Social Relations in Youth
Determinants and Consequences of Relations to Parents, Teachers, and Peers

Elin Olsson
CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

Study I  THE ROLE OF RELATIONS:  
Do Disadvantaged Adolescents Benefit More from High-Quality Social Relations?

Study II  THE ECONOMIC SIDE OF SOCIAL RELATIONS:  
Household Poverty, Adolescents’ Own Resources and Peer Relations.

Study III  SEX COMPOSITIONAL EFFECTS IN SCHOOL CLASSES:  
Do School Subject and Parents’ Education Matter?
ABSTRACT

The thesis includes three empirical studies on Swedish children’s well-being. Central themes in these studies are how children’s social relations are influenced by and influence other dimensions of their well-being. The studies are framed in the introductory chapter, which includes an international comparison of children’s social relations.

Study I analyses whether relations with parents and teachers are associated with the adolescent’s social background and whether the positive consequences of having strong relations are more important for disadvantaged adolescents. The results, based on nationally representative survey data, confirm that strong social relations are conducive to adolescents’ school and psychological outcomes, and show that disadvantaged adolescents have weaker relations with parents and teachers. Furthermore, these results imply that relations with teachers are of particular importance for disadvantaged adolescents’ outcomes, while parental relations are equally important for both advantaged and disadvantaged adolescents.

Study II investigates the social side of consumption by studying the association between adolescents’ economic resources and their relations with peers. Analyses on nationally representative survey data; which include children’s own responses, as well as information from parents and register data, show that economic resources, in terms of both household economy and adolescents’ own resources, are positively associated with peer relations.

Study III analyses whether final grades in compulsory school are influenced by the sex composition in school classes. Analyses using register data show that boys’ grades are negatively affected by the share of girls in school classes in typical female school subjects. Girls’ grades are negatively affected by the share of boys with highly educated parents. The proposed explanation behind the results is that sex composition effects are due to negative social comparisons with the other sex.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis points to the importance of children’s social relations. However, social relations are also highly valuable for the well-being of a doctoral student. Therefore, I would like to thank some people who have been important to me, writing this thesis.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Jan O. Jonsson who at the beginning recruited me as a research assistant for the Level-of-Living project, and who has been my supervisor throughout the work with this thesis. Janne has provided me with valuable comments and suggestions and taught me how to do research in practice. Also, I thank Carina Mood who has been engaged in my doctoral studies and for a period was my co-supervisor. I am also grateful to all colleagues who have contributed with valuable comments and support. In particular, I thank participants in the research project ‘Family structure, economic resources, and children’s living conditions’, headed by Jan O. Jonsson and Elizabeth Thomson. Also, a special thanks to Katarina Boye, Per Engzell Waldén, Eva-Lisa Gustafsson, Jenny Hedström, and Sara Brolin Låftman who helped me finalize this thesis by reading and correcting proofs. Further, I especially thank the administrative staff and colleagues at the Swedish Institute for Social Research, who have been supportive in both practical and academic matters, and also in social. I will not risk forgetting to mention someone, so thank you all.

There have also been other significant contexts of social relations during this period. Peer relations outside the university are, of course, important, and I would especially like to thank Sara Söderström, who besides being a close friend, also has been kind enough to design various aspects of my life, most recently the front of this thesis.

In addition to ‘teachers’ and peers, the family also is a central context for me, just as it is for children. I would like to thank my parents for always being very supportive in all kinds of matters. Also, I would like to especially mention my grandmother for being a very special person and probably the best grandmother I could have.
Finally, I would like to thank my family of destination. During the period of doing research on children’s living conditions, I have had the fortune of having my own child. Being with Embla and her father Mats is the best way of sweeping away thoughts and doubts about this thesis, and they remind me about what really matters in life.

Stockholm, April 2011

Elin Olsson
INTRODUCTION

This thesis is about children’s social relations. Social relations are a central dimension in people’s life, and especially so when it comes to children. However, social relations are sometimes an overlooked dimension of children’s well-being, and therefore, in the first part of this introductory chapter, I provide an overview of different aspects of children’s social relations. I discuss the centrality of social relations for children, different contexts of children’s relations, and gender issues.

In the second part of this introductory chapter, I discuss determinants and consequences of children’s social relations, both at an individual level and at the macro level. As social relations are one dimension of children’s living conditions, I consider policy aspects of social relations. Also, I discuss the concepts of social capital and social exclusion in relation to children, as they bring policy and social relations together.

In the third section of this chapter, I put Swedish children’s social relations into a wider international context. Measuring the quality of children’s social relations is a part of measuring their living conditions, and the policy dimension of social relations suggests that there might be international variations in social relations. Therefore, I provide an international comparison of children’s social relations.

In the fourth section, I provide extended abstracts of the three empirical studies that constitute this thesis. While the international comparison in this chapter raises questions of macro determinants of social relations, the focus in the empirical studies is on individual determinants and consequences of Swedish children’s social relations. The studies take a broad view of social relations. First, relations with peers, parents, and teachers are considered. Second, different aspects of social relations are examined, for example, transmission of resources, social support and social comparisons. Third, social relations are measured in

---

1 Previous versions of this introductory chapter have been presented at seminars at Stockholm University. I wish to thank participants at those seminars, especially Ann-Zofie Duvander, for helpful comments.

2 I use the concept ‘child’ in the introductory chapter to refer to individuals 0–18 years of age. In the empirical studies, the term ‘adolescent’ is also used, a consequence of older children (above 10 years) being included in these studies.
several ways, for example, for relations with peers, aspects such as number of friends, frequency of meeting, and the supportive dimension of relations are used.

Finally, I summarize this introductory chapter with some concluding remarks.

SOCIAL RELATIONS

Social relations have a central role, both in human life and in sociology. There are several ways in which relationships are important. For instance, close relations are a basis for attachment and social support (Belle 1989; Berkman et al. 2000; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003). Relationships are a source of social influence, and are central for identity formation, role modelling, sense of belonging, and social comparisons (Berkman et al. 2000). Furthermore, a relationship can be a means to access different types of resources that other people possess (Coleman 1988; Lin 2001). Also, strained relations have been shown to be adverse for child well-being (Bond et al. 2001; Låftman and Östberg 2006). When studying social relations, different aspects of a relationship can be examined. For example, the structure of relations is related to the linkages between individuals, such as the number of relationships a person has and how a social network is constituted. The function or the quality of a relationship refers to the content of a relationship, such as social support or relational strain (Due et al. 1999).

It is particularly important to study social relations when it comes to young people. Relations to peers are significant in adolescence, because comparisons and processes of identity formation are intense during this period (Garbarino 1992). Moreover, children’s living conditions are to a large extent dependent on and determined by relationships to other people and by others’ actions and resources (Jonsson 2010). The opportunities to choose social relations are, furthermore, limited for children (Ostner 2007). Children do not choose their parents, but because they are minors, they are dependent upon them. Children (up to the age of 15 in Sweden) are obliged to participate in compulsory education, and have therefore a limited opportunity to choose teachers and classmates.

At the same time, the agency of children themselves is central and should be taken into consideration. The focus on children’s social relations enables a view of children as actors who form relations, use social support, and make social comparisons. The active role of children and the focus on their social relations are in line with the research paradigm called the new sociology of childhood. Studies of children and their lives have changed during the last decades. The traditional views of
children in sociology as a target of socialization, and childhood in psychology as a mere developmental stage, have been criticized (Alanen 1992; Corsaro 2005; Prout and James 1997; Qvortrup 1994). Theoretical perspectives on childhood that take into account the actions and present situation of children have increasingly influenced research on children. Childhood has gained status as a social structure with its own sociological characteristics (Alanen 1992, 2001; Prout and James 1997).

In this sociology of childhood, the perspective on children has changed from viewing children as passive receivers (e.g. of socialization) to active participants, forming and influencing their own situations (Alanen 2001; Corsaro 2005). The focus has shifted from the future outcomes of children (e.g. later educational attainment and employment) to also include the situation at the present, that is, from ‘well-becoming’ to ‘well-being’ (Ben-Arieh et al. 2001). This implies that not only long-term consequences but also the well-being of children here and now are important to consider (Corsaro 2005; Prout and James 1997). There has been a shift from the focus on negative outcomes and risks, to a focus also on positive behaviour and protective factors (Ben-Arieh 2008). Furthermore, it has been stressed that the child (and not the family, for example) should be the unit of analysis (Alanen 2001; Qvortrup 1994). The importance of taking children’s own views into account has also been emphasized, not simply relying on information collected from parents, teachers, or administrative registers (Alanen 2001; Corsaro 2005). Even though information from sources other than the child might be the most relevant and reliable information in some cases (e.g. on grades, parents’ education, or household income) information from children themselves is vital in some domains of children’s lives, for example, regarding children’s social relations and psychological health (Alanen 1992, 2001; Ben-Arieh et al. 2009; Jonsson and Östberg 2010).

