Children’s Subjective Well-Being: A Proposed Component of Assessments of Accountability in Promoting the Rights and Quality of Life of Children

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Under the auspices of the International Institute for Child Rights and Development, this paper is aimed at promoting the use of children’s subjective well-being (SWB) indicators in assessing the quality of life of children. The paper is situated within the context of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and its implementation and evaluation. An assumption underlying the children’s rights movement is that such rights are essential to a good quality of life for children. Although efforts to improve the lives of children and implement such basic rights are likely to be “good”, the results of such efforts should be carefully monitored to determine their actual (as opposed to intended) effects on children. The central principle of this paper is that monitoring efforts should include the voices of the children themselves, especially their judgments of their SWB. Children’s perceptions of the nature and impact of life conditions can differ from those of key adults (e.g., teachers, parents) suggesting that both the perspectives of children and their adults need to be taken into account when considering issues of importance to children (Ben-Arieh, McDonnell, & Attar-Schwartz, 2009).

One growing field of the assessment of children’s voice involves assessment of their SWB. Based on Diener (2000), SWB includes three components: the experience of frequent positive emotions (e.g., joy, interest), infrequent negative emotions (e.g., sad, anxious), and a positive, cognitive evaluation of life as a whole and/or with specific life domains, such as family, school, and community. The latter component is often referred to as life satisfaction or perceived quality of life. Thus, children with high SWB would be ones who report experiencing frequent positive emotions, relatively infrequent negative emotions and a sense of satisfaction with their lives overall and with specific, important life domains. Children with low SWB would report relatively fewer positive emotions, more negative emotions, and a pervasive sense that their lives are not going well.
Although research with children has lagged behind that of adults, several psychometrically sound measures of children’s SWB have been developed during recent years, including brief measures suitable for large-scale national and international surveys (see Huebner & Hills, in press). Some measures are multidimensional in that they incorporate assessments of children’s global and/or domain-specific evaluations of their lives and positive and negative affect. The measures have been limited to children approximately ages 8-18, however. Suitable instruments for younger children await development.

SWB data offer several unique benefits in determining children’s quality of life. First, measures of SWB allow the assessment of optimal well-being, not just the absence of ill-being. SWB measures, such as life satisfaction measures, allow respondents to report levels of satisfaction above a “neutral” point, providing more nuanced distinctions of well-being. For example, a child can report “extremely high” levels of satisfaction with family experiences along with “mildly high” satisfaction with peer experiences and “moderately” low levels of satisfaction with school experiences. Given such a full range of options, assessors can thus incorporate various levels of “positive “and “negative” information into their evaluations and tailor the development of policies and programs accordingly. The inclusion of positive data enables the determination of personal and environmental assets as well as “problems” and “deficits”, yielding additional incremental validity in understanding children’s adaptation (e.g., Lewis, Huebner, Reschly, & Valois, 2009). Second, multidimensional SWB reports can offer an array of ecological data (e.g., family, school, community ratings) as well as individual data (e.g., self ratings). Reports of SWB related to specific environmental domains may thus yield estimates of “goodness of fit” between children and the objective conditions of their lives (Schalock, Keith, Hoffman, & Karran, 1989). Third, SWB measures provide both “input” and “output” data in that children’s SWB data may reflect differences among their environmental conditions (e.g., presence of specific rights and associated implementation strategies) as well as determinants of future life outcomes. Specifically, research
summarized by King, Lyubormirsky, and Diener (2005) demonstrates that positive SWB promotes future life success in physical and mental health, interpersonal, and vocational domains, further supporting its usefulness as an indicator of quality of life. Finally, SWB measures provide important information regarding quality of life outcomes associated with small- and large-scale programs. For example, using three waves of life satisfaction reports, Gilman and Handwerk (2001) observed the changing effects of placement in a residential treatment program for adolescents.

In conclusion, a multi-trait, multi-method, multi-occasion approach is advocated to evaluate the success of societies in terms of implementing children’s rights and promoting children’s quality of life. Although not limited to SWB data, SWB data would represent one core component of a comprehensive evaluation of implementation efforts. The multi-method aspect would entail the collection of SWB data, but also the collection of data from more objective sources (e.g., parent and teacher judgments, objective indices (e.g., infant mortality rates, teenage pregnancies). The multi-trait aspect would involve multidimensional indices, such as domain-based life satisfaction and positive and negative affect reports. Of course, the multi-occasion component would involve the collection of systematic, longitudinal data across meaningful time periods. Although researchers and policymakers tend to forget the child’s perspective, a full understanding of efforts to promote child well-being will necessitate the inclusion of the voices of the children themselves (Ben-Arieh, McDonnell, & Attar-Schwartz, 2009). The use of evidence-based, developmentally appropriate SWB measures provide one such opportunity for children to be heard.

References


