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**Happiness of Children as They Grow into Their Teens:  
The Hong Kong Case**

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2012

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Abstract:

This paper reports the results of a dual survey of children from Primary 4 through Secondary 3 and their parents from Hong Kong conducted from November 2011 to January 2012. It confirms the often-cited result that happiness declines as the child moves into the teens, and finds that scores indicating Love, Insight, Fortitude, and Engagement, which reflect aspects of mental capital essential to happiness, also tend to decline during adolescence. Pressures from extracurricular activities surprisingly appear to have a greater adverse effect on happiness than pressures from school work. Siblings add to disharmony at home, and parents' education does not help enhance a child's happiness, although perception of financial well-being does. A loving relationship between father and mother is a key driving factor for a child's love score. Respect for the child's opinions and respect for privacy appear to offset completely any intergenerational barrier to effective communication or negative effect from parents' age.

## **1. Introduction**

Studies on the happiness of children are few and far between, as Beaton and Frijters(2012) pointed out. Their recent work offered a glimpse into the happiness of Australian children aged 9 to 14. Another recent study by Thoroddur Bjarnason *et. al.* (2012) found that children who live with both biological parents tend to be happier than children in other family arrangements. Their data is drawn from the 2005/2006 Health Behaviour in School-aged Children (HBSC) study and involved 36 Western industrialised countries—mostly European countries, but also inclusive of Canada, the UK, and the United States. Holder and Coleman (2009) studied happiness of children in Western Canada and found that social relationships are significant predictors of happiness for children aged 9 to 12, which mirrors the case for adults and adolescents. More recently, the Children’s Society(2012) published a separate report on the well-being of UK children.

Deserving of note and of further study is the universal pattern of declining happiness as children grow older. The current study from Hong Kong reveals the same pattern and confirms a number of other findings from the HBSC study and the UK Good Childhood Report 2012. Distinct from the other studies, the present study also covers aspects of mental capital and sources of pressures experienced by children. Similar to Holder and Coleman (2009) it also involves a dual study, matching the survey on children with one on their parents. Similar to the HBSC and the UK studies, we confirm the crucial role of the relationship between the parents in impacting the happiness of children. Perhaps counter-intuitively, parents’ education and having siblings apparently add to pressures in the family and potentially reduce the happiness of children.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 The Surveys**

The Centre for Public Policy Studies of Lingnan University was commissioned by the HK Early Childhood Development Research Foundation to conduct a survey on “Development of Children from Formative Years to Teens: the Role of Family, Schools, and Peers in Nurturing Happy and Healthy Individuals” in 2011. The surveys were conducted from November 2011 to January 2012.

The objective of the Survey is to study the health and well-being of children from an early age. Given that very young children may have difficulty understanding the

instructions in the questionnaire, the survey targets at children from Grade 4 or roughly age 8 and above. Some of the questions, especially those on their relations with their parents and relations between the parents, no doubt involve recollection of the earlier year experiences. The survey questionnaire is self-administered and consists of two parts:

- **Survey on students:** The lists of all primary schools and of secondary schools were compiled from the government website. The schools were asked (in random order) whether they were willing to participate in the survey. In each of the participating schools, one class was randomly selected in each grade for P.4 to P.6 for primary schools and for S.1 to S.3 for secondary schools (in the case of international schools, two classes are selected). We sent a package of questionnaires to each of the participating schools. Students were asked to complete a questionnaire (the “student questionnaire”) in class. Teachers are asked to collect the completed questionnaires.
  
- **Survey on parents:** The package of questionnaires sent to each of the participating schools also consisted of questionnaires for parents (“parent questionnaire”). Students were asked to bring the parent questionnaires home for their parents to complete, and to bring the completed questionnaires back to school. Teachers were asked to collect the completed questionnaires for us.

Both student questionnaires and parent questionnaires were numbered so it was possible to match students to their parents. We started to contact the schools in August 2011. Questionnaires were sent to and received from the schools in the period of November and January 2012. Most of the questions ask the respondent to pinpoint the extent to which they agree to certain statements. The questionnaires are available from the CPPS website.

In the end, 13 ordinary primary schools, 1 international primary school, 14 ordinary secondary schools and 1 international secondary school participated in the Survey. A total of 1,025 student questionnaires (ordinary primary 419; international primary 62; ordinary secondary 483; international secondary 61) and 955 parent questionnaires (ordinary primary 411; international primary 51; ordinary secondary 443; international secondary 50) were collected. The details are as follows:

