Personal and Family Correlates to Happiness amongst Italian Children and Pre-adolescents

Valeria Verrastro[a], Giuseppe Ritella[b], Valeria Saladino[c], Jessica Pistella[d], Roberto Baiocco[d] and Lilybeth Fontanesi[e]

    [a]University Magna Graecia of Catanzaro, Catanzaro, Italy

    [b] University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

    [c] University of Cassino and Southern Lazio, Cassino, Italy

    [d] Sapienza University, Rome, Italy

    [e] University G. D'Annunzio, Chieti- Pescara, Chieti, Italy

This study examines how family functioning, the parent-child relationship and personal factors are related to happiness in 1549 children aged 7 to 14 years old (53% females) in Italy. Children and pre-adolescents completed a set of questionnaires on self-rated happiness, self-concept and loneliness. At least one of their parents filled in questionnaires on family functioning, attachment and their child's happiness level. No gender differences were found in the direct measure of happiness, but younger participants were happier than older participants, according to both the children's and parents' evaluations. Happiness is influenced by positive self-concept, self-esteem and low levels of satisfaction but family functioning does not seem to play a major role. The clinical and social implications of the study are discussed.

Keywords: happiness; early adolescents; self-concept; children; family functioning

Introduction

Happiness is a subjective experience related to positive feelings across the life span and different cultures. The psychological inquiry into happiness is fundamental because happiness is not only associated with improved

---

1

  Corresponding author. Email address: lilybeth.fontanesi@unich.it

physical health, but it is also a priority for the individual. Most empirical studies suggest that happiness is a predictor of psychological, social and personal well-being. Positive psychology studies have found that happiness, and its pursuit during one's lifetime, is an indicator of personal satisfaction and subjective well-being (Donaldson et al., 2015; Parks et al., 2012). Hedonistic theorists claim that happiness overlaps the concept of well-being itself and is described as the presence of positive effects and the absence of negative ones (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Happiness plays an important role in scientific and clinical research on people's psychology and behaviour (David et al., 2013). Most of the studies on happiness have been conducted on adults and adolescents, but in the past decade, there is a growing body of research literature focused on happiness and well-being in young children and pre-adolescents (Godoy-Izquierdo et al., 2013; Holder et al., 2009; Holder et al., 2010; López-Pérez et al., 2016). Studies of happiness in these early stages of life are essential for assessing, promoting and contributing to children's well-being in families (Bjarnason et al., 2012) and schools and communities (López-Pérez et al., 2016; López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2017)

Age correlates to happiness and the transition between childhood and adolescence
It is well established that happiness is one of the first emotions recognized by newborn babies (Ichikawa et al., 2014). At the age of seven, children are fully capable of identifying, understanding and explaining a number of emotions, becoming more sophisticated in handling their feelings and attaching more words to those feelings (Skelley & Crnic, 2010). In addition to psychological and physical growth, even if childhood and pre-adolescence are two very close stages of life, children and pre-adolescents face different critical developmental tasks. The widening of social boundaries, for example, involves an increase in the number of comparisons with others, whose feedback has a strong influence on self-esteem (Reese et al., 2010). The development of emotional self-efficacy and an efficient emotional regulation is a crucial challenge for mediating between internal and external responses, positive self-concept and achieving goals, especially in adolescence (Gullone et al., 2010; Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012). Therefore, younger children appear less preoccupied and more satisfied with their lives than adolescents. Moreover, school-aged children and adolescents differ in the elements that influence happiness because they are at different stages of cognitive, social, relational and personal development (Holder & Coleman, 2009; López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2017).

The research literature consistently demonstrates that happiness and life-satisfaction decrease in early adolescence (Bisegger et al., 2005; Michel et al., 2009). This may be attributable to the new developmental tasks during this period, as well as family and school responsibilities that adolescents face in different stages of life (Goldbeck et al., 2007; Holder & Coleman, 2009). Indeed, the transition from childhood to adolescence is characterized by a change in relationships, perceptions and social activities. A key developmental task for children is the reciprocal and interactive play. During childhood children move from playing alone toward true interactive play as they establish more complex social dynamics. With the onset of preadolescence and adolescence, preadolescents' activities become shared and less tied to the classroom. Preadolescents begin to

explore relationships outside the school and the family systems, to establish romantic and friendship bonds and to improve their decision-making autonomy. As reported by parents in some longitudinal studies, these trends increase gradually across preadolescence and adolescence (Wray-Lake et al., 2010). The physical, emotional and social changes in preadolescence and adolescence might result in an increased conflict and lower closeness with parents. However, adolescents still need the support of their parents who remain a fundamental part of their life. Unfulfilled needs and the new developmental tasks can lead to a lowering of happiness levels amongst preadolescents and adolescents.

Gender correlates to happiness

The literature indicates that there are gender differences in expressing emotions (Bisegger et al., 2005; Chaplin & Aldao, 2013), results on happiness are conflicting (Goldbeck et al., 2007; Mahon et al., 2005; Michel et al., 2009). Furthermore, in adolescence, boys appear to be happier than girls (Bisegger et al., 2005; Holder & Klassen, 2010; Michel et al., 2009; Park & Peterson, 2006). This finding could be related to the fact that, starting from middle school, girls are generally more anxious, more concerned with their well-being, and experience more loneliness and internalizing of their feelings than boys (Michel et al., 2009; Patton & Viner, 2007).

