

# Simple Secrets To A **HAPPY** Child

Nothing is as delightful as the laughter of a child – and it results not from expensive toys or vacations, but simply from parental touch

**W**e hear a lot about what makes a child happy – images on TV point to the latest Barbie doll or the newest gizmo kids must have. Happy faces of kids who are fortunate enough to acquire these sought-after toys light up the screen. As parents who love our children and want the best for them, we do our utmost to fulfil our children's wishes and desires. And like us, children do love acquiring material things.

Carolyn Kee, Senior Psychologist with the Child Guidance Clinic of the Institute of Mental Health says, "There is nothing wrong with making our children happy this way. However, we should remember that short-term happiness is not the same as long-term happiness. Children love the toys and gifts they receive, but the joy is short-lived and then, the quest is on again for the next object of desire!"

Carolyn talks about the importance of how children need to see love expressed in concrete ways. "I've seen many parents scrimp on themselves and make personal sacrifices. They invest money in capital funds, enrol their children in the best schools and slog long hours at work to provide a good life for their kids.

"After work, they come home and spend yet more time supervising their children in their schoolwork and ensuring that they do well in their exams. Certainly, success and achievement can bring some happiness. But there are

children who do well academically and are unhappy."

## WHAT MAKES A CHILD HAPPY?

\*\*\* **Time and attention** Carolyn says, "It is not enough to just do work together; a parent should spend time listening, talking, playing and just being with their children." There is nothing more unpleasant than to talk to someone who is paying less than half her attention to you. Don't make the newspaper or TV more important than your child. Stop what you are doing and listen to what your child is saying. Whether he tells you about an imaginary bear that came to his school or simply that he loves you, listen to him. Not only should you look your child in the eye when he speaks to you, but reply so he knows you heard him.

By spending time with your child, you show her that you enjoy her company and find her important and interesting. She sees that she's valued for who she is and not just what she does. This builds her self-esteem and confidence, allowing her to face the world secure in her self-worth and unafraid to face challenges. "A child who has this quality has a deeper and more lasting joy, as her sense of self is not easily crushed by failures, disappointments and fears," says Carolyn.

By spending time relating to your child, you also impart skills needed to form meaningful relationships with other people. Children who learn how to make

friends and cope with the complexities of human relationships are able to form relationships that bring happiness and enjoyment. Take the time to expose your child to situations (eg a friend's house or the playground) where he has the chance to play with other children, form friendships and practise the skills of social interaction.

\*\*\* **Know what they need at different ages** Consultant psychiatrist Dr Nur Hamidah Mohd Salleh of Gleneagles Intan Medical Centre, Malaysia, believes that understanding the emotional needs of children at different stages of their lives may be part of the answer to their happiness.

●●● **BIRTH TO SIX YEARS** Known as the formative years, children's needs at this age are basic. As long as they're well fed and feel cared for, they are happy.

"Babies, toddlers and preschool children like being touched, smiled at, cuddled and stroked. Maintain eye contact or hold their hand when talking to them. They also like to know that you are doing things for them, for example, that a particular dish that you are cooking is specially for them," says Dr Nur Hamidah.

●●● **SEVEN TO TWELVE YEARS** The school-going child already has a mind of her own and can speak her mind too. Kids in this age group already have friends, and may start being influenced by peer pressure.

"This is a good time to teach them the value of self-worth and coping skills

so they can deal with future adversities. Having resilience will help them find their own internal strength – a quality needed for happiness,” says Dr Teoh Hsien Jin, a consultant clinical psychologist.

Says Dr Nur Hamidah, “School-going children like doing things with their parents, so engage them in activities like washing the car, baking a cake or even spring-cleaning. Instead of lavishing them with presents, instill the sense of responsibility in them by making them earn their gifts through doing chores.”

\*\*\* **Offer self-expression** Give your child opportunities to express herself. Expose her to various types of music, and let her dance, play or paint to it. Although the push is for classical music to stimulate brain functions, don't rule out rock and roll, jazz, blues, country and pop. Allow your child to be creative at home – try using clay or papier-mâché.

\*\*\* **Don't expect perfection** Mastering a task requires trial and error, so don't prevent your kids from making mistakes. Don't make them feel like failures when an attempt is not flawless. Just because mistakes are negative experiences doesn't mean they destroy self-esteem. In fact, the feedback from such experiences helps kids learn what works and what doesn't.

\*\*\* **Praise your child whenever possible** Children are told what they are doing wrong so often, they probably have a tough time believing they can do anything right. We all fall into this trap – we say things like “Don't jump on the couch”, or “Don't throw the ball in the house”. Of course, we need to deter problems or dangerous behaviour, but let's not lose sight of all the positive things your child does during the day!

\*\*\* **Be persistent** All success stories involve perseverance – the ability to try and try again until you succeed. As perseverance develops, so does tolerance for frustration. If your kids cannot tolerate frustration, they'll have trouble succeeding at anything.

\*\*\* **Motivate whenever possible** Psychologist Carolyn remembers a teenager who once told her that as a child, he gave up on his studies because no matter how well he did, his father always said, “Well, you could do better”.

No doubt his father was proud of him, but a child's young mind has yet to develop the ability to see embedded meanings and underlying intentions.

Parents who give positive feedback frequently motivate their children to do better. Even when the child's performance falls below expectations, give positive feedback about her efforts and focus on areas of improvement.

By telling a child, “What's important is that you tried your best and I'm proud of you because of that” or “It's okay to make mistakes, you can learn from them”, you're helping him cope with disappointments.

\*\*\* **Try not to over-protect** Over-protecting a child can do more harm than good. Instead of being happy, a child who gets what she wants too easily, constantly has things done for her, or is quickly rescued from a difficult situation, tends to be easily agitated, anxious and dissatisfied with herself and others. She lacks the confidence to try new things, lacks persistence and isn't able to tolerate frustration. She becomes highly dependent on her parents and feels fearful and unable to cope when left on her own. She expects a lot out of life, but is unwilling to work for it. That's why she's constantly disappointed and angry.

Carolyn concludes, “While children need our protection, they also need to be exposed to challenges to test their skills and strengthen their ability to cope. They have to be allowed to experience some degree of deprivation, failure and even hurt. It may seem ironic, but by letting your child experience some unhappiness, you can help him achieve a more enduring happiness in the long run.”

