Growing Pains, Real Gains: Modern Support for Adolescent Wellbeing

Navigating Adolescence – Which way is the true north?

It has been 6 months since the Netflix program "Adolescence" first streamed in Australia. It sent shock waves through the parents of children and young people across the nation, and indeed the world. For many, it was this series that really sealed it - the world that our young men are growing up in is vastly different from the one we grew up in!

Though many of the issues facing Jamie, the young person in the series, are not new. Adolescence is a unique and crucial time of development. Peer pressure and identity formation, hormonal changes, and academic stresses. Young people aged 10-19 are particularly vulnerable. 1 in 7 young people are experiencing a mental disorder

according to the World Health Organisation, with depression, anxiety, and behavioural disorders among the leading causes of illness and disability among adolescents (WHO, 2025). It is also important to note that up to half of all mental health conditions start before the age of 14 years, making these years vital in the long term.

Many would have stopped reading after that last paragraph. It seems that the research paints a dire picture, failing to recognise the wonderful opportunities that adolescence presents. As previously mentioned, it is a unique and crucial time of development, and though challenging, if navigated safely, can be a time where young people start to discover their 'true north.' Well done and thank you to those still reading!

At this stage, it is important to acknowledge the challenges faced by parents within the school community. The sweet, energetic little boy who hung off your every word seems harder to connect with. It can leave you feeling powerless at times, uncertain of how to support them, because "what would you know?". It cannot be emphasised enough the importance of staying engaged and connected even when your young person is pushing the boundaries or withdrawing.

> "Individuals can be vital, open, curious, and caring. Yet, they can also be depleted, self-centered, irresponsible, and even aggressive toward people important to them. Indeed, we all have potential for growth and flourishing, while also possessing vulnerabilities for defensiveness and even pathological functioning. An intriguing question then is which mechanisms elicit either the "best" or the "beast" in each of us." (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Positive Psychology

"The aim of positive psychology is to begin to shift the focus of psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building positive qualities" (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In simple terms, it operates under the age-old assumption that 'prevention is better than cure.' This approach brings in and maintains enablers, building resilience so that individuals have the strength to rebound from adversity that might otherwise cause mental health issues.

The quote above captures the beauty and unpredictability of adolescence - a time when young people can be full of energy, curiosity, and care, yet also struggle with volatility and vulnerability, particularly when they perceive that their basic psychological needs (BPNs) are not being met. Ryan & Deci (2000) identified three needs in Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the time when young people seek to establish independence. Competence involves learning, and life in general can become more challenging. Relatedness, on the other hand, is where identity is constantly being formed and re-formed.

SDT is foundational to Positive Psychology and is essential for individuals' adjustment, integrity, and growth, leading to flourishing and well-being. Conversely, the thwarting of these needs increases the risk for passivity, ill-being, and defensiveness - perhaps this side is familiar for many!

Flourishing? I don't remember learning this at school!

Flourishing, used in this context, may not be a word with which you are familiar. Conceptualizations of well-being broadly use the term 'flourishing' to describe a positive state of well-being. A very general definition of flourishing by Huppert & So. (2013) states that flourishing is the combination of "feeling good and functioning

effectively". Most models of flourishing and sustainable wellbeing emphasise the individual's role and agency in achieving wellbeing. This is more sustainable when there is a shared responsibility across systems. In our context, this can refer to, but is not limited to, the family and the school. After all, this is where our young people spend most of their time.
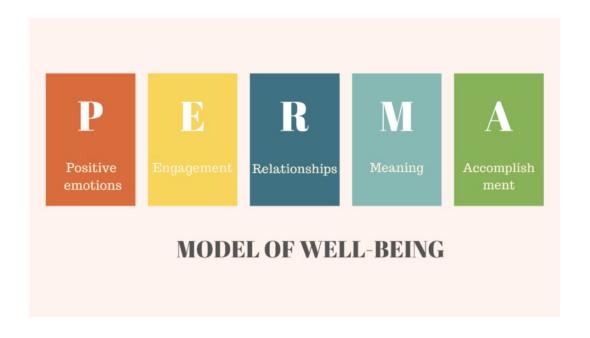
Flourishing at Marist College Ashgrove

As Christians, and in the spirit of Marist education, we affirm that your sons, the young men of Marist College Ashgrove, were created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27). Each one possesses inherent dignity and sacred worth from the moment of conception. It is our role, in partnership with you, to walk with them on the journey. At times, this can be hard for teachers and parents to remember, particularly when our young person is displaying challenging behaviour. But despite the challenges that appear along their journey, we firmly believe in the potential for each young man to achieve his personal best in life, grounded by a Marist education.

Central to this is student wellbeing. In their time at the College, students respond to several surveys that seek to establish a wellbeing measure - we are about more than just ATARs! Much of the research in this area of academic study is via self-report methodology. In some of my recent interviews with students, when asked to define what wellbeing and flourishing are. A Year 8 student answered, "Wellbeing is feeling true to yourself and being happy with the person you are", and a primary-aged student said, "I think wellbeing means treating yourself and others with respect and being kind to people all around you and yourself."

