

Autism and Happiness

Peter Vermeulen, Ph.D

Happiness is something that individuals – both those with and those without autism spectrum disorder – strive to obtain. It is innate for all human beings to want joy and meaning in their lives. Happiness does not mean a life without problems since no life is exempt from challenges and difficulties. Happiness comes from accepting the challenges you face with positivity, and from learning and growing from each obstacle presented. Happiness is being in harmony with the life you live.

All parents want their children to be happy. It is why they buy them gifts and take them on holidays, and why they work tirelessly to give children the tools they need to succeed. The question is, is your child *really* happy?

Happiness is more than just having good feelings. There are two main factors that contribute to happiness: pleasure and meaning.

1. A pleasant life involves immediate joy and pleasure. It is similar to being on a holiday. You can have pleasurable days and weeks, but can also have times when there is little pleasure.

2. A meaningful life is the base-rate of happiness and does not change dramatically from day to day. It includes a sense of personal satisfaction and refers to the idea that you have a meaningful life, that your life makes sense. You are proud of who you are, you have a sense of belonging, and you feel included in society.

It is vitally important that we focus our attention on giving our children a meaningful life and not just a pleasant life. Sometimes it can be easier to give children the games, food, and experiences that will give them immediate pleasure. Happiness, however, comes when parents foster inclusion, learn ways their children can contribute to society, and provide opportunities for their children to feel pride in their accomplishments. Of course, families and individuals with autism have many challenges. Stress and anxiety are most likely a constant in their daily lives. However, success and happiness can be achieved when children/individuals with autism begin living in harmony with themselves. A parent's role is to help their children make sense of their life by giving autism a place. Autism should not be ignored or romanticized. It does not have to define your child or always be the focus, but it needs to be addressed and it needs a place. When your child comes to terms with his/her own autism, life will have meaning, and it will make sense. Your child can move towards happiness and life satisfaction.

Happiness is an abstract idea for an individual on the spectrum. Well-being, or happiness, is not typically measured in numbers and is not "black and white." It's a general feeling of satisfaction over a period of time. We have happy and sad moments, which are easily identified by a child on the spectrum, but overall happiness is not always concrete.

Assessing Happiness

Traditionally, to assess your child's happiness, a parent might ask the child, "how was your day?" But this might not be effective with a child on the spectrum, as one negative incident might overshadow all positive experiences in the day. This is especially the case if the negative experience was recent. Individuals on the spectrum often have difficulties seeing things in a broader context. There are two important aspects to discussing and assessing happiness with your child. The first is to ask many times throughout the day how happy the child is feeling. This will give the opportunity to recognize and mentally document times that the child was feeling joy. The second aspect is to provide a visual conversation. Create a "Good Feelings" graphic, where your child can visualize the level of happiness instead of trying to verbally express it. It is important that this visual represent different levels of happiness, and not anger or frustration. Asking a child how "good" he/she is feeling will help the child identify moments of joy and reflect on the positive aspects of the day.

Indeed, every life will have its ups and downs. Every day is not pleasurable, and there will be some frustrating and sad moments. However, a good and meaningful life is when there are more happy moments than sad moments. Parents can sit with their children each day and document all the happy and sad moments with pictures and words. This will help your child visualize that negative moments can occur (e.g., I had a fight with my friend, I fell off my bike), but that it can still be a happy day.

Strategies to Create Happiness



Exercise

One thing every person can do to increase happiness is to participate in physical exercise. For many children on the spectrum, talking about feelings is not always productive. Exercise is a natural way to improve one's mood and decrease feelings of anxiety and depression. Spending time outside is also key as it naturally gets children moving and away from sedentary activities indoors.



Relax

Every child needs time to relax. This is especially important for children on the spectrum whose minds are often racing with a constant flow of thoughts. Children need moments when they can recharge their batteries and relax. While video games and electronics can be used as a relaxation tool, they should be used with caution. At some point, the game can turn from relaxation to obsession. If gaming and special interests are used, it's important to have clear boundaries and time limits. Ideally, relaxation time will include movement or action. Yoga is an excellent practice in which the child can visualize different poses. There are also many progressive relaxation techniques that focus on tensing up and releasing muscles. Another strategy is to use an activity associated with a child's special interest. For example, if Star Wars is your child's special interest, you could provide a Star Wars puzzle to do during relaxation time.



Establish a Routine

To give a child a good feeling, provide a routine. Routines are effective because your child can be on autopilot, or in a state of flow, where he/she does not have to think or stress about what is to come. When considering routines for individuals with autism, it is important to make slight variations and introduce flexibility. For example, you can establish the routine of walking the dog at 6:00 pm every evening, but you might consider having two different walking routes to choose from. This will allow the child to rely on the routine, but not to become so obsessed with every detail and require that the order remain unchanged.