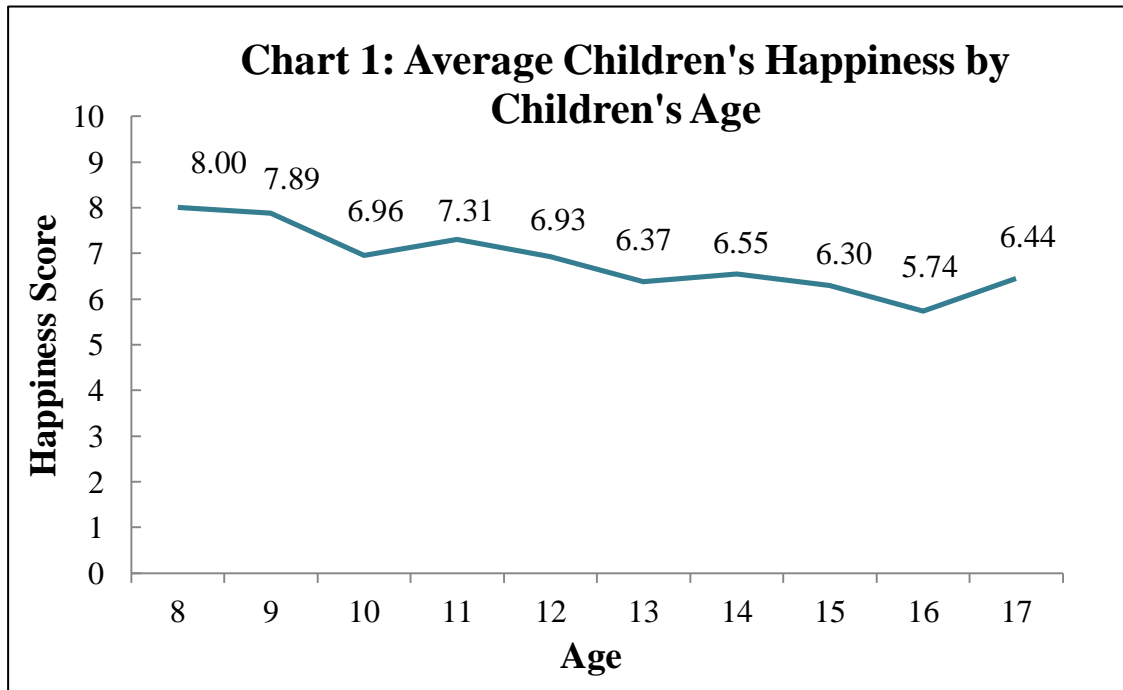


**Table 1: Frequency Distribution of the Respondents**

	Local School		International School		Total
	Primary	Secondary	Primary	Secondary	
Students	419	483	62	61	1,025
Parents	411	443	51	50	955

## 2.2. Overview of Survey Results

One striking result from our survey is that happiness of children tends to fall with age. Ignoring the small uptick for age 17, for which the sample size is rather small, happiness almost declines monotonically, from close to 8 (on a scale of 0 to 10) at the age of 8 and 9 to less than 6 by the age of 16.



This declining happiness with age is reflected also in the profile of happiness by school grade (Table 2)

**Table 2: Happiness by School Grade**

	<b>P4</b>	<b>P5</b>	<b>P6</b>	<b>S1</b>	<b>S2</b>	<b>S3</b>	<b>P4 &amp; P6(I)</b>	<b>S1 &amp; S2(I)</b>
“Very unhappy” (0-2)	0	13	10	5	7	13	1	2
“Neutral” (3-7)	8	65	79	85	60	123	29	35
“Very happy” (8+)	24	89	108	78	35	60	32	24
Mean	8.28	7.06	7.19	6.96	6.40	6.29	7.13	6.67
% of Very unhappy	0%	8%	5%	3%	7%	7%	2%	3%
% of Very happy	75%	53%	55%	46%	34%	31%	52%	39%
Obs.	32	167	197	168	102	196	62	61

Mirroring this is a similar picture from happiness by class grade. Children’s happiness falls precipitously from Primary 4 to Primary 5, with the unhappy percentage shooting up from 0% to 8% and the happy percentage falling from 75% to 53%. In high school the percentage of happy students continues to fall, all the way to a dangerous 31% by secondary 3. The happiness index keeps falling from 8.28 at P4 to 6.29 by Secondary 3.

Comparing happy against unhappy children, where happy is defined as children with happiness score at or over 6 and unhappy children as children with happiness score at or below 4, we come up with the following table:

**Table 3: Happy and Unhappy Children with Caring Parents**

(Parental Care  $\geq 4$  on a 5-point scale; Happiness on an 11-point scale 0-10))

	<b>Range of Score</b>	<b>Unhappy children (happiness<math>\leq 4</math>)</b>	<b>Happy children (happiness<math>\geq 6</math>)</b>	<b>t-test</b>
<b>Parents’ relationships</b>	1-5	M=3.63, SD=1.06; N=76	M=4.14, SD=0.92; N=560	t(634) = 4.47, p<.001
<b>Children’s pressures (composite)</b>	1-5	M=3.23, SD=0.96; N=75	M=2.48, SD=0.86; N=571	t(644) = -6.98, p<.001
<b>Parents’ disciplinary severity on misbehavior</b>	1-5	M=3.13, SD=1.12; N=76	M=2.84, SD=1.10; N=556	t(630) = -2.19, p=0.03
<b>Parents’ age</b>	29-68	M=43.75, SD=6.32; N=61	M=42.26, SD=5.89; N=459	t(518) = -1.85, p=0.07
<b>Children’s perception of financial well-being of the family</b>	1-5	M=3.69, SD=0.92; N=77	M=4.06, SD=0.88; N=575	t(650) = 3.42, p<.001

It is clear that happy children mainly come from families with parents enjoying a warm and loving relationship. Compared to unhappy children, happy children face less pressure or are more able to cope with pressures. Happy children's parents are also less likely to scold them or beat them up when they have done something wrong. Happy children are also more likely to have younger parents and to come from financially well off families.<sup>1</sup>

### **2.3 Mental Capital and Happiness**

According to Ho(2001) "Mental capital describes the degree of mastery of life skills at the time an individual faces the choices of life," where "life skills" refers to "the ability to undergo various household activities to produce fulfillment attributes."(p.24) Ho(2012) provides more elaboration, saying that mental capital includes both cognitive skills as well as "the capability to produce the mental goods one needs as one goes through life."(p.44) Mental goods are like physical goods in filling needs, but they are intangible and include such qualities as a sense of self-dignity or self-esteem, being at ease with oneself, self-efficacy, having a sense of purpose and achievement, etc. According to the Foresight Report (Government Office for Science,2008), "A key conclusion of the Project is that mental capital and mental wellbeing are intimately linked: measures to address one will often affect the other. This argues for them to be considered together when developing policies and designing interventions."

