

Children and the Good Life

Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research Series

Volume 4

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Editors

Children and the Good Life

New Challenges for Research on Children

 Springer

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Introduction

Sabine Andresen, Isabell Diehm, Uwe Sander, and Holger Ziegler

In 1938, Virginia Woolf published her critical essay *Three Guineas*, in which she moved on to perform a much broader analysis of the political and cultural implications of women's oppression through inadequate education, inequality and exclusion. She pointed to the institutional and financial handicaps facing girls and women and their poverty of resources. And she was especially interested in the diversity of higher education and the achievements of formal school education. To enter the professions, she argued, women had to follow different principles. One of them is the principle of poverty as modest financial independence; another, the principle of chastity as a refusal to sell one's brain for the sake of money. From her feminist point of view, Woolf was highlighting the impact of rights, capabilities and responsibility through education. But she was also formulating the question of how education and university education need to be reformed if they are to serve as an education against war (very comprehensible in 1938). For Woolf, it was important for educational institutions to focus on the ability to empathize with others as a key competence to counter patriarchal structures.

As a feminist, Virginia Woolf was consistently trying to determine the necessary conditions for living an autonomous life. She attributed great importance to institutions such as the family and school and the latitudes that become available through access to education. Even for Woolf, it was already autonomy that was the indispensable factor for a good life, and the current discussion on the good life in general and the good life for children in particular is still concerned with the conditions and abilities that permit autonomy without ignoring dependence. As a consequence, questions on what the "good" may be and what defines a "good life" always address the image of humanity and the conditions for a fulfilling human life—what Martha Nussbaum calls "human flourishing". In the first chapter of this book, Tom Cockburn analyses this relation between autonomy and dependence, between feminist ethics and the well-being of children, that emerged in early feminist theory.

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Questions about children and the good life as posed in this book require not only normatively based responses, ethical reflections and sound theories but also differentiated empirical findings. When planning the present volume, we were initially guided by this tension between autonomy and dependence as a challenge to childhood studies, particularly in the field of educational science. This links up with further questions such as this: how can we simultaneously achieve both respectful caregiving *and* the freedom to choose between different options and lead a self-determined life? Or how can we link together social policies, which focus particularly on the vulnerability of children, with child-appropriate policies directed towards participation and agency? Although these are questions that may be significant for all life phases, the tensions they reflect are particularly characteristic for the life phase of childhood.

A further aspect needs to be introduced here: When we look at the major changes to the welfare state to be observed in many countries, at the problems of redistribution that have re-emerged in the international financial crisis and the fundamental changes to the environment through, for example, climate change, we can see that new questions about responsibility are being generated. The “appeal” for responsibility is an international issue on the political agenda. From the perspective of child and family policies, there is a growing need to take responsibility for all members of society, and not just for those who are actually dependent on special support or whose lives are defined by specific dependencies such as those in need of care, children, school dropouts, the unemployed, the chronically sick and the underqualified. Analyses of governmentality based on Foucault provide a critical approach with which to systematically examine the processes of exclusively privatizing responsibility. One of the things these reveal is the way in which the neoliberal discourse is always “calling” for personal responsibility.

One theory that we are working with at the *Bielefeld Centre for Education and Capability Research* and the *Research School “Education and Capability”* is that formulated by the economist Amartya Sen and the social philosopher Martha Nussbaum. This Capability Approach focuses on the latitudes of possibility and freedom and the accompanying chances that people have to realize their ability to lead a “good life”. Hence, the concern is to examine which abilities, conditions and freedoms people require in order to be able to bring about this good life. This theory of justice approach, which is receiving increasing international attention, distinguishes between forms of being, known as functionings, and chances of their realization, known as capabilities. Whereas functionings focus on whether people are or do something specific, capabilities focus on the objective set of possibilities of bringing about various combinations of specific qualities of functionings. *Capabilities* are more than the possession of certain goods or the knowledge of specific cultural techniques and so forth; they are expressions of actual possibilities of being that individuals may choose “for good reasons”. The Capability Approach systematically links together freedom—in the sense of social, political and cultural framing conditions—with individual abilities—in the sense of an unfolding of potentials, competencies and education. The theoretical potential of this approach lies in the development of responsibility as an issue addressing the conditions for a

good life and addressing the necessary processes of negotiation to allow responsible participation for all.

