A Cross-Sectoral Model of Child Well-Being in Estonia: Summary[1]

Investments in children are often made primarily to promote their future well-being, with less attention paid to their current situation. In a critical analysis of various welfare state systems, Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2002), an internationally recognised Danish political scientist and sociologist, argued that the traditional welfare state has focused primarily on compensating for social risks that have already arisen (e.g. unemployment, illness, etc). However, he believes that the central task of the 21st century welfare state should be to invest in a good childhood. According to Esping-Andersen, investing in children's well-being is not just a matter of social policy; it is also linked to other policy areas and to ensuring social justice in both present-day and future societies. James J. Heckman, a Nobel Prize laureate, agrees with Esping-Andersen, arguing that investing in children from an early age is the most economically rewarding approach and the most effective way to reduce social inequality.

Although numerous studies have been conducted on children in Estonia, the data are scattered and there is no comprehensive overview of children's circumstances. However, to invest in a good childhood, we need regular, comprehensive and reliable data on children's well-being. This data must be cross-sectoral, evidence-based and grounded in the scientific concept of well-being, as well as being tailored to the Estonian context.

The report, *A Cross-Sectoral Model of Child Well-Being in Estonia*, presents a comprehensive model of child well-being developed by the University of Tartu, the Praxis think tank and the National Institute for Health Development. This model is tailored to present-day Estonia and will form the basis of a child well-being dashboard. The study was commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs, who received co-funding from the European Union. Development of the child well-being model involved a project working group consisting of children and young people aged 14–20 from various parts of Estonia and diverse backgrounds. These young people formed the Youth Council. A steering group of experts from various fields also served in an advisory capacity.

The first step in the development of the model was to create a framework for children's well-being in Estonia. Drawing on contemporary research literature on children's well-being, as well as Estonian normative and strategic documents, a preliminary version of the framework was drafted. This was then refined through seminars and discussions with the Youth Council, a steering group of experts, and individuals directly involved in children's well-being, including parents, professionals, and interest groups working with children and young people at local and national levels. To ensure that the developing model considers the circumstances relating to the well-being of Estonian children at higher risk of vulnerability, additional data was collected from children.

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[1] In the fall of 2025, a collaborative project commissioned by the Ministry of Social Affairs and carried out by the University of Tartu, the PRAXIS Think Tank, and the National Institute for Health Development, titled "Creating a Conceptual Model of Estonian Children's Well-being and Developing Its Indicators," which is co-financed by the European Union's 2021–2027 Cohesion and Internal Security Policy Fund. See: https://www.sm.ee/lapsed-ja-hoolekanne/lapsed-ja-pered/laste-heaolu-andmepilt

The model is based on the conceptual model of well-being across societal domains and the life course in Estonia (Kutsar et al., 2026); Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory; Corsaro's (1997) orb web model of child development; and Nahkur's (2024) theoretical framework of vulnerability and resilience. The model treats well-being as a multidimensional, multilevel and time-varying relational process: it is created collectively through interpersonal interactions in various places and situations. It emerges from the combined influence of well-being-related factors located in different domains and levels of a child's life (see figure). The model addresses the following domains: health; material resources; environment and living conditions; self-development and learning; time organisation and leisure; safety and protection; relationships; and culture and integration. Additionally, the model incorporates cross-cutting sub-areas: agency and autonomy; inclusive and equitable prevention and support; and technology and digital life. Distinctions are made between the levels of the child, family, peers, educational institutions, local government, state and society.

