

# Cultivating Young Children's Positive Emotions: Based on Anji Play

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**Abstract.** Positive emotions are one of the main research contents of positive psychology. Cultivating children's positive emotions has a positive effect on children's physical health and psychological development. Anji Play is the abbreviation of the game education model for kindergartens in Anji County, Zhejiang Province. This paper focused on the cultivation of positive emotions in Anji Play and found that giving children the initiative to play, returning play to nature, and providing opportunities for children to reflect on shared experiences after play can cultivate positive emotional experiences. It is hoped that through the research of this paper, kindergarten teachers can learn the spirit of Anji Play and promote the development of preschool education from the perspective of emotional cultivation.

**Keywords:** Positive emotions; Anji Play; young children.

## 1. Introduction

Early childhood is a critical period for emotional development [1], and playing is a basic activity for young children. Playing can stimulate the brain's nerves to produce emotional experiences. Moreover, the positive emotions generated in the game are of great value to children's physical and mental development. In recent years, educators have actively explored research on the development of positive emotions in young children through different forms of game education in the past. However, there is no systematic explanation about the new play education to cultivate positive emotions in young children. Therefore, this paper focused on cultivating children's positive emotions through Anji Play as an example to effectively promote children's physical and mental development and inspire educators.

Anji Play is the abbreviation of the game education model of kindergarten in Anji County, Zhejiang Province. Its founder, Xueqin Cheng, created such a new type of preschool education practice based on game activities after years of research and exploration according to the local environment and natural resources of Anji County [2].

In China, most kindergartens adopt a teacher-led play approach to various activities. Teachers are the planners and organizers of activities. Unlike common games, Anji Play provides children with natural playgrounds and natural play materials. However, as a form of generative play, Anji Play emphasizes that the production of play ideas, the conduct of play, and reflection are all carried out by the children themselves. In this way, young children can effectively use their initiative and creativity. In the kindergarten in Anji, there are bamboo ladders, stones, abandoned paint buckets, tires, boards, and other natural materials that have local characteristics and are closely related to nature. Compared with entertainment facilities in big cities, low-structured play materials are more likely to stimulate children's creativity and imagination [3]. In addition, children's activities during Anji Play are not interfered with by the teachers' will. Teachers give children the opportunity to negotiate the game at the beginning of the game, allowing them to choose the game on their own. Anji Play advocates children's self-participation, self-creation, and self-enjoyment during the game. It gives children the right to try the game independently, focuses on children's self-motivated game, and children are able to develop interests and gain knowledge while playing. Furthermore, based on the development of young children's nature, Anji Play provides young children with challenging games, allowing them to play freely in the sand, climbing frames, and other playgrounds. In this process, children can try to

break through new challenges for them. Anji Play returns children's instinct to "play" while strengthening their self-awareness [4].

Liu [5] points out that play is a basic activity for young children and that attention should be paid to their play and life. By way of "real play," Anji Play transforms traditional play education into an outdoor autonomous play education activity that is child-oriented and stimulates their internal motivation to learn. This game model lets children interact with the natural environment in the game, trigger the spirit of adventure and challenge, and experience independence and creativity in the activity. Research has shown that when young children engage in art and physical activity, their left prefrontal cortex is more active and can provide a good physiological basis for the development of emotional abilities [6]. As a result, young children in Anji Play have more positive emotional states and socialization levels.

## **2. Definition and Value of Positive Emotions**

### **2.1 Definition of Positive Emotions**

The concept of positive emotions has been defined differently by national and international psychologists. Watson et al. [7] stated that positive emotions are a reflection of an individual's degree of positive activity and alertness. Fredrickson [8] considered positive emotions as a special reaction to something that has a significant meaning for the individual, and it is a momentary pleasure. The Chinese scholar Meng [9] believed that positive emotions were closely related to individual satisfaction, and the pleasant subjective emotional experience attached to positive emotions could effectively improve individual motivation and competence. In summary, positive emotions are emotions that have positive value. They are pleasurable emotions that arise from internal and external stimulation and events that satisfy the individual's needs, including happiness, interest, satisfaction, pride, gratitude, and love.

### **2.2 The Value of Positive Emotions**

#### **2.2.1 Positive emotions and physical health**

Research by Peter Salovey et al. [10] has shown that positive emotions improve the body's immune system, which in turn improves human function. This is reflected in enhancing one's ability to prevent heart disease, helping stroke victims recover their eyesight, and repairing personal trauma. And positive emotions can play a healing role in such a disease to some extent. For example, when older people with cardiovascular disease have more positive emotions, their health care goes better [11].

