

# Current Status and Trends in Research on Children's Happiness

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## Abstract

The enhancement of children's happiness is the focus of improving children's quality of life and enhancing children's mental health, and systematically sorting out the current status of research, research hotspots, and future research trends in this field is of great significance in guiding and referencing the enhancement of children's mental health. In this paper, a total of 341 papers from CSSCI, CSCD, and Peking University core journals were selected from CNKI as the research object, and CiteSpace software was used as the analyzing tool to analyze the core authors, major research institutions, research themes, and future trends of research in this field. It was found that: the annual number of papers published in this field showed a fluctuating trend, normal universities pay more attention to this field, research on the influencing factors of children's happiness, research on the relationship between happiness and children's mental health, research on the happiness of children in difficult circumstances, intervention research on children's happiness are the main content of research in the field, research on children's happiness in the context of the internet, and parent-child attachment and children's happiness are the future research trends.

## Keywords

Children's happiness, CiteSpace, Visualization.

## 1. Introduction

Happiness refers to an individual's overall assessment of their own quality of life, generally measured by life satisfaction, positive and negative emotional experiences[1]. The higher the level of life satisfaction and the richer the experience of positive emotions, the stronger the sense of happiness. Children's quality of life and mental health have been receiving widespread attention, and "The Outline for the Development of Chinese Children (2021-2023)" explicitly points out that it is necessary to improve children's physical health and psychological health and improve children's sense of happiness and sense of security. It can be seen that the sense of happiness is of great significance for improving children's quality of life and mental health, and the study of children's happiness is also an important research topic at present. In order to have a macro grasp of the existing research in the field of children's happiness and to provide reference for future research, this study intends to use CiteSpace software to carry out a visual analysis of the research in the field of children's happiness, and grasp the research status, hot topics and future research trends in this field through data presentation and knowledge mapping.

## 2. Data Sources and Research Methodology

### 2.1. Data sources

The data were mainly obtained from the CNKI database, and the process of searching and screening the papers was as follows:

First of all, go to "Advanced Search" in the CNKI and select "Academic Journals". Drawing on academic research on children, the age of the research object of this paper is defined as under

18 years old. Therefore, the search topic was set as “children’s happiness” AND “adolescents’ happiness”. The time frame of the search was not set, and the source category was selected as “CSSCI, CSCD, Peking University core”, and a total of 454 papers were retrieved. Secondly, through the basic reading of paper titles and paper contents, duplicated papers and papers unrelated to the topic were deleted, while the types of papers unrelated to the study such as book reviews, information, journal catalogs, project evaluations, etc. were eliminated, and papers whose age of the research subjects did not meet the requirements was deleted, and finally 341 sample papers were obtained. Among them, the papers were published in the time range of 2002-2024.

## 2.2. Research methodology

The analysis was mainly conducted using CiteSpace 6.3.1, which was developed by Dr. Chen Chaomei, a Chinese American scholar, with powerful function of scientific measurement, and the software is widely used in research. In this study, this software was used to conduct quantitative analysis and visualization analysis of 341 sample papers obtained from screening, mainly analyzing the research status of this field from the aspects of annual publication, core author publication, and institutional publication of the research in this field. The research themes and future research trends in this field were analyzed from high-frequency keywords, clustering and emergence of keywords. The software settings for the specific analysis are: time span is “2002-2024”, time slice is “1” year, attributes are set as “Author”, “Institution”, “Keywords”, and check the Pathfinder option.

## 3. Research Result

### 3.1. Status of research

#### 3.1.1. Annual distribution of papers

The annual number of publications in the papers can reflect the academia’s attention to the research field and, to a certain extent, predict the future research trends in the field. Figure 1 demonstrates the annual publication of research on children’s happiness in China. Overall, the total number of annual publications in this field showed fluctuating ups and downs during 2002-2024. During 2002-2011, the number of publications on research on children’s happiness in China showed a relatively fast growth trend, indicating that the academia is paying more and more attention to the research topic of children’s happiness. Among them, the number of publications in the field during 2002-2008 was relatively small, with the annual number of published papers below 10, which may be due to the fact that the research in this field is in the beginning stage. The number of articles in the period of 2012-2016 is reduced compared with that of 2011, but the annual number of papers is more stable in general, maintained at about 20, indicating that academia continues to pay attention to the research theme of children’s happiness. The number of papers is the highest in 2017, which is 36. Between 2017 and 2023, the number of published papers on children’s happiness showed a significant downward trend, indicating that academia’s attention to the topic of children’s happiness has declined. By the end of February, a total of 4 papers were published in 2024.

