

***Can you put a number on a feeling?  
Measuring charities' impact on children's well-being***

There is a growing demand for charities to measure, manage and communicate their impact. If charities do not measure their success, the most effective approaches cannot be scaled-up, the least effective cannot be challenged and the maximum benefit cannot be achieved.

In the eighteenth century the philosopher Bentham proposed that the object of public policy should be to maximise the sum of happiness in society. I am sure that most children's charities would agree.

Often the main goal of the services they provide is to improve the quality of life or happiness of the children they work with. They achieve important outcomes for their beneficiaries that are difficult to measure. These might be anything from better family relationships to improved self-esteem.

Hard outcomes, like improved academic attainment or reduced truancy rates, are objective and easier to recognise and capture than subjective outcomes like improved self-esteem. Yet it is vitally important that charities can also capture less tangible outcomes to prove their full impact. We at NPC have developed a robust and practical tool for charities to do just that, and which I will be talking about to you today.

It is a comprehensive multi-dimensional questionnaire developed for use with 11 to 16 year old children—to help charities to capture and evaluate those intangible aspects of life, like good peer and family relationships, resilience and emotional well-being that are only experienced from the perspective of the child and which contribute to that child's happiness. We think it will help charities to prove their full impact, and adapt and improve their services in a way never done before.

But first, I want to give you some background on the organisation I work for, New Philanthropy Capital, as this will help you understand the rationale for this project.

New Philanthropy Capital is a charity that was set up 7 years ago based on the founding belief that people and organisations who give money to charity should be able to access high-quality independent research and advice to achieve the most with their giving.

Since then our vision has become more ambitious: we now want to help create a world in which both charities and their funders are as effective as possible in changing people's lives and tackling social problems.

Matthew Bishop of The Economist described us in his recent book as 'simultaneously a service (for donors) and a cause (for everyone)'. He could also have added that we are a service for charities too.

We want to challenge charities to achieve impressive results and to raise their accountability to funders and to themselves, but we also want to help them to achieve this. As well as publishing research we continue to build a number of free and easy-to-apply tools which help charities to measure and put numbers on all kinds of seemingly intangible results, from the success of an awareness raising campaign to a charity's impact on a child's well-being.

So why do we think it is so important for charities to measure their results?

As well as being able to improve their services, charities that measure can prove to donors that they are having an impact. Philanthropic and statutory funding can then be channelled to the most successful interventions and away from ineffective or even damaging interventions.



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This is especially important in today's climate. Levels of philanthropy are likely to be threatened by the recession, whether due to businesses laying people off, the falling value of trust's endowments, plummeting confidence amongst the wealthy, or government caught between higher bills and lower tax receipts.

In addition a recent article from the ESRC stated that 'lapsed donors rarely claim they can't afford to go on giving, but they often say they lost faith in the effectiveness of their giving'. In other words they lost faith because they couldn't see any evidence of impact.

This loss of faith is something charities can ill afford in current times. Charities are having to step up their game and work harder for their income. They need to measure their results.

As well as a more competitive funding environment, there is also a growing emphasis on subjective outcomes in policy both in the UK and elsewhere.

Economists and policy makers have realised that GDP by itself is a hopeless measure of well-fare. Since the 1940s GDP has shot up in leaps and bounds, while the well-being of the population has stagnated.

This graph shows changes in GDP and happiness in America as measured using a U.S. General Social Survey question. The Europe the Eurobarometer series that began in the early 1970s shows the same trend.

There is an increasing realisation politically that simply encouraging economic growth is not enough to ensure increased levels of well-being. Government have therefore started making policies aimed specifically at improving subjective well-being.

In the UK the 2000 Local Government Act gave local authorities, the largest single funder of charities, the power to commission services on the basis of improved well-being. The UK Government also recently laid out their framework, called Every Child Matters, for improving children's well-being and proposed a number of subjective well-being outcomes that should be central to children's services.

Charities have always believed that the needs of the child should come first, and now policy too is becoming more child-centric. There is also a move to promote positive well-being outcomes, as opposed to just preventing the negative.

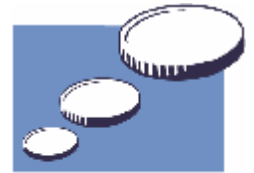
With this increasing emphasis on subjective well-being, comes the urgent need for charities to measure it. Yet there has previously been no single measure for charities that meets this demand.

In the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, behaviourist psychologists like Pavlov and Skinner argued that you can never truly know or measure other people's feelings and that all we can do is to study their behaviour.

However, more recently psychologists and social scientists are returning in strength to the of study feelings—measuring them, comparing them across people and explaining them. In 2002 Daniel Kahneman was given a Nobel prize for his work on subjective well-being. He describes his work as:

*"The study of what makes experiences and life pleasant or unpleasant. It is concerned with feelings of pleasure and pain, of interest or boredom, of joy or sorrow, and of satisfaction or dissatisfaction"*

Researchers are not only measuring people's internal feelings of happiness or well-being but also trying to explain the factors that lead to improvements in those feelings.



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There are a number of methods that have been developed to measure subjective well-being and these tend to fall into two groups.

Firstly, global measures of life satisfaction aim to capture overall happiness or satisfaction with life, such as those used in large surveys like the World Values Survey or the U.S. General Social Survey.

Secondly, there are measures designed by psychologists and social scientists to capture specific aspects of subjective well-being. For example, Professor Herbert Marsh designed his self-description questionnaire to measure aspects of self-concept. Wagnild and Young developed a scale to measure resilience, and Huebner designed a multi-dimensional questionnaire to measure how satisfied students are with different aspects of their life such as peer and family relationships.