#### **2.2.2 Positive emotions and mental health**

Positive emotions can prevent the overproduction of adrenocorticotrophic hormones that lead to a decrease in immune system hormone secretion. They can relieve the body's tension, thus improving the individual's ability to cope with stress and bringing a good attitude and hope to the individual. In addition, positive emotions stimulate individuals to feel pleasure in order to wake up mental activity and motivate behavior. The experience of positive emotions contributes to the ability of the individual's resilience level to recover effectively from daily stress [12]. In terms of cognitive abilities, Fredrickson's broaden-and-build model of positive emotions theory suggested that positive emotions could expand an individual's momentary sphere of thought, construct lasting individual beneficial resources, and increase individual well-being through a spiral, resulting in promoting personal growth and in turn leading to cognitive expansion [8]. The broaden-and-build model of positive emotions helps to improve people's comprehension, memory, attention, autonomy, and flexibility of thinking. It is evident that positive emotions have a positive effect on individual development.

### **3. Impact of Positive Emotions on Young Children**

Early childhood is a critical period for emotional development, and the emotional health of young children is related to the future developmental health of the individual. Positive emotions play a significant role in the development of young children.

#### **3.1 Positive Emotions Promote Physical Development of Young Children**

Emotional experiences are closely related to the neural activity of the emotional system and are determined by physiological processes in the subcortical central nervous system [13]. Moreover, the changes in emotions, through the conduction of the nervous system, can cause a series of physiological changes in the respiratory organs, digestive organs, and cardiovascular activity [14]. Young children are in their golden period of growth and development. A good emotional state can regulate the level of physiological arousal, and maintaining a positive and optimistic emotion can promote a constant stream of new cell production, thus ensuring the regular function of the body and the normal development of body tissues and organs, as well as facilitating the development and perfection of the young children's nervous system [15].

#### **3.2 Positive Emotions Promote Cognitive Development of Young Children**

Ashby [16] proposed a neuropsychological theory of the effects of positive emotions on cognition. She believed that a moderate state of positive emotion raised dopamine levels in the limbic cortex and anterior cingulate cortex of the midbrain [16]. In daily learning, positive emotions lead to the more neural secretion of dopamine, which increases the flexibility of thinking and thus effectively promotes individual problem-solving skills [17]. At the same time, positive emotions can enhance young children's attention, enabling them to concentrate more during the learning process and to have a stronger desire to learn [18]. Increasing curiosity is beneficial in helping young children learn with interest and confidence, it mobilizes children to engage in learning, and this knowledge and experiences brought about by curiosity are more accessible than other ways of acquiring knowledge and experiences [19].

#### **3.3 Positive Emotions Promote Prosocial Development of Young Children**

Prosocial behavior is a behavior in which an individual voluntarily and intentionally benefits other people, including acts of helping, cooperating, donating, and sharing [20]. And positive emotions can promote the development of prosocial behavior in young children [21]. In particular, positive emotions play an important role in interpersonal relationships. When children are willing to offer help to others actively, positive emotions are generated, and this reinforces helping behaviors in children, which further enhances their interpersonal relationships [22].

#### **3.4 Positive Emotions Enhance Young Children's Resistance to Stress**

Research has shown that when individuals choose to use more positive emotion regulation strategies and less negative emotion regulation strategies, their level of psychological resilience is higher [23]. And young children's psychological resilience is the ability to adapt and recovering in the face of difficulties, frustrations, and conflicts, that is, a kind of resilience to stress [24]. It is clear that once children develop positive emotions, they are more likely to acquire an optimistic, confident and cheerful character, which makes them brave and determined in the face of difficulties and able to actively explore solutions to problems, resulting in a stronger ability to cope with difficult situations.

### **4. Positive emotions cultivation in Anji Play**

#### **4.1 Giving Children the Initiative to Play**

According to The Convention on the Rights of the Child, play is a fundamental right of children [25]. Through play, children can express their inner emotions fully. In Anji Play, teachers change the

previous educational concept of over-protection and intervention, return the time and space for play activities to children, and give them some opportunities and time to choose their games, which helps to mobilize their positive emotional experiences. During Anji Play, neither do the teachers participate in the formulation of game rules, nor directly interfering with children's activities. They only provide a wide playground and sufficient play time and act as observers, observing whether children can achieve the goals of the game activities and guiding them to solve the difficulties they encounter independently. And children are free to negotiate the way of playing and design their own game, playing with great delights [26]. By returning the principal status of children's play and building children's inner sense of exploration in their natural state, they are able to cultivate the spirit of taking risks and facing challenges. The game guides children to find fun in the activities, stimulating their motivation to participate in the game, and bring them positive experiences, which in turn stimulate positive emotions. The cultivation of positive emotions leads to the exercise of children's sense of cooperation and team spirit, and consolidates rational social attributes such as morality, emotions, attitudes, and values [2].

