



The Sources of Happiness in Preadolescence and Adolescence: A Multi-Method and Multi-Informant Perspective

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Abstract

Research on happiness in preadolescence and adolescence has been limited regarding the sources of happiness. The present study aims to explore such sources in preadolescents and adolescents through a multi-method and multi-informant approach. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 77 family triads: children (age range: 11–19; $M=13.90$, $SD=2.70$; 61% female), mothers ($M=47.50$, $SD=4.35$), and fathers ($M=50.53$, $SD=5.30$). The triads were asked to define happiness from children's perspective, describe what makes children happy, and indicate children's levels of happiness. Using quantitative data, preadolescents exhibited higher individual happiness levels than adolescents, and fathers reported higher levels of children's happiness than mothers. Through Thematic Analysis, five primary sources of happiness emerged: *Social relationships*, *Family relationships*, *Personal interests*, *Achievement*, and *Entertainment*. *Social relationships* was the most recurring theme across the narratives of both preadolescents/adolescents and parents. The second most recurring theme was *Personal interests* for preadolescents/adolescents and *Family relationships* for parents. Parents notably more frequently mentioned *Achievement* than children. Males displayed a higher propensity to report the *Entertainment* theme than females, while females reported the *Family relationships* and *Social relationships* themes more frequently. Preadolescents exhibited a higher occurrence of the *Entertainment* and *Family relationships* themes than adolescents. Regarding the concordance of themes between children and their parents, low overall levels of agreement were observed, all below 40%. The highest levels of concordance were found between mothers and fathers rather than between parents and children. The results could provide valuable insights to parents and educators on how to help youth promote their happiness.

Keywords Happiness · Preadolescent · Adolescent · Parents · Multi-informant

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1 Introduction

Happiness is one of the main themes explored within the theoretical framework of Positive Psychology (Seligman et al., 2005). In psychological literature, the exploration of happiness has predominantly followed two distinct approaches. The first approach views happiness as synonymous with Subjective Well-Being (SWB) and aligns closely with a hedonistic interpretation of happiness, prioritizing the maximization of pleasure in the present moment (Venhoeven et al., 2013). Within this conceptual framework, happiness is understood as a multidimensional construct characterized by high levels of life satisfaction, frequent positive emotions, and a relative absence of negative affect (Diener et al., 2018; Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

The second approach examines happiness as related to Psychological Well-Being (PWB). According to this perspective, the concept of happiness draws upon Aristotle's notion of "eudaimonia", which defines happiness as self-realization and personal growth (Deci & Ryan, 2008). Using a bottom-up approach, the current study specifically focuses on the affective aspect of happiness and psychological well-being, investigating the perceptions of happiness held by preadolescents and adolescents, considering both hedonic and eudaimonic approaches.

During the past two decades, research on happiness in the developmental age has received growing attention from the scientific community (Holder, 2012). The scientific literature on happiness in preadolescence and adolescence has focused mainly on the different variables associated with this construct (Izzo et al., 2022; McKnight et al., 2002; Proctor et al., 2009), conferring less relevance to the definitions of happiness, the sources of happiness, and the differences between children and their parents. The present study aims to fill the literature gaps and explore preadolescents' and adolescents' conceptions of happiness and potential happiness sources through a multi-method (qualitative and quantitative measures) and multi-informant approach (children's, mothers' and fathers' perspectives).

Previous studies had shown that preadolescents and adolescents defined their emotional state as happy when they spent time with friends, felt romantically connected with someone, had more leisure time, achieved successes in hobbies and school, and felt free to engage in flow activities that made them feel alive and proud, amplifying their abilities and self-confidence (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012, 2014). In contrast, family problems, poor friendships, school-related factors (such as performing obligatory activities like homework), and feelings of loneliness reduced happiness levels (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003; Navarro et al., 2017). In particular, loneliness is defined as an undesirable emotional state resulting from unmet social needs and a lack of emotional connections (Asher & Paquette, 2003) and has a significant impact on the mental health and happiness of children and adolescents (Baiocco et al., 2019; Ercegovac et al., 2021). For these reasons, examining loneliness together with happiness can provide a better understanding of the factors influencing psychological and social well-being, and can guide efforts to improve people's quality of life.

Most studies have identified specific categories of happiness sources for preadolescents and adolescents, such as having good self-esteem and being optimistic (Furnham & Cheng, 2000), having a positive family (Freire et al., 2013; Navarro et

al., 2017) and friendship relationships (Giacomoni et al., 2014; Thoilliez, 2011), feeling safe and secure at school (López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018; Sargeant, 2010), pursuit achievements (Chaplin, 2009; López-Pérez et al., 2016), having leisure and hobbies and engaging in sports activities (Chaplin, 2009; Eloff, 2008; Izzo et al., 2022).

Previous studies have shown that having good family relationships significantly predicted happiness and life satisfaction in elementary to high school (Izzo et al., 2022; Park, 2005; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2013). Differently from the importance of relationships with friends, which would seem to remain constant over time (Goldbeck et al., 2007), the importance of relationships within the family changes depending on age, with a decrease in importance with increasing age (Navarro et al., 2017; Sargeant, 2010). The study by González-Carrasco et al. (2019) highlighted that children and adolescents with higher levels of SWB more frequently emphasized the importance of receiving support from parents, whereas those with lower levels of SWB highlighted the negative impact on well-being resulting from not having anyone in the family to turn to for help when needed. Furthermore, compared to children and preadolescents who define happiness primarily based on relationships with their parents, adolescents report growing importance of relationships with peers and conceptualize happiness in terms of close relationships with peers and friends (López-Pérez et al., 2016; Thoilliez, 2011).

School is another vital socializing agent in youth's lives after the family and is where students spend much of their time (López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018; Simons-Morton et al., 1999). Previous studies have shown that students' perceptions of their academic achievements (Thoilliez, 2011), teacher support, and school satisfaction strongly correlate with overall happiness (Gilman & Huebner, 2006; González-Carrasco et al., 2019; Park, 2005; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). In addition, good teacher-student relationships and higher student engagement in school activities (Csikszentmihalyi & Hunter, 2003) strongly predict students' happiness (Bennefield, 2018; López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018). However, problems in the school context contribute to decreased happiness and well-being at all ages, showing how students' perceptions of the educational system are related to feelings of dissatisfaction, pressure, and stress (Casas et al., 2012; Navarro et al., 2017). Again, relationship quality and satisfaction in the family and school-related contexts decreased between ages 11 and 16 (Casas et al., 2007; Goldbeck et al., 2007; Park, 2005).

Friendship represents a protective factor against adversity that may arise in the family or school context and is one of the most important aspects of happiness from childhood to adolescence (Thoilliez, 2011). Previous studies have shown that secure social relationships were a primary factor in preadolescents' and adolescents' happiness (Chaplin, 2009; Freire et al., 2013; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012). Key aspects related to friendship relationships reported by adolescents are receiving affection, help, support, and having fun with their friends, including playful and recreational activities (Izzo et al., 2022; Navarro et al., 2017).

Generally, the decrease in happiness during adolescence should be considered a normal developmental phenomenon due to the multiple challenges adolescents experience during their transition from childhood to adulthood (Bisegger et al., 2005; Goldbeck et al., 2007; Steinberg, 2005). The only domain in which there was a slight

increase with age was satisfaction with partnership/sexuality, which, however, cannot compensate for the decline in adolescents' satisfaction in almost all life domains (Goldbeck et al., 2007). However, it is interesting to point out that in preadolescence, there was a shift from hobbies to material aspects, whereas, in adolescence, there was a shift away from material possessions, as adolescents were happier through experiences and achievements (Chaplin, 2009; Chaplin et al., 2020).

In addition to the decline in happiness with increasing age, the scientific literature has pointed out the significant role of gender (Casas & González-Carrasco, 2019). Some authors found that the decline in levels of SWB would appear to be more pronounced and longer for girls (Bennefield, 2018; Goldbeck et al., 2007; González-Carrasco et al., 2017). A possible explanation could be that girls in Western society face more dramatic physical changes during puberty and conflict with exaggerated cultural norms of beauty (Bisegger et al., 2005; Goldbeck et al., 2007). Other studies have found no significant gender differences in the happiness level using quantitative methods (Ercegovic et al., 2021; López-Pérez et al., 2016; López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012).

