

## What Makes You Happy? Appreciating the Reasons that Bring Happiness to Argentine Children Living in Vulnerable Social Contexts

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A growing body of research has documented factors that predict happiness in adults; however, studies on children's happiness have just begun. The aim of this study was to explore Argentine children's reasons for happiness. The sample included 120 children between the ages of 7 and 9 years ( $M = 8.03$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ) who attended Argentine public schools. The Face Scale was used to evaluate how children assess happiness and a focused interview was conducted to obtain their spontaneous verbal descriptions of what made them happy. A content analysis was then conducted after the interviews. Most of the children reckoned that family and friendships were the main sources of happiness. They also mentioned different kinds of activities as sources of happiness, like school, recreation and leisure activities, and owning and playing with pets. These findings may be useful for designing mental health programs aimed at promoting positive socio-emotional development during childhood.

*Keywords:* Happiness, Children, Socio-emotional developmental, Well-being, Poverty

How do Argentine children assess their happiness? What makes them happy? What are the self-reported reasons they feel happy? These are recurrent inquiries in the field of psychology and a growing body of research has already documented factors that predict happiness in adults (Diener, Suh, Lucas & Smith, 1999; Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Lu & Hu, 2005; Myers & Diener, 1995). Similar studies on children's happiness, however, have only just begun (Elloff, 2008).

One possible reason for this has to do with the lack of well-validated instruments to assess children's happiness. Instruments used with adults, more specifically scales including numerous items, are not suitable for children due to differences in cognitive maturity and concentration span, for it would be too difficult for most children to answer 45 or more multiple-choice questions. Taking into account this limitation, some studies make use of a simple measurement instrument based on the question "What makes you happy?" (Chaplin, 2008; Elloff, 2008). Children find it very easy to

answer such a direct query and this paves the way for the identification of characteristics or dimensions of children's happiness.

By conducting focused interviews with children, the emphasis was placed on their perspectives and viewpoints on happiness. The idea of challenging the children to define and understand the concept of happiness presupposes that children can be considered as "experts" and,

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therefore, their knowledge and experience are highly valuable (Fattore, Mason & Watson, 2009). In this way, studies that focus on children's perspectives on happiness contribute to expanding the knowledge that has been gained through the opinions of parents, teachers and other adults.

Happiness is defined as a global perception of personal satisfaction, presence of positive affection, and absence of negative affection, all of which are directly related to subjective well-being (Diener, 1994). Demir and Ozdemir (2010) explained that happiness components (personal satisfaction and affection) are different constructs that may require different research methods to be fully understood. Personal satisfaction is a long-term judgment about a person's life, whereas happiness is a balance of the positive and negative affection that causes an immediate reaction (Diener et al. 1999). This study focuses on the affective component. Thus, happiness has been defined as the predominance of positive affect over negative affect (Diener et al. 1999).

According to Lazarus (2000), happiness does not necessarily represent a single unique affective state but rather a group of related states with a topic in common. Thus, it shares the conceptual space of other terms connected to positive emotions such as fun, excitement, and joy. Happiness arises from familiar and safe contexts. Sometimes, this emotion may result from a steady progress towards the accomplishment of an objective. Happiness is also engendered by expected events and is characterized by physiological excitement as well as by smiling.

An additional small set of research studies has contributed to the emerging area of research about childhood and happiness (Chaplin, 2008; Cheng & Furnham, 2004; Eloff, 2008; Greco, 2010; Holder & Coleman, 2008, 2009; Oros, 2008). Chaplin (2008), for example, used an open-ended task to explore what made children happy. Five sources of children's happiness emerged from his study: "people and pets," "achievements," "material things," "hobbies," and "sports." Chaplin explained that, during middle childhood, children perceive people and hobbies as the most important domains contributing to their happiness. The "people" category consisted mainly of people including family, friends, and other social influences such as teacher, coach, and neighbor. He noted that "people and pets" are still central to children's happiness, while categories such as "hobbies", "material things" and "achievements"

seemed to have varying degrees of importance depending on the age of the child. Social relationships, however, more specifically those involving friendship, family bonds, and owning a pet are more closely related to the happiness experienced by children than are any socio-demographic variables.

In a similar manner, Eloff (2008) explored the ways in which South African young children constructed the notions of happiness. Six open-ended questions guided the interview, including, "What do you think the word happiness means?" "What makes you happy?" and "Tell me about the place where you feel happy" (p. 85). The results suggested that the children constructed happiness around three main themes: relationships, recreation, and receiving material possessions.

Regarding interpersonal relationships, children attributed happiness particularly to the good relationships they established with their family members and to the activities they shared with them. They claimed that having friends and playing with them was also a source of happiness to them. In addition, they attributed happiness to recreational activities in which they participated, such as leisure activities, holidays, sports, technology-based entertainment, and pet ownership. They also mentioned presents given to them on special occasions as another source of happiness.

