Article

Children's well-being and social relationships, UK: 2018

How children aged 0 to 15 years in the UK are coping in a range of areas that matter to their quality of life, reflecting the circumstances of their lives and their own perspectives.

Contact:
Edward Pyle; Charlotte Hassell
QualityofLife@ons.gsi.gov.uk
+44 (0)1329 447141

Release date:
26 March 2018

Next release:
To be announced

Table of contents

1 . Main points

- The proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who argued more than once a week with their mother fell significantly from 30.5% in 2009 to 2010 to 25.8% in 2015 to 2016.

- The proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who talked to their father more than once a week about things that mattered to them increased significantly from 38.0% in 2009 to 2010 to 45.2% in 2015 to 2016.

- The growth in children talking to their fathers more was driven largely by girls, who reported an increase from 35.7% in 2009 to 2010 to 45.6% in 2015 to 2016, making this aspect of children's relationships with their fathers now very similar for both boys and girls.

- The proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years reporting high or very high happiness with friends fell significantly from 85.8% in 2015 to 80.5% in 2017, with boys being the main driver of this change.

- The proportion of children aged 10 to 15 years who reported using social networking sites for more than three hours on a normal school day increased significantly from 8.6% in 2010 to 2011 to 12.8% in 2015 to 2016, with girls more than twice as likely to spend this length of time using social networking sites

2 . Statistician's comment

"The quality of relationships has a very significant impact on our sense of personal well-being and children are no exception. This is why we look at their relationships with parents and friends. It's encouraging to see that among girls especially, family relationships are improving. Girls are now more likely to talk to their fathers about things that matter to them than previously. Use of social networking is on the increase among children – among girls more than boys. However, children's happiness with their friends has seen a drop. These findings can help to inform initiatives that are being adopted to reduce loneliness across all age groups in society."

Dawn Snape, Assistant Director, Well-being, Inequalities, Sustainability and Environment (WISE) Division, Office for National Statistics

3 . Things you need to know about this release

This article presents a picture of how children aged 10 to 15 years in the UK are coping in a range of areas that matter to their quality of life. The indicator set covers children aged 0 to 15 years.

Children's quality of life is monitored using a set of 31 headline indicators designed to shed light both on their current well-being and on their future prospects. The measures include objective data (for example, participated in sport in the last week) and subjective data (such as happiness with appearance). The aim is to provide a holistic view of life in the UK for children reflecting both the circumstances of their lives and their own perspectives. This article focuses on family and social relationships but the full set of 31 measures, which includes the latest data for all the indicators where available, can be found in the dataset.

The analysis uses the latest data available as of March 2018. However, the data underpinning the indicators are from a range of different sources with different time periods and geographical coverage. Further information on the source of each indicator can be found in the indicator set.

Assessments of change

To provide an overview of if and how quality of life is improving for children in the UK, we assess whether each indicator has improved, deteriorated or remained unchanged. Within the reference tables, comparisons are made with the previously published data for each indicator. Where possible, the article also includes trends over a longer period to provide further context.

Our next publications and your feedback

We are in the process of reviewing our children's well-being indicators and how we publish these data.

You can help inform our work by sharing your opinions in this short survey: ONS Children's Well-being outputs: Your feedback.

Your feedback will be very valuable in making our results useful and accessible. If you have any questions, please contact us via email at QualityOfLife@ons.gsi.gov.uk.

Thank you for taking part!

4 . The importance of relationships to children's well-being

Children's well-being is an important part of the nation's well-being. Not only does childhood set the foundation for a well-functioning and healthy adulthood, but children ought to be able to experience life and flourish as individuals.

The importance of social connections to well-being throughout our lives is something that is gaining increasing policy attention. The Prime Minister recently announced the development of a strategy to alleviate loneliness in response to the Jo Cox Commission, and requested Office for National Statistics (ONS) to develop measures of loneliness for use with people of all ages. As this is such an important issue, children's family and social relationships are the focus of this article as part of the latest update of the children's well-being indicators.

Most people experience loneliness at some point during their lifetime. For children, one of the first reasons for loneliness is an absence of peer friendship, with an increasing focus on quality of friendships rather than quantity as children move into late childhood and adolescence (Qualter and others, 2015).

In March 2017, the government laid an amendment to the Children and Social Work Act 2017 by making Relationships Education statutory in all schools. The focus will be on different types of relationships, how to recognise, understand and build healthy relationships, how relationships may affect health and well-being, including mental health, as well as healthy relationships and safety online. In subsequent sections, this article will cover a range of issues relating to children's social, family and community relationships using the data collected and analysed as part of the children's well-being indicators.

