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learning joy

Christine Carter on what it takes for kids — and their parents — to get happy, and why we should

By **Melinda Sacks**

Learning to be happy is like learning a foreign language, says UC Berkeley sociologist Christine Carter. Anyone can learn the skill set. Some just need more practice than others.

A self-described anxious and overly emotional child, Carter says she wasn't naturally happy. In fact, she remembers in great detail the painful morning rides on the school bus where she was taunted for her frizzy hair and buck teeth. Often she was the target of mean kids who would pelt her with berries during the interminably long ride to the last bus stop where she grew up in Orinda.

Today at 38, she is a nationally renowned expert on what it takes to raise happy children. And yes, she says, she has learned to be happy.

The author of "Raising Happiness: 10 Simple Steps

for More Joyful Kids and Happier Parents," Carter holds a doctorate in sociology. She is the executive director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, which sponsors research into social and emotional well-being. Her popular blog, "Raising Happiness," melds science and her own experiences with parenting advice, practical suggestions and empathy for 21st-century parents struggling with issues from bullying to chores to teenage moods. She is a regular on morning news shows and "Oprah" and on the Huffington Post.

The divorced mother of two daughters, 7 and 9, Carter has wrestled with many of the demons that can make mothers (and fathers, too) and their children unhappy, including financial pressures and divorce. Happiness is not about having a perfect life, or being a perfect parent,

she explains, adding, "It is never too late to become a happier person, even if you had an unhappy childhood yourself."

From her home in the East Bay, Carter took time out from her hectic schedule to talk about what science proves all of us can do to live a happier life, and raise happy children.

How did you become a happiness expert?

I started my career in marketing, really specializing in innovation and creativity. I went to get my degree in sociology, and I was still interested in that line of inquiry. Then I had children, and it moved my whole focus from how can companies be more innovative to the important question for me: How do social structures like the family elicit happiness? I started looking at the sociology, psychology and neuroscience of happiness.

Then my oldest started kindergarten, and I would meet other parents picking up their children. What happened was this great mom-to-mom dialogue, where I would arrive every day, and they would have questions, and I would go back and do the research on what was affecting us as moms. That is how it went from academic inquiry to discussion between parents.

What is the primary thing you have discovered parents do that causes an obstacle to their own and their children's happiness?

They try to be perfect. They worry too much about how they are parenting and whether they are giving their children all the right things. It is a mistake to think we can raise our children free from pain, and that structured activities are what they need. We think if we just structure every minute of every day with lessons and classes, they will be successful, and if they are successful they will be happy. Children have what they need to be happy within them if they can just let it out. If we protect them from childhood, they become very brittle. Then they think if they fall down, they can't get up.

Tell us about "Raising Happiness" and what you hope readers will gain from it.

The meta theme is that happiness is much better thought of as a skill or set of skills we have a huge amount

of influence over. We can teach it and practice it and get into patterns of thought and behavior that will influence our happiness for a lifetime. We think our children are born with the capacity to be cheerful or happy, and it's not that this isn't true, but happiness can also be taught like a foreign language, and just like a foreign language, it needs to be practiced.



Christina Koci Hernandez

Sociologist Christine Carter says that just like a foreign language, happiness can be taught and needs to be practiced.

You suggest that every night at the dinner table each family member names three things they are grateful for ("the three Gs"). What do you advise families who don't have the luxury of sitting down together?

This book is full of ideas, and no one needs to implement them all. The suggestions are based on science that

shows if you do any of them, you will be happier. If the three Gs don't work, you can do mindfulness while driving your kids to school (see related story). You have to implement what works for your family.

Often teens are resistant to things like the three gratitudes exercise. What can parents of teens do to practice some of your suggestions and not start World War III in the process?

I call some teenagers gratitude resisters. For teens, it is their developmental tactic to reject what their parents are doing. They will still be watching you, though. You can model the skills they are going to need later in life. If you go shopping when you feel sad, they will learn to go shopping when they feel sad, which is not a behavior you want to promote. It is really important to model the 10 steps outlined (in the book) yourself. They will do what you do, eventually.

Second, teenagers have a lot of powerful emotions, and they can drown a family in their emotions. It is very important for parents to take care of their own emotions — exercise, eat well, and that will spread to the teens and they will see that. Even if kids are not participating or are openly objecting, if you go on talking about what makes you feel grateful, it makes them feel happier and they are learning from it. They are learning to express gratitude in a specific, meaningful way, not in a global sense of, "I am grateful for clean air to breathe."

Psychologist Judith Wallerstein has written extensively on the devastating impact of divorce on children. How did you decide to get a divorce knowing how it might affect your kids, and how did you minimize the damage?

I looked at all the research very carefully. ... Judith Wallerstein's research is a lot of hooey. Her population is made up mostly of families who have someone already in therapy for a mental illness. This is not transferable to the rest of the population. We do have great research on marriage and divorce, and conflict seems to be the linchpin. For kids in high-conflict relationships, it is very damaging. If you get divorced and the conflict in your family goes up, the divorce will be very difficult, but if you get divorced and the conflict goes down, the children will come out ahead.

