

# **A Summary of The Final Report of The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People**

## **A Danish Answer to a Western Challenge**

**The Commission for the Well-Being of Children  
and Young People**

**February 2025**



# Preface

Contemporary societal diagnoses are like individual diagnoses: they easily risk becoming definitive for how we understand ourselves. As Grundtvig said, *"The word creates what it names."* Therefore, it matters greatly how we describe and understand our contemporary society. The stories we tell ourselves and each other about the age we live in will inevitably shape and colour our self-perception and communal life. We humans do not just live our own lives, but also those of our time and age. Whether we like it or not, our lives are always influenced by the cultural, structural, technological, pedagogical, and political currents driving societal development.

The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People was tasked with understanding the paradoxical development that Denmark and other Western societies are experiencing: increasing wealth and accelerated freedom seemingly do not translate into greater life satisfaction and well-being among children and young people. What is at stake? What should we do? These questions have guided the commission's work.

Specifically, the commission was asked to *"shed light on the challenges relating to well-being and make recommendations on how to prevent and address poor well-being and vulnerability, as well as how to strengthen resilience and empowerment"* and to examine *"the influence of social media and other major societal trends."* The work was to *"focus on the broad, general group of children and young people aged 0–25."* In other words, the task was extensive—but above all, it was important. In the end, a society must be measured by whether people live happy, active, and meaningful lives: welfare and growth can never be goals in themselves, but must always be means. The subtitle of the commission's final report is: A

Danish Answer to a Western Challenge. This reflects the commission's ambition to take what Denmark does well—pedagogy, education, democracy, life enlightenment, character development, communities, and a strong civil society—and formulate a Danish response to the challenges relating to well-being that many Western societies are facing. A response in which children and young people themselves, parents, educators, teachers, coaches, volunteers in civil society, and everyone else involved in their lives, become part of the solution. The commission firmly believes that Denmark has favourable conditions for solving these challenges to well-being and creating a society where children and young people live good lives. But this requires all of us to take responsibility. There is no need for finger-pointing: instead, we should each ask: How can I contribute?

In recent years, considerations around children and young people's well-being have come to be dominated by healthcare-related disciplines. As a society, we have mainly looked to psychologists and psychiatrists for answers, and there is often no distinction between poor well-being and illness. The ordinary has been medicalized, and a generation of children and young people has been left with a diagnostic vocabulary to understand universal human conditions. This development is unhelpful. In this report, the commission therefore presents a number of proposals for a new way forward—guided by our own history and pedagogical tradition and recognising that the challenges we face cannot be solved in silos.


On the contrary, this requires that we recognise that challenges and solutions differ by age, gender, and background, and that children and young people's lives unfold in several arenas: the family,

public institutions and schools, the digital world, civil society, and leisure.

Well-being challenges are and will remain a wicked and entangled problem. To solve them, we must acknowledge this complexity and accept that the task cannot (only) be solved top-down, but will require a mix of political framing, regulation, a revitalised pedagogical approach, stronger communities, cultural change, and character development.

Expressed formally, the dual task is this: on the one hand, we must create a better—more tolerable—society for children and young people, and on the other hand, we must enable the individual and our communities to tolerate more. Not because anyone should learn to tolerate the intolerable, but because life, whether we like it or not, has both peaks and troughs—ups and downs. With a series of cross-age recommendations, the commission aims to help the group of children and young people who struggle with their self-image, due to inner unrest or external conditions, to have the opportunity to live good lives—for the benefit and joy of both the individual and the society.

On behalf of The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People,



Rasmus Meyer,  
Chairman, The Commission for the Well-Being of  
Children and Young People

# The members of the commission

- **Rasmus Meyer** (*Chairman*), Principal, Krogerup Folk High School
- **Andreas Rasch Christensen**, Head of Research, VIA University College
- **Christine Ravn Lund**, Chairwoman, Danish Youth Council (*Dansk Ungdoms Fællesråd*)
- **Hanne Kirk**, Programme Manager, COOP Crew
- **Karin Ingemann**, Head of Development, National Olympic Committee and Sports Confederation of Denmark (*Danmarks Idrætsforbund*)
- **Khalil Abdeddaim**, Playmaker (volunteer coach), GAME
- **Lene Tanggaard**, Principal, Kolding School of Design; Professor, Aalborg University
- **Marie Holt Hermansen**, Former Chairwoman, Danish School Students (*Danske Skoleelever*)
- **Mie Oehlenschläger**, Independent Tech and Policy Advisor
- **Simon Calmar Andersen**, Director, TrygFonden's Centre for Child Research; Professor, Aarhus University
- **Vibeke Jenny Koushede**, Dean, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Copenhagen