An important aspect of family relationships to be considered as a source of happiness is the responsible care provided by parents and/or adults. Research carried out in Argentina analyzed the relationship between attachment and happiness during middle childhood. The study showed that children with secure attachment were happier than children with less secure attachment (Greco, 2010). Also, Cheng and Furnham (2004) showed that maternal care towards their children was particularly beneficial in increasing children's scores on self-reported happiness.

Along these lines, Holder and Coleman (2009) assessed happiness in children (ages 9-12), using three different measures of happiness and examining the relations between these measures and items in connection to social relationships. The items were grouped into two positive categories (i.e., family and friends) and two negative ones (i.e., negative relations with peers and behaving badly towards others). Variance in children's happiness was partially accounted for by positive social interactions involving family and friends.

Negative social interaction also explained variance in children's happiness, including negative relations with peers and behaving badly towards others. Accordingly, some research suggests that positive relationships with peers and family promote happiness while negative social interactions may hinder happiness and successive social interactions.

Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) examined the proximal environmental factors as well as behaviors and habits that correlated with personal happiness in a sample of American youth. The results of their study showed that being alone rated the lowest levels of happiness, while being with friends corresponded to the highest. Specialists in this field also noted that friendship implies a strong, positive emotional experience linked to acceptance, intimacy, loyalty, and safety and this is the reason friendship contributes towards happiness and well-being (Bukowski, Hoza & Boivin, 1994; Bukowski & Sippola, 2005; Demir & Weitekamp 2007). Positive emotions can decrease aggressive behavior and promote peer pro-social behavior (Mestre Escrivá, Samper García, & Frías Navarro, 2002). On the other hand, children who are rejected by peers are likely to behave more aggressively (Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin, 1988) and to feel loneliness and exhibit symptoms of depression, which leads them to experience a feeling of unease (Newcomb, Bukowski, & Pattee, 1993).

Following this research line, a study carried out in Argentina analyzed children's positive emotions and their relationship with the cognitive variables that are involved in the interpersonal problem-solving process. The results seem to indicate that children who experience higher levels of positive emotions such as happiness are able to anticipate more positive consequences in relation to the solutions provided and make assertive decisions to solve interpersonal problems (Greco & Ison, 2011). Thus, positive emotions optimize the way children function because (a) they encourage healthier perspectives on problems, (b) they promote healthier coping skills, and (d) they foster more tolerant attitudes when coping with frustration (Oros, 2008).

Including children's perceptions in the study of happiness is important for several reasons. First, the sources that contribute to children's happiness may be different from those identified by adults. Several factors that have been identified as important to happiness by adults do not apply to

children: marital status, employment, and having children (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Wilson, 1967). For children, happiness may be found in the domains of personal, positive social interactions (cooperation and prosociality) and home life (Aknin, Hamlin & Dunn, 2012; Chaplin, 2008; Cheng & Furnham, 2004; Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Eloff, 2008; Holder & Coleman, 2008). Second, understanding the reasons for children's happiness in poverty-stricken areas might be important to understand why money is not a central variable for experiencing happiness. Third, the study of happiness in childhood provides useful information that may be helpful in the promotion of positive socio-emotional development since it involves the analysis of variables related to children's well-being, which constitutes a mental health indicator. It is also conducive to the study of protective factors and may lead to recommendations of intervention alternatives or a course of action aimed at developing mental health promotion programs in childhood.

Moreover, studying happiness in Argentine children contributes to understanding the socio-emotional development of children living under adverse conditions, as a consequence of the socioeconomic situation that affects Central and South America; these areas are marked by growing inequality, unfavorable working conditions, social exclusion, and loss of resources. In this context, vulnerability in children and their families increases since they are faced with social processes of inequality and a sharp decline in the opportunities that are necessary for their growth, development, and social integration. Thus, social vulnerability is a social risk that thwarts, either immediately or in the long term, the chances to attain well-being in terms of survival and quality of life (Golovanevsky, 2007).

Although common to all Latin American countries and similar in several aspects, social problems vary from country to country, and it is therefore appropriate to consider the differences found in each region. Uchida, Norasakkunkit, and Kitayama (2004), in their work on cross-cultural variations and similarities of happiness and subjective well-being, state that happiness might have similar or different characteristics depending on the context and assume that the attainment of happiness depends on the cultural features of each context. The authors point out that in North America, happiness is built upon personal

achievement and a positive sense of self, whereas in East Asia, happiness is based on social harmony.

The goal of the present study, then, was to explore Argentine children's reasons for happiness, that is, to identify their sources of happiness. In this way, this study makes a twofold contribution: on the one hand, to increase knowledge and understanding of childhood happiness from the children's own perspectives and, on the other, to explore the construct of "happiness," considering contextual variety by sampling Latin American Argentine children from socially vulnerable areas.

## Method

### Design

The study was non-experimental and cross-sectional (Kerlinger & Lee, 2001), using both quantitative (Face Scales) and qualitative (focused interviews) research methods. Quantitative and qualitative data gathering and analyses were conducted independently; the written report of research results was prepared afterwards.

