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When Children are Asked About Their Well-being: Towards a Framework for Guiding Policy

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Abstract Research which focuses on children's perspectives of their well-being complements and challenges existing research and policy on children. The study reported on here explored children's views of what constitutes well-being, what meaning children and young people ascribe to the concept and whether distinct dimensions or characteristics of well-being can be identified. The project was initiated by the New South Wales Commission for Children and Young People as a basis for developing an authoritative child-informed framework for monitoring of well-being of children in New South Wales, Australia. In this paper, we outline the rationale for and details of qualitative research methods employed in the project, along with details of the major findings from the research. These include, the overarching importance of relationships with others and, more specifically, the importance of agency and control in the various domains identified as relevant to their wellbeing, the importance of safety and security and the way these factors contribute to sense of self. More minor but significant domains identified were: dealing with adversity, material and economic resources, physical environments, physical health and social and moral responsibility. The significance of the findings for policy development and the particular challenge of developing indicators from the research are discussed.

Keywords Well-being · Indicators · Children's perspectives · Researching with children · Standpoint

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1 Introduction

Little is known about what children and young people identify as well-being, what it looks like and the factors which affect their sense of it. In 2001, Ben-Arieh et al pointed out that, if we are going to adequately measure children's well-being, children need to be involved in all stages of research efforts to measure and monitor their well-being (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001). Yet, despite the call to include children in research efforts, few child indicator frameworks have been developed using children's understandings as a basis for, or a contribution to, conceptualising the framework.

Historically, monitoring efforts have reflected the influence of psychological science in general and developmental psychology in particular. The focus of psychological thinking on the successful attainment of developmental milestones, although important, has meant that indicators frameworks have largely neglected children's perspectives on well-being. As many scholars have pointed out, developmental paradigms have silenced children in research, situating them as objects, rather than subjects (James et al. 1998; John 2003; Mayall 1994; Mayall 2002; Qvortrup 2005; Stephens 1995; Woodhead 1999).

While many indicator frameworks are child-focused, in the sense that children are the objects of monitoring and information is collected on children, and sometimes, but more rarely, from children, adults have generally determined the nature of the research, the conceptual parameters and the methods used. As has been discussed in relation to child research in other areas, adult authority and expertise are typically 'foregrounded', in contrast to highlighting child 'knowledges' (Mason and Gibson 2004; Mason and Urquhart 2001).

This paper proceeds by first discussing the epistemology, methodology and method of our research on children's understandings of well-being (in sections 2 and 3): these are critical in identifying a children's standpoint on well-being. In sections 4 and 5, we outline the findings and provide a framework of well-being domains and dimensions developed from a children's standpoint. The challenges in converting this knowledge into indicators (Section 6) and the potential for using such a framework to guide and enhance policy (Section 7) will be elaborated. Ultimately, we show that children understand their well-being as complex and multi-faceted, that children's perspectives validate and confirm existing measures of well-being but also extend and challenge these understandings by giving new meaning to issues already in our focus and by drawing our attention to issues that are currently not receiving attention.

2 Epistemology and Methodology

Attempting to involve children in defining their understandings of well-being required that we adopt an explicit epistemological position, one that places children centrally, values them as 'knowers' and their knowledge and experience as significant. In taking this approach we acknowledge that, as Manderson (2005) has argued, well-being is socially contingent and prone to change and redefinition over time. This implies that there are likely to be differences in the ways adults and children define well-being, based on factors related to time and generation. In our

research, we saw ourselves as engaged in a constructionist enterprise: that is, we saw ourselves as co-constructors of meaning along with our participants. This contrasted with seeing meaning as something that researchers 'create', drawing on the data they have 'collected'.

In attempting this collaborative approach, we were informed by standpoint theory, a diverse body of theory which locates researchers on the same plane as the researched. In epistemological terms, standpoint theory emphasises the importance of the knower as the framer of knowledge (Fraser 2004). In adopting children's standpoint, we were acknowledging children as the sources of authoritative knowledge about their own world and as active agents shaping and interpreting that world, constructing meaning and purpose much as adults do. That meant bringing the power and privilege that naturalises hierarchical arrangements—between children and adults—into critical focus, along with our own adult-centric ways of understanding childhood and well-being.

Those who have set out to develop a children's standpoint (see Alanen 2005) have situated their research within the feminist standpoint methodological tradition. The significant theoretical work involved in developing a children's standpoint has led these researchers to make an important contribution to what has come to be known as 'the new sociology of childhood', which sees children as social actors with their own understandings of the world and underlines the significance of adult-child relations and of 'generation' as a dimension of social structure and inequality. In addition, many of these researchers have drawn on the children's rights movement with its emphasis on the right of children to be heard, to have their viewpoints taken seriously and to be involved in decisions affecting their lives. Indeed, children's experiential knowledge has been conceived as a vital ingredient in furthering that recognition of children's rights.

This reconstruction has given rise to a profound re-ordering of the way in which we view the research enterprise and its knowledge claims. The concept of facilitating or enabling children's 'voices' has been a critical element in this new way of researching with children and has therefore influenced the methods we used in our research on children's well-being.

3 Method and Analysis

Central to the collaborative methodological approach guiding our research was the iterative nature of our engagement and dialogue with the children before and during our research interactions with them. The research was conducted over three stages, involving either individual or group interviews and employing a range of task-oriented methods. In the first stage, we sought to find out what makes up the elements of well-being for children and young people. The second stage explored in more detail the main themes identified from the first interview. This stage allowed us to obtain greater insights into what was important to the individual child's well-being. In the third stage, the children or young people completed a project of their own design that explored a particular well-being theme or themes of interest to them. They had free reign and could choose to use photography, collage, drawing and journal keeping in their projects.

