

Review of

**The Happy Kid Handbook:**  
**How to Raise Joyful Children in a Stressful World**

By Katie Hurley, LCSW

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**Reviewed by**

Melissa L Hurteau

Nanny

St. Louis, MO

*A quick note before jumping into my review: while I believe the information and techniques in this book to be useful for all caregivers of children, the author uses the term “parents” exclusively. For simplicity’s sake, and to remain true to the book, I have continued to use parent/parents when referencing the book. It is not my intention to focus on parents or to exclude any other caregivers.*

This book is a gem that needs to be added to my library! Initially I saw something on social media that had me all fired up to read The Happy Kid Handbook, then Lora had it on her list of interesting books, so I thought it was meant to be. Upon first perusal, however, I began to get cold feet. Both the description and the introduction focused on “we just want our kids to be happy” (back cover) and commenting negatively on the amount of advice floating around. By the time I got to “Gone are the days of come-as-you-are parenting” (Pg. xi) my alarm bells were screeching. As a nanny I have run into my fair share of adults who avoid conflict in the name of keeping things happy or long for the good old days when parenting was easier, all the while complaining about some aspect of people nowadays. I had no interest in spending hours with either of those viewpoints, but I made a commitment, so I powered through. I am so glad I did. Katie Hurley manages to avoid any discussion or judgement of most current parenting trends and quickly get to her point, beginning with the common

- **“Happiness is a choice we make”** (p. 284), and expanding that to focus on her point that
- **“Kids aren’t born into this world with coping skills; they need to learn them.”** (p. 206)

There are brief discussions throughout the book about the benefits of happiness, including better school performance, stronger friendships, and better overall health as described by Shawn Achor in his book The Happiness Advantage, but for the most part The Happy Kid Handbook focuses on HOW to support children in learning to live a happy life rather than WHY we should do so. Supporting a child in learning happiness is defined as helping a child learn to

- follow their passions,
- empathize with others,
- appreciate those around them, and
- manage and cope with their own stress. (pg. xii)

This book contains many concrete activities, but a fundamental tenet to Ms. Hurley’s approach is that while they are understandably tempting,

- **quick fixes and one-size-fits -all approaches do not build the skills necessary for long term growth and happiness.**

Instead,

- **happiness is achieved through the exercise of learned behaviors,**
- **acquiring those behaviors “requires guidance, patience, and repetition” (p91-92) over long periods of time (potentially years)**

- from adults (my word, the author references parents) who are “present and attentive to the child” (pg. 206)

There is little to no discussion of consequences for misbehavior, especially those that look suspiciously like renamed punishments. And about that earlier concern that some readers might take away the message that maintaining happiness is more important than dealing with conflict, the author eventually states “This is not to say that my kids are happy every single second of every single day. That’s just silly.” (pg. 66). I’m all in, this is a book about learning to manage conflict, internal and social, building problem solving skills, and keeping life honest. As a nanny with an infant, toddler, and reluctant work at home parent, I can use this.

The Happy Kid Handbook is broken into two parts. **Part 1: Raising Happy** focuses on the general skills that kids need to learn. Each chapter is a separate skill, begins with a lengthy discussion of what the skill entails and how it supports the goal of happiness, and concludes with several activities or suggestions for practicing the skill. The focus of the book is how parents can support their children, so readers should be prepared to roll up their sleeves (figuratively speaking for the most part!) I was pleasantly surprised by the quantity and quality of the tips, a few of the suggestions were of the tried and true variety, like playing with puppets, and discussion was brief, but most were either new to me or welcome reminders—“Body Language Simon Says” anyone? Suggestions were, almost without exception, very specific. How many minutes of down time should a child have each day? The author indicates where to start, then recommends adjusting for the needs of the specific child (generally up!). How many after school activities for an elementary aged child. Yup, there is a specific suggestion for that, too. (Lots of scheduling tips in this book!) The chapters in Part 1: Raising Happy are

- Chapter 1: Know Thy Child
  - This chapter focuses on treating each child as an individual, and working with temperament, primarily “Introvert, Extrovert, or Some Other Vert:” (pg. 10)
- Chapter 2: The Power of Play
  - This chapter is focused on supporting UNSTRUCTURED play, both without and with parents. Even when parents play, the emphasis is on child led play. Scheduling and environment building are covered.
- Chapter 3: Understanding Emotion
  - Many children don’t know what they are feeling, this chapter focuses on how we can help them figure it out. There is an interesting discussion about emotional regulation. Also, some discussion of why this is not a book about consequences. Once children leave infancy, we tend to focus “on behavior correction rather than working through the emotions that triggered the behavior.” (pg. 66)
- Chapter 4: The Art of Forgiveness
  - I wish more books went into the detail this does about forgiveness. The topic is covered from the viewpoints of both the child receiving forgiveness and the child requested to give it. “Forgiveness means working through the situation, telling the other person how you feel about it, and then letting go of negative emotions.” (pg. 89)
- Chapter 5: Empathy Matters
  - This one does seem straight forward, but the discussion is thorough. There are some nice role-playing games in the tips section.
- Chapter 6: Speak Your Mind—Building Assertiveness Skills
  - We want children to learn to “confidently state their wants and needs without imposing those wants and needs on others” (pg. 135). There is also a discussion of parenting styles in this chapter. The author identifies four: Permissive, Hands off, Authoritarian, and Authoritative, emphasizing that there are typically pros and cons to each. The focus is on making sure parents consider the relationship between parenting style tendencies and temperaments of individual children. This is when a nagging concern began to solidify for me. More on that below.
- Chapter 7: Embracing Differences
  - We need to embrace differences, not tolerate them. “Most kids are hard wired to see the good in differences.” (pg. 158) and Embracing “differences isn’t just about raising kind kids who choose not to exclude and/or hurt others, after all, it’s about expanding the worldviews of our children and enriching their lives.” (pg. 164)

