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Are the kids alright? Data exposes dissatisfaction beneath veneer of well-being

Academic pressure, peer bullying, spaces for play taken over by development, pollution in neighbourhoods, stress, boredom, loneliness and anxiety, all lurked beneath the outer veneer of life satisfaction and well-being



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by **Matthew Vella**

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Fighting in schools is a daily occurrence according to 36% of 11-15-year-olds interviewed as part of the latest report delving into the well-being of youngsters living in Malta.

The Wellbeing of Children and Young People in Malta report shows that overall youngsters enjoy a high level of well-being and are happy with aspects of their lives.

But a closer look at the findings shows not all the children are okay – 9% of adolescents frequently find solace in self-harm; 17.3% of seven- to eight-year-olds interviewed experienced bullying and reported being hit two or more times during the past month; 21.7% were called unkind names; while 23.1% were excluded by their peers.

“Academic pressure, peer bullying, spaces for play taken over by development, pollution in neighbourhoods, stress, boredom, loneliness and anxiety, all lurked beneath the outer veneer of life satisfaction and well-being,” Marie-Louise Coleiro Preca, Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society chair and champion of children’s rights, said,

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The report was presented to Parliament to mark World Happiness Day and forms part of the Malta Wellbeing INDEX project (focusing on Indicators, Networking, Data, Exploration and eXchange), a collaborative effort between the Malta Foundation for the Wellbeing of Society and the University of Malta.

Compiled by university academics Carmel Cefai, Rachel Spiteri, Natalie Galea and Marie Briguglio, the study was carried out among 364 youngsters through three separate questionnaires for seven- to eight-year-olds, eight- to 11-year-olds, and 11-15-year-olds.

Prof. Cefai said this study illustrated the importance of listening to the voices of the children themselves in seeking to understand which aspects in their lives were going well and what they were unhappy with.

“While on average the majority of those interviewed across different ages, enjoy a high level of subjective well-being and report safe and healthy systems such as home, school, friends, and the local community, a closer look at the data shows that particular aspects of well-being remain problematic.

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“These include peer bullying at school, a decreasing liking for school with age, relative lack of autonomy and participation in decision-making in the family, limited play areas, lack of physical exercise and excessive screen time, and negative moods among adolescent girls.”

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Prof. Briguglio, the principal investigator of the Wellbeing INDEX Project, said: “Overall, just like in adults, we find high levels of well-being on average but it is in the distribution around the mean that we need to pay attention to; and we need to pay attention to those experiencing low well-being...”

“This echoes the findings in adult surveys where we fare relatively well in life-satisfaction generally, but satisfaction with use of time is relatively low (compared to EU counterparts and other areas of life), where negative affect is relatively high (compared to other countries in the world), and where enjoyment levels are relatively low.”

Prof. Briguglio said that while children are okay on average, a spotlight on some aspects of their lives show they are not. “All policies – not just education, but also planning, environmental, immigration and health matters – impact the well-being of children,” she added.

The report, the fourth study since the launch of the Malta Wellbeing INDEX project in 2020, delves into asking children and young people themselves how they feel, instead of relying on other indicators.

It reveals interesting age and gender differences, with participants becoming less satisfied with various aspects of their lives as they grow older, boys experiencing more bullying, and adolescent girls experiencing more negative feelings and moods than boys.

As children move into adolescence, they also appear to spend less time engaged in physical exercise and sports, and more time on TV and social media.

Particular groups of children and young people – mostly those from lower socio-economic status, a migrant background, or those with a disability – reported a lower level of well-being and less satisfaction with various aspects of their lives when compared to their peers.

The study recommends the introduction of a national policy for the promotion of mental health of children and young people, as well as a national strategy to promote physical exercise, sports and nature-based activities.

It also calls for a more inclusive environment for children with diverse needs, a strategic focus on the well-being of those at risk, initiatives to curb bullying, the inclusion of well-being and most importantly, the need for children’s voices to be heard.

Coleiro Preca said this latest well-being index would not be the last contribution to Malta and in the coming months other initiatives will be taken. “Regular and robust national statistics and research are required to be able to compare the well-being of different segments of Maltese society over time and to evaluate policy performance in well-being terms... this will help identify the priorities to enhance the quality of lives that the people and children of these islands deserve to enjoy.”



Matthew Vella, a freelance journalist at MaltaToday, was formerly executive editor at Malt...

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