5 . Family relationships

In The Good Childhood Report 2013 (PDF, 1.05MB), The Children's Society found that a measure of family harmony was substantially more indicative of children's well-being than family structure. Additionally, they also found that the quality of family relationships was one of the three most significant aspects of life that contributes to children's overall sense of well-being.
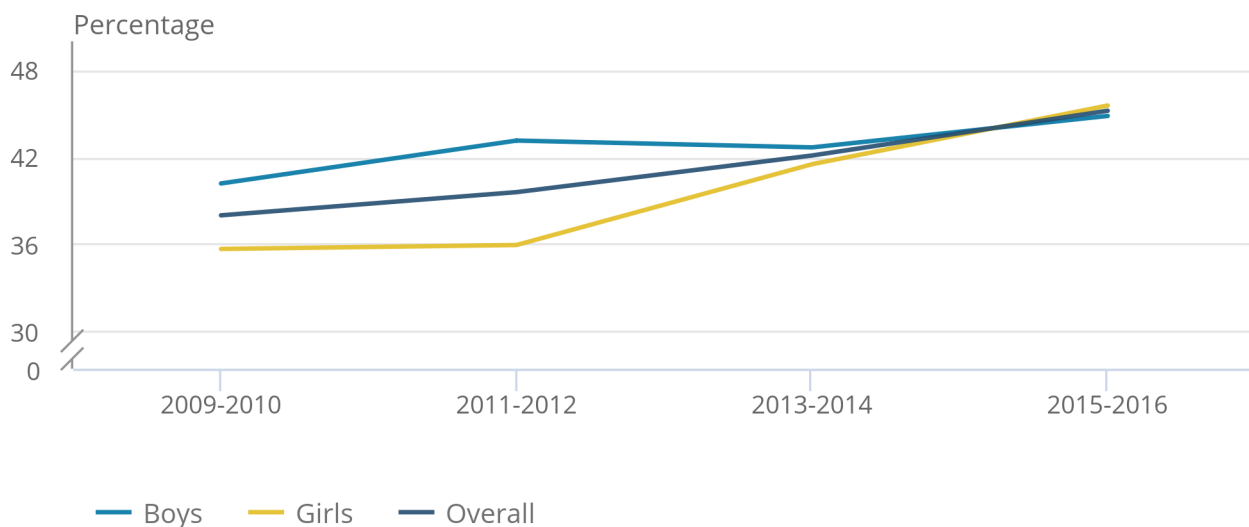
Talking to parents

The percentage of children in the UK who reported talking to their father more than once a week about things that matter to them increased significantly between 2009 to 2010 and 2015 to 2016, increasing from 38.0% to 45.2%. This improvement was largely driven by girls, with 45.6% reporting regularly talking to their father in 2015 to 2016, compared with 35.7% in 2009 to 2010, making this aspect of children's relationships with their fathers now very similar for both boys and girls.

Figure 1: Percentage of children who reported talking to their father more than once a week about things that matter, 2009 to 2010 to 2015 to 2016

UK

Figure 1: Percentage of children who reported talking to their father more than once a week about things that matter, 2009 to 2010 to 2015 to 2016

UK

Source: Understanding Society, The UK Household Longitudinal Survey

Notes:

1. Chart axis does not start at zero.

A greater percentage of children reported talking to their mother more than once a week about things that matter to them; however, this improvement was not significant. Despite this, children were significantly more likely to report talking to their mother than to their father. In 2015 to 2016, 64.9% of children reported regularly talking to their mother about things that matter, while only 45.2% of children reported regular conversations with their father in the same time period.

It is important to note that these analyses do not take family composition or living arrangements into account and specifically how these might relate to opportunities for interaction between parents and children.

Arguing with parents

Between 2009 to 2010 and 2015 to 2016, the percentage of children aged 10 to 15 years who argued with their mother more than once a week fell significantly, from 30.5% to 25.8%. Again, girls were the main driver, as the percentage of girls who reported regularly arguing with their mother in this time period also decreased significantly, falling from 31.0% to 25.2%. This marks the first time that boys have been more likely to report arguing with their mother than girls. Figure 2 shows the percentage of children who reported regularly arguing with their mother.

