

# The Contribution of Social Relationships to Children's Happiness

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**Abstract** The association between happiness and social relationships was examined in 9- to 12-year-old children. Participants included 432 children and their parents. Children's happiness was assessed using self-rating scales, parent's ratings, and the Happiness and Satisfaction Subscale from the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, Second Edition (Piers and Herzberg 2002). Children's social relations were assessed with items from the Piers-Harris scale and questionnaires given to the children and their parents. These items were grouped into two positive (i.e., family and friends) and two negative categories (i.e., negative relations with peers and behaving badly toward others). Variance in children's happiness was partially accounted for by positive social interactions involving the family (e.g., children agreeing that they are important members of their family) and friends (e.g., parents reporting that their children visit with friends more frequently). Negative social interactions also explained variance in children's happiness including negative relations with peers (e.g., children agreeing that they feel left out of things) and behaving badly toward others (e.g., children agreeing that they are often mean to other people, and they cause trouble for their family). Demographic variables related to the family (i.e., number of siblings, age of parents, and marital status of parents) were only weakly, or not at all, associated with children's happiness. The results parallel findings from the literature involving adults and adolescents; social relationships are significant correlates and predictors of happiness.

**Keywords** Happiness · Children · Family · Friendship · Social relations · Peers · Popularity · Well-being · Demographics

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A substantial literature on the correlates and predictors of subjective well-being now exists. Subjective well-being (SWB) involves an individual's evaluation of his or her own life in terms of satisfaction and happiness. This literature includes discussions of demographic, personality, health, and lifestyle variables, which may account for variations in well-being (see Diener et al. 1999). Most of the literature has focused on adults, and to a lesser extent on adolescents. Research on well-being that includes children has often examined how children influence parental happiness and satisfaction, or how childhood experiences influence well-being during adulthood (e.g., Amato 1994). However, recent work demonstrates an increased attention on promoting well-being in children (Ben-Arieh 2006; Dwivedi and Harper 2004).

The present study investigated children's well-being by examining factors related to social relations that may influence the happiness of 9- to 12-year olds. The study of happiness in children has several benefits. For example, developing methods to assess happiness in children can provide a means to assess the impact of community, school, and government initiatives, on children's well-being. Additionally, identifying correlates and predictors of happiness in children can help parents, educators, and researchers identify strategies to promote children's happiness. Furthermore, by comparing the factors that contribute to happiness in children with those in adolescents and adults, we can begin to understand how happiness, and the factors that contribute to happiness, differ between age groups. Studies indicate that the level and predictors of well-being change with age. For example, elementary school children have higher positive affect than older students (Greene 1990). Additionally, children in Grade two reported higher life satisfaction than children in Grade eight, and academic test scores predict life satisfaction for children in Grade two but not in Grade eight (Chang et al. 2003). Furthermore, men define happiness in terms of their family life when they have school-aged children, but look outside of the family for happiness before and after this phase of the family life cycle (Harry 1976).

The happiness of children 9–12 years of age is well suited to study because these children are old enough to have a comprehensive and mature grasp of the concept of emotions, including happiness. Emotional milestones during this period typically include an ability to consider multiple sources of information when explaining emotions, awareness that people can experience more than one emotion at a time, and an ability to understand a wide range of emotions (see Berk 1994, for a review). Children in this age range have developed the ability to identify and use emotions in complex social relations (Schultz et al. 2004) and have an ability to understand simultaneous emotions, including happiness, and attribute causal relations to these emotions, similarly to adults (Denham 1998; Whitesell and Harter 1989). However, school-age children may differ from adolescents and adults in the types and variety of factors that contribute to happiness because they have not experienced the same level of cognitive maturity (e.g., perspective-taking and empathic development) and range of experiences (e.g., high school, hormonal, maturational, and romantic relationships) that may influence happiness at older ages. For example, children prior to adolescence may be more influenced by their family and only later more influenced by their peers (Feshback 1987; Huebner 1991; Larson and Richards 1991). Furthermore, factors associated with adults' well-being such as job satisfaction (Tait et al. 1989), marital satisfaction (Headey et al. 1991), and spousal happiness (Stull 1988) do not pertain to children. Therefore, happiness in preadolescent children may have predictors that are unique to their happiness. Given that adults in all 48 countries tested desired high levels of happiness for their children (Diener and Lucas 2004), the factors associated with children's happiness are important to identify.

Several theories, supported by empirical studies, have emphasized the role of social relations in happiness. For example, Tkach and Lyubomirsky (2006) suggested that the consistently strong relation between extraversion and happiness was mediated by social affiliation. They report that the most frequently used strategy of undergraduates to promote happiness was social affiliation, which included behaviors such as helping others and communicating with friends. In particular, social people (people rated high in extraversion and agreeableness) were happier if they pursued highly social goals (McGregor et al. 2006). Social relations may increase happiness because sharing an experience can increase the enjoyment from that activity (DiTommaso and Spinner 1993; Saklofske and Yackulic 1989).

Theories of the role of social relations in children have usually focused on negative dispositions. For example, one theory is that negative experiences with peers, including a lack of popularity, can impair the development of friendships that in turn may lead to loneliness and then depression (Nangle et al. 2003). If these theories apply to happiness, the present study may find that positive social experiences (e.g., feeling popular with peers and visiting with friends) may be associated with increased happiness and negative social experiences (e.g., feeling left out and being mean to others) may be associated with decreased happiness. Consistent with this model, children in Grades 6–12, experienced the highest levels of momentary happiness when they were with friends and the lowest levels when they were alone (Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter 2003).

