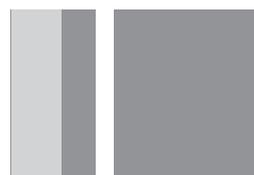
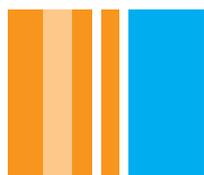


# HAPPINESS AND FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN IN SERBIA

How to design public policies  
for the well-being of families  
with children



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

---



UNICEF and Hemofarm Foundation express their gratitude to the organisation “Public Policy Research CENTRE” that carried out the study on Families and happiness.

The publication in front of you contains the most important findings from this research. It has been compiled by Marko Milanovic and Branka Andjelkovic from the CENTRE and Katlin Brasic from UNICEF. Significant support to the work on this research has been provided by Lesley Miller, Vesna Dejanovic, Jadranka Milanovic and Vesna Savic Djukic from UNICEF, Tanja Jakobi and Svetlana Djurdjevic-Lukic from the CENTRE and Jelena Djordjevic Knezevic as UNICEF Consultant. Telephone survey, based on which the analysis has been conducted, was performed by the “Factor Plus” agency.

Integral Serbian version of the research on families and happiness may be found on the UNICEF web site at:

<http://www.unicef.org/serbia/StudijaoSreci-Integralno.pdf>.

# CONTENTS

---

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Whom we asked what and how</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Findings of the research on families and happiness</b>	<b>8</b>
Family relationships – the key to family happiness	<b>9</b>
Understanding and respect – when you listen, do you really hear?	<b>11</b>
Not mine not yours, but ours	<b>12</b>
Wider family and friends as an important support system, especially for happy families	<b>13</b>
How material living standard affects happiness	<b>15</b>
Health and family happiness	<b>16</b>
Need for support	<b>17</b>
<b>What can we learn from happy families based on everything presented?</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>How to improve happiness in families with children?</b>	<b>19</b>
Developing special services and support measures	<b>20</b>
Strengthening and educating parents	<b>22</b>
Importance of public spaces as places for family strengthening	<b>23</b>
Recommendations for parents	<b>24</b>

*He who thinks he is happy,  
is truly happy.*

*Jovan Dučić*

## INTRODUCTION

The greatest wish parents have for their children is for them to be happy. It is also something that any state should be wishing for its citizens – although happiness is certainly not a term which politicians use to define their aspirations. It might be said that the word happiness is stigmatized – it is considered not serious enough, even a little trivial, to be used by those dealing with serious issues.

As opposed to that, if we go far back into the past, we would notice that happiness was a central concept in defining the essence of life, the way in which one should live and finally also the way the state should be organised. Ancient Greeks and Romans put a strong accent on the discipline of living; they believed that moderation and empathy were key virtues that one should possess and virtues that should be systematically encouraged. According to Aristotle “Happiness is the meaning and the purpose of life, the whole aim and end of human existence”<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, the foundations of Christianity recognise that the meaning of life is in our relationship with other people, and Buddhism emphasises the ability to feel empathy for others as the main source of personal happiness.

Happiness, as a topic, has always inspired philosophers, writers and representatives of religious communities; however the scientific community has only recently “re-discovered” the importance of this concept. Exploring happiness is mostly based on exploring and respecting subjective opinion (how people subjectively feel is the most important), and the science has only recently accepted the significance and legitimacy of the subjective. This has led to the expansion of both qualitative and quantitative research on happiness and wellbeing, different ways of measuring happiness and the creation of a scientific base for studying happiness<sup>2</sup>. Due to this “objectivisation” more and more often it could be heard that when formulating public policies attention should be paid on how they could contribute to the happiness of citizens.

The United Nations have also recognised the importance of measuring happiness and understanding it in the context of policy design. The first international World Happiness Report was published in 2012<sup>3</sup>. It is interesting to point out that Costa Rica and Mexico are ranked above the United States and Great Britain; Brazil is above Germany, Guatemala and Bolivia are above Poland and Croatia, while Mongolia, Zimbabwe, Tunisia and Iraq are above Serbia which holds the 106<sup>th</sup> place on this scale. If only one aspect of happiness which includes answers to the question “how happy do you personally feel” is observed, surprises are even bigger because the three countries with the highest results are Columbia, Malaysia and Brazil.

<sup>1</sup> Aristotel, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Rev. ed. Edited by H. Rackham. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926.

<sup>2</sup> Since the year 2000 there is also a scientific journal devoted to happiness: *Journal of Happiness Studies*.

<sup>3</sup> Helliwell, J., Layard, R., Sachs, J. (2012). *World happiness report*. The earth Institute, Columbia University. Retrieved September 23, 2012 from: <http://www.earth.columbia.edu/sitefiles/file/Sachs%20Writing/2012/World%20Happiness%20Report.pdf>

As the research show happiness is “contagious” and therefore people surrounded by happy people are more likely to become happier themselves.

As UNICEF is primarily devoted to the status of children, **we were interested to find out how public policies can contribute to the happiness of children.** The initial assumption of this research was that a strong and happy family, which offers a warm, stimulative and safe environment for children is an important basis for a child to be happy and grow up into a happy adult. This is why the focus of this study was on a happy family. Even though the importance of the family is always emphasized, very few public policies and programmes are oriented towards family support and parenting. In a world where the design of policies is divided into sectors with strictly divided roles and responsibilities of different actors, focus on family and public policies directed toward family strengthening has remained in the background. This is true for different countries and continents and it is not a Serbia-specific challenge.

With this report we wish to encourage a debate on how we could bring the family back into focus. If we really wish to improve the environment for growth and development of children in Serbia, firstly we need to understand what makes a family strong and happy and what we can do to empower those that are not.

As a first step in this direction, UNICEF has conducted a research on families and happiness in Serbia. Our goal was to see what is specific for the families with children in Serbia, what characterises happy families, what differentiates them from others and how to support other families to become happy. We want to know how public policies can influence family happiness and whether other social segments, either the corporate sector or civil society, can contribute to happiness and wellbeing of families with children. Policies are usually defined in accordance with the problems in a society and ways to eradicate them. Here, we have taken a different approach. We wanted to see what is good in the society and how to enhance those good characteristics and expand them further.

