



# Reasons to be cheerful

## being a 12 year old boy who eats dinner with his family

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Given current interest in a wellbeing index that measures happiness, the results of a survey recently carried out by NFER, on behalf of the Department for Education, produced some interesting results.

As part of the Tellus4 Survey, over 32,000 school children, in years 6, 8 and 10, were asked to rate how they felt about the statement “I feel happy about life at the moment”. Through analysis of their responses to this question and how these relate to other findings in the survey, some conclusions can be made as to how various aspects of their life affect their happiness.

### Main findings

The top ten things associated with increased chances of feeling happy were (in order):

- 1 Being able to talk to parents when worried
- 2 Having one or more good friends
- 3 Not being bullied
- 4 Not often feeling worried about parents or family
- 5 Often sitting down to have a meal with people at home
- 6 Being able to talk to friends when worried
- 7 Not often feeling worried about the way they look
- 8 Being a boy
- 9 Being pre-teenage
- 10 Eating fruit and vegetables

### Introduction & background

Tellus is a national, on-line survey which gathers children and young people’s views on their life, their school and their local area. In response to the statement ‘I feel happy about life at the moment’ they can reply ‘True’, ‘Neither true nor not true’, ‘Not true’ or ‘Don’t know’.

The analysis took the following six broad categories and investigated the impact each had on a child’s happiness.

- Communication with friends and family
- Level of interaction at home
- Worries and bullying
- Use of free time
- Health related behaviours such as diet, smoking, drinking and drugs
- Background characteristics

### Overview of “feeling happy”

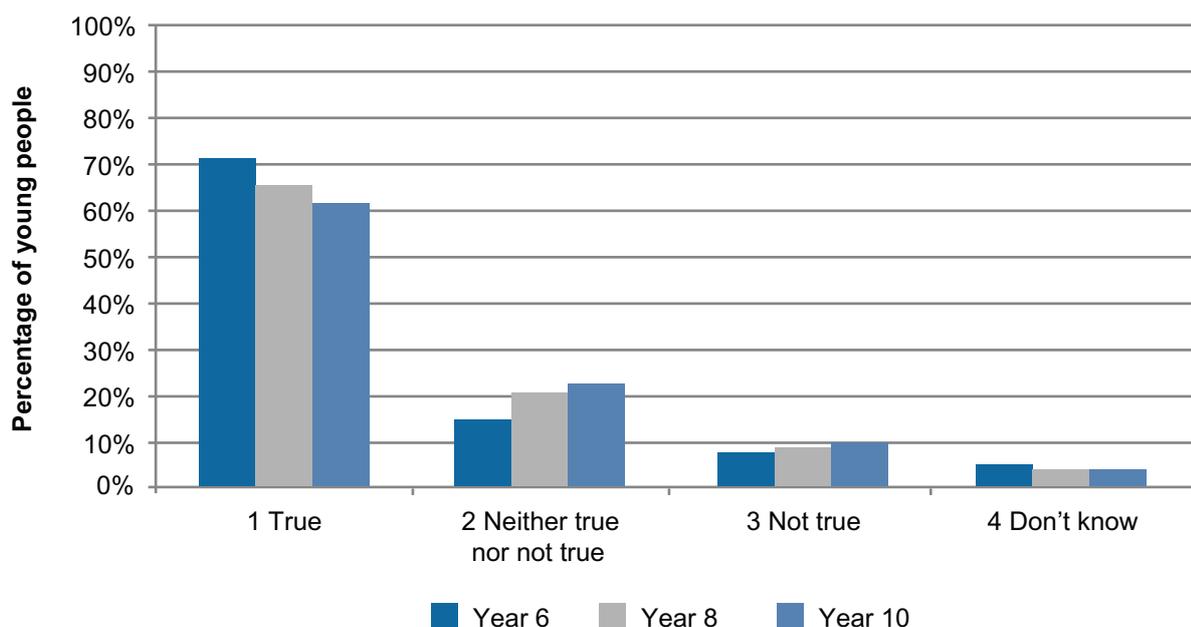
Overall 67 per cent of the young people surveyed reported “feeling happy” at the moment<sup>1</sup>. As shown in figure 1, pupils in year 6 (aged 10/11) were more likely than older pupils to report this.



Girls were less likely than boys of the same age to state that they felt happy at the moment



Figure 1 Answers to the question 'I feel happy at the moment'



## Background characteristics

Having taken into account other factors, there remained some relationships between the characteristics of young people and their chances of stating that they were happy. For example:

- Girls were less likely than boys of the same age to state that they felt happy at the moment.
- Young people became less likely to state that they felt happy as they got older.
- Having a disability was associated with slightly decreased chance of young people stating that they feel happy.

One aspect of a child's life which surprisingly did not affect their happiness was poverty, where, once we have taken account of other influences, no significant association was found. (Poverty was measured either by eligibility for free school meals or by the level of deprivation in the areas where young people live).

## Communication with friends and family

Of the influences considered within the model, feeling able to talk to their parents<sup>2</sup> when something worried them was the most important<sup>3</sup> predictor of whether young people felt happy. The second most important was whether they had one or more good friends. Of lesser importance (though still highly significant) was whether young people could talk to their friends or an adult other than their parents when something worried them.

