

How to Raise a Happy Kid

The potential for lifelong joy is inside every child. Here's how to bring it out.

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Think of the smile that appears on your child's face when he's enjoying an ice cream cone. Those are the moments and feelings we all want to preserve. But once the last drip is licked, what happens to that happy feeling? Does it just go away? Or is it something deeper inside? Can happiness be learned? Or must we be "born" happy? What is happiness anyway?

The study of happiness is a growing field and it's loaded with questions, especially for parents of young children. We all want our kids to grow up to be happy adults — that much is clear. What's often not clear, however, is how to give our children the gift of lasting happiness. We take stabs at it by showering them with nice things, praising them to the hills, and lending a hand when they struggle. Those external motivators are okay from time to time, but the results last about as long as ... an ice cream cone. To raise a child who knows how to sustain joy throughout his life takes a different approach — one that depends on the development of certain inner qualities, including optimism, trust, respect, joy, self-esteem, and a sense of playful enthusiasm. In short, happiness relies on self-sufficiency and self-love.

What Happiness Looks Like

Let's take a step back for a moment and define happiness. I have two favorites. The first is simply that a happy person has a general feeling that life is going well. He is upbeat and optimistic, and feels as if he is connected to those around him. That's not to say that he doesn't experience sadness at times — we all face loss, grief, and unexpected setbacks. But, in general, life feels good. The second definition is simple yet profound: Happiness is the capacity to enjoy what you have, rather than always wanting what you don't have.

So are we born happy? Or must we "pursue" it, as our nation's founding fathers so eloquently stated? It turns out to be a little of both. All children begin life with a tremendous potential to be happy throughout their lives. Even kids with a genetic predisposition toward traits like anxiety or depression have the ability to lead very happy lives, though it may take more effort for them to reach their full potential for happiness.

Happiness, unlike eye color, is not a trait that is guaranteed to last. What happens during childhood impacts long-term happiness, but that doesn't mean you have no chance of becoming a happy person if your childhood was miserable. There are many happy adults whose younger years were less than ideal. But as a parent, it means that you can—and should — play a role in helping your child create the habits that lead to joyful living.

Five Steps to Lifelong Joy

Fortunately, it's easier than you might think to begin instilling the inner qualities that lead to a lifetime of happiness. With patience and an open mind, the following five steps can help you lay the groundwork for your child:

- **Connect with others.** More than any other single factor we can control, connection is the key to a happy childhood, and adulthood. Connection, in the form of unconditional love from an adult, helps foster self-confidence. Try to create an atmosphere at home in which your child feels cared for, welcomed, and treated fairly. Without that feeling, kids shy away from new things and experiences.

- **Foster a can-do attitude.** This is one of the most reliable defenses against depression and despair at any age. Children watch and learn from how you deal with disappointment, be it in your career or at an athletic event or even just in being cut off in traffic. You can encourage competition, making sure that your child experiences both victory and defeat, and help her deal with each. You can use humor to deal with the pain, or bits of philosophy, or simply let your children see that you never give up.
- **Pretend and play.** Unstructured play hones children's imagination, teaches critical problem-solving skills, and trains them to tolerate frustration. It also helps children learn that doing things again and again leads to improvement. In fact, play is the most important "work" your child can do. Practice, as part of structured activity, trains children how to receive help and get the most from other adults, such as good teachers and coaches.
- **Create opportunities for mastery.** With mastery comes confidence, leadership skills, initiative, and an enduring desire for hard work. It transforms a child (or an adult) from a reluctant, fearful learner into a motivated player. One of the great goals of parents, teachers, and coaches should be to find areas in which a child might experience mastery, then, make it possible for the child to feel this potent sensation. Once there, children want to go there again and again.
- **Provide recognition.** The feeling of being valued by others (friends, family, community) is key. You can exert a tremendous positive influence through the recognition you offer. We adults too quickly forget how much it meant to us when we were young — it meant the world to us, and to children today it still does. Recognition in turn reinforces the sense of connection that all children need.

Keep It Simple

It's important to say something further about mastery and the hot topic of self-esteem. Some parents think the way to boost a child's self-esteem is to lavish him with praise. Not so. Self-esteem is rooted in mastery. So, if you want your child to have high self-regard, do not go out of your way to offer praise. Go out of your way to make sure he has plenty of opportunities to experience mastery. And always remember to make sure your child feels connected to others and valued for who he actually is, rather than for just his accomplishments. Children who focus only on mastery, rather than mastery and connection, become "accomplishment junkies," always striving for the next thing and never happy with what they have.

One more word: It may be tempting to skip playtime because it seems trivial. Don't. Play is the time children engage fully with what they are doing. So, if your preschooler is interested in taking apart an action figure over and over, let him. If your school-age child likes bicycle racing, let him work with his friends to figure out how to make his bike go faster and pursue his passion. The skills he will build as he "plays" with adjusting his spokes, installing new brakes, or searching the Internet for racing tips are far greater than just learning about bikes.