Over the years Ho has tested and confirmed a "happiness formula" based on Love, Insight, Fortitude, and Engagement, each of which may be considered to be a dimension of mental capital (Ho, 2011). The LIFE scores are all measured on a Likert scale 0-10. In the current study the original answers to the key questions were all on a 5-point or a 4-point scale. They are all converted to the 11 point scale before being compiled into the 11 point scale LIFE variables according to a formula proven to mirror accurately the original scale without any bias (see Appendix). The conversion helps easier interpretation of the statistical results.

**Love** is measured using responses to a set of questions about the respondent's natural propensity to care for others. Love helps generate a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Love is specifically defined not to include the perception of being loved by others since being loved depends mainly on the behaviors of others. We want to assess strictly a child's attitude, and to concentrate on how this attitude may affect happiness.

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<sup>1</sup> This approach of asking children's perception of financial well being of the family is similar to what is done in Beaton and Frijters(2012).

<b>Love</b> = average of responses to the following, (originally in 5 point scale)
You love your mom
You love your dad
You have a good relationship with your mom
You have a good relationship with your dad

**Insight** is measured using responses to a set of questions about the respondent's sense of proportion and priorities, ability to distinguish between means and ends, interpretation of what constitutes success in life, ability to reflect over one's decisions and to learn, etc. Insight thus helps generate a sense of self-efficacy, autonomy, and a sense of achievement that is not dependent on others.

<b>Insight</b> = average of responses to the following (originally in 5 point scale)
Success is to have outstanding academic results ( ordering reversed for compilation of the Insight score)
Success is to achieve the best within one's capability
Taking others' criticism or advice is not emotionally difficult
You are satisfied with how you allocate your time

**Fortitude** is measured using responses to questions regarding the respondent's ability to face adversity. Fortitude helps generate a sense of achievement and inner strength.

<b>Fortitude</b> = resilience = average of responses to the following (originally on 5 point scale).
You won't give up once you have decided to do something.
You have the courage to face difficulties.

**Engagement** is measured using responses to questions regarding the respondent's putting thoughts into action. An engaged person is a person who actively engages in tasks that serve his identified purposes. Engagement generates a sense of self-actualization. Because of a need to contain the length of the questionnaire, we can only use the following proxy for the Engagement score, for active participation in family life.

<b>Engagement</b> = Purposive and enthusiastic living but in this study measured by the response to the following question, originally on a 4-point scale.
You do many things together with your family, e.g. outing, dining and watching movies.

The questions used to compile children's LIFE scores are constrained by the consideration that the questionnaire must not be excessively long. The following is the baseline regression of the happiness score against the LIFE scores.

**Table 4: Baseline OLS Regression against LIFE Scores**

Dependent Variable: hapi or Children's Happiness		Number of obs. = 894				
		F(4, 889) = 81.46				
		Prob. > F = 0				
		Adj. R-squared = 0.2602				
		Root MSE = 1.9603				
	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
love	0.368465	0.044288	8.32	0	0.281545	0.455386
insight	0.348892	0.137322	2.54	0.011	0.07938	0.618405
fortitude	0.204955	0.042919	4.78	0	0.12072	0.289189
engagement	0.095363	0.026728	3.57	0	0.042905	0.14782
constant term	0.828738	0.409489	2.02	0.043	0.025061	1.632415

### 3. Results:

Table 4 shows that the LIFE variables all carry statistically significant and positive coefficients which together with the constant term explain 26% of the variance of children's happiness index. The adjusted R-squared rises slightly to 0.264 when demographic variables and a financial well-being variable is added to the equation.<sup>2</sup>

