

The self at play: Exploring the core developmental origins of positive psychological well-being

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Abstract: Positive psychological well-being (PPWB) has emerged as a significant factor associated with increasing health-enhancing behaviors and decreasing participation in health-risk behaviors as well as mitigating risk for non-communicable diseases. In its simplest form, PPWB refers to an individual's inner sense that their life is going well. However, PPWB has been conceptualized, defined, measured, and studied in myriad ways, causing confusion for both researchers and practitioners as to the essence of this inner sense and the mechanisms underlying its development. This is problematic for those conducting interventions to enhance PPWB across the lifecourse as effectiveness is limited by ambiguity and undue complexity. Guided by a developmental lifecourse perspective, the purpose of this conceptual review/essay is to explore the developmental origins of PPWB, which have rarely been sought. In exploring developmental origins we uncovered four innate, central potentialities—flow, autonomy, biophilia, eudaimonia—that comprise a synchronous expressive self with a strong connection to PPWB. When nurtured in early childhood and adolescence via quality parenting and play experiences, the expressive self produces a positive inner sense that life is going well as a natural byproduct or outcome that is sustainable throughout the lifecourse. These relationships remain strong within both Western and non-Western cultures.

Keywords: expressive self, well-being, developmental origins, lifecourse, play

1. Introduction

Positive Psychological Well-Being (PPWB) is known to ameliorate or mitigate the risk of myriad noncommunicable disease (NCD) processes as well as slow physical and cognitive decline (Boehm & Kubzansky, 2012; Boehm et al., 2015; Hatch et al., 2010; Ryff et al., 2004; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Reviews of multiple studies indicate that individuals with PPWB are likely to engage in health-enhancing behaviors (e.g., physical activity) and less likely to participate in health-risk behaviors (e.g., substance use) (Boehm et al., 2012; Kimiecik, 2016; Trudel-Fitzgerald et al., 2021). Based on these significant health benefits, the primary purpose of this conceptual essay is to explore the developmental origins of PPWB within a lifecourse perspective. We make the case that an expressive self, when nurtured and developed through high quality parenting and play, is the core origin of a PPWB that enables humans to thrive and flourish throughout the lifecourse.

During the last half century, especially with the call for a more positive psychology at the beginning of the 21st Century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), psychological well-being (PWB) emerged as an important internal state. Within that inner framework, some have suggested that PWB is a "positive and sustainable state" (Huppert et al., 2004, p. 1331), whereas others suggest a person can have low (Languishing) or high (Flourishing) PWB (Keyes, 2002).

That is, PWB can range from negative to positive. In its most simplified version, PWB *refers to an individual's inner sense of how their life is going* (Ryff et al., 2021), which suggests a person can feel their life ranging anywhere from bad to neutral to good, and anywhere in between. For the purposes of this conceptual essay, the focus is primarily on *positive psychological well-being* (PPWB) because we are most interested in the developmental origins of what Ryff and colleagues (2021) consider an inner sense of how one's life is going on the positive end of the continuum (i.e., an inner sense that my life is going well). In essence, this conceptual essay explores how a person comes to experience life in such a way by focusing on the developmental origins of the relationships among play, parenting, self, and well-being.

2. A developmental lifecourse approach

A lifecourse perspective examines the relationship between time and health/well-being and how many factors, such as age, relationships, and social change, shape people's lives from birth to death (Halfon et al., 2013). A lifecourse perspective asserts that noncommunicable chronic diseases (NCDs) develop gradually over time and are strongly linked to developmental origins of health and disease (DOHaD) (Barnes et al., 2016). There are many different ways to take a developmental lifecourse approach. For instance, a developmental psychopathology framework emphasizes the enduring impact of both early life and cumulative experiences on subsequent development (Cicchetti & Toth, 2009; Han et al., 2023). According to Hatch and colleagues (2010), a developmental-contextual perspective provides the framework to consider the influence of individual characteristics and social environment in early life on the likelihood of positive and negative outcomes in adulthood (Lerner, 1996; Schoon, 2006).

A developmental lifecourse approach is necessary when seeking the core origins of PPWB. As examples, within a broader social determinants of health (SDoH) framework, beginning with the seminal work of Felitti and colleagues (1998), a niche of research studies has been examining the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on various adolescent and adult health outcomes. A number of systematic and critical reviews have demonstrated a moderate to strong association between ACEs and diminished adolescent and adult mental and physical health as well as increased morbidity and premature mortality (Grummitt et al., 2021; Petruccioli et al., 2019; Yu et al., 2022). Based on emerging strengths-based perspectives within such areas as social work, public health, and positive epidemiology (e.g., Saleebey, 2008; VanderWeele et al., 2020), recent studies also have demonstrated a connection between Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) with positive long-term physical/mental health and reduction in risk of some NCDs (Han et al., 2023).

Both ACEs and PCEs appear to be potentially useful for a more comprehensive understanding of health and well-being later in life. However, related to our interest in PPWB, the ACEs/PCEs focus alone may not move us closer to discovering and understanding the developmental origins of PPWB or the mechanisms underlying the association between PPWB and long-term health. As an example, much of the PCEs work has focused on mental health outcomes, such as anxiety, depression, PTSD, and psychosocial stress as well as physical health and health behaviors (Han et al., 2023).

There are two good reasons for exploring developmental origins of PPWB. First, psychosocial research focusing on PPWB has dramatically increased in the first quarter of the 21st century (Park et al., 2023). Although a positive trend overall, this proliferation has created significant conceptual and definitional confusion, leading Jackson and colleagues (2022, p. 02) to observe: "In short, for a concept [well-being] that is at the center of contemporary social life, there is very little clarity about what it means and/or how it should be measured." One review found 99

measures of well-being with 196 dimensions identified within them, and little explanation about how existing theories had influenced scale design (Linton et al., 2016). Park and colleagues (2023, p. 11) have stated that this approach has created a fragmented body of work and a "landscape of confusion" because the relevance of findings relating to one term to findings related to others is unclear. This chaotic state surrounding psychological well-being research also poses challenges when designing and evaluating interventions to enhance PWB, which tend to produce relatively small effects on psychological well-being (Kim et al., 2023). It is hoped that by uncovering developmental origins of PPWB that the view of the well-being landscape will be clearer, providing a means for more effective interventions.

The second, and more pertinent, reason for our purposes is that no matter how psychological well-being or PPWB is defined and measured, it generally is viewed as a byproduct (outcome) or marker of experiencing life in certain ways. For example, within self-determination theory (SDT) the satisfaction of basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) has been shown to increase well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001). This suggests that much of the action pertaining to psychological activity lies within the lived experience (i.e., process) and its subsequent influence on PPWB (i.e., outcome). In this essay, we are using a developmental origins framework to seek root causes of PPWB (Gluckman et al., 2010), and one way to do this is to consider the role of the self.

