

Motivating Miles: Reflections on why The Daily Mile might be tapping in to children's natural motivation.

Last week I was lucky enough to be involved in the official launch of The Daily Mile in Guernsey. The Daily Mile has been taken on by most schools on the Island in the last 9 months and last Thursday day was a celebration of the work here to date. Elaine Wiley, the founder of The Daily Mile and John, Elaine's husband, were in Guernsey to support the launch including a tour of Daily Miles at various schools around the island, a celebration lunch and pupils representing some of the local schools doing a mile around the beautiful Government House (the residence of the Lieutenant-Governor, the Crown's personal representative in the Bailiwick of Guernsey).

It was whilst walking the mile around the Government House grounds (being lapped by happy, rosy-cheeked children in the process) that Elaine and I began discussing how my research on people's motivation for physical activity, and developing interventions (which can only aspire to the levels of uptake The Daily Mile enjoys) could help explain why children and schools in Guernsey and around the world seem so taken by The Daily mile phenomenon.

Elaine explained her take on this by beginning the following conversation:

Elaine: *Think of a happy memory you had as a child, but don't tell me what it is.*

Me: (thinking...)

Elaine: *Now tell me, were you inside or outside?*

Me: *Outside*

Elaine: *Were you on your own or with others?*

Me: *With others*

Elaine: *Were you in the supervision of adults?*

Me: *Sort of ... at a distance*

(By the way, my happy memory was of when I was 7 or 8, a hot summer day, building a sand boat with family and friends to sit in as the tide rose up Port Grat beach in Guernsey. I was outside, with other children and parents were involved sporadically, but letting us play freely.)

In identifying a happy memory, Elaine had just revealed some of the [core principles](#) of The Daily Mile. These include a focus on having fun, being non-competitive, being outside and in nature, connecting with other pupils/teachers, being a simple intervention, being fully inclusive and owned by the children (i.e., jog or run at their own pace).

These core principles chime with the fundamental elements of much of my research into physical activity motivation. Using a psychological framework called [Self-Determination Theory](#) (or SDT) I have studied the foundations of and outcomes linked with high quality motivation for physical activity in children and adults. According to this approach, a person's motivation is high quality when it is *autonomous*, in other words when motivation stems from the enjoyment of being active, the satisfaction one gets from being active (or doing a mile), a feeling that being active is in harmony with a person's sense of who they are, or that being active brings them personally valued benefits (e.g., meeting pupils in other year groups or getting fitter). People have these kinds of motivation for being active when they experience SDT's core principles; Autonomy, Belonging and Competence or A, B, C.

Autonomy: Feelings of volition, freedom, choice, ownership and empowerment

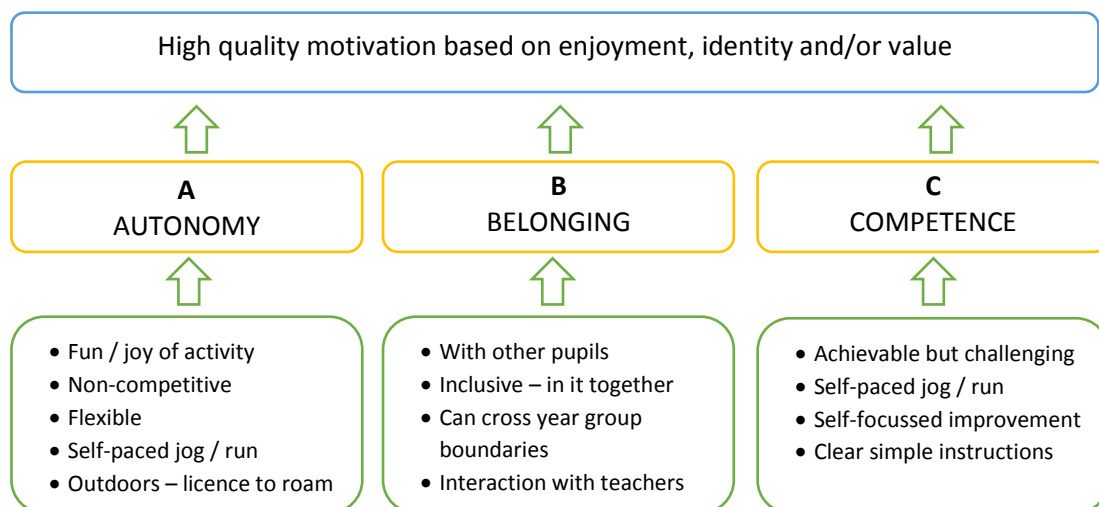
Belonging: Feeling strong connections with others, included, understood and respected

Competence: Feeling capable, able to master a skill or task.

Importantly, according to the theory, the A, B, C are essential psychological ingredients for humans to experience optimal well-being, development and functioning.

In a number of studies ([here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)) over the last 10 years or so, my colleagues and I have found evidence to support the idea that when children and adults feel that their A, B and C is satisfied when thinking about being active, they experience high quality, autonomous motivation and that this is linked with greater physical activity. Common to all of these studies is the finding that motivation based on enjoyment and/or personal value is linked to physical activity, whereas motivation based on guilt or external pressure (such as rewards, or demands from others) is not. Accordingly, we have designed a number of physical activity interventions for [children](#) and [adolescents](#) with the A, B and C of motivation in mind.

When viewing The Daily Mile through this motivational lens, it is possible to see how the intervention expresses the A, B and C:



Of course, my retro-fitting of SDT principles to The Daily Mile is just one lens through which to study its broad appeal and apparent motivating effect on pupils. However, it is entirely possible for interventions which grow from the ground up to align in many ways with what is known from behavioural or psychological sciences even if they did not set out to do this from the start. Aligning the core principles of The Daily Mile with a framework such as SDT's A, B, C may also allow the intervention to stay faithful to its design as it is adopted and potentially adapted in schools around the world.

I would argue that unknowingly, when implemented in line with its core principles, The Daily Mile could be tapping in to a well-known, evidence based and positive source of motivation for physical activity. At its core The Daily Mile is simple. Perhaps it is as simple as A, B, C.

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