

Children's Well-Being: Exploring the Current State-Of-The-Art in Conceptualization and Measurement

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Abstract

In the last decade, there was substantial growth in children's well-being investigations, which made considerable progress in understanding the correlates, antecedents, and consequences of children's well-being. In order to gain more insight into the current state-of-the-art in the field of children's well-being, this paper aims to present an integrated overview of the recent scientific progress in this area of research. First, we elaborate on the main theoretical conceptualizations of children's well-being, including hedonic and eudemonic approaches. Second, we explore the challenges of assessing children's well-being, with a focus on different measurement approaches as well as the developmental aspects of assessing children's well-being. Finally, we present patterns of findings on the associations between children's well-being and basic demographic variables, as well as conclusions and implications for future research.

Keywords: children's well-being, review, children's well-being conceptualizations and measurement

Introduction

The importance of children's well-being cannot be overstated as it reflects how children feel and how favourably they assess their lives, relationships, and the environment they live in. In the last decade, there was substantial growth in children's well-being investigations and initiatives (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Bradshaw, 2019), including the pronounced Child Indicator Movement (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014), as well as individual-level and cross-national research such as the Children's Worlds survey (Rees et al., 2020), the Multinational Qualitative Study on Children's Understandings of Well-Being (Fattore et al., 2019), the OECD framework for child well-being measurement (OECD, 2021). These investigations

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This article was conducted as a part of a longitudinal project „Child Well-Being in Family Context (CHILD-WELL)” study financed by Croatian Science Foundation.

substantially contributed to the understanding of the indicators, correlates, antecedents, and consequences of children's well-being.

In particular, existing studies reveal that about 70% of children are mostly satisfied with their lives (Dinisman & Ben-Arieh, 2016; Klocke et al., 2014). Moreover, studies consistently demonstrate strong positive associations between children's well-being and various indicators of adaptive psychosocial functioning. Children with high (vs. low) well-being have better interpersonal relationships and more social support (Casas et al., 2007), academic success, higher self-esteem, and internal locus of control (Huebner, 2004), as well as less risk behaviour and fewer internalizing and externalizing behaviour issues (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; Proctor et al., 2010). Children with higher levels of well-being have better chances of experiencing resilience and other beneficial outcomes in different domains in their adult lives. For instance, findings from a large-scale British Cohort Study and National Child Development Study showed that emotional health in childhood is an important base for adult life satisfaction, even after controlling for cognitive abilities and family economic and psychosocial resources (Flèche et al., 2021). Accordingly, children's well-being translates into the well-being of society as a whole.

However, there is still a lot of room for improvement as there are persisting knowledge gaps in our understanding of children's well-being, including the imbalance in the research representation of different aspects of children's well-being. For instance, some aspects of children's lives (i.e., cognitive development, health, educational outcomes, and behavioural challenges) are studied substantially more than others (i.e., social, emotional, economic, and material aspects of children's well-being) (OECD, 2021). There is also a noticeable imbalance in terms of studied age groups of children, namely, most studies focus on middle and late childhood or adolescence, whilst early childhood is largely underrepresented (Andresen et al., 2019). Furthermore, it seems that children's and adults' well-being have somewhat different predictors, i.e., what makes children happy is often different from what makes adults happy, and this needs to be understood better (Bradshaw, 2019; Rees et al., 2020).

To gain more insight into the current state-of-the-art in the field of children's well-being, this paper presents an in-depth integrated overview of the recent theoretical and empirical progress in terms of the conceptualizations of children's well-being, measurement approaches, and challenges of assessing children's well-being. In addition, in order to have a better overview of some of the variables that are relevant for children's well-being, we present main patterns of findings on the associations between children's well-being and basic demographic variables. In line with the existing research, this review also aims to present the major knowledge gaps in the current field of children's well-being and to highlight the necessity for much-needed improvements in conceptualizations and measurement of different aspects of children's well-being.

Children's Well-Being Conceptualizations

Despite its increasing popularity and use, the construct of children's well-being is largely under-theorized, and the structure of the construct has rarely been empirically examined in the literature (Savahl et al., 2021). As Savahl et al. (2021) state in their recent study, children's well-being structural configuration received very scarce research attention due to the uncertainty regarding the conceptualization of children's well-being. Most of the existing frameworks build upon the adult well-being literature and these adult-based conceptualizations and interpretations have been very useful as a foundational framework for structuring the complex nature of the well-being construct (e.g., Metler & Busseri, 2017). However, they are often not child-centred and are somewhat limited in addressing cognitive and socio-emotional developmental specifics of different childhood phases and needs (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). In addition, even among adult-based well-being studies, there are theoretical and methodological inconsistencies and conflicting evidence on the conceptualization and structure of well-being construct (Busseri, 2018; Daniel-González et al., 2020). Hence, the area of how to precisely define children's well-being in a child-centred way by considering the specific developmental features and children's perspectives and needs is still currently very much a work in progress.

Nonetheless, the most prominent theoretical approach to children's well-being in the literature is the idea of well-being as a multidimensional construct consisting of hedonic (cognitive and affective dimensions), and eudemonic well-being aspects, which is in line with adult-based well-being conceptualizations (Brdar et al., 2009; Diener et al., 2018; Savahl et al., 2021). The hedonic aspect refers to the degree of pleasantness vs. unpleasantness in one's life, with the cognitive dimension reflecting global and domain-based life satisfaction, and the affective dimension reflecting positive (PA) and negative affect (NA) (Diener et al., 2018), whereas the eudemonic aspect revolves around the experiences of meaning, personal growth, strengths, and autonomy (Huta & Waterman, 2014).

