



Children's Emotional Well-being in Family and Educational Contexts: A Qualitative Study with Parents, Children, and Professionals in Spain

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Abstract

Children's emotional well-being is shaped by family routines, relational dynamics, and everyday stressors. While mental health in childhood is gaining increased attention, little is known about how children and their caregivers make sense of emotional well-being in daily life. This study explores the perspectives of children (aged 8 to 11), their parents, and professionals working in education and psychology. A total of nine focus groups (N = 58) were conducted across three Spanish autonomous communities located in the east, southeast, and south of the country, using a semi-structured script focused on routines, stress management, social pressure, family organization, and perceived support needs. Thematic analysis revealed that children associate emotional well-being with feeling safe, being heard, and having time for rest and play. Parents emphasized challenges related to time constraints, digital saturation, and emotional connection. Professionals highlighted systemic issues, including overstimulation, the absence of emotional education, and a lack of coordination between institutions. Despite their distinct perspectives, all groups consistently emphasized the importance of emotion regulation, caring relationships, and accessible support. The findings highlight the need for multi-level strategies that promote emotional well-being through both relational care and coordinated systemic interventions. By centering on lived experiences, this study offers valuable insights to guide the development of preventive strategies that are closely aligned with children's everyday realities. The findings support the design of contextually grounded and developmentally appropriate interventions with potential implications for both mental health policy and educational practice.

Keywords Emotional well-being · Children · Parenting · Professional support · Qualitative research

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The emotional well-being of children has become a critical public health priority, fueled by the growing incidence of anxiety, sadness, and behavioral challenges in early and middle childhood (UNICEF, 2023). These concerns have gained visibility in part due to increased social awareness, but also because of accumulating evidence indicating that a significant proportion of children experience emotional difficulties, many of which remain undetected or unsupported within families and institutions (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023; World Health Organization [WHO], 2024). These early challenges can interfere with key developmental processes, including the ability to regulate emotions, form secure attachments, and adapt to academic or social demands (Lu et al., 2024). Without timely and adequate intervention, emotional difficulties can persist over time and contribute to long-term difficulties in mental health, academic achievement, and overall well-being (Orben et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2023).

Developmental and sociocultural frameworks help explain how children's emotional well-being is shaped within everyday relational and environmental contexts. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory highlights how children's development is shaped by multiple nested systems, including family, school, and broader sociocultural environments, that interact dynamically over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). Similarly, Vygotsky's sociocultural framework emphasizes the role of social interaction, communication, and cultural mediation in the development of emotional understanding and regulation during childhood (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Together, these perspectives underscore the importance of examining emotional well-being as embedded within everyday relationships and social practices rather than as an isolated individual characteristic. In addition, the Capability Approach has been used in child well-being research to emphasize the importance of children's agency and participation in defining what well-being means in their own lives. From this perspective, well-being is understood not only in terms of outcomes but also as the opportunities children have to achieve valued states of being and doing. This perspective supports the inclusion of children's voices in research and policy discussions on well-being (Dominguez-Serrano & del Moral-Espín, 2022).

While quantitative research has helped to map the prevalence and risk factors associated with childhood mental health, less attention has been paid to how emotional well-being is experienced and constructed by children and their caregivers in everyday life. However, a growing body of literature increasingly explores children's subjective perspectives on emotional well-being, often emphasizing participation, agency, and context-specific experiences (Kosher, 2023; Salazar-Muñoz et al., 2025; Xu et al., 2024). Collectively, this work suggests that listening directly to children and valuing their lived experiences is essential for designing policies and interventions that are both developmentally appropriate and contextually grounded.

Qualitative research has increasingly emphasized the importance of understanding children's well-being from their own perspectives. Studies focusing on children's voices highlight that well-being is often described in concrete and relational terms, such as feeling listened to, having supportive relationships, experiencing fairness and inclusion, and having time for rest and play (Daoust-Zidane et al., 2025; Hunner-Kreisel et al., 2022). This line of research underscores that children are not merely passive recipients of care, but active interpreters of their own emotional experiences.

Approaches that foreground children's participation and everyday narratives therefore provide valuable insights into how emotional well-being is understood and negotiated within family, school, and peer contexts.

Emotional well-being in childhood is understood in this study as a contextual and relational dimension of child well-being that goes beyond the absence of psychological distress. It includes children's sense of emotional safety, their ability to express and regulate emotions, the experience of supportive and meaningful relationships, and the everyday capacity to cope with challenges in family, school, and peer contexts. This perspective assumes that children's emotional well-being is not merely an individual trait, but is shaped through daily interactions, relational environments, and opportunities to feel heard, valued, and supported. While some findings emerged during the pandemic (e.g., Ravens-Sieberer et al., 2022), they revealed broader trends regarding the link between emotional security and relational consistency. Recent qualitative studies have emphasized the importance of capturing these lived experiences, particularly concerning daily stressors such as family routines, school-related pressures, and digital exposure (OECD, 2023; Orben et al., 2020). Parents frequently report feeling unprepared to support their children emotionally, whereas children often describe their well-being in terms of being heard, emotionally connected, and having time to rest and play (UNICEF, 2023).