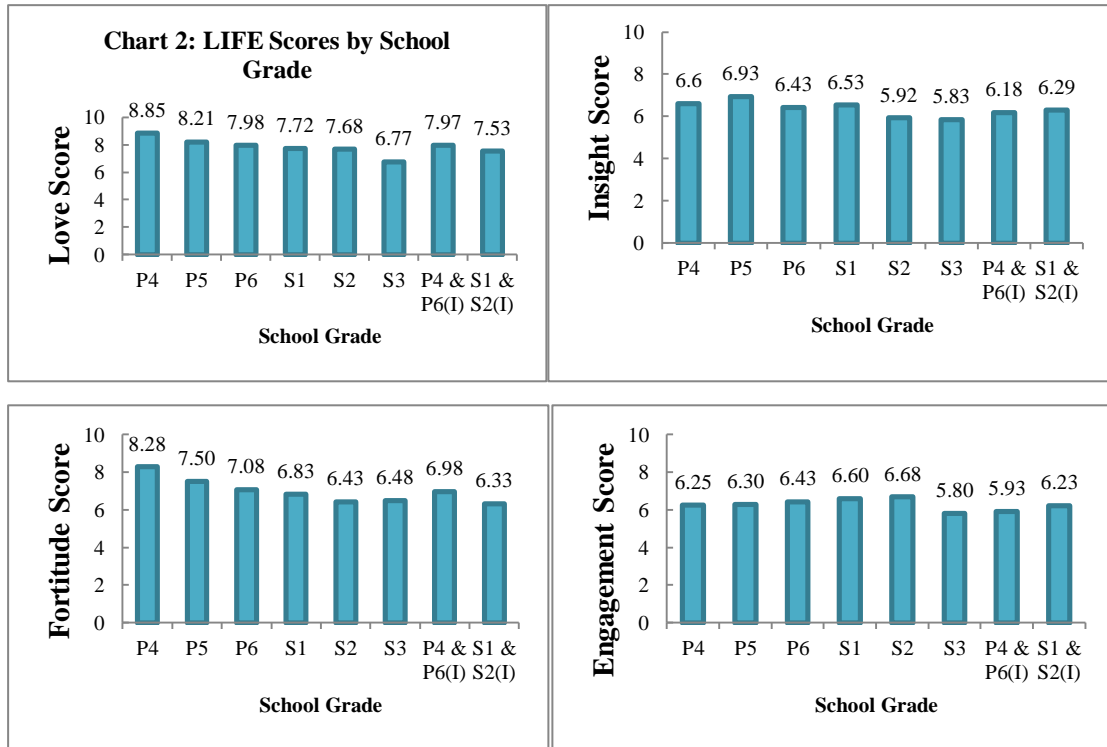
#### 3.1 Declining Happiness and Declining LIFE Scores with Age

Similar to the study by Bjarnason *et.al.*, this survey shows that older children are less happy. Bjarnason *et.al.* used the 11 year olds as the benchmark, and found negative coefficients for the 13-year olds and 15-year olds, with the negative coefficient for the 15-year olds almost twice as big as that for the 13 year olds. In their model I, "Between the ages of 11 and 13 children move almost half a rung down the ladder (0.45) and by the age of 15 they have moved four-fifths (0.81) of a rung down the ladder." The UK Good Childhood Report found a significant drop in wellbeing between the ages of eight and 15 for the 10 aspects studied. "The largest drops are for school and appearance, where average well-being at the age of 15 is over 15% lower than at the age of eight. This is a drop of over 2% each year. The differences in well-being for friends and home are much smaller with drops of less than 1% per year."(p.14)

The data from the Hong Kong survey shows that mostly the LIFE scores exhibit a declining profile with the school grade as well. The only exception seems to be the Engagement score, which appears to rise with the school grade, but it nevertheless also

<sup>2</sup> The results of the extended statistical model are not reported. The age of the responding parent carries a statistically significant negative coefficient.

plunged from Secondary 2 to Secondary 3. The Engagement score at 5.80 at Secondary 3 is lower than that of 6.25 at Primary 4. P6(I) and S2(I) refer to results in an international school.



### 3.2: Explaining Love

Given that Love carries the biggest coefficient in among all the factors in the equation explaining a child’s happiness, we did a regression of the Love score on Parental Care, Respect for the Child’s Opinion, Respect for the Child’s Privacy, the Relationship between Father and Mother, and Perception of Financial Well Being. All these variables carry statistically significant coefficients, and Momgdredad (Mom in good relation with Dad) carries the biggest coefficient, and the most significant. Together, all these variables explain over 63% of the variance of Love. The results show the importance of parents’ example in guiding the development of their children.

**Table 5: Explaining Love: Importance of Parental Relations (OLS)**

Dependent variable: Love

Number of obs. = 897

F(5, 891) = 269.15

Prob. > F = 0

Adj. R-squared = 0.6325

	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	Root MSE = 1.1741 [95% Conf. Interval]	
parcare	0.314788	0.057262	5.5	0	0.202403	0.427173
respop	0.488009	0.066769	7.31	0	0.356966	0.619052
respri	0.375331	0.063092	5.95	0	0.251504	0.499157
momgdreldad	0.726511	0.069138	10.51	0	0.590819	0.862203
finwelloff	0.181324	0.05829	3.11	0.002	0.066922	0.295726
_cons	-0.27463	0.25523	-1.08	0.282	-0.77556	0.226289

It appears that as the child gets older, he or she becomes much more sensitive to parents' respect for his/her opinions and privacy, while the relationship between mom and dad may become tense as the child goes into adolescence.<sup>3</sup> In this regard, it is interesting to note the following remarks from children in the UK report about what they value:

*'Having a good, safe home with loving parents.'*

*'A stable family with parents or carers who love and provide for you.'*

*'What I would change is that my parents would never argue and always get along with each other.'*

### 3.3 Effective Communication

Bjarnason *et al.*(2012) highlighted the importance of effective communication in explaining overall life satisfaction among children. Since “generation gap” is generally perceived to be at play as a stumbling block for effective communication between parents and children, we tested the effects of the age gap on children's happiness and effective communication. We first regress effective communication against the child's gender, the child's age, and the age gap.

Here are definitions of some variables.

<b>Effcom</b> = Effective Communication = the average of responses to the following questions, on a 5 point scale:
You often share with your mom what happens at school.
You often share with your dad what happens at school
You have a good relationship with your mom
You have a good relationship with your dad

<sup>3</sup> In 2009, about eight percent of children and teens in America from 12 to 17 reported incidents of Major Depression Episode during the course of the year. See <http://www.teendepression.org/stats/childhood-depression-statistics/>

**Respop** = Respect for the child’s opinions, = average of responses to the following:

Your mom takes your views/suggestions seriously
Your dad takes your views/suggestions seriously
<b>Resppri</b> = Respect for the child’s privacy, = average of responses to the following:
Your mom respects your privacy
Your dad respects your privacy

The results are presented in **Table 6a**.