# The commission's understanding of well-being

The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People has formulated an understanding of well-being that makes it clear that *well-being* and *wellness* are not the same; that poor well-being and mental illness must not be conflated; that well-being and poor well-being should be understood as levels on a continuum; and that well-being is a category of expectation that must be understood in its context, among other things. The commission's definition of well-being is as follows:

*Well-being means generally feeling happy with your life. You experience well-being when you are able to grow, use your abilities, and take part in - and contribute to - communities. It is possible to experience well-being even during periods of adversity and challenge. What matters is the ability to cope with such periods.*

The commission wishes to emphasise that it is both an individual responsibility and a shared societal task to create good conditions for children and young people's well-being.

# Status of the well-being of children and young people

In recent years, well-being has increasingly taken up space in the public debate, but the discussion is often too black-and-white: the landscape of challenges relating to well-being is far more nuanced than the public conversation often suggests.

Based on a thorough review of existing knowledge from various studies, the commission concludes that it is not accurate to speak of a *well-being crisis*;

nevertheless, there are clear challenges to well-being that must be addressed.

The commission's broad analysis and cross-study review of existing knowledge about children and young people's well-being are detailed in the commission's *Baggrundsrapport. Status på trivslen blandt børn og unge* (Background report: Status of children and young people's well-being).

## A snapshot of the well-being of children and young people

- The vast majority of children and young people in Denmark experience high levels of **well-being**.
- By international standards, Danish children and young people generally experience high levels of well-being.
- Over a long period, there has been an **increase in poor well-being** among children and young people: not only in Denmark but also in **other Western countries**.
- This increase is seen both in the growing proportion of children and young people with very low levels of well-being and in a decline among those with very high levels.
- The proportion of children and young people with a registered **psychiatric diagnosis** is increasing—around one in ten—even though a mental disorder or developmental condition does not always equate to poor well-being.
- It is often observed that poor well-being is **particularly prevalent among older children and young people**.
- **Girls and young women generally report lower well-being than boys and young men**—especially in areas such as self-esteem, confidence in their own abilities, and physical symptoms. By some indicators, however, (such as externalising behaviour and social isolation), boys are not necessarily better off than girls.
- Although poor well-being affects children and young people widely, **social inequality exists**: children and young people from higher socio-economic backgrounds generally fare better than those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.
- **Certain groups** face greater well-being challenges: 1) children who are subject to social interventions; (2) children growing up with mental illness or other serious illness in the family; (3) children with disabilities; and (4) LGBT+ children and young people.

Note: This status overview is based on sources from The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People (2025).

*Baggrundsrapport. Status på trivslen blandt børn og unge.* (Background report: Status of well-being among children and young people).

# Factors and societal trends affecting the well-being of children and young people

The well-being of children and young people is influenced by many different factors. The commission has identified a number of *protective and risk factors*, which are considered particularly significant for the well-being of children and young people today. In selecting these factors, the commission drew, for example, on existing research on protective and risk factors, insights gained from the commission's tours around the country, meetings with researchers and professionals at the commission's knowledge workshops, perspectives from the commission's Children and Youth Panel, the commission's public hearing, meetings with stakeholders, and the knowledge of commission members within the field. The selected protective and risk factors identified are as follows:

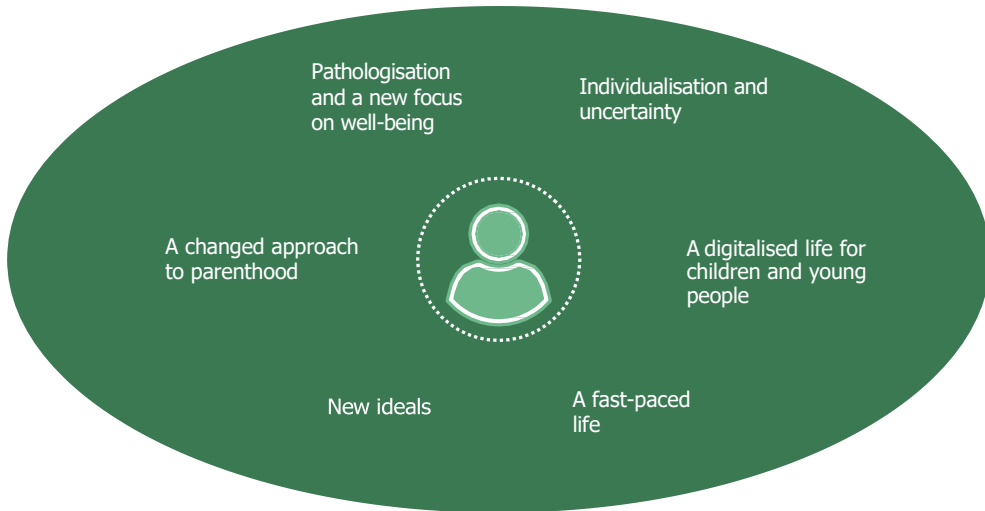
1. Self-esteem
2. Belief in one's own abilities
3. Socio-economic background
4. Ability to cope with stress and challenges

5. Attachment to parents or other caregivers
6. Friendships and communities
7. Relationships with adults, e.g., in early childhood education and care, school, education, and leisure activities
8. Sleep
9. Physical activity
10. Sense of meaning
11. Bullying and discrimination
12. Prolonged and severe stress exposure

In addition to these, the commission highlights *six recent societal trends* that may help explain the rising well-being challenges among children and young people. These trends are discussed individually but, in reality, they overlap, influencing and reinforcing each other to varying degrees.



## Societal trends affecting the well-being challenges of children and young people



Regardless of the more recent societal trends, there is significant social inequality in how low levels of well-being affect children and young people. Although this is not new, the commission believes that this recognition is essential: that it is still children and young people from socially and/or economically marginalised homes who remain most at risk of experiencing low levels of well-being in various ways.

### Individualisation and uncertainty

Children and young people today are free to shape their lives in ways that previous generations could not. This development is commendable, but it also appears to come with an emotional burden, as freedom and opportunities bring with them a new sense of responsibility and seriousness. Much suggests that today, it is not only all the things children and young people *must* do that put them under pressure, but equally all the things they *could* do that challenge them.

### A digitalised life for children and young people

Screens and digital services have, in a short time, become part of every aspect of children and young people's lives, and many spend a lot of time online—for example, on social media and gaming. This boundless access to digital services has consequences for their sense of self and their communities, and can lead to reduced sleep, difficulties concentrating, and feelings of loneliness,

among other things. At the same time, it takes time away from other important parts of childhood and youth, such as leisure activities, in-person interaction, play, and deep focus. The commercialised digital landscape permeates all aspects of children's and young people's lives and thus plays a role in several of the societal trends that are believed to contribute to the challenges to well-being.

### A fast-paced life

Many children and young people report living life at a rapid pace. This increase in pace is reflected in a dual movement. On the one hand, the speed of digital technology and the demands of online presence create new emotional pressures. On the other hand, there is the experience of a politically driven desire for progress and acceleration, which also becomes an emotional burden. This dual movement—digital high-speed and the experience of political pressure for pace—has seemingly resulted in children and young people feeling a new sense of being *out of breath*.

## New ideals

The combination of individualisation and a culture that has simultaneously liberated and isolated the individual, together with the commercialised digitalisation of children and young people's lives, has created a new reality in which children and young people measure themselves against (unattainable) ideals in new and different ways compared to the past. This can lead to a sense of inadequacy. Many children and young people also experience a discrepancy between the expectations and ideals they hold *for* and *about* their own lives and the reality they actually live.

## A changed approach to parenthood

Parenthood today is generally more competent and better informed than ever before, characterised by a high level of reflection and strong awareness of the parental role. Fortunately, most parents are committed to giving their children the best possible foundation for a good life, which is fundamentally positive. However, this increasing focus on children's well-being can, in some cases, lead to an overprotective, monitoring, and negotiative approach to upbringing which unintentionally risks resulting in poorer well-being and a weaker sense of the communities that their children are part of.