Hedonic Approach to Well-Being

The hedonic approach conceptualizes well-being using the tripartite model of well-being (Diener et al., 2018), based on research among adults. The model conceptualizes well-being as an umbrella term encompassing three primary components: life satisfaction, and frequency of positive and negative affective states. Recent meta-analysis and longitudinal studies (e.g., Busseri, 2018) provide support for this model by showing that well-being is indeed best conceptualized as a hierarchical construct. Specifically, as a higher-order well-being factor (i.e., overarching tendency of enjoyment and fulfilment with one's life as a whole) reflected in lower-order components: cognitive evaluations of one's life (life satisfaction) and positive and negative affective experiences. A recent cross-sectional study by Savahl et al. (2021) aimed to address this knowledge gap by testing a four-

dimensional model of children's subjective well-being SWB, which incorporated the context-free and domain-based cognitive components of life satisfaction, positive and negative affect among 92 782 children in two age groups (10- and 12-years-old) from 35 countries. Their findings supported the generalizability of the hierarchical structural conceptualization of children's well-being SWB, namely, they showed that a single higher-order well-being factor manifested in four intercorrelated lower-order factors (global life satisfaction, satisfaction with life domains, positive and negative affect).

Life Satisfaction. Life satisfaction, the cognitive component of well-being, captures general evaluations of one's life as a whole. Life satisfaction measures are the most commonly used indicators of well-being among children and Veenhoven (2002) emphasizes that life satisfaction aspect of well-being is the best indicator of overall quality of life. Whereas affective experiences are inherently dynamic and fluctuating, life satisfaction indicators tend to be more stable and indicative of one's general attitudes towards life (Antaramian & Huebner, 2009; Rees, 2019). In other words, life satisfaction reports typically do not fluctuate often and tend to change only when people experience major changes in life's circumstances, while currently experienced affective states tend to have trivial effects on life satisfaction assessments (Jayawickreme et al., 2017).

Satisfaction with Different Life Domains. Satisfaction with different life domains refers to cognitive evaluation of one's satisfaction with different aspects of their life, such as family, friends, self, school, and living environment (e.g., Huebner & Diener, 2008). This is important because it acknowledges the role of children's environments and relationships that directly or indirectly strongly influence children's well-being by (not) providing sufficient and appropriate resources and opportunities. Research shows that children have their own understanding of the socioeconomic conditions of their lives from a relatively early age (Clarke & Thévenon, 2022). Studies among adolescents reveal that the assessments of satisfaction with life domains yield additional insights beyond assessments of overall life satisfaction (Haranin et al., 2007). Hence, when exploring children's well-being, it is essential to incorporate not just how children feel and function, but also how they view different aspects of their living environments. This is more important for children's than for adults' well-being because children's well-being is more closely related to the quality of their family relations as well as other immediate and broader contexts (i.e., childcare, school, friends, health, material resources) (Savahl et al., 2021).

Positive Affect. Positive affect refers to the experiences of higher arousal affective states such as joy, excitement, and enthusiasm and the low arousal states of relaxation, satisfaction, and calm. According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson et al., 2008), positive affective states are not only indicators, but also important prerequisites of feeling and functioning well. The theory states that positive emotions, such as love, joy, and interest, enable *broadening*

of the scopes of attention, cognition, and behaviour and *building* of enduring personal resources (Fredrickson et al., 2008). A few of the existing studies demonstrated the broadening effect of positive affect among young children, showing that positive affect was positively related to cognitive performance, self-regulation (Yates et al., 1981), and creativity (Blau & Klein, 2010; Stifter et al., 2020).

Several longitudinal studies demonstrated positive associations between positive affect and beneficial outcomes such as emotion processing, empathy, helping behaviours, and social competence (Stifter et al., 2020; Volbrecht et al., 2007); thus, providing support for the build effect of positive emotions among children. These insights underlie the importance of further examination of positive affective states among children as their accumulated enduring effects have the potential to support optimal functioning throughout children's development (Stifter et al., 2020). Indeed, recent studies point out that positive affect is the key element of children's well-being (Casas & González-Carrasco, 2020; Savahl et al., 2021).

Negative Affect. Negative affect refers to the experiences of higher and lower arousal unpleasant affective states, such as anger, sadness, and frustration (Diener et al., 2018). It is worth noting that high well-being is not equal to the absence of negative affective states, rather, it reflects higher frequency of positive affect than negative affect as one can experience positive and negative affect at the same time (e.g., excitement and fear) (Moeller et al., 2018). Several studies highlighted the positive affect as a better indicator of well-being, and negative affect as a better indicator of behavioural problems and emotional difficulties, such as depressive and anxiety symptomatology (Davern et al., 2007; Savahl et al., 2021).

