

WELL-BEING OF CHILDREN DURING THE TRANSITION FROM MIDDLE CHILDHOOD TO ADOLESCENCE: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to explore certain aspects of children's transition from middle childhood to adolescence as part of the Child Well-being in Family Context project. Focus groups were conducted among a convenience sample of 4th, 6th, and 8th graders in one elementary school in the city of Varaždin, using a semi-structured protocol organized into three broad areas: happiness, leisure time, and digital technology. Results indicate that the hypothesis of social contacts being the most important source of happiness was confirmed, as well as the shift in focus from the nuclear family among the 4th graders to peers among the two older groups of participants. It appears that children experience autonomy in choosing both organized and optional activities; however, the amount of free time available for engaging

in these activities declines as they progress through the school system. The use of digital technologies also becomes more frequent with age, not only for educational purposes but also increasingly for entertainment. The study revealed that children are aware of both the advantages and disadvantages of using these technologies, but more education on health and safety threats should be provided. Throughout the study, the topic of pets was introduced multiple times, indicating that pets are perceived as an important source of happiness for children and should, therefore, be included in future research.

Keywords: *well-being, children, happiness, leisure time, digital technology*

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of happiness, subjective well-being, and positive psychology flourished at the end of the 20th century (Diener, 2000; Seligman et al., 2005; Veenhoven, 2000) and are still being researched by many. However, most of these studies have focused on adults, while children's points of view have been neglected (Park & Peterson, 2006), mainly focusing on different variables associated with the construct of happiness (Izzo et al., 2022; McKnight et al., 2002; Proctor et al., 2009). Over the last few decades, attention to the well-being of children has been on the rise, recognizing it as a multidimensional construct, although researchers tend to define it slightly differently (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Moore et al., 2016; Newland, 2015). Some define it through objective indicators (e.g., health, poverty, educational outcomes) (Šućur et al., 2015); others define it using optimal developmental outcomes (e.g., adequate self-regulation and social competence) (Moore et al., 2016; Newland, 2015; Shaffer et al., 2009). Despite this growing interest in objective indicators of children's well-being and their developmental outcomes, data have predominantly been provided by parents, caretakers, or relevant experts (e.g., teachers, educators, social workers). Over the past decade, the focus of research has shifted to children's perception of their own well-being (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). Despite an agreement about the importance of examining child well-being (Proctor et al., 2009), there is no consensus on which of the above-mentioned indicators provides better insight into this construct (Moore et al., 2016). That is why different researchers use different combinations of indicators to define the well-being of children and youth (Bradshaw et al., 2007; Newland, 2015; Šućur et al., 2015). For example, Bradshaw et al. (2007) define children's well-being using 51 indicators grouped into 8 clusters (i.e., material situation, housing, health, subjective well-being, children's relationships, safety, and civic participation). Ben-Arieh et al. (2014) define three perspectives of children's well-being that should be considered: (1) children's living conditions and objective measures of their well-being; (2) children's subjective well-being; (3) perceptions and evaluations of children's outcomes by other relevant people in their lives (i.e., parents, teachers, and other experts).

Diener (2012) defines subjective well-being as the way in which individuals evaluate their lives or how favorably they assess their own lives. The subjective well-being construct com-

prises cognitive (life satisfaction and satisfaction with specific life domains) and emotional evaluations (positive and negative emotions) (Diener, 2013). This type of definition is used in research on well-being in both adults and children (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014). Research on the subjective well-being of children focuses not only on general life satisfaction but also on satisfaction with various life domains that are important to children. Most often, these include school, family, peers, leisure time, and the living environment (Huebner, 2004). Research indicates that approximately 70% of children are mostly satisfied with their lives (Huebner et al., 2000; Park & Huebner, 2005). In a review of research on children's well-being, Proctor et al. (2009) demonstrated that children's subjective well-being is a significant predictor of positive outcomes and a protective factor against the adverse effects of stressful environments and the development of mental disorders (Suldo & Huebner, 2004a). Other studies also show numerous positive associations between subjective well-being in children and youth and various positive outcomes such as higher self-esteem and internal locus of control (Huebner, 1991), higher levels of perceived control and social support (Casas et al., 2007; Suldo & Huebner, 2004b), as well as less risk behavior (Shek, 2005). As far as predictors of children's subjective well-being are concerned, research points to family and peer relations, as well as school and neighborhood satisfaction, as the most important predictors (Lawler et al., 2017).

