

Growing Happy Children

BY KAREN HOLFORD



IF YOU ASK MOST PARENTS what they want for their children, it won't be long before someone mentions "happiness." Just as there are simple, basic principles for nurturing physically healthy children, there are also simple, basic principles for nurturing their emotional wellbeing. And the two go together—happy children are more likely to be healthy, and healthy children are more likely to be happy.

Happier students are more likely to believe they can learn new things, be creative, and do better in their studies. Happier people are more likely to get married, stay married, and have happy families. Happy people are more likely to do well at their jobs and help others. And happiness is an important part of a healthy Christian life. Paul was a wise psychologist when he told the Philippians to rejoice in all things and to focus on positive thoughts (Phil. 4:4-8).

MANAGING NEGATIVE EMOTIONS

Negative emotions are things that drain the happiness out of our lives, such as anger, contempt for others, disgust, embarrassment, fear, frustration, guilt, sadness, shame, or stress.

Here are some ways to help your children empty their emotional garbage bins every day so they aren't overwhelmed by their negative emotions:

Be a good role model. Show your child how you manage your own negative emotions. Let your children see and hear you pray for help with your own difficult feelings. Talk about what you are feeling and what you are doing to manage the feeling. "I'm really sad because someone was unkind to me at work, and that hurts. But I'm also remembering how kind most of the people are, and I'm going to bake a cake for everyone to share tomorrow."

It's very hard for children to deal with emotions they can't name. Help them by using feeling words to describe what they might be experiencing. "You must be so sad and disappointed that David wasn't able to come and play today." When they can use words to describe their feelings, their emotions are easier to manage.

If your child looks worried or distressed, invite them to talk and be ready to listen, to accept their feelings, and to let them know you understand and care. Encourage them to pray about every worry they have because God cares about their concerns. Once they feel understood and comforted, they'll find it easier to sort out their feelings and find healthy ways to manage them.



Acknowledge when your children manage their emotions well, and let them know you've noticed how brave they've been in a scary situation. This encourages them and lets them know when they're getting it right.

However understandable a child's difficult emotions might be, let them know when their behavior is inappropriate and help them find different ways to respond. "I know you're angry that Tom broke your toy by accident, but it's not OK to hit him. Let's go for a run to let off some steam!"

Teach children to distract themselves when something's bothering them. Help them make a "busy box" full of interesting things to explore, or find a funny song they can sing. In *The Sound of Music*, Maria makes up a lovely song to distract herself from feeling afraid—"My Favorite Things."

Whatever you do, don't dismiss their negative feelings or tease them for being scared. Negative feelings are a normal response to a sinful world,

but the feelings are not necessarily sinful. God also feels sadness, anger, frustration, and disgust.

ENCOURAGING POSITIVE EMOTIONS

Positive emotions include laughter, wonder, thankfulness, joy, inspiration, interest, serenity, love, hope, and feeling valued.

You're the best teacher to help your children learn how to have happy and healthy emotions. So take care of your own needs and make sure that your children see you enjoying positive emotions. Talk openly about your happiness and gratitude. Thank God for the good things in your lives.

Involve your children in being kind to others. Being kind is one of the best ways for children to experience positive emotions.

Laugh before learning! Having a moment of fun before trying to learn a new skill actually relaxes and opens the mind to make learning easier. Talk together about what went well during the day and why it went so well. Remember the happy and good things that have happened to your family, such as answered prayers, God's guidance, and His provision.



Children need space to be quiet and still. Don't overfill their time with activities. Help them find a "peaceful place" where they can think and pray. Help your children experience God's love, acceptance, and forgiveness through the way you love, accept, and forgive them. Encourage children's *efforts* rather than their achievements to keep them working and motivated.

Keep a gratitude diary and write down what you're thankful for as a family. Inspire your children by reading and watching true stories of people who excel in their field and by talking about how hard they have worked to reach their goals. Use some of these ideas to start small traditions in your home that will help to nurture positive emotions on a daily basis. The happier they are, the easier it will be for them to love, learn, trust, and obey. 7

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HEALTHY, HAPPY EMOTIONS	BRIEF DESCRIPTION AND BIBLE VERSE
Awe and wonder	Encountering God. A sense of wonder about something beautiful in nature. Ps. 139:13, 14
Laughter/amusement	Laughing and smiling at something unexpected, positive, unusual, and safe. Pr. 17:22; Eccl. 3:1, 4
Thankfulness	Sincere appreciation for the good gifts that God and others give us. 1 Thess. 5:18
Hope	The belief that things will change and improve. Jer. 29:11
Inspiration	Being inspired by God and the wonder of His works. Recognizing excellence in others and being inspired to pursue excellence. Ps. 104
Joy	A feeling of pure and happy delight. Pr. 15:13
Interest	Being intrigued or challenged by something new. Wanting to explore and discover new things. Eccl. 1:13
Feeling valued	Having your efforts noticed and valued by others. Healthy satisfaction in a job well done. Eccl. 9:10; Col. 3:23
Serenity	Feeling peaceful, still, calm, and contented. John 14:27; 1 John 4:18
Love	A blend of positive emotions experienced within a warm, close, safe, and caring relationship. 1 Cor. 13:4-8

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