#### 3.1.2. Analysis of core authors

There are 272 authors in the 341 papers obtained for this study, and the most frequent author is Liu Xia with 12 publications (regardless of the order of attribution). Price’s Law[2] is widely used to calculate the core authors in the field of research with the formula:  $M = 0.749\sqrt{N_{max}}$ , M in the formula denotes the minimum number of publications of core authors, and  $N_{max}$  denotes the number of publications of the most productive authors. The M value obtained by substituting the data of this study into the formula is about 2.59, so the authors with three or more publications are designated as core authors, and there are 13 authors in total, namely, Liu

Xia (12 papers), Liu Zaihua (6 papers), Ma Yinghua (5 papers), Liu Yan (5 papers), Hu Fang (5 papers), Ye Yituo (5 papers), Tian Lili (4 papers), Lin Danhua (4 papers), Shi Baoguo (4 papers), Zhou Zongkui (4 papers), Zheng Xue (3 papers), Chang Shumin (3 papers), and Zhou Xinran (3 papers), accounting for about 5% of the total number of authors. These authors have paid more attention to the field of children’s happiness, and have a certain degree of representativeness and authority in this field.

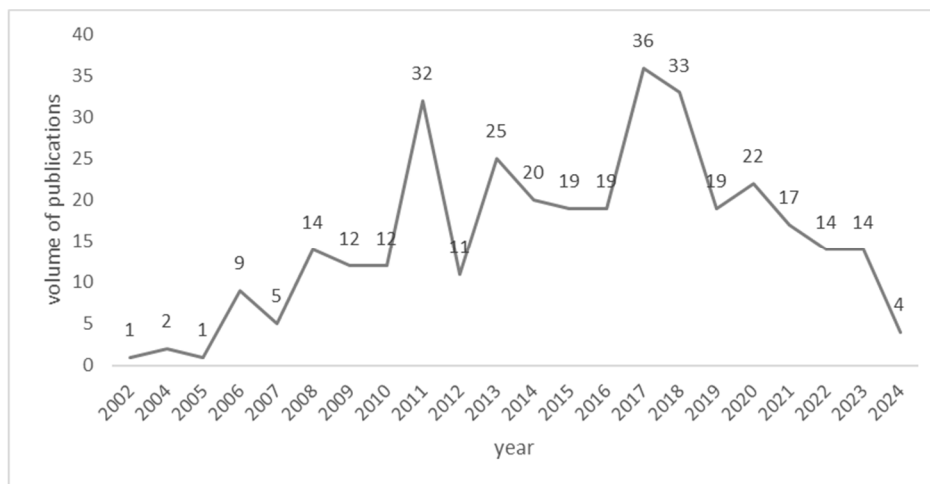


Figure 1. Annual number of publications on children’s happiness research in China

Table 1. Number of publications by core authors

No.	Author	Volume of publications	No.	Author	Volume of publications
1	Liu Xia	12	8	Lin Danhua	4
2	Liu Zaihua	6	9	Shi Baoguo	4
3	Ma Yinghua	5	10	Zhou Zongkui	4
4	Liu Yan	5	11	Zheng Xue	3
5	Hu Fang	5	12	Chang Shumin	3
6	Ye Yituo	5	13	Zhou Xinran	3
7	Tian Lili	4			

3.1.3. Analysis of the volume of institutional publications

Some scholars, for the sake of the accuracy of the statistical results, will include the corresponding institutions in the secondary colleges or departments when counting the number of papers issued by institutions[3]. Referring to this practice to get the number of institutional publications. The results show that the institution with the largest number of publications is Beijing Normal University, which has published a total of 46 related papers. Drawing on the formula for counting core authors, M = 5.08 was obtained, so the institutions with a volume of publications greater than or equal to 5 were the core institutions, namely Beijing Normal University (46 papers) and the China Academy of Educational Sciences (5 papers). In addition, on the whole, the issuing institutions in the research field of children’s happiness are mostly universities, especially normal universities have more papers for this research field, as shown in Table 2, there are four normal universities among the top five institutions in the field, and there are five normal universities among the top ten institutions, which shows that universities, especially normal universities, are paying more attention to this field, and they are able to play a leading role in research.