**Table 6a: Determinants of Effective Communication (OLS)**

Dependent Variable: Effcom		Number of obs. = 708				
		F(3, 676) = 6.71				
		Prob. > F = 0.0002				
		Adj. R-squared = 0.1248				
		Root MSE = 0.80893				
	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
female	0.214613	0.063015	3.41	0.001	0.090883	0.338342
age(child’s)	-0.13106	0.045275	-2.89	0.004	-0.21996	-0.04216
agegap	-0.00909	0.005196	-1.75	0.081	-0.0193	0.00111
constant	5.389203	0.581355	9.27	0	4.247725	6.530681
Note: Dummies for schools are included but are suppressed (29 categories)						

As it turns out, daughters appear to better able communicate with their parents. The age of the child appears to have a negative effect on effective communication, while the age gap also has a moderately significant but relatively small effect on effective communication. The negative coefficient of the age variable underlies the commonly found negative effect of the child’s age on happiness. The age gap is probably more significant for teenage children than for younger children.

We then conduct a second test. This time we added two variables: parents’ respect for the child’s opinions, and parents’ respect for the child’s privacy. Once these variables are included, we find the effect of the age gap to dwindle to virtually zero, and the t statistic becomes very small, suggesting that if parents can give their children the impression that they respect their opinions and their privacy, then age gap would not exert any independent negative effect on communication at all. In this second test, we continue to observe the negative effect of the child’s age on effective communication, suggesting that adolescence does have a robust effect on effective communication. Our results also confirm the UK study’s finding that children value privacy very much.



According to the UK resport, “Issues of privacy at home also become increasingly important as children grow older.” Moreover, highlighting the importance of respect, “children also identified the importance of their being listened to and taken seriously and allowed appropriate freedoms as they matured: ‘They should listen to the child.’”(p.17)

**Table 6b: Determinants of Effective Communication (OLS)**

Dependent Variable: Effcom							Number of obs. = 692
							F(5, 658) = 96.84
							Prob. > F = 0
							Adj. R-squared = 0.5204
							Root MSE = 0.60159
	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]		
respop	0.363118	0.037518	9.68	0	0.289448	0.436788	
respri	0.255328	0.036225	7.05	0	0.184198	0.326458	
female	0.122993	0.048467	2.54	0.011	0.027825	0.218161	
age(child’s)	-0.0856	0.031294	-2.74	0.006	-0.14705	-0.02415	
agegap	-0.00206	0.00408	-0.51	0.614	-0.01007	0.00595	
constant	2.34975	0.426968	5.5	0	1.511366	3.188134	
school codes absorbed						(29 categories)	

### 3.4 Pressures and Their Effects on Family Life

**Famlife** is a variable on a scale of -3 to +3, and measures the quality of family life. It is the average of positive qualities (active family activities + encouragement and support) minus the average of negative qualities (physical or verbal fights or abuses). Since the maximum of the mean of positive scores is 4, and the minimum of the mean of negative scores is 1, the maximum for Famlife is +3. Conversely the minimum of Famlife is -3. Specifically, for each of the following questions in Table 7, they were allowed to choose among Never, Occasionally, Sometimes and Often.

**Table 7: Components of Family Life (Famlife)**

<b>The “high quality episodes” are covered by questions 11b and 11d, viz:</b>
11b. You do many things together with your family, e.g. outing, dining and watching movies (Family Plus Score)

11d. Your parents praise or encourage you (Family Plus Score)
<b>The “low quality episodes” are covered by 11e, 11f, 11g, 11h, 11i and 11j:</b>
11e. Your parents have arguments with each other (Family Minus Score)
11f. Your parents have physical fights with each other(Family Minus Score)
11g. Your mom scolds you without a good reason (Family minus Score)
11h. Your dad scolds you without a good reason (Family minus score)
11i. Your mom beats you up without a good reason (Family minus score)
11j. Your dad beats you up without a good reason (Family minus score)

**Table 8: Overview of Family Life (Famlife)**

<b>Interpretation</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Percentage</b>	<b>Freq.</b>	<b>Remarks</b>
“Bad”	-3 – -1	3%	26	3 % of the children live in families characterized by some degree of violence.
“Fair”	>-1 – <1	38%	330	38% of children sampled live in “fair” families.
“Good”	+1 – +3	59%	516	59% of children sampled live in families characterized by loving behaviour.

When we divide the sample by age categories, we find that the percentage of families having good or healthy family life together keeps falling with the age of the child.

**Table 9: Famlife Score (%) by Age of Child**

Range	8-9	10	11	12	13	14	15-17
“Bad”	0%	5%	2%	3%	3%	4%	5%
“Fair”	29%	34%	30%	34%	39%	46%	53%
“Good”	71%	61%	68%	63%	58%	50%	42%
N	62	103	182	141	131	183	66

We compiled two separate measures of pressures faced by children: a school work pressures index, and an extra-curricular activities pressures index.

**Pindexshw** = school work pressures = average of the responses from following, each on a 5 point scale:

Do you feel strained in handling your schoolwork?

Do you feel strained in handling your tests and exams?

**Pindexact** = pressures from extracurricular activity = response to the question: “Do you feel strained in handling extra-curricular activities at school?” This is defined on a 5 point scale.

