

# How to be a happier mom: 8 ways to focus on the positive

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Ask a mom if she's happier now that she has a child and she'll usually say yes. In fact, around the world, children top the list of the most enjoyable things in life. But psychologists who study happiness -- a new field in the past decade -- often report a different picture.

Being the mom of a young child (especially one under 3) is rich and 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. "You may be squabbling with your spouse more. You have more negative emotions." The time you spend taking care of your child may not even be the high point of your day.

On their list of pleasurable activities, moms rank it lower than eating, exercising, or watching TV, according to a University of Michigan study of 900 women. In fact, kid care rates only slightly higher than housework, working, or commuting! "This finding shocks people," says Daniel Gilbert, Ph.D., a psychology professor at Harvard University and author of "Stumbling on Happiness."

"They think psychologists are saying you don't love your children. Of course you love your children beyond measure! And kids do bring joy. They bring transcendent moments in which you feel so happy that it outweighs all the hard work you've done. It's just that children do not increase your average daily enjoyment." (Parenting.com: "When I'm a mom, I'll never..."[external link](#))

The Happiness Paradox

One reason for the discrepancy between moms and experts: selective memory. When psychologists ask moms in a general way whether they like spending time with their kids, the overwhelming majority say they do because they're thinking of fun activities such as 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."

And being needed is a rewarding experience as well. "You get back tenfold everything that you put into it," says Elizabeth Howard, mom of Reilly, 2, in Anaheim, California. "I don't think people should have a child just to make them happy, but it's opened up a whole part

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of my heart that I didn't even know was there."

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. Not only will you be doing the best thing for yourself, but you'll also become a more effective mom.

Say you're with your 2-year-old and she wants her juice in the red cup, but the red cup is missing. "If I'm in a grumpy mood, I may just say, 'Drink it in the blue cup,'" says Reivich. "But if I'm feeling more positive, maybe I'll take some red construction paper and tape it around the blue cup. I've transformed something that might get ugly into something playful and fun." The good news for all moms is this: You can learn to focus on the positive -- and learn to make it a daily habit. 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 really helps to realize that it's OK to feel frustrated, angry, tired, or irritable sometimes," says Dr. Ubel. "You're not a bad parent. It's not even a bad parenting experience. It's just normal." (Parenting.com: [Get over new mom guilt. external link](#) )

### **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 is good about taking over on the weekends so she can sleep in or nap. "It absolutely makes a 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?" And if you work outside the home, consider exploring whether you can afford to go part-time rather than full-time.

### **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

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before you: your child. "To you and me, every leaf and ant is pretty much the same, but not to a two-year-old," says Reivich. "So try to actively notice things as your child does -- that ant is dragging a big 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 all of us could enjoy."

One mom she knows loves architecture and got passionate about explaining the history of columns as her 4-year-old made sand castles. Her preschooler may not have gotten all the references, says Reivich, "but it was entertaining for both of them."

### **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 watches a video. Notice what's going on. Will it change your life? No, but you'll probably feel calmer.

Gilbert has an even shorter version: "Take ten seconds every hour and 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, the endearing things she says -- and share that joy with someone who'll rejoice in it with you. That's another way to grab on to 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" and mom of Anna, 9. She remembers the times when her daughter wanted to sit on her lap and watch SpongeBob. "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. "You've signed on for a hard job -- it's not supposed to be fun most of the time," says Gilbert. "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."

### **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" -- from infancy to around age 3 -- that experts say are the most stressful (until your kids become teens,

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that is!) 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 be doing to keep our connection to each other strong during this rough time?'"

For instance, she and her husband try to have a glass of wine together at night once a week, after their four kids (all under age 9) are in bed. "It's not a date-- we don't need a baby sitter - it's just 15 minutes. But it's a change to sit together and unwind, and sometimes a chance to dream."

When she works with couples, Reivich helps them figure out what they can do for a couple of hours together that interests both of them. With one couple, one partner was very curious, the other really appreciated beauty, so they spent an afternoon museum hopping.

"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. "It's affected our relationship a lot; we've both noticed it," says Sauer. "If you can both just say, 'Raising a kid is hard,' putting it out there diminishes the strain." She and her husband are working on having more time together-- by themselves. "We just went on our first date since the baby was born," she says.

Another way to strengthen your connection is to practice what shrinks call "active constructive responding." When your spouse comes home and shares some good news, don't just say, "That's nice." Ask questions that let him tell you about his day, even for a minute or two. At least for that minute, the two of you will be celebrating what's good about your lives.

### **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 for a birthday, we go around the room and say one thing we appreciate and the one thing we like best about that person," says Elizabeth Howard.

Another effective way is to put what you're thankful for down on paper: Write the three best things that happened today. It might be something positive that happened to you, your kids, your spouse or friends, or in the world. It might just be something funny that your child said at breakfast. Experts say that if you do that every day for two weeks, your feelings of well-being will increase.

Of course, even if you do all of these things, 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. Not all of it, but perhaps more than you were aware of.

"When I started to research happiness, I thought it was a feeling, and you had to wait to have it happen to you," says Ryan. "But feelings follow thoughts -- they don't precede

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them. I think of happiness as three things -- enjoyment, satisfaction, and fulfillment. Mothering can give us any one of those at any given moment -- if not necessarily all of them at the same time!"

Robert Barnett is the former health editor of Parenting.