their lives (41%).

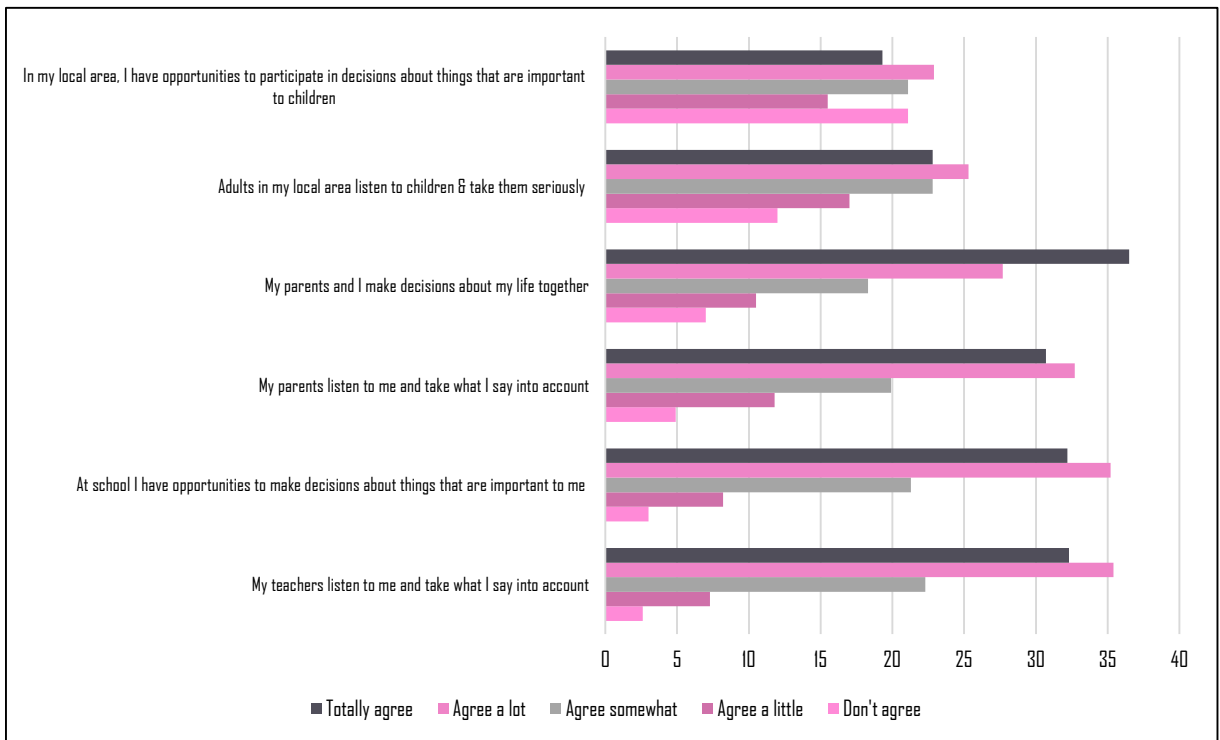
Hong Kong children show some concerning results on the negative affect scale

More than one-in-three Hong Kong children reported high agreement with the statement that they felt ‘bored’ over the last two weeks (37%).

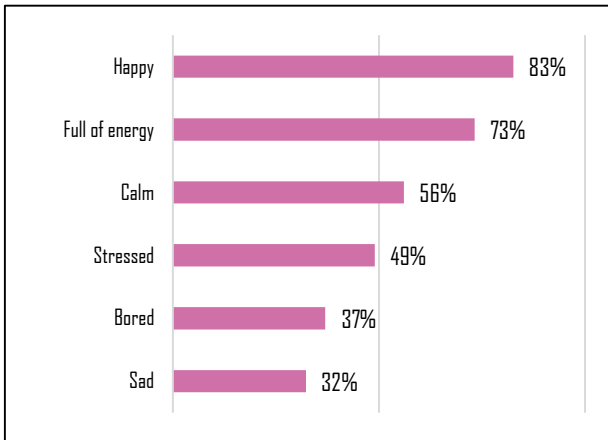
“We believe that all children should have equitable opportunities to reach their learning potential and fulfil their aspirations. In supporting innovative research projects like this we promote the generation of critical data needed to improve children’s lives.”

says Simon Sommer, Co-CEO of Jacobs Foundation.

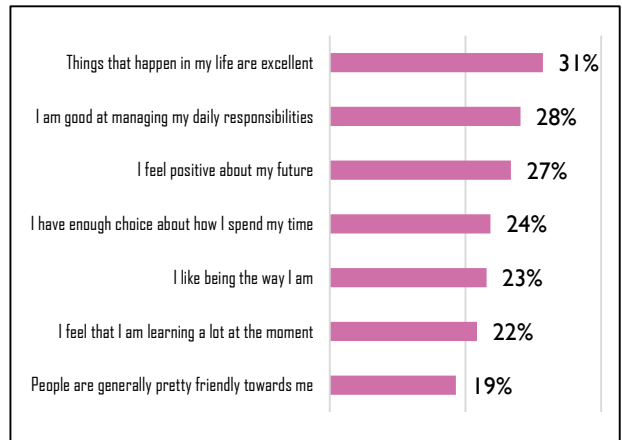
Close to one-in-three of the surveyed children reported a high agreement with the statement that they felt ‘sad’ over the last two weeks (32%), while around one-in-four (27%) reported very low agreement with the statement that they felt calm over the last two weeks (on a scale from 0-10). Almost one-in-two of Hong Kong children reported a high agreement with the statement that they felt stressed over the last two weeks (49%).