In this study you will find the main results of the research conducted in autumn of 2013, which was implemented in cooperation with the Association CENTRE. *Public Policy Research Centre* and the *Factor Plus* agency. It was carried out as an integral part of a project supported by the Hemofarm. If you are interested to learn more about happiness and the data we obtained through this research, after having read this, there is a more detailed version of the research available on the internet<sup>4</sup>.

Bhutan approaches this issue in a specific way. Since 1971 the Government of this small state has introduced Index of Gross National happiness as a new approach to developing and measuring prosperity. This way of measuring development monitors psychological well-being, vitality of the community, health, the quality of governance, ecological consequences of development and other indicators. With this approach Bhutan puts far greater accent on non-economic elements of development, than it was the case before. In the world of volatile financial systems, growing inequalities and widespread ecological devastation, the concept applied by Bhutan has attracted considerable attention.

*Happiness is contagious.  
This is the only disease,  
the spreading of which needs  
to be encouraged.*

*Anonymous*

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unicef.org/serbia/StudijaoSreci-Integralno.pdf>.

If we tried to summarise the conclusions of the research into a single sentence it would go like this - **the secret of happiness is in our relationships with other people.** In short, whatever the structure of a family may be, happy families are far more likely to be characterized by good family relationships that include mutual understanding and respect between partners and between parents and children. Happy families have a developed social network and they rely on extended family when having fun but also when having problems. Happy families also have a greater support network among friends. Material wealth does not significantly impact happiness, except when the material status of a family is so low that it jeopardizes the family's safety, that is – when the family cannot satisfy their basic needs and cover basic obligations. In other words, for children it is much more important what the atmosphere at home is like, whether they are supported and accepted by their parents, than whether they have a new or expensive mobile phone. Such conclusions are not unusual or original. Our research is one in a series of such researches that indicated that policies need to address much more seriously the issues of advancing good interpersonal relationships, issues of positive parenting and partner relations and not only the economic aspect of development. There are some recommendations in this respect which point to the need of utilizing such knowledge to educate parents, reform school curricula and ensure that the children learn new values, knowledge and skills that can impact their life decisions, habits and behaviours.

We believe that the increase of knowledge on happiness and its understanding are important ways to become both a healthier and a happier society. Knowledge on what makes families happy should help us create a vision of a better environment for growth and development of children.

This report is intended for all those who believe that through their personal engagement, in their own respective fields, they can contribute to the children growing up in a happier Serbia. We believe that the media are especially relevant we consider them important partners in this endeavour, because they have a big role in the creation of the value system in a modern society. Media influence the way the value system is set, which then influences the quality of social environment and thus also the conditions and circumstances in which our children grow.

# WHOM WE ASKED

## WHAT AND HOW

---

Before sharing the main research findings with you, it is important to briefly look at the methodology.

The research covered 600 households in Serbia, from 28 municipalities. The sample is stratified and random. Data was gathered by implementing a 12-minute telephone interview, with one parent /guardian of children from each household.

Apart from happiness, the factors identified as important for happiness in other countries were measured:

- Relationships within a family, family habits and parenting;
- Support of the extended family and friends i.e. social network;
- Family structure and general demographic characteristics;
- Material status / income;
- Health.

Detailed information about the research methodology, measuring method, instrument and limitations of the research may be found in the integral version of the research<sup>5</sup>.

Tolstoy begins his novel Anna Karenina with the words “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”. Today, the researchers have also pointed to the fact that happy families often have certain common characteristics, and thus his statement on happy families has been scientifically backed.

---

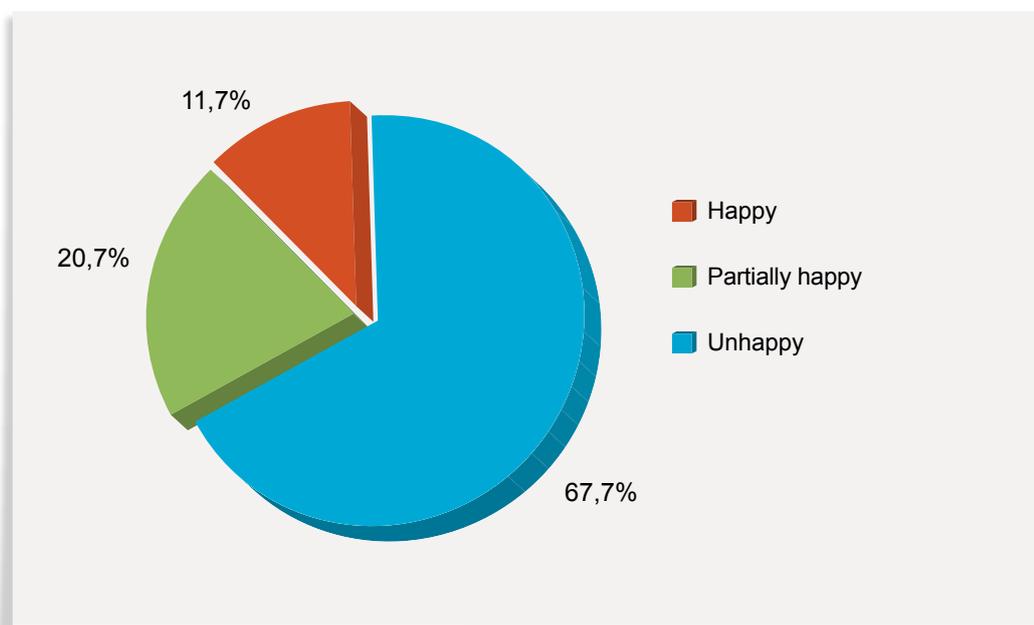
<sup>5</sup> <http://www.unicef.org/serbia/StudijaoSreci-Integralno.pdf>.

# FINDINGS OF THE RESEARCH ON FAMILIES AND HAPPINESS

## Families with children in Serbia – generally about happiness

Comparative international researches on happiness indicate a worrying data that the Serbs fall among the unhappiest nations. There is data on Serbia based on the Gallup World Poll for 2010 and 2012<sup>6</sup>. Out of 155 countries ranked in 2010, Serbia was in the 91st place, with 16% of its population being happy, 63% partially happy and 21% unhappy. In 2012 there was an increase of the share of happy population to 26% but also of the unhappy to 24%. In 2012, 51% of the citizens were partially happy.

