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## Judith Rodwell and Sarah Grogan

# Parents' Perspectives on the Good Childhood Report 2013: A Qualitative Study

The Good Childhood Report 2013 (The Children's Society, 2013) provides information that is of interest to parents concerning the subjective wellbeing of children. The stated aim of the report is to update research already undertaken in The Good Childhood Report 2012 (The Children's Society, 2012) in light of the changing social and economic climates. This study focuses on parents perspectives on this report.

The Good Childhood Report 2013 (GCR) found that children's levels of self-reported wellbeing are in decline in the UK, particularly between 15 and 17 years. The results indicate that wellbeing might improve through influencing factors such as feeling positive about themselves, good relationships with family and friends, household financial security, a safe environment, a supportive learning environment and appropriate activities in which to participate. In conclusion, the report emphasises the importance of taking into account a child's own feelings about their lives.

New findings produced in the GCR 2013 relate to the age self-reported wellbeing begins to decline, and how teenagers perceive their lives when wellbeing is at its lowest level. Also discussed is the extent young adults are "flourishing", defined as "feeling satisfied with their lives and finding their lives worthwhile" (The Children's Society, 2013; p.11).

This study will look at parents' views of the summary version of the GCR. The Children's Society has so far not included a parental perspective in the current series of wellbeing reports, so this study will ask parents to discuss elements they feel positive about, and any negative areas they wish to comment on. The aim of this study is to produce clear

recommendations formed from parent's perspectives on the summary, to support further research, including work by the Children's Society.

## Method

### Participants

All participants were parents with children aged between eight and 17 years who had not heard of, or read, the GCR. The age range of the children reflected the ages of children involved in the GCR. Based on similar studies the researcher determined that 10 participants should create a robust data set (Barlow and Cairns, 1997; Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006), and we determined that saturation of themes was complete before completing the series of interviews. Parents, (Table 1), were recruited via an email advert sent to colleagues and friends of the researcher, and those who responded received an information sheet outlining the current study. Pseudonyms were allocated to parents to protect their identities. Each parent received a PDF version of the GCR summary, and was asked to read this at least 24 hours before interview.

Table 1. Participant details

Pseudonym	Age of Parent (in years)	Gender	No. of Children	Ages of Children (in years)
Arthur	35	Male	1	8
Betty	50	Female	1	17
Charles	42	Male	2	9 and 12
Dorothy	46	Female	2	16 and 17
Edith	40	Female	2	10 and 14
Francesca	45	Female	1	17
Graham	44	Male	2	13 and 17
Helen	32	Female	1	8
Ian	35	Male	1	9
Jane	45	Female	2	16 and 17

## The Interviewer

The researcher who conducted the interviews (the first author) is an MSc student and a 32-year-old mother of one child aged two years. The researcher informed participants of her status as a mother prior to interviews taking place.

## Materials

An audio-recorder, the summary version of the GCR, and a list of open-ended questions were used. Flexible questions encouraged parents to explain their interpretations of the summary (Gaskell, 2000) to enable us to understand parents' perspectives. Questions were based on the researchers' initial thoughts concerning important points that should be discussed, alongside a comparison of similar studies (DiCicco-Bloom and Crabtree, 2006).

## Procedure

Ten parents (four male, six female) gave accounts of their knowledge and interpretations of the GCR gained from the summary version through semi-structured, audio-recorded, individual interviews. The Department of Psychology Ethics Committee at Manchester Metropolitan University approved the study to proceed and each parent signed a consent form prior to interview. The interviewer completed an initial pilot interview to test selected questions. A brief chat and warm-up questions before the interviews aimed to relax parents (Bartholomew, Henderson and Marcia, 2000). Interviews took place in parents homes, or a quiet space in their workplace and sessions were audio-recorded with the parents' permission. The focus of interviews concerned the level of understanding parents gained regarding the findings of the GCR after reading the summary version, and any recommendations they could make as a result. The interviewer debriefed parents at the end of their interview and provided contact details for any queries.

## Data Analysis

The first author transcribed all interviews including the researcher's speech. Transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis, loosely informed by a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) and adopting a critical realist perspective. Line-by-line open coding identified initial categories, before applying axial coding to find relationships

between transcripts. A second coder checked the analysis, to avoid researcher bias (Yin, 1989). The researcher completed several phases of analysis, informed by guidelines produced by Strauss and Corbin (1990), to gain a thorough understanding of the parents' perspectives (Daly, Kellehear and Gliksman, 1997). Each theme was informed by comments of at least half of the parents, and saturation of themes was found to be complete after the tenth participant.

## Results

Seven themes were uncovered through analysis, and comparisons between them indicated that there was evidence of overlapping across themes, as shown in Figure 1 (page 90). The core theme 'Where is the focus?' is the only theme linked to all others within the transcripts, and all ten parents discussed the areas explored within it.

All links within the model are demonstrated using arrows. Where a line has arrows at both ends, these themes link in both directions, for example 'Where is the focus?' and 'Where is the structure?' Where an arrow only goes in one direction, the link does not feed back to the original theme, for example 'What is new?' and 'What is the point?'

