

**Child Well-being Measurement:
Aligning Data to Strengthen Systems,
Support Families, and Promote Equity**

**February 7, 2018
Meeting Summary**

Introduction

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation held a one-day meeting on February 7, 2018, to address the topic of Child Well-Being Measurement. The overall goal of the convening was to identify strategies that can help foster consensus about indicators and measures of child well-being. The meeting focused broadly on multiple dimensions of child well-being measurement, including *key domains* of well-being, especially those that have special significance in assessing equity and disparities among child populations; *indicators* of child well-being that can be used to compare child populations at the national, state, and local levels; and *measures* of child well-being that can be used to evaluate the effects of local policies and programs for children and families.

In examining these topics, the participants were encouraged to consider opportunities to address the following:

- Highlight ways to foster coordination, avoid duplication, and improve capacity of those who collect and/or use child well-being data. Such efforts include ways to make existing data more user-friendly, increase accessibility, and foster multi-sector collaboration across multiple datasets;
- Explore opportunities to strengthen capacity of data users (policymakers/advocates/community groups/others) to gain access to and use high-quality data in a timely way;
- Clarify user data needs, highlight gaps in existing datasets that require attention, and identify challenges that need to be resolved; and
- Improve data systems so that they can provide better contextual information that respond to family needs, highlight disparities, and address equity concerns.

Fifty invited participants representing a mix of researchers, practitioners, and funders gathered at The Study Hotel in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, to examine these issues. The meeting was organized into three sessions focused on the following topics:

- An Overview of National, State, and Local Indicators of Child Well-being
- Significant Gaps in the Field: Building Integrated Administrative Datasets, Responding to Local Practice Needs, and Creating Measures that Serve Disadvantaged Families
- Innovative Approaches to Examining Child Well-being: Measures from Longitudinal Research Studies and Minority Perspectives

Each session featured presentations by two authors, who prepared background papers prior to the meeting, as well as a discussant, who highlighted major points emerging from the commissioned papers. Extensive time was available for meeting participants to suggest additional key points as well as to offer examples of current or recent child well-being measurement efforts that deserved consideration. The meeting agenda, list of the commissioned papers and authors, and the roster of participants are included as addenda to this summary.

Key Themes

More than two dozen general topics emerged in the child well-being measurement meeting from the presentations and discussions throughout the day. This summary highlights a selection of these topics under three subheadings: 1) **What** child well-being indicators deserve attention? 2) **How** should child well-being indicators be collected and used? and 3) **Who** needs to be engaged in strengthening the quality and use of child well-being indicators? The topics highlighted below do not represent a consensus of the meeting participants, but they are intended to highlight opportunities for future action and next steps.

1) *What child well-being indicators deserve attention?*

- Child well-being indicators should be developed within frameworks with strong theoretical or causal relationships. Such frameworks can explain how the child well-being indicators provide evidence in support of future outcomes. Indicators of special interest are those that can link selected child outcomes to important social goals such as healthy development, school readiness, and achieving equity (e.g., School Readiness Initiatives Project).
- Indicators of both child and family well-being are closely linked, and both types of indicators are necessary.
- The impact of contextual influences (also called inputs, social determinants, or environmental factors) requires particular consideration, especially those influences that can be modified by programs or policies. All too often context is mixed up with indicators of child well-being, challenging our capacity to assess dependent and independent relationships.

