



# The Relevance of School Coexistence Free of Peer Violence in Relation to Children's Subjective Well-Being: An Essay Article

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## Abstract

Peer violence within school coexistence exposes children and adolescents to risk and vulnerability, therefore scholar bullying is also a relevant issue on childhood well-being. In that sense, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child constitutes a framework for promoting children's well-being in schooling and education: in relation to protection rights from all forms of violence, schools should protect children from physical, mental or any other danger. The negative influence of scholar peer violence on children's subjective well-being can be explored through the analysis of the responses given by a probabilistic sample of primary school children from Barcelona in 2017 (mean age = 10.7, analysed sample = 3,962) to the Barcelona Survey of Children's Subjective Well-Being, an adapted version of the third wave of the International Survey of Children's Well-Being from the Children's Worlds international research project. It is noteworthy the negative influence of the scholar peer violence on the children's subjective well-being, and that there are children without the personal and social support for deal with this type of adversity. Finally, some children's interpretations and their proposals are shared to 'taking decidedly action against bullying and preventing it'.

**Keywords** School coexistence · Peer violence · Children's well-being · Protection rights · Barcelona Children's Worlds

## Background

Peer violence within school coexistence exposes children and adolescents to risk and vulnerability (Olweus & Breivik, 2014). Therefore, in addition to school satisfaction, scholar bullying is also a relevant issue on childhood well-being (Dinisman et al., 2015; Lawler

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et al., 2015). In that sense, children who report having been bullied at school display lower subjective well-being (SWB); expression related to being older, a girl, or materially deprived (Bradshaw et al., 2017). In their study, Savahl et al. (2019) found that, although some children having been bullied presented adequate levels of life satisfaction, they may still be at risk, as they could display adverse psychological traits. And Zarate-Garza et al. (2017) suggested that chronic peer violence could have physiological and mental health consequences related to stress.

Under bullying phenomenon, schools play an important function in improving emotional well-being for 21st-century children, since teachers help raise their self-esteem and motivation by being a role model, mentor and educator (Choi, 2018). For Jiang et al. (2014) in based on the United Nations (1989), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child constitutes a framework for promoting children's well-being in schooling and education by offering them provision, protection and participation rights. Regarding provision rights, schools should be easily and readily accessible to all children and provide them with opportunities for development. As for protection rights, schools should protect children from physical, mental or any other danger. And, finally, in terms of participation rights, schools need to ensure children have a variety of participation and self-determination rights.

Briefly, children's SWB is essential for promoting positive development, but also for identifying risks, and it seems to be influenced by housing, safety, bullying, school achievements and social interactions (Dinisman et al., 2015). In addition to this, freedom to choose and self-perception (Lee & Yoo, 2017), but also social support, friendliness and choice about time use, have all been reported as relevant factors contributing to children's SWB (Bradshaw & Rees, 2017). Children's SWB usually decreases with age (Casas & González-Carrasco, 2018), and it may also vary according to gender, home context, family/peer/teacher relationships, school context, and neighbourhood quality (Newland et al., 2018). About children's SWB in schooling and education, Casas and González-Carrasco (2017) underlined that, in children's minds, satisfaction with life as a student and satisfaction with school experiences extend far beyond the boundaries of the school: when children are very satisfied with teachers and peers, children consider school as one world, and when one of the two dimensions does not provide enough satisfaction, they represent school as two different worlds.

What is more, in cases of low SWB, girls' SWB was driven by relational factors such as satisfaction with peers, whilst for boys, school was the main factor (Kaye-Tzadok et al., 2017). And children's SWB in schooling and education has also been found to decrease with age and depends on how their teachers and schoolmates treat them, as well as how safe they feel at school (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017). Considering that children make relevant groups of friends from the networks created with classmates (Ivaniushina & Alexandrov, 2017), support from family and friends predict satisfaction with life and with school experience in children aged 10–12, but friends support is a more important predictor than family support (Oriol et al., 2017). According to Holder and Coleman (2015), children's friendships are closely associated with children's well-being, greater self-worth and coping skills later in life. They found that children who enjoy close friendships experience higher levels of happiness, life satisfaction and self-esteem, besides lower levels of loneliness, depression and victimization.

