Australian Education Research Organisation

Research summary
Measuring wellbeing and belonging in children aged 3–8 years

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To understand which wellbeing programs and practices adopted by early childhood education and care (ECEC) services and schools improve children's outcomes, it is necessary to measure and track children's wellbeing. This research summary shares some preliminary learning from work the Australian Education Research Organisation (AERO) commissioned on developing wellbeing and belonging measures for children aged 3 to 8 years.

Measuring wellbeing helps improve practice and outcomes

Children who successfully develop the social-emotional skills that allow them to flourish in life have the best opportunity to maximise their educational outcomes (Kaya & Erdem, 2021; Kiuru et al., 2020). However, reviews such as the <u>Review to Inform a Better and Fairer Education System</u> have found that policymakers and teachers are unsure whether school-based wellbeing programs and practices actually improve wellbeing outcomes. To have confidence about which programs and practices improve wellbeing (and the specific contexts and populations they work in), it is necessary to measure wellbeing or components of wellbeing, such as belonging.

Effective measurement requires effective tools

A measure is more likely to improve practice and outcomes when it:

- measures what it is supposed to
- is relevant and appropriate for the context
- is easy to integrate into existing systems and frameworks.

Further, measures used with Australian children should be inclusive of the experiences, cultural contexts and communication styles of First Nations children. This means involving First Nations participants from the earliest stages of development through to trialling and testing.

AERO has previously noted that there is no existing student voice measure of wellbeing for children below Year 4. Belonging (a component of wellbeing) is explicitly acknowledged in the Early Years Learning Framework V2.0. and is an indicator of a successful transition from ECEC to school or between contexts where children learn. Without effective measures of wellbeing or belonging, it is not possible to evaluate the relative merits of educational practices to understand what works. Developing and validating measures for the early years is a first and necessary step towards improving practice and outcomes.

Developing wellbeing measures for children

To address the gap in existing measures, AERO commissioned the University of Western Australia (UWA) to develop a draft measure of wellbeing (Table 1) and Monash University to develop a draft measure of belonging (Table 2) for children aged 3–8 years. While their approaches differed in focus and methodology, each followed the first steps of one process for developing a rigorous measure (Boateng et al., 2018). This involves:

- identifying wellbeing domains (the factors that contribute to overall quality of life)
- item generation (the questions to ask)
- content validity (assessing whether the questions are the right ones).

UWA examined existing frameworks and research to identify relevant wellbeing domains, then developed a number of statements for testing with children.

Monash used a different approach to establish the domains of belonging, known as the 'Draw, Write, Tell' method (Angell et al., 2015; Pope et al., 2019; Waters et al., 2022). This is a child-friendly way to capture how children understand and define belonging in their educational settings. Parents and caregivers were asked to read a description and show a series of pictures about how a child might experience belonging in their learning environment, then prompt responses from their child with a series of questions. Children could express themselves through drawings and words, accommodating various levels of communication skills.

Tables 1 and 2 show a sample of the statements drafted by UWA and Monash that could be further developed and collated into measures of wellbeing and belonging. Several additional steps are required to develop and validate each measure. These steps are discussed in the next sections.

Table 1: Draft wellbeing measure domains and example statements

Domains[1]	No. of statements	Example statements
Organic Needs	10	I can move around a lot
Identity	14	I can tell other children about me
Self-Direction	12	I can do great things every day
Empathy	12	I am happy with what other children can do
Intimacy	12	Other children believe me
Agreeableness	12	I am polite to other people
Conscientiousness	22	I try to do well at lots of things
Emotional Stability	16	When I lose something, I feel very sad
Extraversion	14	I show the way I feel
Openness to Experience	14	I like looking at things around me
Social Environment	30	My family comes to my ECEC service/school[2]

[1]Domains were identified by examining existing frameworks and research.
[2]The terms 'ECEC service' and 'school' are placeholders to be modified to suit the context.