Relations in Different Contexts

When studying children’s relations, it is central to take into account that relationships exist in different contexts. The family is often regarded as the most important mediating factor for children’s well-being. Also when children themselves are asked, the family is often reported to be the most central factor determining their well-being, followed by peers and school (Bradshaw et al. 2006). Regarding emotional support, children most frequently indicate that their mother is the person they usually talk to when concerned or worried, followed by peers and their father. But siblings, teachers, and other relatives are also people children usually confide in (Jonsson and Östberg 2001; SCB 2011). The value of a
relationship also depends on the type of relationship. For example, children report that both parents and peers are important sources of intimacy and emotional support, while they turn more often to teachers for instrumental aid (Furman and Buhrmester 1985a). Also, the importance of relations in different contexts varies with age. Parents are in general the most central context for young children, but as children grow older, the centrality of relations to people outside the home, especially peers, increases (Furman and Buhrmester 1992; Jonsson and Östberg 2001; SCB 2011). Furthermore, a strong relation in one context might buffer a strained relationship in another context. A child having problems at home might be helped by strong relations to people outside the family, for example, teachers or peers. Similarly, a child with weak relations to peers might be buffered by strong relations to parents (Crosnoe and Elder 2004; Sandbæk 2007).

The importance of children’s social interaction in varying contexts is considered in Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model of human development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998). The model brings developmental psychology and sociology together and has been an important inspiration for the development of the field of child well-being (Ben-Arieh 2010). The interaction between the child and the environment is seen as the primary mechanism that produces human development. The development varies with person, environmental context, and time. The context is represented by four concentric circles of systems (micro-, meso-, exo-, and macrosystem) with time, both individual and historical, as an underlying factor (see Figure 1).

The child interacts with the family, but also with other people, such as friends, teachers, and neighbours. These face-to-face interactions with influential others on a regular basis over extended periods of time constitute different microsystems. The interactions in the microsystems have the strongest influence on children’s development. But it is also common that interactions between people in different microsystems (mesosystem) – the classic example being parents and teachers interacting with each other – influence children’s development. Children are also influenced indirectly by the societal context of the microsystems (exosystem), for example, parents’ working conditions, the local community, or media. Finally, the macrosystem, including the micro-, meso-, and exosystem, is the wider societal context and includes social norms, economic conditions, and policies (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Garbarino 1992).
Relations in Different Microsystems

Parents. As mentioned, relations to parents have a central role in the child’s development. An early relationship with a caregiver is important for the child’s development of attachment and is considered to be crucial in forming future relations with other persons (Berkman et al. 2000; Cohn et al. 1991; Dunn 1993; Garbarino 1992). Emotional support through parental relations is important for children’s current well-being and function as a protective element that potentially buffers the child against stress or a disadvantaged situation (Belle, 1989; Berkman et al. 2000). Furthermore, the transmission of resources, such as human capital, information, norms, and material resources, between parent and
child is arguably contingent on the quality of the relationship between them (Coleman 1988; Teachman et al. 1997).

*Teachers.* Intergenerational bonding with adults other than parents (e.g. recreation leaders or teachers) is an often neglected but potentially important factor for children’s well-being. Teachers are adults whom children meet on a regular basis in their daily lives. Besides being a source of support, teachers might serve as role models and mentors, and their setting of standards and their expectations of the child might influence educational outcomes. Also, transmission of resources between teachers and the child is facilitated when these relations are strong (Birch and Ladd 1997; Crosnoe and Elder 2004; Crosnoe et al. 2004). Empirically, strong relations to teachers have been shown to be positively related to educational and psychological outcomes (Crosnoe et al. 2004; Study I). Because children are dependent upon teachers for education and grades, power dimensions are incorporated in these relations. Some have found negative associations between the quality of teacher relations and the risk of pupils being discriminated against by teachers based on, for example, gender or social background (Eurydice 2010; cf. Studies I and III).

*Peers.* Another important type of social relations is with peers. There are several methods of studying children’s relations to peers. For example, sociometric methods are often used to measure peer acceptance, status, and popularity; social networks are used to map the structure of connections between peers; and the quality of a dyadic relation is used to measure friendship and social support (Almquist 2011; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003). A close relation with a friend is an important source of emotional support, especially when a child has problems with her/his family, or problems the child does not want to talk with the parents about. Also, being a member of a peer group is central for identity and for feelings of belonging (Dunn and McGuire 1992; Gifford-Smith and Brownell 2003; Rubin 1980). Group membership might be threatened when a child is not able to fully participate in the peer group, for example, due to poverty, minority status, or disability. Strained peer relations, such as low peer status or bullying, have been shown to be negatively associated with children’s current mental well-being and physical health (Bond et al. 2001; Due et al. 2005; Låftman and Östberg 2006; Östberg 2003; Prinstein and Aikins 2004). Low peer status has also been found to influence educational outcomes (Almquist et al. 2010; Woodward and Fergusson 2000) and health in later life (Almquist 2011; Modin et al. 2011; Östberg and Modin 2008).

Children’s peer relations can also be examined in terms of peer effects. The composition of characteristics of peers in the peer group
(Duncan et al. 2001), in the school (Hanushek et al. 2003, Jonsson and Mood 2008; Willms 1986), and in the neighbourhood (Brooks-Gunn et al. 1997; Dietz 2002; Durlauf 2004; Sampson et al. 2002) has been shown to influence the child in various ways. Norms and behaviours of peers can spill over to the child. Moreover, the peer group is used as a reference group against which the child can make comparisons, this can be seen when the child assesses one’s own economic situation or in the formation of self-concepts (Studies II and III). Duncan et al. (2001) analysed peer influences on achievement and delinquency and found that peer effects in neighbourhoods and schools were small. Influences by siblings were largest, followed by influences by best friends.3

The literature on peer effects often takes the perspectives of children by viewing children as actors, influencing and being influenced by each other. However, apart from effects on academic achievement, most studies of peer effects focus on the transmission of negative and deviant behaviour (e.g. Sampson et al. 2002), instead of positive behaviour and norms. Also, the existence and size of peer effects are not easily measured, due to empirical difficulties in establishing and disentangling causal peer effects (Dietz 2002; Duncan et al. 2001; Evans et al. 1992; Sampson et al. 2002).

Gender and Social Relations

Social relations are closely related to gender. Gender identity and differentiation are by definition shaped in social relations. Traditionally, parents have been seen as the major agent behind gender socialization. However, the focus on socialization of children and the dominance of parents has been questioned. Instead, children’s own actions and relations to peers have been emphasized (Maccoby 1998, 2002; Morrow 2006; Rose and Rudolph 2006). Peers set the norms of appropriate gender behaviour, and gender conformity is often a way to be accepted by peers and avoid being bullied (Kimmel 2010). Children tend to interact in same-sex constellations, especially with peers. Children as young as 2–3 years old generally prefer same-sex relations and this preference strengthens and peaks in early adolescence. The interaction with same-sex peers is both caused by children themselves actively seeking same-sex relations and encouraged by adults (Belle 1989; Ladd 2005; Maccoby 1998, 2002; Rose and Rudolph 2006). In same-sex peer groups,

3 Children’s relations with siblings are an often-neglected area, not only for social influences, but also concerning social support. Studies including social support from siblings are, for example, Crosnoe and Elder (2004), Dunn (1993), Dunn and McGuire (1992), and Furman and Buhrmester (1985b).
gender-stereotyped behaviours emerge and are reinforced, and there are often larger gender differences in behaviour between a girl-group and a boy-group than between an individual girl and boy (Maccoby 1998, 2002).

Research on gender issues of children’s social relations tend to focus on differences between the sexes, ignoring similarities, and describe girls’ and boys’ relations as separate spheres and in terms of dichotomies (Thorne 1997). Girls are described as interacting with peers in dyads more often than boys and having a higher level of intimacy and emotional support in their relations. Boys’ peer relations are described as more concentrated on shared activities, competition, and hierarchies than girls’. Boys are reported to be more subjected to verbal and physical peer victimization. Further, boys are described as seeing friends more frequently than girls and to see friends in public spaces and without adults more often, probably a consequence of girls feeling less safe in public spaces and parents being more protective towards girls. Furthermore, mother relations are in general rated higher than father relations, and mothers are seen as more supportive, especially by girls. Boys are described as spending less time with family and having fewer kin relations than girls, but assessing parental relations as the most important source of support, while girls rate peer relations highest (for reviews, see Belle 1989; Ladd 2005; Morrow 2006; Rose and Rudolph 2006). Even though statistical differences between girls’ and boys’ social relations often are found, the magnitude of these differences and the variation within sexes are often neglected (Thorne 1997; cf. Study III).
DETERMINANTS AND CONSEQUENCES OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

Social relations can be described in terms of both resources and outcomes. Several studies have shown the interconnectedness between social relations and other dimensions of children’s well-being. Some dimensions, such as material resources, have been found to influence social relations (e.g. Sletten 2010; Studies I and II), and social relations have been shown to influence, for example, health (e.g. Berkman et al. 2000; Låftman and Östberg 2006) and educational outcomes (e.g. Garbarino 1992; Studies I and III). When studying the associations between social relations and other dimensions of children’s well-being, it is important to bear in mind that the order of causality often is difficult to establish (Conger and Donnellan 2007). For example, poor health might lead to poor social relations, rather than the other way around.

