

# Money, Friends and Muscles: The Wishes of Primary School Children in a South Wales Community

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## Abstract

*This paper describes the 'wishes' of over 600 7-11 year old children from one of the most disadvantaged communities in the UK, obtained in a classroom based exercise. The children's wishes are categorised, analysed by gender and family structure, and the primary concerns that emerge discussed. Boys' wishes were more likely to be associated with sport, power and possessions, girls' wishes with intimacy, pets and caring about others. A substantial number of children in lone parent families expressed wishes for their parents' reconciliation. While the many wishes for the sudden acquisition of wealth were clearly associated with the National Lottery, children's 'wishes' retained a strong moral framework. It is proposed that this approach is a useful and easily administered addition to the range of child consultation procedures encouraged by the 'Every Child Matters' Green Paper.*

**Keywords:** children, wishes, gender, consultation, aspirations, concerns

*Real service improvement is only attainable through involving children and young people and listening to their views.*

(DfES, 2003: 12)

## Introduction

Consultation with service users, with a view to exploring their needs, has become a core feature of both local government and health service reorganisation (DETR, 1998; Department of Health, 1999). The views of children, as well as adults, are increasingly sought, driven by national and international human rights legislation, notably article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which directs that the child's opinion must be considered in any matter affecting them (McNeish, 1999). The government Green Paper, *Every Child Matters*, builds on this trend by stressing that services should be organised around the needs of children, and that this can only be fully achieved by listening to their views.

Exploring the views of children however, particularly pre-adolescent children, poses a number of methodological problems. Children may be typically preoccupied with proximal rather than distal concerns, levels of understanding may vary and children's estimations of the magnitude of phenomena - for example, dimensions of self-reported health - may differ from third party views (Fallon and Schwab-Stone, 1994). Nonetheless, there is compelling evidence that children's views have been grossly under-represented in the past because of their alleged immaturity (Alderson, 1996) and the assumption that we are able to impute children's views by proxy or from an

analysis of demographic profiles (Mahon et al, 1996). Dissonance often exists when adults and young people are asked their views on similar issues affecting children. For example, despite adult beliefs to the contrary (Coddington, 1972), children appear to suffer more distress as a result of chronic long term adversities, such as bullying or parental disharmony, than acute events such as bereavement or physical trauma (Compas, 1987; Wertlieb, 1991). Where the views of children have been solicited directly, moral conservatism and a desire for stability feature more prominently than social radicalism (Newman, 1996). As children's views have gradually become an indispensable dimension of policy and practice development, the need to develop effective and replicable methods of examining their perspectives has acquired a corresponding urgency.

Children's views on a multitude of topics have been explored through surveys (Davis and Jones, 1996), group discussions (Lewis, 1992), personal interviews (Mauthner, 1997) and creative art, such as painting or drawing (Oakley et al, 1995). This study sought to illuminate children's concerns with their present and future circumstances through the simple mechanism of asking a large sample of junior school children, '*if you could have one wish, what would it be?*'. Data were also collected on gender, age and family status, enabling the effect of these variables to be examined.

The analysis of 'wishes' has been previously used with adults in order to explore measures of human motivation (King, 1995) and changing aspirations over time (Petrie et al. 1999), the subjects being psychology and medical students respectively. Similarities and differences between male and female wishes have been used to illuminate constructions of sex roles (Ehrlichman and

Eichenstein, 1992). Children's as opposed to adults' wishes have been previously explored as a means of highlighting the different aspirations of gifted and non-gifted children (Chiu and Nevius, 1990). The approach thus has a respectable pedigree as a vehicle for investigating the ways in which people construct their social world, order their relationships, express their values and describe their ambitions.