Figure 2: Percentage of children who argued with their mother more than once a week, 2009 to 2010 to 2015 to 2016

UK

Figure 2: Percentage of children who argued with their mother more than once a week, 2009 to 2010 to 2015 to 2016

UK
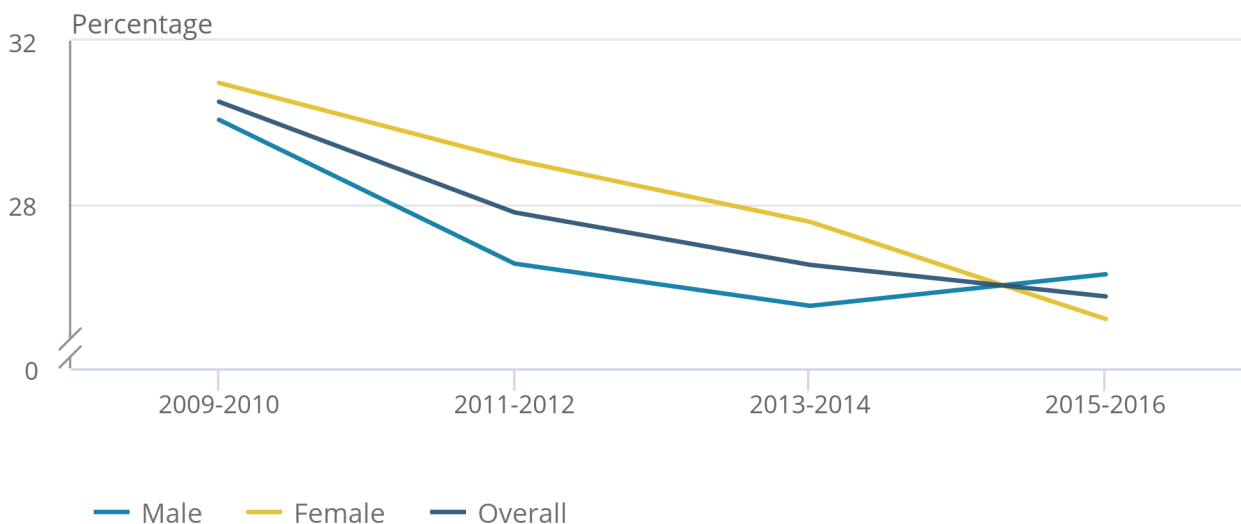
Source: Understanding Society, The UK Household Longitudinal Survey

Notes:

1. Chart axis does not start at zero.

Despite this decrease, children remained significantly more likely to report frequent arguments with their mother than with their father. In 2015 to 2016, 25.8% of children reported arguing with their mother more than once a week, while 19.2% of children reported arguing with their father more than once a week in the same time period.

Again, it is important to note that family composition or living arrangements have not been taken into account for the purposes of these analyses. There is potential for further analyses to understand how this may impact interactions between parents and children.

6 . Relationships with friends, bullying and social media use

Relationships with friends are also important to a child's well-being. The 2013 NatCen report Predicting Well-being found that children with good social relationships with both family and friends were more likely to have higher well-being.

Relationships have also been examined in the wider context. In the most recent The Good Childhood Report 2017 , The Children's Society found that there was some evidence that social media may have a beneficial association for satisfaction with friendships. However, there was also the recognition of the negative consequences of heavy social media use such as fear of missing out and potential for cyberbullying. A recent inquiry on cyberbullying conducted by The Children's Society highlighted the negative impact that online bullying can have on children and young people's mental health, with a call for social media companies to do more to tackle the issues.
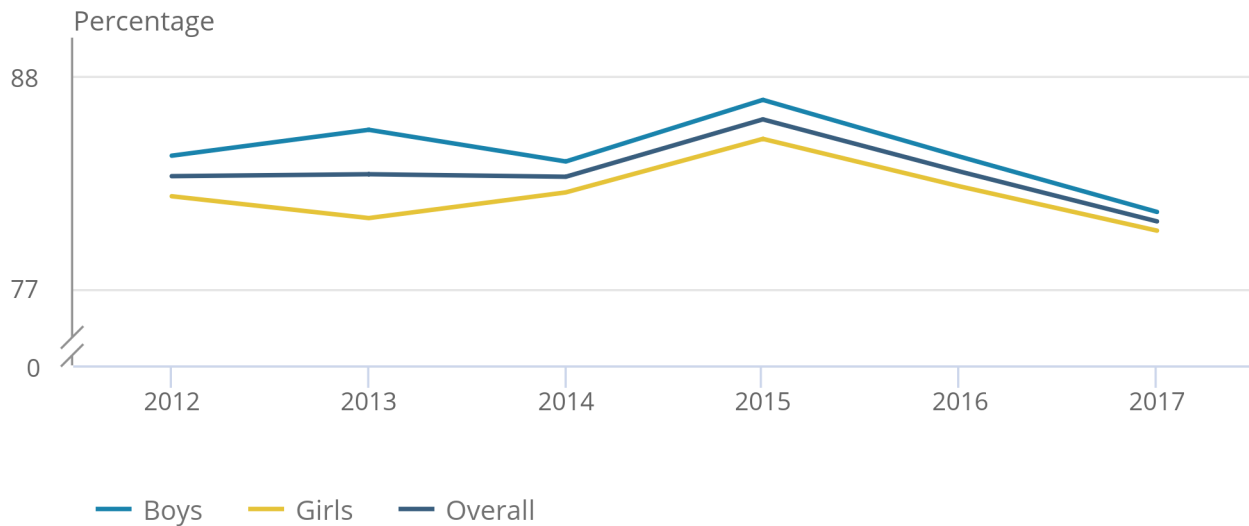
Happiness with friends

