

Ways to Make Your Child

Happy

(and why they work)

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Our discovery of a wonderful new way of parenting was accidental. It all began with a group of extraordinary children. We had set out to investigate the cause of creativity—those factors in the family and home that produce highly creative children. In the course of our research, our team of psychologists and educators spent more than 1,400 hours interviewing creative children and their families.

We expected, based on the stereotype, that many of these children would be unreliable and self-involved, even reclusive and "strange." To our great surprise, we found nothing of the sort! Virtually without exception, these super-creative kids were super in general: responsible, articulate, and socially adept. They possessed wit, insight and motivation. They were ethical and empathetic, confident and caring. They were popular with their schoolmates and worked hard at household chores and part-

time jobs. With their parents they were relaxed and respectful, yet when the intellectual gauntlet was thrown, they rose to the challenge with exuberance.

"How have you done it?" we asked the parents. The more we listened, the more we heard the same story—a story of parents who trusted and respected their children, and who truly enjoyed their company. Of parents who imposed few, if any, rules, yet who had no problems with discipline. Of parents who exerted little pressure to achieve, yet looked with pride on their kid's achievements. We could come to only one conclusion: *This approach to childrearing was responsible for creating these marvelously capable and creative kids.*

We call this "nurturing parenting." Nurturing parenting is for parents who want, above all, to raise happy, healthy children—children who tackle life with humor and enthusiasm; who are flexible, joyful, independent, and self-motivating; who can embrace change, delay gratification, and think imaginatively. It is never too early to begin nurturing parenting. While you obviously wouldn't (Continued on page 107)

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want to give a toddler the same autonomy that you'd give a school-age youngster, you can show a child this age that you believe in her and enjoy being her parent—which is what nurturing parenting is all about. Here are the six fundamental principles that nurturing parents live by. They are not static beliefs; rather they are active forces that you can use to shape your relationship with your child and your child's relationship to the world.

1 Nurturing parents trust their child's fairness and good judgment.

Nothing is more central than trust. The parents in our study stated again and again that they trusted their children's good judgment and their decency.

"I believe in the goodness of children," one father remarked. When we asked him to clarify, he replied, "I don't think anyone is saying that kids who are raised in a vacuum of parental attention will be good. But children will be good if they see goodness, live with goodness, and are allowed to choose their own goodness."

The concept of choosing one's own course of goodness is not new. For example, "doing your own [good] thing" was expressed as an educational philosophy in the "free" schools that prospered during the late Sixties and early Seventies. It was believed that by placing kids in an unstructured environment, they would naturally become motivated, self-disciplined, and hard-working. But sadly, what happened to many children was just the opposite. With no rules and requirements, they became stuck. They didn't grow because they didn't know what was out there.

The schools begun in that era that still thrive are, by and large, the schools that believe that children need and want to be challenged. Likewise, the parents in our study defined trust as an *activity*, not just an attitude. "You have to show kids how to be trustworthy. They have to know what it is that makes you trust them, so that they can cultivate and trust those things in themselves," said one parent.

Before trust can exist, a child has to know what his parents mean by good judgment or moral behavior. Nurturing parents trust their children's fairness because they

themselves have demonstrated fairness. They trust their children's sound judgment because they have shown them how to make good decisions. They trust their children's morals because they have raised them in a household with high moral principles. Children then need to *practice* those skills by making decisions and assuming greater responsibility as they mature.

"Of course kids are going to make some silly or ill-advised choices," one mother said. "But that's how they learn. I'll step in if I think my child is truly going to be hurt, or hurt someone else. But otherwise, I think it's better for him to find his own way. My son wants to make good decisions, so he looks hard for what is right."

Another mother observed, "Once children have done time in school, they develop this dread of making mistakes. They associate mistakes with failing. But mistakes can be valuable and enlightening. I tell my kids that every mistake brings them that much closer to a solution. I think that's one reason my kids feel they can come to me when they have a problem."

One father stressed that trust between parents and children can be unintentionally broken—through misunderstandings, poorly communicated expectations, missed cues or false assumptions. However, he saw these lapses as being completely different from more willful breaches of trust such as lying, breaking promises, or behaving irresponsibly.

"This was brought home to me several years ago when I got a call from my daughter's school, informing me that she had left during the morning," he says. "I usually trusted her, yet my first thought was why you little sneak, skipping school. Then I considered various possibilities: that she'd been kidnapped or had run away.