The years between 6 and 14, known as middle childhood, are a critical period in which children develop social, emotional, cognitive, and physical competencies that support mental health and well-being in adolescence (Eccles, 1999). During this period, many cognitive, emotional, and social changes affect children's well-being. For example, executive functions continue to develop at this stage (Best & Miller, 2010), with specific improvements in various aspects, particularly in behavior planning (Šimleša & Cepanec, 2015). Children at this age become increasingly influenced by their peers, and there is an improvement in certain socio-emotional competencies, such as more frequent prosocial behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2015). Despite improvements in some aspects of cognitive and social functioning, declines may still occur in other domains of children's well-being. Research studies have shown that the level of children's subjective well-being changes during this period (González-Carrasco et al., 2017). Most studies on this construct focus on adolescence (Bradford et al., 2002; Chang et al., 2003; Shek & Lin, 2017; Tomy & Cummins, 2011; Ullman & Tatar, 2001), and they show that between the ages of 12 and 18, there is a decline in subjective well-being. The exception is the study by Suldo & Huebner (2006), which found no significant differences in well-being. Casas & González-Carrasco (2018) point out the lack of studies on children in middle childhood to answer the question regarding the precise age at which this decline in subjective well-being occurs. They compared cross-sectional data from 15 countries regarding subjective well-being in children aged 8 to 14 years and showed that in most countries, there is a rise in subjective well-being between the ages of 8 and 10 but also a decline between the ages of 10 and 12, while in some countries (e.g., Spain) this decline is evident even earlier – between ages 8 and 10. Casas and González-Carrasco (2018), therefore, assert that these

results present a challenge to the homeostatic theory of subjective well-being (Cummins, 2014), according to which levels of well-being are relatively stable and various psychological and neurological processes are responsible for maintaining this stability. Tsai (2016, as cited in Casas & González-Carrasco, 2018) argues that genetic explanations in the context of children and youth are insufficient for understanding differences and changes in subjective well-being. He also stresses the importance of contextual influences on changes in children's well-being. Studies focusing on preadolescents and adolescents have found that they experience happiness due to time spent with friends, engaging in leisure activities, achieving success in hobbies and school, and having the freedom to make their own choices (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012, 2014). Good family relations have been shown to be a significant predictor of happiness and life satisfaction in both elementary and high school (Izzo et al., 2022; Park & Huebner, 2005; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2013). Numerous studies point to the importance of parental behavior for positive child outcomes, such as the development of self-regulation, prosocial behavior (Richter et al., 2018), well-developed executive functions (Fay-Stammbach et al., 2014), better life satisfaction (Suldo & Huebner, 2004b), and better school achievement (Pinquart, 2016). Furthermore, regarding child well-being at different ages, researchers emphasize the importance of adequate parenting characterized by warmth (Davidov & Grusec, 2006), acceptance (Rohner & Britner, 2002), autonomy support (Bernier et al., 2010), and positive disciplinary actions that include the use of explanations and clear argumentation. On the other hand, negative parental behaviors such as harsh punishment, intrusion, and psychological control are all related to various internalized, externalized, and social problems in children (Silk et al., 2003; Šarić Drnas et al., 2018). Although some studies highlight the importance of parental well-being for positive parenting and child outcomes, a research gap remains regarding its relationship to children's subjective well-being. Since children find the quality of their relationships with parents to be the crucial determinant of their subjective well-being (Franc et al., 2018; Tadić-Vujčić et al., 2019), it is important to investigate both the direct and indirect effects of parental and family well-being on different domains of child well-being. However, it appears that the importance of family relationships decreases as children grow older (Navarro et al., 2017; Sargeant, 2010), whereas the importance of friendships seems to remain constant over time (Goldbeck et al., 2007). Another highly significant factor in children's well-being is school, as it provides a space for socialization and achievement, given that children spend a significant portion of their day in that setting (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; González-Carrasco et al., 2019; Park, 2005). However, school-related problems can lead to dissatisfaction, pressure, and stress, resulting in decreased happiness (Casas et al., 2007; Navarro et al., 2017). Like family relationships, school satisfaction has been shown to decrease between the ages of 11 and 16 (Casas et al., 2007; Goldbeck et al., 2007; Park, 2005).