The present study examined whether aspects of social relations and children's happiness are related. Though social relationships outside of the family contribute to adult and adolescent happiness, this contribution may be less evident for children. For younger children, relationships with their family may contribute more to life satisfaction than relationships with their peers (Huebner 1991). Young children spend more time with family and less time with friends than older children (Larson and Richards 1991). However, children's friendships with their peers are generally recognized as contributing to children's well-being and self-esteem (see Dunn 2004). Therefore, the present study examined the relationship between children and their social relations both within and outside of the family. Social variables for children were selected from four domains of social relations: (1) family (e.g., whether children perceived themselves as important family members, and whether they indicated they were disappointing to their family); (2) friendships (e.g., number of friends, perceived ease of making friends, and frequency of visiting with friends); (3) negative relations with peers (e.g., whether children perceived themselves as picked on and made fun of); and (4) behaving badly toward others (e.g., whether children perceived themselves as being mean to others and behaving badly at home). Demographic variables related to the family (i.e., number of siblings, age of parents, and marital status of parents) were also included.

## 1 Social Correlates and Predictors of Happiness

### 1.1 Family Variables

Research shows that social variables related to the family account for individual differences in subjective well-being (e.g., Amato 1994; Furnham and Cheng 2000b). For example, in a study by Terry and Huebner (1995), relationships involving parents were the strongest predictors of elementary school children's life satisfaction. These findings are consistent with the beliefs of the public. For example, Furnham and Cheng (2000a) asked

lay people to rate 38 different possible causes of happiness. Having loving parents, and being married to someone you love, were rated as two of the most important causes. In an older study by Sidana et al. (1976), children perceived their parents as contributing more to their happiness than other groups of people including their teachers and peers. However, these results were based on a relatively small sample (i.e., 40 children) from India, and therefore may have limited external validity.

### 1.1.1 Parents

Research reports that variables related to the parents are associated with the well-being of offspring. For example, children's well-being is associated with parental style (Suldo and Huebner 2004), and young adults' ratings of their relationships with their parents predicted their happiness (Furnham and Cheng 2000b). Similarly, young adults' ratings of their closeness to both their fathers and their mothers predicted the young adults' happiness (Amato 1994). The relationship between closeness to parents and offspring's happiness was not affected by divorce. Closeness to stepfathers was also correlated with the happiness of young adults but frequency of contact with parents was not (Amato 1994; see also Harvey et al. 1991). Authoritative child-rearing styles predicted happiness in 15- to 35-year olds (Furnham and Cheng 2000b). However, the contribution of parent-offspring relationships to the offspring's happiness may differ for children compared to adolescents and young adults because children perceive their relationships with their parents differently than older offspring (Furman and Buhrmester 1992). For example, compared to older children and adolescents, Grade four children perceive their relationship with their parents as more supportive, less conflicted, and less egalitarian.

Though research suggests that the self-reported happiness of adolescents is greater for adolescents with intact families (see Grossman and Rowat 1995), the relationship between divorce and the happiness of offspring is not conclusive. For instance, divorce was not associated with the happiness of the adolescent offspring (Cheng and Furnham 2003). However, parental divorce experienced as a child was related to psychological distress as an adult (Rodgers et al. 1997).

### 1.1.2 Siblings

Both the presence and gender of siblings have been linked to happiness. For example, adults (particularly males) generally report higher levels of happiness if they were the first-born child than if they were the last-born child (Allred and Poduska 1988). Happiness is negatively correlated with having brothers for male siblings but positively correlated with having brothers for female siblings (Furnham and Brewin 1990). However, the contribution of sibling relationships to happiness may differ for preadolescent children compared to adolescents because the younger children view their relationships with their siblings as providing more conflict and being more intense (Buhrmester and Furman 1990; Furman and Buhrmester 1992).

Overall, variables related to the family (e.g., one's relationship with his or her parents and the presence of siblings) contribute to the happiness of adults and adolescents. Given the particular importance of the family to children, the present study assessed the contribution of variables related to the family to children's happiness.

## 1.2 Friends Variables

Strong social relationships, including relationships with friends, contribute to well-being (Argyle 2001; Myers and Diener 1995). For example, undergraduates who were very happy were highly social, had strong social relationships, and spent little time alone (Diener and Seligman 2002). Similarly, one of the best predictors of happiness in older adults was their social relationships including their friendships (Lyubomirsky et al. 2006). Consistent with the findings that social relationships contribute to well-being, extraversion, which is associated with friendships and social activity, is reliably and strongly correlated with happiness (Cheng and Furnham 2001, 2002, 2003; Hayes and Joseph 2003; Hills and Argyle 2001; Neto 2001; Pavot et al. 1990). Given that friendships are associated with well-being, the present study examined the relation between friends and children's happiness.

### 1.2.1 Negative Relations with Peers

Research suggests that not only do positive relationships with peers promote happiness, but also negative social interactions may reduce happiness and subsequent social interactions. For example, negative experiences with others, such as having conflict in relationships (Demir et al. 2007) are associated with a decrease in happiness. Additionally, children aged 7–13 years who were victims of bullying viewed themselves as less happy, less popular, and have fewer friends (Slee and Rigby 1993). Consistent with these findings are reports that unstable introverted adolescents (i.e., fearful adolescents who would like to approach their peers but do not) rate themselves as less happy and less popular (Young and Bradley 1998). Social rejection and isolation may decrease happiness. For example, less popular adults (Feingold 1983) and children (Holder and Coleman 2007) are less happy. This decrease in happiness may be self-perpetuating as rejected children expect consequences that are more negative when they interact with their peers (Underwood 1997). Given that negative social relations are associated with happiness, the present study assessed the role of two types of negative relations on children's happiness: (1) behaving badly toward others, and (2) negative relations with peers.