A total of 123 children[1] from both rural and urban locations in New South Wales participated in the first stage of the research. Of these, 92 children contributed to stage 2 and 53 to the final stage.[2] The children, when initially recruited to the project, were aged between eight and fifteen. The sample, which was large and diverse for a qualitative study and the diverse methods employed, allowed the research to be open to different stories, experiences and understandings of what well-being means for children.

In order to help bridge the inevitable power imbalance between adult researchers and child participants and thus optimise our capacities to hear children's standpoints, we conducted a lengthy engagement process, allowing for a sharing of information. In order to further minimise researcher influence, we conducted relatively unstructured interviews in that we encouraged participants to take the interview in directions that suited them. As the interviews progressed, children were able to respond in terms of their conceptualisations and older participants, in particular, articulated a particular standpoint on the world, aware they were making certain claims to knowledge based on their position as children. While adult researchers designed broad questions, we did ask children to comment on what kind of questions they thought appropriate and would like to respond to, giving them the opportunity to respond to new questions:

> Interviewer: What sorts of questions would you ask if you were doing this project?
>
> Participant 1 (Female, 14 years): Um, I definitely like this wand idea. I think if I could make, if I could ask any child what they would like in the world I would definitely ask it. I think it would be interesting to find out what everyone's ideas are. What they want.
>
> Participant 2 (Female, 14 years): It is like a creative way of asking what would you really like. It is like putting a nice edge to it.

The analysis of the data commenced following the first interviews. This analytical process included identifying the dominant and minor themes and mirrored the fieldwork process at an interpretive level. Analysis proceeded by interrogating the interviews by asking:

(i) What does well-being mean for the child or young person?
(ii) How is well-being experienced in everyday life, (what people, places, things and times are associated with well-being)?
(iii) What factors can be identified that contribute to a sense of well-being?

By interrogating the interview transcripts in this way, themes relating to well-being meanings, processes and factors were identified. The iterative process of the research was especially marked in the second stage interviews. For each individual participant, the themes specifically identified for that participant formed the basis of

[1] The definition of child used in this article is that used by the United Nations, being persons from birth to 18 years of age.

[2] In total, 178 interviews were conducted, totalling approximately 150 hours of transcript.

the second interview. Each participant was asked whether these themes made sense to them and to elaborate on those themes that did make sense, but also whether they would add themes or change the emphasis of the themes. In this way, the participants' interpretations of our initial attempts at analysis were built into the ongoing development of our analytical framework, extending the analysis and verifying or challenging the analysis that had been undertaken.

In attempting to ensure that those who chose to take part in the third interview were given the freedom to express their own ideas about their social world, Stage 3 projects became a medium through which the participant could focus on what was of greatest interest and importance to them. We then sought children's interpretations of their own work, what it meant and how it related to well-being. This continued to give prominence to children's own interpretations of well-being. In some cases, this added new dimensions to what had previously been said; in other cases, it provided a deeper understanding of what had previously been discussed; and in others, it confirmed previous understandings. In this way, children's own perspectives on what were the important themes guided the analysis, so that the meanings we were constructing from our data validly reflected children's understandings and priorities.

These interviews and the third stage project based interviews were then coded again with the key questions in mind, identifying meanings, processes and factors. We constantly returned to our 'standpoint' and the values that it incorporated, to test each decision. Through ongoing research team discussions, several iterations of analysis proceeded, so that themes converged into a system of themes delineating overarching foundational elements, primary aspects or domains of well-being and secondary aspects of well-being.

4 Findings: A Children's Standpoint on Their Well-being

In this section, we report on the themes we derived from the children's contributions. Figure 1, has been designed to show both the articulation of separated themes and their interconnections. The underlying mediums through which children understood experiences of well-being are children's significant relationships and emotional life. The well-being themes are largely discussed in terms of these two modes. The three overlapping circles in the centre of the figure represent the three overarching dimensions of well-being identified by children, positive sense of self, agency and security. These three themes were discussed as having independent importance to well-being, but also were clearly evident when children discussed a further six themes, those placed around the edge of the circle. The six domains, which tend to reflect more conventional domains of well-being, were concrete areas of life that children identified as important to their well-being. Each aspect will now be discussed in turn.

4.1 Children's Emotional Life and Relationships

As noted above, two fundamental elements underpinned children's discussion of well-being—emotional life and the significance of important relationships. These two factors provided mediums that children used to discuss what was important to

