

INTRODUCTION



The Art and Science of Raising Happy Kids

*The most important work you and I will ever do will be
within the walls of our own homes.*

—HAROLD B. LEE

Recently I was an observer at a sold-out parent education seminar about the epidemic levels of depression, suicide, and anxiety disorders affecting children. The lecturer asked the audience rhetorically, “What is it that we most want our children to be?” In stunning synchronicity, the audience roared, “*Happy.*”

Of course.

We parents want our children to grow into happy adults—but the trouble is, sometimes we feel as though our children’s personalities are already more or less set in genetic stone: “Timmy is my sunny optimist, Ben is my Eeyore, and look—they’ve been raised in the same house. Clearly I have no control!” a friend recently exclaimed. The good news is that we actually *do* have a lot of influence: parenting practices have a tremendous effect on children’s emotional outlook on life. Personality is not predetermined at birth, and neither is happiness. Nearly half—maybe more—of the factors that determine children’s happiness can be attributed to the environments in which they are raised. That isn’t to say that genetic makeup doesn’t play a role; it does. But “it is biologically impossible for a gene to operate independently of its environment,” explains Daniel Goleman, an expert on social and emotional intelligence. “Genes are *designed* to be regulated by signals from their immediate surroundings.” These signals include, of course, what we do as parents.

So there is a lot that we can do to ensure our children’s happiness—

and our own at the same time. In fact, there is a perpetual “buy one, get one free” special: teach your kids the skills they need to be happy, and you’ll become happier yourself in the process.

What does it mean to have a happy childhood? Happiness, as I conceptualize it, is much more than a mood or a cheerful disposition. Rather, a happy life is one that is full of lots of different types of positive emotions. For example, positive emotions about the past, such as gratitude, forgiveness, and appreciation, are important components of a happy life, as are future-based positive emotions such as optimism, faith, and confidence. The field of sociology has long shown us that people find happiness through their connections to other people. Positive emotions such as love, kindness, and empathy help us make those connections. And present-based positive emotions such as joy and contentment are obvious ingredients in a happy childhood.

Kids become accustomed to different ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving based in large part on what we teach them about the world, their relationships, and our expectations. These habits profoundly influence how happy they are. That’s what this book is all about: how to foster the skills, habits, and mind-sets that will set the stage for a wide range of positive emotions in childhood and beyond.

BASED ON SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH

Everything in this book draws on scientific research related to happiness. Much of this research comes from the new field of “positive psychology.” Social scientists used to focus solely on why people and society fall short: what makes depressed people so sad, what constitutes autism, why some cultures are racist and others harbor violent class conflict. Generally speaking, the aim of traditional social science is to understand dysfunction and relieve suffering. But in the last few years, social scientists across disciplines have turned their attention to the reverse: what makes happy people happy, functional families functional? Instead of trying to get something negative back to neutral—to get a depressed person functioning, perhaps—this science is about how parents and children can be happier, no matter where we are starting from.

As a sociologist and the executive director of the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley, I've made it my business to make the psychology, sociology, and neuroscience of raising happy children approachable to real people. That said, this book is also about me and my family. I have two daughters: Molly, age six, and Fiona, age eight. I'm not married to their father, Mike, anymore, but he and I work hard at being a great co-parenting team. My parents (the kids call them Nonie and Dadu) are part of our daily lives. So this book represents the intersection of my brain and my heart: my intellectual training in the social sciences and my very real, sometimes raw, experiences as a mother struggling daily to put the science into practice.

IT IS NEVER TOO EARLY—OR TOO LATE— TO READ THIS BOOK

Happiness is a continuous creative activity.

—BABA AMTE

This is not a book targeted to children of a specific age, because children and adults of all ages benefit from practices that are scientifically proven to contribute to human happiness. *Raising Happiness* is about setting up your children to thrive. And you don't have to be a parent to read this book. Think of all the people who care about kids: teachers, grandparents, health-care providers, aunts and uncles, librarians, babysitters . . . the list goes on and on. Some of them spend a lot of time with our children each day. These people also contribute a lot to our kids' happiness skills. This is a book for all of us to read during pregnancy and keep handy through our kids' adolescence.

Why? According to a series of studies commissioned by The Lucile Packard Foundation for Children's Health, only about half of parents rate their children's overall emotional and behavioral health as excellent, and 67 percent worry that their teens are too stressed. But according to the same studies, the well-being of children is more important to adults than just about anything else—health care, the well-being of seniors, the cost of living, terrorism, and the war in Iraq. More than two-thirds of adults say they are "extremely concerned" about the well-being of children, and this concern cuts across gender, income, ethnicity, age, and political affiliation.

