

**REVIEW ARTICLE**

**Relations between character strengths and subjective well-being in children and adolescents: A brief overview**

**Author:**

Marco Weber, PhD

Division of Individual Differences, Personality Psychology, and Psychological Assessment

Department of Psychology

University of Greifswald

Germany

Email: [m.weber@mail.de](mailto:m.weber@mail.de)

**Abstract:**

This brief overview focuses on the relations between character strengths and subjective well-being in children and adolescents. The VIA classification of good character encompasses 24 character strengths, positive personality traits that contribute to a good life, which includes but is not limited to satisfaction, happiness, and success. Subjective well-being is a multi-dimensional construct that can be differentiated into positive and negative affect as well as global and domain-specific satisfaction. Cross-national results show that specific character strengths are positively related to positive affect, global life satisfaction, and domain-specific satisfaction. Furthermore, specific character strengths are negatively related to negative affect. Effect sizes are typically small to medium in magnitude. It is concluded that character strengths are clearly relevant correlates of young people's subjective well-being. Because most - albeit not all - of the results are based on cross-sectional data, more longitudinal studies are needed to further validate these important findings. Nevertheless, the reported findings suggest that it could be very helpful for health-related and other youth-related professionals to be aware of a child or adolescent's character strengths in order to better interpret their level of subjective well-being.

**Keywords:** character strengths, subjective well-being, positive affect, negative affect, life satisfaction, domain-specific satisfaction, childhood, adolescence

## 1. Introduction

Broad personality traits like the Big Five (e.g., neuroticism, extraversion) have been repeatedly found to be predictors of various components of subjective well-being in adults and young people.<sup>1,2,3</sup> However, there is also a growing body of empirical evidence showing that character strengths, as narrower personality traits, are meaningful correlates of subjective well-being in adults and in children and adolescents as well.<sup>4</sup> This is relevant because character strengths have a both stable and malleable nature, making it helpful to know about their link to individuals' subjective well-being (e.g., positive affect, life satisfaction). Positive affect and life satisfaction are by no means just epiphenomena in life. There is still a lack of empirical agreement about the directionality of the associations between positive affect, life satisfaction and positive life outcomes and events. Commonly, positive affect or life satisfaction are seen as the consequence of a positive life event (e.g., a big success). On the other hand, empirical findings suggest that effects in the opposite direction (i.e., positive affect or life satisfaction leads to success or other positive life outcomes or events) are also likely.<sup>5</sup> In any event, it is good to know how factors such as character strengths contribute to subjective well-being in young people.

## 2. Character Strengths

The VIA classification of good character presents a catalogue of 24 different character strengths, which are organized into six abstract and universal core virtues (i.e., wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity,

justice, temperance, and transcendence).<sup>6</sup> Character strengths are positive, measurable trait-like personality characteristics. They are valued cross-culturally in their own right and not for the tangible outcomes they may produce, although they do produce desirable outcomes. Their existence does not diminish other people.<sup>6</sup> Good character is seen as a core characteristic of moral competence in children and adolescents, which helps young people to know what is good, but also desire to do good.<sup>7</sup>

Character strengths manifest in individuals' behaviors (e.g., helping others), thoughts (e.g., considering the consequences before acting), and feelings (e.g., feeling strong enough to resist others' opinions). They are seen as the inner determinants of a satisfied, happy, and successful life, in addition to external factors like a good education, stable social environment, or financial security.<sup>6</sup> As trait-like constructs, character strengths are stable over time, but as narrow and character-related traits, they are also malleable (e.g., through intervention programs).<sup>8</sup> Within the 24 character strengths included in the VIA classification, individuals can be high on one character strength or a subset of character strengths but low on others.<sup>9</sup>

Character strengths are seen and measured as unipolar constructs (as opposed to bipolar constructs), meaning that they range from "not at all present" to "highly present" across individuals (e.g., from "zero hope" to "high hope"). This also means that "zero hope" is not equivalent to "depression" (which would be the opposite of a character strength).<sup>9</sup> Table 1 shows the multidimensional set of 24 character strengths divided into subcategories

of three to five character strengths, which are in turn grouped under the six core virtues.

