

Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research

Volume 16

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Psychosocial Well-being of Children and Adolescents in Latin America

Evidence-based Interventions

 Springer

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ISSN 1879-5196

ISSN 1879-520X (electronic)

Children's Well-Being: Indicators and Research

ISBN 978-3-319-55600-0

ISBN 978-3-319-55601-7 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-55601-7

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017938306

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Printed on acid-free paper

This Springer imprint is published by Springer Nature

The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Acknowledgements

We thank, first and foremost, the opportunity we have been given to write this book, built through solid bridges among researchers in Europe and researchers in Latin America. When we signed an agreement between the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS, Brazil) and the University of Girona (UdG, Spain), we began a trajectory of partnerships led by Professor Ferran Casas, who has always encouraged us. Our thanks to Professor Ferran's team at UdG.

The presence of members from our Research Group on Community Psychology (GPPC/UFRGS) at the International Society for Child Indicators (ISCI) conferences has also led to the approximation with Professor Asher Ben-Arieh, who has always valued and supported the participation of members from Latin America in the ISCI activities. Thank you! In the same way, we thank the Springer editorial team, who encouraged us to elaborate this book, especially Esther Otten, who believed and encouraged this project.

The need to place Latin America on the map of research on child well-being indicators has led to the creation of a regional network formed by Argentina, Brazil and Chile, with Professors Enrique Saforcada, Graciela Tonon and Jaime Alfaro, who also collaborated in this book, as well as his national colleagues. In the first part of the book, we have contributions from the countries of Latin America generating a greater dimension of the work in different Latin-American contexts. We thank the contribution of our co-authors.

In the second part, the book presents the strand of intervention in the well-being of children and adolescents, which we believe to be one of the first contributions of the practice of psychosocial transformation on wellbeing. This important contribution is due to the effort and competence of the GPPC team, formed by postdoctoral, doctoral, master and graduate students, a group of motivated university students that are passionate about working with children, after 6 years of data collection in the projects PROTEBA and ISCWeB, putting in hard work and learning with reality, sometimes very hard and difficult to deal with. To them, our thanks, not only for the co-authorship in the chapters of this book but also for their fieldwork in periphery schools of Porto Alegre.

We thank the school teachers, principals and especially the children for having embraced the well-being development project, changing the school schedule and sharing the achievements and difficulties in day-to-day interventions. Especially, we dedicate this book to the children with their vitality, their motivation and collaboration to follow the steps of the programme and their parents who authorized the possibility of participating in the intervention.

Finally, we are grateful for the support received by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) and the National Council for the Improvement of Higher Education (CAPES) for the research aids that enabled resources for data collection and the fellowships of the GPPC researchers, who have been working for almost a decade incessantly to bring together the multiple perspectives involved in child well-being in Latin America.

Contents

Part I Aspects Related to Children's Well-Being

1	A Multidimensional Approach to Well-Being	3
	Jorge Castellá Sarriera and Livia Maria Bedin	
2	Spirituality and Religiosity Related to the Well-Being of Children and Adolescents: A Theoretical and Empirical Approach	27
	Miriam Raquel Wachholz Strelhow and Kaena Garcia Henz	
3	Subjective Well-Being of Children in Residential Care	47
	Fabiane Friedrich Schütz, Luciana Cassarino-Perez, and Vitória Ermel Córdova	
4	The Use of Software to Improve Child Maltreatment Detection and Assessment	71
	Tiago Zanatta Calza, Carme Montserrat Boada, and Ferran Casas	
5	Neighborhood and Housing as Explanatory Scales of Children's Quality of Life	91
	Graciela H. Tonon, Claudia A. Mikkelsen, Lía Rodríguez de la Vega, and Walter N. Toscano	
6	Sociodemographic Profile of Children's Well-Being in Chile	109
	Javier Guzmán, Jorge J. Varela, Mariavictoria Benavente, and David Sirlopú	
7	Cultural Meanings that Mediate Life Satisfaction in Chilean Children and Adolescents	129
	Lorena Ramírez Casas del Valle, Verónica Monreal Álvarez, Gabriel Urzúa Vera, and Francisca Valdebenito Acosta	