2.1 *The self as progenitor*

According to Jackson and colleagues (2022 p. 06), well-being is a "by-product of living simply and in concert—not conflict—with nature...a (natural) outcome of who we *are*, rather than something we must *do* and account for." In this essay, we ask what are the natural (nature) states, the developmental origins, of human beings that would lead to a more natural outcome of people's inner sense that their lives are going well (PPWB) (e.g., Kimiecik & Teas, 2020)? From a psychological perspective, this question naturally leads to a focus on humans' innate inner qualities or characteristics. We call this natural beginning the expressive self and have provided detailed background and specifics elsewhere (Kimiecik & Teas, 2020). We provide an overview here for context.

Covington (1991, p. 87) suggests that the self begins everything and as "the progenitor of psychological processes and of every behavior" is a "playful source of energy longing for release." Viewed in this way, the self with this expressive quality lies at the core of being human. E.O. Wilson (1998, p. 130) wrote that the "self is not an ineffable being living apart within the brain ...The self and body are ... inseparably fused" from the beginning. This self-body connection is highly significant because others, such as Zangwill (2017, p. 50), have argued that the self is by nature dynamic: "it exists, we believe in it, and that it has an active nature, whatever else may be true of it ... the self has the power of self-motion." Along these lines, Weger and Herbig (2018, p. 1) claim that a fundamental aspect of the self is the "capacity to initiate activity rather than to merely reflect on it." These authors suggest that much of contemporary psychology has ignored this unifying process or activity aspect of the self, and instead has focused on subcomponents or outcomes reflective of the self, such as self-concept. McGilchrist (2019) suggests that this fragmented, reflective view of the self is due to Western culture's de-valuing right brain hemisphere activity, which is responsible for maintaining a coherent, continuous, and unified sense of self. Relating to this self-body connection, Devinsky's (2000, p. 69) work has shown that an individual's awareness of a "primordial" corporeal self is grounded in the right cerebral hemisphere.

Based on the above discussion, when it comes to the self our basic premise is that the self above all else is expressive, ergo the *expressive self*. According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), being expressive is "effectively conveying meaning or feeling." The expressive self does this because of its natural energy, activity, connection with the moving body (i.e., self-motion), and inclination to become an integrated whole or system (Plotkin, 2008). According to Meadows (2008, p. 8), "A system is an interconnected set of elements that is coherently organized in a way that achieves something." As Crutchfield (2018) delineates, a defining feature of any system is the interrelatedness of its parts. Thus, we are proposing that all humans have central inner tendencies (parts) as part of their nature striving to create a system (whole): the expressive self.

To be clear, following Prinz (2012, p. 13), human nature refers to things that "human beings do naturally" (see McAdams & Pals, 2006, for a more in-depth discussion). Innateness, human nature, and natural are all terms related to the notion that, as humans, we have central characteristics or qualities. How many, and what kinds, of these central qualities are universal in humans are very complex issues (see Brown, 2004). However, Martela and Ryan (2023) do provide guidelines by which an essential basic need is deemed universal, which include: the satisfaction (positive) or frustration (negative) of the need has both short-term and long-term mental and affective consequences, the basic need should provide an explanation for why certain activities lead to well-being, and the need should be universally operational across all cultural contexts. In the subsequent sections we utilize and address these criteria relating to the innate and universal aspects of the central tendencies of the expressive self.

Additionally, human nature refers to central tendencies in how humans want to interact with and experience the world (E.O. Wilson, 1984), and we propose that the potentialities within the expressive aspect of the self are those innate tendencies. Thus, we present here a synchronous set (system) of four central tendencies of the expressive self—*flow, autonomy, biophilia, eudaimonia*. Each of these core qualities is regarded as a natural, innate potentiality of being human and, when nurtured to be felt or experienced, grow and develop into a coherent/integrated expressive self that serves as an active force for the development and sustainability of PPWB. We suggest that these qualities are primordial, predating traits and personality, and should be a primary focus for children of any age as part of their positive childhood experiences. By nurturing and developing these four innate qualities of the expressive self, PPWB becomes a more natural outcome of growth and development throughout the lifecourse.

2.2 Expressive self and other meta-need approaches

The four central tendencies—*flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia*—we are including within the expressive self are naturally broad (meta), and it would be presumptuous to believe they form an exclusive set (see, for example, Brendtro et al., 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2023). But we start with these four as their supporters have explicitly claimed each to be innate, psychological nutriment provided to all humans at birth (e.g., Deci & Ryan, 2000; Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003; Norton, 1976; E.O. Wilson, 1984).

The expressive self approach is similar to, but different from, other meta-type approaches focusing on innate or universal needs associated with human development and well-being. In Nussbaum's (2011) Capabilities Approach, capabilities are the answer to the question, "What is this person able to do and to be?" Within this approach, Nussbaum identifies ten Central Capabilities: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination, and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliations, other species, play, and control over one's environment. The main premise is that people possessing these Capabilities have a greater capacity for flourishing. However, Nussbaum (2011, p. 28) herself declares that the approach is "evaluative and ethical

from the start," and not grounded in innate human nature. DeHaan and colleagues (2016) suggest that the Capabilities Approach relies heavily on objective evaluations and may not reflect how people live their lives according to their own subjective evaluations. Thus, although Nussbaum's Capabilities Approach provides a useful universal foundation for enhancing human growth and development, the focus is more on Capabilities as rights to be protected and it does not fully take into account the subjective experiences that lead to well-being (DeHaan et al., 2016). This is a key distinction with central tendencies within the expressive self as innate and the Capabilities Approach: *subjective experience*. To be discussed in more detail in the next sections, each of the potentialities in the expressive self involve a feel or feeling as part of the lived experience (Kimiecik & Newburg, 2023). As Cantril (1967, p. 96) states, "feeling, then, appears to be the great activating force" and Bellah and colleagues (1985, p. 334) suggest that "each person has a unique core of feeling." Relating to the expressive self, Ryan and Deci (2010) observe that the experience of autonomy is characterized by *feeling* volitional or self-endorsed, with eudaimonia the *feeling* of meaning is likely to arise (Heintzelman & King, 2013), in flow a *feeling* of deep engagement is experienced (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003), and biophilia is a *feeling* of connection to all life forms (Barbiero & Bento, 2021; Weber, 2016).

The expressive self is certainly aligned with self-determination theory (SDT), which posits that humans are "active, growth-oriented organisms who are naturally inclined toward integration of their psychic elements into a unified sense of self" (Deci & Ryan, 2000, p. 229). SDT proposes that humans have broad, innate motivational propensities that provide the energy needed for this growth and integration (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Soenens & Vansteenkiste, 2011). Within SDT, the self is a causal agent of life experiences and develops through intrinsic activity, driven by three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy is the need to feel volitional and free in one's actions; competence is the desire to feel effective; and relatedness is the need for connection (Ryan & Deci, 2008; Williams et al., 2000). Although all three needs are important, autonomy has received the most attention, with Ryan and Deci (2010) proposing that autonomy is most important for thriving.