### Theme 1: *Where is the focus?*

A theme seen in most interviews revealed that the summary portrayed the report as being too broad, and failing to focus on specific aspects of childhood. Parents thought the summary itself was too vague and over-generalised. Additionally, parents felt confused about the aim of the report. Charles did not think the report had any aim based on the summary:

*Did it have any aims? It's just descriptive from what I could gather. Like I said, there's no argument just unconvincing information that posits itself as factual, but it strikes me as far from objective (Charles, L68-70)*

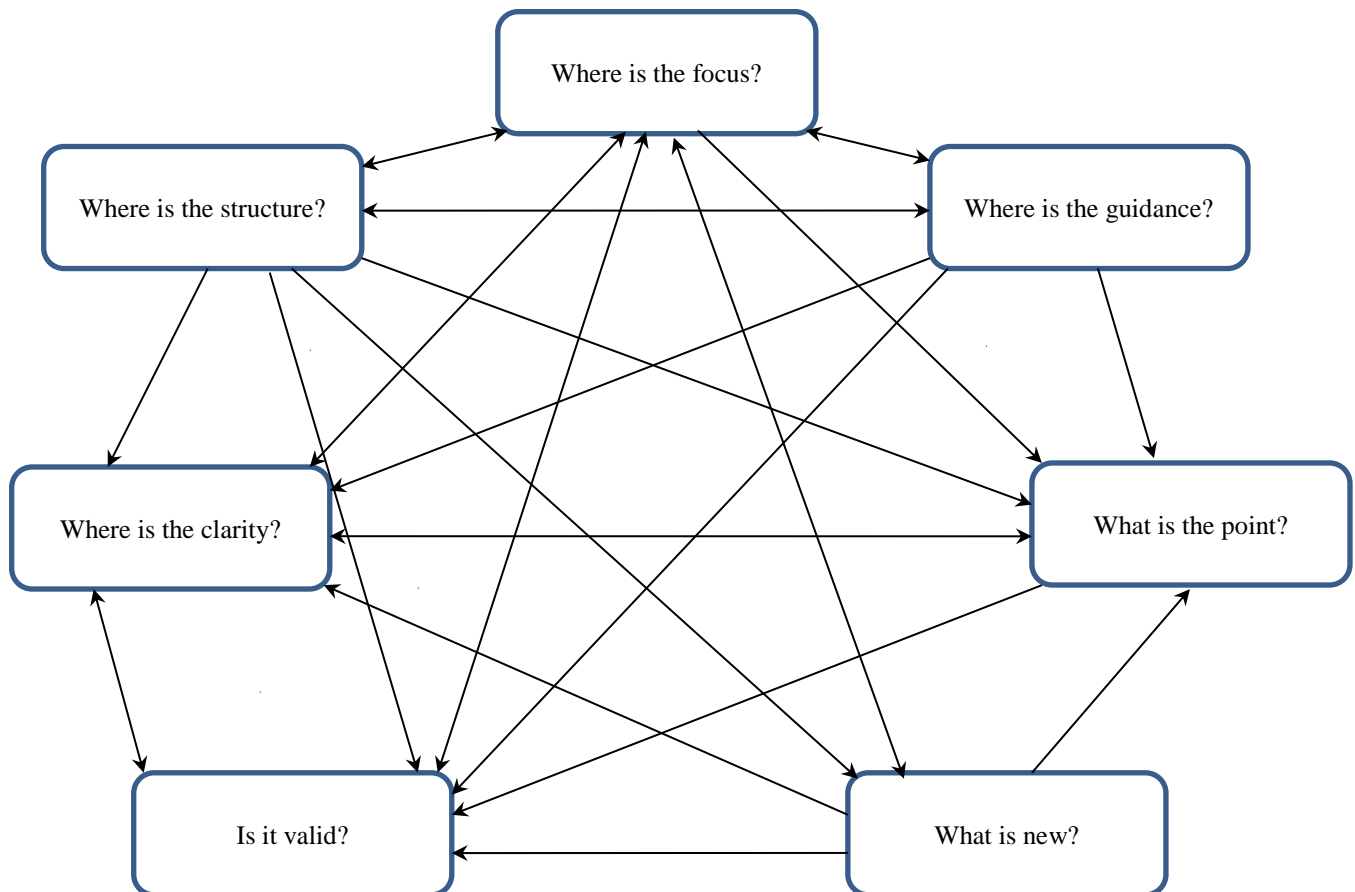
### Theme 2: *Where is the structure?*

Arthur, Betty, Francesca and Helen felt the summary missed important information, such as the demographics of the children studied:

*There's nothing in the summary about the demographic either, where these children have come from, y'know, have they come from inner cities, for instance. Y'know, are they, are they living in care? Y'know, do they come from stable two parent backgrounds? (Francesca, L175-177)*

Half of the parents commented on the confusion

Figure 1. The seven themes produced by the analysis. Links are shown using single and double-headed arrows.



they felt after reading the summary as they found no recommendations for parents, and a distinct lack of definition within the structure:

*But (.) I think the thing that confused me, was that it's talking about wellbeing, but they don't give you a definition of what they mean by it. And the way I read it, was (.) I dunno, it's like it's talking more about their emotional state, and not what I'd consider their wellbeing. (Jane, L36-39)*

### Theme 3: *Where is the clarity?*

The key point of this theme lies in the lack of definitions of key terms used throughout the summary such as “wellbeing” and “flourishing”. These terms are central to the report and have a contestable meaning and interpretation. Parents noted that there were no clear statements informing the reader how researchers had interpreted the terms. Graham in particular said he does not think the summary is for parents because of this:

*I don't think it's aimed at parents because there's things in here that've got no er, (.) no definitions, no clear definitions like “wellbeing”. Well, I'm a parent and I don't know what wellbeing means. Erm, what's the difference between “struggling” and “flourishing”? No idea. (Graham, L21-26)*

### Theme 4: *What is the Point?*

Francesca wondered whether the information would be used in the development of future government policies:

*And where, who's gonna use this information? Y'know, is it passed through to policy makers? Y'know and has any of it, there's nothing to say that any of that information has been used in government policy for instance. (Francesca, L220, 222)*

### Theme 5: *What is new?*

Parents said the summary was vague and that it made statements that were “common sense”. Edith said she felt the findings reported in the summary were obvious:

*From my point of view I think those are fairly obvious reasons why you wouldn't be very happy because if you've got awful living conditions, your parents are split up, y'know, your parents can't manage the money. (Edith, L38-40)*

### Theme 6: *Where is the guidance?*

Parents were concerned that the summary fails to include any clear guidance or recommendations for parents, and questioned its usefulness as a result:

*It would be good if the researchers had suggested more*

*specific ways to help children with low wellbeing, instead of vaguely saying that their needs aren't being met. Erm, (.) yeah, I think there needs to be some emphasis put on recommendations for families, that might have specific known reasons behind low wellbeing. (Ian, L56-59)*

### **Theme 7: Is it valid?**

Parents raised concerns about the children's level of understanding of the study and the questions they were asked. Arthur did not think younger children would understand the questions asked:

*I don't think they'd understand it at all. I read that as this being a conclusion or a (.) cos if you're saying to kids "is your life worthwhile?" they won't know anything about that. (Arthur, L160-162)*

## **Discussion**

In this study, the summary version of the GCR 2013 was clearly not considered optimally informative by the parents interviewed in this study. Having analysed the transcripts, recommendations are proposed below that are intended to inform future similar research, including that carried by The Children's Society.

### **Key Recommendations**

- *Explain terms.* Include definitions of key terms and more detailed background information, including in the summary report. Definitions of key terms are included in the full report and a summary could also include abbreviated definitions. Currently the report loses value by not including these in the summary. Parents had difficulty following the results of the report through to conclusions and recommendations for change.
- *Check that key findings are prominent.* Use a clearer structure and make the aim and recommendations more prominent. Most parents in this study overlooked the report's recommendations, as they were not prominent in the summary.
- *Explain the wider impact of the report.* What new information has the report uncovered and what will happen because of it, how will it inform government policy, and what advice does the report have for parents and teenagers? Parents were uncertain about the intended impact of the report, and were unclear about whom the summary is for, and whether it is intended to inform government policy (Unicef, 2011, National

Children's Bureau, 2012). If so, parents were concerned that it was not clear enough to do so.

- *Explain where the support is.* Provide links to guidance documents for parents who are concerned about their children's wellbeing and for teens experiencing it themselves.
- *Consider wider influences.* Future research should include a consideration of economics that could affect children's lives, and geographical comparisons. Varying concepts of relative poverty (Diener and Lucas, 2000) and the psychological effects of material wealth (Diener and Biswas-Diener, 2002) involve more complicated debates than those presented in the summary.
- *Involve other groups of children.* The subjective wellbeing of disabled children (Lyons and Cassebohm, 2011), and how they feel their lives could improve may have provided crucial information related to the provision of services and access to current schemes (University College London Institute of Health Equity, 2014).

## **Strengths, Limitations and Ideas for Further Research**

The advantage of carrying out interviews was the depth of information gained from these parents, and having the opportunity to follow up brief or unclear answers. However, this did mean that relatively few views were accessed here. An online survey could have provided an alternative to semi-structured interviews, and may have generated more data, enabling results to be generalised further, and this might be a valuable route for further research. However, the information obtained through these interviews was probably richer than we would have been able to gain through an on-line questionnaire (Clough and Nutbrown, 2007) which we believe outweighed the disadvantages of limiting the extent to which we could generalise from our data. Social desirability pressures (Nederhof, 1985) may also have influenced responses as participants wanted to be viewed as 'good' parents. However, as can be seen from the views expressed above, parents did seem to discuss their concerns openly with the interviewer, possibly because she was seen as another parent with whom they could

express their views openly. Further research will determine the generalisability of the interesting, and largely consistent, views expressed by these parents.

(Full report on which this paper is based is available by emailing the author at: [Judith.Rodwell@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:Judith.Rodwell@mmu.ac.uk))

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## Education and Health

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