

The first rule of happiness?  
Create a warm and fostering  
environment for your kids.

HAPPINESS

# 10 Tips For Raising Happy Kids

We all want our kids to grow up being happy. Here's what parenting experts recommend we do to raise a well-adjusted, confident child.

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## 1 Step back to problem-solve.

Too often, parenting tends to be reactive, says Ari Yares, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist based in Potomac, Maryland. "But you have to be willing to engage in new ideas, and it's difficult to do that when you're in a survivor mind-set." For example, take packing up school lunches: At Yares' house, he found he was spending what felt like half the night getting lunches prepared for six people—and much of the time, those lunches were coming back home, half eaten. So he sat down with his kids and explained that his time was valuable and needed to be used for the things only he could do—which meant his kids needed to get in on the lunch-making process. "We tried it, and it was a disaster—the meals were totally unbalanced; the kids were late getting to school, because they were packing up in the morning; and they still weren't eating what they packed." So they went back to square one and had a brainstorming session. "We had a conversation about healthier eating choices, figured out what they wanted to eat, came up with a shopping list and made sure we had what they needed on hand. And after that, we definitely saw an improvement, even if it was just an incremental one."

The idea behind innovative parenting, says Yares, is to start by observing and asking questions, then figuring out strategies that work. "Ask yourself, what are the principles and values that are important to you, and then what you can do to solve whatever problems or issues you may face." You have to be willing to experiment, he adds, and—as with the lunch process—you probably will have setbacks; but "if you fail and try again, it will ultimately make for healthier parenting."

## 2 Emphasize both rules and relationships.

"Rules without relationships can lead to rebellion," notes Joy Acaso, LCSW, a psychotherapist and parent-child relationship specialist in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. On the other hand, she notes, "you can't have relationships without structure or boundaries." That means making sure your child gets her homework done on time but also praising her for her hard work. "You have to have a synergy of both to make the most impact," says Acaso.

## 3 Maintain high standards and low expectations.

Parents naturally want their kids to get straight As or excel at particular sports or activities; but more often than not, they'll get cut from the team or earn a disappointing grade on an exam. "Don't become disgruntled or get upset. Things aren't always going to go as planned, so our job is to stay calm and help kids learn, if and when they fail," says John Mayer, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and parenting consultant based in Chicago. Kids learn resilience, just like other life skills; the more you can help them try again, the more success they will ultimately have.

## 4 Offer less.

We're often so busy trying to give our kids everything they may need that we don't realize we're simply overloading them, notes Natasha Beck, Psy.D., a clinical psychologist based in Los Angeles. "Having too many games,



gadgets and other toys can get overwhelming.” If you give your child one of 10 books to choose from instead of trying to pick from dozens, it can help him focus and feel less frustrated. “Try to simplify things as much as you can—it doesn’t make you less of a parent to give fewer choices,” she adds.

## 5 Check in with your kids—every day.

“These days, kids too often fly under the radar. They may be depressed, anxious, angry, scared—and they think you’re too busy to talk to them about it or not interested, so they don’t make an effort to tell you,” observes Carole Lieberman, M.D., a child psychiatrist based in Beverly Hills, California. “You need to check in with them every day to find out how they’re feeling.” Whether it’s spending a few minutes talking before they go to bed or chatting with younger kids when they’re in the bath, make sure you find time each day to just sit down with your kids. Too young to express emotions? You can always ask him to draw a picture of his feelings for you, adds Lieberman.

## 6 Plan family adventures.

Once a week—or as often as you can—set aside some family time and head out to explore something new, says Lieberman. “Rotate who in the family gets to pick what the outing is, so everyone gets a chance to do something special that they like,” she adds. Think: Hitting an aquarium or a museum; going to see a show or a movie; taking a hike or picnicking in the woods; or anything else that will give your family some time away from devices to share what’s been happening in your lives. These are the moments that will provide your family with the biggest impact and the most lasting memories.

## 7 Practice gratitude.

Some families say bedtime prayers; others may say grace before dinner. But expressing gratitude can also be worked throughout your child’s day, says Supna Shah, founder of WeGo Kids and a mom of triplets based in Tampa. “In our family, we will practice gratitude several times a day—after a playdate or a trip to the grocery store, in the car, around the house. I’ll tell my children two things that I’m grateful for, like the chance to spend time with the family, and then I’ll ask each one what he or she is grateful for. And now my kids will do this unprompted!” says Shah. By acknowledging small moments of gratitude now, she adds, you’ll help hardwire your children’s brains to recognize and appreciate feelings of thankfulness in their lives.

## 8 Stop multitasking.

By now, most of us have earned a Ph.D. in the ability to simultaneously juggle tasks (text, cook, homework help, feed the dog) for the entire family. But you might actually gain more by doing less. Shah recommends the strategy of time blocking. “I block off set amounts of time each day to specific tasks and focus only on those,” she says. “When it’s my time to be with my kids, I’m with the kids—no distractions allowed. When I’m working, I’m focusing on that.” Multitasking may seem like a good way to fit everything in, but ultimately you’re adding more stress and not really doing any one thing well. “Kids are born being present, and we grow them out of that all too soon,” adds Shah. “It’s so important to enjoy every moment and not always be rushing for the next thing.”

Research shows that our brain is hardwired to do one task at a time, not several. So forget multitasking—give your kids all your attention when you can.

