



Policy integration and child well-being: What can countries do to become more effective?

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Good policy making for child well-being calls for government ministries, agencies and other service providers to better collaborate and to focus efforts on a small number of key child well-being issues. “Integrated policy making for child well-being” takes stock of OECD countries’ recent initiatives to strengthen the integration of child well-being policies. It lays out the challenges facing countries as they work to push the child well-being policy agenda forward and discusses what countries can do to become more effective.

- Integrated policy plans for child well-being are a widespread tool for policy integration. They set out the government’s approach to promoting child outcomes in several well-being domains. Half of OECD countries (21) have an integrated plan, with several in the early stages of implementing their first ever. To date, countries don’t have a long history of routine use of child-specific policy tools to inform policy and budgetary decisions, but there’s an expressed desire to change this and to build the relevant competencies.
- OECD countries generally view these integrated plans as making a positive contribution to coordinating the child well-being policy agenda. Integrated plans can provide the needed strategic direction, improve policy coherence, and increase the visibility of child well-being issues. Across countries, they are a basis for introducing new approaches to promoting child well-being, implementing system-wide reforms, and revising legislation. Nonetheless, growing them beyond a guiding framework to become a real driver of cross-government work is not easy.
- To become more effective, countries should use the integrated plans to generate traction on specific cross-cutting issues and to funnel attention to a “small number” of critical issues. Being clear and explicit about priority groups of children and their families is necessary, on top of thinking concretely about service integration. Moreover, to the greatest extent possible, streamlining coordination processes could help minimise the coordination burden that integrated plans may generate.
- Being strategic about investing in child-specific policy tools and extending their use is also called for. For example, there’s a need to set priorities for conducting child impact assessments and to better integrate them within child-specific budgeting methodologies, while assessing the “value for money” of public expenditures for children could help make budgetary decision on more solid grounds. Improving the child data infrastructure demands sustained investment, strong coordination of data production, and better use of untapped data sources.

The paper “Integrated policy making for child well-being: Common approaches and challenges ahead” (Dirwan and Thévenon, 2023^[1]) draws on responses to the [2022 OECD Child Well-being Policy Questionnaire](#) to give an overview of OECD countries’ recent initiatives to strengthen the integration of child well-being policies. It lays out the challenges countries face as they work to push the child well-being policy agenda forward and discusses what countries can do to become more effective.

OECD countries undertake a lot of different initiatives to strengthen integration of child well-being policies

OECD countries undertake a lot of different initiatives to strengthen the integration of child well-being policies. Integrated policy plans for child well-being are a widespread tool for policy integration, with countries generally viewing them as making a positive contribution to coordinating the child well-being policy agenda (Box 1). More than half of OECD countries (21 out of 34) have an integrated plan. For the past decade or longer, a good number of OECD countries and regions have been implementing integrated plans, while in the last year or two several countries and regions have started to implement their first-ever.

Box 1. What is an integrated policy plan for child well-being and how do they differ across the OECD?

The 2022 OECD Child Well-being Policy Questionnaire gathered examples of integrated policy plans for child well-being from 21 OECD countries and eight regions, which allowed for the first time ever to bring together a comprehensive picture of these plans and how they differ.

For starters, integrated policy plans for child well-being serve as a basis for cross-government work. OECD countries use these integrated plans to integrate existing and sometimes competing policy initiatives into a cohesive strategy, and to formalise coordination and cooperation across different government ministries and bodies. Put in more simple terms, countries use the integrated plans to outline clearly what matters for child well-being, what they wish to achieve, how they will go about this, what tools and instruments they will use and the resources they need, and who the main stakeholders are and what is expected from them.