### Participants

Participants were 120 schoolchildren between the ages of 7 and 9 years ( $M = 8.03$ ;  $SD = 0.72$ ). This age group was chosen so that the children would be old enough to have a comprehensive and mature grasp of emotions, including happiness. Children in this age range have developed the ability to understand simultaneous emotions in complex social relations, including happiness, and attribute causal relations to these emotions (Denham, 1998). The sample group included 64 boys and 56 girls who had obtained their parents' consent to participate and were attending either third or fourth grades in public schools of the province of Mendoza, Argentina.

According to the school categorization established by the General Board of Education, these schools with students of low socioeconomic status. The categorization of schools is based on sociodemographic conditions, such as population density and spread in houses located in the school area, parental education and occupation, and rates of successful completion of primary education, obtained by comparing numbers of students at first and seventh grades (Arone, personal communication, June 13, 2006). These schools

were in marginal areas characterized by overcrowding, low education levels, poor working conditions and/or unemployment. Most of these children lived in socially vulnerable neighborhoods and faced social inequality and acute lack of opportunities in terms of social growth, development, and integration.

## Measures

**Face scale.** The Face Scale is a single-item measure that was used to assess children's happiness. It includes seven simple drawings of faces, arranged in a horizontal line, that represent participants' response options to the question: "How do you usually feel?" The scale ranged from "very unhappy" to "very happy" and the participants marked the face that best represented their feelings. According to Holder, Coleman, and Singh (2012, p. 265), "Single-item measurement instruments for happiness are reliable, valid, and commonly used" (Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Harry, 1976; Stull, 1988 as cited in Holder et al., 2012). "The Face scale is especially suitable for children because children as young as 3 years perform best when recognizing and labeling emotions when emotions are represented as schematic drawings as opposed to photographs, and they are best at labeling happiness, followed by sadness" (MacDonald et al., 1996, as cited in Holder et al., 2012, p. 265).

**Focused interview with children.** A questionnaire was developed in child-friendly language in order to conduct a focused interview, that is, an in-depth interview that focused on only one aspect (Ruiz Olabuénaga & Ispizua, 1989). The interview was carried out after administering the Face Scale. The scale allows the researcher to assess happiness and determine whether children are happy or not, but does not provide any information on what makes them happy, on the sources of their happiness, or on the factors that contribute to their concept of happiness. Thus, the questions posed during the interview were: a) How does this face look? (pointing at the face that had previously been chosen by the child), b) What makes you feel that way? (pointing again at the face that had previously been chosen by the child, in response to which the emotional state mentioned by the child was then verbalized).

The focused interviews were carried out by specialized psychologists. One interviewer was an advanced student in psychology who previously received training in the proper use of assessment

instruments. The second interviewer was one of the authors, who took an interdisciplinary residence in Mental Health at a public hospital for three years, specialized in Clinical Psychology, and had vast experience conducting interviews. The interviews lasted between 20 and 40 minutes.

### Procedure

After explaining the research objectives and procedure to school principals, teachers, practitioners who provide psycho-pedagogical support at each institution and parents, parental consent was obtained for the children's participation. The children also agreed to participate. Data confidentiality and research objectives were explained to each child. Individual interviews were conducted by experimental psychologists during the school timetable. Teachers undertook to complete children's class work while they were being interviewed. The face scale and the focused interview were carried out in the framework of an interview, in the context of a pleasant atmosphere to help establish good rapport with the children. The interviewers began by having informal conversations with the children about their families, friends and activities.

### Content Analysis

The verbal responses offered by children during the focused interview were transcribed and classified by means of the content analysis technique, which allowed for data categorization and classification (Krippendorff, 1980). The coding system used was the emergent type, since the categories were established after analyzing the data. Firstly, categories were defined by analyzing the children's accounts. Frequencies were then calculated by taking into account each term's connotation within the context provided by the children. More specifically, words were grouped according to similarities in meaning. Ambiguous or confusing descriptions were not included.

Ten categories emerged (see Table 1). Some categories were divided into sub-categories. These categories were in line with the rules established by Ruiz Olabuénaga and Ispizua (1989): (a) each category was created according to a unique criterion; (b) categories were exhaustive; (c) categories were descriptive enough; (d) categories were clear, unambiguous and consistent; (e) categories could be replicated. Intracoder reliability was tested by one coder coding causes related to "the happiest" state on two different

Table 1

#### *Categories of Main Reasons for Happiness in Vulnerable Social Context Argentine Children*

Category	Subcategory	Description
1. Pro-social behavior	1.1. Child's pro-social behavior	Voluntary action taken by the child to help or benefit an individual or a group of individuals; includes a variety of actions like: sharing, comforting, helping and saving others, among others. Altruistic or not, pro-social behavior implies positive social conducts. Two subcategories differentiate between two possible causes of happiness: 1.1. The child displays pro-social behavior towards other people. 1.2. Other people display pro-social behavior towards the child.
	1.2. Adult or peer's pro-social behavior	
2. Friendship	2.1. Being invited over by a friend and vice versa	A peer relationship characterized by loyalty, intimacy, reciprocal affection and support (Bukowski & Sippola, 2005). Two subcategories differentiate between two possible causes of happiness: 2.1 Being invited over by a friend and vice versa. 2.2 Playing with friends. Games with friends are prioritized.
	2.2. Playing with friends	

Table 1, cont.