Research has also shown gender differences in the different life domains of adolescents, where girls scored higher on family satisfaction and satisfaction related to learning than boys, who scored higher on satisfaction with friends and physical activities (Casas et al., 2007). When asked about aspects that would make them happier, more often than boys, girls wanted more friends, better appearance, and success in school. On the other hand, boys preferred to have more free time, success in a hobby, and money (Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012, 2014).

Some studies found that females seemed more focused on relational and emotional sources of well-being, emphasizing positive feelings of happiness in their definitions, compared to males, who mentioned more leisure activities, sports, and play (Businaro et al., 2015; Chaplin, 2009; Giacomoni et al., 2014). Males believed that better socioeconomic conditions and personal advantages (high level of education, higher intelligence, and better physical appearance) were the most important causes of happiness, compared to females who believed more in social support and high self-esteem (Furnham & Cheng, 2000).

However, regarding happiness levels, the literature presents ambiguous results. Several studies find that males are happier than females (Bennefield, 2018; Kaye-Tzadok et al., 2017; Weaver & Habibov, 2010), while other studies report the opposite outcome (Booker et al., 2018; Casas et al., 2013; Gross-Manos et al., 2015). Meanwhile, some studies have found no gender differences in happiness levels (Chui & Wong, 2016; López-Pérez et al., 2016; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2013; Verrastro et al., 2020).

Again, the literature focused on the happiness perception of youths and their parents. Parents remain an essential and reliable source of information in assessing their children's happiness (Holder & Coleman, 2009). Although studies have shown positive correlations between parents' and adolescents' SWB (Ben-Zur, 2003), the concordance was very low when comparing parents' and children's responses (Verrastro et al., 2020). The study by Casas and collaborators (2007) showed little correlation between parents' responses and those of their children aged 12 to 16 in the different domains of life. Furthermore, a recent study focused on children showed a disagreement in the concepts and the levels

of happiness between parents and children (Izzo et al., 2024). These findings strengthen the idea that generational differences may exist in parents' and children's perspectives and that further research is needed to identify sources of happiness for adolescents better (Shek, 2001). The scientific literature has shown that when parents must assess their children's happiness, they make two types of mistakes: (1) they use their happiness levels as an anchor to assess their children's happiness (egocentric bias; López-Pérez & Wilson, 2015), (2) they tend to overestimate their children's happiness and underestimate the presence of negative emotions (positivity bias; Lagattuta et al., 2012). Parents may misinterpret or ignore what makes their children happy, and therefore, using only parents' reports could provide an incomplete or inaccurate view of their children's happiness (Chaplin, 2009). For this reason, more studies using multiple sources of information are mandatory to increase the reliability of measurements by cross-comparison of children's and parents' perspectives (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009).

1.1 The Present Study

The present study aims to fill the literature gaps and explore preadolescents' and adolescents' conceptions of happiness through a multi-method and multi-informant approach. Specifically, we explored how preadolescents and adolescents define happiness through qualitative and quantitative measures, highlighting possible age and gender differences. In addition, we investigated potential discrepancies between parents' and children's perspectives. To our knowledge, no study has explored conceptions and sources of happiness considering the perspectives of both preadolescents and adolescents and their parents: Integrating parents' perspectives could be an essential resource for a better understanding of youth conceptions of happiness.

Based on the literature reported previously, we hypothesized that: (1) preadolescents are significantly happier both in general and in different life contexts than adolescents (Goldbeck et al., 2007; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2014); (2) no gender differences emerge in preadolescents' and adolescents' levels of happiness (Ercegovic et al., 2021; Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012); (3) using qualitative data, the reported sources of happiness are likely to be family interactions (Freire et al., 2013; Thoilliez, 2011), relation with peers (Giacomoni et al., 2014; López-Pérez et al., 2016), moments of leisure and fun (Giacomoni et al., 2014; Navarro et al., 2017), and positive school-related experiences (Navarro et al., 2017; López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018); (4) using quantitative and qualitative data, parents report low concordance with the answers of their children regarding happiness (Casas et al., 2007).

2 Method

2.1 Procedures and Participants

A semi-structured interview, called "*Happiness Interview*", was constructed ad hoc by the research team to explore the happiness of preadolescents and adolescents in different life contexts (family, school, friends). The snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants. Specifically, families were recruited through online advertisements

of the research project and direct contacts, who were asked to identify other potential participants. The following inclusion criteria were adopted: (1) cohabitation of biological family members; (2) children aged between 11 and 19 years old; (3) Italian citizenship of all family members; (4) absence of disabilities or severe illnesses in both parents and adolescents.

Before data collection, parents provided informed consent, and the adolescents provided oral consent to participate in the research. Parents and adolescents completed separate questionnaires and were interviewed individually. Participation in the study was voluntary, and measures were taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity by eliminating sensitive information, such as names or city of residence, and using identification codes for data collection. Interviews were recorded (audio or video, with consent) and transcribed for analysis. The research protocols were approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Developmental and Social Psychology, Sapienza University of Rome, adhering to the guidelines of the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

The sample consisted of 77 preadolescents (11–13 years; $n=37$) and adolescents (14–19 years; $n=40$) aged between 11 and 19 years old ($M=13.90$, $SD=2.70$; 61% female), along with their mothers ($n=77$; age range 36–59; $M=47.50$, $SD=4.35$) and fathers ($n=77$; age range 36–64; $M=50.53$, $SD=5.30$). The participants resided predominantly in central Italy (71.4%), followed by southern Italy (22.1%) and the Islands (6.5%). Regarding socioeconomic status, most participants reported a middle-low (50.6%) or middle-high level (42.9%), with two families reporting a low socioeconomic status and three families describing their economic status as high. Regarding educational level, 44 mothers and 50 fathers reported having a middle school or high school diploma, and 25 mothers and 22 fathers reported possessing at least a bachelor's or master's degree. Finally, 8 mothers and 5 fathers indicated having a Ph.D. or post-graduate degree. On average, mothers reported a higher level of education compared to fathers. Detailed sociodemographic characteristics of adolescents and their parents are shown in Table 1.

2.2 Measure

The study used a multi-method and multi-informant approach, employing research methodologies of both qualitative (*Happiness Interview*) and quantitative (*Contextual Happiness Perception Scale*, *Faces Scale*, and *UCLA Loneliness Scale*) nature and taking multiple sources of information. Data were collected independently for adolescents, fathers, and mothers and analyzed separately for each family member.

In the field of research on happiness, employing a mixed-method approach to combine qualitative and quantitative data can provide a more comprehensive and in-depth understanding of the studied phenomenon. Within this methodology, we examined not solely the levels of happiness (quantitative approach) but also which aspects make preadolescents and adolescents happy (qualitative approach), yielding a deeper understanding of the contexts involved. The combined use of qualitative and quantitative methods can foster a greater diversity of perspectives in research, including subjective viewpoints and objective data (Lopez-Fernandez & Molina-Azorin, 2011).