## Pathologisation and a new focus on well-being

As a society, we are currently preoccupied with well-being in a new and different way. This growing attention has brought with it a new tendency: pathologisation. Pathologisation describes a cultural and structural dual movement: a cultural shift in which universal human conditions are translated into something pathological, and a structural shift in which diagnoses become the gateway to certain forms of help and support within the public system.

# The commission's recommendations

The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People has aimed to formulate a Danish answer to a Western challenge—an answer rooted in what we do well in Denmark: pedagogy, life education (*dannelse*), democracy, enlightenment of life, character development, communities, and a strong civil society. An answer in which children and young people, parents, educators, teachers, coaches, volunteers in civil society, and everyone else involved in the lives of children and young people must be part of the solution.

The commission firmly believes that, as a society, we have strong conditions for tackling the challenges to well-being and creating a society where children and young people can live good lives. However, this requires all of us to take responsibility. The well-being challenges are complex and cannot be solved by a quick fix or only from the top down. On the contrary, what is needed is a combination of different measures and initiatives. And—most importantly—that we all contribute and take responsibility.

Against this background, the commission presents 35 recommendations divided into eight themes. These recommendations should be viewed as a whole: taken together, they will help ensure that children and young people have better conditions for well-being and living good lives in the future.

The eight themes and the recommendations are detailed in the commission's report *Et dansk svar på en vestlig udfordring* (A Danish Answer to a Western Challenge), which can be downloaded from the website of The Commission for the Well-Being of Children and Young People: [www.trivselskommissionen.dk](http://www.trivselskommissionen.dk)

## A new discourse about well-being

### Recommendation 1

A new way of talking about well-being:

- An effort by everyone to nuance the discourse about well-being
- Open debate about the understanding of well-being
- Clear definition of well-being when the term is used, for example, in legislation

### Recommendation 2

Establish an expert group on the consequences of the increasing number of psychiatric diagnoses among children and young people

### Recommendation 3

Put the needs of children and young people at the centre of support and initiatives in schools

### Recommendation 4

Revision of well-being surveys:

- Revise the national well-being surveys (*conducted at Danish educational institutions*)
- Create a new name for the well-being surveys
- Reduce the number of well-being surveys
- Use well-being surveys as a management tool
- Conduct repeated quality assessments in early childhood education and care

## A balanced digital life

### Recommendation 5

Pressure on the EU for stricter regulation and enforcement of digital services:

- Ban retention mechanisms and addictive design
- Effective and mandatory age verification
- Ban advertising to children and young people on digital services

### Recommendation 6

Postpone children's smartphone debut until they are at least 13 years old

### Recommendation 7

Adults as digital role models:

- Adults should lead by example
- Parental agreements should be established on children's use of digital services
- Agreements should be established on screen time at home
- Leisure and community life should support delaying children's debut on social media

### Recommendation 8

Smartphone-free primary and lower secondary school as well as in upper secondary education:

- Primary and lower secondary education should be made smartphone-free—including after-school care (*SFO*) and recreational centres
- Upper secondary educational institutions must have a clear screen policy
- Children and young people should be equipped to use digital technologies responsibly

### Recommendation 9

Firewalls in all primary and lower secondary education, boarding schools (*efterskoler*), preparatory basic education (*FGU*), and upper secondary education

### Recommendation 10

Stop livestreaming children's and young people's sports activities

## Character development and empowerment

### Recommendation 11

Character development as a central element of early childhood education and care and in municipal primary and lower secondary education (*the Folkeskole*):

- Character development must be explicitly addressed in the purpose clause of the Act on Day Care Facilities
- Character development must be explicitly addressed in the purpose clause of the Folkeskole Act (*act on municipal primary and lower secondary education*)
- Character development as part of teacher's and child and youth care professional's training programmes
- Character development as part of the pedagogical assistant programme

### Recommendation 12

Democratise access to boarding schools (*efterskoler*):

- Reduce financial barriers to attending a boarding school
- Reduce cultural barriers to attending a boarding school
- Evaluate whether access to boarding schools has become more democratised
- More parents and young people should choose boarding schools

### Recommendation 13

Strengthen opportunities for more young people to attend a Danish folk high school (*højskole*):