Existing research among children and adolescents shows that cognitive and affective well-being components are moderately correlated and tend to have different correlates (Huebner, 2004; Huebner & Dew, 1996; McCullough et al., 2000). For instance, in line with studies among adults (Diener et al., 2018), socioeconomic resources consistently show stronger associations with cognitive well-being component (life satisfaction) than with affective ones. Lindberg et al. (2021) found that affective well-being components correlate stronger with individual personal characteristics, such as self-confidence and health, whilst cognitive well-being components correlate stronger with external variables, such as family and societal dimensions. Furthermore, the literature shows that researchers often claim to investigate well-being, while using only life satisfaction measures in their studies, which is not aligned with the existing findings that posit positive and negative affect as the main components of the children's well-being construct (Savahl et al., 2021; Tomyn & Cummins, 2011).

Eudemonic Approach to Well-Being

The eudemonic approach, typically conceptualized as psychological well-being, posits that life satisfaction and affective states are important, but incomplete

indicators of well-being because high well-being is not only characterized by feeling good, but also by optimal functioning, positive relationships, and a sense of engagement (Martela & Sheldon, 2019). As such, eudemonic approach reflects a more comprehensive and complex idea of well-being than life satisfaction and affective states. Given the broad understanding of positive functioning, there are many different approaches to eudemonic well-being. In particular, Martela and Sheldon (2019) found at least 45 different eudemonic approaches, mostly represented as a combination of different psychological constructs related to living in congruence with one's full potential. Ryff's (2014) psychological well-being model and the self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000) stand out as the two most influential theoretical approaches to eudemonic well-being.

Ryff's (2014) psychological well-being model proposes six dimensions of positive functioning: positive relatedness (developing and sustaining supportive relationships), life purpose (having focused intentions and goals in life), self-acceptance (having positive attitudes towards oneself), personal growth (having a sense of continued personal development), autonomy (aspirations toward a sense of choice and control over one's life), and mastery (having a sense of competence for dealing with challenges and the ability to choose and create adequate conditions). Although the six-factor theoretical model was not consistently confirmed in cross-cultural research, the model has received substantial empirical support in studies among adults, showing positive associations of psychological well-being with health and positive adjustment (Ryff, 2014). Ryff's psychological well-being scale was adapted to be used by children and adolescents, by creating age-appropriate items as alternatives to items that were too difficult, ambiguous, had negations, or were not age-appropriate, to improve the ease of use for children and adolescents. Research in this area showed that adolescents tend to report medium-high psychological well-being (Gao & McLellan, 2018; Oprea et al., 2018).

However, existing studies that used this scale among children and adolescents have been somewhat inconsistent, showing similar factor structure, test-retest validity, and construct validity as in adult samples among European children (e.g., Oprea et al., 2018), whereas among adolescents in China factorial structure was not completely in line with the Ryff's theoretical framework (Gao & McLellan, 2018). Another distinguished approach to eudemonic well-being is the SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2000) proposes autonomous regulation as the key feature of high well-being and underlines the importance of putting effort into everyday activities out of a sense of choice, interest, and enjoyment rather than out of external pressure. This is important because it highlights the self-regulation capabilities that enable realization of one's potentials, meaningful connections with others, and, in turn, flourishing. The SDT also addresses the conditions that enable children to flourish and thrive. Specifically, SDT posits that positive development and well-being arise from satisfaction of three basic psychological needs for: a) autonomy (to have a sense of choice and control over one's life), b) relatedness (to have close, safe, and affectionate connections with

other, and a sense of belonging), and c) competence (to be effective and confident in dealing with environment and in pursuing one's aspirations). In a study among 331 middle childhood and early adolescence children, Véronneau et al. (2005) showed that children, who had fulfilled their needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, felt positive affect more frequently than a negative.

Moreover, the structure of the well-being construct among children and adolescents received very little research attention, which highlights the necessity of further investigations among children because this has implications on how well-being is measured, analysed, and interpreted, and in, turn, applied in real life settings (Savahl et al., 2021). The few existing studies among children and adolescents that built upon both hedonic and eudemonic well-being approaches revealed that these two well-being approaches are distinct, but related constructs and research should investigate them as such (e.g., Gómez-López et al., 2019; Oprea et al., 2018).

Altogether, the structure of well-being construct among children and adolescents, and eudemonic well-being in particular, is still quite unexplored area that requires further investigations (Oprea et al., 2018). In order to have comprehensive perspectives into how children view their lives in terms of global evaluations of life and affective experiences, as well as in terms of meaning, experiences of autonomy, mastery and connectedness with significant others, it is important to assess different well-being components that enable children and young people to flourish (Ryff, 2014). Bearing in mind the importance of children's well-being, the issues of how to precisely define children's well-being and how to assess it are quite complex, but essential aspects of developing strategies and initiatives aimed at enhancing children's well-being (Thompson & Aked, 2009).

Measuring Children's Well-Being

The existing literature shows increased attempts aimed at systematic monitoring of children's well-being. These studies reveal three major paradigm shifts in measuring children's well-being: a) from a focus on negative indicators, such as depression and behavioural problems, to positive indicators, such as life satisfaction, happiness, and quality of life; b) from focus on solely objective indicators, such as family income and education, to emphasizing the importance of subjective indicators, such as affect and eudemonic well-being; and c) from investigating children as *research objects* to a focus on the children as *subjects and active partners* in the research process (Andresen et al., 2019; Ben Arieh et al., 2014).

