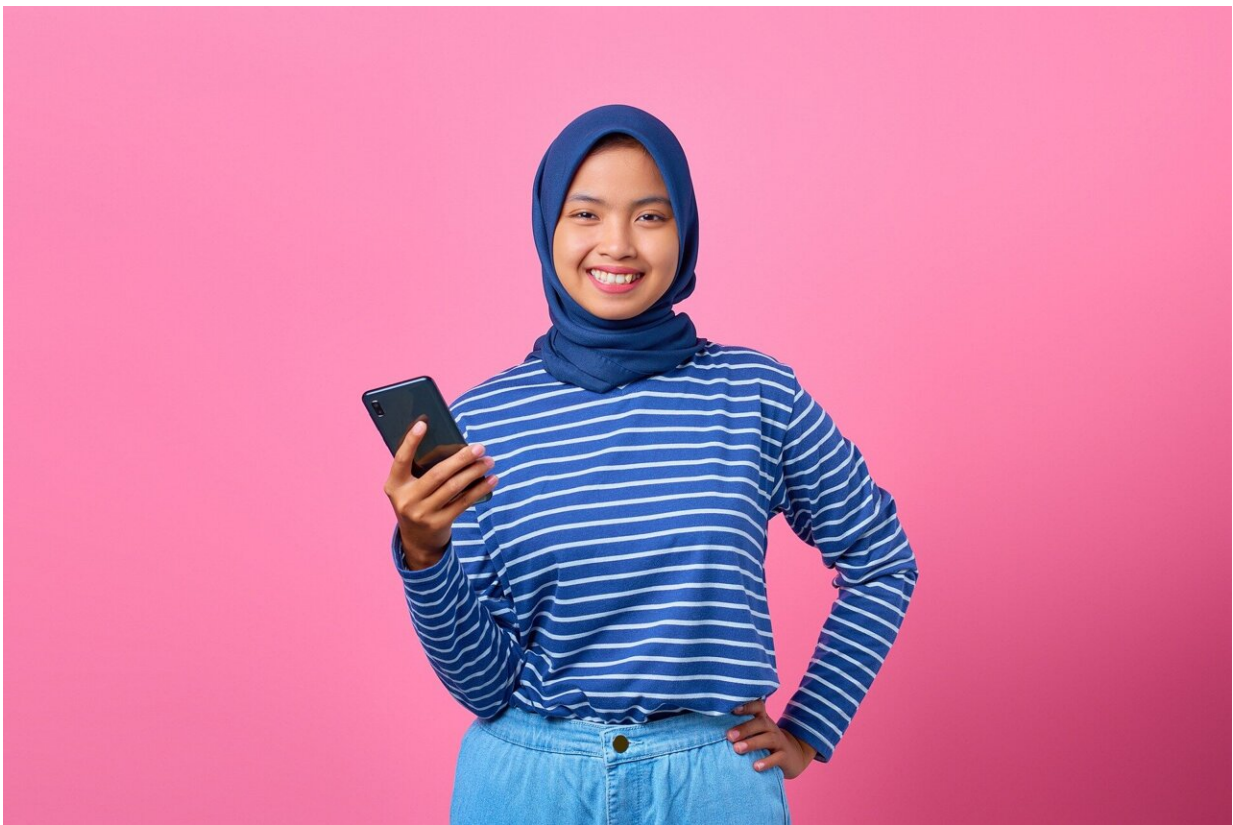


Helping adolescents to feel competent and purposeful—not just happy—may improve grades

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Encouraging adolescents to feel capable and purposeful—rather than just happy—could improve their academic results as well as their mental

health, according to new research which recommends changing how well-being is supported in schools.

The University of Cambridge study, involving over 600 teenagers from seven English schools, examined two separate aspects of their well-being: life satisfaction and 'eudaimonia'. While life satisfaction roughly equates to how happy a person is, eudaimonia refers to how well that person feels they are functioning. It incorporates feelings of competence, motivation and [self-esteem](#).

Researchers found that students with high levels of eudaimonia consistently outperformed their peers in GCSE-level assessments, especially Math. On average, those achieving top Math grades had eudaimonic well-being levels 1.5 times higher than those with the lowest grades.

No such link was found between [academic performance](#) and life satisfaction. Despite this, child well-being policy in England tends to focus on life satisfaction. The Government has, for example, recently added 'happiness' to national curricula as part of its Relationships, Sex and Health Education (RSHE) guidance, emphasizing teaching adolescents how to feel happy and resilient while managing negative emotions.

