



WHAT MAKES A GOOD LIFE FOR DISABLED CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE?

A summary report in the *What Makes a Good Life?: Children and Young People's views on wellbeing* series. Published by the Office of the Children's Commissioner, September 2021.



[Read the full *What Makes a Good Life?* report on our website](#)

In October and November 2018, the Office of the Children's Commissioner's *Mai World* team and the Oranga Tamariki *Voices of Children and Young People* team, engaged with more than 6,000 children and young people, for the *What Makes a Good Life?* report. In total, 423 children and young people were engaged face-to-face and 5,631 participated via a survey run through schools, community groups and available publicly online.

As part of *What Makes a Good Life?* we heard from 474 disabled children and young people about how they envisage a good life, and the barriers they face in experiencing this. A total of 23 disabled children and young people were interviewed face-to-face and 451 via the online survey. We also heard from the whānau of one disabled young person as the young person themselves was non-verbal, but present for the conversation.

We mainly heard from disabled young people aged 14-19 and some children aged between 9 and 13.¹ These children and young people were from Wellington, the Hutt Valley, Christchurch, and Dunedin. The ethnicities of those we spoke to included Māori, Indian and Pākehā/ New Zealand European.

This summary report presents some of the key messages we heard from disabled children and young people. It is important to note however, that this report is not representative of disability communities as the young people participated as a part of the wider engagement.

What Makes a Good Life? informed the [Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy](#), released August 2019. We hope this summary report can inform people's understandings of what disabled children and young people experience and that this understanding is reflected in the development of policy, practice and service delivery.

¹ When general insights are shared, the descriptor 'children and young people' has been used. When the insight came from a specific age-group then either children (aged 9-13) or young people (aged 14-19) is used.

Acceptance: Discrimination is widely experienced by disabled children and young people

Disabled children and young people told us that the actions of others are discriminating. Other people's actions can make them feel anxious, criticised, judged and really unhappy. One young person told us that she did not choose to have a disability.

Some young people spoke about being made to feel different because of their appearance. This included being judged, mocked, and bullied, both in-person and online.

“Online bullying is the worst.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

One young person said they feel people expect less of them because of their disability. An example of this came from a young person who told us that just because they are blind, it is viewed as “exciting” when they go on a walk. Other people's views contrasted with the high aspirations that the young people had for themselves.

Some young people told us they feel unhappy when they are asked personal questions about their disability:

“If there are some questions like I know people are curious like how we got [*insert disability*] and stuff, but some people don't feel comfortable answering all that.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

Some young people with a disability that is not visible felt they always had to explain themselves or their actions.

“A way to make our community better for me would be, say a way to identify like us people with [*insert disability*] to everyone so we don't have to like explain ourselves every time we do something that is like odd.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

We heard from some young people that they wanted people to have more awareness and understanding of disability.

Accessibility: A lack of accessibility gets in the way of the good life

Disabled young people told us that it is dehumanising how inaccessible physical environments restrict where they can go and what they can do.

“If you were a young disabled person in a wheelchair and there wasn't a ramp at the front of a building, [*you would have to*] go around the back entrance just to get in. As much as you have the accessibility it's almost dehumanising to be forced to go through that back entrance.”

– Disabled young person from Auckland.

Young people told us how to make things accessible. For example, having voiceover announcements installed in trains and buses would assist those with vision impairments.

Safety: Unique for all of us

Disabled children and young people spoke about feeling unsafe in ways that were unique to them. One child said that safety means both being, and feeling, safe.

We heard from a young person who was blind that he feels unsafe when people smoke cigarettes around him. For another young person they feel unsafe when there is too much noise happening around them. These things are unsafe because they interfere with their senses, which they rely on more than other young people. We heard from one young person about how they had to be extra careful and aware of their surroundings when exercising, which gets in the way of them fully enjoying sport.

There are specific places and things which help children and young people feel safe. We heard that for some young people, community groups or a learning support unit feels like a safer place than the mainstream school.

Education: To work better for us, be flexible and supportive

Through the *What Makes a Good Life?* engagement, we heard that from young people, including those who are disabled, that they want the education system to work for them. Factors that support young people to learn better, and enjoy school included; flexibility in how they are taught, classrooms being set up in a way which works for them; relevant subjects being taught; flexible start and finish times and being able to choose what they wear.