"It turned out instead that a friend of hers had received a call telling her that her brother had just been killed in an automobile accident. It was tragic; I don't know how they could tell a kid something like that over the phone. This girl became quite hysterical and ran out of the school. My daughter went after her and spent the rest of the day taking care of her, trying to calm her down, getting her home, talking. That was why she had left school.

"After I understood, I felt proud. Later, when we talked (*Continued on page 108*)

about it, I asked her why she hadn't called me when she must have known I would have been worried. Well, never having skipped school before, she didn't know that the school would try to reach her parents. So even there, I assumed that she had made a decision not to call. You see? Unless you consider what goes through your child's mind, how can you build trust?"

Most kids are eager communicators

when young; whether they continue to be so as they get older depends on the response their communications receive. Follow these principles to maintain trust-building communication.

■ **Recognize that your child is entitled to private thoughts.** It's natural to feel left out and even jealous of the intense confidences your child shares with her peers. However, if your child feels that you respect her

right to emotional and intellectual privacy, she'll be more likely to open up.

■ **Take care when questioning your child's attitudes, beliefs, and values.** Would you reveal your ideas, hopes, and concerns to someone who consistently told you what was wrong with them?

■ **Listen for the hidden messages behind your child's words.** For example, your fourth-grader comes home from school and announces: "I'm never going back to that stinking school again!" Some parents would say, "Don't be silly. Of course you have to go back to school." This turns the discussion into a power struggle: "You're going to school!" "No I'm not!" Instead, you should say: "Something bad must have happened. Tell me about it."

■ **Look for the feelings behind your child's communications.** When kids say things that are selfish, vengeful, or thoughtless, it often means that there is something powerful going on below the surface. Don't be baited into an argument or judgment. React to the emotions, not the words.

■ **Try not to offer your child a "quick fix."** While it's perfectly natural to want to solve your child's woes, children are comforted more by empathy and commiseration than by artificial salves for their troubles. It's best to avoid these easy outs that dismiss the intensity of a child's feelings:

"You'll get over it."

"There'll be another chance."

These comments may be true, but they're not what a child needs to hear. To support your child's feelings, say instead:

"No wonder you're so disappointed."

"That must have been embarrassing."

This emotional acknowledgment helps your child realize on his own that, yes, he will get over it, or that there will indeed be another opportunity next year.

■ **Rephrase your child's comments to show that you really understand what he is feeling.**

You might say, "You feel the teacher was unfair," or, "You're afraid that they will laugh if you say you don't want to go." This not only fosters conversation but also gives your child the opportunity to correct any misimpressions you may have.

■ **Turn your child's comments into statements that are less self-destructive and more suggestive of the possibility of change.** For instance, if your child says, "Everybody hates me!" You can reply, "You would like to have some more friends."

■ **Give nonverbal support as you listen: a smile, a hug, a wink, a pat on the shoulder.**

■ **Pay close attention to your child's body language.** She may tell you that she doesn't feel sad, but moist eyes and a quivering chin will tell you otherwise. When her words and body language say different things, always believe the body language.

Nurturing parents respect their child's autonomy, thoughts, and feelings.

Nurturing parents don't live through their children. You are unlikely to hear them say, "Make me proud of you." They are already proud of their children. They want their kids to be proud of themselves.

"I used to hate it," one parent remarked, "when my parents would say that something was just a stage I was going through. It was as if nothing I felt mattered."

Feelings are subjective, sometimes irrational, and always changeable. We cannot expect the emotional responses of a 12-year-old to be the same as those of a 40-year-old, nor would we want them to be. Listen to your child's feelings with concern and support, communicating confidence in

his ability to work things out. Ask questions not to lead him to your point of view, but to help him find his own.

Respecting a child's autonomy also means that the child is responsible for his mistakes. Mistakes do not reflect upon the parent, they reflect upon the child. You can see this difference exemplified in how two parents would react to the same situation. For example, upon learning that her child had done something foolish, one parent might say: "Oh, I'm mortified. How could he do that? What will people think?"

A nurturing parent, however, is likely to say: "I'm sorry my child did that. He's learning and he obviously made a serious mistake. But I'm sure that he will do whatever is necessary to set things right."