Self-esteem, self-concept, loneliness and happiness

In addition to age and gender, happiness is strongly connected to the general sense of self, which is a relatively stable, multidimensional concept, encompassing different aspects of self-concept (Holder & Coleman, 2008). Self-esteem has been linked to happiness and life-satisfaction from childhood to late adulthood (Diener et al., 2003; Holder, 2012). Various studies, in fact, have found that variables associated with positive mood, such as extraversion and sociability, positive cognitive factors, such as feeling competent and having a purpose, and positive self-concept such as. physical acceptance, self-esteem, and self-control, are correlated with greater happiness (Holder & Klassen, 2010; Tomlinson et al., 2017). Moreover, as self-concept is built upon significant experiences with others, loneliness in terms of social and family isolation is connected to happiness and life-satisfaction in children and pre- and early adolescents, namely lowering the happiness and life-satisfaction levels in the youth population (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012; Perry-Parrish & Zeman, 2011; Proctor et al., 2009), especially in older children.

Family correlates to happiness

In addition to the previous considerations, family connections and closeness to parents seem to have considerable influence on children's happiness (Ginsburg, 2007; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Parks et al., 2012). Field research has revealed that family structure (e.g. single, divorced or separated parents, a large number of siblings)—even if it plays a substantial role in the development of individual identity—does not always influence children's happiness (Hair et al., 2008; Holder & Coleman, 2009). On the contrary, the quality of

family relationships and parental style contribute to the personal growth of happiness and life-satisfaction. Attachment, appreciation, communication, closeness and acceptance are all factors that can enhance children's well-being (Park & Peterson, 2006). Parents who are involved in their children's lives and spend time with them (Ginsburg, 2007), share experiences with them, and promote good communication, contribute to their children's life-satisfaction (Levin & Currie, 2010). These behaviours mean that the parent is perceived as an available, reliable and responsiveness attachment figure (West et al., 1998). However, parents tend to overestimate their children's happiness (López-Pérez & Wilson, 2015) and underestimate negative emotions (Lagattuta et al., 2012) because they use their own life-satisfaction levels as an anchor to estimate that happiness (López-Pérez & Wilson, 2015).

Clearly, contextual variables, such as family structure and style, and attachment and relational features, such as the quality of interaction between children and others (e.g. parents, siblings or friends), appear to play an important role in the development of a satisfied and happy life, but few studies have assessed the contribution of these variables to happiness (Baiocco et al., 2019).

The present study

The extant literature agrees that children's well-being and happiness should be assessed across different dimensions of their lives (López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2017; López-Pérez et al., 2016), such as family and personal-related variables. Interestingly, few studies have considered all these aspects at the same time, and even fewer have included other factors such as children's and parents' subjective opinions. Within this framework, the present study explores the concept of happiness, as a personal feeling of well-being, a positive feeling of satisfaction and positive emotion, in a sample of Italian children and pre-adolescents, assessing the relationship between family functioning, parents' willingness to serve as an attachment figure, children's self-concept and behaviour, and the role of gender and age regarding happiness.

To our knowledge, very few studies in Italy have been conducted on children's and pre-adolescent's happiness, with most studies focusing only on elementary-school students (Businaro et al., 2015; Migliorini et al., 2018). We assessed differences between children and pre-adolescents and males and females regarding the variables related to happiness, and we expected to find no significant gender differences in happiness (Hypothesis 1) but decreasing happiness levels with age (Hypothesis 2). A positive self-concept and high self-esteem should correlate with higher levels of happiness (Hypothesis 3), and loneliness with lower levels of happiness (Hypothesis 4). Positive family functioning, good communication between family members, and parents willing to serve as a positive attachment figure, should correlate with high levels of happiness (Hypothesis 5). By determining the relationship between the studied variables, we may better understand how personal and family variables may contribute to explain children's and pre-adolescents' happiness, as reported by them and their parents in a sample of 1549 dyads (parent-son/daughter) from southern Italy.

Methods

Participants

We collected 1997 sets of questionnaires, but 223 were missing from the parents' responses, and others were incomplete or not properly completed and were thus excluded from the analysis (22.44% exclusion rate). The final sample comprised 1549 responses from young children and pre-adolescents aged 7 to 14 years old; with 734 males (median age = 11.15, SD = 1.43) and 815 females (median age = 11.13, SD = 1.52) recruited from 95 elementary and junior middle-school classes in central and southern Italy. Parental written consent was obtained for all participants. Furthermore 385 fathers and 1150 mothers completed the survey, while 14 parents did not report their gender. The composition of the families, as reported by the parents who participated in the research, was as follows: 87% were married and 13% were in cohabitation; 90% of the couples were in their first marriage/cohabitation; 7.6% were new families following divorce or the death of a spouse; 89% had been married or cohabiting for more than 10 years, and 4% for less than five years. Most of the parents (83%) defined their economic status as 'average', 5.5% as 'good or very good' and 12.5% as 'bad'. Due to the homogeneity of the participant group, information on family composition was not considered in reporting the present research.