The good news within the context of this bad one is that it is not true for families with children. Our research indicated that two thirds (67.7%) of these families are happy. When we look at the assessed happiness of parents on an individual level, the average score is on the level of the Nordic countries, which is a surprising result. This may be explained by the fact that the adults included in the research are parents living in a household with their minor children and have a phone. The research did not cover the households of single adults or the elderly, and other adults with no children – and it is possible that among those individuals there is a greater probability that the perceived level of happiness is below the average.



<sup>6</sup>Gallup-World. Retrieved September 25, 2012 from: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/world.aspx?ref=b>

# Family relationships – the key to family happiness

The research in other countries clearly indicate that happy children get along well with their parents and other children, and that they have at least one or several close friends. Support, self-confidence and emotional security resulting from close relationships with other people are the most important for happiness<sup>7</sup>. Data from our research show that the relationships with other family members are one of the foundations of happiness. Therefore, we will now see what is important in family relationships, i.e. which characteristics of family functioning are linked to happiness.

## Conflicts – it is better without quarrels

Mutual understanding and respect is important when the relationships between parents and the family as a whole are concerned, primarily in the context of resolving arguments and the family atmosphere. The presence of conflicts in the family is one of the main risks for the family to be unhappy.

In families where there is an intense conflict, the chance for these families to be unhappy is 12 times greater than that of the families with no conflicts. Even a moderate conflict impacts family happiness and the chance for the family to be unhappy is three times higher when such conflict exist.

If we look at individual conflict indicators, tense atmosphere and open arguments and quarrels equally influence family happiness. This tells us that family happiness is not only affected by open disputes but by the way in which family members form mutual relationships i.e. the atmosphere in the family permeated by negative feelings and dissatisfaction. While it is easier to hide quarrels from children, the atmosphere in the family is more difficult to hide, therefore keeping arguments “out of children’s sight” is not enough to avoid the influence of conflicts in the family on happiness.

The influence of conflicts may be clearly seen if we compare the number of (un)happy families where the conflict is present with the number of families with no conflict:

- Among families with no conflicts only 8.4% say that they are unhappy;
- Among families with a prominent conflict 39.4% see themselves as unhappy families.

*Happiness always comes to a harmonious family.*

*National proverb*

*He is the happiest, be he king or peasant, who finds peace in his home.*

*Gete*

<sup>7</sup> Helliwell F.H., Putnam, D. R. (2004). The social context of well-being. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London*, 359, 1435-1446.

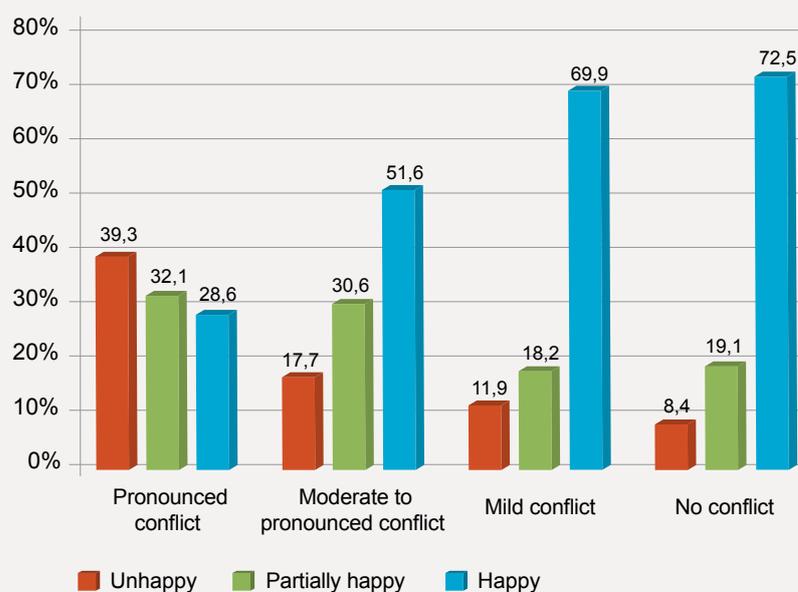
Demir, M., Ozdemir, M. (2010). Friendship, need satisfaction and happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 11, 243-259.

Joshanloo, M., Afshari, S. (2011). Big Five Personality Traits and Self-Esteem as Predictors of Life Satisfaction in Iranian Muslim University Students. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 12, 105-113.

Diener, E., & Oishi, S. (2005). The nonobvious social psychology of happiness. *Psychological Inquiry*, 16, 162–167.

Holder, M.D., Coleman, B. (2009). The contribution of social relationships to children’s happiness. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 10, 329-349.

Correlation between family happiness and prominence of conflict



*There is nothing greater a father can do for his children than to love their mother.*

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Conflict in a family, as an indicator of the state of family relationships, is especially important for the happiness of families with adolescents i.e. when children are aged 13-18. In these families the presence of intense conflict increases the chance of family unhappiness by 18 times.

Relationships within a family are important both as the basis for other relationships with others in the society, and as the basis for establishing a wider social network. Families where disagreement is present have difficulties establishing supportive relationships within their community.

New family configurations where children do not live with both of their biological parents represent a challenge for children, but are not necessarily places characterised by conflict. Although both parents do not necessarily need to live in the same physical space, they can base family relationships on the values such as mutual respect and understanding, and they can have harmonised positions regarding child upbringing. These are the things that give the feeling of security to children and have positive influence on happiness.

# Understanding and respect – when you listen, do you really hear?

In the research we analysed the connection between happiness and answers to questions - how often parents talk with their children, how well they understand each other and what is their attitude towards child upbringing.

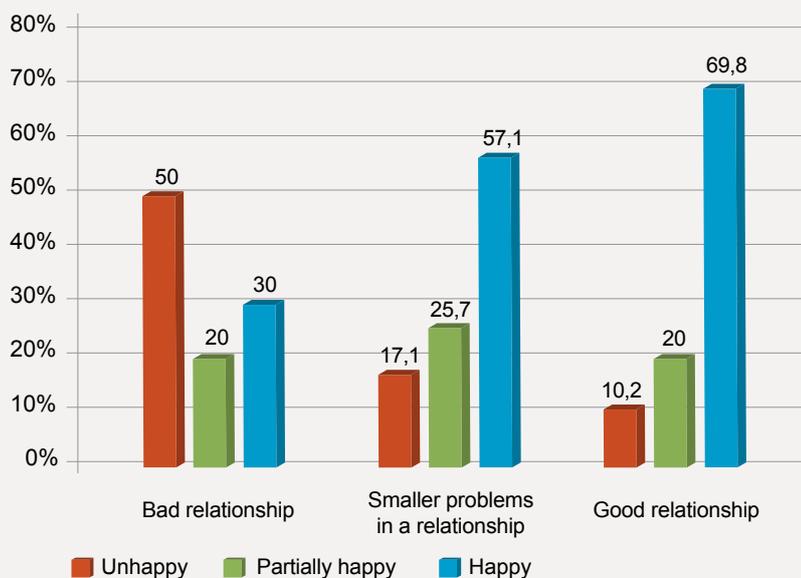
Family happiness greatly depends on the quality of these relationships:

- Among the families where children and parents have a good relationship and in families where parents believe that it is not appropriate to yell at a child, more than two thirds are happy;
- Among the families where parents report that they do not have a good relationship with their children, and in families that believe that yelling is justified, only about one quarter of the families are happy.