Previous research has pointed to the importance of fostering adolescents' eudaimonic well-being by nurturing their personal values, goals and sense of self-worth. The new study appears to strengthen that case by demonstrating a positive link between eudaimonia and academic performance.

Its lead author, Dr. Tania Clarke, is a psychologist of education who now works for the Youth Endowment Fund, but undertook the study for her doctoral research at the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge.

The findings are published in *School Psychology Review*.

"Well-being education often focuses on teaching students about being happy and not being sad." Clarke said. "That is over-simplistic and overlooks other vital qualities of well-being that are particularly salient during the formative period of adolescence."

"Adolescents also need to develop self-awareness, confidence, and ideally a sense of meaning and purpose. Judging by our findings, an adolescent who is currently getting a 3 or 4 on their Math GCSE could be helped to rise a couple of grades if schools emphasized these qualities for all students, rather than just promoting positivity and minimizing negative emotions."

The study involved 607 adolescents, aged 14-15. Participants completed an established psychological assessment called '[How I feel about myself and school](#)', which measures both life satisfaction and eudaimonia, as well as feelings of interpersonal relatedness and negativity.

These measures were compared with their scores in mock English and Math GCSEs. The research also assessed whether the students exhibited a 'growth mindset': a belief in their personal capacity for improvement. Many educators consider this essential for enhancing academic performance.

The students' overall well-being—their eudaimonia and life satisfaction combined—clearly correlated positively with their [exam results](#). Those attaining top Math grades (Grades 8 or 9) had, on average, a well-being score of 32 out of a possible 50. This was nine points higher than those with a Grade 1, and three to four points higher than the average for all 607 students.

When they analyzed the separate dimensions of well-being, however, the

researchers found a positive relationship between eudaimonia and higher attainment, but no correlation with [life satisfaction](#). In Math, the average eudaimonic well-being score of Grade 9 students was 17.3 from a possible 25, while that of Grade 1 students was just 10.9. These results held true even when accounting for potentially confounding factors, such as school attended, gender, socio-economic status, or [special educational needs](#).

The study also found that a growth mindset did not predict good academic results, although students with high eudaimonic well-being did tend to exhibit such a mindset. [Other research](#) has similarly struggled to draw a clear link between growth mindset and academic progress, but does link it more generally to positive [mental health](#). This implies that eudaimonia, as well as supporting better attainment, may also underpin important aspects of self-belief, leading to broader mental health benefits.

Clarke's wider research suggests that various constraints currently limit schools' capacity to promote eudaimonic well-being. In an earlier [Review of Education](#) article she published the results of in-depth interviews with some of the same students, which highlighted concerns about a 'performativity culture' stemming from a heavy emphasis on high-stakes testing. These interviews indicated that many students associate 'doing well' with getting good grades, rather than with their own strengths, values and goals.

Students said they often felt worthless, inadequate or "dumb" if they failed to get high marks in tests. "You let your scores define you," one [student](#) told Clarke. "Then you feel really low about... your worth and everything. You think it's literally the end of the world." Ironically, the new findings suggest that by limiting teachers' capacity to support students' personal growth, the heavy emphasis on exam results and testing may be undermining academic progress, at least in some cases.

Clarke suggested that eudaimonic therapy, which increasingly features in professional mental health psychology for adolescents, could be incorporated more into well-being education. In particular, her study underscores the need to help students understand their [academic work](#) and progress in the context of their personal motivations and goals.

"There is a link between better well-being and a more nuanced understanding of academic success," Clarke said. "Because schools are under heavy pressure to deliver academic results, at the moment students seem to be measuring themselves against the exam system, rather than in terms of who they want to be or what they want to achieve."

Dr. Ros McLellan, from the Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge, who co-authored the study, said, "Well-being education needs to move beyond notions of 'boosting' happiness towards deeper engagement, helping adolescents to realize their unique talents and aspirations, and a sense of what happiness means for them, personally. This would not just improve well-being: it is also likely to mean better exam results, and perhaps fewer issues for students later on."

More information: Tania Clarke et al, Beyond Life Satisfaction: Wellbeing Correlates of Adolescents' Academic Attainment, *School Psychology Review* (2023). [DOI: 10.1080/2372966X.2023.2217980](https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2023.2217980) , www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/2372966X.2023.2217980

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