



Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents

Christine Carter

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What do we wish most for our children? Next to being healthy, we want them to be happy, of course! Fortunately, a wide array of scientific studies show that happiness is a learned behavior, a muscle we can help our children build and maintain.

Drawing on what psychology, sociology, and neuroscience have proven about confidence, gratefulness, and optimism, and using her own chaotic and often hilarious real-world adventures as a mom to demonstrate do's and don'ts in action, Christine Carter, Ph.D, executive director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, boils the process down to 10 simple happiness-inducing steps.

With great wit, wisdom, and compassion, Carter covers the day-to-day pressure points of parenting—how best to discipline, get kids to school and activities on time, and get dinner on the table—as well as the more elusive issues of helping children build healthy friendships and develop emotional intelligence. In these 10 key steps, she helps you interact confidently and consistently with your kids to foster the skills, habits, and mindsets that will set the stage for positive emotions now and into their adolescence and beyond. Inside you will discover

- the best way avoid raising a brat—changing bad habits into good ones
- tips on how to change your kids' attitude into gratitude
- the trap of trying to be perfect—and how to stay clear of its pitfalls
- the right way to praise kids—and why too much of the wrong kind can be just as bad as not enough
- the spirit of kindness—how to raise kind, compassionate, and loving children
- strategies for inspiring kids to do boring (but necessary) tasks—and become more self-motivated in the process

Complete with a series of “try this” tips, secrets, and strategies, **Raising Happiness** is a one-of-a-kind resource that will help you instill joy in your kids—and, in the process, become more joyful yourself.

Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents Details

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Helena says

I wanted to like this book but couldn't get past the first few chapters, and found myself skimming those. A lot of it seemed to focus as much on one's own happiness as one's children's, and for that topic I like Gretchen Rubin's *Happiness Project* better.

Darlene says

Ten steps to raising happy kids, and being happier yourself. Sounds pretty simple. Look after yourself first, build a village, encourage effort, Choose gratitude, teach emotional intelligence explicitly, motivate through empathy and reason, teach self-discipline, Live in the now, let kids learn social and problem solving skills through play in a nurturing environment, eat dinner together. All good stuff, written in an engaging manner with plenty of anecdotes about how the author got it wrong on many occasions and how it doesn't matter if you aren't perfect.

Rachel says

This book took me a while but the knowledge is priceless!! Highly recommend!!

Katie says

This is a hard book to read with teenagers that you didn't raise. Starting these habits early makes the job much easier, and I spent most of the pages thinking, "well, yes, i would have LOVED to raise them practicing gratitude and modeling loving-kindness!"

Still some useful thoughts, and a reminder that assuming teens will hate implementing gratitude practices means there really are bigger problems at work.

The parts that stuck with me:

7 ways to raise kind children:

- model kindness
- be (inspirationally, not annoyingly) preachy; emphasize empathy
- make kids personally responsible
- encourage kids to think about giving
- don't reward helping behavior other than verbally
- be positive
- expose them to need

Practice Loving-kindness

"may i be well, may i be happy, may i be filled with ease."

1. direct to yourself
 2. direct to someone you are thankful for, or who helped you
 3. direct to a loved one
 4. direct to someone we feel neutral about
 5. direct to someone you don't like
 6. direct to everyone, everywhere
-

Susan says

Good advice. Intuitive and simple but not simplistic. A helpful guide.

Sharon Leger says

Great book, helpful tips. Keeping this one, for sure!

Meganjenk says

I read a lot of parenting books for insight and inspiration, and don't usually put them on goodreads since I don't ever get through the whole thing, just read bits and pieces. But I really loved this one and read the whole thing. It distills most of the advice from other books into smaller and more doable chunks, providing the research behind it, and then great ideas she used to implement it. So whereas you might read a whole book on emotional intelligence, here you can read one insightful chapter, then go on to habits or whatever. Loved it, and wish I owned it for referencing.

