
Emotional Safety and Happiness in Learning in Relation to Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Emotional safety and happiness are essential pillars for optimal early childhood development and should be central to early education policies and practices. The paper emphasizes that emotional safety is defined by freedom from fear, predictable relationships, and consistent emotional support, which foster secure attachments vital for cognitive and emotional growth. It further clarifies that happiness is a state of emotional well-being that a person experiences either narrowly, when good things happen in a specific moment, or more broadly, as a positive assessment of one's overall life and achievements, known as subjective well-being. According to the paper, creating emotional safety involves providing children with psychological safety, defined as the belief that they can express themselves, ask questions, and make mistakes without fearing negative reactions from teachers or peers. This approach is grounded in the PERMA model theory originally proposed by Martin Seligman. The paper also suggests that morning meetings and community building are practical strategies to promote happiness and safety for children in early childhood education. It concludes by stating that every child deserves to experience the joy of learning in an environment where they feel valued, supported, and free to reach their potential. Furthermore, it recommends that teachers establish daily routines that develop class procedures to foster a structured environment, reduce stress, and encourage self-direction.

Keywords: emotional safety, happiness, psychological safety, childhood education

Introduction

A child from a friendly family arrives at school excited, but that excitement soon evaporates due to an unfriendly teacher and an unwelcoming school environment; such a child will find it difficult to learn. Also, a pupil coming from an unfriendly family who encounters a friendly teacher and a supportive environment with effective teaching and learning in place. Finally,

consider a child who comes from a friendly family and has a friendly teacher and a friendly school environment; the rate at which such a child will learn and assimilate cannot be predicted

Happiness can be defined as a state of excitement and pleasure of an individual resulting from a result of good physical outlook of an environment. Britannica (2025) stated that happiness in psychology is a state of emotional well-being that a person experiences either in a narrow sense, when good things happen in a specific moment, or more broadly, as a positive evaluation of one's life and accomplishments overall, that is, subjective well-being. Happiness can be distinguished both from negative emotions (such as sadness, fear, and anger) and from other positive emotions (such as affection, excitement, and interest). This emotion often co-occurs with a specific facial expression, a smile.

Emotion is an internal feeling of a person that ultimately results in either happiness or unhappiness. Walter C (2012) describes social-emotional development as "the process by which children develop the ability to interact socially and manage their emotions effectively," involving understanding and expressing emotions, developing social relationships, and adapting to their social environment. A classroom environment where every child is genuinely recognised, praised, and protected is regarded as a friendly and joyful space for such a child. Happiness in school is closely linked to learning itself, whereby a child's mistakes serve as opportunities for learning instead of punishments. This approach goes beyond mere idealism; it forms the basis of effective educational strategies. When students see their learning environment as one of safety and joy, they not only achieve better academically but also develop into confident, resilient, and perceptive individuals capable of thriving in an ever-changing world.

Ahmed, S. (2010) stated that Human brains are inherently wired for survival and went further to say that when children encounter threats or stress, their brains trigger a 'fight or flight' response. The amygdala, which functions as the brain's alarm system, becomes overly active and disrupts signals to the prefrontal cortex, the part responsible for learning, memory, and reasoning. Neuroscience shows that stress activates the amygdala, potentially impeding learning by preventing information from reaching the brain's memory centres. Providing a calm, emotionally secure environment helps students better absorb and retain knowledge.

Emotional triggers in children greatly affect their ability to learn. When a child feels unsafe, whether physically, emotionally, or socially, it's harder for their brain to access learning centres effectively. Stress hormones like cortisol flood their system, impairing memory formation, while feelings like embarrassment, boredom, or irritation activate the brain's 'fight or flight' response. This trigger

increased activity in the amygdala, which hampers the areas of the brain responsible for memory Ahmed, S., 2010). On the other hand, when children feel secure, their cognitive processes function optimally. Their prefrontal cortex operates at its best, leading to better memory retention, sharper focus, stronger executive functions, greater creativity and problem-solving abilities, and improved emotional regulation.

Consistent research shows that students experiencing their world as emotionally secure produce higher academic achievements, develop healthier relationships with classmates, and demonstrate a lower incidence of behaviour problems in the learning environment. Happiness is not an end product of successful learning but is, in fact, a motivator of it. Positive affect accelerates memory formation and recall processes, while chronic stress fosters neural roadblocks to learning. If children experience joy in their learning environment, they will be likely to engage actively in their learning process, take intellectual risks, persist through challenges, believe in their inherent abilities, and develop positive associations with teachers and classmates. Studies have found a significant positive correlation between happiness and academic achievement across all age groups (Tabbodi et al, 2015)

Creating Emotional Safety in The Classroom

1. Building Trust Through Relationships

Emotional security is most built with strong, affirmative relationships between learners and teachers. (Sullivan, 2024) states that as long as students feel they are considered valuable and understood, they will have an increased desire for active participation in class activities as well as improved retention of central learning. For instance, if a teacher opens daily procedures with a personal greeting of each pupil as they enter the classroom and he/she use direct eye contact, address them by name, and ask a brief individualised question. This simple procedure will build a feeling of presence and worth among the children as they enter the learning environment.

2. Establishing Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is defined as the belief that one can express oneself, ask questions, and make mistakes without fearing negative reactions from the teacher or other children. It relates to the perception that a learning environment is safe for interpersonal risk-taking, showing vulnerability, and sharing perspectives without fear of negative consequences. Edmondson (2004) supported this by stating that Psychological Safety refers to a sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. This is vital for successful learning, as pupils are more likely to seek help, explain ideas clearly, reveal uncertainties, and see errors as learning opportunities. A teacher can create

a space called "Beautiful Mistakes," where children can share errors, they made that would lead to valuable insights. Consequently, this approach helps them to improve in their learning by reducing the emphasis on their errors.

