

The Happiness Box

Rationale for the Happiness Box

If you scrutinise the international literature around Mental Health, two simple questions emerge from the evidence base: What makes us happy? What makes us sad?

When you feel sad, it is often doing something that makes you happy that takes away that sadness. For some children it can be cognitively challenging; they may not actually recognise the emotion they are experiencing or that they know they are upset, that things are not right.

We often talk about our inner strength. When times are difficult for us, we pull on that inner strength. That is an abstract concept that the young child, or the child with special educational needs, may find difficult to comprehend.

The Happiness Box is a visible and tangible way of creating, before the child's eyes, what inner strength may actually look like; it enables them to practise and rehearse strategies that help them cope with their emotions, resolve inner conflict, and bring them to a calm emotional state. In the box, they can see and physically touch the items, which helps bring them in a calm self-soothe state of mind. Initially it will be with the support of their teacher, or supporting adult, who prompts them to use something in the happiness box.

What might be in a Happiness Box? The joy of a Happiness Box is that it can be totally personalised to the child; they put in the box things that make them happy. It might be a piece of music; it might be soft toy, a book, or a blanket that brings comfort.

A Happiness Box can be as large or small, as round or square, as you want it to be.



Happiness Box

Step 1

Shoeboxes are good because they have a lid. The lid makes it special because you can't see what's inside, until the need to open it. It's also private, unless you want to share. The objects inside instantly remind you of 'happy' times, which help calm.



Step 2

Ownership of the box is pivotal. The undecorated box is fine, but decorating it is a positive start of the relationship with the box. Decoration ideas include painting or covering with paper/drawings/stickers .



Step 3

Let the choice of objects be theirs. What makes you happy does not mean it will make them happy. Objects can range from: toy/material/family/scarf/putty/photos - *pet/favourite person/home / themselves/holiday/mirror/Hairbrush/sensory object/mindfulness activities - colouring/postcards to colour & send/bubbles/card game/reminder notes - who or where to go to when feeling wobbly/book/ notes on how well they are doing.*



Step 4

The box is ready to use. Introduce the box when you think it is a positive time to be received. Teach when to use the box, talk about times when feeling wobbly or wanting to screech/scream/run! Ensure the box is always accessible.



Step 5

'Happiness' is a lovely term for a child/young person or student to understand, however, there is a deeper message you want them to learn. It is a box which helps them to feel calm, helps them to self-regulate and build their emotional resilience.



We suggest that happiness boxes are readily available in the classroom. There is a need to build a repertoire of emotional well-being interventions. The Royal College of Psychiatrists has suggested that teachers need interventions to support children's emotional well-being in the same way that they have a number of interventions for literacy and numeracy. We are far from that point. The Happiness Box is a tool to help with achieving that goal.

The boxes need to be accessible to the child - ready, for when the need arises. The teacher can usually detect when a child is agitated, or when their mood is low. The Happiness Box will hopefully be soothing to the child and enable them to self-regulate their emotional state.

The real joy comes on the day when the child asks the teacher if they can have five minutes with their Happiness Box. This is a real breakthrough; the child has begun to recognise the emotional need within themselves, identifying a way to bring about resolution to that inner turmoil. That is a significant step forward. It's a skill for life.

Think about this in terms of yourself. When you are sad or upset you may play your favourite piece of music, go for a run, complete a jigsaw, meditate, do some mindful colouring, cook, walk the dog... The list is endless, but you know the personal intervention that will restore your state of well-being. It enables you to get through each day. It replenishes your inner strength. It enables you to get through life. Quite simply ask yourself: "What is in my Happiness Box?" Your box may be within you. For the child, the starting point may be in an actual box, which enables learning about their emotions and how to deal with them. One day it may also be a place in their mind.

We know schools that use this approach for individual interventions, for group support or whole class activity.

In the year after leaving school, students may really miss the social interaction with their peer group. This may make them sad. To have their Happiness Box to hand could regulate their emotional state; the contents can be refreshed and updated.

A Happiness Box has endless possibilities. It's a low/no cost intervention, designed to be age-appropriate, personalised and deeply meaningful.

We hope that you have endless fun in constructing Happiness Boxes and that they make a real contribution to promoting children's positive mental health.

Don't forget your own **Happiness Box!**

Professor Barry Carpenter CBE, OBE, PhD
Professor of Mental Health in Education

Beverley Cockbill
Complex Learning Needs Co-ordinator
Specialist Teacher/ASD/CCN Team

May 2020