Veronica says

This one was sitting on my shelf for too many years, so I finally downloaded the audio version and listened to it. Lots of familiar parenting philosophies here, with suggestions for cultivating happiness. I'm a huge fan of Christine Carter. Good stuff, I should have read it years ago.

Megan Jacobsmeyer says

I like the research and her comfortable writing style. She shares many great practices and understandings. I don't agree with all her perspectives and think the later half of the book is more redeeming of the valuable lessons she is trying to get across. A worthy read for parents and those who work with children.

Hwydiva says

Just bloody awful. Don't bother unless you lack basic common sense. "Involved fathers have proven a positive influence on children, so pay your child support." Carter has a very narrow focus on the world and in parenting. Yes, your a single mother, you've mentioned it about twenty times in the first two chapters. It maybe that this book is specifically geared toward that audience. "Bring sunshine into others life"; seriously annoying mixed with ignorance. Much better advice on parenting out there.

Susanne says

A really good summary of much of the current research on what is best for kids. If you aren't into reading parenting books, but want to know what research is saying about best practices when it comes to parenting, this is a great place to start. My notes below:

Raising Happiness by Christine Carter

1. Take care of yourself first; do the things that make you happy (it's not selfish, it's healthy)
 - If you aren't yet motivated to improve the way you fight (with your parenting partner), consider this: the way you fight with your co-parent is how your teenager is most likely to fight with you. If you resolve conflicts by becoming angry, so too will your adolescent. On the other hand, if you engage in more constructive problem solving, your teen will likely mimic that as well. (pg. 17)
 - How to fight:
 - Sugar-coat your complaints
 - Calm down and take a break from the discussion if you need to
 - Negotiate (but don't forfeit) (pg. 18-19)
2. Teach kids to cultivate deep and lasting friendships
 - Teach kids to make eye contact and give full attention
 - Use body language / facial expression to soften conflict
 - Conflict: consider other people's feelings
 - Breathe to center yourself
 - Point out that there is a conflict -- label it as a conflict
 - Ask for what you want
 - Say how you feel (I statement)
 - Explain why you want it
 - Communicate understanding of the other person's feelings
 - Change focus to finding a solution TOGETHER as a team
 - Let kids find a win-win to agree on, and then HUG!
 - Positive emotions have an "undoing effect." Emotions – both positive and negative – have biological and physiological effects. Negative emotions, such as anxiety and anger put stress on our systems, causing inflammation and heat disease, among a huge host of other illnesses. Positive emotions, on the other hand, "undo" the damaging physiological effects of negative emotions, calming the heart rate and reducing levels of stress-related hormones in our bodies. (pg. 32)
3. Value effort over achievement; perfection isn't the goal
 - When we send the message to kids that their talents are inborn – as when we tell them they are a "natural

born baseball player” – we create in them urgency in them to prove their “gifts” over and over. ... When kids want to keep their special label as talented, they also start to avoid learning new things, and they start choosing activities based on whether or not they think they will succeed. (pg. 48)

- For kids and parents who attribute success to natural talent rather than something such as practice, having to make an effort is an indication that they aren’t naturally gifted (after all). (pg. 49)

- All we have to do is clearly send the message that effort is more important than achievement. (pg. 49)

- People who rise to greatness have five things in common:

- They practice hard

- They practice consistently

- They gain experience over the long haul

- They have passion for what they are doing (and continue to do)

- They believe that their persistent effort till lead to success (pg. 50-51)

- At the dinner table try adding, “One mistake I made today..” to the conversation.

- Quitting can be a good thing; when the task is too difficult and becomes defeating

4. Choose gratitude, forgiveness and optimism

- Children aren’t born feeling grateful for what they have; we have to teach that.

- Gratitude Visit: write a thank you letter and read it aloud to the person you wrote it to.

- Write one to your teacher at the end of the school year, then read it to them.

- When kids come to expect that we will anticipate their every need, they feel disappointed – not gratitude – when they don’t get exactly what they want. For this reason, make sure all their dreams don’t come true.

