

Study: Sad children out-perform happy children in attention-to-detail tasks

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Psychologists at the University of Virginia and the University of Plymouth (United Kingdom) have conducted experimental research that contrasts with the belief that happy children are the best learners. The findings, which currently appear online in the journal *Developmental Science*, and will be printed in the June issue, show that where attention to detail is required, happy children may be at a disadvantage.

The researchers conducted a series of experiments with different child age groups who had happy or sad moods induced with the aid of music (Mozart and Mahler) and selected video clips (Jungle Book and the Lion King).

The groups were then asked to undertake a task that required attention to detail — to observe a detailed image such as a house and a simple shape such as a triangle, and then locate the shape within the larger picture. The findings in each experiment with both music and video clips were conclusive, with the children induced to feel a sad or neutral mood performing the task better than those induced to feel a happy state of mind.

Lead researcher Simone Schnall of the University of Plymouth describes the psychology behind the findings: "Happiness indicates that things are going well, which leads to a global, top-down style of information processing. Sadness indicates that something is amiss, triggering detail-orientated, analytical processing.

"However, it is important to emphasize that existing research shows there are contexts in which a positive mood is beneficial for a child, such as when a task calls for creative thinking. But this particular research demonstrates that when attention to detail is required, it may do more harm than good."

Co-author Vikram Jaswal, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, added that the findings contradict conventional wisdom that happiness always leads to optimal outcomes. "The good feeling that accompanies happiness comes at a hidden cost. It leads to a particular style of thinking that is suited for some types of situations, but not others."

Study: www.blackwell-synergy.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2008.00709.x

Source: University of Virginia

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