

SUMMARY

THE HAPPY KID HANDBOOK

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Summary of “The Happy Kid Handbook” by Katie Hurley, LCSW

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How to Raise Joyful Children in a Stressful World

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Introduction

In today's world, we are being constantly bombarded with tips and tricks on how to become a better parent. You'll find endless lists of parenting theories, books that will make parenting easier, calmer, or quieter, and countless blogs and articles that promise to make you a better parent. Parenting experts tend to be just about everywhere nowadays and there is an abundance of information on how to parent better or more efficiently. With all the information overload, there is a key element missing: how do the kids feel? What makes them thrive? While each book tries to teach you how to correct the thousands of things that can possibly go wrong, very few focus on simply raising happy kids. Happy kids are successful in more ways than one. They do better in school, they are better at making and keeping friends, and they experience overall better health. Sure, parenting is hard work. It's stressful, exhausting, and downright frustrating. It's time, however, to focus on raising happy kids by giving them the tools to lead with happiness. "Life is short - you want your kids to live happy lives by learning to follow their passions, empathizing with others, appreciating those around them, and managing and coping with their own stress." So if you want to learn how to let your kids be kids again, then let's get started.

Parent to the Individual

Author Katie Hurley learned an important lesson after giving birth to her second child. Kids are *different*. While her daughter, Riley, was introverted around the edges, the girl talked just about every minute of every day. Before she even celebrated her second birthday, she was stringing sentences together, and once she got started, she never stopped. So while she was an introvert in the outside world, she was anything but at home.

Then at twenty-one months old, her little brother was born. Hurley and her husband quickly realized how different the two would be. While Liam was a talker, he only talks if he trusts you to listen. He needs downtime and alone time, he needs space to do puzzles, to think about numbers, and play his drums. He still naps at the age of five. And when he becomes scared, frustrated, or confused, his reaction is the same: big, loud, and long. Liam lets everything out when he feels them while Riley internalizes her feelings until she can't hold them in any longer.

With children so different, it doesn't make sense to raise them the same way. They have two different children with two very different emotional needs. Hurley has found that she and her husband need to adapt their parenting styles for each of them. Riley, for example, needs a lot of one-on-one time to work through her worries to feel happy and confident. Liam craves space. So while Hurley feels guilty that she spends more time with Riley, she is simply meeting each of their needs in different ways.

Parenting is tough. And no matter how many kids you have, you likely have some ideal in your mind of how you want your family to be. To help ease the stress of parenting, you set schedules and expectations. You set rules you expect them to follow. This makes sense. Rules and structure help kids thrive. When children know what to expect each day, they experience less anxiety and become happier kids. But the catch is that no two kids are exactly the same. And while a general blueprint of rules is helpful, it's also important for children to simply be themselves. Children are unique and

you must respect their needs. In other words, you'll need to parent the individual. This means that you might have to be unfair in how you spend your time or discipline your children. But "Fair isn't about everyone having exactly the same thing. Fair is about everyone having their needs met."

Introverted Children Need to Understand Their Feelings

One of the most common mistakes we make when it comes to personality is that we rely on “either/or” thinking. Is your child an introvert or an extrovert? When a child is outgoing and jumps at the opportunity to talk to someone new or make new friends, we quickly label that child an extrovert. On the other hand, when a child seems quiet and less likely to jump into a new situation, we label him as an introvert. The truth is that introversion and extroversion is scale. Everyone has a little bit of both and children’s personalities can change day to day. No matter where your child falls on the scale, it’s important to meet the needs of each unique personality.

For instance, whether you have an introverted or extroverted kid, your kids need downtime. Spending time and playing with other kids is both fun and engaging, but it’s completely exhausting. Every kid needs to re-energize but introverted and extroverted children tend to do that differently. Introverted children get their energy from time spent alone when they can truly think their own thoughts. Respecting that your child needs to spend time alone with their thoughts is one of the most important things you can do as a parent. Raising introverted children comes with many challenges, but luckily Hurley includes some strategies to help.

First, introverts sometimes experience big meltdowns or tantrums. While you may think the meltdown is related to a specific trigger, it’s often just a final straw after a series of unspoken frustrations, worries, and overwhelming feelings. Once you understand this, it’s important to teach your child how to express his or her feelings throughout the day.

One way you can do this is by creating a feelings book. Start by giving your child a stack of paper with feelings written on each page, like happy, sad, excited, frustrated, lonely, and angry. Then, ask him to draw a picture, or write a description, of a time when he felt each way. When the pages are complete, staple them into a book, read it out loud, and discuss each page.

