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Is Britain the worst place to grow up?

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BRITAIN is the worst place to grow up in the developed world, according to the first study of its kind.

Wide-ranging research released by UNICEF today reveals the UK lags behind countries such as Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary in a league table assessing children's wellbeing.

It highlighted that the UK is struggling in terms of relative poverty and deprivation, the quality of children's relationships with their parents and peers, education and young people's own sense of wellbeing, as well as their behaviour and risk-taking.

Academics compared 40 indicators to compile the snapshot of life for children in 30 industrialised nations. The review put the UK in the bottom third in five of the six "dimensions" measured. It fared best in the category examining health and safety - finishing 15th out of 25 countries.

The UNICEF report described the UK's performance as a "shocking" result for one of the richest countries examined. Professor Jonathan Bradshaw, one of the authors, said: "It's a depressing picture for the UK. I think there's a belief that things are much better than they are. Across the board, we're not doing well for our children."

Britain was ranked worse than average in rates of teenage pregnancy, smoking, obesity, drug and alcohol use, physical violence, bullying and daily access to fruit. The study also revealed that 22.6 per cent of Britons aged 11, 13 and 15 in 2001 said they were either in "poor or fair" health - compared with a mean result of 14.1 per cent.

It revealed that only 43.3 per cent of Britons in the same category found their peers "kind and helpful" - compared with 65.6 per cent overall in Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development countries.

And 35.3 per cent of Britons aged 15 in 2003 admitted they aspired to low-skilled work - compared with 27.5 per cent overall and just 14.4 per cent in the United States. Child wellbeing was at its highest in the Netherlands, Sweden, Denmark and Finland.

UNICEF officials said the report showed that the UK "scores particularly badly in bringing about the wellbeing of its children". Prof Bradshaw, of the University of York, added: "We don't have answers to all of the 'why' questions. We do comparatively badly, but if you look at the data as a whole, children are fairly happy - but our children aren't as happy as other country's children.

"A general statement must be that it's due to a huge increase in child poverty and deprivation during the 1980s."

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The report also highlighted that only 66.7 per cent of British 15-year-olds said they ate with their parents several times each week - compared with 79.4 per cent overall. Prof Bradshaw said that figure suggested a "lesser importance of the family unit" in the UK than elsewhere in the developed world.

The study revealed that 16.2 per cent of British children were growing up in relative poverty - significantly higher than the 11.2 per cent mean figure.

Academics at the Child and Adolescent Health Research Unit at Edinburgh University contributed to the report. Rebecca Smith, assistant international co-ordinator of its Health Behaviour in School-aged Children study, admitted that although it was well known that the UK fares poorly in child poverty league tables, it was "a bit of a surprise" to find it at the bottom overall.

"We sometimes forget links between things like obesity and wellbeing. It shows these links and that children smoking, drinking and getting pregnant don't happen in a vacuum.

"This report will, hopefully, generate discussion."

Campaigners and opposition politicians claimed the report exposed that a generation of children had been failed under Labour. Colette Marshall, the UK director of Save the Children, said:

"This report shows clearly that, despite the UK's wealth, we are failing to give children the best possible start in life. The UK government is not investing enough in the wellbeing of children, especially to combat poverty and deprivation."

Tom Roberts, head of public affairs at Children 1st, described the results as "extremely disappointing", while George Osborne, the shadow chancellor, placed the blame on Gordon Brown. He said: "After ten years of his welfare and education policies, our children today have the lowest wellbeing in the developed world. We need a new approach."

Prof Bradshaw also called for the government to "refocus" to tackle the issues highlighted in the assessment, titled Report Card 7, Child Poverty in Perspective: An Overview of Child Wellbeing in Rich Countries. He said:

"In government, there's a sense they've achieved a lot and the problem is being solved. But we've got a long way to go and need a redoubling of efforts."

A Scottish Executive spokeswoman said: "We want every child in Scotland to have the best possible start in life. We are determined that, through our health-improvement and anti-poverty strategies, we will improve health, education and economic opportunities for the next generation of Scots."

A government spokeswoman said: "Improving children's wellbeing is a real priority for this government. But in many cases the data used is several years old and does not reflect more recent improvements in the UK, such as the continuing fall in the teenage pregnancy rate, or in the proportion of children living in workless households."

'I'VE GOT NO COMPLAINTS'

"I'M definitely surprised by this report. From my experience, you have everything to hand in this country. I have had access to good education and different sports, and anything I would want to

buy is available. I've had a nice upbringing and I am very close to my parents and peers. It is a very unusual night when I don't eat with my parents. I would say from my background there's nothing I could really complain about."

Euan Bell, 17, Edinburgh

'THERE IS AN UNDERCLASS'

"IF YOU look at Scotland's top university and the average student is a white middle-class female - so there is definitely an underclass of young people in this country which is denied opportunities in education and society.

"And if you look at it, it largely depends on geography. So I can understand a lot of the reasons why we lag behind other developed nations."

Nicole Leys, 20, East Whitburn

'EVERYONE HAS AN OPPORTUNITY'

"I DON'T think you can blame the society for the difficulties that young people face.

"You get individuals that go to private schools and have all the money in the world and then drop out.

"Conversely, you often have children from deprived areas that end up at top universities.

"So I think the problems are more to do with individuals.

"Everyone has an opportunity."

Susan Weir, 20, Whitburn

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