

POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

Positive psychology is the study of the conditions that enable humans to flourish and function optimally. Positive psychology arose out of the recognition that other aspects of human psychology existed that cause us to perform at our best, to be interested and to be creative. This is in contrast with the traditional approach to psychology which tends to be associated with mental health problems, distress and disorder.

Positive psychologists are interested in studying three paths to life that lead to optimal functioning. These include the pleasurable life, the meaningful life and the engaged life.

The pleasurable life

The pleasurable life is primarily concerned with positive emotion and regard for life. It is those things that make us happy and allow us to experience enjoyment in life. Sonja Lyubomirsky in her book “The How of Happiness” talks about some of the myths associated with happiness, which primarily relate to changing our circumstances or being born either happy or sad. These have some bearing on our happiness. However, through review of studies, Lyubomirsky suggests that 40% of our happiness comes from intentional activity. That is we have to take responsibility and act in order to create our own positive emotion.

She suggests a range of activities that we can engage in to increase our positive emotion including:

1. Taking regular exercise
2. Taking the time to spend with family and friends
3. Savour Life’s Joys – through an album of positive experiences (including photo’s, letters) which can be viewed on a regular basis.
4. Expressing gratitude on a regular basis

Within children’s services, the expressing of gratitude for what has gone well at team meetings can help boost the team’s positive affect. It also gets the meeting off to a positive start. In our work with children many of the above recommended activities can be integrated into pedagogical practices e.g. providing opportunities for children to enjoy ‘being’ together, taking time out to be grateful for what is available and engaging in positive discussions.

The meaningful life

The meaningful life is concerned with purpose and meaning that we create in our lives. Studies have demonstrated that people who have a sense of



purpose and meaning have increased levels of well-being and are more resilient in the face of adversity. Using our strengths can help us engage with our sense of purpose and meaning. Considerable work has been done in identifying global strengths and virtues. These twenty-four human strengths clustered around six virtues which range from zest and curiosity to kindness, humility, fairness and love.

You can find out what your signature strengths are by taking an on-line questionnaire at www.authentichappiness.org. Barbara Fredrickson in her book *Positivity*, suggests that when we apply our strengths to our work, we can begin to craft our daily lives in a way that allows individuals to use our strengths more often. This can lead to greater increases in our well being and overall positivity. Within our work with children it is imperative that we explore alongside children the strengths that they have and how these strengths can be engaged throughout the program. Further, pedagogical documentation should focus on the strengths children have rather than on areas of development.

The Engaged Life

Engagement in the here and now is fundamentally important in our work with young people. Additionally, if we are engaged, we can create opportunities to increase our overall happiness and well-being. The engaged life refers to taking part in those activities, which lead us to flow or where we are more mindful. Flow is a state where we are fully immersed in an activity that we enjoy doing and more often than not we have a sense of time slowing down or speeding up. After an event where we experience flow, we feel satisfied and happy. We find flow experiences intrinsically motivating meaning that we want to do them more often. Flow can occur in our hobbies or in our work with young children.

Additionally, the EYLF makes specific reference to engagement and flow theory in our work with children. Lyubomirsky suggests that we find activities that lead us to experience flow and create opportunities to experience them on a regular basis.

Positive psychology has much to offer to us in our work with children and each other. As Lyubomirsky argues, it is up to us to create opportunities to increase our own well-being and Fredrickson leaves us with this powerful story.

“One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside people. He said, ‘My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all, disgust, fear, embarrassment, guilt shame and hate.



The other is Positivity. It's joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe and above all love.

The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked his grandfather: 'Which wolf wins?'

The old Cherokee simply replied, 'The one you feed'