

ARTICLE

Being good and feeling good: What happiness means to children

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Email: fan.yang@uchicago.edu**Abstract**

Happiness is one of the most important parenting goals in today's modern society. To promote a happy childhood, we need to understand what happiness means to children. Contrary to the view that young children may equate happiness with satisfying material desires and experiencing simple pleasures, in this article, I review recent developmental research showing that (1) even young children have a sophisticated understanding about the role of desire satisfaction in happiness, (2) they perceive happiness as contingent on moral goodness, and (3) they experience happiness from performing morally good behaviors. Together, the findings suggest that for children, happiness means more than feeling good about satisfying material desires and experiencing simple pleasures; it also means *being good* to oneself and others. This research deepens our understanding of children's emotional cognition and experience, elucidates the nature and origins of happiness, and has significant implications for fostering a happy childhood and beyond.

KEYWORDS

emotion development, happiness, material desire satisfaction, moral goodness

“I just want my kids to be happy.” This sentiment strikes a chord in modern societies, reflecting the unwavering childrearing value placed on prioritizing children's happiness (Berman, 2014; Stearns, 2019). Large-scale cross-cultural data reveal that this desire transcends borders, with adults across 48 countries expressing a universal aspiration for their children to experience high levels of happiness (Diener & Lucas, 2004). It is reasonable to prioritize happiness as one of the most important parenting goals. Philosophical and educational perspectives have long acknowledged the intrinsic value of happiness in childhood, going so far as to consider it the ultimate purpose of education (Gilead, 2012; Rousseau, 1905). Empirical evidence has also demonstrated that positive emotions predict success (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2005) and greater kindness (e.g., Aknin et al., 2019; Brethel-Haurwitz & Marsh, 2014; Rhoads et al., 2021), while negative emotions such as anxiety and depression often predict maladaptive social and school functioning (e.g., Logan et al., 2009; Mychailyszyn et al., 2010). As Oscar Wilde aptly summarized, “the best way to make children good

is to make them happy” (2007, p. 172). The question is: What makes children happy?

Despite decades of extensive research on happiness among adults, happiness in childhood has not been an active area of study in developmental psychology. Traditionally, children have been viewed as relatively positive and optimistic (e.g., Lefkowitz & Burton, 1978), and in studies, most 6- to 12-year-olds report very high levels of positive affect (Thoilliez, 2011). By implication, happiness seems to become a significant question only later in life. In contrast, an Internet search on “how to raise happy children” yields numerous questions and an abundance of advice, primarily by parents or science writers (e.g., Barker, 2014; Garcia, 2023). The advice ranges from arranging enjoyable activities (e.g., increasing outdoor playtime) to cultivating virtuous behaviors (e.g., fostering self-discipline). However, many popular strategies on happiness lack a strong scientific foundation (Folk & Dunn, 2023). Some recommendations (e.g., to adopt a growth mindset, to foster self-control) may have research-supported effects on children's school and social adjustment, but happiness was not the focus of the

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research and most studies did not even include happiness as a measure. In other words, popular recommendations stem primarily from what lay adults believe would make children happy, and we lack research-based answers to the essential question of what happiness means to children.

To shed light on this question, in this article, I review the growing body of developmental research on children's sense of happiness, focusing primarily on 3- to 10-year-olds from diverse demographic backgrounds in the United States. (For the sociodemographic characteristics of the studies reviewed herein, see [Table S1](#).) Providing a theoretical foundation, I first provide an overview of philosophical and adult views of happiness. Then, I review developmental findings from two different research perspectives and approaches: (1) how children understand and think about happiness, and (2) how children derive and experience happiness.

PHILOSOPHICAL AND ADULT VIEWS OF HAPPINESS

Throughout history, philosophers and psychologists have been deeply interested in the nature of happiness. Analyses of definitions of happiness suggest that in ancient usage, the word referred to favorable external conditions and good luck. However, in contemporary English language, the definition has shifted to mean favorable internal feelings (e.g., McMahon, 2006; Oishi et al., 2013), defined as “the state of pleasurable contentment of mind” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d., Definition 1). Consistent with this modern definition, one philosophical perspective views happiness as the right kinds of subjective feelings, including a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and an overall subjective satisfaction with one's life. This hedonic view of happiness has formed the foundation for major psychological theories and measures of happiness (e.g., Diener, 2000; Hektner et al., 2007; Kahneman et al., 1999; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999).

