

**Current status of research literature in the area of Well-being in Early
Childhood**

Morato-Espino, P.G.,

University of Santo Tomas, The Graduate School Paulin Grace Morato-Espino

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6484-3152>

Email: pmespino@ust.edu.ph

DOI: 10.21913/TAHS.v4i2.1650

Citation details: Morato-Espino, P.G. (2023). Current status of research literature in the area of Well-being in Early Childhood, The Allied Health Scholar (2), 5-20.

Abstract

Early childhood is an important period in a child's development. Despite the advances in child well-being research in the past decade, there are notably fewer studies involving young children, and even fewer ones where children are active participants. This mini-review summarises recently published work on the study of well-being in early childhood and provides recommendations on the future direction of research in this area. Most research on early childhood well-being is related to health promotion and parenting. These studies define well-being varyingly and employ diverse instruments to measure it. Only one study necessitated the active participation of children. Recommendations include operationally defining well-being, more research developing instruments and methods to measure well-being specifically for young children and including the active participation of children in well-being research regardless of age.

Keywords: well-being, early childhood, participatory approach, mini-review

Introduction

Children are among the most vulnerable, and adverse events during childhood can have long-lasting effects on their health and well-being (McCrory et al., 2015; Nurius et al., 2015). This is especially true for early childhood, where most growth and development happen, and the foundations for adult functioning, behavior, and habits are established (Guyer et al., 2009). This mini-review summarizes studies on well-being in early childhood published within the last decade. Recommendations for the future direction of research in this area are presented.

Early Childhood Well-Being Research In-Context

Well-being is context-specific, and it is important to recognize the context of research related to the well-being of young children. Research in this area in the past decade is primarily about health promotion, such as those related to movement/physical activity (Atkinson & Rubidge, 2013; Lee & Carson, 2018; Pippi et al., 2020), play (Howard & McInnes, 2013; Lee et al., 2020), screen use (Przybylski & Weinstein, 2019; Tezol et al., 2022), sleep (Kitsaras et al., 2018), and feeding (Lepinioti et al., 2021). Other contexts of research in which the well-being of young children is discussed include those performed in a daycare facility (Sood & Comer-Hagans, 2018) or related to ethnicity (Condon & McClean, 2017) and parenting (Howard et al., 2011; Shimazu et al., 2020). Most of these studies are quantitative observational (n=8) in design, but a number are qualitative (n=4) and experimental (n=2).

The Definition of Well-Being

The study of well-being in early childhood is faced with several challenges. One difficulty is the absence of an integrated and cohesive definition of child well-being (Amerijckx & Humblet,

2014; Pollard & Lee, 2003; Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2014; Street, 2021). Authors often discuss the indicators of child well-being but not what it constitutes (Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2014) and do not always provide how they operationally used the concept in their work. In this review, only four studies identified the definition of well-being utilized in their study. Table 1 provides the various definitions of well-being utilized by the authors of these studies (Björger, 2015; Howard & McInnes, 2013; Sood & Comer-Hagans, 2018). Several critical elements can be identified from these definitions of well-being. First is multidimensionality, which denotes that well-being consists of different domains (Fernandes et al., 2012; Pollard & Lee, 2003) and that a child is well if these different areas in a child's life are in a positive state. The second is context-specificity, or the dependence of well-being on an individual's context. Many scholars describe well-being as ecological (Pollard & Lee, 2003; Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2014), context-specific (Camfield et al., 2010), and a result of intrapersonal, interpersonal, societal, and cultural processes (Minkkinen, 2013). Third is that well-being is dynamic (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2014; Ben-Arieh et al., 2014), and it constantly changes with shifts in an individual's internal processes and external environment. Fourth is the ability of an individual to meet the demands present in the current stage of one's life. Meeting the challenges results in positive feelings (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Minkkinen, 2013), the fifth critical element. These elements may be seen separately or together with other elements in existing definitions or proposed definitions of child well-being, but never all together in one definition. Also, some elements may be encountered more often than others. For example, the first element is very common and will often be encountered in studies defining well-being, while the fourth element may need to be emphasized more in current conceptualizations of child well-being. While this list is in no way exhaustive, it may at least provide guidance on determining what well-being during early childhood constitutes.