This also permits what could be a new order of the social-philosophically based relation between rights and duties and the senses of responsibility for childrearing. The definition of rights and duties can and must be regulated formally through, for example, social legislation or children's rights. However, it is particularly empirical studies that show the great breadth of differences in ideas on rights and duties in daily life and the need for negotiation processes. Here as well, this addresses fundamental issues such as the following: Who is responsible to what extent for the well-being of children? Or who has the right to define and impose standards, or in what way are which groups committed to which duties? Responsibility as a relation between rights and duties can also be discussed as a question of the moral relations between parents and children or between other adults such as educators and children.

This brief sketch of our opening questions should show that the new challenges facing childhood studies do not just lie in empirical research but in nothing less than the formulation of a theory of childhood. As a theory integrating an idea of the good life, this is embedded in the traditions of social philosophy and ethics just as much as in ideas from theories of education, law and justice. We also orient ourselves towards the demand formulated by Sheila Kamerman, Shelly Phipps and Asher Ben-Arieh (2009): The knowledge generated by childhood studies and research on child indicators should be made available for policy making.

This book is based on papers presented and discussions held at a conference in Bielefeld in Spring 2009. The introductions to the single sections of the book reflect not only the state of research but also our discussions at the conference. The book is divided into four sections. It starts with the analysis of the theoretical challenges imposed by wanting to study children and their good lives. The section entitled *Children and the Good Life: Theoretical Challenges* contains chapters written by *Tanja Betz* (Munich), *Tom Cockburn* (Bradford), *Lourdes Gaitàn Muñoz* (Madrid) and *Sabine Andresen* and *Stefanie Albus* (Bielefeld). It is introduced by *Susann Fegter*, *Martina Richter* and *Claudia Machold* (all from Bielefeld) who concentrate on the new approaches and challenges to childhood studies as well as the importance of national and international social reports.

Tanja Betz discusses in her chapter conceptual and methodical reasons that favour the spread of homogenising notions about modern children and their well-being. She argues that research should reflect more the impact of unequal childhood and construct well-being from the perspective of inequality theory. *Tom Cockburn's* chapter—as mentioned above—reconstructs the phases of the discourse on the feminist ethic of care and forges systematic links to childhood studies. *Lourdes Gaitàn Muñoz* focuses on the significance of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child for childhood welfare and uses her own empirical studies to discuss central issues such as cultural relativism, child labour and different degrees of responsibility. *Sabine Andresen* and *Stefanie Albus* analyse the theoretical possibilities of defining need and discuss the systematic benefits of childhood studies oriented towards need theory.

Part II, *The Capability Approach and Research on Children*, works out the significance of the Capability Approach for childhood studies and the question of the good life for children. The introduction by *Zoe Clark* and *Franziska Eisenhuth* (both from Bielefeld) analyses the potential of New Social Childhood Studies and reveals the promising ties to the capabilities perspective. The three chapters in this section link systematic theoretical concepts with their own empirical studies—an approach that promises to close gaps in research on the Capability Approach. In his chapter, *Mario Biggeri* (Florence), who works with participatory methods in his empirical studies and who has presented extremely informative empirical findings that fill out the rather vague list of the good life presented by Martha Nussbaum, addresses the impact of the Capability Approach on the field of childhood studies. *Holger Ziegler* (Bielefeld), in contrast, presents a critical analysis of the research approach to *subjective well-being* while stressing—like *Biggeri*—the potential of the Capability Approach. *Isabell Diehm* (Bielefeld) and *Veronika Magyar-Haas* (Zurich) critically discuss the one-sided perspective on language education in Germany, particularly in the German kindergarten. Based on an ethnographic study, they take a systematic approach to Nussbaum's list and the significance of literacy for children and point to different fields of language.

Part III examines *Children's Perspectives: Methodological Critique and Empirical Studies*. The introduction from *Melanie Kuhn* and *Christine Hunner-Kreisel* (both from Bielefeld) starts by examining the methodological and theoretical significance of doing research from the perspective of children. They clearly show its limitations and warn against taking a naive view of children. The three chapters from *Gonzalo Jover* and *Bianca Thoilliez* (Madrid), *Cecile Wright* (Nottingham) and *Akile Gürsoy* (Istanbul) then address specific theoretical and methodological approaches and problems. *Gonzalo Jover* and *Bianca Thoilliez* present their empirical study of children in Spain. Based on educational science, the study applies biographical theory to access the children's voice. For both authors, this is also an attempt to generate new education-based knowledge on children. *Cecile Wright* analyses the educational experiences of children in Great Britain against the background of the influence of race on their identity, social relations and agency. Theoretically, her chapter is based on concepts of ethnicity and critical discourse analyses. Particularly illuminating are her ideas on early childhood and the ability of children to reproduce dominant discourses in society. *Akile Gürsoy* looks at the development of childhood studies in Turkey. She draws on the role of the child in Turkish history, placing this in the context of the historical studies of Philippe Aries, and closes by giving examples of empirical research in Turkey and reconstructing childhood-specific topics.