We have reason to be concerned: nearly a third of high school students have reported feeling sad or hopeless almost every day for two or more weeks in a row. Persistent sadness and hopelessness are predictors of clinical depression, and depression in youth is linked to anxiety disorders, suicidal behavior, obesity, and deficits in social functioning. Depressed youth are also much more likely to use drugs or alcohol, drop out of school, and engage in promiscuous sexual activities.

The good news is that happiness is a skill that we can teach our children. The new science of positive emotions shows that this seemingly crazy idea is, in fact, true. What we say and do with our children is far more important in determining their success and happiness than any God-given talent or innate disposition. For example:

When Pregnant

Mothers who are anxious or stressed during pregnancy can hardwire their children to be anxious and fearful. Stress can damage unborn babies' nervous systems in a way that affects their ability to calm themselves and focus their attention. The good news: almost no hardwiring is permanent in a baby's brain, so this damage can be consciously reversed.

In Infancy and Early Childhood

Emotional literacy is a skill that parents and other caregivers can begin teaching children virtually from birth and continuously throughout childhood. Emotional literacy, perhaps the most important skill for growing into a happy and successful adult, is the ability to regulate and understand emotions. Children who can regulate their emotions are better at soothing themselves when they are upset, which means that they experience negative emotions for a shorter period of time. In addition, emotionally literate children understand and relate to people better, form stronger friendships, and do better in school.

In Adolescence

Parenting practices still matter a lot. Despite the popular notion that most teenagers are tormented and difficult, 70 percent of teenagers are actually happy—but their home and school environments are very different from those of their unhappy counterparts. One recent study shows that parenting moderates genetic vulnerabilities: teenagers who have a particular gene that makes them susceptible to substance abuse are much less likely to use drugs when their parents are involved and supportive.

It is possible to teach an old dog new tricks. Even if your children are older, happiness is still a skill that they can learn. Just by fostering gratitude in your home, for example, you can increase children's happiness by as much as 25 percent. You can sow the childhood seeds of adult happiness in your family, and you have plenty of time to do it. Our brains develop rapidly in early childhood, but they don't stop developing once we reach full height. We parents have two solid decades to help our children form happiness habits that can last a lifetime. And as you'll see in Chapter 1, our own brains remain plastic even in adulthood. This means you can even teach *yourself* to be happier. It is never too early or too late to start learning and teaching good happiness habits.

IS HAPPINESS ACTUALLY IMPORTANT?

Hordes of parents sheepishly—but regularly—ask me about the connection between happiness and success. The crux of their questions: If I focus on my children's happiness, will they still rocket to the top of their classes? Go to Dartmouth? You'd be surprised how often people ask me if my own children are “annoyingly happy.” In a culture fixated on high achievement, happiness can seem fluffy. Distracting. Certainly not serious enough to muster the effort and skill it takes to bring about.

Even if you prioritize your children's success over their happiness, here is why you should read this book: happiness is a tremendous advantage in a world that emphasizes performance. On average, happy people are more successful than unhappy people at both work and love. They get better performance reviews, have more prestigious jobs, and earn higher salaries. They are more likely to get married and, once married, they are more satisfied with their marriage.

Happy people also tend to be healthier and live longer. Each chapter in this book details the benefits that positive emotions bring to our well-being, our health, and our performance. In her groundbreaking research on positivity, psychologist Barbara Fredrickson has found that positive emotions

- Broaden our thinking in ways that make us more flexible, more able to see the big picture, and more creative
- Accumulate and compound over time, transforming us for the better by building the resources—strength, wisdom, friendship, and resilience—we need to truly thrive

- Are the most important ingredient in determining a person's resilience in hard times; positive emotions help our bodies and our minds cope with stress, challenge, and negative feelings

But what about negative emotions? Aren't they important, too? Is it possible, or even desirable, to be happy all the time? It turns out that among very happy people, those who are a tad less joyful than the happiest of happy actually have higher incomes, academic achievement, job satisfaction, and political participation than the happiest people. It follows that those with some feelings of discontentment—whether it is dissatisfaction with the status quo or an inclination to improve things—are probably more motivated toward action and therefore success. At work and in civic life, the desire for something better sets us in motion—to elect a new leader, secure a better job, negotiate a raise.