## The Study

### Population

The population was drawn from six junior schools in a Welsh county borough council. The borough, set in the former industrial heart of the South Wales valleys, is, on most major indices of deprivation, one of the most disadvantaged communities in the UK. In order to generate as representative a sample as possible, all the schools in the authority were ordered on the basis of the proportion of free school meals - the most easily available deprivation index - received by children. The selected schools were from the top, seventh, fifth, third and bottom deciles. An additional Welsh language medium school from the third decile was added. The mean proportion of free school meals in the sample was identical to the total LEA mean (32%, range 12–68%) and substantially greater than that of the all-Wales mean of 20.2 per cent. The number of responses from each school varied from 70 to 108 - depending on the size of the school - and totalled 642; useable replies were 625. Age range was 7-11 years (mean 9.2). Boys comprised 51 per cent of the population, girls 49 per cent. The proportion of children in lone parent families was similar to the national average, just over 20 per cent (National Statistics, 2002).

### Methodology

A questionnaire was distributed in the classroom by the children's teachers and collected when it was completed. No names or identifying details were requested. An analytical structure was devised, based on that used by King and Broyles (1997), with the categories amended to take account of the youth of the respondents. Spelling (but not grammar or syntax) has been corrected in the quotes given below. The wishes were detached from the child's personal details and the code

assignment done blind to the age and gender of the child. A randomly selected sample of 70 wishes, plus the coding schedule, was sent to a colleague, who assigned codes without consultation. Inter-rater reliability was high ( $\kappa=0.84$ ).

The 13 domain categorisation structure used is summarised in Table One.

**Table 1: 'Wish' categorisation**

Domain	Description
<b>Wealth</b>	Acquisition of money
<b>Happiness</b>	To be happy now or in the future
<b>Altruism</b>	For good things to happen to others
<b>Affiliation</b>	To make or keep friends, become popular
<b>Achievement</b>	Succeed in school, sport, music, etc.
<b>Health</b>	Health or recovery of health for self or others
<b>Intimacy</b>	To be loved, have close relationships
<b>Travel</b>	Holidays, journeys to other places
<b>Power</b>	Become important, powerful, magical
<b>Appearance</b>	To look good or better
<b>Food</b>	Have favourite meals
<b>Undoing</b>	Changing the past
<b>Material goods</b>	Toys, bikes, cars, computers, etc.

## Results

Table Two summarises the children's wishes, by category and gender.

**Table Two - Wishes of junior school children (ages 7 - 11 years)**

Category	Male	Female	Per cent	Totals
Wealth	86	66	24	152
Achievement	63	43	17	106
Intimacy	9	46	9	55
Material goods	34	20	9	54
Health	18	27	7	45
Travel	21	19	6	40
Altruism	20	19	6	39
Happiness	15	24	6	39
Affiliation	11	21	5	32
Power	26	6	5	32
Undoing	9	17	4	26
Food	2	1	<1	3
Appearance	2	0	<1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>316</b>	<b>309</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>625</b>

## Gender

As can be seen from the above table, gender plays a powerful role in distinguishing the responses of girls and boys. In line with what is commonly hypothesised about stereotypical male/female differences, girls expressed more concern than boys on issues associated with relationships and expressions of emotion. Boys, conversely, were more likely to wish for the acquisition of wealth, material goods and power. The latter, in particular, differentiated boys from girls ( $p < 0.01$ ). Girls' wishes associated with intimacy were the most strikingly dissimilar to boys in terms of frequency mentioned ( $p < 0.01$ ).

A recurrent fantasy for boys was becoming a famous sportsman. Their desires for possessions were typically associated with cars, motor bikes, expensive holidays and computer equipment, their aspirations focused on stardom in football (almost exclusively Manchester United). As noted above, power was an important male theme, such as becoming super-strong or being able to fly. Boys said:

*My wish is to go to Italy on a monster truck and run over cars and squash them.*

(Boy, 11).