The current study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of children's well-being by allowing them to express themselves in their own words. As part of a larger longitudinal project, this

study aimed to further explore children's well-being during the transition from middle childhood to adolescence. While the larger project addressed different aspects of well-being using a quantitative approach, this study used a qualitative method to explore children's perspectives in three broad areas: perceptions and sources of happiness, leisure time, and the use of digital technology. Based on the literature and common knowledge, we expected to detect both similarities and differences between children in middle childhood and those at the beginning of adolescence. We anticipated differences regarding sources of happiness, with a greater emphasis on family among younger children, while friends would be more important for older ones. Regarding leisure time, we presumed that structured activities (e.g., sports, music school) would appear more important to older children, while unstructured ones (e.g., free play) would change in frequency and form with age. In terms of digital technology, we anticipated an increase in usage with age, both for educational and recreational purposes. Regarding school satisfaction, we expected to observe lower levels among older participants due to the increased pressure they face. Finally, we wanted to see whether the discussion would generate novel insights into sources of children's happiness that should be included in future research on their well-being.

METHOD

The aim of the study

The current study aimed to gain a deeper understanding of children's well-being using qualitative methodology.

Procedure

The research project was based on a longitudinal-sequential cohort design and carried out for three consecutive years, following three age cohorts of elementary school students (4th-, 5th-, and 6th graders at the first wave of the study). We obtained approval for research from the Croatian Ministry of Science and Education. In addition to the quantitative part of the research, a qualitative methodology was employed to gain a more in-depth understanding of the researched problems. At each time point, different cohort groups took part via three focus groups, which were later analyzed as clusters for each of the cohorts. At the time point, the T1 cohort of 4th-grade students participated; at the second, the T2 cohort of 6th-grade students was interweaved; and at the third, T3, 8th-grade students were enrolled. The focus groups were conducted at three different time points to cover a broader range of age spans (from childhood to adolescence). Each of the three focus group clusters was organized in a different school participating in the longitudinal study, and participants were selected by

school psychologists who were instructed to choose students with diverse academic achievements and social and family backgrounds. The convenient sample consisted of 29 students in the first wave, 23 students in the second wave, and 14 students in the final time point (Table 1).

Table 1
Characteristics of focus groups

	1st wave	2nd wave	3rd wave
Date	10/29/2021	11/22/2022	11/16/2023
Grade	4th grade	6th grade	8th grade
Age	9-10	11-12	13-14
No. of focus groups	3	3	3
Total No. of participants	29	23	14
Girls	10	13	4
Boys	19	10	10
Average time	30-45 min	45-85 min	40-50 min

For the participation of students in focus groups, a consent form was obtained from their parents, and interviews were conducted on school grounds. We informed the students about the purpose of the focus group and the rules of conduct, and they were assured of their anonymity and privacy. Following the student’s approval, all focus groups were audiotaped. We used a pre-written, semi-structured protocol that consisted of three broad areas, allowing interviewers to guide the conversation from general to more specific aspects of the targeted areas while paying attention to the natural course of the conversation and its flexibility (Table 2). All focus groups were led by two experienced research team members. Recorded discussions were transcribed and analyzed separately by two research members following the principles of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Table 2
Focus groups protocol

Area	Aim	Examples of questions
Experience and source of happiness	The aim was to determine how children perceive the concept of happiness and which aspects they consider most important for achieving happiness.	What does it mean to be happy?
What makes you happy?		What makes you happy?
		What do you think makes other children happy?
		What is necessary for happiness?
		How satisfied are you with your life?
		Describe a situation where you felt happy.
		How do you feel, and what do you do when you feel happy?
		Do the same things make children and adults happy?
		If you caught a goldfish and it granted you one wish, what would you wish for?