The expressive self differs from SDT in two subtle, but important, ways. First, as pointed out by Ekkekakis and Zenko (2016), SDT is a rational theory of human development and behavior focusing on cognitive processes and the "conscious processing of information" (Deci & Ryan, 1980, p. 34). As stated earlier, within the expressive self, the self is considered embodied and more closely connected to subjective or lived experience that entails movement or action. From a conscious/nonconscious perspective, the psychological needs within SDT are reflected within thoughts and beliefs grounded in the left cerebral hemisphere, considered System 2 (second order representation) (Kahnemann, 2011). Feel or feeling is part of System 1 (first order presence) emanating within the right cerebral hemisphere and "is the only scale that can express what is relevant for a living being" (Weber, 2016, p. 123). Each of the four central potentialities, as we construe them, are embodied within the self as lived experience and the feel or feeling of flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia is the source of that lived experience.

The second difference from SDT lies with the central tendencies included in the expressive self, and those that are excluded. Obviously, within SDT, flow and biophilia are not considered innate psychological needs. However, flow and biophilia are included within the expressive self because we, and others, consider them to be innate, central tendencies of all human beings that are tied to the self. Csikszentmihalyi and Nakamura (1989, p.64) state:

... complex human behavior... cannot be explained or predicted unless one takes into account the needs of the self. Foremost among these is the need for the self to determine

its own choices [autonomy] and to maximize optimal experience [flow] in high-challenge, high-skill [competence] situations.

Similar to Vansteenkiste and colleagues' (2020) approach to basic psychological needs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) within SDT, we have chosen not to include competence within the expressive self to avoid a proliferation of central tendencies and because competence (as skill) is embedded in the flow state which we consider to be one of four central tendencies comprising the expressive self. Additionally, biophilia has been considered by too many, too often to be an innate need and warrants its selection as a central potentiality of the expressive self (Barbiero & Berto, 2021). As support, Fromm (1964, p. 51) recognized biophilia as a "primary potentiality". Again, for parsimonious purposes, we exclude SDT's version of the need for human relatedness within the expressive self, not because it is unimportant, but because others have suggested that relatedness may be broadened with psychological theories and concepts to expand beyond human affiliation to also include human-nature interaction (Macy, 2009; Tam, 2014).

3. Central tendencies, expressive self, and positive psychological well-being

This section overviews the four innate central potentialities of the expressive self along with support from child and adolescent research demonstrating a strong connection between each potentiality and present or future PPWB. Following suppositions from the DOHaD and child development literature that the first 1000 days and early childhood are sensitive and critical periods relating to long-term health and well-being (Barnes et al., 2016), we focus on research mostly within an early life experience framework (e.g., early childhood, adolescence, emerging adulthood). This time frame of life experience encompasses the broad period between conception and reproductive maturity (Lea & Rosenbaum, 2020). Within each potentiality we examine its innate characteristic, connection to PPWB, and its universality across cultures.

3.1 Flow and well-being

Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi (2003) state that humans are naturally wired for worldly involvement, a drive present from birth. Flow is a state of complete engagement in an activity where time fades, action and awareness merge, and challenges and skills are optimally matched (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 1993, 1997). In this state, one's attention is fully focused, fostering an inner harmony that mobilizes resources for engagement (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). From a growth perspective, flow makes the self expressive, alive, and vital, as Csikszentmihalyi (1993, p. 237) notes, "Every flow experience contributes to the growth of the self." This self-growth is seen in the development of vital engagement, where enjoyment and meaning emerge from a felt connection between self and world (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Through flow, the self differentiates and integrates, allowing meaning to unfold naturally. Additionally, Baumeister and colleagues (2013) observe that doing things to express the self increases life's meaning, and Csikszentmihalyi (1975) found that the experience of flow and meaning reduces anxiety and boredom. Relating to universality, studies indicate that people in non-Western cultures and across the lifespan describe the flow experience in similar ways as people in Western cultures, with cultural parallels for the onset of flow as well as continuation (Massimini et al., 1988). Csikszentmihalyi and Asakawa (2016, p. 12) found that the Japanese experience flow similar to people in North America and Western European cultures supporting optimal experience as a "basic universality of human nature."

Flow plays a significant role in supporting mental health and well-being among young people, serving as a buffer against psychopathology (Freire et al., 2021). Research by Bassi and colleagues (2014) found that openness to experience was the only personality trait strongly linked with flow among adolescents, where greater flow frequency correlated with higher life satisfaction, well-being, and emotional balance. Numerous studies have shown that adolescents experiencing flow report greater life satisfaction, self-esteem, joy, and positive affect (Asakawa, 2010; Bassi et al., 2014; Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002), as well as increased engagement in learning (Schüler, 2007). Early flow experiences may evolve into a trait called “flow proneness” (Ullén et al., 2012), which is associated with well-being, an active lifestyle, and health. This cumulative effect supports the idea that regular flow experiences in adolescence foster positive long-term outcomes, with reduced flow often linked to lower well-being (Fullagar & Kelloway, 2009; Steele & Fullagar, 2009).

These findings relating to the positive effects of flow on well-being also are consistent across different cultures. For example, Asakawa (2010) found that Japanese college students who experienced flow more often in their daily lives displayed higher levels of well-being, as indicated by higher self-esteem, lower anxiety, and greater academic commitment. Similarly, a study of Chinese college students found a significant, positive relationship between flow and academic self-efficacy and self-esteem (Wu et al., 2021). Lastly, a comprehensive cross-cultural flow study by Delle Fave and colleagues (2011) confirmed that the recurrence of flow, and the consistency of the flow dimensions, was stable across Western and non-Western cultures (i.e., Europe, Asia, and Africa).

3.2 *Autonomy and well-being*

As indicated earlier, autonomy is a central concept within Self-Determination Theory (SDT, Deci & Ryan, 2000). According to Ryan and Deci (2010), autonomy is first and foremost a characteristic of actions. When people are acting autonomously they are fully behind their own actions—they feel choiceful and integrated in behaving. Ryan and Deci (2023) emphasize that autonomy involves directing one’s vitality toward self-endorsed actions, which is distinct from being independent or having freedom of choice (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Although all three needs within SDT are significant, autonomy has received the most attention, especially because of its strong association with PPWB. From a well-being perspective, autonomy is central to enabling individuals to grow, and to choose and develop preferred ways of being, all of which leads to PPWB. Satisfying this autonomous need is essential for developing intrinsic motivation as well, where people engage in tasks for their own sake which are associated with positive affect and enjoyment (Ryan & Deci, 2000, 2010; Ryan et al., 2009).

Autonomy is strongly linked to psychological well-being across ages and contexts (De-Juanas et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2024). While Ryff and Singer (1998) consider autonomy a component of well-being, others view them as independent, as autonomy within SDT is defined as self-endorsement rather than just being independent (Ryan et al., 2008). Studies confirm that greater perceived autonomy correlates with higher well-being. For example, studies have shown that both choice and volitional intention positively impacts well-being (Rivas et al., 2012; Romero et al., 2013), while findings from Hunter and Csikszentmihalyi (2003) indicate that high school students with motivational autonomy demonstrate stronger self-concepts. Autonomy consistently predicts well-being across activities and is more influential than activity type in promoting well-being in early adults (Kukita et al., 2020). School-based studies have also found that fostering autonomy enhances well-being (Bassi & Delle Fave, 2012; Ruinni et al., 2009).