Lastly, Kutsyuruba et al. (2015) argue that a positive school climate, a safe school environment and a favourable well-being are all critical to children's academic, emotional and social needs. They therefore stress the importance of remembering that children's

educational experience occurs in classrooms, peer groups, the school, the school board, and the neighbourhood. Sancassiani et al. (2015) also argue that targeting social and emotional competences and attitudes about oneself, others and school is useful for enhancing healthy behaviours, promoting psychological well-being, and improving academic performance. Meanwhile, Cheney et al. (2014) stress that psychological interventions in schools are related to social and emotional aspects of learning, as well as cognitive, behavioural and social skills.

In line with this background, the main objective of this essay article is to know the negative influence of scholar peer violence on children's SWB. The following research questions underline the specific objectives:

How many children say they perceive peer violence in their schools?

Is there peer violence the same in all schools?

How is the environment of interpersonal relationships of children perceiving scholar peer violence?

What does scholar peer violence involve in the children's SWB?

## Methodological Approach

### Design, Data Collection and Sample

The negative influence of scholar peer violence on children's SWB can be explored through the analysis of the responses given by a probabilistic sample of primary school children from Barcelona in 2017 (mean age=10.7, analysed sample=3,962) to the Barcelona Survey of Children's SWB, an adapted version of the third wave of the International Survey of Children's Well-Being from the Children's Worlds international research project. Using this survey for knowing children's SWB was the first act of 'The Children Have Their Say Programme', which is promoted by the Barcelona City Council and developed by the Barcelona Institute of Childhood and Adolescence as a local tool to know and improve children's well-being from their point of view and with them taking an active role (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017; Institut Infància i Adolescència de Barcelona 2019a).

### Instruments

The Barcelona Survey of Children's SWB is based on the questionnaire for the children's SWB analysis of the Children's Worlds international research project. The purpose of Children's Worlds is to gain the widest possible view of children's lives and well-being by asking them questions in which they evaluate their lives and their specific aspects so that the effect of living circumstances or contexts on their well-being can be analysed (Andresen et al., 2020a; Andresen et al., 2020b). The children's SWB is generally defined as a broad concept, which includes the cognitive and affective evaluations that children make of their lives, the circumstances that affect their lives, and the contexts in which they live (Savahl, 2017). Accordingly, the questionnaire includes different questions for measuring the children's SWB, such as children's satisfaction with their life as a whole (Children's Worlds SWB Scale) and expectations, by domains (self and health, family and home, school and friendships, or local and time), as well as their affective state (both positive and negative). The questionnaire also includes questions about the

relational experience of children in their family, school and local environment, if they perceive scholar peer violence, as well as the frequency of children's participation in activities outside the school. Also, the living context of children is characterized by an index of material deprivation adapted by Children's Worlds (Barrett & Russell, 1998; Boyce et al., 2006; Casas, 2019; Casas & González-Carrasco, 2019; Casas et al., 2012, 2013; Cummins & Lau, 2005; Currie et al., 2008; Huebner, 1991; Russell, 2003; Seligson et al., 2003).

## Data Analysis

Using the guidelines from Hair, Tatham, Anderson and Black (1999), a cluster analysis was performed to identify homogeneous groups of children according to whether they perceive peer violence in their schools (see Table 1), as the grouping or structure of the data was not previously known. The method chosen for cluster analysis was updated K-means, since it can be used to test different number of models or prototypes. A set of three clusters was adopted, since using two clusters is too generic, and more clusters do not offer practical information, as there can be too many similar central responses between clusters, as well as resulting in cluster sizes that are statistically too small. For instance, it is the case for children within 'only aggressors' situations'. The number of iterations was 1, and the convergence criterion was 0.5. IBM SPSS 25.0 was used.

After this main step, the three identified clusters are described by school (see Fig. 1). It is also tested if there are statistically significant mean differences at the 0.05 level in interpersonal relationships variables (see Fig. 2) and children's SWB indicators (see Fig. 3). IBM SPSS 25.0 was used.