## 1.3 Summary

Personal relationships have been recognized as one the strongest contributors to happiness (e.g., Kahana et al. 1995; Lyubomirsky et al. 2006; Myers and Diener 1995; Ryff 1989). Many studies have identified a strong link between social affiliation, including family and friends, and happiness (see Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). In fact, researchers are now suggesting that friends and family are not merely correlated with happiness, but they may play an essential causal role (Diener and Oishi 2005).

However, the majority of studies that have examined these relations have studied adults and adolescents. This is true even when the family is studied. For example, studies have examined the contribution of family-related variables to both parent's and offspring's happiness once the offspring has become an adult (e.g., Allred and Poduska 1988; Amato 1994; Furnham and Brewin 1990; Furnham and Cheng 2000b). Though happiness and life satisfaction remain relatively high throughout life (Inglehart 1990; Latten 1989; Stock et al. 1983), the predictors of happiness, including the role of social relations, appear to

vary with age (Herzog et al. 1982). Furthermore, though some studies report that measures of children's and adolescents well-being show little change with age (e.g., Huebner and Dew 1996; Huebner et al. 2000) others report that it decreases with age (e.g., Greene 1990; Storksen et al. 2006). The association between family variables and happiness in children has received little attention despite that the impact of the parent-child relationship on the children's well-being may be greater when the child is young (Amato 1994).

The present study assessed happiness in 9- to 12-year-old children using three different measures. A primary objective was to evaluate the contribution of variables related to social relations to children's happiness. These variables included those related to family and friends, and included both positive and negative interactions.

## 2 Methods

This paper is based on a larger study. A previous publication reports on additional results from this study (Holder and Coleman 2007).

### 2.1 Participants

Elementary school students in Grades 4–6 in a public school system (primarily Caucasian) in Western Canada ( $N = 817$ ) were given information letters, letters of informed consent and questionnaires to bring home to their parents/guardians/caregivers. For simplicity, and because 99.5% of the adults who participated were parents, all parents, guardians, and caregivers (e.g., grandparents), are referred to collectively as “parents” throughout the remainder of this paper. Five hundred and twenty-six (64.4%) responses were returned. Four hundred and thirty-three parents (53%) complete the questionnaires and consented (86.1% women, 13.2% men). Female parents ranged in age from 24 to 71 years ( $M = 40.64$ ,  $SD = 5.1$ ) and male parents ranged in age from 25 to 74 years ( $M = 43.9$ ,  $SD = 8.7$ ). The children (55.3% girls, 44.4% boys) were from 6 schools and 30 classrooms. To increase the generalizability of our findings, schools representing three rural and three urban areas were included, and students from four large and two small schools were sampled. Additionally, a wide range of socioeconomic levels was included (see Holder and Coleman 2007). Seventy-five percent of the parents were currently married, 8% were single, 6% were living common law, 7% were widowed or single/divorced (4% did not report their marital status).

The children ranged in age from 9 to 12 years ( $M = 10.25$ ,  $SD = 0.9$ ). Children whose parents identified them as having a prior history of depression (e.g., were currently receiving treatment for depression) were excluded from the study. Data for one child were excluded because this child did not meet these criteria for participation even though the criteria were explained prior to testing.

### 2.2 Materials

Children completed three questionnaires: the Piers-Harris 2 Children's Self-Concept Scale 2 (Piers and Herzberg 2002), the Faces Scale, and the Children's Questionnaire. The Children's Questionnaire was developed for the present study. When an item required a range of possible responses, Likert-type scales were used instead of visual analogue scales

as some research suggests that children aged 5–14 often do not understand visual analogue scales even with the help of teaching methods designed to increase their understanding (Shields et al. 2003). Parents completed the Parents’ Questionnaire, which also included Likert-type scales to maintain the similarity between the formats used by adults and children.

2.2.1 Piers Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale 2 (Piers-Harris 2)

The Piers-Harris 2 is a standardized self-report questionnaire that assesses overall self-concept (Piers and Herzberg 2002). The Piers-Harris 2 is a modification of the original 1984 Piers-Harris Children’s Concept Scale which provides a multidimensional assessment that is widely adopted, has high test-retest reliability and internal consistency, is the most frequently used and strongly recommended instrument for children in our age group, and can be administered to an entire class (Marsh and Holmes 1990; Piers and Harris 1984; Piers and Herzberg 2002). The Piers-Harris 2 has 60 True-False items that express how children may feel about themselves (e.g., “my classmates make fun of me”). These items are combined to form six subscales that assess specific components of self-concept: Behavioral Adjustment, Intellectual and School Status, Physical Appearance, Freedom from Anxiety, Popularity, and Happiness and Satisfaction. A standard score is given for each of the six subscales. Similar to other studies (e.g., Wood et al. 1996; Young and Bradley 1998), the score on the Happiness and Satisfaction subscale (HapPH2) was used as one estimate of children’s happiness. Individual items related to the children’s social relations were selected from the Piers-Harris 2 as possible predictors of children’s happiness. These items are listed in Tables 3 and 6.

2.2.2 Faces Scale

The Faces Scale was similar to that reported by Andrews and Withey (1976) and assessed the children’s self-perception of their happiness. It uses a Likert-type scale with seven simple drawings of faces, arranged in a horizontal line. The mouths of the faces varied from very downturned (indicating not at all happy) to very upturned (indicating very happy). The ends of the row of faces were anchored with the words “most unhappy” and “most happy.” (See Table 1 for an example of the drawings used for the Faces Scale.) Children rated their overall happiness by rating how happy they were “most of the time”.

