



How to talk about and support young people with their well-being

Guidance for adults with advice from young people

The
Children's
Society



Advice for adults

At The Children's Society, we have been researching young people's well-being for more than 17 years and have surveyed almost 44,000 young people about how they feel about their lives.

By hearing directly from young people, we can actually know what's going on in their lives and work out how best to support those young people who might be struggling.

Every year, The Children's Society publishes findings from our research with young people in our Good Childhood Report, which you can find on [our website](#).

As a charity we talk about young people's well-being a lot. But it can be difficult to know how best to talk with young people about their well-being.

In summer 2022, we spoke to the experts. We consulted with young people in schools and youth groups and at the Young Carers Festival to find out:

- what well-being means to young people
- how adults can have better conversations with them about well-being
- how adults can best support young people's well-being.

What is well-being?

Well-being is a term that can mean many different things to different people. The difficulty in defining well-being is partly explained by the fact that it is holistic or as one young person put it:

'Well-being is such a big thing; it means a lot. It's like talking about anything.'

The shared definition we use at The Children's Society comes from the What Works Centre for Wellbeing, which states:

'Well-being is about 'how we are doing' as individuals, communities and as a nation and how sustainable that is for the future.'

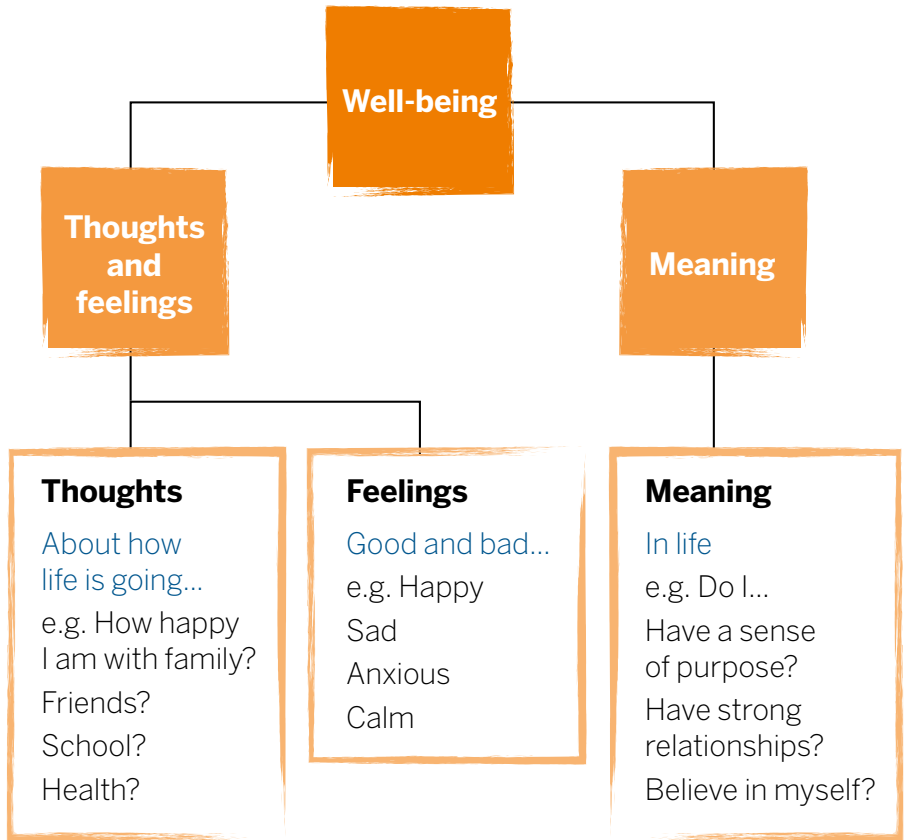


Within this definition, well-being can be understood in two ways as objective or subjective well-being.

When we talk about objective well-being, we are referring to visible, quantifiable, and externally defined factors – in other words, how someone's life looks from the outside. For young people, this could be how well they are doing in school.

Subjective well-being, however, refers to people's individual views of how they experience and feel about their lives. This can include our emotions (affective well-being), the thoughts we have about our lives and the things in our lives (cognitive well-being), and our sense of meaning, purpose, and control (eudaimonic well-being).

Concepts of subjective well-being



While The Good Childhood Report focuses on young people's subjective well-being, this guide relates to the term more generally.

What does well-being mean to young people?

The Good Childhood Report draws on years of research with young people, which shape our understanding of what is important for their well-being.



In this guide, we wanted to represent how young people themselves understand the term. So, we asked them what the term 'well-being' means to them.