However, despite the increasing interest in emotional well-being as a policy and research priority, there is limited knowledge about how children actively define and communicate their emotional needs, or how families and caregivers interpret and respond to those needs. Much of the literature relies on structured surveys or standardized instruments which, while informative, may fail to capture the nuances, complexity, and context-dependence of children's emotional life (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Furthermore, few studies have explored the intersections between children's perspectives and those of parents or professionals, which limits our understanding of how emotional needs are negotiated within relational and institutional ecosystems (Bianchi et al., 2024; WHO, 2024).

Within the field of child well-being research, increasing attention has been given to the development of indicators that capture children's emotional and subjective experiences. These indicators are often used to monitor children's well-being at population level and to inform policy and intervention strategies. However, many existing indicators rely primarily on adult-defined categories or standardized survey measures, which may not fully capture how children themselves interpret emotional well-being in their everyday lives. Qualitative approaches that incorporate children's perspectives can therefore provide valuable insights for refining well-being indicators, particularly by identifying age-relevant dimensions and highlighting how emotional well-being is experienced across family, school, and social contexts.

Current evidence suggests that children's emotional well-being is shaped by multiple intersecting dimensions, such as the organization of family life, parental emotional availability, peer relationships, and children's expectations about their future. Stable, predictable routines have been associated with improved emotion regulation and fewer behavioral problems, particularly in the face of uncertainty or heightened social expectations (Hosokawa et al., 2023; Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2024). In contrast, family disconnection, often exacerbated by work-life imbalance or digital

saturation, can undermine children's sense of safety and stability (Yang et al., 2025). International research suggests that as children grow, academic pressure tends to intensify, while emotional scaffolding from families may decrease, underscoring the need to better understand these evolving dynamics (WHO, 2024). In line with this literature, the present study focuses particularly on everyday domains through which children's emotional well-being is frequently experienced and negotiated, including daily routines, stress management, family organization, and perceived support needs. These domains provide concrete entry points for understanding how emotional well-being is expressed and supported in children's daily lives across family and school contexts.

In addition to children's and parents' voices, the perspectives of professionals working in education and mental health provide critical insights into the structural and institutional conditions that shape emotional well-being. These professionals often operate at the intersection of family and school systems and can help identify both the barriers and opportunities for improving support across sectors. Their views also highlight the need for enhanced coordination, professional training, and systemic reform to address emotional needs effectively (Gallagher & Roberts, 2022).

Although prior research, especially quantitative studies, has contributed to mapping the mental health landscape in childhood (e.g., Salari et al., 2024), fewer studies have explored how emotional well-being is experienced and understood by children, their families, and professionals within this context. Recent quantitative studies conducted in Spain have provided valuable data on the prevalence and comorbidity of internalizing symptoms (Orgilés et al. 2025a) and lifestyle habits, digital use, and psychosocial functioning among youth (Orgilés et al. 2025b), yet qualitative insights into children's lived experiences remain scarce. A qualitative approach, particularly one that centers on participants' narratives and relational dynamics, is well-suited to capture these subjective experiences. Focus groups allow for dialogue that reveals not only individual concerns but also shared meanings and collective tensions (Benavides-Lara et al., 2022; Braun & Clarke, 2019). This is particularly relevant when addressing complex, interconnected domains such as daily stressors, family dynamics, peer relationships, and systemic support structures, which are often missed in survey-based research.

This study explores how children, parents, and professionals perceive and describe children's emotional well-being in everyday life, with particular attention to daily routines, stress management, family dynamics, and perceived support needs. Drawing on a multi-actor, multi-site qualitative design, the study highlights participants' narratives and shows how emotional well-being is co-constructed in everyday relational and institutional contexts. These findings complement previous work exploring emotional well-being in Spanish youth, particularly by deepening the understanding of middle childhood and emphasizing systemic and contextual dynamics (Morales et al., 2025 a). The results aim to inform prevention and intervention strategies that are developmentally appropriate, context-sensitive, and responsive to children's lived realities.

1 Methods

1.1 Participants

The participants ($N=58$) comprised children ($n=20$), parents ($n=13$), and professionals working in psychology and/or child and adolescent education ($n=25$). Each participant took part in one of nine focus groups. The inclusion criteria were as follows: children aged 8 to 11 years, parents of children (8–11 years old), and professionals working with children (e.g., child psychologists, educational counselors, primary and secondary teachers).

Children aged 8 to 11 were included because middle childhood represents a particularly relevant developmental stage for exploring emotional well-being. At these ages, children are generally able to reflect on and verbalize daily experiences, emotions, and relationships, while family routines, school demands, and adult support remain highly influential in their everyday lives. The participants' characteristics are detailed in Table 1.

1.2 Procedure

This study was approved by the Ethics Committee of Miguel Hernández University of Elche, Spain (DPS.MOA.02.21). Participants were recruited through schools and institutions serving children aged 8 to 11 years. A total of nine focus groups were held between November and December 2024, including three with children, two with parents, and four with professionals, and distributed across three Autonomous Communities in Spain: the Valencian Community ($n=5$), Region of Murcia ($n=2$), and Andalusia ($n=2$).