*Categories of Main Reasons for Happiness in Vulnerable Social Context Argentine Children*

Category	Subcategory	Description
3. Violent behavior	3.1 Absence of violence	Violence is behavior that is intended to hurt other people either physically or verbally; includes injuring, insulting, frightening, rejecting, threatening other people and destroying or stealing other people's belongings. This study draws on the following category: absence of violence (children are not violent towards others and they are not victims of violence either).
4. Family relationships	4.1 Games with siblings and cousins. 4.2 A new-born baby. 4.3 Secure attachment (parents' love and care)	Family is defined as the group of people who live with the child, who may or may not be blood-related. Subcategories differentiate aspects of family life that can bring children happiness.
5. Participation in an institution	5.1 School 5.2 Church 5.3 Local sports centre	An institution is defined as any organisation or group of people with specific purposes that carries out different activities in pursuit of common goals. Children commented that they really enjoyed attending and participating in at least one of the three institutions.
6. Sense of humour		Funny things that can make the child laugh: jokes, games, etc.
7. Receiving or owning something	7.1 Receiving or owning something 7.2 Receiving praises 7.3 Receiving relatives' and friends' visits	Receiving or owning material possessions.  Receiving praise because of personal qualities and abilities.
8. Subjective perception of pleasure resulting from participation in different activities	8.1 Recreation activities 8.2 School activities 8.3 Leisure activities 8.4 Game-playing activities 8.5 Owning and playing with a pet.	Children's experiences of a positive emotion such as happiness performing different types of activities (recreation, school, and leisure activities). Game-playing activities are those the children carry out by themselves. A pet is defined as an animal that provides children company.
9. Empathy towards people		An emotional response elicited by another individual's emotional response that is concurrent with the other individual's emotional state; stresses the ability to discriminate between their own and other people's emotional states.
10. Having a cheerful disposition		Associated with personality traits and temperament; includes remarks that describe their good mood.

coincidences were observed, which indicated that the level of agreement was 91.67%.








## Results

### Face scale

Table 2 illustrates the happiness level reported by the children in the sample. It is organized in ascending order, from the unhappiest face (represented by 1) to the happiest face (represented by 7). Overall, the children reported being quite

happy ( $M = 5.78$ ;  $SD = 1.58$ ). Indeed, 40% of the children reported a happiness level of 7; 34.2% reported a happiness level of 6, and 10.8% reported a happiness level of 5. Thus, 85% of the children's answers fell within the three happiest categories. An additional 5% reported a happiness level of 1, 2.5% reported a level of 2, and 1.7% reported a level of 3. Therefore, 9.2% of the children's responses fell within the three lowest categories.

Table 2  
*Participants' Ratings of Happiness Using the Face Scale*

								
<i>f</i>	6	3	2	7	13	41	48	120
<i>%</i>	5.0	2.5	1.7	5.8	10.8	34.2	40.0	100%

### Focused Interview for Children

The focused interview allowed us to identify the reasons that children feel happy. The verbal reports of the children ( $n = 89$ ) who showed the highest values (6 and 7) on the Face Scale and represented 74% of the sample were analyzed first.

Ten categories were defined from the content analysis. The frequency analysis revealed that family bonds were the main source of happiness. The children in the study experienced happiness in terms of their family relationships: it was especially important for children to feel loved and cared by adults who were significant in their lives, such as parents and grandparents. When talking about family relationships, some children said, "When I have a problem, my dad and my uncle help me, so I am happy." "Because my dad and mum don't leave me alone; I know that other mothers leave their children to themselves and I have a dad and a mum." "Because my mum helps me do my homework, love me, and she prepares something to eat." "I am happy because I have siblings and we love each other." "My grandparents live with me; they help me and make me laugh."

Other sources of happiness related to family relationships were the presence of siblings and

cousins and in-home games or activities. The children expressed the following feelings: "I am happy because I have siblings and we do love each other, my elder sister takes me home and feeds me on home-made food, which makes me really happy." "In summer, my siblings and I play with the hosepipe and we get soaked in the streets; that makes me happy." It is important to highlight that, due to their low socio-economic status, these children usually lived with other relatives, such as grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins. Since each family could not afford their own house, two or three generations shared the same housing unit. Finally, within the category of family bonds, children also included newborn babies as a source of happiness.

