

# Happiness Doesn't Just Happen

Helping young people find the joys in life.

**FROM HAPPY MEALS** to the “Happiest Place on Earth,” the joyful emotion is all around us. Most parents would do anything to make their kids happy, as their credit card statements will attest. Yet the 2015 World Happiness Report ranked the United States 15th, behind both Canada and Mexico. (No. 1 was Switzerland.)

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).

## Play With Them

Hurley’s first suggestion is to spend time playing with your kids — not just in organized activities like board games, but also 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 says, 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 OK 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.” That 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 takes 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 want for them in the first place. ✦



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