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WHAT MAKES KIDS HAPPY?

UBC Researchers Surprised at the Role Spirituality Plays

By Bud Mortenson

What makes you happy? Spirituality typically accounts for four or five per cent of an adult's happiness, but new research has found a much stronger influence of spirituality in children.

Mark Holder, Assoc. Prof. of Psychology at UBC Okanagan, and graduate student Judi Wallace recently tested 315 children aged nine to 12, measuring spirituality and other factors such as temperament and social relations that can affect an individual's sense of happiness.

"Our goal was to see whether there's a relation between spirituality and happiness," Holder says. "We knew going in that there was such a relation in adults, so we took multiple measures of spirituality and happiness in children."

The results were a surprise – 6.5 to 16.5 per cent of children's happiness can be accounted for by spirituality.

"From our perspective, it's a whopping big effect," says Holder. "I expected it to be much less – **I thought their spirituality would be too immature to account for their well-being.**"

"Spirituality is easiest to describe as having an inner belief system," Wallace notes. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, she cautions that "spirituality is not religiosity, which is often more organized, and may be church-based."

To describe their daily spiritual experiences, private religious practices, and whether they think of themselves as religious or spiritual, children in the study rated statements such as "I feel a higher power's presence," and answered questions including "how often do you pray or meditate privately outside of church or other places of worship?" Parents were also asked to describe each child's apparent happiness and spirituality, and teachers rated each child's happiness level.

While the connection between spirituality and happiness in adults has been established, Holder says relatively little is known about the connection between spirituality and happiness in children.

Factors such as gender or money contribute very little to happiness, says Holder. "In fact, the contribution of money to happiness explains less than one per cent." They found that whether children attend **public or private school has virtually no impact on their happiness.**

There are lots of new questions to explore – such as how to improve the well-being of children by applying this new understanding of what contributes to happiness.

"This research represents the first steps in that direction," Holder says. With funding from UBC Okanagan and the Michael Smith Foundation for Health Research, he has formed a research group nicknamed the Happy Lab to examine the biology, psychology and assessment of happiness.

The researchers have identified several possible reasons why spirituality and happiness are linked. **Spirituality**

- **produces a sense of meaning;**
- **it stimulates hope,**
- **reinforces positive social norms, and**
- **can provide a social support network**

– all things that can improve a person's well-being.

Wallace, who conducted the in-school testing, envisions a day when activities that improve happiness are built into the school experience.

"We would love to have a way to apply our research findings in the schools," she says. "A program in elementary schools promoting positive psychology might involve giving students cameras to take pictures of things they think are beautiful or give meaning to their life."

"It creates a 'search image' – an anticipation – to **look for beauty in the world,**" Holder explains, adding that a number of simple activities can go a long way to promote student happiness.

"Rather than a child saying 'this is what I did today,' **they could be asked to come up with three things they're thankful for** – different things each day. That greatly increases happiness," he says. "Or students could list **daily activities that contributed to the community,** or teachers could **have them look at what they do that makes a difference.**"

Happier people are more tolerant, creative, and productive, Holder says. "If we could promote happiness in children, it might come with these attractive traits."

The team's findings were presented at the World Congress on Psychology and Spirituality in India in January. "People from Portugal, Australia and India are interested in our research and possibly trying to duplicate it in their own countries," says Wallace. But, she says, the findings are also having an impact much closer to home.

"What we're learning is useful in our own lives," Wallace says. "**At the dinner table, we ask our own children to list all the good things that happened that day.** It's actually pretty easy to increase the happiness of your family."

"We do take the research personally," Holder agrees. "It's not just academic to us."

The next phase of the study will look at families, not just the children. "We have collected data on the parents' happiness and spirituality," Holder says, "so we will be able to look at the relation and independence of parents and their children's spirituality."

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