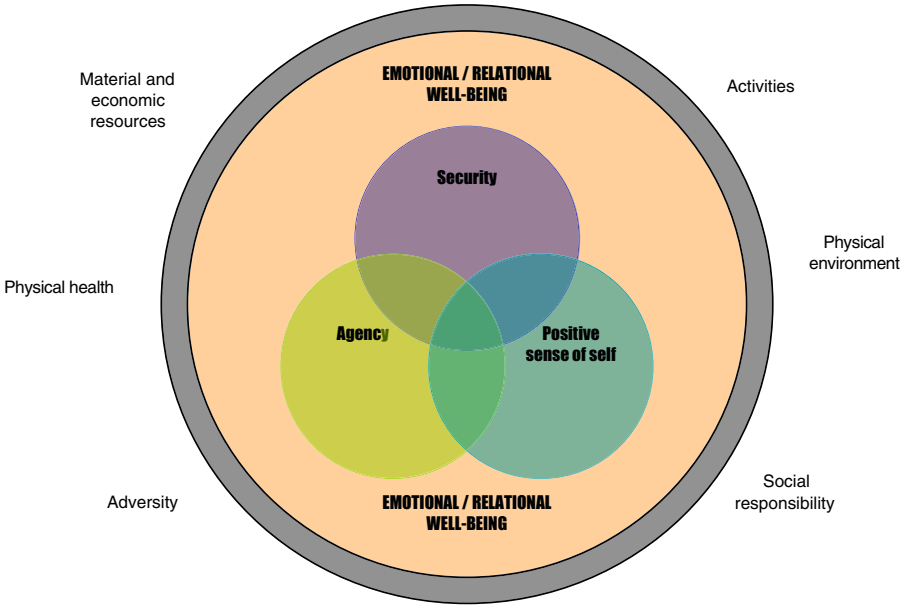

Fig. 1 A model of children's well-being

well-being and also allowed children to integrate complex and contradictory experiences into their understanding of well-being.[3]

Thus, children understood well-being not in terms of isolated domains but in terms of how, for example, health or economic well-being manifested in certain types of relationships or aspects of relationships (well-being as the need for care when ill) or as certain types of emotions (e.g., feelings of shame when not having socially perceived cultural items). Children described the interconnectedness of experiences of well-being in relationships when they indicated, for example, how, at specific points in time, through particular circumstances or encounters with certain people, they had awareness of feelings of competence, which then provided a basis for ongoing experiences of being a competent person.

Understanding well-being in emotional and relational terms also meant that children integrated complex and contrasting elements into their understanding of well-being: positive and negative experiences were seen to be intrinsic to well-being. Children discussed integrating loss and sadness as being important in the ongoing process of developing self and self-identity. This idea of integrating sadness into one's life was part of children's conceptualisation of a notion of resilience, it was about how they organise their lives so that they are okay and feel strong. Experiences of failure could be (or could become) well-being experiences. When children were well supported it became possible for there to be less focus on the failure, as such, and more emphasis on moving on past this particular instance,

[3] The specific characteristics of relationships, which can be described along a number of different lines, including the degree of love, affection, communication, interaction, time together, attachment, identification and commitment and, alternatively, the amount of conflict, violence, disagreement and abuse (Thornton 2001), are touched upon in specific well-being themes discussed below.

learning from it and gaining greater confidence in the process. Children described how important relationships were, at times, characterised by tensions that had to be worked through or negotiated. These tensions, especially with parents, often arose around changes in sense of self and therefore changed needs for agency and security (discussed below). Children understand and want their parents to provide guidance, because such guidance provides a foundation to exercise agency in everyday life. However, they want the boundaries of this guidance to be negotiated over time.

Underlying the significance of well-being as emotional and relational is the understanding that well-being manifests as both process and outcome. Well-being is experienced as that state of being which is related to sense of self and relationships with others, to important episodes and events, to competence, but also to the process of achieving competence. From children's discussions, the experience of well-being is understood not as something finally achieved or arrived at but as fluctuating and as negotiated, or worked out, over time. The process of well-being is an important aspect of the experience of well-being.

Relationships important to children were described as those in which they had experienced some or all of the three interconnected factors, those that we have identified as overarching themes in the data—a positive sense of self, a sense of agency and feelings of security. In understanding this interconnectedness, Giddens' (1991) argument concerning the individual and modernity and the reflexive project of the self has value. In an important sense, the interconnectedness that was being highlighted by the children and young people in this study reinforces Giddens' understanding of the process of identity formation which he conceived as a process of self-identity formation in which individuals (children, in the case of this research) participate actively and for which they require 'ontological security'.[4] These three interconnected themes then interface with the other points on which the children's narrative focussed and which we have identified as additional themes, themes which have to do with material, physical and social aspects of their world.

4.2 Overarching Themes of Children's Well-being

4.2.1 Positive Sense of Self

A positive sense of self was concerned with children feeling that they are an 'okay' or good person. Feelings of self-worth were anchored in experiences of positive recognition and in feeling a sense of belonging and could be linked with concrete achievements but also a general sense that things were 'going okay'. Positive recognition (either formal or informal) is obtained both through everyday acts of recognition and through more ritualised forms of recognition. For children, education is a significant context for formal recognition and they understand that rewards in this context are provided to those who do well. However, children distinguished between doing well formally and a feeling that they had done all right. The latter involved having a sense of satisfaction with their progress, linked to knowing that they had done their best.

[4] Here Giddens draws upon the work of R. D. Laing. See Laing 1960.

A positive sense of self is also closely linked with a sense of self-integrity described as 'trying to be someone I want to be' and as 'being yourself rather than pretending to be someone else for the sake of others'. Children described how sometimes they felt they couldn't just be themselves and had to project a false self-image in order to meet the expectations of friends and family. They also discussed the importance of having time and personal space to reflect on what kind of person they are and want to be and what is important to them. Taking time out to be on your own, to relax and reflect allows children to process how they feel, to take stock of what is going on around them, and to reflect on particular difficulties they might be experiencing. The important thing was the autonomy to move away from routine expectations to focus on what is occurring in their life. For example:

> Participant (Female, 14 years): I think even being on your own can often make you feel good. Um, I think giving yourself time to think and process everything that is going on around you. You can find good and happy things in life and that can also make you happy as well.

