Measures of Flourishing

Among the characteristics associated with optimal development are positive relationships, curiosity, interest and persistence in learning, and resilience. Children and youth who are female, white, or more affluent more frequently demonstrate these qualities, according to their parents.

Importance

For many years, more attention, at least within the field of child development, has been paid to the characteristics of a “normal” or unwell child than to characteristics of one who is thriving. However, developmental science has identified a number of “building blocks” of positive well-being, sometimes referred to as measures of “flourishing.”[1],[2]

Within the period of infancy and toddlerhood, important markers of flourishing include a healthy attachment relationship, curiosity and interest in learning, the ability to regain equilibrium after an upset, and expressions of joy or happiness.

A recent federal survey provides the first nationally representative data on the proportion of young children who are flourishing in these ways. A child whose parents say they “always” or “usually” in the past month “smile and laugh a lot,” “bounce back quickly when things don’t go their way,” “show interest and curiosity in learning new things,” and “is affectionate and tender with the parent” is considered to be showing signs of flourishing.

For older children, a somewhat different set of characteristics can be taken to describe flourishing. Among the constructs researchers have suggested are personal attitudes or beliefs (for example, optimism, a sense of purpose, and spirituality); positive interpersonal relationships (with peers, parents); and task-related characteristics, such as diligence and initiative.[3]

In the recent survey, parents of older children (ages six-17) responded to questions asking whether their child “finishes the tasks they start and follows through with what
they say; â€œstays calm and in control when faced with a challenge; â€œshows interest and curiosity in learning new things; â€œcares about doing well in school; and â€œdoes all required homework. Children are considered to be in the optimal category if parents indicate an item was true â€œalways or â€œusually within the past month.

These survey measures only partially represent the range of characteristics researchers have included within the construct of â€œflourishing. In addition, just as experiencing multiple sources of risks to optimal development is associated with poorer outcomes than is exposure to a single one, research suggests that the more positive attributes children have, the more likely they are to make health-promoting choices and avoid harmful behaviors.

**Trends**

In 2011/12, on each of the measures of flourishing a majority of children and youth were said by their parents to â€œusually or â€œalways have the characteristic. Among children younger than six, parents indicated that 78 percent usually or always bounced back quickly if something didnâ€™t go their way, 93 percent were affectionate and tender with their parents, 96 percent showed interest and curiosity in learning, and 98 percent smiled and laughed a lot. Among children between six and 17 years old, parentsâ€™ reports indicated that 65 percent stayed calm and in control when faced with a challenge, 65 percent finished tasks and followed through with what they said they would do, 85 percent showed interest and curiosity in learning, 86 percent cared about doing well in school,
and 87 percent usually or always did all required homework. (Figure 1) No trend data are available for this indicator, because these data have been collected only once.

Differences by Age

Data by age group are available for the items used for children ages six to 17. There are no significant age differences in whether a parent thinks their child follows through on tasks. Parents of older children are more likely to indicate that their child "usually" or "always" maintains composure. However, these differences are small, with about two-thirds of children in each group falling in this category. On the remaining three measures—showing interest and curiosity in learning new things, caring about doing well in school, and doing required homework—there is a modest decrease with age in the proportion of children whose parents report they "usually" or "always" demonstrate these characteristics. (Appendix 2)

Differences by Gender

For younger children (through five years of age), the only significant gender difference is on the item that asks about how often the child is "affectionate and tender" with the parent. Parents of girls are more likely than parents of boys to report that they "usually" or "always" show this behavior (95 and 92 percent, respectively). (Appendix 1)

When it comes to older children, females are more likely to have parents report frequent evidence of flourishing on these measures. Females, more than boys, were reported to "usually" or "always" finish tasks (69 and 62 percent, respectively), stay calm in the face of a challenge (67 versus 62 percent), show interest in learning new things (87 versus 83 percent), care about doing well in school (92 versus 81 percent), and do their homework (91 versus 83 percent). (Appendix 2)

Differences by Race and Hispanic Origin[7]