Hong Kong children having their voices heard(%)



During the last two weeks, Hong Kong children have felt (% reporting 6 or higher on an 11-point scale, where 0 = not at all agree and 10 = total agree)



Hong Kong children having low agreement with the following statements (% of 12-year-olds reporting 5 or lower on an 11-point scale, where 0 = not at all agree and 10 = totally agree)

There is a significant variation in the answers between 10- and 12-year-olds children in Hong Kong, with the latter generally being less satisfied with their lives and well-being

There is a significant variation in the answers between 10- and 12-year-olds children in Hong Kong, with the latter generally being less satisfied with their lives and well-being. Nearly one-in-three 12-year-olds had very low agreement (5 or below) with the statement that the things that happen in their life are excellent (31%). More than one-in-four of all 12-year old children reported very low agreement with the statement that they are good at managing their daily responsibilities (28%) and that they feel positive about their future (27%). Around one-in-four 12-year old children had very low agreement that they have enough choice about how they spend their time (24%) and that they like being the way they are (23%).

Policy options

There is no simple policy response to addressing the gaps in Hong Kong's children's subjective well-being. Multiple pathways to subjective well-being exist and

main challenge for policymakers is to find institutional complementarities that work for the specific Hong Kong context. Based on the evidence in the policy brief, and the emerging international evidence base on subjective well-being of children in their middle years, such an approach ought to include the following elements:

Protect the incomes of Hong Kong families with the poorest incomes

It has long been established that material deprivation and low socio-economic status go hand in hand with lower children's subjective well-being. In the wake of the Covid-19 public and economic crises in Hong Kong, boosting employment opportunities for parent, providing effective after school services for children and cash and in-kind support for e-learning at home (including IT equipment, IT literacy, etc.) present a top priority. Income inequality and the risk of poverty is also directly related with the ability of the social safety net to effectively protect the incomes of families. In order to break the intergenerational transmission of opportunity from parents to their children, social transfer systems have been shown to play an important role and

should be reformed in the interest of single parents and other family types with low work intensity.

Focus on improving the educational environment in Hong Kong schools

The Convention of the Rights of the Child emphasizes the right to education “on the basis of equal opportunity”. Bullying in Hong Kong schools has for some time been identified as a crucial determinant of children’s subjective well-being. Besides Hong Kong children’s sense of belonging in their schools and the relationships with teachers, gaps in school satisfaction may stand in the way of achieving the goals of the Convention of the Rights of the Child in Hong Kong. Relationships in the school environment should not make it easier or harder for children to reach their full educational potential and should not be determined by the children’s socio-economic family background.

Promote and support healthy lifestyles including more equitable time use

Healthy lifestyles at an early age have been shown to pay both short- and long-term dividends. Gaps in out-of-school activities, such as educational time use, family time, and organized physical activity, aggravate policymakers attempts to provide a fair and equitable social environment for Hong Kong children. Low income is typically identified as a barrier to extra-curricular activities and joining sports clubs, but it may also affect the quality time Hong Kong children may spend with their parents if, e.g., they work long-hours and in precarious work environments. Recent research suggests that children from lower socioeconomic family background may spend more ‘unproductive’ time watching TV and playing electronic computer games.

Take Hong Kong children’s subjective well-being seriously

International research programmes have collected information about trends in multidimensional child well-being and, particularly, the perspectives of children on their own lives. Although research interest on children’s well-being has been growing, existing studies in East Asia, including Hong Kong, have predominately adopted ‘expert-led’ or ‘adult-derived’ measures. By contrast, ‘child-derived’ measures of subjective well-being are still much less accessible particularly for children in their middle years. The findings of the third wave of Children’s Worlds suggests a pattern of inequality in Hong Kong children’s subjective well-being. The fact that children with low subjective well-being have internationally been shown to be more exposed to risky behaviours and outcomes underlines that Hong Kong children’s subjective well-being matters for health and education and, therefore, for the future of the Hong Kong economy as a whole.

Better monitoring and measurement of Hong Kong children’s well-being is essential

Effective policymaking and public debate on the state and future lives of children in Hong Kong require better data. Ideally, data on Hong Kong children’s subjective well-being should be available longitudinally and track children through different stages of their life. Evaluation of the well-being of children in their middle years is imperative because this age presents a critical time for children to develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills, to build healthy social relationships and to learn the roles that prepare them for adolescence and adulthood, but the factors associated with children’s subjective well-being also differ across age groups. The Hong Kong government, together with local stakeholders, should, therefore, increase available support for building up such longitudinal data sources and, crucially, provide real opportunities to children to shape the questions asked in surveys on their own lives and subjective well-being.

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