CHILDREN'S VOICES IN HAPPEN

WHAT DO CHILDREN WANT AND NEED TO MAKE THEM HAPPIER & HEALTHIER?

A REPORT FOR WEST GLAMORGAN.

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SUMMARY

Between January 2023 and March 2025, 1,563 children across West Glamorgan responded to open-ended questions in the HAPPEN Survey about what would make them happier and healthier in and out of school. The insights were explored using thematic analysis, resulting in six core themes for both school and community contexts.

This report highlights these themes, incorporating children's own words, and provides strategic recommendations for future priorities and stakeholder action.

Children answered two open-ended questions in the HAPPEN Survey:

1. What would make you happier and healthier in school?
2. What would make you happier and healthier out of school?

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER IN SCHOOL?

SUPPORT AND NURTURE HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

MAKE GOOD FOOD CHOICES MORE AVAILABLE

HAVE MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO BE ACTIVE IN VARIOUS WAYS THAT ARE MEANINGFUL

CONSIDER THE IMPLICATIONS OF OTHERS BEHAVIOUR AND RULES

IMPROVE THE PROVISION AND ACCESSIBILITY OF ADEQUATE SPACES AND RESOURCES

WAYS IN WHICH THE SCHOOL DAY COULD BETTER SUPPORT HAPPINESS AND HEALTH

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER IN SCHOOL?

IMPROVE ACCESS

Children identified a need for more and better physical environments. In particular quiet areas, green spaces, or play spaces were mentioned. Access to quality school infrastructure that facilitates these aspects could have significant impacts on the health and wellbeing of children as they spend a large proportion of their developmental years in this setting.

"The playground should get a rework because it would be better…"

"Maybe put some fake grass around the yard and maybe a more stable shelter."

"More things to play with."

Play Wales (1) has published guidance around creating play friendly schools and a key theme in this is space. Providing spaces which are accessible and safe can facilitate health in terms of physical activity but also wellbeing with the established links between it and green spaces (2–4). Opening school grounds beyond the school day could be a consideration that would improve access as well.

IMPROVE ACTIVITY

Children consistently asked for more physical activity and play during the school day. Requests included more P.E. sessions, longer break times, more playground equipment, and greater access to school fields.

"Make break times longer, to ensure you get more exercise."

The most common request was around longer break times. This request has been noted in previous research (5) and runs alongside and observed decline in break time and lunch times across the United Kingdom (6). Protecting these times is important, not just because children are asking for it, but because of the physical and mental health benefits that come with being able to play, relax and be outside. This is reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child Article 31 which advocates for the right to play (7).

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS

Friendship, kindness, and feeling safe were important to many children. They highlighted the safety provided by supportive peers and requested less shouting from teachers.

"Stop bullying and be kind to everyone."

"Make people really happy and help them when they are stuck in something."

It is worth noting the inclusivity of this, with children noting that this should be something everyone gets to experience. With the introduction of the Curriculum for Wales (CfW), there is space for schools to have autonomy over their curriculum and relationships are mentioned in the Health and Wellbeing Area of Learning Experience (AoLE).

THE SCHOOL DAY

Children made suggestions such as 'funner lessons' and 'easier homework.' These ideas show a desire for more engaging, accessible, and less stressful school experiences.

BEHAVIOUR & RULES

There were concerns about how rules are applied in school. Children want behaviour policies that are fair and clear.

"Being allowed on the grass!!!"

"Lots of adults do not give proper punishments when a child has done something wrong."

These comments suggest that children want environments where expectations are clearly communicated and upheld with empathy and fairness. Concerns were also raised about peer behaviour, especially aggression or exclusion, which can affect their sense of safety and belonging in school. The latter can be a key contributor to not engaging with the school environment more generally (8).

GOOD FOOD CHOICES

Many children wanted healthier and more varied food options at school. This is particularly important with the recently implemented Universal Free School Meal provision, early findings from HAPPEN suggest there are mixed perceptions of the provision, including issues around food quality, food choices and the logistical challenges in some settings.