**Compindex** = composite pressures index = average of pindexschwk and pindexact

**Table 10: Three Levels of Children Pressures Scores**

Children Pressures Score	Range	Percentage
“Low pressures”	1 – 2	31%
“Middle pressures”	>2 – <4	58%
“High pressures”	4 – 5	11%

*Note: Children’s overall pressures scores are the average scores of pressures from school work and from extra-curricular activities*

A simple plot of the Happiness score against school work pressures or against pressures from extra-curricular activities shows that both kinds of pressures appear to have a clear adverse effect on happiness. But it is rather surprising that pressures from extra-curricular activities appear to be even more potent in undermining the quality of family life than pressures from school work. (**Table 11a**) A regression with quality of family life regressed against demographic and pressure variables yields a much bigger negative coefficient for pressure from extracurricular activities. Financial well-being is clearly positive for the quality of family life. But the surprise is that parents’ education and having siblings do not help at all. That parents’ education may not help

could be due to a perception, whether real or imagined, of higher expectations from parents who are well educated. That having siblings could cause a decline in the quality of family life could be related to worries about favoritism, and could be related to resources of attention and financial resources being spread thin among the siblings. A recent cover story in Time Magazine reported that favoritism or uneven treatment of siblings by parents is quite common and potentially could leave unhappy memories on the unfavored child, and could even cause a sense of guilt on the favored one.<sup>4</sup>

**Table 11a: Famlife as explained by school work and extra-curricular activities pressures**

Dependent Variable: Famlife		Number of obs. = 647				
		F(8, 638) = 12.27				
		Prob. > F = 0				
		Adj. R-squared = 0.1582				
		Root MSE = 0.94657				
	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
pindexschwkw	-0.04492	0.04733	-0.95	0.343	-0.13786	0.04802
pindexextact	-0.07551	0.033963	-2.22	0.027	-0.1422	-0.00881
female	0.117146	0.075901	1.54	0.123	-0.0319	0.266192
age(child's)	-0.02126	0.021468	-0.99	0.322	-0.06341	0.020899
page	-0.00818	0.007275	-1.12	0.261	-0.02247	0.006106
pedu	-0.14109	0.07672	-1.84	0.066	-0.29174	0.009565
sibdum	-0.26694	0.08619	-3.1	0.002	-0.43619	-0.09769
finwelloff	0.345161	0.047673	7.24	0	0.251545	0.438776
_cons	0.999237	0.447064	2.24	0.026	0.121342	1.877131

Whereas Famlife is a variable based on behavior, Hapfam is a variable based on perception of having a warm, loving family and having parents who are in a good relationship. The variable Hapfam is based on the responses from questions of the extent to which the respondent agrees or disagrees with the following statements:

<b>Hapfam</b> = sense of having a happy family = average of responses to the following:
You have a good relationship with your mom
You have a good relationship with your dad
Your mom has a good relationship with your dad
You have a warm, loving family

<sup>4</sup> See the Time Magazine story by Kluger(2011), according to which fully 65% of mothers and 70% of fathers exhibit a preference for one child over another, while others may just hide it well (p.39)

Table 11b shows that when Hapfam is the dependent variable, results are generally stronger. Adjusted R-squared goes up to 0.23, and the t statistic on pindexextact (pressures from extra-curricular activities) becomes noticeably bigger. The coefficients on age of the child and parent’s education also become more statistically significant. The siblings dummy continues to carry a negative and statistically significant coefficient.

**Table 11b: Hapfam as explained by school work and extra-curricular activities pressures**

Dependent Variable: Hapfam		Number of obs. = 696				
		F(8, 687) = 23.92				
		Prob. > F = 0				
		Adj. R-squared = 0.2298				
		Root MSE = 0.84881				
	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
pindexschwkw	0.032895	0.038025	0.87	0.387	-0.04176	0.107555
pindexextact	-0.07267	0.029596	-2.46	0.014	-0.13078	-0.01456
female	0.069523	0.0648	1.07	0.284	-0.05771	0.196752
age(child’s)	-0.05468	0.018482	-2.96	0.003	-0.09097	-0.01839
page	-0.00739	0.006383	-1.16	0.248	-0.01992	0.005147
pedu	-0.15475	0.064792	-2.39	0.017	-0.28196	-0.02753
sibdum	-0.21432	0.079527	-2.69	0.007	-0.37047	-0.05818
finwelloff	0.403415	0.038949	10.36	0	0.326942	0.479888
_cons	3.782067	0.397919	9.5	0	3.000784	4.563349

**Table 12a** shows that children’s ability to cope with stress is positively related to their sense of having a happy and warm family, and negatively related to their age. The important contribution of a happy family in raising the ability to cope with stress is particularly robust as it is not affected by adding parents’ education in the equation (indeed the coefficient gets bigger!) In **Table 12b**, parent’s education appears to have a deleterious effect on the pressures faced by the child, but the coefficient is not statistically significant.