These paradigm shifts underline that, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of the mechanisms through which children can flourish, it is necessary to incorporate theoretical and methodological approaches to children's well-being that capture positive and subjective aspects of well-being (Huebner & Diener, 2008). This is important because, as the evidence shows, high well-being cannot be reduced to the absence of psychopathological symptoms or to objective indicators because these

aspects do not capture subjective perceptions of one's life, which represent the essence of well-being (Davern et al., 2007)

Measurement Approaches

Despite an agreement about the importance of examining well-being of children and directly engaging children in this process, the literature reveals different approaches to well-being measurement and currently there is no consensus on which indicators provide the best insights as children's developmental stage has a significant role for the appropriateness of the indicators (Moore, 2020). This is a specific aspect of children's well-being research compared to adults' well-being research. In this section, we will discuss different types of measurement that represent relevant approaches to assessing how children feel and perceive the quality of their lives. We will present types of measurement tools and discuss the differences between objective and subjective well-being indicators, unidimensional and multidimensional well-being measures, and retrospective and episodic well-being measures.

Objective and Subjective Well-Being Measures. Traditionally, studies used objective measures, external, measurable dimensions, such as GDP, household income, educational attainment, life expectancy, and crime rates, as a children's well-being proxy (Ben Arieh et al., 2014). Although objective measures can provide useful information on well-being at the context-level of children's lives, using solely objective measures provides quite limited information and only partial glimpse into the quality of children's lives. Recently, it has been largely accepted that children's own perceptions, perspectives, and experiences are essential aspects of their well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Bradshaw, 2019). In particular, different individuals (children and adults) can perceive the same circumstances in different ways, depending on their own experiences, personalities, culture, values, etc. (Diener et al., 2018). Well-being is inherently subjective, and one should decide for himself or herself the extent to which his or her life is going well (Diener et al., 2018). The use of subjective well-being measures is further justified in the large body of existing research that consistently demonstrates psychometrical validity and reliability of self-report measures of well-being components, as well as meaningful associations with relevant outcomes and constructs (Casas, 2017; Huebner & Diener, 2008; Savahl et al., 2021).

However, assessing children's well-being is somewhat more complex than assessing adults' well-being because of the children's age and development, and in turn, their understanding of the meanings attached to different responses. Bearing in mind that both approaches can provide unique and important information on the quality of children's lives, different researchers use different combinations of indicators to define well-being of children and youth. For example, Bradshaw et al. (2007) defined children's well-being using 51 indicators grouped in 8 clusters

(material situation, housing, health, subjective well-being, children's relationships, safety, and civic participation). In this perspective, Bradshaw et al. (2007) defined children's subjective well-being using three domains: self-reported health (e.g., poor health), personal well-being (e.g., life satisfaction), and well-being at school (e.g., liking school, finding classmates kind and helpful).

Ben-Arieh et al. (2014) defined three aspects of children's lives that are essential for their well-being: 1) living conditions and objective circumstances; 2) subjective well-being; 3) perceptions and evaluations of children's outcomes by other relevant people in their lives (parents, teachers, and other relevant people). In a recent review of children's well-being measures, Cho and Yu (2020) found that among children's well-being studies conducted between 2000 and 2019, the majority of studies (51%) used solely subjective well-being indicators, some of them (32%) used both subjective and objective indicators, and only a minority of studies (17%) used solely objective indicators.

Unidimensional and Multidimensional Well-Being Measures. In line with the multidimensionality and broadness of the well-being construct, there are many different well-being measures. In the systematic review of children's well-being studies conducted from 2000 to 2013, Žukauskienė et al. (2015) found 186 assessment tools of various lengths and structures specifically designed for measuring child and adolescent well-being. Measures are typically divided into unidimensional and multidimensional instruments.

Unidimensional measures aim to capture a context-free assessment that reflects children's evaluations of their lives according to their own personal criteria (Huebner, 2004). These measures can be one-item single question (e.g., "How satisfied are you with your life as a whole?"), or brief scales, such as Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (SLSS; Huebner, 2004), Positive and Negative Affect Schedule for Children (PANAS-C; Ebesutani et al., 2012), or Children's Worlds Subjective Well-Being Scale (CW-SWBS; Savahl et al., 2021), which use multiple items to measure the one dimension (i.e. life satisfaction, or positive and negative affect). Even though most cross-national comparisons of children's subjective well-being used single-item measures, the results of a large-scale cross-national study, Casas (2017) showed that multiple-item measurement tools are more powerful than single-item scales. In particular, the study showed that children's well-being comparability across countries increases when well-being is assessed using different multi-item measures. Still, Casas (2017) points out that using single-item life satisfaction measure, in addition to other measures, is useful for assessing convergent validity.

The multidimensional measures aim to assess children's well-being within different aspects of life (satisfaction and/or affective experiences within school, family, and peers). The most often used multidimensional scales for children are the Brief Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (BMSLSS; Seligson et al., 2003), Multidimensional Students' Life Satisfaction Scale (MSLSS; Huebner, 2004), and more recently the Children's Worlds: Domain-Based Subjective Well-

Being Scale (CW-DBSWBS; Savahl et al., 2021). More recently developed scales include measures of eudemonic well-being, such as the Psychological Well-Being scale for children (PWB-c; Oprea et al., 2018), which consists of six dimensions similar to psychological well-being construct for adults.