In relation to a sense of self-image and self-integrity, significant others in their lives would seem to be the points of reference for assessing how they were doing. Children negotiate their difference and assert their sameness with these key figures in their lives. In that sense, a positive sense of self is inter-subjective and introspective, reliant upon attitudes received from others and self-judgement as to the authenticity of ones own behaviour.

What children tell us in their discussions of self is significant particularly given the extent to which a lacunae exits on the topic in the adult generated literature where, as Uszyńska-Jarmoc (2004) points out, the emphasis is on adult and adolescent conceptualisations of self. Children in their discussion of self are indicating that, as the psychological literature informs us, the self is subject to external influences, but that children's response to those influences is not a passive one. Rather, children are actively and reflexively engaged in the configuration of self-identity. Here, for children, as for adults, Giddens' argument that self-identity is a process, applies.

4.2.2 Agency—Control in Everyday Life

Having agency, or the capacity to have some control and to be able to exert influence, was important to well-being. Most important in children's understanding of agency was democratisation of everyday life, which could be understood as a condition in which feelings of mastery, control and self-efficacy was experienced. Children discussed the importance of being able to make choices in everyday situations and influence everyday occurrences at home and at school. They felt that their level of control over their own lives was one of the things that made them different from adults, who control what goes on day-to-day. As well as being able to exert agency in everyday life, children identified how it was important to their wellbeing to be involved in more formal decisions about their lives, such as at school:

> Interviewer: Do you think children should be part of making rules, like, should adults make them on their own or should they ask children?

> Participant (Male, 9 years): Well, I think, that both sides should co-operate together and should have, like, meetings together and make up the rules because it is more fair that way.

Children differentiated between opportunities to negotiate about and contribute to everyday decision-making, the capacity to act as an agent and the outcomes of acting. They spoke about responsible decision-making having two dimensions: the process of acting responsibly and responsible outcomes. The process of acting responsibly was expressed as knowing you have the capacity to process information, make morally sound decisions, and be able to stand by the reasons for your decision. Responsible outcomes involved knowing that by making a sound decision, good outcomes would be achieved for yourself and for those affected by your decision, especially the people close to you.

Many scholars have documented the shift towards negotiation within family relations, especially between partners, arguing that negotiation between parents and children has also become the norm as part of the democratization of family life (Beck and Beck 1995; Beck 1997; Cunningham 1995; Vandenbroeck and Bouverne De-Bie 2006). This altered relation between parents and children has been taken as diminishing the differences between childhood and adulthood (Wyness 1996). Our research suggests that, in these negotiations, children quite clearly differentiate their role from that of the adults in their lives: the role of adults is seen to involve providing reference points and setting limits for action, which are negotiated over time. Children discussed agency as only possible within the boundaries and possibilities set by others, particularly parents. They articulated the social relations upon which autonomy was premised, including stable, secure relationships with adults. Such guidance provided them with a sense of certainty and context within which they could act, particularly when situations or problems were complex. If it was accepted that these boundaries with the adults in their lives could be negotiated, children felt enabled to participate in decision making about their own lives, achieve their goals and experience competency. This perhaps differentiates children's understanding of agency from related concepts of environmental mastery (Ryff 1989; Ryff and Keyes 1995) and self-efficacy (Bandura 1986; 1993) which focus on the individual psychological exercise of control over, or management of, the environment. Rather, children discussed the importance of exercising agency because of, or through, the social environment in relational rather than atomistic ways.

4.2.3 Security and Safety

Having a sense of security based on the negotiated difference between adulthood and childhood is the third dominant theme. Children described feeling safe and secure as important to well-being because this enabled them to engage fully with life—'I can live life to the full'—and do what they needed to do, in a context of feeling safe. This again underlines the close interconnection between agency and security. Several factors were identified by children as providing a sense of security and safety. These included having the protection of parents, a personal safe place to be, and trusted people around them. This is illustrative of Giddens' point that a sense of trust becomes crucial in a period such as our modern era in which we typically experience

the 'disembedding' (from traditional ties of family, locality or social class) of the individual as actor (Giddens 1991. See also Beck 1992; Beck et al. 1994).

Parents are the people who children and young people said were primarily responsible for keeping them safe. There are two related aspects to this; a sense of being cared for, combined with trust that parents will provide protection; and the practical things that parents do to keep children safe (such as making the household physically secure; teaching safe behaviours; and making sure that children don't place themselves in unsafe situations or do unsafe things). The first aspect, which could be a described as emotional security, relates to having warm, satisfying, trusting relationships with others (Prilleltensky et al. 2001). Children expect that home should be a place where personal threats do not exist and emotional and physical security is promoted. In our research, some children described this as a feeling of 'togetherness'.

Personal fears that impacted on a sense of well-being were often located in community contexts. Fears about personal safety, being a victim of assault by a stranger and having personal property taken by others, were the primary fears that children related. Lack of safety was attributed by some children to a decline of what has been described elsewhere as 'social capital' (Putnam 2000). Neighbourhoods are not welcoming or safe because people did not 'look out for each other' and were less inclined to take responsibility for children in their neighbourhood. When children feel safe in their neighbourhood, they feel connected to place and are able to act autonomously within it. The design and qualities of the built environment are important factors in making a community safe or unsafe and have an influence on just how safe children feel. The lack of 'safe spaces' for general use restricts children's capacity to engage in activities in their own way. A 10 year old boy described how living on a busy road meant he was not allowed to ride his bike freely:

> Participant (Male 10 years): I used to be allowed to like ride by myself just around the block and everything with my friends, like when I was really little. My friends used to live next to me and we just rode around but now I can't because it's busy and anything could happen.