Area	Aim	Examples of questions
Leisure time	The aim was to determine which activities children engage in during free time, including both structured (e.g., sports, music) and nonstructured activities (e.g., playing, watching TV). Children were asked if they considered structured activities fun or an obligation, and if they chose them on their own, why they preferred certain activities.	What do you do in your free time? What are your favorite activities? With whom do you spend most of your free time? Do you choose what to do in your free time by yourself? If you could choose anything you want, what would it be? How do you have fun in your free time? Where do you usually go after school? How happy are you at school? What do you like the most? What would you change?
What do you do in your free time?		

Area	Aim	Examples of questions
Digital technology	The aim was to determine how children view different devices, for which activities they use them, how often, and for what reason. They were also asked about their stance regarding the excessive use of digital technologies.	What devices do you use? How often?
How important are digital devices (e.g., cell phones, laptops, game consoles) to you?		What do you like doing the most?
		What do children your age do on such devices?
		Do your parents limit the content you watch or the time you spend on devices?
		Do you think children use these devices too often?
		Do you think parents use these devices too often?
		What do you think are the good and bad sides of digital technology?

RESULTS

The data analysis revealed four main topics: happiness, leisure time, school, and digital technologies. All topics, except one, have subtopics that relate to different aspects of the main topics. Defined topics, subtopics, and codes are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Topics, subtopics, and codes based on thematic analysis of the focus group's transcripts

Main theme	Sub-theme	Codes 4th grade	Codes 6th grade	Codes 8th grade
Happiness	Definition	Family and friends.	Good, positive feeling.	Feeling content and satisfied.
		Feeling fulfilled.	A positive feeling when successful in a task.	Lack of stress and problems.
		Feeling joy and excitement.	Nice feeling after receiving a gift.	Feeling love for yourself and others.
		Feeling love and friendship.	Freedom.	
	Source	Playing with parents, siblings, and friends.	Interaction with family and friends.	Engaging in an activity.
		Holidays, lack of school requirements.	Engaging in an activity.	Interaction with friends.
		Success in school or sports.	Animals.	Parents and family.
		Helping others and watching them smile.	Material gain (e.g., gift).	Non-material gain (e.g., success).
			Non-material gain (e.g., success).	Material gain (e.g., gift).
		Children and adults experience happiness through different sources.	Children and adults experience happiness through different sources.	Children and adults experience happiness through different sources.
			Engaging in domestic activities (e.g., cooking, ironing, sewing, knitting).	
Leisure time	Satisfaction	Satisfied with the amount of free time.	Not enough free time, only on weekends.	Not specified.
		Students have autonomy in choosing activities.	Students have autonomy in choosing activities.	Students have autonomy in choosing activities.
	Organized activities	Students enrolled in various sports and/or other structured activities.	Students enrolled in various sports and/or other structured activities.	Students enrolled in various sports and/or other structured activities.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Codes 4th grade	Codes 6th grade	Codes 8th grade
	Nonorganized activities	Playing with parents and siblings.	Interaction with family and friends in live settings (e.g., board games, quizzes, outdoor activities).	Using digital technologies.
		Playing with friends outdoors.	Playing video games.	Spending time by themselves (e.g., drawing, reading, listening to music)
		Spending time alone (e.g., reading, drawing, building Lego)	Spending time by themselves (e.g., drawing, reading, listening to music)	Interaction with friends.
				Doing choir.
				Going on walks with the dog.
School	Satisfaction	School is well-liked, considered pretty, and big.	Too difficult.	Rules are too strict.
			It is very demanding, with numerous tests and a constant need to study.	Teachers are boring, lifeless, like robots.
			Not enough time for self or interaction with friends.	
Digital technologies	Usage	Mobile phones predominantly used for communication with parents, less for entertainment.	Using DT for educational purposes.	Using DT for educational purposes.
		They discuss the dangers of the internet with adults, primarily with teachers.	Using DT for communication.	Playing games.
		Parental control of content and time spent on DT.	Using DT for fun (e.g., listening to music, watching videos).	Lack of parental control.