Positivity

Each day should end with positive talk about the day. This can include questions like "what did you do today that you are proud of?", "what happened today that was funny?" or, "what made you laugh today?" For some children on the spectrum, these moments will be difficult to verbalize. They may wish to represent them in drawings or by pointing to pictures. An effective way to have positive talk is to start a positivity diary. You can include photographs or drawings of happy moments and look at the diary each night before bed.



A Sense of Belonging

For a child with autism, and indeed for everyone, happiness and inner harmony are achieved by having a sense of belonging. It is important for parents to ensure that their children feel included in all areas of their life. This will give your child a sense of belonging: belonging to a family; belonging to a class; belonging to a sports team; and belonging to society. As your child ages, it's also important to provide opportunities for him/her to contribute to society. Each individual with autism can make a contribution that will be a strength to other people and to the community. It might be in employment, in raising money for cancer or in mentoring other individuals on the spectrum. Parents can help direct this urge in their children so that their happiness and satisfaction with life continue into adulthood.

As a parent, you can only work on the happiness of your child if you take care of your own happiness. Although the strategies listed above are directed towards children with autism, they can apply to any individual. Begin your happiness journey *with* your child. Exercise, relax, build a routine, have positive talks with your child and foster a sense of belonging. The outcome will be rewarding for both of you. The greatest gift you can give your child is teaching him/her the tools to be happy.

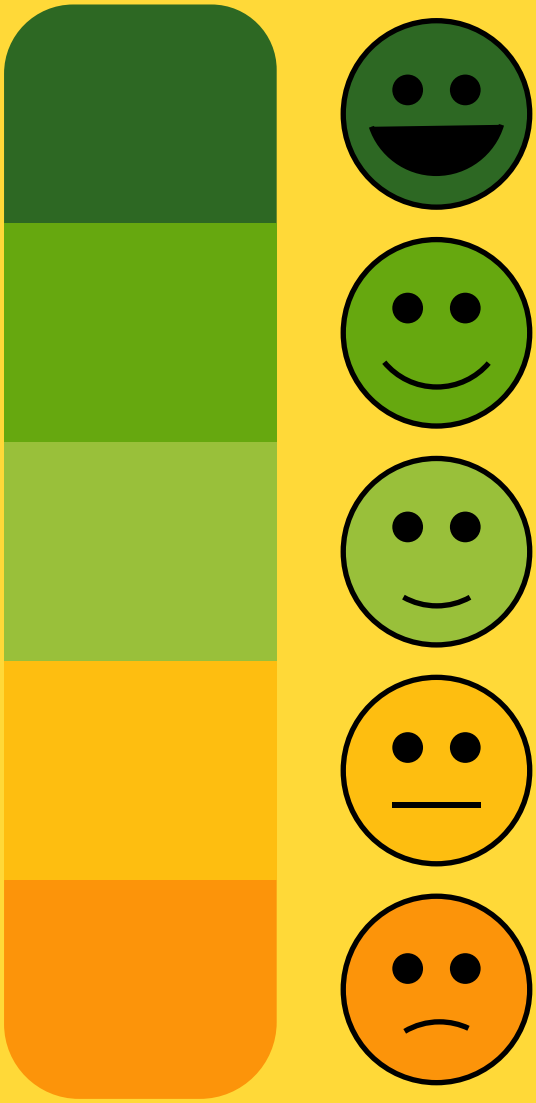


Peter Vermeulen, Ph.D, received his degree in Psychology and Educational Sciences. He lives and works in Belgium. Dr. Vermeulen is an internationally respected lecturer/trainer and gives presentations all over Europe and beyond. He has written more than 15 books and several articles on autism. His books include, *"This is the Title: on Autistic Thinking"* (2001), *"I am Special: handbook for psycho-education"*(2000, revised edition 2013), and *"Autism as Context Blindness"* (2012), a book that won several awards in the USA. In 2019 Peter received the Passwerk Lifetime Achievement Award for his 30+ years of work with people with ASD and their families. www.petervermeulen.be

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Good Feelings Meter

How good are your feelings today? Really good or just a little bit good?



my gratitude journal

This gratitude journal belongs to

be magic

my gratitude journal

Today's Date: _____

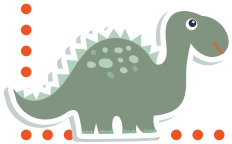
The weather today was...



What did you do today that you are proud of?



What was your favorite part of today?



What happened today that was funny? Can you draw a picture of it?





Today made me feel...

Color the square or squares that match how you felt today.

