



8 Ways to Be a Happier Mom

How to focus on the positive (for you and your child)

By Robert Barnett, *Babytalk*

Ask a mom if she's happier now that she has a child, and she'll usually say yes. But psychologists who study happiness often report a different picture. Being the mom of a young child (especially one under 3) is rewarding, but also a real strain on your mood. "Moment to moment, you may be exhausted, frustrated, sometimes angry," says Peter Ubel, M.D., a professor of medicine and psychology at the University of Michigan. In fact, on their list of pleasurable activities, moms rank childcare lower than eating, exercising, or watching TV, according to a University of Michigan study. And kid care rates only slightly higher than housework, working, or commuting!

"Kids do bring joy," says Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Harvard University and author of *Stumbling on Happiness*. "They bring transcendent moments that outweigh all the hard work. It's just that children do not increase your average daily enjoyment."

the happiness paradox

One reason for the discrepancy between moms and experts: selective memory. When psychologists ask moms in a general way if they like spending time with their kids, the overwhelming majority say they do because they're thinking of fun activities like reading a book or playing in the park. When they're specifically asked to describe their actual daily routine, they remember the hours they spent struggling to get their child dressed or ready for bed. Maybe, though, the cold calculus of psychological science is missing the intensity of joy that time spent with your child can bring. "There are little moments that are grand-slam home runs," says Gilbert. Luckily, those moments can overcome your daily frustrations. "Happiness is more than just that smiley feeling," says Karen Reivich, Ph.D., a research associate in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. "It's also feeling a connection to something larger than yourself. When people are in service to something bigger, they describe their lives as filled with meaning. It's not the smiley face, but when it's all over, you realize you'd do it again." The first step to being a happier mom, then, is to value what you do -- to feel that it's important. The next step is to find ways to make it more enjoyable. Here's how:

admit when you're stressed

Ironically, once you stop expecting motherhood to feel warm and fuzzy all the time, life as a mom gets easier. "It's okay to feel frustrated, angry, or irritable sometimes," says Dr. Ubel. "You're not a bad parent. It's not even a bad parenting experience. It's just normal."

get enough sleep

Most of us know that money can't buy happiness, but who knew that a good night's sleep just might? That's a key finding of that University of Michigan study. "Making \$60,000 more in annual income has less of an effect on your daily happiness than getting one extra hour of sleep a night," says study author Norbert Schwarz, Ph.D., a professor of psychology.

So how can you sneak in that extra hour or two? Misha Sauer, mom of 1-year-old Riley, says her husband takes over on the weekends so she can sleep in. "It makes a big difference in the way I feel," says the Culver City, California, mom. "And I'm more willing to do something active, like take my daughter to the park. If I'm tired, the most I can do is sit there and read to her."

(re)consider your priorities

It may sound simplistic, but one key to being in a more positive mood is to structure your day so you do more things you enjoy. "It's how you spend your time, not your money, that counts," says Dr. Ubel. "If you have any financial flexibility that lets you maximize your family time, use it now. For instance, do you really need to be the one to clean the house? How about paying someone to help out? And if that's not an option, think about how clean your house really needs to be -- do you need to make the beds, or is bed-making time better spent drawing pictures with your kids?"

go with the flow

Time seems to slow down when you're doing what you enjoy, whether it's gardening or running laps. People who experience this level of engagement -- which psychologists call "flow" -- are happier than people who rarely do. And you're lucky to have a master of it right before you: your child. "To you and me, every leaf and ant is pretty much the same, but not to a toddler," says Reivich. "So try to actively

notice things as your child does -- the ant dragging a piece of bread, for instance."

Bringing more of your best qualities -- your strengths -- to the often mundane tasks of child rearing can also help you feel more engaged. "One of my strengths is humor," Reivich says. "I was making peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for my kids one day, and I started talking like it was a cooking show: 'Now I'm browning the bread, now I'm applying a thin layer of peanut butter.' It transformed a mundane task into something we could all enjoy."

savor the moment

One way to nourish positive emotions is to take a moment to appreciate, well, the moment. Just map out two- or three-minute activities that you can do that day to relish that time. In the morning, for instance, instead of trying to do ten things, take your cup of coffee to the window, and sip it while your child plays in an Exersaucer. Notice what's going on. Will it change your life? No, but you'll probably feel calmer.

Gilbert has an even shorter way: "Take ten seconds every hour to look at what you're doing from a higher place." While you're at it, appreciate what a wonderful child you have -- those chubby cheeks, that toothless smile -- and share that joy with someone who'll rejoice in it with you. That's another way to grab onto the good stuff and prolong your happiness.

take the long view

Having a sense of perspective will also improve your attitude. "It gives you more patience, and it certainly awakens you to the preciousness of the moment, which is fleeting," says M.J. Ryan, author of *The Happiness Makeover*. She remembers the times when her daughter wanted to sit on her lap and watch a video. "Yes, I had other things to do. But I said to myself, 'How long will this last?' I'm grateful for that time with her."

If the drudgery is getting to you, think about life without children. "It's easy to get caught up in the details, but you need to step back and realize how empty your life would be without these people in it," says Gilbert.

reconnect with your spouse

A supportive group of friends and family is one of the cornerstones of a happy life, and for many moms, the center of that social circle is their partner. That's why it's so important to keep the lines of communication open, especially during the "diaper years" -- infancy to age 3 -- that experts say are the most stressful on a marriage.

"You can't say, 'I'll handle the relationship later,'" says Reivich. "A healthy and realistic goal is to ask, 'What are some small, manageable things we can do to keep our connection strong during this rough time?'" It can be as easy as going food shopping together, she says. "Once you make little steps, it's easy to move on to bigger ones, like a night out."

Even discussing how stressed you both are can help. "If you can both just say, 'Raising a kid is hard,' putting it out there diminishes the strain," says Sauer.

say thanks

Feeling grateful is a mood booster. It can be as simple as saying grace every night or finding new ways to acknowledge others. "When our extended family gets together, we go around the room and say one thing we appreciate about each person," says Elizabeth Howard, mom of Reilly, 2, in Anaheim, California.

Another effective way is to put what you're thankful for down on paper: Write the three best things that happened today. Experts say that if you do that every day for two weeks, your feelings of well-being will increase.

Of course, you'll still have bad days. But at least you'll be less likely to think there's something wrong with you. And the more you engage in positive thinking, the more you'll realize how much happiness is under your control. "I think of happiness as three things -- enjoyment, satisfaction, and fulfillment," says Ryan. "Mothering can give us any one of those at any given moment, if not necessarily all of them at the same time!"

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