Cross-culturally, autonomy, competence, and relatedness are associated with well-being in diverse regions, including the United States, Belgium, and Mexico (Chen et al., 2015). Chirkov and colleagues (2003) found that in both Eastern and Western cultures (i.e., South Korea, Russia, Turkey, and the US) people who reported their behavior as autonomous also reported greater psychological well-being, an effect that was not moderated by cultural context. Chirkov and colleagues (2010) also reviewed studies within South Asian cultures (typically collectivist cultures) and found that personal autonomy is relevant and important via both the individualized self and the spiritual self. They conclude that "autonomy is universally essential for people's mental health and ultimately for their happiness and the good life" (p. 14).

3.3 Biophilia and well-being

According to Barbiero and Berto (2021), Erich Fromm first recognized biophilia's innate and ontogenetic character, describing it as both a "primary potentiality" (Fromm, 1964, p. 51) and "intrinsic to human biology" (Fromm, 1973, p. 407) that encompasses love for both humanity and nature. Similarly, E.O. Wilson (1984, p. 1) defines biophilia as an "innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes." Orr (2004, p. 137) echoes this, suggesting an "innate urge to affiliate" with nature. This natural inclination aligns biophilia with other expressive self qualities such as flow, autonomy, and eudaimonia. However, while the other qualities are often grounded in the psyche, biophilia is usually considered biologically driven, as humans have an instinctive affinity with the nonhuman world (Kellert, 2010). The expressive self, however, is holistic—body and mind—and even early hunter-gatherers exhibited this holistic expression, as the mind experienced wonder and creativity while the body moved to find sustenance (Liebenberg, 2013). Wilson (1993) proposes that biophilia is not a single instinct, and Abram (2016, p. xii) adds that the mind is "part and parcel of its physicality" and "manifest in the dynamism of its material being." Biophilia, or the ecological self (Bragg, 1996), connects body and mind to the natural world, an essential aspect of the expressive self that immerses us "into the presence of an earth much wider and deeper than our human designs" (Abram, 2016, p. xiii). Weber (2016, p. 95) calls this process the biology of wonder: "If living beings realize themselves as selves by regulating the flow of matter through their identities...then the matter that comprises an organism must express this subjectivity."

Biophilia is strongly associated with psychological well-being outcomes, such as life satisfaction, positive emotions, mental health, cognitive function, and vitality across all age groups (Barbiero & Berto, 2021; Jimenez et al., 2021). Quality green spaces enhance children's well-being, with older children (ages 12–13) benefiting more than younger ones (Feng & Astell-Burt, 2017; Tillman et al., 2018). Proximity to natural features, such as forests near schools, also fosters socio-emotional development in preschoolers (Scott et al., 2018). Physical activity, closely associated with well-being in children, increases when they have access to green space (Almanza et al., 2012), whereas disconnection from nature correlates with reduced well-being (Samborski, 2010). Studies show cognitive outcomes improve with exposure to natural environments (e.g., playgrounds and gardens) (Pretty et al., 2017). Biophilia also leads to vitality, a core element in SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2008), with subjective vitality linked to outdoor experiences (Ryan et al., 2010). This "self-environment interaction" generates energy, as people are naturally drawn to nature, enhancing both physical and psychological health.

From a cross-cultural perspective, Lefosse and colleagues (2025, p. 1) found that people's biophilic perceptions (i.e., "feeling nature") in varied city environments (e.g., Amsterdam, Singapore, Dubai, Trondheim) on different continents were comparable, regardless of biome or gender, suggesting that biophilia is universally experienced more so than influenced by

geographical conditions and variations in nature. Also, based on multiple qualitative and quantitative sources, a nature-based environment produced positive feelings as demonstrated by 49% of survey-based comments across all cities. A meta-analysis of 49 studies across 11 different countries demonstrated large effect sizes (0.8 or greater) regarding the effect of natural environments and immersion in nature on increasing positive affect (Gaekwad et al., 2022). Lastly, results of a study out of Germany that used a reaction-time paradigm revealed a tendency to approach nature and avoid cities, which suggests that living in cities may be contributing to the emergence of mental health problems in urban areas (Schiebel et al., 2022).

3.4 Eudaimonia and well-being

Aligned with the notion that feel/feeling and activity permeate each of the four central tendencies of the expressive self, what is eudaimonia a feeling of? Relatedly, if eudaimonia is an inner imperative that one feels (Norton, 1976), what is the specific imperative? These are not easy questions to answer as of the four potentialities comprising the expressive self, eudaimonia appears to be the most complex, confusing, and controversial (Vitterso, 2025). For instance, Martela and Sheldon (2019) counted at least 45 different ways to operationalize eudaimonic well-being with even more approaches to measure the construct. Some, such as Ryff and colleagues (2021), view eudaimonia as having six dimensions that together *are* psychological (eudaimonic) well-being. However, as Vitterso (2025, p. 245) observes, Ryff's eudaimonic conceptualization of PWB leaves out one core element: "what we feel in our lives." This is significant because, as indicated throughout this essay, our conceptualization of the expressive self is grounded in one's lived experience, or the feel, of flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia. Based on Huta and Waterman's (2014) extensive review of approaches to conceptualizing and operationalizing eudaimonia, we focus on one of the two common elements present in all approaches to eudaimonia that they reviewed: purpose and meaning. This perspective of eudaimonia as the lived experience of meaning and purpose is supported by a Martela and Sheldon (2019) review that found meaning/purpose to be one of the most commonly measured elements of eudaimonia. Martela and Ryan (2023) identified meaning as one of two broad concepts within eudaimonia, and Eurostat (2017, p. 80) associated eudaimonia with "meaning and purpose of life."

Within a humanistic perspective, meaning and purpose emanate from the notion that all humans have an innate inclination to experience their unique, full potential (Rogers, 1961). One of Ryff's six eudaimonic dimensions is *Purpose in Life*, which is described as finding *meaning* in one's efforts and challenges. Vitterso (2025) concludes that meaning in life is now a significant part of the eudaimonia concept and Bauer (2021) suggests that meaning best represents the complexity of eudaimonia. Lastly, relating to our view of the expressive self, Baumeister (2018, p. 33) proposes that meaning is "concerned with constructing and expressing the self." For our purposes, we consider purpose/meaning the central aspect of humans' innate inclination to feel eudaimonic. This follows Vitterso's (2025) premise that eudaimonia is an innate drive to actualize one's human potential. Thus, eudaimonia is an essential, inner foundation for each person to actively seek, discover, and express their uniqueness via lived experiences that feel purposeful and meaningful. In essence, eudaimonia is activity that feels purposeful and meaningful or as Bauer (2021, p. 66) emphasizes: "the *sense of having* meaning in life."