Focus groups were selected because they facilitate interaction among participants and allow shared meanings, agreements, and divergences to emerge through discussion. This was especially appropriate for the present study, as emotional well-being was examined as a relational and socially constructed phenomenon embedded in everyday family and school contexts. The group format also enabled comparison of how children, parents, and professionals collectively framed relevant concerns and support needs.

Each group was facilitated in person by a trained moderator. Group sizes ranged from 5 to 11 participants, and each session lasted approximately one hour. Five moderators, all trained by a senior qualitative researcher, led the sessions using a semi-structured interview guide developed from the literature and expert consultation. All focus groups were audio recorded. Participants completed a sociodemographic questionnaire and received a certificate of participation.

1.3 Instruments

1.3.1 Focus Groups

Topics varied by participant group: children, parents, and professionals. Example guiding questions are shown below.

Table 1 Description of the sample ($N=58$)

Children		
Age, M (SD)		9.90 (1.45)
Girls, N (%)		11 (55)
Boys, N (%)		9 (45)
Spanish nationality, N (%)		20 (100)
Autonomous community, N (%)	Region of Murcia	9 (45)
	Andalusia	11 (55)
School type, N (%)	Public	6 (30)
	Concerted	14 (70)
Grade level, N (%)	3rd grade PE	6 (30)
	4th grade PE	2 (10)
	5th grade PE	3 (15)
	6th grade PE	8 (40)
	1st grade CSE	1 (5)
Parents		
Age, M (SD)		40.62 (6.04)
Mothers, N (%)		11 (84.6)
Fathers, N (%)		2 (15.4)
Spanish nationality, N (%)		13 (100)
Autonomous community, N (%)	Valencian Community	5 (38.5)
	Region of Murcia	8 (61.5)
School type (of children), N (%)	Concerted	5 (38.5)
	No answer	8 (61.5)
Marital Status, N (%)	Married	9 (69.2)
	Living with partner	1 (7.7)
	Separated/Divorced	1 (7.7)
	Single	2 (15.4)
Education Level, N (%)	Primary	0 (0)
	Secondary	0 (0)
	Higher Education	13 (100)
Household income, N (%)	0–15,689€	1 (7.7)
	15,690–20,919€	1 (7.7)
	20,920–31,379€	6 (46.2)
	31,380–41,939€	3 (23)
	41,940€ and above	1 (7.7)
	No answer	1 (7.7)
Professionals		
Age, M (SD)		40.36 (10.14)
Women, N (%)		18 (71)
Men, N (%)		7 (29)

Table 1 (continued)

Spanish nationality, <i>N</i> (%)		25 (100)
Autonomous community, <i>N</i> (%)		
	Valencian Community	19 (76)
	Andalusia	6 (24)
Marital Status, <i>N</i> (%)		
	Married	16 (64)
	Widowed	6 (24)
	Separated/Divorced	1 (4)
	No answer	2 (8)
Profession		
	Child/adolescent psychologist	6 (24)
	Educational counselor	4 (16)
	Primary teacher	1 (4)
	Secondary teacher	14 (56)
Workplace		
	Private clinic	4 (16)
	School	2 (8)
	High school	19 (76)

N=Number; *M*=Mean; *SD*=Standard Deviation; *PE*=Primary Education; *CSE*=Compulsory Secondary Education

The children's focus group addressed the following topics: daily routines and habits (e.g., "How many hours do you usually sleep?"), coping with stress (e.g., "What do you do to feel better when you feel stressed or sad?"), worries and social pressure (e.g., "What things worry kids your age the most?"), family dynamics (e.g., "How demanding are your parents when it comes to school or rules?"), parental availability (e.g., "How would you describe the time you spend with your parents?"), diversity and inclusion (e.g., "What do you do when someone is being treated unfairly?"), and future and expectations (e.g., "What excites and worries you about the future?").

The parents' focus group explored the following topics: daily routines and habits (e.g., "Do your children feel rested before school?"), coping with everyday stress (e.g., "Who supports your children when they are upset, and how?"), worries and social pressure (e.g., "Do you think children face too much pressure to do everything right?"), parenting dynamics (e.g., "How do you handle school performance or rules at home?"), work-life balance (e.g., "How do you feel when you're too busy to be with your children, and what do you think could improve that situation?"), diversity and inclusion (e.g., "Do you think your children and their classmates accept differences in others?"), and future and expectations (e.g., "What do you think your children would like for adults to understand better how they feel?").

The professionals' focus group addressed topics related to daily routines and habits (e.g., "What strategies or activities do you recommend to help children relax after stressful days, and which ones seem most effective?"), worries and social pressure (e.g., "Based on your experience, what are the main concerns of children, and how does social media play a role?"), family dynamics (e.g., "What family dynamics promote emotional well-being?"), work-life balance (e.g., "What family activities or dynamics do you suggest to strengthen the parent-child bond, and what support do

parents need to improve this balance?”), diversity and inclusion (e.g., “What challenges do you face when addressing diversity issues in school and/or clinical settings?”), self-image and self-esteem (e.g., “What are the main factors influencing children’s self-esteem, and how do you address them?”), future and expectations (e.g., “What concerns do children have about their future, and how do you help them manage realistic expectations with personal goals?”), and professional training and needs (e.g., “What challenges do you face in your work, and what additional training or support do you consider necessary?”).