**Table 1.** *VIA Classification of Six Core Virtues and 24 Character Strengths*<sup>6</sup>

---

*Virtue I. Wisdom and knowledge: Cognitive character strengths involving the acquisition and use of knowledge*

1. Creativity: Thinking of novel and productive ways to do things
2. Curiosity: Taking an interest in all of ongoing experience
3. Judgment: Thinking things through and examining them from all sides
4. Love of learning: Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge
5. Perspective: Being able to provide wise counsel to others

---

*Virtue II. Courage: Emotional character strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, external or internal*

6. Bravery: Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain
7. Perseverance: Finishing what one starts
8. Honesty: Speaking the truth and presenting oneself in a genuine way
9. Zest: Approaching life with excitement and energy

---

*Virtue III. Humanity: Interpersonal character strengths that involve “tending and befriending” others*

10. Capacity to love and be loved (short: love): Valuing close relations with others
11. Kindness: Doing favors and good deeds for others
12. Social intelligence: Being aware of the motives and feelings of oneself and others

---

*Virtue IV. Justice: Civic character strengths that underlie healthy community life*

13. Teamwork: Working well as a member of a group or team
14. Fairness: Treating all people the same based on notions of fairness and justice
15. Leadership: Organizing group activities and seeing that they happen

---

*Virtue V. Temperance: Character strengths that protect against excess*

16. Forgiveness: Forgiving those who have done wrong
17. Modesty: Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves
18. Prudence: Being careful about one’s choices; not saying or doing things one might later regret
19. Self-regulation: Regulating one’s feelings and actions

---

*Virtue VI. Transcendence: Character strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning*

20. Appreciation of beauty and excellence [short: appreciation]: Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in all domains of life
21. Gratitude: Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen
22. Hope: Expecting the best and working to achieve it
23. Humor: Liking to laugh and joke; bringing smiles to other people
24. Spirituality: Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of life

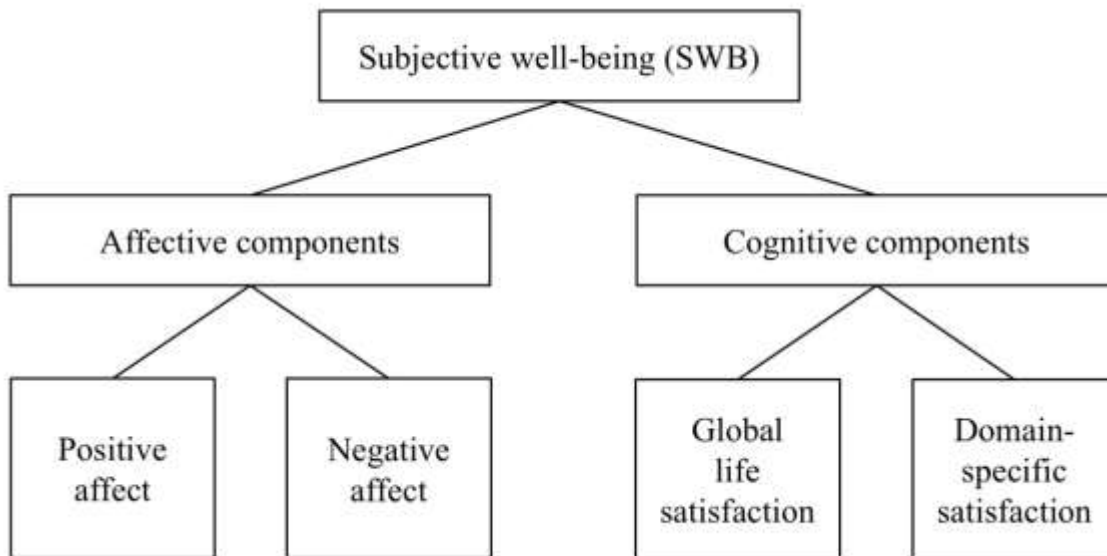
---

### 3. Subjective Well-Being

Subjective well-being is a multi-dimensional construct.<sup>10</sup> As can be seen in Figure 1, subjective well-being comprises affective and cognitive components. The affective component of subjective well-being can be separated into positive affect and negative affect. Both are seen as dispositions to experience specific sets of feelings and moods.<sup>11</sup> Individuals with high levels of positive affect regularly experience feelings like high energy, concentration, and pleasurable engagement, whereas individuals with low levels of positive affect regularly experience feelings like sadness and lethargy. In contrast, individuals with high levels of negative affect regularly experience feelings like anger, contempt, disgust, guilt, and fear,

whereas individuals with low levels of negative affect regularly experience feelings like calmness and serenity.<sup>11</sup>