**Table 2.** Number of publications by institution

No.	Issuing institutions	Volume of publications
1	BEIJING NORMAL UNIVERSITY	46
2	China National Academy of Educational Sciences	5
3	SOUTH CHINA NORMAL UNIVERSITY	3
4	NORTHEAST NORMAL UNIVERSITY	3
5	SHANDONG NORMAL UNIVERSITY	3
6	Anhui Normal University	2
7	BEIJING SPORT UNIVERSITY	2
8	MINZU UNIVERSITY OF CHINA	2
9	SHANDONG UNIVERSITY	2
10	RENMIN UNIVERSITY OF CHINA	2

## 3.2. Hot topics

### 3.2.1. High-frequency keyword analysis

Keywords can show the core and focus of related research, and the frequency of keywords in a certain field can reflect the research hotspot of the related field to a certain extent. As can be seen from table 3, the keywords that appear more frequently in this field are adolescents, happiness, left-behind children, migrant children, mental health, etc. In order to further observe the research focus of this field, excluding the object keywords, such as “adolescents, middle school students, children, junior high school students, students”, it can be found that “sense of happiness, migrant children, left-behind children, self-esteem, mental health, happiness, social support, intermediary role, mental health, mental resilience” is the focus of research in this field. In addition, the keywords “adolescents, self-esteem, mediation, social support” are more central, and their mediating role in the whole network is stronger.

**Table 3.** Frequency and centrality of keywords (frequency  $\geq 4$ )

No.	Keyword	Centrality	Frequency	First year
1	adolescents	0.63	68	2002
2	sense of happiness	0.21	42	2006
3	migrant children	0.12	24	2008
4	left-behind children	0.05	24	2011
5	self-esteem	0.57	21	2011
6	mental health	0.04	17	2011
7	happiness	0.16	13	2010
8	social support	0.41	13	2013
9	middle-school student	0.15	12	2006
10	children	0.15	12	2007
11	intermediary role	0.52	10	2009
12	junior high student	0.28	10	2006
13	mental hygiene	0	9	2011
14	schoolchildren	0.03	7	2011
15	mental resilience	0.02	6	2016
16	personality	0.09	4	2006
17	regression analysis	0	4	2011
18	parent-child attachment	0.21	4	2013
19	psychological capital	0	4	2017

### 3.2.2. Keyword clustering analysis

Keyword clustering is a further formation of a smaller number of research themes based on the co-occurrence of keywords. As shown in the table 4, a total of seven clusters emerged in the area of children's happiness, namely "#0 adolescents", "#1 middle school students", "#2 migrant children", "#3 loneliness", "#4 mental health", "#5 middle school students" and "#6 health behaviors". Among them, "adolescents, middle school students, and junior high school students" are the subjects of this study, and "migrant children, loneliness, mental health, and health behaviors" are the main research content in this field. Deriving the keyword clustering table and further analyzing it, the clustering results can be summarized into several aspects: (1) The keywords of "basic psychological need fulfillment, learning engagement, parent-child attachment, discrimination perception, psychological resilience, parent-child separation, self-esteem, and family characteristics" can be categorized into the research on the influencing factors of children's happiness. Research has shown that high self-esteem[4], psychological resilience[5], parent-child attachment[6] have a significant positive effect on children's happiness, and discrimination perception[7] and mother-child separation[8] have a negative effect on children's happiness. (2) The keywords "psychological adaptation, mental health, loneliness, mental hygiene" can be summarized as research on the relationship between happiness and children's mental health. The two-factor model of mental health proposed by positive psychology recognizes that positive psychological indicators and negative psychological indicators are two necessary elements for diagnosing mental health, and that happiness, as an important part of the research field of positive psychology, has a significant impact on children's mental health[9]. (3) Keywords such as "left-behind children" and "migrant children" show the importance that academia attaches to the study of children's happiness in difficult situations. Empirical studies show that the experience of being left behind has a negative impact on children's psychological adjustment[10]. The mental health level of migrant children is worse than that of urban children[11]. (4) "Social support, hope" can be categorized as intervention research on children's happiness. It has been found that social support can reduce the negative impact of stressful events on individuals, and is important for enhancing children's happiness [4]and is important for enhancing children's sense of happiness.

