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Press release

Hong Kong children are happier in 2013 but happiness index tempered by pressure from schoolwork and extra-curricular activities

Hong Kong children from Primary 4 to Secondary 3 were happier in 2013 with their happiness index standing at 7.23, evidently higher than 6.91 in 2012, according to results of the latest survey conducted by the Centre for Public Policy Studies (CPPS) of Lingnan University announced today.

However, the encouraging result was tempered by worrying declines in the Insight and Fortitude scores, two of the four key determinants of happiness, namely Love, Insight, Fortitude and Engagement (LIFE). In 2013, Hong Kong children's Insight score fell to 6.19 from 6.37 in 2012, while Fortitude dropped to 6.64 from 7.10 during the same period.

“The decline in Fortitude is rather significant and thus warrants attention. Fortitude, an alternative name for resilience, is conceptually related to Insight because we expect wiser people to be more resilient,” said Prof Ho Lok-sang, Director of CPPS. “Insight does not mean intelligence, but rather attitudes about life, including a sense of balance, an ability not to keep comparing with others and instead focusing on doing one's best, and the ability to learn from mistakes etc.”

Commissioned by the Hong Kong Early Childhood Development Research Foundation, this survey has collected a total of 1,119 student questionnaires (377 primary and 742 secondary) and 1,060 parent questionnaires (361 primary and 699 secondary) from eight primary schools and 12 secondary schools across Hong Kong from September to October 2013. The Public Governance Programme of Lingnan University offered assistance in conducting the survey.

Adolescents under increasing pressure as they enter their teens

As in 2012, the 2013 results indicated a tendency for the happiness index and the LIFE scores to fall with age among children. For example, Fortitude dropped from 7.15 among Primary 4 students to 6.18 for Secondary 3 students. This may suggest that Hong Kong children are losing confidence, which may reflect the highly competitive environment and the failure of schools to boost their confidence. It is gratifying, however, to see that both Love and Engagement scores stand at the respectable levels of 7.84 and 7.43 respectively.

Pressures from schoolwork and extra-curricular activities also have a significant adverse impact on children's happiness. Respondents who reported high pressure in schoolwork have a happiness score of 5.84, much lower than that of those who reported low schoolwork pressure, whose happiness score stands at 7.96. Children who said they face high pressure in extra-curricular activities only reported a happiness index at 5.52, compared to 7.27 of those who reported low pressure. The evidence shows that such pressures undermine the quality of family life, leading to disharmony at home and unhappiness among children.

Primary 6 students seem to spend the most time on homework, with an average of 136 minutes per day. The average time spent on homework among secondary students is slightly

less than two hours, at 108-118 minutes per day. Perhaps the heavy workload explains why Primary 6 students are among the least happy, only second to Secondary 3 students. Also noteworthy is that children with more “disposable time” – time remaining after homework, commuting and attending classes, tend to be happier.

In addition to pressures from schoolwork and extra-curricular activities, rebukes and beatings, and the perceived financial well-being of the family also contribute to family disharmony, which is negatively associated with parents’ education level. This means children of parents with less education are more likely to experience family disharmony.

Happy parents, happy children

The 2013 survey shows that parents’ LIFE scores are related to children’s happiness. Happy parents tend to nurture happy children. As children grow into adolescence, family disharmony tends to increase and parents’ happiness declines.

The survey results also confirmed an important observation commonly found in studies of a similar nature – that the relationship between mother and father has a huge impact on children’s development, in particular their Love score. This was also in line with the survey results in 2012. Since Love is an important aspect of mental capital that contributes significantly to children’s happiness, parents who love each other tend to nurture loving, happy children. Respect for children’s opinions and their privacy also have an important bearing on their Love score.

Happy people, happy schooling

Happy schooling is strongly associated with good teachers and classmates, according to the survey results. However, it is interesting to note that having good classmates appears to be twice as important as having good teachers to happy schooling. Both a happy family and happy schooling are very important to children’s happiness, but there seems to be little difference in their importance.

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