



## The subjective well-being of Spanish adolescents: Variations according to different living arrangements

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### ABSTRACT

Children and adolescents' subjective well-being (SWB) has been recognized as an important component in understanding their quality of life. However, little is known about differences in the SWB of children from different groups, particularly those who are living in diverse households. The purpose of this study is to explore differences in SWB between young adolescents in care and in two other living arrangements. The study used data from a large representative sample of Spanish 1st year students in the second compulsory education (mean age = 12.08, SD = 0.68). 5381 adolescents were divided into three groups according to their living arrangements: 'living in care' (0.9%), 'living in single parent families' (18.7%) and 'living in two-parent families' (80.4%). Self-administered reports were used to measure SWB in five life domains: school, social relationships, leisure time, health, and oneself. Overall life satisfaction was also measured. Background characteristics were obtained mainly in relation to stability in the adolescents' lives in the past year. Adolescents living with two parents reported better SWB in all life domains than those in the other two groups. Differences between adolescents living with one parent and adolescents living in care were mostly found in relation to interpersonal relationships and health. Furthermore, it was found that adolescents living in care have the least stable lives, followed by adolescents living with one parent, while adolescents living with two parents lead much more stable lives. These findings highlight the need to address the SWB of vulnerable children, particularly those living in care. Results are discussed in view of the value of stability to children's lives.

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### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. Children's subjective well-being

The quality-of-life perspective emphasizes the importance of including nonmaterial psychosocial measurements in order to better understand complex social realities (Casas, 2011). These psychosocial elements include the perceptions, evaluations and aspirations of the target population (Casas, 1997). Therefore, if we conduct research into children and adolescents' well-being, it is they who should by rights be the main social agents involved. Reaching this what would appear to be obvious conclusion has, however, taken a long and complex route, on both theoretical and methodological levels.

Children's well-being has traditionally been studied on the basis of objective facts such as rates of mortality, illness or malnutrition. Ben-Arieh (2008) demonstrated how researches on children's well-being used to include only this type of objective survival indicators. Only in the last decade of the 20th century, due to a growing interest in quality

of life research, there has been a growing recognition in the importance of including positive indicators, and subjective indicators in particular (Casas, 1997). The acknowledgment of children's rights through the approval of the Convention on the Rights of the Child also contributed to focusing on the point of view of children themselves. Since then, research into overall life satisfaction and satisfaction with different life domains (school, family, interpersonal relationships, and so on) has been published with increasing frequency (Casas, Castella Sarriera, et al., 2012; Huebner, 1994; Rees et al., 2012).

The UNICEF's Report Card #7 (UNICEF, 2007) took an important step towards articulating objective and subjective indicators for understanding children's well-being in different countries, contemplating material well-being, health and safety, educational well-being, interpersonal relationships, behavior, risks and subjective well-being.

From the hedonic perspective of well-being research, subjective well-being (SWB) refers to people's satisfaction with their lives, both overall and certain aspects of it. It generally comprises two components: one more cognitive, related to people's evaluations of their own life, and another more affective, related to positive and negative emotions deriving from their life experience (Casas, 2011). The first component – life satisfaction – is seen as more stable, and the second – affect – more changing over time. The research presented here concerns the former.

The inclusion of self-administered reports in child research has led to heated discussions on a methodological level, questioning their

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reliability. This conveniently forgets that the problem is the same for adults. Some authors have pointed out that researchers also rely on social representations of childhood based on their categorical perception as not yet adults (Casas, 1997, 2011; Verhellen, 1997).

As seen, the field of research into children's SWB is a recent one (Ben-Arieh, 2012; Casas, 2011). The knowledge about the ways in which young people's living arrangements may affect their SWB is even more scarcer, the more so with regard to young people living in care (UNICEF, 2009). The aim of this article is to address aspects of this vacuum by examining differences in the SWB of young adolescents in care and two other living arrangements.

### 1.2. The SWB of children in care

Past researches have identified the importance of investigating the well-being of vulnerable children. The OECD report "Doing better for families" acknowledges that "child maltreatment has received less attention than other aspects of child well-being in international comparisons, despite good work at a United Nations and Council of Europe level" (OECD, 2011, p. 245). The little data we have indicates that this is a small but significant group of children, who tend to suffer other social disadvantages as well, such as living in poverty or having less equality in terms of educational opportunities. UNICEF (2009) also demonstrated how the lack of data on children living in care systems made it difficult to compare between countries. It proposed 12 quantitative indicators for gathering numerical information regarding the situation of children in care and 3 more for the legal and political context of a country, but only via objective indicators.