Friendship was also considered as an important source of happiness. Children verbalized the following opinions in relation to invitations and games among friends: "I am happy when I ask Eber to come home and play with me; he is my friend, we laugh together." "I am very happy when I ask my friends to play with me and they accept; some days ago, Micaela invited me over, we spent a great time together." "Because I invited my friends from school over and they came." It is worth mentioning that these verbalizations reveal that happiness does not only lie in playing with friends but also in being invited and chosen by

Table 3  
*Frequency of Reasons for Happiness in Vulnerable Social Context*

Reason	Frequency	%	% Subcategory
1. Pro-social behaviors			
1.1 Child's pro-social behavior	5	2.36	4.25
1.2 Adults or peers' pro-social behavior	4	1.89	
2. Friendship			
2.1 Being invited over by a friend and vice versa	8	3.79	15.25
2.2 Playing with friends	25	11.46	
3. Violent behavior			
3.1 Absence of violence	10	4.73	
4. Family relationships			
4.1 Games with siblings and cousins	17	8.05	19.41
4.2 A newborn baby	5	2.36	
4.3 Secure attachment (parents' love and care)	19	9.00	
5. Participation in an institution			
5.1. School	15	6.80	14.37
5.2 Church	1	0.47	
5.3 Local sports centre	1	0.47	
6. Sense of humor	14	6.63	
7. Receiving or owning something			
7.1 Receiving or owning something	18	8.53	11.27
7.2 Receiving praise	3	1.37	
7.3 Receiving relatives and friends' visits	3	1.37	
8. Subjective perception of pleasure resulting from participation in different activities			
8.1 School activities	11	5.21	22.16
8.2 Recreation activities	6	2.75	
8.3 Leisure activities	12	5.68	
8.4 Game-playing activities	10	4.73	
8.5 Owning and playing with a pet	8	3.79	
9. Feeling empathy for people	4	1.89	
10. Having a cheerful disposition	12	5.68	
Total	10 categories 211 accounts	100.00	86.71

them. The activities that they claimed to share with friends seemed to be pleasant and peaceful; they were not described as violent or disruptive. These were some of their verbalizations on this matter: "I'm happy because I have friends and we borrow school stuff from each other, toys, we don't quarrel." "Because my friends and I play together; we don't hit each other." "Because I play with my friends, they play with me, and we offer each other snacks." References to family bonds and friendship represented 35% of all the

reasons reported by the children (see Table 3).

Taking part in pleasant activities, which was mentioned several times by children, was another category that emerged as a source of happiness. Among these activities were school, recreation, leisure and game-playing activities, and owning and playing with a pet. Children attributed happiness not only to the activities they engaged in at school but also to the sense of belonging they developed by attending a particular school and feeling part of it. These were some of the



verbalizations they used to explain what made them happy: “*spending time with my classmates at school;*” “*playing with my classmates at break time;*” “*because I learn stuff at school and become more intelligent;*” “*I like studying;*” and “*knowing that school is here, near my home.*”

The out-of-school activities that the children emphasized included recreation activities like games with friends, siblings, and cousins in their neighborhood. The children referred mainly to football matches in the streets or nearby squares. Extracurricular activities that cost money, like learning a language, dance and music private lessons, and sports, were not mentioned, perhaps because the children lived in poverty-stricken areas and could not afford those activities. Leisure activities were often mentioned by the children too. The children indicated activities such as: “*I enjoy playing in the neighborhood square;*” “*because I can read books from the school library;*” “*because I can ride my bike around the neighbourhood;*” “*going to my grandmother’s on Sundays;*” “*visiting my uncle and cousins.*” It is worth mentioning that the children rarely referred to activities such as going to the movies, going on holiday, going shopping, or others that required spending money. It should also be noted that the children did not mention technology, such as watching TV, playing computer games, or with the PlayStation, as part of their entertainment activities. Given the socioeconomic status of the group, they most probably did not have these technological devices in their homes.

According to the children’s comments, presents, praise, positive reinforcement, and family visits were sources of happiness, too. As regards getting presents, children made the following verbalizations: “*I’m very happy when I get school things like notebooks and pencils;*” “*because they buy me clothes to go to school;*” “*I’m very happy when my mum buys me trainers to come to school;*” and “*because they give me some pocket money to buy some snack at school.*” These verbalizations refer to basic needs like clothing, school things, and food rather than to other material resources that could be assumed would be mentioned due to the children’s socio-cultural characteristics. It is also interesting to note that the children considered visits by relatives (aunt and uncles, cousins, grandparents) to be a source of happiness. These were some of their verbalizations on this matter: “*I’m happy because I love my uncle very much and he comes to visit me when I don’t*

*have classes. I’m also very happy when my other aunts or uncles come home;*” “*when my cousins come to visit me on Saturday afternoon;*” and “*when we make barbecue at home and my family comes over.*” It is usually a tradition for Argentine family members to spend a day together sometime during the weekend.

Finally, children mentioned other reasons for experiencing happiness such as funny events and jokes (“*because they make me laugh when they tell jokes. My grandmother is very funny.*”); having an optimistic mood (“*I think everything is fine;*” “*because I feel happy almost every day;*” and “*I like laughing and telling jokes*); absence of violence (“*because I don’t get hit*”); pro-social actions from others or from themselves (“*because I help my mother clean the house;*” “*because my mother does a lot of stuff and my siblings and I help each other*”), and empathic concern (“*if my brother is sad, I play with him.*”).