- The brain registers forgiveness deep in its emotional center (the limbic system), not the areas of the cortex that are associated with reasoning and judgment. The best way to activate the forgiveness area of the limbic system is empathy, not reason. (pg. 73)

- Forgiving is not about forgetting, but about letting go and choosing positive emotions over negative ones. (pg. 74)

- If we can’t apologize sincerely, we shouldn’t do it at all; insincere apologies make people angrier than if there had been no apology. This means no insisting that our children apologize right away if they can’t do it sincerely. (pg. 77)

- When we make mistakes and learn from them, we also learn that we can overcome the challenges that likely lie ahead as well. (pg. 79)

- WARNING: Repeated failures lead to learned helplessness, not optimism, so it is important that the challenges that children face are developmentally appropriate. Too much hardship – challenges that children have little chance of rising above and can’t opt out of, such as poverty or a high-pressure academic environment – can overwhelm children, making them anxious and insecure. (pg. 79)

- Praise should be:

- Growth mind-set: focuses on effort rather than innate ability

- Optimistic: point to the causes of good things as likely to occur again and specific to the person being praised

5. Raise emotional intelligence

- Biggest difference between happy people and depressive ones is that the happy people know how to cope with painful situations and emotions, and they know how to bounce back from them. (pg. 83)

- People are emotionally literate to the extent that they can read and understand emotions – their own and those of other people. Emotionally literate kids can recognize , interpret and respond constructively to their own feelings and the feelings of others. (pg. 84)

- To be a responsive parent: (pg. 86-87)

- Be sensitive to our kids’ needs and be warm in our interactions with them

- Be responsive and consistent; know what they need and give it to them

- Be available and assessable

- Encourage multiple attachments

- Mother, father, day-time care-giver
- Recognize the importance of sibling and peer relationships (safety blankets)
- Emotion Coaching is: (pg. 89-94)
- Label and validate the feelings at hand
- Before solving the problem, you have to make sure you got it right!
- Imagine yourself in your kids' shoes and feel their pain
- Deal with the behavior
- Problem-solve: get their ideas
- Forcing a smile and your body will release feel-good brain chemicals. Even holding a pencil between your teeth can work. (p. 96)
- To flourish in life, we need to experience 3+ positive feelings for every negative one
- Married couples need to maintain a ratio of five positive comments or interactions to every negative one (pg. 97)
- Try this: make a list of emotion words and post on the fridge. Give each family member a different color, and have him or her check next to each word when they feel it. This helps kids realize that other family members sometimes feel the same way they do.

6. Form Happiness Habits

- Automatic Processes – automatic responses that we don't have to think about
- Controlled Processes – require language and conscious thought
- Make the everyday un-fun things in life into automatic routines so that we don't have to fight the urge not to do them day in and day out
- Rewards make kids like doing an activity less, and decrease the likelihood that they will engage in the activity again when given the choice (pg. 107)
- Support your kids' intrinsic motivation when you are asking them to do mundane tasks:
- Empathy – "I know you'd rather... I know you don't want to.... but xyz."
- Reason – Tell why they should do xyz
- Non-controlling language – Use manners! Be polite
- Using ERN encouragement ends up with kids feeling happier while performing the task than if they had been offered a material reward
- Just because something isn't fun, doesn't mean it isn't important

7. Teach Self-Discipline

- Preschooler's ability to delay gratification – to wait for that second marshmallow – predicts intelligence, school success, and social skills in adolescence. (pg. 120)
- Self-disciplined kids cope better with frustration and stress and tend to have a greater sense of social responsibility. (pg. 120)
- How to be an authoritative parent:
- Don't be a push-over
- Be involved
- Don't be controlling, even in a well-meaning way
- Exude warmth
- Don't react to misbehavior; preempt it
- Many researchers believe that the reason kids today are so much worse at delaying gratification than they were in the 1940s is that they spend much more time in front of the (instantly gratifying) television and computer, neither of which helps to develop their willpower or control their impulses. (pg. 126)