Parallel to this hedonic perspective yet distinguishable from it, happiness has also been conceptualized as the satisfaction of desires. According to this view, individuals maintain a list of desires and as long as they satisfy those desires, they are happy (Brülde, 2007). Both perspectives view subjective states as sufficient for happiness—they equate happiness with a singular form of *subjective* value for the individual, where the *moral* qualities of the means and behaviors used to attain happiness, whether they are deemed good or bad or right or wrong, are not directly relevant. In contrast to these perspectives, dating back to Aristotle, philosophers have put forth a *eudaimonic* view of happiness that is intricately linked to moral goodness (Aristotle, 305 B.C./2009; Foot, 2003). This view emphasizes the importance of virtuous behaviors and character traits, such as performing

morally good behaviors and striving for excellence, as fundamental for happiness. In this light, a person who leads a morally flawed and unethical life, even if they enjoy overall positive feelings and complete satisfaction of desires, would not be considered happy.

Supporting this latter perspective, research indicates that although adults recognize the importance of hedonic states and desire satisfaction in happiness, they do not consider these factors sufficient for happiness. Instead, when thinking about happiness, they also evaluate the moral value of individuals' actions (e.g., Phillips et al., 2011, 2017; Prinzing et al., 2023). Additionally, adults derive happiness from performing prosocial actions to benefit others, sometimes above and beyond receiving benefits themselves (e.g., Aknin et al., 2013; Dunn et al., 2008). Do these tendencies emerge relatively late in life, based on extensive experience and advanced cognitive abilities, or are they deeply rooted tendencies that are present from early in life? Answering these questions can help us understand how children think about and experience happiness.

EARLY RESEARCH ON CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING OF HAPPINESS: MATERIAL DESIRES AND SIMPLE PLEASURES MATTER

Early research on children's emotion understanding indicates that material desires play a significant role in how children understand happiness and people's actions in general. Even infants expect individuals to show positive affect by eating the food they like (Repacholi & Gopnik, 1997). By age 2, children discuss what people like or dislike and predict happiness based on obtaining desired objects (Bartsch & Wellman, 1995; Wellman & Woolley, 1990). By age 5, children recognize that others may have and act on desires that differ from their own (e.g., Moore et al., 1995; Rakoczy et al., 2007; Wright Cassidy et al., 2005).

Much research has also shown that children under age 7 often prioritize material desires and simple pleasures over moral rules or higher values, despite the fact that young children understand and expect others to follow moral and normative rules (e.g., Kalish & Shiverick, 2004; Shtulman & Phillips, 2018). For example, when faced with a choice between enjoyable activities (e.g., playing video games) and valued goals (e.g., doing well on a test), young children predicted that individuals would prioritize fulfilling their preferences rather than reaching their goals (Yang & Frye, 2018). In another study, children under age 7 also doubted that people could act against their own desires (e.g., Kushnir et al., 2015). More directly relevant to happiness attributions, the *happy victimizer effect* shows that children younger than 7 years believe that individuals feel happy by getting what they want, even if it involves

moral transgressions (e.g., pushing another child off the swing to play; e.g., Keller et al., 2003; Nunner-Winkler & Sodian, 1988; Smith & Warneken, 2014).

Relatedly, in limited research on children's lay theories of happiness, children under age 12 tended to perceive happiness as stemming from engaging in enjoyable activities; only upon reaching adolescence did they appreciate happiness as being influenced by factors such as social relationships and personal growth (e.g., López-Pérez et al., 2016). In another study, children under age 12 recognized that their teachers and parents valued academic achievement and good behavior, but were less inclined to view these as direct sources of happiness (Thoilliez, 2011).

These findings seem to suggest that young children primarily associate happiness with greater satisfaction of material desires and pleasures. To refine this view, next, I review the growing body of evidence from recent developmental research showing that (1) children have a sophisticated understanding of the role of desire satisfaction in happiness, (2) children consider moral goodness of behaviors in their perceptions of happiness, and (3) children derive happiness from performing morally good behaviors. Taken together, these findings suggest that to children, happiness means more than feeling good about satisfying desires; it also means *being good* to oneself and others.

CHILDREN'S UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE OF HAPPINESS: REFINED VIEWS

Children have a sophisticated understanding of desire satisfaction in relation to happiness

Do most children simply think that greater desire satisfaction equals greater happiness? Recent research suggests that children have a more sophisticated view than this. For example, one fundamental nature of happiness is that individuals adapt to desirable changes quickly, so higher levels of desire satisfaction often have diminished utility for happiness; this is termed the *hedonic treadmill* (Brickman et al., 1978). Children intuitively understand the diminishing utility of desire satisfaction for happiness. With age, 5- to 8-year-olds increasingly expected that obtaining additional resources would make individuals with fewer resources happier than individuals with more resources (Ahl et al., 2023).