However eudaimonia has been defined, operationalized, and measured, it has strong connections to positive psychological well-being. In a series of studies involving adolescents, Coatsworth and Sharp (2013) assessed a variety of self-defining activities to examine their degree of eudaimonic identity, such as personal expressiveness, and connection to wellness and well-being. Findings suggest that the experience of an expressive eudaimonic identity within the

activities was a more significant predictor of subjective well-being than the activities themselves. In a rare longitudinal study focused on eudaimonia, Telzer and colleagues (2014) followed adolescents for 1 year to determine if neural sensitivity to eudaimonic or hedonic rewards differentially predicted changes in depressive symptoms. Results demonstrated that ventral striatum activation during eudaimonic-based decisions predicted longitudinal declines in depressive symptoms, whereas ventral striatum activation to hedonic-related decisions predicted longitudinal increases in depressive symptoms. These findings support the premise that eudaimonic orientations and experiences can have a significant effect on well-being over time. In this case, eudaimonic processes served as a protective mechanism to depression within this sample of adolescents. As significant, those adolescents who identified as pleasure seeking through hedonic activities were at greater risk of ill-being. Considering these findings, it is interesting to note that much of the psychological well-being research with children and adolescents has focused more on hedonia than eudaimonia (Hoosen et al., 2024).

From a universal perspective, Gaston-Breton and colleagues (2021) examined meaning (and other eudaimonia-related concepts) and its relationship to life satisfaction across 12 countries. The findings indicated that this aspect of eudaimonia predicted life satisfaction, and most importantly, the magnitude of its effects did not vary across these countries. In addition, eudaimonic meaning was a stronger predictor of life satisfaction than hedonic-based measures such as pleasure. Several studies within different cultures (China, Poland) have found individuals with a greater sense of meaning in life (viewed as eudaimonia) to experience higher levels of life satisfaction and well-being (e.g., Glaz, 2024).

In sum, the most natural sources for creating *and* sustaining an inner sense of life going well (PPWB) can be found within the central potentialities of the expressive self–flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia. The lived experiences of deep engagement, agency and volition, connection with all natural and human life, and a sense of meaning and purpose are universal across cultures with both independent and interdependent qualities. Following a developmental lifecourse perspective these innate origins have the potential to integrate into a holistic expressive self, especially when nurtured in early childhood, which leads to a more natural and sustainable lifelong inner sense of life going well (PPWB). The remainder of this conceptual essay focuses on the role of parents and play in nurturing the development of the expressive self.

4. Nurturing the expressive self: Parents and play

As is evident, strong associations exist with each of the four potentialities of the expressive self and PPWB across all ages of early childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood. In that sense, flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia are potential mechanisms to explain the relationship between PCEs and long-term health. Han and colleagues (2023) have suggested that research should clarify the mechanisms by which PCEs contribute to children developing a more positive well-being. We propose that flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia are those higher-order (meta) mechanisms, and provide evidence for why and how parenting quality and play are two significant influencers for the development of these potentialities within the expressive self.

4.1 Parenting quality and the expressive self

Frankowski (2023) emphasizes a strengths-based approach to Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs) for promoting child and parent development, stating, “Strong families are better equipped to provide protective factors for their children...[and] strong youth can build on PCEs to help buffer the effects of ACEs and negative SDoH” (p. 1). Flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia are the innate strengths that, when nurtured, develop the healthy, happy, productive

adults Frankowski envisions – those with a positive psychological well-being (PPWB). All caring adults can help children develop these strengths, but the foundation is established through parenting (Neufeld, 2012). Parenting quality, particularly nurturant caregiving, provides essential support for child development. For example, for mother-infant dyads facing poverty, positive caregiving supports cognitive, socioemotional, and brain development, promoting a child’s ability to thrive (Luby et al., 2024). Findings from another study demonstrated a strong link between flourishing and the parent-child connection in their family resilience index, underscoring the value of safe, stable, nurturing relationships (Bethell, Gombojav, & Whitaker, 2019). As recommended by the National Research Council (2014), family-focused interventions are crucial for increasing child flourishing and mitigating adversity. More work needs to explore how such parenting practices affect flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia strengthen the expressive self and optimize child well-being.

4.1.1 Parenting and flow

Parenting quality within family dynamics influences children’s optimal, or *flow*, experiences. Rathunde (2001) found that children in high support/high challenge families spend more time in states of “undivided interest” – a positive mood and focus on the activity itself, which Csikszentmihalyi (1997) describes as flow. High support/high challenge environments best coordinate adolescent attention, with parents’ active support and challenge fostering mastery. Rathunde (1988) suggests that such “autotelic” families value an approach to life that fosters attention and engagement. The connection between parenting quality and children’s optimal experiences has PPWB implications. A study conducted by Shoshani & Yaari (2022) showed that parenting offers significant opportunities for flow, benefiting both children and parents by enhancing subjective well-being. Their findings also demonstrated that parents’ play and leisure activities with their children, especially when in flow, was a source of continuous happiness in their lives. Lansford and colleagues (2023) suggest that these kinds of parent-child interactions with flow at the center are universally adaptive for children’s development.

4.1.2 Parenting and autonomy

Joussemet and Mageau (2023) propose that autonomy support (AS) is key to optimal parenting, fostering children’s sense of agency. Research shows that autonomy-oriented communication from parents, beginning in infancy, boosts motivation, learning, and well-being (Joussemet et al., 2008). Autonomy support benefits children of young ages as well, as even infants and toddlers thrive with AS. Joussemet and Mageau (2023) also note that AS requires parents’ patience and perspective-taking, paving the way for healthy, flourishing trajectories. They conclude that “all human beings should benefit from having their autonomy supported, even very young ones” (p. 542). There is evidence to support their claim even within cultural differences in parenting. Studies conducted in Russia and China showed that parental autonomy support was associated with effective self-regulation and positive school outcomes for adolescents, which is similar to findings from studies with North American adolescents (Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Vansteenkiste et al., 2005).

4.1.3 Parenting and biophilia

Parents significantly influence their children’s *biophilic* tendencies (Yanez et al., 2017). In an age where children’s experiences in nature are declining, biophilia becomes crucial. Parents often view organized sports as more valuable for development than free play in nature, prioritizing

structured activities over outdoor exploration (Watchman & Spencer-Cavaliere, 2017). Even when green space is accessible, children may avoid free play due to parents' preference for scheduled activities (Skar et al., 2016). In studies of preschoolers, parental attitudes strongly influenced children's engagement with nature, with restrictions limiting outdoor play and parental allowance encouraging interaction with natural materials (Yilmaz-Uysal, 2020). On the positive side, when mothers and daughters interact together in nature they both report psychological benefits (Izenstark & Ebata, 201n). Findings from other studies show that parents' attitudes and behavior impact how children feel about nature (Cheng & Monroe, 2010), and children's values about nature are transferred to them by the actions of their parents (Chawla, 2009). This influence extends to Children's Independent Mobility (CIM)—the freedom to play outside unsupervised. Parental concerns about local safety and traffic often limit CIM, reducing children's autonomy in nature (Ferreira et al., 2024).

4.1.4 Parenting and eudaimonia

A sense of meaning and purpose in life may be nurtured by parenting quality from childhood through adolescence. Parental actions rooted in eudaimonia have lasting impacts. For instance, higher perceived parental warmth in childhood predicted adult use of problem-focused coping, leading to greater well-being two decades later (Moran et al., 2018). Similarly, Huppert et al. (2010) found that perceived parental care from early childhood through adolescence correlated with higher midlife psychological well-being, measured as eudaimonia. Role-modeling eudaimonia is essential. Huta's (2012) study with college students found that parents who exemplified eudaimonia, rather than merely endorsing it verbally, helped their children experience positive affect, self-esteem, vitality, meaning, and self-connectedness. Eudaimonic experiences benefit both parents and children. Fosco and Lydon-Staley (2020) found that adolescents' sense of connection to their parents strongly correlated with the experience of eudaimonia in both groups. Additionally, adolescents saw family support as essential to developing life purpose, viewing parents as models of purposeful living through empathy and prosocial behavior (Malin et al., 2014).