- Chapter 8: In Support of Passion
  - This is a big one, both in length and importance to the premise of the book. There is lots of discussion around the importance of interests, how kids find their passion, passion vs. specializing, the nature of shifting passions, and the importance of healthy boundaries. If there was any doubt about the author's views regarding overscheduling, there won't be after this chapter! There are also discussions of optimism and quitting, which I thought were nice additions.

**The second part of the book, Part 2: Lessons in Coping**, focuses on managing issues that more specific. This section is shorter, but I found the discussions to be reasonably thorough on most topics. The structure, discussion followed by tips, is the same. Issues covered are:

- Chapter 9: Reducing Childhood Stress
  - This chapter expands on Chapter 3: Understanding Emotion to focus on helping kids recognize the signs their bodies send when their stress levels need relief. I need to have it pounded into my head that children "don't make the connections between what they're feeling and what's actually happening in their lives." i.e. they don't see that having a headache every day before recess is the result of that kid who teases them every day at recess. (pg. 205) It is one of those things I forget in the moment, if I see it why can't they? Yeah . . . There are tips for helping children make that connection and for helping relieve general stress. There are some nice tips for leading your child in guided relaxation.
- Chapter 10: The Anxious Child
  - I found this to be one of the best chapters, one of those why didn't I have this when I was working with that kid chapters. "(H)appy kids are kids who are confident in their ability to work through anxiety-producing situations and find their own happy ending as a result." (pg. 242)
- Chapter 11: When Frustration Strikes
  - This is the temper tantrum chapter. The focus is on helping the child build an "anger toolbox" (pg. 245) suited to their individual needs. The author notes that some kids need to calm down FIRST, but others actually need to get the emotion out first. Promise, the book makes more sense that I just did.
- Chapter 12: Happy Parents Raise Happy Kids
  - This is the what about parental stress chapter. While the author makes her points clearly and compassionately, in a voice that may reach parents who have not previously taken these messages to heart, to me it contained little new, and I was a little disappointed. To handle stress parents are encouraged to make sure they are finding enough me time and disconnect from electronics, among other good but not necessarily original recommendations. I had hoped that my big concern would be addressed here.

The acknowledgements page is sweet and may be worth a look through (I often skip it, so clearly, I was wanting just a little more!)

I have few concerns with this book. The first is minor. Occasionally, I felt that the discussion sections of the chapters would get a little preachy. When this occurred, however, the author either wrapped it up quickly or made a new point, so I quickly moved on.

My second concern, however, . . . well, I need to keep thinking about it . . . I fully agree that children can, should, and have a right to meet the goals laid out in this book. However, supporting a child, especially one who is struggling, requires a great deal of patience, perseverance, and emotional intelligence on the part of the parent/caregiver. What if that is an area in which the adult struggles or simply does not currently possess the skill? Over my career I have had to build those skills as an adult. It was a surprise, it was hard, and I had good guidance through a number of sources. I still work on my people skills and expect to do so for the remainder of my career. That is partly because I believe that social skills can always be improved, but also because I didn't enter adulthood with the level of skill this book aims to instill. Throughout my career I have run into other adults who truly struggle to manage their emotions in order to help their children, does this book provide enough support for them? Certainly, working through the exercises alongside a child will increase the adult's skill as well, and would provide a valuable lesson for children—we all struggle, and we can all

improve. The idea is touched upon, most directly in the chapter about forgiveness, but I don't see that the author makes the point clear, and I suspect adults who do not view their emotional skills with confidence may be intimidated by this book, when potentially their children need it the most. On one hand, the skill level asked of adults is troubling me, on the other, a good book inspires conversation and further exploration, which this is doing.

Overall, I would consider this an excellent book. It was well worth the time spent reading, and worth the cost of adding it to my personal collection. There are enough suggestions to go back to, and a variety of issues covered in depth. I borrowed my copy from the library and at times it was difficult to resist the temptation to write in it or mark pages for a return visit. I suspect there will be something value for everyone, whether the reader is new to emotional intelligence training or has been consciously practicing for years and years.