1.3.2 Sociodemographic Data

Collected data included age, gender, nationality, and place of residence. Professionals reported marital status, occupation, and workplace. Parents reported marital status, education level, and household income. Children shared details about their school type (public or concerted) and grade level.

1.4 Data Analysis

The qualitative data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun et al. (2019). Transcripts were first reviewed in full by the research team to ensure familiarity with the data and to identify initial patterns. Preliminary codes were then generated through close reading of the transcripts and iterative discussion among the researchers. Two members of the research team were directly involved in the coding process. Initial codes were discussed in regular analytic meetings with the broader research team, where interpretations were compared and refined until consensus was reached regarding the final thematic structure.

An AI-based language model (ChatGPT, OpenAI) was used only in a limited and auxiliary way to support the organization of excerpts and to help identify potential recurring patterns across transcripts for later human review. The AI tool was applied only to anonymized transcript excerpts after the initial human coding stage. Its role was limited to assisting with the organization of coded segments and suggesting possible cross-group patterns that could be further examined by the researchers. At no stage did the AI independently determine codes, themes, or analytic interpretations. However, all coding decisions, theme development, interpretation, and selection of illustrative quotations were carried out by the research team. AI-generated outputs were treated as provisional suggestions and were critically reviewed, compared with the original transcripts, and either refined or discarded by the researchers.

Given the emerging use of AI-assisted tools in qualitative research, particular attention was paid to maintaining researcher accountability and interpretive transparency throughout the analytic process. Ethical considerations regarding the interpretive adequacy, potential biases, and researcher accountability associated with the use of AI tools were also acknowledged, following recent discussions in the literature (Davison et al., 2024). All transcripts were anonymized prior to analysis, and the use of AI-assisted tools was consistent with the ethical approval granted for the study.

Visual figures were created to represent the most salient themes and subthemes discussed within each participant group. Codes were annotated with the number of

associated excerpts to reflect their relative weight in the analysis. These counts were used only as descriptive indicators of the relative prominence of themes within the dataset and were not interpreted as quantitative measures of prevalence. These figures were developed to enhance the interpretability of the results and clarify the structure of key thematic categories.

The research team included scholars with backgrounds in psychology, child mental health, and education. Throughout the analytic process, the team engaged in reflexive discussions to examine how their professional perspectives, assumptions about children's emotional well-being, and expectations regarding family and school contexts might shape interpretation. These discussions were used to refine codes, challenge premature conclusions, and support greater interpretive transparency.

2 Results

2.1 Children's Perspectives on Emotional Well-being

Thematic codes identified in the children's groups included: daily routines, stress management strategies, social and academic pressures, family interactions, parental availability, experiences of social inclusion and peer exclusion, and future aspirations.

When feeling overwhelmed, children often relied on music, solitude, or close relationships for support. For example, one child explained "*When I'm sad, I listen to music*", while another described withdrawing to reflect: "*I lie in bed and think about things until I feel better*". Academic and family expectations were also mentioned as sources of stress, although family relationships were simultaneously described as an important source of affection and stability. As one child explained, "*Sometimes I feel nervous when there are many exams at the same time*". Reflections on bullying and discrimination highlighted children's sensitivity to inclusion and diversity. Although digital habits were part of children's daily routines, they were not always described as a direct source of emotional distress. Instead, their emotional impact appeared to depend on broader relational and contextual factors, such as family routines and peer interactions. Table 2 summarizes these key topics, and Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual connections among themes.

2.2 Parents' Perspectives on Emotional Well-being

The focus groups with the parents followed a structured script addressing seven pre-defined topics: routines and habits, coping with everyday stress, social and academic pressure, family dynamics, work-life balance and child mental health, diversity and inclusion, and future expectations (Table 3).

Parents frequently described difficulties in helping children regulate emotions and manage stress. One parent noted, "*She cries easily and sometimes doesn't know how to explain what's wrong*", highlighting the challenge of interpreting children's emotional signals. Others emphasized the pressures of balancing work and parenting responsibilities, with one participant stating, "*I feel guilty when I get home late and they're already in bed*".

Table 2 Summary of children's perspectives of emotional well-being

Topics	Children
Routines and Habits	Children described daily routines involving school, homework, meals, rest, and digital device use. Some highlighted screen time as affecting their time management. "I wake up early, go to school, do homework, and then maybe I can play."
Coping with Everyday Stress	They reported emotional reactions to sadness or anger, and shared strategies such as listening to music, being alone, or talking to someone. "When I'm sad, I listen to music." "I lie in bed and reflect."
Worries and Social Pressure	Children expressed concerns about their academic performance, future school demands, and social comparisons with their classmates. "They demanded at least a 9.5, or they'd take away my Nintendo." "I worry a lot about exams at university—even now."
Family Dynamics	They described positive and negative aspects of family relationships, including affection, rules, and perceptions of fairness. "My mom always talks to me when I'm sad."
Parental Work-Life Balance and Child Mental Health	Some children noticed their parents' absence due to work, linking it to emotional distance or reduced shared time. "We only have lunch together on Sundays."
Diversity and Inclusion	They discussed experiences of exclusion based on weight, ethnicity, or behavior. Some noted that these incidents have decreased. "Now we all play together, even if someone is different."
Future and Expectations	Children expressed their aspirations for future jobs and concerns for distant relatives, especially those living in other countries. "I want to be a preschool teacher." "My cousin is in Venezuela, and I haven't seen her in a long time. I miss her a lot."