8	School and Neighborhood: Influences of Subjective Well-Being in Chilean Children	153
	Denise Oyarzún Gómez, Ferran Casas, Jaime Alfaro Inzunza, and Paula Ascorra Costa	
9	Fatherhood in Adolescence: A Qualitative Study on the Experience of Being an Adolescent Father	167
	Gehysa Guimarães Alves, Sheila Gonçalves Câmara, Denise Rangel Ganzo de Castro Aerts, and André Guirland Vieira	
Part II Intervention on Children Psychosocial Well-Being		
10	Psychosocial Well-Being of Children and Adolescents: Intervention Effect and Impact Evaluation	193
	Jorge Castellá Sarriera, Livia Maria Bedin, Miriam Raquel Wachholz Strelhow, and Javier Morales Sarriera	
11	Promoting Child Wellbeing: Community and Nature Connections	217
	Francielli Galli, Ângela Carina Paradiso, and Camila Bolzan de Campos	
12	Rights and Material Resources as Indicators of Child Well-Being: The Challenge to Promote Protagonism	243
	Luciana Cassarino-Perez and Tiago Zanatta Calza	
13	Time Planning, Leisure and Technology as Tools to Promote Child Well-Being	267
	Fabiane Friedrich Schütz and Juliana Cardoso Stum	
14	Subjective Well-Being Intervention: Focus on Children's Interpersonal Relationships Through Social and Emotional Learning	291
	Bibiana Ramos dos Santos and Francielli Galli	
15	Intervention on Self-Concept: A Path to Promoting Subjective Wellbeing	319
	Cristina da Silva Hasse and Ângela Carina Paradiso	

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Introduction

A growing interest in researching **subjective well-being** has been observed during the last decades in scientific literature, including different disciplines and the meaning of self-evaluation of people's own well-being. Researchers have used self-evaluated well-being in order to know and better understand human positive situations and positive changes (not only situations and changes related to pathology and social problems), the factors influencing them, and the related conditions – particularly those related to risk behaviour prevention, to promotion of resilience in vulnerability contexts and to facing risk of social exclusion. Emphasis has often been given on self-evaluated well-being that correlates with physical and mental health and with human overall development both at individual and collective levels.

It is very important to notice that in social sciences, this growing research interest was born in a broader context, at macrosocial level: the **quality of life studies** started with the so named **social indicators movement** (Land & Michalos, 2015). In 2016, we celebrated the 50th anniversary of this movement, or “silent revolution” (Casas, 1989, 1996), symbolized by the publication of the book edited by Bauer in 1966, which also gave birth to an increasing research on programme and impact evaluation. Social indicators were accepted as scientific and epistemological tools for political decision-making at macrosocial level. However, they were also linked to completely new fields of research and to new social debates on our conditions of living, both material and non-material. According to Inglehart (1990), that was so because of the crisis of material values and of the rise of post-material values in advanced industrial societies. The consequences of this silent revolution, although difficult to assess, have doubtless been far-reaching.

After this movement started, information provided by representative samples of citizens (from overall population or from specific subgroups of population) not only started to be very seriously considered and analysed as socially and politically relevant but also started to be assumed as having high scientific status, against the existing mainstream in many sciences considering that science can only be based on “objective” measures.

Subjective information, subjective data, subjective statistics and subjective indicators started to be considered as having a new scientific and political entity at the same time. Opinions, perceptions, evaluations and even aspirations of citizens (Campbell, Converse & Rogers, 1976) became a source of useful data for decision-making at macro level. That situation was consistent with the etymological meaning of the word “statistics”, from Latin *ratio status* (“state’s reason” = in the national interest).