Children also expressed fears about global threats, such as war and terrorism. They indicated that they felt helpless to do anything about such fears and expressed anxiety that something horrific could happen close to home. A general insecurity about their own future, and that of their community and society, was described by some children as compromising their well-being to the extent that they were required to live in a risk-averse way so as to manage risk.

Positive sense of self, agency and security were the fulcrums around which children defined their well-being. Interactions and tensions between these themes formed the parameters within which children discussed other themes which they told us were important to their well-being. There were six of these.

4.3 Other Themes

4.3.1 Activities—Freedom, Competence and Fun

Activities, including formal sports, free-time, informal hobbies, educational activities and special occasions with family and friends, were important to children's sense of

well-being. This was not so much because of the activity itself, but because the activity was a means to experience fun, freedom from constraints (such as rules and routine) and develop competence:

> Participant (Male, 14 years): ... you have to practice to be good at something. So the more I practice the better I'll become.

Children discussed having increased mastery and capacity to do things as contributing to a sense of enhanced enjoyment. Competency, and becoming more competent, enhances both present and future experiences and is important to a sense of well-being. The relationship context is crucial in determining whether activities lead to a sense of well-being. Children discussed the importance of supportive adults for helping them learn new things and 'develop'. They felt secure in learning something new when they perceived that adults could appropriately manage any risks that were involved.

4.3.2 Adversity—Dealing with Difficult Times

Children described how their ability to cope with adverse circumstances is developed through the support they are provided in specific contexts and within specific relationships (what are conventionally referred to as protective factors. See Brindis et al. 2001). The presence of a supportive and caring family is important in helping children deal with a variety of difficulties and adverse circumstances. Families provide the context within which to discuss daily problems and obtain the assistance to deal with emotional and practical difficulties. Children identify certain friends who they can confide in because these friends understand where the child is 'coming from' and can empathise. Often the depth of friendship developed through shared experiences allows children to share their experiences of adversity:

> Interviewer: So what is it about friends that you think is important to our well-being?
>
> Participant (Female, 15 years): You can go and hang out with them and just have a good time when you are with them and if there is something that I can't tell my Mum or something like that, I can tell my friends and know that they will be able to understand what I feel and everything. And when I have had a fight with my Mum I always tell [my friend] that what's happened and she is always like, 'Oh, all right then'.

4.3.3 Material and Economic Resources—What Families Need to Get By

In this research, the link between money and well-being is overwhelmingly about having enough money to provide a decent standard of living for households, not individuals. For children, the financial security of their family and having enough money to do things together as a family constitute an appropriate standard of living. This was expressed as 'what families need to get by and do their thing'. Children's discussion of economic well-being was founded upon the recognition of the importance of adequate household income, but it was discussed in terms of how lack of adequate income results in forms of social deprivation (see Saunders et al. 2007).

Many participants discussed their own experiences of relative poverty described as times of 'going without' or compromises that had to be made so that their family

could make ends meet. The emotional costs of going without for some children include labelling, shame and exclusion (similar to Ridge's study of children's experience of poverty. See Ridge 2002). In talking about these times the focus was often on the emotional impacts and the ways they and their family coped:

> Participant (Female, 15 years): Well, for example, if at Christmas, and my mum is a bit tight for money so she can't go out and buy everything that she wants, I said to her, 'cause my brother is younger and he is still growing up, I said get his presents first and get mine later because I've seen through it'. I know what it is all about. He is growing up and he believes in the whole Santa thing and everything.

Children also told us that money was important for social and cultural participation. They discussed how money provides increased access to cultural activities and cultural capital, and provides opportunities and capacity to purchase goods and services. Ownership of specific sorts of commodities could facilitate integration with and acceptance by peer groups. However, many participants distinguished between these sorts of commodities and special items that were invested with emotional significance. The latter items may have little economic value but were part of that child's identity and, accordingly, highly valued by them.

4.3.4 Physical Environments

The design and physical features of the natural and built environment can provide a sense of well-being, as explained by this group of children. This was particularly so when the physical environment allowed children to engage actively in their community, where it facilitated special occasions with family or friends and also where the physical environment was associated with feelings of calm and relaxation. For example:

> Interviewer: …Why did you choose that picture there? [A picture of a secluded beach viewed through bush in the foreground]
>
> Participant (Male, 8 years): (pause) Because of the view. When it is far away you can see, you are in the picture because (you are) from a place to the beach. And, again, because of the calmness.

Children commented on the importance of maintaining the quality of the environment. In particular, environments that were noisy, unhygienic and traffic-dense were not conducive to wellbeing. For example, being able to access parklands autonomously, and feel safe to play in parks, is important to some children's well-being.

4.3.5 Physical Health—Eat Well and Be Active

In these accounts, staying physically healthy is important to well-being. Children distinguished between health and illness. As described by an eight year old male who chose a picture of people playing football to describe well-being, good health enables children to have an active life and continued opportunities to do things that children want to do—it is not fun to be ill! Three factors emerged as important to physical health—appropriate care, healthy food, and physical activity. These were

seen as the responsibility of the home. Some children believe that while they were encouraged to exercise and lead a physically active life, they were constrained in achieving this because of a lack of safe places in the community to 'just go out and play'. For these children to feel safe, activities had to be organised and supervised by an adult:

> Interviewer: So there are not as many opportunities to do sort of exercise in a free way.
>
> Participant (Female, 13 years): Like you've got to go to tennis classes. Like, you can't just hit a ball out on the street. You've got to go for tennis lessons one afternoon... Like everyone is there and you've got a coach and like he is there or she and you feel you can be more safe.

