

Spirituality is key to kids' happiness

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To make children happier, we may need to encourage them to develop a strong sense of personal worth, according to Dr. Mark Holder from the University of British Columbia in Canada and his colleagues Dr. Ben Coleman and Judi Wallace. Their research shows that children who feel that their lives have meaning and value and who develop deep, quality relationships - both measures of spirituality - are happier. It would appear, however, that their religious practices have little effect on their happiness. These findings have been published in the online edition of Springer's *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

Both spirituality (an inner belief system that a person relies on for strength and comfort) and religiousness (institutional religious rituals, practices and beliefs) have been linked to increased happiness in adults and adolescents. In contrast, very little work has been done on younger children. In an effort to identify strategies to increase children's happiness, Holder and colleagues set out to better understand the nature of the relationship between spirituality, religiousness and happiness in children aged 8 to 12 years. A total of 320 children, from four public schools and two faith-based schools, completed six different questionnaires to rate their happiness, their spirituality, their religiousness and their temperament. Parents were also asked to rate their child's happiness and temperament.

The authors found that those children who said they were more spiritual were happier. In particular, the personal (i.e. meaning and value in one's own life) and communal (i.e. quality and depth of inter-personal relationships) aspects of spirituality were strong predictors of children's happiness. Spirituality explained up to 27 percent of the differences in happiness levels amongst children.

A child's temperament was also an important predictor of happiness. In particular, happier children were more sociable and less shy. The relationship between spirituality and happiness

remained strong, even when the authors took temperament into account. However, counter intuitively, religious practices - including attending church, praying and meditating - had little effect on a child's happiness.

According to the authors, "enhancing personal meaning may be a key factor in the relation between spirituality and happiness." They suggest that strategies aimed at increasing personal meaning in children - such as expressing kindness towards others and recording these acts of kindness, as well as acts of altruism and volunteering - may help to make children happier.

Reference: Holder MD, Coleman B, & Wallace J (2008). Spirituality, religiousness, and happiness in children aged 8-12 years. *Journal of Happiness Studies* DOI 10.1007/s10902-008-9126-1

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