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the theories and perspectives that children have about their own happiness. However, it is also important to explore the theories and perspectives of those children who perceive themselves to be less happy to determine whether their sources of happiness differ. Psychologist appointments were therefore arranged for children who showed the lowest values on the Face Scale (1 and 2). These children ( $n = 9$ ) represented 7.5% of the sample.

Our analysis indicated that the children who perceived themselves to be less happy attributed this feeling to situations related to aggressiveness. (See Table 4.) They referred to situations in which they witnessed aggressive behavior. These were some of their verbalizations: “*I feel bad when my brothers and sisters have a fight;*” “*when my dad gets mad and yells at my brother;*” and “*when my dad and mum argue.*” They also mentioned exchanges during which they were the targets of aggression: “*when other children make fun of me;*” “*when I quarrel with my brothers, I feel sad;*” and “*because my brother breaks my toys.*” (Note that cases of suspected child mistreatment, abandonment or negligence were referred to the corresponding child mental health centre.)

This group also claimed to feel less happy due to the absence of a father and/or mother or a significant adult figure. These were some of their verbalizations: “*Sometimes my mother leaves me with my aunt, and that makes me sad because I want to be with her;*” “*because my uncle moved to Spain and that makes me sad;*” “*I cry because my*

Table 4  
*Frequency of Reasons for Lower Happiness in Vulnerable Social Context Argentine Children's Verbal Reports*

Sources of Happiness	Frequency	%
1. Pro-social behavior		
Children do not perceive pro-social behavior by adults and/or peers towards them.	2	9.52
2. Interpersonal relationships with peers		
Children are not invited by peers to join activities	3	14.28
3. Aggressive behavior		
3.1 Children behave violently towards adults and/or peers and vice versa	5	23.80
3.2 Children witness but do not engage in aggressive events in different contexts	4	19.04
4. Family relationships		
Absence of one of the parents or significant adult figures	4	19.04
5. Parental misbehavior control: children's negative feelings when limits or punishments were imposed on them by their parents; no violence involved	3	14.28
Total	21	100

*mother works all day long and I don't see her much; that's why I cry and feel sad;*" "My dad is always sleeping and doesn't play with us because he works at night;" "because my dad lives in San Juan. He has been living there since I was born, so I don't see him;" and "because my uncle died and he was the only one I used to play with. He had a heart attack because he drank a lot of wine."

In the same way children in the sample group who perceive themselves to be happy attributed their happiness to having friends and feeling accepted and loved by them, children who perceived themselves to be sad attributed this feeling to being rejected or not loved by their friends. Some of their verbalizations were: "I feel sad because they sometimes don't want to play with me;" and "Nobody asks me to play at school."

Another source of unhappiness was related to parents setting limits on children or grounding them. Among children's verbalizations were: "Because they're always scolding me;" and "because they don't let me go outside and play in the sidewalk." The sample children also perceived themselves to be less happy when they were not helped by their loved ones: "when I ask my brother for help, he doesn't help me and I always help him."

happiness in South African children. These children also mentioned family relationships as a source of happiness, which involved spending time with their parents, playing with their siblings, and enjoying and sharing activities with their families. Similarly, Chaplin (2008) used an open-ended task to explore what made children happy and found that, during middle childhood, children perceived people (including family, friends, and other social influences, such as teachers, coaches, and neighbors) as the most important sources of happiness. In the same way, Fattore et al. (2009) stated that the relationship with others and, more specifically, the importance of safety and security from their parents were children's self-reported reasons for well-being.

Argentine children have also mentioned friendship as an important source of happiness. They claim to be happy when they are invited by their friends to participate in various activities. Spending time with friends and engaging in enjoyable activities with them added to the happiness of being invited. These results are in agreement with those of Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003), Chaplin (2008), Eloff (2008), and Holder and Coleman (2009) who conducted research aimed at discovering what specifically makes children happy. Their studies involved

children between the ages of 6 and 14 attending public schools in both rural and urban areas and living in various socioeconomic backgrounds. The results revealed that friendship was highly regarded as a source of happiness in children.

Specialists in this field also point out that friendship involves a strong, positive emotional experience linked to acceptance, intimacy, loyalty, and safety and for this reason friendship contributes towards happiness and well-being (Bukowski et al., 1994; Bukowski & Sippola, 2005; Demir & Weitekamp 2007). In a similar manner, studies of adults also indicate that friendship is a source of happiness (Demir, Özen, Doğan, Bilyk, & Tyrell, 2011). These studies explain that having friends could be positively associated with happiness at every stage of an individual's lifespan. For this reason, it would be a valuable contribution if future research in childhood explored what aspects of friendship (companionship, help, security, intimacy, reliable alliances, self-validation, and emotional security) contribute to happiness and what types of friendships allow children to build happiness.

Regarding interpersonal relationships and happiness, Holder and Coleman (2009) underline that, particularly during childhood, family bonds and friendship correlate significantly with happiness and can even help predict the probability of experiencing this feeling. These authors consider that family and friends may contribute to happiness because they provide social support through praise and generate pride. In addition, when positive emotions are experienced, they promote the development of social relationships. Likewise, positive emotions arising from social interactions are likely to nourish interpersonal relations. Moreover, children who experience higher levels of positive emotions are able to anticipate more positive consequences in relation to the solutions provided and hence make assertive decisions to solve interpersonal problems (Greco & Ison, 2011). These results are in line with those of Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) who found that children who participated in social activities reported higher than average levels of happiness, whereas those who spent more time alone reported lower levels of happiness.