While health was about daily health-promoting behaviours, illness was about treatment and cure and thus the responsibility of doctors and other health professionals. Here the importance of being able to access appropriate health care was significant to well-being. Thus both primary (preventive) and secondary (curative) dimensions of health care were seen as important to well-being.

4.3.6 Social Responsibility and Moral Agency—being a good person

Relationships with other people, how you treat others, and whether you believe you are doing the right thing were described by the children and young people as important to their sense of well-being: being a 'good person' is important. Children feel good about themselves when they help out friends, do well at school, and 'look out' for parents.

Children told us that it is important to their sense of well-being to feel they are able to express their values in their actions in everyday life. This sense of emotional integrity (Salmela 2005) was sometimes, but not necessarily, related to codified systems of belief. Principles for action were context dependent and worked out as they went along, rather than based on a defined set of moral principles. Important people in their lives, especially parents, are significant in providing guidance and setting an example of how to act. Again the importance of supported negotiation is evident. By negotiating moral situations (and being supported in these negotiations), children develop their ideas about moral issues and build critical capacities, including their ability to reflect on their own values. Through experience, moral concepts are enlarged, refined and replaced:

> Participant 1: Um, I think there is still room for us to learn from our mistakes.
> Participant 2: A lot of boundaries.
>
> Participant 1: … A lot of control from higher power people. Parents, for example… they often stop you from doing mistakes before you can make them. You still learn from it but you haven't actually done the mistake yourself. (Females, 13 years and 14 years)

The most important contexts for enacting notions of social responsibility and moral obligation are the home and personal life. In our study, children talked about this as cooperation and respect, helping out (doing 'one's share'), supporting and caring for family members and trying to meet parental expectations. Within their

communities, responsibility and moral obligation is about civic engagement with people who are not connected through bonds of family or friendship. These interactions are premised on a general sense of being a good person, and treating others according to their own values, such as acting fairly and honestly.

5 Developing Domains and Dimensions of Well-being

Table 1, below, provides a list of potential domains and dimensions of well-being derived from this research. The domains and dimensions identified are those that are meaningful and important in terms of what children have told us about their lives. The well-being *domains* are the main themes identified and the *dimensions* are the key aspects of each theme discussed. For example, children's discussion of agency as important in everyday and institutional contexts is reflected in terms of a number of dimensions of agency and decision-making in everyday circumstances—in the family, in institutional contexts (educational institutions and local community) and in relation to broader political processes.

The domains are a combination of what have been described, on the one hand, as 'traditional' domains of well-being, and, on the other hand, as 'new' domains of well-being (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001). Agency, social responsibility and children's activities are difficult to align with traditional domains derived from protection or service-oriented rationales. However, domains such as safety, economic well-being and health have a well-developed history of measurement in morbidity, mortality, child abuse and poverty statistics. The self, adversity and environment domains reference both well-established and emerging areas of indicator development. Mental health measures relating to clinical level mental health burdens have been collected for decades in many countries, but measures of broader definitions of emotional well-being have not. Children's use of the environment links with the growing body of work around child-friendly communities and environments. In part this work has had increased impetus because of global concerns for environmental sustainability. As a result, indicators of sustainable child-friendly natural and physical environments have been developed and are being used as tools and accountability measures for local, provincial and national governments (Chawla 2002).

Our research explored with children and young people how they understand the meaning of well-being, right now, at this point in their lives. It is unsurprising that the 'domains' and 'dimensions' (set out in the table) emphasise the quality of experiences within childhood, emphasizing well-being rather than well-becoming. Most, if not all, of the well-being dimensions are concerned with children's quality of life in the present, and reflect the preoccupations of children rather than necessarily the preoccupations of adults for future happy, productive adults. The dimensions therefore conceptualise the well-being needs of children as citizens (Ben-Arieh and Goerge 2006; Qvortrup 2005). However, the dimensions mitigate the differences between well-being and well-becoming. The tension between being and becoming, between citizen child and future citizen, has led Frønes (2007) to argue that identifying the wellbeing of children is more complex than identifying the well-being of other age groups, in a field that is already fragmented and lacking any unifying theory. Consideration has to be given to being and becoming and the

Table 1 Well-being domains and dimensions—children's understandings of well-being

Well-being domain	Well-being dimension
Agency	Children have opportunities to effect change in everyday situations and relationships—(family, educational institutions, local community).
	Children have opportunities to participate in broader civic, political processes.
Safety and security	Children are safe from abuse and neglect within their families.
	Children are safe from violence, bullying and discrimination within their peer groups and community.
	Children live in homes where they feel protected, safe and secure.
	Children live in communities that are child-friendly and inclusive of children.
Self	Children have a positive sense of self-worth and integrity and feel they are a good person.
	Children are appreciated and respected for who they are and given positive recognition within their family, by peers and teachers.
	Children have a sense of personal space or a home environment where they can relax and be themself.
Activities, freedom, competence and fun	Children enjoy their experience of learning so they feel competent, connected to learning institutions and motivated to learn.
	Children have the capacity and are supported to set out and attain goals.
	Children participate in structured and unstructured activities that promote positive sensory experience and enjoyment.
Dealing with adversity	Children live in families where they can routinely discuss and seek practical assistance on problems they confront.
	Children have friends who stick by them and they can confide in.
	Children have adults outside their family they can turn to for support.
	Children have feelings of self-worth and control so they can solve the problems they confront.
	Children have strategies which can provide diversion and relief from stress and hurt.
Material and economic resources	Children live in households that have enough material resources to get by and do their thing, including having socially perceived necessities.
	Children live in households free from poverty.
	Children have access to enough income to allow them to participate in social and cultural activities.
Physical Environments	Children are safe and feel secure within community spaces.
	Children have access to appropriate physical environments and community resources to allow creative and exploratory play in their local community environment.
	Children have opportunities to access ecologically diverse natural environments.
Physical health—eat well and be active	Children have access to basic health services when needed.
	Children participate in health promoting behaviours that allow them to engage in life, such as physical activity, healthy eating.
	Children are free from illness, morbidity and mortality, including activity limiting disabilities.
Social Responsibility and Moral Agency—being a good person	Children have positive values that guide their behaviour, including valuing and appreciating others in their community.