- More young people should prioritise a folk high school stay
- Folk high schools should offer more scholarships for attendance
- More free places at folk high schools and the possibility of exemption from self-payment requirements
- Reduce cultural barriers to attending a folk high school

### Recommendation 14

More young people in part-time jobs:

- More young people in part-time jobs
- Increased cooperation between municipal youth schools and the local business community to get more young people into part-time jobs
- A positive first encounter with the labour market
- Teaching in schools and municipal youth schools (*ungdomsskoler*) to help young people get a part-time job
- Implement the initiatives from the government proposal *More Young People Should Have a Part-Time Job*

### Recommendation 15

More children and young people with experience of volunteering:

- Use local elective subjects to teach about volunteering
- Focus on conducting mandatory work experience (short-term internship during lower secondary education) in voluntary associations and organisations
- Trials with volunteering internships
- Make it easier to combine upper secondary and higher education with voluntary engagement

### Recommendation 16

Art and culture for more children and young people:

- Promote children and young people's joy of reading through municipal library services
- Municipal prioritisation of cultural activities for children and young people
- Support for the trial of a culture pass for young people

## A contemporary pedagogical practice

### **Recommendation 17**

Contemporary pedagogical practice in early childhood education and care, primary and lower secondary education, and upper secondary education

### **Recommendation 18**

Contemporary pedagogical practice in higher education

### **Recommendation 19**

A stronger general education system that supports better well-being for more pupils

### **Recommendation 20**

Change the grading scale

### **Recommendation 21**

Adjust the assessment load in municipal primary and lower secondary education (*the Folkeskole*)

### **Recommendation 22**

Study new ways of using grades in upper secondary education

### **Recommendation 23**

Fewer class changes during the foundation course of three-year upper secondary programmes

## Social communities during leisure time

### Recommendation 24

All children and young people should have a leisure activity together with others

### Recommendation 25

All municipalities should have a leisure pass scheme

### Recommendation 26

More children and young people engaged in leisure and community life:

- Municipal prioritisation of cooperation with leisure and community associations
- An independent purpose clause for after-school care (*SFO*)
- New models for collaboration between leisure and community life and after-school pedagogical services

### Recommendation 27

Safe and inclusive communities in leisure and community life:

- Safe and inclusive communities in leisure and community life
- Less bureaucracy for associations and civil society
- Support for civil society's social initiatives for children and young people

### Recommendation 28

Safe youth communities and a healthy alcohol culture:

- Safe youth communities in upper secondary education
- Alcohol-free study start in upper secondary education, preparatory basic education (*FGU*) and higher education
- Alcohol policies at boarding schools (*efterskoler*), upper secondary education, preparatory basic education (*FGU*) and higher education
- Parental agreements on alcohol consumption and use of tobacco and nicotine products
- Adjustment of the alcohol content limit for retail sale



## The body and movement

### Recommendation 29

More physical activity and joy of movement in children and young people's lives:

- Greater focus on the body and movement in early childhood education and care
- More play in everyday life
- Prioritise and monitor physical activity in municipal primary and lower secondary education (*the Folkeskole*)
- Strengthen young people's connection to leisure and community life

### Recommendation 30

Offer children and young people realistic and healthy body images:

- Continued prioritisation of teaching about body and identity
- Safe changing rooms in primary and lower secondary education and upper secondary education
- Smartphone-free changing rooms in leisure and community life

## Early and timely intervention

### Recommendation 31

Continued focus on systematically identifying children and young people at risk of experiencing low levels of well-being:

- Continued focus on systematically identifying children and young people experiencing low levels of well-being and earlier intervention at municipal level
- Maintain existing initiatives for early identification within the healthcare sector

### Recommendation 32

Pedagogical and social well-being initiatives as part of easily accessible treatment services

### Recommendation 33

Promote low-threshold services (*lavtærskeltilbud*):

- Continued prioritisation of financial support for low-threshold services
- Increase awareness of low-threshold services
- Evaluation of low-threshold services

## Parenthood in 2025

### Recommendation 34

Parenthood in 2025 to be debated, based on the commission's 'seven recommendations for better parenting'

### Recommendation 35

Support for vulnerable parent groups and parents of children and young people with special needs





## Read more

You can read about the commission's work, analyses, and results in the commission's report and background report on the commission's website:

[www.trivselskommissionen.dk](http://www.trivselskommissionen.dk).