One way of approaching issues of reversed causality is to use longitudinal data with information on children’s social relations and the proposed determinants and outcomes from several points in time.

Another problem when examining causes and consequences of social relations is that omitted variables can affect both social relations and the proposed determinants or outcomes, resulting in spurious associations. For example, the association between a child’s social relations and health might be explained by the child’s personality, affecting both relations and health (Cohen 2004). Also, the association between children’s social background and their social relations might be due to parental characteristics affecting both their own socioeconomic status and their children’s opportunities (Mayer 1997).

The common way of handling this problem is to control for possible confounding factors in multivariate models. For example, when examining the association between economic resources and social relations, factors likely to influence both economic resources and social relations should be controlled for. However, it is almost impossible to control for all potential confounders; some characteristics are unobservable and cannot therefore be controlled for. Moreover, some confounders are likely to influence or be influenced by, for example, economic resources. If a variable mediates the association between economic resources and social relations, controlling for this variable underestimates the true relationship between economic resources and social relations. One way to handle these problems is to use longitudinal data with control variables that are measured before they could have been influenced by the present economic situation. When using longitudinal data, it is possible to study how changes in independent variables relate to changes in dependent variables, thereby accounting for unobserved variables that affect the
level of the dependent variable at the first time point. Another solution is to compare social relations of siblings who share unobserved family characteristics, but have experienced, for instance, different economic situations in the family (Duncan et al. 1998). Given the scarcity of suitable data that includes children’s reports of their social relations, we often have to resort to correlational analyses. Studies I and II, below, suffer from this common problem of establishing causality, and while they contribute by showing theoretically interesting associations, it is a challenge for future research to address the issue of causality.

Social Relations and Policy

Social Relations as a Dimension of Children’s Living Conditions

The centrality of social relations in children’s lives suggests that social relations should be seen as an important dimension of children’s living conditions. However, in much research, the well-being of children is reduced to their material situation, or indexed by child mortality or educational outcomes. Although child poverty is a central dimension of children’s living conditions, influencing both their current situation and future outcomes (Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Ridge 2002; Roelen and Gassman 2008), children’s living conditions cannot be reduced to a single measure; resources within several dimensions are important to consider (Pollard and Lee 2003; Sen 2000). Using several dimensions gives a more comprehensive and rich picture of children’s well-being. While there is no clear theoretical guidance as to which dimensions should be included when describing children’s living conditions, previous research tend to focus on similar dimensions. Social relations are often regarded as one dimension, along with material resources, educational outcomes, health, political resources, safety aspects, and subjective well-being (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009; Bradshaw et al. 2006, 2007; Jonsson and Östberg 2010; Lippman et al. 2009; Pollard and Lee 2003).

Policy interest in children’s well-being has resulted in several attempts by researchers, governments, and organizations such as the United Nations to measure and monitor children’s well-being in a multidimensional sense (Ben-Arieh 2006; Bradshaw and Richardson 2009; Bradshaw et al. 2006, 2007; Jonsson and Östberg 2010; OECD 2009a). In Sweden, an important source of information about children’s well-being is the child survey in the Swedish Level-of-Living Survey, a data set used in two of the three studies in this thesis. In this survey, the level of living is seen as multidimensional and social relations are considered as one of these dimensions. The level of living is defined as the command over resources with which an individual can control and direct her/his living
conditions (Erikson and Åberg 1987; Johansson 1970). The idea behind the level-of-living approach is that citizens themselves should provide information on their living conditions so that they and politicians can make informed decisions. This view has also been applied to children, and they were included and interviewed in the survey in the year 2000. In addition to children being the best respondents of their living conditions in several dimensions (e.g. social relations), the inclusion of children ensures that their interests are taken into account in political decisions, and facilitates young people’s involvement in society (Jonsson and Östberg 2010).

**Policy Determinants**

Positive social relations have a value in themselves and can be seen as a private domain, something individuals establish and maintain. But social relations are also resources that have several outcomes. As social relations are a central dimension of children’s living conditions, it is important to consider the distribution, determinants, and possible ways for policy to affect social relations. Although private in nature, social relations, especially children’s, are partly influenced by structural conditions. The most obvious example is the parental leave legislation, which in Sweden has been set up to ensure that small children develop an early and strong relationship with both their parents. Similarly, the working conditions of parents and the opportunities to successfully combine family life and paid work might influence parental accessibility and the relations between children and their parents (cf. Östberg 1996). Children’s legal rights to meet both their parents after a divorce might affect parental relations for those children. Moreover, subsidized or in other ways publicly supported youth clubs and other organizations for children’s leisure time activities influence children’s relations to children outside school, and to adults other than parents and teachers. The way schools are organized, and differences in public spending on schools between countries, resulting in, various reward systems, teaching styles, and class sizes, might affect children’s relations to teachers (cf. Crosnoe et al. 2004; OECD 2010). Furthermore, international variations in peer effects might be explained by school policy and the level of segregation in schools and neighbourhoods. Because the composition of characteristics of peers is the foundation for peer effects, institutional differences in school systems, such as in the use of tracking or single-sex schools, and the level of segregation (e.g. by socio-economic status or ethnicity), might be important for international variations in the existence and magnitude of peer effects (cf. Hanushek and Woessman 2006). Even
though not always intentionally, policies at least indirectly intervene in children’s social opportunity structure.

**Social Capital and Social Exclusion**

The policy dimension of social relations is also connected to concepts such as *social capital* and *social exclusion*. Social relations are seen as the foundation of theories of social capital and social exclusion, both of which bring public policy and sociology together. These two concepts share theoretical roots, are often measured by the same indicators, and are sometimes used interchangeably. However, as Daly and Silver (2008) note, it is important to separate these concepts.

Both social capital and social exclusion are widely used concepts, but vaguely defined. Briefly described, social capital is rooted in social relations and can be seen as resources inherent in social relations, at both the micro and the macro levels. At the micro level, social capital is described as resources (e.g. information, ability to influence, prestige) mediated through relations with other people. The quality of relations and the embeddedness in a relationship are important for an individual, in order to have access to another person’s resources. At the macro level, social capital is a collective asset and a feature inherent in a community or in a social organization (e.g. civic participation, trustworthiness, mutual obligations, cooperation, and norms of reciprocity) (for an overview, see e.g. Portes 1998; Schuller et al. 2000).

Social exclusion refers to the ability to maintain good relations and receive social support, and to participate in social activities. Atkinson (1998) mentions three central characteristics of social exclusion: *relativity* (a person is socially excluded in relation to other people), *dynamics* (social exclusion is not only defined as present exclusion, but also as future exclusions and exclusion across generations), and *agency* (someone is the excluding agent, either consciously or unconsciously). The excluding agents can be parents, peers, or the child him/herself, but also schools and governments (Redmond 2008).

Even though social relations are the central departure for theories of both social capital and of social exclusion, they focus on different aspects of social relations. Regarding social capital theories, aspects such as reciprocal and mutual ties, exchanges and transferring of resources, trust, and civic participation are stressed. For social exclusion, social isolation, solidarity, and cohesion are important aspects. Also, both weak and strong ties (bridging and bonding capital) are valuable for building social capital, but only strong ties are central for avoiding social exclusion (Daly and Silver 2008).
Both social capital and social exclusion are linked to economic resources and inequality. While social capital often is described as producing economic resources, social exclusion is seen as a consequence. Therefore, social capital is described as more individualized, while social exclusion is more connected to public policy (Daly and Silver 2008). The importance of governments to redistribute economic resources, provide universal services, and facilitate leisure activities has been stressed in order to reduce social exclusion among children (Redmond 2008).