Table 1 (continued)

Well-being domain	Well-being dimension
	Children have appropriate obligations and responsibilities at home and act in a responsible way with their family.
	Children have opportunities to actively engage in community life, and act in a socially responsible way within their communities.

interplay between the two. Many of children's own discussions of well-being contained both present and future oriented dimensions. Most of the dimensions are specified as outcomes because well-being dimensions were largely anchored in relationships and therefore part of an ongoing process of interaction with family, friends, institutions and communities. These processes are therefore neither outcomes in the present nor outcomes in the future, but processes that connect the two through ongoing lived experience.

The other connection between well-being and well-becoming in these dimensions is that present well-being experiences are in many cases likely to be the preconditions for healthy development as conventionally elaborated and understood within developmental health frameworks. For example, the dimension, 'Children enjoy their experience of learning so they feel competent, connected to learning institutions and motivated to learn', relates to quality of educational experiences. Both enjoyment and feeling connected to school are associated with the development of productive traits such as cognitive ability, educational achievement, and skill acquisition. (Moore et al. 2001). However, what children emphasised is that current experiences and processes, while possibly connected to future outcomes, are critical in having value in themselves. While we have measures of skill acquisition, we also need measures of quality of connections to learning institutions, not only because of their significance to development but because this is an important aspect of children's quality of life. These dimensions therefore contribute to understanding the dynamics between child well-being and becoming (Frønes 2007) and support the argument of Uprichard (2008) that it is time to question the dualism in the construction of children as 'being' or 'becoming'. Rather, we can acknowledge the complementarity of the application of the two concepts to understanding the lives of children and the way this construction 'places children in the real situation of being present and future agents of their present and future lives and ultimately of the social world around them' (311–312).

The dimensions (developed in our analysis) reflect, foremost, children's interactions at the microsystem level, with family, friends, local community members, teachers and so forth. This focus prioritises the significance of relationships for children's well-being which, in ecological models, are also conceptualised as having the most direct influence on children's well-being (Bronfenbrenner 1979). While child attributes, behaviours, preferences and status are the centre of measurement, latent in all of the dimensions is the importance of broader contexts of parental, familial, communal, and social well-being (Prilleltensky et al. 2001). These exogenous or structural contexts relate to the provision of infrastructure,

programs, service and facilities at one level (the mesosystem and exosystem), and policy regimes, political and economic systems and respect for human rights at the broadest level (the macrosystem) (Belsky 1993). For example, feelings of competence (individual) are developed through supportive interactions with adults (parents and teachers—the microsystem), which are facilitated by the exosystem (positive working conditions, well-resourced schools) and the macrosystem (norms supportive of children's rights, positive pedagogy, systems of industrial rights/employee protections). These aspects could potentially be developed as measures that are supportive of children's experiences of competence. Furthermore, where children discussed the embedded experience of well-being within broader inter-subjective and structural contexts, the dimensions we developed also reflect this. For example, 'Children have access to basic health services when needed', and, 'Children live in households free from poverty', encompass experiential and structural dimensions.

6 Challenges for Indicator Development

Developing indicators from qualitative data is a complex and challenging task, one which remains ahead of us. We identify several challenges for this process.

The translation of qualitative research into quantitative measures will invariably result in a loss in complexity and richness in understanding children's well-being. In particular, our findings show that contradiction is a normal part of children's lives and sense of well-being, something that they negotiate on a daily basis. For example, expressions of anger and sadness are both important to a sense of well-being. As Frønes argues: 'A good life is a meaningful metaphor for most people, but it is not an entity that exists in a given format. The good life and happiness exist as narratives, visions, and images and as economic and psychological models' (Frønes 2007, 14). 'Good' indicators, on the other hand, need to be easily interpretable and conceptually consistent and are, therefore, not easily amenable to the complexity of some aspects of well-being discussed earlier.

Another of the challenges in indicator development has already been alluded to, that is the tension between well-being and becoming. Frønes (2007) argues that, because of children's special position as citizens and as future adults, children's well-being has to encompass both the present and dimensions of future development. At the level of measurement this poses difficult choices between concrete alternatives. Frønes suggests that some domains, such as citizenship and rights, lend themselves to 'well-being' measures, while others, such as education, lend themselves to 'well-becoming' measures. While we would agree with Frønes that we need to be mindful of the special position of children, measures must be developed that include the present experience dimension because of its significance to children. The focus on children as future citizens at the expense of children as citizens in the present, which still dominates policy, ignores what Uprichard (2008) refers to as the 'temporality of childhood that children themselves voice' and thereby the relevance, which children recognise, of the present to the future. Child-oriented indicators can contribute to a more equitable shift in this focus.