Procedure

Data collection took place in two stages. First, questionnaires were administered to students during regular class periods. A teacher and a trained researcher were always present to help young children complete the questionnaires. Each parent was asked to think about his/her relationship with the child (as opposed to other siblings) when they were asked to complete the questionnaires sent through the school. Children completed a socio-demographic questionnaire, recording general information about, for example, age, gender, and classroom, a scale on self-concept and a face chart on happiness. Parents, in addition to personal data, completed a set of questionnaires on the composition of their family, their family style, satisfaction and communication between family members, and their emotional relationship with their children. For the purpose of the present research, we used only matched sets of children and their parents, and eliminated incomplete ones.

Measures

Children and pre-adolescence measures

     Piers-Harris Children's Concept Scale 2 (PHS). Children completed the translated (Fontanesi et al., 2017) version of the Piers-Harris Children's Concept Scale 2 (Piers & Herzberg, 2002), a self-report questionnaire for children aged 7 to 18 years old that provides a multidimensional measure of self-concept. Participants responded '*true*' or '*false*' to 60 items that addressed how they perceive themselves. An overall self-concept score (TotPHS) on six different subscales is derived from the following: *Popularity* (POP), or how the child is considered by peers (e.g. 'I have many friends' or 'I'm unpopular'); *Freedom from Anxiety*

(F-ANX), measuring the degree to which children are free from symptoms of anxiety, *Behavioural Adjustment* (BEH), referring to children's manners and behaviour (e.g. 'I am a good person'); *Intellectual and School Status* (INT) or how the participant evaluates his/her academic and intellectual levels (e.g. 'I am smart'); *Physical Appearance and Attributes* (PHY) evaluates how smart and pleasant the participant perceives him/herself (e.g. 'I have nice hair'); and *Happiness and Satisfaction* (HAP), measuring children's positive view of their life and overall satisfaction (e.g. 'I like being the way I am'). The PHS reliability in the present sample is .87.

Happiness Face Scale. This self-report instrument contains a seven-point Likert-type scale with seven smiley faces on a horizontal line. The Happiness Face Scale assesses children's self-perception of their happiness (Holder & Coleman, 2009). The first face (score 1) has a very sad expression and the last face has a large smile (indicating very happy, point score 7). The children were asked to rate their happiness by evaluating how happy they are most of the time. This one-item instrument has been proven to be reliable and is commonly used (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Swinyard et al., 2001), and many studies have shown its reliability in the assessment of happiness, as a general feeling of well-being and positive sensation, in adolescents and young people (Clemente et al., 2020; Otsuka et al., 2020). The same instrument was administered to the parents, who were asked to evaluate how happy their child is most of the time, on the same scale, so as to compare the two measures about children's and pre-adolescents' happiness.

UCLA Loneliness Scale (Loneliness). A five-item short form of the UCLA Loneliness Scale (Baiocco et al., 2011; Russell, 1996) was used to assess the children's feelings of loneliness. Items such as 'How often do you feel alone?' were evaluated by participants on a four-point Likert-type scale from '*never*' to '*always*'. Internal consistency for the present study is .73.

Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Self-Esteem) (Rosenberg, 1965) This is a 10-item questionnaire assessing global self-esteem in children, defined as respect and acceptance toward oneself. Responses are based on a four-point Likert-type scale, from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 7 (*totally agree*). In the present study, the Cronbach's α is .67.

Parent measures

Family Adaptability and Cohesion Evaluation Scales (FACES IV). Parents completed the FACES IV (Baiocco et al., 2013; Olson, 2011), a self-report questionnaire on a Likert-type scale used to evaluate family functioning and family relationships. The theory underlying this measure is the circumplex model (Olson, 2000; Olson et al., 1983), which suggests that balanced levels of cohesion and flexibility are most conducive to healthy family functioning.. In this study, we used the subscales reflecting balance (*Cohesion* and *Flexibility*) and two supplementary subscales (*Communication* and *Satisfaction*) to assess the quality of communication and the levels of parental family satisfaction. Internal consistency in the present study ranges from .75 to .83.

Attachment Figure Scale. This scale (Kerns et al., 2001; Kerns et al., 2000) is a 10-item self-report questionnaire assessing the propensity and willingness of parents to serve as secure attachment figures for their children. The parents rated how much they trust, appreciate and communicate with their children on a Likert-type scale from 1 ('*not at all*') to 7 ('*absolutely*'). Cronbach's alpha for the present research is .75.

Data analysis

Data analysis was completed using SPSS v. 23 (IBM, 2012). The internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's α. Paired *t* test analysis was performed to assess the difference between the parents' and children's evaluations of happiness. A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to assess the effect of age and gender while bivariate correlations were computed to assess the relationships between the variables. Hierarchical multiple regression, using PROCESS v3.3 (Hayes, 2013), was conducted to test the interactive effects of gender, age, and the other variables in the study.

Results

Gender and age differences

This research assessed the relationship between family relationships, happiness and self-concept in young children and middle-school pre-adolescents. Table I lists the MANOVA significant effects for age and gender. Age has an effect on happiness with children appearing to be happier than pre-adolescents in both self ($F_{(1,1548)}$= 22.7; *p*<.001) and parental evaluations ($F_{(1,1548)}$ =4.92; *p*<.001). Pre-adolescence has an effect on loneliness ($F_{(1,1548)}$= 22.7; *p*<.001), self-esteem ($F_{(1,1548)}$= 6.98; *p*<.01) and on self-concept ($F_{(1,1548)}$= 6.98; *p*<.01). Finally, parents are more likely to serve as an attachment figure for younger children than for pre-adolescents ($F_{(1,1548)}$= 5.00; *p*<.05), and perceive younger children to be happier than pre-adolescents ($F_{(1,1548)}$= 4.92; *p*<.01).

