

Are You Teaching Your Kids To Be Unhappy?

By Marilyn Suttle



Zoe is the mother of a two-year-old, a preteen and a teenager. Some of her best efforts to make her kids happy have backfired. The more she tries to make everyone happy, the more unhappy they seem to become.

George, her two-year-old has become an expert whiner. If he wants anything, a cookie, a toy, or to get out of the grocery cart, he whines. It's hard for Zoe to see her child unhappy. Eventually she gives George whatever he wants to restore peace. George has learned that mom can ignore his whines for five, sometimes even 10 minutes, but if he persists in displaying misery, she will give him what he wants. He has learned to use unhappiness to get his way.

Zoe's daughter Florence is 12 going on 20. She is a cheerful and chatty girl, but lately she's been prone to preteen moodiness. Zoe tries hard to lift her spirits by spending a lot of extra time and energy probing Florence about her moodiness. Florence hasn't had so much attention since before George was born. Recently she bought a T-shirt with the words, "drama queen" on it and seeks mom out to share her daily woes. Florence is learning to amplify unhappiness to get her mom's attention.

Andrew is sixteen. He's been a joy to Zoe from the moment he was born. He's bright, social, an honor student and an active sportsman. Zoe has always been strict about curfews and boundaries with Andrew. Being an agreeable kid, he followed her rules with ease. When Andrew got his drivers license, she gave him limited driving privileges, which he reluctantly abided by. One day Andrew wanted to drive a group of friends to a teen dance club, 45 minutes from their home. Zoe said, "No." In an uncharacteristic moment, Andrew's face turned red. In an angry, low-toned voice, he said, "You can't do this to me. I have to be able to drive tonight." Zoe was rattled by the intensity of his anger. She figured it must be awfully important to him because he had never spoken to her that way before. She let him take the car, despite her misgivings. Over the last few months, Andrew's agreeable disposition has been increasingly replaced with unhappy displays of anger. He's learning to use unhappiness to expand his boundaries with mom.

Who is this woman? Zoe is a composite of all of us who have the mistaken belief that we can rid our family of unhappiness by taking their problems away. We need a skilled way of dealing with unhappiness to bring out everyone's best. Here are answers to some common questions about dealing with unhappiness.

Question: *What do you do when your kids whine?*

Answer: When kids are too hungry, tired or overstimulated they may whine. When this happens, ignore the whining and focus on what they need. Take a short break for food, sleep, or relaxation. Kids who whine to get their way have learned that unhappiness gets them what they want. Be helpful by letting them know that you will not consider their request until they choose to talk in a regular tone of voice. Say, "If you want to whine you can. It's your decision. I don't respond to whining. When you talk with me in your regular voice, I'll consider your request." If you give in to the whining, they learn to whine longer next time because eventually unhappiness will work for them.

Question: *What do you do when your kids act moody and miserable?*

Answer: Don't overreact. The bigger a deal you make out of a behavior, the more attractive the behavior becomes for a child seeking attention. Identify how your child is feeling. Say, "Honey, it seems like you are feeling blue." Then stop talking and listen. Once kids express their feelings, they are better able to cope with the situation and happy feelings return. If they don't choose to talk to you, give them some space. Say, "I'll be in the kitchen if you decide you'd like to talk." Be sure to give your kids plenty of positive attention for the positive things they are doing.

Question: *What do you do when your kids use anger and intimidation to get their way?*

Answer: Don't let it work. Kids without limits are often unhappy. Kids feel more secure knowing that a parent will set safe boundaries for them. Talk about the child's feelings and needs. Allow all feelings. Do not allow unacceptable actions. Say, "When you gain more experience driving, then I'll expand your driving boundaries.

Would you like to talk about other options for tonight?”

Question: *How do you make an unhappy child happy again?*

Answer: Don't try to push away or deny their unhappiness. It will just go underground and intensify. When you allow kids to express their negative feelings, it defuses the intensity of the feeling. When kids feel understood, they are better able to cope with life's disappointments. Be careful not to feed their unhappiness. Do not pity your kids or see them as helpless. Show confidence in their ability to handle whatever life brings their way.

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