**Table 1** Percentage of respondents within each category of the two Faces Scales

						
ChildOwnFace	1	0	1	7	10	36
ParentChildFace	0	0	1	3	20	17

Note. Percent of children’s self-ratings (ChildOwnFace), and parents’ ratings of their children (ParentChildFace)

### 2.2.3 Children's Questionnaire

The Children's Questionnaire contained nine items related to research findings on happiness including the question on friendship reported here: "How many times a week do you visit with your friends outside of school?" Additional questions included "How many hours of TV do you watch per day?"; "What type of TV do you watch?"; "How much do you like school?"; "How important are your grades to you?" "How important are your grades to your parents?"; "How do you do in school?"; "How often do you go to church or other religious place?"; and "In terms of money, how rich do you feel your family is?" Children filled in a circle representing one of five or seven response options for each item.

### 2.2.4 Parents' Questionnaire

The Parents' Questionnaire assessed factors, related to the children, known to correlate with adults' happiness. Many of the items on this questionnaire were similar to those on the Children's Questionnaire. Additionally, parents were asked to rate their child's happiness using the Faces Scale (i.e., "How would you rate your child's overall happiness?"). Ratings of others' traits by knowledgeable people are one of the most valid measures of personality (Funder 1991). Research has indicated that ratings by others of happiness and life satisfaction are valid and show good agreement with self-reports (Lepper 1998). Parents also provided demographic information related to the family (i.e., marital status, age of mother, age of father, and number of siblings). Parents were also asked two questions about their children's friendships: (1) How many close friends (including siblings who are close friends) does your child have? and (2) How many times a week does your child visit with friends outside of school?

## 2.3 Procedure

Informed consent was first obtained from teachers, and then from parents. Children at school were instructed to take information letters, consent letters, and Parent's Questionnaires home. Parents were asked to sign the letter of informed consent, complete the Parent's Questionnaire without consulting with their child, and return the completed material to the school, in a sealed envelope that we provided, with their child. If their teachers and parents consented, then children were asked for their assent. Children who provided their assent were assessed approximately 10 days after the consent letters were distributed to the parents.

Only children whose parents completed the Parent's Questionnaire were asked to participate. These children were introduced to a researcher who described the purpose of the study. Children were surveyed in classrooms and their participation took an average of 30 min. Participating children were given the three questionnaires. Standardized instructions for each questionnaire were provided prior to starting, and the researcher used a chalkboard to demonstrate how to respond to the items. For the Children's Questionnaire, children were instructed to read the questions carefully, think about their answers, examine the response options, and then choose the option that was most appropriate for them.

All surveys were coded with participant numbers to help ensure confidentiality. To answer children's questions and distribute material, the researcher and at least one assistant were present in each classroom. Teachers did not assist children with the questionnaires.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Three measures of happiness were used as the criterion measures in the analyses. One measure was the Happiness and Satisfaction subscale of the Piers-Harris 2 scale (HapPH2), which provided a standardized score for each child. The other two measures used the Faces Scale: the children's rating of their own overall happiness (ChildOwnFace), and the parents' rating of their children's happiness (ParentChildFace). The distributions of ratings on from the Faces Scales for ChildOwnFace (Skewness =  $-2.27$ ,  $SE = .12$  & Kurtosis =  $6.64$ ,  $SE = .23$ ) and ParentChildFace (Skewness =  $-1.18$ ,  $SE = .12$  & Kurtosis =  $3.05$ ,  $SE = .24$ ) violated the assumption of normality. Therefore, these distributions were transformed by reflecting the scores (see p. 81, Tabachnik and Fidell 2001) and computing natural logarithms (i.e., ChildOwnFace: Skewness =  $.53$ ,  $SE = .12$  & Kurtosis =  $-.07$ ,  $SE = .23$ ; ParentOwnFace: Skewness =  $-.30$ ,  $SE = .12$  & Kurtosis =  $.21$ ,  $SE = .23$ ).

Multivariate regression with predictors from four groups (i.e., Negative Relations with Peers, Behaving Badly Toward Others, Friends, & Family; see Tables 3 and 6 for a list of items in each group) was used to predict variance on the three measures of happiness (i.e., HapPH2, ChildOwnFace, & ParentChildFace). Certain items were selected from the Piers-Harris subscales (Piers and Herzberg 2002) that reflected the social categories of interest to this study. These items were used in the analyses to determine the relation between these categories and happiness. Additionally, parents' responses to demographic items related to family were used as predictors (i.e., number of siblings, age of parents, and marital status of parents; see Table 6). The significant multivariate predictors were then used in a standard multiple regression analyses for each of the three measures of happiness. Finally, to avoid artificially high correlations with the HapPH2, none of the predictors from the Piers Harris 2 questionnaire were items that comprised the Happiness and Satisfaction subscale.

## 3 Results

### 3.1 Ratings of Happiness

In general, using the Faces Scales, children rated themselves as happy, and parents also rated their children as happy. Over 90% of the responses on the Faces Scales were in the three happiest categories (see Table 1). Children's responses to each item in the Piers-Harris Happiness and Satisfaction subscale were within 10% of the reported standardized norms for the Piers-Harris 2 (Piers and Herzberg 2002).

Ratings from all three measures of happiness were significantly correlated (see Table 2) though the correlations were not high and did not indicate singularity (e.g.,  $r > .90$ ,

**Table 2** Pearson product-moment correlations between the three measures of happiness

	HapPH2	ChildOwnFace
HapPH2	–	
ChildOwnFace	.37**	–
ParentChildFace	.20**	.34**

\*\* $p < .01$  (2-tailed)

*Note.* Correlations between three estimates of happiness: the Happiness and Satisfaction Scale of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (*HapPH2*), children's self-ratings using the Faces Scale (*ChildOwnFace*), and parents' ratings of their children using the Faces Scale (*ParentChildFace*)

Tabachnick and Fidell 2001) between them. Inter-item correlations ranged between .001 and .635, with the highest correlations between mother's and father's age. Though some of these correlations were high, they were not necessarily multicollinear relations as Tabachnick and Fidell (2001) suggested that multicollinearity is likely to exist between items that correlate at .7 or higher.

