# WORLD'S OF INFLUENCE: UNDERSTANDING WHAT SHAPES CHILD WELL-BEING IN RICH COUNTRIES

## UNICEF UK: REPORT CARD 16 BRIEFING

UNICEF Innocenti's Report Card '*Worlds of Influence: Understanding what shapes child well-being in rich countries*' offers a comprehensive approach to measuring and understanding child well-being in High-Income Countries (HICs). The report introduces a **multi-level framework of child-wellbeing that considers the spheres of influence that impact upon outcomes for children**. These spheres include activities and relationships (the world of the child), the networks and resources available to children (the world around the child) and the policies and contexts which impact upon their lives (the world at large). This framing – and its use in ranking HICs – provides a **mechanism to understand the interrelation of different factors that influence child-wellbeing today**.
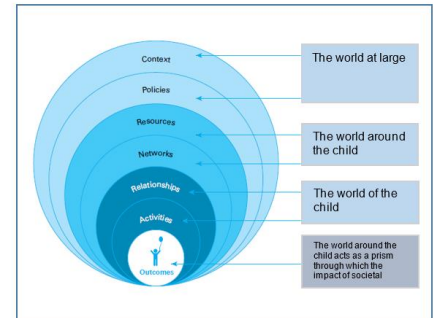
The findings of the Report Card highlight the **critical importance of a cross-departmental approach to implementing social policy that realises children's rights**. Policies must complement each other in order to ensure improvements in children's well-being are felt, and experienced, across all stages of their lives.

KEY FINDINGS:

- The UK ranks **27th out of 41 HICs in terms of overall child well-being outcomes** and for general policies and contexts which impact on children's lives.
- The UK is listed in the **top group for economic, societal and environmental contexts** ranking 12th, 9th and 10th respectively. Although the UK performs well in this group, the contexts have not always translated across to positive outcomes.
- Overall **the UK would benefit from strengthening existing efforts to improve child well-being**, such as continuing to improve mental health outcomes in schools, while also increasing the efforts to address the gaps in social policy.
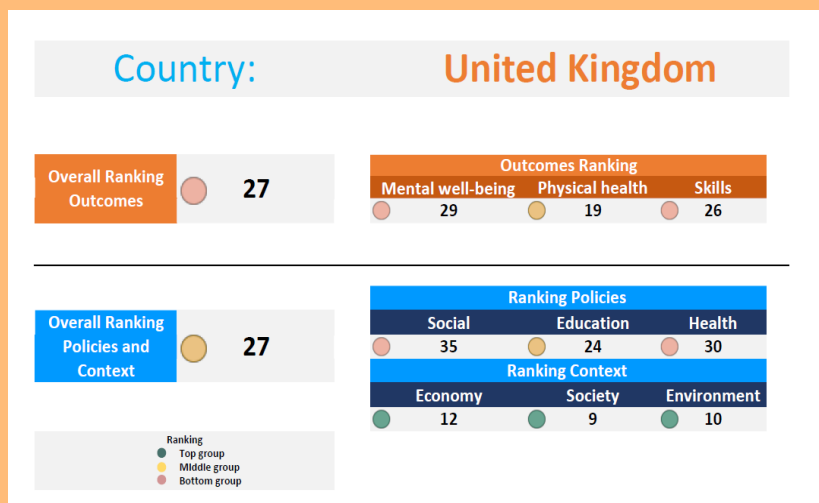
This year, the Report Card must also be viewed within the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, with the impact of impact of COVID-19 posing significant risks for children and their well-being. At this moment of personal and national reckoning, families across the country are reassessing what matters most to them and their children. It is this moment of reflection that provides a **critical opportunity for the UK Government to take action**. In considering the findings of both the Report Card, it is vital that cross-departmental working is prioritised to ensure social policy complements all areas of children's lives. **The ongoing response and recovery action undertaken by the UK Government must prioritise children's rights and wellbeing to deliver a better future for every child.**

KEY POLICY AREAS FOR ACTION

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

Report Card 16 illustrates that children's mental health and well-being is informed by a variety of factors in their lives, including their networks and activities. **Commitments made by the English, Scottish and Welsh Governments to improve mental health and wellbeing for children are thus very welcome**. Increased funding and attention has been prioritised for mental health interventions over recent years and **Unicef UK welcomes the action taken by the Government in following the recommendations outlined in the Dilnot Review and believes this progress should continue**.