## Ethical Issues

Based on the best interest of all children to be heard without any discrimination to maximize their personal and social development when making decisions that affect their lives, 'The Children Have Their Say Programme' is defined as a local tool for knowing and promoting the children's well-being. It is guided by of criteria for the assessment of social needs and the development of psychosocial intervention plans. Following guidelines for ethical research with children, children are treated as key informants or experts in their lives (first act in 2017: the Barcelona Survey of Children's SWB), researchers who learn

**Table 1** Scholar peer violence, by gender and living context

	Gender		Materially deprived	
	Girls	Boys	Yes	No
Neither victim nor aggressor (49.7%)	65.1%	49.9%	53.1%	57.8%
Situations as a victim (22.4%)	22.8%	29.0%	22.2%	26.3%
Situations as victim and aggressor (14.5%)	12.2%	21.1%	24.7%	16.0%
TOTAL	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

*The questionnaire includes some questions that can help detecting different types of peer violence perceived by children in the school context: the frequency of 'being hit', 'being called nasty names', and 'being left out' during the last month ('never', 'once', 'two or three times', and 'more than three times'), and the frequency of having it exercised itself (in the same format of questions)*

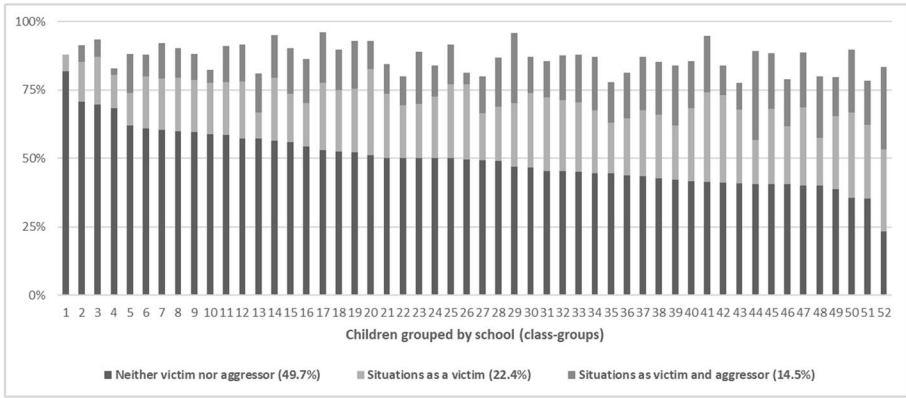


Fig. 1 Scholar peer violence, by school

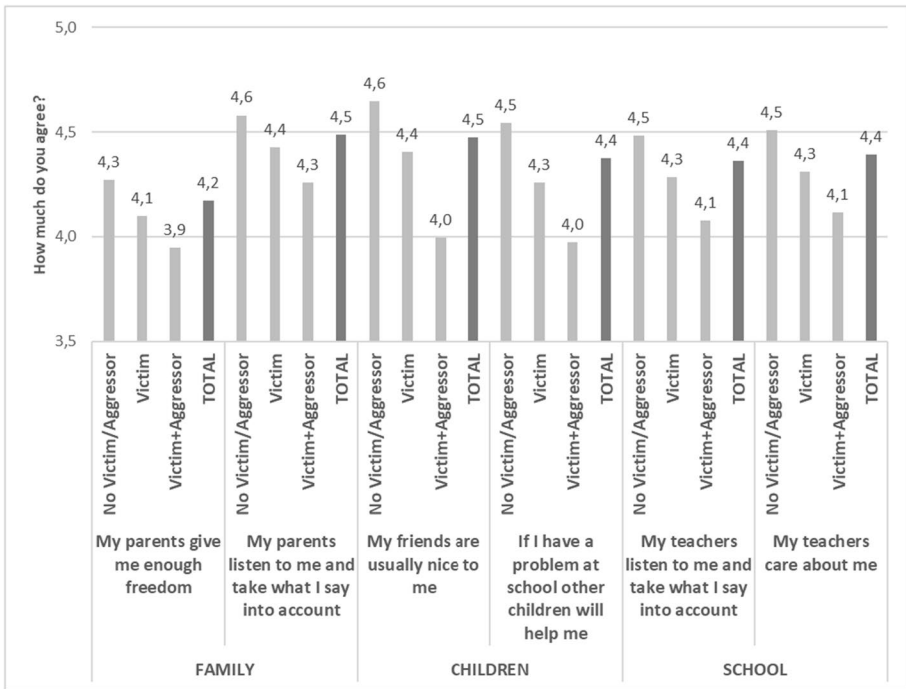


Fig. 2 Children’s agreement about their interpersonal relationships, by scholar peer violence situation