### 3.2 Negative Relations with Peers

Seven items from the Piers-Harris 2 involve negative relations with peers (e.g., having classmates make fun of the child or having people pick on the child). Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviations of these seven items. With the exception of an item related to thinking they were different from other people, the mean ratings were .67 or higher, in favor of a "no" response to items that indicated negative relations. Many of the children (68%) agreed that they were different from other people. The correlations between these predictors and the three measures of happiness (i.e., HapPH2, ChildOwnFace, and ParentChildFace) are shown in Table 4. All seven predictors were correlated with HapPH2. Likewise, all predictors correlated with ChildOwnFace, except for one (i.e., thinking they were different from other people). Finally, only two items (i.e., thinking they were different and thinking that it was difficult for them to make friends) were not significantly correlated with ParentChildFace.

**Table 3** Means and standard deviations (SD) of items from two categories of negative social relations: negative relations with peers & behaving badly toward others

Questionnaire	Item names	Piers-Harris 2 items (paraphrased)	Scale	Average	SD
<i>Negative relations with peers</i>					
Piers-Harris 2	Make fun of child	Classmates make fun of child	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.90 <sup>a</sup>	.30
	Unpopular	Child is unpopular	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.67 <sup>a</sup>	.47
	Last chosen	Child is among the last to be chosen for games and sports	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.81 <sup>a</sup>	.39
	Pick on me	People pick on child	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.88 <sup>a</sup>	.33
	Different	Child is different from other people	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.32 <sup>a</sup>	.47
	Left out	Child feels left out of things	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.78 <sup>a</sup>	.41
	Make friends	It is hard for child to make friends	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.88 <sup>a</sup>	.33
<i>Behaving badly toward others</i>					
Piers-Harris 2	Mean to others	Child is often mean to others	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.97 <sup>a</sup>	.16
	Fights	Child gets into a lot of fights	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.92 <sup>a</sup>	.28
	Trouble to family	Child causes trouble to family	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.93 <sup>a</sup>	.26
	Behavior at home	Child behaves badly at home	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.95 <sup>a</sup>	.23

<sup>a</sup> Mean

**Table 4** Pearson product–moment correlations between happiness measures and items related to negative relations with peers, behaving badly toward others, friends, and family

Item names	HapPH2	COF	PCF
<i>Negative relations with peers</i>			
Make fun of child	.25*	.13*	.13*
Unpopular	.36*	.21*	.17*
Last chosen	.44*	.30*	.14*
Pick on me	.38*	.21*	.20*
Different	.16*	.04	.02
Left out	.44*	.26*	.21*
Make friends	.30*	.15*	.09
<i>Behaving badly toward others</i>			
Mean to others	.26*	.15*	.14*
Fights	.31*	.12*	.09
Trouble to family	.35*	.14*	.15*
Behavior at home	.30*	.17*	.11*
<i>Friends</i>			
Many friends	.35*	.14*	.09
Leader	.13*	.13*	.12*
Popular with boys	.17*	.03	.07
Popular with girls	.21*	.21*	.12*
Visit with friends	.15*	.14*	.13*
Child close friends	.12*	.11*	.16*
Child visits friends	.07	.09	.06
<i>Family</i>			
Expect too much	.29*	.14*	.18*
Disappointed	.24*	.19*	.15*
Important member	.38*	.19*	.16*
Siblings	.09	.13*	.14*
Mothers age	.03	.08	.08
Father's age	.00	.07	.00
Marital status	.09	.04	.03

\* $ps < .05$  (2-tailed); HapPH2 = Happiness/satisfaction ratings on Piers-Harris 2 subscale; COF = ChildOwnFace ratings; and PCF = ParentChildFace ratings. Item names described in Tables 3 and 6

### 3.2.1 Regression of Negative Relations with Peers Items

The multivariate results, semipartial ( $sr^2$ ) for each predictor,  $R^2$ , and the standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for the three measures of happiness are shown in Table 5. The multivariate regression test (Wilk's lambda) indicated four significant predictors related to negative relations to peers (i.e., feeling left out, being among the last chosen for games and sports, having people pick on the child, and being unpopular),  $F_s(3,397) > 3.66$ ,  $ps < .05$ . Items related to classmates making fun of the child, having difficulty in making friends, and being different were not significant predictors,  $F_s(3,397) < 0.86$ ,  $ps > .05$ , and were not included in the following multiple regression analysis. HapPH2 ratings were lower if

**Table 5** Regression analysis on the relation between negative relations with peers, and behaving badly items with the three measures of happiness using semipartial ( $sr^2$ ),  $R^2$ , and standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ )

Item names	MVR	HapPH2		COF		PCF	
		$sr^2$	$\beta$	$sr^2$	$\beta$	$sr^2$	$\beta$
<i>Negative relations with peers</i>							
Make fun of child	$p = .84$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Unpopular	$p < .05$	.02*	.15	.00	.08	.00	.09
Last chosen	$p < .01$	.03*	.22	.03*	.18	.00	.01
Pick on me	$p < .05$	.02*	.17	.00	.08	.01*	.13
Different	$p = .61$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Left out	$p < .01$	.04*	.24	.01*	.13	.02*	.14
Make friends	$p = .46$	–	–	–	–	–	–
	$R^2 =$	.32*		.12*		.07*	
<i>Behaving badly toward others</i>							
Mean to others	$p < .001$	.06*	.23	.02*	.14	.02*	.13
Fights	$p = .12$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Trouble to family	$p < .001$	.11*	.34	.02*	.13	.02*	.14
Behavior at home	$p = .08$	–	–	–	–	–	–
	$R^2 =$	.18*		.04*		.04*	