Differences by these categories are generally small, but some are statistically significant. In the case of younger children, on all four measures white children show a slight advantage over Hispanic children, black children, or both, but absolute differences are slight. The item asking parents how often the child "bounces back quickly when
things don’t go his or her own way is the only measure where there is a significant
difference between black and Hispanic children. On this measure, the proportions who
indicate the child “usually” or “always” does this are 84 percent among whites,
76 among Hispanics, and 70 percent among blacks. (Appendix 1)

When it comes to older children, even significant differences are relatively small, ranging
from four to 13 percentage points. These differences favor white and Hispanic children
over black children; the data for Hispanic children in some cases are significantly lower
than those for white children; in others, they are not significantly different. (Appendix 2)

Differences by Poverty Level

The data show that children in more affluent families are more likely than those in poor
families to be “flourishing,” according to these measures, and this pattern is more
evident among older children. Among the younger children, differences between
children living below the poverty level and those with family incomes of at least twice the
poverty level range from three percentage points (child “smiles and laughs a lot”; 96
and 99 percent, respectively), to 16 percentage points (child “bounces back quickly
when things don’t go his or her way”; 69 and 85 percent, respectively). (Appendix 1)

In the case of older children, poor children are less likely to meet the criterion on these
flourishing measures than are those who are “near-poor” (with family incomes
between the poverty level and twice the poverty level). The “near-poor,” in turn, are
less likely to meet the criterion than are the most affluent group (family incomes of more
than twice the poverty level). The measure on which these differences are greatest is
parents’ rating of the frequency with which the child “stays calm and in control
when faced with a challenge.” On this item, eight percentage points separate poor
children from those who are “near-poor” (53 and 61 percent, respectively), and a
further nine points separate the “near-poor” from the more affluent group (70
percent). (Appendix 2)

Differences by Parental Education

In general, parents who have education beyond high school are more likely to say their
child “usually” or “always” shows behaviors consistent with these “flourishing” measures. Among the younger children, the widest disparities by
parental education level are on the item regarding the child’s tendency to “bounce
back quickly when things don’t go his or her way: 67 percent of children with parents who did not complete high school “usually” or “always” act this way, compared with 83 percent of children with parents who have more than a high school degree. (Appendix 1)

Among older children, staying “calm and in control when faced with a challenge” is the measure where disparities by parental education are greatest, with 53 percent of children whose parents did not finish high school described as “usually” or “always” this way, compared with 69 percent of children whose parents have some education beyond high school. (Appendix 2)

State and Local Estimates

2011/12 state estimates for the flourishing measures are available from the National Survey of Children’s Health at the Data Resource Center for Child & Adolescent Health.

International Estimates

The Healthy Behavior in School-Aged Children Study (2009/10 survey) includes several measures related to the flourishing measures presented here. These include (for ages 11, 13, and 15) life satisfaction and liking school.

In addition, the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) publishes data on “resilient” students, defined as 15-year-olds who are from the bottom quartile of the socio-economic distribution for their country, but score in the top quartile on academic performance across students from all countries with similar socio-economic backgrounds. PISA also publishes data on students’ reading engagement.

National Goals

While there are no comprehensive goals related to flourishing, the Healthy People 2020 initiative of the federal government has several related goals for child and adolescent well-being. These include increasing the proportion of adolescents who are connected to a parent or other positive adult caregiver, increasing the proportion of adolescents who consider their schoolwork to be meaningful and important, and increasing the proportion of parents who report a close relationship with their child.
More information is available here (Goals 3.1 and 5.5) and here (Goal EMC 2.1).

**What Works to Make Progress on This Indicator**

The research in this emerging field has not yet arrived at a consensus on the interventions that may be effective in promoting these dimensions of flourishing.

**Related Indicators**

- **Adverse Experiences**
- **Parental Warmth and Affection** (archived)

**Definition**

There were four measures of flourishing among children ages six months to five years. Parents indicated whether each was true of their child “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” “usually,” or “always” during the past month.

1. Child is affectionate and tender with parent
2. Child bounces back quickly when things don’t go his/her way
3. Child shows interest and curiosity in learning new things
4. Child smiles and laughs a lot

There were five measures of flourishing among children ages six to 17 years. Parents indicated whether each was true of their child “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” “usually,” or “always” during the past month.

