



INTERVIEW

Find Your Bliss

A child psychologist reveals how to nurture happiness in your home.

BY DARCY JACOBS • PHOTOS BY GETTY IMAGES

Maureen Healy, PhD, is the author of several award-winning books, including *Growing Happy Kids*, and is an expert in social and emotional learning. She helps provide educators and parents with strategies for raising happier children.

Q Your website is called *Growing Happy Kids*. Do you think it is possible to do that? And why do you use the word *grow*—as in a flower?

A *Growing Happy Kids* was my first award-winning book, and it helped parents and their children develop a deeper sense of confidence. As you know, flowers need water, sunlight and good soil to grow. Children are similar, in that they have certain necessities in order to grow into healthier and happier people. The idea of growing happy kids suggests that we can tend to children and deliver to them essential nutrients like love, affection, safety and support, and intelligent guidance to help them move toward their own flourishing. Of course, some children are more like orchids while others are more like marigolds, but both types need our care, love, attention, support and guidance to

move them toward not only surviving, but ultimately, thriving. What this also means is that we are both products of our environment (parenting, schools, community, life experiences) as well as our biological composition (genetics, physical attributes/traits).

Q What do you think we should be doing as parents to help kids feel more joyful?

A Parents teach by the clarity of their example. The more mom or dad can tend to their own emotional health, the better they can stay calm, keep it together, and show their children how to be calm amid life's inevitable storms. I'm not suggesting you do more, but make your time alone (as little as it is) more effective. Do a three-minute meditation on Headspace with your child, or do "Three Good Things" daily and use the free app to focus on the good things that are actually happening in your life. Research shows the more you do a daily practice like this, the more you—and your child—program the mind to naturally look for the good things happening. Of course, this leads me to one of the secrets of becoming healthier and more joyful—to appreciate. The more



Maureen Healy, PhD
Author and therapist



you can appreciate the good things—even if they are small—in the moment, the more you can become optimistic and move yourself toward feeling more joyful. That’s not to say some days aren’t lemons. They are. But sometimes we can purposefully make lemonade from lemons, and well, that’s where you become invincible.

Q Are there things educators can do to make school more fun?

A Teachers have an incredibly important role in helping children learn how to embrace discomfort and move through challenging emotions in a healthy way. My book *The Emotionally Healthy Child* has helped many educators learn about teaching what are helpful and challenging emotions. In today’s world, it is not enough to simply educate a child’s mind; we need to guide their emotional health, too. Learning can also be fun. This book includes many strategies that are fun for children, and that have the aim of increasing their ability to focus and pay attention as well as self-regulate their emotions—all of them. Way back when I was teaching elementary-aged students, I always heard, “You’re the best teacher”—because I made learning fun. I genuinely believe without some fun in the classroom, what’s the point? Children learn when they are engaged, interested and enthusiastic, which means that some enjoyment accelerates their ability to learn.

Q Has parenting become harder, and consequently made raising a child less joyful?

A Parenting has always been tough. The challenges of yesteryear are not necessarily the challenges of today—but trauma, loss and abuse remain a thread throughout society, and that requires that we work together to create a better world, a world that works for everyone. But to answer your question, parenting today requires intelligence and good instincts, as well as being focused on raising the child you have. For example, some children have difficulty putting a screen down, while others do not. I believe the best parents aren’t perfect in what they do but they

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focus on their child, develop an honest and open communication style, and seek to partner together with their child to be focused on problem-solving (versus punishment). Said differently, mom and dad have to become somewhat skilled at emotional coaching versus controlling their child. But yes, there are clear and present challenges for parents such as screens, bullying, addictions (video games, vaping), fear of school shootings or experience of trauma, loss and unfortunately, abuse.

Q What do you think are some of the most important skills children should be taught?

A I believe that resilience, and then social and emotional learning skills, are central to helping children become more constructive in their choices, rather than destructive. To put it simply, I see the healthiest children learn how to pay attention, stay calm and make smarter choices regarding their emotions as well as in other areas of their lives. This includes honesty versus lying, being a friend versus teasing someone, and so on.

Q Are some people more naturally joyful than others?

A Every person is patterned for their purpose. Our talents, gifts and development areas are unique to us. Every person has a set happiness point, like a temperature. There is someone who is naturally grumpy. This is where he wakes up, and where

he goes to sleep. But through thinking or doing something differently, he can increase his set happiness point and become happier. Therefore, happiness is a skill that can be learned.

Q Is there a difference between joy and happiness?

A Joy and happiness are different. Joy is at the center of everyone and is our natural state. Humans, through conditioning, tend to disconnect from their natural state of joy and become conditioned to seek satisfaction from external things, like cars, houses, income, awards and grades, instead of internal things like peace, contentment and joy. Of course, I have nothing against money—money is a good thing, which I use to bring blessings to myself and others. But joy is our natural state and happiness is something we create through our thinking and actions.

Q Do you think kids should be spending more of their time doing things like drawing, playing games and singing?

A Every child is different, and encouraging them to explore their unique gifts is important. Those gifts may be inside, like building Lego structures, or outside, like learning horseback riding or archery. But art and nature are both important for the healthy development of children. Boys and girls who have a healthy balance between creative play and logical learning are better, more well-rounded children. The appreciation of art and culture helps children appreciate—as well as celebrate—diversity, too. I would be wary of a curriculum that was solely focused on academic achievement without social and emotional learning as well as character development and cultural education.

Q Can you explain the ways the brain works in regard to feeling joy?

A Our brain is not fully formed until we are in our mid-20s, and the prefrontal cortex is the last to come online. This is where judgment resides. After our mid-20s we can always rewire our brains and change, which is one of the great discoveries in recent years. Since happiness is a skill similar to playing the piano or juggling it takes practice to



learn. The brain is very receptive—in most healthy and neurotypical children—to learn the ideas and strategies that move them toward feeling healthier and happier. For example, I know that when I help someone else, I feel good. This creates a bump in the feel-good feelings in the brain, and I feel a sense of joy. The same goes for children. Samantha, age 7, knows that if she shares a (pre-approved) special treat with everyone in the classroom it feels good, so she goes out of her way to make everyone in the class feel cared for. Everyone immediately thanks her, and celebrates her thoughtfulness, which reinforces her good deed and bumps the feel-good feelings in her brain. This is just one example of a child directly experiencing how feeling happier works.

Q Do you have a motto?

A I don't necessarily have a motto, but I do say something to myself frequently: "Life always works out for me." Sometimes there are moments where we feel all is lost, or we experience a major disappointment. This is normal. But by focusing on the temporary nature of life and that I'm a powerful creator on the planet, I can reclaim my inherent power and move toward my good. I have come to a very positive place in my life, but I have overcome great odds (like many people) like having to bury my parents very early. I truly believe that each of us can use the power of life for good, no matter what our past has been.