

Does the CWI Measure Representative Domains of Child Well-Being?*

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Indices of child well-being are needed because it is too easy for us to focus on narrow aspects of well-being and lose sight of the whole child. Ideally, summary indices like the CWI give us the means to evaluate each need, strength, advance, and inequality that we observe in particular domains in the larger context of the whole child. And they compel us to evaluate how our children are doing overall rather than narrowly defining success as higher math scores or lower obesity rates. It is too easy, in fact, to purchase success in one domain with decline in another as we direct limited temporal and financial resources towards the concern du jour.

To describe the condition of children as a whole, a summary index must reflect all major domains of well-being with indicators that adequately reflect each domain. When significant components are left out or poorly operationalized, the index is incomplete or inaccurate, and trends and group comparisons based on it will often be misleading. This can lead to poor decisions and poor policy, so the stakes are not small.

It is useful to see child well-being through the lens of history. The CWI was constructed with this in mind. While one may quibble with its content here and there, I am comfortable that it represents about the best one can do with the class of data elements that have been regularly collected since the mid-1970s. In planning for the future, however, I think we need to be looking at developing a limited set of complementary indices that take full advantage of the richer set of contemporary data sources available to us. I also suggest that future index work be based on frameworks that have grown directly out of child and youth development research rather than the Quality of Life Tradition.

The 10-year CWI (CWI-10)

The 30 year time frame of the current CWI has provided a valuable historical perspective for understanding how children's well-being has fluctuated over time. That message has now been delivered, though, and does not much change from year to year. The extended time frame may now be more of a burden than a benefit because of the substantial limitations it puts on available indicators for the index.

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I suggest that FCD and Dr. Land consider moving to a 10-year CWI as their primary index. The 10-year time frame is more than adequate for informing most policy discussions. Its components could be revised every year so that it is continuously improved while still providing valuable historical context. If continuous updating causes too much instability, one could compromise and update every five years. This approach would continuously strengthen the index as an index, and would, over time, stimulate better policy discussions by taking advantage of the increasingly rich component measures of the index.

The State-of-the-Art Child Well-Being Index (SACWI)

With the continuous expansion of child well-being data that has taken place in the last decade, and with further improvements anticipated for the future, any index based on the data available even ten years ago will not be able to deliver as complete a picture of well-being as one that takes full advantage of the best data currently available. While a state-of-the-art child well-being index (hereafter SACWI) would not allow for trend analyses, it would be the best available tool for exploring inequalities across groups (a critical feature of all social indicators) while providing a richer array of index components to examine.

For example, recent index development work by Moore and colleagues using the 2003 National Survey of Children's Health is able to include multiple indicators across all domains of individual functioning and key contexts of development that more adequately reflect the domains (Moore, Lippman, Theokas, O'Hare, and Bloch, forthcoming). Children's involvement in health-promoting behaviors, positive social skills, activity engagement, and school-related experiences that have been shown to be related to current and future well-being are all included. In addition, parental involvement and monitoring, and perceived levels of neighborhood safety and supports are directly measured. Most of these measures were simply not available in regularly-fielded national surveys 30 years ago.

A practical concern of using both the 10-year CWI and the SACWI is the potential for some public confusion if each uses somewhat different indicators to represent key domains. I think confusion could be minimized if there is a clear division of labor with the CWI used only for trend analyses, and the SACWI for cross-group comparisons.

The Ideal Child Well-Being Index (ICWI)

I would also recommend the development of a third, complementary index, an ideal child well-being index (ICWI). The ICWI would specify an ideal set of constructs, some already available, others in need of development and collection. The index would be used primarily to guide future data development, the fruits of which would, we hope, ultimately feed into the SACWI and the CWI. At Child Trends, Kristin Moore and colleagues have also been doing a lot of work on summary indices of well-being over the last few years, and are currently taking a first cut and specifying an ideal index. This is a starting point for what we hope will be a more substantial and rigorous effort down the road (Moore, Lippman, Vandivere, McPhee, and Bloch, 2005).

Should Outcomes and Social Context Indicators both be included in Indices of Child Well-Being?

It is common practice to include measures of the family and community environment alongside direct measures of child and youth outcomes when constructing summary indices of child well-being. The CWI does it, as does the KIDS COUNT index. When we mix outcomes and social contextual influences in a single index, what exactly have we summarized? Does it not make more sense, at least intuitively, to produce separate indices, one summarizing child well-being directly, another summarizing the overall quality of the environments in which they develop? Might the latter be even more useful for policy purposes, as it would highlight the environmental characteristics that are in fact the “social levers” that policymakers focus on to improve child and youth well-being? When available measures of well-being are relatively scarce, combining outcome and context measures makes sense. As our stock of available measures grows richer, however, separate indices may be preferable.

A New Guiding Framework

When the list of indicators available to construct an index is so limited, as they are for the 30-year CWI, the consequences of using one guiding theoretical framework over another is also limited. A knowledgeable researcher in the area of child and youth well-being could, in fact, create a serviceable framework inductively by sorting those available measures into reasonable-looking categories. But as we move into an era with richer data resources to choose from, and as we move toward guiding future data collection to support ever richer indices, the framework we choose to guide these efforts takes on greater importance.

The Quality of Life (QOL) framework that underlies the construction of the CWI was, I think, more than adequate to the task of organizing the limited set of indicators available since the mid-1970s and 1980s into a defensible index of well-being. But as a guide to future work on indices of child well-being, it makes sense to use frameworks built up from and fully reflecting the cumulative knowledge of the traditions dominating child and youth well-being research. From this perspective, the Quality of Life (QOL) framework may not be the best choice. It is a very general model used to capture elements of well-being across the entire age span. It is not explicitly developmental, that is, not systematically sensitive to the particular challenges and milestones of any particular stage of life.

There are a number of frameworks that have grown directly out of the research traditions dominating child and youth well-being research. They are explicitly developmental, identifying common milestones to be achieved in each developmental period as well as developmental problems to be avoided or overcome. There is also a strong focus on the social context in which children and youth grow up including characteristics of the family, peer, school, and community environments that particularly abet or retard development at each stage. Some models are general, such as Bronfenbrenner’s classic work, while others are focused on particular stages of development including early childhood (Zaslow, Calkins, and Halle 2000), adolescence and youth (Hawkins, Pollard, Catalano, and Baglioni 2002), and the transition from youth into adulthood (Settersten, Furstenberg, and Rumbaut 2005).

Ideally one might want a single integrated, developmental model covering infancy through early adulthood, drawing on all these existing models, to inform the sorts of index work recommended above. As a practical matter I do not think the field is ready to specify such a seamless model. For now, it may be most productive to use the current set of stage-specific models available, perhaps doing some work to “harmonize” them by adopting similar category names when that can be done.

Conclusion

The full potential of a CWI to guide our thinking and our policies cannot be tapped so long as its content remains frozen in the 1970s. It must continue to evolve, taking advantage of the expanding set of indicators offered by more contemporary national data resources. And for the longer term, it and similar efforts should start to drive some new data collection to fill in the missing pieces, so to speak, led by developmental frameworks that have grown out of the rich research traditions within child and family research. I have made a few modest suggestions as to what this might look like. The obvious next question is how to make this all happen.

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