

# Editorial: The well-being of Malta's young

Two reports about the state of Malta's young people are cause for concern

Opinion Editorial Children Youth

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Children are no longer shielded from the world. Photo: Chris Sant Fournier

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Childhood is meant to be carefree. Childhood is not meant to come with worries about finances, the environment or the state of the country. But recent research showed that today's children are carrying the weight of the world around them.

The World Happiness Report showed that Maltese people under 30 are the unhappiest in the EU. Malta ranked 57th in the world out of 143 countries, with a score of 6.45 on a scale from one to 10. This marked a drop of almost 0.4 since the 2006-2010 period.

But why? The Well-being of Children and Young People in Malta report, also launched last week, shed some light.

The report showed that while 11- to 15-year-olds enjoyed a high level of happiness in their lives, "beyond the average data, the situation on the ground is not that rosy". 17.3% of seven- to eight-year-olds experienced bullying and reported being hit twice or more during the previous month; 21.7% were called unkind names; while 23.1% were excluded by their peers.

A quarter of 11- to 15-year-olds experienced fights at school on most days and another 11% every single day. And 9% of adolescents frequently found solace in self-harm – a subject raised earlier this month by the FSWS Sedqa prevention services manager, Jareth Grima, who spoke about a worrying rise in self-harm among children.

"Sometimes it is self-harm and sometimes it's a drug. Both can help you forget and ease the pain away," he said.

What is causing this pain? The Malta report showed that 20% of eight- to 11-year-olds and 15% of 11- to 15-year-olds always worry about family income and over 10% of both age brackets always worry about "things they heard happening in Malta".

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".

The study illustrated the importance of listening to the voices of children. Researchers stressed that all policies – not just education but also planning, environmental, immigration and health matters – impacted children's well-being. They recommended the introduction of a national policy for the promotion of mental health of children and young people, amongst other things.

The world our children are living in is very different from the one today's adults grew up in. We cannot expect them to just get on with it. Social pressures are higher, with social media demanding perfection, while parents and schools demand academic excellence.

Our children are no longer shielded from the world. News is all around them and they consume it whether they like it or not. They are bombarded with political language about corruption and wars. They hear about the rising cost of living. They see their parents work long hours to pay the bills.

Their parents are less present in their lives and sometimes lack the time, and the skills, to help them navigate today's complex problems.

And they have no escape. Public open spaces are limited, and they cannot escape to the safety of their bedroom because social media is a portal into their sanctuary, allowing in pressures and bullies.

They are a generation of instant gratification, and many lack the skills to cope with rejection and negative emotions. All this is hard for everyone, let alone for young minds often flooded by hormones and insecurities.

This is where, as grown-ups, we need to step up and take responsibility for the world we are creating for our children. The least we can do is ask what's bothering them, listen to them and be present.