Table 1 Sample characteristics

		Preadolescents		Adolescents		Total	
		<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender	Male	14	18.2	16	20.8	30	39.0
	Female	23	29.9	24	31.1	47	61.0
Residence	Central Italy	24	31.1	31	40.3	55	71.4
	Southern Italy	10	13.0	7	9.1	17	22.1
	Islands	3	3.9	2	2.6	5	6.5
Socio-economic status	Low	1	1.3	1	1.3	2	2.6
	Middle-low	16	20.7	23	29.9	39	50.6
	Middle-high	18	23.4	15	19.5	33	42.9
	High	2	2.6	1	1.3	3	3.9
Education level mother	Middle School	3	3.9	9	11.7	12	15.6
	High School	14	18.2	18	23.4	32	41.6
	Bachelor's Degree	2	2.6	1	1.3	3	3.9
	Master's Degree	15	19.5	7	9.1	22	28.6
	Post-graduate	3	3.9	5	6.5	8	10.4
Education level father	Middle School	6	7.8	11	14.3	17	22.1
	High School	16	20.7	17	22.2	33	42.9
	Bachelor's Degree	4	5.2	1	1.3	5	6.5
	Master's Degree	7	9.1	10	13.0	17	22.1
	Post-graduate	4	5.2	1	1.3	5	6.5

Happiness Interview. Considering the complexity of the topic, an interview was structured for the present research to investigate the happiness of preadolescents and adolescents in different life contexts. The research team drew on the qualitative protocol of the Friends and Family Interview (FFI; Psouni et al., 2020; Steele & Steele, 2005) and the systematic review by Izzo and colleagues (2022) to create the interview. The interview protocol encompassed five areas of adolescent happiness considering both the perspectives of the adolescents themselves and their parents: (1) The *Self* area explores individual happiness in adolescents, delving into their subjective levels of happiness, the factors contributing to their happiness, and the nature of their happy moments shared with their parents (e.g., “*Can you tell me what was the happiest moment you experienced with your mother/father, specifically when you were alone with her/him?*”); (2) The *Family* area explores the level of happiness within the family context and the subjective perception of familial happiness by adolescents (e.g., “*Thinking about your whole family, how happy do you think your family is?*”); (3) The *School* area investigates adolescents’ happiness within the school context (e.g., “*Compared to other adolescents you know, how happy do you think you are at school? Happier, equally happy, or less happy than others?*”); (4) The *Friends* area examines adolescents’ happiness in the context of peer relationships and friendships (e.g., “*Could you describe the happiest moment you have had with your friends?*”); (5) The *Future* area explores adolescents’ expectations of future happiness and their perceptions of what will make them happy as adults (e.g., “*Thinking about when you grow up, not as a teenager but as an adult, what do you think will make you happy? What things will make you a happy adult?*”).

The *Self* area was explicitly investigated for the present study, focusing on the factors that elicit happiness in preadolescents and adolescents. For instance, participants were asked questions such as “*What is happiness for you? What makes you happy?*”. Similarly, parents were prompted to express their understanding of happiness and identify the key factors that truly make their son/daughter happy. An example question posed to parents was: “*In your opinion, what is happiness for your daughter/son? What makes your daughter/son happy?*”. Moreover, the study explored the parents’ capacity to empathize with their child’s perspective by asking, “*What might your son/daughter answer to this question?*”

Contextual Happiness Perception Scale (CHPS; Baiocco et al., 2019). To enhance a more profound knowledge about contextual happiness in preadolescents and adolescents, based on the questions of the *Happiness Interview*, we asked only preadolescents and adolescents three questions to assess adolescents’ happiness levels in different contexts. Participants were asked to rate their affective happiness with their family (“*How happy are you with your family?*”), happiness at school (“*How happy do you think you are at school?*”) and happiness in their friendships (“*How happy do you think you are with your friends?*”). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very much). Higher scores indicate a higher level of happiness. The Cronbach’s alpha for these three questions was 0.69.

Faces Scale (FS; Holder & Coleman, 2009). The level of happiness in preadolescents and adolescents was assessed using a single-item *Faces Scale*. This scale employed a seven-point Likert scale featuring graphic representations of stylized faces displaying varying levels of emotional expression. Participants were asked to choose the face that best represented their current emotional state, ranging from very low (absence of happiness, represented by a very down-turned mouth) to very high (high level of happiness, represented by a very up-turned mouth). The *Faces Scale* was also administered to parents to gauge their perception of their children’s happiness. Utilizing this scale with parents is a reliable measure, considering the importance of gathering information from multiple sources to enhance reliability through cross-source comparisons (Schneider & Schimmack, 2009). Previous research highlighted that the *Faces Scale* was a valid and reliable measure to assess happiness and was commonly used with young people’s samples (e.g., Abdel-Khalek, 2006; Holder & Coleman, 2009; Otsuka et al., 2020; Swinyard et al., 2001; Verrastro et al., 2020).

UCLA Loneliness Scale (ULS; Russell, 1996). The *UCLA Loneliness Scale*, consisting of 20 items, was utilized to assess individuals’ overall level of loneliness. A shorter version comprising five items (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007) was employed for the present research. Only preadolescents and adolescents rated the frequency of their feelings of loneliness on a 4-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (Never) to 4 (Always). Sample items included, “How often did you feel that there was no one to turn to?” The internal consistency of this scale, as indicated by Cronbach’s alpha, was 0.81.

2.3 Data Analysis

Paired-sample *t*-tests were conducted to evaluate potential differences between the perceptions of children and their parents on children’s happiness. Furthermore, age and gender variations in the level of happiness within different life contexts were ana-

lyzed using analysis of variance (ANOVA). Interviews were analyzed with a qualitative approach, systematically reading, reflecting upon, and decoding the collected data to generate themes.

Specifically, the interview transcripts were analyzed using *Thematic Analysis* (TA; Braun & Clarke, 2006), a qualitative analysis method used to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. TA allows open and axial coding and comprises several steps: In the initial step, three independent coders (first author, second author, and third author) extracted a set of themes from the transcripts, which were subsequently discussed in a collaborative session. Next, the labels for the various thematic structures were defined based on the existing literature and through discussions with other research team members. Finally, the final thematic structure was organized into a table containing the identified themes and subthemes. Kappa coefficients (κ ; Cohen, 1960) were calculated to assess the agreement among raters regarding the coding of sources of happiness in preadolescents and adolescents from parents' and adolescents' perspectives. Chi-square analyses were conducted to examine potential differences in the frequency of emerging themes based on the adolescents' age and gender.

3 Results

3.1 Quantitative Analysis

Correlations between the main variables were examined. Significant negative correlations were observed between age and all dimensions of happiness, whereas positive correlations were found between age and loneliness. Data suggested that as youths get old, they tend to report lower levels of happiness and higher levels of loneliness. As expected, a significant positive correlation exists between overall happiness among preadolescents/adolescents and their happiness levels across various life domains. Finally, the results suggest that preadolescents/adolescents who exhibit more significant levels of general happiness and happiness across various contexts tend to report lower levels of loneliness. These correlations are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Correlation matrix

	Children Age	FS _C	FS _M	FS _F	CHPS	ULS
Children Age	—					
FS _C	-0.35**	—				
FS _M	-0.24*	0.22	—			
FS _F	-0.33**	0.19	0.63***	—		
CHPS	-0.45***	0.54***	0.23*	0.18	—	
ULS	0.45***	-0.50***	-0.21	-0.21	-0.39***	—

Note * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$; FS_C = Faces Scale – Children version; FS_M = Faces Scale – Mother version; FS_F = Faces Scale – Father version; CHPS = Contextual Happiness Perception Scale; ULS = UCLA Loneliness Scale

Subsequently, an analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to assess differences between preadolescents and adolescents in terms of their levels of individual happiness. This analysis encompassed self-report data obtained directly from the participants and reports provided by their mothers and fathers. Two additional ANOVAs explored the variations between preadolescents and adolescents on self-reported assessments of contextual happiness perception and perceived loneliness (Table 3). Preadolescents exhibited higher levels of individual happiness (*Faces Scale*) than adolescents. This was evident through the examination of self-reported data from children, $F(1, 75) = 7.87, p = .006$, as well as reports from their mothers, $F(1, 75) = 6.58, p = .012$, and fathers, $F(1, 75) = 12.2, p < .001$. Furthermore, preadolescents reported higher overall happiness levels (*Contextual Happiness Perception Scale*) in school, family, and social settings than adolescents, $F(1, 75) = 12.6, p < .001$. Conversely, adolescents tend to report higher levels of loneliness than preadolescents, $F(1, 75) = 18.7, p < .001$.