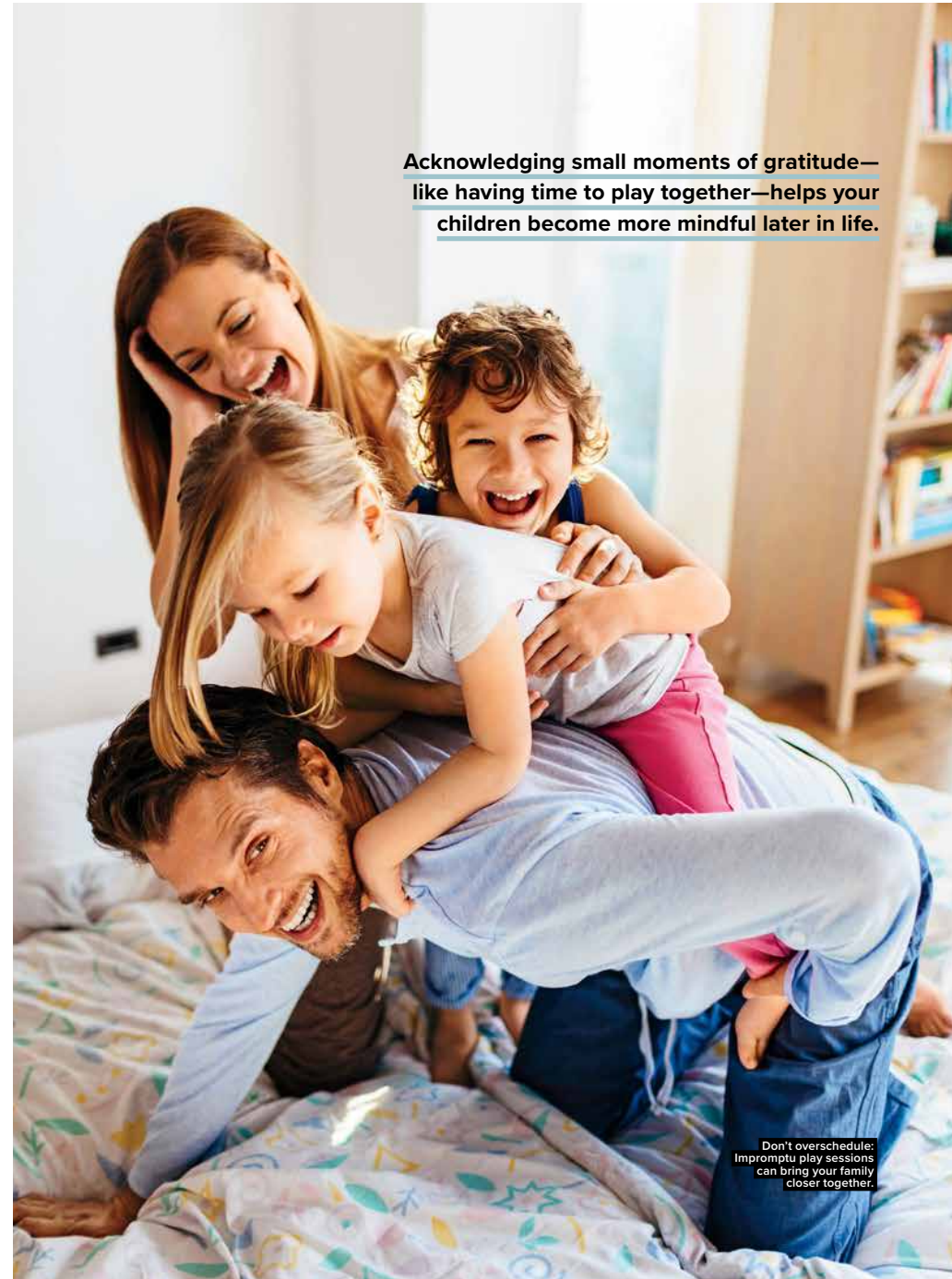
## 9 Be consistent.

Consistency is the key to discipline, writes Tanya Altmann, M.D., a pediatrician and author of *Baby & Toddler Basics*. And that remains true whether you’re dealing with a toddler or a teen. “Set firm limits or consequences for completely unacceptable behaviors,” says Altmann. When a younger child throws a temper tantrum, ignore the behavior (walk away or simply don’t pay any attention to her), then after she calms down, refocus your child on something else. And provide praise when your child is behaving nicely, she adds. For older kids, enforce curfews, bedtimes and other age-appropriate limits.

## 10 Don’t be a rescue unit.

Admit it—how many times has your kid forgotten her lunch or homework and you’ve swooped in to save the day by delivering it to her at school or wherever else she may need it? Many of us simply can’t stand the thought of our kids’ being disappointed. But always coming to their rescue can sometimes do more harm than good, says Nicole Beurkens, Ph.D., a licensed psychologist based in Caledonia, Michigan. “We have to teach kids to be competent and think for themselves,” she notes. Whether it’s allowing your 3-year-old to dress herself or having your 12-year-old make his bed, give your kids responsibilities and try not to do everything for them. “Many parents today are not comfortable allowing our kids to be uncomfortable,” adds Beurkens. “But in the long run, you’re not doing your kids any favors—they need to practice those skills, because in life, you’re not always going to be there to help them.”

**Acknowledging small moments of gratitude—like having time to play together—helps your children become more mindful later in life.**



Don't overschedule: Impromptu play sessions can bring your family closer together.