- The presence (or absence) of social relationships affecting children within their family and community environments is often neglected in the development of child well-being indicators. Indicators of social relationships need to highlight the ways in which such relationships create *bonding* social capital as well as *bridging* social capital for children. They should also include the following: dynamic qualities within such relationships, such as family stability or complexity; the ways in which the existence or absence of such relationships affect child outcomes; and the opportunities these relationships create in fostering healthy development, school readiness, and greater equity.
- We need indicators of positive development, especially in areas such as thriving, trusting, hope for the future, and capacity to deal with adversity (e.g., measures incorporated into NSCH). Such indicators are especially important in considering what makes a difference for children who are “beating the odds” and are thriving in spite of difficult circumstances.
- Indicators that can establish linkages across different national and state efforts, such as Medicaid, Title VI and Title V, and Early Learning Initiatives, are especially useful in examining the impact of federal and state policies on child outcomes.
- Indicators that can link community efforts to other types of state or national data sets are necessary, but we should recognize that the specific measures used to develop such indicators may vary by local circumstances. Achieving general agreement about common domains and conceptual frameworks can then support experimentation with different measures suitable for local areas.
- Sufficient data sources are available in many cases to support a robust set of indicators, but significant gaps remain. Such gaps include: indicators for two- and three-year-olds; indicators of social and emotional status; indicators that reflect racial, ethnic, and cultural differences; and indicators that make meaning of neighborhood experiences.
- Many existing child well-being indicators are drawn from administrative data sources that make it difficult to align them within the programmatic needs of place-based initiatives. These community efforts are striving for data systems that can offer an evidence-based learning system and contribute to performance measures for collective action across multiple sectors (e.g., Magnolia Community Initiative).
- Children in the “birth to three” space are frequently not engaged in existing child health and social service systems. This area remains a persistent gap in developing a trajectory of indicators of child well-being within a developmental framework. While many families with young children are receiving services (e.g., home visiting, WIC, child support payments, child care, etc.), data on the children themselves within these and many other families remain sparse.

2) **How** should these child well-being indicators be collected and used?

- Existing indicators need to be translated into actionable messages that can assess progress in achieving key goals. Indicators for young children are especially useful when they can be associated with child outcomes that affect multiple service systems and social benefits or costs.
- In a similar way, indicators of child well-being that can be linked in real-time to local decision-making processes are valuable. This has been demonstrated in Philadelphia with respect to Head Start placement policies and in multiple regions through the work of the Actionable Intelligence for Social Policy network of Integrated Data Systems (IDS).
- Administrative datasets, such as those associated with IDS, are striving to develop consistent indicators that can be used across multiple sectors, including education, health, child welfare, and others. While technical and legal remedies have evolved to support our capacity to identify the same child in multiple systems and data integration, these systems remain challenged by difficulties associated with establishing parent-child and other family relationships.
- Collaborators, such as the state programs associated with Kids Count, have demonstrated that child indicators can be used to create action and policy change. But local communities need training, technical assistance, and opportunities to learn from others in making creative use of existing child well-being indicators. Some communities are creating learning systems that support community leaders in their efforts to draw attention to population health concerns as well as identifying hidden strengths embedded within selected neighborhoods.
- The data systems used by existing child and family service systems children—such as child welfare, juvenile and criminal justice, early care and education, mental health, family support and others—are focused primarily on managing or mitigating child risk and safety rather than child well-being. Few incentives currently exist to invest in or shift data collection efforts to focus on positive aspects of child well-being at the population level.
- Mixed methods involving quantitative and qualitative data can improve our understanding of child well-being, especially within communities that experience racism, marginalization, distrust, and isolation. Ethnographic and longitudinal studies can contribute to the development of rigorous qualitative data that supplement and help to explain complex social relationships within families and communities.
- International indicators and measures of child well-being offer significant opportunities to enrich national, state, and local data collection efforts within the United States. A multitude of efforts are already underway under the sponsorship of UNESCO, OECD, and other groups that deserve consideration. The International Society for Child Indicators also publishes a journal of research papers that highlight cutting-edge work.

3) **Who** needs to be engaged in strengthening the quality and use of child well-being indicators?