The contingent nature of well-being poses another enduring challenge for the development of indicators. This research has focused on the common themes that

emerge out of the relatively diverse population of children involved in the research. However, looking at children as a separate social category may mask differences between children. Researchers attempting to develop a children's standpoint have had to recognise that there is no one children's standpoint and to find ways of building that recognition into their research design and analysis. For all the significant commonalities they share, children are not all the same. In our research, we were conscious, from the beginning, of those critical points of contrast, such as gender, age, ethnicity, ability and disability, socioeconomic status, and geographic location. In designing indicators and indicator concepts, it remains a challenge to identify and take fully into account the range of difference among children even within one state, New South Wales, let alone more globally.

Furthermore, indicators are situated in a particular historical, cultural and social context. For example, Vandenbroeck and Bouverne De-Bie (2006) discuss how negotiation, as an educational norm, is a western, middle-class norm which privileges certain groups of children and excludes others. In this respect, "middle-class values and norms are decontextualized and naturalized, and consequently perceived to be universally 'good for children'" (137) (Also see Kjørholt 2002). In addition, well-being dimensions can take different forms in different contexts and for different groups of children. For example, the needs for autonomy and security may be experienced in different ways by different children at different times in their lives but nevertheless may be universal throughout lifetimes. The ambiguity resulting from this situation points to an ongoing challenge in developing indicators meaningful to children generally, but allowing for flexibility in application.

It is therefore essential that there is an ongoing involvement of children in the process—in the development of measures, in their validation, in their application, and in the process of monitoring and drawing out implications for policy. This constitutes probably our greatest challenge: such a process is inevitably time and labour intensive and therefore expensive. Even more daunting is the inevitability that such processes will require strategies which change as circumstances change, and as the way children conceptualise their well-being changes over time and over cultures and geographic locations.

7 Towards a Framework for Guiding Policy

The findings challenge policymakers and professionals in the children area to separate out adults and children's interests in the complex field of children's well-being. Such processes are essential if we are to develop policies in ways which, because they accord with children's understanding of their well-being, actually promote this well-being both in children's presents and futures.

When we seek to gain an understanding of the meanings that children attach to well-being, it prompts a reassessment both of the issues to be regarded as policy relevant and the parameters of existing policy debate on children's issues. Some aspects of children's experience have not been sufficiently considered in policy, for example, agency, social responsibility and sense of self. Consequently, our current policy frameworks may not deliver to children the well-being outcomes they value. Further, our policies and actions may have had unintended consequences because

some key components of children's well-being have been regarded as irrelevant or unimportant in policy terms. Shifting children from the objects (clients) to the subjects (citizens) of policy not only requires a reconceptualisation of what is policy relevant but requires processes of meaningful participation for children in policy determination. If we accept that children should be involved in a meaningful way in contributing to policy and the content of indicators, that implies that policy and indicator development mechanisms have to alter to allow for effective and deliberative dialogue that understands children as important contributors to policy formation.

Children's perspectives on their well-being emphasise not only the significance of broader structural issues but also the significance of small acts in daily interactions in promoting their sense of well-being. For those who work and live with children, including parents and teachers, the challenge is to consider how their own behaviour and decisions impact on children in light of what children have told us.

8 Conclusion

This research has provided an account of children's understandings of what constitutes their well-being. It has attempted to bracket out preconceptions and preoccupations concerning the adult understanding of that world of meaning. Children, when given the chance, have both the capacity and ability to participate in research about their lives. Standpoint theory stresses the fact that, as well as being authoritative about their own world, children see things differently as a result of their different location, structurally, in the social order. Acknowledging that difference, and valuing children's understanding of their different status, has also been important for us as researchers. How children understand what being a child means, the nature of childhood and adulthood, and the powerfulness of adults in a child's world, is especially significant if we are to understand well-being from the child's point of view. In doing so, we also need to recognise the importance of diversity and difference among children.

For this group of children, well-being is about their emotional lives. As for adults, well-being for children is complex and multi-faceted, covers both negative and positive dimensions, and is understood in a holistic way. What children told us about their wellbeing gives new meaning and context to some issues already in policy and research focus, for example, health, poverty and safety, and further informs us on existing constructs, such as self concept. Analysis of the data contributed by children also draws attention to issues important to children that are currently not in focus, such as the importance to them of practising social responsibility.

Children's perspectives therefore contributed both external validity to our ways of understanding, researching and monitoring their well-being—i.e., are we actually attempting to measure the right things in the first place—and internal validity for existing measures—i.e., are we actually measuring what we think we are measuring? While enhancing and complementing existing measures, children's understandings also extend and challenge domains, developed by research, which are adult-centric, questioning dominant beliefs and expectations of what constitutes and is important for children's well-being. That children's perspectives potentially map onto and

challenge measures developed in other areas, such as developmental psychology, provides a source for future dialogue across disciplines in relation to the dynamic between well-being and well-becoming.

The research also challenges the historically dominant tradition in social science research which has frequently silenced the voices of children and relied on adults providing data on children's lives as part of attempts at shaping the future. As exemplified in our research, hearing the voices of children forces us to consider the significance to them of their well-being in the present, while co-incidentally presaging the relevance of their 'presents' to their futures. Further, the findings position children in New South Wales as linking their concerns about their present well-being with concerns about the well-being of others, both locally and globally. The way in which children conceptualise their well-being in a broad context of family, peers, school and global issues emphasises Manderson's (2005, 13) point that "(i)ndividual sense of wellbeing, is more than the subjective assessment of embodiment; rather, it is embedded in and derives from society itself".

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