The cognitive component of subjective well-being can be separated into global life satisfaction and domain-specific satisfaction. Global life satisfaction represents a cognitive evaluation of the quality of one’s life<sup>12</sup>, whereas domain-specific satisfaction represents cognitive evaluations of the quality of specific major life domains (e.g., family, friendships, school experiences). Such cognitive evaluations of one’s life as a whole (global) or of specific life domains are based on comparing one’s current circumstances to the standards one has set for oneself.<sup>12</sup>



**Figure 1.** Components of subjective well-being<sup>10</sup>

## 4. Summary of Results

### 4.1. Character Strengths, Positive Affect, and Negative Affect

The relations between character strengths and positive as well as negative affect have been studied in samples of children and/or adolescents from Brazil<sup>13</sup>, Israel<sup>14, 15, 16, 17</sup>, Switzerland<sup>18</sup>, South Africa<sup>19</sup>, and Spain<sup>20, 21</sup>. All reported significant correlations between character strengths and positive affect were positive, which means that higher levels of character strengths were associated with higher levels of positive affect. Conversely, all reported significant correlations between character strengths and negative affect were negative, which means that higher levels of character strengths were associated with lower levels of negative affect. The reported effect sizes were between small and medium in magnitude.<sup>22</sup>

Certain character strengths appeared to be more relevant than others. Although numerous character strengths showed significant relations to positive and negative affect, zest, gratitude, and hope were among those exhibiting the largest in magnitude positive correlations with positive affect. Hope, zest, and self-regulation were among those showing the largest in magnitude negative correlations with negative affect.

### 4.2. Character Strengths and Global Life Satisfaction

The relations between character strengths and global life satisfaction have been studied in samples of children and/or adolescents from Argentina<sup>23</sup>, Australia<sup>24</sup>, Austria, Germany,

and Switzerland<sup>25, 26</sup>, Brazil<sup>13</sup>, Ghana<sup>27</sup>, Israel<sup>15, 16, 17</sup>, the Philippines<sup>28</sup>, South Africa<sup>19</sup>, Spain<sup>20, 29, 30</sup>, Turkey<sup>31</sup>, and the US<sup>7, 32, 33</sup>. All reported significant correlations between character strengths and global life satisfaction were positive, which means that higher levels of character strengths were associated with higher levels of global life satisfaction. The reported effect sizes were between small and medium in magnitude.<sup>22</sup>

Certain character strengths appeared to be more relevant than others. Although numerous character strengths showed significant relations to global life satisfaction, hope, gratitude, zest, and/or love were consistently among those exhibiting the largest in magnitude positive correlations with global life satisfaction. One study reported regression coefficients (instead of zero-order correlations) and showed for 4 of the 24 character strengths (e.g., judgment, appreciation) negative links to global life satisfaction<sup>24</sup>; but these negative relations might be explainable with a statistical suppressor effect. First (short-term) longitudinal research suggests that character strengths might be able to predict young people's global life satisfaction over a longer period of time.<sup>16, 20, 28, 33</sup>

### 4.3. Character Strengths and Domain-Specific Satisfaction

Research on domain-specific satisfaction in children and adolescents often focuses on satisfaction with the family, satisfaction with friendships, satisfaction with school experiences, satisfaction with the self, and satisfaction with the living environment (e.g., own house, neighborhood).<sup>34</sup> Although

research on the relations between character strengths and domain-specific satisfaction is relatively sparse at the moment, findings from samples of children and/or adolescents in Austria, Germany, Switzerland<sup>35, 36, 37, 38</sup>, Spain<sup>30</sup>, and the US<sup>32</sup> are available. All reported significant correlations between character strengths and satisfaction in the five life domains (see above) were positive. The reported effect sizes were between small and medium in magnitude.<sup>22</sup>

Numerous character strengths exhibited significant relations to satisfaction in different life domains. *Firstly*, character strengths like love, gratitude, and prudence were among the largest in magnitude correlates of satisfaction with the family life.<sup>30, 32, 37</sup> *Secondly*, character strengths like love, humor, zest, and teamwork were among the largest in magnitude correlates of satisfaction with friendships.<sup>30, 32, 35, 37</sup> *Thirdly*, love of learning, zest, and perseverance were among the largest in magnitude correlates of satisfaction with school experiences.<sup>30, 32, 37, 38</sup> *Fourthly*, zest and hope were among the largest in magnitude correlates of satisfaction with the self.<sup>30, 32, 37</sup> *Finally*, character strengths like gratitude, love, zest, and hope were among the largest in magnitude correlates of satisfaction with the living environment.<sup>30, 32, 37</sup>