However, none of these tools meets all the needs of charities. Charities often do not know how or what to measure, and those that do have tended to use a variety of incomparable and often untested scales that only measure certain aspects of well-being.

NPC have drawn together existing research to create a comprehensive multi-dimensional questionnaire to allow charities to prove their success across a range of positive well-being outcomes.

The first questionnaire is designed for 11 to 16 year olds and contains seven scales designed to measure those aspects of subjective well-being that are deemed most relevant, through review of the literature and discussion with charities and funders.

The seven aspects of well-being being measured by the questionnaire are as follows: self-esteem, resilience and emotional well-being, quality of peer and family relationships, and satisfaction with school and, home or community environment.

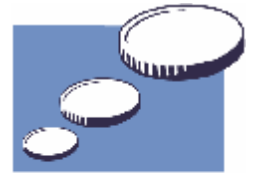
We are working in partnership with the Children's Society. They are a large UK children's charity who have conducted a nationally representative survey in England of 5000 11 to 16 year old children's well-being and extensively researched the best scales to measure different aspects of well-being.

We have included in our questionnaire shortened versions of existing validated measurement scales that have been piloted by the Children's Society, deemed robust and included in their survey. The intention is to use the Children's Society national data to standardise the well-being questionnaire and provide a national baseline so that charities can put their results in context.

We are currently piloting the questionnaire with five children's charities providing interventions of differing breadth and depth including counselling, after school clubs, anti-bullying workshops and support for young carers. A baseline is taken before the intervention and a follow-up measure after or during the intervention.

The purpose of the charity pilots are threefold: To test the validity and reliability of the measurement scales; to check that the questionnaire is sensitive and can show change with variety of charity interventions, and finally and importantly; to test that it is practical for charities to use on the ground.

I am delighted to say that the early results are looking very positive. The scales are passing tests of internal consistency and test-retest reliability, and the feedback from pilot charities is positive. The questionnaire is also showing positive change and proving success.



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For example, one of the pilots was conducted with 100 14 and 15 year olds from a mixed school in Scotland who were going on a 5-day outward bound course. We took the baseline in the week before the intervention and the follow-up about 10 days after. The children showed significant improvements in self-esteem, resilience and emotional well-being after the intervention.

Also, interestingly when we compared the boys to the girls, we found that the improvements were much greater in the girls. Which raises an interesting question as to why?

Once we have launched the questionnaire in October 2009 charities can use it to answer all sorts of questions. They can not only prove their full impact, but also find out whether they are working better with some groups than others, and which elements of their service delivery are linked to success. By comparing their baseline with the national average charities prove that they are working with particularly disadvantaged groups.

I wanted to finish up with some discussion about the challenges for the well-being questionnaire and how we are tackling them.

In developing this questionnaire NPC has aimed to combine academic rigour with a good understanding of what is practically possible for charities to achieve.

We do not intend the questionnaire to be used in isolation but rather to complement other methods. Before evaluate themselves, charities need to think carefully about who they are trying to help, what they are trying to achieve and how they effect change. Only then can they decide what are the most appropriate measures of impact.

For example, the well-being questionnaire will not be useful for the work of some charities with victims of abuse, or very damaged children, where clinical scales are more appropriate.

Also, ideally improvements in subjective well-being would be captured alongside more behavioural and objective outcomes like improved academic attainment or reduced truanting.

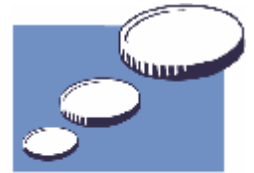
A final problem for the well-being questionnaire is that of attribution. It is very difficult for charities working with children to conduct fully randomised control trials or have a good comparison group. This means that it will be difficult to know whether changes in children's well-being are caused by the intervention, caused by regression to the mean, or by some other environmental factor.

However, we are realistic about what is practically possible for charities and this tool that is an excellent first step for charities who wanting to prove their impact. Also, we have addressed the attribution problem in two ways.

Firstly, one of our pilots involves a control group so that we can assess the likely size of regression towards the mean. And secondly, the national baseline will provide a type of control.

Levels of well-being tend to change with age. As children reach adolescence aspects of well-being such as self-esteem decrease. This means that for some ages just maintaining levels of well-being constitutes a positive outcome. The national baseline will allow the questionnaire to be standardised for different ages.

The real strength of the well-being questionnaire is that it fills a measurement niche by providing a robust, valid, practical and high quality tool for children's charities to use to prove their success across a range of common positive well-being outcomes.



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So what of our plans for the future?

Once finalised we will make the questionnaire freely available online for charities to use, and will provide training and guidance on implementation and interpretation of the results. We hope to launch in October 2009. A condition of using the questionnaire will be that charities will have to submit their anonymous data so that we can build up a picture of what works best in achieving outcomes for children.

Finally, we eventually hope to develop questionnaires for other groups, for example, younger children, young adults and the elderly, and potentially versions for other countries.

To sum up. We at NPC believe that charities should measure their results, we believe that charities should have the right tools at their finger tips to do just this, and we have created a tool that fills a gap and allows charities to measure subjective well-being.

Can you put a number on a feeling? We think you can.

***Camilla Nevill is a research analyst at NPC. She was speaking at the Campbell Collaboration Annual Colloquium in Oslo.  
20 May 2009***