

Become a Happy, Flourishing Parent

IN HIS recent publication *Flourish*, psychologist Martin Seligman, the founder of Positive Psychology, set out an approach for helping people to flourish in life and find the happiness we all desire. Flourishing is the word Martin Seligman uses to describe the highest level or gold standard of happiness and well-being.

Seligman named his approach to a flourishing life as PERMA, an acronym that identifies the five essential elements required for us to attain a fulfilling and happy life. The more often you experience these elements, the greater your level of life satisfaction, happiness and flourishing.

Applying PERMA to parenting

Positive emotions

There's little that beats having a positive emotion. Ask any long distance runner and they'll tell you how good it feels when the endorphins kick in.

The good news is we don't have to be a long distance runner to experience feelings of well-being. Positive emotions can also induce a natural high. Gratitude, pleasure, fulfilment, peace, satisfaction and inspiration are some of the positive emotions we can savour and celebrate.

By practising mindfulness (living in the moment) we can celebrate our positive parenting by making the most of our kids' milestones and memorable occasions. Keep a journal to discover those events that occur during the day that lead you to experience different positive emotions. Build these events in your life on as regular a basis as possible.



The five PERMA elements are:

P = Positive Emotions

E = Engagement

R = Positive Relationships

M = Meaning

A = Achievement/Accomplishment

Anything can sound good in theory, but putting the five PERMA elements into place in our lives doesn't have to be complicated or difficult if we are committed to making the most of ourselves. Often theory is not as far removed from reality as we think, and being positive and engaged, and finding meaning in our relationships and achievements is pretty much what most of us ideally want our parenting to reflect.

Engagement

Engaging with our kids is foundational to bonding and building a relationship. Most of us know how disconnected we can feel when we're trying to accomplish one task and the mobile rings, or we're still in work mode thinking of tomorrow's strategy meeting, or we have to drop everything to put out someone else's spot fire.

Only when we're comprehensively engaged in concentrating on the task at hand, free of distractions, can we hope to experience the pleasure of being 'lost' to the world. Little kids are good at this – they can play or create, oblivious to what's happening around them. As adults however, we may need to rediscover this skill, so that when we connect with our kids we are helping to form a secure base of attachment for their growth and development.

Bottom line here is that it is a good investment towards flourishing to spend quality time with your children away from your physical and mental distractions.

Positive relationships

A relationship that isn't positive is probably not worth having. As humans, some of the reasons we strive to work at meaningful relationships are to be happier, more secure, feel cared for and enjoy the spin-offs such as empathy, friendship, strength and support.

Relationships are core to our feelings of well-being and taking the time and effort to build a strong relationship with our child as well as our partner, extended family, friends and neighbours will give us pleasure as well.

Some people can become so engrossed in work commitments or in raising a family they fail to put in the time necessary to stay connected and to reap the rewards. Also, it is far too easy to subtly disengage from our partners devoting our energy and time to our children.

Keep in mind that personal relationships are hugely important to our happiness as a parent and fulfilment as a person. Whether it is reaching out to family or friends in an hour of need or simply scheduling a few hours to be with a friend. These are likely to be behaviours within your reach, so stretch yourself towards others.

Meaning

Research suggests that the existence of children in our lives does not increase levels of happiness. However, when having children fills a greater purpose of believing in and serving someone and something greater than ourselves, our happiness and satisfaction in raising children increases enormously.

In choosing to have kids, the research suggests the decision to bring a child into the world can be based on meaning. As parents, maintaining high levels of meaning occurs when we focus on the bigger picture of giving ourselves unconditionally to another person.

We can also make conscious efforts at keeping in mind the important place that our children have within our broader and intergenerational family. So, reflect on the meaning of parenting and not just the everyday tasks.

Achievement and Accomplishment

Raising a child is a significant achievement. Along the way, there are numerous small achievements – some of them child-centred, some parent-centred. We can experience child-centred feelings of achievement when children first manage to sleep through the night, or when they're fully toilet trained, or when they can at long last read a book for themselves.

Parent-centred accomplishments can often be a little more difficult to achieve. These require us to put time and effort into achieving goals outside those of parenting, and it is important that 'me' time is kept separate from parental responsibilities. Feeling good about our personal achievements and ourselves helps to support our positive mindset as parents.

Developing and nurturing the PERMA principles, helps us to maintain feelings of well-being and get the most from life. PERMA principles also help us as parents to enjoy our kids, not just raise them.