From country to country, the scope of the integrated policy plans vary, as do implementation timeframes and the practice of identifying priority groups of children. Moreover, different policy approaches underpin the integrated policy plans. These policy approaches were broken down into four categories: child rights, child protection, and health, and well-being. Each approach is informed by countries’ key priorities, the types of capacity they wish to develop, as well as the understanding of what matters for child well-being. A **child-rights approach** is the most popular, reflecting the fundamental role of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) as a basis for child well-being policies. A **well-being approach** is the second most popular, highlighting the sometimes alignment of child well-being to broader well-being initiatives as well as efforts to enhance child outcomes in different well-being areas and to consider more systematically the potential interactions and trade-offs of intervening in different areas of children’s lives.

Integrated policy plans offer opportunities to steer the child policy agenda but can be tricky to grow beyond a guiding framework

“Integrated policy making for child well-being” establishes that countries generally view the integrated plans as offering a range of opportunities to steer the child well-being policy agenda. In the Questionnaire and across policy documents, countries describe them as useful for clarifying responsibilities, promoting coherence of actions on child well-being with other government priorities, and aligning child well-being policies with international commitments. Across the OECD, integrated policy plans are a basis for introducing **new approaches to promoting child well-being, implementing system-wide reforms, and revising legislation.**

Integrated policy plans can also provide the needed strategic direction to promoting child well-being and can serve as a **reference framework to structure and organise cross-government work.** For instance, Spain credits its integrated plan with improving the country’s strategic approach to child well-being as it established common approaches and objectives among different agencies, which as implementation progressed remained coherent (DGFCS, 2018^[2]). New Zealand uses the integrated plan in policy discussions to consider potential initiatives and actions from a child and youth perspective and to understand where the government’s programme of work fits in (Carter et al., 2022^[3]).

Growing the integrated policy plans beyond a guiding framework to become a real driver of cross-government work is tricky. Korea found that with its previous integrated plan, line ministries paid insufficient attention to implementing the country’s new approach to child policy. As a result, Korea’s current integrated plan focuses on policy objectives unique to children. Though this amounts to a smaller number of action areas, they consist of ones that are more relevant for policy coherence and achieving the integrated plan’s vision (MHW, 2020^[4]).

Evidence is mixed on whether integrated policy plans aid or hinder government and stakeholder to set clear priorities for child well-being. Integrated plans can come with broad agendas, which can create ambiguity over what governments need to first get right to promote child well-being. For instance, New Zealand found that its integrated plan does not provide enough clarity on where stakeholders need to focus efforts, giving rise to the need for the government to give explicit guidance on which outcomes to focus the particular actions, and to identify a small number of priority areas (Carter et al., 2022^[3]; DPMC, 2023^[5]).

To make the integrated policy plans more effective, OECD countries should consider narrowing down their scope and incentivising joint work

Focusing the integrated policy plans on a small number of cross-government activities could mean either **addressing a small number of clear priority issues** or **cross-cutting issues for which coordinated action** by different bodies, administrations, and potentially civil society organisation and other stakeholders is most needed. These priority issues should capture the very issues that are putting children’s well-being most at risk, be that specific problems or tricky implementation issues. For example, Australia has focused its two integrated plan on the “wicked problem” of child maltreatment because meaningful progress cannot be made here without the commitment and engagement of policy portfolios outside of the traditional child protection ones.

To encourage greater traction and buy-in, governments need to think further about changing established policy making processes and incentivising joint work. For example, adequate human and budgetary resources are needed to minimise the coordination burden, but very few countries report in the Questionnaire a dedicated budget to encourage and facilitate joint work. Indeed, some countries find it easier to find budget agreement on activities that don’t require coordination.

Finally, the integrated policy plans for child well-being should be a tool for putting the right policy pieces into place for integrating service delivery to **support children with complex needs**. As a whole, countries could be thinking more about how efforts to improve coordination at the policy level could positively spill over into service delivery. For instance, Australia's successor integrated plan focuses more directly on service integration. Among the key actions here are developing mechanisms to ensure an effective interface between child and family services and disability services to support timely responses and information sharing and also developing multi-disciplinary intervention models (Commonwealth of Australia, 2023^[6]). Similarly, New Zealand will focus the next stage of implementation on improving coordination and alignment across agencies and between agencies and communities (DPMC, 2023^[5]).