Table 1 The Definition of Well-being and Their Focus

Reference	Well-being Definition	Focus
Bjorgen, 2015	“When individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge.” (Dodge, Daly, Huyton & Sanders, 2012)	Multidimensionality; meeting demands
	“...when they express positive feelings in various ways. ...refers to feeling at ease, being spontaneous and free of emotional tension, and is crucial to good “mental health”....linked to self-confidence, self-esteem, and resilience.”(Laevers, 2005)	Positive feelings; indicators
Howard & McInnes, 2013	“...can be defined in different way but is generally understood to encompass physical, social and emotional health” (Statham & Chase, 2010)	Multidimensionality
Sood et al., 2018	“Health & well-being are dynamic in nature and function differently in each person to enable them to meet the demands on life in accordance with age, culture, and personal responsibility.” (Bircher, 2005)	Dynamic; context-specific; meeting demands

Measurement of Child Well-Being

Many studies related to children’s well-being are available, and researchers use diverse instruments as there is currently no guidance on its measurement. Various indicators of well-being in early childhood were measured using different instruments, as seen in Table 2. The use

of different measures will make the comparison of findings of different studies difficult. Also, researchers measure many different dimensions or indicators of well-being, and measuring only selected dimensions or indicators may not accurately represent the child's well-being in its entirety. There has also been some confusion regarding the concepts of well-being and quality of life and their measurement. For example, one study utilized Kid-Kindl to measure psychological well-being. However, the instrument is described as a "self-report questionnaire that measures a child's health-related quality of life and consists of six different domains of general well-being: physical well-being, emotional well-being, self-esteem, family, friends, and everyday functioning (school)" (Pippi et al., 2020). Quality of life and well-being are separate but related concepts and are sometimes used interchangeably in the literature. Future studies need to clarify the taxonomy related to these two terms to avoid any confusion in interpreting the findings of these studies.

Table 2 The Indicators of Well-being and Measures Used

Indicator	Instrument	Reference
Involvement	Leuven's Involvement Scale	Howard & McInnes, 2013
Emotional well-being	Smiley Face Likert Scale; Children's Emotional Manifestation Scale	Lee et al., 2020
Mental well-being	Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)	Lepinioti et al., 2021; Shimazu et al., 2020; Tezol et al., 2022
Psychosocial well-being	A questionnaire developed from the Bayley Scales of Infant Development and Ages and Stages Questionnaire	Lee & Carson, 2018
Physical well-being	Pedometer and body mass index (BMI)	Lee et al., 2020
Social well-being	Peer Interactive Play Scale and Test of Playfulness	Lee et al., 2020
School readiness	Bracken School Readiness Assessment	Kitsaras et al., 2018
Dental health	Dmft score	Kitsaras et al., 2018
	National Institute of Health (NIH) Toolbox	Kitsaras et al., 2018
Executive functions	Behavioral Rating Inventory of Executive Functions (BRIEF-P)	Kitsaras et al., 2018

Participation of Young Children in Well-Being Research

Another important consideration in the study of child well-being is the extent of participation of children, which may vary in the application of participatory research (Nygren et al., 2017). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) (1989) emphasizes that children's

voices are heard, especially concerning their welfare. However, many may find it difficult to recognize this right, especially when doing research with young children. A review (Larsson et al., 2018) found that most of the studies related to developing health and well-being interventions included children eight years old or older. Very few studies included in the analysis recruited children seven years old and below, and they participated mostly as informants. Of the studies included in this mini-review, only one necessitated the participation of young children and only as the source of information (Lee et al., 2020). It is essential to recognize children's right to be heard and that the best source of information regarding their well-being is the children themselves. Age is not a hindrance to children's participation in well-being research. Careful planning of data collection methods, however, is crucial to make them suitable for the early childhood level.