Table 2: Draft belonging measure domains and example statements

Domains[3]	No. of statements	Example statements
Positive Emotion States	24	I feel good with other children
Positive Environments	12	My ECEC service/school[4] is a nice place
Friendship	19	Other children want to play with me
Inclusion	22	I can ask to join in
Safety	10	My educators/teachers[5] protect me
A Loving and Caring Environment	10	Other children help me when I am sad
Teacher's Role	21	I am happy to see my educators/teachers
Fun and Engaging Activities	14	My ECEC service/school is fun
As Comfortable as Home	9	I can be myself at my ECEC service/school
Responsibility for Others	8	I help other children when they're sad

[3]Domains were identified by analysing children's drawings and words about belonging.
[4]The terms 'ECEC service' and 'school' are placeholders to be modified to suit the context.
[5]The terms 'educators' and 'teachers' are placeholders to be modified to suit the context.

Key learnings

While the development of these measures of wellbeing and belonging by the UWA and Monash teams is ongoing, AERO's commissioned work has so far generated three key insights for those seeking to develop wellbeing measures in the early years. These insights highlight the importance of:

- seeking and incorporating children's perspectives
- drawing on existing research and frameworks
- consulting widely with experts and caregivers.

Some of these key learnings have been incorporated into AERO's commissioned work and others should be included in any future work towards measure development.

Seek and incorporate children's perspectives

For a measure to be effective, children's responses need to accurately reflect how they feel and represent what is useful for educators and teachers to know. Including children's perspectives in the development of a measure is one way to ensure this.

To gather children's perspectives, it is important to use child-friendly methods that consider differing communication skills and make children feel comfortable and confident (Mayne & Howitt, 2022). Culturally responsive engagement with children is also essential. Researchers who are culturally responsive are critically reflexive about their own identities, culture, histories and biases, and consider how this impacts their relationships and interactions with participants with a view to engaging in a culturally safe manner. Child-friendly and culturally responsive approaches may require specialist knowledge about how to engage with diverse children and families, including children with disability or developmental delay, First Nations children, and culturally and linguistically diverse children.

The 'Draw, Write, Tell' method used by Monash included parents and caregivers as participants along with their child. Incorporating children's perspectives was also a priority in the wellbeing measure methodology. This methodology describes using child-friendly approaches (such as puppet play and cartoon-style stories) to consult children on the wording and relevance of questions, as well as how the measure could look and be administered.

Including the perspectives of diverse children is important. The work AERO commissioned highlighted the need to plan engagement approaches that work in various contexts. In the development of each measure, successful recruitment and sustained engagement with First Nations children and families was not achieved, limiting the applicability of the measures in First Nations contexts. Future research should ensure measure development is conducted specifically with First Nations children, families, communities and other experts. If appropriate, the findings can then be merged with those from existing work to create measures that are effective for use for all children in Australia, or to create measures that are specifically designed for First Nations children.

Draw on existing research and frameworks

Including multiple text sources, such as research literature and existing measures and frameworks, increases confidence that a measure will be effective. When selecting and using existing texts, it is important to consider how they were created and whether they are relevant to diverse populations, including First Nations peoples.

To ensure a measure will collect information that systems and sectors are interested in measuring, it is beneficial to consider frameworks already in use. For example, to develop the wellbeing measure, researchers investigated relevant Australian wellbeing frameworks that relate to children from each jurisdiction and 2 that were specific to First Nations peoples. Including a range of frameworks ensures that aspects considered important in one context but not in another are not overlooked or excluded. Aligning a new measure with existing frameworks also increases the likelihood that integrating the measure will be straightforward.

Information to develop measures can also be derived from research literature, for example, analysis of published research provided insight into existing wellbeing measures that could be adapted for the Australian early education context. In developing the belonging measure, researchers drew on existing research to inform the process of identifying relevant themes in children's drawings and words about belonging.

Consult widely with experts and caregivers

Parents and caregivers, educators and teachers, and educational experts can offer significant insights into children's worlds. Incorporating multiple perspectives provides a holistic view of children's experiences. This can be done at various stages of measure development and for different purposes. For example, for the wellbeing measure, early childhood teachers and psychologists were consulted to provide insights into young children's wellbeing needs, as well as daily challenges in learning environments.

Next steps

The work commissioned by AERO can provide a useful starting point for systems and sectors aiming to advance the development of wellbeing and/or belonging measures for children aged 3 to 8 years. However, the draft measures require further development, piloting and testing to ensure they are fit for purpose and culturally responsive.

References

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