EDITORIAL

Thriving in youth: Age-old wisdom, new to science

Cara: You’re not going to believe what’s going on.
Jeff: What?
Cara: James has been working on a 300 piece puzzle for the past 4 hrs straight, and he’s been singing the whole time while doing it.
Hours later I (Jeff) arrive home from work and see my son, James, still working on his puzzle.
James: Daddy, look at what I did. Look at my McQueen puzzle.
Jeff: Wow, that’s amazing buddy. You did that all by yourself?
James: Uh huh.
Jeff: Cara, wait, how long has he been doing this for?
Cara: Eight hours.

The above transaction seems simple enough. My wife called me at work to share that our son, James, was immersed in an engaging activity for an extended period of time. Now this might seem ordinary enough, but James is 3 years old, and it has been my experience that the average 3-year old can hold their attention long enough to scribble the family pet and eat a pretzel rod. That got me thinking. How did James acquire his apparent strengths of curiosity, love of learning, and persistence? Are they inborn? Did they simply emerge and get reinforced without any of us noticing? And now that he seems to have them, what can we do to foster them? And if we do, what long-term impacts might this have on him? Will he be happier or less likely to suffer from depression? Will he do better in school and continue to find other ways to be engrossed in activities? Or alternatively, could such engrossment get in the way of his social relationships? After reflecting on such questions, I realized that the field of positive psychology, the study of what is right with people (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), is better equipped to answer such questions for adults than it is for youth. This is not to say, however, that good work is not being done with children and adolescents. It is. But this work lags behind the work pertaining to adults, and it is time to start considering how gains made so far can be consolidated into better understanding. This is the main goal for this Special Issue on Positive Youth Psychology.

The seven papers presented here and the important article by Chaplin, Bastos, and Lowrey (2010) serve to help psychologists who work with children and adolescents to better appreciate the importance of identifying and enhancing human strengths in the formative years. Each article brings a unique perspective that outlines a different aspect of positive youth psychology. I provide highlights below to demonstrate how each offers clues to solving the puzzle of how we can ensure thriving in young people.

Eggum et al. (2011) examine how emotion understanding and theory of mind predict young children’s prosocial orientation within and across time. Data were collected when children were 42 (T1), 54 (T2), and 72 (T3) months of age. A major strength of this study, beyond its longitudinal design, is the use of multiple methods to decrease problems associated with shared-method variance. Specifically, children’s emotion understanding and theory of mind were observed, whereas children’s prosocial orientation was self-, mother-, and/or father-reported. The researchers found that emotion understanding positively related to children’s sympathy across 2.5 years, and T1 emotion understanding positively related to parent-reported prosocial orientation at T1 and 1 year later (T2). T2 theory of mind positively related to parents’ reports of prosocial orientation at T2 and parents’ reports of sympathy and prosocial orientation 18 months later (T3). T3 theory of mind, however, was unrelated to sympathy or prosocial orientation. This article suggests that promoting children’s emotion understanding and theory of mind may facilitate development of prosocial orientation.

Suldo, Thalji, and Ferron (2011) build off the wonderful work of Suldo and Shaffer (2008) where they found that children with complete mental health (i.e., high subjective well-being, low psychopathology) had better reading skills, school attendance, academic self-perceptions, academic-related goals, social support from classmates and parents, self-perceived physical health, and fewer social problems compared with their vulnerable peers also low in psychopathology but with low subjective well-being. In the present study, Suldo et al. assessed 300 middle school students at baseline and 1 year later (T2). Results indicated that students in the troubled mental health group (i.e., low subjective well-being, high psychopathology) declined at a significantly faster rate on grade point averages than youth without psychopathology. Further, at T2, the best attendance, grades, and math skills were found among students with complete mental health, supporting the utility of a dual-factor model whereby one
considers a student’s level of negative and positive functioning to predict important outcomes. This article shows that it is essential for psychologists working with youth to measure and clinically address both their weaknesses and strengths.

Gillham et al. (2011) conducted one of the first studies to explore the prospective relationships between character strengths and well-being. In a sample of adolescent high school students assessed over 2 years, they found that other-directed strengths (e.g., forgiveness, humility, kindness) predicted fewer symptoms of depression. Transcendence strengths (e.g., meaning, love, gratitude) predicted greater life satisfaction. Gillham et al. then went on to examine the mechanisms linking character strengths and well-being and found that social support partially explained the relationship between strengths and depression, but it did not explain the relationship between strengths and life satisfaction. This article provides solid evidence that fostering character strengths in adolescents will not only provide psychological dividends today (Park & Peterson, 2006) but also tomorrow.