Child-specific policy tools are not yet playing a fully effective role in mainstreaming the child well-being policy agenda across government

OECD countries don't have a long history of routine use of child-specific policy tools to inform policy and budgetary decisions. Around half of OECD countries have a child well-being indicator set but fewer again have an indicator set linked to monitoring their integrated policy plan's progress (Box 2). To date, only a handful of countries have experience of child budgeting and what this entails exactly varies. Across the OECD, child impact assessments (CIAs) are not conducted to a great extent, be that at the national, sub-national or local level.

Despite the limited practice, there's an expressed desire across countries to up the use of child-specific tools and to build the relevant competencies. For example, Austria, Finland, Iceland, Korea and New Zealand have set in their integrated plans the goal of promoting the systematic use of CIAs; the rationale here is to make children's issues more visible within the workings of government. Similarly, Vienna (Austria), Wallonia (Belgium), Helsinki (Finland), Iceland and Scotland (UK) have set the goal of developing child budgeting. Most of the countries that have started child budgeting are continuing to perfect their methodology.

Being strategic about investing in child-specific policy tools and extending their use is called for. For instance, extending the use of CIAs requires countries to look at when and where they might be a priority as conducting a CIA to assess the impact of each and every policy would be extremely costly. Moreover, a better integration of CIAs into child budgeting processes, as Finland is working towards, would help to evaluate whether resources are sufficient for children's needs and whether funds are allocated efficiently.

Box 2. How are child well-being indicator sets used across the OECD?

The 2022 OECD Child Well-being Policy Questionnaire found that around half of OECD countries have a child well-being indicator set or measurement initiative. In general, these indicator sets mostly provide information on child well-being at the aggregate level only, with no disaggregation by child or family characteristics etc. (Table 1). More broadly, it is not always very clear how they are used to inform policy making, whether that be targeting particular aspects of the policy cycle, such as agenda setting, budgeting or reporting.

Even fewer countries again have an indicator set linked to monitoring the integrated policy plan for child well-being. Seven countries and regions, Australia, Helsinki (Finland), Ireland, New Zealand, Valencia (Spain), Scotland (UK), and the United States have indicator sets covering child outcomes. However, only four, Ireland, New Zealand, Scotland (UK) and the United States, connect their indicator sets to an “outcomes framework”, which motivates the choice of indicators for measuring changes in specific aspects of each outcome. Chile’s indicator set focuses on child rights and is framed around the four axes of child rights: survival, development, protection, and participation. Reflecting the real difficulties in measuring the right to participate, Chile has yet to identify any indicators under the participation axis. Colombia’s indicator set provides administrative data on access to services, while Iceland’s indicator set provides information to help the government and municipalities to prioritise projects, make funding decisions and to develop policies.

Beyond child indicator sets, other approaches are taken to using indicators to monitor the integrated plans. For example, Wales (UK) uses the small number of the child-related indicators in its national well-being indicators set, while British Columbia (Canada), Costa Rica, Korea, and Luxembourg have identified within the integrated plan itself the selected indicators, some of which are linked to policy plan implementation.

Table 1. Selected national child data initiatives and indicator sets

| Country | Child data activity | Responsible Entity | Dimensions covered | Disaggregation |
|--------------------------|---|---|---|--|
| Estonia | Indicator set on children and young people’s rights | The Chancellor of Justice (Ombudsman for Children) | Aspects of well-being and child rights | by gender |
| Ireland | State of the Nation’s Children/ National Set of Child Well-being Indicators | Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration & Youth Affairs | 6 areas, including child outcomes, relationships and supports. | by gender, family background, and disability/and or chronic illness status |
| Slovenia | Child Well-being Index | Social Protection Institute of the Republic of Slovenia | 7 areas covering outcomes, behaviours and risks, and environment and settings | by gender |
| Spain | Childhood in Data Portal | Ministry of Social Rights and Agenda 2030 | 6 areas of children’s lives and children in vulnerable positions | by gender |
| Türkiye | A Snapshot on Statistics of Children in Türkiye | Turkish Statistical Institute | 8, including health, education, and material well-being | by gender |
| United Kingdom | Children’s Well-being Measures | United Kingdom Office for National Statistics | 7, personal well-being, relationships, education and skills, and neighborhood | by gender |
| United States (Virginia) | Measuring Success for Children and Youth | Fairfax Virginia Country Government | 8 outcome areas covering health, education, violence and injury prevention and contribution to community. | by gender and by age |