In addition to the predefined areas, parents introduced emergent themes such as the development of autonomy, concerns about screen time, and sensitivity to peer comparison. These are incorporated into Fig. 2, which visualizes both predefined and emergent themes.

2.3 Professionals' Reflections on Emotional Well-being

The professionals' focus groups addressed a wide range of issues, including children's daily routines, social and academic pressures in children, family dynamics, work-life balance, diversity and inclusion, self-esteem, future expectations, and professional training needs.

Participants emphasized structural challenges affecting child and adolescent mental health, such as the limited presence of emotional education in schools, insufficient

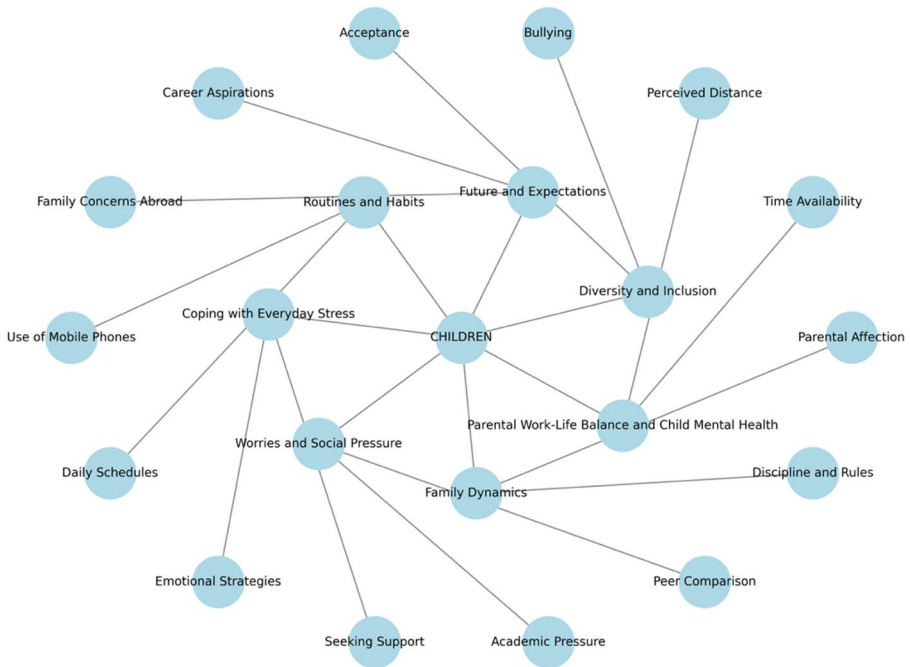


Fig. 1 Themes from the focus groups with children

strategies to support parents, and the growing clinical complexity faced by educators. As one professional noted, *“Many families are trying their best, but the system doesn’t always give them enough support”*. They noted the impact of digital overstimulation on emotional self-regulation and identified social media, appearance-related pressure, and academic overload as key contributors to emotional distress. A synthesis of these insights is provided in Table 4.

Professionals identified barriers to effective intervention, including institutional fragmentation, lack of coordination between the health and education sectors, and insufficient public resources. Emerging themes included concern over children’s suicidal ideation, emotional numbness in children, and the growing role of educators as emotional mediators.

Professionals often emphasized structural challenges affecting children’s emotional well-being. One participant commented, *“They come to school exhausted; their sleep is completely dysregulated,”* referring to disrupted routines. Another highlighted institutional limitations: *“We need more training, more time, and less bureaucracy to really help”*. These insights are synthesized in Fig. 3, which illustrates the interconnections among core and emerging themes.

2.4 Shared Dimensions of Emotional Well-being in Childhood

Across all participant groups, emotional well-being and everyday family life emerged as central concerns, although they were emphasized from different angles. Children

Table 3 Summary of parents' views on children's daily life and emotional needs

Topics	Parents
Routines and Habits	Parents reported inconsistent sleep schedules and insufficient rest. "He wakes up tired almost every day; bed-time is always delayed."
Coping with Everyday Stress	They described the children's difficulty in calming down and expressed concern over their emotional outbursts. "She cries easily and sometimes doesn't know how to explain what's wrong."
Social and Academic Pressure	Children were perceived as highly self-demanding and affected by school performance. "He got a 9.5 and started crying. We didn't expect that reaction."
Family Dynamics	Parents described rule enforcement, emotional bonds, and parenting disagreements. "Each of us handles things differently, and it creates tension."
Work-Life Balance and Child Mental Health	They discussed the limited time they have with their children due to work and its emotional impact. "I feel guilty when I get home late and they're already in bed."
Diversity and Inclusion	Parents reflected on how children perceive and respond to differences in others. "They don't always understand when someone is different, but we try to explain."
Future and Expectations	They expressed concerns and hopes for their children's futures. "I worry about what kind of world they'll grow up in."

focused on emotional expression, academic demands, and their relationships with peers and family. Parents highlighted parenting challenges, limited time availability, and the need for emotional connection at home. Professionals drew attention to systemic constraints, digital overstimulation, and rising emotional demands in school settings.

