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How to Awaken Joy in Kids
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Can joy be cultivated? And, if so, can we teach our kids how to be more joyful in their lives?

In our experience, the answer to both of these questions is yes. But it takes knowing what kinds of practices bring true happiness—and not just momentary pleasure—to your life. Once you've mastered that, it's not too hard to introduce those practices to kids in a way that they can understand and appreciate.

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Our new book, Awakening Joy for Kids, is a resource for parents, teachers, and caregivers who want to give their kids the gift of authentic happiness. Filled with practices you can integrate into your day at home or at school, our book is designed to be a guide to helping your children increase their well-being and enable them to meet the stresses of the world with presence, self-compassion, and openness. We offer practices for adults as well as kids, since your own well-being is the best prescription to passing it along to younger people.

Many of our practices are rooted in science. For example, we suggest helping kids to set intentions for happiness because paying attention to the good things that happen in life rather than focusing only on the bad can help rewire their brains for happiness. We teach mindfulness meditation because mindfulness has been shown to decrease stress and increase happiness. And we teach the practice of compassion because caring for others is key to better relationships, health, and emotional well-being.

These practices and the others outlined in our book come from our experiences as meditation practitioners and as teachers of adults and children. The two described below—cultivating gratitude and building resilience in difficult times—are some of the most powerful.

1. Gratitude

Why practice gratitude? Because gratitude has been found to increase happiness and social supportin kids, both crucial for long-term well-being. It also seems to benefit adults.

Paying attention to what you're grateful for can switch the channel of your negative thinking and help you appreciate what is here in your life right now. To deepen the effect, though, it's important to let yourself fully experience gratitude when it's here and take time to savor the moment, particularly in the body. Even just a few seconds of registering the positive feelings of gratitudewhen they arise help to strengthen their impacts.

Here are a couple of ways we encourage the practice of gratitude, first in adults, then in kids:

Gratitude meditation for adults

To experience a taste of gratitude, try sitting quietly in a relaxed posture and focusing on your heart center. As you inhale, visualize breathing in kindness; as you exhale, allow negativity to be released. Then reflect on some blessing in your life—any person or thing that you are grateful for. It could be as simple as having eyes to see, food to eat, and air to breathe; or it could be thankfulness for having love in your life or a good job or kind friends. Whatever it is, take time to say a quiet "thank you" and then to mindfully experience the good feelings in your body.

Other gratitude practices we've found helpful are writing a gratitude letter, listing three good thingsin a journal before going to bed at night, or just sharing your appreciation for others when you encounter them in your everyday life. Whenever you do a gratitude practice, you deepen your feelings of joy and increase the joy around you. Here's the key: Don't miss it!

Gratitude exercises for children

To help instill gratitude in your own children, try starting a gratitude practice at the dinner hour. Perhaps you can hold hands with your children and all share something that you were grateful for that day. It can be something as simple as noticing a flower or the kindness of a friend. Just sharing in this way helps parents and their kids to get a better idea of what's happening in each other's lives and is a simple way to build deeper family bonds.

At school, a practice we suggest is to have children gather in a circle and pass around a special stone, sharing what they are grateful for. With a little encouragement, children will come up with many ideas, like "having Mom make my lunch" or "snuggling with my cat" or "living on such a beautiful planet."

Teachers can encourage kids to write in a special journal about what they are grateful for or to make "gratitude flags"—small pieces of fabric where they write down what they are grateful for—and then hang them from a string in the schoolyard. That way, kids can remember and show their friends what they are thankful for whenever they are outside playing.

2. Help in difficult times

Gratitude and other skills we write about—like intention, mindfulness, and compassion—can be cultivated over time through attention and practice, and they all lead to greater happiness and social-emotional well-being.

But that doesn't mean that life is always joyful—nor should it be. One of the great truths is that life also brings challenges. It's important for us to breed joy in our lives not to avoid the inevitable difficulties, but to meet them with strength and compassion.

The practice of embracing the difficult is a vital part of awakening joy. The more we

understand suffering and are willing to come to terms with it, the greater the possibility of developing a mind that is not afraid of the hard stuff when it comes—because underneath the pain lies wisdom, compassion, and love that can open to it.

RAIN: How adults can work with difficult feelings

When we suffer, we often experience pain, anger, fear, or sadness. The acronym RAIN can help us remember how to directly open to and work skillfully with these difficult feelings. Here are the steps to doing this practice:

Recognize what you're feeling. Let yourself be open to your emotions of sadness, anger, or fear, and name it.