*Note.* Multivariate regression (MVR) involving items related to three estimates of happiness: the Happiness and Satisfaction Scale of the Piers-Harris Children’s Self-Concept Scale (HapPH2), children’s self-ratings of happiness using the Faces Scale (COF), and parents’ ratings of their children’s happiness using the Faces Scale (PCF). \* $p_s < .05$ , for the multiple regression results. Item Names described in Table 3

children felt that they were left out of things, the last to be chosen for games and sports, picked on by others, and unpopular. Together, these items accounted for 32% of the variance in children’s happiness assessed with the Piers-Harris 2. ChildOwnFace ratings decreased if the child felt they were last to be chosen for games and sports, and if they were left out of things. All of the predictors together accounted for 12% of the variance in ChildOwnFace. Likewise, ParentChildFace ratings decreased if children thought they were left out of things, and that others picked on them. All of the predictors together accounted for 7% of the variance in ParentChildFace.

### 3.3 Behaving Badly Toward Peers

Four items from the Piers-Harris 2 addressed whether the child behaved badly in social situations (i.e., the child is mean to others, gets into lots of fights, causes family trouble, and behaves badly at home). Table 3 shows the mean and standard deviations of these four items. All of the Piers-Harris 2 mean ratings were .92 or higher for these questions indicating that most children responded that they did not behave badly. Table 4 reports the correlations and all four predictors showed significant relationships with HapPH2, ChildOwnFace, and ParentChildFace measure. The only non-significant relation was between getting into fights and ParentChildFace ratings.

### 3.3.1 Regression of Behaving Badly Toward Peers Items

Table 5 depicts the multivariate results, semipartial ( $sr^2$ ) for each predictor,  $R^2$ , and the standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for the three measures of happiness. Wilk's lambda identified two significant predictors (i.e., items related to being mean to others and causing trouble to one's family),  $F_s(3,401) > 7.25$ ,  $ps < .001$ . The remaining two non-significant predictors (getting into fights and behaving badly at home),  $F_s(3,401) < 2.32$ ,  $ps > .05$ , were not included in the multiple regression analysis. The multiple regression analysis showed that HapPH2, ChildOwnFace, and ParentChildFace ratings decreased if children indicated that they caused trouble for their family, and were mean to others. The linear combination of predictors accounted for 18, 4, and 4% of the variance in HapPH2, ChildOwnFace, and ParentChildFace, respectively.

## 3.4 Friends

Four items from the Piers-Harris 2 (i.e., having many friends, being a leader in recreational activities, being popular with boys, and being popular with girls), one from the Children's Questionnaire (i.e., number of close friends the child reports they have), and two from the Parents' Questionnaire (i.e., parent's estimates of the number of close friends their child has and the number of times per week their child visits with friends outside of school) were related to the children's friendships. Table 6 shows the mean and standard deviations for these seven items. Children's ratings on the Piers-Harris 2 items were more evenly distributed between "yes" and "no" responses compared to items reported above. For example, half the children agreed that they were popular with boys. Children typically reported that they visit two to three friends each week outside of school time. Parents also reported that their children visit two to three friends each week outside of school time, and have about five or six close friends. As shown in Table 4, all predictors were significantly correlated with HapPH2, except for parent's estimates of how many times a week their children visit with friends outside of school. Only two items (i.e., child was popular with boys, and parents' estimates of how often their children visit with friends) were not significantly correlated with ChildOwnFace. These two items were also not significantly correlated with ParentChildFace, as was children's response to whether they agreed that they had many friends.

### 3.4.1 Regression of Friends Items

Table 7 shows the multivariate results, semipartial ( $sr^2$ ) for each predictor,  $R^2$ , and the standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for the three measures of happiness. Wilk's lambda showed three significant predictors (items from the Piers-Harris 2 related to having many friends, and being popular with girls, and parents' estimates of how often their child visits with friends),  $F_s(3,395) > 2.73$ ,  $ps < .05$ . The other four predictors (i.e., being a leader, being popular with boys, children's estimates of how often they visit with friends, and parents' estimates of the number of close friends their children have) were not significant,  $F_s(3,395) < 2.52$ ,  $ps > .05$ , and were not included in the following multiple regression analyses. The multiple regression analysis showed that HapPH2 ratings were higher for children who reported that they had many friends, were popular with girls, and frequently visited with their friends outside of school time, as reported by their parents. All items together accounted for 15% of the variance in HapPH2. Similarly, for ChildOwnFace being

**Table 6** Means and standard deviations (SD) of family & friendship items

Questionnaire	Item names	Items from Piers-Harris 2 (paraphrased), and children's and parent's questionnaires	Scale	Average	SD
<i>Friends</i>					
Piers-Harris 2	Many friends	Child has many friends	0 = No; 1 = Yes	.86 <sup>a</sup>	.35
	Leader	Child is a leader in games and sports	0 = No; 1 = Yes	.40 <sup>a</sup>	.49
	Popular with boys	Child is popular with boys	0 = No; 1 = Yes	.50 <sup>a</sup>	.50
	Popular with girls	Child is popular with girls	0 = No; 1 = Yes	.56 <sup>a</sup>	.50
Child	Visit with friends	How many times a week do you visit with friends outside of school?	Range: 0–5+	2.78 <sup>a</sup>	1.68
Parent	Child close friends	How many close friends does your child have?	Range: 0–15	5.74 <sup>a</sup>	2.78
	Child visits friends	How many times a week does your child visit with friends outside of school?	Range: 0–7	2.34 <sup>a</sup>	1.54
<i>Family</i>					
Piers-Harris 2	Expect too much	Parents expect too much of child	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.80 <sup>a</sup>	.40
	Disappointed	Family is disappointed in child	0 = Yes; 1 = No	.97 <sup>a</sup>	.17
	Important member	Child is an important member of their family	0 = No; 1 = Yes	.93 <sup>a</sup>	.26
Parent	Siblings	Total number of siblings	Range: 1–7	2.60 <sup>a</sup>	1.00
	Mothers age	How old is your child's mother?	Range: 24–71	40.60 <sup>a</sup>	5.10
	Father's age	How old is your child's father?	Range: 25–74	43.00 <sup>a</sup>	5.80
	Marital status	What is the marital status of your child's primary caregiver?	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8	3.00 <sup>b</sup>	.80