(second act in 2018: participatory process through workshops on return and interpretation of the results to formulate improvement proposals) and active citizens (third act mainly in the years 2018–2020: through the Children’s Agenda, dialogues aperture by a ‘Spokeskids Group’ of children or already young adolescents with adults, social organizations, representatives of the administration, and political parties) (Ajuntament de Barcelona, 2017;

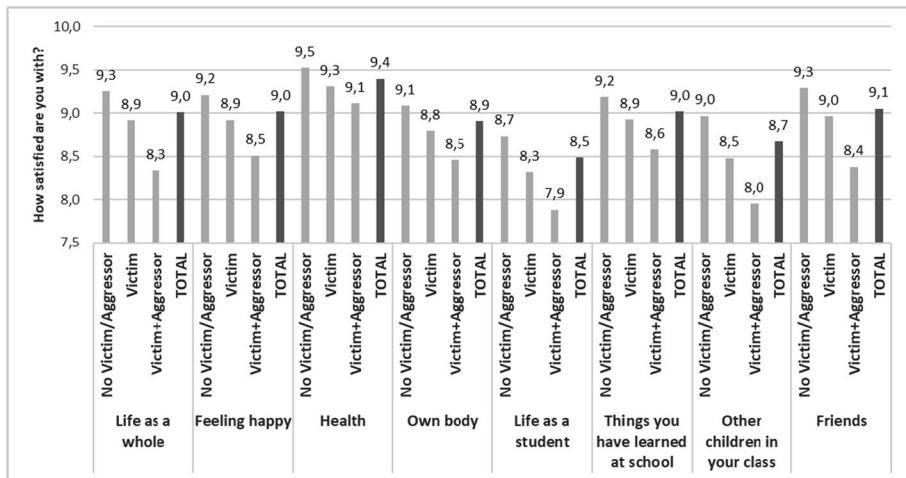


Fig. 3 Children's SWB, by scholar peer violence situation

Corominas et al., 2019; Graham et al., 2013; Institut Infància i Adolescència de Barcelona 2019a; UN Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2009).

## Results

### How many Children Say they Perceive Peer Violence in their Schools?

As presented in Table 1, the main results indicate that 49.7% of children does not claim to be a victim or an aggressor of scholar peer violence, 22.4% is found in situations as a victim, and 14.5% in situations as victim and aggressor (13.4% does not answer all questions about scholar peer violence and the pattern cannot be identified). In relation to gender, girls generally neither are victims nor aggressors (65.1%), although 22.8% claims to be in situations as a victim, and 12.2% in situations as victim and aggressor. In contrast, boys tend to be more involved than girls in situations as a victim (29.0%), or in situations as victim and aggressor (21.1%). And, in relation to living context, although materially deprived children usually neither are victims nor aggressors (53.1%), they claim to be in situations as a victim (22.2%), and also in situations as victim and aggressor (24.7%); in this case with a major proportion than children not materially deprived (16.0%).

The results of the Barcelona Children's SWB analysed here are consistent with the results of other local sources, such as the 'Risk factors survey in the secondary school in Barcelona 2016' to adolescents aged 13–19 by the Public Health Agency of Barcelona, as well as the 'Survey of school and security coexistence in Catalonia 2017' to adolescents aged 12–18 by the Departments of Security and Education of the Government of Catalonia. According to the first survey, 1 in every 10 adolescents is a victim or an aggressor in the school context, with more girls as victims and more boys as aggressors, but with independence of economic context. By the second one, to the question 'do you think there are boys or girls who are maltreated in your class?', 1 in every 4 adolescents says yes (Generalitat de Catalunya, 2017; Santamariña-Rubio et al., 2017).

## Is there Peer Violence the Same in all Schools?

From the 52 schools of the sample and their class-groups, as shown in Fig. 1, in all schools there are children who claim to be in situations as a victim or in situations as victim and aggressor, but with different intensities. In a half of the schools this is not the majority situation as most children are not in situations of peer violence (between five and eight in every ten children affirm not being in situations of school peer violence). However, in the other half of the schools, between four and six in every ten children claim to be in situations as a victim or in situations as victim and aggressor.