*I would wish that I was the powerfulest boy in the whole world.*

(Boy, 9)

*To be a football player and kiss girls.*

(Boy, 8)

*I wish I was superman so I get a lot of fights and catch people for the police. And my muscles could be bigger than my head.*

(Boy, 8)

*I would like to be the ruler of the world and help people. And I would like everyone to like me.*

(Boy, 9)

Girls were much more likely to opt for pets and more modest consumer goods. Sporting aspirations were largely absent - the only two girls who wished for success in sport had hoped that their school team would win the local netball league. Girls expressed a higher proportion of caring concerns than boys and were also more likely to fantasise about meeting famous people, especially pop stars. Girls wanted little brothers and sisters, horses and pets, to live in new houses and to offer help to others. Girls said:

*I wish that I had a brother or a sister. I would like a sister most.*

(Girl, 8)

*To have a magic watch so if you were in trouble you could stop time and turn it back.*

(Girl, 10)

*It would be a dog so I can take it for walks and I can have a lot of fun with it and it could fetch a ball for me and everything like that. This is my wish.*

(Girl, 8)

*I wish that I could help the poor people who haven't got no food water or nothing.*

(Girl, 8)

*I would wish for a big house for all the homeless and money for the homeless and some clothes and shoes because it is nasty for people to be on streets.*

(Girl, 11)

*For the children who have no mothers or fathers to be lucky like us. Even adults.*

(Girl, 7)

### **Wealth**

For both boys and girls, the largest proportion wished to acquire vast wealth. The National Lottery was the largest source of wishes for wealth, though often children wanted wealth for other members of their families, and many wishes for wealth included an associated wish for happiness or contentment.

*If I had one wish, it would be for my whole family to be rich, including me.*

(Boy, 9)

*For us to win the lottery and for my family to be happy.*

(Girl, 9)

*I would like to be a millionaire, have a fairy mansion and never go to school.*

(Boy, 11)

*I wish I found a magic lamp and every time I rubbed it 1,000's pounds came out and I'm the owner of that lamp.'*

(Girl, 11)

*My parents be the richest people in the world and I was 20 and I had a Ferrari and a super bike and no boys could die.*

(Boy, 9)

### **Sensitive issues**

Sensitive issues were mentioned much more frequently by girls. The pain caused by the absence of friendships was a common theme.

*I wish that I could have a friend that was so kind and helpful and independent and someone who would never break up with me and care and love me.*

(Girl, 8)

*It would be nice if I had a lot of friends because people don't like bothering with me because I dress up in fancy clothes.*

(Girl, 9)

*It would be to have a wonderful husband and a big massive house and a few dogs.*

(Girl, 9)

*I wish that in the future, I would have a wonderful reputation and my family would.*

(Girl, 10)

*If I had a wish, I would wish that my house was not being repossessed.*

(Girl, 10)

*For everyone to be friends and happy or for when I grow up to live in a beautiful bungalow with lots of adopted animals and to always have a happy family. And that all homeless have homes and be happy.*

(Girl, 10).

*That I would never never never be diabetic and be like everyone else in the school be a normal kid not a different kid to every one else in the school.*

(Girl, 8)

Boys however, were not entirely concerned with lottery wins and football.

*I would never get bullied by other kids in my life*

(Boy, 9)

*I wish I would not suffer from asthma so my mother doesn't have to do so much dusting. I wish my dad could have more time off work.*

(Boy, 10)

*My wish for my mother that she would live forever.*

(Boy, 8)

*If I had one wish, I would wish I would have a bit more of friends when I'm lonely out in the school yard.*

(Boy, 9)

### **Education and work**

While girls had fewer achievement related wishes, they expressed more wishes than boys for future careers – notably as vets, nurses, doctors and general work with animals. However, only one of the 103 children from the school with the highest proportion of free school meals mentioned vocational or educational aspirations of any kind; seven of the 126 (5%) children from the school with the lowest proportion had such wishes. This inverse relationship between the level of entitlement of free school meals and educational aspiration has been confirmed on a national scale by the Statistical Directorate of the National Assembly for Wales (National Assembly for Wales, 2003).