Despite these varied perspectives, several shared themes emerged: the influence of digital routines on children's emotional states, the family's dual role as both a protective or a risk factor, and the need to strengthen emotional education and support strategies across home, school, and clinical settings. These commonalities are synthesized in Table 5, which presents a comparative overview of recurring emotional well-being topics across the three participant groups. While shared concerns were evident, notable differences also emerged, for instance, in how emotional signals were interpreted by adults versus children, or in the emphasis placed on structural versus relational factors.

3 Discussion

This study explored how children, parents, and professionals describe and interpret children's emotional well-being in everyday life. Across the three groups, emotional well-being was consistently linked to everyday relational experiences, including

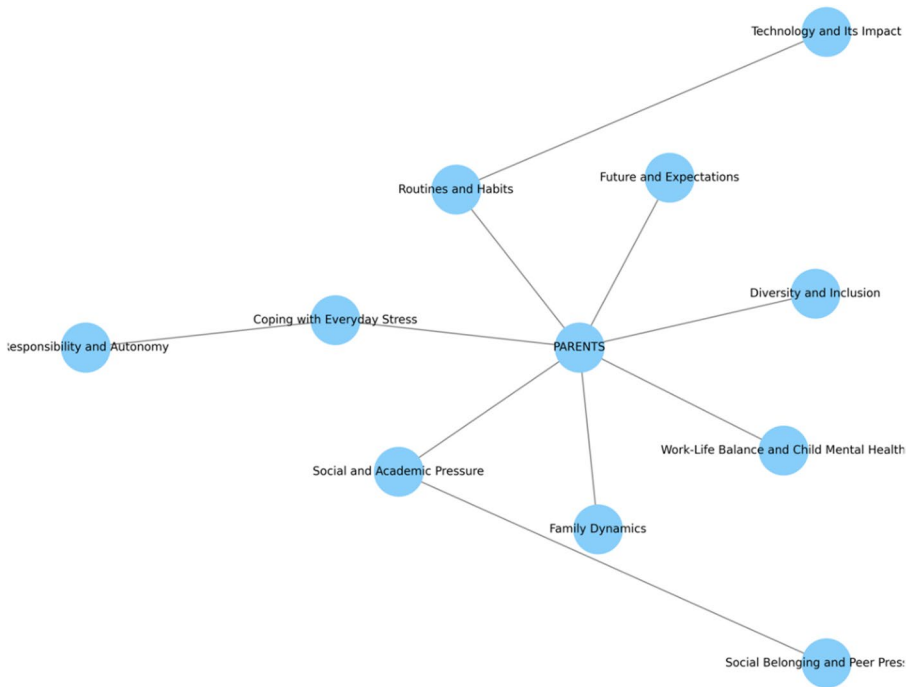


Fig. 2 Themes from the focus groups with parents

feeling listened to, having supportive relationships, and maintaining balanced daily routines. Children emphasized the importance of emotional expression, peer relationships, and manageable academic demands. Parents highlighted challenges related to time constraints, emotional communication, and balancing work and family responsibilities. Professionals, in turn, emphasized broader structural factors, including institutional limitations, the lack of emotional education, and the growing emotional demands placed on schools. Together, these perspectives suggest that children's emotional well-being is shaped through the interaction of relational and systemic conditions.

Recent research also highlights the importance of everyday routines and emotional scaffolding as protective factors (Hosokawa et al., 2023). Emotional well-being can therefore be understood not only as the absence of distress but also as the presence of supportive relationships, meaningful engagement, and opportunities for emotional expression in everyday life (Seligman, 2018). These frameworks support the study's focus on lived experience and reinforce the need for interventions that are relationally grounded and developmentally sensitive.

Recent research has underscored the value of innovative qualitative techniques, such as metaphorical dialogue (Gervais et al., 2024), for eliciting rich insights into children's emotional worlds. Although this study relied on traditional focus groups, the findings similarly underscore the importance of employing flexible, child-centered methods to explore subjective well-being. This aligns with evidence from care-

Table 4 Summary of professionals' insights on emotional challenges and family contexts

Script Topics	Professionals
Routines and Habits	Professionals reported disrupted sleep cycles and overstimulation in many children. "They come to school exhausted; their sleep is completely dysregulated."
Social Pressure and Concerns	They noted increased anxiety linked to academic expectations and social media. "There's a growing obsession with performance and online comparisons."
Family Dynamics	Participants described both overprotective and absent parenting styles, and their emotional effects. "Some children are micromanaged, others completely neglected emotionally."
Work-Life Balance and Child Mental Health	They identified a lack of parental time and attention as key risks. "Children say their parents don't even look at them when they talk."
Diversity and Inclusion	Professionals encouraged inclusive practices but acknowledged social resistance and institutional limitations. "We talk about inclusion, but then we don't act when exclusion happens in class."
Self-Image and Self-Esteem	They emphasized peer judgment, body image, and external validation as key influences. "They believe they're only valuable if others approve of them."
Future and Expectations	They observed unrealistic aspirations among children and stress about future success. "They talk about being YouTubers, but there's also real fear of not being enough."
Professional Training and Needs	Professionals requested more tools for emotional education and systemic support. "We need more training, more time, and less bureaucracy to really help."

experienced populations, where standardized measures often fail to capture children's own priorities (Hall et al., 2025).

