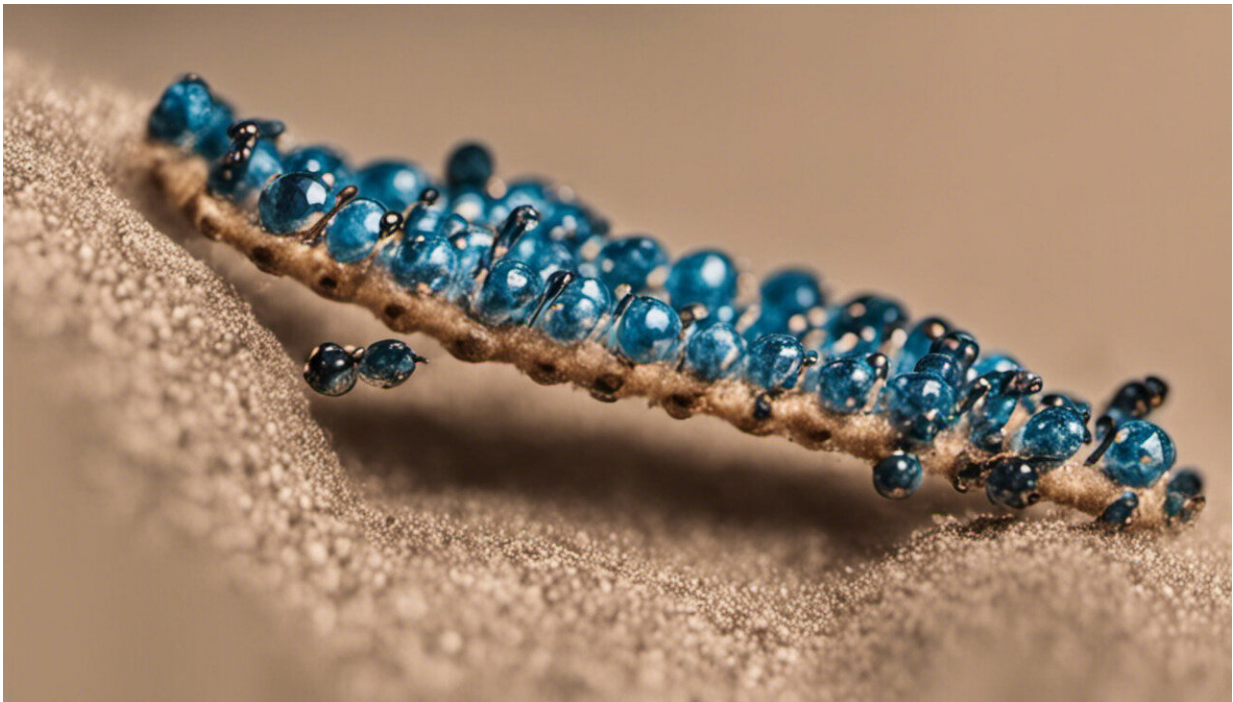


# Schools could teach children how to be happy but they foster competition instead

September 2 2019, by Angel Urbina-Garcia

---



Credit: AI-generated image ([disclaimer](#))

Diagnoses of mental disorders and [drug prescriptions](#) among school-age children have skyrocketed over the last two decades. The World Health Organisation (WHO) reports that [20% of children](#) experience mental disorders—such as depression, anxiety, [ADHD](#) and [autism](#) – at any given time.

This is a significant problem in the UK, where one in eight [children](#) between the ages of five and 19 has been diagnosed with an [emotional or behavioral disorder](#). Even children as young as five are getting ill: according to the latest reports, [6% of five year olds](#) suffer from a mental disorder. The challenges are greater still for children from low income families, who are four times more likely to [develop mental health problems](#) than their better off peers.

While home life, friends, [social media](#) and body image all have an impact on the mental [health](#) of children, [a recent report](#) from The Children's Society found that more young people feel unhappy about [school](#) than any other area of their lives. Yet a growing body of research from around the world shows that schools can actually help children lead happier lives—if they value such outcomes.

## **Under pressure**

Generally speaking, the UK's education system—like many others around the world—is geared toward competition. International rankings such as OECD's [Programme for International Student Assessment](#) (PISA) rate the performance of schools, placing pressure on governors, teachers and pupils. As a result, schools seem to value the academic achievement of students over their [mental health and well-being](#), which is reflected not only in the way students are taught, but also how they are assessed.

Teachers also face a lot of pressure to ensure their students obtain the highest grades possible. This is also contributing to poor mental health among teachers, with many developing [mental health problems](#) such as burnout, which [negatively impacts](#) their performance and can ultimately lead them to [quit the profession](#).

While there are [requirements](#) for UK schools to teach pupils how to stay

physically and mentally healthy, it's clearly not enough. All too often, academic demands on pupils [provoke a sense of rivalry](#), rather than teaching them how to enjoy life and cultivate positive emotions. Yet educational performance does not need to come at the cost of children's happiness and well-being.

Education systems, including the UK's, have the capacity to respond to the growing mental health crisis among children. And research shows that promoting mental health and well-being in schools, on a par with core skills such as maths and literacy, has [a positive impact](#) on the self-esteem, academic achievement, social relations, motivation and career prospects of pupils.

## **The Nordic way**

To see how schools can teach pupils to be happy, consider the [education systems](#) of some of the happiest countries in the world. For instance, all five of the Nordic countries—Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland and Iceland—appear in the top ten happiest countries, according to the [World Happiness Report](#).

It's well known that Nordic countries place a greater emphasis on [social-emotional learning](#), which gives children the skills and knowledge to to recognise and manage emotions in effectively. This forms [the basis of well-being](#), and can significantly improve [academic achievement](#) among students.

Nordic countries also value the judgments of teachers over national examinations, and schools are [not rated or ranked](#) as they are in the UK or US. This prevents the education system from placing needless [pressure on schools](#), leading to less rivalry, stress and anxiety among students, and [lower rates of burnout](#) among teachers.

## Finding happiness

When it comes to being healthy and happy, research suggests that money only matters to a certain extent. What matters most is [developing self-knowledge](#) – that is, knowing how you think, behave and manage your own emotions—and [positive social relationships](#). This is evident in some Latin American countries. For example, Costa Rica and Mexico also score well on the World Happiness Index, and rank among the happiest countries according to the [Happy Planet Index](#) (which takes into account well-being, life expectancy and inequality, as well as ecological footprint).

These nations have a culture of promoting social networks of [friends, families and neighborhoods](#). Despite living on the [most unequal continent](#) in the world, research indicates that Latin American people [are extremely resilient](#), meaning they have the ability to successfully overcome adversity and enjoy life in spite of difficult circumstances.

According to [recent UN reports](#), schools in Latin America are also doing a good job in promoting resilience among children. Environmental sustainability is also [a key part of education policies](#) in places like Costa Rica. This promotes empathy toward other members of the society—a core skill of social-emotional learning.

My own research has found that education systems in both [developing and developed countries](#) value forming responsible citizens through valuing equality, harmony and diversity among others. Yet none of the countries included in the analysis—China, England, Mexico and Spain—seem to place an explicit value on mental health in their education systems.

Education systems around the world can tackle the mental health crisis among children—if they set out to do so. And countries that prioritize

children's happiness and well-being offer a strong starting point. By promoting positive relationships over rivalry, and learning over league tables, children around the world can be given the chance to flourish.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Schools could teach children how to be happy but they foster competition instead (2019, September 2) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-09-schools-children-happy-foster-competition.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.