Retrospective and Episodic Well-Being Measures. Most well-being measures have been used as retrospective assessments that ask children to think about their life and rate satisfaction and/or affective experiences over extended periods of time (Savahl et al., 2021). Studies using a between-person design (i.e., using retrospective, trait-level well-being measures) have provided valuable insights (Choi, 2018; Huebner, 2004); however, these measurement tools cannot detect important proximal factors (e.g., daily social interactions and school experiences) that affect children's well-being fluctuations in everyday life and changes in well-being over time.

Although the retrospective questions seem relatively simple, coming up with the answer involves complex cognitive processes, including thinking about the balance between what one wants and what one has, and comparing one's experiences on an intraindividual and interindividual level (Hudson et al., 2022). As such, the retrospective types of assessments have proven to be susceptible to various biases (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006; Robinson & Clore, 2002; Schwarz et al., 2009). For instance, studies among adult populations showed that estimates of how happy one has felt in the past tend to be more positive than average happiness as assessed via multi-moment episodic measures (Miron-Shatz et al., 2009). This incongruence has been conceptualized as the *memory-experience gap* and has also been confirmed among early adolescents. More concretely, Tadić et al. (2014) demonstrated that, when asked how they felt yesterday overall, pupils, on average, tend to overestimate the pleasantness of their affect. In other words, their global yesterdays' happiness reports were higher than their averaged episodic happiness ratings.

In contrast, episodic (multi-moment) assessments of well-being, such as the experience sampling method (ESM; Mehl & Conner, 2013), the day reconstruction method (DRM; Kahneman et al., 2004; Tadić et al., 2014), and diary methodology (Bolger et al., 2003; Kahneman & Krueger, 2006), enable researchers to capture the fluctuations in children's affective and cognitive well-being components, and to discover the more proximal determinants of their well-being. Within-person level studies using episodic well-being measures tend to successfully tackle most of the retrospective biases they are less influenced by cognitive dispositions and processes than global assessments (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006), and they also enhance the ecological validity of the findings (Bolger et al., 2003; Daniels & Harris, 2005)

This in line with Robinson and Clore's (2002) propositions that when assessing affective experiences, on the one hand, the more recent the experience, the more likely respondents built upon their recent, episodic memories of the actual experience. On the other hand, the more distant (such as in global life satisfaction

assessment), the more likely respondents build upon their semantic memory, that is, on their general beliefs, attitudes, and values to reflect on their well-being.

Given this context, children's well-being can be seen from two qualitatively distinct perspectives: state (episodic, within-person) level and trait (global, between-person) level well-being (Schwarz et al., 2009). Trait level children's well-being reflects the typical ways children evaluate their life in general, or the degree to which one judges the overall quality of his/her own life favourably. State (episodic) level children's well-being reflects the within-person fluctuations in how children experience their life from moment to moment (Beyens et al., 2020; Schwarz et al., 2009). Unfortunately, with the exemption of a few studies (e.g., Larson et al., 2002; Tadić et al., 2013; Weinstein et al., 2007) children's well-being from a within-person perspective is still largely understudied. Well-being from a within-person perspective is substantially less studied among adults, and particularly among children (e.g., Beyens et al., 2020). Several aspects could explain this, including the higher demands that this type of research poses on participants, but also because children's well-being is somewhat more complex to measure.

Challenges in Measuring Children's Well-Being

Children's conceptions of complex constructs such as well-being largely depend on the level of development of cognitive competencies (Franc et al., 2018), but also on their personal experiences and background, their needs, abilities, and aspirations (Richardson & Ali, 2014).

Children's Active Participation in Research. Furthermore, most research so far focused on parents' or teachers' perceptions of children's well-being, thus neglecting the perceptions of children themselves. For instance, earlier assessments of children's well-being focused solely on adult-based measurement tools (Savahl et al., 2021). In acquiring better understandings of the meanings children attach to well-being, it is necessary to actively engage children as main participants in these processes as attempts to enhance children's well-being need to consider their own perceptions, concerns, and preferences. This is evident in a recent major trend in research that aims to gain new insights directly from children on their own perspectives and experiences using innovative quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Bradshaw, 2019; Fattore et al., 2019; Montserrat et al., 2021). These studies demonstrate that children are motivated and capable of coherently considering and pondering upon their personal views, experiences, affective processes, and satisfaction with life. For instance, in a large-scale study among over 34 000 children from 15 countries (aged 8–12), Casas (2017) showed that commonly used well-being scales for children's well-being have good psychometric characteristics. Montserrat et al. (2021) explored how children from three different cultural contexts (Catalonia, Cape Town, and North-Western Romania) perceive and

understand well-being measurement tools. Their study demonstrated that children have quite similar understandings of the response options across the three contexts.

Developmental Aspects of Children's Well-Being Assessment. Developmental aspects present one of the main issues that need to be acknowledged when addressing children's well-being measurement. In particular, in order to determine the level of one's well-being, one needs to have a basic understanding of emotions, i.e., the ability to distinguish between different emotional states and to use the emotional vocabulary in an efficient way (Bosacki & Moore, 2004). Hence, in the subsections below, we mention some of the specifics of different developmental stages that are relevant in the context of children's well-being measurement.