Theories of social capital and social exclusion, when applied to children, have both been criticized for not taking the child’s perspective. Several studies have used theories of social capital and shown the associations between social capital and children’s living conditions in varying respects (Ferguson 2006). However, the conceptualization of social capital is mostly adult-focused and lacks a perspective on children (see critiques by, e.g., Leonard 2005; Morrow 1999; Schaefer-McDaniel 2004). In the major works on social capital (by, e.g., Bourdieu (1986), Coleman (1988), and Putnam (2000)) children are absent or described only as receivers of adults’ resources and norms. The relationship between a parent and a child is seen as a means for socializing the child, ignoring the reciprocal nature of social relations between parents and children. Also, the resources and norms transferred through relations are primarily seen as resources to be utilized for children’s future outcomes, rather than for their present well-being. In addition, children’s own social networks and active use of their own social capital are not considered (Leonard 2005; Morrow 1999; Schaefer-McDaniel 2004).

In studies of socially excluded children, as well, theories need to take children’s perspectives into account. Ridge and Millar (2000) point to the fact that children are automatically excluded, by the virtue of being children, from many of the arenas usually used to describe adults’ social exclusion. They argue that exclusion from children’s society is important to consider when conceptualizing a child-centred view of social exclusion, and mention friendships between children as an important dimension of children’s social exclusion. They show that children’s own social networks are important for avoiding poverty and have consequences for future outcomes and the transition to adulthood. Sletten (2010) has conceptualized social exclusion in relation to children, focusing on children’s participation in leisure-time activities. She shows that leisure-time organizations are an important agent behind poor children’s social exclusion in Norway.

Determinants and consequences of children’s social relations are important to consider, both at an individual level and at a macro level. When including children’s perspectives, social capital and social exclu-
sion can be useful concepts for understanding how economic resources and inequality are linked to children’s social relations, both at the individual level and the macro level. These concepts have linkages to policy, and it is likely that policies have the potential to influence children’s social relations.
AN INTERNATIONAL VIEW OF SOCIAL RELATIONS

The empirical studies in this thesis contribute to the research on determinants and consequences of Swedish children’s social relations at a micro level. However, as discussed, determinants of social relations are important to consider also at the macro level, even though this aspect has been less studied in previous research and little is known about international differences in children’s social relations. A first step is taken below, by examining international variations in children’s social relations.

Influenced by the sociology of childhood, some important efforts have been undertaken to measure and monitor child well-being internationally. Ben-Arieh and colleagues have been working on finding indicators of children’s well-being in a multidimensional sense (Ben-Arieh 1999, 2008, 2010), and four international reports of child well-being have been published in recent years (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009; Bradshaw et al. 2006, 2007; OECD 2009a). The definition and dimensions of child well-being are rather similar in these reports, probably in part because the data available are limited and because the reports to a large extent are written by the same authors. Social relations are considered as one dimension of child well-being in three of the reports.

The ranking of countries in the reports show that the general child well-being in Sweden is high compared to other countries, since Sweden is highly ranked on most dimensions (Table 1). The other Nordic countries and the Netherlands are also highly ranked. At the opposite end, in the United Kingdom and the United States, child well-being is considered low. The well-being in Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, and Greece is also ranked low (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009; Bradshaw et al. 2006, 2007; OECD 2009a).

Concerning children’s social relations, the ranking of Sweden differs considerably between the reports. In the first two, Sweden has a middle ranking, but in the most recent report, Sweden is highly ranked. The difference is probably due to differences in the indicators used. The reports also discuss the scarcity of good international indicators for children’s social relations. Several of the indicators on social relations used in the reports are indirect and far from ideal (see description and discussion in Appendix). Also, a drawback is that the relationships with mother, father, and peers, respectively, are only measured with one single question respectively. Social relations are complex and should ideally be measured by several indicators.

4 D. Richardson has been a co-author of all four reports, and J. Bradshaw of three.
Table 1. Overview of four international reports on child well-being and the ranking of child well-being in Sweden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Countries</td>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>EU</td>
<td>EU + Norway and Iceland</td>
<td>OECD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of countries</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ranking of Sweden in the following dimensions:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Material well-being</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behaviour and risks</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subjective well-being</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing and environment</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic participation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quality of school life</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Low numbers refer to high well-being.

Furthermore, some aspects of children’s relationships are not included in these reports. For example, the prevalence of bullying is included in all reports, but classified as an indicator of experience of violence (in the dimension ‘behaviour and risks’) or as an indicator of the quality of school life. However, one can argue that bullying also is an indicator of (strained) social relations. Furthermore, children’s relations to teachers are not considered. One might question whether a measure on relations with teachers is an indicator of the dimension of social relations or education (indicators of other characteristics of the school environment are included in some of the reports). However, having a good relation with a teacher might be a valuable resource, not only for educational achievement, but also for psychological well-being (Crosnoe et al. 2004; Study I), and is therefore an important aspect of children’s social relations.
An International Comparison of Social Relations

Here, the international comparison of children’s relations will be further explored and new indicators presented. Because of the scarcity of good indicators of social relations in the existing international comparisons, I will conduct an analysis of international differences in children’s social relations that elaborates the existing ones. The aim is to provide a richer picture of international differences in social relations and to put Swedish children’s social relations into a wider international context. The general well-being of Swedish children is highly ranked in the international reports discussed above. However, it is not self-evident that social relations are also highly ranked. On the one hand, one could argue that welfare is a good foundation for social relations. On the other hand, one could argue that a high level of material welfare comes at the expense of social relations. Therefore, the question whether high levels of general welfare and material resources also imply a high quality of social relations will be addressed by an internationally comparative study.

Data, Indicators, and Considerations

The analysis includes the 27 current member states in the European Union, plus Norway and Iceland (the same countries are used in the most recent EU report on child well-being by Bradshaw and Richardson (2009)). The data are drawn from several sources. A criterion for being an indicator of children’s social relations is that the measure is child-reported, cross-nationally available, and comparable. Relations with parents, peers (including bullying), and also teachers will be taken into account. However, only the function of those relations will be taken into consideration (e.g. emotional and instrumental support). Other aspects of social relations, such as the structure of relations (e.g. number of friends) or international differences in the existence and magnitude of peer effects, will not be considered here.

The most frequently used data source in the reports mentioned earlier is the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC), which includes measures on family and peer relations (Currie et al. 2008). These data will be used here. However, there exist other international data sources of social relations. For indicators of children’s relations with teachers, the recent findings of PISA (Programme for International Student Assess-

---

5 In the analyses, data from HBSC are based on figures published in the report by Currie et al. (2008) as there are restrictions on access of data from HBSC. Data are aggregated and weighted by sample numbers for sex and age. For UK and Belgium, the data are aggregated and weighted for child population in the areas used in the report (England, Scotland and Wales, and Flemish and French Belgium) (cf. Bradshaw and Richardson 2009).
ment) include indicators on children’s relations to their teachers (PISA 2009 database).6 Concerning relations with parents and peers, several questions were asked in the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD).7 However, several countries are missing in the ESPAD survey and the representativeness is unclear for some others (Hibell et al. 2004). As far as I know, there is no other data source that includes information on the quality of peer relations from an international perspective. To avoid relying on only a single indicator on parent relations, the indicator in HBSC will be compared to and complemented by the indicators in ESPAD. The datasets are summarized in Table 2 and the indicators in Table 3.

Table 2. Overview of surveys

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number of cases per country</th>
<th>Missing countries¹</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HBSC</td>
<td>2005/2006</td>
<td>11, 13, and 15</td>
<td>Around 4,500</td>
<td>Cyprus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PISA</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>4,000–10,000</td>
<td>Cyprus, Malta</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ESPAD</td>
<td>2003³</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>1,900–5,000</td>
<td>Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Portugal, Spain</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹ Additional countries are missing on some questions in ESPAD; see Table 3.
² HBSC was also conducted in 2009/2010, but the results have not been presented yet.
³ ESPAD was also conducted in 2006 (and will be conducted in 2011), but these data are not available to researchers outside the ESPAD network.

---

6 In the International Civic and Citizenship Education Study 2009 (ICCS) there are questions about teacher relations, and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2006 (PIRLS) includes a question on relations to teachers and one on bullying. However, several countries are missing in those surveys.

7 ESPAD is a collaborative European project coordinated by the Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs (CAN). This paper is written in accordance with the rules for the use of the ESPAD database. I am indebted to Björn Hibell, Sweden, CAN, the National Principal Investigator, for providing data for this study.
Table 3. *Overview of indicators of children’s social relations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicators of social relations</th>
<th>Survey</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental relations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 How easy is it to talk to your mother about things that really bother you?</td>
<td>HBSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 How easy is it to talk to your father about things that really bother you?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I can easily get warmth and caring from my mother and/or father.(^1)</td>
<td>ESPAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 I can easily get emotional support from my mother and/or father.(^1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 How satisfied are you usually with your relationship to your mother?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 How satisfied are you usually with your relationship to your father?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher relations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 I get along well with most of my teachers.</td>
<td>PISA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Most of my teachers are interested in my well-being.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 If I need extra help, I will receive it from my teachers.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Most of my teachers treat me fairly.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer relations</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Most of the students in my class(es) are kind and helpful.</td>
<td>HBSC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 I have been bullied at least two or three times at school in the past couple of months.(^2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 How satisfied are you usually with your relationship to your friends?</td>
<td>ESPAD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 I can easily get warmth and caring from my best friend.(^1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 I can easily get emotional support from my best friend.(^1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^1\) On these questions the following countries are missing (in addition to the countries indicated in Table 2): Austria, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Malta, the Netherlands, and Norway.