*If a beating could make someone smart, than the ox would be the smartest of all.*

*Madagascar proverb*

**Correlation between the quality of the parent-child relationship and family happiness**



When the relationship between parents and children is disturbed, a chance for a family to be unhappy is around 11 times greater than the chance to be happy.

When we look at what is the basis of happiness in the child-parent relationship, we see that the most important is that the children know that their parents would always listen to them and try to understand them. This is not always easy for parents because they often need to overcome their fears and worries and try to step into “the child’s shoes“. It is important to emphasize that a good relationship does not imply that a child needs to share everything with parents. A child has the right to his/her privacy and secrets. What is important is that there is trust, that a child knows that they he/she can rely on his/her parents and talk with them about issues of concern. Even when a parent gets angry, it is important that they do not yell or use insulting words or other forms of hurtful behaviour which may deepen the conflict.

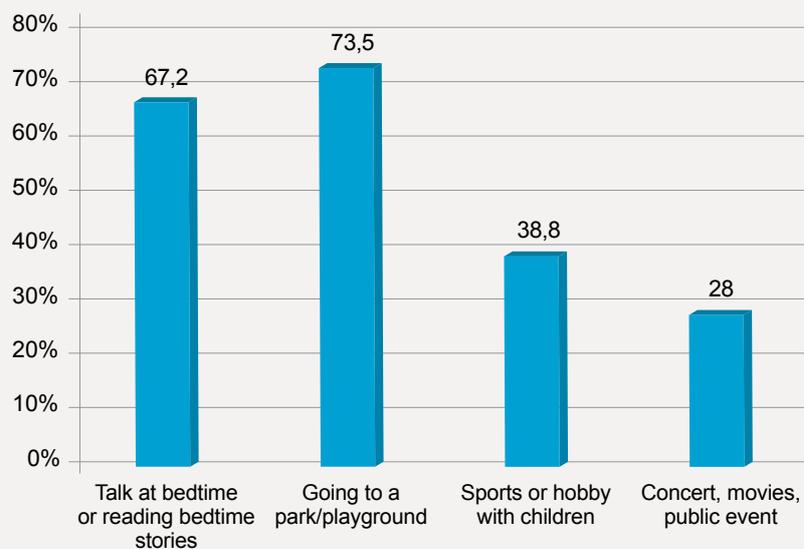
# Not mine not yours, but ours

*The source of our happiness is in our personal traits: a noble nature, a capable head, a joyful temperament, bright spirits and healthy body.*

Arthur Schopenhauer

Great majority of parents (86.5%) state that they spend at least one hour per day with their child doing some **joint activity**. Regarding the frequency of activities performed together, parents most often go with their children to the park, to a playground, for a walk, talk with them before sleep or read a bedtime story, but they far less frequently go to public events with their children or practice a hobby or a sport.

Frequency of joint activities of parents and children



It is extremely **important** that parents and children have **at least one joint activity that they do together**.

Families where children and parents participate in various joint activities are happier than others.

- Among the families where children and parents jointly participate in all 4 examined groups of activities only 3,8% are unhappy;
- Families that have meals together almost every day are happier than other families – as much as 90.9% of happy families have meals together almost every day!

Equal parental responsibility is important for happiness primarily in the sense that both parents equally spend time with their children. This proved to be especially important if a child is aged between 6-12.

Participation of both parents in the life of a child is an important ingredient in the recipe for family happiness. Among the families that evaluate themselves as unhappy sharing parental responsibilities is not present in any of them.

Although the concept of equally sharing child-raising between parents is present in Serbia, it is still based on a traditional division of roles. Even when both parents equally spend time with their children, mother is primarily responsible for upbringing of children, in as much as 79,2% of families.

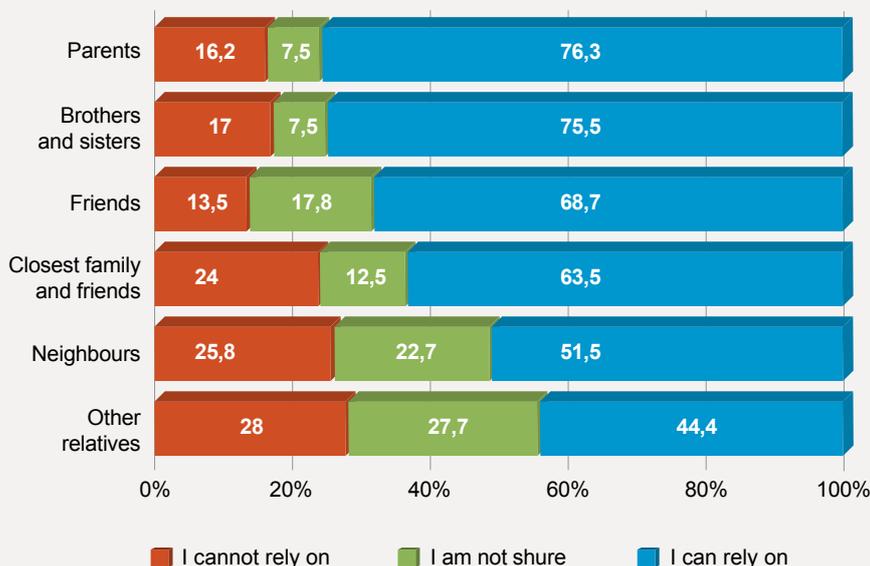
# Wider family and friends as an important support system, especially for happy families

Informal social interaction, interaction with the family, friends, acquaintances, represents one of the fundamental links between social capital and happiness. Based on this research we may conclude that parents in Serbia have a high level of social support, both from relatives and friends.