## 5. Conclusions

As postulated, character strengths are related to subjective well-being in children and adolescents across various nations. Character

strengths are positively related to positive affect and can be seen as factors facilitating positive feelings in young people. On the other hand, character strengths are negatively related to negative affect and therefore serve as a buffer against negative feelings in young people. Character strengths are positively related to young people's global life satisfaction. Furthermore, character strengths are meaningfully linked to satisfaction in different life domains. The above-mentioned character strengths are those that typically show the largest in magnitude relations with subjective well-being. It is important to realize that further character strengths (which are not explicitly mentioned above) are statistically significant correlates of subjective well-being as well.

Although the reported findings support a clear positive link between character strengths and subjective well-being, most results stem from cross-sectional studies. Only a few of the studies reported above implemented a (short-term)longitudinal design with at least two measurement points<sup>16, 20, 28, 33</sup>, hence, future research should be designed as intervention/longitudinal studies to further validate the directionality of these important findings. All in all, it seems crucial and very useful for health-related and other youth-related professionals to have a good understanding of young people's character strengths and their link to subjective well-being in order to better interpret their levels of subjective well-being and draw necessary conclusions (e.g., applying a training program for specific, poorly developed character strengths).

## 6. References

1. DeNeve KM, Cooper H. The happy personality: A meta-analysis of 137 personality traits and subjective well-being. *Psychol Bull.* 1998;124:197-229.
2. Proctor CL, Linley PA, Maltby J. Youth life satisfaction: A review of the literature. *J Happiness Stud.* 2009;10:583-630.
3. Weber M, Huebner ES. Early adolescents' personality and life satisfaction: A closer look at global vs. domain-specific satisfaction. *Pers Individ Dif.* 2015;83:31-6.
4. Ovejero Bruna MM, Cardenal Hernández V, Ortiz-Tallo M. Fortalezas humanas y bienestar biopsicosocial: Revisión sistemática [Character strengths and biopsychosocial well-being: A systematic review]. *Escr Psicol.* 2016;9:4-14.
5. Lyubomirsky S, King L, Diener E. The benefits of frequent positive affect: Does happiness lead to success? *Psychol Bull.* 2005;131:803-55.
6. Peterson C, Seligman MEP. Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification. New York (NY): Oxford University Press; 2004.
7. Park N, Peterson C. Moral competence and character strengths among adolescents: The development and validation of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth. *J Adolesc.* 2006;29:891-909.
8. Proyer RT, Ruch W, Buschor C. Testing strengths-based interventions: A preliminary study on the effectiveness of a program targeting curiosity, gratitude, hope, humor, and zest for enhancing life satisfaction. *J Happiness Stud.* 2013;14:275-92.
9. Peterson C. A primer in positive psychology. New York (NY): Oxford University Press; 2006.
10. Diener E, Suh EM, Lucas RE, Smith HL. Subjective well-being: Three decades of progress. *Psychol Bull.* 1999;125:276-302.
11. Watson D, Clark LA, Tellegen A. Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS scales. *J Pers Soc Psychol.* 1988;54:1063-70.
12. Diener E, Emmons RA, Larsen RJ, Griffin S. The satisfaction with life scale. *J Pers Assess.* 1985;49:71-5.
13. Dametto D M, Noronha APP. Character strengths and subjective well-being in adolescence. *Estudos de Psicologia.* 2019;24:340-8.
14. Shoshani A. Young children's character strengths and emotional well-being: Development of the Character Strengths Inventory for Early Childhood (CSI-EC). *J Posit Psychol.* 2018;14:86-102.
15. Shoshani A, Shwartz L. From character strengths to children's well-being: Development and validation of the Character Strengths Inventory for Elementary School Children. *Front Psychol.* 2018;9:2123.
16. Shoshani A., Slone M. Middle school transition from the strengths perspective: Young adolescents' character strengths, subjective well-being, and school adjustment. *J Happiness Stud.* 2013;14:1163-81.
17. Weber M, Ruch W, Littman-Ovadia H, Lavy S, Gai, O. Relationships among higher-order strengths-factors, subjective