Girls were more likely to express wishes for educational and vocational success, the latter largely in jobs that involve caring for people or animals, though in few cases, these wishes were combined with other aspirations. Boys' vocational ambitions were more varied. The children said:

*To pass all my tests and have a good job.*  
(Boy, 10)

*My wish would be to be an archaeologist when I'm older and have lots of money .*  
(Boy, 10)

*I am going to be a bus driver for Stagecoach.*  
(Boy, 10)

*To have 555 in my SATS and win the lottery and also have lots of horses.*  
(Girl, 11)

*My wish is to be a doctor and help people who are ill.*  
(Girl, 9)

*My wish is to be a nurse and look after old people who are ill*  
(Girl, 9)

*To be able to leave school when I'm old enough and get my dream job, as a person working in a dog re-homing centre and getting all of my exams right.*  
(Girl, 11)

*I wish, my wish is that I can be a vet and have a pig.*

(Girl, 9)

### **Children's Concerns for Illness and Health**

Wishes associated with family illness were common. Fourteen (2%) children made clear wishes for the recovery of relatives from illness, 18 (3%) that loved ones suffered no future illness and 11 (2%) expressed concern for the general welfare of communities. Wishing that relatives could return from the dead (the 'undoing' category) was a concern of a small number of children (n=7), largely girls. However, almost as many (n=5) wished for the revival of a pet.

*For my grandpa and nan to come back alive .*  
(Girl, 9)

*I wish my granpas and nan would come back to life.*  
(Girl, 9)

*If my rabbit would come back to life I would be very pleased and other people as well.*  
(Girl, 8)

Concern for the health of others, both family and people, in general, was the most frequently mentioned. This was not unexpected - the children surveyed lived in a community where almost a third of the adult population report a life limiting long term illness, and almost 16 per cent are permanently sick or disabled (Office for National Statistics, 2003). The most common expressions were wishing for recovery from illness, or that close relatives would never die.

*I would wish for my dad's foot to get better.*  
(Boy, 8)

*I wish that my mother would get better from the pain in her coccyx bone and she will be able to play with me once again.*  
(Girl, 10)

*I would wish my mother could see better and my nan to walk down the road for once.*  
(Girl, 10)

*My parents wouldn't be ill like my mother is.*  
(Boy, 8)

*For my uncle [name] to stop drinking.*  
(Girl, 10)

*If I had one wish I would make all my family better and not to smoke.*  
(Boy, 11)

*I wish that my mum's bad back to get better today when I go home.*  
(Boy, 8)

*For my grampy and me to stay alive and live together forever.*  
(Girl, 11)

General wishes for the future health of relatives and the community in general were common:

*That my baby brother could be healthy when he grows up.*  
(Girl, 8)

*For people not to get diseases and die, that's what I wish.*  
(Girl, 8)

*For no one to die in the universe ever again.*  
(Boy, 8)

*That my family could be safe all their lives in a safe street.*  
(Boy, 11)

*That one day, all the illnesses will have a cure.*  
(Girl, 10)

### Helping

Small numbers of children - almost all girls - wished for help, to be able to help or applauded the general principle of helping.

*I wish that every child looked after their mum and dad and grandparents.*  
(Girl, 10)

*To be a good helper.*  
(Girl, 10)

*I wish that every child looked after their mum and dad.*  
(Girl, 10)

*Some woman to help my mother washing up .*  
(Girl, 9)

*I will help people when they are ill because my Gran is ill.*  
(Girl, 7)

*To tidy the house and look after my parents if they are ill.*  
(Girl, 10)

No child expressed a clear wish that they could be relieved of caring duties for a sick or disabled parent, or that they were suffering from emotional, physical or other adversities because of parental illness, though one child wrote:

*I wish that everyone could get better so I could go out to play and places.*  
(Boy, 9)

### Children of Lone Parents

Twenty per cent (n=131) of children in the survey reported only one parent living at home, with girls (n=67) and boys (n=64) being roughly equal in number. This included five children who lived with grandparents only and three with fathers. The rest reported living with their mother. The disproportionately poor health suffered by lone female parents has been widely noted (for example, Meltzer et al, 1995). However, while ten of these 131 (8%) children wished for the health of relatives, half of these wishes were that no illness or death would occur to loved ones, rather than recovery from an illness. A further 6 per cent wished for a baby brother or sister. Apart from the inevitable wishes for lottery wins – wealth being the largest category however the sample is stratified - the single greatest concern expressed by this group was associated with marital breakdown. Of the 123 children living with mothers, 16 (13%) expressed a wish for the reconciliation of their parents.