A good rule of thumb is to **keep it simple and enjoy your children**. You can't buy happiness — it is learned and earned. But once they have developed a solid can-do attitude, children are set with skills to which they can return throughout their lives.

Boys Who Are Different

The new evidence
may surprise you

By ANNA MULRINE From U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT

SANDY DESCOURUEZ, of Aurora, Ill., is worried about her three sons. Nineteen-year-old Greg, whose quiet demeanor became more noticeable after his parents' divorce, was found smoking marijuana and arrested for stealing a golf cart in 2000. David, age 14, struggles with borderline grades and attention-deficit disorder. And Luke, three years old, is a one-boy demolition derby whose "speech isn't up to speed," says Sandy.

In time, Sandy's "boys will be boys" sighs gave way to bewilderment and fear. She realized that all three sons had problems very distinct from those she encountered in

her daughter, a top student. The family has had counseling, and a physician tracks David's situation.

The travails of this family mirror America's struggle with its sons: Boys are in serious trouble. They get the lowest grades that teachers dole out. They make up two-thirds of students labeled learning disabled. They are the suspects in eight out of ten arrests on drug and alcohol charges, and are arrested for over 70 percent of juvenile crimes.

They are also less likely to go to college. By 2007, universities are projected to enroll 6.9 million men compared with 9.2 million women.

That's not what America expects from its boys. "Maybe because men enjoy so much power and prestige

in society, there is a tendency to see boys as shoo-ins for success," says child psychologist Michael Thompson, coauthor of *Raising Cain*. But "people ignore the evidence that they are in trouble."

And increasingly, that evidence is tough to overlook. Says William Pollack, a clinical psychologist at Harvard Medical School and author of *Real Boys*, "We are experiencing a crisis of the boy next door."

Sensitive Souls. Scientists are exploring very real biological differences that may make boys more impulsive and less efficient classroom learners—in sum, the weaker sex, a role typically associated with women.

Research indicates that vulnerabilities can be traced back to the womb. The male fetus is at greater risk of peril from obstetric complications such as brain damage, cerebral palsy and premature birth. By the time a baby boy enters the world, he trails the average girl developmentally.

Social pressure often compounds biology. "Many boys today are growing up with tremendous expectations but without adequate emotional fuel or the tools they need to succeed in school or sustain deep relationships," says Eli Newberger, a pediatrician at Harvard Medical School.

In her recent book *The War Against Boys*, Christina Hoff Sommers cites a study done by psychologist Nancy

Leffert. Girls reported feelings of well-being that, in many cases, boys did not. Girls have higher aspirations and claim better assertiveness skills.

"I regularly see girls who are both valedictorian and captain of the soccer team, but I almost never see that in boys," says Leonard Sax, a family physician in Poolesville, Md.

Judy Chu, a researcher at New York University and Harvard who studies boys' development, notes that their behavior often masks emotional inclinations. "Boys are a lot more sensitive to others than people give them credit for," she says.

Chu spent two years having conversations with a group of boys outside Boston. At age four, the boys candidly discussed their feelings about subjects ranging from toys to hurt feelings. "They were so articulate and attentive," Chu says.

Over time, however, the boys modified their behavior in light of other people's expectations. "They began to behave in ways that made their capabilities in relationships more difficult to detect—which made them seem inarticulate, indirect and inattentive," she says.

Chu believes that boys become more selective about where and with whom they reveal thoughts and feelings that might make them vulnerable. She recalls one boy, a member of a group that dubbed itself "the mean team." "All the girls in my class are my friends," the boy told Chu.

"The crucial questions of how to raise and teach our male children arise every day," says child psychologist William Pollack. Try these practical tips:

DO NOT

- Tell your boy to "be strong" or "act like a man," especially when he's feeling vulnerable.
- Discourage him from expressing feelings of hurt or fear.
- Use shaming language like "How could you do that?" Instead, be nonjudgmental. Ask "What's going on?" or "What happened here?"

DO

- Give your boy your undivided attention at least once a day.
- Express your love and empathy openly and generously.
- Encourage his expression of a range of emotions—happy, sad, nervous, lonely. And if he seems to be in emotional pain, reach out.

—WILLIAM S. POLLACK and KATHLEEN CUSHMAN, *Real Boys Workbook* (Willard)

friends ("They'll stab you in the back"). And he kept that attitude throughout high school.

When boys get emotional, adults often encourage them to tone it down. "People say, 'My son, he's so sensitive,'" says child psychologist Thompson. "They don't realize it's not the exception. It's the norm."