Furthermore, Holder and Coleman (2009) point out that multiple dimensions of social relationships, including positive and negative interactions, are associated with happiness; in other words, positive social interactions promote

happiness while negative interpersonal relationships lead to negative emotions and great psychological unease. These aspects are observable in this study since the group of children who perceive themselves to be less happy attribute their sadness to troublesome relationships with their peers, among others, whether it be because they feel rejected by them, because they fight or argue with them, or because they have to face verbal aggression such as mockery. These children also claimed that witnessing or being involved in aggressive social situations, such as peer or family arguments, were also a source of sadness to them. In turn, the children in the sample who felt happy stated that the absence of violence contributed to happiness. Positive emotions can decrease aggressive behavior and promote peer pro-social behavior (Mestre Escrivá et al., 2002).

Many children also relate their happiness to making different kind of activities like: school activities, recreation activities, leisure activities, and playing with pets. Previous studies, such as those conducted by Eloff (2008) and Chaplin (2008), which looked into what makes children happy, also revealed that engaging in activities was a source of happiness to children. However, some similarities and differences emerged when analyzing children's accounts. For example, in Eloff's research, South African children did not mention school activities as a source of happiness. In Argentina, due to the current socioeconomic situation, schools play a particularly important role, especially in the case of children from impoverished families. In addition to acting as a link between the primary family structure and the child's full incorporation into society, schools often compensate for deficiencies in the children's biopsychosocial development (Ministerio de la Salud, 2005). Moreover, many of these children do not participate in costly activities like language, dance, or music private lessons, because they live in poverty-stricken areas and cannot afford them. School is, therefore, the only institutional space apart from their families to which children belong, which could be related to their identity.

As for recreational activities such as hobbies, holidays, sports, technological entertainment, and pet care, Argentine children do not mention activities such as going to the movies, going on holiday, going shopping, or others that require spending money. Neither do they mention technology-based entertainment, such as watching TV, playing computer games, or playing on

PlayStations. Given the socioeconomic status of the sample, they are very unlikely to be able to afford this type of entertainment. However, they do seem to enjoy activities shared with their friends in their free time. Once again, social relationships are referred to as a source of happiness by children, since they mention activities that involve spending time with someone like a friend, a sibling, or a classmate among those they enjoy.

The sample of Argentine children also attributed happiness to receiving gifts. The same result was found by Eloff (2008) when he studied sources of happiness in South African children. The Argentine children said they enjoyed receiving gifts, such as school supplies and warm clothes, which may contribute to satisfying their needs. In Eloff's study, children referred to receiving gifts for their birthdays or when they did well at school, in which cases gifts were meant to be rewards. It is worth noting that for both samples simply receiving a gift was a source of happiness, regardless of the kind or number of gifts, which children did not mention in their accounts. Chaplin (2008) also mentioned receiving gifts as a source of happiness. However, he stated that older children, in seventh and eighth grade, were the ones who considered receiving gifts as a source of happiness, whereas younger children, in third and fourth grade (like the present study) attributed their happiness to interpersonal relationships, sports, and hobbies.

It should be highlighted that the Argentine group does not mention "hobbies" as a source of happiness. A hobby may be defined as a regular activity or interest that is undertaken for pleasure, typically during one's leisure time. The sample children may not have the economic resources or the adult support needed to take up hobbies and maintain them over time. It may also be that children had not yet found any hobbies to which they wanted to devote their time and effort.

The sample of Argentine children did not attribute their happiness to activities related to personal achievements either. This finding is in agreement with Eloff's study (2008) of South African children who did not mention this issue either. Personal achievement does appear to be important to seventh- and eighth-grade children, probably due to their being older (Chaplin, 2008). According to Eloff (2008), this should be explored in future research, especially because personal accomplishment has been found to be the main

way of constructing "happiness" by children in Westernized communities (Uchida et al., 2004).

In this study, a small group made reference to temperament and dispositional profiles. Children referred to having a positive mood as a source of happiness: "*I am happy because I feel joyful every day*" and "*I like laughing and telling jokes.*" Holder and Coleman (2008) mention that variables like temperament partly contribute to perceptions of happiness. Exploring the relation between happiness and temperament in children seems to be relevant and future research should focus on this topic. Studies of adults have also shown a positive correlation between happiness and an extroverted nature, and a negative correlation between happiness and neuroticism (Diener & Seligman, 2002; Furnham & Cheng, 2000).

On the basis of these findings, the two paramount sources of happiness reported by the children were family bonds and friendship. In addition, social relationships seemed to be of paramount importance as a source of happiness in relation to certain areas of their lives, such as school and out-of-school activities, which children shared with peers and family members and which involve interpersonal relationships. In this regard, Chaplin (2008) and Holder and Coleman (2008) found that social relationships, more specifically those of family bonds and friendship, were more closely related to the happiness experienced by children than socio-demographic variables. Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) also found that working-class teenagers and those coming from poverty-stricken backgrounds were happy.