1. Child shows interest and curiosity in learning new things
2. Child stays calm and in control when faced with a challenge
3. Child finishes tasks and follows through with plans
4. Child cares about doing well in school
5. Child completes all required homework

**Data Source**

Child Trends’ original analyses of data from the 2011/12 National Survey of
## Children’s Health

### Raw Data Source

National Survey of Children’s Health.

[http://www.childhealthdata.org](http://www.childhealthdata.org)

### Appendix 1 - Percentage of Children, Ages Six Months through Five Years, Whose Parent Indicated They “Usually” or “Always” Showed Selected “Flourishing” Behaviors, 2011/12

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child is affectionate and tender with parent</th>
<th>Child bounces back quickly when things don’t go his or her way</th>
<th>Child smiles and laughs a lot</th>
<th>Child shows interest and curiosity in learning new things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>93.4</td>
<td>78.7</td>
<td>97.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>91.9</td>
<td>77.5</td>
<td>97.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>94.9</td>
<td>79.9</td>
<td>97.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race/Hispanic origin</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>94.5</td>
<td>83.6</td>
<td>98.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic black</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>69.5</td>
<td>97.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>93.6</td>
<td>76.4</td>
<td>96.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>45.1</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level and below</th>
<th>89.4</th>
<th>68.6</th>
<th>96.2</th>
<th>91.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>101 to 200% of poverty level</td>
<td>93.0</td>
<td>77.9</td>
<td>97.4</td>
<td>96.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 200% of poverty level</td>
<td>95.6</td>
<td>85.0</td>
<td>99.0</td>
<td>97.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Parental education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Less than a high school degree</th>
<th>89.0</th>
<th>67.1</th>
<th>96.1</th>
<th>89.1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school degree</td>
<td>90.7</td>
<td>74.4</td>
<td>97.3</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More than a high school degree</td>
<td>95.2</td>
<td>82.6</td>
<td>98.4</td>
<td>97.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Child Trends™ original analyses of data from the National Survey of Children™s Health.

**Appendix 2 - Percentage of Children, Ages Six through 17 Years, Whose Parent Indicated They â€œUsuallyâ€ or â€œAlwaysâ€ Showed Selected â€œFlourishingâ€ Behaviors, 2011/12**
through with what child says he or she will do  control when faced with a challenge  curiosity in learning new things  doing well in school  required homework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total</th>
<th>65.2</th>
<th>64.7</th>
<th>85.0</th>
<th>86.0</th>
<th>87.0</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>61.5</td>
<td>62.2</td>
<td>82.8</td>
<td>80.8</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>67.3</td>
<td>87.3</td>
<td>91.5</td>
<td>90.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 to 11</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>89.7</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>92.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 to 14</td>
<td>64.2</td>
<td>66.6</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>85.2</td>
<td>84.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 to 17</td>
<td>65.1</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>77.7</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>80.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Hispanic origin</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic white</td>
<td>66.4</td>
<td>68.3</td>
<td>87.0</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>88.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Hispanic black</td>
<td>53.5</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>79.8</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>80.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>69.4</td>
<td>61.3</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>87.6</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>66.5</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>85.7</td>
<td>88.5</td>
<td>89.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty level and below</td>
<td>58.5</td>
<td>52.5</td>
<td>81.4</td>
<td>80.2</td>
<td>81.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>101 to 200% of poverty level</td>
<td>64.1</td>
<td>60.8</td>
<td>85.1</td>
<td>84.9</td>
<td>84.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200% of the poverty level</td>
<td>67.5</td>
<td>70.1</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>87.2</td>
<td>89.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parental education</td>
<td>Less than a high school degree</td>
<td>64.6</td>
<td>52.7</td>
<td>79.0</td>
<td>86.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High school degree</td>
<td>59.6</td>
<td>58.4</td>
<td>83.2</td>
<td>82.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More than a high school degree</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>86.9</td>
<td>87.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Child Trends’ original analyses of data from the National Survey of Children’s Health.

Endnotes


[7] Hispanics may be any race. Estimates for whites and blacks do not include Hispanics.

Suggested Citation:


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