Preschool Children. A large majority of studies on children's well-being mostly investigated children over 10 years old, and research on younger children's (aged 0-6) well-being is quite scarce (Franc et al., 2018; Rees, 2019). This is, at least in part, due to the developmental specifics of young children that affect their emotional development: young children (ages 0–6) are a very specific group in terms of well-being measurement because assessing well-being of young children is firmly linked to their social and cognitive development. For instance, results from developmental neuroscience demonstrate that cognitive processing is strongly associated with regulation of emotions (Wager et al., 2008). This needs to be considered when assessing well-being directly from young children. Thus, most of the existing studies assessed young children's well-being indirectly by using indexes of objective data as well-being proxy (O'Hare, 2016), coding naturalistic observations of children's emotions (Lindsey, 2019), and using data from parents, caregivers, and teachers about different aspects of children's well-being (Lindsey, 2019; Przybylski & Weinstein, 2017). Studies that asked young children about their emotions and well-being directly used different types of child-friendly, creative tasks, such as picture vignettes test and puppet interviews (Dunn & Hughes, 1998; OECD, 2020).

Some studies used qualitative methodologies, such as Koch (2018), who used ethnographic observations and photo-elicited interviews with five-year-old children. Furthermore, Abed et al. (2016) developed the Well-Being in Preschool Children Scale, and their study used individual interviews with children combined with their teachers' reports. The study demonstrated sufficient validity and reliability of the scale that consists of three dimensions: self-concept, life satisfaction, and resilience. There are also other innovative attempts that aim to assess younger children's well-being using a combination of child reports and adult (teacher and parent) reports, such as the OECD's International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) (OECD, 2020). The IELS captured data directly from children using electronic tablet with hypothetical scenarios-brief vignettes with cartoon-like characters, as well as indirectly from teachers and parents by asking them about children's social-emotional skills.

According to the existing research, children begin to recognize and learn to label their emotions, and to understand the causes of emotions between the ages of two and four (Bosacki & Moore, 2004; Kujawa et al., 2014). They tend to recognize happiness earliest, and then other basic emotions (e.g., sadness, anger), followed by more complex emotions, such as surprise and shame (Kujawa et al., 2014). Children are able to conceptualize and report on their affective states earlier in their development than they are able to make complex cognitive evaluations of their life as a whole (Rees, 2019).

Bearing in mind these notions, in terms of developmental context, in addition to using episodic measures of current well-being (especially positive and negative affect) might be particularly useful for younger children. Specifically, episodic measures focus on what is happening right now in terms of affective experiences rather than aiming to ask children about their emotions in general. However, there is a scarce number of studies that use episodic measures, and this might be a promising area of research on well-being, especially well-being of younger children. In this context, episodic measures could use various techniques of data collection, including verbal and numeric, as well as vignette-like and other types of measures and reports.

School-Aged Children. Younger school-aged children, between ages 7 and 10, typically use concrete cognitive operations, namely, their thinking is focused on factual, observable, and previously acquired facts. They apply their operational schemes to objects, situations and events that are real or imaginable (Shaffer & Kipp, 2013). Younger children tend to be more accurate in reporting facts than in reporting judgments.

Older school-aged children, between ages 11 and 13, start to use more abstract terms and cognitive operations and process information faster and more efficiently than younger children (Shaffer & Kipp, 2013). Recent studies show that it is possible to attain reliable and valid self-assessments of well-being in children of 8 years of age (Franc et al., 2018). In this period, many cognitive, emotional, and social changes take place, such as executive functions that continue to develop at this stage with specific improvements in various aspects, particularly in the area of behaviour planning and socio-emotional competencies (Šimleša & Capanec, 2015). Accordingly, they can perform mental operations based on ideas and propositions.

Although children's understanding of emotions improves with age and they seem to recognize happiness before other emotional expressions (Eggum et al., 2011; Kujawa et al., 2014), research on well-being of children, particularly of children under the age of 9 years, is still very scarce. Thus, there is a need for more research on how children understand well-being at a younger age. A recent unique study (Monserrat et al., 2021) aimed to bring further insights into these matters by examining scale granularity of children's well-being measurement tools among children aged between 11 and 12 years old from three different countries (Catalonia, Cape Town and North-Western Romania) using focus group interviews and thematic analysis. Their findings showed that children, similarly to adults, use the four-step

model of comprehension, retrieval, judgement, and estimation and reporting when trying to respond to a 0 to 10-point life satisfaction scale (Tourangeau, 2018). However, their findings indicated that children's understanding of the possible response options is somewhat different from adults.

For instance, a recent study (Montserrat et al., 2021) showed that many children understand the response option "7" as the median point when making sense of the response items presented on the 0 to 10-point scale. The study also demonstrated that children attach different meanings to concepts of "satisfaction" and "happiness". More concretely, most children understood "happiness" as somewhat more intense, broader, and having a more positive meaning than "satisfaction". In fact, children understood "happiness" as an indicator that better reflected how they felt about their lives overall as well as in different life domains.

Bearing in mind that the existing children's well-being research practice often does not often distinguish between these concepts (Cummins, 2014; Davern et al., 2007; Savahl et al., 2021), these important findings have significant implications for children's well-being assessments. First, it seems that it might be best to focus more on the concept of "happiness" when trying to assess how much children like and enjoy different aspects of their life as well as life in general. Second, given that children have somewhat different interpretations of the response item options on 0-10 well-being scales, with option "7" often being perceived as the median point, this has implications for scale sensitivity and needs to be considered when interpreting children's well-being reports.