And so, parents react differently to their upset daughters and sons. "The actions," says Thompson, "can be as subtle as asking a girl what's wrong when she's crying, but patting a boy on the head and saying, 'You're okay; now get back out there.'"

The result, some researchers say, can be emotional isolation from boyhood to middle age—with physical and emotional consequences.

PRAGMATISMS. Not all the old stereotypes are unfounded. Though day-care provider Marcy Shrage encourages sensitivity in her

"But if 'Bill' [the leader] finds out, he'll fire me from his club."

Boys' friendships also begin to change. "We associate girls with emotional intimacy and boys with sports and activity-oriented friendships," says Niobe Way, a professor of psychology at New York University, who has been conducting research with ethnic minority, low-income boys. "But very tough boys talk about wanting friends to share secrets with."

She recalls one subject in a research study, "Malcolm," who was great in sports and admired by other boys. One day, Malcolm learned that a close friend had been talking about him—and became distressed.

"Conventional wisdom is that gossip and arguments with friends don't affect boys, or that they'll 'fight it out,' then let it roll off their backs," says Way. But that's often a misconception. In Malcolm's case, he announced he was giving up on his

charges, she's also noticed how much they crave action. At her home in Lawrenceville, N.J., she cares for five boys under age four. She stops for senior citizens in crosswalks to model good behavior and takes the boys for long walks in the woods.

But this black belt in karate admits the boys get most excited when she teaches them martial-arts moves. And on plenty of days, she says, "they'll bite their sandwiches into the shape of guns and start firing away at each other."

It is the paradoxical combination of physical aggressiveness and emotional vulnerability that now fascinates scientists at the University of Pennsylvania's Brain Behavior Laboratory. Center director Ruben Gur says they've found intriguing differences in brain structure and physiological activity. The differences affect the way boys and girls process information and emotion and may make boys better at gross motor skills.

On average, women's brains are about 11 percent smaller than men's, says Gur. But from a strictly evolutionary standpoint, the female brain is slightly more finely developed. Brains are made of gray matter (where information processing is done), white matter (long fibers covered in fat, which transmit electrical impulses from brain to body), and cerebrospinal fluid (which acts as a buffer from the skull).

Research shows that males have a lower proportion of gray matter than females. Gur says this may mean fe-

male brains have certain advantages in processing information.

Males have more white matter, however, which means information can move more easily from one region of the brain to another, says Gur. This may explain why boys are better in spatial abilities. And their greater volume of cerebrospinal fluid, he suggests, means male brains may be better suited to sustain blows.

A bundle of nerves links the right and left hemispheres of the brain, helping the two sides communicate. In women, this bundle—the corpus callosum—is larger. It's the difference, researchers say, between a path in the woods and a two-lane highway.

So female brains tend to be more verbally facile, says Gur. "The female brain is an easier brain to teach," says Michael Gurian, coauthor of *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*.

Sensible Solutions

At Thomas Edison Elementary School in Saint Joseph, Mo., teachers have begun putting some of the scientific ideas to work. Third-grade teacher Denise Young gives her boys at least 60 seconds to "process" a question. "They need time to stop, switch gears and respond," says Young. "They didn't have it in the past, and I think that's why a lot of boys got into trouble."

Debbie Murphy, former principal at Thomas Edison, tried something new during disciplinary chats. "I would not make the children talk when they were angry," she says.

Are Boys the Weaker Sex?

"Boys, in particular, just have trouble verbalizing when they're upset."

Once they cooled down, Murphy took the boys for a stroll. "Boys have an easier time talking if they're walking too—it seems to tap into something in their brains," she says.

In three years, Edison Elementary watched its test scores skyrocket—in 4th-grade math and social studies—to among the top ten in the state for the school's size. And incidents of in-school suspension decreased from 300 in the 1998-1999 school year to 22 in the 1999-2000 school year.

Other districts are experimenting with single-sex classrooms within coed schools. The hope is that all-boy classes will allow boys to improve standardized test scores in reading and writing, much as girls have narrowed the gap in math and science. (Currently, the average 11th-grade boy writes with the proficiency of the average 8th-grade girl.)

In Good Time. Family physician Sax and other specialists advocate a later start in kindergarten for boys. "The curriculum is more accelerated than ever. Boys are expected to do too much too soon—their brains aren't ready," says Sax. "Later enrollment would solve 80 percent of the problems we see with boys and school today."

Sandy Descourouez is considering holding her youngest son, Luke, back from kindergarten. "I don't want school to be a miserable experience for him," she says.

With son David, she's determined to nurture the tenderness she sees in him. "He designs computer screens that say, 'I love-you,'" she says. And as for her oldest son, Greg, she hopes he'll attend college one day.

She vows not to disregard the silence of all three boys. "When they can't find the words for their emotions, I try to help them," she says.

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