'Well-being I think is about making the most of your life, trying to succeed in what you're good at, be on the good side and trying to be happy.'


'Your mental state and how healthy you feel, how happy you are in life, having friends and physical activity.'

'To me well-being means to be happy to be yourself and being happy to express your identity.'

doing things you enjoy
exercise inspiration sport
school positive social media
money friends pets safety
mental nature physical
health active family
well-being
food social home
feeling relationships
emotions happiness
diet freedom support
sleep privacy space busy
self-care religion

Is talking about well-being important to young people?

If you are an adult reading this guide, you may be concerned about the well-being of young people in your care. But is well-being something that young people feel it is important to discuss?



'100%. It is extremely important as it can improve many young people's lives.'

When asked why they felt it is important to talk about well-being, young people said...

'Because knowing about how others are doing is key to helping them.'

'Because if they don't then nothing will be done about it.'

'Because if they bottle everything up it can become way too much and they could metaphorically explode.'

However, some young people reflected that having conversations about well-being can be awkward or uncomfortable – for them as a young person but also for the adult.

We therefore asked young people for their advice on what they find helpful and unhelpful for adults to do when having conversations about their well-being.



How to approach the conversation

In seeking advice about how adults can have better conversations with young people about their well-being, young people shared what they thought was helpful for adults to do. They also provided examples of what was unhelpful!

Trust is important for young people. If a young person trusts an adult, they will feel comfortable talking with them about their well-being in general but also when they have a concern.

'Any adult wants to help a child's well-being and check on them, a good way to ask is saying if anything is wrong and letting us know we can trust you and talk to you.'

'We do have adults, but we don't think they're trustworthy - if you tell them something, they might call your parents and then you lose your trust.'

'Keep our business to themselves. If they have our trust to start with, they shouldn't tell other people.'

Confidentiality and the impact of feeling that this has been broken was a key issue for young people. It was also a reason given for why they may avoid sharing in the future.

That said, as adults there will be times when we need to act on our concerns about what a young person has shared. How this can best be approached is addressed in more detail later in the guide.

Timing of the conversations can be key. Young people may not be ready or want to talk about their well-being. They may feel pressured or not be in a place to process their feelings right away.



'Trying to get us to talk about stuff we don't want to discuss.'

'They pressure us to answer when they want, not when we are ready to.'

'Not to force people to share their well-being.'

'Talk about my feelings. I want to bring it up when I want and when I am ready.'

'Let us have our time to speak and not pressure us.'

Don't push a young person to share if they don't want to.



Tone can impact how receptive young people are, and how comfortable they feel discussing their worries or concerns with adults. Helpful ways mentioned...

'Calm, more understanding, talk to you in more of a friendly way.'

'Be friendly, approachable, open, respectful.'



Rather than...

'Yelling and getting angry if we are uncomfortable sharing our feelings.'

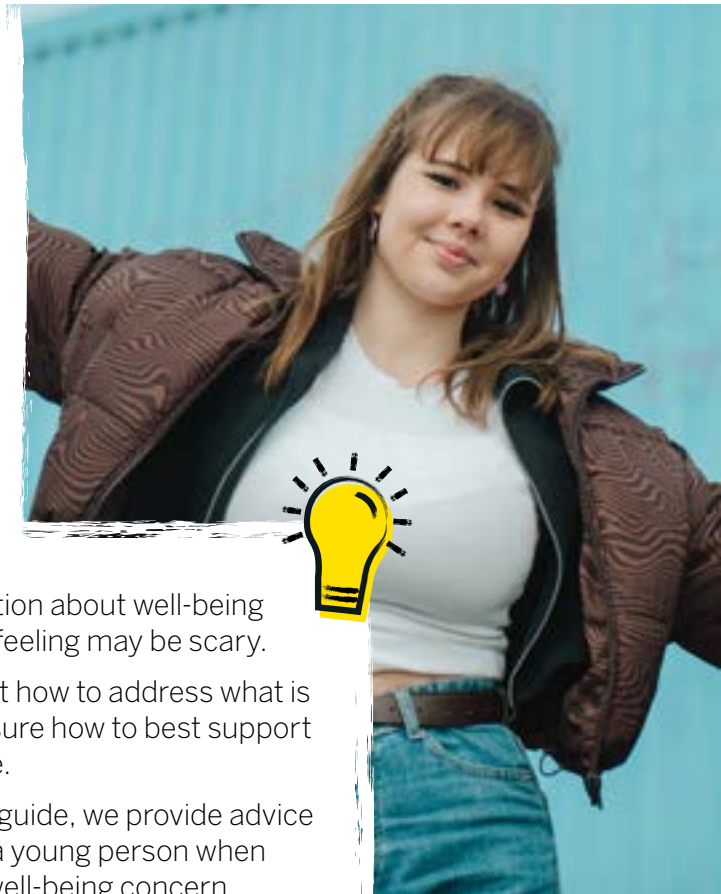
'Often blame the young person for being the cause of their own problems'

Young people also felt that how adults approach conversations can make them feel **Tense**. Some felt a more general check in would be preferable.