While this hands-off approach is often the best way for parents to foster growth and to respect their child's competence, it doesn't mean that you should leave your child dangling. Sometimes respect is best expressed not by backing off, but by jumping aboard. At these times, you put into practice the third fundamental principle of nurturing parenting: support.

Nurturing parents support their child's interests and goals.

Of course, support is an elusive concept. In theory it sounds great, but when you translate it to the real child, just what does it mean? Surely, support means giving your child a lot of praise, right?

Wrong! As one parent put it: "Nothing destroys creativity faster than praise."

These words fly in the face of common sense and parental instinct. How can praise hurt a child? Everyone likes to hear praise. And that, in a nutshell, is the problem. The desire to hear praise leads kids to seek it above all else. What others think becomes more important than what they think. As one mother put it, "Praising kids makes them think that you are the judge, so they never learn to judge their own work." When this happens, motivation becomes extrinsic—work is done for applause. With applause as the goal, creativity withers.

If the approval of others were a requisite for creative (Continued on page 112)

achievement, the world would be without some of its greatest art and inventions. To triumph over the derision or skepticism of others, it is necessary to have a highly developed sense of autonomy, and a belief in the intrinsic value of one's work. Supportive parents generate this self-sufficiency in their children.

We aren't saying that you should criticize your children. Rather, get children to tell you what *they* think. That will further their creativity, foster their sense of responsibility, and fine-tune their empathy. They will work to please themselves.

Let's say that your child comes to you with a painting and says: "What do you think?" Your immediate reaction will be to say, "It's beautiful!" But it's better to help her discover how *she* feels about it. What were her intentions? Praise her effort: "You must have worked hard on this."

Whether she bubbles enthusiastically or looks at you blankly, she will eventually form her own opinion. She may even lose interest in yours! At that point, it is fine to tell her what you think. But even then it's better to ask questions and to encourage her to look deeply into her work.

It's fine to offer reactions and criticisms—*after* your child has expressed her own. With her own opinions intact, she is better able to value yours for their honesty and illumination. Your comments should still be informed by what she has told you about the purposes of her creation. And remember that criticism in the form of questions is especially constructive because it encourages kids to think and challenge your interpretations.

There are times when praise is appropriate. Any time you are so sure of your child's feelings that the question she asks of you is practically rhetorical, kudos are definitely in order. For instance, when your 5-year-old, after weeks of mustering up the courage, takes that first triumphant leap off a diving board, and, with water dripping from the corners of a grinning mouth, asks, "How was that?" you can and should exclaim, "That was great!"

Rewards, however, can be damaging to autonomy. Research on creativity conducted by psychologist Teresa Amabile, Ph.D., of Brandeis University in Boston, has shown that children who are rewarded for work tend to become less creative and

motivated in the work they do. When kids look no further than the grade, they confirm that the reward has become the goal. When they ask, "Do we have to know this?" they really want to know if the reward system is in operation. If it is not, chances are, neither is their attention.

Of course, parents depend upon the reward system. How do you get a child to eat without the promise of dessert to coax him through dinner? Somehow, spinach just isn't intrinsically motivating.

No child is going to be harmed by an *occasional* treat to underscore certain positive behaviors: taking greater responsibility for chores, better effort on homework, the cessation of nail-biting. In these situations, rewards are used as "jump-starts," to recharge motivation and confidence.

Parents who use rewards in this fashion must wean their kids from them as soon as possible. Focus your child's attention on the *natural* benefits of her behavior: more choices, more friends and freedom; less anxiety, conflict, and guilt. Point the child toward the rewards that come from within—a profound satisfaction, a sense of purpose, a torrent of exhilaration.

You can also minimize the use of external rewards by encouraging your child to reward himself. When he faces a daunting task, suggest that he think up some treat or incentive to help him meet the challenge. This puts the system of reinforcement under your child's control. After all, don't most of us reward ourselves—with dinner out, a new CD—to get through those less-than-motivating times?

Encouragement may be the healthiest reward that you can give your child. Nurturing parents hang their children's art throughout the house, listen to them practice their music, and send their stories to grandma. They provide lessons, tools, equipment, and opportunities.

"But," parents often ask us, "don't you sometimes *have* to force children to try something so they can see if they like it?"

