



## **Get Happy**

**Helping Your Kids Find Happiness.**

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*Scouting*

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From Happy Meals to the Happiest Place on Earth, happiness is all around us. Most parents would do anything to make their kids happy, as their credit-card statements will attest. Yet the World Happiness Index ranks the United States behind 14 other countries, including both of our North American neighbors. (By the way, Switzerland, not Disneyland, tops the list.)

The problem, according to psychotherapist, blogger and mom Katie Hurley, is that we're going about the happiness thing the wrong way. "Parents ask, 'How can I make my kids happy? Can I buy them stuff? Can I put them in programs?'" Hurley says. "We can't hand them happiness; we have to empower them to figure out what makes them happy."

Helping parents help their kids is the subject of Hurley's new book *The Happy Kid Handbook: How to Raise Joyful Children in a Stressful World* (Tarcher/Penguin, 2015). In a recent interview, she shared tips for raising happier kids.

### **Play with Them**

Hurley's first suggestion is to spend time playing with your kids—not in organized activities like board games but in the unstructured way kids crave. "If the kid wants to play Legos and says, 'Hey, be this guy,' then be that guy," she says.

By observing how your kids play, you'll discover what makes them happy, whether that's imaginative play with action figures or rough-and-tumble games in the backyard. "If you take a kid who's action packed, who wants to be outside and moving,

and say, 'Why don't you sit here and play chess for an hour?', you're telling that child to be someone totally different."

### **Process with Them**

Second, Hurley said, teach your kids that happiness is not really the opposite of sad, angry or frustrated. "Happiness is knowing how to cope with everything else," she says. "The happiest people are the people who know that it's okay to express your emotions and know how to cope with the negative ones."

Don't downplay your kids' negative emotions with some variation of "Don't worry; be happy", which works as well with kids as it does with adults. Instead, teach them to process their emotions.

One way to do that is with a worry box, a shoebox your child decorates with words and images that are meaningful to him. Each evening, invite him to write down his top three worries of the day and put them in the box. Then, pull out one worry at a time, discuss it and work together on a solution. For example, if a worry is about not getting picked for a game at recess, the solution might be asking a teacher to intervene.

If your child thinks a worry has been resolved, have him tear it up and throw it in the trash. If not, it goes back in the box. Either way, Hurley says, "Mom puts the box away for the night so that she can keep their worries."

"What if that became the new norm?" Hurley asks. "Then kids would know how to cope with stress and worry, and they wouldn't need me so much."

And they would be much happier, which is what their parents wanted for them in the first place.