**Table 12a: Determinants of the Composite Pressure Index (OLS)**

Dependent Variable: Compindex		Number of obs. = 928				
		F(3, 924) = 16.7				
		Prob. > F = 0				
		Adj. R-squared = 0.0475				
		Root MSE = 0.88461				
compindex	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
hapfam	-0.11886	0.033667	-3.53	0	-0.18493	-0.05279
age(child's)	0.071551	0.016166	4.43	0	0.039825	0.103278
female	-0.13515	0.057775	-2.34	0.02	-0.24853	-0.02176
_cons	2.333763	0.271129	8.61	0	1.801662	2.865864

**Table 12b: Determinants of the Composite Pressure Index (OLS)**

Dependent Variable: Compindex		Number of obs.=806				
		F(4, 801)=11.5				
		Prob. > F=0				
		R-squared=0.0494				
		Root MSE=0.88629				
	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
hapfam	-0.13246	0.037389	-3.54	0	-0.20586	-0.05907
pedu	-0.09153	0.062581	-1.46	0.144	-0.21437	0.031313
age(child's)	0.067676	0.017209	3.93	0	0.033896	0.101456
female	-0.11802	0.062297	-1.89	0.059	-0.2403	0.004266
_cons	2.611792	0.322659	8.09	0	1.978435	3.24515

### 3.5 Interaction between Parents' Happiness and Children's Happiness

Parents' happiness is found to be rise with their children's happiness. When parents' happiness is regressed against children's happiness, children's happiness carries a positive and statistically significant coefficient. On the other hand, when children's happiness is regressed against parents' happiness, we do not find a statistically significant coefficient. (**Table 13** and **14**) Apparently parents are happy to see happy kids; kids do not care as much for the happiness of their parents.

**Table 13: Determinants of Children’s Happiness Highlighting Minor Role of Parents’ Happiness and Age Gap and Possible Negative Effect of Parent’s Education**

Dependent Variable: hapi, Child’s Happiness

Number of obs. = 686  
F(6, 679) = 17.43  
Prob. > F = 0  
Adj. R-squared = 0.1182  
Root MSE = 2.1199

	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
hapi	0.05209	0.047701	1.09	0.275	-0.04157	0.14575
female	-0.02317	0.163253	-0.14	0.887	-0.34371	0.297374
age(child’s)	-0.14848	0.047442	-3.13	0.002	-0.24163	-0.05533
agegap	-0.03528	0.015765	-2.24	0.026	-0.06624	-0.00433
pedu	-0.17474	0.167395	-1.04	0.297	-0.50342	0.153931
finwelloff	0.651288	0.091436	7.12	0	0.471756	0.83082
_cons	7.352243	0.968218	7.59	0	5.451182	9.253304

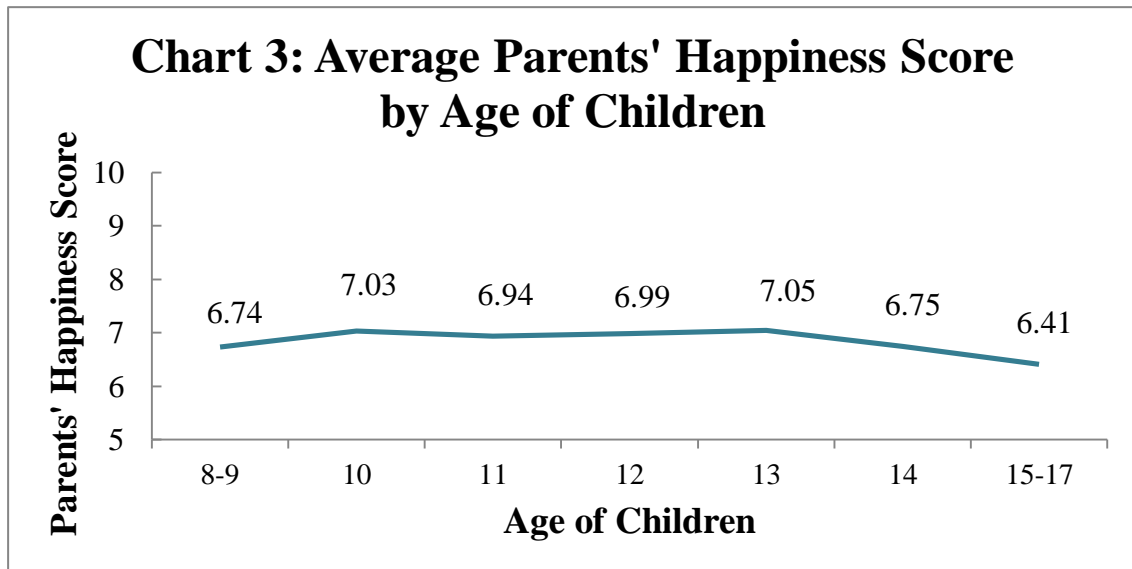
**Table 14: Determinants of Parent’s Happiness Highlighting Role of Child’s Happiness, Gender of Child, and Financial Well Being**

Dependent Variable: phap, Parent’s Happiness

Number of obs. = 689  
F(6, 682) = 10.71  
Prob. > F = 0  
Adj. R-squared = 0.0873  
Root MSE = 1.7601

	Coef.	Robust Std. Err.	t	P>t	[95% Conf. Interval]	
hapi	0.076748	0.031655	2.42	0.016	0.014596	0.1389
female	0.22586	0.134156	1.68	0.093	-0.03755	0.489268
age(child’s)	-0.01906	0.039759	-0.48	0.632	-0.09712	0.059004
agegap	0.018665	0.012311	1.52	0.13	-0.00551	0.042837
pedu	0.187213	0.139307	1.34	0.179	-0.08631	0.460735
pfinwelloff	0.602364	0.090687	6.64	0	0.424305	0.780423
_cons	3.423717	0.849935	4.03	0	1.754914	5.09252

Chart 10 shows that parents' happiness declines noticeably when their children enters adolescence. It seems clear that dealing with children in adolescence is a great challenge for parents.