Or maybe your child doesn't like writing or drawing, then you can try to create a game, like Feelings Bingo. Make Bingo boards using feelings faces in the boxes. Call out the feelings to mark off on the board. When the winner calls "Bingo!" then discuss each feeling marked off on the board.

Next, it's important to remember that introverted children must be criticized gently and in private. That's because introverted kids are sensitive and become embarrassed easily, so when you criticize your child in front of the others, you'll only upset her or make her want to go into hiding. Wait to address any issues in private and make sure your child feels safe and cared for as you discuss appropriate or inappropriate behavior when out in public.

Extroverted Children Need to Make Sense of Their Feelings and Learn How to Relax

If your child is an extrovert, then beware! There are many positive traits of extroverted children but be prepared to be constantly on the move. Little extroverts are often described as “spirited” and “high energy.” They may be energetic little beings with a lot to say, but it’s important to teach them how to process their thoughts. Extroverts need to talk their way through things and find focus through hands-on, action-based activities.

Silencing an extroverted child is the equivalent of crushing their spirit. They feel their best and are happiest when they are encouraged to talk and get their energy out. This can be incredibly hard for many parents, especially ones who tend to be more on the introverted scale. But these children must be given the freedom to chat, express their thoughts and ideas, and move. Additionally, extroverted children tend to wear their feelings on their sleeves; therefore, they too need to learn how to process and work through their feelings and emotions. Once they learn how to release and make sense of their emotions, they are likely to experience more happiness!

Begin with an activity called *The color of feelings*. Have your child assign a color to each feeling they experienced during the day, like red for anger and blue for sadness. On a plain white piece of paper, ask your child to color as much of each feeling that she experienced during the day. For example, If she was angry or frustrated a lot, the page might be covered in red. Once the coloring is complete, talk about what might have caused those feelings and what your child can do differently the next day. Another activity involves using the weather! Fold a paper into thirds and draw a sun on one panel, a rainstorm on a second, and foggy day on the third. Ask your child to tell you what things made her feel sunny and happy, what made her feel sad or angry and rainy, and what left her feeling in between. Write them in the appropriate panel and discuss ways to increase the sunny feelings.

Extroverted children also need to learn how to direct their energy. Plays, puppet shows, and comedy routines provide both a creative outlet and an audience. Other activities include building projects and arts and crafts which provide opportunities for children to connect and talk through the process. Perhaps even allow your child to create a series of “how-to” videos and teach you how to do something. And while learning how to direct their energy is important, it’s just as important for extroverted children to learn how to relax. Just like anyone, they need downtime too, they just don’t know how to do it. Try teaching your child easy breathing exercises or find a child-friendly yoga video on YouTube.

Unstructured Playtime Has More Benefits than Just Getting Your Child's Energy Out

Many parents understand the importance of playtime for children but giving your child adequate time for play might be more important than you realize. Unstructured play allows children to do what makes them feel happy, calm, and inspired. Unfortunately, those benefits become overshadowed by academics once children become school-age. Play, however, helps children develop skills like problem-solving, self-expression, empathy, higher-level thinking, language development, creative thinking, and physical strength, endurance, and balance.

Perhaps the best benefit to playtime is the opportunity for creativity. Creativity isn't just limited to the arts, like painting and drawing, it's also about making new things and generating new ideas by tapping into the imagination. It's about thinking outside the box! Through imaginative play, children begin to create constructs of the world around them, combining reality with their fantasies. By merging both worlds in their play, they begin to work through the various questions and the wonder of their minds.

In addition to creativity, playing helps kids create connections and learn to relate to others. When you look at a playground or even a group of small children, you'll always notice the kids who jump right in and play with others. You'll also notice the ones who tend to wait and watch until they receive an invitation to play. Some hang out somewhere in between. Regardless of how children enter the play, they learn to work together, solve problems, and consider the feelings of others. Perhaps one of the most important skills children learn through playing with others is empathy.

When playing with other children, arguments will happen. It's only natural. Everyone wants to play the role of mommy or teacher. Three kids want to play one game while the other two yell and beg to play something else. Some well-meaning parents are often quick to jump in and do the negotiating for the kids by offering "Why don't you play one game for ten

minutes and the second for another ten minutes?” However, it works best when kids negotiate the play themselves. When problems arise, children learn to think about the feelings of others, they read facial cues and make connections between facial expressions and emotions, and they identify problems and try to come up with solutions.

