Assessing Happiness for Very Special Learners-Flo Longhorn

We are all uniquely different. Our brains are all 'wired' differently, causing us to view the world in a multitude of different ways, with different values and emotions. No one is better or worse, merely different. Most of us however, are at our happiest when we feel secure, safe and valued – living in an anxiety-free environment. In such surroundings, our moods, emotions and behaviours are usually channelled usefully and productively. Very special people are just the same as anyone else in this regard.

Emotions are identified in six major areas:

joy (pleasure) – **fear** – **surprise** – **disgust** – **anger** - **sadness**.

Happiness is part of "joy" and it can be gauged by happiness indices and through physical means, such as measurement of blood pressure, skin response and brain activity. It can also be assessed by keen observations, such as observing:

Happiness	Unhappiness
• facial movements, • subjective feelings, • increase in energy, • decrease in negative feelings, • feeling of well being, satisfaction and pleasure. ☺	• drop in energy, • fall in enthusiasm, • unwillingness to partake of enjoyable activities, • deepening depression, • metabolism slowing down, • introspection creeping in, leading to… • withdrawal, restlessness and sad faces. ☹

The emotions, including happiness and sadness, are very powerful and take precedence over everything happening in the brain. Imagine a tiger about to pounce on you – your emotions override logic immediately! If we take emotional happiness as an excellent framework for learning, it can provide the optimum environment for learning by very special learners.

There is very little research on happiness and very special people.

Green et al (1996) looked at happiness for six adults using conventional happiness indices. Conclusions were simple – there was an increase in happiness when a person was given a preferred sensory stimuli and unhappiness when given a least favoured activity. Staff used the assessments to plan and extend programmes. For example, Sonny liked human voices, so he began to be included in an intensive interaction programme with an emphasis on voices.

Happiness can also be observed on the simple level of sensory happiness through provision of positive sensory environments, interactions and events. However, very special people may sometimes portray the opposite of what they actually feel emotionally when placed in such situations.

Andrew was agitated and cried every time liver and onions was on the menu for school dinner. Staff were understanding and made sure he had an alternative. When his mum came to school for a review, she recounted how Andrew adored liver and onions so much that he actually cried with happiness!

Observations, therefore, need to be ongoing and open to unexpected interpretations of happiness, as shown in Illustration1.

	Observed Examples/different learners
Situations observed:	• classroom; garden; swimming pool; dark room.
Physical clues: Head –	• holds head to one side; rolls head around.
Body –	• dances; slaps body parts; open gestures; flaps and wriggles.
Face –	• smiles; giggles; has a Big Big Smile!
Emotional clues: Joy ➜ Despair	• makes happy noises, • looks happy and calm – lies on sofa and moves hands around head, • has self-confidence, • has violent swings – happy to sad and back.
Communication clues:	• pulls you around and spins you, • points and taps, • eyes roll to top right, • laughs to him/herself, • gets the giggles, • moves body from side to side with loud vocal noises.
Behaviour clues: Positive ➜ Negative	• goes to be on the beanbag, • makes eye contact, • wants to interact - grabs you and signs, • goes from blank face ☺ to cheeky grin ☺ • stops self-injurious behaviours, • becomes louder and bigger.
Sensory changes:	• blocks environment – concentrates on own senses, • spins around, • wants close bear hugs – repeating "oo" "ooo" sounds.
Patterns of motivated learning:	• pauses and processes information, • more receptive - stills – becomes more communicative, • rewards of grapes.
Concentration/Attention: Shortened ➜ Extended	• stays with you – grows and grows with increased happiness, • more receptive to staff, more successful at activities. • stops demanding instant attention, • sporadic, but looks more intent.

Illustrations 2 and 3 show simple assessment sheets for observation of an individual's sensory happiness and preferred environment of happiness. Remember to observe at a good time in the day (not a wet Friday afternoon!), to ask family or carers about happiness at home and to build up a picture of happiness over time.

Illustration 2 - Assessing the Environments Surrounding the Learner to Encourage Optimum Happiness

Environments	Examples Observed/different learners
Immediate Environment:	• special toys - familiar environments, • quiet - under their control, • access to instant communication, • windows and radiators
Preferred Sensory Input:	• vibration; visual vibrations; blowing winds
Preferred Teaching Styles:	• needs motivating rewards • quiet and firm; out and about.
Preferred Friend(s)/Adult(s):	• quiet people, • new staff (runs rings around them!), • strong males, • sensual approach from people.
Preferred Grouping:	• on own; with one friend only
Preferred Materials and Equipment:	• switches; bubble tubes; bowls; books/magazines.
Preferred Style of Interaction:	• tickles; on own terms; rough and tumble, • spoken to as a man/woman and not a baby, • no surprises, routines, close 1:1.
Preferred Personal Leisure Activities and Obsessions:	• flapping cellophane; stretching elastic, • ticking clocks; chill out in beanbag, • line dances; bikes.

Illustration 3 – Sensory Happiness

happiness is............................	Examples Observed/different learners
The touch I like from humans:	• tickles; scratch up and down my legs, • firm touch.
The tastes I like:	• pickles and vinegar; jam tarts, honey, bananas, cheeseburgers.
Smells that make me happy:	• bodily smells, lavender oil, hair, rubber, aftershave.
Sounds I like to hear:	• crying, toilet flushing, flicking noise, Abba, chanting, fast tempo music, household appliances.
What I like to see best:	• friends, repeating patterns, bubble tubes, lorries, Postman Pat, shiny objects.
Vibrations I like to feel:	• flapping (jumping and roaring), vibration of water, toys put to ear, horse riding, stamping my feet.
Touches I like from the world around me:	• touches from people, the breeze, being thrown onto a beanbag, silky cloth, animals, smearing, hard touches.
Movements that stimulate me:	• spinning top, roundabout, flapping, riding.
Pleasing multisensory environments	• busy ones, spinning myself at speed, cars, ponds, swimming.

With this happiness baseline, it is then up to the educator to ensure, within each learning experience on offer, that there is an element of happiness included. Environments that are optimal then can be extended into formal curriculum, as indicated in Illustration 4.

Illustration 4 – Extending environments to formal curriculum.

Supriya loves to tear and tear paper – she is happiest in art with an extensive range of *papier maché* work to her credit.

Anne Marie is at her happiest in the company of her dad and brother. School ensures that she has time in a male teacher's lessons and the company of male students at break time.

Jamie is happiest with flashing lights in the multisensory room. He is ecstatic when his community skills are learned in the local town centre amusement arcade!

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