Table II reports the MANOVA significant effects for gender. Happiness levels do not differ in the two measures of happiness, but males scored higher in the HAP subscales ($F_{(1,1548)}$=13.86; p<.001). Moreover, males appear to be less isolated ($F_{(1,1548)}$=46.65; *p*<.001), less anxious ($F_{(1,1548)}$=74.80; *p*<.001), and show a more positive self-concept than females ($F_{(1,1548)}$=12.54; *p*<.001). However, females exhibit better behavioural adjustment than boys ($F_{(1,1548)}$=17.68; *p*<.001). Other results (i.e. the family variables and the happiness scales) are not reported because no statistically significant differences were found.

Correlates of happiness

Table II shows that children's happiness correlates negatively with age (*r.*= -.16; *p*<.01) and loneliness (*r.*= -.39; *p*<.01) but positively with all the other study variables (Table II). Furthermore, the children's happiness self report correlates with the parental response (*r.*= .28; *p*<.01), even if a paired sample *t* test analysis revealed that parents estimated their children to be happier than they actually were (PCF *M*= 5.88, SD = .94; COF *M*= 5.80, SD = 1.16; t =2.25, *p*<.05), with no significant interaction for gender.

Table I. Significant univariate effects for age (7-11years, N= 898) (12-14 years, N= 651)
Pillai's trace value is .995 (p<.001)

Dependent Variables	df	F	Age	Means (DS)	p	Partial η^2
Happiness						
COF[a]	1	22.73	7-11	5.94(1.10)	.000	.017
			12-14	5.62(1.21)		
PCF[b]	1	4.92	7-11	5.96(.936)	.000	.004
			12-14	5.80(.955)		
Children's variables						
Loneliness	1	16.61	7-11	9.24(3.09)	.000	.013
			12-14	9.87(3.45)		
Self-Esteem	1	6.98	7-11	29.62(4.59)	.008	.005
			12-14	28.97(4.50)		
INT[c]	1	6.68	7-11	11.14(2.86)	.010	.005
			12-14	10.82(2.90)		
PHY[c]	1	6.59	7-11	7.57(2.47)	.010	.005
			12-14	7.27(2.76)		
F-ANX[c]	1	19.23	7-11	9.61(2.79)	.000	.014
			12-14	8.91(3.35)		
HAP[c]	1	21.28	7-11	8.46(1.80)	.000	.016
			12-14	8.00(2.29)		
TotPHS	1	8.86	7-11	42.93(8.10)	.003	.007
			12-14	41.90(8.92)		
Parents' variables						
Attachment	1	5.00	7-11	36.28(5.24)	.025	.003
			12-14	35.58(5.73)		

Note: [a]Children's Happiness Face Scale (Self) [b]Children's Happiness Face Scale (Parents); [c]Piers-Harris Children's self-concept subscales.

Table II. Pearson's Correlation for the study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1.Age										
2. COFa	-.16**									
3. PCFb	-.08*	.28**								
4. Loneliness	.096*	-.39**	-.18**							
5. Self-Esteem	-.073*	.26*	.14**	-.292**						
6. Self-Concept	-.053	.42**	.23**	-.506**	.40**					
7. Attachment	-.054	.06*	.27**	-0.03	.07**	.08**				
8. Cohesion	-0.01	.06*	.24**	-.08**	.054*	.12**	.37**			
9. Flexibility	0.00	.06*	.23**	-.05*	0.042	.10**	.31**	.60**		
10.Communication	-0.03	.08**	.25**	-.09**	0.049	.12**	.36**	.64**	.53**	
11. Satisfaction	-0.04	.10**	.31**	-.12**	.10**	.15**	.42**	.55**	.51**	.71**

Note: *p<.05; **p<.01; ªChildren's Happiness Face Scale (Self); ᵇChildren's Happiness Face Scale (Parents).

Predictors of happiness in children

Using hierarchical regression analysis, we further analyzed how the study's key variables may relate to happiness in children and pre-adolescents (Table III). First, the children's age and gender were entered as identity variables. Then, we added the children's personal variables, such as loneliness, self-esteem and general self-concept. Family variables, such as family functioning (cohesion and flexibility), communication and satisfaction, and attachment were entered in the third step. All possible interactions between these variables with gender and age were added in the final step. Prior to the analyses, all continuous measures were mean centred to limit multicollinearity. The regression analysis revealed that happiness is influenced by age (B= -.08, t= -4.42, $p<.001$) and gender (B= .13, t= 2.27, p=.003). Higher levels of happiness are related to a positive self-concept (B= .04, t= 10.11, $p<.001$), and self-esteem (B= .01, t= 1.97, $p<.05$), while lower levels are related to isolation (B=-.07, t= -7.17, $p<001$). Family variables added in the third step were not significant. In step 4, two-way interaction was found between age and loneliness (B= -.06, t= -2.21, $p<.05$), revealing that pre-adolescents experiencing higher levels of loneliness were less happy than younger participants. A final significant interaction was found between children's gender and family communication (B= .06, t= 2.03, $p<.05$), suggesting that, for female participants, living in a family with good communication is associated with higher levels of happiness.