Finally, a series of ANOVAs were performed to investigate potential gender differences in individual happiness, as reported by children, $F(1, 75) = 1.50, p = .224$, mothers, $F(1, 75) = 0.304, p = .583$, and fathers, $F(1, 75) = 0.376, p = .542$, as well as *Contextual Happiness Perception Scale*, $F(1, 75) = 0.749, p = .390$, and loneliness, $F(1, 75) = 0.087, p = .768$. However, the results revealed no significant variations between boys and girls across these measures (Table 3).

3.2 Thematic Analysis

Using the method of *Thematic Analysis* (Braun & Clarke, 2006), five themes emerged to describe aspects of happiness reported by participants. Table 4 presents a comprehensive overview of the main themes and their frequencies. The first theme was *Social relationships* and included joy, well-being, and tranquility associated with spending time with people outside the family unit. It includes four sub-themes: *Interpersonal engagement*, referring to the happiness experienced through interacting with people outside the family, friends, and romantic relationships, *Friendship*, indicating the happiness derived from spending time with friends, *School-based relationship*, highlighting the happiness derived from engaging in school-related interactions, *Romantic relationship*, signifying the happiness derived from spending quality time with one's romantic partner.

The second theme was labeled *Family relationships* and included well-being, tranquility, or general joy related to spending time with family members. The third theme was *Personal interests* and related to happiness derived from engaging in personal passions and interests. It comprised two sub-themes: *Sports*, indicating the happiness experienced through participating in sports or physical activities, and *Recreational activities*, denoting the happiness derived from less-structured activities, such as dancing or playing a musical instrument. The fourth theme, *Achievements*, pertained to happiness associated with accomplishing personal goals and attaining desired outcomes. It included two sub-themes: *Academic achievements*, highlighting the happiness derived from achieving high grades or academic success, and *Personal achievements*, referring to the happiness derived from personal success and achieving non-academic accomplishments (i.e., winning a sports trophy). The last theme

Table 3 ANOVAs

		Group	<i>n</i>	Mean (SD)	SE	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Age differences							
FS	FS _C	1 _a	37	5.95(0.97)	0.16	7.87	0.006
		2 _a	40	5.33(0.97)	0.15		
	FS _M	1 _a	37	5.68(0.88)	0.15	6.58	0.012
		2 _a	40	5.13(0.99)	0.16		
	FS _F	1 _a	37	5.95(0.74)	0.12	12.20	<0.001
		2 _a	40	5.25(0.98)	0.16		
CHPS	Children	1 _a	37	11.8(1.91)	0.31	12.60	<0.001
		2 _a	40	10.3(1.83)	0.29		
ULS	Children	1 _a	37	9.57(3.01)	0.49	18.70	<0.001
		2 _a	40	12.68(3.28)	0.52		
Gender differences							
FS	FS _C	1 _b	30	5.80(1.06)	0.19	1.50	0.224
		2 _b	47	5.51(0.97)	0.14		
	FS _M	1 _b	30	5.47(0.90)	0.16	0.30	0.583
		2 _b	47	5.34(1.03)	0.15		
	FS _F	1 _b	30	5.67(0.88)	0.16	0.38	0.542
		2 _b	47	5.53(0.97)	0.14		
CHPS	Children	1 _b	30	11.3(2.28)	0.42	0.75	0.390
		2 _b	47	10.9(1.82)	0.27		
ULS	Children	1 _b	30	11.0(3.22)	0.59	0.09	0.768
		2 _b	47	11.3(3.70)	0.54		

Note Preadolescents represented Group 1_a; Adolescents represented Group 2_a; Male represented Group 1_b; Female represented Group 2_b; FS_C = Faces Scale – Children version; FS_M = Faces Scale – Mother version; FS_F = Faces Scale – Father version; CHPS = Contextual Happiness Perception Scale; ULS = UCLA Loneliness Scale

Table 4 Main theme and frequencies

Theme	Participant	Age frequencies		Gender frequencies		Total
		Preadolescent	Adolescent	Male	Female	
Social relationships	Children	27	35	22	40	62
	Mothers	21	23	15	29	44
	Fathers	18	23	13	28	41
Family relationships	Children	18	10	7	21	28
	Mothers	24	20	19	25	44
	Fathers	20	18	16	22	38
Personal interests	Children	20	15	16	19	35
	Mothers	16	10	8	18	26
	Fathers	14	12	12	14	26
Achievements	Children	4	12	9	7	16
	Mothers	10	17	8	19	27
	Fathers	14	17	9	22	31
Entertainment	Children	16	5	13	8	21
	Mothers	8	5	4	9	13
	Fathers	12	3	7	8	15

was *Entertainment*, encompassing aspects of happiness linked to playfulness, humor, and enjoyment.

Table 5 provides the thematic structure, including representative quotations and frequencies of sub-themes. In the frequency column, the total occurrences for each sub-theme by children, mothers, and fathers have been reported. Additionally, for all participants, the number of females and the number of adolescents who reported the different sub-themes are provided. It is important to emphasize that the frequencies do not correspond to the number of participants because neither the themes nor the sub-themes are mutually exclusive. Specifically, given the complexity of the questions, participants might have identified multiple themes while responding to a single question. Therefore, in some cases, we codified the same participant in more than one sub-theme involved in a macro-theme. Furthermore, to evaluate the agreement between the coders, kappa coefficients were computed for each emerging theme based on the participants' responses. The degree of agreement ranged from excellent ($\kappa=0.86$) to perfect ($\kappa=1.00$). The indices of the agreement are summarized in the supplementary material.

3.2.1 Social Relationships

The first theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts with pre-adolescents/adolescents and their parents is the *Social relationships* theme concerning social interactions with people outside the family. Overall, this theme represents the most frequently reported from parents' and preadolescents'/adolescents' perspectives, irrespective of preadolescents'/adolescents' age or gender. However, it is interesting to note that, according to fathers and mothers, social relationships appear to be more relevant for their daughters (mothers: $n=29$; fathers: $n=28$) compared to their sons (mothers: $n=15$; fathers: $n=13$) as a source of happiness. Moreover, even from the children's perspective, social interactions are more important for females (females: $n=40$) than males (males: $n=22$).

The *Social relationships* theme encompasses four sub-themes: (1) *Interpersonal engagement*, (2) *Friendship*, (3) *School-based relationship*, (4) *Romantic relationship*. The *Interpersonal engagement* sub-theme contains relational aspects inherent in spending time with people outside the family, friendships, and romantic relationships. It involves sharing pleasant experiences, experiencing a state of harmony and alignment with another individual, and offering support and assistance to others. From the perspective of parents and children evoking this theme, happiness for preadolescents/adolescents is linked to interpersonal connections, acceptance within relationships, positive social experiences, harmonious relationships, engaging in pro-social behaviors, and alleviating feelings of loneliness.

I think [happiness] can rarely be something that is not shared. Even if it is an act that pertains to me alone, it feels as though I am compelled to share happiness with others or the world [...]. It's about believing in relationships despite the ups and downs and occasional doubts you may have in relationships. Feeling empathy and sharing deep emotions with others brings me immense happiness. (Adolescent female, 18 years old)

Table 5 Thematic structure, representative quotations, and frequencies of sub-themes