Disabled young people told us how extra practical support, such as one on one help from teaches aides, could better support their learning.

We heard about positive experiences in learning support units such as having more understanding teachers; the physical environment being set up in a physically accessible way; having specific resources (such as books in braille); and not having to be around people who discriminate or bully.

We heard that learning support units are a positive place for some young people and they can make them feel safe and understood. However, we also heard they wanted to be included in the mainstream environment.

“We’re at the back of the school obviously, I wish the mainstream included us more than they do now. We should be in front of the school, but they probably will, still won’t act like, include us more than they do now.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

A lot of young people, (including disabled) want to see a direct connection between what they are learning and what they want to do in the future. They want a good education and opportunities that lead to a good job and to being independent. They did not want to be discriminated against.

Disabled young people talked about how teachers have a real impact on their education, both positive and negative. We heard about the positive impact from supportive teachers who listen. Two young people told us that their teacher:

“Treats us like we kind of mean something to her” and “makes me feel like coming to school every day.”

– Two disabled young people from Wellington.

On the other hand, teacher’s attitudes can be a barrier to a good life. We heard how teachers can contribute to the discrimination that some young people face. For example by asking inappropriate questions about their disability, which feel invasive. Some young people told us they find school hard when teachers do not interact with them or are not patient with them.

Employment: Job opportunities and being supported is important to us

Some young people told us that a big part of having a good life is having a job they enjoy, but that there are barriers to achieving this. Young people were concerned that they will not be given the equal employment opportunities, now and into the future, due to their disability.

“That also, you know, they judge and meaning that it’s just like they judge a book by its cover meaning they just judge person on how they look and not really seeing what they’re capable of.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

Disabled young people talked about how discrimination has a negative impact on their mental health. Some young people said it is assumed they can’t do some jobs, and that there are not many support programmes to help young disabled people find a suitable job.

“Without sort of being scared that they are going to apply to this work and just be rejected based on the fact that they’ve got this physical disability.”

– Disabled young person from Auckland.

We heard that young people want networks to connect them to job opportunities. Having a job, being independent and the ability to do what they feel is relevant, contributes to having a good life.

Whānau: We want support from, and for, friends, families, whānau and communities

A key insight we heard from disabled children and young people was about what is needed for them to be independent, and supported, and what gets in the way.

We heard a lot about the importance of whānau. Disabled young people valued the support received by the those around them. In turn, they wanted their family, whānau and communities to be supported. Young people told us they wanted more time to do more activities together with their family and whānau. One child told us that for all people to be happy, they should have people who love them and that it is important to love and be loved.

Support looks different for everyone. One whānau told us that support looked like making sure the disabled young person is included, providing them with practical assistance to get around and with support for learning and activities. Some disabled young people told us that community groups provide practical supports such as specialist equipment for swimming or reading, and writing support for exams. Some young people told us how being part of community groups meant they could socialise with their peers.

Not having enough money was identified as a barrier to having a good life. Some young people spoke about their families not having enough money because of their disability. We heard how their family may not be able to afford things that they otherwise would have been able to, or that they cannot always cover the costs of the extra supports. The cost of living was a barrier to independence.

The young people we heard from felt it was important to have independence but understood that they may need support along the way.

“They do support me, but I wish I could support *[them]*.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

Young people want their families to be supported, so that in turn, they can best be supported by them.

A Good Life for disabled children and young people

Through our engagements with disabled children and young people, we heard about what contributes to a good life and what gets in the way.

“I feel like the best life for young people is to have the opportunity to do what you love and to follow the things that inspire you and interest you.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

Things that would contribute to disabled children and young people living a good life included: feeling accepted for who they are, having access to safe and accessible spaces, having education and employment systems that support them, and support for their families, whānau and communities.

“I just want people to be more understanding.”

– Disabled young person from Wellington.

Disabled children and young people have the right to have their voices heard in matters which involve them. We hope the voices shared in this report will encourage further thinking about the perspectives of disabled children and young people and provide guidance about the important questions to ask about issues that affect them.

“Making sure they *[wheelchair users]* feel like they are like everyone else they’re not feeling like they’re being pushed down or they’re feeling like they are less than everyone else because they’re finding it so much harder to go to the places where they want to go.”

– Disabled young person from the Hutt Valley.

The full What Makes a Good Life? report, including methodology and oversight, is available on our website.