It might be important to understand then why money is not the central variable for happiness during childhood. The bonds that children establish with their families and peers are crucial to their socioemotional development and to the shaping of their self-esteem and identity. This might be the reason that interpersonal relationships with family and peers are perceived as happy when children belong in human contexts where there is willingness to overcome social vulnerability and their basic needs are satisfied. In this regard, the children's neighborhoods, along with government and non-government organizations, have all created social networks to promote social and human development. These local spaces have allowed for the creation of educational and entertainment centres such as public libraries, *murgas* (bands of street musicians and dancers), sports centres, and soup kitchens. All these

initiatives are intended to support families in raising and educating their children with a view to encouraging positive and healthy development. These organizations also constitute small communities with the capacity for organization, team work, collaboration, and solidarity, which lead to personal satisfaction and mental health. Social networks can act as survival mechanisms for people who live in poverty-stricken areas (Abello Llanos, Madariaga Orozco & Hoyos de los Ríos, 1996), because they contribute to communal well-being in spite of adverse socioeconomic conditions.

In the light of these results, it is important to contextualize the study of happiness across cultures given that human beings and their cultural contexts actively interact with one another. Individuals, like social groups, develop notions of what is good and desirable on the basis of their features (Delle Fave, Massimini, & Bassi, 2011).

### **Conclusions, Implications, Limitation and Future Research Directions**

This study contributes towards the understanding of the reasons for children's happiness during childhood from children's perspectives. These aspects are useful to design mental health programs aimed at promoting subjective well-being and positive and functional development during childhood. Positive emotions are of paramount importance to health, well-being, and life quality. So, research focusing on children's views of positive emotions, such as happiness, help in the design and implementation of consistent health and social policies. In this way, the study of happiness and subjective well-being are issues of interest not only for academicians but also laypersons, for individual, social economical and political reasons.

Moreover, Argentine children's self-perceptions of happiness enable us to describe the social dimensions related to happiness: family and friendship are the most important factors that contribute to Argentine children's happiness. The school context is also frequently mentioned by children as a source of happiness. On the basis of the results of this study involving Argentine children, we have drafted a number of action guidelines aimed at orienting intervention programs for the promotion of mental health, and children's happiness and well-being.

One guideline involves promoting psycho-educational workshops for parents or adult figures who take care of children to strengthen their bonds with children, by teaching them about sensitivity and how to adequately respond to children needs, thus helping them build positive relationships with children.

On the basis of the children's assessment of their happiness, it is worth noting the relevant role played by the bonds of friendship with their peers. Therefore, strengthening quality bonds of friendship as well as promoting the social competencies that are needed for their personal development is of paramount importance. The organization of activities involving games by schools and recreational community spaces is strongly recommended.

Aggressive events were claimed by children to affect their happiness. They referred to the absence of aggressive events as a source of happiness and the presence of violent behavior as a cause of sadness or lower happiness. Thus, some action guidelines for children, teachers, and parents that might reduce stressors associated with violent situations could include: teaching children coping strategies that could replace violent responses to aggression; strengthening psychological resources that could favor the incorporation of new coping responses depending on the situation; strengthening the ability to control impulses; promoting positive emotions, such as calmness, through relaxation techniques; and developing social skills.

In the case of parents, we recommend organizing psychoeducational workshops aimed at informing them about family factors that can lead to aggressive behavior in children, teaching them about healthy and coherent communication styles, helping them develop abilities to solve interpersonal problems, and instructing them on different ways to correct misbehavior, with a special focus on alternatives to physical punishment or affective deprivation.

In addition, we lay out some lines for future research on children's happiness which might contribute to gaining more knowledge of this field. The conclusions arrived at in this study pertain exclusively to the sample group of boys and girls who participated; that is, Argentine boys and girls who live in socially vulnerable contexts. In the future, researchers could conduct comparative studies of Argentine boys and girls living in more favorable socioeconomic conditions in order to

describe more precisely what the sources of happiness are for children living in contexts of poverty, as such studies may allow us to determine how similar or different their perceptions of happiness are in comparison with those of children in better socioeconomic conditions.

In the same way, it would be interesting to extend the age range under study to examine happiness throughout childhood and adolescence. Although children's oral accounts provided information about their sources of happiness, it would be helpful to explore what it is that children need to continue being happy or to become happy when they are not. Studies of that sort could further explore to what extent words are in keeping with actions to determine what role happiness plays in the socio-emotional development of children. Likewise, future cross-cultural studies of children's happiness could be pursued to uncover differences and similarities across diverse contexts.

Finally, we did not examine gender differences in children's self-perceptions of happiness because previous studies, such as those conducted by Demir and Weitekamp (2007) and by Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003), did not find any such differences. However, this does not rule out the exploration of gender differences in future studies of this topic.

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