Where are the boundaries between encouragement and pressure? Is asking a child to *try* piano for three months pushing? When we raised this topic with nurturing parents, the response was unanimous: So long as safety is not at stake, force plays no role in the nurturing family.

"Having to finish everything you start—

persistence for its own sake—is highly overrated. Think of all the trouble people get into because they are too pigheaded to change directions or stop what they're doing," noted one parent.

Nurturing parents know that when kids are motivated to learn, they are willing to endure all manner of hardship along the way. Think of the scrapes and bruises of learning to ride a bike, the numbed fingers and wet feet of learning to ski, the dented egos and broken hearts of learning to love.

4 Nurturing parents enjoy their child's company.

"Encourage your kids to ask questions."

"Find out what *they* think."

"Include them in *your* activities."

As the parents in our study described their methods, we began to wonder, isn't all of this talking and probing and explaining and questioning a rather time-intensive way to raise children?

"Well," joked one of the fathers, "I suppose tyranny is a lot more efficient than democracy, if that's what you're asking."

Another mother said, "A stitch in time saves nine. That's how I see what we're doing. From day one, we give our kids good and regular servicing. Preventive maintenance, if you will. And as a result, we don't have to send our children in for painful and expensive overhauls. If you ask me, that's cost-effective."

"I'd second that," added another parent. "I have never had to spend one minute in a teacher's or principal's office. And we've never had what my computer programmer neighbor calls 'downtime' with our kids, where they disappear for days into funks or hostility—and you stay up nights worrying yourself sick about them."

In discussion after discussion, we realized the common thread: These parents enjoy their kids. As families, they spend time together working on various projects, planning, dreaming, traveling. Of course, this is easier said than done in today's two-career or single-parent families. It can be difficult to coordinate everyone's schedule to provide for this type of sharing. A little ingenuity, however, goes a long way toward staying close. Here are some ideas gleaned from our research.

■ **Call your child from your office for a 10-minute chat.** You can learn the latest news, answer any pressing questions, and show your child that you're thinking of her.

■ **If your child will be in bed before you get home,** ask him to leave you a note or picture. Suggest that it be about something important or exciting that happened during the day. And you can leave a note for your child to find on his pillow the next morning.

■ **Encourage your child to take snapshots that keep you in touch.** If you're going out of town, ask your kids to show you what they did, where they went, and how they felt. It's not only a way to stay close, but also a marvelous creative opportunity.

■ **Take your child to work for a day.** If at all possible, let your child come to your office after school from time to time to sit by your side and do homework.

■ **Keep a log in a prominent, well-trafficked spot in your house.** Use it to jot down thoughts, reminders, jokes, concerns.

■ **If you have a hard time getting together for family dinners, get together for dessert or a snack later in the evening.**

The pleasure that nurturing families find in one another's company deepens their love. Love, of course, is the spring that feeds parental worries about their children's safety. Nurturing parents, like virtually all parents, want to protect their children from the dangers of life. Most parents deal with these concerns by establishing rules and restrictions. Nurturing parents, however, take a very different tack.

5 Nurturing parents protect their child from doing injury to self or others.

"How many rules do you have?" we asked parents and children in our study.

"Rules?"

"You know, rules for behavior—bed-times, curfews, study hours, dating, television, where you can go, what you can do."

Parents often seemed embarrassed by the question, and some stalled for time. The reason soon became clear: Our research revealed that these nurturing families averaged less than one rule per household (the 20 families with no highly creative members averaged six rules).

This dramatic finding was our first clue that a different (*Continued on page 216*)

style of parenting was afoot. Despite the absence of rules, however, these kids showed no signs of a permissive upbringing—they weren't selfish or irresponsible or directionless. In fact, they were just the opposite—giving, reliable, and motivated. It is this paradox that lies at the heart of nurturing parenting: Fewer rules seems to make for better behavior.

The absence of rules does not, however, imply the absence of limits. Nurturing parents do set limits, but indirectly. They communicate values, they discuss their children's behavior with them, and they certainly act to protect their children from causing injury to themselves or others. But they don't see a package of rules handed down from above as the best way to build trust and responsibility.

"The trouble with rules," one parent said, "is that they discourage self-discipline. With rules, children don't learn how to control themselves."