## How is the Environment of Interpersonal Relationships of Children Perceiving Scholar Peer Violence?

Referring to Fig. 2, in the most significant interpersonal relationships, children who perceive situations of scholar peer violence as a victim, but also as victim and aggressor, they feel interpersonal relationships less enjoyable. What is more relevant, in the family context, children as victim and aggressor feel their parents give them less freedom (3,9/5) than children as victim (4,1/5), and that their parents listen to them and take what they say into account in a lesser extent (4,3/5 and 4,4/5, respectively). With other children, children as victim and aggressor feel their friends are less nice to them (4,0/5) than children as victim (4,4/5), and that if they have a problem at school other children will not help them in a major extent (4,0/5 and 4,3/5, respectively). Lastly, in the school context, children as victim and aggressor feel their teachers listen to them and take what they say into account in a lesser extent (4,1/5) than children as victim (4,3/5), and that their teachers care about them also in a lesser extent (4,1/5 and 4,3/5, respectively). Congruently, children who do not are directly in scholar peer violence situations are more positive with their interpersonal relationships than who are in scholar peer violence situations.

## What does Scholar Peer Violence Involve in the Children's SWB?

As seen from the Fig. 3, children who perceive situations of school peer violence as a victim, but also as victim and aggressor, are less satisfied with their life as a whole and feel less happy (in comparison with no victims/aggressors). They are also less satisfied with their health and own bodies, as well as their lives as student, things they have learned as school, other children in their class and friends. What is more relevant again, children who perceive situations of school peer violence as victim and aggressor show a lower SWB than children who perceive situations of school peer violence as a victim, but not as an aggressor.

## Main Conclusions and Implications

### Children are Aware of Scholar Peer Violence

With this essay article is showed that, when asked, the children report experiencing scholar peer violence situations, either as a victim or as a victim and aggressor. This fact reported by children is in line with the observations of different researchers on that scholar bullying is a childhood vulnerability factor (Bradshaw et al., 2017; Dinisman et al., 2015; Lawler et al., 2015; Olweus & Breivik, 2014). With this essay article, it is also found that, due to their personal and social circumstances, the materially deprived children can be more

exposed to scholar bullying (Bradshaw et al., 2017). But not only the girls as suggested the analysis by Bradshaw et al. (2017), since are the boys who reported experiencing more scholar peer violence in this case. This gender difference by studies surely reflects the complexity of the phenomenon of scholar bullying.

Moreover, this essay article provide evidence about the different intensities of scholar peer violence by school: in all schools there are children who claim to be in situations as a victim or in situations as victim and aggressor, but it is noteworthy that, while in some schools they are concrete cases, in others they are practically the majority. This fact also reported by children interpellated their protection rights in schooling and education, that schools should protect children from physical, mental or any other danger (Jiang et al., 2014; United Nations, 1989). In that sense, it is essential that teachers could be a role model, mentor and educator (Choi, 2018), next to schools with the facilitators to guarantee a positive school climate (Kutsyuruba et al., 2015), targeting social and emotional competences (Sancassiani et al., 2015), and psychological interventions if it were the case (Cheney et al., 2014).

### **The Negative Influence of Scholar Peer Violence on the Children's SWB**

With this essay article is also showed the negative influence of scholar peer violence on the children's SWB: children who do not are directly in scholar peer violence situations are more positive with their interpersonal relationships and presents a better SWB than who are in scholar peer violence situations. Moreover, children who perceive situations of scholar peer violence as a victim and aggressor feel interpersonal relationships less enjoyable than victims (either in the family context, as with other children and in the school context). And the same pattern is observed with the children's SWB indicators (life as a whole, happiness, satisfaction with health and own bodies, as well as their lives as students, things they have learned as school, or other children in their class and friends).

This evidence is in line with the observations of other researchers in relation to social support and friendliness (Bradshaw & Rees, 2017), the variation of the children's SWB according to peer relationships (Newland et al., 2018), and that children's SWB depends on how their teachers and schoolmates treat them, as well as how safe they feel at school (Kutsar & Kasearu, 2017). It is also relevant to consider that, in children's minds, satisfaction with life as a student and satisfaction with school experiences extend far beyond the boundaries of the school: when children are very satisfied with teachers and peers, children consider school as one world, and when one of the two dimensions does not provide enough satisfaction, they represent school as two different worlds (Casas & González-Carrasco, 2017).

