



## Creating Happy Kids

By Tom Nehmy, PhD

The single greatest wish for the majority of parents enrolling their child in school is that they be happy. They want their son or daughter to succeed socially and academically, and they want them to be free from distress, chronic worry or loneliness.

Being happy is more than we might expect at first. And for many people their happiness in life comes about as a result of fortuitous circumstance: loving parents, opportunity, growing up in a supportive wider community. But happiness can be created and there are a series of specific ingredients that make up the recipe. We'll look at few of them here.

### Resilience

One of the great buzzwords of recent times, *resilience* is a term that is often misused and misunderstood. In people as in inanimate objects and materials, resilience is about coming under stress, and returning to prior good functioning. Life inevitably contains some stress, and these stressful experiences – in the right amount – help us cultivate the ability to deal effectively with life's ups and downs. When well-meaning parents protect their child from stressful experiences *too much* it inhibits them in developing this ability. By learning the psychological skills that help us think, feel, and act in helpful ways, we can become resilient *because of* our experience of responding to challenging and stressful events.

So where does resilience come from? It comes from 4 key sources:

- Our genetics (which we can't do anything about so it is of limited use to focus on this)
- Our experiences throughout the natural course of life (friendships, sport, camps, clubs, life events)
- What is directly taught to us either by parents, teachers or other influential people, and;
- What is modelled to us, that is, what we learn by observing how our parents deal with stress and life.

### True happiness is about more than feeling good

It is important that we regularly experience positive mood states, but it is not normal to 'feel' happy 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so it is not helpful to make that our end goal. Having a meaningful, value-driven life that embraces the challenges, mistakes and failures along the way, and a life that focuses on *wellbeing* as much as good mood is what true sustainable happiness is all about.

School communities – including parents – can now be guided through the process of creating these essential conditions and skills for happiness in our kids. The very latest research from preventive psychology has taught us how to prevent the onset of psychological problems, and how to ensure kids learn and use the strategies for coping well with life's inevitable stressors while enjoying the journey along the way.



### Take-away messages

- It's not normal to feel happy 24/7
- True happiness is about resilience and wellbeing, in addition to regular positive mood states
- It is the way we handle the stressors of life, rather than avoiding stress, that is crucial to developing resilience
- Parents influence their children constantly through modelling the way they handle stress, emotions, and the challenges of life
- Children can be explicitly taught the skills of resilience and wellbeing (and therefore sustainable happiness)

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