Adolescence and Youth. The period of adolescence represents preparation for adulthood that encompasses intense physical maturation as well as the development of the capacity for abstract reasoning and broadening of different relationship-maintaining skills (Shaffer & Kipp, 2013). During early adolescence (12–15 years), the intellectual capacity becomes almost comparable to those of adults. However, early adolescents are still not entirely able to understand complex concepts, or the associations between behaviour and consequences, which can be manifested in the illusion of invulnerability. This can sometimes lead to heightened risk-taking and can influence their health decision-making regarding sexual behaviour, experimentation with drugs etc. By the end of late adolescence (15–21 years), young people can deal with the same cognitive operations and tasks as adults. Thus, older adolescents could use similar measurement tools that are developed for adults, whereas younger adolescents need more age-appropriate measurement tools.

Children's Well-Being and Basic Demographic Variables

Although the large body of research consistently demonstrates that demographic variables are only modestly associated with well-being of both adults and children (Huebner, 2004), we provide an overview of the main patterns of findings on these associations because they can be relevant for conceptualization,

assessment, and interpretation of children's well-being in different contexts (e.g., different cultures, nations, groups of children, etc.). One study among a representative sample of 7000 UK children between 10 and 15 years of age showed that all demographic variables accounted for approximately 7% of children's well-being (Rees et al., 2010). Similarly, in a study including over 34500 children from 14 different countries, Dinisman and Ben Arieh (2016) found that demographic and socio-economic variables combined explained between 10.9 and 20.2% of the well-being variance. Among all demographic variables, the most widely studied are age and gender.

Gender. There are many studies that examined the associations between gender and children's well-being, mostly focusing on differences in life satisfaction; however, the findings have been inconsistent (Chen et al., 2020). Several studies showed similar levels of well-being among girls and boys (Chui & Wong 2016; Proctor et al. 2010), whereas other studies demonstrated significant differences (Bradshaw et al., 2011). A recent meta-analysis (Chen et al., 2020) including 46 empirical studies from 1980 to 2017 (with total $N = 11772$) revealed similar life satisfaction of girls and boys, with boys reporting somewhat higher, but not significantly different life satisfaction. Their meta-analysis also showed that girls reported higher satisfaction with interpersonal domains (school, family, and friends) with the largest difference between girls' and boys' school satisfaction. Moreover, girls reported higher satisfaction when it was assessed via a multidimensional scale; however, when it was assessed via unidimensional measure, there were no differences between boys and girls (Casas et al., 2013). Altogether, this indicates that boys and girls might have different perceptions of life satisfaction domains, which should be considered in future research.

Socioeconomic Variables. The findings on the associations between children's well-being and families' socioeconomic variables have also been somewhat inconsistent. Some studies found no significant or very low associations between material deprivation and children's well-being (Rees et al., 2010). Dinisman and Ben-Arieh (2016) found that indicators of children's socioeconomic status (self-reported items on things they have: 'clothes in good condition to go to school', 'access to computer at home', and 'access to Internet') explained between 2.4 and 5.8% of the children's well-being variance. Other studies suggest significant associations between material deprivation and negative outcomes risk (Griggs & Walker, 2008). Casas et al. (2013) found higher well-being among children who lived with two employed adults, and Klocke et al. (2014) found lower well-being among children (aged 11–15) whose fathers did not have a paid job. There are also studies that explain the associations between children's well-being and material deprivation via lower educational possibilities, risks of social exclusion, and worse living conditions (Bradshaw, 2011; Rees et al., 2010).

It is possible that children's understanding of their families' socioeconomic status has a significant impact on their well-being, which could explain, at least in

part, the inconsistencies in the findings. For instance, children's view of their material resources (indicated as having pocket money, TV, or right clothes) had a stronger association with children's well-being than the household income (Main & Pople, 2011). This is also visible from qualitative studies showing children's reports of negative impact of living in poverty (Tadić Vujčić et al., 2019). Hence, this area of research requires further investigations with the direct inclusion of children's own ideas, understandings, and perceptions.

Age. Research so far has shown that children's well-being declines from middle childhood to adolescence (Casas & González-Carrasco, 2019). Most studies on these issues focused on the period of adolescence and showed that between 12 and 18 years of age there is a decline in children's well-being (Shek & Lin, 2017). One study employed three-wave longitudinal design and used episodic measures of daily affect over one year among two age groups (mean ages 13.9 and 16.0) of children (Weinstein et al., 2007). The study found moderate decline in positive affect and showed that boys experienced greater declines over time, while girls experienced higher negative affect over time (Weinstein et al., 2007). Martin-Krumm et al. (2018) showed the decline in positive affect and an increase in negative affect during a period of adolescence (from 13 to 20 years of age) and that girls tended to report higher negative affect than boys.

Casas and Gonzalez-Carrasco (2019) compared cross-sectional subjective well-being data from 15 countries among children aged 8 to 14 years and showed that in most countries there is a well-being rise between the ages of 8 and 10, and a well-being decline between the ages of 10 and 12. However, in some countries (e.g. Spain) this decline is evident even earlier – between ages 8 and 10. According to Casas and Gonzales-Carasco (2019), genetic explanations are insufficient for explaining these changes and age-related differences in children's subjective well-being. In order to get better understanding of how these trends develop and how can they be explained, we need more longitudinal studies that would follow children's well-being and the circumstances of their lives throughout their development. Hence, it is important to examine the (un)stability of different domains of children's well-being in middle childhood and in the transition to adolescence by using a longitudinal approach.