4.2 Play, playfulness, and the expressive self

We conclude with play because it is the "original design," considered "every human's birthright" (Gordon, 2014, pp. 250–251). Both play and playfulness align naturally with the core qualities of the expressive self: flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia (see Figure 1). Without play, the development of the expressive self would be limited, as play and playfulness are fundamental to human existence (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975; Huizinga, 1950). Huizinga (1950, pp. 7-8) describes play as an activity deeply tied to freedom: "All play is a voluntary activity... it is free, is in fact freedom." Play is an expression of intrinsic motivation and is pursued for its own sake, making the experience more valuable than any goal (Gray, 2013). Following this theme, we suggest that PPWB is a natural byproduct of experiencing flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia, with play, along with high quality parenting, as the catalysts that generate and develop these qualities over time.

Figure 1. Developmental Origins of Positive Psychological Well-Being

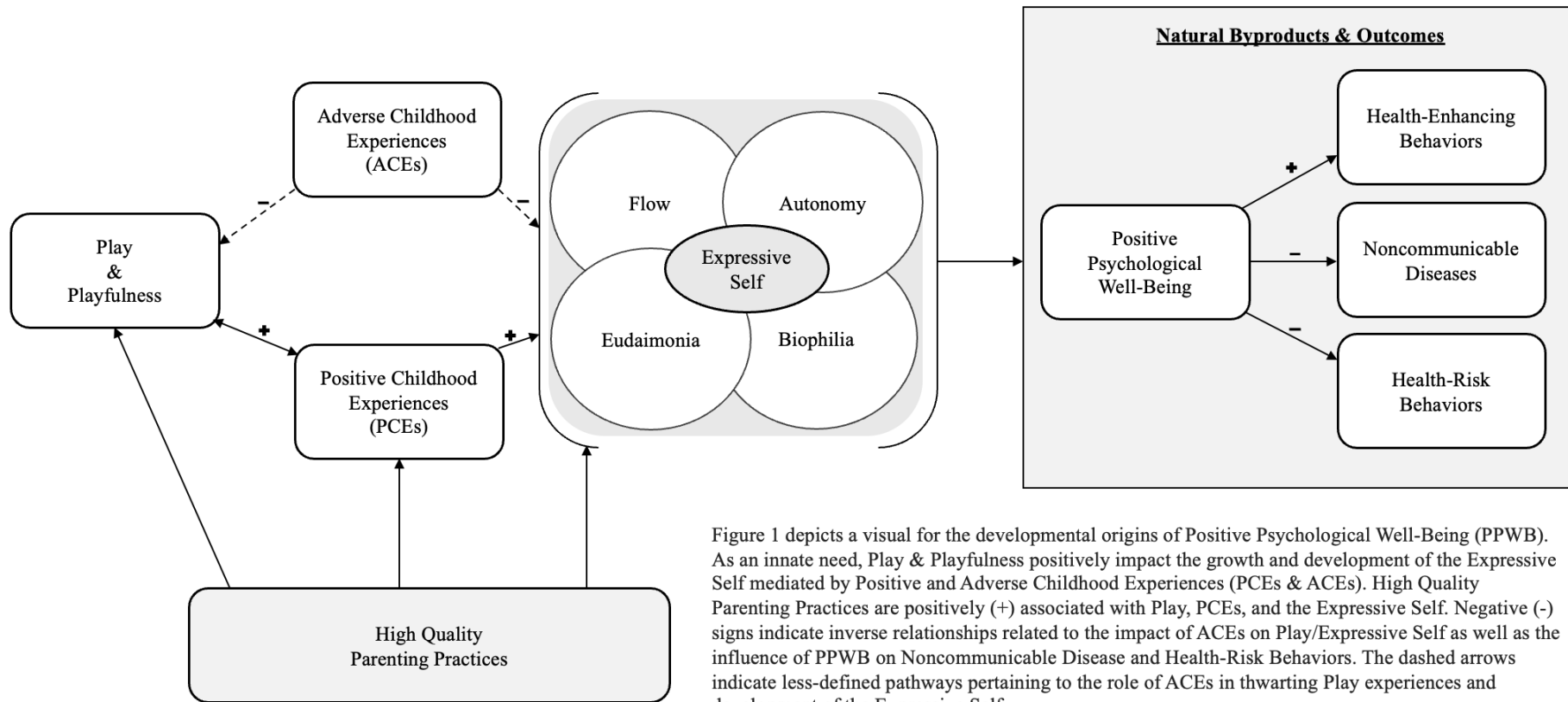


Figure 1 depicts a visual for the developmental origins of Positive Psychological Well-Being (PPWB). As an innate need, Play & Playfulness positively impact the growth and development of the Expressive Self mediated by Positive and Adverse Childhood Experiences (PCEs & ACEs). High Quality Parenting Practices are positively (+) associated with Play, PCEs, and the Expressive Self. Negative (-) signs indicate inverse relationships related to the impact of ACEs on Play/Expressive Self as well as the influence of PPWB on Noncommunicable Disease and Health-Risk Behaviors. The dashed arrows indicate less-defined pathways pertaining to the role of ACEs in thwarting Play experiences and development of the Expressive Self.

The concept of play includes various forms, such as free, deliberate, social, and spontaneous play (Bateson, 2014; Gray, 2013). Although each form is distinct, they share the innate drive toward freedom, joy, and exploration. In each form, participants may create or change rules freely, promoting flexibility and creativity without the direct oversight of adults. Gray and colleagues (2023) emphasize that independent play, free from adult control, significantly supports children's mental well-being. Playfulness personifies the same sense of freedom and spontaneity as play, but is more of a particular positive mood state, leading individuals to behave in flexible and creative ways that opens them up to novel possibilities (Bateson, 2014; Bateson & Martin, 2013). Bernard De Koven (2014, p. 31) asserts, "Playfulness isn't an achievement; it's a gift." Both play and playfulness contribute to child development, carrying over into adulthood as predictors of well-being (Barnett, 2011; Held & Spinka, 2011).

From a cross-cultural perspective, there are cultural differences in parenting practices that may influence the nature of play and its impact on flow, autonomy, biophilia, or eudaimonia. As an example, Bornstein (2007) has demonstrated that parents in some societies play with babies and see them as interactive partners, which could be conducive to flow states, whereas parents in other societies think that it is senseless for them to play with infants. Relating to the expressive self, Western-oriented traditions consider the self as agentic—an organizer of action and an integrative center of experience, internally controlled, and relatively unchanging across contexts. non-Western communities emphasize qualities such as harmony and interdependence rather than autonomy and independence (Morelli & Rothbaum, 2007). Based on these differences, Bornstein (2007) writes that American mothers try to promote autonomy, assertiveness, verbal competence, and self-actualization in their children, whereas Japanese mothers try to promote emotional maturity, self-control, social courtesy, and interdependence in theirs. Despite these differences there are also similarities, and Bornstein (2007, p. 217) concludes that "nearly all parents regardless of culture seek ... to rear happy, healthy, fulfilled children."