Theme	Sub-themes	Frequencies	Examples
Social relationships (<i>n</i> = 203) Females > Males	Friendship (<i>n</i> = 110)	Children (<i>n</i> = 42) F=25, A=21	Preadolescent: "When we talk to friends... Not about school, of course! This can be nice". Mother: "Happiness is when she is free to be alone with her friends".
		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 35) F=25, A=17	
		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 33) F=24, A=17	
	Interpersonal engagement (<i>n</i> = 48)	Children (<i>n</i> = 25) F=17, A=11	Adolescent: "I am happy when even those I love are happy first of all". Father: "He is happy when he sees others happy".
		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 11) F=8, A=3	
		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 12) F=8, A=8	
	School-based relationship (<i>n</i> = 25)	Children (<i>n</i> = 6) F=4, A=3	Adolescent: "It makes me feel good to go to class and be with my classmates". Father: "Do not have problems and worries at school".
		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 10) F=6, A=6	
		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 9) F=7, A=4	
	Romantic relationship (<i>n</i> = 20)	Children (<i>n</i> = 6) F=4, A=6	Adolescent: "Cuddling with my boyfriend". Mother: "Manage time with your boyfriend with as much serenity as possible".
		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 9) F=7, A=9	
		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 5) F=4, A=5	
Family relationships (<i>n</i> = 110) Females > Males Preadolescents > Adolescents		Children (<i>n</i> = 28) F=21, A=10	Preadolescent: "Love the people who live with you". Father: "To see that the rest of the family, me, mom, and little brother are happy".
		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 44) F=25, A=20	
		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 38) F=22, A=18	
Personal interests (<i>n</i> = 92) (No gender or group age differences)	Recreational activities (<i>n</i> = 64)	Children (<i>n</i> = 23) F=12, A=8	Preadolescent: "Many things make me happy, like drawing, reading a book... Then I like discussing the films I have seen". Father: "It makes him happy to be able to express his creativity in drawings".
		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 21) F=17, A=8	
		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 20) F=11, A=10	
	Sports (<i>n</i> = 28)	Children (<i>n</i> = 17) F=9, A=10	Adolescent: "Sport, as it is my passion that I have been cultivating for seventeen years". Mother: "He loves sports and playing football".
		Mothers (<i>n</i> = 5) F=1, A=2	
		Fathers (<i>n</i> = 6) F=3, A=1	

Table 5 (continued)

Theme	Sub-themes	Frequencies	Examples
Achievements (<i>n</i> = 88) Adolescents > Preadolescents	Personal achievements (<i>n</i> = 58)	Children (<i>n</i> = 10) F=3, A=8 Mothers (<i>n</i> = 23) F=17, A=14 Fathers (<i>n</i> = 25) F=17, A=12	Preadolescent: “It makes me happy when I can achieve some important goal”. Father: “Succeeding in what it aims to do”.
	Academic achievements (<i>n</i> = 30)	Children (<i>n</i> = 6) F=4, A=4 Mothers (<i>n</i> = 14) F=9, A=11 Fathers (<i>n</i> = 10) F=8, A=8	Adolescent: “Understanding a school topic”. Mother: “Realize his plans and matriculate at the university”.
Entertainment (<i>n</i> = 49) Males > Females Preadolescents > Adolescents		Children (<i>n</i> = 21) F=8, A=5 Mothers (<i>n</i> = 13) F=9, A=5 Fathers (<i>n</i> = 15) F=8, A=3	Adolescent: “It makes me happy to have fun more than anything else”. Mother: “For him to play the PlayStation. He is focused on playing the games”.

Note F = Females; A = Adolescents

I see that it is essential for her to spend time with peers, to be accepted by peers, and to have a group of people who seek her out. Beyond the love we, as parents, can give her, the relationship with peers is crucial for me in adolescence. She enjoys being helpful to others and being the center of attention, feeling loved and accepted primarily by her peers. I think having someone to support you gives you tranquility if not happiness. (Mother, 53 years old)

I believe she is still experiencing some confusion at this stage, which I believe is typical of adolescence. She currently associates happiness with getting along well with others experiencing love and reciprocation. It's not about materialistic concerns for her but rather about emotional and sentimental aspects. So, I imagine she finds happiness in the small everyday moments when she feels a sense of fulfillment and moral satisfaction. (Father, 54 years old)

The second sub-theme, *Friendship*, revolves around the happiness derived from spending time with friends, engaging in free outings, having fun, and playing together. For participants evoking this theme, friendship holds a fundamental emotional and affective role: Preadolescents/adolescents find happiness in feeling valued, accepted, integrated, appreciated, comforted, and loved by their friends and knowing they can count on them. As a 14-year-old female adolescent expressed, the friend group becomes like a second family. Similarly, a 61-year-old father emphasizes the emotional aspects that friendships bring forth:

I am very close to my friends because they are like family. My group of friends [brings me happiness], especially my best friend. (Female adolescent, 14 years old)

[For her, happiness lies in] having friends, being connected with others [...], being accepted by them, being in the company of friends, and feeling well, I believe. [...] [What makes her happy is] to feel accepted... this is very important for her... to not feel guilty for something terrible she may have done towards others. (Father, 61 years old)

The third sub-theme, *School-based relationship*, focuses on various relational moments within the school environment with schoolmates. Participants referring to this theme emphasize that attending school allows preadolescents/adolescents to engage with their classmates and experience a sense of acceptance and belonging.

I feel very good at school. I am convinced that this is something that makes me happy. (Female adolescent, 14 years old)

Although she may not be head over heels for school, I think that school has something to do with her happiness. She still likes to attend school. Without school, I don't think she would be happy. It is an essential thing for her. I do not know, and I think that friendship and school [contribute to her overall happiness]. (Mother, 43 years old)

[Happiness for my daughter is] engaging in fellowship with schoolmates and not having problems at school. In short, in my opinion, [it entails] being eventually accepted and loved by everyone. (Father, 45 years old)

Finally, the last sub-theme, *Romantic relationship*, focuses on adolescents' romantic relationships with their partners. Although the information provided by parents and adolescents regarding this topic is somewhat limited, the available information substantiates the notion that adolescence represents a critical developmental stage characterized by exploring and nurturing romantic bonds. Notably, no instances of this subtheme were mentioned in transcripts involving preadolescents, as indicated by the absence of references. Conversely, the emergence of this subtheme was exclusively evident in conversations specifically focused on female adolescents (adolescents: 4 females out of 6; mothers: 7 daughters out of 9; fathers: 4 daughters out of 5).

The following examples show two cases where a 15-year-old male adolescent reports that his happiness is related to his relationship with his girlfriend, and a 54-year-old father reports that what makes his son happy is his authentic connection with his girlfriend:

[Happiness] could be a person who makes you happy, [...] that is, in my case, it's truly a person, my girlfriend. It may sound obvious or overly sweet, but I swear it's true. She is the person who makes me completely happy, and if I am happy today, it's solely because of her. Happiness allows you to see the world

from a different perspective, helping you better deal with life's challenges and difficulties. (Male adolescent, 15 years old)

In my opinion, currently, [happiness] is the relationship he has with his girlfriend, which appears to be a relationship that, although typically adolescent and therefore somewhat conflicted, is still authentic...in short, [a relationship] lived with much passion and a strong sense of self-identity. (Father, 54 years old)

3.2.2 Family Relationship

The second theme, *Family relationship*, includes the experience of happiness related to sharing moments with family and dwelling within a harmonious, secure, and genuine familial environment. It emerged as the second most prevalent theme reported by mothers ($n=44$) and fathers ($n=38$). However, from the perspective of preadolescents ($n=18$) and adolescents ($n=10$), *Family relationships* were identified as the third most commonly recurring theme. Moreover, females ($n=21$) reported family as a source of happiness more than males ($n=7$). The following excerpts from transcripts obtained from a 17-year-old female adolescent and a 55-year-old father serve as illustrative examples:

Happiness consists of living in a peaceful environment, having a sincere relationship with loved ones, and being free from hidden secrets. (Female adolescent, 17 years old)

For him, happiness is a state of tranquility. He needs stability in his surroundings and harmony and affection among family members ... I have seen that he feels comforted when there is this kind of atmosphere, and you can see it in his eyes. (Father, 55 years old)

The balance and agreement among family members is a topic that frequently emerged from the interviews. Participants reporting this theme perceived that for preadolescents/adolescents, happiness is intricately linked to harmony, family unity, and a sense of peace within the home environment. Conversely, conflict and lack of cohesion between family members can give rise to discomfort, eroding the serenity and harmonious atmosphere within the family unit. While some interviewees acknowledge the inevitability of occasional disagreements within the family context, it is noteworthy that a 12-year-old male preadolescent and a 55-year-old father specifically underscore the importance of resolving conflicts within the family as a means to enhance overall family well-being:

When, for example, my mother and father, or my brother and I, argue and then resolve everything: this is happiness. (Male preadolescent, 12 years old)

[Happiness for my son is] living in a, let's say, normal family with certain prin-

ciples... even [a family] with problems that can be resolved within the day... and so, for him, happiness is harmonious living and being happy within the family. (Father, 55 years old)

Within this theme, parents and preadolescents/adolescents report moments of physical affectionate interactions, such as hugging and cuddling, and emotional aspects, such as intimacy, sharing, and emotional support, as sources of happiness. Accordingly, a key factor contributing to the happiness of preadolescents and adolescents is a stable and secure family environment that instills love, acceptance, appreciation, comprehension, comfort, and support. From this perspective, this familial environment should refrain from hindering youth's growth while simultaneously acting as a valuable resource to tackle their challenges. For example, a 50-year-old mother emphasizes the importance of physical affection for her child's overall well-being, whereas a 48-year-old father focuses on the emotional dimensions involved in fostering a sense of being heard and supported within his child:

I think consistent affection within the family sphere and fulfilling some of his desires can lead to spoiling. However, consistent affection and physical affection are crucial for his stability. (Mother, 50 years old)

[For him, happiness lies in] feeling that he is peacefully growing up and is effectively addressing the challenges that come with his age... Sure, the problems may be there, but the overall experience of happiness derives from a sense of serenity, as he feels heard, understood, assisted, and supported. (Father, 48 years old)

Finally, leisure and recreational activities alongside family members represent a source of happiness for preadolescents and adolescents. Analysis of interview transcripts reveals several parent-child shared activities that evoke happiness in preadolescents and adolescents, including evenings spent together watching films, playing games, and family vacations. These moments of familial togetherness provide preadolescents/adolescents with opportunities for amusement and relaxation, enabling them to temporarily detach from everyday concerns and immerse themselves in care-free experiences.

Being with the important people, the family, or having fun and then also maybe in the little things, like in the evening watching movies altogether (Preadolescent female, 12 years old).

In my opinion, [my son] is very attached to the family, particularly in terms of seeking physical contact even with just the members of his family... for example, he is always very happy during our vacation periods when he has the opportunity to spend the entire day with us. [...] In my opinion, his happiness is greatly influenced by the close bond he shares with family members, spending time together, doing things together, going to the beach, swimming, playing computer games or board games together. In short, consciously dedicating

ourselves to him [contributes to his overall sense of happiness]. (Mother, 46 years old)

Indeed, during moments when we are all happy as a family, play together, and embark on trips. It is during these times that I think he is very happy. (Father, 46 years old)

3.2.3 Personal Interests

The third theme is *Personal interests*, which refers to the happiness of regularly engaging in structured activities. It emerged as the second most frequent theme after *Social relationships*. However, when examining the perspectives of mothers and fathers, *Personal interests* rank as the fourth most frequent theme. Mothers tend to evoke this theme more frequently when referring to their daughters ($n=18$) than their sons ($n=8$). Two sub-themes have emerged within this theme. The first one, labeled *Sports*, pertains to the happiness experienced through engagement in sporting activities:

I do rhythmic gymnastics...When I do sports, I have so much fun, and I enjoy the sport I play. (Female preadolescent, 11 years old)

I play volleyball and, after training. I finish at 11 pm and I go home and go for a jog, even though I'm tired. That, for me, is happiness. (Male adolescent, 18 years old)

Perhaps for him, happiness could be... [...] He loves sports and plays football. He enjoys watching the game and being able attend training sessions. (Mother, 48 years old)

What makes my daughter very happy, in my opinion, is the fact that she enjoys attending rhythmic gymnastics sessions. (Father, 48 years old)

The second sub-theme, *Recreational activities*, refers to happiness derived from other structured activities such as dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, reading, and drawing. Notably, when considering the perspective of the youth, preadolescents ($n=15$) more frequently mention engaging in recreational activities compared to adolescents ($n=8$):

Many things make me happy, such as drawing, and reading books. They make me very happy and sometimes I find myself talking and laughing to myself about books and things like that... and I really enjoy discussing the movies I've watched, even though I have seen very few of them. (Female preadolescent, 11 years old).

Listening to music... Drawing. (Male adolescent, 14 years old)

I think [my daughter's happiness] lies in traveling... she is always wandering around! (Mother, 46 years old)

[What makes him very happy is] being able to express his creativity in the drawings... he always tries to make things, even a little bit, to please us, meaning that he draws and then immediately comes to us to ask for feedback (Father, 42 years old).

3.2.4 Achievements

The fourth theme, *Achievements*, refers to the happiness derived from accomplishing goals, attaining results, or receiving rewards. While preadolescents/adolescents do not often associate happiness with aspects of *Achievements* ($n=16$), this theme is highly prevalent in the narratives of parents ($n=58$), who also attribute this theme more to daughters (fathers/daughters: $n=22$; mothers/daughters: $n=19$) than sons (fathers/sons: $n=9$; mothers/sons: $n=8$).

Two sub-themes have emerged within this theme. The first sub-theme is *Academic achievements*, which refers to the happiness derived from obtaining good grades, comprehending topics taught in class, choosing a university, and similar accomplishments. Notably, from the parents' perspective, the association between happiness and school achievement was more frequently observed among adolescents (mothers: $n=11$; fathers: $n=8$) than preadolescents (mothers: $n=3$; fathers: $n=2$).

It makes me happy to receive a good grade. (Male preadolescent, 11 years old)

That's a challenging question [...] Understanding a subject at school [brings me happiness]. (Female adolescent, 17 years old)

She is an inquisitive and exceptionally gifted child, [...] reasoning and learning, knowing, reading, and acquiring new knowledge are all a part of her happiness. (Mother, 48 years old)

Perhaps for him, given his age, [happiness lies in] achieving his goals as he gets closer to the university world. (Father, 52 years old)

The second sub-theme is labeled *Personal achievements* and refers to the happiness derived from accomplishments in sports, music, and personal endeavors. Notably, *Personal achievements* (preadolescents: $n=2$; adolescents: $n=8$; mothers: $n=23$; fathers: $n=25$) are reported more frequently compared to *Academic achievements* (preadolescents: $n=2$; adolescents: $n=4$; mothers: $n=14$; fathers: $n=10$).

[Happiness lies in] the satisfaction of accomplishing something important, leaving a lasting mark. This is what would bring me a sense of self-satisfaction. (Male adolescent, 14 years old)

[...] Surely, I often set goals for myself and manage to achieve them, which is something I struggle with due to my limited sense of discipline ... Being able to say, “I truly made it”, and seeing a clear path ahead. It’s one of the things that would make me feel happier at the individual level. (Female adolescent, 18 years old)

She is an enthusiastic person, so let’s say that many things make her happy. However, [happiness for her relies on] accomplishing things... succeeding in what she does. (Mother, 48 years old)

Indeed, happiness is primarily [derived from] achieving small dreams, the ideas he has. (Father, 51 years old)

3.2.5 Entertainment

The final theme that emerged was labeled *Entertainment* and pertains to the experience of happiness in the context of recreational engagement, encompassing activities such as play, amusement, and jesting, either in the presence of others, such as engaging in recreational activities with friends, or solitary contexts, such as engaging in video games. Noteworthy sub-themes were not identified. The frequencies of references to enjoyment were notably low for preadolescents/adolescents ($n=21$), mothers ($n=13$), and fathers ($n=15$). Generally, preadolescents ($n=16$) more frequently reported an association between happiness and enjoyment than adolescents ($n=5$). Similarly, fathers of preadolescents more frequently consider play and enjoyment as sources of happiness for their children ($n=12$) compared to fathers of adolescents ($n=3$). The following extracts from the interviews exemplify instances related to the *Entertainment* theme:

[Happiness is] having fun with my friends. (Male preadolescent, 11 years old)

For me, happiness is, for example, going out with my friends, laughing, and joking. (Female adolescent, 16 years old)

My daughter might say happiness is being with friends, spending time with them, playing together, and maybe not doing homework! (Mother, 43 years old)

For her, as a teenager, happiness currently means carefreeness, playing, and thinking about having fun. (Father, 40 years old)

3.3 Age and Gender Differences and Family Agreement Indices

As shown in Table 4, the most recurring theme across the narratives of both preadolescents/adolescents and parents was *Social relationships*. Specifically, the theme of

friendships emerged as the most prominent within this overarching theme. Next, the second most recurring theme for preadolescents/adolescents was *Personal interests*, whereas, for parents, it was *Family relationships*. The theme of “*Achievements*” was notably more frequently mentioned by parents than children.

