

On Parenting

# How to teach our children the art of happiness

When I think about what I want for my children as they grow up, I think of the kind of people I'd like them to become: Adults who are kind, thoughtful and grateful, who laugh often and find passion in life. I hope they surround themselves with whatever brings them joy, that they find a career they love and that they forge meaningful relationships with people who cherish them as much as I do. Above all, I want them to be happy.

As parents, it is our job to guide our children in so many areas. We toilet train them, we teach them self-care and manners, we teach them how to read, what to do in an emergency, how to cross the street safely. We might teach them how to play a musical instrument or a sport we loved growing up. But can we teach them how to be happy?

Mike Ferry, a long-time middle school teacher, father of four and author of [\*Teaching Happiness and Innovation\*](#), maintains that we can. Contrary to what many believe, success does not always bring happiness; but research has shown that the reverse is true — happier people are more likely to be successful at school, work, and in their personal lives. Ferry defines happiness as “an optimistic, communal, and disciplined perspective on life.”

The happier we are, the more successful we become. And thanks to the plasticity of our brains, Ferry explains that happiness and innovation can be

taught, nurtured and practiced. He goes on to say what Shawn Achor of *The Happiness Advantage* has expressed: that when we are in a positive mindset, “our brains become more engaged, creative, motivated, energetic, resilient and productive at work.”

It turns out we can teach our children how to be happy by encouraging certain habits.

The first is gratitude. Teaching children to be grateful in a world of overabundance can seem like a daunting task. It is easy to get sucked into the consumer mentality of society; children are constantly inundated with the idea that more is better and that they need the next new gadget or toy and then on to the next.

But the importance of saying “no” to children in order to instill a grateful attitude cannot be overstated. Help them focus on being grateful for what they already have rather than on what they want next. Another way to teach this is to get into the habit of observing a “moment of gratitude” every day. This may be upon waking up, or as the family gathers around the dinner table. Take a moment to reflect, then go around the table taking turns sharing one thing for which you are grateful. For older children, encourage them to keep a gratitude journal. Practicing gratitude daily can rewire our brains to recognize appreciation rather than to dwell on disappointments. In turn, we will become happier.

Kindness is another skill we can teach our children to help them find greater happiness. Ferry highlights research that has shown a link between the “feel-good” brain chemical dopamine and kindness. Acting with kindness increases the flow of dopamine within the do-gooder’s brain, making him feel happy.

We can encourage kindness in children first and foremost by modeling it within our homes. Be kind, especially during disagreements, and praise even small acts of kindness. Teach tolerance, highlight opportunities to give back to your community and volunteer as a family if possible.

Happy homes can also inspire creative minds. Our brains, and those of our children, are most receptive to new information when we are relatively stress-free, happy and engaged, according to Ferry. That means happiness is crucial for learning and critical thinking. We can inspire creativity by embracing humor, curiosity and open-mindedness at home.

Encouraging creative ideas from children can come in the form of including them in family decisions (such as planning vacations or designing bedrooms). You can also play games that involve open-ended questions to inspire them to think critically. Allowing children plenty of time for unstructured play helps, too. Ferry's book contains a wonderfully detailed list of suggestions and examples.

We should also celebrate the unconventional people in our lives by talking about how some of the most unconventional people in the world have had great impact (think Mahatma Gandhi, Albert Einstein, Nelson Mandela and Thomas Edison).

Happiness is not something that falls out of the sky and into our children's laps. It is a wonderfully complex state of mind that can be strengthened with practice. And I'm willing to bet that we all want our children to experience happiness and joy in life.