

Avoid raising ungrateful kids

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Reams of academic research abound across the country on how to raise happy children, but who has the time to read this myriad of findings, boil down the facts, and then turn them into practical parenting advice? The University of California, Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center is taking on the job with its new Web site on how to foster joy and avoid brattish behavior in children.

The Web site is the brainchild of Christine Carter, executive director of UC Berkeley's Greater Good Science Center, which examines the underpinnings of happiness, compassion, social bonding and altruism. Carter, who has become a parenting guru among her friends, came up with the idea after being cornered at a birthday party by parents desperate for advice.

"They said, 'We've read enough. Tell us what to do,'" said Carter, the mother of two young girls, ages 4 and 6, who follows child development research closely.

A video producer offered to film Carter having blog conversations or "blogversations" with other moms and parenting experts, and thus was born the "The Science of Raising Happy Kids" Web site at: greatergoodparents.org .

Carter points out that happiness is not necessarily something we're born with, but is a skill children learn best from their parents. For example, research shows that the road to happiness is paved with altruism rather than materialism. Moreover, children who are praised for working hard

rather than for "being smart" respond more positively to all sorts of challenges.

While grounded in rigorous social science research from institutions ranging from Stanford University and UC Berkeley to Harvard University and Columbia University, the Web site each week will answer such common questions as how best to praise your children, how to foster gratitude and how to establish sit-down family dinners even when everyone is on a different schedule. Carter said her ultimate goal is to help parents raise "emotionally literate" children.

"Emotional literacy is one of the best predictors of school performance and career success, better even than IQ," Carter said. "Children who can regulate their emotions are better at soothing themselves when they are upset, which means that they experience negative emotions like fear and anger for a shorter period of time. They also have fewer infectious illnesses and form stronger friendships."

Unlike other online parenting resources, the Raising Happy Kids site focuses on the positive rather than approaching everything as a problem. In addition, visitors can receive helpful tips from parents via message boards rather than from pediatricians, nutritionists and other experts.

Plus, there's not a single advertisement on the site: "We are doing this because we are concerned about trends in child well-being, not because we want to sell something. We know that we have good science that can improve children's outcomes, and our commitment is to getting the word out," Carter said.

Right now, visitors to the site will find short video blogs and "Try This at Home" tips as well as a blogversations between Carter and East Bay author, mother and breast cancer survivor Kelly Corrigan. Each month, a new theme will be featured. Not surprisingly, November's is gratitude

and December's is an emphasis on family traditions and rituals as alternatives to shopping and toy fests.

The Greater Good Science Center helps people apply scientific research to their lives. Researchers at the center currently are looking into the neurobiology of positive emotions as well as at trends in well-being among American youth.

"Scientists have traditionally focused on understanding dysfunctional behaviors, but for the first time we are really seeing a lot of research that tells a positive story," said Dacher Keltner, a UC Berkeley professor of psychology who is founder and faculty director of the Greater Good Science Center. "When scientists learn something about what helps children thrive or what makes them happy or compassionate or grateful - well, then, we need to pass that information on to parents."

Source: UC Berkeley

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