Chi-square analyses were employed to examine potential gender differences in the frequencies of the different themes. The results, $\chi^2(4, n=162)=9.40, p=.05$, indicated that male preadolescents and adolescents displayed a higher propensity to report the *Entertainment* theme compared to females, while females tended to report the *Family relationships* and *Social relationships* themes more frequently. Conversely, no significant gender differences in theme frequencies were observed when considering the perspectives of mothers, $\chi^2(4, n=154)=1.96, p=.744$, and fathers, $\chi^2(4, n=151)=3.24, p=.519$.

Significant differences emerged in age, $\chi^2(4, n=162)=13.4, p=.009$: Adolescents tended to report the *Achievements* theme more frequently, while preadolescents exhibited a higher occurrence of the *Entertainment* and *Family relationships* themes than adolescents. Compared to preadolescents, who more frequently report the play aspect and the family as a source of happiness, adolescents more frequently report the achievement of academic and general goals as a source of happiness. There were no noteworthy disparities in theme frequencies based on age when considering the viewpoints of mothers, $\chi^2(4, n=154)=4.25, p=.374$, and fathers, $\chi^2(4, n=151)=6.40, p=.171$.

The presence or absence of different themes in triad responses was examined to assess the level of agreement within families regarding definitions of happiness. The agreement percentages were calculated between mother-child, father-child, mother-fathers, and the overall agreement within the mother-father-child triad. For instance, if the child responded with *Social relationships* and the mother responded with *Achievements*, it would be considered a disagreement. Generally, the agreement percentage between children and mothers was 32.7%; between children and fathers, it was 36.9%; between mothers and fathers, it was 38.4%; and within the triad, it was 34.8%. A Chi-square test was conducted to evaluate the differences in agreement based on the age or gender of the children. However, no significant differences in agreement were observed.

Using quantitative data, three paired-sample *t*-tests compared children's happiness levels to mothers' and fathers' evaluations (*Faces Scale*). There were no significant differences in scores for children's ($M=5.56, SD=0.98$) comparison with mothers ($M=5.39, SD=0.97; t(76)=-1.13, p=0.26$) and fathers ($M=5.58, SD=0.94; t(76)=0.18, p=0.86$). The fathers reported higher levels of children's happiness than the mothers' evaluation ($t(76)=-2.07, p=0.04$): Data suggest that mothers tend to underestimate their children's happiness relative to fathers. Finally, we did not find differences according to children's age (preadolescents vs. adolescents) and biological sex (girls vs. boys) between children's, mothers', and fathers' evaluations.

4 Discussion

The present study used qualitative and quantitative methodologies to explore the conceptions of happiness among preadolescents and adolescents. Using a bottom-up methodology, we classified the main themes considering both hedonic and eudaimonic perspectives. The study specifically examined what makes preadolescents and adolescents happy from the parents' and children's perspectives. In terms of quantitative measures, several results emerged from the current study. Firstly, when measuring average happiness levels in preadolescents and adolescents, it was found that preadolescents reported significantly higher levels of happiness and lower levels of loneliness than adolescents, supporting the first hypothesis. This finding is consistent with previous literature indicating that higher age groups experience less happiness and self-esteem and have more negative self-perceptions than other age groups (Baiocco et al., 2019; Verrastro et al., 2020).

Adolescence is a critical phase characterized by significant psychological changes in individuals. As a result, these changes can influence happiness and well-being, often accompanied by an increased perception of loneliness. Building relationships with peers is a developmental task during these life stages (Steinberg & Morris, 2001); lower levels of happiness may affect the social engagement of preadolescents and adolescents, thus leading to higher levels of perceived loneliness. With increasing age, there seems to be an increase in the sense of loneliness.

No gender differences were observed. This result is in line with the hypothesis and a substantial portion of the literature (Uusitalo-Malmivaara, 2012; Uusitalo-Malmivaara & Lehto, 2013; Verrastro et al., 2020), although the findings on this point are not entirely consistent (for significant gender differences in happiness levels, see Bennefield, 2018; Kaye-Tzadok et al., 2017; Leto et al., 2019). This ambiguity could be attributed to using different happiness measurement tools or contextual diversity, such as belonging to different cultural backgrounds.

In an exploratory way, the qualitative part of the present study investigated conceptions of happiness in preadolescence and adolescence. Confirming the third research hypothesis, when asked what makes preadolescents and adolescents happy, parents and children reported that sources of happiness were *Social relationships* (Eloff, 2008), *Family relationships* (Freire et al., 2013), *Personal interests* (Chaplin, 2009), *Achievements* (López-Pérez et al., 2016; López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018) and *Entertainment* (Giacomoni et al., 2014; Navarro et al., 2017). In line with the literature, preadolescents and adolescents conceptualize their happiness in relational and personal terms (Sargeant, 2010).

The results showed that the primary source of happiness was *Social relationships* from both parents' and preadolescents'/adolescents' perspectives. Numerous studies have shown that spending time with people outside the family, whether friends (Thoilliez, 2011), schoolmates (López-Pérez & Fernández-Castilla, 2018), or boy-friends/girlfriends (Navarro et al., 2017), was associated with higher levels of happiness of preadolescents and adolescents (Holder & Coleman, 2009). Peer relationships are essential in adolescence, providing social support and opportunities to share interests and joint activities (Cheng & Furnham, 2002). Moreover, friendship seems much

more critical during preadolescence and adolescence than during childhood (Bagwell et al., 2015; Pallini et al., 2014).

Although the family is less salient to adolescents' well-being than peer relationships, *Family relationships* represented the second theme that emerged from the parent's perspective and the third theme from the preadolescents' and adolescents' perspectives. Consistent with the literature, having good relationships with family represents an essential source of happiness in preadolescence and adolescence (Freire et al., 2013; Giacomoni et al., 2014; López-Pérez et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2017). Previous studies have found that spending more time with family and perceived higher levels of parental care, love, and emotional connection were associated with higher happiness levels in adolescents (Cheng & Furnham, 2004; Gray et al., 2013).

Living in a safe and secure family environment, where children feel cared for and at the same time are confident that their parents will provide them protection and security, was an essential aspect of well-being and happiness from childhood to adolescence (Fattore et al., 2009; Greco & Ison, 2014). On the other hand, family conflicts and lack of cohesion among family members reduced adolescents' happiness (Izzo et al., 2022; Navarro et al., 2017). In this sense, the family becomes the realm of emotional bonds where physical and emotional needs can be satisfied in a secure context (Fattore et al., 2009; Thoilliez, 2011). The present findings emphasize that family continues to be a key source of support in adolescence and emotional closeness among family members cannot be underestimated in transitioning from childhood to adolescence (Bennefield, 2018).

The *Personal Interests* theme emerged as the second most frequent theme for preadolescents and adolescents but the fourth from mothers' and fathers' perspectives. This theme has also been reported in other studies with different labels, such as hobbies (Chaplin, 2009), playing sports (Maftei et al., 2020; Sargeant, 2010), and recreation activities (Eloff, 2008; Greco & Ison, 2014). In the present study, *Personal interests* refer to the happiness derived from doing more or less structured activities that involve both engaging in sports (like playing a sport, swimming, riding a bike, running) and performing recreational activities (like singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, drawing and reading). Several studies have shown that performing recreational activities such as painting and drawing (Greco & Ison, 2014; Maftei et al., 2020), listening to music and playing an instrument (Sargeant, 2010), parties (Thoilliez, 2011) and holidays (Eloff, 2008) were associated with increased happiness in children and adolescents. In addition, increased physical activity and engagement in sports activities had beneficial effects on mental health and happiness levels in every age group (Zhang & Chen, 2019).