Main theme	Sub-theme	Codes 4th grade	Codes 6th grade	Codes 8th grade
		Parents use DT a lot for fun at home.	Lack of parental control, only if school obligations have not been fulfilled.	Lack of parental control, only if school obligations have not been fulfilled.
			Parents rarely discuss dangers on the Internet with their children.	Parents do not discuss dangers on the Internet with their children.
			Parents use DT for both work and fun.	Parents use DT for both work and fun.
	Positive	Educational materials.	Communication with friends and family.	Communication with friends and family.
		Ability to communicate with friends.	Educational content.	Educational content.
	Negative	The possibility of tricking the children and committing fraud.	Possibility of addiction.	Possibility of addiction.
		Playing too much makes it impossible to stop unless someone else turns it off.	Loss of time.	Identity theft.
		Health risks (e.g., eyesight, headache)	Inappropriate content.	Less time for friends in a live setting.
			Health risks (e.g., eyesight, obesity).	Inappropriate and/or illegal content.

Happiness

When asked to define what happiness is, 4th and 6th graders provided positive associations, describing it as a feeling of joy, excitement, and a good feeling that comes from success or being with loved ones.

“Happiness is the best thing one can feel!”

“A feeling that satisfies all our needs.”

Although happiness was defined positively among the 8th graders as well, some of them described it as the absence of stress, problems, and worries, mostly related to school.

"Happiness is when I don't think about the problems. And I think about it all the time, with school being the biggest problem of them all."

For all participants, a much easier task was to list sources of happiness, i.e., give examples of what makes them feel happy. In all three age groups, the primary source of happiness was social interaction with both family and friends. However, the 4th graders almost exclusively referred to parents and siblings, while both 6th and 8th graders mostly spoke about family in general, only occasionally mentioning non-resident family members when discussing the use of digital technology. To all three age groups, the relevant source of happiness was accomplishment in school or sports activities. Only among 6th graders did domestic activities emerge as a source of happiness.

"I'm happy when I cook with my dad."

"My aunt taught me how to knit, and now I love doing that."

All participants believe there is a difference between children's and parents' happiness. Children are happy when they play, receive gifts, and play computer games. In their opinion, parents' happiness is greatly related to material things, such as a paycheck, having a day off, fewer problems and stress, as well as the success of their children in school and elsewhere. One 6th grader even explained why happiness is so different for children and parents:

"They can't relax; that is why they consume alcohol, cigarettes, and drugs. Kids are more relaxed because they have no fears."

Satisfaction with the amount of leisure time is highest among the 4th graders, while the two older groups complain, placing the blame on school duties. Leisure time is filled with both structured and nonstructured activities. Regardless of age, children attend at least one organized activity (e.g., sport, music, dance). Nonstructured activities include interaction with family and friends, as well as time spent alone. Although they all list similar activities, some differences were noticed. The youngest group reported a greater variety of activities with parents and siblings (e.g., board games, hikes, field trips) as well as everyday outdoor play with friends. Both 6th and 8th graders reported a lack of time for socializing during the week; however, 6th graders stated that they always prefer playing in person. Among 8th graders, the use of digital technologies emerged as a significant part of their leisure time. In addition, they perform household chores, which they perceive as a normal part of everyday family life.

Satisfaction with school is in alignment with satisfaction with leisure time. Only the youngest cohort described the school as a positive and happy place; they were proud of it and found it to be in good balance with other parts of their lives. Older participants acknowledge some positive aspects of the school, such as the nice building and friends, but without the same enthusiasm as that visible among the youngest. Both 6th and 8th graders feel overburdened with

school duties, tests, and the need to study at home, stating they have a very limited amount of free time, which is only available during weekends. Some of them complained about the teachers:

“Some teachers are not good at passing on the knowledge. As a result of that, a lot more needs to be done at home.”