For our purposes, play is naturally connected to the four central tendencies of the expressive self. As an ideal vehicle for *flow*, play allows individuals to engage in activities that balance challenge, skill, and enjoyment, effortlessly creating flow states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1975). Children especially experience flow in natural, unstructured play, where they can explore and challenge themselves without external constraints (Gray et al., 2023). Play also embodies *autonomy*. Huizinga emphasizes that play must be voluntary—chosen freely, without compulsion. In play, individuals make their own decisions, explore interests, and act according to intrinsic motivation (Yogman et al., 2018). The freedom to choose when, where, and how to play allows children to experience self-determination. Natural playscapes foster unstructured play, promoting autonomy and self-regulation (Kochanowski & Carr, 2014). Outdoor play also aligns with children's *biophilic* tendencies. Outdoor play positively affects physical, psychological, social, and academic development (Strife & Downey, 2009; Yogman et al., 2018). Barbiero and Berto (2021) note that children's innate affinity with nature will develop only through frequent exposure to it, highlighting the importance of outdoor play. Since biophilic tendencies form early in life, nature play is vital, encouraging problem-solving and self-regulation skills tied to flow, autonomy, and eudaimonia (Kochanowski & Carr, 2014, p. 163). The connection between play and *eudaimonia*, although less studied than the other three central tendencies, is worthy of further exploration. Eudaimonia involves discovering one's unique potential via the creation of meaning and purpose. Play enables individuals to immerse themselves in activities they enjoy (flow) and choose autonomously, aiding self-discovery and passion (Yogman et al., 2018). Waterman (2011) suggests that self-defining, meaningful activities are expressions of eudaimonia. Play also helps individuals feel an immediate connection to

activities they enjoy, helping them explore personal passions and interests (Schwartz, 2006). Côté and colleagues (2007) found that children's elite skill development in sports benefits from both free and deliberate play, which teach adaptability and skill acquisition, contributing to a sense of personal meaning. These experiences may ultimately lead to self-identity based on eudaimonic activities, promoting self-discovery and alignment with personal potential (Waterman, 1990).

5. Challenges and possibilities

Trends within the social landscape of early childhood, adolescence, and emerging adulthood are making it much more difficult for families to nurture their children's natural tendencies for developing and experiencing an expressive self, and their well-being has significantly suffered. According to multiple data sets, the rates of teenager depression, anxiety and suicidal ideation have all increased in recent years (Haidt, Rausch, & Twenge, ongoing; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Similar trends are evident among college students as findings from multiple surveys demonstrate a broad worsening of mental and social well-being among U.S. undergraduates over the past decade (Duffy et al., 2019). In one national survey, almost three quarters of students reported moderate or severe psychological distress (American College Health Association, 2022). In a longitudinal analysis of annual census data, Dumuid and colleagues (2023) found significant downward trends in well-being for Australian youth. Three main causes have been proposed: 1) social media (Twenge et al., 2022), 2) changes in parenting practices, particularly the loss of encouraging autonomy and unsupervised play (Gray et al., 2023), and 3) economic factors and associated rise of inequalities (Haidt, Rausch, & Twenge, ongoing).

Data from the ACEs literature suggest that almost half of all children in the United States have been exposed to ACEs with significant long-term negative effects on their health and well-being (Bethell et al., 2014). In addition, ACEs appear to be increasing at an alarming rate with a forecast for this trend to continue through 2030 (Hartwell et al., 2023). According to Mate (2022), experiencing ACEs-oriented trauma may restrict young people from growing into what he calls their authentic selves, which is similar to our notion of the expressive self. Considering the negative well-being trends and the aforementioned primary causes, it is more crucial than ever that strengths-based approaches within a PCEs framework be adopted within early childhood contexts (Frankowski, 2023). Of course, there are as many ways to do this as there are definitions of well-being.

As observed earlier, much of the emerging PCEs work to strengthen families is grounded in family-focused interventions to improve interactions and connection within family resilience frameworks. This is a good start, and some evidence supports these resilience-based initiatives as professionals in family science, public health, and social work address the negative, long-lasting effects of childhood adversity and trauma (Harper Browne, 2024). As an example of these efforts, the state of California outlines a comprehensive *Roadmap to Resilience*. Within primary prevention, the *Roadmap* proposes more proactive interventions as "stress-buffering activities" for families that may include access to nature, mindfulness, physical activity, and high-quality sleep as well as opportunities for social-emotional learning, executive function and healthy relationship skills, and responding to challenges (Bhushan et al., 2020). However, other than access to nature and providing playgrounds and other safe outdoor spaces to provide opportunities for outdoor recess at school and to increase play, the emphasis is on promoting traditional health behaviors and child development skills as a means for mitigating the negative health consequences of ACEs and toxic stress.

As an example, the aforementioned *Roadmap to Resilience* provides guidelines to increase children's physical activity. However, Kimiecik and colleagues (2020) have written about both

the short- and long-term ineffectiveness of these behavior-focused interventions based on risk reduction and prevention. In fact, studies actually show that positive well-being over time leads adolescents to be more naturally attracted to and likely to participate in healthy behaviors such as physical activity (e.g., Hoyt et al., 2012). It appears that a number of these efforts, although framed within a PCEs approach, are still largely problem-focused and deficit-based. In addition, although mindfulness approaches show potential to enhance child and adolescent PWB, the effects of these interventions thus far have been "universally small" (Klingbeil et al., 2017, p. 99). Also, it is not clear "what forms of mindfulness exercises help with specific outcomes" (Tan & Martin, 2015, p. 13), and Greenberg and Harris (2012, p. 165) state: "Enthusiasm for promoting such practices, however, outweighs the current evidence supporting them."

Play is what all children naturally like to do and if we had a laser-like focus on helping all families and their children play more, the development of PPWB would be a natural outcome emanating from the core of a strong expressive self that could provide sustenance over the lifecourse. Although these developmental experiences are relevant for all children and their families, the challenge for play experiences and the development of an expressive self is even greater for children living within low-income and minority families because of their limited resources and restricted access to greenways, sports fields, and parks (Strife & Downey, 2009). This is certainly true for children living within homeless or housing insecure families, which increased in numbers by 16% from 2022 to 2023 (U.S. Department of Housing & Urban Development, 2023). Adolescents living in family shelters experience extreme poverty and deprivation, and the institutional setting reduces their access to the outdoors, healthy play, and nutritious food, all of which may lead to long-term health disparities (Cronley et al., 2019). From interviews of adolescents living in these kinds of shelters, Cronley and colleagues (2019) found they expressed a desire for healthy play and access to safe, outdoor spaces, but were continually restricted by the built environment leading one participant with no other options but to "run inside the buildings." In support of this finding, C. Kimiecik (2024) found in a photo-elicitation study of adolescents living within homeless/housing insecure families that most of their photos were of outdoor places they considered "nature". Overall, the participants' favorite places were outside so they could play, either with siblings or the entire family. Parents in these vulnerable families recognize the power of play as moments for eliciting positive emotions, such as fun and enjoyment (Owens et al., 2022), and in a qualitative study parents/caregivers in homeless/housing insecure families discussed the importance of play-based activities for their children while extolling the benefits of dancing, going to the park, and riding bikes (C. Kimiecik, 2024). The respondents found it challenging to continue those activities with or for their kids when experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Among children and families experiencing homelessness/housing insecurity, play needs to be integrated into their lives as the impact of play and engaging in fun activities not only leads more naturally to the development of PPWB, but also resilience (Masten & Barnes, 2018; Murran & Brady, 2023).