**Table 4.** Keyword clustering table

Clustering number	Average year	Clustering identifier	Keyword
#0	2009	adolescents	adolescents; basic psychological needs fulfillment; life satisfaction; psychological happiness; migrant children
#1	2012	middle-school student	middle school students; left-behind children; learning engagement; parent-child attachment; psychological adjustment
#2	2013	migrant children	migrant children; intermediary roles; mental health; perceived discrimination; mental resilience
#3	2015	loneliness	happiness; loneliness; primary and middle school students; parent-child separation; subjective happiness
#4	2012	mental health	students; mental health; happiness; regression analysis; subjective happiness
#5	2013	junior high student	middle school students; self-esteem; subjective happiness; social support; influence factors
#6	2009	health behavior	children; health behavior; family characteristics; trauma and injury; hope

### 3.3. Research trends

Emergent words are keywords that suddenly increase in research in some years, and the emergent words reflect the research frontiers in a particular field[12]. By analyzing the emergent words in the field of child's happiness, the top 17 emergent words for the period 2002-2024 were identified. Looking carefully at the starting and ending years of the emergent words, the 17 emergent words can be categorized into three phases. The first stage is 2002-2015, in which the emergent words are "adolescents", "personality", "migrant children", "mediation", "happiness", "socialization", "happiness", "left-behind children", "middle school students", "self-esteem", "children", scholars in this stage focus on the mediating role of personality traits and self-esteem on children's happiness, while the study of the happiness of migrant children and left-behind children is also the focus of scholars. The second stage is 2016-2020, the emergent words are "mental resilience", "mental health", "middle school students", "happiness", "mental hygiene" and "students". In this phase, academics are more concerned about students' mental health, and "mental resilience", a factor that affects students' mental health and happiness, has received more and more attention. The third stage is 2021-2024, the emergent words in this stage are "internet" and "parent-child attachment", scholars in this stage pay attention to the relationship between the internet and children's happiness as well as the impact of parent-child attachment on children's happiness. This may be related to the background of the digital era and the related policies emphasizing the strengthening of parent-child companionship, such as "Family Education Promotion Law of the People's Republic of China", which was introduced in 2021, has expressions such as "parenting in person and strengthening parent-child companionship". The emergent words in this research phase are also the future research trend.

**Table 5.** Top 17 Keywords with the Strongest Citation Bursts

No.	Keywords	Year	Strength	Begin	End
1	adolescents	2002	1.78	2006	2007
2	personality	2006	1.24	2006	2007
3	migrant children	2008	4.18	2008	2010
4	intermediary role	2009	1.49	2009	2011
5	happiness	2010	4.21	2010	2011
6	left-behind children	2011	2.49	2011	2015
7	junior high school students	2006	1.38	2013	2014
8	self-esteem	2011	2.44	2014	2015
9	children	2007	1.35	2014	2015
10	mental resilience	2016	2.04	2016	2019
11	mental health	2011	1.33	2016	2018
12	middle school student	2006	1.27	2016	2017
13	sense of happiness	2006	3.04	2017	2019
14	mental hygiene	2011	1.45	2017	2020
15	student	2011	1.13	2018	2020
16	internet	2021	1.25	2021	2022
17	parent-child attachment	2013	1.16	2022	2024

## 4. Conclusions of the Study

By visualizing and analyzing 341 papers in the research field of children's happiness during the period of 2002-2024, this study found that the annual number of publications in this research field showed a fluctuating up and down trend during the period of 2002-2024, with 2017 being

the year with the highest number of annual publications in this field. There are 13 core authors in the field, representing approximately 5% of the total number of authors. These authors are more concerned with the field of children's happiness. In this field, the number of publications issued by normal universities is in the forefront, which shows that universities, especially normal universities, pay more attention to this field and are able to play a leading role in research. "Happiness, migrant children, left-behind children, self-esteem, mental health, happiness, social support, mediation, mental resilience" are high-frequency keywords in this field, and the research on the influencing factors of children's happiness, the relationship between happiness and children's mental health, the happiness of children in difficult circumstances, and the intervention study of children's happiness are the main research topics in this field. Research on children's happiness in the context of the internet and parent-child attachment and children's happiness are the future research trends.

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