

"It changed my life forever"

Scott, left, and Evans with two children exploring tide pools at Victoria's Clover Point.

... As it turns out, intensely happy and uplifting childhood memories can do just that

by Peigi McGillivray

When you think back on your childhood, do your memories include an experience that made you feel especially wonderful?

Perhaps it was a time when you felt a bubbling sense of excitement or happiness, or a moment when you felt a deep connection to nature or to another person. Maybe it was an unforgettable dream or an especially strong sense of accomplishment or delight.

People often remember moments like these—which are known to social scientists as “childhood peak experiences”—throughout their lives. They have been documented in cultures and countries around the world, and research indicates that up to 80 per cent of us have them.

But does this kind of experience influence what course our lives take?

Dr. Daniel Scott, director of the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care, is curious to find out. His recent research project into childhood peak experiences may have an impact on how young people are counselled in clinical, school and vocational settings.

“International research until now has

focused on whether demographic factors such as age, gender, location or culture might influence whether children have this kind of experience,” says Scott. “We wanted to dig deeper and discover whether having a childhood peak experience might affect the life and career choices people make as they grow up.”

The goal of the project was to collect data that would allow a comparison across cultures, contexts and languages, as part of an international study on childhood peak experiences.

The questionnaire asked respondents to describe childhood experiences of especially wonderful happiness, and to tell whether, and how, the experience influenced or affected them.

Scott's research assistant, graduate student Jessica Evans, gathered data from UVic students, using a short questionnaire that has also been used in Japan, Mexico, Singapore and the US.

“Training the next generation of researchers is what I do,” says Scott, “Involving students in defining a project, gathering and analyzing data and reporting on results gives them hands-on experience and expands the learning that goes on in the classroom.”

Scott and Evans took a close look at

demographic and career information about respondents.

“What surprised us was that many of those who reported having had one or more childhood peak experience that we identified as interpersonal were working toward a career in such human service fields as education or child and youth care,” says Scott. “And those who said they had never had an experience of this kind weren't attracted to any particular career path.”

Scott's research indicates that transcendent experiences during childhood may play a role in shaping people's sense of self and orientation to life.

Counsellors should be interested in this information, and so should parents, says Scott. “Parents can often be dismissive of what their child is trying to tell them about an unusual experience. But it's important to be respectful and listen.”

Researchers need to gain a better understanding of this kind of experience and the potential it may hold for influencing lives, says Scott. “Identifying and validating children's peak experiences may become an important tool in helping young people lead meaningful and fulfilling lives.”

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The term “peak experience” describes an event that involves sudden feelings of intense happiness and harmony, wonder and awe, and an awareness of something greater than oneself.

Researchers have identified several kinds of childhood peak experience such as interpersonal joy, uplifting experiences involving nature, spontaneous moments of bliss triggered by aesthetic delight, uncanny perceptions, mastery of a skill, and unforgettable dreams.

Did you have a childhood peak experience? Think back to your life before the age of 14 and describe an experience in which you felt especially wonderful happiness and joy. Did this experience have an impact upon your attitude toward life? If so, how did it affect you?

Daniel Scott is currently working on a book arising from *The Girls' Diary Project* which explores the inner lives of girls based on their adolescent writings.

UVic researchers were awarded more than \$104 million in outside research grants and contracts in 2008/09—more than double the research support of five years ago.

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