Table III. Hierarchical Regression Analysis for child and family
variables predicting children happiness

	B	SE B	β	R	R²
Step 1 (Identity variables)				.16***	.03
Age	-.08	.02	-.11***		
Gender	.13	.06	.05*		
Step 2 (Personal variables)				.50***	.25
Loneliness	-.07	.01	-.20***		
Self-Esteem	.01	.01	.05*		
Self-Concept (TotPHS)	.04	.01	.30***		
Step 3 (Family variables)				.50	.25
Cohesion	-.01	.01	-.02		
Flexibility	.00	.01	.00		
Communication	-.01	-.01	.00		
Satisfaction	.00	.01	.01		
Attachment	.00	.01	.03		
Step 4 (Interaction effects)				.51**	.26
Gender x Communication	.06	.03	.05*		
Age x Loneliness	-.06	-.03	-.05*		

Note: The tabled values for beta reflect Bs after Step 5, * p < .05; ** p< .01;
*** p < .001. Interactions which were statistically significant are reported.

Discussion and Conclusion

According to our results, entering early adolescence appears to be a crucial change in the well-being of children. Happiness levels decrease during this period, as do the overall sense of a positive self-concept and self-esteem, with pre-adolescents becoming pervaded with a general sense of loneliness. These results are in line with other international studies (Bisegger et al., 2005; Goldbeck et al., 2007; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Michel et al., 2009), suggesting that the pre-adolescents are probably facing a stressful developmental step in which cognitive, physical and emotional changes have a strong influence on the general sense of life-satisfaction of older children (Hypothesis 1).

Our results did not reveal any gender differences in the overall sense of happiness, as reported by the children's or parents' Happiness Face Scale. However, the HAP subscale of PHS data produced significantly lower scores for the female children, in contrast to previous studies (Bisegger et al., 2005; Holder & Klassen, 2010; Park & Peterson, 2006). This result suggests that, when asked directly, boys and girls display no differences in the level of happiness, but if the concept is investigated indirectly, considerable gender

differences are revealed. This finding is controversial, especially because, in the regression analysis, gender appears to have an influence on happiness levels. Hypothesis 2 is thus not confirmed and should be further investigated using different tools to assess happiness and life-satisfaction.

Higher levels of happiness are correlated with positive self-concept and higher self-esteem (Hypothesis 3), as confirmed by the literature, in both children and pre-adolescents (Holder et al., 2010; Tomlinson et al., 2017), whilst higher levels of loneliness are related to lower levels of happiness (Hypothesis 4) (Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012; Perry-Parrish & Zeman, 2011; Proctor et al., 2009). The sense of loneliness experienced by pre-adolescents, which strongly impacts happiness levels, could be related to parents being more concerned for their younger children's emotional and behavioral development and, thus, paying more attention, and even feeling closer, to them. However, even if early adolescents are beginning to spend more time in leisure activities with peers, distancing themselves from family (Gilman & Huebner, 2003; Holder & Coleman, 2008), previous studies have found that shifting from primary school to middle school can make it difficult to make new friends (Baiocco et al., 2018).

Our data reveal that parents perceive their younger children to be happier than pre-adolescents and, overall, they estimate their children to be happier than they actually are. This effect, called 'parents positivity bias' (López-Pérez & Wilson, 2015), is in line with previous literature. However, even if positive family functioning, satisfaction, communication and attachment are correlated to higher happiness levels in children, they have no direct influence on children's happiness (Hypothesis 5). This result seems to be in contrast with existing literature about the influence of family cohesion and the quality of family relationships on children's and early adolescents' happiness (Levin & Currie, 2010; Parks et al., 2012). Having good family communication seems to be important only for female children. This finding could be related to girls experiencing more negative emotions about themselves and having more feelings of loneliness than boys during their development. Moreover, according to the literature, family functioning moderates the relationship between adverse childhood experience and adolescent health and emotional well-being (Balistreri & Alvira-Hammond, 2016) and is also a protective factor against risky behavior, such as the use of substance (Tucker et al., 2013). Family functioning may thus serve more as a protective factor against negative events and situations in development, rather than directly connected to happiness.

Our data underline the role of self-esteem, self-concept and loneliness in the life-satisfaction of children and pre-adolescents. However, in contrast to previous studies, personal variables appear to be more significant than family functioning. The result that self-esteem and positive feelings about self are connected to happiness in children is in line with the definition of happiness by the hedonistic theorists, suggesting that happiness is a personal positive sensation, more connected to the self rather than to relationships and experience, and this is in part substantiated by existent literature on child happiness (López-Pérez et al., 2016). Nonetheless, this perspective assumes a specific relevance since we analyzed a sample composed of traditional Italian families anchored to old-fashion values; therefore, future studies should address the same variables in different types of families, in which family functioning and family relationships could assume a major role.

Due to the fast changing Mediterranean European societies, assessing the roles of different family variables in children's happiness could prove a valuable method to understand the strengths and weaknesses of families and consequently provide appropriate supports.