In addition, various studies (for review see: Proctor, Linley, & Maltby, 2009) have found associations between lower levels of well-being and certain problems in childhood such as depression, high-risk behaviors, suicide attempts and eating disorders, among others. Rees (2011) also found a relationship in England between having had a recent experience with running away and low well-being. In the YIPPEE project (Montserrat, Casas, Malo, & Bertran, 2011), reviewed studies showed that for the social groups identified, young people leaving care were at a greater risk of teenage pregnancy, health problems and delinquency.

A lack of stability in residential and foster care is one of the factors increasingly more accepted as disrupting the well-being of this population. Children who experienced numerous placement disruptions and changes are prone to negative outcomes while in care and after leaving care. Working towards permanency becomes an important challenge for all the child protection systems (Montserrat et al., 2011; Sinclair, Baker, Lee, & Gibbs, 2007).

On the other hand, less agreement is found among studies into the well-being of children who live with only one parent, with more negative results standing out in the United States. In the OECD report (2009) "Doing better for children", the cross-OECD meta-analysis suggests that growing up in a single-parent family can only have a small effect on children's well-being. In most other OECD countries, the single-parent effect is on average slightly less than in the United States. Similarly, Bradshaw, Keung, Rees, and Goswami (2011) found association between children's SWB and family structure only regarding health, in varied European countries.

A report on children's views and experiences of parenting (Madge & Willmott, 2007), showed how children value good relationships, affection and support above all else and particularly dislike family conflict. The authors highlight the fact that children are able to face up to family separation and other problems if they feel being cared for. What is more, satisfaction with family relationships is strongly linked to children and adolescents' overall well-being (Bradshaw et al., 2011; Rees et al., 2012).

Only few researches have compared the SWB of children in care with other groups of children. In Israel, a study by Davidson-Arad (2005, 2010) compared the quality of life (QOL) of two groups of children in a situation

of risk, some living with their family and others in residential facilities. Evaluations were submitted by professionals, the children and the families. All of the scores reflected a high level of well-being for the children living in residential care, with the evaluations provided by professionals being the lowest. This study suggests that offering children better living conditions can contribute to their well-being, while staying in situations of risk can be a negative factor. Montserrat and Casas (2007) found that the satisfaction of children who live in kinship foster care with different life domains and with overall life was similar to that found in studies conducted with adolescent from the general population.

Poletto and Koller (2011) studied the SWB of children and adolescents who lived with their families and those who were in residential care in Brazil. Results showed that the latter experienced more negative affect regarding development contexts, but did not show differences with regard to positive affect and life satisfaction. In France, Muñoz and Ferrière (2000) used Diener's Satisfaction with Life Scale and their results, comparing children in residential care to those living with their families, showed three main factors influencing the lower level of well-being among children in care: a direct effect of placement, and an indirect effect of satisfaction with family life and experiencing personal growth.

Finally, it is worth referencing the results of a recent research published by The Children's Society carried out jointly with the University of York (Rees et al., 2012). This English study analyzed the SWB of a sample of 30,000 children aged between 8 and 16, including both satisfaction with different life domains and overall life satisfaction. They identified a subgroup of children who did not live with their family, either because they were in foster or residential care, representing 1% of the total sample. These children were around five times as likely (50%) to have low SWB as those living with their family (10%).

To sum, despite the growing recognition of the importance of exploring children's SWB, far too little is known about differences in the SWB of children who live in varied living arrangements, particularly those who are living in out of home care.

### 1.3. Research question

The purpose of the research presented in this article is to examine differences in the SWB of young adolescents in three different living arrangements in Spain: adolescents living in care, adolescents living in single parent families, and adolescents living in two-parent families. This study is linked to a new international effort, shared by the International Society for Child Indicators, UNICEF and World Vision, to obtain a better understanding of children and adolescents' lives by exploring their SWB.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Sample characteristics

The study presents data from a large representative sample of Spanish 1st year students in the second compulsory education. The sampling unit was secondary schools with a 1st year, and a stratified cluster random sampling was employed using a list of all relevant schools in Spain. Three strata were applied: Spain's autonomous regions and cities (17 regions and two cities), type of school (private, public or mixed funding) and school location (urban, semi-urban or rural). The overall sampling error was 1.9% (for more details see: Casas & Bello, 2012). 138 schools were randomly selected, with two 1st year classes included from each school. In case of schools with more than two classes, random selection was used.

After giving their informed consent, the adolescents completed the self-administered survey during class time in the first term of the 2011–2012 school year. Due to missing data we were unable to classify the living arrangement of 553 adolescents (9.3%), and they were therefore not included in the current research. The final sample comprised

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