#### 4. Discussion

The key determinants of children's happiness appear not that different from those of adults. The mental qualities of Love, Insight, Fortitude, and Engagement(LIFE) alone explain 26% of the variation of the self-reported happiness of children (Table 4). This compares with 32% to 47% for adults.<sup>5</sup> When demographic variables and a financial well-being variable are added the adjusted R-squared goes up slightly to 0.264.

A glimpse into the declining happiness of children as they grow older is offered in this paper which discovers that children's LIFE scores generally decline with age. Given that a key Insight or Wisdom question relates to how children understand success, the result indicates that going through school success is increasingly taken to be outperforming others rather than realizing one's own potential. Such interpretation of the meaning of success inevitably creates pressures on children, and this is not helped by well educated parents, as results indicate that children with well educated parents actually experience greater pressures. This suggests a need to strengthen life education in schools to nurture the mental capital that is so crucial to mental health. Parents, too, will benefit from parenting education that puts more emphasis on realizing the potential of their children rather than outperforming others.

While these attitudinal variables, which reflect mental capital, are crucial in explaining happiness(c.f. Cheng and Furnham, 2001) we show that some of these variables are directly related to the behaviors of parents. In particular, Love is driven, first and foremost, by the quality of the relationship between the two parents, and then by the degree to which the child feels he or she is respected—whether in the realm of opinions expressed or privacy. Perception of parental care and perceived financial well being of the family are also positive factors for Love, but are less important. It is remarkable that for children who see parents as respecting their opinions and privacy, the age gap is not an obstacle to effective communication.

Interestingly and perhaps surprisingly, parents' education is always a negative factor—though not always significant, for children's happiness. For some reason, parent's education appears to enhance children's pressures and to undermine the quality of family life. It is not clear whether parents with better education put more pressures on their children because their expectations are higher, whether children simply consider highly educated parents as difficult to emulate, or whether they have longer

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<sup>5</sup> Adjusted R squared was 0.32 and 0.47 in a randomized survey involving 722 adults and an on-line survey involving 8523 adults, both conducted in Hong Kong in 2011.

working hours and cannot attend to the needs of the family as well as others (Pouwels et.al. 2008), but it suggests that there is something lacking in most parents' education, particularly parenting education.

A disturbing result is that having siblings appears to undermine the quality of family life and happiness and adds to pressures. Another disturbing result is that between pressures from school work and pressures from extra-curricular activities, extra-curricular activities turn out to be a much stronger source of pressures. The nature of so-called extra-curricular activities has apparently changed over the years. Instead of serving as fun and relieving pressures from school work, they have become an independent source of pressures. This may reflect increasing competition among students for better placement in further studies or employment, as extra-curricular activities have become a crucial item on the student's vitae. Parents are especially keen to ensure that their children do not underperform relative to other students.

## **5. Conclusions**

This study on children's happiness in Hong Kong produced several results similar to studies on children in western industrialized countries, but it also produced a number of surprises that were not found before. While the study confirms the validity of the hypothesis that Love, Insight, Fortitude, and Engagement go a long way in determining if a person is happy, children are found to be less loving and less wise as they grow older. This offers some clue to the commonly found pattern of declining happiness with age among children. Adolescence is a big challenge both for children and for their parents. In line with earlier findings, we find that the relationship between the father and the mother is a key driver for love in children and thus a key factor in explaining their happiness. Surprisingly, extracurricular activities appear to create even more pressures on the child and tensions within the family, suggesting that these activities may not be based on free choice and interest of the children. Parents' education does not help produce a happier family life, and may even lead to more pressures and tensions within the family. To the extent that higher income is associated with better education of the parents, the possible negative effect of parent's education on children's happiness may be blurred in regressions that do not control for the financial well-being of the family. Also surprising is the result that siblings could be another source of pressures and stress in the family. Parents need to take extra care with handling the needs and demands from their different children.

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## Appendix: Scale Conversion Formula:

Assume all the elementary variables are measured on a discrete finite scale starting from a value of 1.

Then they are converted to an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10 using the following formula:

(Value of the Original Variable-1)\*(10/(Maximum Value of the Original Scale-1))

$$(VOV - 1) * \frac{10}{MVOS-1}$$

In the event that the original scale starts from 0, conversion would simply follow:

$$(VOV) * \frac{10}{MVOS}$$

### Key to Acronyms

Variable	Values	Descriptions
age(child's)	8-17	children's age
agegap	16-57	age gap between parents and children
effcom	1-5	effective communication score
engagement	0-10	children's engagement score
famlife	-3 – 3	family life score
female	0=male 1=female	children's sex
finwelloff	0-10	perception at financial well-off of family
fortitude	0-10	children's fortitude score
hapfam	1-5	happy family score
hapi	0-10	children's happiness score
insight	0-10	children's insight score
love	0-10	children's love score
momgdreldad	1-5	mom having a good relationship with dad
age	29-68	parents' age

parcare	1-5	parents' caring score
pedu	1=primary education of below 2=secondary education or matriculated 3=tertiary education	parents' education level
pfinwelloff	0-10	financial well-off perceived by parents
phapi	0-10	parents' happiness score
pindextact	1-5	pressure at extra-curricular activities
pindexschw	1-5	pressure at school work
respop	1-5	respect children's opinion score
respri	1-5	respect children's privacy score
sibdum	0=do not have sibling(s) 1=have sibling(s)	sibling dummy variable

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