Taking this group of variables as a whole, these were found to be easily the most important in predicting whether a young person would state that they are happy at the moment. This highlights the extreme importance of good relationships (particularly at home) in maintaining the wellbeing of young people.

## Interaction at home

Related to the above, we also explored the relationship between feeling happy and particular types of interaction within the home. These were how often they sat down with people at home to eat a meal, how often they talked with them about their day at school and how often they got help with homework. For all three of these variables young people who reported that these things happened often were more likely than other similar young people to state that they were happy. However, the strength of these relationships is perhaps surprisingly large. In particular it was found that often sitting down to have a meal with the people they live with was the fifth most important predictor overall of whether a young person would say they feel happy at the moment.

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## Worries and bullying

Predictably, stating that you often worry about particular things is associated with a decreased chance of stating that you feel happy. Having said this, some worries were more strongly related with the overall chances of feeling happy than others. As might be expected given the findings already stated above, the most negative worry (in terms of the effect it had on chances of stating that they feel happy) was worrying about parents or family. This single worry was the third most important predictor overall. Slightly less important, but still displaying a large effect, was young people worrying about the way they look. Still significant but with a less severe effect were worries about money, girlfriends/boyfriends, friendships and being a victim of crime.

Worrying about being bullied also had a fairly large negative effect. In addition to this, reporting actually being bullied in the last year was found to have a very large negative effect, ranking as the third most important factor overall.

Once other factors including the level of worry about other issues were accounted for it is interesting to note that some worries were associated with very slightly increased chances of a young person stating that they feel happy. The first of these was worrying about sex, where young people with this worry were slightly more likely to state that they were happy than similar young people that did not often worry about this. Of more relevance to educational policy was worrying about school work and exams. Much has been made recently of the stresses placed upon young people by the pressures of formal assessment and so it is interesting to note in this context that those young people

worried about school work and exams were very slightly more likely to state that they were happy overall than similar young people who were not worried (although this effect was not statistically significant). This may indicate that although schoolwork and examinations may be stressful at the time they do not as a rule have a negative impact on young people's overall feeling of happiness.

Once other factors are allowed for, there was no significant relationship between worrying about what to do after year 11 or being healthy and the chances of a young person stating that they are happy.

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## Use of free time

For the most part there was no significant relationship found between the activities that young people undertake in their spare time and the chances of them stating that they are happy. Where significant relationships were found, the strength of these relationships were universally quite small. Of those that were found, the most important was participation in sports clubs or classes. Young people who took part in such activities in their free time were slightly more likely than other similar young people to state that they were happy. Going to a local park or playground was also very slightly associated with increased chances of being happy.

Participating in a religious, faith or community groups, music groups or lessons, youth centres or charity work was not significantly associated with the chances being happy. Participating in an art, craft, dance, drama or film/video group outside school was associated with very slightly decreased chances of being happy as was participating in 'something else'.

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Feeling able to talk with their parents when something worried them was the most important predictor of whether young people felt happy

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## Health Related Behaviours

Eating an increased amount of fruit and vegetables was associated with increased chances of a young person stating that they were happy. However, allowing for all other factors, the difference between those young people stating they eat at least one portion of fruit of and vegetables each day, and those that do not eat any, was greater than the differences between those who eat the full five portions a day and those who eat less than this. Indeed there was no significant difference identified between those eating one to two portions a day and those eating three to four.

Young people who indicated that they currently smoke were less likely to state that they were happy than similar non-smokers. Perhaps surprisingly, once other factors were taken into account, no significant relationship was found between either getting drunk or taking drugs in the last four weeks and the chances of a young person stating that they are happy. Having said this, it should be remembered that the percentage of young people reporting taking drugs at all is very small so this result is based on a relatively sparse amount of data.

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## Conclusion

By far the biggest influences on the happiness of young people are having a secure family environment and good friendships. Having said this there are a number of other important factors some of which may be influenced by the environment at school and elsewhere outside the home. Further analysis may explore the

extent to which the influence of the different factors that have been identified in this paper vary between different geographical locations and might also further consider the link between feeling happy and feeling safe.

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## Statistical details

Analysis was undertaken using multilevel logistic modelling. This technique allows us simultaneously examine the effect of many inter-related characteristics of young people whilst also taking account of the fact that our sample of young people is grouped within schools and that the school a young person attends may also have an influence upon the chances of them stating that they are happy.

For statistically minded readers full details of the coefficients from the models can be found at [www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/99910/](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/99910/)

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## Final note

The data used to conduct this analysis is available to researchers from the UK data archive and can be found by searching for "Tellus" at <http://www.esds.ac.uk/Lucene/Search.aspx>

The Tellus4 survey was delivered by NFER and undertaken online by 253,755 children and young people in Years 6, 8 and 10 in 3,699 primary, secondary and special schools and Pupil Referral Units in the 2009 autumn term.

- 1 Tellus4 National Report <http://publications.education.gov.uk/eOrderingDownload/DCSF-RR218.pdf>.
- 2 For questions about their parents children are encouraged to take this to mean either their parents or the people, such as step parents, carers or grandparents who they live with and look after them most of the time.
- 3 By "most important" we mean the variable which showed the biggest difference between those students who had a particular attribute and those who did not all other things being equal.



By far the biggest influence on the happiness of young people are having a secure family environment and good friendships



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