It is widely accepted that the impacts of COVID-19 have also had profound consequences for children's mental health and well-being. This is re-enforced by the results of multiple surveys undertaken by Unicef UK and partners informed by teachers, parents and pupils themselves.[1] As schools begin to return in the Autumn, and in light of the UK ranking 29th on mental health in the Report Card, **the Government's focus on mental health should continue, and educators must be given the support and space to focus on pupil wellbeing**. Placing mental health and well-being at the heart of recovery will be key to ensuring child rights are prioritised and the Government must ensure that policies are supported by the necessary funding and training to ensure their full realisation.

EDUCATION AND SKILLS

Many non-academic factors affect children's educational attainment, making the multi-sectoral approach as outlined by Report Card 16 critical to implement. For example, previous Report Cards have illustrated that **bullying has an impact on children's educational performance**. Report Card 16 also sets out that **children who feel more of a sense of belonging in schools do better academically**. As schools re-open following lockdown, educators should be provided with guidance and feel empowered to focus on children's well-being in order to best enable learning to facilitate improvements in children's educational outcomes.

CHILD PARTICIPATION

The Report Card also suggests that **children in HICs feel left out of the decision-making processes which affect their lives**. The right to express their views and be involved in decision-making is enshrined in Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. **Such opportunities are vital for children's well-being in the present and for their development towards adulthood**. While Wales comes out as a top country for children feeling included in school decision-making, this is still only at 57%.

THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Report Card 16 highlights that **systems should be "future-proofed"** with Governments encouraged to **build strong foundations to ensure system resilience to shocks and to sustain improvements for child well-being**. Whilst critical and decisive action was necessary to protect the health of the nation in response to COVID-19, the impacts of these decisions, including school closures and lockdown, had a profound impact on children's ability to realise their right to education.

In the UK, **future-proofing must include increased efforts to close the digital divide** recognising that access to devices and connectivity to the internet is now – and will continue to be – a key part of delivering children's rights and improving their well-being. The significant efforts made by the Department for Education to get all children learning online during the outset of the pandemic are positive. As of 30 June, **more than 200,000 devices and more than 47,000 wireless routers had been delivered or dispatched to schools, trusts and**

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[1] Unicef UK conducted a poll of more than 1500 individual school staff across the UK. Unicef UK worked with First News and Opinion Matters to conduct a poll of 755 children aged 6-16 (inclusive). Unicef UK also conducted a Censuswide poll of more than 750 parents of school aged children based on how the response to the COVID-19 has affected their children.

local authorities, which is a good first step.[2] However, we know that some children across the UK were not reached through this intervention. As highlighted in the Report Card, in order to improve children's well-being and reimagine a better future for children, the spheres of influence around the child must be considered. This approach should be used when addressing the digital divide to ensure a comprehensive, equity-based approach to online learning. As such, the Department for Education should undertake **a nation-wide mapping exercise to identify how many children do not have adequate access to the internet, and what the barriers to access are, in order to inform long-term policymaking to close the digital divide and improve access for all children.**

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. The **UK Government should produce a cross-departmental Recovery Plan** for the COVID-19 crisis. This should prioritise children's rights and reimagine a better future for every child.
2. **Social policies, including policies and measures taken in response to the Coronavirus pandemic must take a child rights-based approach**. Emphasis should be placed on the need to realise the best interests of the child principle (Article 3 of the UNCRC) and comprehensive Child Rights Impact Assessments should be undertaken in all policy-making.
3. The **Government should continue to place mental health and emotional well-being at the heart of recovery**. This should be a holistic approach which is informed by children, teachers, parents and organisations working with children.
4. As schools re-open, **teachers must be given the support and empowerment to prioritise mental health and well-being** with their pupils.
5. Recognising the impact of COVID-19 on education and learning, **action to support children to catch-up must be comprehensive and inclusive of all learners**, including those without access to digital technology.

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/896820/Devices_and_4G_wireless_routers_progress_data_010720.pdf