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER OUT OF SCHOOL?

WIDER ISSUES THAT CHILDREN ARE THINKING ABOUT

CONSIDERATION OF THE ROLE OF SUPPORTIVE RELATIONSHIPS

THE FACILITATION AND REGULATION OF SAFE COMMUNITIES

MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY AND BE ACTIVE

INCREASED COMMUNITY ACCESS TO A RANGE OF SAFE SPACES

SUPPORT WITH LIFESTYLE CHOICES AND BEHAVIOUR

WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU HAPPIER AND HEALTHIER OUT OF SCHOOL?

COMMUNITY ACCESS

Children want more parks, green areas, and indoor spaces that are welcoming and inclusive. They noted the importance of places where everyone feels safe and included. This is very similar to what has been suggested by children inside of school but is interesting to note they feel this is also note available in their communities either.

"More parks and indoor places welcome to everyone."

"So there could be more green areas."

For many, the ideal space is one that is green, open, and designed with children in mind. Some called for more "indoor places that are welcome to everyone," while others noted the lack of places to go in poor weather or darker months. Children also spoke about the importance of being able to see and spend time with friends locally, which is tied to access and walkability.

SAFE COMMUNITIES

Children's responses made it clear that safety is a foundational need for their happiness and health outside of school. When they spoke about what would improve their lives, they didn't just mention the presence of fun or engaging spaces, they also mentioned whether those spaces, and their communities, felt safe. Key impacts on safety included bullying and racism. They noted that people can be "mean" or "aggressive".

"Bullying, racism, bad words like swearing cursing and so on."

"Everyone included."

Equally significant were concerns about unsafe environments in the form of poorly lit streets, traffic dangers, and the presence of older people engaging in anti-social behaviour. Children want adults and services in their community who listen and treat children with respect. They are aware of what feels unsafe and unfair, and they are asking for communities where they can walk, play, and gather safely.

LIFESTYLE CHOICES

Children showed a clear awareness of healthy behaviours, expressing a desire to eat more fruit and vegetables and reduce screen time. These insights reflect their understanding of personal responsibility and health.

"No eating a lot of junk food."

"Eating healthier and more sport centres near local towns."

PLAYING & BEING ACTIVE

This theme was very similar to the in school responses. There was a strong emphasis on having regular access to physical activity. Suggestions included daily outdoor time and structured physical activity to support health and connection. Specific suggestions include running, football, swimming and gymnastics.

RELATIONSHIPS

Out of school, children still prioritised their relationships. They wanted to live closer to friends and have more opportunities to socialise in safe environments.

WIDER CONSIDERATIONS

Some children expressed concern about societal issues such as climate change, pollution, and world peace. These views highlight that children are active citizens with global perspectives. This is interesting as children are often left out of conversations on these topics however, the UNCRC's Article 12 would advocate for children to have a voice on all matters that affect them (9). The CfW gives space for this to happen in school settings but there needs to be opportunities for this to happen in the community also.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Children view health and happiness holistically, incorporating physical activity, emotional wellbeing, social inclusion, and environmental factors. The desire for autonomy and voice is present in both school and community contexts, reinforcing the importance of Article 12 of the UNCRC. Key recommendations would include:

1. Prioritise safe, inclusive, active spaces by investing in parks, school playgrounds, and welcoming community spaces.
2. Embed relationship and belonging strategies by funding peer support and anti-bullying programmes, and train school staff in this practice.
3. Improve food accessibility and education by enhancing and exploring healthy food options in schools especially.
4. Involve children in designing their day. This could mean using participatory approaches to co-develop school rules and spaces.
5. Ensure safe transport and local hubs that allow children to connect and engage.
6. Respond to children's concern for the wider world including topics like climate change education in both school and community learning.

Children across West Glamorgan have provided clear, thoughtful, and actionable insights into what they need to feel happy and healthy. Their perspectives reinforce the importance of listening to and working alongside children to shape environments where they can thrive.

Embedding these findings into planning and policy will ensure that West Glamorgan grows into a place where all children feel supported, included, and valued.

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