

FINDING A HAPPIER NEW YEAR FOR KIDS IN CARE

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I'm writing this days away from when the people the world over will be wishing each other a "Happy New Year". When I put myself in the small, medium, or big teenage shoes of kids in care, I wonder what they think and feel as they contemplate the year ahead for themselves. I also wonder how those of us who love them can help them face both the reality of their lives and the possibility of finding some "happy" for themselves in the days ahead.

Happiness is a feeling. And whatever else our children and youth have or don't have, they will always have their feelings. We've been hearing and reading about "emotional competence" lately. Often, those young people who are in treatment are referred to as "emotionally disturbed". This is not a bad title, although it is certainly too narrow, because it is true that because of the abuse and/or neglect they've experienced they also experience very "disturbing" feelings. They are certainly entitled to these feelings – sadness, anger, confusion, dejection, depression, rage, despair, etc. – because these kinds of feelings are natural responses to being treated badly. But as Caregivers, we want to both help them to understand and express these very unhappy feelings, and also to assist them in finding other ways to feel, instead of, or in at least in addition to, these emotions that often cause them to dread, rather than anticipate, another year.

To be "competent" at any given task we must have sufficient levels of required skill, knowledge and capacity to accomplish the task. Children develop competence in dealing with feelings gradually as they develop into maturity. Emotions develop and express themselves within the first minutes of life and remain continuous until the last breath of life. It would appear that of the gifts and skills we can pass along to our children, the ability to deal successfully with feelings would be among the most important. Emotional competence dictates in large measure how well we will get along with ourselves, and with others.

Most children receive at least minimally adequate care while growing up and so happiness is often taken for granted as part of being a child, and occupies many of the celebrations in culture. Happy birthday, we say. O happy day, we sing. We look and listen for the bluebird of happiness. Bars offer "Happy Hours". And in this month we salute each other with cheers and wishes for happiness for the new year. Our constitution actually **guarentees** us the right to the "pursuit of happiness", along with our rights of life and liberty. As we and our clients know

all too well, we are not guaranteed happiness, only it's pursuit. How do we approach young people who have been exposed primarily to pain and disappointment to go after, try for, aim at, strive for "happiness". First, we want to be clear with them that we acknowledge that they have been deprived of one of their rights – the right to be happy – and that we are going to help them learn to find some of what they deserve, even though they might have to work harder than other children to get some. We want them to know they deserve to be happy.

Happiness is a habit we can develop. Those of us interacting with hurt and hurting children want to work hard to assist them in developing this behavior pattern. Their pain tempts them to become habituated to being angry and cynical, so it doesn't come naturally to them to seek happiness, or even to believe it is possible for them. Hopefully it is a skill we have developed for ourselves and can thus "teach it" to others.

It is a feature of immaturity to believe that feelings are created by other people, thus we hear things like: "you're making me mad", or "you hurt my feelings". If it true that feelings are the result of how people treat us, we are left feeling helpless in creating happiness for ourselves. The fortunate truth, however, is that we are capable of creating our own feelings, and this gives us much more power over our emotions. It's not that the way other people treat us doesn't matter, because it certainly does. At the same time, as we grow and become more independent we can decide what kind of people we want to spend time with, thus improving our chances of being treated well. Lessons in deciding who to hang out with are very important to happiness. It's also true that as we grow we realize that other people can't control our minds, and we can decide what we want to think about. It's up to us to decide whether a glass with water up to the midline is half-full or half-empty. There is no magic road to happiness but a responsible attitude is probably the best path to follow. Rather than waiting for someone or something to make us happy, or blaming someone or something for our unhappiness, starting to take our thoughts into our own hands is the most sure formula for finding the happiness everyone wants. No one can tell us what to think! And just as importantly, we can learn to change the way we think. And when we think differently, we feel differently. This is a lesson we can learn when we're young that will serve us well for all of our lives.