Finally, since children's personal variables play a central role in determining their life-satisfaction, families, caregivers, teachers and psychologists should pay attention to early signs of depression and loneliness in elementary-school-aged children, especially girls, who appear to be significantly less happy and satisfied than their male peers. Parents may need to be more careful during their children's transition to adolescence, because pre-adolescents are more anxious and concerned about their appearance and social relationships than younger children. Moreover, family therapy may focus not only on the relationships between family members, but also on the personal functioning of each member, especially children, who are usually those who 'carry the symptoms'. Since children's personal variables have an important impact on the development of happiness, schools should also be involved in the process. For example, previous research's findings show that education has an impact on happiness, particularly the feeling of self-confidence linked to the process of acquiring knowledge (Cuñado & de Gracia, 2012). Teachers thus have a key role in promoting students' happiness, and schools should represent happy places, including positive dynamics and relationships, because one of the aims of education is actually to promote children's self-esteem and social and emotional learning (Cefai et al., 2018).

Limitations and future study directions

Although our results are promising, there are a few limitations to acknowledge. First, the data collected on children was based on self-report and may be subject to biases or inaccuracies due to the length of the questionnaires, particularly with respect to young children. Furthermore, even if we have specific data on the socioeconomic status of families participating in the study, most of the families in the selected area come from a high socio-economic background. Since our sample comprised two-parent families, single-parent families should be added in future studies. Only a small number of fathers took part in the research. Probably the high number of mothers compared to fathers in completing the questionnaires is related to from the greater involvement of the mothers in the activities of their children. Mothers are perceived in a more supportive role than fathers, and this perception is also connected to the cultural context, that is the Italian one, which portrays the maternal figure as the centre of the family system. Future studies should thus address the difference between male and female parents. Further research should also consider different environments and test the same relationships in different control and experimental samples, such as institutionalized adolescents or immigrant families. Another aspect to consider is the relatively low correlation between children's and parents' ratings of a child's happiness, which somewhat calls into question the validity of the measure. It could be that parents think that their children are happier than they actually are, but it could also be that whilst the measure used to assess happiness is appropriate for children and young people, it is not suitable for parents. Children and their parents evaluate different aspects when it comes to an evaluation of happiness, and maybe this is

reflected in the correlation between the two measures. Further studies may thus take this into consideration, making use of other tools in the case of parents.

References

Abdel-Khalek, A. M. (2006). Measuring Happiness with a Single-Item Scale. *Social Behavior and Personality: An International Journal*, *34*(2), 139–150. https://doi.org/10.2224/sbp.2006.34.2.139

Baiocco, R., Cacioppo, M., Laghi, F., & Tafà, M. (2013). Factorial and Construct Validity of FACES IV Among Italian Adolescents. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *22*, 962–970. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-012-9658-1

Baiocco, R., Laghi, F., Schneider, B. H., Dalessio, M., Amichai-Hamburger, Y., Coplan, R. J., … Flament, M. (2011). Daily Patterns of Communication and Contact Between Italian Early Adolescents and Their Friends. *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking*, *14*(7–8), 467–471. https://doi.org/10.1089/cyber.2010.0208

Baiocco, R., Verrastro, V., Fontanesi, L., Ferrara, M. P., & Pistella, J. (2019). The Contributions of Self-Esteem, Loneliness, and Friendship to Children's Happiness: The Roles of Gender and Age. *Child Indicators Research*, *12*(4), 1413–1433. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-018-9595-7

Balistreri, K. S., & Alvira-Hammond, M. (2016). Adverse childhood experiences, family functioning and adolescent health and emotional well-being. *Public Health, 132,* 72-78. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.puhe.2015.10.034

Bisegger, C., Cloetta, B., von Rueden, U., Abel, T., Ravens-Sieberer, U., Duer, W., … Atherton, C. (2005). Health-related quality of life: Gender differences in childhood and adolescence. *Sozial- Und Praventivmedizin, 50,* 281-291. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00038-005-4094-2

Bjarnason, T., Bendtsen, P., Arnarsson, A. M., Borup, I., Iannotti, R. J., Liefstedt, P., … Niclasen, B. (2012). Life satisfaction among children in different family structures: A comparative study of 36 western societies. *Children and Society*, *26*(1), 51–62. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1099-0860.2010.00324.x

Businaro, N., Pons, F., & Albanese, O. (2015). Do Intelligence, Intensity of Felt Emotions and Emotional Regulation Have an Impact on Life Satisfaction? A Quali-quantitative Study on Subjective Wellbeing with Italian Children Aged 8–11. *Child Indicators Research, 8,* 439-458. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-014-9250-x

Cefai, C., Bartolo, P., Cavioni, V., Downes, P. (2018) *Strengthening social and emotional education as a key curricular area across the EU. A review of the international evidence*. NESET Report. Publications Office of the European Union.

Chaplin, T. M., & Aldao, A. (2013). Gender differences in emotion expression in children: A meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, *139*(4), 735–765. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030737

Clemente, M., Gandoy-Crego, M., Bugallo-Carrera, C., Reig-Botella, A., & Gomez-Cantorna, C. (2020). Types of love as a function of satisfaction and age. *PsyCh Journal*. Advance online publication.

https://doi.org/10.1002/pchj.338

Cuñado, J., & de Gracia, F. P. (2012). Does Education Affect Happiness? Evidence for Spain. *Social Indicators Research, 108,* 185-196. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11205-011-9874-x

David, S. A., Boniwell, I., & Conley Ayers, A. (2013). *The Oxford Handbook of Happiness*. Oxford University Press.