'Just be chill about it, take it seriously but don't make the conversation tense.'

'Don't keep asking constantly about how we are if we are OK.'

'Have a general conversation, don't make it a big thing.'



Opening up the conversation about well-being or how young people are feeling may be scary.

You may be worried about how to address what is shared with you or be unsure how to best support young people in your care.

In the second part of this guide, we provide advice on how you can support a young person when they come to you with a well-being concern.



How you can support a young person with their well-being

Alongside asking young people how we can have better conversations about their well-being, we also asked them what forms of support they found helpful.

Their thoughts, comments, and advice are shared on the following pages in relation to five key steps which for the purpose of this guide we are calling:



1

Actively listen

When asked 'what adults can do?', many young people simply said: 'Listen'.



'I think that parents (adults, teacher) should listen to the full story and think before they speak because a lot of the time we get guilt tripped accidentally.'

'Adults listening even if they do not understand the young person's issues.'

'To adults when trying to support young kids' well-being, talk to them and let them know you're listening, don't yell at them, ask questions to help understand and get information and just be there for them.'

'Active listening instead of telling them what to do.'

If a young person approaches you to talk about a worry or concern, the most important thing is to take the time to actively listen to what it is they want to share with you.

It is very tempting as an adult to want to jump in with advice or actions, but that may not be what the young person wants.

Feeling like you have not been listened to when you have approached someone with a worry or concern can have a negative impact.

Through active listening you can identify the issue(s) together. It will also help you, the adult, to understand what form of support the young person is seeking.

The importance of actively listening also came up in our advice guide for adults on supporting young people with friendships, available on [The Children's Society's website](#).



2

Acknowledge



An important part of active listening, and the next stage in providing support, is acknowledging the issue that has been shared.

Young people explained that adults being dismissive of their concerns when shared was very unhelpful.

'Sometimes they don't understand where we're coming from, they're just like "thanks for letting us know.'

'When they say "oh, don't feel like that" and say "distract yourself" and because it is not helpful information.'

'Diminishing their problems.'

'...that we are fine and have no reason to be stressed instead of helping.'

To acknowledge and make sure you understand, repeat back to the young person what you have heard.

This can help clarify what has been shared and reduce the chance of misunderstanding.

In acknowledging the concern or issue that has been shared, you let that young person know that you have heard them.

Once the issue has been acknowledged, you should then find out from the young person what support, if any, they are looking for from you.

'We just want to let everything out and know that you've been heard.'

'Wait for me to finish talking and then ask me if there is anything you can do to help me.'



This can be done by asking open questions, for example:

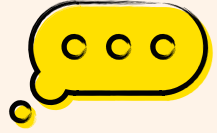
How would you like my help with that?

or

What can I do to support you?

3

Affirm



When asked what support the young person wants, they may say that talking about it was enough.

'We don't necessarily want actions... We might not need that; we just want to talk.'

It may be that they were looking for the space and opportunity to vent or verbalise their issue.