3. Predictable Routines and Clear Expectations

Children thrive in environments with a degree of predictability. Creating routines and setting out clear expectations increases feelings of security in children, thus reducing anxiety (Sarah, 2023). For instance, a teacher begins each class with a five-minute check-in period in which pupils can reveal how they feel using a simple color-coded scale. This daily ritual helps ease pupils into learning mode while at the same time giving the teacher immediate understanding of how they really are.

Theory Adopted

This work is anchored in the PERMA model theory that was originally proposed by Martin Seligman. He outlines five basic elements that work together to enable people, both students in a classroom environment and adolescents in general, to be more satisfied and happier. PERMA is an acronym that stands for: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Achievement.

Seligman (2011) suggested that these five basic elements are also measurable and must be taught; together, they form a system aimed at raising both perceptions of well-being and academic and real-world accomplishment.

Positive Emotion include joy, appreciation, optimism, curiosity, and contentment. When positive emotions pervade a range of emotional experiences, they reinforce resilience and encourage optimism. These emotions stimulate pupils' engagement.

Engagement fully immersed and involved in activities. When pupils show full involvement, they tend to lose time awareness and show intrinsic motivation, which means that the activity is enjoyable in itself.

Strong, supportive connections with peers, teachers, and family are critical for well-being. Positive relationships engendered through encouragement, and a safe context for risk-taking and exploration. In school, Cooperative learning, peer mentoring, and warm teacher-pupil relationships foster trust and motivation.

This engagement and relationship have attached meaning and relevance for the child. Having a sense of meaning or being part of a larger group enables coping with difficulty and value being attached to the learning process.

At the end, achievement of mastery, progress toward targets, and recognition of accomplishments that yield self-efficacy and feelings of pride, creating a positive cycle of motivation with corresponding achievements.

The PERMA Model is applicable in early childhood contexts, where foundational emotional skills and positive educational experiences significantly impact children's development. For instance, a positive psychology intervention based on the PERMA Model demonstrated significant increases in psychological well-being among participants, emphasising the utility of the model in fostering a supportive environment for emotional safety among children (Uzun & Özdemir, 2025). Such an environment not only nurtures emotional health but also enhances children's capacity for learning, showcasing the interplay between emotional safety and educational outcomes (Khanam et al., 2023).

Practical Strategies for Happiness and Safety in Early Childhood Education

A. Morning Meetings and Community Building

According to Kimi (2022), morning assemblies among pupils promote a feeling of unity and brotherhood. These kinds of events can include: projects aimed at enabling interaction between pupils, sharing time for personal experiences, Community projects that promote mutual engagement, Meditation on classroom agreements and core principles

B. Mindfulness and Emotional Regulation

Teaching children mindfulness techniques helps them develop emotional regulation skills and reduces stress and anxiety (Christiane, 2023). Simple practices include deep breathing exercises, gratitude practices, and mindful movement-based activities.

C. Restorative Practices

With conflicts, restorative practices focus on repairing interpersonal relationships as opposed to punitive action. Such approaches discuss the negative impacts of unethical behavior, improve narratives submitted by those affected, empower pupils to make amends, and strengthen the classroom community (Amos, 2023).

Physical environment, Children's Security and Happiness

Early childhood education environment that ensures children security and happiness are realized through the following;

1. Creating Warm and Welcoming Spaces

The physical environment significantly impacts how safe and happy children feel. Research indicates that natural light, plants, and well-organized space can enhance children focus and overall well-being (Theresa, 2023). Design principles such as natural lighting when possible, comfortable, flexible seating

options, calming colours and décor, designated quiet spaces for reflection, and prominently displayed student work.

2. Calm-down corners and Reflective Places

Recognised space that promote pupils; self-regulation is essential in maintaining emotional security. This space includes: softer textiles like cushions, sensory devices like fidget tools or pressure bags, reflective journals and respiratory exercise indicators illustrated in pictures.

Conclusion

Emphasizing the social-emotional safety of children in learning environments, create impacts that go beyond the classroom itself. This do not merely enhance academic performance; but also nurture individuals who will strive to foster a more caring, resilient, and thriving world. Research provide clear evidence that children learn better when they feel happy and secure. Also engage more deeply, take risks, overcome challenges with greater resilience, and develop the social-emotional skills essential for long-term success. Teachers, parents, and other stakeholders have both the opportunity and the duty to cultivate such environments. The question whether emotional well-being in education is pivotal cannot be undermined. The issue is whether it can be affordable. Every child deserves to experience the joy of learning in an environment where they feel valued, supported, and free to attain their best potentials.

Suggestions

1. Foster warm, respectful teacher-student interactions to create a sense of security and belonging.
2. Establish programs designed to build empathy, self-regulation, and emotional knowledge.
3. Develop class procedures that promote a structured setting, decrease stress, and encourage self-direction.
4. Ensure classrooms are clean, well-lit, and free of hazards to allow for both comfort and safety.
5. Create spaces for children to voice and make decisions, thus increasing engagement and supporting autonomy.
6. Equip teachers with skills to help children affected by stressors or challenging situations.
7. Provide access to counsellors or psychologists to ensure timely intervention and provide emotional support.

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