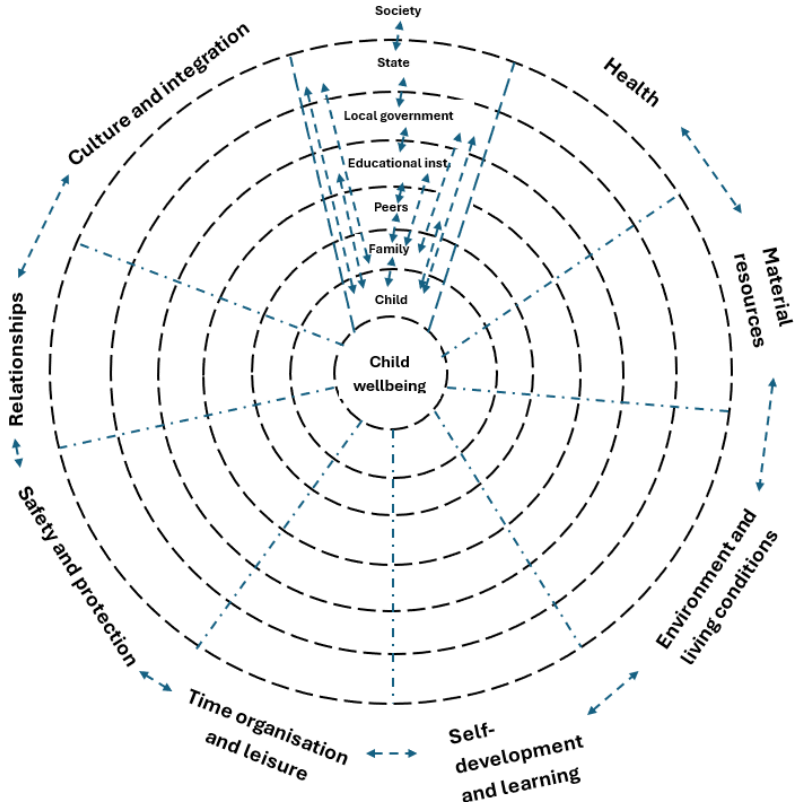


Figure. Diagram of the Estonian Cross-Sectoral Framework for Children's Well-Being.

The next step in the development of the model was to create a system of indicators for the well-being of Estonian children. Data characterising children's well-being were identified across different domains and levels of well-being, and a suitable set of indicators for measuring children's well-being was proposed and placed within the framework of the model. The resulting model was then tested and further developed in collaboration with Estonian experts, the project steering group and researchers from the Youth Council and the Centre of Excellence in Well-being Sciences. The model

comprises a set of approximately 250 indicators, most of which are supported by relevant data. These measure a child's subjective well-being, as well as well-being factors relating to the child and their environment, across various domains. To highlight differences in child well-being and potential inequalities and vulnerability, six cross-cutting dimensions were added: gender, age group, language/ethnicity, economic status, family type and special needs/disability. Data related to the indicators were analysed and compiled into a test dataset on child well-being to the extent possible.

Analysis of the test dataset revealed several important issues to consider when developing Estonia's cross-sectoral indicator system and dashboard for children in future. For example, the use of the data was limited by the sample size of various surveys, the representativeness of the results at local, county and national levels, and issues related to data confidentiality (including the risk of indirect identification and personal data protection requirements). In some cases, concerns were raised about the representativeness and reliability of survey data. For instance, certain surveys had too few respondents under the age of 18 to yield reliable estimates, or the age classification used in the questionnaire did not allow for differentiation between smaller groups. The usability of data for the consistent measurement of child well-being is also affected by instability in survey administration, such as changes to the timing and methodology of regular surveys.

The aim of developing the indicator system was to assess child well-being at a local level. However, the model's set of indicators allows child well-being to be monitored at the local municipality level using around 70 indicators. Data for around half of these indicators are available at county level, while data for 70% are available at regional level. The groups of children reflected in the data sources — categorised by age, economic status and other factors — are defined differently in various studies. This poses a challenge to the comprehensiveness and clarity of the data picture presented through the indicator system. Changes to the data source, an unclear frequency of data collection and/or long intervals between data collections may render the data from that source unusable for the purposes of this analysis. The report makes recommendations for addressing the above issues.

The Estonian child wellbeing model and its system of indicators have been developed in their entirety – covering all sectors and levels – for the first time. The indicator system, based on the framework of the model, can serve as the basis for developing a child wellbeing dashboard and as a research-based tool for making policy decisions relating to investment in a good childhood. Understandably, the indicator system is subject to further development and cannot be regarded as a definitively complete toolkit, as, on the one hand, opportunities for data use are evolving rapidly and, on the other, society as a whole is changing, including the factors that shape children's lives and well-being. The cross-sectoral child wellbeing model and indicator system now completed can be regarded as a solid foundation for measuring children's well-being in Estonia in a more informed, consistent and comprehensive manner.

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For more information, please write to oliver.nahkur@ut.ee and mari.sarv@sm.ee