Almost all parents believe that they have someone to rely on if they have a problem or when they need support:

- As much as 90.0% of parents believe that they can rely on their family (parents, siblings or other relatives);
- 84.2% of parents believe that they can rely on someone outside of the family (friends, closest family friends, neighbours);
- 75.4% of parents state that they could rely on three or more sources of support.

*Representation of different sources of support outside the close family*



A wide social network (extended family and friends) is what strengthens the family and has a positive influence on happiness:

Even though the majority of families in Serbia are characterised by a good social network, we still may notice some differences:

- In happy families parents` support is present in 80,5% of cases, while only a half of the unhappy families have support from the parents;

*Moms, you should give birth to daughters as daughters become sisters, sisters become aunts and aunts are the most beautiful and irreplaceable gift of every childhood.*

*Duško Radović*

- Almost 80% of parents in happy families may rely on their brothers and sisters compared to, 60% of parents in unhappy families;
- Families that have a stronger social network are happier than the families who have weaker social support.

When we talk about babysitting, parents rely on their own parents (the grandparents) in 56.7% of the cases. 20.8% of parents have no one to leave their children with if they need to do so.

Although most of the parents think that they have someone to rely on when they have a problem, only 38.3% share their troubles with individuals outside of the primary family. Families living in rural areas most often rely on their parents and siblings, while the families living in urban settlements more often rely on a partner.

In happy families parents can share something that troubles them with a partner or their parents more often than in unhappy families:

- In happy families 74.1% of parents can share what troubles them with their closest ones (parents and partner), while only 5.5% have no one to share their worries with;
- In unhappy families only a half of the parents can talk with their partner or parents about what troubles them, and as much as one quarter have no one to share this with.

**The Easterlin Paradox** was named after professor Richard Easterlin who researched happiness back in the 1970-ties. He pointed to the fact that the continuous economic growth did not improve the subjective experience of happiness among the citizens. He believed that the social and not economic capital is the most important for happiness.

# How material living standard affects happiness

High financial standing does not contribute to happiness, although people often believe the opposite. The level of income is not linked with happiness, and neither is the fact whether one or both parents have income. However, this does not mean that everyone should be poor; but rather it means that money should be spent wisely. What is important is not how much money someone has, or how much money a state has, but how that money is spent. Money that one spends on hanging out with friends or helping others and making them feel nice is something that contributes to happiness. Similarly, at the level of a state, investing resources in prosocial activities – strengthening families, building social capital and social networks - contributes to happiness. This is one of the characteristics of Denmark, which is one of the happiest nations<sup>8</sup>.

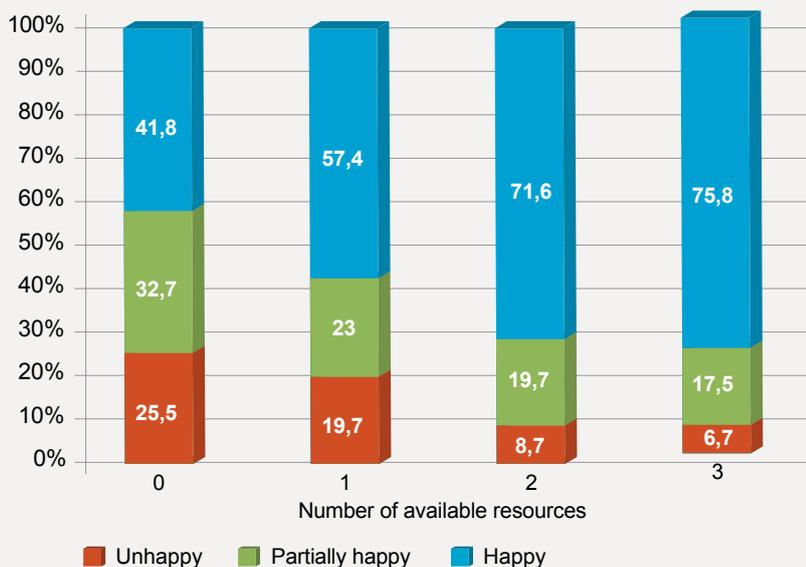
Material status can nevertheless have a strong negative impact on happiness when it is related to the possibility of meeting the existential needs of family members. If a family cannot cover the basic needs, provide living space, heating, fulfil financial obligations, then there is a 7 times higher chance for it to be unhappy compared to a family that can cover these basic existential needs.

*There are many of those who are poor among our children, because parents could offer them nothing but money.*

Duško Radović

The results of the studies from Utah University show incredible advantages that grandmothers bring because they teach children to cooperate and to be emphatic. Children who spend more time with their grandmothers and grandfathers are more sociable, do better in school, and show more care for others. The research shows that grandmothers' superpowers are extraordinary for a modern family – not only do they teach children to be patient and tolerant, but additionally the mothers who have the grandmothers' support are less stressed and more satisfied.

**Correlation between family happiness and availability of basic resources**



Among the families that can provide one meal with protein per day, basic living conditions (heating, electricity...) and a possibility to go on a holiday outside their place of residence 75.8% are happy, while among the families that cannot provide the above only 41.8% are happy.

It is interesting that the data obtained through this research show that the families that bought their adolescent child an expensive mobile phone are not happier than those that have not done that. Also, it turned out that it is not important for happiness whether a child at an older age has an expensive or a cheap mobile phone.

<sup>8</sup> E. Diener, M.E. Seligman, "Beyond money: Toward an economy of well-being", *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 5, 2004, pp. 1–32;

Camfield, L., Choudhury, K., Devine, J. (2009). Well-being, happiness and why relationships matter: evidence from Bangladesh. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 10, 71–91.

Gerdtham, U. G., Johannesson, M. (2001). The relationship between happiness, health and socio-economic factors: results based on Swedish micro data. *Journal of Socio-Economics*, 30, 553–557.

L. Torpe, "Social capital in Denmark: A deviant case?", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, 26, 2003, pp. 27–48.