<sup>a</sup> Mean<sup>b</sup> Mode

Marital status: 1 = single; 2 = common law; 3 = married; 4 = divorced; 5 = widowed; 6 = single & divorced; 7 = common law with someone else & divorced; 8 = divorced & married to someone else

popular with girls and parents giving higher estimates for the frequency of visiting with friends were significant predictors, but not having many friends was found to be an insignificant predictor. The linear combination of all predictors accounted for a small amount of the variance in ChildOwnFace ( $R^2 = .07$ ). The only significant predictor of ParentChildFace ratings was the parent's estimate of the frequency of their child's visits with friends ( $R^2 = .03$ ).

### 3.5 Family

Three Piers-Harris 2 items (i.e., having parents expect too much of the child, having the family disappointed by the child, and being an important member of the family), and four

**Table 7** Regression analysis on the relation between friends, and family items with the three measures of happiness using semipartials ( $sr^2$ ),  $R^2$ , and standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ )

Item names	MVR	HapPH2		COF		PCF	
		$sr^2$	$\beta$	$sr^2$	$\beta$	$sr^2$	$\beta$
<i>Friends</i>							
Many friends	$p < .001$	.09*	.31	.00	.09	.00	.06
Leader	$p = .38$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Popular with boys	$p = .10$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Popular with girls	$p < .01$	.02*	.14	.03*	.18	.00	.10
Visit with friends	$p = .64$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Child Close friends	$p = .06$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Child visits friends	$p < .05$	.01*	.11	.01*	.11	.01*	.12
	$R^2$	.15*		.07*		.03*	
<i>Family</i>							
Expect too much	$p < .001$	.04*	.20	.00	.07	.02*	.13
Disappointed	$p < .01$	.01*	.12	.02*	.14	.00	.10
Important member	$p < .001$	.09*	.31	.02*	.15	.02*	.11
Siblings	$p < .01$	.00	.00	.02*	.12	.02*	.12
Mothers age	$p = .35$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Father's age	$p = .27$	–	–	–	–	–	–
Marital status	$p = .33$	–	–	–	–	–	–
	$R^2$	.21*		.08		.07	

*Note.* Multivariate regression (MVR) involving items related to three estimates of happiness: the Happiness and Satisfaction Scale of the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (HapPH2), children's self-ratings of happiness using the Faces Scale (COF), and parents' ratings of their children's happiness using the Faces Scale (PCF). \* $ps < .05$ , for the multiple regression results. Item Names described in Table 6

demographic items from the Parents' Questionnaire (i.e., number of siblings, mother's age, father's age, marital status of parents) were related to the children's family. As shown in Table 6, each child had an average of two or three siblings, the parents were usually married, and the father was about 2 years older than the mother. Table 4 shows that all three items from the Piers-Harris 2 were significantly correlated with all three measures of happiness. The only significant correlations involving children's happiness and the four demographic variables were the correlations between the number of siblings and ChildOwnFace, and ParentChildFace ratings.

### 3.5.1 Regression of Family Items

The multivariate results, semipartials ( $sr^2$ ) for each predictor,  $R^2$ , and the standardized regression coefficients ( $\beta$ ) for the three measures of happiness are shown in Table 7. Wilk's lambda indicated that there were four significant predictors of happiness (i.e., having parents expect too much of the child, having the family disappointed by the child, being an important member of the family, and the number of siblings),  $F_s(3,377) > 4.16$ ,  $ps < .01$ . The remaining three items (i.e., mother's age, father's age, and marital status) were not significant predictors of happiness,  $F_s(3,377) < 1.32$ ,  $ps > .05$ , and were not included in the following multiple regression analysis. The multiple regression analysis

indicated that HapPH2 ratings were higher for children who reported that they were important members of their family, were not a disappointment to their family, and their parents did not expect too much of them. Together, all predictors accounted for 21% of the variance in HapPH2. ChildOwnFace ratings also increased for children reporting that they were important members in their family, and were not a disappointment to the family. However, high parental expectations did not predict ChildOwnFace ratings but having more siblings was related to higher ChildOwnFace ratings. All predictors combined accounted for 8% of the variance in ChildOwnFace ratings. ParentChildFace ratings were higher for children with more siblings, and children who agreed that they were an important member of their family and their parents did not expect too much of them. Together, all predictors accounted for 7% of the variance in ParentChildFace ratings.

#### 4 Discussion

The present study assessed happiness in children using three different measures and examined the relations between these measures and items related to social relationships. Items were included from four categories of social relationships: having negative relations with peers, behaving badly toward others, interacting with friends, and interacting with family. Items from each category correlated with all three ratings of children's happiness. Together, the items from each category accounted for 3–32% of the variance, depending on the measure of happiness and the category. Children's happiness was not strongly correlated with demographic variables related to family (i.e., number of siblings, ages of parents, and the marital status of parents).