Children associated emotional well-being with specific daily experiences, including schoolwork, time spent with parents, and peer interactions. Emotion regulation emerged as a recurring concern, with children describing personal strategies to manage stress such as listening to music, withdrawing to a quiet space, or seeking support from trusted individuals. Although academic demands and social comparison often generated distress, digital activities were not consistently perceived as harmful. This suggests that the emotional impact of digital engagement may be modulated by broader relational and environmental factors, such as parental involvement or household routines. These findings are consistent with existing research indicating that family structure and predictable routines enhance children's emotion regulation and reduce anxiety levels (Selman & Dilworth-Bart, 2024).

Parents emphasized the relevance of stable routines, emotional availability, and shared time in enhancing their children's emotional well-being. However, they also expressed difficulties related to work-life balance, limited time, and uncertainty about

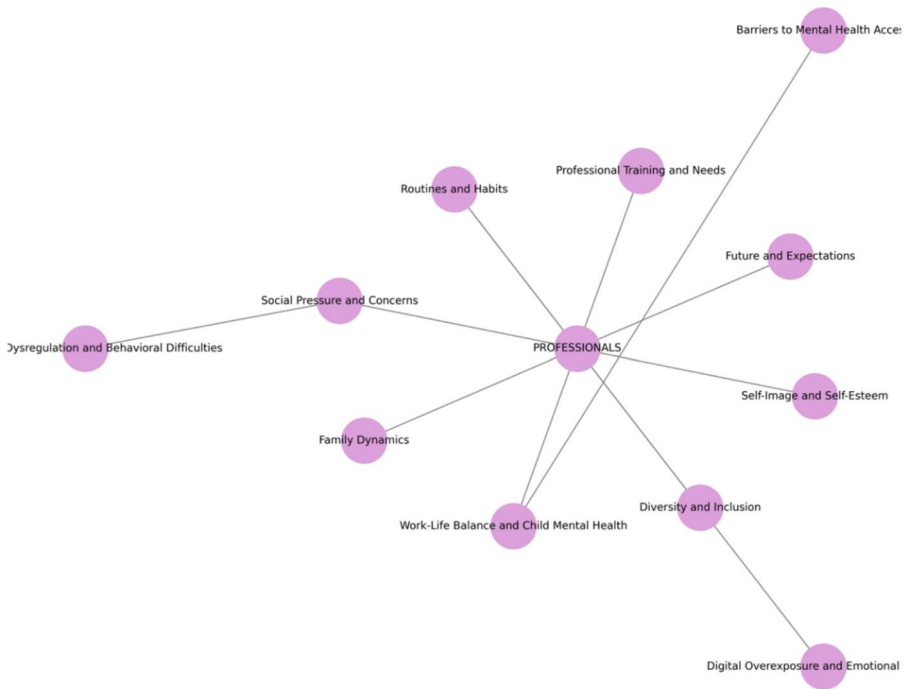


Fig. 3 Themes from the focus groups with professionals

how to interpret their children's emotional signals. Feelings of guilt and frustration were common, particularly among parents who felt unable to meet their children's emotional needs due to time constraints or exhaustion. Concerns about excessive screen time, academic overexertion, and future uncertainty were also prevalent. Interestingly, while professionals often identified clinical or structural causes, parents tended to describe difficulties using relational terms, highlighting the need for support strategies that resonate with families' lived experiences. These results align with previous studies highlighting the role of work-family conflict in reducing emotional availability and increasing parental stress (Kuśnierz et al., 2022).

Professionals provided a broader, systemic view of emotional well-being, pointing to overstimulation, lack of emotional education, and limited institutional coordination as key challenges. They described a growing emotional complexity among children, marked by dysregulation, withdrawal, and increased sensitivity to social comparison. Professionals noted that schools are increasingly expected to address emotional needs without sufficient resources, training, or structural support. These observations echo the findings of Hosokawa et al. (2023), who emphasize the crucial role of intersectoral coordination and institutional investment in promoting emotional health. The lack of formal emotional education within the school curriculum, coupled with bureaucratic constraints, was considered a major barrier to effective intervention. Moreover, professionals highlighted the dual burden of addressing both academic and emotional demands in contexts that are often under-resourced.