Between 2015 and 2017, the percentage of children aged 10 to 15 years who reported high or very high happiness with their friends fell significantly, from 85.8% to 80.5%. The drop was slightly larger for boys than girls, with the percentage of boys who reported high or very high happiness with their friends falling significantly from 86.8% to 81.0%. The percentage of girls reporting high or very high happiness with their friends also fell, from 84.8% to 80.0%. Figure 3 shows the percentages of children reporting high or very high happiness in Great Britain since 2012.

Figure 3: Percentage of children who reported high or very high happiness with their friends, 2012 to 2017

Great Britain

Figure 3: Percentage of children who reported high or very high happiness with their friends, 2012 to 2017

Great Britain

Source: The Children's Society Household Panel Survey

Notes:

1. Chart axis does not start at zero.

Despite the significant changes between 2015 and 2017, it is important to be aware that the data on happiness with friends has been volatile over the five-year period and so it will be interesting to see if this pattern continues in the future or whether the data levels out again. However, evidence from other sources does suggest that children may be struggling more with social relationships. For example, ChildLine has reported an increasing number of calls from children and young people about loneliness and now have a call category specifically devoted to this to monitor the trend more closely going forward.

Social network use

The percentage of children in the UK who spend more than three hours using social networking sites such as Myspace, Facebook and Bebo has increased significantly between 2010 to 2011 and 2015 to 2016. In 2010 to 2011, 8.6% of children reported spending more than three hours on social networks on a normal school day, rising to 12.8% of children in 2015 to 2016. Girls were the main driver of this increase, with 17.4% reporting heavy social media use in 2015 to 2016. This was compared with 12.1% of girls in 2010 to 2011; an increase of 5.3%.

In all years, girls were significantly more likely than boys to report spending more than three hours on social networking websites. In recent years this gap has widened, despite increasing percentages of both boys and girls reporting heavy social media use since 2011 to 2012. Table 1 displays these increases, alongside the widening gap between the groups.

Table 1: Percentage of children who spent more than three hours using social networking websites on a normal school day by sex, 2009 to 2010 to 2015 to 2016

UK			Percentage
	Boys	**Girls**	**Difference between boys and girls**
2009 to 2010	4.1	8.1	4.0
2010 to 2011	5.1	12.1	7.0
2011 to 2012	4.9	8.7	3.8
2012 to 2013	5.1	10.9	5.8
2013 to 2014	6.0	12.6	6.6
2014 to 2015	6.5	13.3	6.8
2015 to 2016	8.3	17.4	9.1

Source: Understanding Society, The UK Household Longitudinal Survey

The shift towards greater social media use could be caused by a range of factors. In particular, the period between 2009 and 2016 has been marked by rapid technological development. Smart phones and tablet devices have become more common, increasing the accessibility of social networking as time has passed. These developments have also affected the ways in which social media is consumed. It is now common to access social media frequently, for a few minutes at a time, using mobile technology. It may be difficult for children to accurately estimate the time spent using social media in this way.

There are ongoing debates about the extent to which social media use is problematic for young people and in 2015 we produced an article on children's social media use and mental health to help inform this debate. Recently, the British Psychological Society (among others) has called for improved evidence in this area.