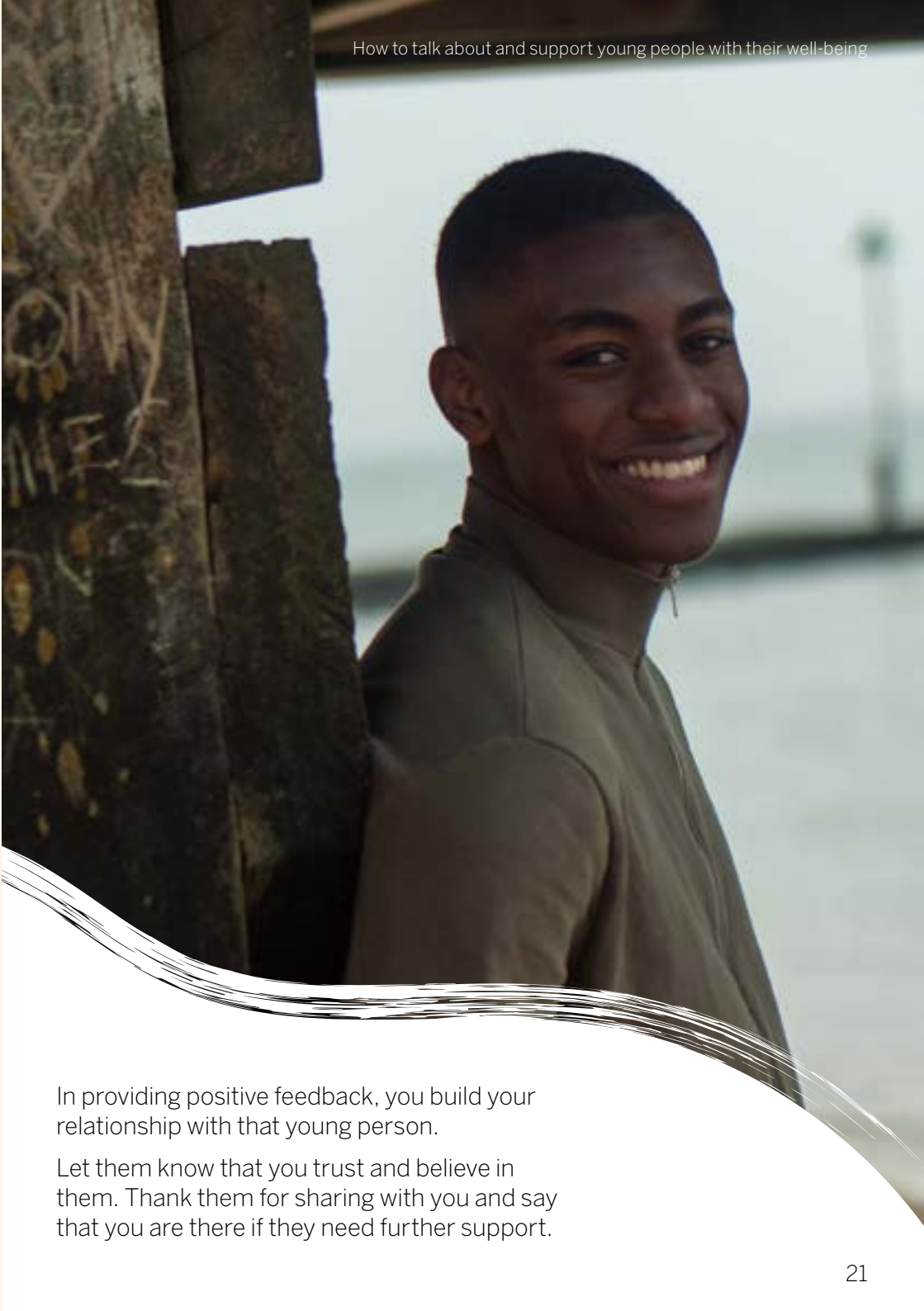
And by being able to talk it through, they feel that they have a handle on the situation.

They may be looking to you for affirmation or belief in them and their ability to deal with and overcome the problem.

'Reassuring you, saying everything will be okay, you'll get through it - that's more supportive.'

'When you validate and sympathise with me it feels more supportive.'

'Keep calm and reassure.'



In providing positive feedback, you build your relationship with that young person.

Let them know that you trust and believe in them. Thank them for sharing with you and say that you are there if they need further support.



4

Advise

Sometimes the issue that a young person wants to talk about will require specific guidance, or they may ask you for your advice.

Young people felt that getting advice from adults was important, but only when they have asked for it.

'Trying to give helpful advice.'

'They give their opinion. I don't want their opinion, I just want to get things off my chest.'

'Maybe you need someone who's gone through something similar. You want something that's specific to you. Not just something that's happened to another person.'

The advice you may be asked for will depend on the issue but also vary in the context of your relationship with that young person.