Part IV completes the book with examples of *Structural Conditions and Children in Different National Contexts*. One fundamental research issue is always the relevance and weighting of specific contexts—be they either social or national. We continue to consider that social reports on national conditions, national surveys or empirical studies on special problems are indispensable. Alongside the issue of universal standards and the major significance of international comparisons, knowledge about individual contexts is also extremely important—particularly in relation to

childhood and family policy. We fully endorse Alfred Kahn's insight that support for children should always be measured against one standard alone: that it should be good enough for all children (Kamerman, 2009). *Tim Köhler and Uwe Sander* (both from Bielefeld) use their introduction to examine the problems raised by the dominance of the western viewpoint and discuss criteria for making comparisons. This section contains three chapters reporting on very different countries: *Antje Richter-Kornweitz* (Hannover) on Germany, *Didem Gürses* (Istanbul) on Turkey and *Tadas Leončikas* and *Vida Beresnevičute* (Vilnius) on Lithuania. *Antje Richter-Kornweitz* performs a critical analysis of child poverty in Germany and draws conclusions for social and economic policy. She discusses poverty as a fundamental developmental risk for children in all areas of their development, and she places a particular emphasis on health. In her chapter on the well-being of children in Turkey, *Didem Gürses* reflects on the tensions between constant economic growth in recent years and the large disparities between regions and genders in terms of income distribution, health, education and political representation. She shows how this trend impacts particularly on the well-being of women and children, which groups of children are particularly exposed to poverty in Turkey, and which socio-political strategies are needed. The chapter by *Tadas Leončikas* and *Vida Beresnevičute* asks why various educational projects in Lithuania aiming at Roma integration have not succeeded in ending their exclusion. The authors present an overview of the life situation of the Roma and then analyse their position in the educational system. They point clearly to the mechanisms of exclusion and consider strategies to overcome these mechanisms.

The three final chapters in the book address children's lives in very different countries and life situations. This once again gives us an insight into how important it is to perform systematic research on different contexts and then compare political strategies and the breadth of their impact. Such research confronts the normative and universal theories for defining the good life—which have such innovative potential for childhood studies—with the necessary “irritation” of the breadth and variety of empirical findings. Nonetheless, this variety does not hide the continuous exposure to stress factors facing children and their families. Although the universality of our research questions and the Child Indicators Movement (Ben-Arieh, 2005) are confirmed by children's rights, looking both from and with the perspective of children always means taking account of the individual as well.

We received a great deal of support for our conference, and we would particularly like to thank the Rector's Office at Bielefeld University and, in particular, Martin Egelhaaf, the Prorector for Research.

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Part I

Children and the Good Life: Theoretical Challenges

Susann Fegter, Claudia Machold, and Martina Richter

1 Introduction

Empirical research on the “good life” of children is to be found particularly under the heading “well-being,” where it includes aspects of the discussion on the quality of life. There has been a marked growth in studies on childhood well-being in recent years, and they also represent an expanding field of international research. Nonetheless, they sometimes reveal major differences in how well-being is conceived. For example, studies vary greatly in the indicators they select, the ways in which these are combined, and how they are weighted (see Veenhoven, 2004). Sociological approaches to research on well-being focus more strongly on external living conditions. Nonetheless, these are assessed in a differentiated way that is not just limited to purely material aspects (see, in Germany, e.g., Bertram, 2006; Deutscher Bundestag, 2001, 2005; Hock, Holz, & Wüstendörfer, 2000; Holz, 2006; see, worldwide, e.g., Brandoli and D’Alessio, 1998, Gurses, 2006; UNICEF, 2007; Wilk, 1996). Psychological and public-health approaches, in contrast, place more emphasis on person-related indicators, and use, for example, the childhood self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-esteem as indicators of well-being (e.g., Bandura, 2006; Marks, Sha, & Westall, 2004; Pajares, 2006). Most so-called happiness research is characterized by assessing only subjective experience as an indicator of well-being and using subjective feelings of happiness or satisfaction as a measure to evaluate, for example, welfare-state provisions (e.g., Beher et al., 2007; Hascher, 2004; Hascher & Baillod, 2004; Otto & Ziegler, 2007). This has led to the criticism that such a line of research may well confuse well-being with adaptive preferences (see, on the problem of adaptive preferences, e.g., Comim, Bagolin, & Porsse, 2004). Returning to analyses of childhood well-being, more recent interdisciplinary research on poverty reveals a combination of macrostructural data

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with subjective appraisals. This approach can be used to plot correlations between children's subjective appraisals and external conditions (see UNICEF, 2007).