\(^2\) Slovakia is missing on the question of bullying.
The indicators presented here expand on previous indicators, but several shortcomings are still present. The analyses are not disaggregated on, for example, sex, age, or social background, and some groups of children are left out. When measuring children’s well-being, children are often viewed as a homogeneous group. Even if it is important to talk about the childhood to stress that children have some characteristics in common (Qvortrup 1994), ignoring the plurality of childhoods might lead to a misleading picture of the well-being of some groups of children, and it might result in that some children are made invisible (e.g. the youngest children and minorities). Also, the dispersion of well-being among children is not considered here.8

There are several methodological problems when comparing the quality of social relations between countries. Perhaps the most obvious problem is the question of comparability. International variations in expectations of the value of a relationship might affect how children respond and rate a relationship. For example, in a country with good student-teacher relations, children’s expectations of their relations with teachers might be higher than in a country with a low average quality of teacher relations. The result could be that a child in the former country, with high expectations, rates her/his teacher relations lower than a child (with low expectations) from the latter country would have done (OECD 2010).

Also, differences between countries might be caused by differences in the translation of questions. For example, the translations of ‘emotional support’ might have different associations and implications in different languages. However, in international surveys care is taken in the translation of questions to make the questions as comparable as possible (Currie et al. 2008; OECD 2009b). For example, in connection to the question of bullying in HBSC, a short description of the definition of bullying is given. To examine the stability of the questions, the rankings of countries on similar questions on social relations, but with different wordings, are compared with each other (more details below). Even though there are difficulties in comparing social relations internationally, the indicators used here are the most reliable and the analyses are a further step in the international comparisons of children’s social relations.

Below, country averages of different indicators of social relations will be presented, both as percentages (reported in the text, but not shown in

---

8 A recently published report has ranked 24 OECD countries by the countries’ inequality in child well-being in three dimensions: material, education, and health (UNICEF 2010). The inequality in these dimensions is low in the Netherlands and in the Nordic countries.
figures) and as z-scores. The z-score represents the deviation from the international average, measured in standard deviations. Negative z-scores indicate that a country has poorer relations than the international average, and positive z-scores that the relations are of higher quality.

**Parental Relations**

Indicators on parental relations are available in HBSC and ESPAD and concern emotional support and satisfaction with the relationship.

In HBSC, two questions were asked regarding emotional support, one for mother and one for father (‘How easy is it to talk to your mother [father] about things that really bother you?’). The percentage of child respondents finding it easy to talk to their mother ranges from 74 per cent (France) to 92 per cent (Romania). The corresponding figures for talking with fathers range between 49 (Malta) and 81 per cent (Slovenia). In Sweden, 86 per cent find it easy to talk to their mother, and 73 per cent to their father. In all countries, the ease of talking to mothers is assessed higher than the ease of talking to fathers, but the country rankings of mother and father relations are similar. Therefore, the two indicators of ease of talking with mother/father are combined, using the averaged z-scores of the two indicators.

In ESPAD, two questions were asked about emotional support from parents (‘I can easily get warmth and caring from my mother and/or father’ and ‘I can easily get emotional support from my mother and/or father’). The percentage receiving warmth and caring/emotional support from parents ranges from around 60 per cent in France to nearly 90 per cent in Denmark, Latvia, and Sweden. The z-scores of the country average are very similar when using either of the two indicators and indicate that the indicators measure the same aspect of parental relations. Therefore, the average of the z-scores of these two indicators is used below.

In ESPAD, questions on the satisfaction with relations to mothers and fathers are included (‘How satisfied are you usually with your relationship to your mother [father]?’). The percentage satisfied with their relationships to mothers ranges between 78 per cent (France) and 91 per cent (Austria), and to fathers between 68 per cent (France) and 84 per cent (Cyprus). In Sweden, 87 per cent are satisfied with their relations to mothers and 79 per cent with their relations to fathers. The satisfaction with mother relations is assessed higher than satisfaction with father relations in all countries, but the country ranking of satisfaction is similar, and therefore, the two indicators of satisfaction with mother/father relations are combined.
The z-scores of the three final indicators of parental relations (easy to talk to parents, warmth/emotional support, and satisfaction) are shown for each country in Figure 2. Iceland, Slovenia, and Sweden have information on all three indicators and are highly ranked on all. Conversely, Belgium and France are ranked low on all indicators. However, some countries are below average on one indicator, but above on another, and several countries are missing in ESPAD. While the questions on emotional support (ease of talking to parents and warmth/emotional support) are direct measures of the quality of parental relations, the question on satisfaction with the relations might cover other aspects of a relationship as well. Also, the degree of satisfaction with a relationship is affected by the expectation of the value of the relation, and is therefore more difficult to compare between children and between countries than the direct indicators of the quality of parental relations. Differences in rankings of emotional support and satisfaction may occur because the indicators measure different aspects of parental relations, and/or because satisfaction is a relative measure. However, dissimilarities in the ranking on emotional support in ESPAD and HBSC may indicate that one or both indicators are poorly measured.

To summarize, Figure 2 shows that the consistency of ranking of countries over indicators is relatively high, and Sweden is ranked above the international average on all indicators of parental relations.

---

9 However, additional analyses show that the items in ESPAD are related. All indicators fall into the same dimension with high factor loadings in a factor analysis, and the estimate of Cronbach’s alpha is 0.77.

10 I have also made the comparison including only the 15-year-olds in HBSC for a higher comparability with ESPAD, and the results are very similar.
Figure 2. *Children’s relations with parents*

Z-scores of three indicators on parental relations.

Source: HBSC 2005/06 (Currie et al. 2008) and ESPAD 2003.
**Teacher Relations**

For teacher relations, five questions were asked in PISA (‘I get along well with most of my teachers’; ‘Most of my teachers are interested in my well-being’; ‘Most of my teachers really listen to what I have to say’; ‘If I need extra help, I will receive it from my teachers’; ‘Most of my teachers treat me fairly’). The questions concern emotional, appraisal, and instrumental support and some items might reflect the general situation in school, for example, the amount of school resources or class sizes. Even though the questions might measure different aspects of teacher relations, results from different tests indicate that the items can be used in a single index with internal consistency.\(^{11}\)

The variation in teacher relations between countries is substantial. The country averages for the percentage agreeing with each of the five statements differ by, on average, 30 percentage points for the highest and lowest ranked country (not shown). The smallest variation is for the item ‘I get along well with most of my teachers’ (15 percentage points), and the largest is for the item ‘Most of my teachers are interested in my well-being’ (59 percentage points).

Most countries have either only positive or only negative z-scores on all indicators, and Sweden is above average on all five indicators (Figure 3). Portugal stands out, as children have rated their teacher relations particularly high. The United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden, and Iceland are also ranked high on teacher relations. On the other hand, Slovenia, Poland, Norway, Greece, and the Czech Republic are ranked low on teacher relations.

\(^{11}\) In a factor analysis all items fell into the same dimension, and the estimate of Cronbach’s alpha is 0.82.
Figure 3. *Children’s relations with teachers*
Z-scores of five indicators on teacher relations.
Missing countries: Cyprus and Malta.
Source: PISA 2009 (OECD 2010).
Peer Relations

Questions about peer relations are asked in HBSC and ESPAD, and include both emotional support and peer group behaviour (bullying).

In HBSC, one question on finding classmates kind and helpful is asked, and one question on being subjected to bullying. The percentage finding classmates kind and helpful ranges between 37 (Bulgaria) and 83 per cent (Norway). In Sweden, 81 per cent find classmates kind and helpful. The percentage not being subjected to bullying ranges from 73 per cent (Lithuania) to 96 per cent (Sweden).

Two indicators on emotional support from peers are available in ESPAD (‘I can easily get warmth and caring from my best friend’ and ‘I can easily get emotional support from my best friend’). The percentage getting warmth from peers ranges between 63 per cent in Estonia and 80 per cent in Belgium. The percentage having emotional support ranges between 66 per cent (United Kingdom) and 89 per cent (Denmark). In Sweden, warmth and emotional support from friends are relatively common (76 and 79 per cent, respectively). When comparing z-scores of the country average on the two indicators of support from friends, the z-scores are similar, and the indicators are therefore combined, using the averaged z-score.

Also, an indicator on satisfaction with peer relations is available in ESPAD. Satisfaction with peer relations ranges between 84 per cent (Hungary) and 97 per cent (Austria). In Sweden, 92 per cent are satisfied with their peer relations.