8. Enjoy the Present Moment

- Teach mindfulness: "The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present

moment, and nonjudgementally to the unfolding experiences moment by moment.” (pg. 134)

- The state of being attentive and aware of what is happening now has important benefits for our well-being, including our ability to cope with stress. (pg. 133)
- Mindful people tend to be more self-confident, outgoing, and grateful. They are less stressed out, neurotic, anxious and depressed. (pg. 133)
- The opposite of being on autopilot.
- In addition to helping kids learn to self-regulate, child-led, unstructured play (with or without adults) promotes intellectual, physical, social and emotional well-being. Unstructured play helps children learn how to work in groups, to share, negotiate, resolve conflicts, regulate their emotions and behavior, and speak up for themselves.
- Things to keep in mind when playing with your kids: (pg. 141-142)
- Let them lead
- Don't play with them in ways that bore you
- Pretend play is particularly beneficial, so make sure kids have ample time for it.
- The more complex the imaginative play, the better. Make sure kids have a half-hour at a minimum per day
- Try to stop caring how much your kids achieve. Dweck's research is clear: kids gain confidence from an emphasis on process rather than product. (pg. 144)
- Emphasize the creative process by asking questions:
- How did you make that?
- Are you finished?
- What did you like about that activity?
- Did you have fun?
- Savor the moment:
- “What is this were the very last sunset you ever saw in your entire life. What would you want to remember about it?”
- Stop trying to multi-task. Be present, one at a time, in whatever activity you are engaged in.
- Flow:
- A key aspect is the challenge cannot be too difficult, which would lead to frustration and anxiety, or too easy, which would lead to boredom and loss of engagement. (pg. 148) [zone of proximal development]
- When challenge begins to exceed kids' skills, they first become vigilant, and then anxious. If you notice anxiety, step in and help so that they can get back in the flow.
- The happiness that kids reap from their play far surpasses what they'd get out of watching TV, which takes no effort or skill. (pg. 148)

9. Rig Their Environment for Happiness

- The effects of child-care quality are small in magnitude when compared to parenting practices. (pg. 155)
- Center-based childcare increases the chances that kids will be more disobedient and more aggressive and have more conflict with their teachers.
- Any more than 10 hours per week of day-care when an infant is between the ages of three and fifteen months will increase the likelihood of an insecure attachment with a low-sensitivity mother. (This is not relevant to children with sensitive mothers.) (pg. 157)
- The amount of time spent in any type of non-maternal care in the first four and a half years of life predicts elevated levels of aggressive and disobedient behavior. (pg. 157)
- Bottom line:
- Reduce the amount of time infants and children under three spend in day care (social issues outweigh increased vocabulary)
- The quality of your parenting matters exponentially more than the quality of your child's day-care.
- When looking for child care: (and choosing a great preschool: pg. 163)
- Look for quality of the connections between the caregivers and children. Are kids forming strong

attachments to one or more caregiver?

- Does the environment foster positive emotions? Warm caregivers?
- How much time is spent in play vs. instruction?
- Why is play so important? (pg. 162)
- Better social skills
- Higher emotional intelligence
- School success
- Superior self-discipline
- Greater creativity
- How kids become materialistic:
 - Parents who are materialistic teach it to their kids
 - Watching TV and exposure to advertisements promote materialism
 - When they feel their needs aren't being fulfilled, feel insecure (basic psychological needs not being met such as safety competence, connectedness and autonomy)
 - Provides short term relief, but deepens insecurity
 - To curb materialism:
 - Limit exposure to advertising
 - After our basic needs are met, the correlation between income and happiness is surprisingly weak.
 - A large number of studies have reported harmful effects from children's television-viewing, including worse performance in school, obesity, attention span problems, aggression, sleep deprivation, requests for advertized foods, and eating fewer fruits and vegetables and more pizza, snack food, soda and high-fat foods. Most, if not all of these things are related to poor self-control. (pg. 167)
- Research demonstrates a strong link between happiness and NOT watching TV (pg. 170)
- Grit is a component of lifelong happiness. When kids learn that they can't cope with life's difficulties – because mom or dad always seems so eager to make sure that they never occur and because mom and dad are always solving kids' problems – the kids come to fear challenge. (pg. 171)