Divorce is very, very difficult for children any way you look at it, but I was in the fortunate position where I could stabilize a lot of factors — the conflict went way down, we didn't have to move, they stayed in the same schools. I felt I was able to manage.

Deciding to get divorced is a huge decision, but every day we make smaller decisions that involve doing or not doing what is best for the kids. How should parents weigh their own wants and needs against those of their kids?

I always say my children have a voice, but they don't have a choice. My kids are constantly telling me what it is they would prefer. We are moving now, and they don't want to move, and my reasons for wanting to move are irrelevant to them. It is the parent's responsibility to take the long view for the family. You have to be careful not to take too many hits for the team. A depressed or anxious parent is not the best parent. The best thing for the kids is to have a parent who is happy and engaged and able to be the best parent.

So you would advise parents to do what is going to make them happiest?

Parents and kids' happiness are totally related. I am not fostering a selfish view of parenting. It is that as parents, we make loads of sacrifices for our kids, but

How to be happier

From Carter: Teach kids the skills to be happy, and become happier yourself. Ways to get started:

1. Put on your own oxygen mask first: Don't let the balance shift so far toward taking care of your children that you don't meet your own needs.

2. Build a village: Very happy people have stronger social relationships than less happy people. Learn to appreciate and embrace others: remind arguing kids to stop and breathe, and do it yourself; model kindness and practice mindfulness.

3. Expect effort and enjoyment. Not perfection: Help kids see that mistakes are fertile ground for growth. Always preventing your children's failures keeps them from learning to deal with challenges and mistakes themselves.

4. Choose gratitude, forgiveness and optimism: Keep lists of specific things you and your kids are grateful for, such as "I am grateful for ... my time with Grandma and the toy she gave me." Practice forgiveness by providing different perspectives about hurt feelings — "Maybe she wasn't feeling well today" or "Maybe she didn't see you." Retell stories of when you were forgiven, or write a forgiveness letter to someone you may have hurt.

5. Raise their emotional intelligence: Teach children to read and understand the emotions of others. All kids need to learn how to express and cope with their own and others' emotions, positive and negative.

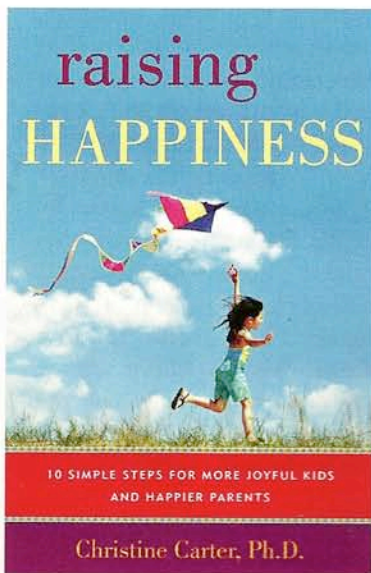
6. Form happiness habits: Make these small, attainable tasks, such as sitting through dinner nicely. Use a worksheet (see "Happiness Habit Tracker" at www.cristinecarter.com). Break down the task into steps, such as "Don't interrupt your brother," "Use your fork." Practice encouragement, empathy and non-controlling language.

7. Teach self-discipline: Pick your battles, use a light touch, and when your kids are old enough, appeal to their reason. Remember the difference between punishment — which involves pain and suffering — and discipline — which contains the Latin root for "the process of learning."

8. Enjoy the present moment: Tune in to what is happening now, rather than living in the past or the future. Teach kids (and practice with them) the same.

9. Rig their environment for happiness: Respect the importance of play, as it builds social skills, school success and happiness. Try to pick a preschool/day care that is warm and uses positive approaches to problem solving. Reduce TV time.

10. Eat dinner together: Use such times to model healthy eating, and to practice any of the above.



Carter's book, published earlier this year, combines research with practical parenting advice.

we need to be careful not to tip the scales too much. If we are miserable, we are putting them at risk for the same. Negative emotions are more contagious than positive ones, and we are hardwired to remember negative rather than positive things.

It plays out in big and small ways every day. Last week, my daughter's soccer team had a special practice that was a 40-minute drive, and it was during dinnertime. I said, "I know you would really like to go, but Mommy will hurl herself off a cliff if we have to go. It is not worth the craziness-making that will ruin our evening. For that reason I am not taking you to that practice." Sometimes it is really small things; sometimes it is really big, like, "I think the best thing is to move and change schools, and I am asking you to do hard things." It is not always about the momentary pleasure.

Do your suggestions apply to people who don't have kids, or who don't have kids in their lives?

Research shows people who have kids are less happy than their peers who don't. I wrote the book for parents because they needed one. The first chapter is about the individual, the second chapter is about social relationships and the third is about relationships and research about adults. You don't have to have children to apply what is in the book, or to be happy. All the same things apply. **S**