In 2017, Emily Frith, based at the Education Policy Institute, reviewed the current evidence and summarised that "social media has many potential positive influences on young people's lives, such as increasing social connections, helping with homework and enabling teenagers to develop their identities and share creative projects… beneficial impact on wellbeing, and young people recognise the value of opportunities to connect online… [Additionally] Teenagers with mental health problems or concerns are also able to seek support."

However, there is also research identifying risks associated with social media, including "concerns about excessive time spent online; sharing too much information; being cyber-bullied; the influence of social media on body image; and sourcing of harmful content or advice", including the recent Safety net: The cyberbullying inquiry from The Children's Society, who are calling for social media companies to take faster and firmer action.

Bullying

Bullying others and being bullied are associated with lower wellbeing and are important factors of children's social relationships. However, between 2013 to 2014 and 2015 to 2016, there were no changes in the number of children who reported being bullied at school, physically, in other ways or both at least four times in the previous six months. In 2013 to 2014, the proportion of girls and boys who reported being bullied was the same (11.9%). In 2015 to 2016, the percentage of boys who reported being bullied increased to 12.5%, while the percentage of girls who reported being bullied fell to 11.3%. Neither change was significant.

7 . Wider relationships in the neighbourhood

A child's perception of where they live is important as it affects participation in local activities as well as their ability and confidence to go outside to play and make friends with other local children. The Sure Start children's centres statutory guidance (PDF, 308.4KB) from the Department for Education highlights that building social capital and cohesion are ways of building communities' capacity to improve young children's well-being, as suggested in section 1 of the Childcare Act 2016.

Neighbourhood

Between 2013 to 2014 and 2015 to 2016, the percentage of girls who liked the neighbourhood where they lived increased significantly, from 88.3% to 92.6%. The overall percentage of children who reported liking the neighbourhood where they lived has increased each year, though these improvements were not significant (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Percentage of children who liked living in their neighbourhood, 2011 to 2012 to 2015 to 2016

UK

Figure 4: Percentage of children who liked living in their neighbourhood, 2011 to 2012 to 2015 to 2016

UK
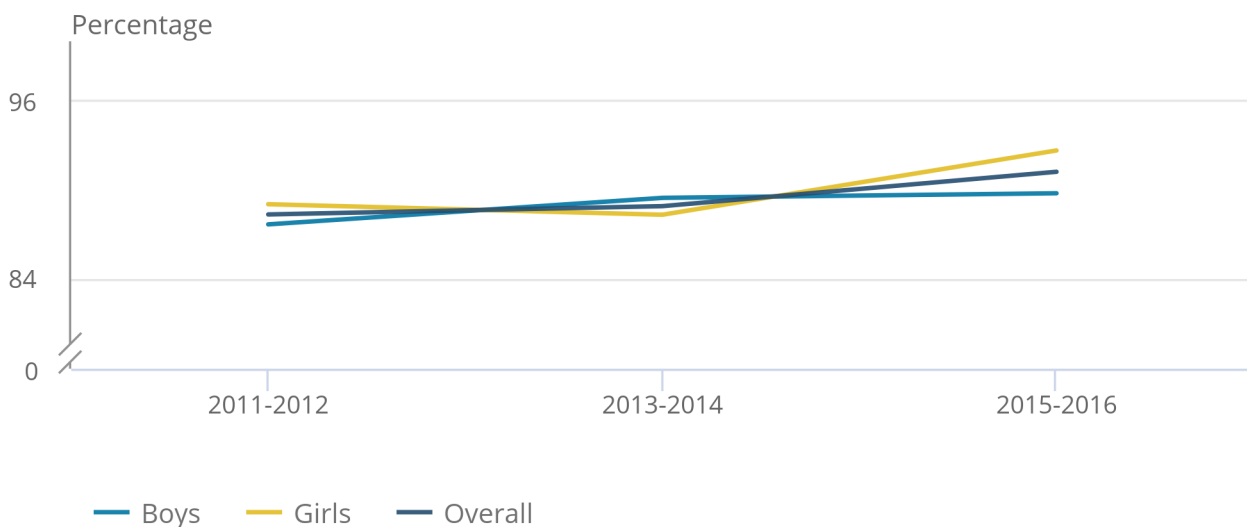
Source: Understanding Society, The UK Household Longitudinal Survey

Notes:

