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Q&A

How to raise joyful kids: Reject perfection and let them fail



Shelley Davies for The Globe and Mail

Praise effort before talent and let them make mistakes, says author Christine Carter in her new book, *Raising Happiness*

Every parent wants their child to be happy. In a new book that is part science, part anecdotal testimony, Christine Carter, a sociologist and the executive director of the Greater Good Science Centre at the University of California Berkeley, as well as the mother of two young daughters aged 7 and 9, offers advice on how to raise kids to be optimistic and kind adults.

For starters, she says, stop obsessing over straight As.

Let your kids fail. And, most of all, breathe.

Q: The book is pretty science-based. What would you say is the most surprising finding that science has made about happiness with respect to kids?

A: [Stanford psychologist] Carol Dweck's research on mindset – I think that's the most counterintuitive finding. When we praise kids for their effort and practice rather than their innate talents or intelligence, they are happier, they are more engaged, they perform better, of course. But for me there's a real happiness finding in there too, in that kids who are praised for effort don't start to fear taking risks. If you say to a kid, 'You are so intelligent or you are so brilliant', they love that label and they want to keep it.

Q: But shouldn't we set high standards for our kids, give them a goal to strive for?

A: Praising them for effort does not mean lowering the bar – it's just putting the emphasis on the process rather than the end result. In fact, when kids have parents who have high expectations, so long as that's combined with a warmth and a growth mindset, which is that effort-based praise, they tend to be happier and do better. [But] just focusing on that end result and achievement is a real happiness killer for kids.

Q: You make the point in the book that there's a correlation between unhappiness and being a perfectionist.

A: I actually see perfectionism as being a particular form of unhappiness. It's a motivation that is driven by fear of failure, fear of making a mistake, fear of disappointing somebody. Perfectionists are far more likely to suffer from clinical levels of depression and anxiety, in college they are much more likely to commit suicide when things do go wrong.

Q: The book makes some interesting points about the benefits of failure.

A: Most parents err on [the side of] stepping in too quickly. When, as a parent we prevent our kids from making a mistake, we are really teaching them two things. One that they can't cope with it on their own. That if they forget their backpack, and don't have their homework or their lunch, they can't work it out themselves. The other message is that making a mistake is really something to avoid. So much so that mom is going to leave work, and drive home and get your backpack and bring it to school. It's the wrong message to send kids. We want them to know that sometimes when we make mistakes we really grow, we learn something from them, and we can cope with it.

Q: On the subject of mistakes, you were pretty honest in the book about the mistakes that you made as a parent, and still occasionally make. What would you consider the worst one?

A: I still fail to live in the moment. What that means, for me, is that I lose my patience with my kids in really predictable ways. When I feel like I am going crazy, when life gets too busy and I am sort of on to the next thing and the kids are not keeping up with me, I can be a little bit of a yeller.

Q: Every parent could probably relate to that. How do you fix it?

A: When I notice that it's happening, what I do is just try to come back to my breath and pay attention to exactly where I am right now in this moment. And I narrate for myself what's going on. Sometimes I do it out loud. So I will be driving and the kids will be arguing in the backseat, and I will be thinking, 'Okay, I am not going to lose my patience. The kids are tired, and they're hungry, and I am really wishing that I'd brought them a snack. And I am tense because we're running late, and really wishing that they would just be quiet. And I am just going to take a deep breath here.' It doesn't always stop the arguing in the back seat, for example, but it is infinitely better than turning around and yelling at them, because that's teaching them the wrong message.

Q: But at some point you just want the bickering to stop. How do you intervene in a happiness-protecting kind of way?

A: There are three things, really. The first is prevention – finding a way to distract them from one another. Once the bickering does start, what I ask my kids to do is to cool it right away – I don't want to hear anything, no tattling, I just need three breaths worth of silence. And then the kids can speak if they are willing to use an 'I statement.' We practice it when we are not in a tense situation. The 'I statement' is simply stating how you feel when the other person is doing whatever she is doing to drive you crazy. It always goes something like this: 'Fiona, I feel FURIOUS with you when you grab the pencil out of my hand.' It's very disarming for them. Often there's a simple, 'I'm sorry,' and handing the pencil back. It's amazing, like a miracle silver bullet for arguing children.

Q: But so many times the stressful moments happen when you have to get somewhere or you have to get something down, and you don't have time to have those conversations.

A: All of these things take a lot of practice and change is made in small incremental stages. [If] the next time you face this heated situation, all you do is calm down and breathe and pay attention to your breathe, that is a very important step. Parents tend to use the just-stop-it method. Parents are umpires and judges. That might work in those situations but it's not actually teaching your kids anything about how to resolve the situation themselves.

Q: You started the book making the point that to raise happy children the first thing they need is happy parents. At least the whole first chapter is relationship advice. Why is that so important?

A: You've got to take care of your own happiness first because emotions are so contagious, and also because that's the best way to teach the skills that kids need – to model them yourselves.

Q: If you could put one thing at the top of the list for raising happy kids, what would it be?

A: I think our most important thing for our happiness is our connection to the other people, so anything parents can do to foster strong social ties or social skills – like conflict resolution – is going to have a lasting impact on their children's happiness.