"I learned that lesson early," said another mother. "My son, who was 5 or 6 at the time, used to drive us crazy kicking his soccer ball in the house. So we established a rule prohibiting it. A few days later I heard a ball bouncing. I was furious. My son was bouncing a basketball along the hallway. 'What are you doing?' I yelled. 'You know you're not allowed to play with balls in the house!' He began to cry. 'But you said I couldn't kick the soccer ball.' If he'd been older I would have thought he was playing games with me, but he looked so surprised and injured that I suddenly realized that the whole point of having the rule had escaped him. He had just heard us say, 'No soccer ball kicking,' and he was in absolute literal compliance.

"From that point on we stopped making rules. Instead, we talked with him about the reasons for limiting behavior. We got *him* to suggest what those limits should be. This gave him a certain pride of ownership. It was no longer a question of obeying our standards. He was acting upon his own. I think that makes all the difference."

"What we're talking about is getting kids to set their own standards and live up to them," added another parent. "I teach high school English and one thing I've found to be very successful is asking my students to evaluate their own work. It's amazing how much this exercise improves their work

over the course of the year. If they write, 'The ending's bad because the fight happens too fast and I should describe the magician more and I'm sorry my handwriting's so sloppy,' they've created a wonderful conflict for themselves: Why are they turning in *this* paper if they know how to make a better one? Kids who wouldn't have been caught dead writing a second draft end up writing third drafts. It gives them an amazing sense of power to know that they have this type of insight. Self-evaluation is really the process of getting kids to establish their own rules."

It all sounded so reasonable, but.... "Aren't there times," we asked, "when you have to impose your authority?"

"Sure," said one father. "When the consequences of a mistake would be truly irreversible, we'll put our foot down. But how many times is that really the case?"

"If your kids are used to making their own decisions, isn't it going to be difficult to get them to obey?" we asked.

"Just the reverse," he replied. "They know that it's so rare for us to countermand them that they either humor us or figure there must be a good reason. And if they need to rant and rave a little, so what? They're still doing what we asked."

"Let's say it's not an extreme situation, but your child wants to do something that you just don't approve of?" we asked.

"Then we talk," he said. "If I have concerns, I'll tell her exactly what they are, which is a good exercise for me to have to do. Sometimes I don't know exactly what it is that I object to other than the fact that I feel a general discomfort. Then I'll ask her for suggestions: how she thinks we should handle it, why she wants to do it, etc. You'd be amazed how many times you can come to a compromise—she'll call when she gets there, or do it during the day, or ask two more friends to go along, or pay for it herself, or whatever. The funny thing is, once she's placed in the role of finding the solution, she doesn't see it as a restriction."

Trust, respect, discussion, compromise—these, not rules, are the elements that nurturing parents use to protect their children from harm. Nurturing parents model the values and responsibility they hope their children will develop. It is the way they live, rather than the rules they set, that maintains "discipline."

Nurturing parents model the self-control, sensitivity, and values they believe their child will need.

"Again and again we say to our children, 'Do whatever you want to, but *do something!*' Then we try to be good role models for a highly active life," said one mother.

"The best way to get your kids to work hard is to work hard. We have always had at least one family project going. We often skipped a meal because we were all into getting a project done," asserted one parent.

Children are more likely to do what you do, not what you say. The nurturing parents in our study don't preach about the value of hard work; they work hard. They don't lecture on the importance of honesty and tolerance; they try to lead consistently honest and tolerant lives.

It's reassuring to think of the great impact of modeling on a child's learning. It means that parents do not have to be brilliant analysts of their children's psyches; they need not possess commanding overviews of educational theory. All they need to do is lead the kind of lives they hope their children will lead, be the kind of people they hope their children will be.

Often without even being aware of it, parents teach their children valuable traits and attitudes. When they change careers and take on new challenges, they teach the value of risk taking. When they volunteer time in the community and donate blood, they demonstrate social responsibility; when mother runs for city council and father stays home and comforts the baby, they illustrate equal opportunity.

The effectiveness of modeling is one reason why parents who are not themselves creative are able to raise highly creative children. Indeed, of the parents of creative children in our study, many were not themselves creative in any way. This suggests that children may well be more influenced by the quality of the environment in which they grow than by genetic inheritance.

To encourage a child in these directions is to encourage the growth of a vital inner life—to push, not for grades and conformity and miniature adulthood but for play and joy, for passion and open-mindedness—so that the child within may keep on living into a merry old age. ■

5