

I Want Them to Be Happy

How to make happiness happen.

"There are many people in the world who want to make children into performing seals. And as long as children can perform well, those adults will applaud. But I would much rather help a child be able to say who he or she is."

—Fred Rogers, in Maxwell King's *The Good Neighbor*



In answer to the question, "What do you want from life?" many people respond, "To be happy." The same answer appears when parents are asked, "What are your hopes for your children?" "I just want them to be happy, " they say.

Wanting one's child to be happy is an understandable and reasonable wish, but how can you raise a child to be happy? How is happiness defined? Is it the same for each person?

What's Necessary for Happiness

First and foremost, happiness depends on the family's physical and safety needs being met. The secure home you provide takes into account the social and emotional needs of your children, too. Children simply don't mature and learn very well without a basic sense of belonging and security.

You provide security for your family—through food, clothing, shelter, safety, and love. As psychologist Abraham Maslow discovered, once our *hierarchy of needs* are met, the rest is discretionary. There is little difference in the level of contentment and happiness between a person who earns \$50,000 a year and someone who makes \$500,000. Similarly, fulfilling all your children's desires and whims will not pave the road to happiness for them, and could very well cause them problems when they must face challenges without you.

Happiness is Contagious

A happy parent is more likely to raise a joyful child. It's no secret that children look to their parents to know how to act and feel. A parent is a model and a child is the imitator. The happier you are, the happier your children will be, so it's wise to know how to be happy yourself.

Happiness comes from within—it's a feeling and a positive point of view. Though we may have an inherited set point of our mood, it can be influenced by our actions and conscious thinking. So, do whatever makes you feel good. Hang out with funny friends, sing, dance, be spontaneous, pet the warm puppy, or pursue your favorite hobby.

Some Common Components

Happiness is not dependent on an Ivy League education, a job on Wall Street, or a million dollars in the bank. What we want for our children might be more about our own dreams of success than the realities of their wishes. Maslow also stressed the importance of one's *self-actualization*. This term refers to the ability to utilize one's natural skills and desires. Contentment and satisfaction (happiness) arise from one's own effort toward a personally chosen goal.



It's been observed worldwide that the happiest people share certain habits that are both satisfying and meaningful. Universally, the most contented people have positive relationships with friends and family, and have a realistic sense of their abilities, manifesting them confidently and gratefully.

Think for a moment about the activities that make you feel good. Be in touch with how it feels when you have accomplished something as grand as running a marathon or as minor as cleaning out a drawer.

For most, happiness arises when we freely contribute to others and the community. When my grandson was twelve years old, he volunteered at a Junior Special Olympics track meet. Afterwards, he was smiling and pleased. "That made me feel really good," he said. "I want to do it again." Several years later, he and a few friends organized a week-long soccer camp for developmentally-challenged youth.

Expectations and Hopes

Montessori education respects the unique needs of each child while guiding children to learn the norms of the community and family. Respect includes discipline, not punishment, acknowledgment, not criticism, and setting clear boundaries, which allows children to become self-disciplined. This approach is hard work and requires us as parents to be disciplined, too. After all, our instincts lead us to shield our children from disappointments and failure.

It's so easy to expect our children to be what we want them to be. We often project our dreams and desires onto our children—along with our fears. According to NIMH, 32% of middle school children suffer from anxiety. As our society has become more competitive, we increasingly push our children to succeed, to be the first in everything, with not enough consideration for their own preferences or needs.

Be aware of the subtle tendencies you may have to compare your child with other children, and, of your concerns about their skills and abilities. Realistic (and diplomatic) appraisal of your child's strengths is crucial. Continued time and practice will help your child learn about his own feelings and capabilities, and, in turn, gain knowledge and self-confidence. Free play, alone and with others, helps children discover themselves and find happiness.

Make Plans to be Happy

Children thrive just as adults do: with others, when contributing, and when engaging their unique strengths, talents, and skills. Try doing the following things for several months and see how contented you feel—and observe the "trickle-down" effect on your children.

- Spend time with friends and family—having fun and laughing.
- Acknowledge your own feelings and skills.

- Make a difference by helping in your community.
- Stay focused on the present.
- Share your values and your fun with your family at dinner (or breakfast) as often as possible.

In other words, make the time for *experiencing* happiness, rather than just *pursuing* happiness.

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