*My wish would be for my mother and father to get back together.*

(Boy, 9)

*If I had one wish to come true it would be to see my father more often than usual.*

(Girl, 10)

*I want my mother and my step father to get back together and be married and for the marriage to work out.*

(Girl, 10)

*I would wish to have my Dad to live with us again and we be a happy family again.*

(Girl, 11)

*For my father to come back with me to live and for every one to be happy.*

(Boy, 9)

*To have my mam and dad not divorced.*

(Girl, 8)

*My wish would be that my mum and dad could get back together and be happy every day.*

(Girl, 8)

*I wish that my mum and dad are back together again today when I go home.*

(Boy, 8)

## Conclusion

What can these 'wishes' tell us about children's hopes, fears and aspirations? The wishes confirm the continuing resilience of gender as a factor in children's reported aspirations. Strength, power and energy flowed throughout the boys' wishes; nurturing, a concern for others, a love of animals and more expressions of pain and loss through those of the girls. These are, of course, tendencies; some boys and girls contravened all these stereotypes. The massive impact of the National Lottery on children is also evident in these data, though often mediated by a concern that any wealth miraculously acquired should be used to benefit others. In this, and in other ways, the wishes of children retained a strong moral dimension. Some graphic - and distressing - statements by children of personal illness and unhappiness were not

uncommon. The secret sorrows of children that are revealed here reflect familiar childhood adversities. The importance of friendships (and the unhappiness caused by their absence) is clear from the children's comments. Family illness - its presence or prevention - was important to a large number of children; a predictable finding given that the area from which the sample was, as noted, drawn has one of the highest reported levels of poverty, illness and disability in Wales. Wishes for stability - of home, family and friends - was a powerful theme. As one boy commented:

*I wish that every single person would live for ever and things would stay the way they are.*

(Boy, 11)

Speculating about the relative volume and magnitude of different sources of children's distress from such sparse information has limited value. We are also unable to make comparisons between children from different socio-economic backgrounds, or other important populations such as looked-after children, disabled children of those from minority ethnic groups. However, this methodology offers the opportunity for such data to be collected, and the corresponding comparisons to be made.

In seeking the single most identifiable cause of reported unhappiness, the absence of a father through relationship breakdown is the unfortunate winner. The frequency with which children expressed grief at the absence of a parent in the context of a classroom exercise was unexpected, and we might speculate that an exercise located in a more intimate and sensitive setting may have uncovered even greater feelings of loss. This is perhaps unsurprising; children's loyalty to their birth parents may inhibit their capacity to accurately report their feelings to third parties, and can result in observers underestimating the persistence of children's feelings of grief over their parents' separation (Royko, 1999). A majority of children, following parental separation, experience confusion and distress and very few report being given clear explanations of a chance to ask questions (Dunn and Deater-Deckard, 1991).

Health, education and social care services are typically concerned with the identification of

threats to children's health and wellbeing and the corresponding search for remedial interventions. However, it is necessary to remind ourselves that not all the troubles that affect children can be eradicated through the activities of professionals nor by the passage of human rights legislation. We cannot heal chronically ill relatives, bring a deceased and much loved grandmother back to life, find children friends, endow them with sudden wealth, mend the broken marriages of their parents or provident a guarantee of stability in a fast changing world. Nonetheless, exploring children's imaginative world through the dimension of their wishes does offer an additional insight into what is more and less important to children, and is a useful annex to more formal methods of consultation. Exploring the fantasy world of children through their 'wishes', especially children of primary school age, enables us – and the children themselves – to step outside the formal structures more usually associated with consultation exercises and set no parameters to children's responses other than the limits of each child's imagination. Where, as in this case, a number of quantitative data can be associated with each child's wish, we are able to detect patterns in the qualitative material that would otherwise be obscured. In particular, this approach illustrates how substantially the distribution and magnitude of children's concerns may differ from those that frequently preoccupy child care practitioners and policy makers.

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