- well-being, and general self-efficacy - The case of Israeli adolescents. *Pers Individ Dif.* 2013;55:322-7.
18. Weber M, Wagner L, Ruch W. Positive feelings at school: On the relationships between students' character strengths, school-related affect, and school functioning. *J Happiness Stud.* 2016;17:341-55.
  19. Van Eeden C, Wissing MP, Dreyer J, Park N, Peterson C. Validation of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth) Among South African learners. *J Psychol Afr.* 2008;18:143-54.
  20. Chaves C, Hervas G, García FE, Vazquez C. Building life satisfaction through well-being dimensions: A longitudinal study in children with a life-threatening illness. *J Happiness Stud.* 2015;17:1051-67.
  21. Giménez M. La medida de las fortalezas psicológicas en adolescentes (VIA-Youth): Relación con clima familiar, psicopatología y bienestar psicológico. Doctoral dissertation, Universidad Complutense de Madrid; 2010. <https://eprints.ucm.es/11578/1/T32253.pdf>
  22. Cohen J. Statistical power analysis for the behavioral sciences. 2nd ed. Hillsdale (NJ): Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1988.
  23. Grinhauz AS. El estudio de las fortalezas del carácter en niños: Relaciones con el bienestar psicológico, la deseabilidad social y la personalidad. *Psicodebate.* 2015;15:43-68.
  24. Toner E, Haslam N, Robinson J, Williams P. Character strengths and wellbeing in adolescence: Structure and correlates of the Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Children. *Pers Individ Dif.* 2012;52:637-42.
  25. Ruch W, Weber M, Park N, & Peterson C. Character strengths in children and adolescents: Reliability and initial validity of the German Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (German VIA-Youth). *Eur J Psychol Assess.* 2014;30:57-64.
  26. Weber M, Ruch W. The role of character strengths in adolescent romantic relationships: An initial study on partner selection and mates' life satisfaction. *J Adolesc.* 2012;35:1537-46.
  27. Abasimi E, Gai X, Wang G. Character strengths and life satisfaction of high school students. *Int J Appl Psychol.* 2017;7:36-43.
  28. Datu JAD, Bernardo ABI. The blessings of social-oriented virtues: Interpersonal character strengths are linked to increased life satisfaction and academic success among Filipino high school students. *Soc Psychol Personal Sci.* 2020;11:983-90.
  29. Blanca MJ, Ferragut M, Ortiz-Tallo M, Bendayan R. Life satisfaction and character strengths in Spanish early adolescents. *J Happiness Stud.* 2017;19:1247-60.
  30. Gimenez M, Hervas G, Vazquez C. Human strengths and life satisfaction in adolescents. Poster presented at the 5th European Conference on Positive Psychology; 2010 June 23-26; Copenhagen, Denmark.
  31. Kabakci OF, Ergene T, Dogan N. Character strengths in Turkey: Initial adaptation study of Values in Action Inventory of Strengths for Youth (VIA-Youth) and life satisfaction in young



- people. *Int J Educ Method.* 2019;5:489-501.
32. Dahlsgaard KK. Is virtue more than its own reward? Character strengths and their relation to well-being in a prospective longitudinal study of middle school-aged adolescents. Doctoral dissertation, University of Pennsylvania; 2005. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/305446183?accountid=11210>
33. Gillham J, Adams-Deutsch Z, Werner J, Reivich K, Coulter-Heindl V, Linkins M et al.. Character strengths predict subjective well-being during adolescence. *J Posit Psychol.* 2011;6:31-44.
34. Huebner ES. Preliminary development and validation of a multidimensional life satisfaction scale for children. *Psychol Assess.* 1994;6:149-58.
35. Wagner L. Good character is what we look for in a friend: Character strengths are positively related to peer acceptance and friendship quality in early adolescents. *J Early Adolesc.* 2019;39:864-903.
36. Weber M. Examining positive schooling: On the relations between character strengths, school satisfaction, enjoyment of learning, academic self-efficacy, and school achievement. Paper presented at the 9th European Conference on Positive Psychology; 2018 June 27-30; Budapest, Hungary.
37. Weber M, Ruch W. Das gute Leben bei Kindern und Jugendlichen [The good life of children and adolescents]. *Psychologie und Erziehung.* 2009;35:21-39.
38. Weber M, Ruch W. The role of a good character in 12-year-old school children: Do character strengths matter in the classroom? *Child Indic Res.* 2012;5:317-34.