Studies clearly show that a far greater percentage (68%) of children in homeless or housing insecure families experience four or more ACEs than children who do not experience homelessness (16%) (e.g., Radcliff et al., 2019) and, as the preceding studies indicate, are in desperate need of Positive Childhood Experiences (PCEs). Within the PCEs and strengths-based framework presented in this essay, play is the place to begin because frequent play-based experiences throughout childhood have the best chance of creating an expressive self that will naturally produce PPWB as a sustainable outcome. Data indicate this inner core serves as powerful lifecourse protection by reducing risk of some NCDs and maintaining strong mental health in the face of life adversity (Tohi et al., 2022). Our view is not without support. For instance,

the HOPE model (Sege & Harper Browne, 2017) has four broad categories for promoting positive childhood experiences, one of which includes play: living, developing, playing, and learning in safe, stable, protective, and equitable environments.

5.1 Considerations of the self and innateness

The foundation of this essay is built on the premise of an internalized expressive self and the innateness (natural origins) of its central potentialities (flow, autonomy, biophilia, eudaimonia), both of which are decidedly embedded in modern Western cultural ideals. As pointed out by Joshanloo & Weijers (2024), the modern notion of the self as an "internalized sense" grew out of cultural developments, such as urbanization, a market economy, and a fluid and dynamic social environment. Thus, views of the self may change based on cultural and societal transformations (Buchmann & Eisner, 1997).

Not all cultures even recognize the existence of such a self that we have outlined (Mosig, 2006). The separateness of the inner and outer realm of being human is a modern Western conception viewing the self as having "unique feelings and thoughts separate from communal roles and rituals" (Joshanloo & Weijers, 2024, p. 03). Additionally, debate exists as to the nature of an internalized self. Do humans have a single, unified self or a multiplicity of selves (Lester, 2010)? Also, the notion of self is dependent on cultural context as collectivistic cultures value interdependence and individualistic cultures emphasize independence (Baumeister, 1998). These cultural distinctions impact varied developments of a self as Westerners have a need to distinguish themselves from others via, for example, autonomy; in Asian culture the self has little need to be distinctive and is embedded in collectively shared systems of meaning (Baumeister, 2023; Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These differences can certainly impact whether, or in what ways, the self's experiences are "expressive".

Additionally, the expressive self we have discussed is grounded in concepts of innateness and universality. Not surprisingly, controversy also hovers over ideas of what is innate or universal (Stotz & Griffiths, 2018). Some have questioned this innate or essentialist approach, suggesting that universality does not equate to a concept of human nature, and that the notion of innateness is not helpful for understanding behavioral and cognitive development (Griffiths, 2002; Ramsey, 2013; Stotz & Griffiths, 2018). Even though some consider innateness to be folk biology or folk essentialism (see Griffiths, 2002), we point to work highlighting laypeople's affirmation of an essentialist idea of the self (Schlegel et al., 2016). In addition, Brown (2004, pp. 50-51) argues for "universals of mind . . . whatever is constant through all human societies must be due to something that goes with people wherever they go; that would certainly include human nature." Furthermore, McAdams and Pals (2006) suggest that a fundamental principle of their integrative science of personality is that humans have a broad, general, universal design.

Lastly, we realize that our conceptualization of an expressive self, along with its four central potentialities, goes against the grain of much of the well-being literature. Concepts such as autonomy and eudaimonia have a deep history of being central in myriad psychological models of well-being (e.g., Bauer, 2021; Park et al., 2023; Ryff et al., 2021). In our view, psychological well-being and positive psychological well-being are outcomes of subjective or lived experiences. This does not mean that well-being as an outcome is unimportant or should not be studied. But in our view the expressive self comes first; the origins of our psychic energy emanate from innate potentialities that are optimally activated via quality parenting and play. As Csikszentmihalyi (1982, p. 14) writes "psychological research . . . has focused on the periphery of lived experience." In our view, the expressive self is at the center.

6. Summary and conclusion

The primary purpose of this conceptual essay has been to better understand and explain positive psychological well-being (PPWB)—an inner sense that one's life is going well—by seeking its developmental origins. Within a developmental lifecourse perspective, we briefly overviewed other developmental approaches, such as Social Determinants of Health (SDoH) and Developmental Origins of Health and Disease (DOHaD). These frameworks serve as a guide for examining the role of early childhood experiences in diminishing (ACEs) or promoting (PCEs) adult health and well-being. Although PCEs are grounded within a strengths-based approach, the relationship with PPWB is still confusing and complex with no clear-cut mechanisms identified.

To advance understanding of PPWB, we identified four innate, central tendencies—flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia—that comprise a synchronous expressive self. These four potentialities or tendencies were overviewed and myriad examples of their strong connection to PPWB provided. When nurtured in early childhood, the four central tendencies of the expressive self produce a more natural *and* sustainable inner sense that life is going well, also serving as potential mechanisms to mitigate the overall negative influence of ACEs and strengthen the positive connection of PCEs with long-term health and well-being.

Finally, parenting quality and play are two significant social capital (Hunter & Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) factors that influence the growth and development of the expressive self. We reviewed evidence demonstrating a strong connection between both parenting quality and play in developing the expressive self. Thus, in its most consilient form: flow, autonomy, biophilia, and eudaimonia are innate qualities of all human beings. When these "psychological capital" are nurtured via positive parenting practices and play, they grow and develop in an interdependent fashion into a synchronous expressive self that provides sustenance for a positive inner sense that life is going well throughout the lifecourse.

To conclude, in the end, or more aptly the beginning, any positive youth or family development approach/program/intervention should be strongly framed within a play/playfulness context to maximize the development of the expressive self. *Simple, not easy.* Borrowing from Bethell, Jones, and colleagues (2019, p. 8), facilitating this play-expressive self-positive psychological well-being chain will depend on "full engagement of families and communities and changes in the health care, education, and social services systems serving children and families." We also know these changes need to happen because play "is usually the first activity to disappear if the individual is stressed, anxious, hungry or ill" (Bateson, 2014, p. 103). Thus, because of the challenge, the creation of positive childhood experiences demands our full attention (Bethell, Jones, et al., 2019). Due to its natural alignment with the expressive self, play could be the best way to create enriching experiences by helping children, families, and communities to deeply engage or immerse in activity, feel volitional and free, connect deeply to nature and with other human beings, and have opportunities to create and feel meaning in life.

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