Table 5 Shared themes across children, parents, and professionals regarding emotional well-being

Shared Topics	Children	Parents	Professionals
Emotional expression & regulation	Express feelings through play, talking, solitude	Encourage expression, worry about outbursts	Observe lack of regulation; need for emotional education
Digital influence on well-being	Acknowledge screen time, not always linked to emotions	Concern about screen time and emotional consequences	Highlight overstimulation and addiction patterns
Family as a relational space	Value time with parents, affected by availability	Feel guilty over limited time, seek a better balance	See family presence/absence as a determining factor
Peer/social dynamics	Mention bullying, desire for inclusion	Concern over peer pressure and comparison	Report increasing sensitivity to peer judgment
Aspirations & future anxiety	Express dreams and concerns about uncertainty	Express fears about opportunities for their children	Observe unrealistic expectations, social comparison
Systemic support needs	Limited access mentioned (tentatively)	Desire for guidance, training, coordination	Highlight the lack of resources and institutional barriers

Despite differences in emphasis, all three groups (children, parents, and professionals) identified core dimensions of emotional well-being: the need for emotional expression and regulation, the importance of close and responsive relationships, and the role of structured daily routines. These shared insights suggest that well-being is not an individual attribute, but a co-constructed process rooted in relational and contextual dynamics. The inclusion of children, parents, and professionals also enabled a form of triangulation across participant groups, strengthening the interpretive robustness of the findings. This finding supports broader trends identified in cross-national studies (e.g., Salazar-Muñoz et al., 2025), which show that emotional well-being is shaped by a combination of structural vulnerabilities, daily routines, and relational safety. This qualitative focus group study extends these patterns by providing nuanced insight into how emotional needs are negotiated within Spanish family and educational contexts. These findings also have implications for the development and interpretation of child well-being indicators. Qualitative insights such as those generated in this study can help inform the selection and interpretation of emotional well-being indicators by highlighting dimensions that may not be fully captured by standardized survey measures. The themes identified in this study suggest that emotional well-being indicators should capture not only individual emotional states but also relational and contextual dimensions, such as feeling heard, maintaining supportive relationships, and managing everyday pressures. In addition, the differences observed across children, parents, and professionals highlight the value of multi-informant approaches when monitoring children's well-being. Incorporating children's perspectives may help ensure that indicators remain developmentally sensitive and better aligned with children's lived experiences. Although common themes

were identified across all groups, some differences also emerged: children primarily emphasized their immediate emotional experiences, parents highlighted relational and logistical challenges at home, and professionals focused on institutional and systemic barriers. These distinct perspectives underscore the importance of integrating multiple viewpoints when designing multi-level interventions. The inclusion of professionals in this study allowed for the triangulation of experiences and helped to situate family-level concerns within broader structural and policy frameworks.

This study should be interpreted in light of several methodological limitations. First, the findings are context-specific and are intended to provide an in-depth understanding of participants' perspectives rather than statistical generalization. Their transferability to other contexts should therefore be considered in relation to the characteristics of the sample and the settings in which the study was conducted. Second, although the inclusion of children, parents, and professionals enriched the analysis by incorporating multiple perspectives, the sample was not demographically balanced across all participant groups and regions. Third, the focus group format facilitated collective discussion but may have constrained the expression of particularly sensitive emotional experiences, especially among children. Finally, although AI-assisted tools were used in a limited way to support data organization, their use introduces additional methodological considerations regarding transparency and interpretive responsibility in qualitative analysis.

Despite these limitations, the study offers several practical implications for educational, familial, and community settings. Within schools, strategies such as daily emotional check-ins, structured routines, and inclusive classroom practices may contribute to more supportive emotional environments. Parents could benefit from guidance on emotional communication, screen-time regulation, and balancing work and caregiving responsibilities. At the community and policy level, this study reinforces the need to: (1) embed emotional education within the curriculum from early stages, (2) foster parental involvement through flexible work arrangements and accessible support services, (3) strengthen coordination between schools and mental health services, and (4) invest in training and resources for professionals working with children.

Because children frequently linked emotional discomfort to academic pressure and limited space for emotional expression, schools may benefit from incorporating brief, routine opportunities for emotional check-ins and discussion into everyday classroom practices. Given that parents often described guilt, exhaustion, and uncertainty about how to respond to their children's emotional signals, family-oriented supports should include practical guidance on emotional communication that is feasible within time-constrained daily routines. Since professionals repeatedly described institutional fragmentation and insufficient cross-sector collaboration, multi-agency coordination between schools, mental health services, and family support systems appears essential for responding to children's emotional needs more effectively.

In sum, emotional well-being in childhood is not merely the absence of distress, but a developmental capacity shaped by everyday interactions, environmental consistency, and structural support. By integrating the voices of children, caregivers, and professionals, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of emotional well-being as a shared responsibility, offering grounded insights for designing interventions that are developmentally appropriate, contextually relevant, and systemi-

cally informed. These findings reinforce ecological and sociocultural perspectives that conceptualize children's emotional well-being as emerging from everyday relational interactions within family, school, and broader social contexts.

Author Contributions M.O., A.M., and J.P.E. designed and conducted the focus groups. A.M. prepared and reviewed transcripts in Word format. P.S. reviewed and refined all outputs of the AI language model ChatGPT (OpenAI). M.T.G. carried out the qualitative analysis of the data and wrote the main manuscript text. All authors reviewed the manuscript.

Data Availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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