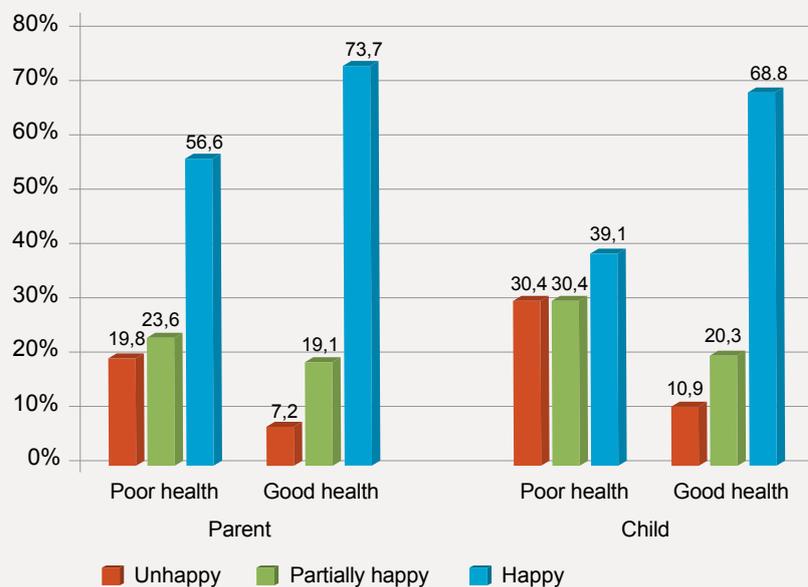
# Health and family happiness

The World Health Organisation points out the worrying trend of the increased depression and anxiety on the global level. The World Health Organisation foresees that until 2020 depression would represent the second most frequent cause of disability (which covers also mental health disorders according to international definitions).

Physical and mental health is very important for happiness. Intensity of the correlation between health and happiness in this research is somewhat lower than in other relevant international research, but it clearly indicates that the perceived general health of parents and children is significantly linked with the family happiness.<sup>9</sup>

A child's deteriorated health condition has greater effects on the family happiness than a parent's deteriorated health condition.

**Correlation between the parents' and children's subjective evaluation of their general health and family happiness**



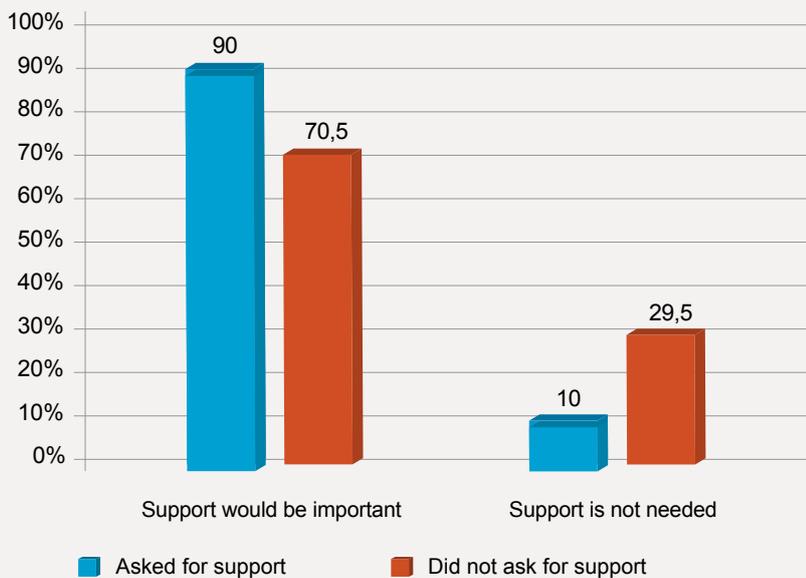
We see that a child's poor health has a significantly higher influence on family happiness. While 56.6% of families in which parents have poor health are happy, only 39.1% families where children have poor health are happy.

<sup>9</sup> Vazquez, C., Hervas, G., Rahona, J.J., Gomez, D. (2009). Psychological well-being and health: Contributions of positive psychology. *Annuary of Clinical and Health Psychology*, 5, 15–28.  
Lucas, R. E. (2007). Long-term disability is associated with lasting changes in subjective well-being: Evidence from two nationally representative longitudinal studies. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92, 717–730.  
Pressman, S.D., Cohen, S. (2005). Does positive affect influence health? *Psychological Bulletin*, 131, 925–971.  
Diener, E., Chan, M. (2011). Happy people live longer: Subjective well-being contributes to health and longevity. *Applied Psychology: Health and Well-being*, 3, 1–43.

# Need for support

As much as 80.2% of parents believe that it would be good to provide additional education and support to parents on raising children. Also, 76.0% believe that for them it would have been beneficial if during important phases of the child's development, they had received additional information on parenting, developmental needs and ways to resolve conflict with children. However, only 28.3% of parents reached out to someone for advice regarding child upbringing and family relations. When we cross these two variables we can see that 70.5% of parents who stated that support in parenting would have been useful for them, did not ask for support. It is not clear why parents do not seek out anyone for help, but we may assume that is it partly because it is not accessible enough and because there is a stigma related to recognising the need for support. Parents most often ask their own parents for advice (12.0%), then psychologists (6.7%), then siblings (3.3%). As much as 95.9% of parents who asked for advice believe that the advice they received was useful for them.

*Correlation between the attitude towards the importance of support in parenting and asking for support*



# WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM HAPPY FAMILIES BASED ON EVERYTHING PRESENTED?

*To like many people spontaneously and without effort is perhaps the greatest of all sources of personal happiness.*

*Bertran Rasel*

If we had to put the findings of the research in one sentence we would say that the secret of happiness is in our relationship with other people. Although we sometimes take more care about external wealth and often strive for material values, the researches show that the most important determinants of happiness are related to interpersonal relationships – relationships we nurture with the persons close to us. Happiness is most strongly correlated with relationships inside the family, however extended family and friends are also of key importance for happiness of family with children.

Constant conflicts destroy happiness while the lack of conflicts, i.e. harmony within a primary family is the most important for happiness. Great majority of families where sharing equal responsibility of parenting really exists without strict division of roles on male and female parts are happy. Grandparents represent the main support to a family, especially when the families have a problem or need assistance. Grandparents also represent the main support to a family for babysitting. However, the results show also the importance of a wider family, friends and neighbours, on whom families rely for support and for socialisation.

Good financial standing is not enough for happiness. No correlations have been found between the level of income and happiness, which confirms the findings from the research conducted in other countries. However, there is a clear correlation between unhappiness and signs of material deprivation. In other words, the financial standing of the family is relevant only if the resources available to the family are not enough to provide for basic minimum (living conditions, enough food for the children and a one-week vacation once a year).