The theme of *Personal interests* can be considered from the dual perspective of hedonic and eudaimonic, as the subthemes within this category pertain to aspects related to competition. The eudaimonic perspective would encompass elements of engaging or interacting with others, which may not necessarily require achieving specific outcomes but would be adequate for a sense of personal fulfillment (Moen & Vittersø, 2015). On the other hand, the hedonic perspective would be more related to the pleasure and subjective well-being perceived in engaging in certain types of activities, such as listening to music or reading a book (Armbrrecht & Andersson, 2020).

Another theme from the transcripts was *Achievements*, which concerned happiness resulting from academic achievement (such as getting a high school grade) and personal success and non-academic achievement (such as personal and dream realization). Compared to the responses of preadolescents/adolescents and parents, achievements were a more important source of happiness than adolescents reported from parents. Previous studies support identifying achievement as a source of happiness (López-Pérez et al., 2016; Navarro et al., 2017) with greater relevance in late adolescence (Chaplin, 2009; Freire et al., 2013). Adolescents conceptualize happiness more sophisticatedly, using more abstract terms and identifying happiness as something to be achieved as a personal success (Thoilliez, 2011). The theme of *Achievements* was primarily contextualized in the eudaimonic perspective, considering the sense of fulfillment derived from the accomplishment of a personally significant goal (Deci & Ryan, 2008).

Finally, the last theme less frequently reported by parents' and preadolescents/adolescents' perspectives was *Entertainment*, which included happy experiences referring to the playful sphere, humor, and fun. The theme of *Entertainment* was primarily contextualized in the hedonic perspective, considering that the theme includes elements associated with sensory pleasure and enjoyable life experiences. This theme has also been found to be relevant in other studies (Eloff, 2008; Freire et al., 2013; Giacomoni et al., 2014; Navarro et al., 2017; Sargeant, 2010), although some research has found that leisure-time-related satisfaction and the importance of play declined significantly over time from childhood to adolescence (Chaplin, 2009; Goldbeck et al., 2007).

Adolescents reported experiencing greater intrinsic motivation, freedom, and happiness while engaging in leisure-time enjoyable activities (Kleiber et al., 1986), which had long-term effects on adolescents' psychological well-being, with decreased stress and increased life satisfaction (Shin & You, 2013). The process of growing up also leads to a change in the conception of play, which for children is mediated by material objects such as toys (Giacomoni et al., 2014), while in adolescence, it is more related to the social sphere of playing with friends or the private sphere of playing through technology (Eloff, 2008; Navarro et al., 2017).

Although there are no gender differences in happiness levels, significant differences exist concerning the sources of happiness. Chi-square tests conducted to explore differences between males and females regarding key themes revealed that for males, a central factor of happiness is having fun, while for females, it is interpersonal relationships, including general, romantic, and family relationships. This finding may be attributed to the fact that female preadolescents/adolescents, more than their male counterparts, tend to build more profound and interdependent relationships with peers and partners (Galambos, 2004; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). In other words, female preadolescents/adolescents appear to place greater importance on relationships compared to their male counterparts, while male preadolescents/adolescents consider leisure and playing essential for their happiness (Furnham & Cheng, 2000; Giacomoni et al., 2014; Maccoby, 1990). Therefore, social expectations may favor fun and recreational activities for males, which are associated with competition or leisure, while interpersonal and family relationships may be considered more important for females.

Regarding age, adolescents more frequently describe the theme of *Achievements* than preadolescents, who, on the other hand, describe relational aspects more often. This result may be driven by the fact that as individuals grow older, they approach a more structured construction of identity in terms of what they want to do and the path to achieve their goals, such as choosing a specific academic track, training extensively to attain the outcome of a particular sport, and so forth. In other words, adolescents may be more focused on personal achievements as they are in a developmental stage where significant psychophysical transitions drive them to seek individual fulfillment parallel to constructing their “career identity” (Maree, 2022; Meijers, 1998). On the other hand, preadolescents may be more centered on relational aspects since they are in a phase where the construction of their social identity and the development of interpersonal skills are central. This factor in preadolescents may be less structured, as their developmental tasks may primarily involve establishing peer groups and forming an identity outside of their family.

Finally, regarding the concordance of themes between preadolescents/adolescents and their parents, low overall levels of agreement were observed, all below 40%. The highest levels of concordance were found between mothers and fathers rather than between parents and children. A possible explanation may be that parents’ communication is more open when discussing their children compared to when they discuss what truly makes them happy. Furthermore, no significant differences were found between males and females and between preadolescents and adolescents, indicating that the disagreement among participants cuts across different subgroups.

However, it is essential to highlight that the nature of the happiness experience itself may also influence the low concordance of themes between preadolescents/adolescents and their parents. Happiness is a complex and subjective emotion that can vary significantly from individual to individual. Nonetheless, the finding remains relevant as understanding the discrepancy in sources of happiness between parents and children can help promote open communication and meaningful interaction between the parties, fostering a mutual understanding of different perspectives on happiness.

The results of the *t*-tests showed differences in the means of happiness levels only between mothers and fathers. Fathers reported significantly higher levels of happiness in their children compared to mothers. The findings indicate a trend of fathers overestimating their children’s happiness compared to mothers, regardless of the age and gender of the children. Findings could be explained by the fact that, in some cases, fathers may be less aware of the emotional nuances of their children or less inclined to recognize signs of sadness or distress compared to mothers. Mothers may be more involved in emotional expressions and intimate relationships with their children, contributing to greater awareness of their children’s emotions, irrespective of gender and age (Shek, 2001).

4.1 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Some limitations should be noted when interpreting the results of this study. Firstly, this study utilized a convenience non-probabilistic sample from Italy, which may not reflect families’ experiences in other cultural contexts. Secondly, the sample consisted of families with a mother, a father, and at least one child, which may limit the

generalizability of the results to other types of families, such as single-parent families or same-sex parent families. Thirdly, the data were cross-sectional and limited to families with children between 11 and 19. By employing a longitudinal design, future studies could provide insights into how happiness and its constituent elements may be crucial factors in the psychological development of preadolescents and adolescents.

Furthermore, this study explored what happiness meant to preadolescents and adolescents and their parents without including additional sources of information close to them, such as relatives, teachers, or friends, or considering different socio-ecological contexts such as the school environment and friendship network. Additionally, the CHPS instrument exhibits a low Cronbach's alpha. The diminished internal consistency implies that the items within this measure may not consistently assess the same underlying construct. This outcome necessitates caution in interpreting the results. However, the instrument has demonstrated potential that could be further explored in additional studies seeking to validate it. This could involve larger participant samples and more specific explorations of various life contexts for young individuals, potentially with an expanded set of items. Lastly, it is important to highlight as a limitation the relatively small sample size. It is crucial to note that the limited sample size could have constrained the generalizability of the results and the ability to detect more subtle differences or smaller effects. Future research endeavors with larger sample sizes could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of such relationships.

Despite the limitations, the findings described in this research are highly encouraging regarding the potential to investigate significant variables for optimal psychological development in preadolescents and adolescents, identifying variables that promote greater individual and social well-being. The age differences observed in the themes identified in this study can provide valuable insights into the priorities and interests of different age groups and can help guide interventions and strategies for socio-emotional development in youth.

Finally, future research could further explore the factors influencing the concordance of happiness themes between parents and children, such as family culture, received education, and social context. These investigations could contribute to enhancing understanding of family dynamics related to happiness and informing interventions to promote better understanding and mutual support between parents and children in addressing the topic of happiness and to create a family environment where parents can effectively support the emotional well-being of their children and facilitate their socio-emotional development.

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Declarations

Ethical Approval The study was conducted in accordance with the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Department of Psychology of Development and Socialization Processes, Sapienza University of Rome.

Consent for Publication Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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