Conclusions and Implications for Future Research

This paper provided an integrated review of the current children's well-being research, with a particular focus on well-being operationalization and challenges in well-being measurement. In doing so, the paper highlighted that, although the field of children's well-being expanded substantially in terms of conceptualization and measurement, there are still knowledge gaps that require further investigation. Overall, the main gaps refer to focusing on measures that are child-centred and age-appropriate as well as sensitive to and inclusive of children's own perspectives and

understandings. Moreover, future research should focus on longitudinal monitoring of stability and change in children's well-being while considering the national and cultural specifics of contemporary childhoods that also captures inequalities and is responsive to children in vulnerable or marginalized positions (OECD, 2021). This is important because in order to develop relevant and evidence-based policies that foster children's well-being, it is necessary to build upon high-quality data on children's well-being.

Need To Assess the Well-Being of Younger Children

Most of the existing studies on children's well-being focused on middle childhood and adolescence (mostly above 10 years of age), whilst there is substantially less research on well-being of younger children (0- to 6-year-olds). Thus, this area of research requires further investigations including the ways of assessing well-being of young children and examining how young children understand well-being and what is important for them to feel and function well. More concretely, measures need to be sensitive to children's stage of development, with adequate age-related modifications in well-being concepts and indicators.

Investigating the Structure of Well-Being Construct among Children

The field of children's well-being is relatively untheoretical, more concretely, most of its ideas have been used from the field of adults' well-being, which is understandable, but also somewhat limited because assessing children's well-being is somewhat more complex than assessing adults' well-being because of the children's age and development, and in turn, their understanding of the meanings attached to different responses. However, one advantage to using adult-based theoretical approaches is that this enables continuity, which allows for longitudinal investigation of well-being throughout the life span.

Moreover, most of the existing studies on children's well-being employed only hedonic approach and the structure of children's well-being construct and eudemonic well-being in particular is still quite an unexplored area that requires further investigations (Oprea et al., 2018). Given the inconsistencies in the structure of Ryff's psychological well-being scales for children, particularly within the cross-cultural context, there is a need for further research to examine more age-specific and context-appropriate items that would represent Ryff's theoretical framework in a more optimal way. This is important because assessing different well-being components adds to a more comprehensive understanding of the structure of children's well-being as well as the variables that have a strong impact on well-being. Given that a recent study revealed good support for the quadripartite hierarchical conceptual model of children's subjective well-being (Savahl et al., 2021), future studies could check whether this model holds in different cultures and age groups.

Longitudinal Studies

Even though studies on children's well-being grow in number, there are not many longitudinal studies on well-being of children, and longitudinal changes in well-being aspects have so far been mainly investigated on the samples of older adolescents (e.g., Ciarrochi et al., 2011; Mosley-Johnson et al., 2019). Therefore, there is a need for longitudinal studies that include younger age groups and a sensitive period of transitions to adolescence to get more insights into the well-being components' determinants, processes, and developments throughout childhood (Casas & González-Carrasco, 2020). One of the reasons for these research gaps can be found in possible scepticism, about children's abilities to give reliable and valid self-assessments. Nevertheless, recent studies show that it is possible to attain reliable and valid self-assessments of well-being in children of 8 years of age (Monserrat et al., 2021). The longitudinal research can enable many insights into changes in the different domains of children's well-being and its determinants. In addition, bearing in mind the developmental trend of lowering well-being in middle childhood, longitudinal studies are essential to gain better insight into the (un)stability of different domains of children's well-being in middle childhood and into the transition to adolescence.

Children as Active Participants

We need more information directly from children on the ways they understand and conceptualize well-being, as well as on the most important variables that foster their well-being. In order to capture what is essential to children themselves, research needs to incorporate children-centred focus in different stages of research ranging from the measurement tools designs to interpreting children's reports, and using self-reports from children directly, whenever possible.

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Pregled recentnoga znanstvenog napretka u konceptualizaciji i mjerenju dobrobiti djece

Sažetak

U posljednjemu desetljeću došlo je do znatnoga porasta istraživanja dobrobiti djece, čime je postignut velik napredak u razumijevanju korelata, prediktora i ishoda dobrobiti djece. Da bi se dobio bolji uvid u trenutno stanje istraživanja područja dobrobiti djece, cilj je ovoga rada pružiti cjelovit pregled recentnoga znanstvenog napretka u tome području. Prvo, u radu se razrađuju glavne teorijske konceptualizacije dječje dobrobiti, uključujući hedonističke i eudemonijske pristupe. Drugo, u radu se istražuju izazovi procjenjivanja dobrobiti djece, s fokusom na različitim pristupima mjerenju, kao i razvojni aspekti mjerenja dobrobiti djece. Na kraju, u radu se predstavljaju dosadašnji znanstveni nalazi o obrascima povezanosti dobrobiti djece i osnovnih demografskih varijabli, kao i zaključci i implikacije za buduća istraživanja.

Cljučne riječi: dobrobit djece, pregledni rad, konceptualizacija i mjerenje dobrobiti djece

Primljeno: 27. 5. 2021.