10. Eat Dinner Together

- Family mealtimes offer a concentrated dose of nurture and nourishment
- Kids who eat dinner with their families on a regular basis are more emotionally stable and less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol. They get better grades. They have fewer depressive symptoms, particularly among adolescent girls. They are less likely to become obese or have an eating disorder. Family dinners even trump reading to your kids in terms of preparing them for school (and increasing vocabulary!)
- Kids need to regularly eat dinner with at least one adult five nights a week or more (pg. 174)
- Family mealtimes are an ideal opportunity to practice the other nine happiness habits...

Beth says

I can't even remember at this point how I came across this book, but boy am I glad I read it. I am a happy person and I was very interested in reading about how to raise happy children, how to give your children the tools to find happiness within themselves and be able to problem solve and face difficult challenges.

The author breaks this book into 10 chapters, each covering a concept: Put on Your Own Oxygen Mask First; Build a Village; Expect Effort, Forgiveness and Optimism; Raise Their Emotional Intelligence; Form Happiness Habits; Teach Self-Discipline; Enjoy the Present Moment; Rig Their Environment for Happiness; and Eat Dinner Together.

Some chapters I found more interesting and relevant to my life, but overall, every chapter was worth reading. This is definitely a book that I will refer to again and again and again during the course of my parenting. There were good tips and exercises to practice with your kids and as a family.

Overall, I am very HAPPY that I read this book :) And would definitely recommend it to a parent looking to do some "parent reading."

Nancy says

Very readable with some good reminders and practical advice.

Brendan says

This book got some nice mentions on BoingBoing and I'll agree that it's a good read. Carter does a nice job of distilling a lot of science that's been done about the effect of various parenting techniques into ten lessons with tips and takeaways. A few thoughts:

* Steps one, two, and nine are broad approaches having to do with setting up a joyful environment. Some of these seem obvious to me (interview and carefully consider your child care providers?) while some are good reminders or new information. I like the first step--the suggestion that children should know their parents have lives beyond the children. She also reminds us to maintain and build adult networks that give us places to go and people to be with outside the childsphere.

* Steps three, four, and eight focus on how we act as parents. It's a reinforcement of other books I've read, including Kohn's Punished by Rewards. These chapters essentially remind us to treat children like their own people, to be kind and forgiving and authoritative without being authoritarian. Great reminders and advice. One new takeaway for me here: expressing gratitude regularly. We've started saying things we're thankful for as part of our evening dinner routine.

* Step five probably has the most take-aways for me from this book. Carter talks about "Raising their emotional intelligence" by talking about feelings as we navigate experiences. I've already used this when Avery's slipping into tantrum mode to defuse situations. Just asking her what she's feeling helps her step back from the tantrum cycle and into a more metacognitive space. She also suggests using meditation and teaching it to your kids as a way to handle tough emotions and get ready for new experiences.

* Step six urges "form happiness habits," and offers some positive ways to get kids to act in ways that will make them happy, while step seven reminds us that self-discipline will serve kids well later as they have to start navigating the challenging waters of the world beyond home.

Overall, it's a good read, with plenty of science-based advice and conversation. Carter brings her own experiences (including errors she's made in the past) into the mix, and offers some new advice. If you've read other books, you've probably encountered some of this stuff before, but even so, it's nice to read again.

Tiffany Tubville says

I enjoyed the science-based (both psychological and physiological) information and description of research

studies. There were some great tips to follow in the “try this” sections, which related the information into real life situations. I usually read from Christian authors so it was different for me to read suggestions for Buddhist meditation, but it was still a great parenting book and I agreed with a lot of the points made.