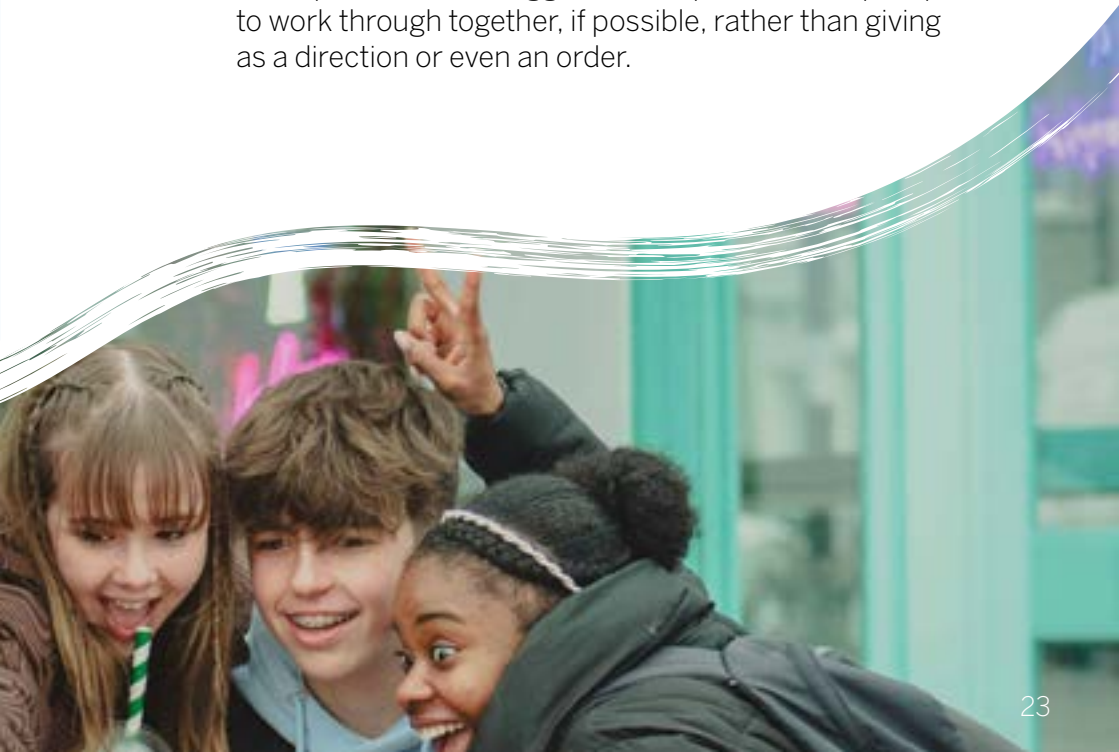
Some general advice from young people on how adults might deliver advice was:

'Talk to the individual not the collective.'

'An example of bad advice - go get a glass of water, have a time out, go to the toilet.'

When giving advice think about how you, yourself, would want to receive advice.

Perhaps frame it as suggestions or provide multiple options to work through together, if possible, rather than giving as a direction or even an order.





5

Act

The final stage of providing support is acting on what has been shared. It may be that the young person has come to you specifically seeking action on their behalf.

Other times, as adults we have responsibilities to act on the things that are shared with us.

In either case, it is important that you communicate clearly and transparently with the young person about why you need to act, what you plan to do and check with the young person on what their expectations are.

'Maybe they could ask if you want anyone else to be told, instead of just doing it.'

When and how action needs to be taken can be difficult to navigate based on individual expectations. Earlier in the guide we mentioned that young people talked about the impact of adults acting without telling them and how that damages their trust.

'They say they won't tell anyone, but they told my parents'

Lots of the young people agreed that they were told things would be private but then discovered that other adults knew about what was happening. They said this would stop them from going to that adult again.

Young people also spoke about how unhelpful inaction by adults can be.

'Not do anything after telling you my problems.'

'They're very good at listening, but not acting on it.'

Sometimes action is not possible. If this is the case, this should also be clearly communicated with the young person so that they can understand and not feel like the issue has been dismissed.

Advice from our Youth Practitioners

At The Children's Society, we deliver direct services that provide support to young people across the country. Here is some of the advice from our practitioners on how they support young people.

'We build relationships by doing what we say we're going to do and being very clear from the outset.'

'There's a bit of routine building and trust building to let them know that you are reliable, you are going to turn up.'

'It's about giving young people a sense of control back and a sense of autonomy and power and value. And about me valuing our relationship.'



Reflection activity

Having read this guide, you may want to use this space to make notes or comments on how you can use the advice in the future.

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin blue border, intended for students to write their reflections or notes.

Help – where you can go if you have a worry or concern

Advice and support for children and young people

Young people can find resources on our website at www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/young-people/well-being/resources

They can also contact Childline for free by calling 0800 1111 or visiting their website childline.org.uk

Advice and support for parents

If you are a parent or carer looking for advice for support you can contact the YoungMinds parent helpline: www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-helpline-and-webchat/ or call the helpline for free on 0808 802 5544

Advice and Support for Professionals

You can find more resources on our website: www.childrenssociety.org.uk/information/professionals/resources

Alongside this guide, we also have produced another guide for adults on how to support young people with their friendships, and two guides for young people themselves on friendship and stressful situations. These can be found on our website.



Every young person should have the support they need in order to enjoy a safe, happy childhood.

That's why we run services and campaigns that make children's lives better and change the systems that are placing them in danger.

The Children's Society is helping children hold onto hope.