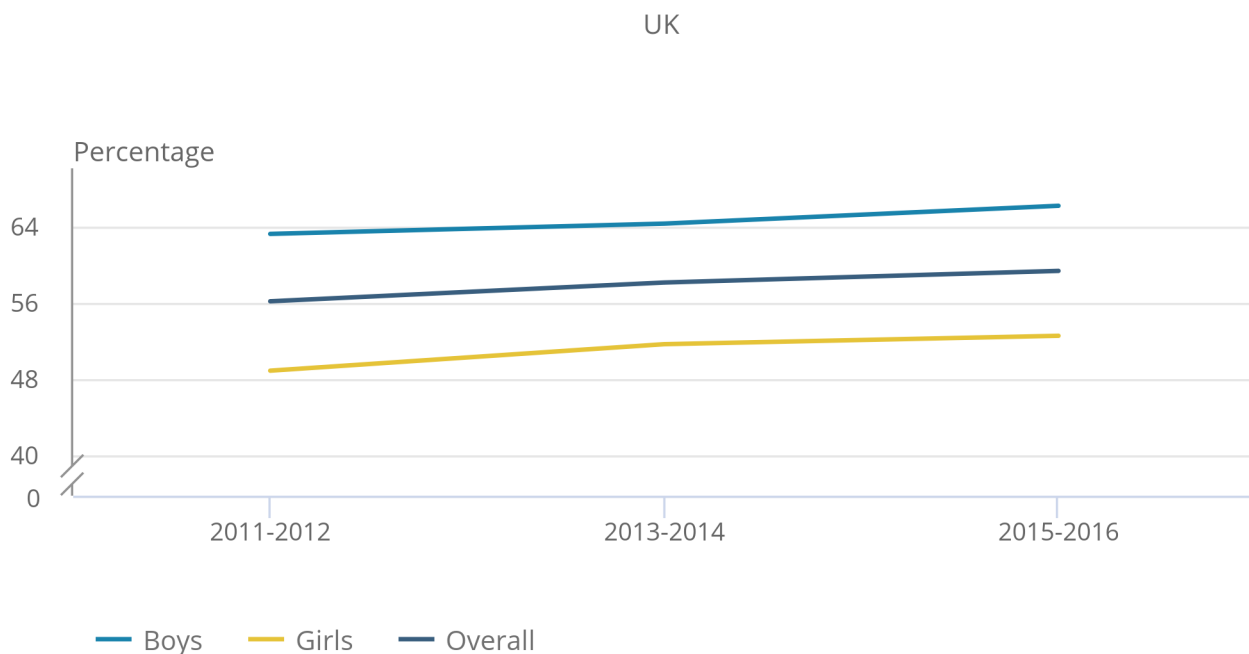1. Chart axis does not start at zero.

Safe after dark

In all years between 2011 to 2012 and 2015 to 2016, girls were significantly less likely than boys to report feeling safe while walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark. For example, in 2015 to 2016, 52.4% of girls reported feeling very safe or fairly safe after dark, compared with 66.1% of boys. Results from the Crime Survey for England and Wales show that this is a trend that starts early and continues into later life; throughout their lives women are less likely to feel safe after dark than men.

The percentage of children who reported feeling very safe or fairly safe has increased each year, however, this increase has not been significant. Figure 5 shows the percentage of children who reported feeling safe each year.

Figure 5: Percentage of children who reported feeling very safe or fairly safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark, 2011 to 2012 to 2015 to 2016

UK

Figure 5: Percentage of children who reported feeling very safe or fairly safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark, 2011 to 2012 to 2015 to 2016

UK

Source: Understanding Society, The UK Household Longitudinal Survey

Notes:

1. Chart axis does not start at zero.

8 . Quality and methodology

The aim of the children's well-being indicator set is to help us better understand children's quality of life and well-being, and to monitor it over time. This report includes assessments showing the direction of change for each of the measures, whether they have improved, shown no overall change, or deteriorated.

Broadly speaking, indicators have only been assessed as having improved or deteriorated if the difference between the comparison periods is statistically significant using 95% confidence intervals. If a difference is said to be statistically significant, it is unlikely that it could have occurred by chance.

Confidence intervals give a measure of the statistical precision of an estimate and show the range of uncertainty around the estimate. As a general rule, if the confidence intervals around the estimate overlap with the interval around another, there is no statistically significant difference between the estimates.

For more information on how we assess change, please contact us via QualityofLife@ons.gsi.gov.uk. Further links to the data used in each measure can be found in the data tables.