Both international and German-language studies on well-being are assigning increasing importance to the viewpoints of children. These children's perspectives expand into research on well-being and are thereby leading to a reconsideration of the premises underlying contemporary childhood studies. Since the second half of the 1980s, there has been a paradigm shift in childhood research (see Grunert & Krüger, 2006; James, Jenks, & Prout, 1998; Mayall, 1994; Schweizer, 2007). In what was initially marked opposition to developmental psychology and socialization research, researchers have attempted to establish a new way of looking at children and childhood that will lead to the development of a new sociologically oriented approach addressing childhood as a social phenomenon (see Alanen, 1997; Andresen & Diehm, 2006; Lange, 2008; Qvortrup, Bardy, Sgritta, & Wintersberger, 1994; Zeiher, Büchner, & Zinnecker, 1996). What was previously often a predominantly adultist perspective directed toward developmental goals projected into the future is now being countered increasingly by a perspective focusing more strongly on the "here and now" of the child and everyday childhood life. As a result, an agent- and child-oriented research perspective in which the differences between children and adults become less important (Alanen, 1997; Qvortrup, 1987) is exerting a growing influence on the methodological debates within recent research in this field.

Both aspects mentioned above, the theoretical conceptualizations of well-being as well as the child-oriented research perspective, are currently confronting researchers with fundamental methodological and especially theoretical-normative challenges. One of these challenges is the need to consider normative postulates when defining "well-being" or the "good life." Asher Ben-Arieh (2008) has pointed out four major shifts in the field of child indicators research that deliver a deeper insight into the context of this normative issue and reveal tendencies that can be taken to be characteristic of the social studies of childhood in general. The first shift is "from survival to well-being," meaning that research interests have moved from physical survival and the basic needs of children to indicators focusing on an idea of quality of life. The second shift is summarized by "from negative to positive" and refers to a broadening of the outcomes collected to include not only negative indicators (like risk factors) but also positive ones like satisfaction. The third shift mentioned by Ben-Arieh (2008) is "from well-becoming to well-being," describing the change from a future-oriented to a present-time focus on the current well-being of the child. The fourth and last shift is called "from traditional to new domains" and refers to an extension of the field of research objects to encompass, for example, children's activities or children's friendships in order to gain a stronger child orientation. Especially the first two shifts entail a more normative and more political direction in the field of research on well-being of children, because the focus on quality of life makes stronger demands for normative decisions than research focused only on the absence of indicators causing serious harm. The more political direction can be seen clearly in the increase in policy-oriented sections within the major international surveys (see OECD, 2009; UNICEF, 2007). These studies also

show that the need for normative postulates can be realized in different ways: the latest OECD Report, *Doing Better for Children* (2009), for example, refers to the UN Charter of Children's Rights when defining well-being. From the perspective of social studies of childhood, this connection is clear and convincing, because the sociological approach is closely interwoven with the children's rights movement (see Zeiher & Hengst, 2005). Other points of reference for a normative definition of the good life of children could be theories of the welfare state, medical-professional opinions, or philosophical approaches like the capability approach developed by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. The Capability Approach offers the advantage of being normative in an explicitly and theoretically reflected way (see Albus, Andresen, Fegter, & Richter, 2009). No matter which of these references is chosen, what they all share is their normativeness. We argue in favor of pointing out clearly that every conception of well-being or the good life contains a normative postulate. To avoid paternalism and an adult-oriented perspective, research projects on the good life of children should introduce participatory elements into the process of defining "the good." This leads to the second dimension of theoretical challenges.