“Teachers are boring, spinning in circles like robots, lifeless, heartless, like they don’t feel like teaching anymore.”

Digital technologies are present in all three age groups. However, its usage differs both in quality and quantity. The youngest participants mostly use cell phones to get in touch with their parents. It is rarely used for schoolwork, except in cases of sickness. They also rarely play games or spend long periods of time using digital technologies, which is monitored by the parental app Family Link. Participants in 6th grade use digital technologies for schoolwork, but also increasingly for entertainment (e.g., playing games, watching videos, listening to music), as well as for communication with friends. It is similar to 8th graders, and both groups negate parental control. All three age groups are well aware of the positive and negative aspects of digital technology, as well as the dangers of the Internet, which they predominantly discuss with their teachers.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we investigated how children aged 9-14 perceive happiness and what aspects of their lives they consider most important for being happy. The gathered data supported the hypothesis that social contacts appear to be most relevant (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012, 2014). Similar to the findings of Goldbeck et al. (2007), socializing with friends was present in all age groups, although the types of interaction presumably changed due to maturation. As expected, the importance of social encounters with family decreased with age (Navarro et al., 2017; Sargeant, 2010), shifting from specific mentions of nuclear family members to more general mentions of the family without any further information. An interesting phenomenon that occurred among 4th-grade students was that they almost exclusively discussed the nuclear family as if other family members (e.g., grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives) and interactions with them were not at the center of the child’s attention and had no significant influence on their happiness. Whether this trend was emphasized or not, and to what extent by the COVID-19 lockdown, we can only speculate.

Results indicate that all participants were free to choose both structured and nonstructured activities while having parental support and independence to organize their own time. Many of them consider these activities to be leisure time as well, and some have asserted that the

problem is not being able to engage in desired activities due to a lack of free time, often resulting from numerous school obligations (except for the youngest group). These findings indicate that leisure activities contribute to the well-being of children, which is consistent with previous research (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012, 2014). As children move up the educational ladder, the burden of school duties (e.g., studying, homework) becomes heavier and occupies more and more time in a day, expanding to weekends, thus causing stress and decreasing satisfaction with that aspect of life (Casas et al., 2007; Goldbeck et al., 2007; Park, 2005). This might explain why students in 8th grade defined happiness as the absence of negative emotions, primarily worries and obligations, while their younger colleagues emphasized positive emotions.

Regarding digital technologies, usage increased with age, as expected. Although we expected the presence of parental control over content and time spent, children reported that they were mainly unsupervised, except for the youngest group. Nevertheless, they demonstrated a very good understanding of both the advantages and disadvantages of using digital technology, as well as awareness of online dangers and maturity in responsible behavior. However, they predominantly discussed parents' behavior, denouncing them as frequent users. Although they understand that parents use digital technology for work purposes, many of the children said they use it very often for fun, thereby neglecting family time and even becoming completely detached from their surroundings.

One interesting information emerged with greater emphasis in the second wave. Many children mentioned pets as a source of happiness, whether they already have one or desire to get one. Children at this age may start to develop affectionate relationships with a pet, making it their first living being that they must care for and be responsible for. Unlike younger children, this is the age when pets can be kept and loved solely by them. This information undoubtedly highlights the importance of a pet in the home environment and its impact on child development. Therefore, we recommend that future studies take this into consideration.

Research limitations, value, and implications for future research

There are several shortcomings to this study. The first one refers to the study being limited to just one school. COVID-related restrictions made it impossible to organize focus groups in several schools, which influenced the heterogeneity of the sample. The heterogeneity of the sample was further reduced due to the students selected to participate. Teachers were asked to assist in forming each group and to include students who differed from one another in terms of socioeconomic status (SES) and school success. However, it seemed that students participating in the first two waves were selected from those with higher socioeconomic status (SES) and better school records. Although it seemed that student diversity was achieved in the third wave, only two of the planned three focus groups were conducted.