The z-scores of the four indicators on peer relations are shown in Figure 4. Some countries are ranked high on all indicators (Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, Norway, Slovenia, and Sweden), and others are ranked low on all indicators (Estonia, Greece, Latvia, Lithuania, and Romania). However, some countries are ranked high on some indicators, but low on others. This illustrates that the choice of aspect and indicator of a relationship is important for the way countries are ranked on social relations.
Figure 4. *Children’s relations with peers*

Z-scores of four indicators on peer relations.

Source: HBSC 2005/06 (Currie et al. 2008) and ESPAD 2003.
An International Ranking of Overall Social Relations

To provide an overall ranking of children’s social relations in different countries that are comparable with the international reports on child well-being discussed above, I follow the same method used in the reports. The z-scores are calculated for each indicator, and then averaged for each subdimension (parental relations, teacher relations, and peer relations, respectively). To get a summary measure of children’s social relations, the z-scores for the average of each subdimension are calculated and then averaged. The use of z-scores takes not only the rank order between countries into account but also the distribution among countries (Bradshaw et al. 2006). However, following Bradshaw et al., I do not use any other weights in summarizing indicators and subdimensions. One could argue that relations to some persons (e.g. parents) should have a greater weight than relations to others (e.g. teachers), but the question of using weights is more urgent when summarizing child well-being in different dimensions. The construction of the indices can be debated, but when others have constructed indices of general child well-being in alternative ways using the same data as the above-cited reports, the ranking of countries has remained very similar (Dijkstra 2009; Heshmati et al. 2008).

The country rankings of the overall measure of social relations, as well as the rankings of the three subdimensions, are presented in Table 4. In the overall ranking of social relations, Sweden ranks second after the Netherlands. In each of the three subdimensions of social relations, as well as on all separate indicators, the quality of relations is ranked high in Sweden. Even though indicators of social relations might be difficult to compare internationally, the consistency over indicators, subdimensions, and surveys indicate that children’s social relations are of high quality in Sweden compared to other countries.

It should be noted that the data coverage differs between countries, and several countries are missing on some indicators of social relations (see Table 4). The ranking of countries is therefore based on an unequal number of indicators. I have tried different inclusions and exclusions of indicators and countries in the rankings, but even though the ranking of some countries are affected, as a whole, the pattern is robust and the ranking of Sweden is not especially affected.12 Also, no indicator is missing for Sweden.

---

12 For example, when excluding ESPAD indicators, the overall ranking of Austria is lower, and the overall rankings of Estonia, Hungary, and Romania are higher. Also, the ranking of Denmark is lower concerning parent relations and the ranking of Belgium is lower concerning peer relations. Finally, the rankings of Iceland, Malta, and the United Kingdom are higher concerning peer relations.
Table 4. *Ranking of children’s social relations*
Low numbers refer to a high quality of social relations/well-being. The number of missing indicators is given in brackets (total numbers of indicators are 3 (parents), 5 (teachers), and 4 (peers)). Ranking of well-being adopted from Bradshaw and Richardson (2009), but excluding the dimension of social relations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Ranking of social relations</th>
<th>Child well-being</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>Parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sweden</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td><strong>6 (0)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyprus</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iceland</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portugal</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>23 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finland</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ireland</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>17 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spain</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>14 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>25 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovenia</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>10 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>20 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latvia</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>19 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovakia</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>18 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>22 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malta</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>27 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luxembourg</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>28 (2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greece</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26 (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29 (0)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When comparing the ranking on social relations with the overall ranking of child well-being in Bradshaw and Richardson (2009)\(^{13}\) (excluding the dimension of social relations), most countries that are highly ranked on overall child well-being are also highly ranked on social relations (Table 4). Thus, there seems to be a positive relation between children’s well-being in terms of social relations and in terms of other dimensions.

**Explaining International Differences in Social Relations**

The results above show that Sweden is not only highly ranked on general child well-being, but is highly ranked on social relations. This implies that there is no contradiction between high welfare and a high quality of social relations, and a high material standard clearly does not preclude good social relations. But why is the well-being and quality of social relations in Sweden high? It is beyond the scope of this thesis to examine the determinants of international variations in child well-being and social relations. However, some possible mechanisms are discussed below.

Child well-being is influenced by factors in different contexts, from the family and school in the microsystem to the ideological and institutional patterns, for example, social policy, in the macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998; Garbarino 1992). Some macro variables have been shown to be important for *general child well-being*. For example, social spending on children, wealth, and economic inequality have been shown to be conducive to children’s well-being (Bradshaw 2010; Bradshaw and Richardson 2009; Pickett and Wilkinson 2007). The generosity of family policy transfers, especially those supporting dual-earner families and universal cash benefits, has been shown to be negatively associated with childhood poverty (Bäckman and Ferrarini 2010; Ferrarini 2009) and infant mortality (Ferrarini and Norström 2010; Lundberg et al. 2008). Some factors behind the high general well-being of Swedish children are probably the relatively high social spending on children,\(^{14}\) the high level of wealth (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009), the correspondingly low rates of child poverty (Bradbury and Jäntti 2001; TÄRKI 2010), the low

---

\(^{13}\) I thank Jonathan Bradshaw for sharing the data on the EU child well-being index.

\(^{14}\) Sweden is not placed in the top position, but is above the average of the OECD countries, according to the OECD family database.
economic inequality (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009), and a high degree of realization of children’s rights in Sweden (Gran 2010). When it comes to international variations in children’s social relations and the high ranking of Sweden, macro variables similar to those for general child well-being are probable determinants.

One explanation behind the high ranking of social relations in Sweden might be that the welfare state in Sweden is child friendly, supporting children, their resources, and social relations by, for example, policies to ensure parental accessibility (such as legal rights to see parents after a divorce and generous parental leave legislation) and high public spending on organizations for children’s leisure-time activities, facilitating participation also for children from poorer backgrounds. Also, there might be a positive relation between the level of general welfare and the quality of social relations. When the levels of children’s material resources, health, and so on, are high, the foundation for establishing and maintaining social relations is good. Furthermore, some argue that societies with inequalities in wealth and social status, and without the equality of opportunity for individuals to improve their situation, engender social exclusion and hinder social cohesion and social capital (Frønes 2007; Kawachi and Kennedy 2002; Kawachi et al. 1997; Pickett and Wilkinson 2007; Putnam 2000; Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett 2006). In unequal societies, there is a greater social distance between groups and a culture of dominance and subordination is more common, leading to more status competition and a view of other people as rivals. In these societies, social relations are to a larger extent built on power relations, dominance, and competition, while social relations in egalitarian countries are more influenced by cooperation, reciprocity, and trust (Wilkinson 2005). A high level of inequality makes status differences more common and accepted, resulting in a higher acceptance and prevalence of behaviour characteristic of status differences such as bullying (Due et al. 2009; Elgar et al. 2009; Pickett and Wilkinson 2007; Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson and Pickett 2006). Economic inequality is therefore seen as corrosive for social relations (Pickett and Wilkinson 2007; Wilkinson 2005; Wilkinson

---

15 The United Nation’s Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) was adopted in 1989 (Santos Pais 1999). The CRC places children on the political and social agenda and can be seen as a normative framework for children’s well-being. The four general principles of the CRC coincide with the sociology of childhood in several respects (Ben-Arieh 2008; Bradshaw et al. 2007).
and Pickett 2006).\textsuperscript{16} At an individual level, economic resources have been shown to be positively associated with social relations (e.g. Studies I and II). Even though not obvious, it is likely that this association is affected by the general level of economic resources in a country and/or by economic inequality.

To conclude, the international comparison of the quality of children’s social relations shows that there are large variations between European countries and that Swedish children’s relations seem to be of relatively high quality. However, due to potential difficulties in comparing indicators of social relations and the lack of indicators of young children’s social relations, the results found here need to be confirmed in other studies and with other measures. The results also point to the importance of taking several aspects of social relations into account when searching for indicators of social relations. The ranking of countries might differ, depending on which aspect of a relationship is considered. Also, the mechanisms behind international variations, and the high ranking of children’s social relations in Sweden, are neither easy to disentangle nor easy to establish empirically, but remain challenges for future research.

\textsuperscript{16} However, the analyses of the associations between economic inequality and social relations have been criticized, and the causal links between economic inequality, social capital, and health have been questioned (Goldthorpe 2010; Pearce and Davey Smith 2003).
SUMMARIES OF THE THREE STUDIES

Study I
The Role of Relations: Do Disadvantaged Adolescents Benefit More from High-Quality Social Relations?