Furthermore, this essay article also reflects on the relevance of the school coexistence free of peer violence in the children's SWB. In that sense, in the schools where more children do not have enjoyable interpersonal relationships with the people of their environments, the children present different forms of school peer violence that affect their SWB, victims and aggressors at the same time, being aggressors in the cases of more adversity. There are children without the personal and social support for deal with this type of adversity. It is suggested that there are children who do not have the level of relational well-being they need for proper holistic development. This means that the children's perspective of their lives and well-being worsens when relationships with people around them do not are appropriate.



As limitations of the presented analysis, despite the relevant suggestions of the reported evidence, caution is needed in the extrapolation or generalization of the results. The analysis presented is exploratory and should be contrasted with other samples (for instance, from the Children's Worlds international research project). In addition, a constructive review with experts of the conceptual bases and statistical analysis is surely recommended. And complementing the statistical results with the children's interpretations of the phenomenon of scholar bullying is necessary to better understand the problem and be able to take adequate measures to prevent it. Finally, this essay article does not identify neither evaluate the public or social measures that are currently being carried out to prevent scholar bullying.

### **Taking Decidedly Action Against Scholar Bullying and Preventing it**

When through the 'The Children Have Their Say Programme' the first results of the survey were returned to the children who answered it and they were asked to interpret the results jointly, boys and girls said that their SWB in schooling and education is not only related to learning, but also interpersonal relationships with friends, classmates and teachers are key, as well as feeling safe at school. In this sense, feeling supported by teachers in difficult times, especially in case of bullying, is essential for children's lives. All this became the seventh highlight conclusion of the programme (Institut Infància i Adolescència de Barcelona 2017a, 2017b, 2019b, 2019c). In that sense, through the programme's interpretation workshops, some children had said:

'If other children don't treat you well, you feel anxious and you get sick more' (boy).

'Sometimes we do it as a joke, we laugh' (girl).

'Some time ago, I was bullied for my thinness and I was not funny' (girl).

'There are children who insult others about their body in order to feel superior' (girl).

'There is always a bunch of children making fun of children who are different' (girl).

'Sometimes they do it to weaker people, who may not have many friends because they are shy' (boy).

'There are children who are afraid to go to school because their peers play bad tricks on them' (girl).

'Sometimes we are not the ones who criticize someone for their body, but we also do it when we avoid contradict who criticize' (boy).

'If some children insult other children about his body, then we should not put on the part of the first ones' (boy).

'At the other school where I was going, there were more children from other countries and the others were leaving them alone' (boy).

What should we do in this regard? In the Children's Agenda, the seventh of 11 demands by children to improve their well-being was 'taking decidedly action against bullying and preventing it' (Institut Infància i Adolescència de Barcelona 2018). The seventh demand was related with others, such as 'feeling safer, and receiving more support when in times of trouble' (the third demand), 'more listening from adults and taking what we say seriously' (the fourth demand), and 'being better cared for, healthy habits and satisfaction with one's body' (the eight demand). As children were asked to, they reflected on themselves, but also made proposals to families, schools in general, and the city council or public authorities:

#### Children themselves:

- Treating other children well, communicating with everyone and not bullying or encouraging it (proposal 64).
- Helping classmates who are bullied by supporting, warning and defending them in front of teachers (proposal 65).
- Not judging or messing classmates about their physical appearance and, at the same time, accept our body and ignore the insults of others (proposal 66).

#### Families:

- Asking us more often how we feel and support us if we have a conflict with classmates (proposal 62).
- Talking a lot more with teachers to find out how we are with our classmates (proposal 63).

#### Schools in general:

- Supporting and helping students when they have problems with classmates (proposal 59).
- Watching more to prevent conflicts, especially in the yard (proposal 60).
- Talking about bullying at school and doing activities to prevent it from happening (proposal 61).

#### The city council and public authorities:

- Organizing campaigns and activities to prevent bullying, such as talks, neighbourhood and school outreach activities, surveys to identify bullying, etc. (proposal 57).
- Controlling bullying in schools and through Internet networks, and helping address bullying by going to schools, acting as mediators with families, with psychologists, etc. (proposal 58).

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**Availability of Data and Material** Data source is available in the ‘public opinion poll register’ of the Barcelona City Council: <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/en/administrative-information/public-opinion-poll-register> (18,017—Enquesta de Benestar Subjectiu de la Infància a Barcelona, 2017, EBSIB).

**Code Availability** Not applicable.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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