As Caregivers I think we are often overly focused on what kids **do**, rather than how they are. Make a new years resolution to notice what kind of emotional habits children in your care are developing and help them cultivate "happiness habits". Does someone sulk their way through an outing or activity that could be fun? If

so, let them know that they are **choosing** to be unhappy. Do they complain about food all the time, without noticing how much food they have and that they are never really hungry? Do they focus entirely on the past without being grateful that the past is behind them with a future in front of them that could bring much more pleasure? Our bodies feel happier with sunlight and lots of air; are they staying inside too much? Our bodies release “happy” chemical with activity: do they sit and exercise only their thumbs or so they run, ride bikes, skate board, swim, play? Do they keep expecting other people to do things that will make them happy? It is not up to us to change events and experiences for them, in an attempt to “make them happy”, but rather to give important life lessons about how one can make a choice about whether to be as happy as possible in a given circumstance.

Happiness is most often defined as a subjective state of well-being, with each person defining happiness for him/her self. Happiness is not a possession. Thinking of happiness as something we can “have” may be what deprives us of feeling happy. We don’t own happiness, therefore it is not something we can buy or keep. Happiness is something we **are**; something we experience. Happiness comes and goes; if it is not here now, it can come again. Expecting “things” to bring us happiness sets us up for chronic disappointment. It is important for us to not buy into happiness as related to things we can buy and places we can go. Happiness is an inside job!

Being “happy” does not imply that we are without pain, or displeasure. Emotions are not either-or events. We can be both happy and sad: happy about some things, sad about others. It is an unreasonable expectation that our life be rid of pain and discomfort in order to be happy. We can use our own experience with our jobs, letting the kids know that sometimes I’m happy with my job and with them, while at some moments during the day you are not extremely unhappy with them. Living is both joyous and agonizing. People who have experienced more agony need to work hard to build in opportunities for more joy. We’ll help them.

Research tells us that frequent positive experiences are both necessary and sufficient to produce the state we call happiness. “Treatment” should not be ponderous and “heavy” all the time, but should just as often be joyful. We want to make it part of our “mission” with our children to provide such “positive experiences”. Such experiences are not related to wealth, or situation. They are related to intention! We do not have to produce “Big Bangs” to give our children happiness. Rather, we can introduce them to paying attention to the ordinary pleasures of everyday life. If your five-year-old loses a first tooth, take him/her to his/her favorite restaurant or make something special for lunch and celebrate.

Make up a cute cards and “post” them on the refrigerator for small victories. By making a habit of rejoicing in the little things, we can stop waiting for big things to happen to bring pleasure. Little things happen all the time; big things rarely.

At the end of each day, why don't you and your children sit down and list some things that have happened that have helped them feel happy. This will help teach our children how to experience life in ways that don't overlook opportunities for happiness, and how to collect and store good feelings. Build in simple choices, such as deciding which of several approved t.v. shows they'd like to watch, or which activity to do, we can teach how our own choices contribute to our own happiness. We can also practice being happy when we don't get our way.

Rewarding relationships are crucial to happiness, and by building such relationships with our children, and encouraging them to develop friendships, we model a skill that can lead to lifelong happiness. And these cost nothing! The truth is that happy people have more friends than unhappy people. And people with more friends, are happier. The circle of happiness.

Newspaper columnist Alice Steinbach has some wonderful insights into happiness. Happy moments, she says, are those moments when you feel fully alive. Such moments “swim by us every day like shining, silver fish waiting to be caught”. Happiness can result from simple everyday events that we have taught ourselves to appreciate – making a friend, a triumph of any kind, the smell of things we like to eat, riding in the car, waking up and finding the sun, not having to go to school, seeing someone you know loves you, laughing. Best of all, this gift of happiness for our children turns out to be a reciprocal gift. We cannot give lessons about finding happiness in the everyday without learning those lessons ourselves. Thus, not only do we enrich their lives, but our own as well.

So to you and those you are privileged to work with, **Happy New Year.**

This article was published in the CYC Advocate in January, 2017