The first study analyses adolescents’ relations with adults in two micro-systems, the family and the school, and takes the adolescent’s social background into account. It is well known that having strong and supportive social relations is beneficial for several different outcomes (Call and Mortimer 2001; Cohen 2004; House et al. 1988; Malecki and Demaray 2003). We also know that social background influences our living conditions and opportunities in several ways (Breen and Jonsson 2005; Conger and Donnellan 2007). However, we know less about how social background affects supportive relations and whether the associations between supportive relations and outcomes are affected by social background. Previous results are inconclusive as to whether the quality of social relations is of different importance for adolescents from different social backgrounds, and such an interaction effect could be predicted from different perspectives.

The aim of the study is therefore twofold. First, the study aims to analyse whether social background is related to the quality of adolescents’ relations with parents and teachers. Second, the study aims at examining whether the associations between social relations, on the one hand, and school-related outcomes, psychological complaints, and self-esteem, on the other, are weaker or stronger for disadvantaged adolescents as compared to advantaged adolescents.

The data used are derived from the child supplements of Statistics Sweden’s Living Conditions Survey (ULF) conducted in 2002 and 2003. The surveys are based on a representative sample of the adult population in Sweden. Adolescents aged 10–18 years who lived in the respondents’ homes were also interviewed (n = 2,645). The data include several aspects of social background, social relations, and outcomes, and are ideally suited to the research questions, in that information about social relations and outcomes are child-reported, while information on social background is parent-reported and based on register data.

The results show that social relations are conducive to various outcomes, and that disadvantaged adolescents have weaker relations with parents and teachers. Furthermore, they imply that relations with teachers are of particular importance for disadvantaged adolescents’ school and psychological outcomes, since the association between teacher relations and the outcomes are stronger for disadvantaged adolescents. This
implies that good teacher relations may protect disadvantaged adolescents from negative outcomes, but also that strained relations are more detrimental for disadvantaged adolescents. However, parental relations seem to be equally important for both advantaged and disadvantaged adolescents.

Study II

*The Economic Side of Social Relations: Household Poverty, Adolescents’ Own Resources and Peer Relations*

The second study focuses on adolescents’ relations to peers and how economic resources influence these relations. Sociological theory suggests that economic resources, through the social side of consumption, are important to social relations (e.g. Baudrillard 1998[1970]; Bourdieu 1984; Giddens 1991; Veblen 1970[1899]). Owning the same things as peers and participating in the same activities contributes to a sense of belonging, and makes it easier to make and keep friends. Furthermore, ownership of visible commodities contributes to the adolescent’s social status, which can increase popularity and provide protection from bullying (McNeal 1987; Seiter 1995). However, few studies have investigated empirically the association between economic resources and social relations.

The data used in the second study come, as do the data in Study I, from Statistics Sweden’s Living Conditions Survey conducted in 2001–2003 and from the Swedish Level of Living Survey (LNU) conducted in 2000 (n = 5,388).17 Several indicators of economic resources and peer relations reported by adolescents, as well as interview data from parents and register data on household characteristics, are used.

Analyses (ordered and binary logit models) show that economic resources, both in terms of household economy and adolescents’ own resources are positively associated with their relations to peers. These results are robust to a number of controls of household characteristics and are valid across age groups and for both sexes. This positive association between economic resources and peer relations implies that the social side of consumption is important to adolescents’ relations to peers. Also, the result that adolescents’ own economic resources have an independent effect on peer relations when controlling for the household’s resources suggests that the intra-household distribution of re-

---

17 In LNU 2000, the non-response rate for adults is 23.4 per cent, and 14.7 for children. Even though there is a risk that disadvantaged children and children with poor relations are underrepresented, the sample is a good representation of the population (Jonsson and Östberg 2003).
sources matters and that adolescents’ own economic resources are important to take into account.

Study III

*Sex Compositional Effects in School Classes: Do School Subject and Parents’ Education Matter?*

The third study examines how social processes in school classes affect adolescents’ grades. Given that boys and girls tend to have different attitudes towards school and schoolwork, and given that their behaviour on average differs, an interesting question is whether the composition of pupils’ sex in schools and classes matters for boys’ and girls’ educational performance, respectively. Assuming that boys have a more casual attitude towards school (Connell 1996; Francis 2000; Jackson 2003; Mac an Ghaill 1994), classrooms with a low share of girls will in general provide less positive assimilation and a less study-friendly environment that reduces teaching efficacy, resulting in lower achievement among all pupils in the class (Francis 2000; Lavy and Schlosser 2007). On the other hand, being in a classroom with a high share of girls should result in more negative social comparison effects, due to girls’ generally higher achievement and higher adaption to school and school norms (Marsh et al. 2008; Preckel and Brüll 2010; Trautwein et al. 2006).

The aim of the study is to examine whether and how the sex composition in co-educational school classes affects grades. Also, unlike previous studies, the effect of the proportion of school-oriented boys (with highly educated parents) within a school class, and differences between typical male and female school subjects are taken into account. In addition, common selection problems in previous studies based on single-sex schools are for the most part avoided here by studying classrooms with a fairly random distribution of boys and girls.

The data in the study are based on a 25 per cent random sample of all state middle schools (Högstadium, grades 7–9, ages 13–15 years) in Sweden. Information on all pupils in their final year in the selected schools is available for two years: 1991 and 1992. The information on schools is collected from school registers (e.g. teacher-assigned marks), and information on the pupils’ households comes from the 1985 and 1990 censuses (e.g. parental occupation, education, and income). In total, 43,221 pupils are included in the analyses.

Multilevel models with pupils nested in school classes within schools show that the sex composition in school classes does influence teacher-assigned grades in several school subjects. For boys, the proportion of girls is disadvantageous in typical female school subjects. Girls are dis-
advantaged by the proportion of boys when the boys have highly educated parents. The proposed explanation behind the results is that sex composition effects are due to negative social comparison with the other sex. Possible negative consequences of comparisons with high achievers of one’s own sex are probably offset by positive assimilation effects that are more common for same-sex pupils. Sex composition effects seem to interact with gender, but also with the proportion of school-oriented boys and type of school subject, and might be a reason behind the mixed results in previous studies.
SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

Social relations are a central dimension of the present thesis. In the three studies, varying aspects of children’s relations in different microsystems (family, school, and peer group) are examined, along with the ways these relations are associated with other dimensions of child well-being. To complement the picture of children’s social relations in microsystems, children’s well-being and social relations in different macrosystems (countries) are discussed and analysed in the introductory chapter.

This thesis contributes to previous research and to the understanding of children’s social relations in several ways. The use of rich and representative data from several sources, including children’s own answers on social relations, enables empirical tests of theories and assumptions of children’s social relations that previously have been insufficiently studied empirically. The thesis also addresses divergences in previous research, stemming from conflicting theories.

The results suggest that comparisons with peers are important for forming a position in the peer group, through both consumption and social comparisons. The positive association between economic resources and peer relations supports theories regarding the social side of consumption as important for forming and maintaining peer relations. The opposing effects of sex composition in the classroom due to negative social comparisons and positive assimilation effects are also addressed (Marsh et al. 2008; Preckel and Brüll 2010; Trautwein et al. 2006), and both mechanisms seem to be important to take into account. Furthermore, conflicting views of whether social relations matter more for advantaged or disadvantaged adolescents are disentangled (e.g. Coleman 1988; Masten 2001). Even though several mechanisms might coexist, the results point to the buffering aspect of social relations, in the sense that strong relations with teachers matter more for disadvantaged adolescents.

The results also call into question some assumptions in theories of social capital that previously have been insufficiently tested (Bassani 2007). It is assumed that a strong relationship is more valuable when the other person has a high level of resources, because the resources can be transmitted through the relationship (Coleman 1988). However, Study I shows that parental relations are not more valuable for children of parents with a high level of resources. Furthermore, the results contradict the assumption that more siblings lead to poorer parental relations due to resource dilution. When children themselves are asked, the pattern is actually the reverse. As pointed out by, for example, Leonard (2005) and Morrow (1999), theories of children’s social capital have to be
developed in relation to children, taking their views and actions into account. In Study I, current outcomes of social capital are measured, rather than only future outcomes, and the strength of the relationship is evaluated by the child. Using children’s views of relationships is vital when measuring their social capital, as their views might differ from their parents’ or teachers’. Another way of focusing on children’s own social resources and social capital is to consider how relations between peers in the classroom can result in transfers of norms and behaviours influencing school grades (Study III).

Although the focus in this thesis is on children’s social relations, the thesis also contributes to general research on children. Viewing children as active, and taking their current situations and own views into account are themes in this thesis that are consistent with the sociology of childhood. One example is the focus on children’s material resources in Study II. Strained social relations seem to go hand in hand with childhood poverty, and it is important to take into account children’s own economic resources, as they are not only a reflection of the economic situation of the household.