Children also have an intuition about the temporal and social nature of happiness and desires. From age 5, children anticipate both desires and happiness as short-lived mental states (Kramer et al., 2024). In one study, even 11-month-olds expected individuals to be happy when seeing their friends succeed in desired goals (e.g., jumping over a wall) but not when seeing rival individuals succeed (Smith-Flores et al., 2022). These findings

expand earlier research on emotion reasoning by showing that infants and children have a sophisticated understanding about the nature of desire satisfaction in relation to happiness. Next, I review evidence showing that beyond satisfying material desires and having pleasures, moral goodness also plays a role in children's perceptions and experiences of happiness.

Children perceive happiness based on moral goodness

Consistent with the philosophical perspective that moral goodness plays an important role in happiness (Aristotle, 305 B.C./2009; Foot, 2003), the impact of moral judgments on perceived happiness manifests early in life and persists into adulthood (e.g., Chen et al., 2023; Phillips et al., 2011, 2017; Prinzing et al., 2023; Yang et al., 2021). For example, in one study, 4- to 9-year-olds and adults consistently perceived mean individuals as less happy than nice and neutral individuals, even if both could get everything they wanted (Yang et al., 2021). Even more noteworthy, they viewed nice individuals with *fewer* positive feelings (e.g., people who helped others in a hospital and empathized with their pain) as *happier* than mean individuals with more positive feelings (e.g., people who stole from others and enjoyed playing with the stolen items; Yang et al., 2021).

Moreover, the connection between moral judgments and children's attributions of happiness is relatively distinct. For instance, in the previously mentioned study, children favored nice individuals over mean individuals only when attributing happiness, not when attributing other positive characteristics such as speed (Yang et al., 2021). Furthermore, not all positive attributes affected children's perceptions of happiness in the way moral character did. When a very smart individual who found everything boring was contrasted with a less smart individual who found everything interesting, children viewed the less smart individual with more positive feelings as being happier (Yang et al., 2021).

Unlike interpersonal moral transgressions, behaviors such as indulging excessively in candies primarily affect the individual and not others. Indeed, from an insatiable appetite for sweets to power struggles over TV time, children often appear to prioritize satisfying material desires and sensory pleasures at the expense of consequences and parental rules. Nevertheless, when presented with enjoyable activities that are harmless in moderation but detrimental in excess, 5- to 10-year-olds cared about the normative value of the engagement—they attributed less happiness to themselves and another child when they knew their preferred level of engagement was harmful and forbidden than when they perceived it as harmless and permitted (Chen et al., 2023). Together, these findings suggest that children's perception of happiness is interwoven with their value judgments and sense of

morality, beyond obtaining material rewards and experiencing simple pleasures.

Children derive happiness from morally good behaviors

Often, morally good behaviors, such as sharing with others, involve personal costs and may not be as immediately gratifying as receiving personal benefits. Indeed, in studies, children younger than 7 or 8 years were much less likely to share equally with others than were older children and adults (e.g., Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Fehr et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2013). Nevertheless, children do derive happiness from engaging in prosocial behaviors, even when those behaviors come at a personal cost. In fact, young children exhibited greater happiness even when giving resources to others (compared to receiving resources themselves; Aknin et al., 2012, 2015; Fast et al., 2023; Song et al., 2020), especially when they shared autonomously (Wu et al., 2017) and could witness the recipient's positive reactions (Fast et al., 2023).

The short-term experimental impact of prosocial actions on happiness raises the question of whether the effect would endure in children's real life experiences. In a comprehensive longitudinal study of 9- to 10-year-old Chinese children (Yu et al., 2023), researchers collected two waves of data from self-reports, peer evaluations, and school records. Peer-rated prosocial behaviors, the quality of peer relationships, and academic performance predicted children's self-reported and peer-assessed happiness over a year, over and above children's self-reported levels of desire satisfaction. These findings suggest that morally good behaviors such as prosocial actions play a significant role in children's happiness in both the short and the long run.

WHAT HAPPINESS MEANS TO CHILDREN: A SYNTHESIS OF DIFFERENT VIEWS

The studies I have reviewed suggest that none of the three philosophical views of happiness—hedonic states, desire satisfaction, or moral goodness—fully capture what happiness means to children. However, children as young as 4 or 5 years integrate these perspectives into their understanding and experiences of happiness. While fulfilling desires and experiencing positive states are significant, children's sense of happiness is also influenced by their moral sensibilities, and the effect seems to be driven by their sensitivity to *morally bad* actions. In one study, 4- to 10-year-olds attributed high levels of happiness to self-benefitting actions, comparable to morally good actions and individuals, but less to morally bad actions and individuals (Yang et al., 2021). This is consistent with findings suggesting that when personal gains do

not harm others, adults view obtaining personal benefits as equally important as, or even more important than, benefiting others and society (Huang & Yang, 2023). In summary, happiness for children entails gaining personal benefits (e.g., experiencing positive states and fulfilling desires) when the actions involved are not morally objectionable.