Certain recurring themes emerge when interviewing young people. They often report that wellbeing is often closely tied to a strong sense of identity, happiness, kindness,

and mutual respect. See, young people are great! Exploration of the scholarly literature reveals similarities, particularly research into subjective wellbeing (Diener, et al. 2018); however, our findings in these 'lay reflections' suggest that personal lived experiences significantly influence how we each utilize our unique perspectives on wellbeing. I will share a perspective from a mother of two a little later on.

Beyond the World Health Organisation's 1948 model that cites wellbeing is composed of physical, mental, social, and spiritual wellbeing, Dr Martin Seligman, the 'father' of positive psychology, proposed the most recognisable model, PERMA, in 2011 that although measuring slightly different aspects to the aforementioned subjective wellbeing, shows a high correlation. PERMA's five elements are:

[Picture credit Psychopedia.in]

 PERMA offers a model that is considered a framework for individual, psychological wellbeing. However, Lomas et al. (2025) emphasise the importance of systems or contexts in wellbeing, suggesting that human flourishing stems from the intersection of the individual and their context doing well. In our educational setting, we are

unpacking how we can use VanderWeele's model of flourishing as we develop our Wellbeing Framework that is contextually responsive and aligned with our community's values and needs. The 5 domains and examples can be found in the table below.

SUSTAINABLE WELLBEING/FLOURISHING
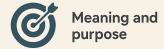
Happiness and life satisfaction

Often referred to as subjective wellbeing and primarily measured through self-report. Marist students routinely evaluate their experiences at school in our wellbeing surveys. Staff use this evidence base to inform our programs.
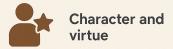
Mental and physical health

Explicit teaching is important for our target audience and largely takes place in Health & Physical Education and 'ASH' Wellbeing lessons. A strengths-based (salutogenic) approach is used, fundamental to positive psychology.

Meaning and purpose

We explore this through our relationship with God and by following Christ's example. As an inclusive educational institution, we offer a diverse curriculum, as well as an extra-curricular program, designed to help every student find their passion and success.

Character and virtue

Key to our Marist and broader Catholic school context, 'character and virtues' are both explicitly and implicitly taught in the curriculum and nurtured within the community.

Close social relationships

Relationships are cultivated through curricular and extra-curricular endeavours, as well as through the 'vertical' House System, which promotes frequent, positive interactions across year levels, further enhancing a sense of belonging.

VanderWeele's (2017) domains of Sustainable Wellbeing (Flourishing) draw inspiration from ancient philosophies and cardinal virtues of practical wisdom, justice, courage, and temperance. It positions these alongside physical health, mental wellbeing, social connections, and even moral character and parallels our values as a Catholic School in the Marist tradition.

Flourishing at Home

When asked the same question about a definition of wellbeing and flourishing, a mother of two and teacher said,

> "Having a strong sense of wellbeing is feeling both balanced and content physically, mentally, socially and emotionally. When my wellbeing is balanced, I am able to really recognise the beauty in my own life and put strategies/coping mechanisms in place to navigate the ups, downs & adversities of life. When my well-being is balanced, my ability to be present increases, my gratitude for life increases, as does my willingness to give to others." (Anonymous, 2025)

There are several layers in this definition. It gives the impression of speaking to the importance of parents looking after their own well-being. When we are well, we are the best versions of ourselves – good for us, and ultimately our kids.

Please find some tips for identifying and nurturing your young person's basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness at home. Attention to these BPNs leads to your son's enhanced self-motivation, mental health, and wellbeing.

Autonomy should foster intrinsic motivation and a sense of personal endorsement.

1. Discuss your rationale behind rules and routines rather than simply dictating them or giving tasks. Reinforcement of key values can help.

2. Offer choices or alternatives (within safe and reasonable boundaries).

3. Acknowledge feelings as legitimate, however stay firm in your pre-established boundaries.

4. Avoid controlling tactics such as threats, or anything that shifts the control externally.

Competence can be built over time and is co-dependent on autonomy.

1. Provide challenges that are developmentally appropriate.

2. Provide positive and constructive feedback to reinforce competence.

3. Avoid negative feedback or shaming – they are sensitive beasts!

Relatedness refers to a feeling of belonging and connection.

1. Cultivate a connection that ensures they are seen, valued and accepted for who they are. Remember they are likely wearing a 'mask' all day at school. This can be exhausting! They should feel safe the be themselves at home.

2. Model desired behaviours. I'm sure we've all been guilty of being on our phone in the presence of family. Model the behaviours you wish to see from them.

3. Build opportunities for healthy family connection into your daily/weekly routines (boys thrive with routines). Talk about emotions, family values and experiences. Model vulnerability. The parents don't have to be right all the time! This gives permission for your son to be vulnerable also.

It should be noted that the author of this article is not an expert on parenting, and openly admits to getting it wrong, more often than he'd prefer to admit. This is also by no means an exhaustive list of parenting strategies. For more information, consider seeking out your preferred parenting book by Steve Biddulph or listening to the 'Parental as Anything' podcast with Maggie Dent, amongst others. It is the intention of this article to go some way towards aligning our understanding of the science of wellbeing and how together we can promote flourishing in your adolescent boy at home, and at school.

Whether you're an adolescent boy or a full-time working mother of two, having your basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfied is key to flourishing. The thwarting of these needs can leave us vulnerable to an array of negative psychological, behavioural, and even physiological outcomes.

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