Determinants and Consequences of Children’s Social Relations

While much research on social relations has focused on outcomes of social relations, this thesis points to the importance of disentangling factors influencing social relations. Both Study I and Study II show that social background, especially economic resources, is important to children’s relations to parents, teachers, and peers. Study III shows how relations and comparisons within the classroom are affected by educational background. Furthermore, the international comparison in the introductory chapter demonstrates that there is a large variation in social relations between countries. These results point to the importance of taking the distribution of well-being into account, and future research would benefit from studying inequalities in children’s social relations further and distinguishing the mechanisms behind these inequalities.

This thesis also points to the importance of taking into account influences by sex and age. Positive assimilation effects in school classes seem to be more common for same-sex pupils, while negative social comparisons effects are more common for the opposite sex (Study III). Concerning age differences, the results show that parental and teacher relations are more central for younger children, while the importance of peer relations increases with age (Studies I and II). The result implies that relations in different contexts (e.g. at home and in school) are
important to take into account when studying social relations (cf. Bronfenbrenner and Morris 1998).

**International Variations**

The international comparison in the introductory chapter shows that there is considerable variation by country in children’s social relations. This is an important result in itself, since social relations are one dimension of children’s living conditions. However, another question is how this variation relates to associations with determinants and consequences of social relations at an individual level. Does the high level of the quality of social relations in Sweden tell us something about the generalizability of the results from the Swedish studies in this thesis? And are results from other countries transferable to the Swedish context? For example, is the association between social relations and outcomes such as educational performance and psychological well-being equally strong in countries with a high or low general quality of social relations? Does the association between economic resources and social relations differ, depending on the economic level and inequality in a country? To examine differences between countries in the strength of associations, high-quality international data are required, and it is beyond the scope of this thesis to answer these questions. However, on the basis of the results here, it is at least possible to discuss them.

Some theories of children’s social relations are likely to be rather universal across contexts and times, such as the importance of social relations for attachment and emotional support. However, other mechanisms might differ between contexts, for example, the association between economic resources and social relations. Much research on children and poverty is conducted in the United States and the United Kingdom (e.g. Duncan and Brooks-Gunn 1997; Ridge 2002), and it is not obvious that theories and results from these countries can be transferred directly to a Swedish setting. In Sweden, the childhood poverty rate is low and economic differences between children are relatively small. Also, the welfare state provides free health care and compulsory and upper secondary schooling for children, as well as heavily subsidized and universal day care. Despite the smaller variation and probably lesser importance in Sweden of children’s economic resources, the results in this thesis confirm that economic resources are important for Swedish children’s social relations, as well (cf. Sletten 2010 for Norway). Results from studies in other countries imply that several of the associations between social relations and the determinants and consequences discussed in this thesis are almost universal (see, e.g., references in Studies I and II). Even if it is likely that international
variations in the level of social relations are larger than variations in the strength of associations with determinants and consequences, this question would benefit from being further researched.

Directions for Future Research

There are, of course, several aspects of children’s relationships not included in this thesis. Two major areas of children’s relationships that are worth noting, especially for their probably increasing importance, are changing family structures and the use of social media. The increase of new family constellations – such as reconstructed families, children living with two parents of the same sex, and a greater extent of equally shared custody and residence after a divorce – may influence children’s relations with their parents (Garbarino 1992; Låftman 2010a). As well, social media and social communication via the Internet (e.g. social forums, chats, interactive computer games, etc.) have become common forms of interaction with peers and a way of forming (virtual) identities and subcultures (Ridge 2007). Whether such fora foremost will favour advantaged children with strong non-virtual relations, or disadvantaged children with poor relations has to be considered further (Mikami et al. 2010). Also, whether these fora will become social resources, with the potential of complementing, say, family and non-virtual friends, is an important question.

The future of studies of child well-being is promising. The sociology of childhood was developed around 30 years ago and the ideas behind it have increasingly been incorporated into research on children. During the past five years, several attempts have been made to measure child well-being internationally, inspired by the sociology of childhood and children’s rights. However, even if there is a promising theoretical perspective on children and childhood, there is a scarcity of quantitative representative data to match this perspective. Most studies use qualitative approaches, and quantitative sociological studies are still rare (Låftman 2010b). There is a lack of both national and international comparable data including children’s own views on, for instance, social relations. Few data materials include both children’s own views and parent-reported and/or administrative data on families and households (Jonsson 2010). Furthermore, the scarcity of data stemming directly from children’s own reports is especially obvious when it comes to young children. One reason for the difficulties in taking account of the youngest children’s subjective views is the difficulty of including these children in surveys (Borgers et al. 2000; Scott 1997). The studies in this thesis do not include the perspective of the youngest children; data including these children
are important for future studies of child well-being (cf. Låftman 2010b).\textsuperscript{18}

Another data limitation when studying children is the relatively few longitudinal studies on children that focus on their own answers.\textsuperscript{19} Even though studies on these kinds of data might alter the focus from well-being to well-becoming, longitudinal studies are important in order to facilitate causal inferences. When measuring indicators of child well-being, a longitudinal view is fruitful, because it is possible to measure stability or change over time. Certain periods in childhood might be more important than others, and with longitudinal data this can be taken into account. When measuring social relations, a longitudinal perspective is important, because long-lasting relations might have different influences and meanings than temporary relations (Moore and Vandivere 2007). Unfortunately, the longitudinal perspective is missing in this thesis, partly due to the scarcity of longitudinal data. One promising contribution to longitudinal data on Swedish children is the follow-up of the children interviewed in the Swedish Level of Living Survey in year 2000. During 2010 and 2011 these children are re-interviewed as young adults (20–28 years old).

Combining high-quality data with the awareness of differences among children and a perspective on children as competent informants whose living conditions are important in their own right is a good foundation for future studies on social relations in youth.

\textsuperscript{18} Methods other than surveys are necessary to include the youngest children. A data material including the youngest children (although not including their subjective views) is the Longitudinal British Millennium Cohort Study (Dex and Joshi 2005; Hansen et al. 2010). Also, Hughes and Dunn (2007) analyse 2-year-olds’ relations with peers and siblings, using observational methods.

\textsuperscript{19} Some of the longitudinal studies on children that do exist are the Stockholm Birth Cohort Study (Sweden), 10 to 18 (Sweden), the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (United States) and the Aberdeen Child Development Survey (United Kingdom).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


International Perspective on Knowledge in the Service of Policy Making, Dordrecht: Springer.


Eurydice 2010 *Gender Differences in Educational Outcomes: Study on the Measures Taken and the Current Situation in Europe*, Brussels: Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency.


APPENDIX: EXISTING INTERNATIONAL REPORTS ON CHILDREN’S SOCIAL RELATIONS

There are three major international reports on child well-being in developed countries that have a multidimensional view including children’s social relations as one dimension. Bradshaw and colleagues contributed two reports of the well-being of children, one concerning the well-being in OECD countries, on behalf of UNICEF (Bradshaw et al. 2006), and one for countries of the European Union (Bradshaw et al. 2007). The EU report was updated two years later with new data and some revisions of indicators and dimensions, and also includes Norway and Iceland (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009).

In the first two reports on child well-being (Bradshaw et al. 2006, 2007), the dimension of social relations includes the three subdimensions family structure, family relations, and peer relations. In the last EU report (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009) the subdimension of family structure is dropped and the indicators of family relations are changed (Table A1). The motivation given for excluding family structure is that family structure is a poor and indirect indicator of the quality of children’s relationships (Bradshaw and Richardson 2009). Although there is an increased risk of poor parental relations for children in single-parent households (Låftman 2010a), the indicator of family structure is a measure of the structure of parental relations, rather than of the quality of relations between children and parents. However, several of the other indicators of children’s relations used in the reports are indirect and far from ideal. The measure of eating the main meal together with parents is one example. Apart from the fact that eating together is a crude measure of the quality of relations, the definition of main meal might vary between countries and could well be defined as the school meal in some countries (e.g. Sweden) where schools provide a cooked lunch meal free of charge. The only direct measure of the quality of relations is the indicator in Bradshaw and Richardson (2009) used for family relations (easy to talk to mother and to father).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subdimensions and indicators of social relations in three international reports of child well-being</th>
<th>Bradshaw et al. (2006, 2007)</th>
<th>Bradshaw and Richardson (2009)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family structure</strong></td>
<td>Children in single-parent families (HBSC 2001)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Parental relations</strong></td>
<td>Eating the main meal together (PISA 2000)</td>
<td>Finding it easy to talk to their mothers (HBSC 2005/06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Peer relations</strong></td>
<td>Finding classmates kind and helpful (HBSC 2001)</td>
<td>Finding classmates kind and helpful (HBSC 2005/06)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

HBSC = Health Behaviour in School-aged Children  
PISA = Programme for International Student Assessment