

# Trying To Keep Your Kids Happy Can Lead To Problems

by Kathy Slattengren

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"I just want my kids to be happy! What can possibly be wrong with that?" Trying to keep your kids happy may actually have the opposite effect.

## Accepting the Full Range of Emotions

When you focus on your kids being happy, your unspoken message is that feeling happy is the goal. Emotions like anger, disappointment, frustration, sadness, loneliness and fear should be avoided.

How do you communicate this to your kids? Perhaps you can relate to the dad whose daughter expressed disappointment at having to go to the store with him. Instead of simply acknowledging her disappointment, he promised to get her some candy. She was then happy to go with him.

Maybe you've been in a situation like Erin's whose son loves playing video games. When she tells him it's time to do something else, he gets angry so she often lets him play a little longer. Even though Erin feels he is spending too much time on video games, she hates dealing with his crankiness when it's time to turn it off.

Another mom described her son's limited food preferences. He likes pizza, pasta and hamburgers so that's what he has for dinner every night. While she knows this isn't the healthiest diet, it keeps him happy.

When you strive to keep your kids happy, they miss out on learning to handle their more difficult emotions. You may also be sacrificing what is healthy for them in the long term for short term happiness.

## Encouraging Self-Centered Focus

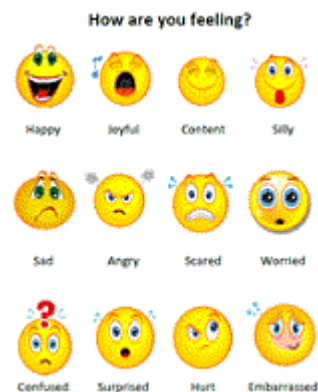
Loving parents can unintentionally raise self-centered, unhappy children. How does this happen? One way it happens is when parents continually give their children the message that the children's needs, desires and happiness are superior over anyone else's. These children grow up learning to focus on themselves, not others.

There are many sad stories of parents who bent over backwards to give their children everything they could possibly want only to have their children grow into self-centered adults. These adult children often take their parents for granted and rarely pay attention to their parents needs. Instead they focus on their own needs.

One mom sadly explained how her 30-year-old son had flown home for Christmas. Mom had planned a big gathering and was busy with preparations. Her son left in an angry huff before the Christmas dinner complaining that his mom wasn't spending enough time with him!

She reflected that she had always done so many things for him so that he would be happy. She didn't think of asking for his help preparing dinner and clearly he didn't think of it either. They both ended up being very unhappy that day.

## Discovering Authentic Happiness



Although it seems that children who have their basic needs met plus enjoy many extras would certainly be happy, this appears to not be the case. In a [2013 U.S. sample of youth in grades 9-12](#), 17% of students reported that they had seriously considered attempting suicide during the preceding 12 months.

What should we wish for our kids instead of happiness? The answer to this question is discussed in Dr. Aaron Cooper and Eric Keitel's book titled [I Just Want My Kids to Be Happy! Why You Shouldn't Say It, Why You Shouldn't Think It, What You Should Embrace Instead](#). They analyze some of the negative effects of putting our kids' happiness first and present healthier alternatives.

The authors reviewed decades of research on happiness. Based on these findings they suggest there are eight key ingredients to authentic happiness:

- Good mental and physical health
- A life of meaning
- Closeness to others
- Acts of loving kindness
- A sense of gratitude
- A sense of spirituality
- An optimistic outlook
- Gratifying pursuits

Which of these areas do you think your children could benefit from further developing? Pick one to initially focus on and decide on a couple ways to work on it.

Working on any of these areas will improve your kids' sense of well-being. Ultimately building these skills will help your children achieve a lifetime of real happiness.

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Kathy Slattengren is an internationally recognized, inspirational parent educator and founder of Priceless Parenting. [Priceless Parenting](#) offers online parenting classes, parenting presentations and parent coaching. Parents learn to effectively handle misbehavior while building loving relationships.

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