At least 30 additional years were needed after the beginning of such influential movement at international level to perceive any impact in the field of childhood studies. Only very recently and very slowly children’s and adolescents’ self-reported well-being has been the increasing objective of social research in more and more countries. Data from representative samples of “not-yet adults” only started to be published more frequently with the new century. Some experiences already exist accepting children’s and adolescents’ data as useful for decision-making. However, collecting such data still involves new important scientific challenges and unsolved debates.

Until recently, in many Western societies, the mainstream representation of childhood and adolescence was that they are a “private affair of the families”. During the second half of the last century, a change in these majoritarian social representations started because of the influence of multiple factors (Casas, 2011; Casas et al., 2013), like the increased training and sensibility of many professionals and NGOs and of many researchers. However, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been the most influential factor to consolidate this tendency. Children have to “count” and have to be taken into account, as human beings with universal human rights.

The **child indicators movement** that appears at the end of the twentieth century in the international arena (Ben-Arieh, 2008) symbolizes that children’s self-reported well-being and children’s quality of life can be “measured” both at macrosocial and micro-social levels and that they are key informants to report on these phenomena, as well as experts in their own lives (Casas, 2011, 2016).

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have observed an increasing number of scientific publications devoted to adolescents’ subjective well-being. When data from different countries was published, unexpected results started to appear, particularly the decreasing-with-age subjective well-being of adolescents in most countries of the world (Casas, 2011).

That increasing number of scientific publications has not only been the result of isolated researchers’ efforts. On the background, very often there is networking of researchers motivated by improving children’s lives in different contexts. I cannot forget in this presentation that scientific researchers from Brazil, Chile, Argentina and Spain met in Porto Alegre and started a new network named PROTEBA – some of them pioneers being involved as authors of different chapters in this book. This network was a facilitator of collaborative research to publish several scientific articles in the following years (as, e.g. Casas et al., 2015) and was also a promotor of reflections, debates and even international stage exchanges related to new research on children’s subjective well-being, mainly focused on 12–16 years of age.

However, the borders are changing fast: the international project **Children's Worlds** (ISCWeB: International Survey on Children's Well-Being) seems to be the first network of researchers that started to collect data from representative samples of children younger than 12 – in fact of 8, 10 and 12 years old in 15 countries (Rees & Main, 2015). This international and interdisciplinary project symbolizes an increasing collaboration and networking process among research teams worldwide, with the common denominator of being sensitive to children self-reported information, with the aim of collecting data from as many different sociocultural contexts as possible.

I think that today we can say that researchers in many countries are already enjoying and enriched by the new knowledge provided by children and adolescents to the scientific community after self-reporting about their own well-being. Adults – and particularly adult researchers – are learning new aspects of our social life by collecting opinions, perceptions and evaluations of “not-yet adults” (Casas, 2011). Researchers are learning to “listen to” children in new ways. We have even been able to start to accept children as advisers of our own scientific research (Casas et al., 2013).

The book that the readers have in their hands (or in their screens) is a good example of this international dynamics. It is an honour for me to write this short introduction to a book fully devoted to Latin-American empirical and applied research on self-reported well-being of children and adolescents. This book is an important step forward for well-being researchers in a region of the world who still need a lot of new scientific knowledge about the well-being of their younger population, where many new actions should be undertaken to improve children's and adolescents' well-being. It presents a very broad selection of research topics related to children's well-being. All the chapters in the second section of the book are devoted to applied research, related with concrete interventions to improve children's well-being. However, what I think is one of the most important aspects of this book is that it presents an impressive new generation of young researchers who are already sharing names with the few pioneers in different Latin-American countries. I believe that is a promising future for our field: I am sure that the scientific research in this field is going to increase very fast in Latin America, thanks to these new active talents. Children and adolescents in their countries deserve this new social and scientific protagonism that the knowledge of their well-being and the applied research devoted to improve it may bring to Latin-American societies.

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