



The Unhealthy And Unrealistic Pursuit Of Endless Fun And Happiness

By Wilson McCaskill

We have been seduced by the idea that having endless fun and being constantly happy is not only desirable, it's attainable.

I worry about the damage this idea is causing and I fear for our children as rapidly increasing numbers of adults become complicit in the countless ways and means used, each and every day, to convince children that if they're not constantly happy and having fun, then something is wrong.

"Have fun," is as frequent a parting salutation as, "See you later" or indeed, "Bye." Nowhere is this more apparent than in primary schools where countless thousands of children slide from the seats of cars to head into classrooms supported by the warm tones of parents entreating them to, "Have fun." This request is reinforced at the end of the day when re-entry into the family car is met with the hopeful question, "Did you have fun?"

There was a time when the expectation was that you would go to school and work hard. Perhaps that expectation was a little harsh and implied that school was a cold and brittle place to which little children went to toil and mine for information as opposed to interactively learn.

Schools today are certainly not cold and harsh. They are warm, welcoming environments to which teachers and students commit much time and effort to reflect the colour, movement and spectacle of learning. Yet, amidst this stimulating environment the requirement for effort and application remain as much a necessity for learning as they have always been.

Would it help to ask children to go to school prepared to have fun but ready to apply themselves even if they don't? I think it would, and I think they should be occasionally reminded that application takes effort and that effort is not always fun.

The pressure to make all learning fun on teachers, sporting coaches, music and dance tutors, indeed anyone who seeks to educate, inform and develop children, is relentless.

Vast volumes of research show that children learn best when they are having fun. I'm sure this current understanding was equally well understood by whom ever taught Sir Isaac Newton when he was a boy. However, I doubt if his teacher spent as much time and commitment ensuring it was a constant of little Isaac's learning environment.



The ability of the majority of today's teachers to excite and engage children is both impressive and, with the assistance of technology and the benefits of research, always improving.

Teachers know that not only must their students learn and achieve required benchmarks; they must do so whilst having the time of their lives. Should their students fail to be obviously happy and decidedly having fun, then the teacher has in turn failed.

Worryingly, it doesn't stop there. Some parents are likewise measuring their effectiveness by both the degree and duration of their children's fun and happiness (their FH levels). Unable to relax and feel that they are parenting effectively if their children's FH levels are in any way diminished, they quickly turn to teachers to do everything possible to get the levels up and keep them up.

This is a tangible and unhealthy pressure for many teachers. I believe it can be a significant contributing factor in the sometimes strained relationships between teachers and parents.

The incessant bombardment of our children with the notion that constant fun and happiness is their rightful expectation has markedly reduced their ability to deal with the everyday trials and tribulations of life. We have made fun the end point of all endeavours. Consequently, when fun ceases so does endeavour, and with it go all the associated benefits.

So convincing have we been in marketing this idea of perpetual fun to our children that too many react as though their rights have been violated when teachers fail to supply a constant stream of it. We have told them it's necessary, they believe it to be so and they are refusing to participate if fun is not a guaranteed part of the learning process.

Surely, we insult our children by believing the only way we can motivate them is to make everything fun. Children can, and many do, labour in the pursuit of noble causes. They can toil to reach a higher goal. They can suffer for the sake of self-betterment. And when they do, they transcend the fleeting experience of fun and reach the promised land of self-respect.

This addiction to fun, like all addictions, has made too many children slaves to their desires. To these children, something only has value if it feels good while they are doing it. Not only does fun determine worth, it also determines right and wrong.

Countless Australians will remember the much publicised behaviour of teenager, Corey Delaney, whose family home in Melbourne was trashed by himself and those who attended his party (held in his parents absence) and were shocked by his lack of remorse. Corey saw no abdication of responsibility nor any disrespect for property or person in his actions and felt no wrong or harm had been done. Such behaviour is not confined to Australia and sadly, I'm sure many hours of news have been filled with the sound and vision of equally wayward youth in various parts of the world.



Should we have been so shocked by his reaction?

Since the time Corey was a little fella I'm sure everyone and anyone has been mistakenly telling him that nothing is more important than his feelings and life is all about having fun and being happy. So, Corey pursued fun with endless commitment. He had lots of it and in every way imaginable.

Unfortunately, no one told him that fun wasn't the way you decided if something was right or wrong. Then his parents' house got trashed and people looked at him and said he'd done the wrong thing. But Corey didn't get it. He and his friends had fun; they had great fun – what was wrong with that?

Those who followed this story will remember that Corey, because of his party at all costs attitude, went on to become a disturbingly popular celebrity for a short time....something he obviously enjoyed and further proved for him and many like him that having fun was the only thing that mattered and if doing so upset others then so what, bad luck, and whatever!

As teachers we face this thinking daily. Children asked to explain inappropriate behaviour, defend their actions by saying, "Because it was fun." When asked why they aren't doing what they are meant to be doing, these same children invariably reply, "Because, it's boring." And by saying the learning is boring the suggestion is that the teacher is likewise.

If trapped by the idea that fun is paramount, any teacher unable to make all learning fun immediately feels the terror and anxiety of stand-up comics when failing jokes raise the ire of patrons and expose the comedian to the snide and cutting remarks of the experienced heckler.

Teaching time for many is akin to show time in front of demanding ticket holders who see it as their right to complain if the show doesn't rock their socks. A season of four terms under this sort of pressure would tempt even the most experienced performer to calm their nerves with a regular tiple before bedtime.

Our drive and commitment to maintaining the high FH levels of our children has generated the mistaken idea, on their part, that if they are not happy they must be sad and if they aren't having fun then obviously they're bored. This polarising of emotional responses leaves little chance for contentment and the wonderful array of states that span the emotional spectrum.

Again, teachers are all too familiar with students whose daily lives are a roller coaster ride of ups and downs. The constant struggle to get them on a stable and productive plateau is both frustrating and fatiguing.

I believe it's time for us to get off the fun and happiness bandwagon and realise that our effectiveness as adults, parents and teachers must not be measured by how well we make our children happy but how well we empower our children to make themselves happy.



Let me quote the Chinese philosopher, Lau Tzu

“Seek not happiness too greedily and be not fearful of unhappiness.”

Our children, caught in a consumerist world that exploits the commercial advantage of having them constantly hunger for fun and happiness, are developing an insatiable appetite for anything that will raise their FH levels.

What can we do about it?

Well, let's first of all choose not to be unwitting partners in this unsustainable and destructive pursuit. And secondly, when our children complain that we are not supplying enough fun and happiness let's stay calm, remain confident, ask and expect them to soldier on, and comfort ourselves with the knowledge that along with the many opportunities for fun and happiness we do offer, we also invite them to participate in the adversity that has and always will, shape character.