Deci, E. L., & Ryan, R. M. (2008). Hedonia, eudaimonia, and well-being: An introduction. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 9,* 1-11. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-006-9018-1

Diener, E., Napa Scollon, C., & Lucas, R. E. (2003). The evolving concept of subjective well-being: the multifaceted nature of happiness. *Advances in Cell Aging and Gerontology, 15,* 187-219. https://doi.org/10.1016/S1566-3124(03)15007-9

Donaldson, S. I., Dollwet, M., & Rao, M. A. (2015). Happiness, excellence, and optimal human functioning revisited: Examining the peer-reviewed literature linked to positive psychology. *Journal of Positive Psychology*, *10*(3), 185–195. https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760.2014.943801

Fontanesi, L., Verrastro, V., Saladino, V., Ferrara, M. P., Albanese, C. A., & Holder, M. D. (2017). Il self-concept nei bambini: uno studio pilota per l'adattamento italiano della Piers-Harris Children Self-Concept Scale 2. *Associazione Italiana Di Psicologia-Sezione Psicologia Dello Sviluppo e Dell'educazione-XXX Congresso Nazionale*.

Gilman, R., & Huebner, S. (2003). A review of life satisfaction research with children and adolescents. *School Psychology Quarterly*, *18*(2), 192–205. https://doi.org/DOI 10.1521/scpq.18.2.192.21858

Ginsburg, K. R. (2007). The importance of play in promoting healthy child development and aintaining strong parent-child bonds. *Pediatrics*, *119*(1), 182-191. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2006-2697

Godoy-Izquierdo, D., Lara Moreno, R., Vázquez Pérez, M. L., Araque Serrano, F., & Godoy García, J. F. (2013). Correlates of Happiness Among Older Spanish Institutionalised and Non-Institutionalised Adults. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *14*(2), 389–414. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-012-9335-5

Goldbeck, L., Schmitz, T. G., Besier, T., Herschbach, P., & Henrich, G. (2007). Life satisfaction decreases during adolescence. *Quality of Life Research*, *16*(6), 969–979. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-007-9205-5

Gullone, E., Hughes, E. K., King, N. J., & Tonge, B. (2010). The normative development of emotion regulation strategy use in children and adolescents: a 2-year follow-up study. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry*, *51*(5), 567–574. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-7610.2009.02183.x

Hair, E. C., Moore, K. A., Garrett, S. B., Ling, T., & Cleveland, K. (2008). The continued importance of quality parent-adolescent relationships during late adolescence. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, *18*(1), 187–200. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1532-7795.2008.00556.x

Hayes, A. F. (2013). SPSS Process Models. *Model Templates for PROCESS for SPSS and SAS 2013-2015*. Andrew F. Hayes and The Guilford Press.

Holder, M. D. (2012). The Assessment of Happiness in Adults and Children. *In Happiness in Children*.

*SpringerBriefs in Well-Being and Quality of Life Research (*pp 19-33). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-4414-1_3

Holder, M. D., & Coleman, B. (2008). The contribution of temperament, popularity, and physical appearance to children's happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *9*(2), 279–302. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-007-9052-7

Holder, M. D., & Coleman, B. (2009). The contribution of social relationships to children's happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *10*(3), 329–349. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-007-9083-0

Holder, M. D., Coleman, B., & Sehn, Z. L. (2009). The contribution of active and passive leisure to children's well-being. *Journal of Health Psychology*, *14*(3), 378–386. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105308101676

Holder, M. D., Coleman, B., & Wallace, J. M. (2010). Spirituality, religiousness, and happiness in children aged 8-12 years. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *11*(2), 131–150. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-008-9126-1

Holder, M. D., & Klassen, A. (2010). Temperament and Happiness in Children. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *11*, 419–439. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-009-9149-2

IBM. (2012). IBM SPSS Advanced Statistics 23. *Ibm*, 184. https://doi.org/10.1080/02331889108802322

Ichikawa, H., Kanazawa, S., & Yamaguchi, M. K. (2014). Infants recognize the subtle happiness expression. *Perception*, *43*(4), 235–248. https://doi.org/10.1068/p7595

Kerns, K. A., Tomich, P. L., Aspelmeier, J. E., & Contreras, J. M. (2000). Attachment-based assessments of parent-child relationships in middle childhood. *Developmental Psychology*, *36*(5), 614–626. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.36.5.614

Kerns, Kathryn A., Aspelmeier, J. E., Gentzler, A. L., & Grabill, C. M. (2001). Parent-child attachment and monitoring in middle childhood. *Journal of Family Psychology*, *15*(1), 69–81. https://doi.org/10.1037//0893-3200.15.1.69

Kokkinos, C. M., & Kipritsi, E. (2012). The relationship between bullying, victimization, trait emotional intelligence, self-efficacy and empathy among preadolescents. *Social Psychology of Education*, *15*(1), 41–58. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11218-011-9168-9

Lagattuta, K. H., Sayfan, L., & Bamford, C. (2012). Do you know how I feel? Parents underestimate worry and overestimate optimism compared to child self-report. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 113*(2), 211-232. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2012.04.001

Levin, K. A., & Currie, C. (2010). Family structure, mother-child communication, father-child communication, and adolescent life satisfaction: A cross-sectional multilevel analysis. *Health Education*, *110*(3), 152–168. https://doi.org/10.1108/09654281011038831