Future Directions

Despite the advances in child well-being research in the past decade, there is still much to be done, especially in early childhood. Children's well-being is a concern of multiple disciplines, and each discipline may have its own focus when doing research on this area. Future interdisciplinary research may provide an invaluable contribution to the body of knowledge once there is more clarity on the conceptualization of well-being or the right tools have been made available.

There have been several attempts to shed light on the concept of child well-being (Amerijckx & Humblet, 2014; Minkkinen, 2013; Raghavan & Alexandrova, 2014). However, to date, a unified definition still escapes us. Could it be that the existing definitions do not fully encapsulate holistic well-being, thus the continued search? Or could it be that there really is no need for such? Indeed, a paradigm shift might be needed to address this long-standing issue (Saith & Wazir, 2010). Maybe it is time to finally think outside the box and tackle this problem with fresh perspectives and

innovative solutions. Should we allow different groups of people, including young children, to define what well-being is to them? It is suggested, though, that researchers include how child well-being was defined, at least operationally, when doing research on this area for easier understanding and interpretation of the findings.

There is notably less research on young children's well-being compared to older children and adolescents. This could be from the limited instruments available for this population or the perceived difficulty in drawing valid responses from these children. Much work is needed in this area, from changing old views of adults as experts to that of child-centeredness (Ben-Arieh, 2005), allowing the children to be the key thinkers and movers in defining and evaluating their well-being. More research into the development of instruments and methods to study well-being in early childhood is necessary.

Lastly, it has to be emphasized that it is the right of children, regardless of age, to be heard and allowed to participate in the study of their well-being actively. It is imperative that this right be recognized and considered when designing research that involves children, including young children. Most adults mean well and only have the children's best interests in mind. However, it is still important that children are involved, and there are several ways and levels of how this can be done. Participatory research allows children to participate at varying levels, from nonparticipation to collaboration (Nygren et al., 2017). Children can participate in designing the study, being the source of information, collecting data, analyzing the data, and disseminating and utilizing the findings (Ben-Arieh, 2005). Data collection methods that encourage active participation of the children, such as drawings, photo-elicited interviews, focus group interviews, and role plays have been used and recommended by researchers (Fargas-Malet et al., 2010; Koch, 2018; Larsson et al., 2018; Moore & Lynch, 2018).

There have been great advances in the research in the field. However, several issues have persisted through the years, such as the absence of an integrated definition of well-being, the difficulty in comparing the results of studies due to the use of diverse instruments, and the need for more active participation of young children in research. It is necessary to revisit these issues and look at them through a different lens to develop innovative solutions moving forward.

Key messages

- There is much work to be done on research in this area, including the development and validation of instruments and methods to study well-being during early childhood.
- Several issues related to the research on early childhood well-being have persisted through the years, and a paradigm shift might be needed to address these.
- Operationally defining well-being when doing research in this area may aid in understanding and interpreting findings and allow for better comparison across studies.
- It is the right of every child, regardless of age, to be heard and allowed to participate in research and be the key thinkers and movers in defining and evaluating their well-being.

Acknowledgments:

I thank Dr. INBG and Mr.JMRDR for their assistance in the search and selection of the articles included in this mini-review. I am also very grateful for the guidance and support of my mentors.

Declaration of Conflict of Interest:

No potential conflicts of interest have been identified in this study.

This paper originated from examined student research.

Financial Disclosure:

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship and publication of this article.

Author contributions:

All authors have contributed in different roles and capacities to warrant inclusion as an author of this paper.