The health of parents and children is correlated with the family happiness, but to a lesser degree than our relationships within the family and relationships with wider family and friends. Deteriorated health condition of a child has greater consequences on the family happiness than a deteriorated health condition of a parent.

More families could be happy if adequate investments in them are made. It is especially important to invest in those families that undergo certain life crises because such crises lead to conflicts and create poor family atmosphere and a bad place for growth and development of children. The awareness of the things that are important for happiness and the family could change the behaviour. This is why informing parents and other family members is an important obligation of the state and other actors in the society. However, adjustment of the society as a whole so that it enhances happiness in the families requires much more. Firstly, it implies valorisation of the social capital i.e. resources that the family itself has and the resources of the wider family network and community, as well as the belief that continuous investments should be made in those resources.

# HOW TO IMPROVE HAPPINESS IN FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN?

Based on everything said above it may be concluded that the state policies, especially those related to social care, education, health care and other that can contribute to the creation of a supportive environment for families with children, need to take into consideration the findings on happiness and families. Because if the secret of happiness is in the relationships with other people, than the agendas of the decision makers should make room for the question about how to build and develop constructive and supportive social relationships among the members of the society, how to strengthen the principles of respect, tolerance and understanding on which these relationships are based i.e. how to strengthen the family and support parents in their main role – being good parents to their children. The findings of this research are undoubtedly interesting, but what is most important is whether they can be translated into concrete recommendations for shaping policies related to family and parenting support. It is certain that one research cannot change the value system which is the basis for building good family relationships; however it may open a discussion on how to improve the support for families with children.

For the beginning, investments oriented towards improving parenting, providing support to families with children and building social networks that are of key importance for stability and creation of a healthy environment for growth and development of children must be identified as an important aspect of social policies. Family is the most important and the greatest resource for any child. It is always worth investing in the family and its functioning.

Of course, we should not forget that some families first need support to get out of the poverty and material deprivation, so that they could fully benefit from the listed measures.

Here we have listed only some proposals on how and in which areas we can use the resources available to our society to formulate new or build on the existing programmes, services and measures directed towards families and children.

Since the 1970s the GDP in Great Britain has doubled, however people`s life-satisfaction has barely improved. Therefore, two years ago, the British National Statistics Office has started measuring the nation`s “wellbeing” through questions related to subjective experiences of happiness, with the aim of using these data for designing future policies.

*This new world must be a world in which the powerful do not exploit the powerless, the evil do not exploit the good, and the rich do not degrade the poor. It can be a world in which the acts of the mind, the development of science and the building of skills serve the community for providing relief and for making life more beautiful. It should not serve the interests of individuals' and their gain of personal wealth.*

*Nikola Tesla*

# Developing special services and support measures

In the following section we present examples of certain innovative programmes which have turned to be successful in strengthening the family capacities. Such initiatives are just examples, i.e. “demonstrations” of how it could be invested in the family and they are aimed at opening a wider debate on what kind of support the families need the most.

**Family Conference** gives support to the family in decision making and finding solutions to problems it faces. This model of work gathers together primary and wider family and friends, as well as all those people that mean something to the family members and are willing to help. The approach is based on an assumption that the family members and their social network are the greatest support resources to every individual, which has been corroborated by our research too. Family conference is organised by an independent coordinator who gathers all those who represent pillars of strength or may become one for the respective individual. A solution is found by the family relying on its own strengths. The goal of the meeting is not to identify a guilty party but to define a plan for problem resolution in which all close individuals participate and undertake responsibility.

When the participants of the Family Conference agree on what should be done and how each of them would contribute to the problem resolution, the safety of the agreement is checked and then the realisation of the plan starts. In this way a solution to many family problems can be found within the family circle, without radical actions such as separating a child from the family (which might on the short term seem as the safest, but on the long term would leave serious scars on future emotional and social development of a child)<sup>10</sup>.

The **“Family Support Worker”** service is aimed at safeguarding families at risk and preventing child separation from their families as well as ensuring the return of children temporarily placed in residential institutions or foster families to their families. The service is set up flexibly so as to respond to the different needs of families. Family Support Worker regularly visits a family and provides practical support in resolving different challenges, resolving family disputes and strives to improve the family environment so that it could provide the children what they need most – care, love, security, and safe but also a stimulative environment. In addition, Family Support Worker represents a “bridge” between the family and the community, and it helps for example, with child enrolment in a kindergarten or a day care centre, collection of administrative documents for obtaining financial benefits for the family, inclusion of family members in treatment, inclusion of children in creative or sports activities in the community. The service is based on a belief that separating a child from the family and placing it in an institution or a foster family is stressful, traumatic and that these forms of care cannot be a replacement for a family. Therefore, the principle applied is family strengthening whenever a family can be strengthened through support and whenever this is assessed to be in the best interest of a child.

<sup>10</sup> The “Family Conference” service in Serbia is implemented by the organization “In the family circle”. Vision of this association is “a society where the responsibility for own wellbeing and the wellbeing of the closest ones is being encouraged”, and the mission “Strengthening families in resolving crises and problematic (hard to resolve) situations using the Family Conference model”. This association of citizens is a part of the pan-European network of organizations that support organization of family conferences.

Users of the Family Support Worker service are families with children that are often faced with extreme poverty, where there are challenges related to mental health problems or where a child or a parent is a person with a disability. In other words, those are families faced with multiple deprivations and where it has been assessed that there is a risk of neglecting some of the child's needs, but the risk that may be overcome with the right support<sup>11</sup>.

**Community Centres** are places for building new skills, acquiring new knowledge and socialising with the closest ones in order to improve interpersonal relationships. These are places where parents gather and attend trainings, where children can get support in learning, and where other activities are organised that may enhance the relationship of people living in the same community and help them develop new skills and become more responsible parents or find a creative way to spend free time. Community centres do not need to be grandiose, ambitiously designed, or expensive. Such centres are especially important for in communities with more prominent material deprivation or with families and children belonging<sup>12</sup> to vulnerable groups.

**Family resource** centres i.e. child centres are places where families with children can get additional support and where their children can socialise in a warm and stimulative environment. Those are places where parents get additional information about child growth and development, where they can consult experts regarding different problems, where activities for mothers and babies are organised, parents' workshops, and assistance in doing homework and creative activities for children. In many European countries these centres are established in deprived communities, and their common characteristic is that they offer a series of services which all have the same goal – strengthening the families.