But it also turns out that the happiest group tends to have more friends and be luckier in love. Dissatisfaction with an intimate partner or friend isn't often a big relationship strengthener. In fact, evaluating partners in ultra-positive ways—perhaps even thinking they are more wonderful than they actually are—makes for a happier romantic union. My friend Casey's marriage bears out this research: at her wedding shower she said to us with conviction, "Imagine how many girls around the world are going to fall to their knees in agony the day Mark gets married." We all thought this was hilarious and tease her about it to this day, but she really felt it to be true. I asked her if she still feels the same way nearly fifteen years and two kids later. Her exact response: "Well, look at him! Who doesn't think he is super-hot? And he *has* embodied everything I always knew he had in him."

The takeaway: both positive and negative emotions have many functions, and both are important. To be successful, we should embrace some dissatisfaction in the realms of work and politics. To be truly happy, we should endeavor to appreciate—and maybe even exaggerate—the good in our relationships. Contentment with and acceptance of the people around us are critical for our ultimate happiness, so we need to teach our children to nurture—perhaps even romanticize—their most important relationships. This book will help you teach your kids to cultivate positive emotions and to understand and make negative emotions work for them rather than against them.

All of this is to say that happiness is not a fluffy or frivolous notion; it is the most important thing we can foster in ourselves and our children,

for its own value and for its contributions to other things we value, such as professional and social success.

OUT WITH GUILT, IN WITH JOY

The most important thing she'd learned over the years was that there was no way to be a perfect mother and a million ways to be a good one.

—JILL CHURCHILL

As much as we would like to provide it, there is no such thing as a perfect childhood, and I hope you won't use this book to try to create one. In fact, as discussed in Chapter 3, striving for perfection—in our parenting, our children, in anything—rarely leads to lasting happiness. None of us will be a perfect parent, but like any endeavor worthy of genuine effort, we can all work toward being great parents.

Parents have enough to worry about without another expert adding to the list of things they might be doing wrong. I am not worried about the mistakes you are making as a parent: we all make mistakes all the time, especially me. (You will learn about my many errors, do-overs, and “wish I had done that differently” moments throughout *Raising Happiness*.) The trick, of course, is to learn from our mistakes.

Sometimes, guilt about not being a good enough parent is a warning sign that we're making a mistake or doing something wrong. But like many people who strive for excellence in parenting, I sometimes feel angst and guilt about past mistakes or things over which I have no control. In these cases, guilt is not a red flag so much as a choice: consciously or not, I'm choosing to hold myself to an unrealistic standard, or choosing to ruminate about a mistake rather than forgive myself. I feel guilty when instead I could be feeling gratitude for having learned something difficult, or for unintended positive outcomes. And guilt about past mistakes uses up my energy in the present, when I could be parenting effectively if I weren't distracted by the past.

The alternative to unproductive guilt and angst is to focus on what we can do right. We can teach our children happiness habits, such as consciously practicing gratitude. We can model optimism and teach forgiveness. We can make family dinners important. We can help our children

forge friendships, and we can help them deal with pain when they are sad and angry. Most important, we can model happiness in ourselves.

But do we need to do all of these things—take on all ten steps outlined in this book—at once? Or ever?

Of course not. Any *one* of the steps outlined in this book is likely to measurably increase our children's happiness. So don't let *Raising Happiness* become another reason to feel guilty for not doing everything right. Let go of the guilt you feel for not being perfect. Learn to embrace your parenting mistakes as genuine paths to growth. Enjoy the effort you are putting into raising happy children and becoming a happier person yourself. All of these things are good enough in and of themselves. Instead of guilt, choose joy.

Parenting is one grand opportunity to find happiness in the messiness of life. When we engage, we will often trip and fall. But more often, hopefully, we will be simply amazed by the beauty and mystery of it all. At dinner last night, my friend Lisa described her most joyful moment this week: watching her kindergartner show off her jump-roping skills on stage at an all-school assembly. With a furrowed brow and fierce concentration, her daughter Helen jumped forward and backward, on one foot and two, to the tune of "I'm Walking on Sunshine." Lisa welled up with pride, not at Helen's stellar jump-roping skills but because her daughter was so *into it*. Happiness for Helen was learning to jump rope *and* having the courage to try it in front of 350 other kids.

Raising Happiness is about being like Lisa: not simply visiting this world of parenting, but being *in it*. Being continually amazed, moved, delighted. It isn't simply about dipping our toes in the pool; it is about diving in, headfirst. Diane Ackerman once remarked: "I don't want to get to the end of my life and find that I lived just the length of it. I want to have lived the width of it as well." This book is about living the width of our lives and teaching our children to do the same. It is about raising happy kids and, in so doing, becoming happier ourselves.

Ultimately, *Raising Happiness* is about making the world a better place. When we become better parents, our world improves measurably. In our materially rich but spiritually sparse culture, we often forget that this work we do as parents is important, essential. It *matters*—for our children's well-being and for the greater good of the world.