Moving child budgeting beyond estimating public expenditure to assessing “value for money” could inform more on the actual impact of spending on policy objectives and children’s lives. Moreover, aligning budget allocation processes with cross-cutting policies and targets is critical so that child well-being can be considered alongside other government priorities at budget time.

Developing the child data infrastructure, especially for policy monitoring, requires sustained investment, strong coordination of the production of information on children, and making better use of untapped information collected by service providers. The latter includes strengthening data linking to produce information on cross-cutting issues and ensuring that data reflect territorial heterogeneity.

Policy makers and decision makers need to reconcile the demand for evidence of policy impact with the need to communicate on simple and widely understood policy targets. Eagerness to set quantifiable targets should not come at the expense of support for important measures that only target small population groups or have less of a direct impact on chosen indicators. Clarifying how indicators are to be used to inform policies at all stages of the policy cycle is needed to reinforce the consensus on the importance of developing and keeping them up to date.

Further reading

- Carter, M. et al. (2022), *Process Evaluation of the Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy Final report*, Allen + Clarke, <https://www.chilyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/resources/process-evaluation-child-and-youth-wellbeing-strategy> (accessed on 23 September 2022). [3]
- Commonwealth of Australia (2023), *Safe & Supported: The National Framework for Protecting Australia’s Children 2021-2031: First Action Plan 2023-2026*, Department of Social Services, Canberra, https://www.dss.gov.au/sites/default/files/documents/01_2023/final-first-action-plan.pdf (accessed on 1 June 2023). [6]
- DGFCS (2018), *II Strategic Plan for Children and Adolescence 2013-2016: Final Evaluation (II Plan Estratégico Nacional de Infancia y Adolescencia 2013-2016: Informe de Evaluación Final*, Direction General of Family and Children Services, Ministry of Health, Social Services and Equality, https://observatoriodelainfancia.mdsocialesa2030.gob.es/documentos/pdf/II_PLAN ESTRATEGICO INFANCIA.pdf (accessed on 21 July 2023). [2]
- Dirwan, G. and O. Thévenon (2023), “Integrated policy making for child well-being: Common approaches and challenges ahead”, *OECD Papers on Well-being and Inequalities*, No. 16, OECD Publishing, Paris, <https://doi.org/10.1787/1a5202af-en>. [1]
- DPMC (2023), *Child and Youth Wellbeing Strategy: Annual report for the year ending 30 June 2022*, Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, Government of New Zealand, <https://www.chilyouthwellbeing.govt.nz/sites/default/files/2023-04/Final-202122-CYWS-Annual-Report.pdf> (accessed on 28 April 2023). [5]
- MHW (2020), *The 2nd Basic Plan for Child Policy (2020-2024)*, Ministry of Health and Welfare, Korea, <https://gawelfare.or.kr/123/?q=YT0xOntzOjEyOiJrZXI3b3JkX3R5cGUiO3M6MzoiYWxsIjt9&bmode=view&idx=4648239&t=board> (accessed on 13 March 2023). [4]

Resources

OECD Child Well-being Portal, oe.cd/child-well-being.

OECD Child Well-being Dashboard, oe.cd/cwb-dashboard.

Contacts

For more information contact us: wellbeing@oecd.org.

OECD Centre on Well-being, Inclusion, Sustainability and Equal Opportunity (WISE)
www.oecd.org/wise

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