

How do you measure a child's wellbeing?

A central question for policy evaluation in the UK is how to measure wellbeing. To address this, wellbeing years (WELLBYs) were developed at the London School of Economics to assign social and economic value to changes in personal wellbeing. Now adopted in the Treasury's Green Book, a WELLBY represents a one-point change (on a 0-10 scale) in overall life satisfaction for one year, currently valued at £15,920 in 2024 prices.

While this approach works effectively for adults, a parallel measure for children has been absent, due to the lack of a consistent way of assigning value. Isaac Parkes, research associate in CEP's Wellbeing programme, proposes expanding the WELLBY framework by introducing child wellbeing years (C-WELLBYs).

It is clear that, from the age of 10, children can assess their own life satisfaction.

Policy recommendations

- **Extend the wellbeing approach to children.** Without a parallel measure of children's wellbeing, there is a risk of creating policy that regards children as simply "the adults of tomorrow", instead of individuals in their own right.
- **Strengthen value-for-money evidence.** C-WELLBYs could transform how children's outcomes are considered in business cases and impact assessments across government.
- **Value wellbeing equally across ages.** Government guidance already recommends treating health and wellbeing units the same at all ages on equity grounds. One C-WELLBY should therefore be valued at the same level as an adult WELLBY (£15,920), ensuring parity without subjective weighting.
- **Apply age-appropriate measures.** For children over 10, life satisfaction questions remain suitable; for younger children, wellbeing can be proxied through measures such as happiness or behavioural assessments.
- **Recognise limits for early years.** For infants and pre-school children, subjective wellbeing constructs are less well defined. In these cases, health-related measures may remain the only viable way to directly value welfare.

Expert

Isaac Parkes is a pre-doctoral researcher at CEP, LSE, where he also teaches seminars in the School of Public Policy on Happiness and Public Policy, with Professor Richard Layard.

His research focuses on measurement of wellbeing.

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Key findings

- As the WELLBY is based on the ONS life satisfaction question, it is not suitable for those aged under 10. This means, roughly 11 per cent of the UK population are not represented in the measurement of the WELLBY.
- Extending WELLBYs to children requires a two-step approach: first, identify reliable predictors of child wellbeing; second, convert these into equivalent changes on the life satisfaction scale. This creates the C-WELLBY.
- Existing frameworks like QALYs (quality-adjusted life years) measure health-related quality of life, but C-WELLBYs would go further—capturing children’s broader experiences in school, family, peer, and digital environments.
- For infants and pre-school children, subjective wellbeing constructs are less well-defined and harder to proxy. Health-related measures may remain as the only viable way to directly value welfare during these early years.

Related research

- **Frayman, D., Krekel, C., Layard, R., MacLennan, S. and Parkes, I. (2024) Value for money: How to improve wellbeing and reduce misery by, CEP Special Paper No. 44.**
This report reviews a range of policies and checks if they have delivered value for money through a benefit/cost analysis. Benefits in this case are measured in terms of the monetary equivalent of the impact of the policy in improving wellbeing.
- **Parkes, I. (2025a) The C-WELLBY: Towards a universal measure of children’s wellbeing for policy analysis by Isaac Parkes, CEP Occasional Paper No. 69.**
This discusses the issues in measuring children’s wellbeing and proposes the C-WELLBY as a solution.
- **Parkes, I. (2025b) Mapping functions for wellbeing measures to generate WELLBYs to use in economic evaluation by Isaac Parkes, CEP Occasional Paper No. 70.**
This shows how different wellbeing indicators map onto WELLBYs.

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