Overall, the variables that correlated with happiness in the present study with 9- to 12-year olds are related to those variables that predict happiness in adults and adolescents. Friendship and family have been shown to predict happiness in adults and these variables may be related. For example, marriage may contribute to an increase in happiness and this increase may be because marriage increases social roles (Wood et al. 1989). For children, friendship and family variables may contribute to happiness because social reinforcement (e.g., praise and blame), which often come from family and friends, contributes to young children's happiness (Singh et al. 1978). Not only do children perceive family and friends, particularly parents and peers, as contributing to their happiness (Sidana et al. 1976), but also the present study suggests that these variables may actually contribute to children's happiness. Previous research suggests that some family variables, including those experienced as a child can influence adult happiness. For example, perceived closeness to parents contributes to adult children's happiness (Amato 1994). The present study suggests that family and friendship contribute to one's happiness while still a child.

All four categories studied in the present research (negative relations with peers, behaving badly toward others, interacting with friends, and interacting with family) contained multiple items that correlated with and predicted the three measures of children's happiness. This finding suggests that multiple dimensions of social relations, including both positive and negative interactions, are associated with happiness.

Though successful social relationships are usually thought to contribute to happiness (e.g., Diener and Oishi 2005), the direction of the relation between happiness and social relations in children is not clear. A meta-analysis of longitudinal studies suggested that happiness often precedes success and may cause desirable outcomes including positive social relationships (Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). Furthermore, when positive affect is experimentally enhanced, one's social interactions increase as does one's positive

perception of these interactions and the people one interacts with (for a review see Lyubomirsky et al. 2005). The possibility that happiness causes social relationships may be particularly true in children. One study reported that children who displayed happiness, most often evoked positive social responses in other children including verbal and physical support and positive reinforcement (Strayer 1980). The expression of happiness informs others that one is friendly and amenable to social relations thus promoting successful relationships (Frijda and Mesquita 1994; Keltner and Kring 1998; Ruch 1993). The present research, like earlier studies (Vernberg 1990), is consistent with the idea that happiness (or depression) might promote friendships (or lead to rejection) and that positive (or negative) relationships might promote happiness (or depression).

Variables related to family and friends, including divorce of one's parents, which do not contribute to adult happiness (Amato 1994; Argyle and Lu 1990), did not contribute to children's happiness in the present study. In particular, in the present study the marital status of the children's parents was not associated with happiness. Divorce has been associated with lower self-reported well-being in adolescents (Amato 2001; see Grossman and Rowat 1995) and psychological distress (Rodgers et al. 1997). However, similar to the present study, marital status was not associated with happiness in a study of adolescents (Cheng and Furnham 2003). Our finding that parents' marital status was not strongly associated with children's happiness may be because the quality of the relationships that affect children is more critical than whether the parents remain married. For example, adolescents' well-being increased with greater father involvement independently of whether the family remained intact (Flouri and Buchanan 2003). Additionally, children, whose parents' relationships are characterized by high conflict, may feel caught between parents and this may result in a decrease in subjective well-being even if the parents do not divorce (Amato and Afifi 2006). The effects of marital discord and divorce on offspring's well-being appear to interact (Amato 2006). Children's well-being may be more associated with the closeness of their family relationships than with whether or not their parents divorce (Moxnes 2003).

The study of happiness in children is limited by the validity of the measures of happiness. There is no generally accepted measure of well-being or happiness for children and most studies rely on subjective measures (Pollard and Lee 2003). Based on Diener et al.'s (1999) suggestion, we used multiple measures of happiness one of which was not based on self-report. Social factors were related to all three or our measures of happiness. However, for all four categories of social factors, more variance was accounted for by the measure of happiness derived from the Piers-Harris 2, than the measures derived from the Faces Scale. The Piers-Harris 2 assesses both happiness and satisfaction (Piers and Herzberg 2002). Perhaps social relations, though related to children's happiness, are also particularly related to children's satisfaction with life. Nonetheless, we are more confident in our results given that Csikszentmihalyi and Hunter (2003) used a very different measure of happiness, in which children in Grades 6–12 estimated their momentary happiness while engaged in different activities, and their overall results were consistent with ours. For example, in their study, children while engaged in social activities reported higher levels of happiness than average. Furthermore, spending time alone was associated with lower levels of happiness.

The present study is limited because not all variables related to friendships and family relations were included. In particular, though the number of friends and types of social interactions were included, the quality of children's friendships was not. Children with high quality friendships have advantages over those with low quality friendships (Dishion et al. 1995; Ladd et al. 1996). At least for adults, happiness is predicted by the quality of their friendships beyond the number of friendships (e.g., Demir et al. 2007; Demir and

Weitkamp 2007). Future research should assess the relation between the quality and closeness of children's relationships and the children's happiness. An additional limitation of the present study is that children with a prior history of depression were excluded from our study and this likely truncated the range of happiness scores thus reducing the amount of variance that could be accounted for.

Most of the research on positive dispositions has involved adults and adolescents. Future research should continue to focus on happiness in children, including identifying and promoting those factors that appear to contribute to children's happiness. When these factors are identified, they should be measured over time. The understanding of happiness in children would benefit from longitudinal studies for three reasons. First, the factors that contribute to positive dispositions may change with age. For example, though the level of happiness may remain relatively similar with age, factors that contribute to happiness (e.g., excitement, family, and worker roles) may vary as we advance through the life cycle (Harry 1976; Lu and Lin 1998). Second, single age studies may underestimate the contribution of different variables to positive dispositions compared to longitudinal studies (e.g., Lucas et al. 2003). Third, the actual level of positive disposition may vary with children's age (e.g., Chang et al. 2003).

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