References

- Amerijckx, G., & Humblet, P. C. (2014). Child Well-Being: What Does It Mean? *Children & Society*, 28(5), 404–415. <https://doi.org/10.1111/chso.12003>
- Atkinson, S., & Rubidge, T. (2013). Managing the spatialities of arts-based practices with school children: an inter-disciplinary exploration of engagement, movement and well-being. *Arts & Health: International Journal for Research, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 39–50. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17533015.2012.693938>
- Ben-Arieh, A. (2005). Where are the Children? Children's Role in Measuring and Monitoring Their Well-Being. *Social Indicators Research 2005* 74:3, 74(3), 573–596. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S11205-004-4645-6>
- Ben-Arieh, A., Casas, F., Frønes, I., & Korbin, J. (2014). Multifaceted concept of child well-being. In *Handbook of Child Well-being* (Vol. 1, pp. 1–27). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-9063-8_134

- Bjørgen, K. (2015). Children's Well-Being and Involvement in Physically Active Outdoors Play in a Norwegian Kindergarten: Playful Sharing of Physical Experiences. *Child Care in Practice*, 21(4), 305–323.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1084973&site=ehost-live>
- Camfield, L., Streuli, N., & Woodhead, M. (2010). Children's Well-being in Developing Countries: A Conceptual and Methodological Review. *The European Journal of Development Research* 2010 22:3, 22(3), 398–416. <https://doi.org/10.1057/EJDR.2010.11>
- Condon, L. J., & McClean, S. (2017). Maintaining pre-school children's health and wellbeing in the UK: a qualitative study of the views of migrant parents. *Journal of Public Health (Oxford, England)*, 39(3), 455–463. <https://doi.org/10.1093/pubmed/fdw083>
- Fargas-Malet, M., McSherry, D., Larkin, E., & Robinson, C. (2010). Research with children: methodological issues and innovative techniques. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 8(2), 175–192. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X09345412>
- Fernandes, L., Mendes, A., & Teixeira, A. A. C. (2012). A Review Essay on the Measurement of Child Well-Being. *Social Indicators Research*, 106(2), 239–257.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/S11205-011-9814-9/TABLES/2>
- Guyer, B., Ma, S., Grason, H., Frick, K. D., Perry, D. F., Sharkey, A., & McIntosh, J. (2009). Early Childhood Health Promotion and Its Life Course Health Consequences. *Academic Pediatrics*, 9(3), 142-149.e71. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.ACAP.2008.12.007>
- Howard, J., & McInnes, K. (2013). The impact of children's perception of an activity as play rather than not play on emotional well-being. *Child: Care, Health & Development*, 39(5), 737–742. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2012.01405.x>

- Howard, K., Martin, A., Berlin, LisaJ., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2011). Early mother-child separation, parenting, and child well-being in Early Head Start families. *Attachment & Human Development, 13*(1), 5–26.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=57321109&site=ehost-live>
- Kitsaras, G., Goodwin, M., Allan, J., Kelly, M. P., & Pretty, I. A. (2018). Bedtime routines child wellbeing & development. *BMC Public Health, 18*(1), 386. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-5290-3>
- Koch, A. B. (2018). Children’s Perspectives on Happiness and Subjective Well-being in Preschool. *Children & Society, 32*(1), 73–83.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pbh&AN=127554805&site=ehost-live>
- Larsson, I., Staland-Nyman, C., Svedberg, P., Nygren, J. M., & Carlsson, I.-M. (2018). Children and young people’s participation in developing interventions in health and well-being: a scoping review. *BMC Health Services Research, 18*(1), 507.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12913-018-3219-2>
- Lee, E. -Y., & Carson, V. (2018). Physical activity, sedentary behaviour, and psychosocial well-being among young South Korean children. *Child: Care, Health & Development, 44*(1), 108–116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cch.12491>
- Lee, R. L. T., Lane, S. J., Tang, A. C. Y., Leung, C., Louie, L. H. T., Browne, G., & Chan, S. W. C. (2020). Effects of an Unstructured Free Play and Mindfulness Intervention on Wellbeing in Kindergarten Students. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 17*(15). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17155382>