López-Pérez, B., & Fernández-Castilla, B. (2017). Children's and Adolescents' Conceptions of Happiness at School and Its Relation with Their Own Happiness and Their Academic Performance. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, pp. 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-017-9895-5

López-Pérez, B., Sánchez, J., & Gummerum, M. (2016). Children's and Adolescents' Conceptions of Happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *17*(6), 2431–2455. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-015-9701-1

López-Pérez, B., & Wilson, E. L. (2015). Parent-child discrepancies in the assessment of children's and adolescents' happiness. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, *139*, 249–255. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2015.06.006

Mahon, N. E., Yarcheski, A., & Yarcheski, T. J. (2005). Happiness as Related to Gender and Health in Early Adolescents. *Clinical Nursing Research, 14*(2), 175-190. https://doi.org/10.1177/1054773804271936

Michel, G., Bisegger, C., Fuhr, D. C., & Abel, T. (2009). Age and gender differences in health-related quality of life of children and adolescents in Europe: A multilevel analysis. *Quality of Life Research, 18,* 1147-1157. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11136-009-9538-3

Migliorini, L., Tassara, T., & Rania, N. (2018). A study of subjective well-being and life satisfaction in Italy: How are children doing at 8 years of age? *Child Indicators Research, 12,* 49-69. https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1007/s12187-017-9514-3

Olson, D. (2000). Circumplex model of marital and family systems. *Jounal of Family Systems*, *22*, 144–167. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.00144

Olson, D. (2011). FACES IV and the circumplex model: Validation study. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, *37*(1), 64–80. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1752-0606.2009.00175.x

Olson, D. H., Russell, C. S., & Sprenkle, D. H. (1983). Circumplex model of marital and family systems: VI. Theoretical update. *Family Process*, *22*(1), 69–83. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6427.00144

Otsuka, Y., Kaneita, Y., Itani, O., Jike, M., Osaki, Y., Higuchi, S., & Yoshimoto, H. (2020). The relationship between subjective happiness and sleep problems in Japanese adolescents. *Sleep Medicine*, *69*, 120–126. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sleep.2020.01.008

Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2006). Character strengths and happiness among young children: Content analysis of parental descriptions. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *7*(3), 323–341. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-005-3648-6

Parks, A. C., Della Porta, M. D., Pierce, R. S., Zilca, R., & Lyubomirsky, S. (2012). Pursuing happiness in everyday life: The characteristics and behaviors of online happiness seekers. *Emotion*, *12*(6), 1222–1234. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028587

Patton, G. C., & Viner, R. (2007). Pubertal transitions in health. *Lancet, 369*(9567), 1130-1139. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(07)60366-3

Perry-Parrish, C., & Zeman, J. (2011). Relations among Sadness Regulation, Peer Acceptance, and Social Functioning in Early Adolescence: The Role of Gender. *Social Development*, *20*(1), 135–153. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9507.2009.00568.x

Piers, E. V., & Herzberg, D. S. (2002). *Piers-Harris 2: Piers-Harris children's self-concept scale*. Western Psychological Services.

Proctor, C. L., Linley, P. A., & Maltby, J. (2009). Youth life satisfaction: A review of the literature. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 10*, 583–630. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-008-9110-9

Reese, E., Yan, C., Jack, F., & Hayne, H. (2010). Emerging identities: Narrative and self from early childhood to early adolescence. In K. C. McLean & M. Pasupathi (Eds.), *Advancing responsible adolescent development. Narrative development in adolescence: Creating the storied self* (p. 23–43). Springer Science + Business Media. https://psycnet.apa.org/doi/10.1007/978-0-387-89825-4_2

Rosenberg, M. (1965). S*ociety and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton University Press.

Russell, D. W. (1996). UCLA Loneliness Scale (Version 3): Reliability, validity, and factor structure. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, *66*(1), 20–40. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327752jpa6601_2

Skelley, S. L., & Crnic, K. A. (2010). Communicating about internal states. In E. H. Sandberg & B. L. Spritz (Eds.), *A Clinician's guide to normal cognitive development in childhood* (pp. 43–62). Routledge Press.

Swinyard, W., Kau, A., & Phua, H. (2001). Happiness, materialism, and religious experience in the US and Singapore. *Journal of Happiness Studies, 2*, 13–32. https://doi.org/10.1023/a:1011596515474

Tomlinson, R. M., Keyfitz, L., Rawana, J. S., & Lumley, M. N. (2017). Unique Contributions of Positive Schemas for Understanding Child and Adolescent Life Satisfaction and Happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *18*(5), 1255–1274. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-016-9776-3

Tucker, J. S., Pollard, M. S., de la Haye, K., Kennedy, D. P., & Green, H. D. (2013). Neighborhood characteristics and the initiation of marijuana use and binge drinking. *Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 128*(1-2), 83-89. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugalcdep.2012.08.006

West, M., Rose, M. S., Spreng, S., Sheldon-Keller, A., & Adam, K. (1998). Adolescent attachment questionnaire: A brief assessment of attachment in adolescence. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, *27*(5), 661–673. https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022891225542

Wray-Lake, L., Crouter, A. C., & McHale, S. M. (2010). Developmental patterns in decision-making autonomy across middle childhood and adolescence: European american parents' perspectives. *Child Development, 81*(2), 636-651. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.2009.01420.x