

You Can't Buy Happiness for Your Child (but maybe you can make a down payment)

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These uncertain economic times are giving a lot of parents the chance to re-examine their priorities as well as their budgets. When revising family budgets, many parents may wonder whether to classify the newest XBOX 360 purchase for their child as either a necessity or a luxury. This question may be quite challenging for many parents to answer. Here are some questions that parents might want to consider before making another purchase for their child.

Do you feel like your child's happiness is entirely your responsibility and solely depends upon how much you buy them? If your child is unhappy, do you blame yourself and see buying them something new as the solution? Will you go to any lengths to buy a desired item for your child even if deep down you know you're only providing a temporary "fix"? Do you ever compensate for your own current or past unhappiness by buying excessively for your child? Is it frustrating when your children are not made deliriously happy by all the bounty they have received? Lastly, have you made a habit of spending more than you can afford or that makes sense on your child's material wants?

If any of these questions resonate with you, be rest assured, you are not alone. Perhaps never before have parents been so concerned with the ups and downs of their children's levels of happiness, so often associated happiness with material possessions, and so disappointed that their largess has not resulted in happy children. Here's a news flash – it's not necessarily beneficial or realistic for children to be happy all the time. This doesn't mean that you should go out of your way to make your children miserable. It's just that it is important to recognize that not only is it normal to experience unhappiness, it is also adaptive.

As long as it is not chronic, and it does not reach the level of clinical depression, unhappiness can help children to learn about consequences for their negative actions. Unhappiness also gives children practice in coping with the reality of not getting what they want all the time. After all, children raised on a diet of instant, unearned happiness are likely in for a rude awakening when they start facing "the real world" of college and work as well as the cyclical ups and downs of economic conditions, not to mention serious relationships. Unhappiness can also provide motivation to make changes for the better – with increased happiness as a natural reward. Alright, maybe you should go out of your way to make your child unhappy once in a while.

Researchers have taught us a lot about what aspects of children's happiness may be beyond parental control. For example, it appears that each child is born with their own potential for experiencing happiness just like they're born with potential for other attributes such as

height or intelligence. In other words, children's potential for happiness is at least partially hard-wired into them by genetics and biology. This is particularly true when there is a family history of pessimistic individuals or those with clinical depression. At any given time, other factors like luck and economic conditions also play a role. So, think twice before totally holding yourself completely responsible for the happiness of any child.

There is also cross-cultural evidence regarding the relationship between the accumulation of tangible possessions and happiness. For example, the people of Rio De Janeiro, Brazil, many of them living in poverty, generally indicate experiencing higher levels of happiness on average than most other groups. This is just one of many possible demonstrations that the association between material possessions and happiness many parents might expect may not be, in reality, all that strong. Another example is provided by the Amish who reject a life spent in pursuit of modern conveniences, let alone material gain, and instead focus on fellowship as well as spiritual well being. This should bring at least some comfort to parents who worry that their children are doomed to a future of misery if they do not pursue some high paying career or marry someone who isn't wealthy. Anyway, think about it, have material possessions been the true source of lasting happiness in your own life? If your answer is, "Yes," take an honest look at yourself. It would not be surprising to find that material possessions are all you have.

Fortunately, there remain many steps that parents can take to try and cultivate happiness in their children in ways other than buying and short of moving the family to Rio or becoming Amish. Parents can start with the idea that happiness is neither a commodity nor an entitlement. In other words, happiness cannot be bought, sold, or traded like soybean futures. Keep this in mind before trying to make your child happy by buying them the latest game or piece of clothing that they are obsessed with. Especially when they tell you (for the umpteenth time), "It's all I'll ever want." It also may be helpful to think of happiness as a process rather than as an outcome that can be bought. Genuine happiness, in fact, is not something you can obtain directly at all. Rather, it is something that is ineffable and emerges indirectly from a consistent, positive lifestyle made up of meaningful healthy relationships and service to others.

Another confusing issue is what may be termed "little h" happiness versus "Big H" happiness. An example of the "little h" variety might be the fleeting smile on a child's face when they get another in the long line of expensive purchases. In contrast, "Big H" happiness for a child might come when they persevered through a difficult course at school or have made a best friend. Teaching children the difference between these two types of happiness and helping them pursue the "Big H" is one of the greatest possible parental accomplishments.

As much as they wish, parents cannot really bestow happiness on their children. However, what they can do is teach life skills that will increase the likelihood of happiness and practice these skills themselves as positive role models. Some happiness creating life skills

to teach your children include:

the ability to cope with frustration and boredom

the ability to remain resilient and persevere in the face of difficult challenges

the ability to understand and effectively relate to others as well as to oneself

the ability to actively modify negative self-talk.

In addition, having a positive, authoritative parenting style that emphasizes optimism, clear communication, rational problem solving, proper boundaries, and appropriate positive and negative consequences for behavior is also essential in creating the foundation upon which future happiness may be built. Remaining calm and resisting children's immediate material demands (and tantrums and guilt trips when their demands aren't met) in favor of long-term goals isn't easy, but will be well worth it in the end.

Sure, we want more than just about anything else for our children to be happy. But here's a final thought: in the long run, children themselves are individuals who, particularly as they get older, have to learn to take responsibility for their own happiness. As parents, you can certainly help get your children on a path toward happiness, but it is ultimately they who have to learn to travel this path wisely. Maybe the next time your child complains about being unhappy, instead of buying them something, you can try responding, "So what are YOU going to do about it?"