- In striving to achieve equity, we should give attention not only to the use of indicators but also consider how child well-being data are framed and the means by which data are collected and organized. This requires greater attention to achieving equity in the data collection methods, sources, and uses and the extent to which vulnerable populations are or are not included in such efforts. The engagement of *Family Voices* in collecting the NS-CSHCN data is an important example that deserves replication in other areas.
- Many collaborative networks of practitioners and community leaders already exist (such as *Kids Count*), but they lack broader engagement with the research community. Such collaboration could help develop indicators in areas that are currently missing, especially in assessing racial and ethnic differences. The data on child well-being should be woven into a story and narratives for decision-makers and advocates as well as the general public.
- Local communities need to be involved in selecting key indicators so that the data reflect their priorities as well as service needs. We want to understand what child well-being means to local groups, which outcomes matter for them, and then develop indicators that can make meaning from existing data systems.
- Individual states and private philanthropy have opportunities to become the real agents of change in developing and sustaining child well-being measurement. States are historically the primary sources of public investments in children and families. The challenge is to achieve collective action focused on shared goals and collaborative efforts across multiple systems (such as health care, education, and social services).
- The Maternal and Child Health Bureau is supporting a series of Collaborative and Improvement Innovation Networks (COIINs), which are multidisciplinary teams of federal, state, and local leaders working together to foster healthy development in areas such as infant, child, and adolescent health; early childhood comprehensive systems impact; and home visiting. These initiatives offer opportunities to build in new measures as local data systems emerge.
- The notion of polycentric systems—systems that are formally independent but take each other into consideration in developing collaborative or competitive relationships—is acquiring greater importance in assessing how social and behavioral changes occur over time. As a result, child well-being indicators need to be more transparent and meaningful for those who are in a position to act upon them. Examples such as the publicly available Data Dashboard used by Vital Villages (in Boston) or the Child Opportunity Index are emerging responses that can visualize selected patterns across topics, demographics, or regions.

- The current political environment creates major challenges regarding the sensitivity of certain data elements, such as legal status, violence within the home, or coping behaviors that evolve when faced with difficult family circumstances. The Hispanic community should be engaged in designing strategies to assure privacy and protection of key data collection efforts, such as those that were developed within the Hispanic Community Health Study.

Concluding Observations

In reviewing these general topics, two general themes emerged that can guide future actions involving child well-being measurement. First, many participants stressed that we have enough data on child well-being and that the current challenges are to make meaning from the data systems that already exist and to engage community groups in using child well-being indicators as evidence to support their efforts. This topic called attention to the importance of creating networks, training, and tools to strengthen “making sense of data” efforts in guiding decision-making and improving services and policies for children and families.

Second, participants also identified multiple challenges and gaps that characterize the current array of child well-being indicators, highlighting the need for better understanding of contextual factors that influence the interpretation of existing data. This topic stressed the importance of building conceptual frameworks and new measures that can capture the complexity of children’s everyday life and engaging the local community in such efforts so that the wisdom and experience of the residents themselves contribute to data design and collection activities.

Each approach offers multiple opportunities to strengthen the creation and use of child well-being indicators. As noted early in the meeting, “what gets measured, gets done.” The challenge is to ensure that the measures contribute to all efforts to improve the lives of children and families, no matter what difficulties they may encounter. Measurement for action, at the national, state, and local levels, is the ultimate objective.

Background Papers

Rosemary Chalk, “Measurement of Child Well-being: An Introduction and Overview”

Session 1: Overview of National, State, and Local Indicators of Child Well-being

- Charles Bruner, “The Color of Our Future: Child Well-being at the State and Community Levels”
- Kristin Anderson Moore, “Conceptualizing and Measuring Child Well-being”

Session 2: What Are Significant Gaps in the Field? Building Integrated Administrative Datasets, Responding to Local Practice Needs, and Creating Measures That Serve Disadvantaged Families

- John Fantuzzo, Katie Barghaus, and Fred Wulczyn, “Child Well-being Across Multiple Outcomes, Places, and Times: How Integrated Data Systems Can Be a Vehicle for More Actionable Child Well-being Indicators “
- Patricia Bowie, “Building a Responsive Measurement Strategy for Child Well-being”

Session 3: Innovative Approaches to Examining Child Well-being: Measures from Longitudinal Research Studies and Minority Perspectives

- Sara McLanahan, “Measuring Children’s Home Environments: The Role of Family Structure Instability and Complexity”
- Patricia T. Garrett-Peters, Whitney Welsh, and Linda M. Burton, “Social Capital and Inequality as Processes and Indicators of Child Well-being”



Robert Wood Johnson Foundation



AGENDA

LOCATION	The Study at University City, 20 S. 33 rd Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104
DATE	2/7/2018

The overall goal of this convening is to identify strategies that can help foster consensus about indicators and measures of child well-being. The meeting will focus on three key areas:

- *indicators* of child well-being that can be used to compare child populations at the national, state, and local levels;
 - *measures* of child well-being that can be used to evaluate the effects of local policies and programs for children and families; and
 - *key domains* of well-being that have special significance in assessing equity and disparities among child populations.
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8:00 am – 8:30 am	BREAKFAST
8:30 am – 9:00 am	WELCOME AND INTRODUCTIONS / PURPOSE OF THE MEETING Rosemary Chalk, Facilitator, <i>Chair of Advisory Committee for Child Well-being Program at Doris Duke Charitable Foundation</i> Martha B. Davis, Senior Program Officer, <i>Robert Wood Johnson Foundation</i> Lola Adedokun, Program Director, <i>Doris Duke Charitable Foundation</i>
9:00 am – 9:45 am	SESSION 1: OVERVIEW OF NATIONAL, STATE, AND LOCAL INDICATORS OF CHILD WELL-BEING Rosemary Chalk, Moderator Christina Bethell, Discussant, <i>Johns Hopkins University</i> Kristin Anderson Moore, Respondent, <i>Child Trends</i> Charles Bruner, Respondent, <i>Child and Family Policy Center</i>
9:45 am – 10:30 am	DISCUSSION <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are the primary strengths of current national, state, and local data collection efforts? What are their principal shortcomings?• What child outcomes really matter in assessing child well-being? How are these outcomes made relevant to major decision-making and advocacy efforts?

CHILD WELL-BEING MEASUREMENT:

ALIGNING DATA TO STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS, SUPPORT FAMILIES, AND PROMOTE EQUITY

- Can we achieve greater consistency in focusing on the primary domains and constructs of child well-being? Is there broad agreement about the types of contextual variables that deserve attention?
- Are existing datasets sufficient, or do we need new measures and/or data collection efforts? Are there opportunities to use new resources effectively to improve existing efforts?
- What types of networks or other collaborative efforts would strengthen the use of existing data and measures?

10:30 am – 10:45 pm

BREAK

10:45 pm – 11:30 pm

SESSION 2: WHAT ARE SIGNIFICANT GAPS IN THE FIELD? BUILDING INTEGRATED ADMINISTRATIVE DATASETS, RESPONDING TO LOCAL PRACTICE NEEDS, AND CREATING MEASURES THAT SERVE DISADVANTAGED FAMILIES

Lola Adedokun, Moderator

Renée Boynton-Jarrett, Discussant, *Boston Medical Center*

John Fantuzzo, Respondent, *University of Pennsylvania*

Patricia Bowie, Respondent, *UCLA*

11:30 am – 12:15 pm

DISCUSSION

- What key lessons have we learned from locally designed learning systems that draw on administrative datasets?
- What principal gaps reflect the data needs of community-based initiatives that strive to reduce disparities and improve equity for children and families?
- What types of skill sets or technical assistance would improve the capacity of local communities to make better use of child well-being measures? Who are the key partners who need to be engaged in these efforts?
- Are there new opportunities to foster collaboration between research and practice initiatives?

12:15 pm – 1:00 pm

LUNCH

1:00 pm – 1:45 pm

SESSION 3: INNOVATIVE APPROACHES TO EXAMINING CHILD WELL-BEING: MEASURES FROM LONGITUDINAL RESEARCH STUDIES AND MINORITY PERSPECTIVES

Claire Gibbons, Moderator

Krista Perreira, Discussant, *University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill*

Sara McLanahan, Respondent, *Princeton University*

Linda Burton, Respondent, *Duke University*

1:45 pm – 2:30 pm

DISCUSSION

- Should we focus on family well-being as well as child well-being? How does a focus on family relationships fit within our understanding of child well-being?

CHILD WELL-BEING MEASUREMENT:

ALIGNING DATA TO STRENGTHEN SYSTEMS, SUPPORT FAMILIES, AND PROMOTE EQUITY

- Are there important new frontiers in assessing child well-being that reflect the situation of vulnerable children and their families? Can these emerging measures help address equity and disparity concerns?
- How can we use qualitative measures and other means of “getting heard” that reflect neighborhood and cultural concerns about the particular needs of selected groups of children?

2:30 pm – 3:00 pm

CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL OBSERVATIONS

Claire Gibbons, Senior Program Officer, *Robert Wood Johnson Foundation*

Lola Adedokun, Program Director, *Doris Duke Charitable Foundation*

3:00 PM

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