The greatest value of this study lies in its method, as qualitative research on this topic among preadolescents and adolescents is scarce. This study was conducted using focus groups, which not only allowed for greater depth in understanding children's well-being but also enabled them to discuss freely and potentially generate even more information compared to one-on-one interviews.

Future research should aim to eliminate or lessen the drawbacks of this study. A more heterogeneous sample should be obtained, including students from different schools and of varying socioeconomic status (SES) and school status. In addition, pets and their contribution to a child's life should be given closer consideration.

Practical implications of this study

Since family relationships are of the highest importance to 4th-grade students, experts should strive to encourage such interactions and explain to parents that children notice and disapprove of their use of digital media, while suggesting they engage in simple activities like going for walks or playing board games with their children. Since outdoor activities in nature and sports are the main source of happiness for 6th graders, experts should try to encourage them in this direction, especially since it helps them reduce their use of digital technologies. Regarding the oldest group, experts should direct their attention to the students' feelings of overload and possibly offer them education or counseling on the topic of time and assignment organization.

CONCLUSION

This study compared three different age groups of students on the topics of happiness, sources of happiness, leisure time, and digital technology usage using focus group methodology. Participants were students in 4th, 6th, and 8th grades, as the intent of the study was to explore differences in the transition from childhood to adolescence. The results were in alignment with previous research. While the focus on social interactions shifts from family to friends with older students, friendships are important to all three age groups. Students in the 4th grade prefer to spend time with their family, whether engaging in outdoor or indoor activities.

On the other hand, sixth graders enjoy outdoor and sports activities with friends the most. The oldest students feel overwhelmed by the many demands of school. Although the results of this study must be considered and interpreted in light of the sample's characteristics and convenience, they still offer valuable insights and implications for practice.

To summarize, this study examined how students experience happiness, leisure, and digital technology use, revealing age-related shifts from family-oriented to peer-focused activities and an increase in academic stress among older students. Based on these findings, future research should explore the role of pets in promoting emotional well-being in children, investigate the relationship between digital technology use and both leisure and stress, and examine how these factors interact across different developmental stages using more diverse and representative samples.

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Dobrobit djece na prijelazu iz srednjega djetinjstva u adolescenciju – kvalitativna analiza

Sažetak

Cilj ovoga istraživanja bio je ispitati pojedine aspekte dobrobiti djece na prijelazu iz srednjega djetinjstva u adolescenciju u sklopu projekta Dobrobit djeteta u kontekstu obitelji. Fokusne grupe provedene su na prigodnom uzorku učenika 4., 6. i 8. razreda u osnovnoj školi u Varaždinu. Razgovor je vođen putem polustrukturiranoga protokola, organiziranoga u ova tri široka područja: sreća, slobodno vrijeme i digitalna tehnologija. Rezultati potvrđuju hipotezu o socijalnim kontaktima kao najvažnijem izvoru sreće koju kod učenika 4. razreda dominantno predstavlja obitelj, a u starijim skupinama sve važniju ulogu igraju vršnjaci. Čini se da djeca imaju autonomiju u odabiru organiziranih i izbornih aktivnosti, no slobodno vrijeme koje imaju na raspolaganju za bavljenje tim aktivnostima opada u višim razredima. Uporaba digitalnih tehnologija učestalija je kod starijih učenika, a koriste ju ne samo u obrazovne svrhe već sve više i u svrhu zabave. Studija je pokazala da su djeca svjesna većine prednosti i nedostataka korištenja digitalnih tehnologija, no potrebno je provoditi više edukacije o mogućim prijetnjama zdravlju i sigurnosti. Tijekom istraživanja tema kućnih ljubimaca spomenuta je u više navrata, što upućuje na to da se kućni ljubimci percipiraju kao važan izvor sreće, a to bi trebalo detaljnije istražiti u budućim istraživanjima.

Ključne riječi: dobrobit, djeca, sreća, slobodno vrijeme, digitalne tehnologije