Having said that research on well-being and children always contains normative implications regarding how well-being is defined, we now want to focus on another dimension of relevant implications and the theoretical challenges this poses. Research on well-being and children does not just constitute its object of research (well-being) in a normative sense; it is also based on assumptions about its research subject (children). This aspect reveals the need for a broader reflection on the constructions of difference within this research. We assume that childhood and children cannot be understood as an anthropological constant but rather as a socially and historically constructed stage of human life. Throughout history, the first years of human life have been conceived very differently. One example of this is to be found in Philipp Ariès's (1962) *Centuries of Childhood*, in which he claims that the idea of childhood did not even exist in medieval society. Hence, ideas on and concepts of children have to be understood within their sociohistorical context. This makes it necessary to ask which ideas have dominated the way children are defined in recent times. Research and theory formulation can be seen as part of the production of certain knowledge about children. The change of paradigm within childhood studies mentioned above has taken this into account, and the sociology of childhood delivered an important impulse to the way children are seen within research. Its notion of children as social actors challenged the idea of dependent and developing children. Methodologically, this is expressed by the shift from research *on children* to research *with children* or even *from the perspective of children*. Thus, the change of paradigm also implies a change in the conceptualization of the research subject children. Although deconstructive childhood studies now acknowledge this fundamental shift, they point to the attendant risk of romanticizing children and misconceiving their dependence within the social order of society. Therefore, it is necessary to stress that reflection on the ideas produced about children not only is an important end in itself but is also important from an *ethical* point of view. With regard to Alanen's (2001, 2005) concept of "generationing," one can say that the way children are constructed within a certain sociohistorical context is fundamentally linked

to power relations. She understands generation as a social structure that regulates the relation between the groups involved. This social order does not exist per se, but is reproduced in social practice. Generation as a relational structure determines the power, recourses, and possibilities of participation available to social actors. With reference to children and adults, it can be assumed that children are the powerless group lacking any possibilities of participation. Furthermore, the notion of children has to be seen in terms of its differentiation from adults and in the way it is constructed in social processes. One element is the permanent “othering” of children that takes place every time *we* talk, write, and do research about *them*. This becomes an ethical concern insofar as research from this perspective is involved in processes of “generationing” and therefore in the (re-)production of power relations. This is also a concern for research into the well-being of children and the question raised above on the normative decisions made in relation to the conceptualization of well-being. When deciding from a researcher’s point of view what we understand as “the good” for children, we always produce a generational difference. At the same time, this insight enables us to analyze the theories of well-being in terms of how they articulate and reproduce the generational order.

As a consequence, it becomes necessary to reflect on the ideas (re-)produced, either explicitly or implicitly, within the theoretical assumptions underlying research into children, and to question what othering is taking place and which effects this has on processes of generationing. Moreover, these questions do not just arise in respect to generation. They can just as similarly be reflected in other differences: What assumptions about class, gender, or ethnicity underlie the research design?

Nonetheless, having stressed the deconstructive perspective on childhood studies, we should not forget the other side of the coin and the other ethical dimension it raises: Although research on children (re-)produces certain notions about children, it does, at the same time, still give voice to this marginalized group.

To conclude, we would like to emphasize that no matter which theoretical assumptions (feminist care, children’s rights) are made either implicitly or explicitly, research has to be aware of its normative impact on society and its subjectivity—be it in terms of either the idea of “the good” or the social order of generation. At the same time, it remains a necessary way to give voice to children, or at least to cast light on the needs of those marginalized within the generational relation. The following authors have responded to these challenges in very productive and interesting ways.

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Modern Children and Their Well-Being: Dismantling an Ideal

Tanja Betz

Childhood is a culturally formed and socially constructed concept that is subject to constant change. This becomes clear in the changeable, yet persevering institutionalized hierarchy between adults and children spanning multiple aspects of society—a hierarchy regulated by law in child protection or child welfare domains *inter alia* (Mierendorff, 2008) and coupled with its own respective child and youth welfare policy.

Hence, childhood must always be viewed in the context of social change; the concept of a “good childhood” is closely linked to changeable cultural, social and economic circumstances (Bühler-Niederberger & van Krieken, 2008; Kränzl-Nagl & Mierendorff, 2008; Qvortrup, 2005). Likewise, societal changes and modernization spurts affect the concrete shaping of children’s lives (Fölling-Albers et al., 2005).

A modernization theoretical research field that deals with these change processes and their effects on children’s lives has emerged in childhood research (Dencik, 1995; Roppelt, 2003).¹ Within this field of research, but also well beyond in policy and practice, the modernization process is associated with various societal changes that flow into the description of modern children and their lives.

Frequently, in this context, a picture is painted that implies intergenerational relations are less hierarchically structured today than they were in the past. Accordingly, modern childhood patterns in the family are presented as a result of the transformation of the so-called command households into negotiation households—a transition that goes hand in hand with the shift of the parent-figure away from the unapproachable authority person towards that of an advisor or conversation and negotiation partner for the child (du Bois-Reymond, 2005). The interaction forms in (modern) families are characterized by symmetry and reasoning (Wild, 2004). Parents perceive their children as individuals in their own right (Dencik, 1995); the pillars of

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¹Similar research fields pertaining to modernization theory can also be found in youth research (Gille, Sardei-Biermann, Gaiser, & de Rijke, 2006).