- Lepinioti, M., Specht, I. O., Rohde, J. F., Stougaard, M., Händel, M. N., Olsen, N. J., & Heitmann, B. L. (2021). Associations between Child Mental Well-Being or Conflicts during Mealtime and Picky Eating Behaviour. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(11). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18115621>
- McCrory, C., Dooley, C., Layte, R., & Kenny, R. A. (2015). The lasting legacy of childhood adversity for disease risk in later life. *Health Psychology*, 34(7), 687–696. <https://doi.org/10.1037/HEA0000147>
- Minkkinen, J. (2013). The Structural Model of Child Well-Being. *Child Indicators Research* 2013 6:3, 6(3), 547–558. <https://doi.org/10.1007/S12187-013-9178-6>
- Moore, A., & Lynch, H. (2017). Understanding a child’s conceptualisation of well-being through an exploration of happiness: The centrality of play, people and place. *Journal of Occupational Science*, 25(1), 124–141. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14427591.2017.1377105>
- Nurius, P. S., Green, S., Logan-Greene, P., & Borja, S. (2015). Life Course Pathways of Adverse Childhood Experiences Toward Adult Psychological Well-Being: A Stress Process Analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 45, 143. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.CHIABU.2015.03.008>
- Nygren, J. M., Lindberg, S., Wärnestål, P., & Svedberg, P. (2017). Involving Children With Cancer in Health Promotive Research: A Case Study Describing Why, What, and How. *JMIR Res Protoc* 2017;6(2):E19 <https://www.researchprotocols.org/2017/2/E19>, 6(2), e7094. <https://doi.org/10.2196/RESPROT.7094>
- Pippi, R., Buratta, L., Germani, A., Fanelli, C. G., & Mazzeschi, C. (2020). Physical Activity Habits and Well-Being among 6-Year-Old Children: The “Improving Umbrian Kids’ Healthy Lifestyle”, an Uncontrolled Pilot Study Project.” *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 17(17). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17176067>

Pollard, E. L., & Lee, P. D. (2003). Child Well-being: A Systematic Review of the Literature.

Social Indicators Research 2003 61:1, 61(1), 59–78.

<https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1021284215801>

Przybylski, A. K., & Weinstein, N. (2019). Digital Screen Time Limits and Young Children's

Psychological Well-Being: Evidence From a Population-Based Study. *Child Development*,

90(1), e56–e65. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.13007>

Raghavan, R., & Alexandrova, A. (2014). Toward a Theory of Child Well-Being. *Social*

Indicators Research 2014 121:3, 121(3), 887–902. [https://doi.org/10.1007/S11205-014-](https://doi.org/10.1007/S11205-014-0665-Z)

0665-Z

Saith, A., & Wazir, R. (2010). Towards conceptualizing child wellbeing in India: The need for a

paradigm shift. *Child Indicators Research*, 3(3), 385–408. [https://doi.org/10.1007/S12187-](https://doi.org/10.1007/S12187-010-9065-3/TABLES/1)

010-9065-3/TABLES/1

Shimazu, A., Bakker, A. B., Demerouti, E., Fujiwara, T., Iwata, N., Shimada, K., Takahashi, M.,

Tokita, M., Watai, I., & Kawakami, N. (2020). Workaholism, Work Engagement and Child

Well-Being: A Test of the Spillover-Crossover Model. *International Journal of*

Environmental Research and Public Health, 17(17). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17176213>

Sood, D., & Comer-Hagans, D. (2018). Discovering Perspectives on Health and Well-Being

from Parents and Teachers of Preschool-Aged Children. *Open Journal of Occupational*

Therapy (OJOT), 6(1), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.15453/2168-6408.1365>

Street, M. (2021). Theorising Child Well-Being: Towards a Framework for Analysing Early

Childhood Education Policy in England. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 19(2), 211–

224.

<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=EJ1297487&site=ehost-live>

Tezol, Ö., Yıldız, D., & Yalçın, S. S. (2022). The Psychosocial Well-Being of Young Video-Gamer Children: A Comparison Study. *Turkish Archives of Pediatrics*, 57(4), 459–466.
<https://doi.org/10.5152/TurkArchPediatri.2022.21359>