Chaplin et al. (2010) are especially interested in social role stereotyping. Using a clever collage methodology as a projective, where adolescents were asked to describe a cool and quiet kid in any way they wished using a set of labels/pictures and placing them on their collage boards, the researchers found that happy adolescents, compared to their less happy counterparts, held more positive stereotypes of others. They also found that happier adolescents were less likely to form impressions of others based on superficial characteristics such as the products they own and brands they wear. Finally, happy adolescents tended to be more flexible in their views of others compared to their less happy counterparts. Chaplin et al.’s study reminds us that researchers should continue to examine happiness not just as a dependent variable but as an independent variable, too, and that happiness is an important variable underlying adolescents’ harmful stereotypical behavior.

Schmid et al. (2011) are interested in the role of hope for one’s future and intentional self-regulation skills, which involves selecting goals (S), optimizing resources to achieve goals (O), and compensating when original goals are blocked (C), in predicting positive and negative outcomes across the development of adolescence. Using data from 1273 adolescents in grades 7, 8, and 9 from the 4-H Study of positive youth development (PYD), Schmid et al. found that hopeful future and SOC predicted membership in the most favorable trajectories of PYD (i.e., competence, confidence, connection, character, and caring), contribution (i.e., leadership, service, helping, and ideology), and depressive symptoms, when controlling for sex and mother’s education. These findings suggest that researchers interested in the processes involved in thriving in youth should include assessments of self-regulation measured by scales such as SOC as well as the emotional and cognitive characteristics that help one use these skills (e.g., hopeful future).

Bundick (2011) invites us to consider the importance of extracurricular participation and positive development in adolescence. Using a longitudinal design with follow-up being 2 years later, he found that student leadership was positively related with purpose in life and the belief that one is on the path to a hopeful future. Further, volunteering was related to life satisfaction and an omnibus measure of PYD. Participation in the creative arts, however, was negatively associated with purpose in life. Knowing that life typically unfolds as interactions and not simple bivariate relations, Bundick then proceeded to examine perceived personal meaningfulness in the extracurricular domain as a moderator. He unexpectedly found that participation in the activity domain was generally on average more likely to lead to later positive development when the perceived meaningfulness of that domain was relatively low. This article suggests that policy makers and educational administrators should strive to give youth more opportunities to participate in leadership positions and volunteerism as this might give them the rudders to find greater purposefulness in their lives.

Richards and Huppert (2011) conduct, what I think is, one of the most ambitious studies on positive well-being in children to date. Analyzing data from the British 1946 birth cohort study, a longitudinal study that began with 5362 teens and ended most recently with 3035 people in 1999 at age 53 years, the researchers found that children who were rated by teachers as being ‘positive’ at ages 13 or 15 years were significantly more likely than those who received no positive ratings to report satisfaction with their work in midlife, have regular contact with friends and family, and engage in regular social activities. Positive children were also much less likely to have a mental health problem throughout their lives. These findings suggest that childhood well-being predicts positive adult well-being and not merely the absence of ill-being.

Finally, from what I have seen, special issues typically do not end with a commentary. But Huebner and Hills (2011) provide a thought-provoking article on the studies in this special issue that is worth considering. They maintain that positive psychology has legs for children – but that they are moving slowly. They therefore offer advice on how to best apply the findings from positive psychology to the setting where children spend a lot of their time: schools. Huebner and Hills (2011) convincingly argue that scholars and practitioners need to develop collaborative relationships in order for positive psychology to become infused into traditional school psychology practices.
It is only with the development of such relationships that the research–practice gap will narrow.

The seven articles contained in this volume add important pieces to the burgeoning field of positive youth psychology. As these studies suggest, it is important to not just study what is wrong with youth but to study what is right as well. While the findings presented in this volume might not explain why James worked on a puzzle for 8 hours straight while singing ‘You’re a Mean One, Mr. Grinch’, they do help to consider how this characteristic, along with others, might matter in his future. They suggest, in particular, that if his character strengths are nurtured in his formative years that he will likely be a happy youngster (Gillham et al., 2011) who is competent in social judgments (Chaplin et al., 2010) and has good school attendance, grades, and math skills (Suldo et al., 2011). He may even be a happy, productive, and satisfied adult (Richards & Huppert, 2011). I hope that this Special Issue motivates people to give research in positive youth psychology the attention it deserves, as the benefits will only compound over the years. And this is something that will help us all, young and old, have more faith in the future.

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References