As a parent, it's important to take ownership of creating a playful environment. While the mess can certainly be frustrating, reframe your thoughts and consider potential positive outcomes, like seeing your child smile or learning something new. So teach your kids how to play by getting involved, getting dirty, and leaving the stress of the mess behind.

Children Need to Understand Their Negative Emotions, Not Just Positive Ones

At seven years old, Jake was a master at distraction. He spent most of his school day clowning around and making his classmates laugh. He had a contagious smile and his eyes scrunched up into perfect little sparkling crescents each time he laughed. On the outside, he looked like the happiest kid around. What brought him to counseling, however, were the stomachaches, headaches, sore throats, and muscle aches. According to his teacher, each time the work seemed just a bit out of reach, Jake appeared anxious and felt sick. But if you asked Jake, he would say he was happy!

When Hurley asked Jake to identify the feelings being expressed, Jake guessed the exact same feeling each time: happy. Turns out, Jake struggled with identifying feelings and had been taught that happiness was the only one that mattered. It was the only feeling he could identify with, so even when anxiety resulted in a myriad of psychosomatic aches and pains, he only knew how to identify as happy. Jake's story isn't unique, children often have a difficult time understanding their emotions. They don't know how to process their feelings, often because they are only taught to categorize their emotions as either "good" or "bad."

Feelings like jealousy, anger, or sadness are typically labeled as "bad." As a result, parents are often irritated when their children lash out and express strong negative reactions. For example, when Hurley went to the mall one Easter, she witnessed several toddlers become terribly frightened after visiting the Easter bunny. The parents, visibly annoyed by their sobbing children, simply told their kids to stop crying and making a scene and did not attempt to comfort them. Unfortunately, children who go through experiences like this learn that it's only acceptable to share positive emotions. As a result, they mask their negative feelings, as Jake did.

It's important to teach children that all feelings are natural parts of the childhood experience. It's okay to feel angry, sad, or jealous at times. It's

only normal. Therefore, parents are responsible for helping their kids learn to understand and deal with them. When a child becomes overwhelmed or frightened after seeing a scary Easter bunny, then the parent can say something like, “You must be upset and scared because of that bunny. But he won’t hurt you! You’re safe with me.” By identifying why the child might be feeling a certain way helps him understand the emotion, know that it’s okay, but also know he’s safe to stop feeling scared too.

Help Your Child Handle Stress

In today's fast-paced world, everyone is stressed out, even children. Today, children are overloaded with schoolwork, testing, and extracurricular activities. They have jam-packed schedules and children feel they need to always be "on." Therefore, parents must teach their children how to recharge and recover by learning how to handle everyday stresses. It's also important to realize that certain situations may be stressful for children even if we don't think of them as such.

For example, adults might be used to listening to the news and hearing about tragedies, like natural disasters, wars, and disease. For children, however, listening to such news may be incredibly terrifying; therefore, avoid allowing your children to watch the news and simply cut out the unnecessary stress! Next, schoolwork will certainly play a stressful role in your children's lives. As they grow older, their homework will increase and extroverts will typically push themselves too hard to do their best. Additionally, children will begin extracurricular activities and many children, especially extroverted ones, will struggle to find the time to relax and unwind. So encourage your children to plan time for relaxation.

Planning time to relax and unwind is critical. Stress can harm your children's physical and mental health; in fact, even low levels of stress can affect their sleeping patterns and cause migraines and back pain. Of course, chronic stress can have even more serious effects on a child, leading to high blood pressure, anxiety, and depression. The best thing you can do for your child is to teach them breathing techniques to calm their stress. Have your child hold his breath for three counts and then release for three. To further help calm his stress, have your child visualize his favorite place, perhaps a vacation spot you go to every year!

Final Summary

With all of the parenting advice out there today, there's one key element missing in each technique: the child's happiness. It's important to remember that every child is unique so you need to parent each child according to his or her specific needs. While many people identify personalities as "either/or," personality is more of a spectrum and your child may fall anywhere on the introversion and extroversion scale. No matter where your child falls on the spectrum, children must understand their feelings and learn how to identify and deal with them. Additionally, playtime is critical in more ways than one and can teach children empathy and how to solve problems. Lastly, your child should learn how to handle stress to lessen the likelihood of developing mental health issues. Overall, parenting to your child's unique needs and teaching them about their emotions can lead to happier, healthier lives.



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