The New Economics Foundation in London for several decades now has been studying the importance of the well-being of citizens, and advocates that state policy should take things that have an impact on well-being much more into account. This foundation promotes research based messages on simple ways of increasing personal happiness.

- The first message is to invest in social networks and close relationships with the loved ones;
- The second is to be more active, go for walks, dance or exercise, as this is the quickest way of getting out of a bad mood.
- The third is related to our ability to take notice of the things happening around us and enjoy in the diversity of our environment;
- The fourth is about enhancing curiosity through learning and developing new skills;
- The fifth is about supporting others because solidarity, empathy and altruism make us feel happier and enrich our identity.

<sup>11</sup> The "Family Support Worker" service is piloted by the Republic Institute for Social Protection with the support of Novak Djokovic Foundation and UNICEF.

<sup>12</sup> Community centres in deprived communities in Bojnik, Lebane, Surdulica, Vladičin Han, Piroć, Prokuplje and Niš are supported by local self-governments and UNICEF with the support of the Swiss Development and Cooperation agency (<http://www.drustvenicentri.org>).

# Strengthening and educating parents

*Before you start looking for happiness, double-check! Maybe you are already happy. Happiness is small, common, and humble. And many cannot see it.*

*Duško Radović*

Provision of information on positive parenting rules and importance of establishing trust and respect among all family members is crucial in the context of family strengthening. Every contact between the state i.e. public sector and the family is an opportunity to convey crucial messages on the importance of positive parenting. Health care system is an excellent environment that can respond to these needs, because contacts with parents are the most frequent there – especially when a child is young. In that context primary health care centres are of great importance, not only specialised services and counselling centres, but especially designated doctors and paediatricians. Also, we should forget the role that the maternity hospitals and specialised hospitals/children's wards should have. Professionals in kindergartens and schools are also very important because they have a unique opportunity to convey important parenting related messages to parents, to influence the quality of communication between parents and children and thereby also the relationships within the family. This is why it is important that the professionals in these systems acquire more knowledge, be it through formal or informal education, about positive parenting and how to transfer this knowledge to parents. All places where parents come into direct contact with public services are an opportunity for raising awareness and education. Sometimes a brochures or a short conversation with parents can represent a step towards change. When the challenges are already identified, the social care system has and should have a key role. However, the point is that information, educations and consultations with parents should be available to everyone.

The corporate sector and associations of citizens can also be engaged more intensively in activities regarding family, family relationships, positive parenting and encouraging good behaviour models and value systems. Also, media may have an important role, and their influence on the value system, understanding of importance of relationships within the family could be far greater.

# Importance of public spaces as places for family strengthening

Creative and smart investment in public places has not been recognised enough as a resource which carries a significant potential for strengthening the relationships within and outside the family. Public spaces can become an ideal place for informing and educating parents, providing them with useful information and advice, especially now when there are affordable new technologies which can be adjusted for these purposes.

Managed public spaces are all around us and they represent an essential part of everyday urban living, especially for families with children. Places where children play, youth gather together, where families get in contact with nature, sportsmen exercise, animal lovers exchange experiences, while others enjoy their lunch surrounded by greenery, represent a kind of a “home in the open”. As such, public spaces are places that can improve family socializing, inter-generational solidarity and encourage good interpersonal relationships in the community. On the other hand, if no one manages them, if no one has a vision of their utilisation or if they have alternative intentions in the process of their organisation, then they become spaces which do not contribute to anything specific. Depending how we treat it, a park may make it harder or easier for a grandmother to babysit her grandchild; it may stimulate psycho-physical development of a child, or not; it may help a child learn to respect nature or understand the needs of others (animals) or may deprive a child of that experience.

Every public space speaks a certain language. It may be a language of tolerance, sensitivity towards diversities and respect towards nature (e.g. it is accessible for a pram or persons with disabilities, information is presented in several languages, it encourages ecologically acceptable behaviour) or it may not contribute to the above. This depends on the way the space is arranged, managed and which organisations and individuals organise activities and events in it. Public places are often renovated before the elections and therefore their reconstruction is often not as well thought out as these spaces as well as the families that use it deserve.

*If we all embraced love, this world would be like heaven. But if we all at least embraced something that is a little less than love, since love is a relationship of perfection, if we at least held on to the principle “do to others what you wish for yourself and what you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others”, then the world would become something close to heaven, if not heaven itself.*

*Patriarch Pavle*

# Recommendations for parents

*Be happy whenever you have an opportunity for that, and whenever you find strength inside yourself for it, because the moments of pure happiness are worth more and mean more than whole days and months of our life spent in a dim play of our petty and trivial passions and fancies. A minute of pure joy stays inside us forever, as a light which nothing can override.*

Ivo Andrić

For the end, we want to draw some concrete messages for parents from the research on families and happiness. They are, when children are concerned, always the most important. Of course, the recommendations will also be useful for grandparents, aunts and uncles, friends of the families with children. That is why it is important for everyone to carefully read them, as everyone is in some of the roles mentioned above.

- Fathers, get engaged equally in all tasks regarding the raising of the child –equally sharing parental responsibilities creates a better environment for you and your children.
- Parents, make space for grandparents and rely on them for support, but define clearly your boundaries and ensure privacy of your primary family. If you disagree about something with your parents, try to understand them better and resolve those problems, if not for yourselves then for the sake of your children.
- Nurture the relationship of respect, understanding and trust within your family - both with your partner and your children. Create an environment where you and your children feel safe and protected!
- Fuss of everyday life cannot ever be an excuse for not going for a walk or talking with your children, playing or having dinner with them, reading them something before they go to bed.
- Use public spaces and nature as much as possible for socializing and take care that the original purpose of your playgrounds and parks do not change.
- Be brave when there are problems in your family, and if you enter a conflict ask for support so as to resolve disputes in the most constructive way possible. Postponing problem resolutions or an existence of continuously present problems are the greatest risks for the happiness of your family and children.
- Be aware of the happiness that originates from the relationships with other people and especially take care of those carefully chosen relationships.
- Be a mild but decisive parent! Point out what is good about your children; avoid insults, humiliations, belittling and corporal punishment of children.
- Talk to your children and be prepared to really hear them! We were all children once, although we often forget it – go back to those days and try to understand your child from that position. The best way to establish a relationship of trust is to ensure that children feel that you understand them and that you want to listen to them.
- Show your children that you love them - every day! This also goes for other members of the family!!!