Allow it to be here. Let go of any agenda for it to change and, for a few moments, give it permission to be just as it is.

Investigate how it feels in your body on an energetic level without getting into the story behind it or trying to get rid of it. Bring a curiosity or interest that involves simply exploring the landscape of your emotion without needing to figure it out.

Non-identification—meaning, don't take it personally; don't assume the experience reflects who you are at your core. (For example, don't say to yourself, "I'm an angry person.") Recognize that everyone experiences emotions; they are part of the human condition. Open up to that truth and don't let it define you.

If exploring difficult emotions becomes too hard, you can always practice a little mindful breathingor gratitude, and go back to exploring the emotions later. This will help you to be kind to yourself, while bringing more balance to your emotions.

Self-compassion for adults

When working with a difficult experience, the most important thing you can do is to be compassionate and caring toward yourself—to not beat yourself up about it and invoke more pain. Practicing self-compassion involves turning your caring attention toward yourself, remembering that your pain is something everyone experiences.

Researcher Kristin Neff suggests placing your hand on your heart and sending yourself positive messages, like "Suffering is a part of life" and "May I hold my suffering with kindness and compassion." She has found that mindful self-compassion practices have the potential to increase calmness, decrease emotional reactivity toward others, and help us take setbacks less personally—all useful in difficult situations.

Helping children navigate difficult times

Many parents want to "be there" for their kids, to support their growth and well-being. But being there for them all the time, and not allowing them to experience difficulties and frustrations, can keep them from learning resiliency or the power of handling their emotions with wisdom and compassion. Over-protected children are often more anxious than their peers and have trouble bouncing back from setbacks.

To help children navigate difficult times, we still need to encourage joy practices with our kids. Practicing gratitude and mindfulness during the good times gives them the energy to really put in a concentrated effort when things are difficult—sort of like charging a

battery.

But that doesn't mean we ignore our sadness, anger, fear, or pain. We want to teach children to express their emotions in healthy ways rather than stuffing them down or exploding.

Reframing kids' thoughts

One thing teachers can do in the classroom is to help children find antidotes to negative thinking—often a big source of stress for kids as well as adults. Children get a lot of negative messaging, and they need ways to counteract that so that it doesn't lead them down a spiral of despair or helplessness. Reframing or correcting distorted thinking is one way to change negative thinking into realistic thinking.

One exercise involves giving children a sheet of paper that has been divided in two. On one side, the children write down one or more of their own negative thoughts—the kind that tends to run around in their heads, like "I'm not good at math" or "No one likes me." On the other side, they write down the opposite or the antidote to those negative thoughts, like "I find math challenging, but I'm taking on that challenge and it's OK if I don't get every answer right; I'm learning," or "Just because one person was mean to me doesn't mean I'm not likable; I can keep being open and kind to others, because that helps me connect and be a good friend."

Then teachers can ask their students to notice throughout the next day or week when the more positive antidotes run through their minds and encourage them to focus on these when a negative thought arises. By doing this, you are helping to rewire their brains to pay attention to the positive and make it their natural, default setting. This helps kids to be courageous when things get tough, and to not get bogged down in self-defeating thoughts.

Encourage compassion in kids

Another thing that helps is fostering compassionate action. When we learn how to help others who are going through hard times, it can help us to strengthen our relationships, an important resource in challenging situations.

Try this: Ask children to think of someone—a person or an animal or even "the earth"—who is having a hard time. It can be someone they are familiar with or whom they don't know well.

Then ask them to think of an action they could take to make things better. It's important to encourage kids to take baby steps and not expect them to solve the whole problem. But they can do small things like write a get-well letter to a sick relative, make a quick phone call to a friend who fell down at school, give a hug to a pet that's been home alone all day, or water the thirsty plants outside. Encouraging kids to notice others going through challenging times and to take positive steps helps them to stay attuned to the world around them. And it feels great!

We believe that sharing mindfulness and social-emotional practices are vital not only to the next generation but to the well-being of our planet. Whenever we teach our children—and ourselves—to shine a light on the good and to rest our minds on uplifting

moments, we are strengthening the ability to empathize with others, feel more connected, build resilience, and be inspired to make this a better world. And that makes for a more joyful life for all!