At the same time, as we seek to understand children's sense of happiness, we must recognize that numerous questions remain, particularly concerning when children prioritize benefiting the self versus others. In some circumstances, young children do prioritize considerations for others over material benefits for themselves in their perceptions and experiences of happiness (e.g., Aknin et al., 2012, 2015; Fast et al., 2023; Song et al., 2020; Yang et al., 2021). However, we need more research on developmental changes in these priorities and contributing psychological and environmental factors. For now, we must at least recognize that both feeling good and being good matter for children's sense of happiness.

BROADER IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS

Studies on children's sense of happiness reveal a deep connection among children's emotional concepts, moral judgment, and behaviors. Extensive research has shown that children under 7 or 8 years often exhibit more selfish behavior than do older children and adults (e.g., Blake & McAuliffe, 2011; Fehr et al., 2008; Smith et al., 2013), and that at even younger ages, children can carry out frequent unprovoked harmful acts (Dahl, 2016). Therefore, we should not assume that prosocial behavior is as prevalent as it could be in early childhood. However, an intriguing question arises: Can children's ability to anticipate happiness from prosocial actions help them focus not only on obtaining immediate rewards for themselves but also on promoting other-oriented and long-term interests? In one study, exposure to others' negative emotions resulting from dishonesty led children to engage in less cheating (e.g., Zhao et al., 2023). Researchers should examine whether and under what circumstances children's implicit theories of happiness could guide their pursuit of goals and actions.

These insights into children's conceptualizations and experiences of happiness also may prompt us to reevaluate our understanding of children. From an early age, children's sense of happiness is driven not solely by immediate desires and hedonic pursuits, but also by a deep concern for goodness and engaging in actions that benefit themselves and others constructively. This perspective emerges as one of the most significant contributions of this research, carrying far-reaching implications for parenting and educational practices. Perceiving children's happiness as rooted primarily in immediate desires and pleasures might tempt parents, teachers, and

other adults to indulge them with material possessions, potentially hindering encouragement of morally good behaviors. Researchers could examine whether and how recognizing children's appreciation for moral goodness influences parents' choices in fostering happiness in their children.

These developmental findings also shed light on the nature and origins of happiness. The discovery that children derive happiness from performing prosocial actions aligns with the evolutionary idea that happiness serves as a crucial psychological mechanism for promoting prosocial behaviors in human societies (Buss, 2000). Happiness is an elusive concept that has been the subject of centuries of philosophical debate about its nature. While individuals may have diverse desires and find happiness in various aspects of life, everyone implicitly perceives happiness as a fusion of desire satisfaction and moral goodness. This perspective appears to be a fundamental aspect of our understanding, emerging early in life and not dependent on extensive life experiences, advanced education, or intricate philosophical reasoning. Thus, these developmental findings illuminate our deeply rooted notions of and structures related to the concept of happiness.

More broadly, research on children's sense of happiness underscores the potential for productive collaboration among researchers in fields such as positive psychology, existential psychology, and developmental psychology. Children's responses to questions about happiness offer insights into deeply ingrained beliefs and tendencies related to fundamental life experiences, shedding light on the mechanisms by which they emerge and develop. Happiness is just one illustration of this interdisciplinary synergy. Looking ahead, more existential questions (e.g., related to the need for meaning and significance) may benefit from developmental approaches. Moreover, broadening the scope of developmental research to encompass such inquiries will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of human nature, children's development, and ultimately, what constitutes the good life.

CONCLUSION

Children's sense of happiness has captivated parents' and society's attention, yet it remains relatively underexplored in developmental psychology. Children often appear to be driven by their material desires, but the studies I have reviewed suggest that even young children demonstrate a nuanced grasp of the fact that greater satisfaction of desire does not invariably equate to heightened happiness. Furthermore, children discern and associate happiness with actions rooted in moral goodness, both for themselves and for others. They also derive enhanced happiness from engaging in morally good behaviors, in both immediate and long-term contexts. Therefore,

characterizing young children as driven solely by material desires and pleasures is an incomplete portrayal because their sense of happiness is intricately intertwined with their sense of goodness. Living in an era when most individuals are free and even encouraged to pursue happiness and personal desires of all kinds, it is reassuring to realize that Wilde's sentiment that "the best way to make children good is to make them happy" (2007, p. 172) is complemented by the idea that we can also make children happy by guiding them toward the pursuit of the good.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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