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Brief Report

Parent–child discrepancies in the assessment of children’s and adolescents’ happiness



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ABSTRACT

In this study, we assessed parent–child agreement in the perception of children’s general happiness or well-being in typically developing children (10- and 11-year-olds, $n = 172$) and adolescents (15- and 16-year-olds, $n = 185$). Despite parent and child reporters providing internally consistent responses in the General Happiness single-item scale and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire–Short Form, their perceptions about children’s and adolescents’ general happiness did not correlate. Parents of 10- and 11-year-olds significantly overestimated children’s happiness, supporting previous literature on the parents’ positivity bias effect. However, parents of 15- and 16-year-olds showed the reverse pattern by underestimating adolescents’ happiness. Furthermore, parents’ self-reported happiness or well-being (reported 6 months later) significantly correlated with their estimations of children’s and adolescents’ happiness. Therefore, these results suggest a potential parents’ “egocentric bias” when estimating their children’s happiness. These findings are discussed in terms of their theoretical and applied implications for research into child–parent relationships.

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Introduction

Children’s and adolescents’ happiness is a topic that concerns families, educators, and researchers alike. Despite the emergence of positive psychology, there are few studies on children’s and

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adolescents' happiness, only having begun during the 1990s (Chaplin, 2009). This is extremely surprising given that happiness is one of the first emotions recognized by children (e.g., Harter, 1983; Pollak & Sinha, 2002) and that it entails positive benefits for children's and adolescents' well-being (e.g., Holder, Coleman, & Singh, 2012).

Overall, happiness has been described as global life satisfaction, the presence of positive affect, and the relative absence of negative affect (Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2004). However, there is little agreement on the assessment of happiness, leading researchers to use multiple measures (e.g., Holder et al., 2012) to better capture the distinct facets that cover this construct. For both adults and children, multiple single-item measures, such as the Faces Scale (Holder et al., 2012), are regularly used because they have been shown to be valid and reliable (Abdel-Khalek, 2006). Apart from single-item measures, the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire–Short Form (Hills & Argyle, 2002) is frequently used to assess children's and adolescents' happiness or well-being. Despite being widely used (e.g., Egan, Chan, & Shorter, 2014), it has received some criticisms because it may overlap with other constructs such as extraversion and agreeableness (Kashdan, 2004).

When assessing children and adolescents, best practices in psychological assessment entail collecting information from multiple informants (Hunsley & Mash, 2007). These assessments may include reports from parents and teachers as well as from children and adolescents themselves (De Los Reyes, Salas, Menzer, & Daruwala, 2013). Parent-report has been mainly used in two concrete scenarios: (a) when assessing children under the age of 7 years, because children may sometimes find it difficult to introspect about themselves (e.g., Bilancia & Rescorla, 2010), and (b) when using self-report (i.e., testing children directly) becomes time-consuming and difficult to administer (Durbin & Wilson, 2012).

However, using multiple informants may increase the likelihood of discrepancies (Trentler & Epkins, 2003). Low levels of correspondence between informants often create a great deal of uncertainty and pose an important challenge to the interpretation of findings in child development research (Hourigan, Goodman, & Southam-Gerow, 2011). For this reason, many researchers have considered informants' discrepancies as a measurement error (Achenbach, 2011). However, as acknowledged by De Los Reyes (2011), these discrepancies may provide a unique opportunity for researchers to understand more about the underlying reasons behind them.

Parent–child discrepancies when assessing children's positive emotions

The relationship between parent- and child-reports of the child's emotions have been largely assessed in children age 7 years and older who have been diagnosed with emotional disorders (e.g., De Los Reyes et al., 2013). Most of these studies are focused on the informants' correspondence (i.e., whether parents and children agree on their reports) rather than on which informant may over- or underestimate compared with the other (e.g., Achenbach, 2011). More recently, Lagattuta, Sayfan, and Bamford (2012) assessed the direction of informants' correspondence in typically developing 4- to 11-year-old children. They found a *positivity bias*, that is, parents' tendency to report higher levels of optimism and lower levels of worry compared with children's self-reports. These results were in line with previous research in other developmental domains (e.g., Youngstrom, Izard, & Ackerman, 1999).

Evidence from the few studies focused specifically on happiness has also shown discrepancies between parents' and children's reports, supporting this positivity bias. Namely, research conducted with children between ages 8 and 12 years showed that parents tend to overestimate children's happiness compared with the actual reports by children (Holder, Coleman, & Wallace, 2010). Even during several emotion-eliciting laboratory procedures (e.g., playing with a bubble-shooting toy), mothers reported significantly higher reports of children's happiness compared with trained coders or naive adults (Durbin & Wilson, 2012).

Parents' happiness and child age

Why did parents of children under the age of 12 years overestimate children's happiness? According to Lagattuta et al. (2012), these discrepancies may be due to an "egocentric bias" in which parents use their own emotional states as anchor points to make estimations about their children's

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