#### **4.2 Returning the Natural Play Environment to Young Children**

The grounds of Anji Kindergarten have been carefully and artistically designed. Different material venues can provide different types of activities. For example, slopes with different angles of inclination enable children to perceive different senses of space. Moreover, Anji Kindergarten provides a wide variety and quantity of low-structure materials for children to learn to explore [27]. The comprehensive and fresh game environment is full of excitement and challenges, which can greatly arouse children's interest in games, bring them positive emotional experiences and cultivate their spirit of adventure [28]. In addition, young children's life experiences emerge from the interaction between the game and the environment, and the environment is important for motivating children and supporting them to engage in diverse and creative play experiences [29]. Immersing in a natural play environment, children can choose low-structured play materials from local materials and use their imagination to maximize the value of play materials so that they can internalize the process of using play materials into their own play experience and apply it to real life, and feel the joy of learning through play. Research has shown that both the moving and pleasant experiences of positive emotional experiences contribute significantly to creativity [30]. In the Anji game, children build their own fancy objects with various bamboo toys, crawl fearlessly on the tall climbing frame and play freely in the mud, which is enough to let children feel the great freedom and pleasure brought by the natural environment, thus stimulating creativity and enriching play experience [27].

#### **4.3 Providing Opportunities for Children to Reflect and Share After the Game**

For teachers, reflecting on teaching helps to improve their teaching experience. For children, learning to reflect on their play can capture and digest the details of the play process afterward, enhancing the play experience and feeling the pleasure of reflection. When children play competitive sports, teachers observe and record their activities in a timely manner. At the end of the game, teachers sit with the children, watch videos or photos of the children playing the game, relive and share the joy with the children, encourage them verbally and guide them to take the initiative to explain the game process, express how they feel about with each other, and speak out their emotional experiences during the game with confidence and courage [2, 31]. Teachers help to improve children's emotional awareness skills by supplementing this with verbal corrections and showing them the proper way to express each emotion. Furthermore, when children gain positive emotions in Anji Play, it eventually leads to more active participation and reflection in playing by the children themselves, in which they can improve their ability to acquire knowledge. This has double-win implications [32]. Young children also experience positive emotional consequences when they engage in prosocial behaviors in Anji Play [33]. For example, the process of children giving feedback on their feelings about the game is also a process of communication with their peers. During the interaction, children can develop

their own listening and expression skills, feel more kindness from their peers, generate a sense of being respected, and thus stimulate positive emotions.

## 5. Solutions

Psychologists have long recognized emotions as an essential aspect that influences human behavior [34], and positive emotions are seen as beneficial to the development of the individual and awaken the individual to the pursuit of beauty. Young children are the hope of the future and should be carefully taken care of. Kindergarten teachers need to provide children with appropriate positive emotional experiences in their daily lives and play activities in order to promote their healthy development. In particular, teachers can try to apply the spirit of Anji Play in early childhood education. For example, under the condition of a safe environment, teachers can manage not to interfere with children's play behavior and take the initiative in children's activities. In addition, kindergartens can add some natural play resources according to the scale of the field to motivate children's interest in exploring play materials and further stimulate their positive emotions. Through these new methods, not only can they effectively help teachers to achieve their teaching goals, but they also motivate young children to take the initiative and participate in the game on their own and feel the joy of playing. These methods have an important role in developing positive emotions and regulating emotions in young children.

## 6. Conclusion

There are also some shortcomings in this research paper. Since there is no perfect practical proof, the research strategy is only used as a theoretical reference. Its feasibility still needs to be explored in depth in the follow-up. At the same time, due to the novelty of the Anji Play, its game model still needs to be carefully studied and refined. During the game, educators still need to explore how to interpret children's performance in the game after liberating their nature in order to provide support for children's different levels of learning and development. It is also necessary to consider playing safety, making the environment and materials both challenging and appropriate for the children. In this regard, early childhood teachers need to increase their research on Anji Play, practice and summarize their experiences continuously, and develop the ontological and instrumental value of Anji Play, promoting the continuous development of early childhood education from the perspective of positive emotional development.

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